A Daycare Artist Residency in Minusio: Aesthetic Enunciations in Borderspaces

R. Michael Fisher

Abstract

This is a compilation of happenings from an artist residency at an urban core daycare and kindergarten site from July-December, 2021. The artist provides some notes on how to approach a residency, create site-specific art and work with the children, their teachers, care staff and the community surrounding the site. A newly coined concept of minusio, emerged over time and served as an invisible basis for art-care, in a sense the mirror(ing) of the gift of nurturing but also the lack of care—and offering a route to what human’s really desire, when they are not so busy and distracted by the banality of the world. Minusio is not an answer to lack of care; perhaps, but an aesthetic way to be with art and stones, and other materials and processes in borderspaces that may provide a ‘bridge’ for us back to the maternal, to Nature and healthy ways to exist. Using an ethical minusio principle of less is more aesthetic, the art residency was empathetically sensitive to place, and specifically to mountain crushed stones (gravel) for children and adults to bond with.

Bio

R. Micheal Fisher is a Canadian artist, researcher, author, educator (Ph.D. University of British Columbia, 2003) and independent scholar, He has had careers in nature interpretation, environmental biology, rehabilitation, family and youth therapy, school teaching and adult education. Since his teens, he has been dedicated to Life and the decolonization of his mind through arts and healing technologies. He has exhibited his art internationally, written numerous monographs on the problem of fear and is finishing a collaborative book on art-care and the value of aesthetics to develop true compassion and wisdom. He is currently Human Resources consultant to a daycare centre in Nanaimo, BC. Contact: r.michaelfisher52@gmail.com
Figure 1: Artist Walking to Daycare Residency (digitally rendered video still by R. Michael Fisher ©2021 from video by Antje Bitterberg)

Figure 2: First Assessment of the NIA Working Site (photo by R. Michael Fisher ©2021)
I approach this essay as a documentation but also a teaching, based on a five month artist residency I did at a daycare center (Nanaimo Innovation Academy, Nanaimo, BC) during 2021. I am an artist/researcher/teacher very interested in socially engaged collaborative art beyond the classroom. In particular, my place-based installation work partakes in the outdoor studio residencies conception and the dynamics of creating pop-up art galleries. Philosophically and theoretically, the entire project is underlain within a Ettingerian matrixial borderspace theory interested in the intersections of art, trauma, healing, empathy becoming compassion via the maternal relationality as care.

The approach and findings herein are fluid and not strictly linear and descriptive, nor do they create a formula for pedagogy and curriculum in such sites of residencies. My aim is to probe into some of the intricacies, enunciations and amazements that came to me during this residency. I did not systematically evaluate student outcomes from my interventions but share my field observations and speculations of what was happening, including my interactions at times with adults and the community—but mostly, including my relations with the materials and the place.

INSTEAD of trekking on some far-off exotic adventure for thrill, freedom, and proof of something one's ego would love to boast about, I went tracking in the local neighborhood (Figure 1). In their heyday these old rail tracks were the life blood of island life, often shipping out the coal that was heavily mined many decades ago that allowed this city to prosper. I like the tracks because you are in ‘no man's land’ with official signs telling you to stay off the property, for it belongs to the railroad corporation. So many transgress this law, for pleasure, and some for survival as a place to camp for the night. As a tracker, I am on extra alert in this zone and territory—where you never know who or what you are going to meet, and more so these days of economic collapse with so many people without places to live flocking to these borderspaces and zones of transgression.

Within a few blocks from the house my partner and I just moved into, I literally stumbled along the near-abandoned railway tracks that led through the urban core of Nanaimo, British Columbia (Figure 1). The tracks led me to young children playing behind a tall wood fenced-in yard. I was glad the fence was not too tall and I could see everything going on from the tracks. It looked alive with play. It sounded vibrant, happy, and inspiring. I liked the architecture of it all. As I innocuously walked around the place, on the front street side I saw a huge wooden sign on the main building, which said, “Nanaimo Innovation Academy” (NIA). A school? Upon arriving home, I looked up the organization's website. The philosophy of this small non-profit daycare and kindergarten fit with my alternative philosophy of education. Their emphasis of pedagogy was child-centered with the imperative to have children and their teachers (daycare workers) ‘follow the play’ that will lead to what children want to learn. Waldorf, Reggio and Montessori, wholistic education were banner claims of what happens at NIA. This was my curricular homing grounds of attraction and explorations dating back to becoming a certified teacher in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

To my surprise, I wanted to somehow get involved. If successful, I knew it would be a totally new and challenging experience in my life to be around such young ones. I'm 70 years old and I savor my quiet sanctu-ary spaces these days for making art, contemplation and writing.

NEXT DAY, my partner told me there was a call to participate in an Art Walk in the city. I was not much interested to show my art for a new exhibition. Yet, within 24 hrs I put one-plus-one twogether. I contacted the NIA Director and proposed two possibilities: (a) they host my art work for the Art Walk and I would
include the children’s art, both serving as a fund-raiser and promotional event for them and, (b) we do the
same as (a) but I come on site as an artist-in-residence for five months prior to the Art Walk. My concept was
to work with the community, NIA and with a basic simple material like stones, with durability and flexibility
for applications in outdoors environments. I had a few initial concepts swirling but my proposal said upfront:
“I would let the rest of the ideas and processes of creating art and teaching at NIA emerge. I approach my resi-
dencies as art-inquiry and learning rather than teaching art per se.”

I had been working with commercial grade gravel (stones) at the new rental house we had just moved into.
These stones were the basis of a spontaneous art sculpture project where I was creating a ‘Zen’ garden at the
side of the house. After the long move from one province to another, I was mentally exhausted and wanted to
do something really minimalist with my hands and the land. How could I connect with this new place? The
stones bordering the house called to me and enunciated ‘this is a place to care about.’ I sat down on the grass
and began weeding the stone bed and clearing out all debris. It was a simple aesthetic act of touching and puri-
ifying. It was also back-breaking work to bend over so much. Definitely outside my comfort zone. That physical
pain, the trying of my patience, all told me I was involved with ‘the other’ and was not just a voyeur designing
or decorating a landscape.

I had NO NAME at the time for this prac-
tice of connecting with the stones. Yet it be-
came a daily ritual for a number of weeks.
I eventually named this basic practice/
process an enactment of minusio—that
is, subtracting (minus-ing) something
as a way of making something more. I
like what plant scientist-mystic Monica
Gagliano wrote regarding a message she
received from a pine tree: “Move not, but
be moved—then everything is brought
into being at the most perfect time.” That
is an example of minusio. Ultimately, it
is a practice of art-care, where the ma-
terials I work with are respected and ex-
pected to move me beyond myself, and
in much expanded ways, rather than how I move them. The practice of connecting with place, space, time and
materials is an artistic way for me to enter the realm of the ‘sacred.’ By this I mean a convergence of my own
awareness with the consciousness of greater-than-humans in which I co-exist on this planet. The relationality
is utmost, far beyond my willful attempts to ‘create art.’ Thus, the stone bed around the house was a place of
configuring a sacred site for my own care and healing as well as for others who might visit the ‘Zen’ garden.

To my surprise the Director and the main teacher at NIA immediately went for the artist residency I proposed.
While in contemplative practice with the house installation the insight came that I could do something similar,
and maybe more, with the same kind of commercial stones at NIA. On my initial site inspection, I noticed that
NIA and many parking lots in the residential areas, used this same commercial stone base (Figure 2). I pre-
sumed it was a relatively cheap and available local material. Within a few weeks, after attaining all the security
paper work required to volunteer in a daycare, I booked a dump truck half full of local gravel to be poured onto the back end of the gravel parking lot (Figure 3)—with some 30 children and their caregivers witnessing the new visitation. My sister who moved to Nanaimo 12 years ago showed up for the stone dump. She was fascinated by my idea and couldn’t believe that I would entertain young children for five months with only a pile of gravel. I too had my doubts but trusted it would all work out.

IN PARALLEL to meditatively working with the stones at my house, I had several street encounters with “trashed” places—that is, illegal street garbage/waste dumps—many in natural areas near to where we lived. Many homeless people roamed and found refuge in the area often leaving their trash behind them. My curiosity for these nomadic neighbors in our new city was not one of blame as there are many sources for the “troubles” of homelessness, and migrancy practices. Yet, I had to be honest with myself that what arose when I encountered the “trashed” places was an anger—at the whole system of capitalism and its gross economic injustices.

As a long-time environmentalist, the real “pollution” of trashed places is a sign, a symptom, and symbol of lack of care and respect in society. It really bothered me—especially, with dumps encountered while walking in the otherwise beautiful ravines and Nature. Encountering these cultural-dump(s) in nature brought up a terror and disgust inside my soul that destabilized my own false sense of security as a ‘safely’ housed person. There was no escape from the waste and reality of a social system in crisis it represented. At times, no doubt, these toxified places reminded me that my nomadic-artist and marginalized life was also at-the-edge. And being homeless and cast-off (i.e., dumped-off the mainstream of culture) was not far away as a real probability for me because of the choices I have made to be radical critical thinker. I question everything ‘normal’ and usually conclude it is ‘insane.’ I knew I had to work with this disgust-repulsion-fear phenomenon, outside and inside myself, using art processes of inquiry. So, where was my compassion? I needed to track it and re-find it for myself.

The MOTIVATION of the “dump” truck and stone “dump” pile came from my conscious decision to repeat (and echo) the dump of stones that had already made the functional surface of NIA’s staff parking lot. This same gravel material also covered the playground inside the NIA fence. Everyone at NIA was walking, playing or driving on this everyday—taken-for-granted “dumped” material. My challenge was to make the stones (although a grade larger in size than those on the parking lot and playground) that come from blasted mountains in the local area—become also familiar and ‘match’ the expected aesthetic of the places on NIA property. The greater artistic-aesthetic challenge, however, was to bring the stones to life—animate them to be worth bonding to for the NIA community and beyond. I had to simply figure out how to make them interesting material, filled with potential for beauty and even the sacred. They deserved to stand out, catch attention and be cared for anew. Could I do this, and by what means would this happen? I had never done this before. Failure was always a reality and/or a thought travelling alongside me through the five months of this artist residency with the children and the stones. Every day I risked walking into my fear. I followed the art and unknown with care.

I was working the borderspaces in this art project literally ‘outside the fence’ of the secure grounds where children are dropped off (“dumped”) by caregivers and parents five days a week. To bring people into the borderland I invited them into an elaborate out-of-the-ordinary ceremony to bring the stones to their new ‘home’ at NIA. The staff and children participated in this ritual to create a minimalist (i.e., art via minu-sio) ‘sacred site’ for the newly dumped stones as art material. Part of the creating of sacred space was done
during my prior visits to the site. I lit candles and meditated, opening myself to what the site was ‘saying’ or possibly could ‘say.’ Ten minutes before the dump truck drove onto the site, I had the children and staff gather around a rope I had laid in a circle on the ground where the stones would be dumped. I shared a few call and response poems I had written, and then gave them a choice of picking two colored buttons each, from a bag. I invited them to put their imaginations into their hands with the buttons. They were to imagine the button in their left hand representing something they are frightened by or want to leave behind in their life; and the button in their right hand representing something they wish for to come true. Then they were given permission to throw the buttons into the circle. I said, “the Stone People would be coming in the dump truck and would bury their buttons.” In retrospect, this button ritual was likely a projection-reflection of how to release and transform my own fears and wishes for the environment and living a healthier life.

When I pointed the children in the direction of the waiting dump truck, sitting a half a block away, I told them we will have to call the truck over. So, together on the count of three we all yelled and called the truck to come over. The dump truck driver picked up on the cue and the scene was set for the next part of the ritual. The dumping itself was an art performance, a happening. The children loved the deep growl of the big truck engine, the slow tipping up of the bucket, the dust and bigness of everything to do with the truck’s dumping performance at their place of daily care. The truck dump was intended as a spectacle and at first, I was reluctant to fit it with my philosophy of the less is more. But then I remembered, the whole truck performance is a process of less is more. The gaping negative space in the truck’s box stared at all of us watching. It emptied itself. It minus-ed itself by forces greater than our own input, though we all participated in it happening. For the next five months we would respond, engage and co-inquire into what the truck had dumped out.

I PREDICTED that the children would likely run and jump on the stone pile in this ritual. So, I intervened to slow them down from that kind of rambunctious spontaneous play. As an aesthetic intervention, I disciplined and minus-ed the process of reactions and impulses they would have for playing in habitual ways. The art

Figure 4: Children Collecting Stones at The NIA Dump Site (photo by Barbara Bickel ©2021, with permission)
performance was more than just an entertainment spectacle to hype their adrenalin and let them discharge energy onto the material *en masse*.

The aesthetic *minusio* calls for an *emptying negativa* aspect\(^8\) in themselves or holding-back—that is, to minus themselves appropriately to what had actually just happened. The shift I wanted, that was possible but not guaranteed, would be for them to have an encounter interiorly from the Stone People's\(^9\) (i.e., subjective-relational) point of view—in contrast to a totally secular utilitarian point of view (i.e., objective). I was shaping their initial experience with several prompts in the ritual space, in order to have them just *be with* and *connect* with the stones for what they were in and of themselves. To establish some immediate empathy, I created an animistic-sensibility (narrative) in the ritual by telling them “the Stone People have come a long ways to be here with us; so I brought a blanket to keep them warm and quiet.” Two adults helped arrange the red cover over the pile (Figure 3).

Then, the teachers and care-givers gave them each a small container to collect a few favorite stones from the pile from the bottom edge that was not covered by the blanket (Figure 4). To close the ritual, I gave each child a surveyors coloured flag to push in around the base of the pile (Figure 3), telling them that this would “give the Stone People protection” in the next few days especially, and for the whole artist residency during the coming months. The children did this with cautionary care and zeal, thus completing the ritual. A ritual that instigated a space of integrity for the stones as well as building the sense of gratitude and required permission—I would now be able to make art and invite others into connection with the pile of stones for the next five months.

![Figure 5: Child With Collected Stones From the “Dump” Pile (photo still from video by Barbara Bickel ©2021, with permission)](image1)

![Figure 6: First Artist Installation “Following the Contours” (stone sculpture by R. Michael Fisher, colored flags by NIA children; photo by Barbara Bickel ©2021, with permission)](image2)

The first full stone pile sculpture I made played with the original contours of the ridges left by the dump truck as it moved ahead slowly, stopping a few times to spread the stones out. I had bought commercial stones which were all shades of gray but I intuited the children would probably like working with some white stones, so I bought some at a local shop and had them added into the gravel mix in the truck before dumping. The white stones immediately became “crystals” for the children as they shouted out when they found a white one for their individual collection. Influenced by their attraction to the white stones,
I echoed their magical aesthetic basis into accenting lines of the curving forms—lining them with white stones.

EVERYTHING—IS A COMMUNICATION. What quickly became apparent when spontaneously working with the materials and the children, within the art and aesthetics of this place-based project, is that the stones are communicating with the children. The children communicated back when they picked-up stones and thus accent the experience with their aesthetic choices. Their love for the white “crystals” further accents the communication and I carried it forward into the installation. The children came by and visited me working at the stone pile in the next days and weeks with their parents and care-givers when at the daycare and that began another layer of communication. I noted a finely-knit web of communicating going on—like an ecology of human-stones—and so much more that is not all understood. Communication is not mere exchange of information—it is memory and meaning and re-creating communality—that is, relationality on all levels, material to spiritual. I often found myself journaling at the stone site caught up in lingering poetic phrases and fragments. Following traces of all the connections that were happening whether I was physically present or not—this kept me attuned to the whole as well as the particular.

POETIC and reflective writing filled several of my project journals, and after a few months, ideas were stirring from having several encounters with the stones, the NIA children and passers-by in the neighborhood. I wrote (journal entry, August 24, 2021):

If people don’t come to the [stone] dump, that is children and their care-givers, as they seem reluctant to come by, then I’ll bring the children to the “dump” to hang around “trash.”

I’m now sketching an image from my head where the dump creates itself the ‘child’ image...Creation itself—if you think about it, the Big Bang—it’s a story of a dump—of energy/heat/matter in concentration—intensity—moving outward to less intensity—and not always in nice neat clinical order—it’s more a dump(ing)—called an expanding Universe.

What can I see? What am I disgusted to not see at a dump? Am I also doing this with the Universe and its excesses? Is that what modern humans are doing? How will we ever feel at home—here—in this place?—happening?

An early theme arose while I was working at the stone pile in the first month, whereby I noticed how people observe what is going on in their community on the land, or how they do not. NIA staff typically would drive into the parking lot and not look over at the art being made. It was a challenge for me to build-in and attract curiosity and engagement, when virtually everyone seemed to be going somewhere fast—too fast. They did not have the head-space, the band-width, to include art happening(s) in their workplace parking lot, at least, not in the form I brought upon them. No doubt, myself and the stones were somewhat alien strangers. The community passers-by were often more intrigued and talked, curious to know what I was doing. I wondered: How can I help NIA create a more “Invitational” curriculum and culture as an organization so that people and the children of NIA would want to come and participate in the emerging and changing stone sculptures and/or just come and talk with me as the artist in residence?

Looking for other-than-human engagement with the stones to help create more human engagement I turned to a soil/mulch dump site of left-over organic material left at the end of the parking lot from a year ago. I
began incorporating the mulch into the stone pile sculpture(s) to accent, through contrast, a soft-path-way into and away from the stone pile. Many people walked this path as an organic mediator to approach the sculpture center piece. I thought it would slow people down and lure them to travel in a more winding natural flow, rather than the typical way of walking from A to B in a straight line.

Ideally, they might take off their shoes and socks, and walk with bare feet on the soil towards the dump. Art can be a great way to slow people down in general and move them into a place of calm and contemplation. I personally, did not see a lot of this, but I could see the foot prints left in the mulch and the wearing down of the stone pile sculptures from those who visited the site when I was not there.

At SOME POINT early on, to attract people I figured out how to use the hand-made planter boxes already on this borderland site near the outdoor free library box (Figure 2), to possibly inspire others to make art with the stones. I began a series of sculptures in the boxes, leaving them unfinished, to serve as prompts (Figure 9). The dark soil ground was aesthetically pleasing to place stones on top of. Several people in the community did work in the plant boxes, mostly when I was not there on site. Upon reflection, I think the plant box installations were effective interventions for “invitation” to the community-at-large because they were more like working on a ‘chalkboard’ or in a less daunting small frame. Teaching art for years has shown me that most people like the box or frame and fixed borders. In contrast, the stone dump pile did not have that comforting containing aesthetic and scale.

People did walk over the stones, but at times did anyone make art with the stones on the dump pile itself, although at one point someone walked up and pissed on the stone sculpture in the night. Communication with the stones and the art can come in all forms, not all of them welcome. Some of them toxic. In response to people leaving cigarette butts in the stones I created a poem and had a sign made to respond to the defilement of the stone pile (Figure 8). Not long after, I installed the sign in the stone installation these disturbing communications stopped. This inspired me to make more signs as part of the stone pile creations. painted at home in my studio at the same time that I was attending to the stone pile.

This became a series of large gray-scale paintings where I created compositions based on my experiences at NIA with the children and in the community. I also made the painting (Figure 10) with the basic design of...
leaving a section in the painting for the children to work directly on in the gray and black rectangular spaces (10 in. X 10 in.). I was curious to see what the children would produce in markings as ‘conversation’ upon seeing my painting and having had many experiences with me and the stones over the course of the residency. I don’t know for sure what they experienced but I do know what 3-5 years old children will do when they get space and are given a few pencil crayons and told: “You can make whatever you want in this space.”
I informed them their art and mine will be shown together in the Art Walk. Participating in the Nanaimo Art Walk 2021, I was able to link NIA to the city and the local art community “Hecate Street” is the street name address of NIA in Nanaimo where the daycare is located and where these children spend so many hours of their life.

The day when I brought my art piece to the daycare the painting was laid on the ground. Children, two at a time, were invited to pick their choice of drawing instruments (from a *minusio* palette): black, gray, and white pencil crayons; in keeping with the characteristically gray-scale schema of each of the paintings and the stones which were of these muted colors as well (Figure 11). The exceptional color in Figure 10 on the main subject (the artist’s tennis shoes) was unique—and, that has a longer story behind it. Basically, the children were given markers and allowed to draw freely all over my body—that is, on the white sneakers, lab coat and hat that I wore on the first encounters with them at the daycare inside the fence. I wore this transformed clothing whenever I went on site inside or outside, so that children and adults all learned to recognize “my costume.” The children spontaneously began to consistently call me “Artist” (Figure 12).

Figure 13 is a small portion of the large painting. This depicts an area of intense drawing the children made, often drawing on top of each other’s drawing. Analyzing their art response to the painting was a fascinating process as part of my inquiry. The children at times echoed parts of the painting with subtle drawings but mostly they marked fast and heavily (especially the boys) with a seeming interest to make powerful marks on a very big painting. I felt they really were claiming their territory—with me. They seemed “fearless” to express their unique co-participation with “the artist.”
I have come to FRAME everything I was doing during the residency as *minusio* aesthetics in the register of the affective domain that moves beyond simple concepts and words. I felt I was in the midst of *art-care* from the Stone People and the land, air—everything, at this *borderland* site.\(^{12}\) I felt emplaced and nourished—at home. All beings, visible and invisible were involving themselves as I was inviting them to play and make with me. These were intimate “imaginary companions,” as child psychologists and philosophers have recently been studying.\(^ {13}\) These companions were of a kind that was new to me. They were offering me more than what adult humans were able and willing to.

An emergent *art-care* also took me by surprise again and again coming from the children at NIA. This descriptive article can barely pass forward the embodied “zoomed” soul experiences I had when on the ground face-to-face with the children in various playful and often spontaneous encounters. There is some spirit in the eyes of a child that truly I could only call now, “light” although that is so not meant to be romantic, new agey, or love—or such other projections of notions.

Maybe it is just a mystery what transpired body-to-body, eye-to-eye, and “zoomed” is the term that I used to tell myself and others what happened today at the day care. I needed to tell this story as it was certainly a major part of the artist residency in terms of connectivity, communicative warmth and what brought me a joyous meaningfulness, laughter and tears from time to time. I am so grateful to this mystery.

In stark contrast, a passivity on the adults’ part disturbed me at times throughout the residency and was never resolved. I probably took it too personally. I needed to be better prepared for it. But because it was my first time working in this kind of setting and with such young children and professional day care workers; it “shocked” me a bit. I found myself not able to really connect across a divide—invisible but real—and thus was not able to talk to the teachers and staff the way I wished. Why? One reason was that doing a residency...
such as this was brand new to them, but more so, what was hard to witness was how there is so little time in the day for anything but the basic care of children, from the 8:30 am drop-off to 5 pm pick-up. The adults seemed mostly rather speeded up and harried from the vantage point of the art-site in the borderlands and my slowed down aesthetic space/practice. I had empathy for their dilemma.

Artists in residence may have the intention of slowing down busy parents and care-givers and daycare workers lives to engage with the aesthetic; but to be able to design art co-inquiries and interventions with social engagement in the sacred time of borderspaces, one may find themselves stumbling and unable to even begin to think of how to be co-creative with this fast-paced life-style. I found \textit{minusio} to be helpful to get in touch with an aesthetic compassion greater than myself. This allowed me to be less judgemental than I might otherwise.

THE ONLY \textit{CURA} for my despair about the shortage of curiosity and attention available for the art-care transmission (sharing), came through the symbol of ‘the Mother’ (Figure 14). The dominant Western culture’s fast productive tempo, and other cultural strict legal rules, habits and taboos make people so fearful to encounter the full intimacy, vulnerability and joy of both art-care and ‘the Mother’—and Nature. I wanted to show with this symptom that the mothering going on in the child care center and in the parking lot art project were signs of what our dominant society worldview does with mother-love and the gift of care from mother-earth-making. At the same time, this Mother was a reminder of possibility, of new birth of preciousness still—always, even in these dark times of a world going into major cascading crises of great consequences and a lot of suffering and death.

This LAST SIGN that emerged was powerful for me. I left it up on the site for a few months, even when I had officially finished the residency. It now lays in my basement, as I don’t know what to do with it next. It was a sad sign to create and install on the site because it is (in a way) rather a parody on art-care and mothering in today’s world—yes, so it says, “Mother is present” \textit{and} is \textit{absent} (aka: it’s only a sign). Absent mother(ing) on the one hand is real and has consequences for bonding and love in today’s societies; albe- it, mothers \textit{per se} are not the problem—the problem is systemic, economic, and the result of living in a rather violent culture of fear of consumerism and materialism. My use, of what I now call \textit{minusio}, as a basis for art-care is in a sense mirror(ing) the lack, the absence, of what human’s really desire. So, \textit{minusio} is not an answer,
perhaps, but an aesthetic way to be with art and stones, and other materials and processes in borderspaces that may provide a 'bridge' for us back to Nature and natural ways—back to the rhythm of Gaia, Herself, Mother Earth.

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Thanks to Dr. Barbara Bickel for her support with many of the ideas, photo documentation and discussions about the emerging installations and advice on how to make art collaborative and socially engaged. I was inspired by and initiated into the Gestare Art Collective during the time of this artist-residency, which gave me a deeper grounding in mother-care aesthetics as an ontological and ethical approach to art-making, human development and community-care. And lastly but not least, I offer thanks to my sign-maker Ryan Cullen, who offered his talents and wood supplies many times to enhance the ‘messaging from the stones.’

References

Endnotes

1 E.g., see socially engaged art/teaching approach of Bickel (2015). The simple definition of how I understand socially engaged art is that the foundational “material” of my art practice is social experience, based in “relational ontologies” (e.g., Thayer-Bacon, 2017) and steeped in an ongoing interchange of communications with the social sphere—in this case the NIA community and the larger community of the place in which NIA is situated in the inner urban core district of a city.

2 The residency studio as a site of co-inquiry is exemplified in the work of Jordan and Bickel (2021).

3 I am referring mostly to the borderspacing conception in artist, theorist and psychoanalyst Bacha Ettinger’s (2005) work.

4 I only arrived at the concept minusio (a name I coined) some eight months after the start of the NIA residency. This emergent term was derived from my study of and experience with the negative philosophies and theories, like minimalism in art history, but with less stylistic need to remove ‘the artist’s imprint’ on a piece of art. I find that kind of minimalism still too self-centered in its focus to remove the artist and simplify. I was after a natural negation process that was a minus-ing so as to allow for something much larger to arrive, and to do so unpredictably, but to be socially engaged art the whole time. One question that accompanies minusio aesthetics, is how can I as an artist remove something that builds a bond-deeper-stronger and, even eternal between artist, art materials and viewers and/or co-participant? I have since developed an elaborate theorizing about minusio which is detailed and technical beyond the scope of this essay.

5 See Art-Care Practice of Restoring the Communal (2023) B. Bickel and R.M. Fisher.

6 “Homeless” people is a controversial term for many, and I use the term for myself in actuality—as a nomadic artist. So, I do not see it as absolutely negative and meant to be demeaning as if claimed by someone of privileged capitalistic-resourced status (which I do not have). My feelings of disgust related to dump-sites that are toxic is a feeling that comes from my life experiences of people and greater-than-human beings treated as unworthy of the best care that ought to be given to them. I am talking about “polluting” implicitly throughout and along-side with notions of “dumping.” I find that a creative good space for inquiry and art-care and its lack thereof.

7 “Failure” may sound too strong and negative, and even at times implicitly I may sound blaming of those ‘others’ whom I critique as having not given much artistic or attentive value to the art/inquiry conducted during the residency. I would not personalize my use of that term totally, even if I refer to “my” failure to achieve the ideal aims I had for the residency. Rather, in a collective context, I use the term here and in my other past works, of discerning and documenting the “collapse” of many living systems—ecological, social, economic, etc. that are currently pervading everything that is happening. In that context of collapsing cascading crises, yes, “failure” is not unreasonable to imply and claim. My point of use is, that humanity, largely since leaving our Indigenous primal ways some 10,000 years ago, has failed to care-enough for Life. I am not the only one that has declared this phenomenon and ontological universal reality since the early 1960’s with, for example, Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring as the iconic recognition of disaster/failure coming. Ideally, with extra-sensitivity, I might have involved everyone relating to the residency experiences to have a ‘voice’—that is, in a pluralistic, inductive, co-constructing their own individual meanings (ontologically) of what was going on—beyond my labeling some generic phenomena. To have done that inductive research systematically, was far outside my time budget and my focus of major concerns in this residency.

8 There are many references in Buddhism and (mystical) nondual philosophy traditions that I have studied and at times practiced which foreground the importance of emptying; in relation to this Matthew Fox has taught me about the theological tradition of the via negativa (apophatic) path as “the way” to the Divine (e.g., Fox, 1986); in my own 33 years of research and spiritual-educational practice of transformation I utilize “fearlessness” as the major apophatic way for recovery, healing and liberation (e.g., see Fisher, 2010; and Fisher and Kumar, 2021).

9 As part of the post-colonial and post-humanist philosophy I brought into this project/residency, I am interested in the Indigenous worldview (e.g., Four Arrows, 2016) as a pan-Indian perspective of general ethical-interbeing transmission of values and behaviors that work with Nature, not against it. The “stones” were Nature and thus, I was working to shape an aesthetic-sacred experience of stones as having dignity, rights and worth in their existence just because they exist; in this case, stones are that substance and spirt of value, as they are factually the mountains here in the local area (even if blown-up and fragmented so violently by human activity and capitalist extraction economies). Unconsciously or not, my view was that children will feel empathy with the stones and what the mountains have been through—in a traumatic way—to arrive at the place of NIA—a new home. In the ritual with NIA, I called them “Stone People”—echoing the general Indigenous philosophy and ethical understanding that all things require status as ancestors and/or as equal beings to humans. I have read of these labels in some Indigenous-based literature and seen in documentaries—of the language use where “people” is not just to signify humans.
Aesthetically and artistically, working in only black and white (gray scale) was majorly challenging and part of the minusio application for the entire project. Color was minus-ed from these pieces as much as possible—and, indeed, I found that something more was created in impact. One really needs to feel this ‘more’ when standing in front of all three large paintings in the series. In Figure 10, the use of color was intentional in order to ‘match’ the memory of the NIA children drawing with color markers on my white lab coat, hat, sneakers, in the early weeks of the residency. I wanted to honor their marks and use of colors, but also on one sneaker in the painting it turns into a gray scale so the children would see how that is actually done in a painting. None of them really noticed, as far as I can tell.

Art-Care is a term recently coined by Barbara Bickel and myself (both founders of Studio M*)—see the development of theory and practices in detail in the forthcoming book Bickel and Fisher (2023).

I draw for inspiration from Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorizing on “borderlands theory” (a good summary is Naples, 2010).

Gopnik’s (2009) discussion of “counterfactual people” and “imaginary companions” gives one a whole new meaning to the evolutionary significance of childhood and this thinking process and befriending that goes on in imaginal spaces for most children—and, with dreamers, poets, writers, film directors, etc.