

“METRAMORPHOSIS” A SOCIALLY-ENGAGED ARTS-BASED AND CONTEMPLATIVE INQUIRY

BARBARA BICKEL

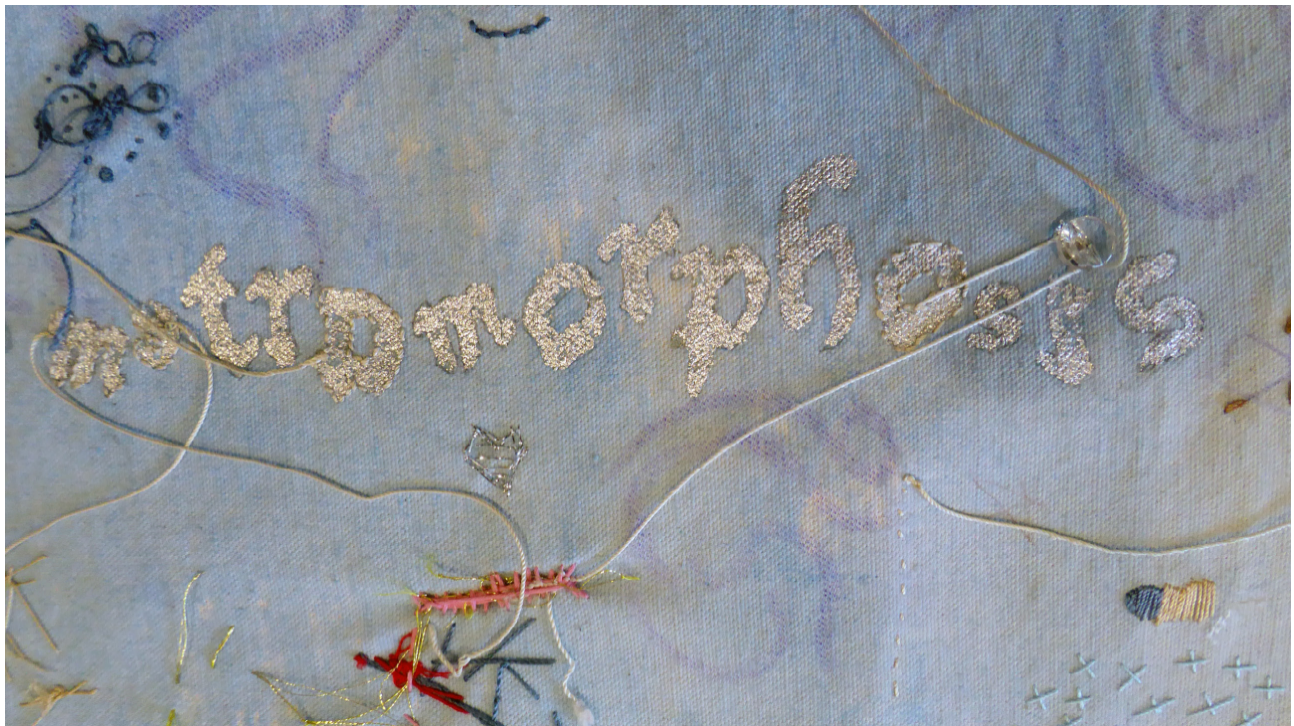
ABSTRACT:

The birth story of the *Metramorphosis* book begins in 2010 at an artist residency on Toronto Island. The book is bound with buttons allowing the cloth pages to be unbound and bound over and over again. In this way it is read anew each time, as it is never re-buttoned in the same order. After a year of stitching into the book I realized it was not my book alone to complete, as the study of matrixial theory (Ettinger, 2005) I was contemplatively engaging in the book making is about relationality, co-becoming and copoiesis. In 2012, I began to carry the book with me while traveling. In the generative state of co-becoming, the book has taken on a life of its own. The 2017 Arts Pre-conference and call to write this article prompted me for the first time to write about this living matrixial

book as an on-going socially-engaged art/inquiry/contemplative co-event. This article includes images of the book pages, Ettingerian quotes, my reflections on the lived experience with the book, and a poetic rendering of the matrixial trance that lies beneath the book’s journey.

BIO:

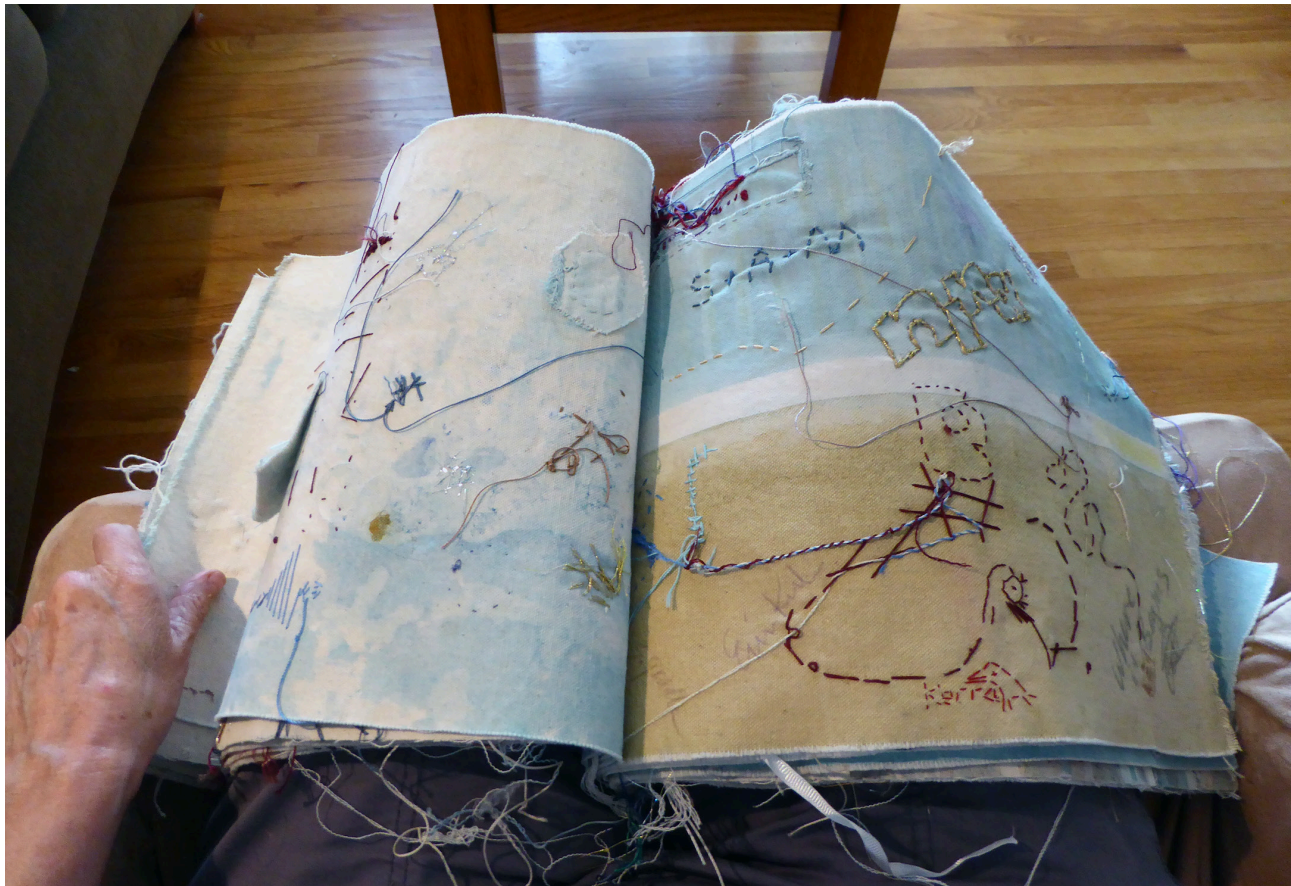
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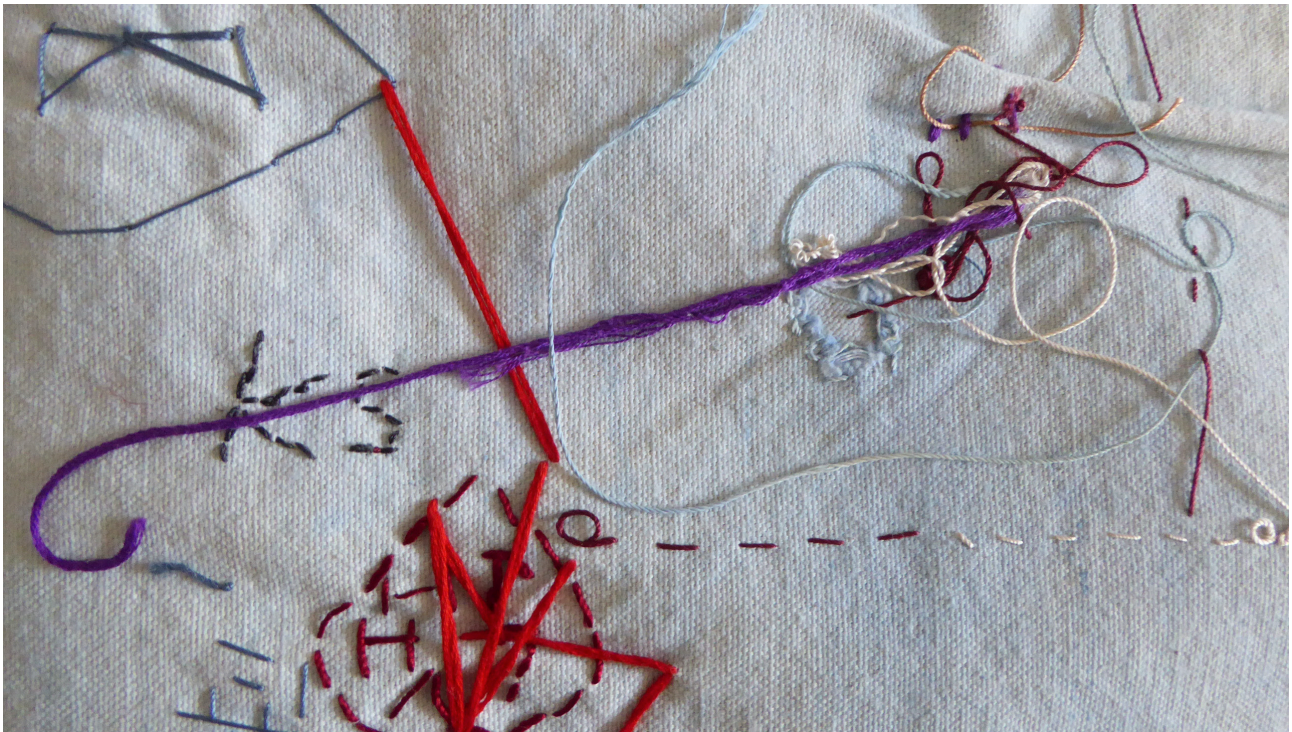
*Metramorphosis*¹ is the “turning of subjective boundaries into thresholds” through the creative process of co-becoming (Ettinger, 1999, p. 165).²

I sit alone on the couch in the middle of the big open room with the cloth *Metramorphosis* book³ resting on my lap. This is my offering for the ARTS pre-conference retreat taking place in Toronto in 2017. I do not know who will choose to join my arts-based and contemplative experience embedded in this ever-evolving living *matrixial*⁴ book. A handful of curious artist-teachers tentatively join me on the couches, and I hand them each a page that I have unbuttoned and detached from the book's binding. I invite them to pick up a needle and thread and to stitch themselves into the conversations found in the "aesthetic and ethical unconscious paths: strings and threads" awaiting them on the cloth page (Ettinger, 2005, p. 703). I tell them there are no rules as to how they do this except to not stitch the buttonholes shut. I ask if anyone knows how to sew, and those that do begin to assist the threading of the needle of those who do not.

The evolving story of the book *Metramorphosis* is encountered and the threshold is crossed in this way – bringing collected memories of the *I and non-I*⁵ into a place of co-becoming. This begins entry into "*matrixial border spaces* [where]... the artist as a partial subject takes part and testifies to/for an unknown other, or rather, it is the matrixial threads of the artwork which testify" (Ettinger, 1999a, p. 93-94). The book *Metramorphosis* has become a testimony with the threads of my own co-becoming woven within it. As a woman artist, always partial, and always becoming the book making process has gathered and extended memories in the forming and unforming dance between my own *I* and *non-I* relations.



Differentiation-in-Jointness as "taking responsibility for the other" (Ettinger & Virtanen, 2005, p. 700).

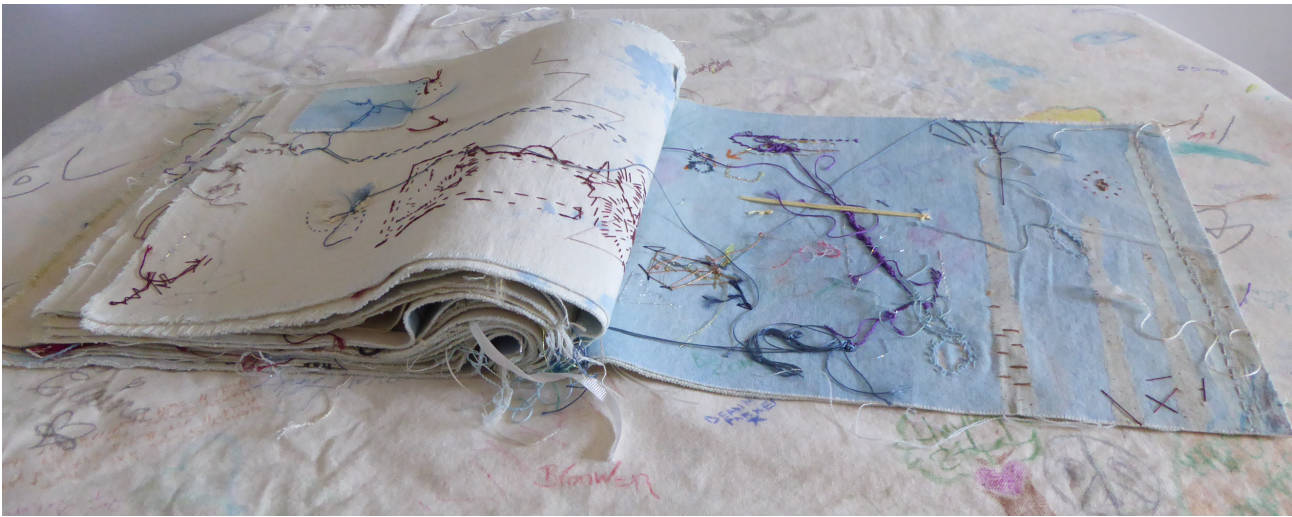


Separation-in Jointness takes place within matrixial border space “where distance-in-proximity is continuously reattuned” (Ettinger, 2004, p. 76).

It is a simple gesture, offering a page to another and inviting them to touch and engage with the book and consequently to *wit(h)ness*⁶ all unknown connected others who have stitched into the pages before them. It becomes an opportunity to engage with *primary compassion*, a knowing of the other before we are known (Fisher & Bickel, 2015). As primary compassion is too fragile for the phallic sphere, it resides in the matrixial. This piece of writing is an invitation into the matrixial sphere of primary compassion.

I invite you to step into the border spaces with me and to be with the matrixial terms, the visual images, the trance and writing about the journey of the book pages while holding a matrixial gaze. A gaze that “is a touching gaze,... never purely visual, a[s] it enters and alters the screen of vision which by definition is im-pure and inseparable from other unconscious dimensions of the psyche, informed by different sources of sensibilities, and mainly, connected to and affected by the unconscious of the Other and the consciousness of the Cosmos (Ettinger, 2005, p. 710).” In engaging art through a matrixial gaze we can touch primary compassion in the process of contemplative inquiry. This is potentially a fragilizing process that can open one to the consciousness of the Cosmos and co-becoming.

In a Pacific Coast time zone two years earlier, in 2015, the cloth book, to which the ARTS pre-conference artist-researchers were adding their stitches, found its way to a weekend writing retreat where the co-authors of another book gathered⁷ and contemplatively added their stitches to the same cloth pages. Each book chapter author brought a contemplative practice to share, co-creating the writing and performance generating processes of the group at their writing retreat. This book was my contemplative arts contribution to that day. This earlier collaborative writing retreat became the template used for the invitational and emergent facilitation structure of the 2017 ARTS pre-conference.



Psychic Strings “covibrate and traces are stored in sharable threads” (Ettinger, 2005, p. 704).

Remembering 5 years earlier, in 2010, during a summer away from my tenure-track university position in the USA. I was at an artist residency on Toronto Island, Canada one of my favorite places to make art⁸. I recall the birth story of the *Metramorphosis* book. It began as a place-based trance journey I undertook with Lake Ontario for an art piece that would be part of a larger project that would be entitled *Wit(h)nessing Eyes Close(d)*⁹. It was a troubling and pivotal year in my art practice of deeply questioning working with the female body and creating art for ‘the wall.’ I had lost trust in my ability to hold the greater purpose of my art and art practice of freeing the human body from the colonizing gaze of a toxic hegemonic patriarchal worldview. My creative optimism was in much need of adaptation to the collapse I was experiencing and witnessing in the world, and in the world of art and visual culture around me. During this artist residency I was intuitively seeking an alternative.

While reading an article on the art of women artists I discovered the work of artist, theorist, activist and psychoanalyst Bracha L. Ettinger.¹⁰ Her articulation of “art as a transport station for trauma” (Ettinger, 2000, p. 91) re-ignited my commitment to making art as a healing gesture for both the creator and the viewer. I created seven large canvas tapestry-like pieces in this project working with images of my own aging body and lake-inspired trance journeys. I exhibited the four artworks created at that residency in a studio showing surrounded by supportive artist friends. But one particular piece I was not satisfied with, as I did not feel it worked aesthetically. After I returned home, inspired by a cloth book I saw created by the early iconic feminist artist Louise Bourgeois, I made the decision to cut up the aesthetically “failed” art piece from the Ettinger inspired series into twenty-two small pieces. In this way I transformed the lake-womb trance-generated art piece into a personal contemplative study book of some of the many perplexing terms I was learning from the language of Ettinger’s matrixial theory. What I did not know at the time of cutting the canvas into smaller pieces was that this simple act was to do much more than repurpose my original “failed” art piece, allowing it to be viewed as a book in the big city art gallery. It was to become a companion book for me to learn from and to travel with, into the future and back. A rich metaphor from which to make, inquire and teach into. It was a way to hold my partial subject self, my *I* and *non-I*, in relationship to my known and unknown relations with others and my often times conflicting selves in its gentle soft pages.

I secured the book with buttons allowing pages to be unbound and bound over and over again. In this way it is read anew each time, as it is never re-buttoned in the same order. I entitled the book *Metramorphosis*, based on my understanding of Ettinger's articulation of the word—as the turning of “the subject's boundaries into thresholds” where meaning is encountered and in process, not fixed (Ettinger, 2005a, p. 165). After a year of stitching into the book I realized it was not my book alone to complete as matrixial theory is about relationality, co-becoming and *copoiesis*.¹¹

When the book was exhibited in the art installation in Chicago it was an interactive art piece and others were invited to stitch into it. I remember vividly the artist talk I gave in the gallery to a group of seniors with Alzheimer's disease-- individually handing a page to them, and the delight and enthusiasm they shared when invited to stitch into the cloth page. I began to carry the book with me on my travels, offering it as an *encounter-event*¹² with many others in a *matrixial border space* (Ettinger, 2006, p. 219). Since the fall of 2011 the book has traveled to 15 different cities in 3 different countries (USA, Canada, and Egypt). In this way the book has come to dwell in the physical and metaphorical border spaces of ongoing threshold crossings.

The book is a peoples' book that has been added to by hundreds of others at the time of this publication. The many co-authors who have stitched into this book have participated through a diversity of venues: 3 artist talks, 4 conference presentations, 11 university art, education or women, gender and sexuality studies classes, 8 art installations, and 3 retreats (including the 2015 retreat for the writing of the book *Arts Based and Contemplative Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence* and the Arts Preconference in 2017). The crossing of thresholds this book has enabled for myself and others is both known and unknown, revealed in its pages and not revealed. The book continues to be held, opened, gazed upon and stitched into and through. It compassionately holds the parts with the whole, the one and the many in its pages.



Fragilization is the “effect of borderlinking to a wound and co-emerging with an-other” (Ettinger, 1998, n.p.).

In the generative state of co-becoming the book has taken on a life of its own. The pre-conference and call to write this article prompted me for the first time to write reflectively about this living matrixial book as an on-going socially-engaged art/inquiry/contemplative co-event. As I dug through my many files and photographs of the book project in preparation for writing, I discovered the transcript of the source trance that preceded the making of the original art piece. This trance had been temporarily lost to my conscious self, forgotten due to my curating decision regarding the artwork as incurable in the aesthetics of the phallic sphere of the art world. That original trance did not accompany the book into the gallery space, as did my other six trance recordings, and consequently was never shared with others. In re-reading and re-connecting with the threads of the trance as I write this piece, I am brought to the awareness that during the many years that have gone by, the original trance has been gestating in the matrixial sphere of metamorphosis *within* the book itself.



Archaic m/Other as “the gestating and birth-giving mother, the begetting mother... as poetic Event and Encounter” (Ettinger, 2004 p. 69).

I share the journey of co-becoming in this writing as an invitation for others to cross the thresholds that too often appear as barriers in our segmented lives as artists, learners, teachers and researchers. In understanding and welcoming art as a transport-station of trauma, as “matrixial threads of testimony,” we are given an opportunity to re-integrate non-conscious parts of our being that are preserved and never forgotten in the matrixial realm. This wisdom is available for those willing to enter, even if temporarily, into copoeisis with unknown others.

In closing, I return to the beginning. Here the experience of transporting the trance memory of the *I* and *non-I* into co-becoming through the *transcryptum*¹³ and my culling of the original trance journey into a found poem is offered as a gift. I share the poetic writing as a healing trace of the matrixial origin story of the book with the com-passionate *matrixial gaze* it contains. This matrixial origin story enters a threshold journey that crosses time, memory, place, space and the human with the more-than-human. A space where the “erotic aerials

of the psyche... as joint gazes assemble, disperse, transmit and conduct the stranger into a compost of trans-subjectivity" (Ettinger, 1999a, p. 90).



"The place of art is for me the *Transport-Station of Trauma*... [art] supplies the space for [transport]" (Ettinger, 2005, p. 711).

Wit(h)nessing Metramorphosis

Deep breath

Waves crashing
I walk out onto the cement pier
step over charred remains
residue of the burning phoenix
night ritual now past
I lean over the pier's edge
dive in to meet a wave

Sightless descent
swimming
with strong strokes
into the deep
I meet sand
plant my feet spring
straight up

Through water calm
head surfaces
encircled in moon spotlight
I look around in all directions
light trickles across the water
traces a path

toward the island small
in the distance

I float
moonlight resting
on my face
water so warm
I am deeply deeply relaxed

Underneath me
a large whale emerges
I recline on its back
as it swims
not quite sure where?
each gentle movement
of the whale's spine
shifts my body
as we glide through water
toward the horizon

At the horizon's edge
a waterfall stops
the whale who
presciently rolls on their side
I tumble down the waterfall

Deep breath

I turn into mist

Mindful of people walking
along a ledge
behind the waterfall
alert to a presence
I re-cognize my 6 year old self
I come near
my mist enveloping her

She unaware of the mist
the protective gift from her future
self wrapping around her
small body
walks behind her mother
her grandmother

Insulated
my young self has no aversion
of underworld spaces
where water and earth reverberate

Deep breath

Unknowingly
wearing the mists' protection
she lives without fear

Facing the falls
looking outward she feels the power
deep intake of breath
she inhales
the force of the water

Now my future self has seen
her younger self embody
the gift
of water
taken in the protection
task complete
my mist self returns
into the falls

Connected to the power source
this young self is
sheltered for the work
for travel
in to transformative terrains
in to altered states
assured now
the mist drifts upward

At the top of the falls
the whale awaits
the mist
hovering over its back
returns to human form

Redelivered to the whale
we retrace our way
to the pier
the moon still
luminous on the lake
the water still
so calm
I thank the whale
for transporting me
to my younger self
reconnecting me
to protective elements
supporting my lifework now

Deep breath

Leaving the whale
I step onto the pier

face the moon
let it wash through
infusion of my body

I turn walk
pass the coal-black remains
of the burnt phoenix
leave black footprints until
they wear out
at the end of the pier

I walk follow
the shoreline feet sinking
into wet sand
find the tree-arched path
turn and walk
toward the arts center
enter the building
walk down the hallway
open the door
of my studio
step through
a second door
to my studio porch
where I sit
returned to present time



Artworking in matrixial borderspace is where “the artist as a partial subject takes part and testifies to/for an unknown other or rather, it is the matrixial threads of the artwork which testify to the traumas of an-other in wit(h)ness” (Ettinger, 1999a, pp. 93-94).

Notes

¹The Ettingerian terms found in bold italics in this piece of writing are the original words I hand wrote into the cloth book as part of my study of these matrixial words. It should be noted that Ettinger is continually expanding and altering her definitions of the matrixial language she is birthing.

² All photos of the cloth art book are taken by Barbara Bickel.

³The book *Metramorphosis*, begun in 2011 is an ongoing socially engaged soft art book (12 x 15.5 x 1 inches), it holds 22 pages including cover & back page. It is made of canvas, paper, acrylic, conté, graphite, crayons, pencil crayons, ink, silk thread, metallic thread, string, buttons, and paper. When displayed, the book is accompanied by a book-wrapping and display canvas cloth (51 x 32 inches) with signatures and drawings of those who have stitched into the book, written onto it with pencil crayons, crayons, ink, and graphite. Accompanying the book is an 8 x 5.5 x 1.25 inch pin cushion, made of canvas, sponge, thread; spools of thread (silk, cotton and metallic); pencil crayons, sewing needles, a thimble, and a pair of scissors.

⁴*Matrixial* is premised on the psychic space of the womb, a space of becoming-m/Other. "The matrixial is an aesthetical and ethical compassionate environment, which is, for each becoming-subject, the Cosmos" (Ettinger, 2006, p. 220).

⁵*I and non-I* - "I and an extimate - intimate- unknown - non-I share an ephemeral, unpredictable and singular alliance, in which each participant ... is partial and relational in differentiating jointness" (Ettinger, 2002, p. 236).

⁶*Wit(h)nessing* = witness + being with (Ettinger, 1999a, p. 91 & Pollock, 2010)

⁷In the process of co-editing the book *Contemplative and Arts Based Practices in Research and Teaching: Honoring Presence*, Carl Leggo (one of the co-editors) with Susan Walsh and myself hosted the authors of the chapters on the University of British Columbia campus to engage an arts-based and contemplative day-long retreat during the writing of the book and in preparation for conference performances. This retreat was a precursor to the ARTS pre-conference on which this essay and special issue of Artizein are based. I am grateful that Carl Leggo's stitches still dwell in this book following his passing from this incarnate world on March 7, 2019.

⁸Artscape Gibraltar Point Artist Residency is part of the Artscape organization that hosted our pre-conference retreat in the city of Toronto. See <http://artscapegibraltarpoint.ca>

⁹To learn more about the exhibition that took place at a women's gallery called ARC in Chicago, Illinois see <http://www.barbarabickel.ca/withnessing-eyes-closed.php>

¹⁰See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bracha_L._Ettinger

¹¹*Co-Poiesis* "is the aesthetical and ethical creative potentiality of borderlinking and of metramorphic weaving" (Ettinger, 2005. p. 705).

¹²*Encounter-Event* is the field where the I and non-I have the opportunity to co-emerge and co-fade "so that absence is desabsented, and presence diminuated but not extinguished (Ettinger, 2000, p. 96-97).

¹³*Transcriptum* is "when in art a memory emerges the occasion for that memory, enfolded in amnesia, to come to light" (Ettinger, 2006a, p. 167).

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