Picking up Where the Text Leaves Off: Topophilia and the Pedagogy of Artistic Practice

by Mary Stuart Hall

ABSTRACT:

While Topophilia was a site specific installation that resulted from a series of interviews, this applied project did not begin or end with an exhibition. This paper traces the origins of my interest in Haiti and examines my own artistic practice as a form of pedagogy. The installation Topophilia served as both an analysis and expression of the text from my interviews. Both the process of creating a space and the space itself is based on an experience of being in inquiry. That inquiry serves as a form of research. This paper is an analysis of that line of inquiry and how that line of inquiry can be understood as a pedagogy.

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Introduction

I remember my undergraduate sculpture professor telling me that there is no such thing as "writer’s block." He explained that artistic practice is one of questions leading to more questions. The idea that the artist sits waiting for inspiration to strike is a myth. The creative process is one that is built on continuously asking questions and reflecting on previous ideas. Sometimes those ideas are linked in a crocheted web and it is the artist’s job to untangle them. The process then becomes one of sorting out, reconstructing and finding new webs. The artistic process is not based on creating new ideas, but instead discovering which ideas are already nagging at you.

It is for this reason that in reflecting on my applied project, I don’t think it’s possible to clearly identify a beginning and end point. Learning to be an artist involves working through problems and techniques with constraints often assigned by an instructor. But regardless of which constraints or techniques are assigned, an artist discovers which questions come out of their work. An instructor may lead them down a path to explore new ideas, but the same questions will persist. These persistent questions become the foundation for a body of work that can last a lifetime. The subject matter and techniques may change but the questions persist.

As I began my applied project I reflected on the questions that have persisted in my own work. I’ve always been interested in place, dialogue and intersubjectivity. Sometimes those questions have manifested themselves in abstract forms or more concrete references. But I can look back at all of my work and see similar themes and questions persisting. Manifesting those themes through an art education format is only another constraint and way of looking at the questions. Rather than simply make something for my own expression, I looked for ways to
think of my artistic practice and product as a pedagogy. I wanted to understand how could looking at my artistic practice as a pedagogy shape my practice?

Understanding my practice through this lens sent me on a journey of discovery in terms of my creative methods and theoretical understanding of my work. Over the course of a year, I searched for the physical manifestation of my project as well as the theoretical content that would give it meaning. I drew on my experiences in working with socially engaged art to create a piece that would be authentic to my own experience and explore a new way of considering my own practice. A deeper understanding of my practice led me to understand it as the form of the art. While we may want to qualify art in terms of its object-hood, in reality the art is both of the object and outside the object; it exists in the experience every person has who interacts with it. By understanding the art as a process of experience, that experience can be transferred to a way of art making based on experiences that transcend the banal. Art does not live in the object; it lives in the stuff of everyday life made new. While I can look at the work I produced retroactively as a research method, I did not begin with this intention. I began by looking at my artistic practice as the basis for creating a body of work with a pedagogical value. This approach allowed me the freedom to shift and change my plans as the project required. The following is an account of that process, the pedagogical space I created, and the implications for understanding an artistic practice as a pedagogy. Although the artistic process is not one that can easily be pinned down or defined, I will do my best to qualify my methods and describe their significance.
Tracing my beginnings

In many ways tracing the trajectory of my applied project is to attempt to trace the trajectory of my creative process since I began to seriously make art in college. The themes that emerged in this project have been present since I made my first significant body of work for my undergraduate exit show. Rather than trace my entire practice I will try to trace where the themes and subjects I chose for my applied project developed. And that begins with my first trip to Haiti.

That first trip to Haiti left me with an image of a country as persistent as the themes I continuously discovered in my own art practice. I could not let go of my experience there and I struggled with ways to have a practical role in a country that was not my own and how to tell my story to those who had never been to the country or seen the poverty that I saw.

I first met Hyvenson Joseph in 2004. He was a seminarian at Sewanee when I was an undergraduate there. I knew who he was but did not meet him until landing in Port-au-Prince in June. Shortly before graduating I saw Dixon Myers, the outreach coordinator, as I was leaving the dining hall. Dixon asked what I was planning after graduation and when I told him I had no plans he suggested I go to Haiti. I had known Dixon since going to Jamaica with him as a sophomore and had always had a friendly relationship with him. He had recently been to Haiti with Hyvenson and was taken with the country. While Dixon had spent a lot of time in the developing world and had devoted his life to marginalized populations, he was struck by the
level of poverty and discord in Haiti.

The Episcopal University in Port-au-Prince was looking for someone to teach English. I spoke some French and had a spirit of adventure so I said I would consider it. Dixon called me a few days later, "What would you think about going to Haiti next week?" he said. I had to make a quick decision. Dixon wasn't asking me to move to Haiti in a couple of weeks, but to go on a shorter trip with Hyvenson Joseph and a professor from the school of theology at Sewanee. I would be able to meet people at the university and see if teaching for a longer period would be of interest to me. So, I said yes.

A couple weeks later I was on a plane to Port-au-Prince. I have always been a faithful, if terribly inconsistent, journal writer and I made some notes on that first trip to Haiti. The first night I arrived in Haiti I wrote,

I got off the plane completely ready for immersion into the third world when instead I was whisked away to the diplomats' room. They took my passport while I waited in a cushy leather sofa. I became aware that I was supposed to see a specific side of Haiti and they would do everything in their power to avoid the other. (May 23, 2004).

We did see a particular side of Haiti on that first trip, but that first introduction was full of the rich contradictions that define that country. We ate meals at hotels and slept comfortably in
beds made by people other than ourselves. We toured a school, a hospital and saw different parts of Port-au-Prince. The primary reason for the trip was for the professor from the school of theology to hold a week long workshop for the Haitian seminarians on homiletics. Having spent time in some of the poorest parts of Jamaica, I was prepared to see poverty. In some ways I was disappointed that our trip wasn’t grittier. I was there simply as an observer.

In the middle of the week we ate a simple meal of authentic Haitian food and both the professor and I got sick. She recovered quickly but I did not. I had brought antibiotics with me in case I got sick, but they were no match for whatever was reeking havoc on my digestive system. I got very dehydrated and they wanted to take me to the hospital which we had toured the day before. The tour of the hospital made it clear it was not a place I wanted to sit and wait for IV fluids. My mother was able to get my flight changed and I managed my way home. I went straight to the hospital in Atlanta for fluids and spent the next week recovering.

I did not go back to Haiti to teach English. I decided it wasn’t the right time for me personally or professionally. Instead I found my first job and went on with beginning my life as an adult. A few years later my mother met a woman who, with her husband, had devoted their lives to building clinics, schools, orphanages and churches in Haiti. Full of life and a dry sense of humor, Alice White still took a group of doctors, nurses and lay people to a remote town
outside of Cap Hatien in the north of the country. Although my first trip had left me ill, I wanted to find a way to go back. I emailed Alice to see if I could join one of her trips and she said yes.

The following summer I met a group of strangers who quickly became my friends in Miami and we got on a very small plane to fly to Cap Haitien. I spent the week as a clinic assistant and got all of the grittiness my first trip lacked. Everyday we trucked in our generator and set up shop in a rudimentary clinic that saved lives with simple drugs and basic medical care. The patients ranged from infants to the elderly. The daily encounter with malnutrition, life threatening infections due to accidental cuts, and the simple awareness of how people live on the margins between life and death took its tole on me.

Every day at the clinic presented a new set of challenges. There were enough charts to organize, medicines to mix, supplies to deliver to the doctors to make the days go by quickly. But what lingered were the images of the infant with orange hair because of a protein deficiency called kwashiorkor, the swollen infected hand of a man who had cut himself working in the sugar cane fields of the Dominican Republic, and the throngs of people lined up for a fraction of the healthcare we take for granted. Those are images that have become part of my story.

I went back to the clinic again the next year but I haven’t been back to Haiti since, mostly for financial reasons. Since going to Haiti I have struggled with

Figure 3. Image from the 2009 trip to Haiti.
ways to process my own experience there and express the strength of the people in the face of such hardship. My experiences at the clinic left me emotionally raw and I couldn’t help but struggle with how to reconcile the vast disparities happening under one sky. Although I have not been back to Haiti since 2009, I have not been able to let go of my experiences there. I can’t honestly say if I was simply taken with the country or the injustice of the poverty, but at some point it didn’t matter to me.

**Haiti in Context**

I do find the country to be an amazing place. Their triumphant history of emancipation is centered at the intersection of colonialism and neocolonialism. Haiti gained its independence from France in 1804 through a slave rebellion, the only slave rebellion to lead to the founding of a sovereign country. The early triumph left Haiti vulnerable to retribution by their colonial power and punishment by every other colony whose economy depended on slave labor. Since then, Haiti has suffered at the hands of dictators and outside forces whose goal was to protect their own interest rather than that of the Haitian people.

Trying to untangle the reasons for Haiti’s status as the poorest country in the western hemisphere is a complicated task with enough blame to go around for every country and special interest involved. Coming back from my trips there, I read as much as I could to be informed about that history. I wanted to understand how this impoverished country could be a short plane ride from so much wealth in the United States.

I also wanted to understand what my role had become and how Haiti had become part of my own story. I couldn’t help but look at the money I had spent on my trips there and think about what that money could have bought in Haiti had I stayed home. Week long trips of large
groups of Americans are an inefficient way to create lasting change. However the group I went with had been committed to Haiti for many years. They travel back to the same clinic four times a year and keep records on all of the patients. They also support a Haitian doctor who goes to the clinic every week as well as nurses who staff the clinic when he is not there. They founded an orphanage and school in the same town as the clinic. Now they are building homes for elderly who have become a burden to their families. Their continuing care and commitment to the people of Grison Garde has saved countless lives, employed many, and fed thousands. But why did I have to be there?

There is a valid critique of aid and outreach as that of neocolonialism, reinforcing existing power structures. Everyone has their own agenda be it religious, political, economic or personal. Unfortunately, the poorest and most vulnerable are often seen as the only ones without that agency. However having been to Haiti and seen the faces of the recipients of aid and outreach, I can tell you that they do have agency. I know not every organization works in response to the community the way the group I went with does and there are countless examples of how aid and outreach can be the dirty, politically incorrect words they have become. But they can also do a lot of good and when you witness first hand the power of an antibiotic and a clean bandage to save a person’s life; it seems our obsession with the right terminology can be as self centered as the neocolonial aid we are critiquing.

The Earthquake of 2010

With these experiences in mind, I grieved over the devastation of the earthquake of 2010. I was driving to a meeting when I got a call from my mother telling me what had happened. I remember saying, “They are all going to die.” I knew what minor cuts and curable diseases
could do without access to medical care and I could only imagine the horror of such a disaster. To say it didn’t seem fair is such a gross understatement as to be beside the point. It felt like a disaster of Biblical proportions. I had watched disasters on the news before, but never had I had such a personal connection to a place that had suffered such a great loss. I knew electricity and clean water and other basic necessities were scarce before the earthquake and I could only imagine what would happen now that so much of the scant infrastructure was reduced to rubble.

I came to realize that Haiti had become part of my own story. It wasn’t just a place I visited, but an experience I carried with me. Having witnessed first hand the disparity between what we take for granted in the United States and the challenges of daily life in Haiti, I could not let the images I saw on TV go. Even before the earthquake, I knew I would never forget Haiti and what I saw there. But after the earthquake I struggled with how to process the disaster from afar and what was my role as a person who cares about Haiti. I wanted to do something, but felt powerless to know what the right something was.

Moving and working in an artistic practice

Understanding how Haiti has become a part of my life is crucial to understanding why it was important to me to focus on Haiti in my applied project. I officially began my project while developing a proposal in the Community Arts class last spring, but I feel like I’ve been working on the project for much longer. It feels more like I have been in the middle of the project and finally reached the point where a public, physical manifestation of it was appropriate. As much as I want to share my experiences there, I also needed to bring a sense of order to those experiences for myself. Incorporating those experiences into an artistic practice is a way of bringing order while at the same time asking more questions. I will discuss this way of bringing
order in more detail later, but for now I will say that I didn’t feel like I chose Haiti as a topic for my applied project, rather it emerged from years of thinking and processing my experiences there. I knew I had to work through those experiences through my art and writing.

I think I was initially drawn to the idea of mapping because the earthquake had quite literally changed the landscape and the map. Maps are a way of depicting and organizing space in order to represent it so that we may all have a collective experience. Maps are an inherently political document that organizes information so that it becomes a shared experience. As I began to investigate maps I discovered many contemporary artists who are capitalizing on this political document and using it as part of their artistic practice. I reached out to the geography department here at UGA and found their faculty to be incredibly supportive of my endeavor. At the time my immediate goal was to produce a proposal for the Art in the Community class. I had vague ideas about where I wanted to go, but was still searching for the threads that would become a complete project.

Although I knew even at that time that my process would take many turns, it was centered in place. I wanted to understand and represent place in a new way. Mapping seemed like a natural beginning for this process. After meeting with several geography department faculty and other faculty with connections to Haiti, I developed a proposal that was the first step towards organizing my thoughts. The following is the proposal as I submitted it about a year ago:

Arts in the Community - Applied Project Proposal

Introduction: The following proposal constitutes my general plan for my applied project for my master’s degree. For the applied project for the community arts class, I hope to work through as many details of the project plan as possible. As
you will see in the proposal, my project is inter-disciplinary. That is partly because I think the project could be greatly enhanced by working with the geography department, but it is also in an effort to receive funding through the ICE grant program. For the community arts class I plan to begin to work on the logistical details of the project and begin to plan the curriculum for the workshop I would like to lead.

Background: There is a Haitian creole proverb, “tou sa ou we, se pa sa”, that literally means “all that you see: it’s not that”. Or more equivocally translated, “Everything you see before your eyes it’s not what’s really here” (Wilentz, 1989, xii). This proverb gets at the heart of the many problems with mapping. Maps have historically been either realistic attempts at or actual views from above. In an effort to make sense of our world on the ground we have visually depicted it from the one perspective we actually can not see with our human limitations. In Medieval and Renaissance times, maps were creative fantasies with little grounding in reality. With the advent of technology, we have a multitude of ways to map or draw a geographic area. However, mapping is a complicated proposition. What does it mean to see a place from above when you have never actually been off the ground? What does it mean to see your neighborhood when visual images are scarce? How does seeing affect how we think about our place and our construction of reality?

As the artist kanarinka states in her article that serves as a small format psychogeographic dictionary:

The question now for artists (and likely for cartographers) is emphatically not how to make a “better” picture or a more “accurate” map. The world, in fact, needs no representations at all. It need new relations and new uses: in other words, it needs new events, inventions, actions, activities, experiments, interventions, infiltrations, ceremonies, situations, episodes and catastrophes. We have departed from a world of forms and objects and entered a world of relations and events. But we still desperately need art and maps. Is it possible to think of a map not as a representation of reality but as a tool to produce reality? (kanarinka 2006, 25)
Because any method of representation involves a creative act, then how does this
creative act manifest itself in a country such as Haiti with little access to
electricity and therefore fewer visual depictions of the geography? How does
incorporating technology influence that creative act? Mapping is a tool for
drawing what the mind’s eye sees. Because reality exists in the mind’s eye, we
can encounter that reality through a map.

Proposal: In collaboration with the geography department at UGA, I would like to
explore these questions. By using various methods of map making as an artistic
practice in association with GPS technology as data, I will explore the reality of
place in Haiti, a country ravaged by the immeasurable tole of politics and a
massive earthquake. I have traveled to Haiti three times since graduating from
college and have been taken with the spirit of the country as well as the
complexity of their history. Not only does that history along with their economic
circumstances place them at an interesting crossroads between geographic
location and identity, but they have recently undergone a dramatic event that has
had a huge impact on the physical landscape as well as the geography of their
culture and people. There are many different forms this type of data production
and collection can generate. I plan to develop a workshop that explores the
physical landscape of Port-au-Prince before and after the earthquake. In
conclusion, maps are inherently political documents. Every decision that is made
about what is included and excluded, the physical form the map takes as well as
the personal identity of its maker influences its meaning. A map is a creation of
reality rather than a representation of it. In working with the people of Port-au-
Prince I hope to discover how art can help to form their present realities as well as
to uncover a portion of their history.
Bringing an Idea to Life

Although the Art in the Community proposal was my starting place, in many ways my project quickly deviated from my initial plan. I continued to think about the idea of mapping and what it meant to me and my process. I looked at many different artists and how they included the idea of mapping into their work. I tried to identify what it was about the idea of mapping that I was so drawn to. At that point in developing my plans my ideas were murky. I was most interested in how maps provide such a clear example of the intersection of a two dimensional physical representation of space and the political implications of the decisions about what to include and exclude in that representation.

I'm interested in the tension between what and how two-dimensional representation changes a three-dimensional object. And, perhaps more importantly, how can we or do we think of our physical landscape as a three-dimensional object? How does the map facilitate and disturb the translation from 3D to 2D? I am interested in the idea of topography as a sculptural object and how to best represent that. In addition to the formal elements of the land I wanted to see how I could contextualize it with the political and cultural reality of Haiti? I wanted to explore how our physical understanding of a place relates to our emotional connections especially when that place has been physically changed by a traumatic experience. Mapping seemed like an interesting place to explore that intersection between space and place.

I looked at the work of Ruby Wallis titled, “Unfixed Landscape: Is it possible to define place through artistic practice?” In describing the project on her website she said,

As a person who grew up in Coolorta and spent eight years living at the site but who no longer lives there now, I find myself neither insider nor outsider. I am
both unable to fix my belonging, or to fully detach myself. Finding myself in a
state of metaphorical exile (neither here nor there), I struggle to define distances
and boundaries and possible definitions of the ‘place’ and the ‘Other’. The three
attempts to represent place through sound, moving image, audio and photography
involve the practices of movement, walking, swimming and ‘being’ in this place.

(Wallis, 2012)

Her work was a wonderful example of an artist who understood her methods as a form of
research. This understanding of her artistic methods would become important to me later in
considering the final form of my project. With Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology as her
primary theoretical framework, Wallis sought to explore place from a phenomenological
perspective. Through her multi-dimensional research, she tried to understand place through
embodied experience. She used auto-walks and other ethnographic methodologies to explore
both her relation to people in the place and the place itself.

This type of research bridges the gaps between research and artistic practice and thereby
creates a dialogue within one’s own work. In describing her work Wallis began by saying that
she was neither an insider or an outsider and her type of research operates in much the same way.
The research practice and that which it examines cannot be separated from each other. The
research is in and of that which is researched. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) said “To be fully
a part of the crowd and at the same time completely outside it, removed from it: to be on the
edge, to take a walk like Virginia Woolf (never again will I say, ‘I am this. I am that.’)” (p. 29).

The idea of research where the researcher is identified both as other and participant is
important to understand the role of the researcher as one who both affects the process and is part
of the process and observes the process. This understanding of the researcher struck a chord with my understanding of artistic practice and how my process would emerge. I also looked at the work of Communograph by Ashley Hunt. Communograph was organized in collaboration with Rick Lowe’s Project Rowe Houses of Houston’s historic third ward. Communograph is a collaborative project with the residents of the neighborhood, “The title, “Communograph,” was developed to combine “community” with “writing” so as to ground this research in a writing of community from the perspective of the community itself. In this way, each of the five research activities serves as a platform for community members to enter into conversation, sharing their thinking and authorship” (Communograph, 2011).

Communograph included an exhibition of research-based works by artists, a series of sidewalk talks in front of the Communograph house, a participatory mapping and story collecting project, a Mapping Community through Creative Action program, and an interactive website.

The project facilitated community conversations about social change, story telling and artistic research as a manifestation of data.

**Figure 4.** Downloadable Route of Possibilities Map, intended to be a participatory part of the Communograph project. Completed maps were archived.
a multidimensional form of mapping. The products are not two-dimensional renderings of three
If mapping is in most abstract sense is a way of giving abstraction form, then artistic research is

Figure 3. Oddities of the 3rd Ward Map.

Community

describing an experience. Mapping created shared experience which is the essence of
experience. Mapping was not simply a way of depicting a three-dimensional space, but a way of
navigating on the map. The stories and community engaged created a fourth dimension through
arts and culture and a map of possibilities where people were encouraged to make their own
community. They created maps of different aspects of the third ward including addresses, histories,
Community used the idea of mapping conversations and stories as a way of depicting a
dimensional space, but rather an attempt to reconstruct an experience that is an experiential
continuation and exploration of the original experience rather than a representation of it. The
new constructions become an experiential form of mapping.

Although to look at my experiences in Haiti on the surface it may seem that I am nothing
if not an outsider, but the nature of phenomenological experience is that we are all both insiders
and outsiders. According to Merleau-Ponty in his essay *Eye and Mind*,

Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is
c caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it
moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself (p.125 1993).

I could not examine and reconstruct my experiences without an understanding of how I was
situated in those experiences. I was and am physically of the experience and in the experience.

**Searching for Materialism**

After nearly a year of planning for my applied project and many more years of working in
Haiti, I set out to nail down my specific vision. I can best describe the process of making a work
of art as that of discovery. The creative process lives in a place between controlled planning and
intuitive movement. The balancing act of guiding the intuition and letting the mind roam free is
a difficult task that must be practiced and will never be mastered.

When I first began thinking about my project, I had wanted to go back to Haiti to see for
myself how I could describe place and see what had changed since the earthquake. It quickly
became clear that I would have to spend most of my time planning the logistics of taking such a
trip and would not be able to focus as much attention on the work itself as I would have liked.
Furthermore, the concerns I had about what was my role as an outsider who would inevitably be
both of and in the work were magnified by the idea of my going back to Haiti. It just didn’t feel right. Even as the project was merely finding its form, it didn’t feel appropriate for me to travel back to Haiti.

I decided to find a group of people in Atlanta who were part of the Haitian diaspora and might be interested in working with me on a mapping and memory project. I didn’t know at that point exactly what that would mean, but I felt that the details of what constituted a mapping and memory project would emerge from interviews. At this point I was continuing to balance the needs of logistical planning with artistic freedom and intuition. I met a new group of women in Atlanta who have been to Haiti many times and are working on a large scale community project there. They are teaching women in Haiti embroidery skills and interviewing them about the history of Haiti. They are then taking those stories and designing a Bayeux Tapestry depicting the history of Haiti. I told them my story and that I was looking for a group of women who might be interested in telling me their descriptions of place and space since the earthquake. Although I had a prior relationship with Haiti, I did not have a prior relationship with the women in Atlanta and it felt like the balance of outsider versus participant was not appropriate. I was searching for ways to understand my personal experience and explore the reality of Haiti. I realized that I only had to look back to my past to discover where I would pick up my narrative.

I contacted Hyvenson to see if he would be willing to help me with my project through a series of interviews and graciously he said yes. From the very beginning he understood that the process would be amorphous and its shape would emerge over time. Wanting to root the experience in place, I started by structuring the interviews around that 2004 trip. I wanted to know what had happened to the places we visited in the earthquake and to start to build a new
map. Our conversations began with place, but they meandered into politics and Hyverson’s personal story of growing up in Haiti. We discussed the coups of the 1990’s, his support of Aristide and what his parents told him about Baby Doc and Papa Doc. He gave me a true sense of what it must have felt like to live through such turmoil while loving and grieving for your country.

The process of the interviews felt like a conversation where I tried my best to facilitate the conversation while saying as little as possible and letting Hyverson tell his story. I hadn’t planned to talk extensively about the last 25 years of politics and Haiti, but that’s where the conversation went. I had read books on my own, but it was different to hear about the history from the perspective of someone who has lived it. Reading about the history and seeing it on TV is a very different experience from living the history. Rather than materializing the specific content of our interviews, I wanted to materialize a new experience that would be intriguing to viewers and I struggled with how best to do this.

After much struggle and struggling at not struggling in order that the ideas may flow freely, there is a moment when the threads begin to come together in a way that the fabric holds its own weight. The goal of the creative process is not to manifest something that is dependent
on the artist's internal logic but one that generates its own energy and logical system. I wasn't trying to find a way to represent my conversations so that a viewer could transcribe them, but could create their own experience. Figuring out what that would look like felt more like discovering something rather than creating something. Ann Hamilton describes this experience saying, "I know when I'm making work like there's a point at which I can't see it, I can't see it in my head, and then you know there's that moment when I can see it and you think it might be beautiful. It has a chance, it's like it bites you and then you will go to all in ends sometimes to try to see it in fact and of course it's always different or something else" (Cojori, 2001).

I started to sketch the art education gallery in hopes of finding my installation. I thought about different ways to incorporate text and create an emotional experience. I wanted to give the text a three dimensional form. Text by definition is an abstract representation, but instead of seeing this as problematic I wanted to see what that abstraction could do for an installation. I can't say exactly how I determined the form for my final installation, but it did feel like a moment of discovery. It's one moment that occurs from hours of working. All of the sudden I

Figure 6. First image from my sketch book. March 2013.
saw it. Seeing it is the culmination of the play between logic and intuition, but unpacking the nuances of the materialization takes many moments and happens over time.

*Figure 7.* Second image from my sketch book that would become the final installation. March 2013.
**Routed in Theory**

After all my struggling and processing, *Topophilia* took shape as an audio/visual installation. I transcribed the text from my interviews with Hyvenson and randomized the conversation using the programming environment Max MSP. The dynamically constructed new conversation was projected onto a round drum hanging from the ceiling. At the same time, the audio from the interviews was sent at very low frequencies through a transducer that was attached to a shallow pool of water. The water vibrated and visualized the audio. The installation became an environment that on the surface was far removed from Haiti or even from the original interviews. But the theoretical support for the content of *Topophilia* was as important as its original subject matter.

I was once told by my professor that the contemporary artist is not defined by how well they can draw but how well they can think. The same could be said for contemporary art; it is judged by what it does, how it functions and the experience it creates rather than what it is. Art is no longer a thing, but an amalgam of constructions of experiences. There may have been a time when the *thingness* of art was easier to identify as a painting or a sculpture, but art has always existed through experience; the experience between the viewer and the work of art. The theoretical underpinnings for *Topophilia* can be found in the work of Joseph Beuys, John Dewey, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Ellizabeth Ellsworth. *Topophilia* is about dialogue, experience and the pedagogy of space and these authors and artists provide the infrastructure and philosophical understanding that make it possible.

In describing his plan to plant 7,000 oak trees across the world, Joseph Beuys explained his intentions,
It is a new step this working with trees. It is not a real new dimension in the whole concept of the metamorphosis of everything on this earth and the metamorphosis of the understanding of art. It is about the metamorphosis of the social body in itself to bring it to a new social order for the future in comparison with the existing private capitalistic system and the state centralized communistic system. It has a lot to do with a new quality of time. There is another dimension of time involved, so it has a lot to do with a new understanding of the human being itself.

It has to make clear, a reasonable practical anthropology. It is also a spiritual necessity which we have to view in relation to this permanent performance. This will enable it to reach to the heart of existing systems-- especially to the heart of economics-- since the wider understanding of art is related to everyone's creative ability. It makes it very clear and understandable to everybody that the capital of the world is not the money as we understand it, but the capital is the human ability for creativity, freedom and self determination in all their working places... This idea would lead to a neutralization of the capital and would mean that money is no longer a commodity in the economy. Money is a bill for law, for rights and duties you know... it will be as real and will lead to a democratic bank system...

(1990, p.114)

This quote is from an interview in 1982. Beuys was touring America for an extended performance piece titled, "Energy Plan for the Western Man." He participated in a series of interviews in order to explain his intentions and demonstrate what he called social sculpture.
According to Caroline Tisdale, “The theory of Social Sculpture by which Beuys described the process of creation was based on three stages: the passage from chaotic energy and unformed mass through a process of harmony and molding to a determined and crystallized form. It was a principle he applied in different contexts, as was his adaptation of Steiner’s anthroposophic description of the three main areas of social organization” (1990, p. 11). While Beuys was not the first to use experience, performance and situations as the basis for an artistic practice, his descriptions of his disparate experiences in terms of one cohesive artistic practice was unique. Allan Kaprow’s happenings and the performance art of the 1960’s and 70’s was already a part of the artistic lexicon, but Beuys’ practice outlined a different way of thinking about art. Beuys situated art outside of one specific event by looking at all experience as a potential part of artistic practice.

While Topophilia is in some ways a discrete installation, the art of Topophilia is found over the last nine years of working in Haiti and working through my artistic practice. Because of Beuys’ expanded notion of art, the art of Topophilia does not have to be confined to the final materialization of the project. Looking at art through the lens of social sculpture as defined by Beuys, the art is found in all of the experiences of the piece, not only the final experience that happens in a gallery setting.

What Beuys described is now referred to as relational aesthetics and social practice, among other terms. While art critics would like to find a term to solidify an immaterial art practice, the nature of the practice defies a codified definition. Nicolas Bourriaud has defined this thread in contemporary art as relational aesthetics saying, “After the area of relations between Humankind and deity, and then between Humankind and the object, artistic practice is now
focused upon the sphere of inter-human relations, as illustrated by artistic activities that have been in progress since the early 1990's" (2002, p.28). Joseph Beuys' performance piece defied objectification not only because of the difficulty in situating the art in planting the 7,000 trees, but because the art did not begin and end with planting 7,000 trees. The art was defined by an artistic practice that incorporated his interviews, experiences, and entire way of being. It was an art practice defined by experiences and relations: the experiences of the growth of the trees, the political ramifications of an anti-capitalistic gesture, and the interviews and talks Beuys gave to explain that piece and others. The Dia Art Foundation financed the piece and over a period of six years planted close to sixty percent of the trees. As the slow growing trees continue to enhance their surroundings and the lives of people who pass them each day, the piece continues to exist and change.

**John Dewey, Art as Experience**

Joseph Beuys' version of social sculpture may have come about in the middle of the twentieth century, but many of the ideas behind "social sculpture" can be found in the aesthetic philosophy of John Dewey. Dewey described the act of viewing art saying, "As a piece of parchment, of marble, of canvas, it remains (subject to the ravages of time) self-identical throughout the ages. But, as a work of art it is recreated every time it is aesthetically experienced" (1934, p. 113). In Dewey's time, art was more often limited to marble or canvas, but the aesthetic experience he is describing exists regardless of the medium. Joseph Beuys took the aesthetic experience itself and allowed it to be his primary art practice. Dewey described the aesthetic experience one has directly with the art. The experience he was describing becomes a dialogue between the viewer and the art. This dialogue is very important to understanding
Topophilia. Topophilia rests on the notion that it must be read; it must be read as a visual language but the text itself must also be read. In order for the viewer to understand how the piece functions, to understand what it is doing they must engage in a dialogue with the piece and have their own aesthetic experience.

Through the individual aesthetic experience and by engaging with the art, the viewer engages in an individual construction and becomes more of a participant rather than a viewer. Experience must be isolated in order to describe the process of meaning making and the creation of knowledge. In reality the most important aspect of experience is how experiences are connected and interwoven. How they are interwoven and how we choose to exploit those connections as artists and educators is central to our success. Dewey states, “The real work of art is the building up of an integral experience out of the interaction of the organic and environmental conditions and energies” (1934, p. 67). Whether we experience art or learning, how those experiences affect us is integrated and influenced by our previous experiences. John Dewey understood that art was defined by those experiences rather than simply its physical presence.

Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics

Bourriaud took the aesthetic experience as defined by Dewey and social sculpture defined by Beuys and codified them into a theory of art called relational aesthetics. Beuys may have been the first to discuss his experiences and the experiences he created as a form of sculpture, but many artists followed in his footsteps and took his ideas even further. Bourriaud’s book Relational Aesthetics functions as a catalogue of late 20th century art making that relies on experience as its primary material. Bourriaud asks the question what does the art do rather than
what is the art. Relational aesthetics explores how the work is moving and functioning in the world. He describes that function saying, “The subversive and critical function of contemporary art is now achieved in the invention of individual and collective vanishing lines, in those temporary and nomadic constructions whereby the artist models and disseminates disconcerting situations” (2002, p.31). Bourriaud not only explores the idea of a construction of knowledge and experience defined by the artist as introduced by Dewey, but he explores the idea of that construction as being “nomadic.” The construction itself is on the move.

*Topophilia* not only requires this understanding of experience as moving, but it tries to exemplify this notion through the dynamic randomization of the text. Not only is the experience of each viewer dynamic and fleeting, but the installation itself is literally moving. Bourriaud synthesized the work of many different artists and understood how they were using these notions of ephemerality and experience and the primary material for their artwork. Situating this type of work in a historical context Bourriaud said,

This type of activity presupposes a contract with the viewer, an ‘arrangement’ whose clauses have tended to become diversified since the 1960’s. The artwork is thus no longer presented to be consumed within a ‘monumental’ time frame and open for a universal public; rather it elapses within a factual time, for an audience summoned by an artist (2002 p.29).

Relational aesthetics relies on the idea that art is doing something rather than being something. Or perhaps more importantly, the essence of being is doing. Once the question is about function then the answer can include all types of experiences and doings. *Topophilia* is meant to be experienced and felt over time. It emerges through and in relationship with the viewer.
Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Places of Learning*

As *Topophilia* emerges, the experience that exists through the viewer and the space that experience creates becomes a type of pedagogy. Elizabeth Ellsworth eloquently explores the question of the pedagogy of art, architecture and place. She begins by describing her notion of pedagogy saying, "My intention is to open a discussion regarding an *experience* of learning that has little to do with *learning as compliance*. I am concerned, instead, with the experience of learning that gives rise to that unmistakable, naked, vulnerable look of simultaneous absorption and self-presence" (2009, p.16). To say that Ellsworth is concerned with the construction of knowledge rather than the transference of knowledge does not go far enough to illustrate the essence of her argument. Her interest lies in the pre-linguistic essence of learning at the heart of the ongoing construction of assemblages. Ellsworth uses the relational and experiential constructions as established by Dewey and Bourriaud and looks at them through the lens of pedagogy. The relational experiences created by each viewer/participant create assemblages of knowledge that is the essence of learning.

Rather than thinking of teaching and learning as a reciprocal, dialectical relationship, Ellsworth argues for pedagogy as a radical synthesis between the two. Teaching and learning do not exist in opposition to one another but rather function together as part of the same construction. She emphasizes the role of pedagogy as a function rather than a representation saying,

They encourage us to ask what pedagogy does rather than what it means or how it means. Pedagogy as a "sensation construction" is no longer merely "representational." It is no longer a model that teachers us to set the terms in
which already-known ideas, curriculums, or knowledges are put into relation;
rather to the extent that sensations are “conditions of possible experience,”
pedagogy as a sensation construction is a condition of possible experiences of
thinking. (2009, p. 27)

According to Ellsworth, pedagogy has its own materiality defined by lived experience. The lived experience is a function of a material change, newness and emergence in our brains. Pedagogy exists through the living, material function of emergent knowledge and experience. The description of pedagogy as something that does something, constructs something, parallels Bourriaud and Dewey’s ideas of art as doing something. Because of the common denominator of assemblages of constructed experience, art can be understood as its own pedagogy.

In describing the geography of a functional pedagogy, Ellsworth uses D.W. Winnicott’s idea of “transitional space, a term that refers, in part, to the interval, the space of self-difference, and the process of self change that opens up in the psyche when the experience of the learning self is in the making” (2009, p.31). The importance of transitional space lies in its capacity for change, changing the self. In order for experience to be embodied, one must be open to the change and newness that comes from lived experience. Change of the self cannot exist without self-difference. Self-difference implies both otherness and sameness. Self-difference does not only place the subject and object in opposition to one another but recognizes that both the subject and the object are necessary for self-change.

This understanding of the relationship between the subject and the object is essential for art to be defined by relational experiences. In the case of Topophilia, the self is both inside and
outside the piece at the same time, both in a phenomenological sense and a philosophical sense. The piece only exists in relation to the self but in order for the self to engage in that relationship it must be simultaneously inside and outside the piece. Ellsworth explores the simultaneity of subject and object and how that understanding of self relates to the function of pedagogy and space.

While she explores several different spaces and how they function pedagogically, Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial and The Holocaust Museum serve as central texts. Both of those spaces promote thinking and experience. Neither, however, seeks to answer questions rather they propose the viewer engage in a conversation. The pedagogy of place hinges on embodied experience, much of which is understood at a pre-linguistic level. Place is sensed and experienced before it is understood on a conscious level. The non-cognitive experience of place constructs knowledge rather than acquires knowledge in a didactic, cognitive method. Those places are not meant to instruct one in a preconceived transference of knowledge, but rather as an invitation to participate in a dialogue of experience, a multi-logue of assemblages.

The pedagogy of place, built upon a multitude of assemblages can be thought of as a infrastructure for experience rather than the delivery of knowledge. Ellsworth (2009) describes this model of pedagogy in contrast with a grid pedagogical model saying,

Pedagogy practiced for the sake of the grid functions as a mere connector between predetermined meanings and identities. It does nothing to address the learning self in motion as it moves between the grids binary poles and is no longer identifiable with or addressable through socially constructed positions. (p.120)
It is important to notice the distinction between a space that has something to teach and a space that functions as a pedagogy. Part of this distinction hinges on the idea that the pedagogical functions both on the conscious and subconscious level. Most importantly it functions in relationship. The transitional and relational space as described by Ellsworth and Winnicott is defined as “Being in relation opens up a space of difference between self and other, inner and outer realities. It opens up a third zone, a space that I can experience as both me and not me” (2009, p.64). Once again, this third zone is part of the function of pedagogy. It creates a relational space based on intersubjectivity and the simultaneity of the self and other.

With the embodiment of pedagogy as a goal, Frank Gehry was charged with constructing a replacement of the “fabled Building 20” (2009 p.71). The original Building 20 was initially conceived of as a temporary space but quickly became renowned for the creativity it embodied. Because it was made of plywood, its users felt they had the freedom to adjust and reconstruct it to their needs, famously drilling holes through the floor and moving walls to suit their functional and creative needs. With that creative spirit in mind, Gehry set out to build a new building that could facilitate a similar freedom and creativity. Ellsworth describes Gehry’s effort to embody these ideas saying, “The pedagogical pivot place of Gehry’s design of the Stata building consists of its flexible and unfinished interior” (2009, p. 71). The moving pedagogy of the place is found in the experience of the building’s users.

The examples Ellsworth uses are primarily spaces with singular authorship. The artist, architect or designer has intentions for the space. When considering spaces as pedagogy, a pedagogy based on constructed meaning rather than representation, the role of design is important to consider. While the spaces can be designed, the pedagogical experience cannot be
planned for or predicted. The distinction between a designed for space or experience and a pre-established delivery of experience is at the heart of the pedagogy of place. Pedagogy is inherently unpredictable. Because it is defined by experience, relationships and constructions, it requires unpredictability. If it were predictable, it would not be an authentic pedagogy. Whether designing buildings or installation, to design them around a pedagogy means to design for constructed experience rather than consumable knowledge.

In describing the Holocaust Memorial Museum, Ellsworth writes,

> The power of the address of the pedagogy of this museum lies in its indeterminacy. This museum, with its primary objective of education, paradoxically embraces the ways that histories of the Holocaust throw the pedagogical relation between teacher and student into crisis (2009, p.100).

While the architecture of the museum and the design of the exhibits have a point of view, part of that point of view is indeterminacy. The indeterminacy engages the viewer/participant in a way that engages the space and embodies its pedagogy. Once again, the pedagogy does not function as a preconceived delivery of substance, but acts through relationship and experience.

**Pedagogy as Artistic Practice**

The same indeterminacy that comes from the teacher/student relationship works through the artist/viewer/participant relationship. The terms we have to describe the actor in those relationships are insufficient. The words we have do not embody the simultaneity of the subject/object relationship that is necessary to understand the role of pedagogy in space and artistic practice. I am often struck by the limitations of language. The French language has more than one word for knowing, *savoir* and *connaitre*. *Savoir* is to know a fact and *connaitre* is to be
familiar with or to know a person. We often understand pedagogy as if *savoir* is the goal while in fact *connaitre* is closer to the experiential potential of pedagogy. Even that more nuanced understanding of knowing falls short of the embodied, relational pedagogy Ellsworth describes. The main reason it falls short is because of its use of language itself. Experience and feeling before conscious thought is the crux or hinge of relational, transitional, embodied pedagogy. Pedagogy is not about understanding what has already been made, but experiencing that which is in the process of becoming.

This understanding of pedagogy allows a new understanding of my own work and how it functions as a pedagogy. It also raises the question, is there art that is not at the same time a pedagogy? The making of art happens through experience with the piece or space. It is an inherently social process of creation and recreation. *Topophilia* rests on the unpredictability of the construction but it also seeks to comment on that construction. It is always in a state of becoming, a state of constructing. Not only is it being constructed by the viewer, but it is constructing itself by randomizing the conversation.

My personal definition for art and art education is anything that is more than the sum of its parts. My definition may be weak and full of holes, but I think what I have been interested in is the transitional space of pedagogy. Art and art education are more than the sum of their parts because they create transitional spaces. The third space is the function of art; it’s what it does. I want to create art that facilitates these transitional spaces and experiences. Both art and pedagogy share a functional quality; they both do something. If they do not function as a verb then one might ask if they exist at all. Can art and pedagogy exist without doing something? *Topophilia* is doing the work of pedagogy.
Understanding My Artistic Practice as Research

Winnie-the-Pooh said, "When...you think of Things, you find sometimes that a Thing which seemed very Thingish inside you is quite different when it gets out into the open and has other people looking at it" (Milne 2001). Winnie the Pooh is a conceptual artist. His understanding of the fickle nature of questions and things is unmatched. Proper questions should lead to more questions and all things are ephemeral. We move through things as the manifestation of ideas just as they move through us. Research is a dynamic process of living in inquiry rather than a linear process searching for answers. In this one quote, Pooh has realized the nature of conceptualizing and manifesting ideas into the world where they live in relationship with those outside their creator. The nature of the creative process is that it seeks to untangle the inter-weavings of the mind into something that can be experienced outside the imaginings of the creator. The manifestation of the internal process as a "thing" that lives outside the mind of the creator is inherently problematic. As a thing in its own right, that manifestation takes on a new construction in relationship to the viewer/experiencer who then takes on a new role as creator. The cycle of creator and experiencer continues indefinitely as does the manifestation of the "thing."

Research questions in particular are thin masks for the real questions under the surface that are far more complex and pertinent. The most important questions are those we do not know to ask. Artistic practice is a way of seeking those unknown questions. It is a method for searching for questions through practice. Although this statement could be made for all research methods, I believe there is something inherent in the artistic practice that allows for a different type of freedom to search for questions and, perhaps most importantly, to recognize the need for
changing methods and expressions of these questions. Identifying the distinction between the researcher as artistic practitioner and artistic practitioner as researcher is a Sisyphean task that results in subjective judgements rather than qualitative distinctions. The real question to ask is what can be learned from different ways of theorizing both an artistic practice and a research practice? What can be learned by inverting each practice and uncovering new means of understanding?

My Grandmother was one of Winnie-the-Pooh’s biggest fans. She corresponded with one of her closest friends over a lifetime each using a sous de nom from Winnie-the-Pooh; she was Pooh and her friend was Piglet. Pooh also said, “I’m not lost for I know where I am. But however, where I am may be lost” (Milne, 2001). The type of research I am interested in exploring is not completed in one case study or ethnography, it requires finding oneself lost. It is a way of living, of living in the inquiry of losing oneself in and through an artistic practice as a manifestation of that inquiry. Using Pooh’s sensibility to untangle the cycle of creation and manifestation, I hope to live through a practice of artistic research.

Installation as Pedagogy - Space as and through Dialogue

Understanding Topophilia requires situating it within the context not only of my own personal narrative but my body of work. When I look back at my work, it always functions on multiple levels: metaphoric, specific and personal. Those different levels work together to create an emotional experience which transcends each individual component.

Metaphoric

While the subject matter is about Haiti, both my experiences with the interview process and being in the country, the piece itself exists outside of that specific subject matter. When a
viewer first encounters the piece there is no indication of the subject matter. The piece becomes a jarring and yet mesmerizing encounter between the falling text and the vibrating pool of water below. In order to understand the content and context of the piece, one must take the time to read the lines of text and understand the lines of the dialogue are not in a logical order. Rather the text begins to exist in a realm outside of what we understand text to be. We expect the text to be a concrete narrative, something that we can understand as clear, representative language.

Text is always based on a construction of our own experience, but we take for granted that there are universals in language. When I came to realize this installation was more specifically about text than mapping, I remembered Italo Calvino’s novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* where he says, “Then from the very first page you realize that the novel you are holding has nothing to do with the one you were reading yesterday” (1981, p.32). Text is a new construction every time we come to it; in *Topophilia* this is true both in the philosophical sense and the literal sense. Because the conversation was dynamically randomized, the text was different for every viewer. The meaning of the text and the order of the text were both on the move and in a state of becoming. Not only did this change the experience with the piece for every viewer, it meant that the piece had no beginning and end. It was not a movie run on a loop or a static, site specific installation. The piece existed only as it was in the process of being constructed and activated by both the computer driving the randomized conversation and the viewer participating in the installation.

Although *Topophilia* was dynamically shifting through the movement of the text, the goal was still to create a common experience. While we all have our own unique experience with a work of art, there is a sense of a common experience if not an explicitly shared one. This shared
experience and potential for intersubjectivity through the process of becoming, is what is most interesting to me about using an installation to depict a series of interviews. Regardless of the physical form of the installation and the randomization of the test, the installation was simply a way to recreate a dialogue; a dialogue which could be read in its plain text form. But I chose to represent it through an installation because I wanted to create a shared experience. As an installation the text could be experienced by more than one person at once and it becomes something entirely new and different than it would if it were simply read or heard. Art has the potential to give form to that space created by common experience.

Many people commented that the way the text scrolled down the black cylinder it appeared to drop into the shallow pool of water below. The vibrating water appeared to be correlated to the scrolling text. The black cylinder and the glass pool directly beneath it created one complete column that connected the text and the vibrating water beneath it both physically and metaphorically. In fact the vibrating water was caused by another manifestation of the text. The
audio of the interviews was transposed to very low frequencies which were then sent through a transducer. While making contact with a piece of plexiglass, the transducer vibrated the shallow pool of water and visualized the speech from the interviews. Because the percussive sounds coming from the transducer were generated by speech they exhibited the rhythm of speech patterns. It felt like speech.

Not only did the two parts of the installation create a column like structure, it also allowed the viewer to walk around the text and sound. Circumnavigating the piece activated a performative element on the part of the viewer. The piece could be never seen in its entirety without the viewer moving just as the text and the water moved. The viewer then not only became an active participant in the construction of the piece but a part of the action as well. A portion of Topophilia was always just out of sight. Two different randomizations of the text were occurring simultaneously. There is no way to take in the entire content of the text in one viewing. Topophilia is meant to be felt, sensed and experienced rather than read.
Specific

Dr. Leara Rhodes attended the opening for Topophilia and had some interesting observations about the connotations she saw. Dr. Rhodes is a professor in the Grady college at UGA and spent a year in Haiti on a Fulbright Fellowship. She commented that the piece felt like Haiti to her. She said that the percussive sounds coming from the transducer remind her of Haitian drumming which is so important in their culture. She talked about how important drumming is as a way of expression and communication. Although I have not had the experience with Haitian drummers that she has, I was interested in the evocative nature of the percussion. For Dr. Rhodes the reference may have felt specifically Haitian, but for someone without a knowledge of Haitian drumming it felt more like a code. It was as though the text was being hammered out in short pops and beats. Those sounds also became a sort of text; a text to be felt rather than read. Whether they are thought of as drumming or morse code, the percussive sounds draw in the viewer in a way that the text does not on its own. They are odd and disarming causing the viewer to look for answers rather than accept the sounds for what they are.

The sounds and the visualization of the vibrations also reference the earthquake itself. Not only do we understand text to be on the move in a philosophical sense, but an earthquake such as the one in Haiti, is a horrific reminder that the ground we live on is always on the move and in a state of becoming. It may move in imperceptibly slow geologic time, but every so often geologic time intersects with human scale with disastrous results. As with many earthquakes, the Haitian earthquake included many different seismographic events that lasted for days terrorizing people who had no access to the media which might explain what was going on. The vibrations rolled on as the percussive sounds from the glass drum continue.
In using the written text of a conversation as the basis for an installation, I thought a lot about the barriers of the written word to the Haitian population with such low literacy rates. The conversation took place in English, a language spoken by very few, and I then transcribed the conversation into a written text further removing the text from anything that could be understood by the common Haitian person. On the one hand it could be said that the common Haitian was not my audience. No Haitians viewed the piece in person to my knowledge and the piece will never be shown in Haiti in its original form. The audience for the piece was predominantly educated white Americans. Although the impetus for creating the installation came out of a genuine desire to make sense of my experience and to create a shared experience with the audience, I did so without Haiti being part of that audience.

However I would like to think that because the installation is so emotional, that a Haitian audience could still be participants in the dialogue and the shared experience. Topophilia has its own emotional resonance regardless of the specific reconstruction of the text. The content of the text is rich, but the emotional experience the installation creates is its own type of text. That text becomes its own pedagogy that must be experienced and lived.

**Personal**

While I can clearly situate my personal experiences in Haiti in this installation, I think the search for place and shared experience has existed in my work in other ways as well. I've always been interested in how art can create a shared experience and how we externalize an internal idea and/or feeling. In my exit show for my undergraduate degree in sculpture I tried to
make that internal space into an object by making a mold of my own head and casting and sculpting my head in different materials. I wanted to give a form to the mind; to objectify my own head so that I could be outside of it. I looked at many artists who work through an exploration of the body but I wasn’t as

*Figure 10. Construction #1 and Construction #2 The University Gallery at The University of the South, 2004*

interested in understanding the body as an object, but rather the mind as an object. I wanted to understand the relationship between our inner and outer selves.

In many ways these are the relationships with which all art struggles. How do we give a form to an idea and what happens to that idea when it becomes a form? The answer is that the formation and materialization of an idea changes the idea. The idea becomes something new and leads to more questions. In my experience, the materialization of a work of art, physical or experiential or both, never equals what I saw in my mind’s eye. But the inadequacy of the realization of an idea is not a failure in
the traditional sense. It is the disconnect between the idea and the realization that drives an artist to keep making.

I tried to express this very basic problem in my earlier work, but the problem persists. In *Topophilia* I was also working with the problem of creating a shared experience, but rather than trying to understand shared experience by creating an object, I tried to understand intersubjectivity by creating an experience. I was interested in exploring that third space that is not the viewer or the object, but the overlap. Rather than try to make that third space into an object, I wanted the installation to live as that third space as discussed by Ellsworth and Winnicott.

*Figure 12. Construction #4 The University Gallery at The University of the South, 2004*
Conclusion and Implications

If new work comes from the unanswered questions of previous work, then I must look at this most recent pause in my practice to see where it will lead me. I think most of those questions concern my artistic practice and where it merges with a research practice. While I was at the Open Engagement Conference at Portland State University I was confronted with many different types of socially engaged art that seemed to blur the lines between artistic practice and research. However, I didn’t hear anyone talk about their art as a form of research. I went to a panel discussion by a group of sociologists who raised concerns around the ethics of socially engaged work and the usefulness of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) in sociology research, but they didn’t talk about the overlap between social practice as an artistic framework for art making and arts based research as a product for a line of inquisition. In my mind it was the elephant in the room. Everything was pointing towards an understanding of social practice work as a research based practice, but that term did not enter the conversation.

While the sociologist raised some very important questions about the rise in work that looks more like social activism rather than traditional art, I couldn’t help but feel they were also putting their academic research and artistic practices in a hierarchy. Art practice that may look like sociology research is not subject to the academic rigor of an IRB. There are clear advantages to operating outside a system that was built for empirical research. While artists are not immune to the ethical concerns of a research practice, they are not subject to an external review board. However, if artistic practices that could be understood as research continue to function outside of the traditional research model do they do themselves a disservice? Do they lose credibility?
Having had the opportunity to revisit my artistic practice and experience in working through the process of my installation, the parallels to a research practice are clear. My research occurred through my artistic practice. But what would that artistic practice have looked like if I had set out to engage in a research practice? What if I had gone so far as to begin with submitting an IRB? Would an IRB have limited my practice? Or would it have sent my practice in a different direction? Some of these questions are genuine concerns over the academic research process because I haven’t had experience with that process. But those are philosophical questions as well. The balance between controlled planning and intuitive decisions that I described earlier may not be suited for a research panel accustomed to concrete questions.

I’m interested in seeing what it means to work through a research question with an artistic practice. Not only for the purpose of using artistic methods, but to determine how that approach to art making affects the art. Can the lens of research become a constraint that facilitates innovative artistic methods or is it so restrictive that the authenticity of the artistic practice is lost? I’m also interested in how my more nuanced understanding of the role of the viewer as both participant and collaborator will affect my work. Bourriaud talks about relational aesthetics creating micro-communities. Although it’s clear that socially engaged practices and interactive work include the viewer in a unique way, how to give the viewer agency in that role is difficult. This type of work requires the viewer to construct their own experience and act as participants and yet they may prefer to think of themselves as passive viewers. Artwork facilitates common experiences. Shared experiences create the intersubjectivity necessary for community to develop. That community is best manifested by engaged participants rather than passive recipients.
Engaged participants, however, are not to be taken for granted. All art may be defined by the experience it creates, but the artist is not in control over the desire of the viewer to participate in that experience. I believe engaging viewers and facilitating their desire to be participants is an area where an art practice and art education overlap; where the art practice becomes one of education. Not only can the art itself serve as a means for education, and therefore a form of pedagogy, but the art becomes a means to educate about art. The micro-communities Bourriaud discusses are essentially learning communities that can happen in a gallery, in a classroom or on the street.

I want to consider how all of these questions fit into the broader picture of my art practice. I will always find Haiti to be a rich place and would like to continue to see how it is part of my own story, but it will never be the only source of content in my work. One thing that struck me at the Open Engagement Conference was how many people were willing to leave physical materials behind for a practice based only on relational aesthetics and experience. While I’m always interested in creating experiences over objects, those experience often begin with materials for me. Materials drive a curiosity to discover what type of experience they will create. Those materials drive the intuitive decisions that lead to an emotional experience. I will always be driven by a combination of experience as well as a desire to make things.

Finally, engaging in the process of making what felt like such a monumental work of art has been one of discovery for me. It has been about discovery of new technology, new means for creating, and a new understanding of my process. Understanding my own process of discovery is essential to exploring an artistic practice through my own teaching practice. After a year of researching my own process I have a new found understanding of that process. This process has
allowed me to map out my practice in a way that I could not have expected when I originally set out to explore the idea of mapping. If the essence of mapping is bringing order to ideas, then it can serve as a fruitful metaphor for the artistic practice. Mapping the pedagogy of my own practice has helped me to understand my motivation for past work as well as to situate forthcoming questions in future work.
References


