

Traces of Communal Touch: Matrixial Encounters with Pre-Service Art Educators Across Two States

————— *Kate L. Wurtzel & Laura Lee McCartney*

Abstract

The matrixial sphere, as put forth by artist and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger, is a shared and trans-subjective space that is beneath the conscious, under the touchable and perceptible; it is a space where we encounter ourselves and one another in shared trauma, healing, art making, and the lived experience overall. This co-authored essay explores how a shared matrixial space and the matrixial gaze, which is not always visual, have been experienced through the square boxes of ZOOM as part of a collaborative, long-distance art exchange project. The project, focused on Spontaneous Creation-Making (SCM) sessions, as outlined in Barbara Bickel and R. Michael Fishers recent book *Art-care Practices for Restoring the Communal: Education, Co-inquiry, and Healing*. These exchanges took place over the span of one semester and consisted of two higher education pre-service art education professors in different North American states. This essay looks generatively at moments where the authors and their students found themselves in a creative space that was not entirely internal or external, not entirely here nor there in terms of location, product, and predictability of the process. Using the lens of the Ettingerian matrixial, the authors question, examine, and pursue an investigation of moments where they, alongside their students, encountered the matrixial space in and through the cross-country SCM project. Applications of this unique art exchange are suggested for other art educators and those pursuing art-care practices in general.

Bios

Kate Wurtzel (she/her), Ph.D. is an artist, educator, researcher, and mother who currently works as an Assistant Professor of Art Education at Appalachian State University and has an active painting practice. Kate's work, often grounded in the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, explores the creative process and its relation to pedagogy as an emergent and embodied experience. As someone who spent many years as a museum educator and public-school art teacher, Kate's teaching and making practice takes relationality, care, and material forces into consideration. Through an emphasis on continued art practice, pedagogical explorations, and constant reflection, she seeks to encourage and support pre-service art educators as they discover their voices and recognize their own process of becoming as artist-educators in the world at large.

Laura Lee McCartney (she/her), Ph.D. is a curator, artist, researcher, teacher, and mother who currently works as an Assistant Professor of Art Education at Texas Woman's University. She has worked as a museum director, curator and educator and has taught elementary, middle, and high school art in public schools in North Texas. In her arts-based practice, McCartney explores spaces to unravel moments of caregiving—between caring and “uncaring” for the things we hand down, especially as mothers and daughters. Her work resides in the tension between caring for objects and ideas with caring for loved ones, visitors, educators, and students as a curator/artist/researcher/teacher. She seeks opportunities to deconstruct material culture as a means to trouble the practices of collecting, creating, and curating as living curricula and pedagogies within art education.



Image 1. Heart-centered Spaces. Digital photograph of collaborative assemblage. Copyright Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

“Individual healing from trauma helps set a piece of the pattern of the universe into a new [ancient] rhythm of resounding care. Care deviates the drumbeat of trauma on repeat.”
(Dickens & Torok, 2021, p. 37)

Touch invokes intimacy and care but also violence and harm. In touching, one is simultaneously touched; there is a multiplicity in touching encounters with vibratory sensations that seep and flow. Touch instantiates transcorporality, rendering material and affective entanglements in a felted, fleshy mesh. Touch is a conceivable and concrete expression, but it can also be imperceptible and imply proximity that can be felt but not measured. (Springgay, 2022, p. 138)

As we looked into our computers, the small Zoom boxes became a shared space of potential creativity and a place for the unknown. Faced with a bit of fear and intimidation, mixed with excitement and anxiousness, we dove head first into the facilitation of a shared, yet individualized, art-making experience with pre-service art education students. Using the book, *Art-Care Practices for Restoring the Communal* by Barbara Bickel and R. Michael Fisher (2023) as a guiding light in this process, we, as professors, stepped out of our own comfort zones to engage in new territory—a space of virtual communal care informed by the sub layers of existence, the Matrixial, and a desire for healing wholeness in art education for ourselves and our students (see Image 1).

This co-authored essay explores how a shared matrixial space and the matrixial gaze, which is not always visual, might be experienced through the square boxes of Zoom, as part of a collaborative, long-distance art exchange project between pre-service art education students and their professors. The collaborative project, focused on Spontaneous Creation-Making (SCM) sessions as outlined in Bickel and Fisher's (2023) recent book, took place over the span of one semester, and consisted of two higher education pre-service art education professors in different North American states. For this project, each professor invited their pre-service students to participate in five art-making sessions via Zoom on Sunday evenings, during which students were provided with specific art-making materials and open-ended prompts. We practiced the ritual of gift giving/gift economy (Vaughan, 1997) by exchanging small bags of materials sent back and forth between participants at both universities. Students were invited to unpack the materials during each of our Sunday SCM Sessions to use as sources for inspiration and reflection as they responded visually or in writing during each session. We wondered, what might our collaboration generate when it travels? We hoped the shared items could invite us to think-with and think-through what we receive and what we give in return along circular, spiral lines. The bags included small papers, fibers, sketches, photos, words, small tokens and prompts to assist in our SCM investigations. It was our hope we might consider new ways of connectivity and experimentation along caring pathways by thinking through the exchange – making conceptual and material connections as we used some of the items, left other things behind, allowed another to add ideas or new concepts, and regenerated something new to



Image 2. Savor the Moment. Digital photograph of student work. ©Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

see, touch, and learn between and betwixt one another and sending it out again. The encounters were not optional, but students could choose the levels at which they flourished in the experiences. The evolving artworks from the Zoom sessions were continuously touched and passed between North Carolina and Texas—they were exchanged via mail between states and between different receivers/art educators. In essence, these small works of art (see Image 2) carried shared marks, as the work moved from fingers to fingers and state to state, touching bordering bodies and shared geographic spaces. For the purposes of this essay, we, the authors



Image 3. Separation-in-Jointness. Digital photograph of collaborative assemblage. Copyright Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

and facilitators, will look for generativity moments. We found ourselves alongside our students occupying a creative space that was not entirely internal or external, not entirely here nor there in terms of location, product, and predictability of the process. This at times, made the space of the matrixial, where a meeting occurs between “co-emerging I and non-1” more palpable, as if we could sense and rely upon the experience to be co-emergent and transsubjective for the collective group as well as the individual (Ettinger, 2006, p. 86.7).

What is the Matrixial?

The matrixial sphere, as put forth by artist and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger (2006), is a shared and trans-subjective space that is beneath the conscious, under the touchable and perceptible; it is a space where we encounter ourselves and one another in shared trauma, healing, and art-making. The Matrixial as presented by Ettinger, is based on the core concept that the feminine is “neither pre-Oedipal nor an after-effect of phallic or Oedipal structure,” meaning it pre-exists the splitting of gender structures into male and female and is in constant relation, (Griselda Pollock in Ettinger, 2006, p. 14.5). This constant dynamic state of relationality requires continuous readjustment between that which is known and that which is unknown. In other words, the matrixial is the feminine before the feminine structure; it strives to be outside of the subject-object divide by recognizing that which came before, acknowledging the subject-to-be and that which co-emerges in the act of living, in the event of human-becoming. This core concept is articulated by Ettinger (2006) as m/Other within the context of the matrixial. As Pollock in Ettinger (2006) explains, “The I and non-I—always in plural—share the space and process of co-affecting co-poiesis in diverse and different ways” (p.14.5). The I and the non-I are plural, existing not as mother and infant, male and female, or subject and object, but rather as co-constituted entities knowable through their partnership-in-difference and affecting one another as they

go along. Breaking away from the term feminine used with the context of gender identity, m/Other becomes a shared fluidity of in-and-out, with-in, and with-out across borderlines and compartmentalized categories, across state lines and constructed computer interfaces that allowed us, professors and students, to border-link and connect with one another.

Our Story: Separation-in-Jointness, Partnership-in-Difference

Separation-in-jointness is where we co-emerge at times, feeling deep connectivity, and at other times sense the separation or “co-fading of connected I and non-I” (Ettinger, 2006, p. 123). For Ettinger, this separation-in-jointness is not simply a tracing back of one’s lineage or a coming to existence through separation of the I to non-I as distinct entities, but instead a recognition of how encounters, mainly traumatic encounters, are experienced in relation as partial-subjects engaging with the dynamic relation of the self-outside-of-the-self, in a space of pre-subject-object distinction and connectivity. As Ettinger (2006) explains, with Matrixial theory, “I am not only concerned with my own traumas, the encounter with the Other is traumatic to me, but I am also concerned with the trauma of the Other” (p. 124.5). There is a shared trauma encounter and a shared experience in the becoming-human that is dynamically transmitted continuously between fluid borderspaces of the subject-object relation. For us, as co-authors and facilitators, this dynamic relation between I and non-I brought about the stirring of our spirits and the sensation of connection when we re-met for the first time in a long while and conceived this two state project together.

It had been several years since the two of us had encountered one another and even back then, our introductions were short and surface level. We did not know each other well. Here we apply the term intra-connectivity and intra-relational in reference to feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad’s (2007) development of “Agential Realism” where she uses intra-actions to refer to the idea that things do not pre-exist before their relations. However, in the Spring of 2023, we briefly connected via Zoom during a meeting focused on Bickel and Fisher’s (2023) book, *Art-Care Practices for Restoring the Communal*, and then in-person during the National Art Education Association conference of 2023. It was during that in-person physical meeting that our partnership-in-difference and our separation-in-jointness began to be felt in an embodied, energetic, and visceral manner. It is where we began to cook up the plan that would continue to flourish for months to follow—one that would keep us connected during challenging times of motherhood and teaching that we explain further in the narratives to follow. Although admittedly we were both a little nervous, we were inspired to enter into the unknown world of art-care theory as laid out by Bickel and Fisher (2023), and begin implementing some of the ideas with our own students by offering SCM sessions throughout the semester.

These sessions became pillars of hope and exploration throughout our semester. They created a structure outside of the classroom where we could think about art-making and art teaching in an unrestricted manner; far from the boxes of a lesson plan or the structure of rubrics and assessment. We became wit(h)nesses to each other’s becoming as we navigated the muddiness of not knowing exactly what we were doing and seeing one another through the matrixial gaze. Here, the gaze is not intended as a means to cut, separate, and slice between subject-object, but instead to recognize their in-separation-ness. Our hardships experienced that semester, our struggles in each of our professional and personal lives, did not become an object of desire, spectacle, or repulsion. We did not become the subject of and for the other. Rather our gaze was of compassion, surrender, and support. The gaze of m/Other as a partial-subjects for-and-with one another, a shareable subjectivity borderlinked through our “bringing into being-together” (Ettinger, 2006, p. 86.7) as we continued down the path of preparation and collaboration.



Image 4. The Perfect Lonesome Mother. Digital photograph of student work. Copyright Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.



Image 5. Metamorphosis Moments. Digital photograph of student work. Copyright Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

Preparing for the Collaboration: Borderlinking through the Matrixial Gaze

Unlike the concept of the phallic gaze put forth by Lacan, the matrixial gaze is pluralistic in nature and unidirectional (Cavanagh, 2022). It accounts for the transference and counter transference that can occur when we are not seeing the self as split from an-other, but rather in a dance of movement and conjunction. So that when we are faced with struggles of life, we might find ourselves in a state of compassion and carriage, rather than individualization and a distinct subject-object divide. It is a decentralized gaze, not landing on object or even the backwards directional glance from object to subject, but instead through continuously transgressed borders and in-between spaces of knowing. This, as Ettinger explains, is due to the matrixial being in dialogue with what she calls, metramorphosis. Metramorphosis being understood in the following way,

Metramorphosis is the process of change in borderlines and thresholds between being and absence, memory and oblivion, I and non-I, a process of transgression and fading away. The metramorphic consciousness has no centre, cannot hold a fixed gaze—or, if it has a centre, it constantly slides to the borderline, to the margins. Its gaze escapes the margins and returns to the margins. (Ettinger, 1992, p. 203)

The matrixial gaze, is inherently feminine in that it offers a fragmented, decentralized, yet rhizomatically connected space that Ettinger (2006) describes as “a link with-in-ter several subjects and between subject and object” (p. 115). Metramorphosis is a key element to the matrixial gaze and defined by Ettinger at this process of transmissibility, with dissolving and re-forming boundaries between self and other. And while Ettinger is discussing these terms in the context of painting and the relationships that stand in dynamic tension between artist, viewer, and artwork, for us this was sensed on a broad scale as well. As professors the idea of dissolving and re-forming boundaries is something we hoped would occur during our SCM sessions as the students got to know each other and experience the spirit of art-care theory first hand. The SCM sessions are meant to be a space of experimentation, low pressure, material-listening, and a sort of unlearning of structured ways of knowing when it comes to art-making—a place where art is not product-based, but rather relational process and processing. For us, this idea of art being about materials leading, opening to curiosity, allowing for emergence to occur, and leaning towards the affectual, is in alignment with our philosophy of art and art-making; it is how we encourage our students to think about their own process of creating and teaching with their future students (see Images 4 and 5). As scholar-artists-educators who create spontaneously together, Darlene St. Georges and Barbara Bickel (2022) expressed how, “Spontaneous creation-making is a co-emergent relationship that entwines the creator, witness, and the creation itself to initiate trust, interconnectivity, and individual and collective understandings” (p. 213). However, what we as co-facilitators did not anticipate was how the matrixial gaze and the idea of metramorphosis would become both all-encompassing and deeply penetrating in our lives. As we prepared for the project, walked through it together, and diffractally looked back once the semester was over, the full experience invoked a shared fluidity of self-other and blurred boundaries between the individual and the collective. Spontaneous Creation-Making helped us to strengthen our friendship, not feel so alone during difficult times, and find compassion across multiple screens and many miles. In this way it feels as if the matrixial gaze, and the idea of metramorphosis, were always-present and sensed through the more finite gestures of making and care (see Image 6).

Metramorphosis allows us to be what Ettinger calls trans-individual and trans-subjective, where the straight and more rigid line of transference and countertransference between subject-object is denied in favor of the



Image 6. Spontaneous Squiggles. Digital photograph of mixed media on canvas. Copyright Kate Wurtzel. 2024.

messy, spontaneous squiggles in the margins of knowing and the sensing of one another (Bertelson, 2004). And while Ettinger (1992, 2006) is addressing the gaze in the context of painting, for us as facilitators and instructors, we were engaged in a kind of unspoken matrixial gaze upon one another as we prepared for the semester project we got to know each other better, and experience our own pathways of grief and strength in a “conjointly but differently” way (Ettinger, 2006, p. 140.1). As such, the next two sections of this article will provide our separate-yet-together accounts of what the collaboration meant to each of us during a particular moment in our lives, a point in time and space where we crossed, touched, entangled, and borderlinked with one-another. Additionally, in the following sections we will share images of students’ work who participated, as well as a collaborative work of art created by us that documents how we have come to understand matrixial theory, matrixial gaze, and metramorphosis.

I Carry You/You Carry Me: Laura Lee’s Story

Carriance is about remembrance—remembrance of wounds, of grief, of fragility, of pain. Within these spaces of hurt, there are moments to feel and re-find our way. Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) suggests “someones were there” (p. 118) as a quiet invitation to trace the edges of lived experience where the matrixial gaze allows space for the Other—for the “someones” who were there when something happened in moments of our transformation. As Kate and I reconnected last April and began to envision an art-care collaboration for our pre-service students, we did not fully anticipate how the space would evolve into an art-care space for us as educators, as someones who would be changed with-in our encounter events. It was with-in our planning conversations that we came to share trauma stories of navigating and balancing our roles as academics and mothers in fragile and vulnerable moments with one another. We were thrust into a space of carriance for



Image 7. Through Threads. Digital photograph of collaborative assemblage. Copyright Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

ourselves and one another without warning and hesitation.

Traces of trauma were stitched into the fabric of our collaboration from the beginning (see Image 7). The second week of the semester, while Kate was in Turkey for a conference, my father died very unexpectedly in an unusual accident. Two weeks later, my daughter was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. As such, I was suddenly called to care for my widowed mother and my very sick daughter while beginning my first year as an assistant professor. Through planning monthly SCM moments with our students, Kate and I developed not only pedagogical spaces for our students to think differently about self-care and creation making, but we also created a supportive space, an art-care space for one another. Our logistical emails about the curriculum collaboration quickly expanded to include texts, humorous and supportive GIF images, and the exchange of handwritten letters and cards chalked full of words of encouragement and support as we became friends moving through trauma in different states, simultaneously. This kind of expansive recognition and caring for both the internal and external journey of one another, as we engaged in the project, is an aspect of "creation-centered research" (St. Georges, 2024) that artists, educators, and scholars, St. Georges and Bickel (2022) explain, "generates and weaves the threads of our stories with the intention of deepening awareness about our interconnectedness with Others" (p. 213). Creation-centered research honors inherent relationality and connection, as well as the generative spirit of creating that allows for movement across the porous boundary of inside-outside, self-other (St. Georges, 2024) (see Image 8).

By engaging in this kind of bordersharing, both in our art-making and in our lived experience, we were tak-



Image 8. Bordersharing. Digital photograph of collaborative assemblage. Copyright Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

ing up this creation-centered work as a way of knowing and being during difficult periods of our lives. Bickel and Fisher (2023) suggest how in *communitas*, “Places hold memories that are positive (where we experienced belonging, care and joy) and negative (where we experienced rejection, separation, fear and hurt)” (p. 50). They posit that the connection to circles of care offer opportunities to re-visit and re-story experiences, allowing healing to come forward. Ettinger describes this kind of exchange as a *borderreliance*, a border-linking of our co-response-ability for carriage to one another. As Ettinger (2023) states in the Foreword to the book *Art-Care Practices for Restoring the Communal* by Bickel and Fisher: Carriage then rises to the consciousness and accompanies the human subject through conceiving—conceiving an image, conceiving a thought, conceiving an idea—discovering that which is mysterious, connecting to the other and the world, up to bearing witness. (p. xxix)

Kate offered genuine care to and for me—as I sat in silences in hospital rooms waiting for my daughter’s biopsy results, lab reports, and chemotherapy infusions while trying to keep up with my new responsibilities at work. Our partnership, that began pedagogically, took a relational turn, a turn towards *communitas* where we hold each other and might “carry + care” (Bickel & Fisher, 2023, p. 8) within matrixial borderspaces. This deep engagement in our lived experiences provided new spaces for radical acts of care. Over several months, Kate held space for my late-night texts and calls—sometimes when I could barely speak through my tears describing the reality of matrixial caregiving for others. She showed me loving kindness and compassion and held the space for my *e/motions*.

Looking back at our exchanges, I realized this was what it means to be human. We were feeling in-the-mo-

ment, and that was how we re-found our way as educators. As a result, we could think more deeply about carriage and ask how we might re-turn to work with our pre-service students—encouraging them to prioritize time and space to care for themselves and each other as new teachers. We also recognized our need to prioritize time and space to care for ourselves as veteran educators and care-givers on many fronts. While Kate's story is different from mine, we were connected on the path of carriage and bound in our wit(h)nessing of each other's journeys.

The Dwarf Star: Kate's Story

The difference between a dwarf brown star and a fused star is that the dwarf star does not generate enough dynamic movement with material to start nuclear fusion. And while they do contract, cool, and glow, they never fully form due to an inability to sustain the fusion of hydrogen at its center. This is unlike a regular star, where its core temperature causes fusion to happen, releasing energy and the shine that we can see from earth. For me, as co-author and co-facilitator of the project, art-care theory, ideas around the matrixial, and the nurturing relationship forming across the country became a point of fusion, a center point shifting me from an internal brown star to one that could shine under its own power. To better understand this shift, this next part of the article involves the sharing of a personal wound that is an important part of the narrative as we wit(h)nessed each other's healing journey and became an entangled presence in one-another's lives.

I was asleep in a very tiny airport hotel room when I got the ding on my phone alerting me to a new text. I was completely disoriented as I had only arrived in Turkey for an international conference a few hours prior. When I saw the text and realized a friend was in need, I pulled my eyes open and cleared the cobwebs from my brain in order to respond. And while Laura Lee in hindsight, talked about this night and that text exchange, as being the night I was there for her during a time of need, for me it became the starting point of a fusion and expansion I didn't even know I needed. Looking back now, I am able to see how I had been untethered and in floating parts until that moment. However, when I answered that "call" in the form of a text in the middle of the night and in a foreign country, something shifted. Yes, a friendship began to burgeon and strengthen but something inside of me began to fuse, moving from a brown dwarf star to one that was wanting to gain light and energy. Looking back, I can see how that sense of fusion and light I was discovering along the way was directly related to art-care, matrixial theory, and the community of care that was forming with and through this co-creative project.

What Laura Lee did not realize or know when she texted me that night in Turkey, was that I was traveling through my own version of trauma at the same time and had consequently lost my internal compass. Due to a deep cut with a long-time girlfriend that occurred only a few months prior, I had lost my ability to trust myself when it came to friendships and relationships and was feeling incredibly broken. I was grieving a thirty-three year old friendship that could not evolve any further and in the thick of that grief, I was also facing some hard personal truths that forced some un-learning to occur. Consequently, that text message was not only the beginning of a beautiful friendship but also the beginning of my ability to trust myself once again. It was as if the wit(h)nessing of Laura Lee's and my blossoming friendship and the wit(h)nessing of this unfolding project, actually became a wit(h)nessing of my own healing process. The evolution of these two burgeoning elements, our friendship and this project, played a significant role in my healing journey, and yet we weren't even physically in the same spaces. This, as philosopher and theorist Massumi (2006) explains is part of the power and ability of the matrixial gaze, to call back and forth across time and space.

In Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's book (2000) *Artworking 1985-1999*, Massumi relates the matrixial gaze to feeling and its ability to cross distances, while drawing elements together especially during times of trauma. This was us—we experienced a matrixial gaze and carriage with one another that expanded across time and space to mutually support one another during challenging moments in our lives. And while some might attribute the timing to coincidence or the natural flow of things, we did not. Instead, we saw our experience as the blurring of I and non-I, the trans-subjective space between subject and object. Because where Laura Lee may have originally thought that it was unidirectional, and that I was supporting her, what she didn't realize was that she was helping me shift internally from a brown dwarf star, into one of fusion and light.

Seeing as to how we could find and feel a connection across a global distance, it gave us hope our students could do the same. As we prepared for the project to begin, we looked to the Art-Care Practices for Restor-

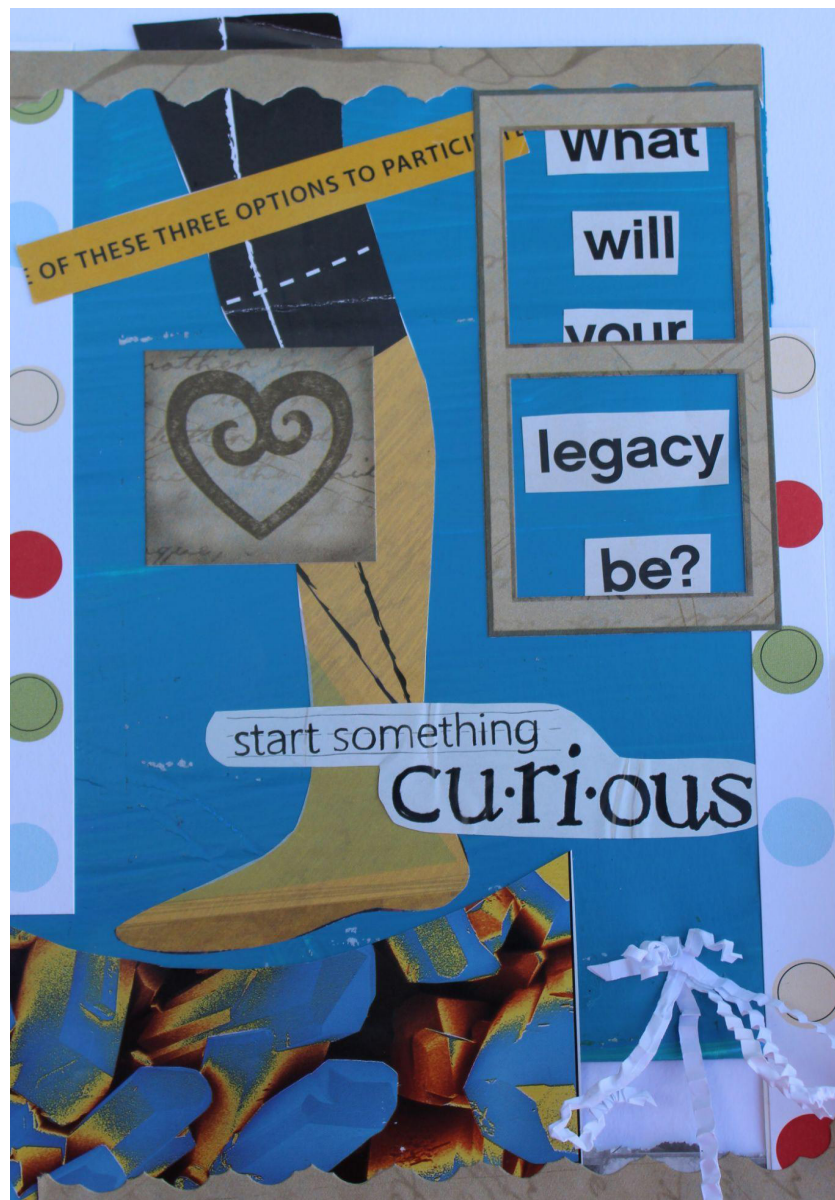


Image 9. Start Something Curious. Digital photograph of student work. © Laura Lee McCartney, 2024.

ing the Communal book to support our planning and used it as a reference point in determining both the sequence and theme of each session with our students. We followed Bickel and Fisher's (2023) Spontaneous Creation-Making Outline on page 42 that lists fourteen key aspects for planning a SCM session. We talked about these aspects with our students, so they could have a better understanding of what to expect in our sessions over the semester. Additionally, prior to our first session, we asked our students to read select sections from the book so they were familiar with certain terms and ideas and had an overview of commitments to the practice. We did this with the hope to establish a common language amongst students and ourselves, and a kind of conceptual familiarity before facing the ever-so-looming Zoom boxes/squares (see image 9).

The Matrixial Gaze Through Zoom Boxes

“What stems from art returns to art, but transformed. Art, in the interim, transmutes as well.”
(Ettinger, 2006, p. 94.5)

It may seem that collectively as a society we should be used to and comfortable with seeing one another through Zoom boxes at this point in time. However, the reality is that it is still a third territory, a virtual and liminal space between here and there that can be uncomfortable and/or challenging to navigate. The screen is simultaneously an invitation and a division, a space of meeting not only the self with and alongside Other, but the self as reflected back by other. Lacan (1981) talks about this as a split, when one becomes the spectacle and spectator at the same time—almost hyper aware of being seen as cut off from the self, and reflected back. Ettinger (2006) articulates Lacan's position as, “the gaze turns us into a picture to be looked at in phantasy, in which we do not appear to ourselves—except as a stain in the picture, or as screen between the gaze and the picture, or as a stain on the screen” (p. 97). And while neither Ettinger nor Lacan are literally talking about the computer screen here, it is interesting to consider how we are viewed (and how we do the viewing) while seeing ourselves through the physical object of the computer screen and the interface of zoom.

Arguably, Zoom creates a division, and one that was felt distinctly at the beginning of this experience, but it also presents a unique opportunity to become shifting subject-object together, to resist staring at one's own face and genuinely trying to be-with self-and-other in a blurred boundary and com-passionate manner. We weren't there to symbolically satisfy a desire to be both spectator and spectacle, professor and student, split into the boundaries of our little lined squares, but to wit(h)ness our mutual and evolving becoming as individuals and as a group, a co-emerging I as Ettinger (2006) calls it. The challenge, however, is looking past the boundaries, past the structured vertical and horizontal grid on the screen and to recognize where we might co-emerge. Is it through the online art-making, in the sharing of our work, or even in the opening and closing orientations that we engage in together? Where does this co-emergence from the gaze of subject-object exist, take place, infiltrate the porous borders of our thinking, our distant spaces, and our physical skin?

Kisiel's (2022) discussion on the need for the matrixial now, in today's post-Covid world, might provide some insight into these questions around co-emergence and co-becoming of subject-object, especially when positioned through the space of Zoom and the virtual world at large (see p. 499). We began thinking about how we might become partners-in-difference through the lens of the matrixial in our new online post-Covid space, rather than perceiving us as divided spectator and spectacle through the lens of the computer camera, which is deeply embedded in matrixial theory. This thinking is submerged in understanding that the feminine is not about sexual organs or specifically mother-child relations, but rather in pre-divisions, in activated connections, in com-passion, and in the intra (and inter) connectivity that already exists between us all, including

our connections to materials in our individual and collective spaces. To borrow from the work of St. Georges and Bickel (2022) these sessions, and even unpacking and discussing them after, took a creation-centered approach that recognized how art-making is both an intra and inter personal experience. As St. Georges and Bickel (2022) express, “We believe an intra)inter-relational aesthetic is essential in order to navigate the paradox of the journey” (p. 214). Specifically, this intra (and inter) connectivity, this fluid movement across boundaries of inside-and-outside, of material-and-self, of self-and-other, is reflected in the students’ comments and feedback after going through a few of the Spontaneous Creation-Making sessions with us during the semester. Below are a few select quotes from our students at both universities that reflect their shifting views and their expanding sense of intra-relations:

Student A: *When I personally engage with materials, I feel guided as if from some other spirit to create something. When I start seeing it become something, I struggle to not take over with my own ideas. Instead, I have to consciously allow this other force to stay in control. I notice that my breath slows down and my mind quiets when I really allow these forces to work instead of myself, but that is only when I affectively do it. When I struggle with trying to take over with my own ideas. I am more nervous and shake and my thoughts are very loud. It is much easier to focus and be calmer when I allow the energy to flow.*

Student B: *For me, I like to let the materials move me. The materials tell me what they want to be and I create that. I usually focus intensely and block out the world around me, my breath may slow down, as I continue to keep focus and I might hold my breath when I am performing a difficult part of my creating. It is a therapeutic practice. I feel as if I am alone—just me and my creation.*

Student C: *The SCM sessions I have taken part in this semester have helped me as a preservice art education student by creating space for calm and peace in the midst of this overwhelmingly busy semester. Something I have struggled with this semester is having trouble finding time to make art for myself. The SCM sessions allowed me a space to ground myself and create in a risk-free environment. After these sessions, I felt more calm and at peace and able to tackle homework, assignments, and another week of classes. So ultimately, the SCM sessions assisted me in being able to slow down so that I could focus on being a student while maintaining a healthy work-life balance.*

Student D: *Participating in SCM felt like coming back to a nurturing mother, where I was free to be my authentic self, and I wasn’t worried about the final product of what I was making, I was just processing and making. I think when students reach a point of finalizing their projects, they could really benefit from taking a ritualized step back, and taking space to really process how far they’ve come and what they have to do to finish.*



Image 10. It was love from the first moment I laid eyes on you. Digital photograph of student work. ©Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

These student responses offer insights into the art-making process and demonstrate how the matrixial gaze might be experienced even through the screen of the computer. From their feedback we see how the materials and process can transcend the limitations of a screen and touch into internal spaces that nurture and counter the stress of academic life and learning (see Image 10). We, as facilitators faced few roadblocks or impediments in the flourishing of our matrixial encounters. Although one student privately messaged us in the Zoom Chat space— the inspirational teaching prompts and readings, body grounding practices and closing rituals made her feel uncomfortable. She asked if she might turn off her camera, microphone and speaker and solely focus on creating her art. Despite her need for private creating, she still entered into the carriage of the group and offered traces of connection. Although her face was not visible in the Zoom box, she still shared her art-making with the group. Acceptance of all forms of participation further reinforces how the students' personalities and dispositions came together in a full willingness to radically trust and explore the SCM process during our time together.



Image 11. Others Appreciate Your Sensitivity. Digital photograph of student work. © Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

While our original intention was to design encounter events that would serve as support spaces to counterbalance the emotional and physical exhaustion many pre-service educators experience going through their training programs, the sessions evolved into something more through our matrixial borderlinks (Ettinger, 2005). We moved out of the Zoom boxes and into our individual and collective spaces of creation-making, where material and energetic forces were felt in carriage with one another (see Image 11). The experience of creating with each other was prolonged and extended as the physical art objects were sent across state lines, again and again. Without being physically present with one another, we found ways to trace the touch of participation and creative encounters. As students and faculty passed work back and forth between North Carolina and

Texas, continuously adapting, altering, adding, never actually completing the work, they came to understand how spontaneous creation-making and art-care in general is not about the product but about the ephemeral ongoing transformation and transmutation of both art and artist. We heard from several students as a result of the encounters, how they would like to take up the SCM ideas and practices in their own pedagogical contexts moved forward.

The Turn-About: An Unexpected Wit(h)ness-Thing

After the semester concluded, we as facilitators, colleagues, and now very good friends strived to continue working in “distance-in-proximity” borderspaces as artist-healers with one another (Ettinger, 2006, p. 143). As we wrote about this project and reflected on our collective and individual experiences, we continued to create and pass a canvas back and forth that focused on the topic of matrixial theory (see images 6-11). This canvas, unexpectedly became what Ettinger might call wit(h)ness-things. A wit(h)ness-thing according to Ettinger (2006) is an “imprint of Thing-events coming from my non-I(s)” (p. 144). This imprint, which for us is in the form of a shared co-created canvas, is reflective of each other’s experience as fragments that make a whole; it is partial but complete in that partiality. We created a wit(h)ness-thing that was sent back and forth in artistic generosity and com-compassion for each other’s trauma within the creative encounter event. This became a means of processing and a way to heal collectively from the end of this academic year and the struggles we both faced.



Image 12. Matrixial Spheres. Digital photograph of mixed media on canvas. © Kate Wurtzel. 2024.

It is important to understand we are not suggesting the matrixial space holds a promise of healing trauma, nor do we identify as art therapists in these matrixial encounters. Rather, we listened for caring interludes, established circles of care, and held space for caring-focused teaching and art creation within our communities of care (Bickel & Fisher, 2023). We were nurturing the communal through art-care practices, and that was healing. Tracing our fingers over one another’s markings and finding the mothering trails in the notes that resonated in our visual fields of inspiration, we found a way to touch, understand and visualize the matrixial link between our physically distant lives. As Ettinger (2005) expressed, “This is where artworking and healing step forward.

In co-poietic moments of exposure towards the other, the artist as healer transforms the traumatic event into a subjectivizing potentiality” (p. 710). With the large word “MATRIXIAL” Kate scrawled across the canvas (see Image 12) and circles pulsing around it, the feminine spheres came to represent our female bodies as mothers and art educators. As Ettinger (2006) described, The matrixial sphere is a space of encounters and their trails: traces of my traumatic encounter with my non-I(s) occurring along unconscious pathways opened by originary Thing-encounters with the m/Other and by imprints of Thing-events—traumatic encounters that are not only mine, but also those of my non-I(s), transmitted to me and trans-scribed (p. 123). The canvas cloth became another matrixial memory and trauma documentation of our event with our students and with each other.



Image 13. Trauma Texts. Digital photograph of collaborative assemblage. © Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

The “Matrixial Spheres” artworking began with Kate’s markings (see Image 12), while in her home in North-Carolina, as she birthed the original imagery and then sent it to Laura Lee, who then added more text, wove-in strands of her daughter’s hair (see Image 7) that had fallen out from chemotherapy, and stitched-in photograph details of the large cell-like mosaics artworks, entitled “Aquasphere,” by artist Sonia King, located in the hallway of the Pauline Allen Gill Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders at Children’s Medical Center in Dallas. The location where her daughter received monthly chemotherapy infusions (see Image 8). The artworking also includes screenshots of some of the text message exchanges (see Image 13) using vintage threads belonging to Laura Lee’s daughter’s great-great-grandmother (see Image 14). While the screenshot text messages were not formally writing for this project, they represent the touchstones that sustained us throughout the year.



Image 14. Threads for Thing-encounters. Digital photograph of collaborative assemblage. © Laura Lee McCartney. 2024.

When we returned to our phones to scroll the messages, we found a different kind of borderlinking that was fast, accessible, and nourishing to the spirit. Additionally, Laura Lee wrote into the artwork, following the paths of Kate's marks around the canvas, the lyrics from Sinéad O'Connor's (1997) song, *This is to Mother You* (see Images 8, 15 and 16). The song is especially meaningful to Laura Lee who listened to it while walking the labyrinth (see Image 15) located outside the children's hospital on treatment days with her daughter. Not only was Laura Lee enacting mothering for her daughter, but was also a daughter herself, in need of mothering.

*I'm here to mother you
To comfort you and get you through
Through when your nights are lonely
Through when your dreams are only blue
This is to mother you.*

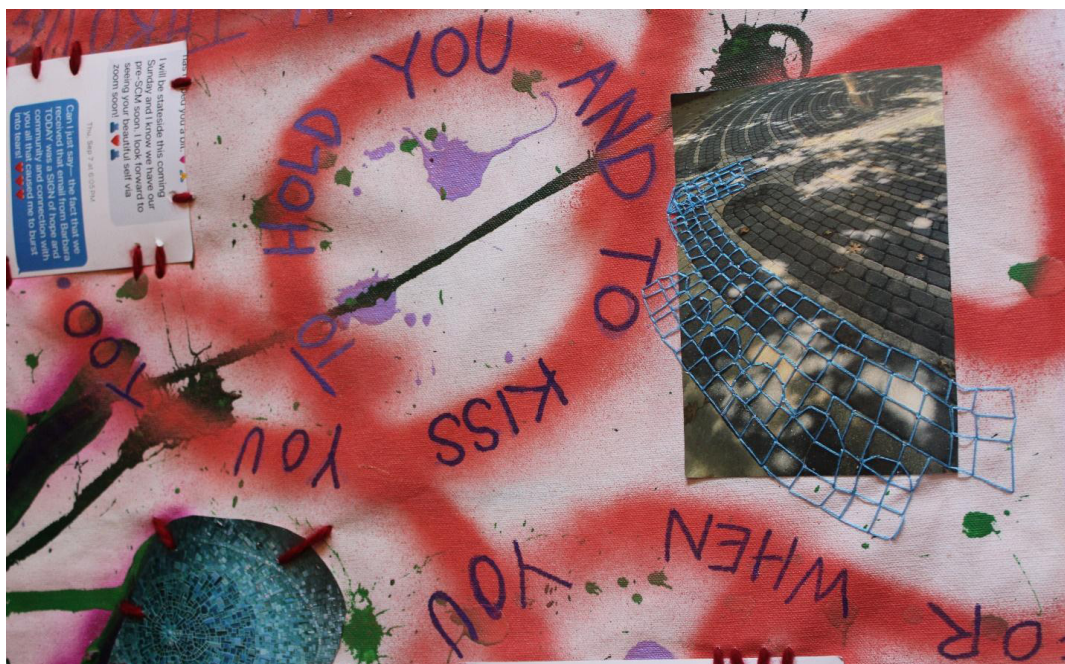


Image 15. Blurring the Boundaries/Walking the Labyrinth. Digital photograph of collaborative assemblage. © Laura Lee McCartney. 2024

What we came to realize was that not only were we providing a matrixial space for our students, but we were also creating a space to mother and heal ourselves. Ettinger (2006) suggests, “A matrixial memory of the event, paradoxically both unforgettable and in/of oblivion—a memory carrying a load no linear story can convey—is transmitted and cross-inscribed” (p. 144). We could not have conceived the wit(h)ness-thing that would come out of our experience prior to the encounters with the loss of Laura Lee’s father and daughter’s illness, prior to being in the art-care community with our students, or prior to the becoming of this project with all its lay-

ers. We could not foresee how the matrixial sphere, as a space of encounters, would hold us throughout the semester and move us forward even post-project and post-semester. Yet, this kind of inability to see, perceive, or predict that which will unfold in advance, aligns with the matrixial gaze with its desire to embrace the sublime over pictorial representation and its blurring of boundaries over distinct cuts between self and Other (see Image 15). We conclude by sharing final thoughts—a few seeds of grains of the affective forces and accounts of our provocations within matrixial spaces/encounters.

Concluding Grains

In the literature on the matrixial gaze, Ettinger (2006) refers to “fragments of unfamiliar others” (p. 116) being like connecting grains and partial-object-subjects within the context of the encounter event. Similarly, in Massumi’s (2000) description of Ettinger’s paintings and her allowance of materials to appear, disappear, and reappear in her paintings, he too talks about grains. He states how “(e)ach black grain has its freedom” in her work and how “the artist exerts no conscious control over the drifting” in this case, of the paint and toner on the canvas (p. 10). Just as Ettinger (2006) explains the self-Other relationship within the context of the matrixial gaze as fragments and partial, here Massumi is implying that the black materials have a freedom that makes it, along with the artist using the material, a partial-object and partial-subject in the shared process of creation.

In many ways we were the grains and the artists throughout this project (see Image 16). We were all the things—material bodies, digital faces visible on Zoom, dried up hot glue strings stuck to yellow envelopes, scraps of paper that fell out upon opening up our packages, paint absorbed into the white paper. We were the vibrating partial subject-object of the unfamiliar Other that became beyond-familiar throughout the time and space of the semester and beyond. Like a

bordersphere existing at the edge of the canvas, or a matrixial link on the surface of the computer screen, we were existing in one space but reaching into multiple spheres and with constant blurred subject-object relations. And while we may not know exactly where the traces of our communal touch from this project will land in the long run; when our students say things such as, “I see myself using these SCM sessions in my art education career by viewing art making not as a list of rules to be followed but as an outlet for expression, creation, and feeling,” we can only hope the extended impact will lead to greater understandings and wonderfully muddy boundaries between self and Other, especially during future creative matrixial encounters in classrooms and beyond.



Image 16. *Matrixial Encounters*. Digital photograph of collaborative assemblage. © Laura Lee McCartney. 2024

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