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Women re-imagining life through art: A/r/tographical discoveries in a community expressive arts studio

ABSTRACT

This article introduces an art-based research study reflecting on women's individual/collective experiences of personal transformation as they engage in visual art-making, writing, storytelling and ritual in a community expressive arts studio. The author shares how she investigated her practice of studio expressive arts therapy, where individual and therapeutic artistic work took place in a relational context through intermodal arts classes. Artist/participants become a community of a/r/tographers, examining the relational aesthetic of studio practice through art-making and writing as well as the creation of an art exhibit and performance ritual. The researcher explores her contiguous roles as artist/researcher/teacher/therapist, disrupting traditional views of therapeutic practice while questioning the role of the arts in healing and community. These re-imaginings invite transdisciplinary considerations of a/r/tography while considering the therapeutic aesthetics of gifting a/r/tographical works to public audiences.

KEYWORDS

relational aesthetic
expressive arts therapy
a/r/tography
art-based research
living enquiry
transdisciplinary

INTRODUCTION

This article presents an overview of a dissertation study that investigated women's experiences of art-making in community. As an art-based, feminist enquiry, 'Re-imagining life through art' explored the lived experiences of women engaged in expressive arts groups within a studio environment. Crossing borders of disciplinary boundaries in art, education and therapy, as well as the edges between private and public life, this study explored the *relational aesthetic* (Moon 2002; Bourriaud 2002) of women gathering as a community of practice to use the arts for personal transformation and healing.

The research took place at the 'Art Life Studio' in Charlottesville, Virginia, my private practice during 2007–2011. I founded this studio to create a dedicated place for my work as an artist, educator and therapist in the field of Expressive Arts. Expressive Arts is the multimodal practice of working with all the arts (visual arts, drama, writing, poetry, music, storytelling, dance/movement and imagery) to foster personal and community transformation (International Expressive Arts Therapy Association [IEATA] 2015). Influenced by philosophical, anthropological, psychological and aesthetic approaches to the arts and healing, expressive arts is interdisciplinary in nature, recognizing that throughout history the arts have been used by all cultures for healing, celebration and expression of the human condition. Art from this perspective is not merely for art's sake but for life's sake (Dissanayake 1998).

Today, the expressive arts are being used in therapy, education, social justice endeavours and a variety of community settings (Levine and Levine 2011). As a practice 'towards a therapeutic aesthetics', expressive arts engages the imagination, inner resources and innate artistic capacities of individuals and groups to respond to the suffering, challenges and fragmentation of our post-modern era (Knill et al. 2005). This is an act of *poiesis*, the Greek word for making, which expressive arts therapist S.K. Levine (2011) theorizes as the creative capacity of humans to shape and respond to the world around them. In this realm, art-making and artworks are not reduced to psychological interpretation nor are they seen as representations of the self (Levine 2011). Instead, art and art-making are ways of enquiry, knowing (Allen 1995) and participating in community. Artworks are seen as expressions of something larger than one's self, 'a world' (Levine 2011: 26, emphasis added) unto themselves that have the capacity to affect us deeply and alter our way of being, leading to positive individual or collective change.

Expanding these ideas by thinking about art-making as a path to life-making, I refer to my practice as 'studio expressive arts therapy', in which individual and therapeutic artistic work takes place within community in a studio environment (Leake 2012, 2013). This naming is inspired by C. H. Moon's (2002) 'studio art therapy' approach, which encompasses a relational approach to therapy that emphasizes viewing therapeutic work from the lens of an artist and creating studio environments where art-making is the focus of therapy. In the context of this research project, the term studio expressive arts therapy is used to denote expressive arts groups for women, which emphasize women creating alongside each other through multiple artistic modalities, immersed in their own personal creative and therapeutic work at the Art Life Studio.

Additionally, a unique feature of the Art Life Studio involved the creation of art exhibits, art openings and artist talks by women engaged in expressive

arts groups who self-selected themselves to share their art and stories of healing and transformation with the public. This bold offering, which I refer to as 'therapy made visible' (Leake 2012: 109), challenges the traditional view of therapy as private, confidential, individual and anonymous. Instead, these communal endeavours educate others about the field of Expressive Arts, invite a community of witness (Leake 2012), create healing rituals or rites of restoration (Knill 2005) that counter the fragmentation of life in the twenty-first century and promote a relational aesthetic (Bourriaud 2002). This relational aesthetic involves a departure from art-making and the viewing of artworks as solely independent or private acts but rather intersubjective, participatory encounters.

Six women, all of whom had been engaged in studio expressive arts therapy at the Art Life Studio for two to four years and had previously participated in at least one art exhibit, were co-participants/co-enquirers in this study, whom I refer to as artist/participants. Through in-depth, video-taped interviews as well as individual and collaborative art-making, including the creation of an art exhibit and *vernissage*, or private art opening, artist/participants were invited to shift their positions from client/group participants to a community of art-based researchers. Over the course of eight months, artist/participants (re)searched their lived experiences of studio expressive arts therapy, educating each other and the researcher about the ways in which art-making within a supportive community supports women in re-imagining their lives.

Re-imagining, which can be thought of as the process of imagining again or anew, or forming and/or re-creating a new conception of, such as re-imagining one's identity, challenges us to disrupt habitual ways of perceiving, being and participating in the world. Inviting multiple ways of knowing and encountering life, re-imagining challenges one to resist limiting or narrow narratives while entering into courageous dialogues that resist the status quo, dualistic thinking, positivism and reductionist world-views (Leake 2012, 2013). *Re-imagining life through art* as a philosophy calls for cultivating an intimate relationship with one's life through personal artistic enquiry and creative practice with others while committing to living enquiry that is infused with aesthetic enactments in any art modality (Leake 2012).

RE-IMAGINING RESEARCH WHILE DISCOVERING A/R/TOGRAPHY

When I became interested in researching my practice of studio expressive arts therapy, I had to re-imagine research in and of itself. I searched for a methodology that would be large enough to hold the complexity, intimacy and artistry of the relational aesthetic I was cultivating in my practice. In expressive arts therapy, a relational aesthetic can be thought of as the interwoven connections between the therapist, client or group participants, artwork and studio environment (Moon 2002). The cultivation of the practitioner's artistic identity and personal commitment to art-making, along with the collaborative nature of expressive arts therapy, whereby the artist-therapist and client or group participants are in a co-creative, emergent process, contribute to an evolving aesthetic that is rooted in relationship, aesthetic empathy (Moon 2002) and living enquiry.

A/r/tography, with its emphasis on self study, being in communities of creative practice and artful, living enquiry (Irwin and Springgay 2008)

intrigued me as a methodology that could encompass the intricacies of my studio expressive arts therapy practice. *A/r/t* refers to artist/researcher/teacher and graphy refers to writing. *A/r/tography* symbolically represents the contiguous and complex relationships between the identities of artist, researcher and teacher as well as the practices of art-making, researching and teaching. A commitment to art-making in any modality, along with writing (graphy), become the methods of enquiry, data collection, analysis and presentation of findings in *a/r/tography*. Collaborative art-based enquiry processes invite a relational aesthetic, whereby the vital space in-between artworks, *a/r/tographer* and research participants yields new imaginings, awarenesses, questions and understandings of the research content (Irwin and Springgay 2008).

In specifying my particular practices and identities in *a/r/t*, I added another 't' to *a/r/tography* in this study to symbolize the additional multiple identity I live as a therapist along with the discipline of expressive arts therapy. Through *a/r/t/t*, I resist locating who I am and the work I do in one domain. I also risk the critique of expressive arts therapists and *a/r/tographers* who might question this border-crossing. For my intention is to open up conversations about how *a/r/tographical* work in communities of practice might disrupt the traditional notions of therapeutic and educational work, generating aesthetic, collaborative living enquiry processes that contribute to well-being, reciprocity and deeper engagement with the world.

In traversing these multi-layered borderlands, I join a growing number of art-based researchers who are generating a vibrant palette of possibilities for engaging in research that is experimental, improvisational, artistic, personal, and rooted in social practice (Barone and Eisner 2012; Leavy 2009; McNiff 2013). This direction humanizes research, reminding us that 'humans are sentient creatures born into a qualitative environment in and through which they live' (Eisner 2002: 20). Departing from sole reliance on positivist science locates art-based researchers in bold new territory where the qualities of the subjective, intersubjective, intimate and expressive nature of living become central to the enquiry process. For *a/r/tographers*, this journey demands 'living their practices, representing their understandings, and questioning their positions as they integrate knowing, doing and making through aesthetic experiences that convey meaning rather than facts' (Irwin 2004: 31).

The identities and practices inherent in *a/r/t/t* challenged me to re-envision research as an animate expression of what art critic Suzi Gablik refers to as 'connective aesthetics' (1992b: 2) and 'radical relatedness' (1992a: 51). This relational orientation resonates with feminist approaches to psychotherapy, whereby women's issues are viewed through the larger lens of sociopolitical and cultural influences as contrasted with traditional theories in psychotherapy that designate the root of psychological matters within the individual (Worrell and Remer 2003). Subsumed within this enquiry is the perspective that all human beings yearn for connection, and that by breaking patterns of disconnection prevalent in western culture, we can move towards a state of connection to ourselves and each other, generating mutual empathy and mutual empowerment (Jordan 2003).

Women's expressive arts groups invite this belonging, initiating the opportunity to 'bring aspects of ourselves into relationships with other persons where we get new responses, build new images, and create new actions' (Jordan 2004: 53). Facilitation from a feminist lens, complemented

by an expressive arts approach, centres the group process on collaborative relationships and personal empowerment of each individual while opening a vital space for examining life experiences, expanding creativity and developing an enlarged world-view (Trepal and Duffey 2011). Therefore, in shifting away from an isolationist modern paradigm and moving towards an intersubjective coexistence that is rooted in interrelational attunement (Gablik 1992a), a further intention in this study was to deepen my understanding of the practice of a/r/tography and expressive arts therapy through collaborative, embodied enquiry.

CONNECTING A/R/TOGGRAPHY AND EXPRESSIVE ARTS THERAPY WHILE CURATING A DISSERTATION

A/r/tography and expressive arts therapy share several contextual underpinnings. Practitioners in both disciplines move in-between multiple roles and identities, with expressive arts practitioners working as multimodal artists, therapists or educators and a/r/tographers as artists/researchers/teachers. Just as expressive arts therapy does not privilege one art form over another (Levine 1999), a/r/tography does not privilege one identity, practice or art form over another (Springgay et al. 2008). Instead, the rigour of expressive arts therapy and a/r/tography comes from a commitment to interdisciplinary practice in which knowing (*theoria*), doing (*praxis*) and making (*poiesis*) inform one's understanding of experience. Working intermodally, expressive arts practitioners layer multiple arts modalities, such as movement, visual art-making and poetry to deepen and expand awareness while a/r/tographers employ art-making in various forms and writing (graphy) to evoke encounters and conversations *within* and *between* artwork and text (Springgay et al. 2005).

Art and art-making in these contexts are not adjunctive to expressive arts practice or a/r/tographical research nor are the arts reduced to illustrative means to validate an idea or experience. Both practices are process-oriented and practice-based, requiring practitioners to work with an 'aesthetic responsibility' (Knill 2005) which focuses on attending to the emergent. Meaning-making is neither fixed nor static, but rather a dynamic interplay within relational encounters between art-making, self and other as one attends to the temporality of experience and the fluidity of knowing which is always in a state of *becoming* (Irwin and Springgay 2008).

In 'curating a dissertation' (Leake 2012: 113–50), I sought to work with an aesthetic responsibility, attending to the unfolding relational aesthetic between myself and my creative endeavours in a/r/t/t, the artist/participants and the artwork and graphy (writing) that was generated individually and collectively throughout the research. The culmination of the research project was designated to be a vernissage to invite an initial private viewing of an art exhibit, curated from our individual and collective discoveries of how the practice of studio expressive arts therapy supports women in re-imagining their lives. While the art exhibit was on view for two months, the vernissage was intended as a special event whereby artist/participants invited family and friends to view their work and whereby the Art Life Studio hosted an open house to celebrate the research project. Invitations featuring artwork were created and distributed to personal acquaintances, shared through e-mail and social media and posted on bulletin boards in nearby cafes and businesses.



Figure 1: Becoming a community of a/r/tographers – artist/participants immersed in a/r/tographical enquiry.

In preparation for the art exhibit and vernissage, we engaged in an eight-month enquiry process, whereby I facilitated two-hour interviews with each artist/participant; a four-hour intermodal expressive arts workshop, during which artist/participants explored the research question through art-making and graphy (Figure 1); and numerous conversations during planning meetings and over group e-mails about the format, content and planning details of the art exhibit and vernissage. Throughout, I kept multiple journals documenting the a/r/tographical process and my own discovery of a/r/t/t through painting, videography, dreamwork and poetic writing.

While navigating the transdisciplinary practices of a/r/tography and expressive arts therapy, it became important for me to honour the unique attributes of each approach while shaping the research as reflective of my studio practice. Research in this context that ‘stays close to the practice of art and the statements of artists, respects images, and allows them to present themselves in ways native to their being’ (McNiff 1987: 291). As art is at the centre or heart of expressive arts practice (Knill 2005), I focused on creating *artscentric* research (Leake 2012, 2013), locating art and art-making at the centre of methodology, analysis, findings and presentation of findings. For example, after transcribing interviews with artist/participants, I wrote a poem for each woman, using a conscientious selection of her exact words and phrases to capture the essence of her experience. Poems were gifted to artist/participants early in the enquiry process and later integrated into the dissertation as a series of Art/Life Portraits. These portraits included a biographical introduction and photograph of each woman, my poem and a selection of artwork and writing created by each artist/participant to offer metonymic representations of women re-imagining their lives through art. These ‘renderings’ are ‘visual, aesthetic, and textual performances that play alongside each other’ (Springgay et al. 2005: 908), inviting the reader to dwell in her own experience of meaning making.

WHOLEHE(ART)ED ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITY

A/r/tography challenged me to enter into a wholehe(art)ed engagement with living enquiry, whereby I had to repeatedly surrender to my commitment to work with/in a community of practice and with an aesthetic responsibility. At times, holding my multiple a/r/t/t roles and identities proved challenging and conflicting, especially during the planning of the art exhibit and vernissage. As an artist, I had to continually let go of my individual aesthetic in curatorial matters. As a researcher, I had to document and enquire into the planning process while simultaneously participating in the planning process. As a teacher, I often found myself in the familiar role of facilitating a planning process while concurrently wanting to drop this identity and focus on learning from the artist/participants as they shared their ideas for the event. As a therapist, I experienced myself 'holding the space' for others to express their varied and sometimes conflicting emotions associated with co-creating the art exhibit as well as preparing to reveal themselves to an unknown audience that would attend the vernissage. These multi-layered roles reveal the complicated nature of being an a/r/tographer. 'It is often an anxious life' as one engages in active, living enquiry with others that can lead to 'dis / comfort' and 'a continual process of not-knowing' the outcome of one's endeavours (Springgay et al. 2005: 902).

While I engaged in my own art-based enquiry, each artist/participant (re)searched her own journey of studio expressive arts therapy by revisiting all of her art, writing and journal entries from her work at the Art Life Studio. This self-reflexive process involved selecting one to three artworks that best reflected her experiences and then sharing them within our community of a/r/tographers. With layers of art and graphy from both myself and artist/participants, there was an excess of material to reflect upon, shape and distil in order to design an art exhibit. This depth-laden work gave rise to a continuous exchange of ideas and possibilities, initiating a 'radical relatedness' (Gablik 1992a: 51) that brought mutual ownership in shaping the event as we worked collaboratively to design an art exhibit that reflected our individual and collective experiences.

This co-creative process involved entering into courageous conversations with one another, in which vulnerability, emotion and the transparent sharing of personal art and story gave rise to an experience of *communitas* (Turner 1969) or a deep bond with each other. This acrostic poem and accompanying painting (Figure 2) reflects one artist/participant's experience of moving from a silenced place of isolation into *communitas*:

'Soul House'

Saved by messages

Of hope.

Soul searching.

Listening.

Harvesting

Our collective story.

You, Me,

Us

Entering into Community.

– Kristin



Figure 2: *She's come unzipped* Kristin Rexter.

FINDINGS ARRIVE THROUGH A RELATIONAL AESTHETIC

As we deepened our practice of living enquiry, the characteristics of communitas became apparent, such as empathetic understanding for each other, 'easy mutual help' and shared pleasure in working together (Turner 2012: 2–3). Unexpectedly, the planning process itself resembled the relational aesthetic (Moon 2002) of our studio expressive arts therapy practice, revealing embodied, intersubjective encounters with artworks and each other. The sharing of a/r/tographical work became therapeutic, as artist/participants began to receive the layered depth and beauty of their own and each other's transformations, honouring their experiences while coming to new awarenesses about themselves and their collective experiences of studio expressive arts therapy.

Artist/participants deemed that their own personal healing and transformation could not have happened without the support of this arts-based community of practice. Each woman communicated that community was an integral part of her expressive arts therapy experience and a primary reason for her ongoing involvement in the studio. The 'connective aesthetics' of art-making and personal sharing supported women in transitioning from their individual isolation to a 'connective, relational self' (Gablik 1992a: 2–7), breaking out of patterns of disconnection. Shared experiences in the arts led to feelings of belonging and *communitas* (Turner 1969) consistent with literature in the expressive arts therapy field that emphasizes the power of art-making in community to foster *communitas* (Atkins et al. 2003; Knill et al. 2005; Levine and Levine 2011). Art-making became an act of *poiesis* (Levine 2011), bringing forth re-imaginings or new ways of engaging in one's life that held significance for each woman.

Thus, the artist/participants felt that in addition to displaying their art in an exhibit, they wanted to create a performance ritual for the vernissage that conveyed their vital experiences of community. As shaping a safe, non-judgemental space to tell and receive each other's stories and art was an essential component of the women's experiences at the Art Life Studio, the performance ritual included the artist/participants forming a circle for each woman to tell her story. Within the ritual, stories were told through the poems I wrote for each artist/participant as my *a/r/tographical* response to her individual interview, with each woman performing her poem. My role in the ritual was to shape the space for this relational aesthetic, creating an altar in the centre of the circle for women to place symbolic offerings. To open the ritual, I spoke this poem, which I wrote as an *a/r/tographical* enquiry, responding to prominent themes that kept appearing in the research, including women feeling a sense of 'coming home to themselves' through studio expressive arts therapy:

'Belonging'

In the shelter of the studio
we live in the layers
of life and art,
revealing stories
hidden beneath
shards of old wounds.

We risk the tearing open,
the breaking point,
the descent
into unknown depths.

Exhilarated yet terrified
we dance into the fire,
revealing ourselves to each other
telling the story
speaking the truth
painting ourselves out of the many boxes
of limitation and safety
we have been so carefully hiding behind
for too many years.

Protected by community
nourished through soul food
we remember
we re-member
our true home.

Artist/participants also wrote enquiries into the practice of studio expressive arts therapy, creating artist statements-often in poetic form-for each of their chosen pieces for the exhibit. Works of art were displayed on the Art Life Studio walls, juxtaposing image and text, to yield an a/r/togographical exhibit (see example Figure 3). We worked collaboratively in framing artworks and hanging the exhibit, shaping a vibrant display of our experiences and



Connection, painting and poem by Karen Robertson

CONNECTION

I am with you
We touch and know we aren't alone
Can you feel me?

Figure 3: Example of a/r/togographical work in exhibit.

performing the ritual in the centre of the studio where we always gathered for conversation and reflection at the beginning and ending of each expressive arts group. A 'Vernissage on Paper' is included in the dissertation, offering an even more private viewing of the exhibit, along with a DVD of the performance ritual for those who were not able to attend the event. This curatorial decision is an invitation for the reader to come to her own meaning-making about how studio expressive arts therapy supports transformation and healing, thus extending the relational aesthetic of the project. An excerpt from the accompanying curatorial statement reads:

These are soul images, shaped through each woman's courageous journey of painting from within while calling forth her authentic voice. As she creates, each artist shapes her life, re-imagining who she is and who she is becoming. She confronts her shadows and challenges, surrendering to the richness of her imagery and awakening to the rich metaphors with/in her art and writing. Her art becomes her companion, guiding her to new insights and possibilities for her life. She offers her story, her own journey of healing and transformation, as a gift to others.

(Leake 2012: 234)

ART AS A GIFT TO COMMUNITY: TOWARDS A HEALING, PARTICIPATORY AESTHETICS

Reflecting on the vernissage, the artist/participants frequently described the event as a 'gift'. This expression held multiple meanings, including the gift of receiving each other's stories, the gift of having had the opportunity to participate in a ritual, art show and dissertation project, and the gift of being witnessed by over 100 attendees, many of whom thanked the artist/participants for the gift of their art and stories.

This gifting of art to community by inviting the public to witness therapeutic, artistic and a/r/tographical work evoked a relational aesthetic (Bourriaud 2002) that brought unexpected reverberations for both audience members and our community of practice. Artist/participant, Ginny, offers the following example and reflection:

I had feedback immediately from two different people about how moved they were by the ritual. One spoke with me at the show, several times, about how much the phrase in my poem *treasure-hunting through the psyche* totally blew her away and how much she wanted to hold on to that and work with it. Another, a close friend, wrote several days later to say that the courage and inspiration she got from all the women sharing had turned her life around at a most challenging time. And that she had started writing herself and finding her own 'stubborn woman poet' and that this process had brought her the first peace she'd felt in a long, long time. She said that 'your inspiring words, mind-teasing imagery, and no-nonsense courage on Friday have moved me in ways that I have only begun to understand.' Each of us shared on a profoundly deep level and that opens a portal not only for the audience but within each of us to continue healing and growing inside ourselves.

(Personal communications)

This portal opened up surprising dimensions of individual and collective discovery for our community of practice. The vernissage marked the culmination of the research project and the last public event before the closing of the Art Life Studio later that year as I had decided to transition from private practice to Academe. This decision, which had arisen unexpectedly during the research process and through my own *a/r/t*/ographical journey, propelled artist/participants into a liminal space (Turner 1969), whereby they experienced anxiousness, disorientation and uncertainty about what would happen once the dissertation process was over and the studio closed. While they had already shifted their positionalities from participants/clients in expressive arts therapy to a community of *a/r*/tographers, they had come to rely upon being part of a community of practice and working together at the studio.

The performance ritual during the vernissage invoked a rite of passage, in which artist/participants experienced the forming of a lasting bond with one another. As *a/r*/tographer Barbara Bickel suggests, performance rituals are 'evocative and/or provocative' experiences that assist participants in moving away from comfortable or conditioned ways of being with each other, leading to transformational moments of awareness or learning (2008: 81). This transformation initiated personal and collective empowerment, motivating artist/participants to form their own community of artistic, therapeutic practice outside of the studio and research project to support their ongoing explorations in life and art. Further, several of the women have presented with me at professional conferences and events, including the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association's Bi-Annual Conference in Berkeley, CA in 2013, thereby keeping alive our *a/r*/tographical enquiry beyond our initial intentions.

By gifting our artistic discoveries to others, we release the animate nature of our creations and our living enquiry processes, inviting others into a shared participation through aesthetic encounters. This stance of art as gift relates to Gablik's ideas of 'a new connective, participatory aesthetics' (1991: 9). From this perspective, the artist and artworks hold the potential of playing an integral role in contributing to collective healing and the renewal of community, which Gablik deems is lost within a modernist society that leans towards alienation and fragmentation. 'Within traditional aesthetics, it is only the image that counts' (Gablik 1991: 99). A connective, participatory aesthetic encompasses the multidimensional relationships between artist/community, individual/society, self/self-in-representation to other (both the human and ecological worlds), and the making of art/the sharing of art with others. Art, therefore, becomes a form of 'compassionate action' (Gablik 1991: 115). By living in between the borderlands of art/research/teaching/therapy, there is the potential to generate a therapeutic aesthetics that cultivates healing rituals, counters fragmentation and invites others into their own living enquiry processes.

CONCLUSION: CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONVERSATIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

This experimental study makes a contribution to the fields of *a/r*/tography and expressive arts therapy by initiating a conversation between these two distinct art-based practices. *A/r*/tography, with its emphasis on unfolding art and text together (Springgay et al. 2005), stimulated me to artfully yet critically reflect on my studio expressive arts therapy practice. In doing so, I designed

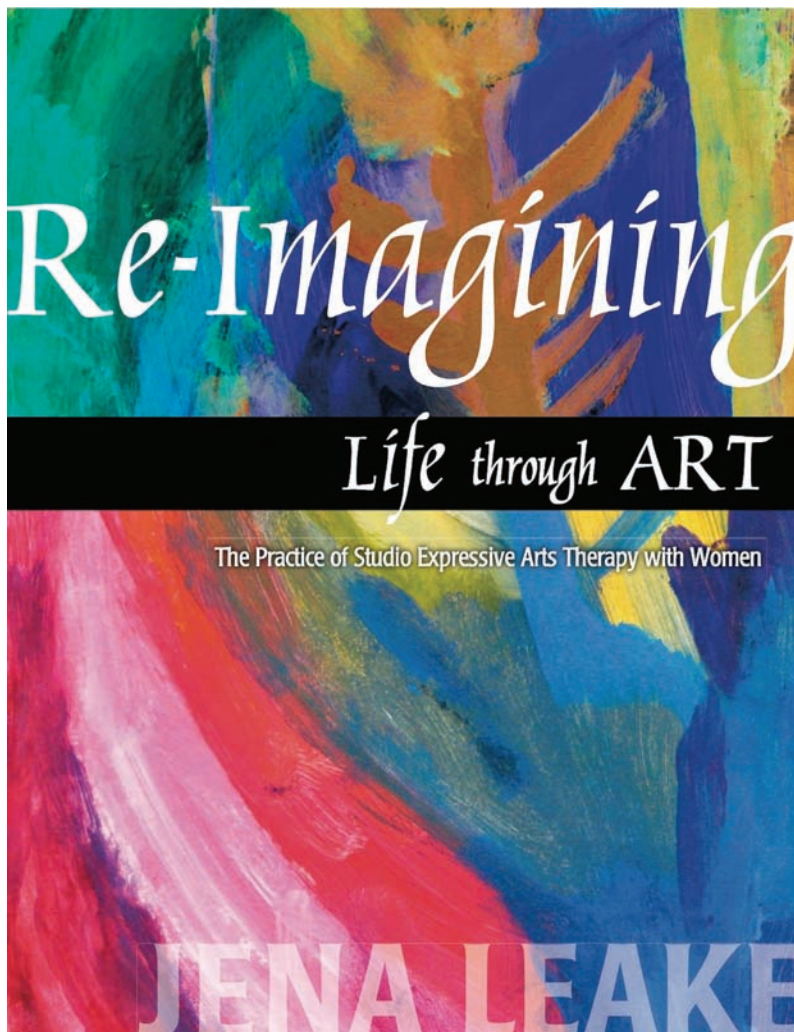


Figure 4: *Dissertation as Art Catalogue Painting* by Jena Leake.

a dissertation to resemble the format of a catalogue from an art exhibit (Figure 4). With over 80 visual images, the printed bound copy opening with one of my paintings on the cover interweaves art and graphy, moving back and forth between photographs, poetry, paintings and reflective and theoretical writing to conceptualize and (ART)iculate (Leake 2012) significant discoveries from the research process.

The aesthetic format is intentional, adhering to Patricia Leavy's (2009) criteria of arts-based research as a piece of art, able to stand on its own, that simultaneously imparts information. As a living document, the renderings in this work are not finite statements or final outcomes, but emergent understandings of *a/r/tography*, studio expressive arts therapy and women's experiences of re-imagining their lives. They offer extended opportunities for contemplation, living enquiry and further *a/r/tographical* work.

Limitations of this study include its specificity to the individuals participating within the temporal, distinct nature of the Art Life Studio, not to mention the sole focus on the author's approach to practice. Due to the demographics of participants at the Art Life Studio, another shortcoming of this study is the small sample size comprised mostly of white, middle-class women. Research that includes women creating together from diverse cultures and demographic groups would provide multicultural understanding of women's experiences of growth, healing and transformation through the arts. Expressive arts therapists who lead women's groups could contribute valuable observations to this conversation. Additionally, expressive arts therapists might consider researching their own practices and presenting their findings in aesthetic ways, thus advancing the discipline of art-based research as well as the field of expressive arts therapy.

In playing at the edges of private and public life while crossing disciplinary borderlines in art, education, research and therapy through the lens of an a/r/tographer, this study extends the idea of a relational aesthetic (Moon 2002; Bourriaud 2002) as a gifting of art to community. The experience of art-making and sharing art 'restore[s] the sense of a living community, of being a part of a whole that is larger than oneself' (Levine 2011: 28). The findings suggest that a/r/tographical and expressive arts work can be offered to community through public events, promoting a therapeutic aesthetics that invites re-imagining our interrelatedness while inspiring others to begin their own living enquiry. With this intention, life becomes art as we shape and re-shape our world with awareness, aesthetic sensibility and compassionate activity.

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