

Becoming Magic: Acquiring the Artist Identity

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ABSTRACT

This research mines the internal reflective process of an artist/researcher/teacher who witnesses her own becoming, seeing herself, in multiples and weaves a multimodal narrative while contemplating, revealing, and living multiple identities through visual inquiry. The purpose of this research, in its broadest sense, is to better understand the nature of artistic identity and how it is acquired in both a personal and social context. We seek to understand how we might create more fertile conditions and facilitate appropriate rites of passage for transitioning individuals from student/teacher/aspirant to self-actualized artist.

KEY WORDS

artist identity, a/r/tography, art teacher development, artistic development

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“To learn, I believe, is to become. To become different.” -Maxine Greene

What follows is a collaborative investigation between two art education researchers and our student, Karen, as she shares her artistic learning journey to becoming an art teacher beginning with Karen’s voice in italicized text.

In the beginning, I was as a collector, an appraiser, a conductor, a shape shifter, a change maker, a student and a teacher; first and foremost, I was—I am still—a wonderer. Throughout my life I have been many things, but not an artist. Did I know then—do I even know now—what it means to be one? What follows is an account of identity and transformation; the story of how I became an artist. To say that I am an artist now begs the question, why was I not an artist before? In truth, I have always embodied many qualities that artists typically share. Inquisitive, rebellious, and avant garde in my youth, I was rarely satisfied with the given. My father, an unlikely sort of artist in his own right, inspired and instilled in me a deep appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the mundane and the inherent mystery and magic of lived experience, values which have inspired a unique sense of connoisseurship in many aspects of my life. Despite all this, I did not consider myself an artist and found it uncomfortable to don such a title. Throughout my youth I viewed artistic production like a kind of sorcery; a magic power I was not gifted by the stars to possess. It was my understanding that one is either born an artist or is not; the idea of becoming an artist never even occurred to me. Fundamentally, I believe I did not understand what the concept meant. Perhaps I understand it only slightly better now.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) noted “Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to or lead back to ‘appearing,’ ‘being,’ ‘equaling,’ or ‘producing’ ” (p. 239). It is emergent in nature, quietly “mattering” as experience unfolds. This ephemeral process is elusive as Deleuze and Guattari observe in Jackson and Mazzei (2011) “a line of becoming is not defined by the points it connects...on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle” (p.87). The opportunity to reveal the process through a retelling of epiphanic moments in the genealogy of an emerging art teacher provides a nuanced glimpse into artistic becoming. According to Jackson and Mazzei (2011), “becoming is the movement through a unique event that produces experimentation and change” (p.87). The unfolding and coalescing of the duality of artist teacher identities emerge as students move through their preservice art education program.

Thus, we sought to understand how one emerges from student to artist teacher and how that awareness unfolds within an art education preparation program at a large Midwest research-intensive university. According to Irwin (2013),

a/r/t/ography

promotes artistic inquiry as an aesthetic awareness, one that is open to wonder while trusting uncertainty. As such, an *a/r/t/ographical* lens serves as a mechanism for thinking and exploring what it means to transform identities. Through attention to memory, identity, autobiography, reflection, meditation, storytelling and cultural production artists/researchers/teachers/learners expose their living practices in both evocative and provocative ways. (p. 355)

Irwin (2004) states that a/r/tography invites all of us to “live a life of deep meaning enhanced through perceptual practices that reveal what was once hidden, create what has never been known, and imagine what we hope to achieve” (p.35-36). This research mines the in-between spaces, the internal reflective process of a pre-service art educator who witnesses her own becoming, and weaves a multimodal narrative while contemplating, revealing, and living multiple identities through visual inquiry.

Literature Review

This research is a/r/t/ographical in its theory, design, and process in that it illuminates the personal journey of a pre-service artist researcher teacher in the act of investigating the phenomena of her transformation and unveiling of her multiple entangled identities.

Theory as a/r/t/ography creates imaginative turn by theorizing or explaining phenomena through aesthetic experiences that integrate knowing, doing, and making experiences that simultaneously value technique and content through acts of inquiry; experiences that value complexity and difference within a third space. Art is the visual reorganization of experience that renders complex the apparently simple or simplifies the apparently complex. Research is the enhancement of meaning revealed through ongoing interpretations of complex relationships that are continually created, recreated and transformed. (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p.31)

Thus, the purpose of this research is to better understand the nature of artistic identity and how it is acquired within an art education program at a large research university. We seek to know how we might create and design emergent experiences that facilitate appropriate rites of passage for transitioning individuals from student/aspirant to self-actualized artist teacher. As art education professors, our reflexive stances are guided by a constructivist ontology of art education that is meaning-based, emergent in nature, and consistent with the lived experience of learning through embodied a/r/t/ographical encounters. Thinking through a/r/t/ographical lenses while plugging into constructivist theories (Vygotsky, 1987) weaves a dynamic picture of the emergent artist/teacher identity.

To gain the necessary perspective on such a complex and nuanced topic, first consider the notion of identity itself; what it is and how it develops. The very act of constructing and examining one’s own personal narrative plays a significant role in the shaping of and acquisition of identity. McAdams (1993) defines identity as “what it is about [one’s] life that provides [them] with meaning, unity, and purpose ... It is a story” (p. 6). According to McAdams, it is stories that define who we are—a personal myth—that is co-created between ourselves and lived and explored in our social contexts. “The stories we live by have their sources within our own imaginations, in our personal experiences, and in the social world wherein we live and tell” (p. 268). McAdams also implies that the process of telling our stories can reify and/or redefine our myth by means of self-understanding. In other words, the act of expressing our personal identity through narrative may also help to develop, define, and transform it. It is through the narrative nature of identity construction that one is enabled to convey and reflect on experience. Through an a/r/t/ographic lens, art

making and art teaching are intertwined in a weaving of known and unknown experiences only fully examined through reflective narrative.

The notion that a structured study of personal narrative may be essential to identity acquisition and learning echoes Connelly and Clandinin (1990). They claim that:

Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general conception translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories. (p.2)

Targeted reflection on one's personal experience is essential to improving practice as both a teacher and learner. Supported by researchers such as Dewey (1910), Schon (1983), and Marzano (2012) makes a case for reflective practice as an indispensable habit of mind for students as well as practitioners and professionals across a variety of fields, though they highlight its particular importance in the field of education and the practice of teaching.

Additionally, we examine some of the same questions posed by Carl Weinberg (1988): "How does learning how to become [emphasis added] an artist contribute to the task of training and sustaining classroom teachers?" (p.17), and "How might the process ... provide insights into what teachers need to understand in order to do what they do better?" (p.18). In other words, what can we learn about the practice of teaching through the process of examining our own development as artists? As Weinburg underwent the process of learning to paint, he gleaned several insights that align with findings such as the value of process over outcomes, the importance of overcoming fear and vulnerability in order to be more fully and authentically invested in the learning and creating experience, and the overall understanding that teaching, like art-making, is a life-long learning process.

Methodology

Rita Irwin (2013) describes a/r/tography as "a research methodology ... that lives in the rhizomatic practices of the liminal in-between"(p.199). She further states, "These in-between spaces of becoming prompt disruptions of dueling binaries, conceptions of identities and the rush to certainty." A/r/tography explores the intersections of plural identities experienced by artist/researcher/teacher and attempts to unify knowing, doing, and making as they coalesce into what may only be described as aesthetic experience (Irwin, 2004). In this spirit, we embrace the implausibility of disentangling the research practices from the researcher, the experiences of the subject, and the artifacts of that experience, and instead consider them a neatly nested, holistic narrative.

The questions which have guided this a/r/tographical inquiry from its first inception were motivated by a desire to uncover and illuminate the enigmatic nature of becoming; those in-between states in which one experiences profound connection, manifestation, and ultimately, transformation. As artist teachers, we wonder what it could mean for our practice to embrace the teeming essence of wonder, the pliant state of vulnerability, and the power of the personal creative process so that we might continue to be transformed while guiding

students through their own transformative encounters. In an attempt to resolve this quandary, Karen mined her own experience as an emerging artist teacher in a pivotal state of metamorphosis. Through a series of insightful and data rich dialogues with Karen, we collaboratively identified the defining features of Karen's experience of transformation through the creative process of becoming an art teacher.

A/r/tography explores questions and experiences through the three lenses of the artist/teacher/researcher assuming multiple lenses simultaneously. In this case, it also assumes an autoethnographic disposition. Auto-ethnography is considered an umbrella term indicating "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p.2), which in this case refers to a sense of personal identity which is both experienced and performed by the individual and recognized in a social context.

As a collaborative auto-ethnographer (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012), Karen represents the researcher and the researched, the narrator and the interpreter, embodying the lenses of the artist/researcher/and teacher. These three identities take shape as each new identity and layer of understanding is popped open by some epiphanal moment when another iteration of personal truth is revealed. Each part is distinct, but fits snugly inside the whole. Karen revisited this metaphor often over the course of her artistic development, as it seemed to visually communicate the layered, folded nature of identity and transformation. It is only through the process of revealing these hidden portions of her inner self that she began to truly shape the story, which informs her own work and her own identity. Ultimately, we, the authors, value the self, and in this case, the subject, as a legitimate source of knowing and generating insight (Palmer, 2010).

Examining Karen's experience within the context of her art education coursework, and in particular, in an undergraduate/graduate course entitled "Teaching for Studio Thinking," designed to prepare the artist/teacher to guide students in a more authentic learning paradigm by exposing them to experiential encounters with the artistic process. One of us, as director of the art education program, saw students transform in their understanding of what it meant to be an artist and wanted to understand what was happening that produced such significant observations from art education students. Karen enthusiastically agreed to share her experiences through three in-depth interviews. Drawing upon the Three-interview Series model developed by Dolbeare and Schuman (1982) and described by Seidman (1998, 2006), the biographical experiences of an emerging artist were prompted through a triad of discrete, 90-minute interviews held one week apart. In the first interview, Karen described her life's journey to the art education program and the important moments that impacted her decision to become an artist teacher. In Interview two, she described the details and memorable moments that unfolded throughout her "Studio Thinking" coursework in which this new identity emerged. The third interview prompted her to reflect on the two previous interviews for insights into how epiphanal life experiences and reflective understanding of significant learning experiences supported the development of an artist identity.

Analysis of the interview data took an a/r/tographical turn. This included repeated listening of audio recordings and reading of transcriptions, noting transformative statements

of becoming. We used these to visually map where transformation emerged as well as drawing connections between seemingly disparate experiences and concepts. With each revisiting of the conversations, Karen's journal entries, and the physical objects created during this space of artistic inquiry, new layers of meaning were revealed which were at once surprising and manifest upon reflection.

Discussion in Karen's Voice

Magic

When I first began this research, I had no idea what I was looking for. I knew only that something profound had happened to me over the last few months, something that seemed to escape my description, something magical. It's unsurprising that the word "magic" reverberates throughout our data; my artwork is explicitly concerned with magic, more specifically, those icons who embody it—witches. Yet, as I listened to our dialogues, I found myself using the language so profusely, I had to wonder, what does this word "magic" really mean and why is it so inextricably linked to my experience of becoming an artist?

In the months during which I was creating the body of work that would come to represent a profound personal transformation, I contemplated the meaning of magic obsessively. I needed to understand the nature of the curiously entangled fear and fascination we somehow simultaneously feel about the subject. Why are witches both persecuted and venerated, sometimes at the same time by the same people, all across history? Where else does this conflict persist in our own cultural psyche?

Magic is a word with many definitions, connotations, and contexts; however, one might discern that the one irreducible and indivisible commonality among them is power. To be more specific, I define magic as any power, influence, or skill, predicated upon esoteric awareness—that is, knowledge or ability that is secret, inexplicable, misunderstood, or mysterious. Magic, we might add, is a phenomenon that not everyone possesses or understands. We often imagine that a special birthright or elaborate ritual of initiation is the only gateway to its mysteries. There is certain congruence here in the way we conceptualize magic power and artistic talent. The uninitiated may find difficulty in rationally explaining the origins and nature of artistic aptitudes. This special, esoteric ability grants power and influence to the artistic practitioner while it may solicit vulnerability in the layperson or aspiring artist. Whether by coincidence or providence, the inextricable duality of power and vulnerability is a central theme in the very series of work, which marked my own transformation from aspirant to artist.

Wonder

It's impossible to describe the phenomenon of becoming without some acknowledgment of wonder. My journey began with the cultivation of wonder. Throughout my developmental life, the experience of wonder has engendered in me an intense fascination with both aesthetics and the many phenomena of life and its mysteries. As the dialogues unfolded it became apparent that my Father had a particular influence over these significant, early experiences.

During our first conversation, I recount a memory from my childhood; an early encounter with the profound, aesthetic experience of wonder. My Dad woke us all up one morning at about 6:30 AM. There had been an incredible ice storm in the night. For some reason, he had already been up and out of the house, probably to get wood for the stove. The old house was always freezing. He made us all pile into his truck and drove us up on the old ridgeline road because he wanted us to see the way the sun was coming through the ice-covered trees. It was blinding—like the whole landscape was covered in tin foil. For 20 minutes or so, I rode along with my face pressed up against the cold window until the sun was too high in the sky and the effect was lost. I've never seen anything like it and I'll never forget it. My Dad was always doing things like that, creating these magical moments. I don't know if he was really aware of what he was doing. He was just so affected by things and he wanted to share that.

Kingwell (2000) described the concept of wonder as, “the experience of astonishment before the world...the experience that prompts philosophy, a doorway to pure theory”(p. 85). He goes on to say that, “Wonder invites not only investigation of the world, but also reflection on the subject who experiences it, and on the experience itself.” (p.89). Wonder, then, might be viewed as a key condition, perhaps the preeminent condition, for a rich and generative learning environment. Wonder makes fertile ground of the mind and the soul. It readies them for the acquisition of new knowledge and the transformation of self. As teachers, we can facilitate wonder by cultivating it within ourselves. It is a contagious condition that is shared more readily than imparted.

In my art education Studio Thinking class, we were invited to produce our own ideas for a content rich series of visual artwork rather than given a creative prompt or task and asked to respond. We were pushed to entertain many possible concepts before settling on a particular idea. In a sense, we were exercising our ability to wonder, to ask ‘what if’ and ‘why not’ until we had discovered a question so enticing that we would be compelled to spend the next several months endeavoring to resolve it.

That alchemical mix of trepidation and excitement defined those first weeks of studio. The pure potential of ideas coursed through our collective discussions. I was inspired with the budding possibilities of harnessed wonder. With this wonder came ideas, and with ideas came the eventuality of execution. Execution came with its own burden; the burden of every maker: vulnerability.

Vulnerability

As quickly as my ideas had formed, and as potently as I perceived the potential in them, I began to experience that familiar feeling, an erosion of confidence in my ability to justify myself in my creative direction. I sat on my ideas for several weeks, mulling over the subjects with what I thought were bound to contain the most accessible meaning and relevance. I became preoccupied with the audience, my classmates, and instructor, and what I thought might be the most impressive solution to the assignment.

My husband attempted to counsel me saying, “Forget about trying to make a statement. What do you want to make? What’s in your head?” Well...I want to make witches, I said. I don’t know why yet, but something tells me I need to make them. He responded, “Then that’s what you’re going to do. Don’t worry about why. It’ll come to you.”

How do you teach students and teachers to trust their intuition? Many teachers, let alone students, still feel the pressures of vulnerability on their own work. It is much easier to rely on a trodden path, a known narrative or a tired talking point than it is to strike out into the territory of the deeply personal and unknown. Those strides, which we as teachers take towards this uncharted inner territory will undoubtedly, carry us into new realms of understanding, meaning making and perspective for our students’ future benefit.

The experience of vulnerability in the face of growth, learning, and becoming is described by Turner (1977) as he observes cultural rites of passage of pre-industrial societies. He observes that the novice or initiate must be “ground down to a sort of homogenous social matter, in which the possibilities of differentiation may be still glimpsed, then later, positively refashioned into specific shapes compatible with their new post-liminal duties and rights as incumbents of a new status and state” (p.37). In other words, in order to be transformed, one must be sacrificed. What Turner describes vividly parallels Karen’s experience of transformation through creative work. The work of creativity is the labor of love and to love, wholeheartedly, is to be vulnerable.

When I finally sat down with a group of my peers and instructors to discuss the direction of my work, their excitement was overwhelming and palpable. The fact that there were still ambiguities to be resolved only intrigued them more and they freely offered up advice, ideas, and support. From that point on, I would have to allow the work I was shaping to speak to me. I would have to listen, look, feel, and respond. I would have to embrace ambiguity, the unknown, and my own vulnerability in order to truly enter into the creative process.

The Power of Process

There is genuine terror in not knowing what you are doing. One of my earliest epiphanal encounters in the Art Education Program introduced me to the importance of play, letting go, and quieting the ego in the artistic process; I relied heavily on this newly acquired insight as I approached the task at hand.

The first witch came into being, more or less, by accident. I had discovered a new material, an air-drying clay substitute, popular with doll-makers, that I thought might come in handy. I wanted to get a feel for the texture and pliability of the material. I needed to know how it behaved so I began to play. As I worked a form over my kneecap, a mask-like face began to emerge. First the nose, then sagging cheeks and pursed and withered lips. I remembered a stone I’d found near a creek a few days prior. This would become her eye; unblinking, ever watchful. The expression that emerged was wizened and skeptical; unflinching, fleeting and mysterious. Without even knowing it, I had begun to wrap my hands around a metaphor, which would guide me through the duration of the project. The face I’d created on

something of a lark, was the moment of conception for a character, a narrative, and a series of symbolic connections that I had been struggling to verbalize or materialize for some time. The more I researched the traditions and history of witches, particularly their brutal and hypocritical persecution throughout the ages, I began to see that the very same fear, ignorance, and violence that burned across the globe for thousands of years still persists in our culture and collective psyche.

From then on, the process of making became a lens through which everything I encountered was filtered. I began to see relationships to the work in history, politics, and my daily-lived experience. The metaphors deepened and expanded, as did my inquiry into the subject material of femininity, nature, magic, fear and power. I realize now that this is a crucial stage in the making of meaning. As artists, as researchers, as learners, and narrators, we appoint significance according to our own frame of interest or experience. We assign meaning to processes, objects, and narratives, making our own version of order from chaos.

It is my conclusion that meaning is not found in art, in teaching, or in life, but rather, meaning is made. Meaning resides in us, those who create and engage with art, it is not relegated to the work itself as a rigid and inanimate fact. When it comes to meaningful making there are no right or wrong answers. The questions become not, “what does this artwork mean?” but, “how does this work affect us?” Students who understand this relationship to art, visual culture, and the stimulus-rich post-modern environment in which they live are empowered to construct meaning that develops their identities and understanding of their worlds.

The Studio Thinking class was the first time I had the opportunity to make meaningful work; work that explored an idea that intrigued and fascinated me. Everything else I had done was just “stuff”, practice, and projects. The work I did in the studio thinking class was an investigation. It was research. What ultimately survives is what I learned from it and the experience that I had. The objects that I made, at this point, are secondary. They are artifacts of an experience.

As artists, teachers, and researchers, it is what we learn that matters more than the art objects, themselves. If we can use the objects to start or add to a conversation, that is good, but it is still the conversation, the thinking that matters most. I learned so much through the process of producing this work. That’s the really interesting thing for us as teachers. I began to see how students learn through art. They don’t just learn how to make lines or build things with clay. If you’re doing it right, they learn about the world and they learn about themselves. They explore things that they wonder about.

Conclusions and Insights

Herein, we captured the reflective annotations of an emerging artist as a “narrative representation of lived experience through the telling and inscribing of stories” (Denzin, 1989, p. 11). This intimate study confirms that perceptual reflection through a/r/tographical lenses can resolve and uncover significant moments within learning experiences of both students and their teachers. Extrapolating from the results of this deeply personal

introspection we glimpse the blossoming awareness of how artists acquire the artist identity. We found that who they are and might become as artists and art educators is similarly enriched through embodied inquiry. This self-reflection and an awareness of their own artistic journey deepened meaning making that we can all convey into our classrooms.

These insights grew from facilitated studio experiences, in-depth reflective interviews, and a/r/tographical analytical engagement with emerging data. We note that the studio classroom, rich with epiphanies, reflections, and meanings that emerging artists make of their studio experience are evolving, adaptable, and deeply revealing to art educational researchers. According to Karen,

By imposing a fluid architecture for self-reflection and self-inquiry, I was able to engage with my art making in new and profound ways that deepened my understanding of artistic process and the meaning of my work. The liminal space of becoming, became productive epiphanies. It was in these epiphanies that realizations unfolded which led to the acquisition of a new identity. “A limen is a threshold, but at least [in some cases], it is a very long threshold, a corridor almost, or a tunnel, which may indeed become a pilgrim’s road, or...may cease to be a mere transition and become a set way of life, a state, that of the anchorite, or monk” (Turner, 1977, p. 37) and dare I add, an artist.

As an artist, I am always in a state of becoming, never being, because to be an artist is to move through experience in a spiral, to exist in a constant state of inquiry, wonder, and vulnerability, and to occasionally be empowered by the practice to manifest artifacts of our encounter. My work was a physical object in the past. Now it is an experience, a marker of time, growth, and change in my life. It is more than evidence. It is the manifestation of my journey.

This research highlights a critical awareness for artist teachers: that it is through reflection, questioning, and meaning making that we are all continually defining and redefining who we are and how we develop as artists, researchers, and teachers. Karen’s account details what the art object signals about depth of understanding, the degree of engagement, and the extent of identity mediation that unfolds in the art-making process. Art teachers facilitate the production of physical objects, but our roles are something akin to that of spiritual leaders. It is through our guidance that our students become who they are while we continue to grow and learn along with them, because “meaning is a product of our experiences and identities” as the researcher and the research, the making, the knowing, and the being, are inseparably wound into one.

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