

## Confessing Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education

Sarah T. Travis, Ph.D.  
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

### ABSTRACT

In this article, the author presents visual and written documentation of engagement in a socially engaged work of art, *Flashpoints: Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education*. This work was enacted through a mobile art gallery, *The Confessional*, as part of a series of performances at an academic art history symposium entitled *Fictions and Frictions: The Power and Politics of Narrative*. Through confessions of critical frictions, this artistic and pedagogical intervention gestures towards reconciliation around the power dynamics of aspects of identity.

KEYWORDS: arts education, arts-based research, phenomenology, critical pedagogy, critical theory, reflective practice, flashpoints

Flashpoints  
Critical Frictions  
You became aware of an aspect of your identity.  
What did this experience feel like as it unfolded?  
[ Write. Sketch. Share. ]

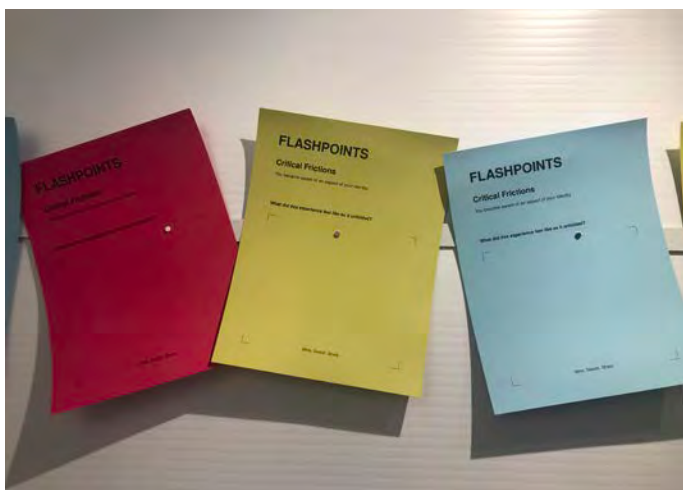


Figure 1: *Flashpoints: Critical Frictions*, 2019, Photograph by Sarah Travis

This is a provocation that I offered as an artistic and pedagogical performance entitled *Flashpoints: Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education* (see Figure 1) as part of a collaborative performance through a mobile art gallery, *The Confessional*. This gallery was created by Angela Baldus and activated several times in 2018-2019 as part of research for her master's thesis, *Considering the Confessional: Spaces of Learning and Objects to Move With* (2019). *The Confessional* references the sacred rituals of the Catholic confessional booth while also connoting the hallowed space of an art gallery (see Figure 2). Through this dynamic, *The Confessional* becomes a site for acts of socially engaged art that references the spiritual aspects of creating and sharing art. In this paper, I document and reflect upon confessing critical frictions in the arts and education through this work, while also considering broader implications for the field of art education.

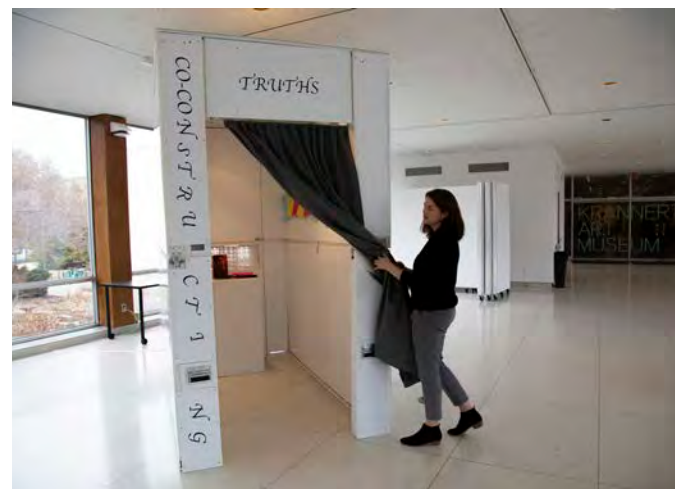


Figure 2: *Pulling Back the Curtain to The Confessional*, 2019, Photograph by Angela Baldus

### Co-Constructing Truths in The Confessional

This activation of *The Confessional* was part of *Co-Constructing Truths*, a series of performances during an academic art history symposium, with about 50 attendees on March 1-2, 2019, in the Link Gallery of the School of Art and Design at the of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, entitled *Fictions and Frictions: The Power and Politics of Narrative*. The performers for *Co-Constructing Truths* included: Paulina Camacho Valencia who shared a video essay, *De Esas Cosas No Se Habla*; Catalina Hernández-Cabal and Lila Ann Dodge, who performed an improvisational

dance to live music by Adrian Wong, *A Counter Intuitive Trio*; Alicia de León, who did a theatrical performance, *Exo*; and me, who enacted the artistic intervention *Flashpoints: Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education*. To promote *Co-Constructing Truths, The Confessional* curator Angela Baldus created a series of risograph posters and affixed them to the walls of the school to invite participation in the event (Figure 3). Most of the *Co-Constructing Truths* performers were graduate students in the Art Education program at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where I am faculty, with each of us activating aspects of our art education scholarship through our performances.



**Figure 3:** *Co-Constructing Truths*, 2019, Poster by Angela Baldus, Photograph by Sarah Travis.

## An Arts-Based Research Methodological and Pedagogical Framework

This work took the form of a socially engaged art installation that was also a part of my ongoing pedagogical practice as well as my research into the development of critical consciousness within art education. This work takes up Arts-Based Research as a methodological and pedagogical framework. Arts-Based Research is broadly defined by the foundational tenet of employing art as an avenue for research inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2014; Mulvihill, & Swaminathan, 2020; Rolling, 2013). Because art takes many forms, Arts-Based Research is a methodology that also manifests in a variety of ways—from musical performance to written narrative to painted portraits—and in this case, a participatory performance. With all of this in mind, I am inspired by Jorge Lucero (2014), who discusses how conceptual art processes can act “as permissions for new ways-of-being by the artist/teacher in the classroom, the museum, the studio, the exhibition, the performance, or the presentation” (p. 24). Other artist scholars have discussed “the pedagogical function of art” (Camnitzer, 2014, p. 95) and “the pedagogical process as the literal core of the artwork” (Helguera, 2009, p. 100). The lines between art, teaching, and research are intertwined within this work just as they are in much of my practice as an art education scholar, and even as I write about this now, the connections are ever unfolding.

## A Critical Theoretical and Pedagogical Framework

*Flashpoints: Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education* is shaped by a critical theoretical and pedagogical framework. With a key focus on the development of critical consciousness for educators, this work is informed by scholars of critical theory and critical pedagogy, including Paulo Freire (1970), bell hooks (1994), and Gloria E. Anzaldúa (2002). Additionally, this work is inspired by several art education scholars who have documented the importance of recognizing how aspects of identity like race and gender shape art teaching and learning (Desai, 2020; Kraehe, 2015; Spillane, 2015; Wilson, 2017; Wolfgang, 2019). Further, this work is informed by art education scholars who have delineated the particular importance of critical consciousness-building around race within art teacher development (Acuff, 2018; Lewis, 2018; Kraehe & Brown, 2011; Sions, 2022; Yoon, 2019).

Within the arts and education, several scholars draw upon phenomenology (Vagle, 2018; Van Manen, 2018) to account for embodied experiences around aspects of social and cultural identity (Travis et al., 2018; Lewis, 2015; Tam, 2010) and I share in this interest in employing phenomenology to describe deeply embedded phenomena. Regarding phenomenology, Samuel D. Rocha (2018) writes: “What I have called *folk phenomenology* (Rocha, 2015) is the attempt to imagine the real, to describe what appears within consciousness as faithfully as possi-

ble.... The path that folk phenomenology takes is the way of art" (p. 61). Through this work, I have found that critical consciousness is not only a cognitive process, but an embodied practice that approaches the spiritual. As Rocha (2018) writes: "Prayer is perhaps the most ancient practice of all time" (p. 74).

Over the years, in collaboration with friends and fellow scholars, I have developed my own critical reflective practice (Hood & Travis, in press). This involves self-observation and my written documentation of moments of embodied friction that transpire within my life and my teaching. I consider these "flashpoints"—visceral manifestations of friction that call attention to asymmetries of power within lived experiences (Travis et al., 2018). *Flashpoints: Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education* is an embodied, performative iteration of this ongoing work within my pedagogy and my daily life.

### Confessing Critical Frictions in The Confessional

The invitation to participate in this work is tied to ongoing scholarship where I use phenomenological narrative methods as a means of provoking reflection upon aspects of identity such as race, class, and gender within art education contexts and particularly focused on a book that I co-edited on the topic of flashpoints with Amelia M. Kraehe, Emily J. Hood, and Tyson E. Lewis, *Pedagogies in the Flesh: Case Studies on the Embodiment of Sociocultural Differences in Education* (Travis et al., 2018). This performance was a way to enact this scholarship in the form of socially engaged art for a pedagogical purpose (Helguera, 2011).



**Figure 4:** *Inside The Confessional*, 2019, Photograph by Sarah Travis.





**Figure 5:** *Confessing Flashpoints, 2019, Photograph by Sarah Travis.*

To set the stage for participation, I placed a copy of the book, *Pedagogies in the Flesh: Case Studies on the Embodiment of Sociocultural Differences in Education* (Travis et al., 2018), on a white podium within the stark white walls of *The Confessional* just below a small window screen like those within Catholic confessional booths (see Figures 4 and 5). I also placed pens and paper printed with my provocation entreating participants to write “confessions” of critical identity frictions from their experiences. During the designated time for the performance, the lunch break for the symposium, the participants of the symposium sat casually in the gallery on an arrangement of sofas, chairs, and tables while eating and chatting. Although I had set up *The Confessional* to encourage people to enter and engage during this time, about halfway through the lunch period, no one had entered the space or responded to my prompt. So, I decided to call the participants to attention and give a statement directly inviting them to write responses to the provocation.

I was shaking with nervousness as I read a statement that I had written to explain what I was asking them to do. I wanted to give them some further explanation, to motivate them to participate in something that I knew was asking a lot of them, that they might feel reluctant to do. I wanted to justify my reasons for asking them to be so vulnerable within this space, to write down a phenomenological narrative description of something they had experienced. Despite my hesitation, I proceeded to read the prompt that I had prepared: *Flashpoints: Critical Frictions. You became aware of an aspect of your identity. What did this experience feel like as it unfolded? Write. Sketch. Share.* I then quickly passed around some of the blank paper templates, printed with black ink on brightly colored A4 copy paper. After this more direct verbal invitation, about fifteen people responded to the prompting of the provocation.

Although I did not complete my own response, as participants wrote, I conversed with them. I discussed the concept of the “flashpoint” with them to contextualize how I have explored this phenomenon within my pedagogical practice as a catalyst for critical reflection. Because some of the participants were my own students and had responded to similar provocations before, they were comfortable engaging in ways that others might not have been. With them, I had already built a sense of trust, an important element in this critical pedagogical practice, that I had not yet built with others who were in attendance.

Once they had completed writing their “confessions,” I asked the participants to pin their pages to *The Confessional* wall with magnets. One participant wrote about “Language” and described “Panic: My words did not make sense to the authority figure” (see Figure 6), another wrote “on my Latina Identity” (see Figure 7) and another wrote: “I realized I am a woman of color” (see Figure 8). These images document some of the responses that reflected experiences of oppression in relation to some aspect of their identity such as language, race, gender, nationality, and ethnicity. Through this work we, embodied beings, intersected with the paper we held, the pens we used to make marks, the gallery walls, the confessional space, the university, the world.

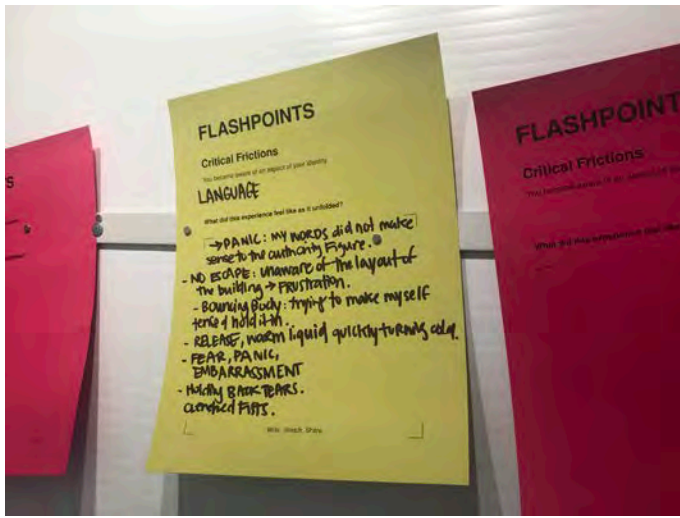


Figure 6: Flashpoints in *The Confessional*, 2019, Photograph by Sarah Travis

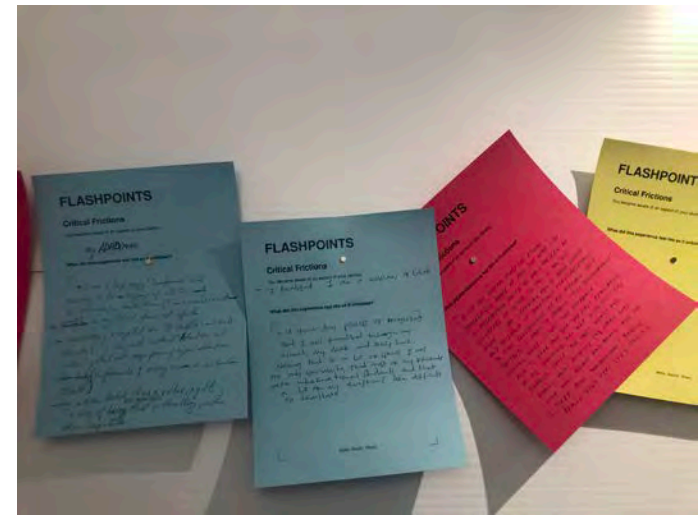


Figure 8: Flashpoints in *The Confessional*, 2019, Photograph by Sarah Travis

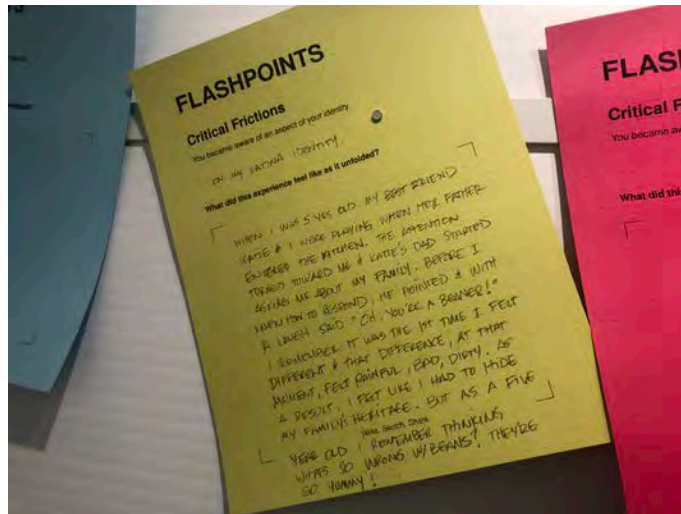


Figure 7: Flashpoints in *The Confessional*, 2019, Photograph by Sarah Travis

## Reflecting on Flashpoints: Power, Confession, and Reconciliation

Flashpoints are critical frictions—openings, breakings, ruptures that call our attention to underlying phenomena within our experience. Phenomenological descriptions of flashpoints are narratives that require direct observation of visceral, embodied experience—akin to confession. Depending upon the power of the person who is engaging in this “confession,” the outcomes are different. For one who is confessing from a position of relative power, this confession might be an admission of guilt, an acknowledgement of something harmful that was done.

Within this engagement, most of the responses to the provocation of *The Confessional* came from those who were in some ways reporting on those who had enacted some form of oppression upon them in relation to their identities (for example, the feeling of panic around language, as described in Figure 6). This documentation became a way to counter the usual ways in which a confessional is situated, where a priest administers absolution. In the Catholic church, the sacrament of reconciliation involves confession and repentance. Thus, to reconcile is “to restore” to “harmony” yet it is also “to account for” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Reconciliation requires observation, admittance, and the making of amends—co-constructing truths while also taking action towards transformation of ourselves and of our world.

There is an anonymity built into a confessional space. The idea is that you go to the priest and confess your sins behind the shroud of the booth, and you do not have to show your face. Your body is shielded from view. This protects your vulnerability and helps you to feel as if you can be honest in what you disclose. I find the notion of a “safe space” to be complicated by the fact that a safe space to some is not a safe space to others. This work thus acted as an extension of my goals as a teacher as I strive to create a classroom environment where there is a sense of trust, a sense that you can speak honestly as you go through a process of learning and growing.



**Figure 9:** Performers of *Co-Constructing Truths*, 2019, Photograph by Jennifer Bergmark

## Concluding Thoughts and Implications for Art Education

*Flashpoints: Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education* was a fleeting intervention where there was little time or opportunity for sustained consideration of the possibilities for individual or collective transformation. Nonetheless, the work had ritual connotations that were intended to move participants out of a state of complacency and to provoke further contemplation. In taking a moment to pause, to reflect, and to confess, the participants, in writing their stories on paper and posting them on the walls of *The Confessional*, were perhaps moved towards some momentary awareness of themselves as situated with others. In-

deed, I am moved by the possibility that a work of art involving the participation of others, even if the act itself is fleeting, has the potential to provoke sustained inner transformation.

Within my work as an art teacher educator, I personally engage in ongoing critical reflection upon my practice, and I encourage my students to consider how aspects of sociocultural identity such as race, class, and gender inform art education. Although I placed this entreaty to engage with flashpoints within the sanctified space of *The Confessional*, as an artistic ritual apart from daily life, acknowledging the flashpoints of daily life is a habitual ritual that I consistently engage in. I have called this work “critical reflective practice” (Hood & Travis, in press). I have called this “narrative.” I have called this “writing.” I have called this “reflection.” It is all these things, but it is also “ritual,” a practice that I undertake as part of my personal and pedagogical development.

As a teacher, I often find myself mediating conversations between students that are charged with emotion around aspects of their racialized, classed, and gendered identities. While I welcome these moments, they are also sometimes difficult moments for my students and for me as an educator. Yet, difficulty punctuates the importance of bringing these feelings and experiences into the open. While not completely public, the art performance, the classroom, the university, the school, the art gallery, are shared spaces for such conversations to be had, for learning to happen that prompts art education students to consider how aspects of their own positional identities inform art teaching and learning.

I recently enacted this same provocation with a new group of graduate students, and I was impressed by their willingness to participate with deep vulnerability and openness. This is possible because I now intentionally create space within my classroom for this and I strive to model a willingness to be critically reflective within myself. As bell hooks (1994) wrote:

When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. (p. 21)

I also acknowledge the difficulty of this, and I am the first to admit that



I do not share everything. I have long considered the limitations of narrative pedagogical and methodological approaches because of what is left unsaid (Kraehe, Hood, & Travis, 2015; Travis & Hood, 2016), even as I also find them to be so valuable to the development of critical consciousness within educators (Hood & Travis, in press). To counter the limitations of narratives, I turn to phenomenology as a guide in consideration of that which is not yet articulated into words but instead that which is embodied, unspoken, and unwritten. Thus, in the search for reconciliation of critical identity frictions, I entreat artists and arts educators to consider: what are the unwritten flashpoints of your experience (see Figure 10)?

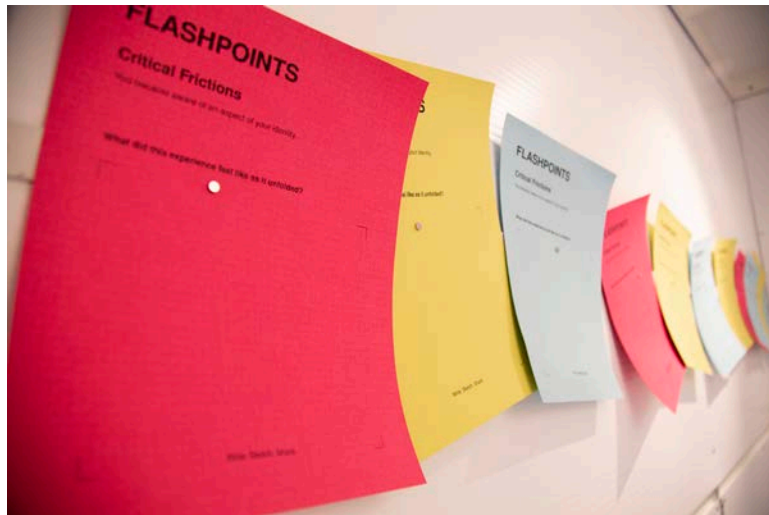


Figure 10: *Unwritten Flashpoints*, 2019, Photograph by Angela Baldus.

## References

- Acuff, J. B. (2018). "Being" a critical multicultural pedagogue in the art education classroom. *Critical Studies in Education*, 59(1), 35–53.
- Anzaldúa, G. E. (2002). Now let us shift...the path of *conocimiento*... inner work, public acts. In G. E. Anzaldúa & A. Keating (Eds.), *This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation* (pp. 540–591). Routledge.
- Baldus, A. (2019). *Considering The Confessional: Spaces of learning and objects to move with* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. <https://hdl.handle.net/2142/104860>
- Barone, T., & Eisner, E. W. (2012). *Arts based research*. Sage.
- Camnitzer, L. (2014). The pedagogical function of art. In A. Alberro (Ed.), *Luis Camnitzer in conversation with Alexander Alberro* (pp. 95-100). Fundacion Cisneros.
- Desai, D. (2020). Educating for social change through art: A personal reckoning. *Studies in Art Education*, 61(1), 10-23.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Helguera, P. (2009). Notes toward a transpedagogy. In Ehrlich, K. (Ed.), *Art, architecture, pedagogy: Experiments in learning* (pp. 98-112). CalArts.
- Helguera, P. (2011). *Education for socially engaged art*. Jorge Pinto Books.
- Hood, E. J., & Travis, S. (in press). Critical reflective practice for art educators. *Art Education*.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- Kraehe, A. M. (2015). Sounds of silence: Race and emergent counter-narratives of art teacher identity. *Studies in Art Education*, 56(3), 199-213.
- Kraehe, A. M., & Brown, K. D. (2011). Awakening teachers' capacities for social justice with/in arts-based inquiries. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 44(4), 488-511.
- Leavy, P. (2014). *Method meets art*. Guilford.
- Lewis, T. E. (2015). "Move around! There is something to see here": The biopolitics of the perceptual pedagogy of the arts. *Studies in Art Education*, 57(1), 53-62.
- Lewis, T. E. (2018) "But I'm not a racist!" Phenomenology, racism, and the body schema in white, pre-service teacher education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 21(1), 118-131.
- Lucero, J. (2013). Instructional resources as permission. *Art Education*, 66(1), 24-32.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012), *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge. (Original work published 1945)
- Mulvihill, T. M., & Swaminathan, R. (2020). *Arts-based educational research and qualitative inquiry: Walking the path*. Routledge.
- 'Reconcile' (2022), *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconcile>
- Rocha, S. D. (2015a). *Folk phenomenology: Education, study, and the human person*. Pickwick Publications.
- Rocha, S. D. (2018). "Doing fake work is very taxing on the nerves": Research-based art and the practice of study. *Visual Arts Research*, 44(1), 60-75.
- Sions, H. K. (2022). Preparing antiracist teachers: Reflections on an antiracist elementary methods curriculum. *Art Education*, 75(1), 26–29.
- Spillane, S. (2015). The failure of whiteness in art education: A personal narrative informed by critical race theory. *Journal of Social Theory of Art Education*, 35, 57-68.
- Tam, C. (2010). Engaging in reflective practices: Investigating pupils'

- experiences of art from a phenomenological perspective. *International Journal of Education through Art*, 6(2), 181-195.
- Kraehe, A. M., Hood, E. J. & Travis, S. (2015). "I'm so offended!": Curriculum flashpoints and critical arts education. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 16(18). <http://www.ijea.org/v16n18/>
- Travis, S. & Hood, E. J. (2016). Troubling sociocultural narrative pedagogy: Implications for art educators. *Studies in Art Education*, 57(4), 318-328.
- Travis, S., Kraehe, A., Hood, E. J., & Lewis, T. E. (2018). *Pedagogies in the flesh: Case studies on the embodiment of sociocultural differences in education*. Palgrave.
- Vagle, M. (2018). *Crafting phenomenological research*. Routledge.
- Van Manen, M. (2016). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Routledge.
- Wilson, G. J. (2017). Fictive kinship in the aspirations, agency, and (im)possible selves of the Black American art teacher. *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, 37, 49-60.
- Wolfgang, C. N. (2019). The white supremacy of art education in the United States: My complicity and path toward reparation pedagogy. *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, 36(1), 14-28.
- Yoon, I. (2019). Rising above pain: An autoethnographic study on teaching social justice as a female teacher of color. *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, 36(2), 78-102.

## Showing Up: A Creative Reflection on Ritualization for Art Educators

Kate Wurtzel, Ph.D.  
Appalachian State University

### ABSTRACT

This creative reflection looks thoughtfully at the act of ritualization as a potential pedagogical tool towards letting go of more outcome-based processes and releasing predetermined expectations. Stemming from the authors repeated actions of showing up to the canvas daily, this visual essay explores the possibility that ritualization may resituate the self and allow for new understandings to present themselves in an emergent way. Using personal experience as the starting point, the essay asks how ritualizing the act of art-making without predetermined outcomes, may impact art educators and their practice.

KEYWORDS: Ritualization, art education, pedagogy, emergence, repetition

Ritualization, as a repeated act that informs one's understanding of the world and a fluid process of structuring a world of meaning for oneself, is continuous—it is dynamic and informative, educational and reflective (Grimes, 2000). For the artist and arguably art educator, ritualization is the act of showing up; it is the 'coming to' of your own creative and learning spaces again and again, not to produce a product but to hold oneself accountable to the emergent possibilities presented through this form of structuring. Specifically, this visual essay points to the importance of ritualizing the act of art-making for art educators, not as a process of sacred and well-defined actions or rituals, but as a means toward letting go of outcome-based practices. As Grimes (2013) writes "Ritualizing action, though it may have as a goal the production of a stable rite, must at the same time let go of goal-orientedness, pronounced intentionalities" (p. 57). As both an art educator and artist, this is an important distinction. Coming to a space with the intention of releasing intentions, as strange as that may sound, holds the potential to engage in not-yet-anticipated ways of knowing and not-yet-determined encounters with self and other. In this way, ritualization becomes a structuring element for engaging in active and often performative inquiry and learning that has the potential to resituate the self or understanding of self within a larger context of people, materials, and practices (Bickel, 2020). Through my own work, I have found this to be true—the ritualization of the art making created a structured container, allowing me to both turn inward and expand at the same time, to rethink the intra-relations between the self and other as well as consider the pedagogical impact of moving and making in this way.