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Gestating Art in the Matrixial Labyrinth

The article examines the artworkings (the art and the processes) of the Gestare Art Collective spanning two artist residencies at The Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts (2009–10). As spiritual feminist artists we engage an arts-based praxis of inquiry through ritual labyrinth making, walking, sounding, and spontaneous movements documenting and creatively rendering these experiences. The ancient cross-cultural architecture of the labyrinth offers a mobile container for our on-going site-related artworkings. To assist the unfolding of womb understandings that have been emerging within our labyrinthal artworkings we draw from the concepts of chora, the ancient Greek word for space, and Bracha Ettinger's (2005) matrixial copoiesis, a radical theory that situates itself in the symbolic intrauterine space of the womb. Ettinger's theory calls us to critical, ethical and aesthetical awareness of the impact our artworkings have on each other and others with whom we are resonating within the matrixial sphere, whether cognized or uncognized. This latter imperative is a corrective to the often unethical practices of art in phallic spheres. By entering the matrixial realm collaboratively, the collective endeavors to extend the arts-based understandings found in Ettinger's solo artworkings, laying the groundwork for the development of what we understand as a matrixial infused education for women's collaborative artworkings.

Introduction: The Matrixial Lens

This article tells the story, at times vulnerable and fragile, of the ethical and aesthetical development of a women's artist collective through arts-based co-encounters and co-events with the earth, Kosmos¹ and each other. To do this we critically reflect upon and examine some of the artworkings (the

art and the processes) of the Gestare Art Collective that emerged from two artist residencies at The Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts, on the Toronto Islands in Canada (2009 and 2010). As women who are committed to living as process artists in relationship with each other, the earth, Kosmos and all its inhabitants, we honour gestation within our inquiry and pedagogical practices. Our individual spiritual and feminist-based art practices include mixed-media drawing, sound composition, improvised vocal sounding, video, photography, textiles, and ritual arts.

To assist the analysis of our experience we insert a “matrixial” lens or a “matrixial” imaginary onto our experiences and the artworkings. Art writer Griselda Pollock describes how matrixial theory, as developed by artist/theorist Bracha L. Ettinger, “invites us to consider aspects of subjectivity *as encounter* occurring at shared *borderspaces* between several *partial-subjects*, never entirely fused nor totally lost, but sharing and processing, within difference, elements of each unknown other.” Ettinger’s post-Lacanian theory, based on the symbolic qualities of the womb, reinserts the matrixial lens beside, behind, below and above the hegemonic phallic lens. Thinking through the matrixial takes on the challenge of thinking through the trauma of repression/return and of remembering and forgetting. The encounter with unknown elements of the other in matrixial borderspaces can be between humans and non-humans. The co-encounters can be aesthetic, ethical and political (cited in Pollock). Through sharing our experiences and artworkings, which are infused by relationships in human and non-human realms, we endeavor to create an aesthetic, ethical and political co-encounter for/with the reader/viewer. It is our desire that the co-encounters may invoke an awareness of the possibilities that are found within the matrixial.

Women’s Spirituality: Naming Ourselves

The collective evolved within a framework of women’s spirituality, drawing on scholars such as Elenor Gadon, Charlene Spretnak, and Starhawk. Spiritual feminism and women’s spirituality are critical, transformative and restorative locations of “spiritually-engaged knowledge” (Crawford) that shift the focus of spirituality from its containment within religion to its further expression and experience in everyday life. Women’s Spirituality, as a social movement within North America, grew from feminist critiques of male-centred, patriarchal religion, women’s reformations of such both within and outside of the Judeo-Christian religious traditions (Braude; Spretnak), and inter-religious dialogues and practices based upon women’s experiences within Eastern traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism (Shaw). Within this movement, women continue to co-create and reclaim ancient and contemporary goddess-centred spirituality

and education, re-coup understanding of the Earth and all of “her” beings as sacred (Reid-Bowen), and understand our female bodies and experiences to be sacred and potent vessels of the divine (Birnbaum).

Barbara, Medwyn and Wende were raised Christian, and left their family and cultural religious traditions as adults. Nané was raised in a non-religious environment that encouraged her to explore more open concepts of spirituality. Barbara, Medwyn and Nané were part of volunteer planning team that hosts an annual multi-faith conference entitled the Women’s Spirituality Celebration (WSC).² Through engagement with WSC we wit(h)ness the significance of holding a sacred sanctuary wherein all expressions of women’s spirituality were welcomed and honoured. Our artistic collaborations began after a labyrinth-walking workshop led by Nané at the 2007 WSC conference. We later embraced Wende’s artistic and healing practice of sounding, a spontaneous improvisation of intuitive sounding and deep listening (Bickel and Jordan). Through sounding we work to restore true connection to the whole-body-voice of full inner resonance. We experience sounding as a significant process of *coming to know* in our collaborative artworkings. At the time three of us were living in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Shortly thereafter two of us moved, and our collaborations have taken place at joint residencies, through long distance collaborative writing, and through an on-line relationship.

We are each at different career stages in our lives. Barbara is in her first university research and teaching position in Art Education after a full time career as a visual and performing artist. Medwyn is a retired project manager of businesses and non-profit organizations with no formal post-secondary education. Her life has dramatically changed course since retiring and she is now a practitioner and teacher of healing and spiritual arts. Nané is a Ph.D. candidate, a mother of two young daughters, and a photography and textile artist with a working background in lay midwifery.

Sharing similar views of spirituality that extend beyond the differences in our life stages, academic backgrounds and past work experiences, we bring deep and rich life perspectives to our collaborative artworkings. Our artworkings, through visual and textual narratives, act as new forms of teaching/learning and curriculum based in a “holistic process perspective” (Slattery 109). They have incited us to pursue future experimenting and sharing of our work.

Between the first and the second residency we found ourselves wanting to explore further the possibilities of working together. Through emails and skype conversations we began to identify ourselves as a working artist collective and officially named the collective. A name identifies, locates, is referred to. It is given and received. In naming ourselves as an artist collective we stepped outside of ourselves as celibate artists and committed to a co-relational process identified by the word *gestare*—a life force bigger than each of us as individuals.

Gestare is Latin for the verb “to carry” in the womb. In receiving the name we expanded our ethical commitment to each other, the community and the earth. This naming proved to be a copoietic trans-subjective force of energy with the power to align us, drive us forward, suspend us, and leave us ruptured.

Early in our conversations we began to hold a vision for a women’s spirituality network and a sacred multiversity/university, a place for teaching/learning and developing women’s spiritual leadership. Recognizing the possibility of creating an alternative to existing educational systems for the development of women’s spiritual leadership for ourselves and future generations, we realized our collaborative artmaking experiences were laying the groundwork for what we now recognize as a matrixial infused education. Our shared reading and study of philosophers, theorists, and artists, as well as extensive dialogues and co-writing, have further led us to believe that we are reconceptualizing the very meaning of “education” in our own lives. And we sense the implications of our findings may have a significant role to play in the radical movement of postmodern “reconceptualization in curriculum theory” (Slattery 109) of the last few decades.

The Labyrinthal Womb

The ancient cross-cultural architecture of the labyrinth, with its historical connection to spiritual pilgrimages, healing and mystery (Westbury), emits vibrating threads of connection between us for our on-going site-related praxis of inquiry [image 3]. Resonating with these threads we entered the matrixial sphere “[a] shareable, psychic dimension that underlies the individual unconscious and experience” (Ettinger 2006: back cover). The frame drum used by Medwyn in our performance rituals is a sacred tool used since pre-contact/Christian times by women shamans from European, Asian, African and American cultures in their medicine practices, according to Max Dashu. The drumbeat through its repetitive rhythm gathers the resonating threads into an energetic container.

The labyrinth has arisen in cultures when “worship of feminine deities is on the rise” (Westbury 43). Helmut Jaskolski noted that in ancient Crete the labyrinth represented the womb of the Divine Mother. For authors Lauren Artress and Jeff Saward the labyrinth’s unicursal design echoes the spiral form in nature and for some signifies both the human journey through life and the connection between humanity and the natural world. After years of research on the labyrinth throughout history, Virginia Westbury concluded that this “ancient pathway is primarily a tool for compassion” and “the only truth about labyrinths is that they contain not one truth. Ambiguity, tolerance, acceptance of multiplicity, of many beliefs, of variety and change and ironically the messages of a pathway which is not multiple but singular” (96). We have found

similar results. Through creating and walking within the unbound boundary of the labyrinth, the imagination can be guided into transformative patterns of thought, pass through gateways into the ancestral world, invoke change and potentially restore compassionate interactions between self, society, and the earth.



Image 1: Barbara Bickel, Cretan Labyrinth, Gibraltar Point Beach. Toronto Island, Ontario, Canada, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

Chora

Within this paper we explore the concepts of the *chora*, the ancient Greek word for space, along with *matrixial copoiesis*, to assist the unfolding of womb understandings that have been emerging within the labyrinthal artworkings of the collective.

The etymological root of *chora* is “choreography,” which is the relational dance that occurs between humans and the environment. Plato described *chora* as nourishing and maternal—a receiving vessel for the chaos of the universe (*Timmeaeus*). *Chora*, as understood by philosopher Julia Kristeva is related to language—as the space between—where signification occurs in the “cleavage between words and meanings” (qtd. in Sutherland). In addition, Kristeva compares *chora* to the maternal experience of birth-giving (Sullivan). *Chora* is also connected to the word chorus. Contributing to the chorus of sound is a

foundational practice of the art collective and is a component of the gestation and birth of our artworkings together.

The development of the language that emerged from our regular sound practices when framed within the *chora* offers a context for our experiences of performance ritual and sounding. Kristeva wrote of the semiotic *chora* as “an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases” (25). She explains how,

...one can situate the *chora*, but one can never give it axiomatic form....
Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularisation, and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm. (26)

The gestures and formless soundings that coalesce within our performance rituals disrupt rational phallogentric language and pre-given “socio-linguistic and gender arrangements” (Diamond 5). Our movements and utterances are drawn from a nurtured connection to the land and each other. Our soundings can be harmonic, sensual, and humorous—at other times dissonant and mournful, filled with the ache of longing and desire. The sounds are fluid and ephemeral, caught for the moment, then released. Our hypnotic-like soundings invoke interpretation as the dissonant qualities of what theologians Matthew Fox, Dawn Perlmutter and Debra Koppman described as the *via negativa*, and the apophatic spiritual paths, and what ancient Greek physicians called hysteria, a woman’s ailment. Respectively, we both embrace and challenge the culturally repressed qualities and representations of these experiences that precede rational understanding and risk traumatic co-encounter with the simultaneous appearance/disappearance of ancient memory in our artworkings together.

Matrixial Copoiesis

Ettinger’s (2006) theorizing, like Kristeva’s framing of the *chora*, disrupts phallogentric language and radically extends postmodern thought to include a matrixial subjectivity that begins in the womb. Matrixial subjectivity is understood as relational encounter, the feminine moving towards a co-subjectivity that is not based on castration theories or the individual versus the other model (Pollock). Her theory is radical in that it places the female body as the originary source of every human being.³ Starting in the gestating space of the womb, the theory is thus pre-gender. As a theory, situated prior to gender differentiation, it reinstates the feminine into our aesthetic and ethical awareness without removing the masculine. Her theory repositions the feminine as a link rather than an object (Pollock 46). As a co-relational theory, it copoetically unfolds

the potential transgressive relationship between what Ettinger (2005) calls the *I* and *non-I*. She describes the *I* as a partial subject and the *non-I* as a partial subject or partial object that is an uncognized intimate other.

Ettinger (2005) articulates copoiesis as an aesthetical and ethical co-emergence that occurs through intimate encounters between several partners, *I* and *non-I*. In these co-encounters partial subjectivities are shared and exchanged. This creates a vulnerable and fragile connection to other because we are not individual celibate subjects but relationally and ethically bound to the other. Art is a vehicle of transportation in the matrixial sphere. Copoietic reattunement with the other in the matrixial sphere does not rely on verbal communication (Ettinger 2005). Instead it relies on sharing, Ettinger writes, “fields of resonance and influence” that are borderlinked through “wavelength, frequencies and vibrations not perceivable by the senses but transmissible and translatable by the mind” (2005: 704). Her art and theory offer an aesthetic and ethical feminine-based relational language to articulate our collaborative Gestare art praxis. Her theory calls us to critical ethical awareness of the impact our art-workings have on each other and others with whom we are resonating within the matrixial sphere, whether cognized or uncognized.

The Residencies: Entering Matrixial Time

During the two residencies we entered exploration of elemental patterns on the island, through ritual inquiry processes. We collectively co-created four performance rituals as well as engaged individual art practices. We experienced working and wit(h)essing on/with the land as a gift. The art, as an action and expression of wit(h)essing and borderlinking with the earth, became a gift in return to the earth and the community.

Understanding art as community-making, our collective provides a container womb through ritual within which the art gestates. Our art has the potential to reunite the unconscious with the conscious, prehistory with the present, the human with nature and the mother with the daughter. This reunion models a contemporary practice of matriarchy—which Adrienne Rich envisions as “a model for the peaceful coexistence of the two elements of the self that could destroy each other in strife” (Farwell 195). Our practices require that we reach deeply into relationship with each other and the natural world. Consciously and unconsciously borderlinking our energies with each other and the earth we open potential spaces for deeper connection. This exposes and brings the fragility of individual and collective vulnerabilities into the field of our inquiries.

We hold that our artworking is interlaced with the memory banks of each other, the earth and the Kosmos where potential vulnerabilities and trans-

formativity are simultaneously exposed. As an ethical practice we collectively engage a ritual praxis of inquiry that begins with an agreed upon intention. The set intention can be simple, creating a space to connect with each other; or complex, energetically assisting the wellhead capping effort for the Gulf of Mexico oil leak (see *Ocean Day Labyrinth Making & Walking* at <http://vimeo.com/17196307>).⁴ Holding our intention we begin the ritual, drawing the labyrinth, drumming its perimeter, walking, sounding, and moving spontaneously on/with the earth and each other. Our practice includes documenting and creatively rendering these intentional experiences through video and audio recordings, photography, visual art and reflective writings.

In the collective's labyrinthal praxis, pre-linguistic sounds and movements of *chora* are activated, while matrixial bordercrossings and linkings reveal collective and individual significations, cultivating shifts in perception. At times these shifts are difficult to fully encounter individually or as a group. Setting the group intention does not foreclose the possibility of disconnections and traumatic re-experiencing of painful co-encounter events in the matrixial sphere. We have found re-engagement with the perceptual shifts through later art making processes to be essential, encouraging a deeper inquiry into the uncognized and cognized experiences and mis/understandings that may emerge.

Collective Art

Tracing Absence Sounding Presence: A Performance Ritual

During the first residency the performance ritual entitled *Tracing Absence Sounding Presence* evolved and took form through group trance (we understand trance as a state of nonordinary awareness, experienced as an awake dream that is spoken out loud), group soundings and deep listening to each individual's soundings (image 2). Shared imagery and story emerged through the trance, which we received as the language of the ancestors shaping and guiding our performance ritual. Sand, body, voice and garden rakes co-formed the movements and vocalizations in ritual expression of the message from the ancestors that comprised the co-event in interaction with the land and surrounding environment.

The rakes utilized in the performance ritual became a significant connection to those ancestors who have come before us and laboured on the earth. The rake, like the broom, is a traditional "woman's" magical tool. The rakes, resurrected from the arts centre's tool shed, embellished in the studio, infused with life through our breath during the performance ritual, symbolized the transformative and integrative journey of our collaborative artworkings. Our movements with the rakes traced the absence/presence above us in the sky and below us in the sand as we infused the space in-

between. The mystery of embodied knowing unfolded during the residency, supported expansion beyond our individual selves to develop the larger mind/Self of being. In this state we understood ourselves to be part of the larger whole of the Kosmos.



Image 2: Gestare Art Collective, Tracing Absence Sounding Presence, performance ritual video still. Gibraltar Point Beach, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2009. Courtesy of Gestare artists.

In unfolding the experience of wit(h)nessing trauma in the matrixial sphere, Ettinger wrote that “[t]he rhythm of repetition created by absence/presence alternations stands for the disappearance/return of the archaic mother” (1999: 89). She describes the repetition of the withdrawal/return of the archaic mother as trauma inducing. Art, she writes, makes present the unrepresentable through “assembling joint gazes and lost figures” (1999: 90) and offers testimony to this event. The artist, she claims, experiences this within her body as affection. The process of creating this performance ritual was all-encompassing. We were swept up in the pathway provided by the artworks and experienced exhaustion, dislocation, euphoria and deep resonance with the land and each other in on/off beats. Ettinger’s words describe the phenomenon that unfolded in the co-creating of the performance ritual and in the year that followed. “In the matrixial transferential relationship, several *I(s)* and uncognized *non-I(s)* are interlaced beyond time and space, opening together the wounds of nomadic places repeatedly, working-through to rein/di-fuse the celibate place” (90).

Profound linking in wit(h)nessing occurred during the first residency as members found their celibate artist selves re-in/di-fused through trance and sound journeying and collaborative art-making. The collective thus experienced new traces that were, as Ettinger refers, “inscribed along psychic matrixial paths and threads and more strings” (2005: 706) that were further nurtured in the months between residencies through online Skype ritual sharings and co-writing, and co-presenting at a conferences.⁵

Early in the second residency, the relationships between self, other and the land began to fracture as the collective encountered resistance to the continuation of the daily meetings that had been a core ritual practice of the first residency. The daily group rituals had assisted engaging threads of connection to/with each other and the land creating a complex weaving of matrixial bonds through stories, soundings, labyrinth drawing and walking. The diminishment of the daily ritual to, at times, a weekly gathering had a significant impact on the entire residency. The loss of committed daily connection manifested in a dissonance in communications, withdrawal and multiple expressions of fear and distrust. At the same time we were collectively, as artists, engaging environmental and world political events that were globally and locally traumatic and frightening in their magnitude. The fragile threads and strings nurtured during the first residency and the on-line communication during the preceding months began to unravel and shred.

M/Other Ways

Our first group art working during the second residency was a labyrinth walk and sound ritual initiated by Wende, that took place on the eve of the G20 summit (see <<http://vimeo.com/17196515>>). Its intention was to be an act of subtle activism in collaboration with the Gaiafield Center for Subtle Activism. The island beach situated off the shore of Lake Ontario, a mere ten minute ferry ride from the location of the summit, is washed by currents and storms thereby rendering our labyrinth-making an ephemeral statement. As we were finishing drawing our labyrinth in the sand we were interrupted by police-driven all-terrain vehicles on summit-protester watch at this otherwise secluded beachfront. After appraising our potential threat to security they left us to attune to the land, each other, and the global leaders at the summit. We stepped into the labyrinth as an active meditation with embodied sonic expressions, gathering up subtle energies from our walking and directing them to the G20 meetings. Intense, aching and vulnerable sounds emerged as the labyrinth as *chora* became the container for world chaos wherein we co-encountered the high security and global influencing dynamics of the summit (image 3).



Image 3: Gestare Art Collective, M/Other Ways, performance ritual video still. Gibraltar Point Beach, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2010. Courtesy of the Gestare artists.

Placenta Ritual

The placenta ritual became our last group performance ritual (image 4). It grew out of Nané's individual art project where she installed felted and red-dyed placenta-like sculptural forms on the Islands, creating resonant images of placenta "events." The consciousness of the collective's name "gestare" and the suggestive nature of placentas themselves being the vehicle of gestation and life, invited a close working with womb space, a birthing and connecting between Mother and the being-to-be. Although the group's struggle with disarticulation and disconnection in its collective workings at the time had reached a painful place, Nané wanted to engage with these placenta-like forms in a collective way. What emerged through the group ritual visioning was to have each woman hold and curl themselves around a placenta within a radiating star of placentas on the beach. The star pattern was created in a twelve-wheel formation (not pre-designed) which we realized afterwards relates to the wheel of the year a symbol of the wheel of life, and oracular, zodiac cycles of divination. Lying close to the Earth (as Mother) we began to sound within this collective womb space slowly moving our bodies into the centre. At the centre was a container holding menstrual blood that was poured into a circular moat at the heart of the star form. Shedding and sharing of blood within the matrixial sphere is a natality inspired sacrifice. According to scholars, Grahn, Maloney, Wright and others, offering one's menstrual



Image 4: Gestare Art Collective, placenta ritual, from video still. Gibraltar Point Beach, Toronto Island, Ontario, Canada, 2010. Courtesy of Gestare artists.

blood back to the Earth is a practice of reciprocity inspired by wisdom and indigenous traditions of women's lodges. Individual birth soundings uttered through the experience of re-birth, or self-birth coalesced momentarily with the releasing of the menstrual blood. Through the performance ritual we psychically encountered a re-co-birth and a co-transfusion of matrixial blood within the matrixial sphere.

Barbara was inspired to take this artworking further into another iteration of inquiry of matrixial borderspace(s). Through the collective's conversation on this ritual a vision emerged of each woman re-entering the placenta ritual through sound and documenting that encounter with video, focusing on facial expressions. The desire on Barbara's part to co-creatively re-enter the placenta ritual provoked further fragility and discomfort compounding what had been surfacing and building within the collective during the second residency. One member was not comfortable with the idea, and an increasing discontinuity of the collective's capacity to work into individual experiences and resistances ensued.

Nané's last day at the residency followed shortly after the placenta ritual. She wanted to have the collective witness and document a leaving ritual for her on the beach using her red thread and placental forms, potentially working further with Barbara's idea of individual soundings. By this time however, the group could no longer hold ritual space as a collective. Nané burst into tears, the disjuncture feeling unbearable. We sat in circle on the beach hoping to

name and process our individual experiences of this, and to acknowledge the resistance and tension overtaking the collective artworkings. We attempted to talk through the tension and were unable to come to a place of resolve. This ruptured space ultimately moved in the following months into greater fragmentation of the collective. Eventually three members of our original four met together online in a group ritual sharing to begin to heal through the hurt and trauma of the rupture.

Individual Artworkings

Wit(h)nessing Eyes Close(d) – Barbara

Feeling the grief and frustration embedded in the collective rupture and not wanting to let go of her own matrixial inquiry birthed during the residency, Barbara shifted to an individual exploration of what Ettinger calls wit(h)nessing: A state of being with the other while witnessing the other, reflecting a deep loss within the moment of birth, yet holding a space of potentiality for the group. To wit(h)ness one must cross a threshold into an intimacy that embodies both close encounter(s) and distant or aerial point(s) of view (Ettinger 2005). Entering altered state(s) we wit(h)ness with close(d) eyes what is within and beyond our grasp, co-encountering in the space/time of ritual an expression of the raveling, unraveling and re-raveling of the matrixial.

The projected video piece, entitled *Wit(h)nessing Eyes Close(d)*, is a braided extension of the group placenta performance ritual and Barbara's individual studio work of large mixed media drawings on canvas. The drawings are based on trance journeys and depicted her free-falling unboundaried body (image 5). This piece projects Barbara's body and the ghost like bodies of the Gestare Art Collective onto the stitched upon and paint stained canvas (image 6). What appears as a solo performance ritual in the video projection is co-joined with the collective through reverberations and co-presencing of sound and visual memory traces. Barbara returned to the site of the placenta ritual and vocalized sounds while listening to the original recording. Wende documented this individual performance ritual that marked the ending of Barbara's residency. Barbara experienced entering an altered state of reunion with the collective through the traces of sound in its absence. The documentation captured the unresolved relational pain and grief that reverberated between us. In the solo sounding her voice is high and strained in its isolation. It is only when rejoined in the video editing process with the collective placenta soundings that it finds a space of co/inhabitation. Through the re-co-encounter of past/present/future in this responsive artworking a "co-emergence-in-differentiation" (Ettinger 2005: 706) occurred.

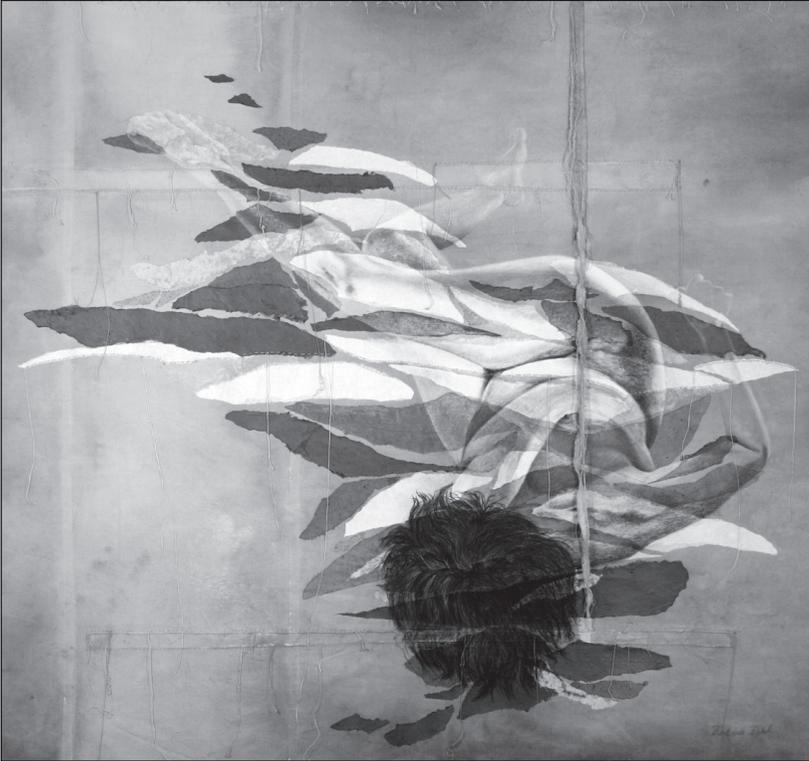


Image 5: Barbara Bickel, Where water meets air, mixed media drawing on canvas. Courtesy of artist.



Image 6: Barbara Bickel, Wit(h)nessing Eyes Close(d), video still. Projection onto canvas, paper collage, thread and paint. Courtesy of artist.



Medwyn McConachy, Oil Catcher, detail. Gibraltar Point Centre for the Arts, Toronto Island, Canada, 2010. Courtesy of artist

teraction between *I* and *non-I* and the earth engaged the threads of ancestral knowing. The mandala became a cry from the Earth (Mother) through the bleeding wound in the ocean floor as Medwyn wit(h)nessed Her destruction and co-encountered the suffering and death of fellow creatures caused by human greed and consumption.

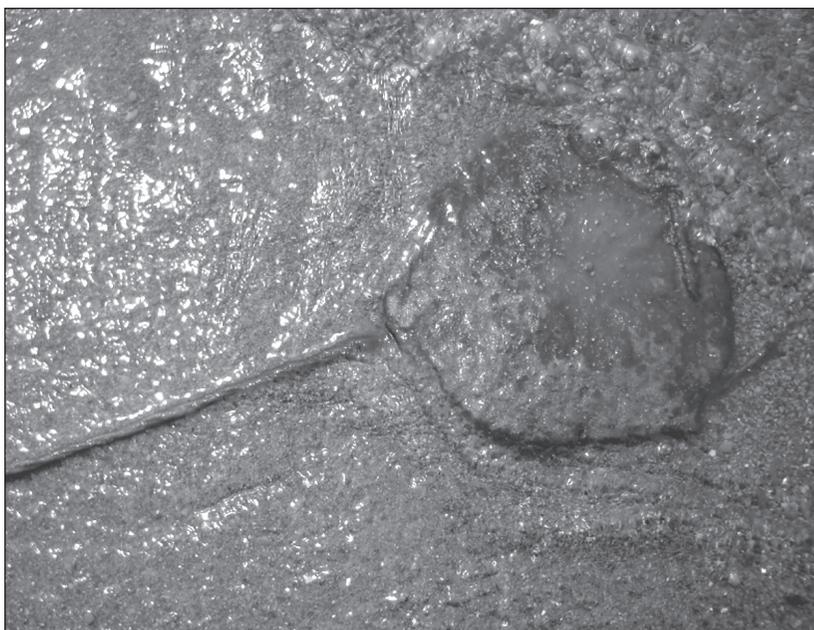


Image 9: Nané Ariadne Jordan, placenta events, Photograph. Toronto Island, Ontario, Canada, 2010. Courtesy of artist.

Placenta Travels on the Island – Nané

Nané’s artistic and creative scholarly work is increasingly focused towards an artful “philosophy of birth” from within a cultural amnesia of its female creative and generative imaginary. Such a philosophy is in contrast to the pervasive Western philosophies of mortality. She is interested in the human fact of being birthed and born, in how re-centering birth knowledge from female origination might contribute to new philosophies and understandings of living interconnection, gift economy, ecology, and “love itself” (Cixous). Ettinger’s matrixial theory resonates with her own grasping at philosophies of birth, towards responses that recognize female/feminine subjectivities and the origination of birth wisdom that is experienced by both sexes and all genders within the act of being born.

From a working background in lay midwifery, an art practice in photography and mixed media textiles, and academic studies into women’s spirituality and birth experiences, the placenta emerged intuitively as a central body parable that might communicate a transformative philosophy of birth, while simultaneously recouping human origination from the Earth itself. Nané came to the residency with a series of placental-like forms created from red dyed and felted wool. These include long hand-spun, umbilical-like chords that reach playfully towards the Earth as primal source of life. She found herself in an



Image10: Nané Ariadne Jordan, placenta events, Photograph. Toronto Island, Ontario, Canada, 2010. Courtesy of artist.

ecstasy of warm summer days as she installed placenta communities into trees, onto the beaches and into the lake water (image 9 and 10). She floated some, womb-like, on the shores of Lake Ontario, documenting her placenta installations as events of communion with elementals of lake water, rocks, sandy beaches and trees—earthly/birth-ly reminders.

Matrixial Fragility, Fracturing and Re-Co-Birthing

Through the labyrinthal womb workings of our original intention for collaborative art making, we engaged a resonance field of matrixial copoiesis in co-encounter events far beyond that which we had anticipated when we came together. The study and application of Ettinger's theories brought new perspective to the experiences of both residencies. In the context of matrixial copoiesis our collective co-engagement became reframed, as the significance of our collaborative processes emerged into our consciousness. As a collective we expand upon the arts-based understandings found in Ettinger's solo artworkings by entering the matrixial realm together artistically collaborating in the intrauterine space of ordinary being.

From our initial euphoria and deep resonances with our artworkings, through the trauma in our co-relational affection, to the shredding of our threads of

connection and the eventual rupturing of our capacity for collaborative co-creation, we were and are held in the matrixial field inherent in our artworkings. Our co-joined journeys through/with/on the matrixial labyrinth and the resulting intimate co-encounters with risk and vulnerability have deepened our understanding of the potency and potential inherent in Gestare as a women's art collective. Ettinger's (1999a) words capture our enduring experience of wit(h)nessing and artworking together within the matrixial:

The matrixial gaze thrills us while fragmenting, multiplying, scattering and joining grains together, it turns us into what we may call wit(h)nesses: *participatory* witnesses to traumatic events of an-other at the price of fragilizing and fragmenting us. It threatens us with disintegration while allowing participation in a drama wider than that of our individual selves. (n. pag.)

Fed by the experience of group co-re-birth, we continue to develop our collaborative vision for Gestare through the matrixial labyrinth, trusting the path of this ancient sacred pattern to hold our fragile opening to and with each other as a collective. We more deeply understand the vulnerabilities of group processes that can trigger trauma as individual boundaries are crossed and each woman learns to take responsibility for herself within the group. We further understand that in the crossing and dissolving of boundaries in our collective artworkings, notions of the celibate, individualistic "artist" are significantly disrupted from what constitutes and supports an artist's identity. The modern, singular "artist" is so well defined and perhaps even deified within the larger phallic sphere of the art-world. We find ethical and aesthetical artistic collaboration needs to arise from strong individual integrity that can co-encounter and co-engage with an/other within the larger workings of the group. An artist who remains embedded in the phallic sphere of the celibate will struggle to contain alone what emerges from a circle of gestating others—gestation being an undeniable co-relational process. We find this to be a little known paradigm in a capitalist economy and an academy that values and prioritizes individualistic efforts. We cannot fully embody the particular visionary work of the Gestare Art Collective alone—we are the ones most surprised by our co-relationally impacted artistic results.

Currently the collective has three active members who continue to engage a practice of labyrinth making and walking at a geographical distance from each other. We create and take advantage of opportunities to enter the matrixial sphere through co-presencing and following our practices of wit(h)nessing, sounding, art and ritual making. We communicate and share our artworkings and inquiries through our co-created website (see <file://localhost/<http://:

www.gestareartcollective.com>), in online ritual sharings with each other, at conferences and during artist residencies when possible.

In February 2011, we initiated a practice of “wombwalking,” wherein we walk (and make) labyrinths on each others’ birthdays in parallel time with the intention of supporting each other in placental wombworkings on these anniversary days of the day we left our earth mother’s wombs. (see <<http://www.gestareartcollective.com/womb-walks.php>>). We are now preparing for a third collective summer residency in 2011 on the West Coast of Canada. This residency will call for a greater practice of inner sanctuary, as it will take place within the city and not at an island artist residency. It will involve offering public labyrinthal wombwalks for others interested in co-encountering collaborative artworkings.

The compelling and fragile learning acquired by the collective within the two residencies undergirds our future intention to expand the co-encounters by inviting others into this potent artworking space. The 2011 residency will co-poietically begin to implement and further develop our matrixial-informed educational and collaborative art praxis, which we believe has the potential to form and inform the phallic-centric world sphere, establishing a new order of co-operation. Bracha Ettinger and Akseli Vertanen note that “art will always escape organization, and the vibrating strings between ethics and aesthetics will always escape the political, while forming and informing it” (702). As a women’s art collective, knowingly living into the wisdom of the name that was given to us, we have deepened our understanding of the potency carried within the wombspace of women’s collaborative art processes. We remain committed to our matrixial collaborative inquiry through/with/on the labyrinth into the challenges, vulnerabilities of an ethical and aesthetic Gestare Art Collective praxis.

¹The Kosmos, as defined by integral philosopher Ken Wilber, includes the multiple “domains of existence,” from matter to mind to Spirit, and is not limited to the material realm as the word cosmos is most often associated with (25).

²The Women’s Spirituality Celebration (WSC) is a volunteer-run women’s gathering that began in 1991 and continued to take place in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada until 2011. From the current WSC mission statement: The WSC is organized, facilitated, and attended by women of all ages with diverse spiritual/religious lineages. Our intention is to nourish body, spirit, emotions and mind through contemplative and embodied spiritual practices, dialogue and the arts. Our desire is to generate dialogue, learn from one another and celebrate together to increase multi-faith awareness in an atmosphere of acceptance, compassion and respect. For more information see www.wscelebration.com

³In 2004, Ettinger addresses the essentialist challenge that her theory has at times attracted. Her theory relates to both men and women. She does not, as a feminist who supports women's rights over their reproductive bodies, want to give up the rich symbolic language that is embodied in a woman's body. She refuses to "surrender to the dominant phallic sphere that censures both men and women and molds them in its phallic frame" (75).

⁴We co-presented early versions of this paper entitled *Gestating Art: A Collective Earth-based Inquiry* at The Association for Research on Mothering conference, "Mothering and the Environment: The Natural, the Social, and the Built," York University, Toronto Ontario, Canada, Oct. 22-25, 2009 and *The Labyrinth, Chora and Matrixial Copoiesis* at the International Conference on Narrative, Arts-based, and "Post" Approaches to Social Research (NAPAR), Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona. January 21-23, 2011.

⁵In response to the worldwide call from Veriditas labyrinth facilitators for a unified effort on June 8, 2010 World Ocean Day, we built a labyrinth on the beach at Gibraltar Point, Toronto Island. It was created with the intention to energetically assist the wellhead capping effort that was at the time reducing the amount of leakage from 3.8 million gallons a day to 1.7 million.

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