

**Coming to Create, Connect, and Exist within Spaces of Community:**

**An Arts-based Youth Participatory Action Research Project**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## Abstract

This thesis describes an arts-based, youth participatory action research study that examines the importance of lived experiences of youth, art applications and community connections. The questions which guided the study included: Can art be a form that connects youth and communities of place? Can art help build community within the lives of youth? How might art play a role in authentic learning experiences for youth? How does place/space affect learning? The research engaged three at-risk aboriginal youth who were participating in a drop-in program called Moving the Mountain, a pilot project at the University of Alberta. Through the application of photography, the young women explored and experimented with their version of what they saw and experienced within the university community. Utilizing an art process called gel transfer the pictures became malleable and transparent photographs. The youth experimented with their own realities and ties with the spaces that they encountered. The study came full circle when I moved to the country of Kuwait to teach, where my similar experiences of art and community were lived and reflected upon. Results from the study were drawn from the combination of assembled photographs from the youth, along with researcher journal entries.

Understandings that came from the study not only applied and validated other ways of knowing, but also the realization that through creating, especially when doing so in the presence of others, community and enduring connections are made. In the end, community is built from the guidance and understanding of relationships and through the act of creating, there can be connections made for which some might be searching.

Keywords: Arts-based research, community, gel transfer, photography, place, space, youth participatory action research.

## Preface

This thesis is an original work by Stacey Keeler. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Learning outside the classroom: Exploring murals through Youth Participatory Action research”, No. Pro00055344, 2015-08-17.

## Dedication

“So they went off together. But wherever they go,  
and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted  
place on the top of the Forest, a little boy and  
his Bear will always be playing.”

*The World of Pooh* by A.A. Milne

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I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Jason Wallin of Media and Youth Culture in Curriculum in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta as the second reader of this thesis. I am gratefully indebted to his comments that pushed me to look again and re-establish myself with my research.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

For ten years as a junior high visual arts teacher, I have seen the results of the disconnect between learning in formal education and the experiences students have outside of school. As someone who has gone through the education system, I have endured boundaries set upon my learning and being told that how I created outside of school was not “correct.” I believe that youths’ experiences need to be acknowledged and seen as valuable, in order to create an authentic learning environment within formal education (Eldridge, 2013). As an educator, I have observed how my students react based on what and where they are learning. I see the potential for my students’ interests to take hold once we leave behind the confines of the classroom. Not only what you learn is important, but where you learn is also vital (Dewey, 1934, 1938). From these experiences as an educator and as a student, I see the need to investigate this detachment, identifying outside interests and the importance of place as points from which connections to community could potentially be (re)established for youth.

### **Study Overview**

My research study used an arts-based, youth participatory action research focus to inquire about the impacts of art and place-based learning with three youth, ages 13, 15 and 18, regarding their understandings and opportunities for authentic learning experiences. I engaged in a place-based photography project with the girls as part of an alternative education program, called Moving the Mountain (MtM), for young Aboriginal women who had been excluded from regular schools. This exclusion included but was

not limited to the disregard of Indigenous history, culture and perspectives, and the difficulty of attempting to connect with mainstream education (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011).

Moving the Mountain was a program that was designed to be an integrated holistic educational environment for at-risk youth. Originally, the program was housed at iHuman, a not-for-profit youth society, which was where I first came into contact with it and with those who organized it and participated in it. The aim of the MtM program was to work with the youth through harm-reduction strategies while still incorporating educational and heritage practices. MtM transitioned from iHuman to the University of Alberta in the summer of 2015 to undertake a pilot project, which incorporated qualitative and quantitative research.

The youth who were part of MtM had Aboriginal cultural backgrounds, were female and were “at-risk” (Conrad, 2005; Pyscher & Lozenski, 2014). The ages of the youth in the program ranged from twelve years old to twenty-one, and the number who were involved averaged between twenty and twenty-five. Some of the challenges that the girls faced ranged from alcohol and drug addictions, estrangement from family, homelessness or difficult home arrangements, to ongoing conflict with law enforcement. MtM provided not only an environment that was consistently supportive, but was also an arts-based educational program to stand against the more traditional forms of education that conflicted with the problems that many of the girls faced.

By allowing arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012) to be the instigator in which I grounded my study, it permitted for the diversity of knowing and experiencing the world in which both the youth and I exist (Finley, 2008). Coupled with the arts-based approach, youth participatory action research (YPAR) was the other pillar driving my

research forward, since, for me there was value in the youth being able to express what they saw and the means to respond and take action (Cammarota & Fine, 2010).

My research was guided by these initial questions:

- Can art be a form that connects youth and communities of place?
- Can art help build community within the lives of youth?
- How might art play a role in authentic learning experiences for youth?
- How does place/space affect learning?

Even though I started with these initial questions in order to engage with the youth in this study, I quickly realized the importance of querying and learning together, and thereby growing together to understand at a deeper level, what we encountered (Mirra, Garcia & Morrell, 2015). I began by locating myself within the study and in doing so I came to understand how place and art have always been tied together for me.

### **My Formative Years, Before and Within Formal Education**

Early in my experience, I realized that the art I produced and the creativity that I enjoyed could not exist within the formal education system. As a child who was enamored with art, the experiences I had were with some chalk and a sidewalk in front of my house. I would lie on my stomach or sit on my knees, drawing and re-drawing. The sidewalk was my canvas and I was unapologetically taking up that space. Being in an area that was not meant specifically for my art or me, I was, regardless, cementing my ties to that area and by doing so, to the community. This was my first understanding of creating and being in a space, but this could not be completely translated into the formal education system. I saw imagination and education as being separate and because of this I did not engage with creating in school, as there was a persistent feeling that this could

not transpire. In that moment, as a student, my learning hinged on the boundaries that were established within my school – what was seen as valid to learn and how to be artistic. I was accustomed to having only the borders of space (the sidewalk) to guide my learning and constructing. It was within these outside borders that I came to understand not only my place, but also how I interacted with others. On the sidewalk, I would draw next to or under where my sisters drew, and then there were people who would walk by and later walk on our “art.” I had not only to be aware of what I was making and where I was within the space that I was occupying, but I also had to understand that I was not alone or isolated in what and where I was creating. I not only impacted the space that I took up through my sidewalk art, but was in turn influenced by the environment and those within it. I needed to learn how to be a part of that space along with everyone else who was present, both during and after. I also had to let go of what I created, as the drawings that I would make became erased as the weather and people descended. In this way, I learned to appreciate what I made in the moment and then to just keep drawing and re-drawing for the love of it, because whatever I created was not permanent. It was okay to make mistakes for there was always space to keep drawing. The knowledge that I gathered on the sidewalk where I drew allowed for lessons to be learned and connections to be made. However, I did not see that same freedom within the formal education system. There, my way of creating was erroneous, since it did not fit within the margins of a desk and the walls of the school. At the time, I did not question, but instead tried to squeeze myself into being part of the system. It did not occur to me to try to create within the school environment, for my experience of art and connecting had nothing to do with what I practiced as a student. Other students were no longer co-

creators, but rivals. Adults were authority figures who had the answers and knew what was “correct.” Looking back, I am not sure if I knew consciously or subconsciously the differences between how I learned outside of school and the learning that was expected within formal education. I now realize that as a student I felt forced to learn in a specific way and because of the disconnect between my own personal learning experience and its lack within formal education; my experience as a student was one of struggle and uncertainty. I was trying to force myself to learn in a way that was un-natural and in direct contrast to what I was learning outside of school.

### **Engaging with Creation, Space, Connectivity and Me**

As I began to write this chapter, in order to understand where my points of connection with my research actually lay, I needed to approach this through my own way of creating and connecting, which is by making visual art pieces. When I am grappling with a concept, this is where I naturally come to best understand how I feel and to be connected. To begin this process, I decided to go back to where this all started, where I first began with creating and expressing myself: in my parents’ house and even more specifically, to the backyard where an art studio now stands (see Figure 1).

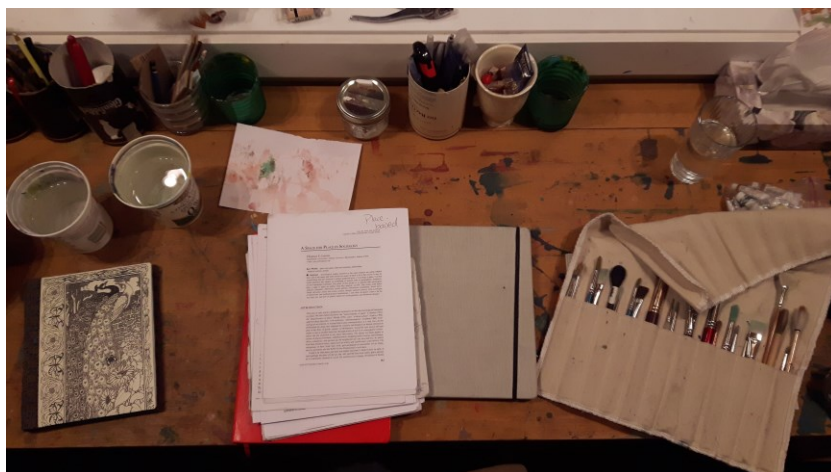


Figure 1: The art studio at my parents’ house



Even though it was not the sidewalk, I stood on the same ground, even if it was now surrounded by walls and a door. I could still see the area that I would have looked upon as a child when I first decided to make a mark on the world around me. When I sat down to reflect on the past and discover if I could work through those feelings in that moment, I had emotions fighting to the surface, feeling not only the need to document what I was grappling with, but to represent the environment in which I was creating and questioning. I felt the need to recreate the space from the past.

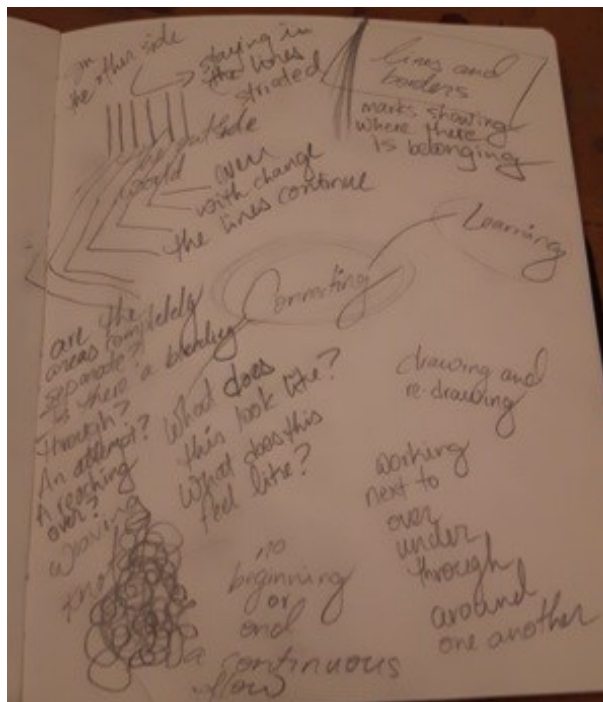


Figure 2: Laying down words

I began the process by working through the concepts that I saw in my research, where those lay with regards to me, and where this first point of connectivity existed. I began the laying down of words (see Figure 2) and drawings (see Figure 3), trying to search for anything that came from my first ideas of how I connected to the places around me.



Figure 3: Drawings representing connections to places

I then took those words and visions that I experienced, and began the process of letting my pencil and colors start to interpret what was coming out. I let my pencil flow from one side to the other, trying to keep the concepts that I was grappling with at the forefront of this entire process. I wanted the experiences of my childhood to be reflective of play and freedom that I had encountered within the space of the sidewalk, even within the boundaries of the page. I did not know what was going to evolve out of my drawings (see Figure 4), because the freedom that was present was complete. In the same way as I did as a child, I allowed myself this freedom as I moved color over, around and through my pencil lines, allowing anything to appear. There were no limitations.



Figure 4: Flowing into structure

As I moved from the one side of my painting towards the other with more structured lines, like those I imagined within the formal education system (see Figure 5), my body started to tighten and become more rigid as I began filling in the lines. I wanted to use watercolor pencils within the structured lines because I felt there was still the potential for creativity and flow to be present. The potential might have been present within my educational experience as a child, though I had not been aware of it. In my artwork, the importance of the two opposing spaces was significant, and equally so the subtle movement from one side to the other; a seeping through of imagination, as I was moving from one space to another.

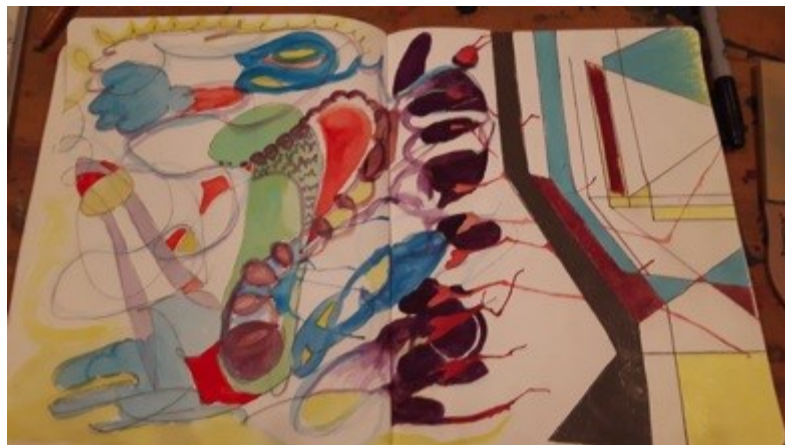


Figure 5: Painting of two spaces

As I have come to interpret my piece, there is the realization that the flow of paint comes from the area that has freedom of imagination. There is not a re-entry of the educational area into my space of creativity at home. However, there is permeability within the lines of the education system, as creativity is able to enter.

### **Teacher and Student Experiences with Creativity and Place at School**

As a visual arts teacher within the education system, I can see how experience and learning inform each other and that this is an understanding that formal education is

trying to incorporate. As an art teacher I am constantly navigating to incorporate the interests of students with the curriculum that I am introducing to them, since I know the importance of connecting the two. Yet, I feel I have been falling short when trying to meaningfully incorporate students' experiences within the classroom, in doing so only at a superficial level. I have asked students to draw things that they "like," or when answering a question based on something that I have introduced in class, I have them connect with an experience that they have had. I have lost count of the number of times that I have seen the importance of student experience in the form of a query and not actually developed as a form of learning. Instead of me using a prompt, for example, draw something that is a representation/inspiration of Van Gogh's "Starry Night", what if there was the freedom for students to decide for themselves the focus of their own learning? The potential that outside experiences and interests can be connected to learning within formal education has become more apparent when I have actually taken students outside of the boundaries of the classroom or the school. When this change of place occurs and is connected to learning, something different happens that might not be possible if done within the boundaries of the classroom. For example, when I take students outside to draw and to actually *see* things, to allow creativity to be sparked in a different way, suddenly there is the possibility for different experiences and different connections to occur. I have students who unexpectedly become aware of their surroundings and that these surrounding are connected with what I might be asking them to do, that is, to create. For example, students will sit on the grass, in the middle of a field just outside of the school doors, and all of sudden they begin to see what is in front of them. They look at things that are lying at their feet, the small leaves or blades of

grass or take in the large vista of trees, buildings and sky as they try to encapsulate everything. Even the conversations that I have with students are different as soon as I allow for the learning to become something that is more engaging and separated from the physical boundaries of the school. There is a freedom in what my students are doing and because of this, there also seems to be a freedom in the way that my students perceive me as their teacher. No longer am I an authority figure, but someone who is present with them in this new experience, a voyageur in the new environment, offering a different way of looking at things. As an educator, it allows me to ask them questions about what they see and how they interpret what they see – something that I might otherwise only look for once an assignment is handed in. When learning is taken outside of the physical boundaries of the school and the deliberate way of comprehending, then understanding and learning can occur at any time. All things are inter-connected: where, how, and what we learn. This realization did not occur for me until I saw the potential of allowing learning to happen outside of the classroom. The possibility for education to change how it approaches learning and creating, which in turn could affect connection and community building, is substantial. Not only is what we are learning important, but also where that learning takes place is significant.

### **Creation: Art and Connectivity within Education**

As I began another painting based on my point of connection within the school where I teach (see Figure 6), I was aware of trying to encourage different conversations with my students, and trying to allow those outside experiences in. However, I found points of difficulty as I came to create. Within the drawing, I realized that both the students and I are surrounded by structure. Even though that structure is on the periphery

of what I do within my classroom, it still shapes and influences how I act as a teacher. I try to have different conversations with my students, allowing for the space to be somewhere they can bring their own interests and ideas into the learning process. Within the art room, there are definitely more opportunities for this to occur. There seems to be an atmosphere of possibility for negotiations to occur, moving between what I have set forward for my students and what they bring to the classroom. Each individual negotiates with me, moving in and out as we have conversations within a place that gives support for these interactions to occur, but doing so within the confines of organization.



Figure 6: Connection within school

At this point of creation, I decided again that the space where I rendered my ideas was important. As this represented my experience as a teacher, working with my students in the education system, I wanted to complete my conception in the same area where I felt these ideas coming to fruition – my classroom. What I did not expect was a metaphorical wall that I encountered every time I tried to engage in the painting. I could not follow through with painting the picture, for every time I attempted to do so, there

was doubt that I could actually paint while in school – doubt that I could show my creativity and still be a teacher. I even questioned that if I could not create within the education system, did this mean that I was still not comfortable with the structure of school and therefore not able to show who I was, completely. I struggled with completing the painting and was only able to do so in steps. I painted the outside structure where I saw definite lines and areas, bolded in some instances, and others looking very creative and different in others, yet overall still coming together to reveal borders and definition (see Figure 7).

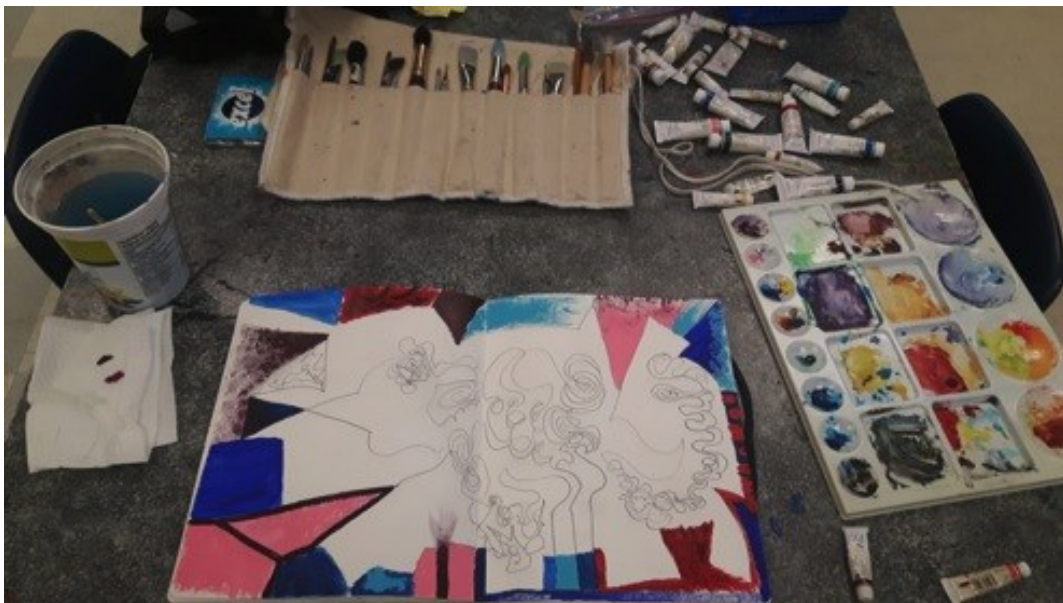


Figure 7: Borders and definition inside school

I then took some time, painting very slowly towards the inside of the structure, allowing for my paint to run and move, working the colors into conversations in order to reveal the dance and interactions that can happen within a classroom, and more specifically within the art room. As I released the paint and allowed the colors to run and dance, there was even a flow of color that seeped back into the bold areas, bleeding some of the lines of structure (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: The dance of flow and colour

I wondered how structure could change as well. These classroom walls that are erected are not permanent and in a sense are an illusion. As a student, I wholly believed that the walls of the education system were rigid and unyielding since I could not see the nuances where my creativity could be present. Now, the question is: How the interactions that I see within the classroom, with all the negotiations and the possibilities, can influence and change the structure that envelops them? This is what I was left with: What are the possibilities and how can I take what is happening in the micro-interactions in the classroom to a larger scale?

### **Why is this Research Necessary?**

Having experienced the school system dampen my creativity, yet still having creative connections outside of the education system, I realize that there is not just one way of knowing and that one's experiences are vast and can be influential. This is only one example of learning and it is my experience to tell. There are many other ways of knowing and stories to tell, and this story is a weaving of my experience along with what



was created from the youth. It was through the above that I came to live and bear witness to the vast and influential understandings of knowledge. I do not agree that there is a need to separate the experiences one has in the outside world from the learning that takes place within a school. If this gap was truly bridged, then the possibility of authentic learning experiences within the formal education system might be more widespread (Greene, 1993; Smith, 2002).

I did not see the potential for this connection between my own creativity and experience and my learning when I entered the school system as a student. Because of this disconnect, I had to force myself to learn in ways that were not natural to my way of being. The coping mechanisms that I put into place to survive the structured way of knowing slowly became effective, but it took years of misunderstanding and struggle to try to fit myself into the learning environment of school (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Greene, 1993). I do not believe that youth should suppress who they are and how best they learn, in order to “make it” through school (Singerland, 2016). Instead they should be supported in their interests and allow for these outside experiences to drive and inspire their learning.

I can appreciate students beginning this internal engagement within my art classroom, because the space differs in many aspects when compared to a regular classroom setting. Yet the area of the art room, as different as it might be, is not enough to support what is needed for youth to be able to allow their experiences to help shape their learning (Dewey, 1938; Singerland, 2016). It is time to investigate how outside experiences and interests can drive learning and support authentic learning experiences, specific to each individual. In order for this to occur, there needs to be an understanding

that the place where they learn has as much of an impact on youth as what they are learning (Ferrell, 1997; Graham, 2007; Smith 2002). The ability to see the connections between learning and place is vital to making the connection to individual experiences and interests (Greene, 1993). This research enacts my desire to build upon what I have experienced as both a student and as an educator, in order to approach learning with youth in a different way, through working with their interests, and using art as a form of pedagogical creation.

### **Introducing My Research Study**

**Background of the study.** The reasoning behind this study evolved from my noticing the disconnect between lived experiences that youth were having outside of school and the education taking place inside the school environment. Even when connections with life outside of school were attempted within school, it was not completed in a way that encouraged a melding of different learning experiences. I believe that everyday learning should be a part of education, in that the experiences one has outside of school are relevant; connections can be made anywhere. Therefore, my initial idea was to find an art practice that was relevant to youth and then to engage with this in a community context in order to see if the experiences shaped the youth, and in turn, the environment. The static energy within the physical structure of a school is very apparent, as youth are unable to directly affect the environment of which they are a part. They have ties to this physical space, but there could be so much more connection. I believe that if people create art in and about somewhere outside you might come to see that place more clearly and more succinctly, and then more learning possibilities can be realized.

The program, Moving the Mountain (MtM), was a pilot program, operating at the University of Alberta from July 2015 to December 2016. As mentioned, it had been initiated the year previous by visual artist and educator Wallis Kendal at iHuman Youth Society<sup>1</sup>. I had been introduced to iHuman Youth Society while taking a Participatory Research graduate course at the University of Alberta. Part of the course included a community service-learning component where I was able to work with the MtM girls and Kendal. I was present with the girls while they began to build a 3D model showcasing their Aboriginal heritage and connection to the land through the past, present and future. This was my first introduction to MtM and I continued to stay in contact with the program beyond the end of the course. It was through the University of Alberta pilot project that I was employed as a research assistant with the MtM program and where I was able to introduce my research project. I attended MtM twice a week for six months, during which time I began building relationships with the girls. I was there to help the girls connect with the university community and to assist in fostering their comfort in that place. Following the research assistantship I continued in a volunteer capacity for 10 months. In total I participated with MtM, through and beyond the course for six months, then through the pilot project for a year and 4 months, and worked on the research study for a year of that time.

### **Outline of Chapters**

This chapter, the introduction, is the positioning of myself as researcher, teacher and creative being within this study, along with a brief overview of the study itself.

Chapter two, a review of literature, establishes the larger picture of what is now

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<sup>1</sup> <http://ihuman.org/>. Wallis Kendal was one of the founders of iHuman Youth Society.

happening within the educational research community in making connections with authentic learning experiences between and through youth interests, art and place. The literature relevant to what youth and I experienced is focused on through the entirety of the chapter.

The third chapter will provide a background and grounding of the research through the methodology and methods used within this study, including a focus on arts based research and youth participatory action research. Chapter three will establish the design and follow-through methods, which took place with the youth and the community within this study, as well as consideration of the ethics and limitations of the study.

Chapter four is a combination of visual materials created by the youth as well as my written self-reflections from beginning to end of the project, spanning the entirety of a year. The visuals by the youth who participated in this project represent their journey throughout. My written reflections indicate how I positioned myself throughout this project. These accounts will follow the timeline of the visuals.

Chapter five consists of my reflections of the process, looking at the research as a whole. I consider the potential learning for the youth, the community, and me that grew from the art that the youth produced and expressed. Specifically, I will determine if this learning is relatable and answerable to the questions that I posed for this thesis.

It is important for me to next center this study within the research literature, in order to develop an understanding of the complexity, especially with regard to the focus on coming to know in different ways – if incorporating the interests of youth can be a driving factor in formalized learning. I begin by examining graffiti art as a connection to

youth culture, and then shift towards the impact of making connections with place, which in turn affects authentic learning practices.

## Chapter 2

### Where Art and Community Come to be: A Review of Literature

For this chapter I reviewed literature relevant to my research questions: Can art be a form that connects youth and communities of place? Can art help build community within the lives of youth? How might art play a role in authentic learning experiences for youth? How does place/space affect learning? These questions led me to begin my review with literature on practices of graffiti art and community engagement. I explored graffiti art since I wanted to engage with the practices of youth culture, intending to make connections with community possibly through making graffiti in an outside/public environment. I have had experiences with graffiti art only as a bystander and one who admires the form and execution. The practice held my attention as the freedom I identified mirrored what I was seeking as an art teacher and an artist. In this regard, I was able to connect my own personal concept of play within art with the methods of graffiti. However, I sought a better understanding of the structure of graffiti and to know whether there are any rules of operation with regards to graffiti as an art form. My inquiry verified that this type of art already has fundamentals of community built into the practice, that there is complexity present in the art form as well as points of resistance, and that graffiti does involve the concepts of space and place. The literature on graffiti art (Avramidis & Drakopoulou, 2012; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011; Ferrell, 1995; Dickens, 2008) describes the connection that graffiti art has to youth culture and graffiti practices. Other relevant literature I reviewed related to space/place (Gieryn, 2000; Roy, 2005; Hickey-Moody, 2010), art used in community building (Shahi, 2015; Hutzler, 2005), the

role of art (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; jagodzinski, 2014), and understanding the connection between art and community (Barndt, 2008).

When I began working with the youth for this study, it became apparent, that the youth were interested in photography. I therefore also reviewed literature focused on reading visual images (Donald, 2004; Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015), and artists' use of layering of images to explore place (Nakanishi, n. d.; Angelucci, 2015), While the outcome my research project changed and adapted as I worked with the youth, the practices and ideologies of graffiti art and community were the starting points.

### **Youth Culture and Disengagement**

When I began the study, I could not help but be aware of youth culture and how graffiti held a place within its values. Initially, I was aware that the connections, which youth had to graffiti were in part due to the illegality of the form, but I was not fully aware of why that was so attractive. What I came to understand was that youth culture is something that should not be ignored when it comes to education and instead embraced and seen as valid experience. Problems arise when the experiences of youth are not seen as valid, and instead there is the desire to force children to become what adults think they need to be. Blake (2004) expands on the idea of trying to force youth into a traditional way of being or learning, and how there is a pushing out or away if one is not able to succeed within the traditional system. A culture of refusal comes about for youth when there is no longer any hope of succeeding within the structured environment; instead what becomes enacted is “non-participation” (Blake, 2004, p.1). Disengaging or non-participating is a way of resisting what is being forced as the only way, or the right way, especially when it comes to education. If youth cannot fit within the specific systems that

are put in place in order to be successful, what other choice do they have but “to ‘refuse’ to be a part of the mainstream culture at all, reflecting this refusal throughout all aspects of their lives, including how they choose to learn and become literate” (Blake, 2004, p. 1). This is where youth culture comes into play as the traditional system is challenged and morphed into what youth need it to be in order for them to find their own place.

Ferrell (1997) looks at this contestation as one of cultural space, which “denotes those arenas in which young people and others construct meaning, perception, and identity” (p. 22). Ferrell proposes that disengagement from the traditional and structured forms actually comes in the form of youth demarking areas, physical and symbolic that are their own and markedly different from the spaces and practices that are more acceptable. Therefore, not only is disengaging from what is acceptable and traditional a way in which youth culture operates, but many youth also participate in exactly what are not the traditional practices and spaces, in order to mark out what stands for the identity of those who do not “fit.” If youth cannot see themselves and their identities within the confines that are put forward, then there will be a looking elsewhere. As Blake suggests, this looking elsewhere is where potential for new learnings comes forward:

a knowledge and understanding of these youths’ lives and literacies is important if we are to find ways in which to provide these youth with opportunities to make their own choices: choices that acknowledge the cultural imprints they carry, choices that make us all richer and broaden all of our lives and literacies as they broaden theirs as well. (2004, p. 45)

An understanding that learning can come from so many different understandings and experiences is vital to allow for there to be change within any system. This acceptance of



new forms of understanding and experiencing then has validity within graffiti, a form that has been perceived as lacking in value. As Ferrell (1997) validates, it will be in the spaces that are occurring within the lives of young people in which new and alternative practices will surface.

### **Conceptualizing Graffiti Art**

Graffiti is an art form that not only connects to youth culture, but also has elements of working within unconventional places and spaces. In analyzing how graffiti art is defined, how the elements of graffiti are utilized in a myriad of forms, and the motivations behind “doing” graffiti art, I gained a greater appreciation for graffiti art through discovering the complexities that lie at its core. There are multiple forms of graffiti art and many reasons behind creating graffiti. Dickens (2008) reminds that to just look at a singular idea of what graffiti is would disregard all of the ways in which “people write, draw, mark and sculpt contemporary urban spaces” (p. 25). For example, one of the basic forms of graffiti is “tagging” where an artist uses a specific style, which is personal and developed in order to make their mark (Ferrell, 1995). In other instances, graffiti artists work on a “piece,” or mural with a variety of styles, to bring together a cohesive theme (Bowen, 1999). The list of forms continues, from posters, reverse graffiti, scratchiti, signage, etc. (Ulmer, 2017). The more commonly known “post-graffiti,” street art, also has a variety of techniques, including stickers, pastels, etc., and involves allowing the visual image to stand for itself, instead of prescribing to traditional graffiti forms, where outsiders might not be aware of how one should “read” the images (Dickens, 2008; Daichendt, 2013). In terms of youth culture, I came to realize that in graffiti art there is room for youth to make it what they want. It is not just a singular form

or a destructive practice that many people see (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). For example, there is a common understanding of graffiti as vandalism. McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) raise the question of whether graffiti is “art” or “crime<sup>2</sup>.” They found that identifying graffiti as either/or was erroneous as this art form can be both, not just one or the other. An understanding that something might be a crime one day, but that on another day might be acceptable, is especially relevant in relation to graffiti art (Bowen, 1999). In some cases that I am aware of, areas had been designated specifically as places where graffiti art was both legal and encouraged. In these places, artists were able to use graffiti as an art form and were allowed this space for such representation. In other places in my community, graffiti is continually condemned and “cleaned up” as quickly as it is produced.

Within the discussion surrounding graffiti art there is also the argument that this form is only for those who practice it, as the “language” is not easily decipherable to outsiders. However, here again, there is a spectrum of understanding; not to recognize the complexity of this form is to take away the elements, which have come to define it (Bowen, 1999). A duality is evident when one looks at the public versus private realms surrounding this art form. McAuliffe and Iveson (2011) remind us that there is the potential for graffiti to be seen by anyone, based on the very fact that it is present within a public forum, where it can be personally interpreted (even though it is part of a sub-cultural context). There is no right or wrong way to encounter this art form. With its multifaceted elements and potential for disruption, graffiti art is upheld as a method that

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<sup>2</sup> <http://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/basically-destroyed-graffiti-spree-a-black-eye-for-street-art-advocate-says>

can shake up the expected norms behind what art is (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011) and this is exactly what I wanted to apply to art and learning in my study.

**Communities of practice.** In exploring graffiti art practices as they relate to the potential of community building, it became clear to me that through making their art form graffiti artists are building community (Avramidis & Drakopoulou, 2012), even though it might be seen as a negative art form within the larger community. When groups of artists come together to make something specific, even when everyone has their unique way of interpreting and creating, there are communities of practice that are developed, and this can be interpreted as pedagogical (Valle & Weiss, 2010). Graffiti, for example, is part of a niche community of wider “hip-hop culture,” which is also comprised of music, dance and even personal style (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011; Ferrell, 1995; Eldridge, 2013; Avramidis & Drakopoulou, 2012; McAuliffe, 2012; Valle & Weiss, 2010). Being aware of one’s own way of creating is one mode reflective of the progression of learning; but learning cannot happen within complete isolation, therefore the surrounding group/community is just as important to the learning process as one moves back and forth through both worlds of learning. Avramidis and Drakopoulou (2012) argue that graffiti artists share knowledge and values through their similar lived experiences as they learn and work together, balancing their individual and crew (community) identities. Clearly, through the process of the established art form, there is a space not only for the singular artist, but also for a coming together of a particular group. Within this space there is room for play, creation and the ability to create ties to a community. The individual and group are united through this art form. The practice of creating and sharing together makes this community strong, as the making of graffiti art supports “communal memory” (Valle &

Weiss, 2010). Small communities of practice also contribute to larger communities of practice, each one relying on the other (Ferrell, 1995). It is through belonging to a larger community by means of this artistic practice that one not only comes to better understand one's place as an individual, but also their interaction in the world, where learning is larger than just one person. Through my reading, I came to appreciate that graffiti art practice was not only a way in which one could express one's art, but that in relation to the larger communities of practice other complexities were at play.

**Graffiti art as resistance.** The many misunderstandings around graffiti art can be used to understand difference (“othering”), through considering various perspectives. One such perspective is seeing graffiti art as resistance to mainstream culture. Ferrell (1995) warns against the romanticization of resistance, which is circumvented through focusing on the everyday practices and the reasoning behind the resistance. Given the simplicity of working in public, on the street, and of not worrying about the social norms of where art should be by just creating art, graffiti is in itself resistant, without having to try to be so (Dickens, 2008). There is a politics of space that many are aware of – where even public space is controlled and manipulated, with everything in its right place, but not many talk about (McAuliffe, 2012). But where does art come into play within this arena? Can art be the bridge that connects contested spaces that seem unfriendly and not usable? There is the understanding within graffiti culture that this practice gives space to those who are otherwise excluded. In the words of a young graffiti artist, “graffiti means I'm here ... They want to snub us, but they can't...” (Ferrell, 1995, p. 81).

For young graffiti artists, like the one quoted above, the ability to express oneself, in the way that fits one's own sensibilities, to be heard and to demand the space to do so,

is empowering. Not only is one affected by what one is constructing, but one also affects and changes the space in which this art is taking form. This is resistance as graffiti artists are able to communicate their images (“stories”), which might go against the grain within the given space. Through the act of writing and communicating, there is a rejection of the imposed ideas of what a space should look like (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). Graffiti art’s resistant use of space allows for new possibilities of what an area could be allowed to become; the prescribed perception of what that space is, and in the end, what art is, are transformed (Iveson, 2010).

For my study, I wanted to explore the role of art within learning and at the same time to alter perceptions of what a community should look like, to allow for new connections to be made and for difference to be present. The lack of “official” boundaries around graffiti art seemed like a perfect fit for different kinds of learning to take place and for questions and connections to be made. Graffiti, within its myriad forms, generates constant changes and fluctuates in response. For example, there are graffiti artists who are using stencils and stickers as a response to increased restraints being placed on the urban landscape (Iveson, 2010). As I continued to read about graffiti art and the idea of resistance, I became increasingly aware of how important space was to this art form and how space was used accordingly. For example, people walking purposefully past the free graffiti walls in Edmonton in order to see if anything had changed, was an unconventional way of interacting with space. These free walls existed in spaces that were commonly thought of as areas to walk past, but to not engage with. Now, people were repeatedly walking into an alley in order to look upon a space that was once ignored. In the culture of graffiti art, Dickens suggests that “through the bodily,

rhythmic writing and re-writing of [a space]” (2008, p. 27) one comes to know and understand that space much more. When one is more aware of their surroundings and can interact with a space, then that space is no longer just a backdrop because it has been inscribed with meaning and cannot be ignored. Another example where space is utilized in new and interactive ways is through the street art of Banksy. The art that is displayed is also central to the message being conveyed, which “directly interferes with the politics of representation within these sanctified spaces of high-culture” (Dickens, 2008, p. 476). Therefore, not only are the pieces that Banksy creates connected with a place because he is engaging with it, but also “the why” of said place is brought into consideration. “Banksy’s desire to ‘make the right piece at the right time in the right place...’” seems to reinforce the importance of visualizing a space as process, instead of as separated sites (Dickens, 2008).

### **Space and Place**

The more that I explored graffiti art, the more I understood the importance of art’s location, in relation to the form that art takes. My appreciation of space and place related to my questions of art and learning developed from the comprehension of graffiti art as “writing” on a public area, and how this can alter the landscape that one creates within. Space is not fixed, i.e., where things happen, but participative with those who interact with it (Roy, 2005). Graffiti art and its possible community connections suggested a correlation between the places with which one chooses to interact and what this interaction does to the person doing the action: and a link between the art created and the subsequent change that occurs upon the place.

Gieryn (2000) notes the distinction between “space” as involving “abstract geometries,” whereas “place” is filled with people and specific ways of doing things. Or as Hickey-Moody (2010) proposes, “spaces” are the areas in between “places” that many people try to get around or through. Roy (2005) brings forward the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari as he compares “optic space” (controlled) with “haptic space” (insurgent). This idea of haptic space is distinguished as the areas which people usually ignore, but are in fact the points to pay attention to as this space can cause disruptions in the everyday, and therefore have the potential to allow for different encounters to occur (Roy, 2005).

For my study I wondered how a space, with established rules and ways of being set up, could become a place. I was interested to see if new connections could be made with “spaces” that normally get overlooked. The act of taking residence within space and through acting upon it, making it public for all people, seems a pressing need, especially as fear surrounding urban areas is increasing due to acts of violence (Mitchell, 2003). I wondered if, through focusing on space and place as a critical mode of learning one could be affected and have an impact. Is it possible to interact with and be acted upon in spaces that one normally would not approach? Could art be the catalyst for this action and reaction, allowing people who would not normally engage within particular spaces be able to do so – turning spaces into places? Also, what would happen if places – following Gieryn’s (2000) definition, were approached as if they were spaces – making familiar places strange? Would there be a reimagining of the space? The concept of place is “remarkable” because of the meanings, interpretations and experiences generated in places (Gieryn, 2000). What might happen if the meanings or interpretations that one

has can be re-imagined? Would this make the place less because of different interactions, or more because it causes someone to look again?

As Hickey-Moody suggests, “we know that environments impact on creativity, but our set, or ‘striated’ conscious means of understanding creativity and the world obscures our chance to see environments as creative triggers” (2009, p. 75). In the case of graffiti, it is to look upon the streets as something else, as an othering, but doing so in order to create a new kind of narrative, of a creative city (McAuliffe, 2012). The recognition of art and creativity as part of a larger landscape in which we participate is an interesting place to start. I thought that “all you need is a wall” (Dickens, 2008, p. 12), in order to create connections through creating art, but I came to realize that making art is also about making community and making place, two elements which can not be ignored.

### **Place-Based Learning**

Learning is not done in isolation. Understanding the importance not only of where you learn, but how phenomena of places can also have an impact on what is learned, requires awareness to be directed to where one is located. Place-based education is learning that is grounded in a specific place, where what is local, and more specifically, the experiences that the learner is interacting with, is the focus (Smith, 2002). The experiences of youth and the areas they encounter and in which they live out their everyday lives are valid for learning. However, within traditional schooling there is the propensity to look only upon the curriculum as the guiding principle for learning. There has been a turn towards understanding that place in itself can engage learning. Primarily within place-based education, many look towards nature and the natural environment when making connections with learning (Gruenewald, 2003). However, this natural



environment is not always the reality that youth are engaged with; where youth are residing is where we should be engaging their learning. Gruenewald (2003) goes on to insist that the urban places in which some youth reside are vital and authentic to learning experiences, as these are the “places” in which youth exist. Instead of trying to get youth to look elsewhere, there needs to be a questioning of where they are, to look critically at the places in which they reside and to ask what is there. It is such direct questioning that overcome[s] the alienation and isolation of individuals that have become hallmarks of modernity. By reconnecting rather than separating children from the world, place-based education serves both individuals and communities, helping individuals to experience the value they hold for others and allowing communities to benefit from the commitment and contributions of their members. (Smith, 2002, p. 594)

However, there are those (Gruenewald, 2003) who warn that it is not enough to just try to connect with a place, but that there is a need to be critical of what is happening in that place; to question and be aware of the everyday, in order to be critical of what is happening and how that place affects those who take it up. This was especially important within the context of the place in which my study occurred, since the University was a place that participants were newly a part of. Very quickly this place was to become a part of their everyday. In this regard, it was a place that the youth could immediately be critical of, since they had no prior experience there, yet, at the same time, it was a place that they quickly got used to.

### **Art and Community Building**

Literature on art and community illuminates the connections made by art that is created by encountering places – that is, art that enables connections to be made. I am interested in what art can do, and how the process of creating, in turn, affects the place and the artist. Upon beginning my study, I speculated that through recognizing art and creativity within a landscape, one would have an experience connected to community and learning. I looked towards Dewey’s (1938) belief that art and life are inter-connected, that art is an experience. In my research, I wanted to ensure that the art that was created connected to the youth. There are examples of how art has been used to perceive and reconceive what is held in community, and as a catalyst for social change (Clover, 2011; Graham, 2007; Hutzler, 2005, 2007; Shahi, 2015). Hutzler (2005) worked with youth, looking at the assets of the community instead of the needs, allowing for a more positive idea of community to come through. Shahi (2015) looked at whether Aboriginal students could be engaged with arts-based projects, and whether this encounter would have an affect on their self-concepts. Shahi put forward the hypothesis that

being involved in an arts-based project would create a sense of belonging for its participants, and that students would become more engaged in school as a result . . . that the encouragement of self-expression would lead students to a higher level of self-awareness, and possibly to an increase in self-empowerment. (2015, p. 2)

I too wondered if being involved with art in the community would provide the youth an increased sense of connection. However, alternative conceptualizations of art made me aware that art is a multi-formed process and complex in its forms, which meant that it could not be seen as the causation to immediately connect youth and community.

Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) presents that the arts do not “do” anything, especially in

reference to using art as a way to measure and control specific effects within education. In this regard, art is being justified in its use if it can produce something specific. Instead, Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) argues that art by itself and within the education system should stand as a cultural form, something that responds to change through which youth can act, express and make meaning. He asserts that “rather than thinking about the arts as *doing something to people*, we should think about artistic forms as *something people do*” (p. 226). The challenge then is to make use of the arts to “de-mystify” and question what is being seen or experienced (Greene, 2010). Initially, the focus of my research was more representative of what art could do, how it could be used for a desired product; in this case, to create a community. However, understanding that art needs to be looked at in a manner that is not product-based, one can see that:

the advantage of reorienting art education to the non-representational dimensions of life is to escape the frame of art as a commodity. All art is doing, a process – “arting” is a process of ceaseless becoming. The subject is never finished.

(jagodzinski, 2014, p. 11)

The idea of art as a doing, a process, a ceaseless becoming, is relevant to the questions that I was asking. The authentic learning experiences and community building potential that I seek are not static, but fluid and constantly changing. jagodzinski helped me realize that the art I made with the youth for my study would not create a desired effect simply because I wanted it to happen. I had to give myself and the youth up to the art process and trust that what came through would be supportive to what was experienced, whatever that might be.

It was through reading Barndt (2008) and her conception of art and community coming together, which solidified for me the connection between these two. Barndt looks at the many different ways in which community arts can be utilized and contested, especially in the understanding the concepts: community and arts, where one then has to, interrogate how we understand art (as most of us are socialized in a more colonial and capitalist notion of the term) as well as how we understand community – whether it be defined by place, tradition, intention, practice or spirit. (2008, p. 4)

Art and its connection to authentic learning experiences and community building, then, is within a constant state of fluctuation, and instead of trying to control and manipulate those points of connecting, there should be freedom to move through the creation process. As Jagodzinski remarks,

The processes of “arting” are about the emergent eventuality of the world, its becoming where subject and object meet. A Life is captured in the tensions of the present tense of becoming and the not yet formed moment that is to come.

Becoming is always an in-between process where A Life is to be revealed. (2014, p. 12)

I could not assume that linkages would automatically be created because I was asking youth to integrate art within a community. I wanted the connections to “become” for each individual youth, not to be forced, but to develop organically. As Greene (1987, p. 21-22) concludes,

I am not convinced, however, that “acquisition of art concepts and skills” will lead to the experiences of expansion . . . or to the “creation and recreation” or to

the kind of encounter that sets beholders or listeners or readers “in motion” –  
breaking with the fixed and the ordinary, transforming their lived worlds.

There are no certainties in creative processes.

### **Reading Visual Images**

While the graffiti art I initially imagined youth might create for this study did not materialize, the underlying ideas from graffiti culture and the understandings I gained around space/place and community building, informed my work of observing and trying to comprehend what the youth created. These points of learning included the possibility of community building through the act of creating – when people come together with similar points of reference, possibilities for connection can be present. As well, the act of making “something” within a space could also allow for meaning to be formed and for bonds to be made spatially. Ultimately, I knew that there would be some kind of art images that would result from this project and that I could interpret those images.

In interpreting an image that has been created, the way in which one “looks” is crucial to understanding how the final art piece has come to be and the potential learning/connecting that could have taken place. One starting point is understanding that any image, artwork, photograph, etc., is connected with human action and in this way needs “a wider frame of analysis” beyond what the initial image is presenting (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015, p. 13). An approach that goes beyond describes a process of encountering an image by “looking through, looking at and looking behind” (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015, p.10). In this way, what was being “seen” and created by the youth in my study were not static pieces, but ways for me to connect with what they had come into contact with before, during and after the creation process. We are beings who are influenced by many

different stimuli. One cannot isolate singular reasons for being or creating, so to be aware of the multitude of influences is imperative to have a better understanding of a final “image.” In graffiti, for example, there is a layering of images and what is created could possibly be influenced by what lies beneath.

Donald (2004) borrows the art concept of “*pentimento*,” which is a scraping away of paint, which might originally be obscuring truths, and as one reveals the layers there is the ability to examine what is underneath. Looking at the different layers is not to try to get to the “truth” of the original, but to acknowledge that “each layer mixes with the other and renders irreversible influences on our perceptions of it” (Donald, 2004, p. 24). There are stages within graffiti, as one writer paints over another, and in the same way there were layers which came to be as the youth in my study put together their images. These new creations did not happen in isolation; the idea of being aware of how everything works together, one influencing the other, is fundamental to how I understand the art, youth, community and place all coming together. Being aware of how one affects the other and being conscious of this influence, allows for a myriad of interpretations and creations.

The youth in my study came into places/spaces where there were a multitude of connections already present. These connections were there for them to see, to be revealed in layers, and from these to create their own work, in whatever capacity they chose. The image making processes, drawing on a metaphor of graffiti, was a conscious effort on the part of the youth to be aware of the layers already present and then to consciously, actively apply other “layers of paint,” and, in turn, be aware that others may add and apply other layers once participants had finished.

We are all inter-connected and things are constantly changing and in flux, so why should we think that anything should be static. This is significant for community building, for as Donald (2004) suggests, there are stories already present, stories being told, and new stories to come in the future:

We must pay closer attention to the multiple ways our human sense of “being together” is constructed through the minutiae of day-to-day events through the stories and interactions which always are imbued with a living principle of reciprocity, and hence moral responsibility for a shared future. (p. 26)

### **Exploring Place through the Layering of Images**

The practice of layering images in explorations of place became significant for the research based on the direction that participants took it. I was intrigued to discover that many artists exploring the idea of place are using techniques of layering of images. I discuss the work of two artists here to inform my interpretations of the work we did for this project.

One artist who works with a layering of photographs is Nobuhiro Nakanishi (n. d.). He is a Japanese artist who takes pictures of one specific place over an extended period of time. All of the photographs are then printed onto sheets of glass and hung as an installation, a sculpture, with each layer suspended in front of and/or behind others. Nakanishi speaks to how the viewer brings his/her own experiences when encountering the layers and the spaces in between (Nakanishi, 2010). He connects the moments of encounter within these spaces, as bound up in the fluidity of time. He believes it is through the shared attempts of viewer and artist that time and space come to be understood.

Another artist who used a form of layering in her artwork was Jo-Anne Duggan (1962-2011), an Australian photo-media artist and scholar (Angelucci, 2015). The work that Duggan would engage in, especially in her later years, was about how museums and public spaces, especially those involving history and culture, were viewed. The subjects of her photographs were the very spaces in which they were to be exhibited. What was quite unique in Duggan's work was that the layers she created were situated side-by-side rather than one behind the other. At times the photographs were staggered, or parts of one image would be placed in line with a similar section of an adjacent photograph, all within the real space. The juxtaposition of layers allowed the viewer to look upon the places through a disruptive lens, allowing for those places to be seen differently, and seen again. Angelucci describes his disorienting encounter with Duggan's work:

of course I could see the reference of the shell in the centre, linking with the left image, and the line of the ceiling linking with the right one and the contemporary lights and the fittings, and the green of the emergency exit and – incredible moving – the half of the modern bench, its surface in line with the legs of the Renaissance table in the back room, but I kept being distracted, wondering of the sake of wonder. (Angelucci, 2015, p. 189)

Reflecting on how these other artists use the layering of images of place in their work informs my understandings of the potential of this artistic technique in relation to my research.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This chapter identified the underlying elements of graffiti art in relation to community building, which provided a starting point for this study. I found elements of



graffiti art informative for creating an arts-based project within a community in an outside space. The complexities of the art form, the ways in which creative processes develop communities of practice, and the potential for resistance inherent in graffiti art led me to also consider the importance of space and place. These layers informed my research, allowing me to ground the experience that the youth had while exploring the community, and providing me with a framework for considering the creation of art outside.

However, coinciding with the literature on graffiti art, I could not ignore the connection to youth culture, and therefore the potential disengagement of youth. This focus assisted me in understanding the connection to alternate spaces that some youth look to for “other” educational experiences, which, at first, may be disengagement. One possibility of engaging connection is through disengaging from a system or way of being that is not supportive in order to find the way to connect again. The notion of connecting with space and place became imperative to the experience of going out into the university community with the youth, as did the distinction between space and place. In engaging with youth through artistic form, I had to be conscious of a way of expressing that tied to community. The literature exploring art in community illustrated ways that art can connect with community; however, it also warned how art can be abused when it comes to assumptions around its uses. Art is a conduit for connecting, and not the sole reason for it. I also considered the reading of visual images and the potential of layering images, which directly correlated with where the youth took the creative project I facilitated with them.

For this research I sought a way of being and engaging which involved the youth in the research, integrated art and connected to a community in a manner that was organic and youth led. This capability is supported by my methodological approach, discussed in the next chapter, where I combine Youth Participatory Action Research and Arts Based Research.

## Chapter 3

### Arts-based Youth Participatory Action Research: Methodology and Methods

#### Behind the Layers

My research study used arts-based research (ABR) and youth participatory action research (YPAR) to direct focus on the young women participants' understandings to address the research questions:

- Can art be a form that connects youth and communities of place?
- Can art help build community within the lives of youth?
- How might art play a role in authentic learning experiences for youth?
- How does place/space affect learning?

I found a correlation between the goals of the study and the methodology and methods, which allowed an emergent nature to the research and provided input from both the researcher and the youth.

This chapter begins by positioning me as the researcher and the study within an ABR framework and explaining how this methodology merged with YPAR. The first section will focus on the methodology and the second section will introduce the research design or methods of the study.

In the methodology section I begin by discussing why I used ABR, especially how it relates to the ways in which the project was developed. I examine elements of ABR and the shape my project took within a specific scope of this approach. I continue, in this section, to take a close look at YPAR and how this approach allowed the project to take a more youth-oriented focus. The youth were essentially not only participants, but

also co-researchers. This methodology provided the structure that allowed us to address the research questions in an emergent way for this project.

The second part of this chapter describes the specific research methods of the project. I provide information on the participants, the arts-based processes with the youth and my process of interpretation of the work we did together. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations including the risks and benefits of the project and the study's limitations.

### **Methodological Approaches: Merging ABR and YPAR**

**Arts-based research.** I elected to use an ABR approach, because it was congruent with the ideas that I was considering as a visual artist and visual arts teacher. The ideas/concepts I wanted to investigate were presented to the youth through engaging them in an arts project with the hope that this would connect with youth and with what they experienced within their own lives. Because the youth participants were part of a program that commonly employed arts practices for learning, this was something with which they were already familiar. Further, my initial intention was to ground the study in graffiti art as something that was already embedded within youth culture. The art was not intended as the end result in the study, but as a conduit for authentic learning experiences and as a way of making connections to a space and perhaps to a community.

The foundation of ABR is an understanding that there are many different ways of knowing something and demonstrating that knowledge (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Although this point may be taken-for-granted by those of us in the arts, there is often still a bias within education and the broader community regarding knowledge and the “right” ways of retrieving answers or asking questions. My approach to ABR begins with

Dewey's underlying idea of experiential education, "that amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 27). Greene (1993) too acknowledges a complexity and diversity within life, in which art can also be a part of the research process. For my study, I wanted expectations of where and how learning happens and the role art – where art should take place - to be shaken up, and this included the possibility for not only participants to be affected by the ABR process, but also the researcher. One point that I connected with regarding my developing understanding of ABR was that,

art-based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. (McNiff, 2008, p. 29)

Working with the arts in research applies not only to the researcher, but for all involved, as it helps to foster supportive environments, which allows for creativity to take form, even if the end product is not known (McNiff, 2003).

For my study, I began with some preconceived ideas, but I also wanted things to change and adapt as the situation warranted. Greene and others highlight the importance of allowing for difference within learning and experiencing, in that there is not one way to be (Greene, 1993; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Using an ABR methodological approach in my study allowed for there to be flexibility in the expectation of where "learning" was to take place, and for taking art out of where one would normally expect it to be. In this sense, the study can be seen to have had a political component – through disrupting normative expectations. Finley (2008) proposes that, "at the heart of arts-based inquiry is

a radical, politically grounded statement about social justice and control over the production and dissemination of knowledge” (p. 72). ABR helps to enable new conceptions of where art “should be” and how this connects with social justice. Finley continues by suggesting that, “arts-based methodologies bring both arts and social inquiry out of the elitist institutions of academe and art museums, and relocate inquiry within the realm of local, personal, everyday places and events” (2008, p. 72). I wanted my study to reflect that “arts-based research involves processes of discovery and invention” (Finley, 2008, p. 72).

There are many different ways that one can come to experience and know the world. I did not want to try to represent life using ABR. I wanted to see if by and through using art, questions and answers might arise through the process. At the same time, I wanted to examine the personal experiences of youth and see if educational learning could be impacted and at the same time coincide within community. Therefore, it seemed only natural to move towards the arts and more specifically the visual.

The power of a visual image can be transformative and make someone look again, especially if put in a space that normally is taken-for-granted or not really “seen.” Weber (2008) focuses on visuals and how they relate to research:

Seeing, being surrounded by the visual, doesn’t always or necessarily mean that we *notice* what we see. It is the *paying attention*, the looking, and the taking note of what we see that makes images especially important to art, scholarship, and research. (p. 42)

If what we look at within research is important, then so is the manner in which we take up that looking. Therefore, the imperative role of the arts-based researcher is “to integrate

herself into the community of participants as learners, and to initiate introspection, reflection, and representations that teach” (Finely, 2008, p. 76). Therein lies the connection to the second methodological approach for this research study as it relates to youth.

**Youth participatory action research.** YPAR was suitable as my second methodological approach since I knew definitely that I wanted the youth to not only be participants, but also researchers, and that I wanted to not only be a researcher, but also a participant in the study. I wanted youth to drive the research and to identify the direction that the research was to take. YPAR supports questioning – especially questioning of relations that are not “natural,” but can be changed through challenging those relations commonly reproduced (Cammarota & Fine, 2010).

YPAR has, in recent years, developed as a youth-focused, Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach (Hutzel, 2005; Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Heron & Reason, 2006). The beginnings of PAR were not methodological per se, but instead concerned with “the degree of engagement of participants within and beyond the research encounter” (Pain & Francis, 2003, p. 46). The reason for using YPAR, stemming from PAR, was my realization that I wanted to allow the possibility for the focus of the study to change, based on what the youth wanted to investigate. I began the study with the expectation that the youth would work with graffiti art, and even my preliminary research questions were based on this assumption. However, I eventually yielded to the YPAR process and worked with where the youth were coming from, rather than from my previously held expectations; this was appropriate in that the original goals in a PAR project will not always be met (Pain & Francis, 2003). Therefore, as supported by Pain

and Francis, in order to fully participate within the YPAR methodology, I had to abandon the assumption that the goals of the research would be met according to my pre-conceived notions, or the specific roles that I imagined I might have in this study. I started the research with conceptions, some of which were misconceived (i.e. using the graffiti art, creating art work collaboratively, or youth working together with community members). I eventually had to re-interpret or re-establish myself alongside the youth according to the direction that they were heading. I listened and asked questions. As such, the work also took much longer than I first imagined since building relationships with my young participants and organically finding direction took time (Hutzel, 2007).

The participatory inquiry paradigm that Heron and Reason develop believes that, “to experience anything is to participate in it, and to participate is both to mold and to encounter; hence, experiential reality is always subjective-objective” (1997, p. 278). When I began this study, I knew that I wanted the youth to be participants in the research; it was not until I actually became engaged in the YPAR process that I began to understand what that really meant.

Reviewing YPAR fundamentals was instructive since it reminded me that the youth were guiding me, but at the same time, through my own participation, I too was a part of the process. This was something to work with, not against. Cammarota and Fine (2008) put forward that there are three essentials, which begin with the researcher as a part of a collective who does not work in isolation. Secondly, the “researchers” are seen as people who are connected to what is happening, and finally PAR is an active way of inquiring for knowledge.



The question remained, as brought up by Cammarota and Fine (2008), as to what is unique to YPAR relative to PAR in general. Where was the connection between the research that I wanted to facilitate and the reasoning to do YPAR? At first, I considered YPAR only because it both was youth-based and participatory. However, as I looked more closely, I came to understand that the particularities of YPAR did resonate with me and with the research. I came to understand, as YPAR practitioners Cammarota and Fine suggest,

Students study their social contexts through research and apply their knowledge to discover the contingent qualities of life. Thus, the important lesson obtained from engaging in this pedagogical praxis is that life, or more specifically the students' experiences, are not transcendental or predetermined. Rather, praxis reveals how life experiences are malleable and subject to change, and the students possess the agency to produce changes. (2008, p. 6)

I knew that the experiences the youth had outside of the classroom were relevant and valid, which confirmed YPAR as an important methodology (Cammarota & Fine, 2010, p. 6).

That youth have valid knowledge and experience is supported by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). PAR was developed based on Freire's work and he was one of the first to articulate research as an opportunity for those who are suppressed to change their situations: "PAR stands on the epistemological grounds that persons who have historically been marginalized or silenced carry substantial knowledge about the architecture of injustice, in their minds, bodies, and souls; in ways that are conscious and floating; individual and collective" (Cammarota & Fine, 2010, p. 223). Through my

work with the young women in this study, I came to realize that as a teacher in the mainstream educational system, I am one of the oppressors. Initially, I wanted to achieve an end, to see if participating in art would, in turn, build community. Then I realized that I could not think for these girls and presuppose their learning, for “[a]uthentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (Freire, 1970, p. 77). In making space to re-think learning and art-making contexts and practices, merging ABR and YPAR as a methodological approach, served the study well.

### **Research Design/Methods**

**Study objectives.** The objectives behind this research were to discover if artistic practices could facilitate connections with community for youth and to reinforce authentic learning practices. Could learning take place outside of the classroom, and the physical structure of school, and instead be grounded in youth-led interests and everyday living? Through the use of an art practice, would the youth be able to explore a community and their connections/disconnections therein, allowing them to shape their own learning?

My research questions, which served to guide the development of my initial research design, were focused around graffiti as an art form. However, as work began with the youth and throughout the study, I found that the form the youths’ work took was not important; we could still address the questions through any form(s) they chose. The literature on graffiti was still relevant since it discussed the elements of community; how it is formed and supported through a focus on working together and individually. As well, the focus on art and the idea that if people make something in a specific place there

is potential for experiential and place-based learning, were what I was searching for in this study.

**The research context and participants.** Participant recruitment for the study took place within the Moving the Mountain (MtM) program. The study was open to all of the youth in the program who were interested. Several young women participated in various activities that I initiated over the year of the study. The formal research participants, however, were three of these girls.

In my role at MtM, I was able to talk with individual youth one-on-one to see if there was curiosity in trying out the project I proposed and where their interests lay with the artistic process of graffiti art. I eventually was approached by two youth who had an interest in photography. This is when I decided to go in the direction that they were leading and to abandon the idea of graffiti. The study began with two young women and a third joined close to the middle of the study. Other girls started or showed interest in joining the group in order to try out the artistic process, but over time, and sometimes due to their lack of interest, they withdrew. The study continued with only the three participants. Only the two who had begun the study with me remained to see the project through, along with the one girl who joined halfway through and continued until the end. The ages of the girls were 13, 15 and 18. I had initially hoped to have 6 to 8 youth participating in my study. However, with constraints such as inconsistent attendance by some of the girls, I realized that three participants was a more realistic number.

**Arts-based research products, processes and interpretations.** Working with the youth and being a part of MtM at the university began in September 2015 and culminated in December 2016. The manner in which arts-based research processes and

products were generated became a very organic process, resulting from the Youth Participatory Action Research methodology. I had an initial plan on how the processes would occur, but very quickly I realized that the more I pushed this structure on the youth, the less I was able to allow for this to be a YPAR process. Initially, I intended to create art with the youth, then interview them and draw on their written reflections in my interpretation of our work. I imagined there would be artwork created by the youth that we would present to the community in an exhibit and then solicit community members' reflections on their work. In the end, the material that was generated from the study was the photos taken by the youth, collaborative art pieces created by two of the girls, pictures that I took of the art pieces created by the youth, and my written reflections completed through the entirety of the study. I worked alongside the program coordinator, Wallis Kendal, throughout the process and learned much from his interactions with the girls, as well as some new arts techniques. The youths' art pieces were eventually displayed in the Art Gallery of Alberta with the assistance of Kendal.

*The art process and photography.* When I started working with the youth I first engaged with activities around graffiti. I put up posters on the walls with questions about graffiti practices, while inviting the youth to write their thoughts/comments. The plan was to begin a dialogue with the youth surrounding this art practice to see what the girls' thoughts might be. Girls would come and go within the program, making it impossible to talk with all of the youth at the same time. I needed to see if there was any interest in graffiti art, and if so, then move forward. The result was some limited initial interest. Due to a lack of funds, the question of being able to afford supplies and the expertise of a graffiti artist was an issue. I continued to go to the program space to talk with the girls,

trying to build a connection. Right from the beginning, the idea was to get out into the community to see what would happen.

While my initial idea was to create a graffiti mural, the girls came to me with the desire to try photography. The process began with two girls and immediately I saw potential for where this could go. The idea of creating “something” within the community still seemed present while engaging with photography, as images could be taken and then decisions made about what to do with them (Aichmaier, 2017). Depending on who was available at any given time, one or both of the girls and I would wander around the University campus with camera in hand to see what would catch their eyes. I was present with the girls, but it was them who were leading the exploration. This experiencing of the familiar or somewhat familiar, since the community was a place with which I had a long-standing relationship, in very different ways also had an impact on me. I had never stopped and looked around me, stooping underneath a bush or lying on the floor in Hub Mall in order to see the shutters of the residences in the same way that the girls looked at them. The boundaries of the spaces were constantly being pushed as the girls flowed freely. There were no codes to reference, which at first was disconcerting, but with time and a new awareness, the girls were showing me how they saw the space, which was reflected in the photographs that they took.

*Gel transfers and the transformation of space.* The exploring of spaces within the community and the taking of photos was not where this study ceased. Through using digital photographs there seemed to be a multitude of possibilities of what the images could be. As Rubinstein suggests:

[i]t will be a mistake to approach an image as an abstraction, as a representation of external reality or as a *painting with light* because there is always a multiplicity of forces at play that place the image in a range of contexts, assemblages and situations. (2016, p.128)

The girls went on to create something, through their own interpretation, creativity and imagination, while still exploring ties to community and place. The original images did not remain, but instead were the beginning of a multi-layered process. In this capacity, the inquiry of the photograph, the inquiry of the space, went further as the girls decided that the initial images were not “enough” with regards to what they saw. The process that they utilized was an art method called gel transfer, which had been taught to them previously by Wallis Kendal, and which I also learned from him through the process of this study. This process gave the youth another element to work with, allowing them to notice and question what was happening with their visuals (Weber, 2008).

The gel transfer process involved printing their pictures and then applying a liquitex acrylic gloss medium over the photos in layers, allowing each one to dry before adding the next (Figure 25). The layers of gel allowed the paper of the picture to be removed. A transfer of the picture was left behind, producing a transparent quality to the picture. The girls then took it a step further through the layering of the transparent photographs – a process which took place in an organic manner as the youth and I experimented with the photos, placing them over paintings, holding them up to the light and then finally laying one over another.

What began as an experiment became a process, in which the youth were selective about which visual needed to be layered behind or in front of another specific image.

Each girl had her own creations that she wanted to make. Each girl was specific about the parts of each picture she wanted to have recede or come forward. There was an emergence of manipulation and possibility as the girls layered the photos. These spaces were no longer stagnant, but fluid through the individual perspective of each youth. There was a sense that the original pictures did not tell the entire story, as there were stories within the layered images (Weber, 2008) that could not be readily seen until the girls brought them to light.

A final detail within this project was how to display the manipulated transparent visuals. Through working together, the youth, Kendal and I came up with the idea of creating lightboxes. The pictures were mounted on an open end of a box with a direct light source placed behind. This allowed the layers to be shown and the girls' ideas to come forward as the stories that they wanted to tell became illuminated. The possibilities were endless. It was these images and lightboxes that were exhibited, with the help of Kendal, at the Art Gallery of Alberta, in May 2016.

*Interpreting youths' work.* Following my work with the youth, I took photos of the visuals that the girls had created. In some cases, I even had digital copies of the original photographs and then photos of the gel transfers, and the lightboxes. I wanted to include the youths' reflections of the process, along with their photographs in my interpretations of our work. However, I was unable to get all of the youth who were involved to reflect through writing. Instead, I have my own journal writings and field notes of what I saw and heard during the year and how I responded. In this regard, I recognized that in YPAR, I was not a simple bystander or the overarching researcher, but someone who was involved with everything that the girls were doing for this study. I was

present throughout, and so, my writings are another voice added to the stories that are present in the creations of the photographs, gel transfers and lightboxes. All of these elements are included in my interpretation in Chapter 4. I threaded them together to create a collection of works – a layering of ideas, images, text, perspectives and points of connection.

*Creating my own connections.* My construction (also presented in Chapter 4) is an assemblage of all of the materials that I gathered throughout the year. This includes the original photographs that the girls took, showing their differing perspectives, as well as the gel transfer applications showing how the pictures started to take on completely different perspectives from beginning to end. The other element that I wove along with the images in my assemblage is the text of my written reflections. The process was guided by the principles of arts-based research for compiling the multitude of stories being told. My interpretive process, reflection, and art creation continued when I moved to Kuwait to teach. The experience of being in this new space/place informed my understandings and additional insights emerged which I also share.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study received full ethics approval from the University of Alberta's Research Ethics Office on August 17, 2015. There was an extension approved on August 9, 2016.

**Informed consent.** Youth within this study provided personal assent and parental consent was obtained for two of the participants who were under the age of 18. There was one participant who was 18 years of age at the time of the study and therefore provided personal consent. The three girls were aware that they did not have to participate within the study if they did not wish to and that, at any time, they could



withdraw without any repercussions. There was also the understanding that by providing personal assent/consent, they were agreeing to their experiences being written about and their photographs and writing, if there were any present, to be shared, but in an anonymized manner – to the extent that it was possible. At any time during the study, they could request that their photographs or writing be removed if they did not feel comfortable sharing them.

**Risks.** There were minimal risks for participants during this research study. One risk was walking around the community of the University of Alberta. This was a community that the girls were initially not familiar with and therefore there might have been some initial hesitation. For these young women, in particular, unfamiliar spaces and strange people initially presented some risk. As I suggested earlier, the girls' lives were somewhat precarious as they were sometimes unsure where they would be sleeping that evening or if they would have enough money to eat after their attendance at the program. These aspects of the girls' lives were more pertinent than making connections with a place that they did not know.

As our work progressed, at the end of my weekly visits, some of the youth wanted to know when I would be back so that they could prepare for the next venture out into the campus community. I learned through trial and error, that I needed to keep a schedule where I would come to the program on a regular basis at predetermined times so that the girls had this to rely upon. This tended to keep things organized and structured, something that helped to put some of their initial apprehension to rest. Another technique that helped reduce the risk of walking around in an unknown area was that we would discuss where we would go in the space before heading out. I would begin with

suggestions and then the girls would decide where they wanted to go. Initially, we always went as a group and made sure to return to the MtM space by 6 p.m., which was when everything was locked up. Even when the girls began to venture out into the university area by themselves, they, too, made sure to stay in a group, and to return at the designated time.

Another potential risk was the social anxiety of taking pictures and comparing them to what the other girls in the group had taken. Even though there were many different photos taken, there was still the possibility of comparison and competition. This was a risk that I was unaware of at the time, but as things started to take form within the study, this sense of anxiety definitely came up. To respond to this, I made sure to speak with each individual youth, talking with them about their pictures and what they were trying to show/see, making sure to identify the uniqueness of each perspective. I also encouraged them to take time to share their work with the other girls. In this way, the potential of competition was transformed into support for one another as they were all working on photography together, but each in their own unique way.

**Benefits.** The benefits of the study outweighed the risks. The benefits for the youth were evinced in how they interacted within the community and the role that photography came to play within and outside of the study. For the youth, the benefits included an increase in self-confidence and independence. They found new ways to express themselves and what they saw, based on their interactions within a new community of which they previously had not been a part. Another benefit was that the youth continued to experiment with photography through their exploration of other spaces in other communities around the city, even once the study was completed.

## **The Study's Limitations**

One of the limitations of the study was that we were unable to have a showcase of the youths' work within the University of Alberta community. Kendal, the coordinator of MtM, had connections with the Art Gallery of Alberta, so two of the girls had their work showcased there. However, a showing of the girls' art at the university never materialized. Therefore, there was not any reflection on the girls' work within the community in which it was created; I found that perspective lacking from the study.

Another limitation was that there were only three girls that were consistently involved with the study. Even this much participation was challenging to navigate, as the girls did not attend regularly, or some days they did not want to work on the study. I quickly came to understand that the issues within the girls' lives, including drugs and alcohol, family and life situations etc., did not allow for consistency, so I always worked with where the girls were at any one moment. In this regard, the sources I had to work with were only the girls' visuals and my own writing, because it was challenging, for example, to set up specific times to interview the girls. With the small number of youth participants in the study and the absence of a variety of generated materials, the study findings are not extensive or broadly applicable.

The next chapter contains the artistic works I collected and created including photographic images taken/created by the girls to illustrate the process in which the girls and I engaged throughout this study, and text, which I wrote as journal reflections throughout the process. The final chapter will offer my reflections on the entire process, addressing the research questions with which the study began.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Art and Community Process: The Research Findings**

When I began this study, I had preconceived expectations of how things would begin, progress and end. However, the reality of the situation required that I had to adapt and allow for something different and unexpected to take place. This study was not linear, set entirely within a tight structure; as the layers of pictures and text reveal, there was a more unfolding progression. The study's structure began with known patterns. The interactions that I had with the youth occurred at specific times in a particular place and these elements were repeated weekly and monthly. My initial agreement with the youth and Moving the Mountain (MtM) was to come in to work with the program twice a week, for two to three hours at a time. This repetition allowed for relationships to be built and expectations that could be relied upon. The journal entries that I wrote took on a structure revolving around this continuous element of time; I made journal entries every time I engaged within the space of MtM. My writings are reflective of the entire process. The development of my writings, like the photographic works that were created by the girls, had a woven and layered quality. In this chapter I present my journal texts (see Figures 12, 14, etc.) as artifacts alongside the photography and my reflections on the process as the study's findings. Overall, my journal writing and my reflections here capture the process out of which the art materialized.

#### **Making the First Connections**

The initial step in entering the space of MtM to begin the project was to establish why I was there and what I could offer the youth. I did not find this initial phase straightforward, although I knew that it was important to establish that I would be there

for the girls on a regular basis and to create connections with them. The process of building relationships with the youth took time and effort. This was somewhat expected within the YPAR process. Simultaneously, I was trying to assess what the girls might be interested in and how their interests could be connected to building community connections within and around the University of Alberta. What follows is a compilation of my efforts, suggestions and ideas, some of which were successful and others ineffective.

I began with questions about what the girls thought of community, art and the two together, but did so in ways that were sporadic and varied. I tried drawing graffiti letters by myself (Figure 11) and encouraged the girls to join me. I left graffiti handouts, such as the one in Figure 9, for the girls to try.

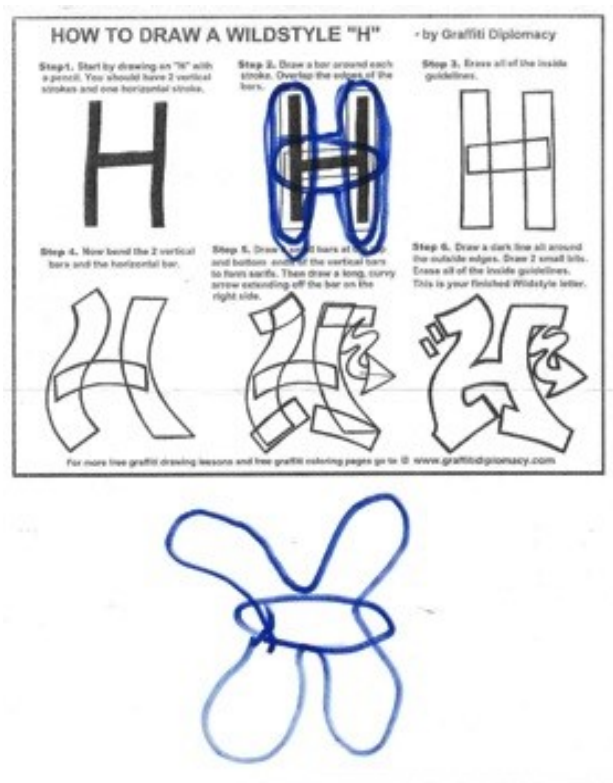


Figure 9: Graffiti handout



Figure 10: Graffiti poster

Figure 11: Graffiti letters

I put posters (e.g. Figure 10) on the wall querying: “Where does graffiti art belong?” I thought that if I could not reach the girls directly, then I might be able to when they were ready to respond. Some girls reacted by writing on the posters, responding to my questions. I attempted to search out a graffiti artist who could work with the girls and had visions of an initial project to get us started. I managed to find a graffiti artist, however, a lack of funds prohibited us from working with an artist who specialized in this art form.

Oct. 1st/15 Moving the Mountain  
 I went up to MTM to work with the girls on a graffiti project, writing their names in graffiti art. I was nervous as I have only tried the different writing techniques only once.  
 But no one was there, except [redacted] which, in the end was good. We talked about starting small instead of spray-painting a large piece of vinyl. I spoke with a graffiti artist named A.J.A. however the price of him coming out to work with the girls was a bit more expensive than what I had hoped for. I think I got too far ahead of myself and started thinking too large. So, now it's small steps to start and this is okay. I have to say that I don't feel as overwhelmed with it all.

Figure 12: Oct. 1, 2015 journal entry

There was much excitement expressed by the youth when I first presented the idea of graffiti art, yet the idea stagnated as time went by and nothing concrete was accomplished. Nevertheless, I kept going back to MtM and I continued having conversations about what they might want to do with art and the community. I sat, listened, talked and ate with the girls, wrote my journal responses to our sessions and repeated this process week after week. It was through being present with them and our casual conversations that the idea of photography came into being.

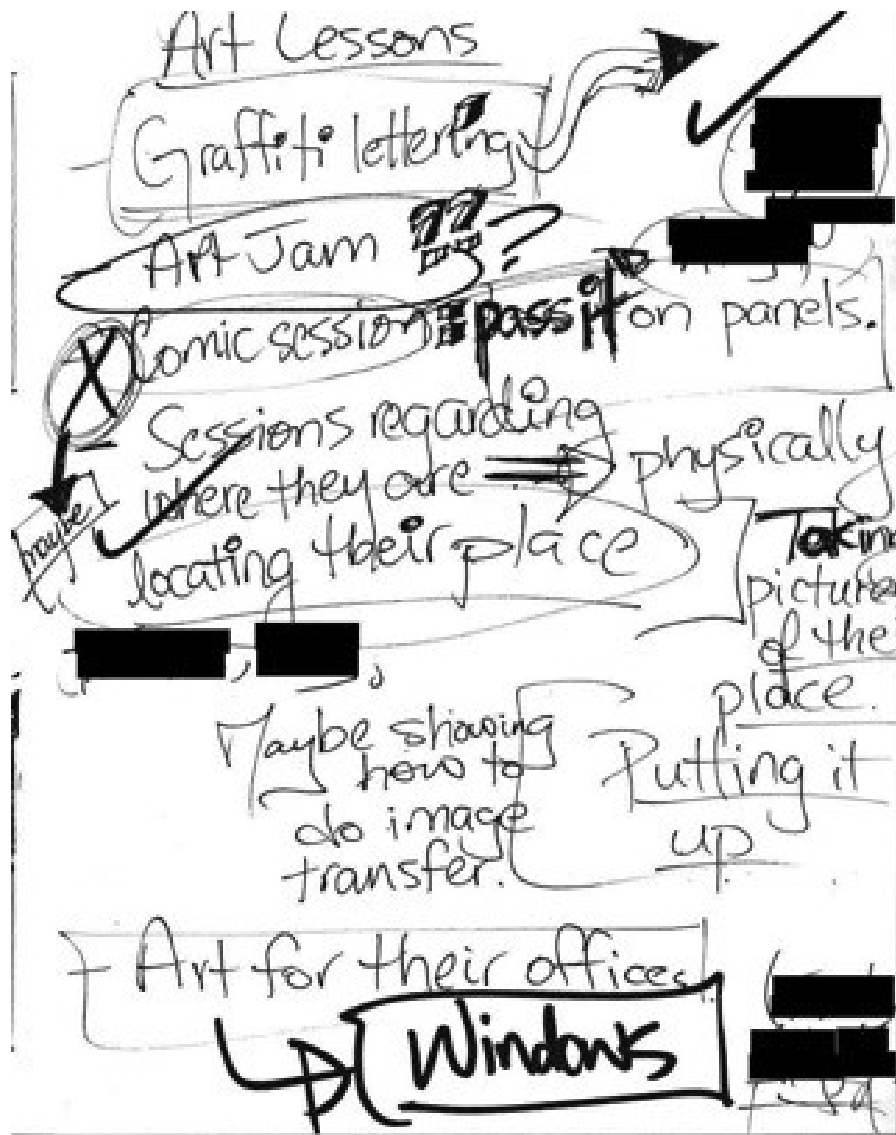


Figure 13: Brainstorming ideas

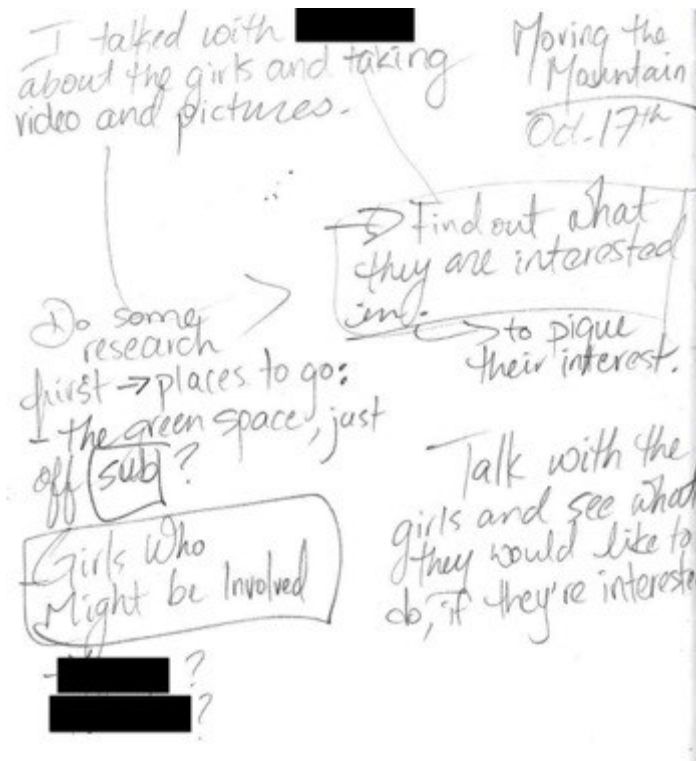


Figure 14: Oct. 17, 2015 journal entry

### New Direction

The answers to my questions came to fruition as the girls started to express an interest in photography as something they would like to explore. It was also a form that we could begin working with right away as the equipment was ready and present. All we had to do was pick up the cameras and start to traverse the university campus to see what developed. The results of our initial day of exploration were not only exhilarating, they provided the motivation to move things forward with the girls (see Figure 15). Now there was a focus, the missing layer. I expected then that all of my initial questions would be answered. I soon was reminded, however, that the process of this project was one that consistently or predictably unfolded; there was nothing that I could rely on completely. I kept going back and asking questions and in that way the process continued.



At the start of our photography project there were only two girls involved. They asked to be identified with the following code names: Jazel Bear Grease (B.g.) and Wanda Bear Balls (B.b.). The third girl who joined later asked to go by the code name JC. When we went out and explored with the camera it was with no particular plans or expectations. My intent for the youth was to allow them to move about freely and see if there was anything that caught their eyes. Although our outings were not led by specific ideas, there was much energy that came from being outside and doing something that the girls were excited about.

Took [redacted] & [redacted] outside of the University and inside (Education building and Hub Mall).  
Was an amazing experience taking the girls out. I could see how they have different ways of looking. [redacted] has this ability to see structure, and wanting to include different perspectives, different angles of viewing. Whereas [redacted] has the want to be outside, taking pictures of natural structures, trees etc.  
Both of them get right in there. [redacted] will get onto the ground just to get another perspective available.  
There wasn't a definite direction to go in - they were walking and wherever they took pictures,

... their interest  
was where we went.  
Some ideas: an exhibit showcasing  
their pictures - a collage outside  
going inside maybe, in order to show  
their different perspectives.  
This was an incredible day to be  
present - so much energy.  
I just had to be there - complete  
self-direction.  
So, the questions: how can I  
support? How can I support with  
the idea of arts-based and self-  
direction/holism?  
Where else can I take the girls?  
- Conservatory @ the University

Figure 15 a & b: Nov. 14, 2015 journal entry

There was excitement that came with trying something that was of interest to the girls in a different space. This new way of being with the camera and being on the University of Alberta campus even heightened my awareness of the way that I was interacting with both the space and the youth. The confines of known space around the University, for me, were being broken down as I was following the youth. I became aware of my surroundings through the girls. Even the conversations that I was having with the girls was changing and adapting to the new spaces that we were encountering. There were opportunities for conversations to develop more naturally as the girls moved creatively through the unknown space. The girls were using the space according to what they wanted to identify with their cameras, which was forcing me to also confront

differently what I thought I knew – not only the space of the university, but what I knew of the youth.

Each girl each took on the project related to the campus community space in a very different manner. Wanda B.b. looked at the University as a place filled with nature; therefore, all of her photographs had a very natural theme running through them. While at the same time, within the same outings, Jazel B.g. looked at the place as a completely urban and manufactured place. Not only was I seeing the youth interact with the space in completely unique manners, but I was also finding that I was interacting with the participants in a way that broke the boundaries, which seemed even to be present within the physical space of the MtM program. There was excitement and pride taken in what they were doing as the girls would come to show me what they had seen, and while they would sometimes share at MtM, there was sometimes a reluctance to be open and vulnerable in that place. There also seemed to be ease with the space because of the camera. For example, the girls were contorting their bodies in order to get that perfect shot, completely unaware of how the space was “supposed” to be utilized or how others might be seeing them.

Both girls were fully immersed within the space, but in completely divergent manners, which implied the connectivity of experience and learning to the complexity of space. As time progressed, other youth came along with us into the spaces of the university, including JC, who eventually joined the study. I found the interaction that JC had with the project was hesitant at first. She did not want to come out initially, and it was not until friends convinced her that she took the opportunity. She was also hesitant in her interaction with the places that we visited, only taking one or two photographs. It

was not until we found a tree that had notes hanging from it that she found something that caught her eye (see Figure 16). The tree was hidden, something out of the way and not easily noticeable. Once the tree was discovered, though, I found that JC continually wanted to search and find those undiscovered spaces that others might not easily see. The sidewalks were no longer just for traveling from one point to another (space) (Hickey-Moody, 2010; Roy, 2005), but something to explore (new and interesting places). The grounds of the university were not just buildings for classes, staff and students, but spaces punctuated with surprises and inspiration.



Figure 16: Image by JC

Sometimes I would punctuate the outings with questions to the girls about what they were looking at or offer observations regarding parts of the space that I had not noticed before. These outings also began an unscripted storytelling of the places that were being visited. I found I was telling the youth of how the places used to be, and through this telling there was a looking again; for the youth who had never been there before, and for me, who had spent eight years of my life there. One such instance

occurred when walking through Hub Mall on the University of Alberta campus, a place of connecting pedways and fast-food restaurants. The walkways are narrow and the seating is sparse. As we walked inside I began to tell Jazel B.g and Wanda B.b of how the ceiling used to be all glass, and the sun would come through which would make everything incredibly bright. As we looked up to the now covered ceiling there was a pause as the girls experienced both the old and new place with me. We stood in the middle of the pedway, with people walking around us, just looking up.

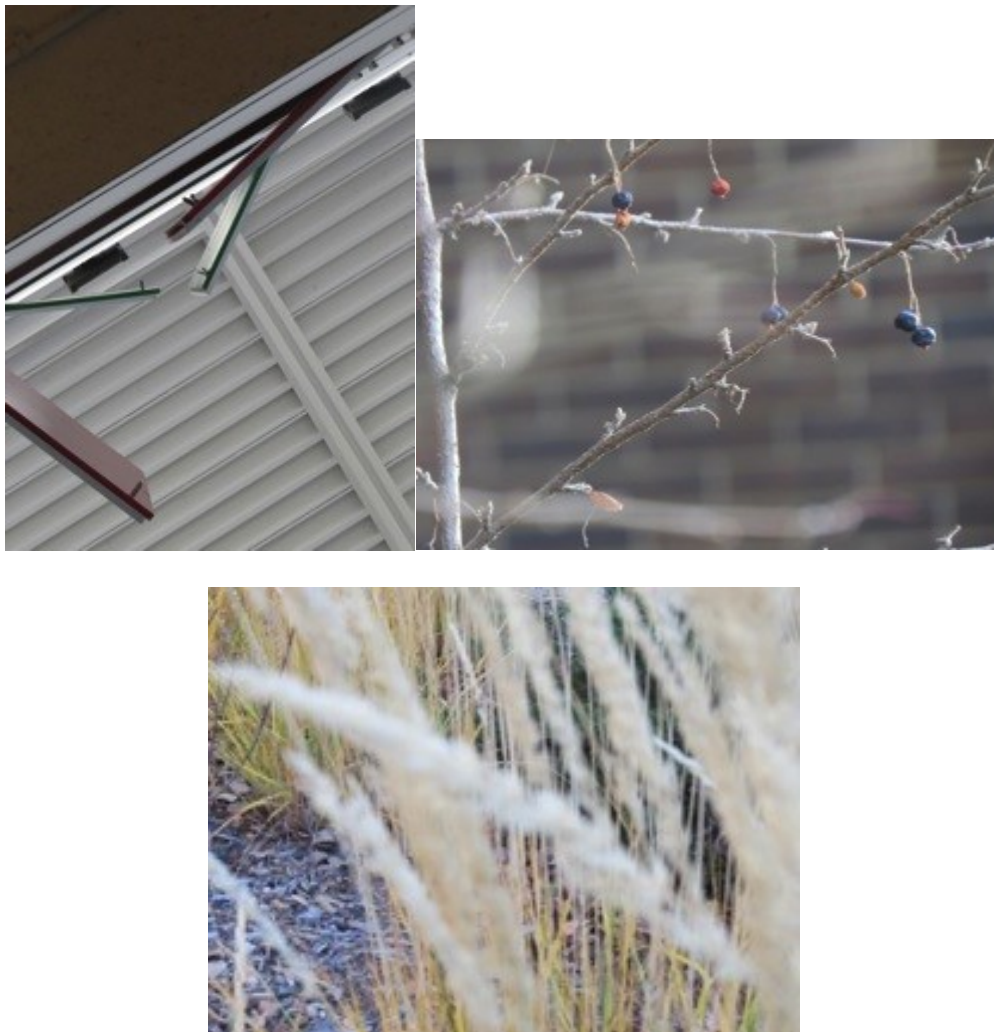


Figure 17 a, b, & c: (Clockwise from top left): Images by Jazel B.g.; Image by Wanda B.b.

## The Unfolding

As time went on and we were taking photographs on a regular basis, the question remained: What was the purpose of this? How could the images represent what the girls were feeling/seeing, and at the same time what was I seeing them experience? Our next step in the process did not directly answer the question of purpose, but was more experimental and playful. This began with the girls printing off the pictures that they liked. It was then that we applied the gel medium to the prints in order to have the images transfer and become transparent.

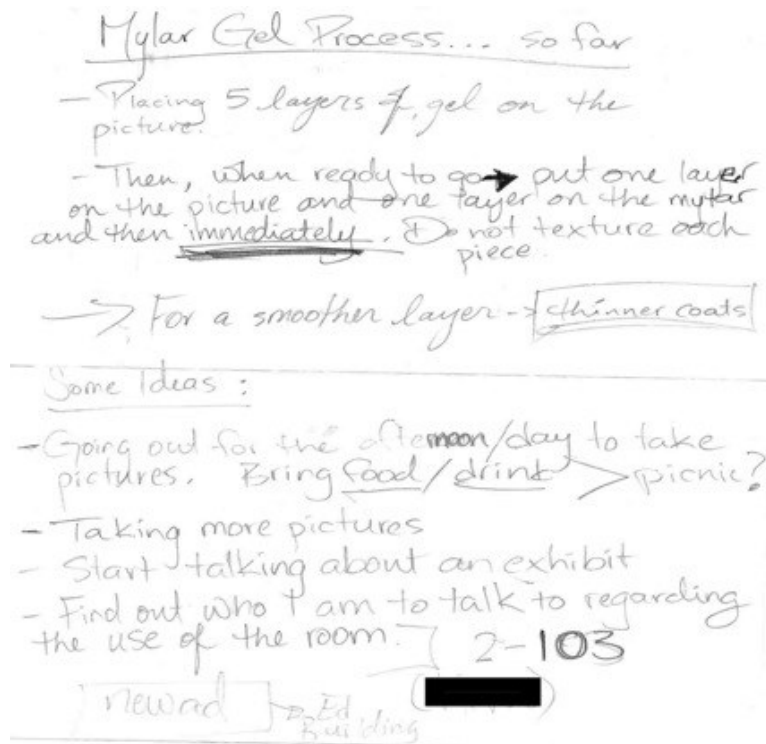


Figure 18: n.d. journal entry

The outings started to cease as the weather began to get colder and the girls were not sure what to do next with the photographs. It was partly because of this lull in the energy of the project that we started to look around within MtM (see Figure 19 a). We played around with layering the pictures over paintings, as the girls had been

experimenting with this art form as well, and their art works were positioned around the studio. The girls were very proud of their paintings, so with the realization that the photographs had become transparent, Jazel B.g. and I began to place them over anything that looked interesting, which happened to include the paintings, and then finally, we placed the layering of transparent prints on top of each other (see Figure 19). As final decisions were made, the girls decided to keep the two art forms of paintings and photos separate.

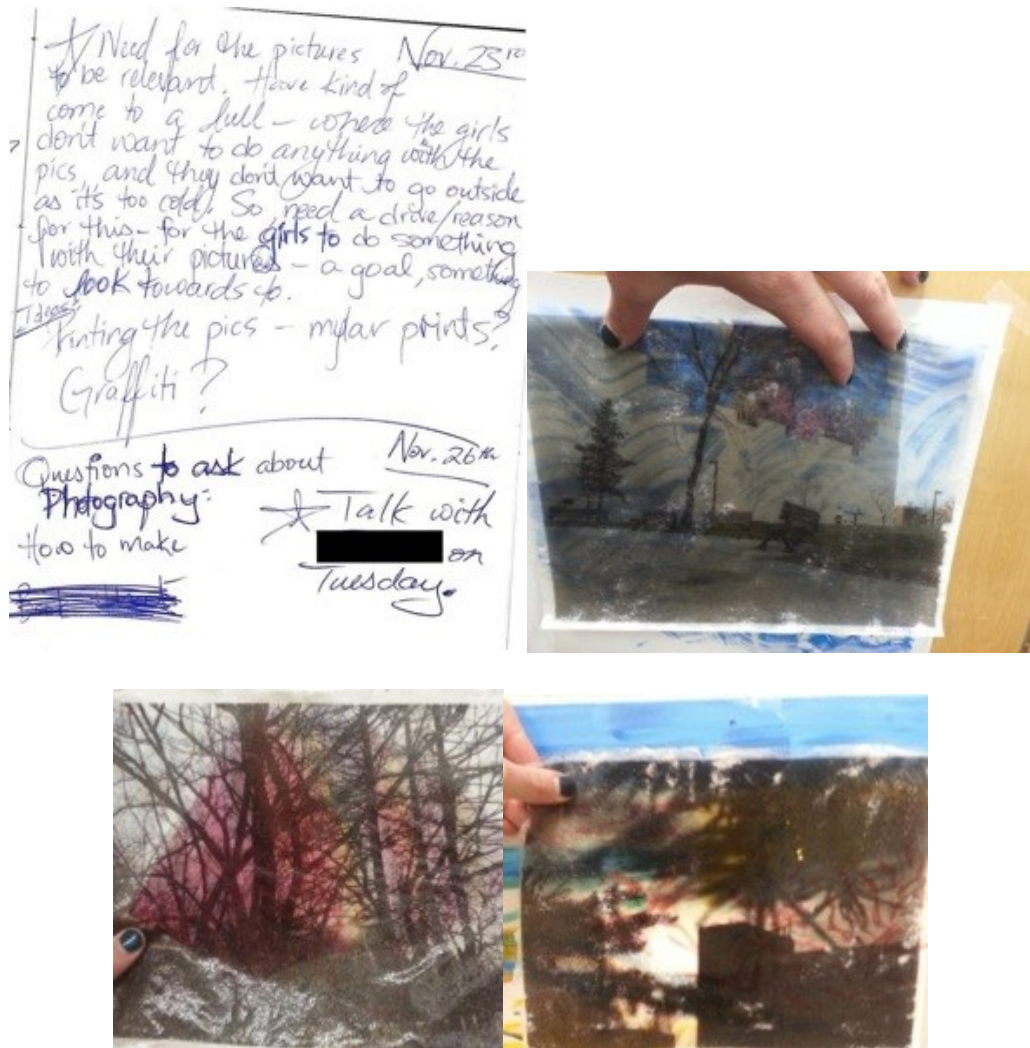
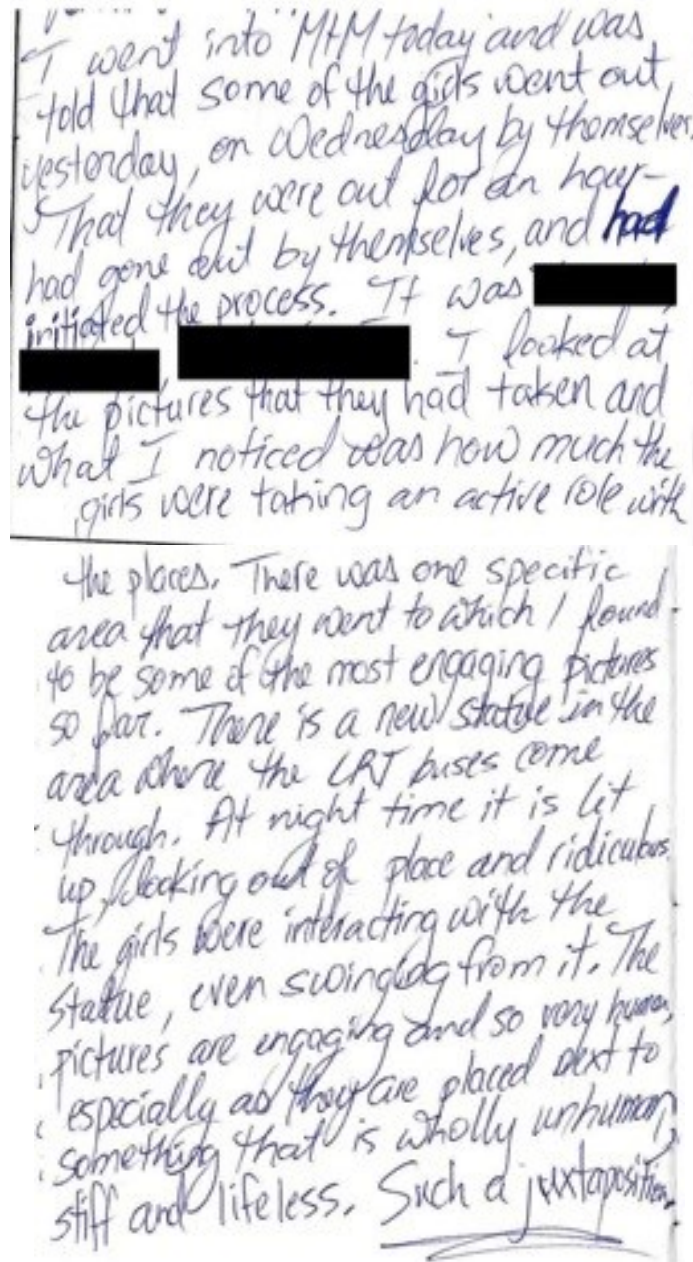


Figure 19 a, b, c, & d: Nov. 23, 2015 journal entry & 3 transparent images on hand painted backgrounds

With renewed vigor, the girls began to venture out into the university community by themselves, finding new spaces and planning for later visits with the camera when I was able to join. I saw a sense of belonging and play in the photographs as they came across these new spaces. No longer were the girls just behind the camera, but they were actively becoming a part of the space as they were taking pictures.



I went into MTM today and was told that some of the girls went out yesterday, on Wednesday by themselves. That they were out for an hour - had gone out by themselves, and had initiated the process. It was [redacted] [redacted]. I looked at the pictures that they had taken and what I noticed was how much the girls were taking an active role with the places. There was one specific area that they went to which I found to be some of the most engaging pictures so far. There is a new statue in the area where the LRT buses come through. At night time it is lit up, sticking out of place and ridiculous. The girls were interacting with the statue, even swinging from it. The pictures are engaging and so very human, especially as they are placed next to something that is wholly unhuman, stiff and lifeless. Such a juxtaposition.

Figure 20 a & b: Mar. 3, 2016 journal entry



As more photos were taken I saw an increase in the girls' confidence in exploring the community on their own. This experience seemed to be drawing them out in their interactions with each other and with me. I would arrive at MtM, greeted with new photographs and plans for the next outing. There was one particular day when Jazel B.g. took me on a trip around the Faculty of Education building to areas that I had never been to before. We went exploring spaces that she had sought out before I had arrived, and I was able to partake in her discoveries. This concept of sharing was one that continued to develop not only as I continued with the project, but also as the taking of photographs evolved.



Figure 21: Image by Jazel B.g.



Figure 22: Image by Jazel B.g.



Figure 23: Image by JC



Figure 24: Image by JC

Everyone seemed to <sup>be</sup> focused, and even if they weren't things were flowing. I wasn't able to get out with the girls to take pictures but it didn't seem to be a problem. I was able to eat food that the girls had made - cake from [redacted] and chocolate covered strawberries from [redacted]. It reminds me how important food is - the making and sharing. Every time I am able to take part in this food sharing, I feel very honored. Not sure if this is the word to use, but it feels this way.

There was also an opportunity to read what [redacted] had written that day. She asked me if I wanted to read and I jumped at the chance to take part in her sharing! Being able to be present for story of where she has been, where she's coming from and where she is right now, is a true honor. Her words touched my spirit. I couldn't turn away from her

words. What she wrote was raw and strong  
and just out there - completely.  
I promised to be back for Monday, and  
I'm going to keep that promise.  
To be there completely for the girls,  
no matter what!

Figure 25: Feb. 17, 2016 journal entry

Things really came together when the girls started taking the transparent pictures and layering them one on top of the other. There were parts of the pictures that would recede, while other parts became more visible because of the way the images were situated. Each girl had her own interpretation of what she wanted to make visible and how this should be done. There was a sense of possibility in the layering of each photograph, and through this process each picture began to take on a more fluid state, as some parts would come through and others would fade to the background. The girls had control of what they wanted the images to say. In a sense, the original pictures, by themselves, could no longer tell the entire story of the places that they were representing.



Figure 26: Layered image by Jazel B.g.



Figure 27: Layered image by Jazel B.g.



Figure 28: Collection of layered images



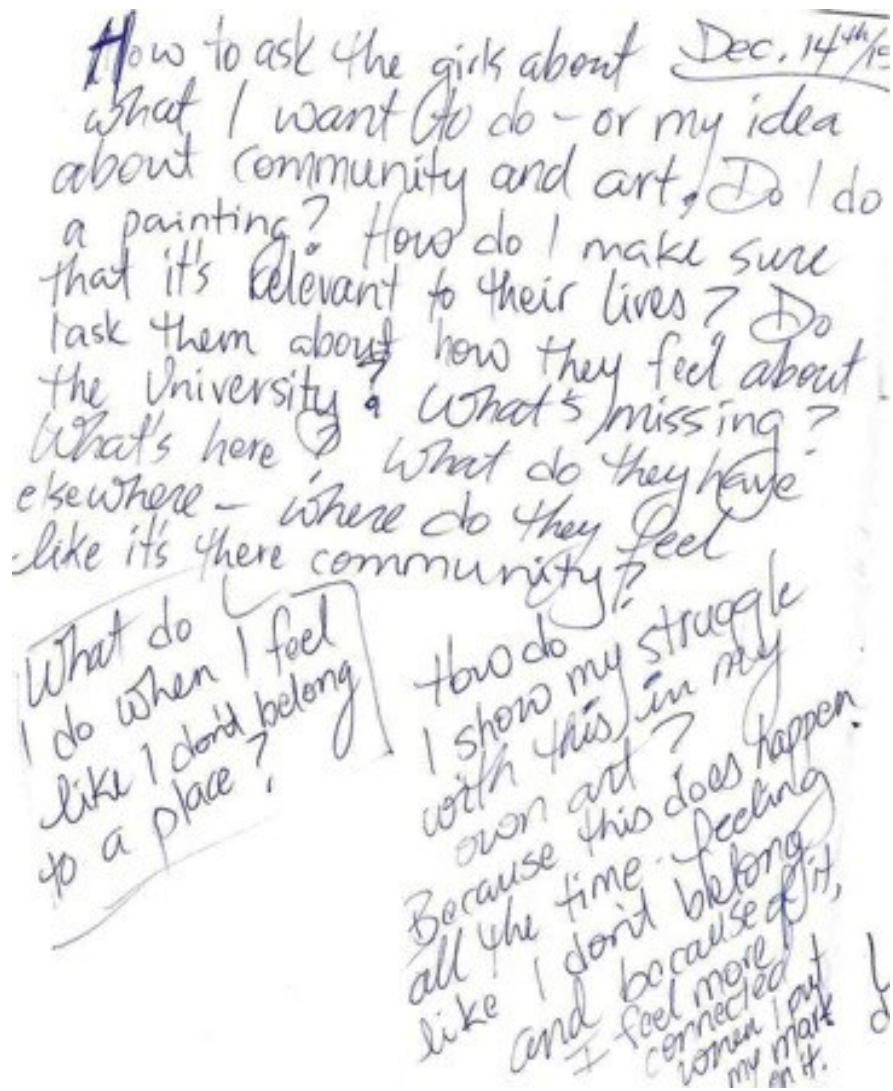
Figure 29: Layered image with crow by JC

I found that many of the layered images that the girls worked on included many juxtaposed images, which at first glance seemed like they did not belong together (see Figure 27). I remember watching the girls choose the images that they wanted to layer: it was very instinctual, for in a single moment, just by glancing at the pictures, they would make a decision. The choices that the girls made when layering the photographs made me look even closer at what was present, even more so than before the layering. It was through these juxtapositions that we began to see what was truly there in the images (see Figure 28 and 29).

### **Manifestation**

The gel transfer process produced rich results, yet I wanted to take the photographic work further, to see if there was a way to show the work, while at the same time connecting with the community in which the photographs were taken. The ideal final step for me would have been to exhibit the work for the university community.

Pursuing how to display the images was another point of tension, as there did not seem to be a simple answer to where this could happen. Even when opportunities were presented, not everyone – from the girls to Wallis, agreed upon the location. Meanwhile, an approach that I thought I might try, to understand what the girls were encountering, was to go through the same process myself. The questions of the study and my personal queries became layered, just like the photographs. This is evident in my journal entries at the time (Figure 30).



How to ask the girls about Dec. 14<sup>th</sup>/15  
what I want to do - or my idea  
about community and art, Do I do  
a painting? How do I make sure  
that it's relevant to their lives? Do  
I ask them about how they feel about  
the University? What's missing?  
What's here? What do they have  
elsewhere - where do they feel  
like it's there community?

What do I do when I feel  
like I don't belong  
to a place?

How do I show my struggle  
with this in my  
own art?  
Because this does happen  
all the time - feeling  
like I don't belong  
and I feel more  
connected  
I feel more  
women I put  
my mark  
on it.

What am I trying to figure out?  
~~What~~ What is my question?  
 Can art putting art into a community, help to build connections?  
 If you put art into public are you a closer part of that place?  
 What is here that you connect with?  
 What don't you connect with?  
 Where don't I feel like I connect with the place? My home  
 Where do I sit? Already there, already established, Not blank canvas.  
 Where do I go? Where do I belong? My space, a room

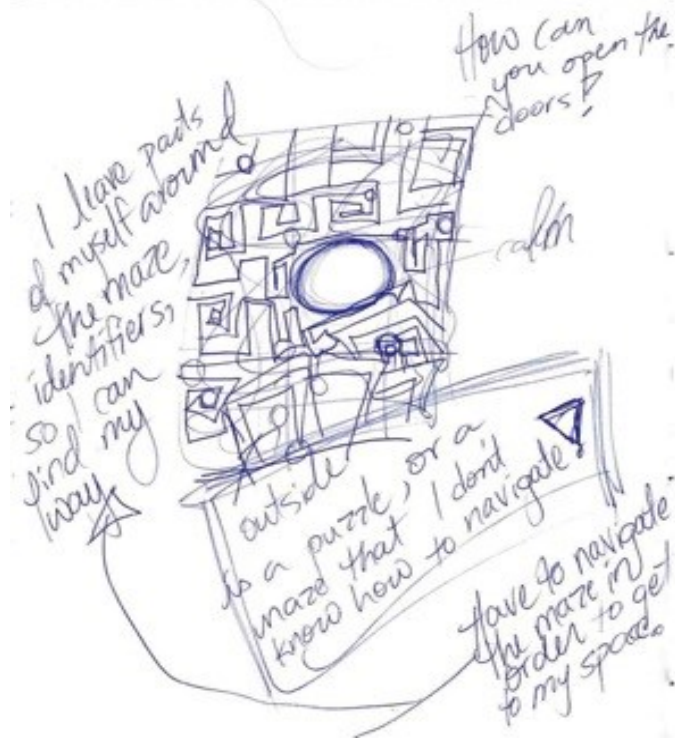


Figure 30 a, b, & c: Dec. 14, 2015 journal entries

The answers to my inquiries were not direct, but involved a process of revealing. Even though I had taken the time to build relationships with the youth, there was still stagnation in deciding what to do next. I was unsure how to proceed in order to best showcase the layers and stories that the girls had produced in their photographs, and in the end through collaboration and experimentation, an idea came to fruition (Figure 31 & Figure 32).



Figure 31: sticky notes with questions from my journal

One of the solutions that emerged on how to best display not only the photographs, but the layers that were cultivated was through the creation of lightboxes. The idea of the lightboxes came from the girls, Wallis and me playing around with the idea of needing light to illuminate the photographs. At one point Wallis put a layered picture on top of a projector and illuminated the image on a wall in a dark room. We spoke about the need for there to be a light source. I went away from that day feeling frustrated and a little lost, yet when I entered MtM the next day, there had been a breakthrough by Wallis and the girls; through experimentation and creativity, the lightboxes were created (Figure 32 & 33).



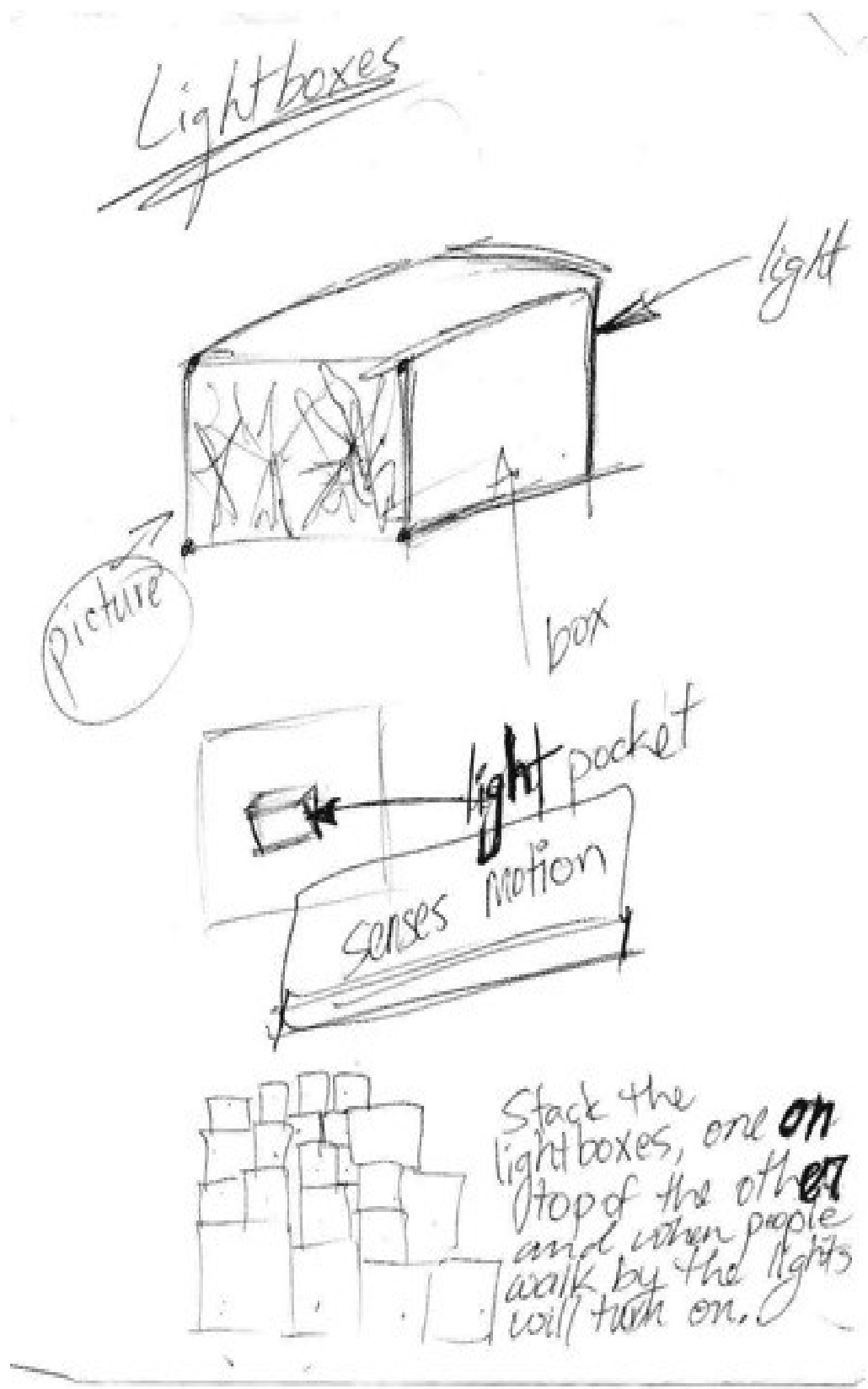


Figure 32: Plan for lightboxes

Moving the Mountain — March 22, 2016

I ranke into Moving the Mountain trying to think about how we can focus attention on the girls' photography. I kept thinking about light boxes but I wasn't sure how to put it together. But light boxes kept coming up in my head.

I got here and [redacted] said he had something that was going to make me excited. He and [redacted] had made a light box, with her picture in the front. He also put two figures within the box and along with the picture you could see the two figures.

[redacted] and I started to talk about how we could stack the boxes, one on top of each other, in order to have the boxes showing the pictures, as one installation piece. [redacted] also mentioned getting motion sensor lights so that the pictures will light up when people walk by, allowing people to look closer. We also talked about putting objects behind the pictures, found objects - whatever the girls wanted to have - to interpret their space in whatever way they wanted.

We are thinking 20 boxes of varying size. Now, the question is where to show the girls' installment? →

Another idea that came up from [redacted] is that each girl who has a place in the installment can have a piece that they wrote, so that we can hear their voice as well - maybe even a recording - or would that be too much?

So now, where on campus to negotiate this place for the installation?

Figure 33: March 22, 2016 journal entry

The lightboxes allowed for the girls to create a piece of work that was larger than the 5x7 inch (approx. 13x17 cm) format photographs that they had originally been working with. The light played with the images illuminating and shadowing them. With the play of light, the boundaries of what could be detected were stretched further, with the potential for different meanings to come through. This was another opportunity for the youth to go further with their interpretations. The process of revealing, which was emphasized through the lightboxes, spoke to the individuality of the youth, the complexity of the places and how all of this came together and overlapped.

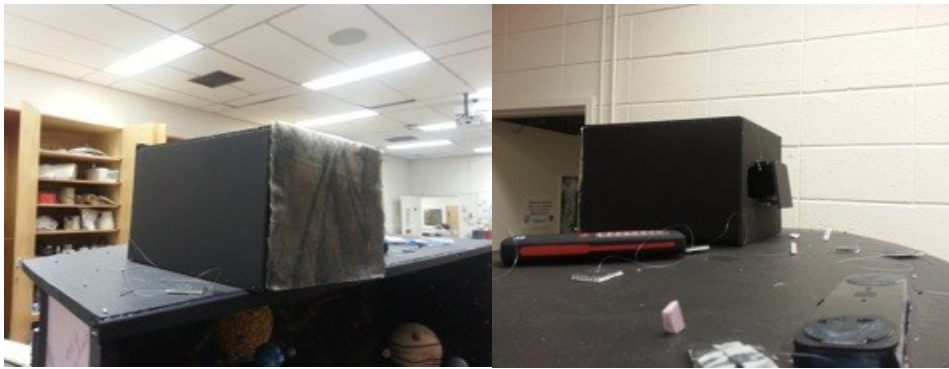


Figure 34 a & b: Lightboxes under construction





Figure 35 a & b: Lightboxes with images

Once the lightboxes were conceived and the potential they offered unlocked, we wondered where these lightboxes and images could be shown. In the end, the final resting place was not at the University of Alberta campus, but outside in the larger Edmonton community. Through Wallis's connections with the Art Gallery of Alberta, both Jazel B.g. and Wanda B.b., who were involved with the photography project right from the beginning, showcased their work there. The art gallery was a place that was there to support the ideas of the youth. With the lightboxes and the exhibition place identified there was an increased vigor in the girls. Not only were Jazel B.g. and Wanda B.b. more involved with their photographs and ideas, there were other girls at MtM who were learning the skills of layering of images and applying them in other capacities and projects to be exhibited at the gallery (see Figure 36).

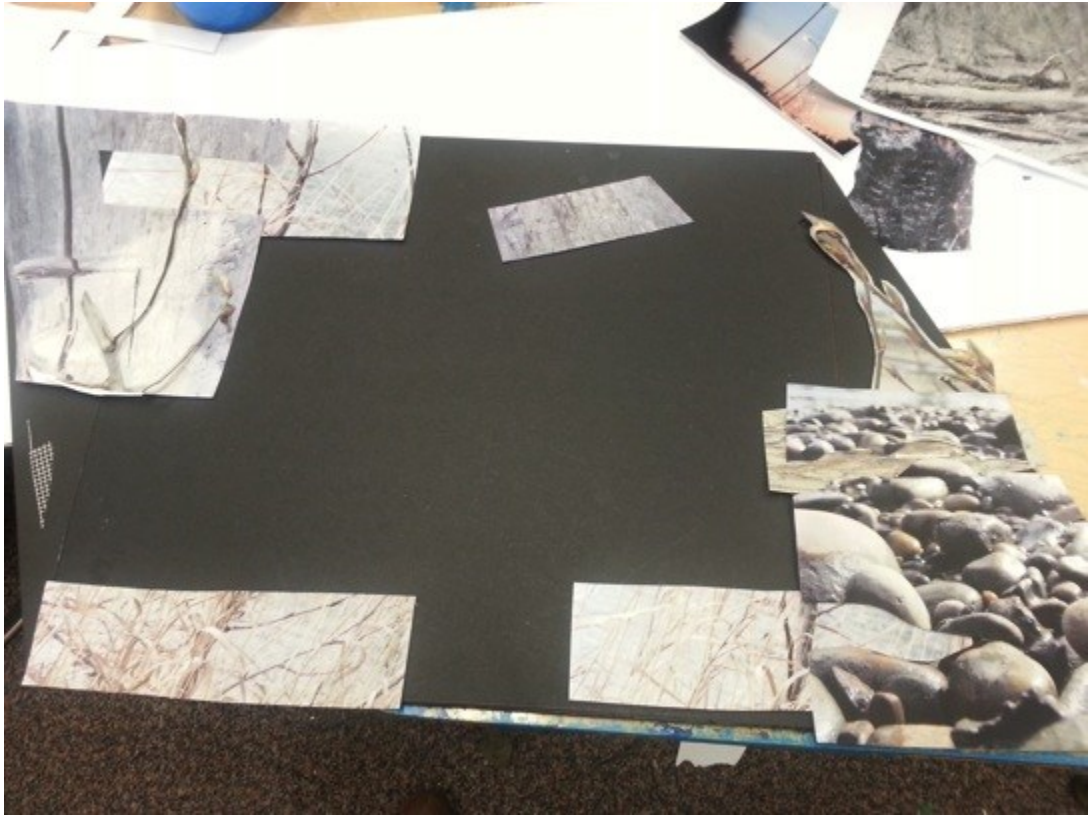




Figure 36 a, b, & c: Plans for Art Gallery of Alberta exhibit





Figure 37 a & b: Layered image collages by Wanda B.b. and Jazel B.g.

Initially, I did not accept that the showcasing of the photographs/lightboxes would end with the Art Gallery of Alberta exhibit, but rather be an instigator for a show at the University of Alberta. Yet, by the time that the works had been shown and the girls who were involved had moved on to new projects, there was no longer a real interest to continue with the same work exhibited in a different location. However, there was continued use of the gel transfer process and continued experimentation with photography, taking this to areas beyond the University of Alberta, across the North Saskatchewan River, all the way downtown and into the neighborhoods that were the girls' homes.

~~to get~~ Got to MTH today and [redacted] was taking the backing off [redacted] largest gel piece for the Art gallery. All of the pieces transferred, which was great because that was one part that we were worried about, if the pieces that were super-imposed would transfer to the gel, and they did! I started working on removing the back of [redacted] piece - there is some sense of consistency because the pieces are to be ready for the Art Gallery on May 2nd, this upcoming Monday.

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Put the power back into ME  
 Release the Past - Butterfly  
 " If we live in the past, or worry about the future then we are walking shadows of ourselves. We are here to experience our life NOW!  
 Releasing our past and releasing others from being responsible for our life empowers us to create what we truly desire.

Figure 38: April 28, 2016 journal entry

In Chapter 5, my concluding chapter, I reflect upon my final understandings of the project and the process in relation to my research questions. Within this reflection I introduce a final set of images, which was a culmination for me of the photographic work and text – my own gel transfers and image layering. Even though I am left with many questions at the end of the project and moments that felt like loose ends, I realize that there will always be questions and areas to work through. Perhaps this is all part of the process of creating within an arts-based, youth participatory action research and community-based project.



## Chapter 5

### Reflecting on the Levels of Art and Community Connections: Conclusions

#### Introduction

When I began my research project, I was initially looking to answer the following questions: *Can art be a form that connects youth and communities of place? Can art help build community within the lives of youth? How might art play a role in authentic learning experiences for youth? How does place/space affect learning?* These focusing questions helped me to begin with a structure for my research, but as time progressed the way I imagined these questions would be answered changed along with the project. In the first part of this chapter, I reflect on what I learned from the research process in which I engaged with the youth. I share and reflect upon some final creative work, which I undertook as part of my interpretation of our work together and the new insights that this creative process revealed about the role of art and the process of meaning-making through art. Serendipitously, my creative process paralleled, in some ways, the creative work on the theme of art and community also encountered by the girls. In the final section, I comment specifically on my research questions.

#### Youth-led Process with Vulnerable Youth

The entirety of this project was based on the youth and the direction they wanted to go with the ideas of art and community. I came into my research with ideas and questions, but when it came down to its execution, the study changed based on who was involved. The way in which all of the elements came together was not something that I could have orchestrated on my own, and so allowing for things to move and change based on my interactions with the youth was vitally important. There were so many things

going on in these girls' lives that the project that I was proposing was not always central in their minds. There were many youth who expressed interest in the ideas of the project and who were involved for one or two weeks, but then I would not see them again.

Without consistent involvement they were not able to proceed with what they were doing with any depth. Working with a vulnerable youth population was challenging and yet it brought a renewed sense of purpose to the project, for this was not going to work if it was not relevant to and supportive of the lives of the girls. There were days when I was there, but the girls were not. Even when the girls were physically present, they were not always emotionally able to participate in the activities. Through all of this, the lack of predictability and stability was an issue that I had to learn to deal with in a variety of ways, which included just being there to listen and support them with whatever other work they were doing (Hutzel, 2007; Pain & Francis, 2003).

### **The Time Needed for Relationship Building**

In joining MtM and trying to involve the youth with the ideas that I was putting forward, I was walking into an already established program with youth who already knew each other. There was also the overarching agenda of MtM, which I wanted to support and mirror in how I introduced my research; I found that I had to do this slowly and over time. I did not come into the program on the first day with a firm agenda, but I did think that I would at least be able to start talking about the ideas to see how they would respond. Initially, it was uncomfortable to enter into a situation, which had a fluid structure and was based in a way of learning that was not my own, neither originally nor through my educational experiences as a teacher. I was a researcher, but what was my place in the program overall; what right did I have to be there? What did my study have

to do with the girls' lives? At the most elemental level of understanding, I was a white, middle-class woman who did not have ties to Aboriginal culture or to the city streets with which many of the girls were familiar. My feelings were not without foundation as I came to understand that "through feelings of discomfort, the notion of exile takes on an embodied and reflexive epistemology, one that resists the colonized rationale of imperialist research practices via the longing for an understanding that has been denied" (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010, p. 120). Even though I felt uncomfortable, it was through the acknowledgement of my emotions that I was able to accept the differences and work at trying to meet the girls through approaches that were not based within colonial practices. I had to build this connection by continually just showing up and proving that I would not go away. I had to learn to endure my awkwardness in not knowing how to introduce my ideas. I made sure to be available, to answer questions and offer support. This was a time when I shared things about myself, shared food with them, and talked with the girls about their lives. We had conversations about graffiti art and how they felt about the university. All of this helped to lead up to asking the girls what they wanted to work on. In retrospect, I do not believe that the ideas that I put forward would have been received at all, if I had not first spent the time to build relationships with the girls. Success in relationship building, I came to realize, takes a great amount of time. The amount of time that it took to build even a small amount of trust and reliability with the girls was something that I struggled with given the limits of my availability. Yet, I had to take the time for the girls to feel comfortable with sharing. In the end, due to my time limitations, though I wanted this research to be fully youth-directed, I did often have to come with ideas to keep the work progressing.

## **The Serendipitous Journey of Youth Participatory Action Research**

I knew that I wanted to attempt a youth participatory action research (YPAR) focus for this project, yet, based on what I knew of this methodology, within the constraints of a graduate program, I understood that this might not be fully achievable. I came into this project with an agenda, even though I knew things were likely to change. I had established questions and ideas. I had the idea of creating a graffiti mural with the girls, so I immediately directed my questions and the focus of the project towards that. When creating a graffiti wall on the campus and working with that specific art form became unrealistic, I became worried. I wanted to go with the flow of the project and allow the youth to take it where they wanted, but I kept asking questions and worrying about what that might be. Yet, beginning with YPAR and the topic of graffiti allowed for the understanding to be present that there was value in the girls' interests and their lived experiences (Eldridge, 2013). With every new direction that we took, I had a new set of questions about where and when and how this new idea might be achieved. This was understandable, yet I remained intent on having the youth create something that could be an outdoor art installation within the community. I kept worrying about the end product. When the girls showed their images and lightboxes at the Art Gallery of Alberta, this did not fit what I had thought was the "right" place/space for the exhibit. I was so concerned with where their work would be revealed, that I actually missed seeing the girls' installation at the gallery. I missed the opportunity to see what these pieces looked like within the space of the art gallery. Even if that place did not fit with what I thought was "right," I still should have been there to witness the exhibition of the images that resulted from the process that the girls and I had gone through. I was so taken with the idea that

the exhibit needed to take place within the university community, that I was distracted. When, after the art gallery exhibit, I pushed to continue – to make an exhibit at the University happen, there was resistance and a lack of interest as the girls had already moved on.

Even after the exhibit, however, I was pleased to find that the cameras were still being used. The youth were going out into other communities and taking pictures around the city, while continuing to share with me what they had worked on. In this sense, the project was taking on a life of its own. One of the girls who joined near the end of the project, began to inquire about careers associated with cameras because of the positive responses she received to her photography. This interaction and the experience of going out with a camera initiated a conversation about photojournalism. The layering of and use of the gel transfer method to create transparencies of the photographs also continued with different projects. So, even when my initial ideas for the project changed, the soul of it still continued and was significant for the girls, even for those who were involved for only one or two sessions. One youth in particular, JC, reflected on the connection that she made to the place of the University. She wrote: “I think the photo’s i’ve taken around the university are memories, they could be better but every photo means something. What I like about photography is capturing the moment, the feeling. It feels as if you can make your own reality however you want. I think the university is inspiring now that i’ve take pictures around it” (December 15, 2016). Another youth, Jazel B.g., kept me informed, sending me images that she had taken, which allowed me to be a part of her continued process of exploration of spaces. I was reminded that YPAR praxis “reveals how life experiences are malleable and subject to change, and the students possess the agency to

produce changes. The praxis aspects of YPAR inspire profound education and development outcomes” (Cammarota & Fine, 2010, p. 6).

### **Challenges with Community and Perspectives**

Another aspect of this project that leaves me questioning was my failure to gather the multiple perspectives on the process and product of our work that I wanted. As I had hoped to mount an exhibit in the community where the girls took the pictures, I anticipated getting feedback on the girls’ work from the community. This was not possible as there was not an exhibit at the university. I was also unable to elicit many written reflections from the youth on their experiences. I tried on several occasions to encourage them to write journal reflections, but without success. Therefore, the majority of the written components in this research were the reflections that I wrote in my journal on the entire process from start to finish. The only element that reflects the perspectives of the youth is their photographs, including the layered images and lightboxes. Therefore, the perspective from the youth is through their pictures and my voice is in the writing (and, shared later, in the art work that I created).

I was unable to include the voices of the community, which makes for a project that is not as richly complex as I had first hoped for. I wanted there to be multiple levels of text from the youth, the community and me reflecting on the process, yet due to the circumstances: the drop-in element of the program and the lack of possibility for community involvement, the multiple voices, unfortunately, did not come through. The sense of community that did come through was amongst the girls themselves and in relation to the place. Within the MtM program there was a continual sharing of the photographs and the processes with the gel transfers and layering. Even the outings to

take pictures were shared with the youth who were not involved in the research, as they were invited to join and even take their own pictures. I saw the elements of this project everywhere as I continued to attend the program, which showed me that the way of creating and being that the project introduced stretched beyond the project itself.

When I began my interpretation of the research there were only two elements to draw upon: the pictures that the youth took and the writings that I had produced. While these two elements seemed simplistic initially, the complexity came from the form that each took and the way in which the elements overlapped. In a culminating activity, which I share below, I wanted to see what might appear when I brought the perspectives of the youth and me together, using the same process that the girls used to make their photographs transparent and layered. Since the conclusion of the project, I have moved to teach in Kuwait. The idea of building and being a part of community has continued for me as I have come to another country with the photographs and layered images.

### **New Spaces, Places and Processes of Engagement**

In order to give this project a sense of completion and to help me understand of all of the pieces that I had collected – the visuals and text, I undertook the same process as the girls. This allowed me to take on, even for a short while, a small sense of what they might have experienced. I printed off all photos I had taken during the project and scanned and printed my journal text, applying layers of the gel medium in the same way that the girls did. With one hundred pictures/text printed and hundreds of layers of gel applied in order to eventually make the images transparent, I was ready to begin. The final component was the place where my interpretive process all happened, as I no longer resided in Edmonton where the project began. I travelled to Kuwait City, Kuwait, to live

and work, and I brought with me all of the printed visuals. As I began the final process, I was in a completely new place, surrounded everywhere by unknown spaces. It was in Kuwait that I created the final layered images that I share below. What I found in doing so further solidified my experiences with the youth in this project.

**Meaning-making through an arts-based research process.** I remember contemplating how to begin the layering of text and visuals. In front of me were hundreds of images, which had at least four layers of gel each. These layers had been frantically applied just before leaving to travel across the world and this hasty experience had caused all of the images to press together as not all of the gel had completely dried in time. I had to soak and peel back the paper on every piece with some ripping and tearing along the way. It was at this point, with everything strewn across my new apartment in this new city of Kuwait, that I was ready to plunge ahead into the creative interpretive task. My initial impulse was to combine sections of text that were similar in content. Wherever I saw similar ideas expressed, I put the text together. I even layered images of text, one on top of the other, that I saw had some emerging ideas. I also looked at the similarities between my text and the pictures. This was the beginning, both in the layering and creating. There was movement there, an acceleration of ideas, action and energy, coupled with questions. The beginning was mirrored in what was in front of me and in my own actions in my new and unusual place.

*Beginning anew.* As I experimented with my own layering everything seemed to merge: what the youth saw and experienced merged with my own perspective. This complexity increased as the backdrop of putting the pieces together occurred in a place that I had never been a part of before. As I situated the layers, I only had a vague



realization of what I was doing, but the energy pushed me forward. Plastering the transparent images on the window, so the light could show through, I realized that behind the images I could see the community that I had just come into: the streets, water and sky of Kuwait (see Figure 39). This was my new and unfamiliar space, just as the University of Alberta had been for the youth. I did not plan for this parallelism to happen, but there it was. As I looked at the series of pictures from this beginning stage, I see the project in a variety of forms.



Figure 39: The beginning

There was so much going on when I began working with the youth; there was an intensity in beginning something. Looking even more closely at the pictures, what I could see as the layers revealed themselves is how I see art as a beginning process of meaning-making. Within the pictures, both the ones created by the youth and those created by me, there was complexity in the details, which stood out when the text was also layered. The question came to the fore: *Can art be a form that connects youth and communities of place?* It was through this process that art was shown to be both a beginning and an energy, which connected me to a community that was new to me. When the pieces were layered, I was able to look closely at the relationships between the words, images and the community represented – both the community physically in front

of me and the one within the photographs; there was a connection, which, when each element was left to stand alone, was not visible. In the chaos, new insights were revealed including the process of connecting with a place through art-making and the opportunities of making community connections.

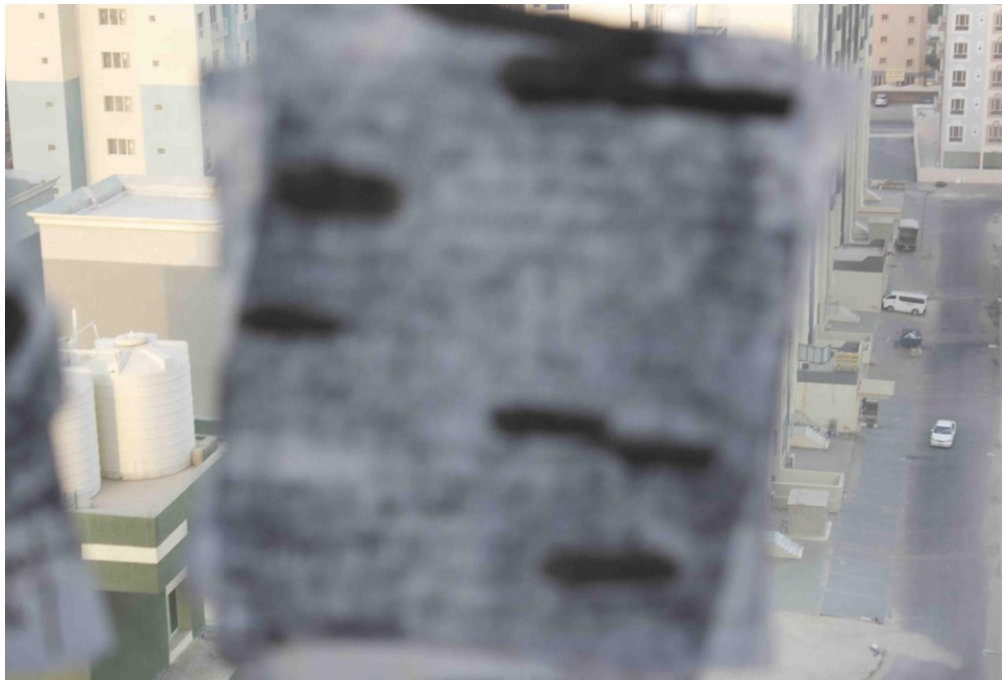
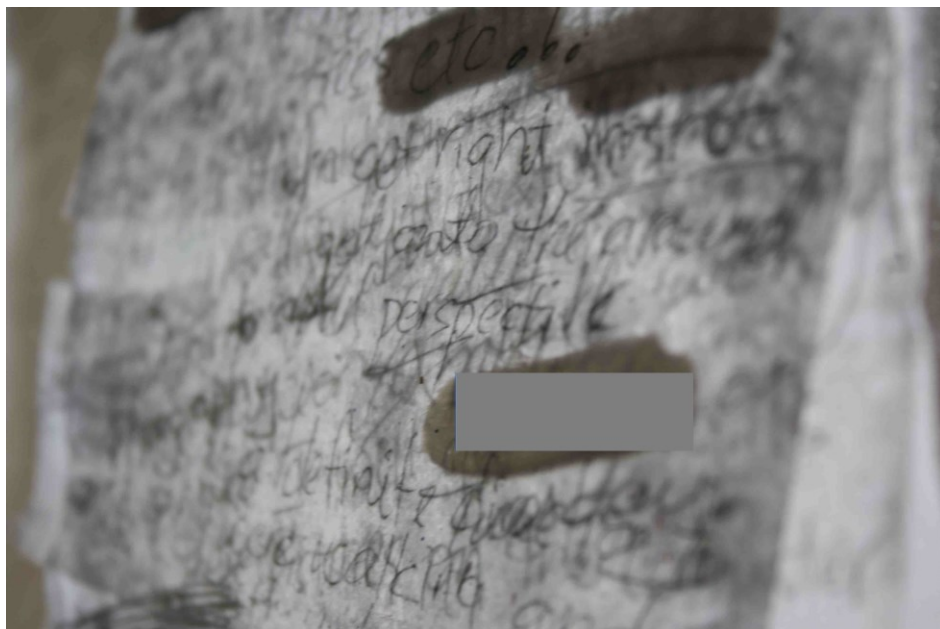


Figure 40: Just beyond



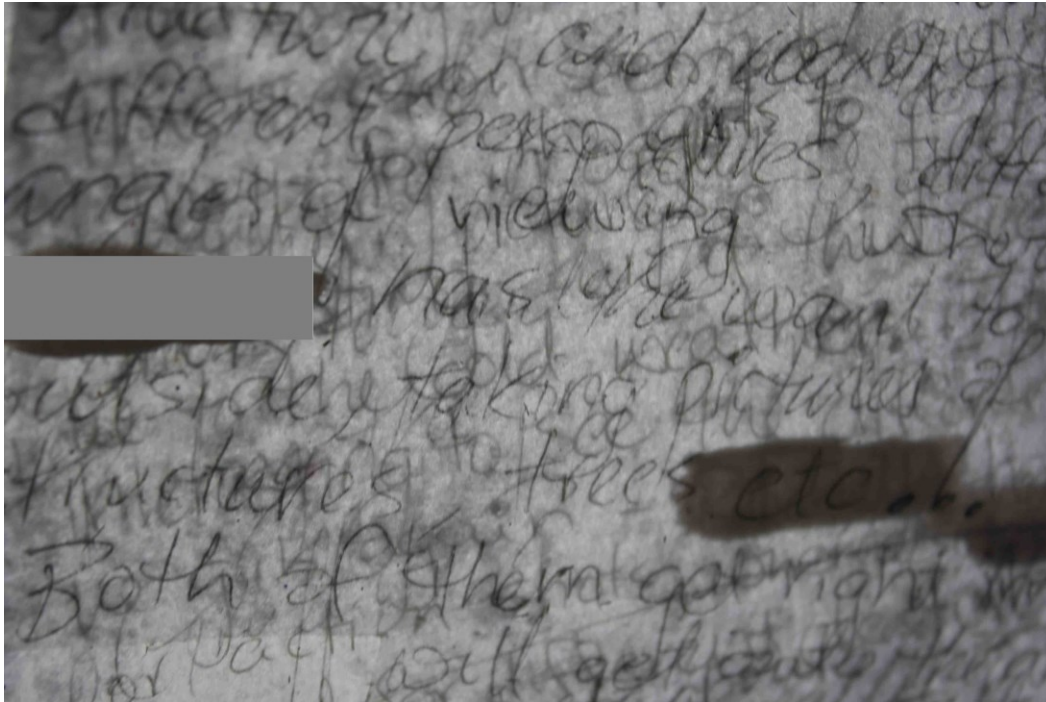


Figure 41 a & b: Weaving words

I realized as this process was going forward that I needed to have a plan, even if the layering at first seemed random. I looked at the beginning of the study, along with my beginning journal entries and the graffiti worksheets. These were the areas that I initially brought together. I thought the theme of a beginning was appropriate, since this all began with my writing and my questions (Figure 41). It was at this stage that I found specific words or phrases that stood out. Just as with the layering of the girls and their photographs, there is always the chance/opportunity for receding and coming forward. I progressed towards layering the initial photographs that were taken in the beginning of the study when the girls were experimenting. I felt a very similar sense of excitement at this stage, while I was finding photographs to layer over text or vice versa. This energy kept driving me forward, even when I realized the breadth of what I was undertaking. It was at this point that I started to question the reasoning behind the pairing of either the

photographs, or the text, or a combination of both. It was not until I let go of the fear of putting a picture where it did not belong, that I began to search for commonalities or areas of overlap within the text and the photographs. At first I focused on bringing together the journal writing and the photographs within the same timeline, however when I started to choose the combinations based on gut feeling, just as the youth had done, I found new inspiration (see Figure 42, 43). Without this layering effect, I might not have noticed the small fragments of images or text that might otherwise have gone undetected.





Figure 42 a, b, & c: Free female

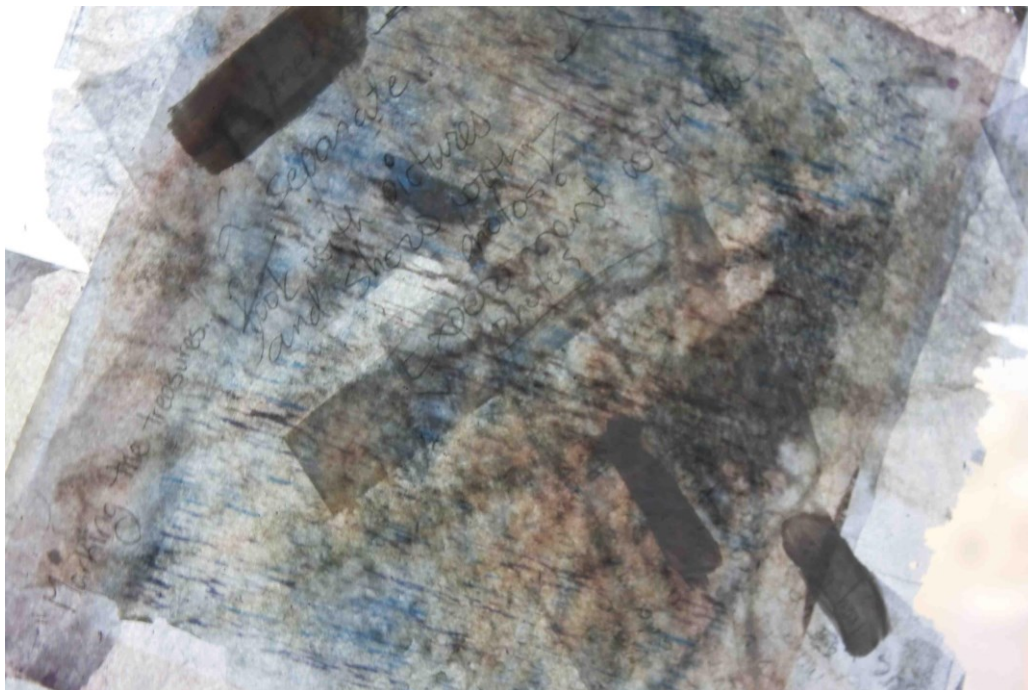


Figure 43 a & b: Making the treasures...

*Questioning, revealing in a new space/place.* During my work with the youth for the project, the stage that I found most thought-provoking was when we were

trying to figure out what to do with the photographs. At the same time, it was also the most confusing, because I sensed we were heading in a direction, but I had no idea what direction that was. I felt the same push and pull when I encountered my second wave of working with images and text in Kuwait; I was excited, but I also felt a fear that this might not work. I remembered that the girls continued to push forward, taking risks as they explored the spaces around the university. As time passed and the girls became more comfortable, there was a sense of exploration and play that they began to express through their photographs. One of the ways in which I was able to observe the level of their engagement was in that the youth were not only determining where they wanted to go within the community, but they were even willing to go out on their own at times (whereas in the beginning they would wait for me to be there before heading out). The girls playfully used space by placing themselves within the photographs and becoming a part of the space of which they were taking pictures. Through this interaction with space, the girls were able not only to express themselves, but also to gain a sense of themselves within this community (Hickey, 2010). I observed that the girls seemed to become more confident with time, as there was increasing ease as they moved around the University. The playfulness in their mannerisms and in how they used their bodies within the space did not seem to be reflective of ego or fear, but rather, of creativity and freedom. They showed up with their individualities and experiences, which were complimented by the plethora of visuals they had created. My text, in the same way, was riddled with questions and wonderings. I seemed so unsure at this point about layering these pieces of text together; I felt that same element of uneasiness. I was questioning myself, the

process, the direction, and yet looking at the images I created, there did seem to be a direction present, just not one that I was controlling.

At this time, my experience of being in Kuwait took an affirmative turn. I found a place called Artspace, which encouraged creating art in many forms including drop-in art. It very quickly became a space where I could be myself, wholly and freely, at a time when I had no idea what I was really doing in a very unfamiliar country. It was where I felt peace in a time of turmoil and chaos. This was where my second phase of layering images occurred. As I sat inside the Artspace, layering the images, I would often be approached by other artists or workers of the space. Questions and conversations would flow between strangers and me, because of the art and the space. A sense of community began to develop, just as it had at MtM between the girls and with me.



Figure 44: How do you see yourself in this place?





Figure 45: To tell a story...

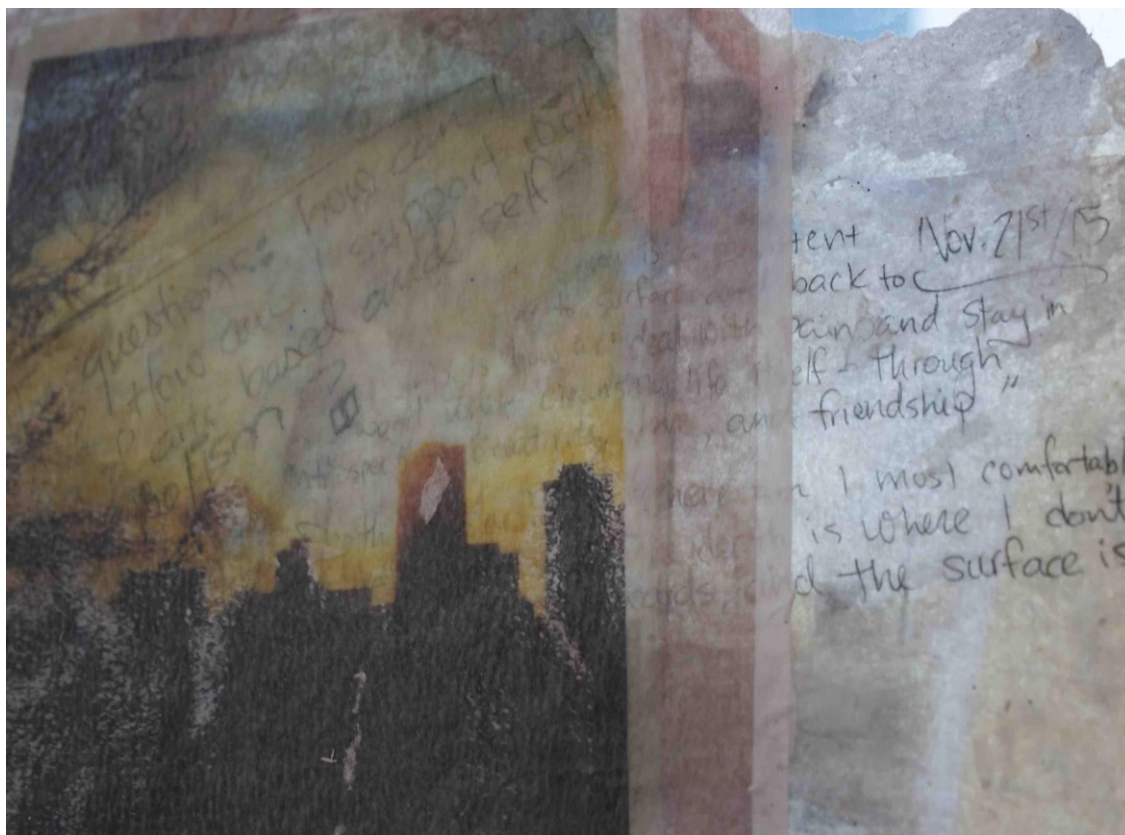


Figure 46: Depth on the surface



Figure 47: Juxtaposed

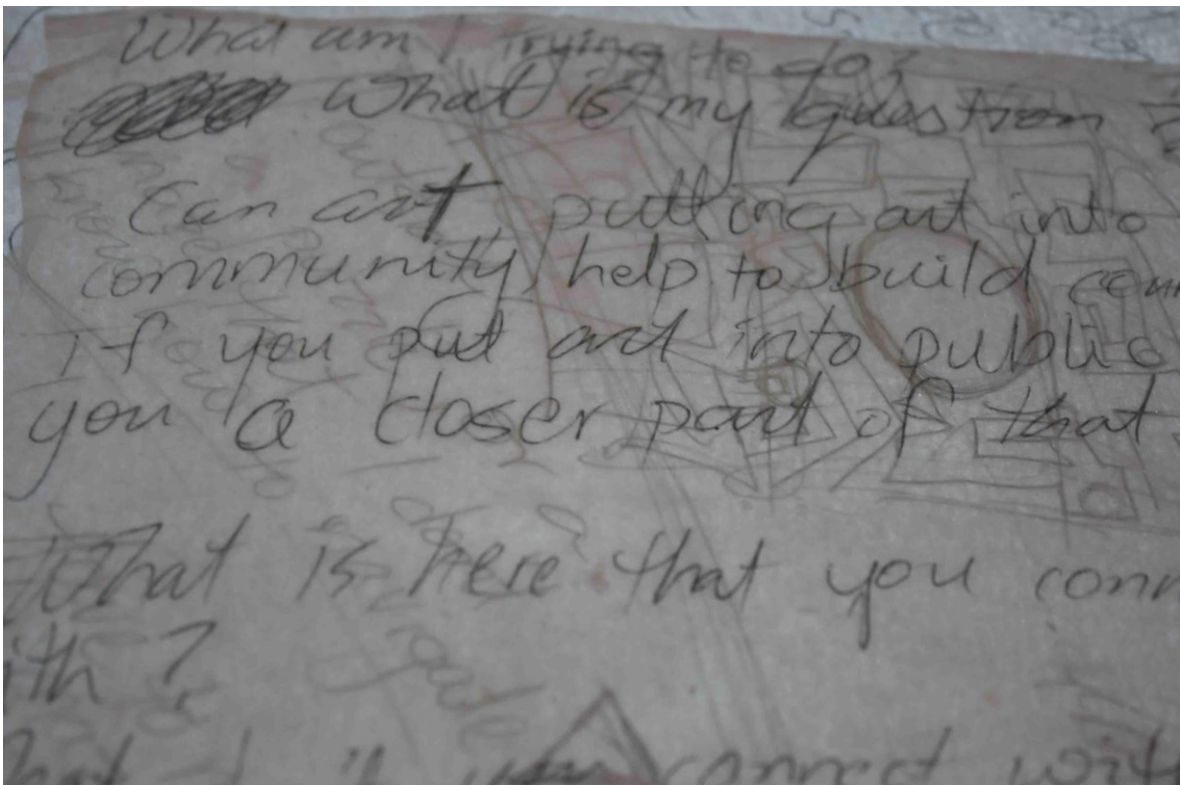


Figure 48: Where is art?



Figure 49: Hanging from above



Figure 50: Artspace giving space

What I noticed as I continued working at layering, was that while the text was still present, it was the girls' visuals that were capturing more of my attention. This was reflective of the process during the project. The photographs were so strong in that they portrayed how the youth were coming into their own in these spaces. This reminded me of the period during my research when the girls were taking those photos – a time that felt personally unstable. My questions underlay our every outing, every step that we made. I kept thinking and turning things over in my head, always one step behind because of this way of being. This was also the feeling that engulfed me when I initially stepped into Artspace with the images in tow; however, I let my intuition guide me. At Artspace I did not feel the same intensity and energy that I had experienced while in my studio apartment, but there was a playfulness in discovering connections between the girls' photographs and my text, yet again (see Figure 46, 47, and 48). This way of creating something in a space with which I had no initial connections was very relevant. It raised the questions for me: *How does place/space affect learning?* and *How might art play a role in authentic learning experiences for youth?* What I noticed was how the photographs caught not only my attention but the attention of those around me – the strangers. The youth had something to say about the spaces they encountered and this really came through in the images they had created, which in turn connected with those around me then. I wonder if that is why the text faded to the background? At that point I did not want the text to disappear, but to take on a more supportive/complementary role. Even more so than in the beginning, the space/place in which I was doing the layering and taking the photographs of the images I created really did matter. I believe that this space, Kuwait and the Artspace, impacted what I was doing and the learning that was

taking place for me in that moment. For within the photographs that I took of the process, one cannot help but notice the streets and sky of Kuwait in the backgrounds (see Figure 54, 55). Creating cannot happen in isolation. One is impacted based on where one is.

*Becoming through creating.* The final stage of my process was not the end, but rather the in-between of what was and what can be. I came to realize that learning is constantly in flux and cannot be regulated by one definition. When the girls took their pictures and chose pieces to be layered for the lightboxes for the exhibit at the Art Gallery of Alberta, this was a point of sharing what they had created with another community. Their learning also comprised the experience of sharing what they had learned with each other, with other girls who were not involved with the project, and moving out into other communities as they shared their photographs beyond the borders of the University. Similarly, a sharing of myself occurred as I finished with my own layering at the Artspace. I realized that I was and am an integral part of this entire process. It was a reminder to me that in community-based research, the researcher is present (Singerland, 2016). Although I may have been unsure of what my role was in the beginning, I acknowledged that it was constantly changing, adapting and growing. Understanding this process of change, for me, was not easy. As Jagodzinski comments, “the shift from being to becoming, which reorients public pedagogy as a phenomenon of nonchronological time and siteless space, as creation of the new cannot be directed” (2013, p. 70).



Figure 51: The light behind



Figure 52: Building blocks

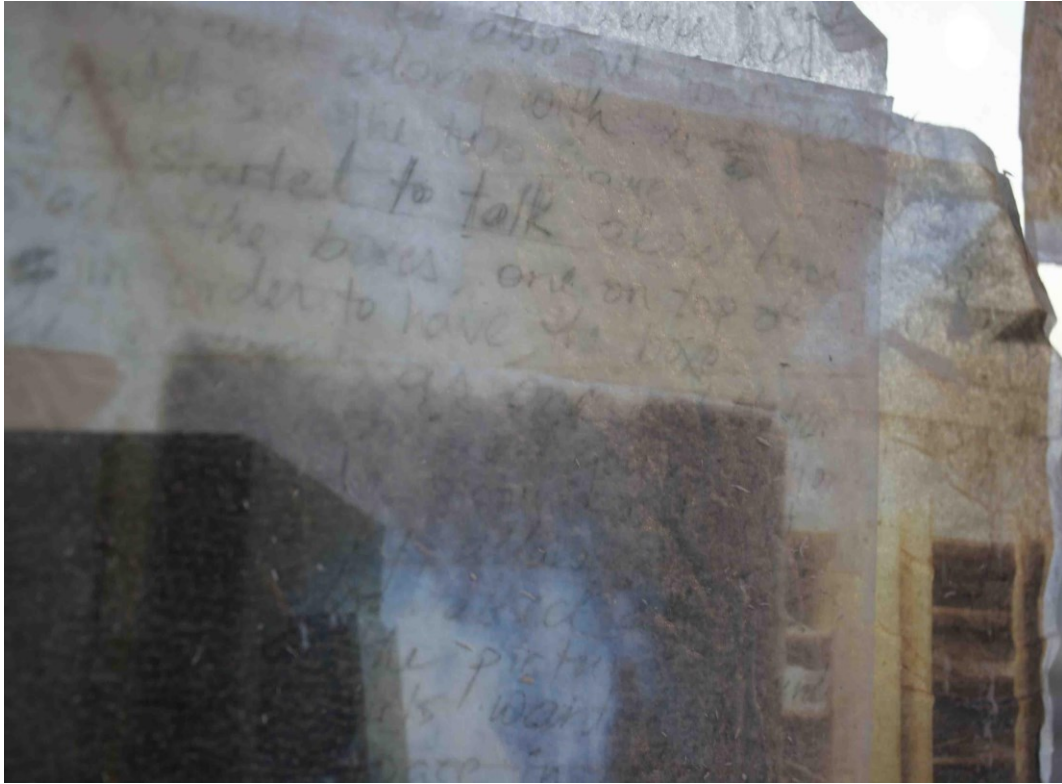


Figure 53: The boxes

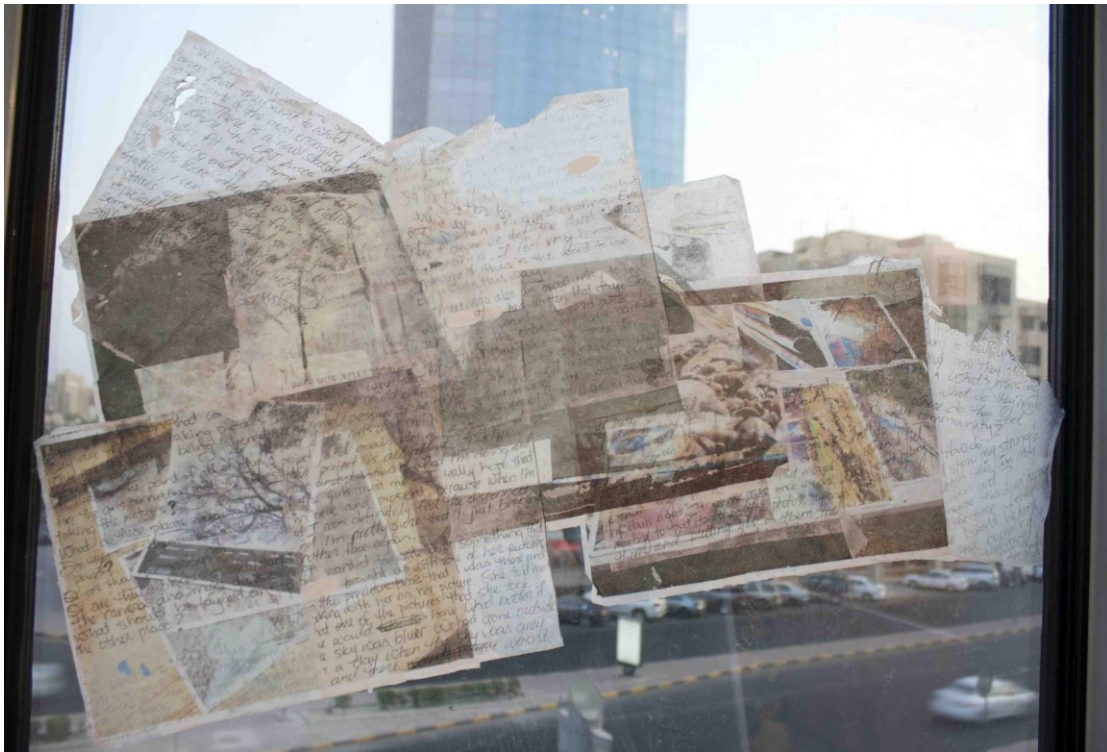


Figure 54: A gut feeling #1



Figure 55: The horizon

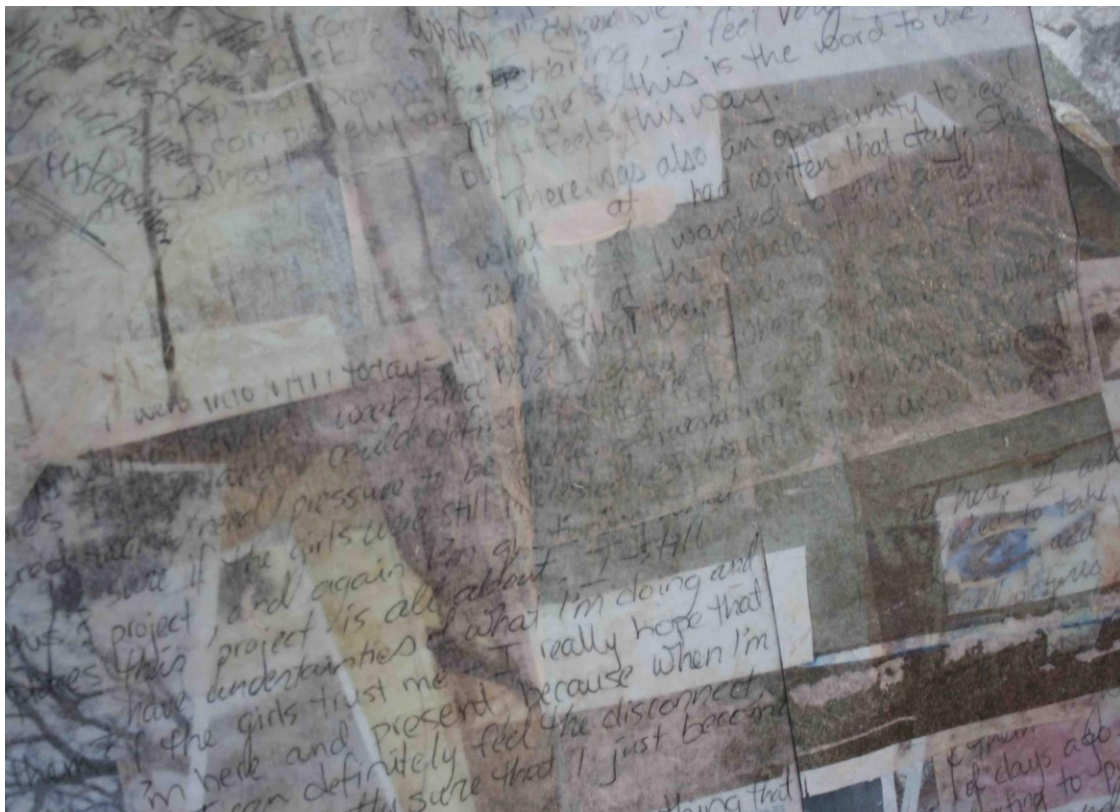


Figure 56: A gut feeling #2



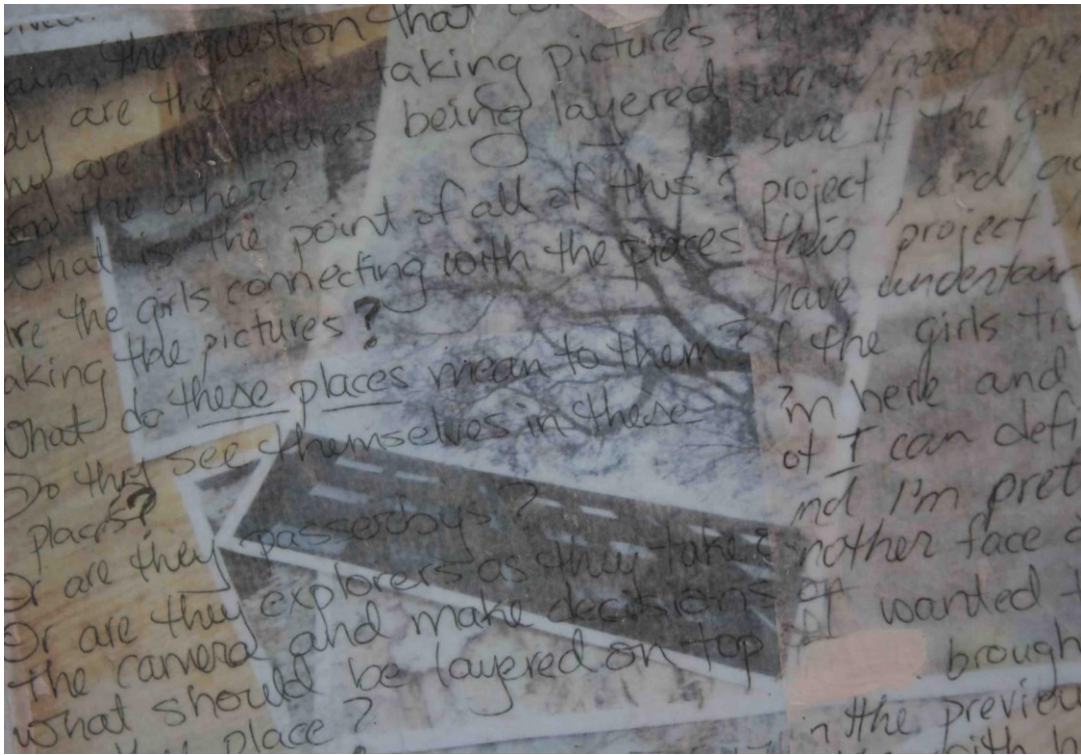


Figure 57: A gut feeling #3

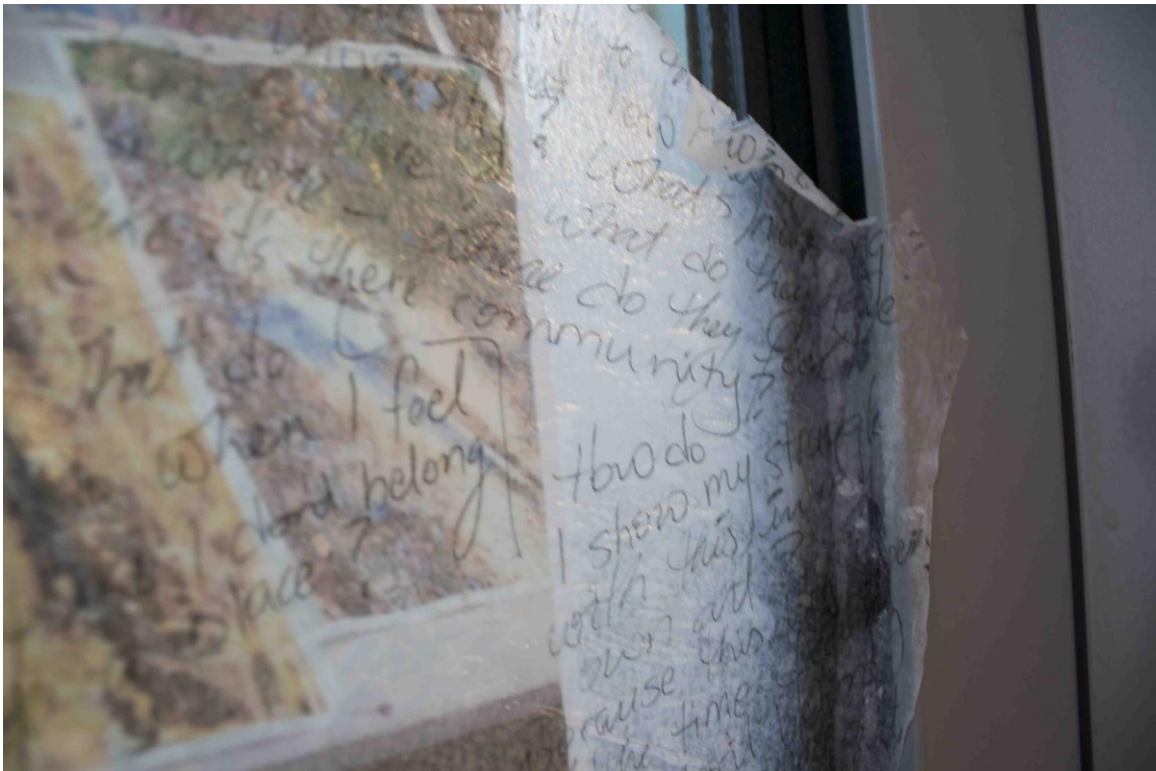


Figure 58: The edges

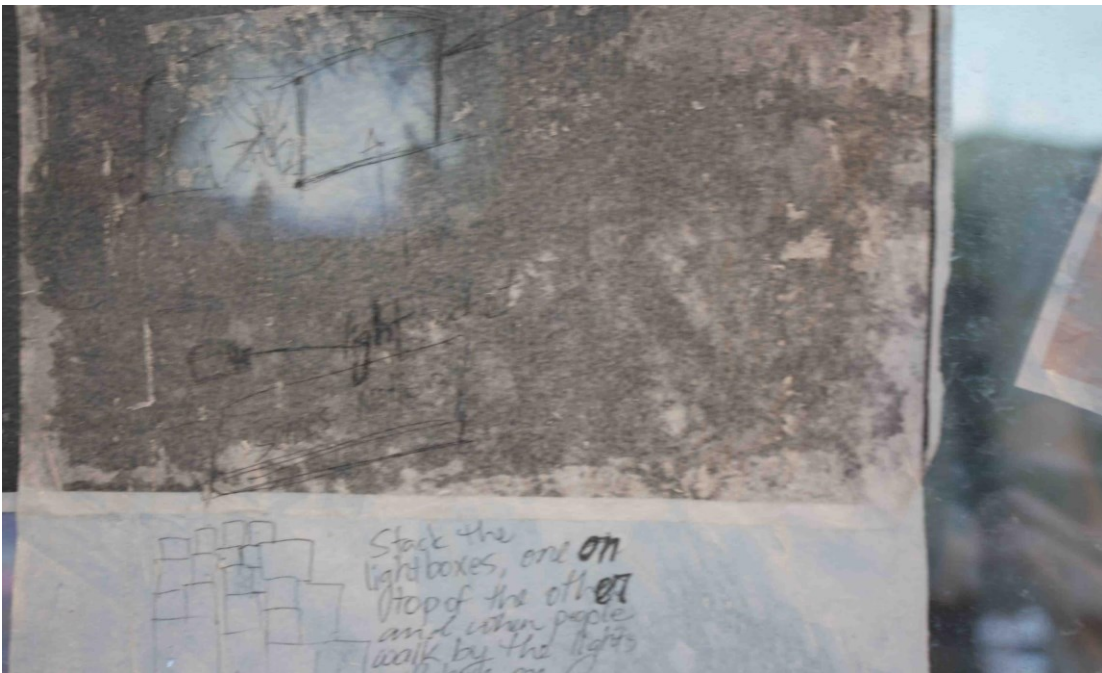


Figure 59 a & b: The light within the box

I see the images that I created during this last stage, connected to what the girls, Jazel B.g. and Wanda B.b., were working on for the Art Gallery of Alberta. I did not deliberately place the last images and texts because I did not know exactly what I needed

to say. I did not want to overthink the process and instead was guided by the visuals. I began layering pieces beyond the borders of the pages, and by doing so, opportunities very quickly grew and presented themselves. I was no longer just working with two or three layers, but multiple layers. I realized that learning cannot take place in isolation and neither does making connections to places or people. In this way, with all of this becoming recognized in the moment, there seemed to be more of a flow when compiling the layers, and the final products moved beyond the limits of a singular page (see Figure 54, 55, 56, 57). As I was taking photos of these final pieces at the Artspace, the sun was starting to go down. In the photos, as well as the layered images taped to the windows and the street scene outside, there I was, in the reflection of the space (see Figure 60).



Figure 60: Layer upon layer

There I was in this this new way of seeing/learning through the lens of a camera, there in the new space, both interior and exterior that I was encountering. All of the layers were present and overlapping. All I had to do was pay attention.

### **Responding to the Research Questions**

Finally, I attend to the questions, which I posed at the beginning of my research project, and will now attempt to re-connect with in order to move forward with the ideas and revelations that surfaced from my learning. The thoughts that I present are not definitive answers, but instead pieced together understandings that culminate from the entire process of this research project.

**Can art be a form that connects youth and communities of place?** Barndt (2008) reminds us that “community” can be defined in various ways: “... by place, tradition, intention, practice, or spirit” (p. 4). One way that I understand “community” is related to place or space and how people interact and encounter one another in that place. It was my recognition that communities are at times indelibly tied to places, which grounded my understanding of the question of youths’ connections to community. I also recognized that for some art practices, graffiti for example, community practices are an inherent part of the art form, which allows for existing connections to place (Avramidis & Drakopoulou, 2012; Valle & Weiss, 2010). In graffiti art, when a person “writes” on a space, they come to know that space (Dickens, 2008). To what extent did this happen in our project? Did the photography project the girls and I undertook help them to connect with the place of the University?

Confirmation for me that the art we engaged in did connect the youth to the community came through the type of engagement I saw the girls showing throughout the

process of moving around the University and taking photographs. They became familiar with and more comfortable in the space as they looked closely at the details through the lens of the camera. JC's quote: "What I like about photography is capturing the moment, the feeling. It feels as if you can make your own reality however you want. I think the university is inspiring now that i've take pictures around it" (December 15, 2016), showed me that this place became meaningful to her. The familiarity the girls gained with the University of Alberta, exhibited in their photos, was in stark contrast to how the girls interacted with the spaces initially, especially before they began working with photography. They moved from demanding to know the exact moment when I would come back to work with them, to heading out into the space by themselves and taking the opportunity to invite others to do so. These changes in their attitudes show me that they were becoming more comfortable and settled at the University and making connections with the community of that place. The connection to place extended beyond just the taking of the photographs as the girls re-imagined and re-made what they photographed through the layering of the images.

From what I saw and what I experienced, the creation of something – the photographs and layered photos, led to moments of connection and the possibility of becoming part of a community. I had a parallel experience as the girls while I was at Artspace in Kuwait surrounded by an already established community of artists. Through the act of working with the photographs, questions and moments of interacting arose, and through this process I felt more comfortable to be present within that place, which was, at first, unfamiliar and distant from me. Possibilities for connection are always present. How

one gets to that point of connection which might allow for opportunities is the challenge. I have come to believe that art can be one of the ways to get there.

**Can art help build community within the lives of youth?** Another way of understanding “community” is around shared experiences and interests (Barndt, 2008). This sense of community is about people coming to collective understandings, and through the experience of building knowledge together, connections are formed. Within the program of MtM there were already points of connection between the girls as there were shared experiences within the established activities and moments of learning. The program involved moments of gathering together to make and eat food, being together in the common area to work on individual projects, or just playing music and exploring the Internet together. Art was also definitely already part of what connected these girls. What I did see was that being part of the photography project allowed a new shared way of being and understanding that went beyond immediate connections to the research project and eventually also extended to other projects. This was through the girls inviting others to come out and take pictures with them, the sharing of the photographs afterwards and in explaining the methods that were utilized in the layering. In creating art as a group for the project with the MtM girls, there was a sharing of creating and the learning. Through the creative process – the acts of sharing, talking, showing, etc., I experienced a greater sense of community grow amongst the girls.

Growth of community through art practices is what happens in the art form of graffiti, which has points of sharing and connecting already established within it (Avramidis & Drakopoulou, 2012; Valle & Weiss, 2010). Such practices established within the art form offer possibilities for enacting points of connection. Our photography

art practice built on the points of connection already present amongst the girls in the MtM program and seemed to strengthen those bonds, not only between the girls, but especially between the girls and me. This research project was another way the girls were able to connect and have their individual and communal voices heard. As Barndt (2008) suggests, “the process of engaging in community arts is in itself a research process, a collaborative process of producing knowledge. The social experience of art-making can open up aspects of peoples’ beings, their stories, their memories and aspirations . . .” (p.4).

Similar to the girls' experiences of building community, I was able to develop a sense of community with the people I met at Artspace in Kuwait, through working on the creative processes involved with my research project. Even though, on the surface, there were a variety of differences between the people of Kuwait and me, including language and religion, a connection was formed through the sharing of the art. I got to know individuals, began to feel more myself through the act of sharing and began to develop a bond. By being present together within the act of creating and sharing knowledge – through showing and telling, a mutual understanding was encouraged. Through such shared points of understanding, community can be built.

**How might art play a role in authentic learning experiences for youth?** In coming to understand the role that art played within this research project I embraced the idea of authentic learning experiences. What are authentic learning experiences? When art is connected to the learning that happens and is connected to life, I believe, that authenticity might be present. If traditional methods of learning are not working for youth, as Blake’s (2004) study showed, there is the process of disengagement. It is

through disengagement from what does not work, and that introduction of some alternative form of engagement that moments of authenticity and connection might take place.

Blake (2004) reminds us that youth have the power to make choices and giving youth choices supports authentic learning. The girls in my project suggested photography as an art form with which they were interested in engaging. They actively chose to participate in photography activities around the University. They chose what they wanted to take pictures of and carefully composed their images in unique ways. Wanda B.b.'s images focused on the natural environment, while Jazel B.g.'s looked at the urban/manufactured qualities of the place. Each girl approached the layering of the photographs in her own way too. These choices also extended to the creation of the light-boxes. The element of choice and self-creation was a way for the girls to express the experiences that they had, and through this self-expression the project offered opportunities for learning on their own terms. They were engaged in “a process of exploring their own histories, identities, struggles, and hopes – not knowing where it [would] lead” (Barndt, 2008, p.5).

Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) argues that art does not do anything; its value is not in its usefulness in bringing about specific effects. Authenticity within creation, then, cannot be forced. However, art might be one of those alternative forms of engagement that can offer authentic learning opportunities. The art and process of creation with the girls allowed for deeper questions to be asked and new understandings to surface. Through taking photos, creating gel transfers, layering the images and creating light boxes, we together looked more and investigated further about the girls' relationship to the place. It was through the creative process that the girls found a way to respond to their



new environment. Without the element of art, the questions and the looking would have been different or might not have taken place at all. The act of creating, of arting (Jagodzinski, 2014), allowed us to look at the situation through a specific lens, from a certain perspective, to enter into a situation – existing comfortably within the space of the University, which might at first have seemed to be off limits. As Greene (2010) suggests, art can be used to demystify, to reveal new understandings and ways of being. This seemed to occur in our project in authentic ways.

**How does place/space affect learning?** Smith (2002) asserts that where learning takes place is just as important as what is being learned. Places have characteristics that can be triggers, which can help to engage creativity (Hickey-Moody, 2009). The physical layout of a place affects the actions that occur there, and in turn can affect understandings gleaned. Expectations surrounding places/spaces also have an effect on learning and what kind of learning takes place there. When spaces are seen as participative, as Roy (2005) suggests, there are opportunities for new modes of understanding. When paying attention to where one is and to then question what is happening within that place/space, there is a possibility for different perspectives to come through and therefore to engender different ways of learning.

How did the place/space of the University affect the girls' learning? I could see that the girls involved in the research project were affected by the places within the University that they visited, visible through their body language and ways of participating in those spaces – even the level of comfort that they found. They were active in affecting their perceptions of the place through the processes of taking photos and the layering the photos. As Gruenewald (2003) suggests, it is not just important to connect with a

place/space, but to also be critical of the environment. In the girls' interacting with the place/space through the act of layering their images, how one layer affected and enhanced the other(s), was where I saw critical reflection and analysis happening. This was achieved in that the girls were assessing aspects of the place in creating their own versions of it. Jazel B.g.'s layering of natural images over urban/manufactured elements (see Figures 26 and 27), for example, spoke to how she understood and what she had to express about the place. In Figure 26, the foreground is of two branches with berries and the background the shadow of a street. While one image contrasts the other, there is also parallelism in the lay of the branches and the traffic light. Also, as JC suggested in her written reflection, they were creating their own versions of the places that they encountered as they built layer upon layer. This process was similar to altered understandings gained about a painting through *pentimento* (Donald, 2004), when earlier traces of a painting are revealed. Each individual layer of the girls' images mixed with and influenced the other(s). The girls chose their layers and allowed each image and the spaces they depicted to speak to them, each in her own individual way. This allowing of their experiences to become a part of a place is similar to the work of Nakanishi (n.d.), the Japanese artist, whose layered pieces speak to the viewers' own personal experiences, which become a part of the viewing of the layers and the spaces in between.

In this research, if the project had ended up being just a collection of photographs, the relationship to the place/space would have been different for the girls and me. As it was, with the added dimension of the layering of the photos, the girls took control of their own experiences with the place and their learning. They were able to create their own realities and make them into what they wanted them to be. Their engagement with the

particularities of the place/space, and the relationships they developed with it, allowed this learning to occur.

Regarding my experiences in Kuwait, I too came to the realization that I was not an outside observer but an active participant in the place. I had control in how I viewed and participated with the spaces and places there, and in the end was able to create my own reality by acknowledging the importance of what I was creating and where I was. I have come to see that something that might seem simple, the taking of photographs in a space, can actually be the beginning of a learning experience, which goes beyond the surface and instead questions what is taken-for-granted in everyday moments in the places/spaces we inhabit.

## **Conclusion**

How does this finish? Here I sit in this space in Kuwait that is still new and strange to me, even though it is slowly becoming more and more familiar. I sit with the layered images that the girls created and the ones that I put together. I sit in a space that has its own layers, many of which I am sure I have yet to uncover. I have taken the first step, just like the youth before me. I have my art and my own way of creating, which I bring to something that seems unfamiliar right now. The steps are small, but they are continuous. With time, I hope that I will feel comfortable and become a part of this community and in the end learn not only about myself, but about others in the process. Here there is already a community in place, into which I am trying to find my way. I do not belong to a community in Kuwait, just like the girls did not initially belong to a community within the University of Alberta. However, through making and connecting,

something was started, both at the University of Alberta for the girls and now here in Kuwait for me.

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