IN/VISIBILITY OF THE ABANDONED SCHOOL:
BEYOND REPRESENTATIONS OF SCHOOL CLOSURE

by

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Abstract

This research is an artistic form of inquiry in which knowledge is generated from a closed school because it is a de-institutionalized and de-commissioned place that has not yet legally been re-zoned, re-sold, or repurposed. Much of the research on the topic of school closure suggests that its aftermath wreaks havoc on cities and neighborhoods. The abandoned school, marginalized and forgotten, enters into a process of neglect and decline (Chambers, 2007). This research demonstrates how acts of ‘re-territorialization’ (Smith, 2010) in the context of the socio-political state of the closed school, holds pedagogical possibility.

To complete this project, I photographed multiple closed schools in cities across Canada and I spoke with principals, students, board directors, faculty, and community members about their experiences with school closure. For one of the final stages of my inquiry, I projected images of the inside of the decommissioned school onto the outside’s physical structure and invited the public, community members who experienced the closure of the school, to take part in an immersive experience in which they could project their own stories and imaginations onto the artwork. Encounters with the abandoned school are brought forward in five ‘concessions,’ articulated here as a virtual spatial practice that explores the abandoned school through photographic images and text, provoking readers/viewers to (re)imagine relationships between space, time, place, and memory.

I articulate how this inquiry acts as an intervention — an experience that occurs because of art and because of the artist who is working as a catalyst within the context of the everyday. Drawing attention to the architecture of the closed school as an archive — a repository of memories (both individual and collective) that has been locked off from the community in which it exists, the abandoned school brings forth a possibility (however partial) to (re)construct, (re)store, and (re)present stories of the past with our own existing narratives.

Conceptualized as a work of art, this exegesis challenges the more traditional dissertation structure. Rather than answering or advancing a hypothesis, it asks that you look at artistic inquiry in a new way, perhaps even provoking a shift in thought itself.
Figure P.1, *The Force of the Abandoned School, 2014*
Documentation of the exhibition *Teaching Material*, the Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory Gallery at the University of British Columbia. Curated by Michaela Rife & Sofía Stalner.
Preface

This dissertation required the approval of the University of British Columbia’s Behavioral Research Ethics Board. The site-specific installation entitled, “In/Visibility of the Abandoned School” was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate #H13-01019.

Portions of concession 5 have been published previously in:

An abbreviated version of this project has been published in:

Select photographs from this research have been exhibited in Teaching Material (March, 2014) at the Art History Visual Art Theory (AHVA) Gallery in the Audain Art Centre: University of British Columbia (Figure P.1), as well as The Performing Arts-Based Research Conference (May, 2013), University of British Columbia: Vancouver, BC, and Art Educators as Artists, (March, 2012) USSEA, National Art Education Association conference in New York, NY.

All visual quotations represented in this dissertation have been reprinted with permission of the artists.
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For my mum and dad,

Because it wasn’t for nothing
Concession 1

THE

VOID

“The void, the place that is empty and waiting…”

(Derrida, 1978, p. 233)
Artistic Statement

This project explores the ongoing work of becoming an arts-based researcher through the processes and practices of photography that open artistic, autobiographic, conceptual, and theoretical sites of inquiry. Inspired by the recent work of Dónal O’Donoghue (2009, 2011, 2015) and Graeme Sullivan (2010, 2011, 2014), I emphasize emerging theories and philosophies of contemporary art while drawing attention to how meaning is made in the production of the artwork and in encounters that the artwork provokes. I seek to make visible some of the critical, reflective, and reflexive processes that my art practice makes possible, inviting you, the viewer/reader to entertain a similar mode of being in which curiosity and wonder create a space for emergence.

Using Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of the ‘nothing’ to frame this project, I explore how my photographic practice, as a mode of inquiry, helps me to engage in a more fulfilled way of being. Abandonment, in Heideggerian terms means to leave this world for an unknown world. For example, when the deceased abandon this world, leaving it and us behind, being towards the ‘nothing’ allows us to be with those that have abandoned this world. Photographing the abandoned school allows me to be with the ‘nothing,’ provoking me to wonder about the very nature of my being by entertaining the possibility of not being. Although it is uncertain whether the photograph saves the abandoned school from slipping into oblivion (vergessenheit), or forgottenness, it does help to reveal the thingness of the abandoned school, which as a paradox, is not a thing per say, yet it is also not ‘nothing.’

As an exploration of Being, Martin Heidegger’s work is imperative to this project. Entering the discussion in the pages to follow are Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida, two thinkers who were highly influenced by the work of Heidegger and the topic of Being.
Allowing my art practice to lead the inquiry, I am less concerned with answering predetermined questions than I am with “generating new insights that are not easily available through verbal modes” (O’Donoghue, 2011, p. 640). In the process, I am also contributing to ways in which art practice can be conceptualized as a mode of research that makes use of “inventive forms whose uniqueness is best seen as connected to, but distinct from, traditional systems of inquiry” (Sullivan, 2011, p. 100).

This study situates practice-led inquiry as a way of working that enables reflection in and through practice. Working in this manner creates possibilities for exploring the relations between theory and practice, presence and absence, the visual and the textual, the finite and the infinite, the visible and the invisible, the permanent and the impermanent, and the beautiful and the grotesque. Practice-led research, although sometimes used interchangeably with creative practice as research, practice-based research, and studio research (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Haseman & Mafe, 2009), emphasizes a mode of inquiry in which “the questions which are researched are questions which arise in practice” (Wall, 2012, p. 278). Similar to the practice of a/r/tography (see Irwin & deCosson, 2004; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008), it is framed by a continual process of questioning where understanding is not predetermined, and where artistic, theoretical and educational interests are consistently challenged so that, as a practitioner, I not only work, but thrive in uncertainty and ambiguity. Situating myself as a learner, I am committed to ongoing inquiry in and through time (Irwin, 2008) and I am inspired by inventive engagements that contemporary art practices make possible, creating potentialities for feeling the relation of “what is yet unknown” (Triggs, Irwin, & O’Donoghue, 2014, p. 253). As such, I move in and out of comfortable ways of thinking and being, sometimes finding myself in vulnerable situations where my understandings are made to shift, to move, and to rupture.
Figure 1.1, Visual Abstract, 2015
Three perspectives of The Void (Tetraptych)
Photography by the author
Post-Dream Longing

In the context of history, culture, politics, philosophy, and art, abandonment is a rich and evocative concept (Armstrong, 2011; Caraher, 2010; Dewar & Manning Thomas, 2013; Povinelli, 2011; Valdivia, 2013). It does not simply refer to things that have been discarded; it makes reference to the objects, the places, and/or the people that have been left behind (Carswell, 2012). In the text, *Landscapes of Abandonment: Capitalism, Modernity and Estrangement*, social theorist Roger Solerno (2003) defines abandonment as “the estrangement from home” (p. 157). This idea implies a separation, or a detachment between people and place, and as such, holds an ability to incite a powerful source of human anxiety. When I was a child, I listened, captivated, by my Mother’s stories about her past and the razing of the tenement building where she grew up in the Gorbals, in Glasgow, Scotland, ‘the slums’ as they are so often called. The loss of her home was great. In 2007, I had the opportunity of traveling to Scotland with my Mother, and we went to the site where her tenement building once stood — now, just a small fenced in area with green grass. We also traveled to where her elementary and secondary schools once were, but are no longer. Both just empty stretches of field located on the side of busy avenues. When we visited these places, from her memory, my Mother recalled where these buildings once stood with a distant glow in her eyes. It wasn’t until later in our journey when we went to *The Peoples’ Palace*, a museum in historic Glasgow Green dedicated to telling the story of the city and its residents, did I encounter the significance that these (invisible) places held for my Mother. On exhibit, was the interior of a tenement building, a small box-like room not much bigger than a pantry, furnished with a small stove, a sink, a table, and two beds. Pointing to the bed on the left, or rather, a shelf-like platform indented from the wall only a couple of inches from the sink, my Mother informed me, “That’s where my parents slept.” Pointing to the bed on the right, she
continued, “That’s where I slept, with your uncle James in the middle, and your auntie Mary on
the right. There was no bathroom, of course, we had to go down a flight of stairs to the
communal toilet outside—” My Mother’s voice cut out, stopped short by a flood of tears.
Motionless, I watched as her body heaved up and down from a strong surge of emotions that
erupted from somewhere deep inside of her. Being inside, even if only a replica of the tenement
that my Mother once knew, evoked a strong surge of emotions that were still tied to this place —
long lost, but not forgotten.

For Salerno (2003), “separation from place is the story of modern capitalism” (p. 157). For
my Mother, it is a story of displacement and of familial and communal loss. Exiled to
Easterhouse after the razing of her tenement building, my Mother not only experienced a
separation from place, but an uprooting of native soil and a banishment from a way of living. She
experienced a loss manifested by nostalgia and a severing of social continuity and collective
history. The (demolished) tenement building has become a symbol of her vanished past and her
vanishing ties with a place that she still refers to as ‘home,’ even after having lived in Montreal
for over 45 years. Solorno (2003) argues that this form of loss is best understood as a dream in
which the dreamer desires to return to the place that no longer exists, provoking a “post-dream
longing” (p. 160).

Although my childhood was not filled with such loss, trauma, or separation, I did however,
frequently search for places where I could be alone. Places where I could experience a physical
state of solitude; places where I could withdraw, dream, imagine, and think. As a child, I often
went on long bicycle rides looking for remote, hidden worlds. I would lose (and try to lose)
myself in the woods that became a place for adventure and escape. Searching for abandoned
places in my adulthood has become an extension of a way of being that came so naturally to me
as a child. Searching out abandoned places in the landscape replaces the commonplace with the uncanny, the boring with the magical, the loud with the quiet, the expected with the unexpected, the regulated with the unregulated, the ‘normal’ or the ‘sterile,’ with the strange and the fecund. Since the late nineteen-nineties, my artwork has explored the concept of abandonment in which, fascinated by the effect that weathering processes have on the built environment, I have literally produced hundreds of photographs of abandoned buildings that punctuate the landscape as they stand mid-collapse. These photographs, in turn, have inspired many, if not all of my large-scale oil paintings.

As part of my master’s degree, I engaged in an art-based inquiry that examined the relationship between my roles as a painter and a photographer by documenting and analyzing several acts of re-creating a photograph in paint. This endeavor not only revealed the relationship that, as a painter, I have with my source imagery, it juxtaposed several points of view as a way of exploring the relativity of my experience(s) as well as the dialectical relationship between the two media that have constituted my art practice since I was a child. My studio inquiry revealed that the photograph captures a moment, while the painting allows me to reflect on that moment, to re-create it and to extend it, providing me with an opportunity to see my subject through multiple lenses and various frames of reference. Producing a dialogue between the two media established that neither the photograph nor the painting was a higher standard. If my intention were to ‘copy’ the photograph, then the photograph would be perceived as an ideal that the painting was attempting to duplicate. But where space and time was concerned, there was a give and take, and a push and pull between the two media in and through practice. This became most evident as I worked towards the painting and away from the photograph. As simple as it sounds: I realized that the painting changes things and edits things because it can and because some
things work better as a painting while some things work better as a photograph. Entitling the project “Beauty in Abandonment,” I wanted to emphasize the vibrant colours, the rich textures, and the unique compositions that are easily overlooked in abandoned buildings, in forsaken objects, and in materials such as rusted aluminum shingles, rotten wood, and other various decaying residues that cause structures to fall down, break apart, or become overgrown due to time, neglect, weather, or the land’s unrelenting shift and movement. However, the title also drew attention to the major finding of my research — that during the painting process, I abandon the photograph for the sake of the painting.

Engaging in this project, I discovered that the term ‘abandonment’ is not synonymous with the terms depravity or derelict, nor is it necessarily associated with debauchery, indulgence, lavishness or squandering. Through my artistic practice, I have come to understand abandonment as a course of action, as a conscious act of surrender, and as an act of reclamation that can become an important tool for understanding the self and for the meanings that are made in relation to place and to artistic practice. Abandonment in the traditional sense, places the individual on the outside, removed from the very position that is required for reaching an understanding. Instead, rendering ‘abandonment’ as a conscious operation allows for an attunement to the temporal features of a place and/or a thing, that can become a provocation for thinking beyond nostalgia, beyond melancholy, and beyond the romantic (or empty aesthetic), enabling an anomalous or embodied experience where new understandings pertaining to the self can be made in relation to the places and/or things that are simultaneously engaged in a state of transition, while placing emphasis on agency as an inherent quality of the ‘in-between.’
Figure 1.2, *White Space(s)*, 2015
*The Void in parts* (Diptych)
Photography by the author
A (Virtual) Spatial Practice

If, following artist and cultural critic Jane Rendell (2010), ‘site-writing’ is a mode of criticism that aims to “put the sites of engagement with art first” (p. 1), then this work aims to put photographic practices, from the perspective of the artist first. Graeme Sullivan (2010) argues “one of the tasks involved in promoting art practice as research is to reconsider what it is that artists do” (p. 76). For Sullivan, the practices and processes of being an artist, which includes taking on various roles such as theorist, philosopher, researcher, curator, and art writer, requires an examination of the art production from the perspective of the individual making the art. The artist, therefore, refrains from being “a silent participant” leaving the relevance of their art for others to interpret (Sullivan, 2010, p. 76).

In conducting close readings of artworks, Rendell (2010) positions critique as a spatial practice capable of exploring the material, the emotional, the political and the conceptual sites of a critic’s engagement with art. ‘Site-writing’ takes into consideration its site-specificity by proposing alternate positions and interpretations of art ‘architecturally’ through the interdisciplinary meeting points of narrative, theory, history, conceptual art practices and art criticism. Informed by Rendell’s work, this project brings together art and writing, shifting the focus from the artwork, as an objective artifact, to the spaces between the artist, the artwork, and the viewer. By bringing together the written and the visual, this work is situated as a spatial practice, or rather a ‘spatial morphology’ (Stein, 1989; Trigg, 2012). It is intended to provoke an interpretation and to produce “a shift in thought itself” (Bolt, 2007, p. 29). Unlike a thesis, this exegesis is not designed to answer, address, create, or advance a hypothesis nor is it meant as an explanation of the artwork. Rather, it “helps to critique or give direction to theoretical ideas” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxix), and it asks that you look at the photograph and think about
photography in a different way. My intention in working in this manner is to produce a multi-sensorial engagement where the potential for relationships and meaning making remain open, fluid, and unfixed.

Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, Barbara Bolt (2007) argues that artistic practice enables a particular form of ‘sight’ also known as ‘circumspection’. Through drawing, painting, sculpting, or as what will be demonstrated here — through writing and photography — the ‘new’ is given reigns to emerge. As such, practice-led research is a mode of engagement that disrupts — producing feelings of instability (and at times insecurity), it is something that can only be understood belatedly as a form of retrospection (Stewart, 2007).
Figure 1.3, Unfixed, 2015

The Void coming un-done (Triptych)

Photography of the author
Figure 1.4, Unhinged, 2015
The Void in movement (Diptych)
Photography by the author
A Cabinet of Curiosity

The wonderkammer, located in the intersection of the collection, the monument, and the domestic interior, is a cabinet of *curiosité* from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It shares similarities with the *Kunstkammern*, room-sized collections of art or other intriguing objects, personal and idiosyncratic collections that predate contemporary public museums while also helping to lay the foundation of contemporary installation practices (Suderberg, 2000). Fabricated as a virtual space, this exegesis dis/orders space while altering surfaces. Like a wonderkammer, it is a collection of things that rather than being chosen for their historical or monetary worth, have been selected for their evocative qualities — as intriguing “wonders of the world” (Suderberg, 2000, p. 7). Once inside the abandoned school as wonderkammer, you may encounter things that are not normally regarded as being aesthetically pleasing, things that may appear overly ambiguous or excessive. As a cabinet of curiosity, it is somewhat an interdisciplinary hybrid that lacks homogeneity. Its power resides in the uncontrolled imagination that, as a (virtual) space, it makes possible. As such, it is an offering, where you are invited to enter inside the abandoned school, a compilation of the sixteen closed schools that I visited and documented as part of this research project. However, the geographical location of each place is intentionally withheld. In the words of cultural educator Tim Edensor (2005), “the arguments of this [exegesis] would be less pertinent if they were accompanied by this superfluous geographical information” (p. 7).

Organized as a ‘topological configuration’ (Rendell, 2010), it is divided into five concessions. Concessions refer to the right to use land or property for a specific purpose, they are normally granted by the government or other controlling body. Each concession, sounding both like ‘session’ and ‘confession,’ is a written and visual act of disclosure, leading you into a
different, yet relational world. Each concession holds a specific vantage point, perspective, and employment of space and time. Weaving together theoretical interpretations, journal entries, observations, and images, each concession is rhizomatically (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) connected as to remain partial, yet relational to one another. Each one, framed by a concept that emerged during my inquiry, allows the collection to resist a chronological or linear ordering system. Although ‘session,’ may evoke a psychotherapeutic appointment, where a patient is asked to reveal their innermost fears, thoughts, and feelings, a ‘confession,’ shares similarities with Derrida’s essay entitled “Circumfession,” a literary genre that “provides a space to construct an identity that is rooted, in part, in an individual’s public persona” (Richards, 2008, p. 25).
Taking spatial form, each concession is an opening, a fragment, and an experience that invites you into the abandoned school where you may encounter the ambiguous and the changing relations of the work. Taking place between the private and the public, the work parallels other situation-based artworks found in many 21st century art practices where, as a reader/viewer, you are invited to become an active participant of the work. This format is intentionally meant to challenge the more traditional dissertation structure while challenging preconceptions of an artist from that of a sole creator, to an artist/collaborator or even co-labourer (Irwin, 2013).
Entering the abandoned school, you will at times, encounter images that are overexposed, blurred, or intimately close-up. You are invited to navigate the myriad, fragmented and fragile ways as they are offered to you. For some, these impressions may have a hallucinatory quality, for others, they may trigger partial, mixed or intermediary recollections of past memories or experiences, calling forth your own series of inner images or sensations to come forth. In any case, you are invited to entertain these ‘unmoorings’ (Farr, 2012) — especially if perforated, raw or formless.
This form of engagement presents an alternate model of schooling, an undertaking that becomes more exploratory and more akin to a daydream. The abandoned school calls for meandering and for a sideways kind of thinking. It welcomes invention, where you are invited to create your own content, subject or curriculum.²

² Once inside the abandoned school, you may feel disjointed or disoriented — sometimes even abandoned. This asks that as a reader/viewer, you entertain a similar mode of being that practice-led research and artistic inquiry demands. This stance, or disposition, asks that you remain open to ideas and concepts as they emerge and that you create your own ways of making meaning. Tim Ingold (2011) refers to this stance as ‘wayfinding’ while Robyn Stewart (2007) posits as a process of ‘orienteering.’ In any case, as a labyrinth of ideas, the abandoned school is a place where you can become lost (and found).
Inside the abandoned school, you may encounter an aura of authority. As a highly structured and compartmentalized place, it may require that you work within the constraints of the architecture — that you work within the so-called ‘proverbial box.’ However, the abandoned school also invites you to become a delinquent to the system. Inviting you to explore some of the things that may have been forbidden in the past due to the rules and the regulations that schools can be known to enforce.
As a surreal place, it renders school as a mysterious, unknown, and scary universe that may even conjure the ghosts and the monsters that lurked in your nightmares and imaginations as a child. Focusing on the presence of absence, it is an invitation for your subconscious and your psyche to roam free. Will ‘breaking the rules’ liberate feelings tied to such a place? Will it disrupt the bondage, the habit, the custom, or the politics that are inherent with/in it? The abandoned school combines the things that we can’t always put into words — things that are kept hidden — things that may even continue to haunt us and/or places.
Creating intersections between dreams and reality, memory and imagination, authority and dissent, the abandoned school may present a disorienting, or even hallucinatory experience, provoking illusions and/or things that don’t necessarily speak to reason (Greene, 1990, cited by Pinar, 2009). It may even provoke you to conjure things that do not make sense. As such, it is an invitation for you to focus on the affect that this experience provokes — to the “monstrum,” the subterranean, or the unusual phenomena that lie beneath the surface of existence (Pinar, 2009, p. 124; 190).
Figure 1.5, *Cabinet of Curiosité*, 2015
The Visual Void (11 images)
Photography by the author
Figure 1.6, Dead Zone(s), 2015
The Void in the landscape (Photo-grid) with photography by the author
The Deindustrial Sublime

As an artist, I have always been drawn to the abandoned. To empty lots, boarded up homes, buildings that have fallen into disrepair. Places that are sinking into the land, or alternately standing tall like shadowy ghosts. In these sites, foundations are crumbling, driveways and yards are overgrown with weeds, and windows sit vacant like hollow eye sockets. Growth is lodged between cracks, bordering walls and ledges, and literally trying to fill every crevice in its way. There are holes in fences, broken shards of glass, wet, rotten and moldy materials; peeling paint and objects scattered haphazardly. Locks are hacked with while cobwebs linger on doorknobs and in corners. Graffiti covers walls in layers painted over (and under) each other like a palimpsest.

My preferred subject matter is abandoned architecture because it is a reflection of economic, cultural, and political history. My practice, informed by the discourses of deindustrialization (Cowie & Heathcott, 2003; High & Lewis, 2007), urban exploration (Garrett, 2009; 2010; van der Hoorn, 2009), and the aesthetics of decay (Edensor, 2005; Trigg, 2006), demonstrate my fascination of towns and cities in North America, where major mines, mills, and factories sit boarded up, desolate and falling apart. These places, once a proud image of human progress and modernity, have become symbols for deindustrialization. They generate insight towards understanding a country’s economic situation and they testify to the inability of the working class to control the forces that are at work within the economy (High & Lewis, 2007). Deindustrialization refers to a widespread withdrawal of investment in which working people have borne witness to the decline of an industrial order, to the dissolution of their society, their culture, their way of life, and the betrayal of trust towards owners, investors, and corporate officers whose decisions have “shaped their fate” (Cowie & Heathcott, 2003, p. 5).
The ‘deindustrial sublime’ (High & Lewis, 2007) is a term used to describe the places that have become synonymous with the expressions “no-man’s land” (High & Lewis, 2007, p. 8) and “dead zones” (Edensor, 2005, p. 13). In the discourse of art and aesthetics they are commonly referred to as ‘modernist ruins’ or ‘post-industrial sites’ — symbols for transition and impermanence (Dillon, 2011; Hell & Schönle, 2010; Millington, 2013; Strangleman, 2013). Comparable to these places are abandoned farms, foreclosed homes, and closed schools — extensions of the direct ramifications of deindustrialization that have just as much (if not more) allure due to their everyday, or mundane quality.

The matter that I am drawn to is how these places can direct us towards a time in the past while simultaneously revealing that there is a change — an interruption, or a tear, in the fabric of the built environment of today. An interruption with a future ‘directedness’ — a future that is unseen, but felt — a future that is unknown and uncertain. What will happen when these places are demolished to the ground? What will happen to the stories, to the narratives, to the myths, and to the meanings that are attached to them? What will happen to the possibility for exploring some of the complex relationships between these places and the people that (used to) inhabit them?

Comprising of 2487 photographs, *In/Visibility of the Abandoned School: Beyond Representations of School Closure* is positioned as a “grand visual archive” (MoMA, 2014) that taps into the traditions of documentary and conceptual photography, documenting some of the overlooked places and textures of the 21st century as observed in Canada’s vanishing and disappearing schools. It is inspired, in part, by the work of Zoe Leonard (Figures 1.7 and 1.8), who documents “the human toll of corporate globalization” (New York Times, 2015) in places such as New York City, Eastern Europe, Cuba, Mexico, the Middle East, and Africa through an
extensive body of images depicting “little bodegas, mom-and-pop stores with decaying façades and quirky hand-written signs” (MoMA Press, 2014). It is also analogous to the work of Eugène Atget, who documented Paris’ vanishing architecture to modernization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it shares a particular connection with Martha Rosler’s seminal work “The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems” (Figures 1.9 and 1.10).
Focusing on the drunken-vagrant as an absent, yet ever-present subject, Martha Rosler’s images of shop fronts and other objects left discarded along the Bowery, a street in New York City (see Figures 1.9 and 1.10), were paired next to a series of metaphors for drunkenness through words associated with abundance, astronomy, and the nautical (Gogarty, 2014). As an investigation into the relationship between linguistic and visual systems of meaning through a series of pairings of text and photographic images, the 24 juxtapositions, placed in a grid formation, asked that spectators participate with/in the void that was present in both forms of representation. The pairings, suggesting that the text be read aloud, provoked a performative, even theatrical response while allowing the work to be accessed in several ways (Edwards, 2012).

Figure 1.9, Visual Quotation: Martha Rosler *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, 1974-75. 45 gelatin silver prints mounted on 24 framed boards. Each framed board: 10 by 22 in. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash.
Each photograph, carefully selected and arranged, holds a specific place within the larger photo-essay that comprises this work. For Ricardo Marín-Viadel and Joaquín Roldán (2010), a photo-essay lends itself to multiple interpretations while exploiting the “rhetorical and narrative potential of images, not just their figurative or representational functions” (p. 11). The photographs, granted a tremendous amount of thought, have been curated as an intertextual form of imagery (Duncum, 2010), purposely staged in and through the written text in order to extend, and at times, disrupt what is written.

Out of respect for the professional field of photography and for the importance that the photograph plays in this investigation, I am employing (visual) organizational frameworks proposed by Marín-Viadel and Roldán (2010) who have argued extensively for the role that photography can play in arts-based educational research (see Marín-Viadel & Roldán, 2012; Marín-Viadel, Roldán & Cepeda-Morales, 2013). In one sense, this entire exegesis can be seen as one entire photo-essay, however, each concession and each individual series (in the form of diptychs, triptychs, etc.), and each photograph, can also function as a singular unit.

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Figure 1.10, Visual Quotation: Martha Rosler. The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems (detail), 1974-75. 45 gelatin silver prints mounted on 24 framed boards. Each framed board: 10 by 22 in. Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash.
As a photographic discourse (Marín-Viadel and Roldán, 2010), the exegesis may be interpreted as a congruent visual sequence in which the abandoned school appears and transforms in successive stages as the investigation unfolds. The conceptual order in which they have been placed in sequence is meant to draw attention to the interrelations and the interconnections that create a (visual) line of reasoning throughout the entire body of work.

Each concession begins with a photograph alongside a series of metaphors that play off the central metaphor framing the section. Similar to the work of Martha Rosler both the photograph and the text present a void, the central (visual) motif in the work that renders the students, the teachers, the administrators, the faculty, and/or even the curriculum in the abandoned school as an absent, yet ever-present subject. The ‘ekphrastic text,’ a rhetorical trope used to create a relation between one medium and another (Edwards, 2012; Russek, 2008), is an invitation for you to look at and read the artwork. Although you may read the text from left to right, as is the traditional mode of reading in the west, you are also welcome to explore multiple possible routes through the various openings presented in the negative space that punctuate the text, the photograph, and the spaces between the text and the photograph.

Among the visual frameworks previously discussed by Marín-Viadel and Roldán (2010), I also utilize a photo-abstract (see figure 1.1), a series of photographs that synthesizes the main idea of the whole exegesis, and various visual quotations (see figures 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, 1.10, 2.2, 2.3, 2.8, 2.9, 2.10, 3.6, 3.7, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5), that, functioning in a similar way to verbal quotations, reference artwork that has been produced by other artists. The visual quotations reside beneath a thin black line, appearing similar to a footnote located at the bottom of a page.

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3 This exegesis has been compiled as an art form itself in which visual and material thinking, as a methodology, is sustained throughout my photographic practice. Barbara Bolt (2007) argues that knowing arises through handling materials in and through practice. As such, it is represented here as a visual argument, one that emerges and unfolds in space and time.
Although they are significantly smaller than the images that were produced for this study, these visual cues are used to indicate the presence of the visual quotation, and are, by no means meant to diminish the importance that each visual quotation plays in the entire photographic discourse.

Another formal decision pertains to the way in which I utilize literary tropes to accompany my imagery. This was something that emerged throughout my process of acquiring and capturing my images during which I would use language in a figurative (or non-literal) sense in an attempt to make connections through; metaphor (similarity and comparison); metonymy (association and contiguity); synecdoche (interchanging of more and less inclusive terms); and irony (contraries and awareness of incongruity). These tropes, forming various layers in and through my practice, created multiple planes of meaning. Pauline Sameshima and Rita Irwin (2008) argue that literary tropes have the ability of forming "various layers of vibrant interpretation" (p. 5) because they create intersections that are emergent, connective, and relational. Opening up spaces for me to think, imagine, and ask questions pertaining to how I was coming to understand the abandoned school, they ultimately helped me to understand the abandoned school as an object of contemplation, whose meaning is both slippery and ineffable.

Utilizing five different metaphors, this exegesis emphasizes the ambivalent and ambiguous character that a decommissioned school embodies while in a temporal state. The abandoned school, as void, as ghost town, as crypt, as corpse, and as wake (beyond the ruin) lead you on a journey, where as a provocation, they become an approach for understanding the abandoned school as a being with generative possibility. As Hannah Arendt (1978: 1) reminds us in *The Life of the Mind*, metaphors are instruments, “enabling us to know and deal with the world” (p. 123). They bridge together the visible and the non-visible revealing that something is always covered over by words and that something always lies behind what has been written. This something
resists and refuses “to be pinned down” (Arendt, 1978: 1, p. 114). As such, what I offer here are thoughts — ideas that are fleeting, temporal ... and ephemeral.
As I walk up the steep hill towards the closed school, protected by a thick canopy of trees, I can see a large soccer field stretching out to the left. While on my right, a small creak is trickling down the slope of the mountain. Squinting up at the tall building, backlit by the warm September sun, I spot the lonely glow of a light hidden in the shadows under the rafters. A Canadian flag, high up on the rooftop, is blowing gently in the breeze.

I approach the entrance and realize that the elongated windows that once adorned the double doors have been covered over with plywood.

*Meticulously.*

Surrounding the doors, stretching from the pebbled ground all the way up to the ceiling of the second floor, there is an enormous window. Designed to let in a large amount of natural light, it lies hidden under several sheets of plywood that have been painted the same off-white hue as the walls.

It blends in so well that I almost don’t see it.

*Buried underneath.*
Figure 1.11, *Buried (Underneath)*, 2015
Photography by the author
From the Closed School to the School ‘Abandoned’

Educational restructuring is not uncommon. When it unfolds, schools undergo physical changes in which downsizing or amalgamation may be deemed necessary. In some cases, it is decided to close a school building altogether. The decision and implementation of school reorganization is “a politically sensitive issue” (Walker, 2010, p. 713). It is one that involves lengthy consultations and one that forces boards of education to make difficult decisions in the context of national laws, provincial/state laws, by-laws, and policies.
Although immigration, population growth, rural/urban migration, and other ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic factors are observed, analyzed, and taken into consideration as part of the decision process to close a school (Basu, 2004; 2007), the three main reasons for school closure are regularly listed as being due to demographic shifts, declining enrolment and increasing costs. When enrollment begins to decline in schools, a false hope surfaces within the community. Fewer pupils create more space (smaller class sizes), more attention (smaller teacher-pupil ratio), and better learning conditions (less overcrowding). However, excess space brings an increase in expenditures in which the school simply cannot exist for an extended length of time. These scenarios are occurring in many Canadian provinces, as well as in many cities in the United States and in Great Britain. Emptiness is creeping into classrooms like a disease. It is spreading into sections of the building until eventually, it succeeds in killing the school; and rendering it abandoned.

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4 These three main reasons have been identified in many informational ‘guides’ pertaining to school closure issued by several Canadian provincial governments (including Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and British Columbia).

5 Sometimes districts hold on to the empty school to observe if enrollment patterns will change, a term known as ‘mothballing’.
Figure 1.13, *What’s in a name?* 2015
Photography by the author
The Void

When the dust settles, when the students begin a new year in their new school and their old school stands on the periphery of daily activity — what happens to it? Ceasing to exist as it once did, stripped of its former name and identity, locked doors and boarded windows physically block the public from entering, or seeing inside. The fate of the building and the surrounding lot remains unknown. Will it be sold? Will it remain vacant for a number of years? Will it be transformed into something else? Will it simply be left to the perils of nature, becoming an eyesore that the community has to ‘learn’ to live with?

Whether the school was relinquished voluntarily, or whether the community was forced to surrender it, my interest resides in the closed school — the place that was abandoned by all those who had once claimed it for its educational possibility. Although the closed school ceases to exist as it once did, and is no longer utilized as it once was: does it continue to affect the community? Does it do so through the means that determine, and are determined by the community? Means, that are radically different from when it was functioning as a school?

The void here is a metaphor for a non-school: a school that once was, but is no longer. The void refers to the emptiness of the once-was-school, a place that was central to the community, but now stands in the periphery, or in the margins of society. In science fiction, a void has been used to describe an ambiguous place in the distance, an indestructible universe that can either contain paradise or, alternately, embody a deadly threat. In astronomy, a void is used to describe a large volume of space between filaments, the largest scale structures in the universe. Again, these spaces are ambiguous. Some scientists believe that voids are devoid of matter, while others believe they contain a smooth distribution of dark matter, which as its name suggests, remains

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6 One example is The Evolutionary Void, a novel by author Peter F. Hamilton (2010), the third novel in The Void Trilogy.
The void presents us with the perplexing question: is an empty space equivalent to nothing? If we are unable to see something, does it mean that it is not there? The above definitions simultaneously point to the discourse of nothing (or no-thing) in philosophy and to the ontology of wanting, or desiring to know more about something that we are unable to see. The void also emphasizes the non-visible affects of school closure, while suggesting the ambiguous role that emptiness plays in its abandonment.

Schools are often more than what they were conceived to be. Intended first and foremost as a political educational facility, they provide opportunities for social and political linkages in the community, which can help foster a strong civil society (Basu, 2004). When a school closes, does it leave a vacancy in the community? Does it become something that is missing, or alternately, something that is not? The void can imply that a closed school is nullified. What is its value if it is no longer legally bound as a school? Is it an invalid structure? One that lacks educational potential?

The abandoned school as void conjures an image of a vacuum, a forbidden, mysterious, and quarantined space. It represents something that has been rejected by the government, by the school board, by the school district and the people who helped conceive it. The void emphasizes the tension inherent in an undesired building and to an undesired school in particular. When the building no longer functions as a school, what happens to it? If only continuing on in the memory of the community does it become void?

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As I walk closer to the building, two young boys come running towards me. They are playing with a toy plane. One boy is holding it up into the sky and making engine noises while the other boy is running quickly behind him. They circle me as if I am not even here. Fumbling to grab my camera, I try to capture a shot of them as they run down the long narrow stretch of lawn between the building and the woods but I am unsuccessful. They disappear into the sunlight — their figures transforming into nothingness as if a phantasm of my imagination.

I pivot in place and am startled to see about a dozen windows lined up neatly in a row. Each one has been covered over with three pieces of plywood, carefully screwed in place around the hinges and seams of the window frame.

*They can open.*

I smile.

*Ghosts need fresh air too.*
Figure 1.14, Closed Openings, 2015
Photography by the author
The Ghost Town

When a school is closed, all of the daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly routines played out by the administrative staff, the parents, the students, and all of the activity that was once flooding in and out of the school — as a school — comes to a halt. When a school closes, where does everyone go? What remains left behind in the school that once played such a pivotal role in housing the community’s social and educational encounters?
For Dewey (1907), education is a process of living. His belief was that the school is a form of life — a unity of relations — an extension of the home, a stimulative environment, and ‘an embryonic community’. A closed school is a stark contrast to the image painted by Dewey. It has more in common with a ghost town, or a place that has been deserted after a war, a natural disaster, or after the economic activity that was supporting it, failed. When a closed school becomes one abandoned, it takes on a role similar to that of tourist attraction, one that is visited only periodically, sometimes written about ... sometimes photographed.

Does an abandoned school haunt the community with its presence? Is it deemed unwanted or unnecessary? After all, it has been rejected from the people who commissioned it, from the activities it hosted, and from the period for which it references. *Indispensable Eyesores: An Anthropology of Undesired Buildings* by Melanie van der Hoorn (2009), centers on the buildings that people would like to reject. For van der Hoorn, a ‘rejected’ building embodies a clash and as such, materializes issues that matter. One such issue to emerge is the perception that buildings can become a threat, “with which people must learn to cope” (p. 10). As an undesired object in the landscape, it begins to haunt all those who don’t want it there, or are unable to see it for its possibilities.

In the article entitled, “The return of the excessive: Superfluous landscapes” by Tom Nielsen (2002), the contemporary city is described as an urban field composed of homogeneous closed centers and the ones that lie beyond it. Nielsen refers to these as the “superfluous landscape,” or areas that are left over from the planning and the building of the “areas that are not usable, not yet used, or already used and later abandoned” (p. 54). Nielsen utilizes Georges Bataille’s philosophical work to demonstrate how materiality often counteracts (and contradicts) human ambitions of the ideal. Rather than representing an ideal of how the city should look, the
superfluous landscape is counter idealistic — it haunts urban planners and the city itself as “something that has been excluded from the primary...wanted world, and then later has returned as a sort of obtrusive matter [that is] impossible to reject or plan away” (p. 54). In this sense, the superfluous space refers to “the concrete matter of the city [which] will always exceed the ambitions and attempts to control and shape it” (p. 54).

Utilizing Bataille’s theory of heterology, Nielsen makes a convincing argument for how urban development is always composed of an interconnected series of processes that lead to unforeseen situations, repercussions, or actions. This process is what causes structures to become something other than what they were intended to be. Rather than a stable entity, they are ones that undergo continual transformation.

The metaphor of the ghost town is meant to emphasize how a closed school, one that stands on the periphery of society, boarded up and locked off from the public is a reminder that “the world is created by mortal hands to serve mortals for a limited time” (Arendt, 1954, p. 189). To visit with the ghosts that haunt an abandoned school, is to become attuned to presence and absence, to the infinite and the finite, but most of all, to the role(s) that humans play in its afterlife.

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8 The entire quote from *Between Past and Future* by Hannah Arendt has tremendous implications for understanding the abandoned school as ghost town. “Basically we are always education for a world that is or is becoming out of joint, for this is the basic human situation, in which the world is created by mortal hands to serve mortals for a limited time as home. Because the world is made by mortals it wears out; and because it continuously changes its inhabitants it runs the risk of becoming as mortal as they. To preserve the world against the mortality of its creators and inhabitants it must be constantly set right anew” (Arendt, 2006, p. 189). Here we can see the “Crisis in Education” that Arendt speaks of.
Figure 1.16, *(Obtrusive)* Matter, 2015
Photo-grid (Triptych)
Photography by the author
Figure 1.17, Cuts, cracks, ruptures and fissures (Finding ways in), 2010
Photography by the author
The Crypt

In this next section, I draw from psychogeography, dialectical theory, and phenomenology, and I chronicle adventures made by the urban explorer, the dérive, and the flâneur to help provide a context for a way of life in which I remain dedicated to exploring, watching, observing, navigating and photographing the abandoned school. As you will notice, there are no short cuts, only unplanned routes and long windy roads that lead into the abandoned school.9

I begin with ‘urban explorers,’10 the people who are actively searching the built environment for gaps, cracks, and openings. Drawn to the liminal, to the derelict, to decay, and to the ruin of buildings, including infrastructure and underground catacombs, the urban explorer has a preference for historical cities such as Paris, Rome, London, and cities scarred by deindustrialization such as New York, Philadelphia, and Detroit. Bradley L. Garrett from the Department of Geography at The University of London conducted a long term ethnographic project and disseminated his findings in the form of a video/article involving interviews with various academics/urban explorers to examine what drives them to such practice, which he also refers to as an “interior tourism” (Garrett, 2010, p. 1450).

Excerpts from the film reveal that urban exploration allows for a confrontation with materiality, which is described as a ‘force’ that one is drawn or attracted to, as to bring to the fore a flow of experience. This experience calls for a movement that is very different from the everyday horizontal, vertical, linear or rigid paths that are normally taken in and through architecture. The derelict calls for climbing or for weaving around through darkness. It also calls

9 As an exploration of ‘Being,’ encounters with the abandoned school are intentionally presented here in a cyclical, or rather, spiral formation. This design strategy is meant to parallel my experiences inside the abandoned school as an urban explorer and it is intentionally meant to create disruptions/ruptures in the reading/viewing experience.

for an engagement with multiple senses and becoming attuned to the unfamiliar.

For Garrett (2010), urban exploration is about the experience of exploring the unknown. It is led by “a quest for myth, mystery and meaning” (p. 1448), it is anti-authoritarian in character; it emphasizes an individual sense of freedom and it is an act of “reasserting local control over historic landscapes and the overdetermined spaces of the city” (Garrett, 2008, p. 1449).

‘Take only pictures and leave only footprints’ (High & Lewis, 2007) has become the mantra for urban exploration. A cultural practice that denotes a way of life in which people, dedicated to photographing, writing, and documenting their travels and their findings, are conscious not to leave physical traces of these visits other than their journals and/or photographs. High & Lewis (2007), argue that the ethics associated with the practice is of “utmost importance” (p. 40), revealing how most urban explorers are against graffiti, tagging, vandalizing, stealing, or damaging anything in and surrounding the abandoned structures that they visit. This code of conduct reflects their love and admiration for the subject as well their motivations for engaging in such practice in which the emphasis remains on reigniting a sense of wonder associated with childhood and/or (re) connecting with the city in which they are living in or visiting at the time.

Many urban explorers, driven by an aggravation and an annoyance for the emphasis of homogeneity and commercialization that surrounds them in their everyday, engage in the practice because it allows emphasis to be placed on the actual experience of being — of submerging oneself in an evocative aesthetic as a confrontation with materiality (High & Lewis, 2007; van der Hoorn, 2009). The experience, usually calling for movement that is very different from the everyday horizontal, vertical, linear or rigid paths that are normally taken in and through architecture, often calls for climbing or for weaving around through darkness. It
demands for an engagement with multiple senses, and for focusing on various textures such as crumbling rock, mossy or wet patches, dust, or cobwebs (DeSilvey, 2006; Edensor, 2005; Garrett, 2010). As such, it necessitates one to become attuned to the unfamiliar. Fascinated with the closed and the inaccessible, urban explorers adopt an interpretive approach in which entropy contributes to understanding through the residual (DeSilvey, 2006). Concerned with ‘making absence present’ (Sharpley & Stone, 2009), urban exploration offers participants an opportunity to (re) interpret past events and to (re) write history.

Urban explorers share similarities with the dérive, a term coined by artist and philosopher Guy Debord that makes reference to an aesthetic walker, or someone who drifts or wanders ‘destinationless’ throughout city streets (Smith, 2010). The dérive is described as “a magic that can walk the power of ideas into the body of the walker” while following a “trajectory of disruption” in which the route of an idea becomes woven in and by its social relations by provoking the walker to negotiate and re-negotiate with it (Smith, 2010, p. 108). Setting themselves apart from exploration (which has colonial baggage), it is important to consider the dérive’s psychogeographical roots. For Debord (2002) psychogeography was a general term for the phenomena that he was investigating in the summer of 1953. In his words,

Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective psychogeographical can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery. (Debord, 2002)

Psychogeography suggests a “going with the flow of time” to create “new, emotionally provocative situations” (Debord, 1975). It calls for one to pay attention to neighbourhoods, to the
housing conditions, to the arrangement of the elements in the architecture or to its historical period. Most importantly, it calls for one to pay attention to the ambience of the space/place, to the appealing or repelling character of it, and to the sensations that it provokes. Psychogeography can be understood as the study of how or why “we animate other people and places with aspects of ourselves” (Stein, 1989, p. 183). It refers to a type of situational provocation in which the social and physical world is constructed through conscious or unconscious experiences of the human psyche. These experiences can range from memories of childhood, traumatic events, relationships between others/family members, or even bodily sensations. For Stein,

In its widest compass, psychogeography consists of the representation of developmental time and the playing out of its vicissitudes on the stage of space. Space is often used as metaphor — sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally - for time. Time becomes space’s drama; space becomes time’s stage. The topography of the mind wends its way into the typography of space. Space is parable. While geographical space may serve as the focus of a person’s or group’s perceptual, cognitive, affective, and behavioral activity, the actual motivational source of this activity remains unconscious fantasy, affect, anxiety, and conflict. (Stein, 1989, p. 181-182)

The study of psychogeography, in this sense, becomes a “spatial morphology” (Stein, 1989, p. 182), or a mediation of ‘reality’ based on the projection of emotion, memory, or imagination. Artists working within the realm of psychogeography do so as a means to learn more about themselves, the world in which they are living in, while asking their viewers/participants to do the same. In the context of artistic social practices, ‘situations’ have grown to include political, social, economic, and technological investigations into the relationship between the human condition and the world in which houses these relationships (Doherty, 2009).
Although I am drawn to artists working in this manner, I wonder, does the creation of a situation in the psychogeographical, or in the artist-as-activist-as-dérive sense become an abstract quest to ‘re-fill’ what is found to be empty, re-placing the inherent qualities found or admired in an object altogether? Undoubtedly, the dérive exerts agency on the city, but what inspires it? What is it about these places in the landscape that draws a response? How do visiting these sites, and/or physically entering them, ‘fill’ a need that other activities/practices seem unable to satiate?

The flâneur described by Walter Benjamin (1972) in The Arcade Project helps bring insight into the materiality of the built environment and to the complex relationship between a city’s structure and the people dwelling with/in it. Reading Benjamin’s text, I find myself weaving through a fragmented compilation of quotes, excerpts, poems, and short excerpts of writing. In the midst of a “literary montage” (Doherty, 2006, p. 157), I am both near and far from his words; feeling lost in a similar, but different time, and awakened by its ambiguity. I am on a journey in two parallel worlds created by dialectical theory that juxtaposes the arcade as a place of splendor and as a place of decay, as an unconscious experience and something that can be physically penetrated, as insight and as not-yet-conscious knowledge. First I encounter, and then I become the flâneur, who “walks long and aimlessly through the streets” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 417). Rather than simply meandering “capriciously,” I take “refuge in the shadows” of the city (Benjamin, 1972, p. 442), I watch, I observe, and I listen.

Borrowing Baudelaire’s concept, Benjamin describes the flâneur as a “dreaming idler” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 417) — someone who is drawn to the arcade and to places like winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, and railroad stations, because they simultaneously quench his “thirst for the past” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 407), while allowing him to
Figure 1.18, *Reflections (on/in)*, 2010-2015 (Diptych) Photography by the author
delight in “the hallucinatory function of architecture” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 908). This is where the flâneur exhibits a passion for lived knowledge. Through “anamnestic intoxication” he promenades throughout the city to feed his senses, both visually and abstractly, “as something experienced and lived through” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 417). He is especially drawn to the interiors of the city, to the underworld and to catacombs — little rooms, recesses, and passages; Benjamin describes these places as lacking an outside “like a dream” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 406). Entering these places, and the arcade in particular, is like passing through a gateway, or a threshold. It is to venture into an “intrauterine world” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 415).

The street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward — if not to the mystical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private. Nevertheless, it always remains the time of childhood. But why that of the life he has lived? In the asphalt over which he passes, his steps awaken a surprising resonance. The gaslight that streams down on the paving stones throws an equivocal light on this double ground. (Benjamin, 1972, p. 416)

For the flâneur, the city is not a homogeneous entity; rather, it is as if it is split into dialectical poles; one is open to him while the other closes in around him. Traveling through its confines, he knows its boundaries, and its enclaves. They become synonymous with who he is — a transient, child-like, collector of experiences drawn to “the colportage phenomenon of space” (Doherty, 2006) as a magical illustrative and dreamlike way of seeing the real and the imaginary; the past and the present; the private and the public; the material and the immaterial simultaneously.

Benjamin’s literary montage of Paris reads as a series of images. Depicting the furniture, the decor, and the fashion and the nihilistic, bourgeois taste of the time. ‘The colportage phenomenon of space’ refers (in part) to the melting or clashing of the Gothic, Persian, and Renaissance styles in one place, “compressed and evanescent like the scenography of a dream in
which chronological sequence is replaced by simultaneity” (Doherty, 2006, p. 159). In another sense, it draws attention to the roles that the positive and the negative space play in its composition.

The urban explorer, the dérive, and flâneur choose to submerge themselves in the landscape, and to surface only periodically. They prefer to live by forging shells around themselves, remaining attuned to the presencing of “indwelt spaces” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 221). They prefer to spend their time in the streets, in the public spaces, and in “the dwelling place of the collective” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 879) where they can become infiltrators, permeating these places through their interstices and pores.

**Dwelling with/in the Abandoned School**

A fascination with the built environment exhibited by all three of our adventurers, solicits an investigation into the term dwelling. In Heidegger’s credited treatise, *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1971), Heidegger leads us on an excursion into thinking about dwelling and building, and how they are bound to one another (this idea is also emphasized in the lack of interval, mark or punctuation between each word in the title). In pondering what it means to dwell, and how buildings relate to dwelling, Heidegger establishes that to dwell does not simply suggest that we take shelter in a building that has been constructed for the sole purpose of housing us, as human beings. For Heidegger, a building is not simply a means for dwelling, and dwelling does not occur exclusively within the confines of a building.

Heidegger traces the meaning of the word building by listening to its various usages in Old English and High German. In doing so, he reveals that building means to dwell; it signifies to remain, or to stay in place. Although the true meaning of the word *bauen* (to dwell) has been lost to us, evidence of it is preserved in other German and English words, such as neighbor (near-
dweller) and abode (place of dwelling). In ascribing this exercise, Heidegger emphasizes the role that distance plays in dwelling (or how far the nature of dwelling reaches), and he reveals that the manner in which humans are on earth, as mortals, also means to dwell. Additionally, bauen means to cherish, to protect, to preserve, to nurture, to tend to, to care for, and to cultivate. These verbs differ significantly from the predominant verbs pertaining to building, the ones that refer solely to the making of something (or to the actual ‘raising of edifices’). What connects these two meanings together, is the idea that dwelling is a form of cultivating, a form of construction, and a form of being.

Heidegger does not stop there. He continues to search for words that are similar to the word bauen in other languages. He discovers that the Old Saxon word for building also means to remain, or to stay in place, whereas the Gothic word for building means to become attuned to how this remaining is experienced. The actual enterprise of building for Heidegger, becomes that of sparing and preserving, which “pervades dwelling in its whole range” (p. 147). Heidegger postulates that when we spare something, and when we keep it safeguarded, we set it at peace, we “set it free in its own presencing” (p. 148). In order to understand what Heidegger means to set something free in its own presencing requires that we first examine what he means by sparing and preserving, and then how they appertain to space.

The meanings to remain and to stay that emerged repeatedly from the definitions of building explicates that dwelling refers to the manner in which humans live (or dwell) on earth. It refers to the “primal oneness” that human beings reside (or dwell perpetually) in the “fourfold,” which Heidegger explains, comprises of: 1) the earth, or the “serving bearer” — the blossoming and fruiting, the plants and the animals; 2) the sky, and the universe, or the context for which the landscape has come into being, 3) the divinities, which can refer to a deity in
various faiths or beliefs, but I understand that it represents the power(s) that transcend human capacities, and 4) the mortals, the human beings who are capable (or inescapable) of death (p. 148). For Heidegger, mortals are dwelling in that they assent the earth as earth, receive the sky as sky, await the divinities as divinities, and accept death as death. Mortals are not merely abiding on earth (amid the divinities and amongst mortals), rather, they are dwelling. In other words, they are staying with things. Dwelling, in this sense, is preserving, or keeping “the fourfold in that with which mortals stay, in things” (p. 149). Not only do mortals reside in the fourfold by that of dwelling, but “dwelling preserves the fourfold by bringing the presencing of the fourfold into things” (p. 149). Therefore, a built thing, refers to an assembling, or a gathering of the fourfold in such a way that it locates it, and creates a site for it. Allowing for it to come into existence by virtue of the object because it’s location allows for this space to open up, to occur, to be witnessed, and to be partaken of. In this sense, the relationship between [humans] and space is dwelling.

Distance and Nearness

For Heidegger, a thing actually refers to a gathering and an assembling. As a thing, it gathers the fourfold. However, “the thing is not always an unknown x to which perceptible properties are attached” (p. 151). Even though a thing is something that can interpreted, this would not happen unless it was a thing first. The thing, for Heidegger, is what creates the location, the site for our perceptible properties to come into being, and not the other way around. The thing gathers the fourfold, makes space for it, and creates an opening for it to occur. Heidegger reminds us that although space resides within a boundary, it does so in being granted into its own bounds. Therefore, a boundary should not be understood as the location for which something stops, but where something begins its presencing.
Figure 1.19, *Distance, Nearness and the Space Between*, 2015
Photo-grid (Triptych)
Photography by the author
Again, Heidegger turns to language to ponder the relevance of space, but this time with the addition of further abstractions from analytic algebraic relations. Here he ponders about space as a location, a relation between, a position, and an intervening interval. For example, a building can be understood as something that is made in a certain place with specific (physical) building materials with an actual dimension (including height, breadth, and depth) that can be abstracted (or subtracted) from space as an interval. This, however, only depicts how a building takes up space. Implying that the building is something at some position (or location) like a marker that can easily be replaced. In understanding the building as ‘spatium’ and ‘extensio’ Heidegger asserts that the building is actually a maker of space, and this is what a building truly is — something that extends, affords, and pervades (into space, outside of its location).

The relationship between human beings and space is critical because space is “neither an external object nor an inner experience” (p. 154). Distance and nearness can be helpful attributes in this regard, as can thought. In thinking toward a location, as in thinking toward a thing, or in this case, a building, spaces are opened up because they are let into the dwelling of a human being; persisting through distance, we bring them near. For example, when we think toward a location, we may be much nearer to it than someone who is actually physically there. This signifies that our thought can transcend space, and persist through it. Most importantly, even though our thought has the ability to extend in this manner, it does so despite the fact that we never give up our standing. Whether our thought transcends our actual physical space, or whether it attends to a psychological analysis of ourselves it does so by no means of abandoning our stay with, and among things (or the location that our body is physically in).

Building does not shape pure space, as if it were a singular unit, or entity. Rather, it acts to join spaces, to construct locations, in which space may take over from the fourfold, as a way
of guarding it, or preserving it. Therefore, a building ‘houses’ the presence of the fourfold and elicits them in its production, but does not do so as a means for its production. Building does not belong exclusively to architecture or engineering, it belongs to the tradition of technê, which Heidegger (2001) defines as art, or handicraft. But it also exceeds this definition, in the sense that it becomes more than a composition, or an assembling of physical elements. It becomes understood as making something appear. Something, not only refers to the edifice that has been designed, built and erected, but to the thought, or the thinking that has become bound to it and bound by it. This is what makes thinking bound to building, and both building and thinking inescapable of dwelling (Heidegger, 2001).

**Pervading Metaphors**

A crypt, like a container, embodies a hollow form. It suggests that its purpose is to hold a physical object — or even a substance. The abandoned school as crypt plays with the idea that, as a closed system, it appears to be empty of ‘school’ as if ‘school’ were a substance that once filled it. If an abandoned school is a container that houses a substance, then what is this substance, if not ‘school’?

The abandoned school as a crypt emphasizes its objective qualities that seduce us to open it: to find its innermost content, to find what endures and to find what remains. As Bachelard (1994) reminds us, there is always ‘more’ to something that is closed as opposed to something that is left open (p. 88). Although the abandoned school is a historical building, as a crypt, it has more in common with things such as buried treasure and locked vaults. Its void becomes affiliated with secrecy and with hiding. Its ‘substance’ therefore, becomes created and re-created through the illusions and the imaginations that are projected onto it. As a result, the abandoned
school becomes something that is neither here, nor there (nor elsewhere); but something that exceeds, multiplies, and moves beyond itself through its very potential.¹¹

The Corpse

Reading Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, the word ‘pervade’ became of particular interest to me. He uses it on numerous occasions to refer to how humans pervade space, and alternately, how things pervade into space, into our thoughts, and into our consciousness. Synonyms for pervade are, to affect strongly, to charge, to fill, to haunt, to imbue, to impregnate, to infiltrate, to infuse, to invade, to reside, to penetrate, to percolate, to permeate, to riddle, to saturate, to spread, to steep, to occupy, and to transfuse. It is a word in which I have come to apprehend urban exploration as a being-with the building, as a thing, and most importantly, as a thing abandoned. What pervades in the abandoned school (similar to sneaking up on being backwards) is a being-towards-death. This is the thingness of it and what draws me to it as generative possibility.

How is one supposed to behave towards death? How are we to imagine ourselves as stopping, ending, finishing, perishing, or disappearing? For Heidegger being-toward-death is a being-toward-possibility. In searching for an answer to the meaning of being in general, urban explorers, ruin-hunters, those attuned to the aesthetics of decay, understand this existential phenomenon of being in relation to death.

Our everydayness, for Heidegger, is substantial. It is “precisely the being ‘between’ birth and death” (2010, p. 223/233). Although we may not explicitly be engaged in thinking about dying in our average everydayness, our everydayness acknowledges death, and does not doubt

¹¹ See Hellstrom, E. (2006) *Tactical Formlessness, Critical Aesthetics, and the dilemma of planning*. In order to comprehend formlessness, it has to be performed, re-enacted and realized. Hellstrom also refers to this as ‘outreaching aesthetics.’
that it exists. Our everydayness involves a certainty of death, yet this certainty has a double meaning. In one way we know that death certainly comes, yet we avoid being certain about it because it does not happen right away. Death becomes postponed, or covered over.

*Dasein*, constituted as a potentiality of being, is always, as such, a potentiality, and a ‘not-yet’ something. The primordial ontological ground of the existentially of *Dasein* is temporality. It is always a ‘not-yet’, it is forever incomplete, and lacking ‘wholeness’ — one that is always coming to its end, and not yet at its end. Since we are born to die, “Dasein is always already dying” (2010, p. 244/255). However, *Dasein* is an inauthentic being-toward-death because the experience of death remains unknown and ambiguous. It is an “insuperable” event (2010, p. 249/260), or as Heidegger also refers to it, “eminent imminence” (p. 241/251). Even if we decide to become attuned to it, can we authentically understand it as a certain possibility? Or does thinking about it become futile?

For Heidegger, “an authentic being-toward-the-end should be able to relate itself” (p. 249/260). Furthermore, it must let itself be projected with positive and prohibitive instructions, and it must be attuned to understanding. Being-toward-death must be characterized as a being-toward-a-possibility, and a taking care of its actualization. Although death is something possible, it is not a thing, and it is not objectively present. Death must be understood as looking away from the possible to understand what it is possible for. This can never be possible by simply thinking about death. A being-toward-death must be “understood as possibility, cultivated as possibility, and endured as possibility in our relation of it” (p. 250/261).

Bodily analogy is profuse in theory pertaining to art and architecture. To state that a building has anthropomorphic qualities would emphasize that the school abandoned is a dead

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12 Similar to Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein*, Merleau-Ponty brought forth the ‘body-subject’ in which the body, including our gestures and mannerisms, are unique to every individual and define who we are. For Heidegger, Being-in-the-world is dependent on care and this is what distinguishes Dasein from the body-subject.
body, or a corpse. An abandoned school as corpse could imply that its remains are like an empty shell. Embalmed, as if it has been drained of its blood, or the life force that once circulated freely among its corridors, classrooms, or offices. It could imply that the government as ruling head, has been severed from its limbs — its people — its hands, its feet, and its heart. With a removal of its identity, it could be that it suffered a cruel or underserved death, “like a martyr” it could conjure up feelings of guilt (van der Hoorn, 2009, p. 175). The abandoned school as corpse makes reference to all of these things. But most of all, it emphasizes how the school is no longer a social or political body — it is a body that has been dismembered after it was no longer required.

In conjuring the abandoned school as corpse, I wonder, did it endure a premature death? Is it in need of a proper burial? Is it in need of a revival? With the rise (and fall) of industrialization, many of our learning environments have become outdated in form and function. Is the abandoned school a symbol for the dead or dying industrial age of schooling? The corpse left after the “dying factory model” and the “crumbling industrial order” (Miller, 2007, p. 5)?

Encountering an abandoned place brings anticipation. Walking on its ground makes it nearer, more immediate. It allows for an experience, a mood, and a state of uneasiness, apprehension, and uncertainty. Walking into an abandoned place becomes a form of de-distancing (it makes distance retract between the living and the dead). It becomes a method of uncovering death, and placing it at the fore of our everydayness.13

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13 Engaging with the corpse as a living body intensifies sensations — affects and intensities that attest to our “immersion and participation in nature, chaos, [and] materiality” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 169).
Figure 1.20, *Embalmed*, 2015
Photography by the author
When Heidegger (2010) speaks of death, he does not speak about the being-at-an-end, but rather a being-toward-the-end. Therefore, a being-toward-the-end would actually mean, “we are searching for the answer of the question of the meaning of being in general” (p. 221). The abandoned school as a corpse draws attention to our own bodily sensations and encounters with it. It reminds us that we have a finite life-span: that life is something valuable; that we still have time to decide how we want to live; and the kind of care we want to exercise in living. Perceiving the abandoned school as corpse, asks that we take inventory of our aims and the execution of our aims, that we pay attention to our accomplishments and our contributions that bid to outlast us.

**The Wake (Beyond the Ruin)**

A ruin refers to a thing that has physically survived destruction and disintegration from physical, moral, social or economic factors. A ruin can be fragmented, devastated, collapsed, partially collapsed, or in a state of decay. Playing an important role in cultural discourse, aesthetics, and art, ruins have become synonymous with the destruction of cities and landscapes; and in some instances, they have become monuments for political history.

Ruins denote that they are fragments of something, something that existed before now or something belonging to the past. As such, they often become ‘tools’ for learning about our ancestors; ways of ‘telling’ us who were megalithic circle builders, temple dwellers, or ritual sacrificers. Since the Renaissance, ruins have actively been sought after, visited, collected, and preserved for their informational content pertaining to history, culture, civilization, religion, and the environment. Almost every culture and civilization has a tradition that is inherent in ruins that speak of their significance, and of the people that produced them, which in turn, speaks of the beauty, and the im/permanence of human particularity (Arendt, 1998).
Ruins emphasize the sparing and the preserving that was presented earlier by Heidegger. Things that are “objectively present” become “things at hand” when modes of taking care “let the beings taken care of be encountered in such a way that the worldly character of innerworldly beings appears” (2010, p.72/73). The essence of ruins are sites that gather and assemble the fourfold: as spatium and extensio, they are traces and mementos for how people dwell and have dwelled on earth, as mortals, and they make space for the living to dwell on their meaning, their context, their significance in relation to who we are in the present, or who we can potentially become in the future.

Phenomenology calls for ‘a back to the things themselves.’

It offers an approach to philosophy that is “fresh” and “authentic” (Seifert, 1987, p. 9). It requires a going back to our contact with things as they present themselves to us through our experiences with them. As demonstrated by Heidegger, it confronts the essence and content of being itself and questions the appearance of things (both everything and nothing). Since ‘phenomenon’ originates from the Greek word ‘phainesthai’ to show itself, to manifest itself, to present itself from itself, a phenomenological method is an unrelenting attempt to go back to the things themselves as they show themselves as a being or as an essence. This ‘showing’ however, is always mediation with things, and with our experiences of them (Seifert, 1987).

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15 I understand phenomenology as an attentive practice of thoughtfulness: an approach that aims to come to a deeper understanding of the meaning of our everyday experiences (van Manen, 1984). I utilize phenomenology to think through and to investigate concepts by living them, ultimately gaining insightful descriptions of the way(s) in which I experience the world.
Figure 1.21, *Fragment(s)*, 2015
(Diptych) Photography by the author
However, does phenomenology present both a possibility and an impossibility? Is it even possible to return to the things themselves as the thing in itself? What are things? For Brown (2001), the thing presents a paradox. In its thingness, we can observe an object that is made of/or contains a certain materiality. It has a certain physicality that is near to us. However, when we encounter it, something not quite apprehended always emerges. On one account, the thingness of the thing refers to its physical characteristics, its mere materialization. But on another account, the thingness of the thing refers to the force of the thing or its excess. Thingness in this sense is a sensuous and metaphysical presence that presents an object/thing dialectic; a simultaneity that, all at once “seems to name the object just as even as it names some thing else” (p. 5).

Bennett (2004) also explores the possibility afforded in being attentive to non-human things. In her opinion, things have “laudable” effects on humans that can be understood as ‘thing-power’ (p. 348). Thing-power is a “speculative onto-story” (p. 349) that helps define the non-humanity that flows through and around humans. For Bennett, thing-power is an assemblage in which objects appear more vividly as things, or as she refers to them, “entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, [and] never entirely exhausted by their semiotics” (p. 351).

Assemblage is a term used by Deleuze and Guittari (1987) to describe being, as in a continual process, as something that is always changing. In opposition to the dichotomies of rational thought proposed by Hegel and Descartes, being, for Deleuze and Guittari is never limited or constrained. It is infinite in nature, and it exists as pure possibility. Being is never fixed; rather it is rendered on infinite difference and multiplicity. Being, as an assemblage, is in a constant state of becoming; it is dynamic and it is never complete. Thing-power, however, is a force that can only emerge as an encounter. It is not a world made of subjects/objects; it is a
world made of various materialities that are “constantly engaged in a network of relations” (Bennett, 2004, p. 354). Thing-power is a type of agency, a continuum that creates a kinship between people and things. It advocates that things are always more than mere objects; they are powers of life or powers of resistance. Thing-power also reminds us that being human is a materiality and that we, as humans possess a thing-power of our own.

Rarely do we stop and look at a ruin as being merely material: solely made of concrete, wood, aluminum, etc. Its matter “invites our touch and draws us into its depth” (Ginsberg, 2004, p. 6). It invites exploration; and it requires a participatory receptivity that makes us pause to realize that “our breathing, walking, timing, feeling, and thinking are given design by the streets, vehicles, and buildings in which we conduct our lives” (Ginsberg, 2004, p. 45).

When Georges Bataille (1929/2010) stated that “the decayed odour of old dust nourishes and intoxicates” (p. 31) he was referring to the energetic presence that is exhibited in the ruin as “a remnant of, and portal into, the past” (Dillon, 2011, p.11). On one hand, the ruin is an entryway into the past, while on the other, through its very survival, it is directed towards a future. The gaze that we set on ruins is a way of “loosening ourselves from the grip of punctual chronologies, setting ourselves adrift in time” (Dillon, 2011, p. 11). In this sense, it takes on a signifying role that not only demands memory and nostalgia; but witness and escapism (Baudrillard, 1996/2011).

There has been a recent resurgence of the ruin in aestheticism, catapulting the notion of ‘ruin lust’ (Dillon, 2011) onto the horizon in its discourse. This romantic conception perceives the ruin as a symbol for the decline of modernism, regarding it as having a unique ability of restoring humanity (Ginsberg, 2004). In Memoirs of the Blind, Derrida (1993) suggests that a love for the ruin can only be exhibited for its possibility, which he questions may actually be “an
impossible totality” (p. 68). Like a fool blinded by love, the ruin never stands directly in front of us. It is neither a spectacle, nor a fetishization of an object, but the actual “experience itself” (Derrida, 1993, p. 68). As such, ruins have become landmarks for numerous artists working in such sites where their interest in decay has led them to create situations that at once recall the industrial decline, environmental disasters, depredations of war, while simultaneously evoking nostalgia and utopian dreams (Dillon, 2011).


The physical environment is provocative. In “being-together-with” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 55/55) the ruin, I have simultaneously engaged in a conscious and an unconscious process. The aesthetics of the ruin is just as important as the history that it ‘presents.’ As an artist in search of sites rich in cultural heritage, I do so as a means to reflect on/or learn about the history of the place in relation to the self. The dialogue between building and dwelling, and between the building and the thing-ness of the building, emphasizes the role that the material object plays in my quest for knowledge about the world and my place with/in it. What the flâneur, the dérive and the urban explorer have in common is that they are attuned to the force of the built environment, to the aesthetics of ruins, and/or to the aesthetics of decay because they are fragments that act as “intermediaries” (van der Hoorn, p. 153). Intermediaries are things that create spaces between: between history and the present; between the present and the future; and between the individual and the collective.

Curriculum theorist Ted T. Aoki (2005) refers to the phenomenon of being ‘in-between’ as in/dwelling, or finding oneself lingering in the fold of double imaginaries. For Aoki (2005), these spaces can be uncomfortable places, but they can also offer generative possibility. Spaces between life and non-life are visceral and tactile experiences that allow one to toy with the notion of what it may mean to be discarded, or to be nullified. Spaces between the known and the
unknown are also active engagements where one is led by wonder, curiosity, and intuition. For writer and anthropologist Paul Stoller (2008), spaces between lie between the real and the imaginary, in edges and borders of events. For Stoller (2008), spaces between refer to “the silence between words,” they are “the dreams that come between our awakened days and sleeping nights” (p. 5).

For Aoki (2005), spaces between locate places where this or that become this and that — places where all humans, as artists, creatively in/dwell. Brown (2001) further adds to Aoki’s idea, reminding us that the very word thing, like the ruin has a tendency of evoking a double imaginary, or indexing “a certain limit or liminality [that hovers] over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable...” (p. 4-5). In its very essence, encountering the abandoned school requires that we dwell in spaces between.

Figure 1.22, Permeating, 2015
(Diptych) Photography by the author
The abandoned school refers to a being that is neither wholly present (as beings have abandoned it) nor wholly absent (as something abandoned, it has an open and unknown possibility of leaving its mark, or a mark on other beings). As Mitchell (2010) demonstrates in *Heidegger Among the Sculptors: Body, Space, and the Art of Dwelling*, the abandonment of being refers to the idea that abandoned beings hold a vital inability of resigning totally to the world.

Abandoned beings are not without being, nor is being somehow absent in abandonment. Instead, abandonment names the way in which the being appears in an inextricable relation with beings. What the abandonment of being names, in other words, is a way of experiencing beings such that they are no longer construed as self-contained and discrete objects but as already opened and spilled into the world. Being lies beyond the being, calling it that it come forth. The idea of abandonment of being keeps us from imagining being as inheriting in the thing; it names the way in which the particular being is always stretched into a context as essentially relational. (Mitchell, 2010, p. 22-23)

Mitchell (2010) is arguing that being, for Heidegger, “takes place between presence and absence” (p. 23), at the surface where it permeates beyond its form and infiltrates the world. In this sense, “being takes place at the limit of the thing — understanding limit as Heidegger does, not as where something ends but where something begins” (Mitchell, 2010, p. 22-23).

Even though the abandoned school is a material remain, an evocative marker of an event that happened in the past, the real object of my attention lies in what is not there, what is no longer there, what has been taken away from there, or alternately, what has been covered over (from) there.
Although a closed school is one that is conceived through rejection, and through a lack of human intervention, an abandoned school is a place remembered for its “forgottenness” or *Vergessenheit* (Heidegger, 2010, p. 333/350). In its very essence, it holds the possibility for being re-imagined, a possibility that has been made possible by the very system that abandoned it. The metaphors presented here do not refer to the abandoned school as nothing; they make reference to the contradiction for which it has come to be. They are meant to remove the emphasis from the building, from its architecture, and from its mere objective qualities (that have been made remote and strange through a loss of identity) in order to place emphasis on us, as urban explorers and how we experience it as part of our landscape. Heidegger defines ‘nothing’ as that which is neither ‘this nor that.’ His philosophy of nothing refers both to a thing no longer and to a thing not yet: both nothing and everything. The abandoned school as void, as ghost town, as crypt, as corpse, and as wake (beyond the ruin) asks that we consider it as being, a possibility for which it is (Heidegger, 2010, p. 43/44).

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16 Forgottenness relates to *attunement* — or “making present” (p. 332/348), which is always temporal. Heidegger (2010) explains forgottenness as both waiting and forgetting.
Figure 1.24 *Coming to (Light)*, 2010
Photography by the author
Concession 2

“IT IS HARD TO TELL WHETHER WE ARE SEEING OR MERELY IMAGINING.”

(Arendt, 1978: 2, p. 101)
the arrival
the departure

the guest
the ghost

the h(a)unter
Figure 2.1, *The (empty) Hall*, 2010
(Diptych) Photography by the author
Counter-Photojournalism

Charlotte Cotton (2009), author of *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, refers to the practice that I engage in as a “counter-photojournalistic approach” (p. 9). Rather than trying to capture an event in a more traditional photo-journalistic way, the wake of events are depicted by what has been left behind. Such practice is evident in the photographic work of Sophie Ristelhueber (Figure 2.2), Willie Doherty (Figure 2.3), and Zarina Bhimji where the scars of tragedy, war, and economic, social, and political upheaval in Kuwait, Ireland, and Uganda are revealed through allegory. This genre of photography shares a similar form in which absence of the human body emits a powerful (human) presence. Ristelhueber reveals the residue of combat through wounds inflicted on the earth. Doherty reveals the turbulence of Northern Ireland through framing corroded areas of derelict city streets. Bhimji produces images reminiscent of still-lifes, acting as evocative narratives for cultural elimination and erasure.

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Figure 2.2 Visual Quotation: Sophie Ristelhueber
Left: *Beirut, photographs, 1984 (École Normale)* Black and white photograph, silver print.
Right: *Eleven Blowups #1, 2006. Color photograph, chromogenic print*
© Sophie Ristelhueber. Courtesy of the artist.
These photographers play with what is seen and (mostly) what is not seen in the visual composition. What is presented before the viewer and what the viewer brings to the photograph becomes a method of visualizing the void of human loss and the complexity involved in conflict. The viewer is left to imagine the economic, social, cultural, and political forces that have motivated such acts and they are left with a story that is open-ended and unresolved (Cotton, 2009). A counter-photojournalistic approach advocates that a photograph is more than it represents. It offers a possible state of encounter between the image and the viewer that involves participation in order for an interpretation and/or an experience to occur. In this sense, the viewer is called on, not as a passive spectator, but as an active participant who has to piece together clues — both found and made — in order to construct a bigger picture of the event depicted.

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Figure 2.3 Visual Quotation: Willie Doherty
Left: Remains (Kneecapping behind Creggan Shops), 2013
Right: Headlights, Border Road at Dusk, 1993-2012
© Willie Doherty. Courtesy of the artist, Alexander and Bonin, New York, NY.
In a similar mode of representation to the artists previously described, photographs that I take inside the abandoned school document the aftermath of its closure through objects that have been left behind in the decommissioned building. Contrasting to the seamlessness, to the smoothness, and to the regulated space that a school regularly embodies, these photographs produce a tension between order and disorder, and between what is seen and not seen. Some photographs depict how the school’s materiality is no longer neatly organized, categorized, segregated or “in place” (Edensor, 2005, p. 66), while other photographs present what has become my preferred mode of representation — I prefer to use the Derridean term “signature” (Richter, 2010, p. 18) that utilizes “uncluttered complexity” — revealing how haphazard objects (such as a power cord, a desk, a telephone, or tiny pieces of shredded paper) serve as the residue of schooling while evoking an
ambiguous sense of longing or loss. In the context of the abandoned school, these objects change from “anything-what-ever” (Barthes, 1981, p. 34) into a contemplation of what remains in and of the closed school. As objects that have been left inside (and left behind), they can be interpreted as dead objects, objects of the dead, or what Freud (1917) referred to as “lost” objects and objects that are “forsaken” (p. 249). For educator and curator Susette Min (2003), “the lost object may be a friend, an event, a place, or an ideal abstraction such as love, democracy, or citizenship” (p 232). Min (2003) describes the lost object as something that is passionately felt and internalized by the grieving subject, who takes up the lost object in parts of him or herself. The lost object helps speak to the emotional affect these things have in their ambiguity and how, in relation to the absence of the human figure, they are the little that is known or the scant that has survived the event of school closure.
In the context of abandonment, the objects photographed may be interpreted as being melancholic — as the sad, morose, or wistful residues of the abandoned school — a place that has been deserted or forgotten. These objects may even come to replace the community who has been made absent in the building as a result of the closure of the school, and thus can even take on anthropomorphic qualities that mirror the human form.

Susan Sontag (1977) once declared that the photograph itself is a “melancholic object” (p. 49) as did Roland Barthes (1981), who stated that the photograph’s appeal is its “melancholy” (p. 79). Both Barthes and Sontag make reference to the spectral quality of a photograph that in signifying an absence, it produces an emotional effect and/or affect in the viewer during the viewing experience in which the subject, something that has disappeared, becomes something that is missed — or longed for.
In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes (1981) establishes two different modes of appearance in a photograph that work heterogeneously. The first mode, the *studium*, presents an average affect; it allows the viewer to ‘get’ the photographer's intentions, to approve or disapprove, but always to understand. Barthes (1981) further describes the studium as an education, a production of knowledge, “a civility”, and a certain “politeness” (p. 28). Although the studium allows the viewer to participate in the figures, faces, gestures, settings, or actions depicted by the photograph, it does not cause delight or pain, whereas the second mode of appearance, the *punctum*, breaks the studium and rises from the scene to “pierce” the viewer (p. 26). Barthes (1981) describes the punctum as a sensitive point, a “sting,” a “speck,” a “cut,” or a “little hole” that is “cast out like a dice” (p. 27). It is an accident with the uncanny ability to “prick” (p. 47) the viewer and also to “bruise” (p. 27).

After visiting 16 decommissioned schools and acquiring 2,487 photographs, I have spent hours reviewing, analyzing, and sorting through them. To a certain extent, I have an interest in all of them as they each reveal something unique about the place and/or about my experience being inside of it. There are some photographs, however, that present me with something unexpected; something that pulls me in and provokes me, like “a tiny shock” (Barthes, 1981, p. 49), which in turn causes me to notice, to observe, and to think.

The photograph entitled, *Contents Erased* (Figure 2.7), is one such image. It depicts the particular school’s institutional colors and its compartmentalized sections but it also represents the seriality and the ‘sameness’ that was a pattern in many of the abandoned schools that I visited. Here, the structure, the spatial organization, and the arrangement are captured in a certain deadpan aesthetic. Like Bernd and Hilla Becher who documented disappearing German
industrial architecture (Figure 2.8), I sometimes capture scenes so that the static temperament of the school are rendered through characteristics that Paulo Friere (1971) once labeled as “lifeless” and “petrified” (p. 71), and that Maxine Greene (1977) infamously called “anaesthetic” (p. 284). This mode of representation grants the abandoned school a structured appearance, allowing the small (sometimes partial) detail to become the focal point. Framing a vestibule, the photograph displays a shelving unit with a row of coat hooks that, at one time, was a center of order within the school (protecting it from disorder).
At first sight, the contents of the vestibule appear empty. But on closer inspection, there is a semi-transparent container located near the upper right hand corner and a chalkboard eraser located below on the lower shelf. The formation of the image is quite geometric. It presents a frame within a frame, a box within a box, and a grid within a grid. The rectangular bricks echo the rectangular shelving unit, which echo the rectangular blocks of color, which echo the rectangular air vent, which echo the rectangular room, which echo the rectangular school. Like a Matryoshka doll that decreases in size to nest smaller versions of itself neatly inside, the image produces a mise-en-abyme that leads the eye to recognize how, like a topological map, or a bird’s eye view, or a Piet Mondrian painting (Figure 2.9) — only called “red, blue and green”— the entire structure is a container within a container. The wardrobe suggests to us that its purpose is to hold a physical object or a substance. Its empty contents play with the idea that the abandoned school is empty of ‘school’ as is if ‘school’ was its content. The image appears like a microcosm, a fragment that has been caught within a larger macrocosm that bleeds outside of the image — and perhaps even outside the abandoned school.

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**Figure 2.8** Visual Quotation: Bernd and Hilla Becher
Left: *Wassertürme (Water Towers)*, 2006  
Right: *Gasbehalter (Gastanks)* image VII from series *Typologies*  
© Bernd and Hilla Becher. Courtesy of the artists and Sonnabend Gallery.

**Figure 2.9** Visual Quotation: Piet Mondrian  
*Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow*, 1930, oil on canvas 86 x 66 cm.
The thin white line of dust lying to the right of the chalk eraser begins to take on a heightened presence. It suggests that contents of the school have just been erased and it evokes thoughts pertaining to what or who has been erased through the closure of the school. Lying delicately on the surface of the laminate shelf, it is uncertain whether the line is headed towards the eraser or away from it. I am left feeling as though the things that are left here risk erasure, along with the history of the place and the memories inside the building. Thinking, fantasizing, and imagining what has been made absent in the wake of this dust, my gaze moves on to the coat hooks, lined up like little toy soldiers or birds on a wire that produce a figurative contrast to the geometric shapes in the composition. Allowing my eyes to follow each hook in sequence, from left to right, and then from right to left, I witness them transform into a school teacher’s stern finger protruding from the wall that begins to move like a Muybridge stop motion photographic series (Figure 2.11) telling me where to go and what to do. Tired, my eyes rest on the blue splatter caught inside a white brick on the left hand side of the photograph, located outside of the vestibule altogether. I can’t stop looking at this spot. It is the only thing that seems out of place. I want to erase it. I want to contain it. Its presence begins to haunt me. Why can’t I stop looking at it?

Figure 2.10 Visual Quotation: Eadweard Muybridge
Race Horse Gallop, 1878-1887
Sequence of photographs
The Refusal (of Erasure)

In terms of digital technology, photographic software and even in-camera features, I am afforded with various quick and easy ways to manipulate the image. I am aware that I can delete this mark so that it can appear as though it were never here. In contemplating this option, I refuse to erase the mark. I need to keep looking at it. This blue splatter, slightly lighter and brighter than the blue below it and in the vestibule draws my attention to other marks, splotches that are slightly lighter on the radiator and areas where the laminate has been torn off of the shelves. These marks force me to look back at the chalk eraser on the bottom shelf, which causes each mark to be read with the connotation that they will soon be erased along with all the other objects in the composition. They simultaneously become a sign of resistance (defying a system that is endeavoring to control and contain them), and the markings of failure (a rhetoric for the school’s internal collapse).

With the knowledge that the decommissioned school portrayed in this photograph has since been re-purposed into a nursing home, I am presented with what Barthes (1981) refers to as the “defeat of time” (p. 96). In other words, I am confounded with the school, as it will disappear, while having the knowledge that it has already disappeared. I realize in this moment that the photograph is not simply a record of the past — something that I can keep and look at after the school is gone — I realize that the photograph collapses time by falling into a liminal ‘in-between’ space of “this-has-been” and “this-will-be” (p. 96). These objects — the shelves, the container, the coat hooks, the peeling laminate, the ventilator, the blue and white bricks, the chalk eraser, and the arbitrary markings on the walls — appear before me as though they are suspended in time. In this space, the school will forever be closed awaiting its fate and preparing
for its death. This is the punctum that “pricks” me as if I’ve been pierced with a sharp point. It is not a form, but an “intensity” (p. 96) that forces me to think critically about the processes for which I am coming to see my role as a photographer documenting the abandoned school. As an historical task, it is not simply an act of chronicling an event; it is an active act of bearing witness to life (and life lost), which is not simply an act of remembering, collecting, and recalling the memorable, but an act that honours the unrememberable (Derrida, 1991 Cited by Wolfreys, 2010) in all its uncertainty and ambivalence.

This blue mark, finding its way outside the structure trying to contain it, asks me to think about how my work is doing the same. Returning to the idea that the vestibule is a topological map, or better yet and more fitting with the spatiotemporal architecture of the building, a modernist grid, the flattened, ordered, and geometricized formation appears as a world of its own, abstract and independent from the natural world. Rosalind Krauss (1979) once described the grid in modern art as being “autotelic” (p. 52), meaning it only has an end, or purpose, in and not apart from itself. I question whether this is true for what I am doing. Is this why the photograph appears constrained by a trope of loss and remembrance, creating a perpetual cycle of melancholia? The irony here resides in the idea that, like an empty cabinet of curiosity, or a Wunderkammer, the unfilled compartments and barren shelves do not contain any answers. They do, however, create a space, where new thoughts, new questions, and new relations have plenty of space to form.

In this concession, the abandoned school is rendered as a ghost-town, a place with only limited visible remains. The images and the text that are presented here are rendered through an aesthetic trope of absence. As (visual) metaphors for uncertainty, the things left behind are things that can only be observed in all their ambiguity. Therefore, loss pertains to a loss of knowing
what these things are or what they may mean for certain. Although an explanation may be desired — or longed for, here they remain forever open and enigmatic, which speaks to the allure of being inside the abandoned school, the space between the visible and the invisible. 

**Being Inside**

There is something extraordinary about being alone in the closed school. Boarded up for some time, the air is stale and the atmosphere is damp. Sections have become musty and moldy. There is a heaviness and deadness in the place as if it has already been transformed into a museum (Newbegin, n.d.). Being inside disarms memories and electrifies my imagination (Trigg, 2012), while my camera helps me take possession of it (Sontag, 1977). I photograph objects as I encounter them, as if they are evidence in a crime scene. I discover how their configurations tell a story and how that story changes depending on how it is framed and from what vantage point it is framed from. I play with these narratives; I crop objects; I use extreme close-ups; I flatten the depth of field; I emphasize various formal elements that are easily found in the modernist characteristics of the building; and I accentuate the mysterious relationships that these objects form as if their spatial configurations testify to an independent agency while being confined within the closed school. Tim Edensor (2005) explains this phenomenon as “the happenstance montages of ruined space” (p. 77) for which the arbitrary relationships and the juxtapositions between different forms, shapes, textures, and materialities create assemblages that defamiliarize a common place, thus celebrating the unfamiliar and producing alternate narratives. These stories often play with the utilitarian value of the object and how new formations make new meanings.

17Although I could refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work entitled, “The Visible and The Invisible,” (1968), I have selected to explore Derrida’s concept of the trace, which has come to inform my understanding of Being. The trace, both something that is no longer and something that is not yet, is visually materialized and ever-present inside the abandoned school.
depending on how objects are placed in context with other objects. I document these arrangements; I capture them on scene as if the school is a stage and the event of school closure their fate.

I begin piecing together the abandoned school’s missing inhabitants through objects that are left behind. Although most rooms appear empty, the doors, the windows, the blinds, and even the telephone and cable wires become clues to the objects and the people who used to inhabit the space. My attention shifts to the trace; hand marks on a particular area of the door, faded areas of carpet, rings, dents and that chart a passing of time and its abrupt halt. On rare occasions, rooms are cluttered; scattered with desks, chairs, and other random personal belongings such as files, art supplies, trophies, posters, framed pictures, broken glass, and bags of garbage. Cupboard doors and drawers are left ajar, curtains half open, objects discarded in the middle of the room or blocking passageways. There is a sense of urgency as if the people who left this place left in a hurry. Caught in limbo, the abandoned school sits waiting. But what is it waiting for?
Figure 2.11, Ghost-Town, 2015
(6 Images) Photography by the author
The Uncanny

In the everyday, a school is a constellation of people, of energy, of technology, of materials and of resources that work together to sustain order. Inside an abandoned school, the mobilizations of flows (that normally take shape in a social space) appear as though they have been trapped — caught (Edensor, 2005). Everything is fixed, hushed, and deathlike. Being-in the abandoned school, I am confronted with processes of natural reclamation, decay, and absence all of which resonate with Heidegger’s discussions of death, human finitude and life. Being-in the abandoned school, I encounter a story about human existence which provokes a certain mood. To borrow a term brought to the discourse of philosophy by Heidegger (2010), I encounter a feeling of anxiety, often translated as “Angst.”

One of the most significant basic attunement of Dasein in Being and Time is anxiety (Heidegger, 2010, p. 140/136). In order to understand what this means, Heidegger, explains how anxiety differs from fear. Fear, for Heidegger, is something definite. It is something specific that can be pinpointed. For the most part, when someone is fearful of something, the thing that makes someone fearful can be acknowledged. In his opinion, there are definite activities and specific tools that one can use in order to keep fear at bay. For instance, when a person is worried, they will look around for the person or the thing that will potentially bring them harm. Angst, by contrast, is not fear of anything specific, but a fear that cannot be described in any specific or definite way. Lee Braver (2014) describes angst as being “amorphous” (p. 65), which the Merriam-Webster (n.d.) Dictionary defines as something with no definite shape or form. Braver (2014) continues by characterizing angst as a “stultifying fog that comes from nothing and nowhere specific” (p. 65). What makes Heidegger’s concept of angst so interesting is that nothing in specific triggers it. As no ‘real’ object, angst is more equivalent to an all-pervasive
feeling or mood. A person held in angst cannot point to what would explain this feeling. If asked what they are afraid of, a person in angst would likely say, ‘nothing,’ which for Heidegger, “contains more truth than we might realize” (Braver, 2014, p. 65).

Heidegger’s discussion of nothingness continues because through angst, like dread, uneasiness, and malaise (Braver, 2014), we imagine the world, as we know it, slipping away. Left in its wake, is a place that appears remote and strange. Familiar things inside the abandoned school change from ordinary, everyday things, into uncanny objects — things that are “unnerving” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 140/136). Angst pertains to the quality of feeling that the uncanny provokes, like the feeling that one might experience in the dark. Heidegger writes (2010), “in the dark there is emphatically ‘nothing’ to see, although the world is still ‘there’ more obtrusively” (p. 190/183). While I am inside the abandoned school, things seem different and strange. Regular, everyday objects take on different meanings and I feel like a stranger that has been granted into their bounds.

Likewise, the feelings that I encounter while inside the abandoned school are different from the feelings that I experience in my everyday environment. In the absence of human presence, the things left behind provoke thoughts about human existence through the bizarre and sometimes even unintelligible thing. As if in a dream, the objects left in the abandoned school turn toward me, while the world outside draws away. Entering inside, nothingness and stillness come over me in their totality where angst begins its haunting. In this experience, the abandoned school holds a peculiar and ominous presence. It is an alien world, yet one that is strangely familiar. Heidegger associates angst with the uncanny (unheimlich), which literally translates to ‘not-at-home’ (Bramann, 2009). He does so in order to emphasize how in angst, we feel removed from our ordinary lives and our everyday roles and positions. As opposed to my habitual life at
Figure 2.12, *The (uncanny) Hall*, 2015
Photography by the author
home and in school, where I have routine tasks and conventional expectations, in the abandoned school, I am purposefully seeking the uncanny as to encounter ‘nothingness’. One such thing that this experience does is move me closer to an understanding of being.

Things inside the abandoned school seem unnatural. They hold a strange and even cryptic presence. Ways in which I normally engage with the outside world are suspended. Ways in which I move, relate, and proceed in a regular, everyday school space is no longer appropriate. The only thing left is a pure being-there, or what Heidegger calls *Dasein*. It is not a negative experience, but an opportunity to explore the qualities of my own existence. By encountering ‘nothingness,’ I position myself outside my everyday to see what unfolds. Experiencing things as unfamiliar and strange provoke my capacity to wonder, to inquire, to imagine and to (re)imagine the world in many ways.

Dylan Trigg’s text entitled, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (2012), parallels many ideas aforementioned by Heidegger. In his opinion, the life-world is a very fertile place for disturbing familiarity and for encountering the uncanny. When we do, the tone and the atmosphere of a place shifts into a reciprocal exchange with our own being acting as an interruption in which we can “become aware of the nothingness as a presence” (p. 25). For Trigg (2012), the uncanny is fundamentally an experience that disturbs the lived-body. Trigg relates the uncanny to a shiver, where the body becomes charged with “a creeping strangeness” (p. 27). The most interesting thing according to Trigg (2012) about the uncanny is that it is not a shock, but a weird rather than annihilating experience. *Something* arouses the body with an intermingling of different sensations leaving me with a vague sense of uncertainty. These are the reasons why Trigg (2012) argues “we lack the conceptual scheme to put it in its rightful place” (p. 28). Although *something* is invoked, it is not clear what. What is made clear, however, is that
the uncanny “refuses to recede to stillness, and instead presents us with something genuinely novel: an augmented familiarity, thus (un)familiar to the core (unheimlick)” (Trigg, 2012, p. 27).

The Return of the Familiar

For Freud (1955), the uncanny is difficult to define because it is relational to one’s sensitivity, which he reminds us, is subjective. One thing that is consistent with the uncanny according to Freud, is that it always “leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (p. 220). Referencing the work of Ernst Jentsch, Freud discovers that there is more to the uncanny than simply the feeling one encounters as a result of “intellectual uncertainty” (p. 221). He begins his analysis of the uncanny by studying the meaning that is attached to the words unheimlich (not at home) and heimlich (familiar, native or belonging to home) in German, as well as in a variety of other languages. The word heimlich belongs to two separate ideas and although they differ, he finds that they are not contradictory. First, heimlich pertains to what is familiar and agreeable, and second, heimlich pertains to what is concealed or kept out of sight. However, Freud reveals that unheimlich also holds the possibility of becoming heimlich. For example, “a man who walks into night and believes in ghosts; every corner is heimlich and full of terrors for him” (Freud, 1955 citing Klinger, p. 4). It is Freud’s opinion (1955) that the uncanny does not necessarily become an opposite, but “sub-species” of heimlich (p. 226). The uncanny, although pertaining to the uncomfortable, the gloomy, the dismal, the ghastly, the haunted, and the eerie, can also be heimlich for certain individuals who are at home in its uneasiness.

In returning to Jentsh, Freud (1955) exposes the uncanny as a narrative device, one that leaves readers in a state of uncertainty, becoming an imaginative story with an unparalleled atmosphere. An uncanny story presents a subtle difference to one’s everyday, yet utilizes some
Figure 2.13, *The (uncanny) Classroom*, 2015
Photography by the author
elements of the everyday with tremendous effect. Referencing E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story “The Sand-Man,” Freud reminds his readers of a mythical creature from European Folklore who tears out children’s eyes when they don’t fall asleep. Placing them in a sack, he carries them off to the half-mood to feed his own children. For Freud, the uncanny effect of the story is that it provokes uncertainty in the reader, making them unaware that they have embarked on a fantastical journey through a world peopled with spirits, demons, and ghosts. Freud explains that the reader is left with an impression that lies beyond the theory of “intellectual uncertainty” (p. 221) because the double seduces them into believing that they are a trusted character from their everyday and instead, catches them by surprise.

Freud argues that the process of transferring the paranormal qualities of the story to our everyday is what makes the story uncanny. Borrowing a term by the German author, Jean Paul, he suggests that the doppelgänger, a transcendental subject with capabilities for transformation, also holds an interruptive power that interrogates the limits of what is known, accepted and believed to be true (Vardoulakis, 2010). The irony here is that the doppelgänger also reveals Freud’s epistemological inconsistency as he engages “in a futile struggle to reach intellectual certainty about the uncanny” (Bartnœs, 2010, p. 34). The doppelgänger becomes a reflection of himself, in search for the uncanny as an intellectual certainty.

Freud’s interpretation of the uncanny, although critiqued as an incomplete gesture (see Bartnœs, 2010), has provoked a much larger discourse in its wake. Anneleen Masschelein (2011) takes up the uncanny in the book, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory*. In which the uncanny is described as having an ethical-political dimension because it is “a model for another type of knowledge operating in the margin of a more general ‘Theory’ governed by ambivalence, uncertainty, repetition, haunting, and fiction” (p. 156). In the
author’s extensive discourse of the uncanny, we learn how it is both “an affect and an effect ... a theoretical fiction ... and a flimsy label” (p. 156). Masschelein (2011) argues that “the uncanny’s operation is often determined by a specific form of stickiness that has become a ‘style’” (p. 156). As a style, Masschelein perceives the uncanny as something that has been over-employed by authors, scholars, artists, filmmakers for its simultaneous affect/effect, and its capability for spawning an endless deferral of meaning. Most interesting is the ‘stickiness’ that Masschelein emphasizes, which renders the uncanny as a resonance. In this way, it shares similarities with a shadow or a “double” (Freud, 1955, p. 235), revealing how the uncanny is something that can never become a single, identifiable thing. As Masschelein (2011) explains, “its dynamic movement cannot be fixed or halted, but only described belatedly when it has already moved elsewhere or when it has already transformed into something else” (p. 102). Perhaps this is the very reason why the uncanny finds its home with/in the theory of deconstruction.

Encountering the Ghost

Until Heidegger, many philosophers rendered presence as a form, with clear, distinct, and unchanging ideas based on logic (Bolt, 2011; Braver, 2014; Richards, 2008). Drawing attention to the absent entities that constantly fluctuate around us, Heidegger demonstrated how importance resides in our ongoing experiences with things as living beings. Among which, experiences with ‘nothingness’ could become an essential quality of life (Braver, 2014). Jacques Derrida, taking up Heidegger’s beginnings and taking on the metaphysics of presence, made it his political and ethical responsibility to reexamine the familiar, proving that “in examining familiar things we come to such unfamiliar conclusions” (Spivak, 1997, pp. xiv). Greatly interested in the work of Heidegger, Derrida translated Heidegger’s concept of Destruktion
(Abbau, dismantling or unbuilding) from German to the French déconstruire (‘to deconstruct’), a process that creates multiple associations and a multitude of relations between both Heidegger and his own terminology. Lee Braver (2014) argues that Derrida was very much indebted to Heidegger and inherited Heidegger’s practice of close readings. Performing Heidegger’s practice of sous rature, Derrida often creates surprising and unconventional interpretations. In his text, Heidegger: Thinking of Being, Braver (2014) explains the relationship between Heidegger and Derrida’s use of deconstruction,

[Derrida] sees all meaning as riddled with absence, contradictions, and irreconcilable tensions, all of which texts deny in presenting themselves as simple, consistent entities. Just as Heidegger’s Destruktion peels off layers falsifying theory to reveal the primordial experiences beneath, so Derrida’s deconstruction removes filters we use when we read to allow us to see the nest of contradictions. (p. 211-212)

Borrowing Heidegger’s Destruktion, Derrida engages in an act of Différance, the French verb differer meaning both to differ (in space) and to defer (in time). This delay plays pivotal importance because it not only extends Heidegger’s notion of temporality, it places emphasis on anticipation, or a waiting for something to come. For Derrida différance is always performative; it is a relational construct revealing how meanings can change and amass through space and over time. As Appelbaum (2009) attests, “difference opens the door to another time, a temporal alterity” (p.ix).

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18 ‘Encountering the ghost’ requires that we entertain what is not ‘t/here’ in the abandoned school. That is, what remains in/visible. This approach requires that as living beings, we learn to live with ghosts (Derrida, 2006).  
19 The practice of close readings (which includes changing and relational readings) is paramount to this study. This speaks to the performative quality of my methodology (Haseman, 2007), in which time and space are required for building an understanding of the abandoned school through artistic practice.  
20 These ideas metaphorically speak to how I am coming to understand my methodology as a performative paradigm that as an emergent field, has the potential for forming new, critical, and original approaches to research.
Figure 2.14, *Markings, 2015*
Photography by the author
Figure 2.15, Markings II, 2015
Photography by the author
The Lure of the Trace

As I wander and drift through the abandoned school’s hallways and rooms, the bits and pieces, the haphazard objects, the dented and the tarnished draw my attention to the trace. As Richard (2008) brings forth, the very word ‘mark’ resembles marche, the French word for walking. As I walk throughout the abandoned school, I search for marks and I observe how they take on multiple forms before me. Sometimes they appear as a tâche (a stain) and at other times, they are layered over one another like a palimpsest with multiple partial impressions resembling Freud’s mystic writing pad. The dents, the engravings, the signs, and in some cases, actual handwriting, corroborate an unknown story. Through their accumulation, I am not simply documenting physical impressions left by previous actions, I am actively searching for the trace, which for Derrida (1997), signals “the dead time within the presence of the living present” (Derrida, 1997, p. 68). These traces mark how “dead time is at work” (Derrida, 1997, p. 68) within the abandoned school. They usher me into a threshold between the past and the future and between the present and the future. They remind me that their origin and their arrival is something that will forever remain unknown. They are something I will never know for certain. Yet as a provocation for my imagination, they are everything I will ever know about the abandoned school.

Discussed previously in the work of Martin Heidegger (2010) and Dylan Trigg (2012), the uncanny, something without a shape or name, may share more in common with Derrida’s (1994) concept of the trace, which he argues is “some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other” (Derrida, 2006, p. 5). Derrida demonstrates how the trace, playing on the concept of ‘phainesthai,’ the Greek word to show or manifest itself, can also present itself as what it is not. That is, in presenting itself, it introduces a movement, something
that creates an illusion of presence (Richards, 2008).

For Derrida, being is marked by *anachrony*. Rather than rendering temporality as something that is ahead of itself, coming towards itself as a perpetual ‘not-yet,’ being is more like a trace, which appertains to “the pure actuality of the now” (Marrati, 2005, p. 124). The trace, opposing any origin, is both something that is no longer *and* something that is not yet — something that will be *and* is no more. For Derrida, time is divisible into parts, yet it holds no parts in the present. Only the trace belongs to the present, the now, which Derrida refers to as a strange relation in time. For Derrida, time is temporal only in *becoming* so. But the trace, passing into and out of nothingness, is atemporal — it is unaffected by time. Derrida, rendering being as something that is neither absent nor present; is something that is more akin to a semblance, an appearance, or an “apparition” (Marrati, 2005, p. 114). The trace — as *différence*, is something that will forever evade us. In its *anachronic* temporality, it produces infinite alterity (Applebaum, 2009; Hodge, 2007; Marrati, 2005).

Through deconstruction, Derrida demonstrates how language can be used to express similar but different ideas. The logic behind deconstruction renders words or signs as being both/and instead of either/or. Paradoxically, they can also become neither/nor (Richards, 2008). In this regard, each mark, and each trace has a double force. Derrida writes,

> Traces thus produce the space of their inscription only by acceding to the period of erasure. From the beginning, in the ‘present’ of their first impression, they are constituted by the double force of repetition and erasure, legibility and illegibility. (Derrida, 1978, p. 226)

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21 For Derrida, even though traces may appear incomprehensible, we *read* them as if they are words. This speaks to his affiliation to Heidegger, where *Being* may be disclosed in language. Although Levinas also argued that the trace, as an inscription, is generative, he also believed that the trace leaves an impression on the body that as an enactment, carries more than language can express (Hodge, 2007). As a generative gathering place, however, language (whether in linguistic or visual form) becomes an analogy for the sensations that are felt/experienced inside the abandoned school.
The visual trace made by someone or something else become signs of \textit{diff\texterance}. My photographs, framing the trace, become a trace of their own. As an act of repetition, the photograph becomes my mark, with a future and a possibility of its own erasure.\footnote{The trace inspires me to think of things in this world that come and go. Like the abandoned school, things that appear `in' and disappear `from' this world always leave a trace. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida (1978) argued that through the trace, we encounter the `Other'. We may `see' the `Other' not in a face-to-face encounter but through the affect of imagination, which becomes a force that is caught in the act (Hodge, 2007).}

Malcolm Richards (2008), exploring how deconstruction can be understood in relation to visual art, argues that rather than imagining deconstruction as a structure or an object that is in mid-air, suspended, with all of its parts visible, as a method of critical analysis that reverses biases within a text’s structure, it is more worthwhile to “conjure an image of something in the midst of collapse, not destroyed, but falling apart — a ruin even” (p. 12). This image places emphasis on the trace, as something that Derrida argues (1978) is an “imprint” of “irreducible means” (p. 66). The trace is something “which does not let itself be summed up in the simplicity of the present” (Derrida, 1978, p. 66). As Wolfreys (2010) argues, it is “the survival of memory without memory” (p. 6). Like a \textit{phantom machine}, it is “both a ghastly mechanism constructed out of nothing other than writing, the sign, and so forth, and also a machinic medium the purpose of which is to conjure and project its singular-collective of phantasmagorical traces” (Wolfreys, 2010, p. 6).

Freud (1955) establishes that the uncanny is something that is buried under the human psyche and in particular, processes of repression in which situations that are unfamiliar carry an eerie sense of familiarity. Through the uncanny, something that was once familiar returns, only to leave a strange impression. The uncanny, as the double “reverse[s] its own aspect” (Freud, 1955, p. 235) and the uncanny, becomes personified — as either a guest … or ghost. As such, the abandoned school cannot but \textit{evoke}, that is, bring to mind, or \textit{invoke} a spirit — something that is
subterranean, secret, hidden, and spectral.

The uncanny does not pertain to all that is terrible; it pertains to all of the sensations and all of the feelings that, in part, cannot be captured in this exegesis. It pertains to what cannot be written, what cannot be said, and cannot be made visible. The obstacle, as Freud (1955) reminds us, is that the uncanny presents something that people’s sensitivity greatly varies — it pertains to a quality of feeling, which requires “an extreme delicacy of perception” (Freud, 1955, p. 220). What I cannot deny is that the abandoned school presents and arouses in me a feeling of uncanniness — a class of terrifying where its essential factor is as an intellectual uncertainty — a place of unknowing. The abandoned school however, is more than something that is unfamiliar. The abandoned school, eerie and motionless, like ‘a stone image’ (Freud, 1955), coincides with its opposite, where instead being a non-school, becomes a sub-species of school, where the uncanny becomes its content.

Being in the abandoned school is an experience that unlike my previous experiences of school deploys a different temporality. In these schools there is a slowing down and at some times there is complete stillness. Being inside is like entering into a fantastic narrative with an unparalleled atmosphere. As something that is quite different from my everyday, it stages action within a world peopled with things un/seen and with things un/heard. The uncanny effect of the abandoned school resides in the double, the similarity by reason of looking or appearing like an ordinary school that is part of my everyday, however, the mental process of transferring the abandoned school to my everyday is what makes the abandoned school uncanny. As a ‘double,’ it is more like a shadow — or ghost

Utilizing Derrida’s concept of Parergon, inside the abandoned school, it is as if there is something paranormal at play. Walking down the halls, I hear the echo of my own footsteps. I
catch (unexpected) glimpses of my own reflection as I try to capture certain shots. These events catch me off guard, they remind me of my own presence as I navigate inside the empty building. For Peeren (2010), “the appearance of the ghost causes surprise, shock, and fear, and represents a rupture in the everyday — an interruption by the unfamiliar and frightening of the familiar, the comfortable, and the routine” (p. 106). In Peeren’s opinion, the ghost, set forth as an intruder, is a visitation that disturbs,

Ghosts are expected to act as powerful figures of disturbance whose appearance causes mayhem: in most ghost stories, unsettling questions are raised about the status of ‘reality’ and the border between life and death, secrets from the past are revealed, revenge is exacted, bloodlines and inheritances put in question, and only decisive action on the part of the living can exorcize the apparition. Ghosts tend to function as unwelcome reminders of past transgressions, causing personal or historical traumas to rise to the surface and pursuing those they hold responsible. This turns them into existential threats, to be greeted with a mixture of shock and fear… At the same time, ghosts are the object of intense fascination: any inkling of a haunting presence is followed by an overwhelming desire to locate it. (Peeren, 2010, p. 2)

For Peeren (2010), the protagonist often perceives the ghost as a problem that requires solving. Their quest becomes part of a plot to force the ghost to depart so that order can be restored. It is here in this place that I wonder, what if it is not the ghost that is doing the haunting? But the living that haunts by a ghost? Perhaps this is the reason why the ghost fails to make an appearance in the abandoned school. Or perhaps none of these questions are right either for they concede the premise that the protagonist is I, when perhaps the protagonist is the abandoned school.
Figure 2.16, *Parergon*, 2015
(Diptych) Photography by the author
The Specter

Inside the abandoned school, there is an invisible and invasive force all around me. I feel like I’m being looked at — watched. Like an ever-knowing eye in the sky, the abandoned school attends to all of my movements. Below its roof and within its walls, I am like an insect in the landscape. Roaming in the dark, the florescent lights turned off. I am caught off-guard. I wasn’t anticipating this. An immense space opens before me and I begin to drift. Haunted by these traces, these marks. I wonder if they will forever remain unavailable to me. Yet, I am opening myself up to all of their phenomenological impressions. Photographing the unexpected, I am not even thinking of where I will go next, or where I will end up. Like the things that surround me, and like the abandoned school, I am suspended in space and in time. I am at home in its unhomeliness. Wandering from detail to detail, I let them confuse my senses. Although these things remind me of my own childhood, attending a school just like this, these things, these marks, this place is connected to something that is much bigger than me. In its ambiguity, it is something that is no longer a thing of the past. It is something that can no longer be contained.
Figure 2.17, *Parergon II*, 2015
(Diptych) Photography by the author
For hauntologist Julian Wolfreys (2010), the presence of imaginary shapes or essences, inclusive to ghostly effects, unexplained phenomena and the uncanny, call attention to something, or someone that has been put under erasure. Having been crossed out and preserved, they are a material reminder that we too, may one day become anachronistic. Though, being inside the abandoned school is an act of bringing it nearer, it brings with it a paradoxical situation. Carrying forth the things that are invisible, they are not insignificant, nor are they nothing. Far exceeding the material remains are the holes, the gaps, the silence and the stillness, “…what one imagines, what one things one sees and which one projects — on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see” (Derrida, 2006, p. 125). The spectral, speaking to the limits of arriving and departing, is neither alive nor dead (Derrida, 2006; Wolfreys, 2010). This is the mark that pricks me.

Standing in a maze adorned with language that is unreadable and undecipherable, I become aware that the abandoned school is playing tricks on me. Are those the markings of its everyday wears and tears? Or the markings of a spirit? I decide on the latter, though I am unsure whether it is something that is trying to get inside the abandoned school — or out. I pause. And it is in this very place that I begin again — drifting.
Figure 2.18, Parergon III, 2012
Photography by the author
Figure 2.19, Grid (2010)
Photography by the author
Figure 2.20, *Suspended*, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 2.21, Suspended II, 2015
Photography by the author
Concession 3

THE

CRYPT

“Gentle closing calls for gentle opening...”

(Bachelard, 1994, p. 83)
no place
non place
other place
beyond place
safe
Traditionally speaking, an exhibition space is a place in which artistic objects are arranged on display for a viewing audience. Artistic exhibitions not only aid in the sale of artistic works, they also help promote the exposure of an artist by opening the work up to public discourse and to (art) criticism. Having taken part in numerous exhibitions, I always learn something new by bringing my work out of my (internal) world and placing it into the world for others to experience. Similar to the critiques that I endured in art school, the questions and the conversations that the work prompts is a process and an event that always fuels me with a newfound energy, inspiring me to re-enter the studio and to begin a new work and/or series of new work(s).

During the production of this project, I had the opportunity of participating in multiple exhibitions that displayed several of my photographs and photographic series. However, these events left me feeling somewhat disappointed — somewhat unfulfilled. After exhibiting my photographs in a traditional mode one exhibits two-dimensional work (on a wall in which viewers looked from a distance), I wanted to do something different from what I had done before — I wanted to invite my viewers to see and to feel the abandoned school in a way that was similar to how I had experienced the abandoned school as an urban explorer dwelling with/in an ambiguous place.

As such, I conceptualized an art installation in which photographs taken inside of a decommissioned school were projected onto the outside’s physical structure and I invited the public, community members who experienced the closure of the decommissioned school, to take part in an immersive experience in which they could, in turn, project their own stories and imaginations onto the artwork.
‘Installation art’ refers to a type of art in which the viewer is asked to physically enter or navigate. Rather than an engagement based on vision alone or at a distance (like a traditional photographic exhibition), an installation presents an immersive experience in which the viewer becomes enveloped by, or engrossed in, the artwork. In the text, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Claire Bishop (2005) utilizes Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) to help describe the main features of an art installation. Like a dream, an art installation is primarily visual. However, it also comprises other fragmentary components such as auditory or olfactory detritus, which evoke a “sensory vividness” (Bishop, 2005, p. 16). As a composite structure, an art installation functions like a dream in which the totality of the discrete objects arranged in space (and time), constitute the singular work. Finally, also like a dream, an art installation does not necessarily require an interpretation, but can be analyzed through processes of free association in which metonymic or affective connections are created (Bishop, 2005).

“The dream scene’ as Bishop (2005) calls it, is a mode of installation art that has played a pivotal role in the discourse of avant-garde art since the surrealist exhibition displays in Paris in the late 1930s and has continued in the artistic *happenings* of the 1950s and 60s with artists such as Alan Kaprow and Joseph Beuys. Accelerating in the 1980s and 1990s with feminist and post structural artists such as Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago, it continues today in which many large-scale, even monumental works submerge the viewer in “a psychologically absorptive, dream-like environment” (Bishop, 2005, p. 10).

One of the predominant characteristics of ‘a dream scene’ is the first-hand experience that it provokes. Staged as a theatrical, immersive, and experiential form of engagement, it heightens viewers’ awareness to how objects or other components are positioned in space (and time) and it
asks them to engage in a bodily response that may even trigger personal fantasies, individual memories, or cultural associations. In this context, the viewer does not encounter a character on scene; rather, they are positioned in the scene as the protagonist of the story. As such, the viewer is faced with all of the uncertainties and challenges that a physical, social, cultural, emotional, and even political situation may bring forth.
Figure 3.2 Projections (2014)
Documentation of the installation, In/Visibility of the Abandoned School.
Photograph by the author.
In/Visibility of The Abandoned School was conceptualized as an invitation for the viewer to position themselves in the context of a decommissioned school; to stand on-site with the building in the starkness of night and in the vastness of space that the rural location afforded. As a method of de-distancing (Heidegger, 2010), it was an invitation for viewers to walk on the same ground as the abandoned school and to engage in an experience or mood. My intentions for the installation were two-fold. First, I wanted to create an immersive experience in which the viewer not only looked at, but also moved in and around the decommissioned school as an invitation to engage in an embodied form of inter/action. Second, playing on the concept of ‘phainesthai’ that had emerged repeatedly in my process of documenting the interior of the decommissioned schools, I was curious to see how the installation would (visually) manifest. Contrary to my experiences inside the decommissioned school, a world peopled with things unseen, the event called people into attendance. It staged an event in which people could be seen and heard.

There were certain challenges in implementing this project. First the design had to abide by certain conditions set forth by the school district that granted me permission to utilize the building. Second, the rural location, positioned in a remote and isolated area, made several visits not only time consuming, but difficult to maneuver (especially in the dark). Third, since the building was already cut off from the electrical grid, a generator was essential to power the projections. This demanded a careful integration into the project’s design (tucked neatly behind the building). Fourth, comprising of multiple projectors, the installation also required multiple computers and numerous power cords that I personally had to set up and then navigate (in an expansive space) in order for the work to be programmed effectively.

The projected images, juxtaposed as a series of four, were programmed to change every twenty seconds, which looped in its entirety every ten minutes. The building’s flat white walls
were selected for the projections and worked very well for this purpose. The community who experienced the closure of the school ten months earlier were invited to come and see the projections and to take part in the event which lasted for two hours. People ages 10 to 80 were in attendance and various forms of dialogue took place. The types of responses ranged from observations and conversations, to response cards that asked a series of open-ended questions. Anecdotal responses sparked many impromptu dialogue sessions, including conversations between viewers and between the viewers and myself. Borrowing terminology by Gaston Bachelard (1994), ‘Dreams of Intimacy’ and ‘Centers of Reverie’ speak to how the installation elicited a response.

**Dreams of Intimacy**

“I feel like I can walk into the school, but then I remember that it’s closed and I can’t.” (Viewer)

One of the most defining features of a closed school in British Columbia is the manner in which the windows are boarded up (meticulously) in order to protect the unoccupied site from thieves and vandals. The photographic interiors projected onto the outside walls were intended to evoke large, oversized windows, and to disrupt the static building by creating openings into new spaces, new thoughts, and new worlds. The projected photographs were intended to address the binary of outside/inside, linking the two disparate physical spaces together by bringing the viewer ‘in’ through virtual and spatial means. The projected interior, with its larger-than-life objects and empty rooms, were meant to be more dreamlike than actual, they were intended as provocations for imagination and for reflection by asking viewers to engage with the closed school by putting their own fantasies, memories and experiences into play.
Figure 3.3, Projections II (2014)
Documentation of the installation, In/Visibility of the Abandoned School. 
Photograph by the author.
Taking into consideration the dimensions of the actual building and surrounding land, the projections, situated between the intersecting lines of the building’s architecture, echoed the formal structure of the decommissioned school. The projections appeared like huge garage doors that opened into a luminous interior space. The projections became provocations for viewers’ perceptions of the materiality of the closed school. It granted them access to enter ‘inside’ the building through a virtual window, or dream-like portal, if you will. As the quotation from one of the viewers at the beginning of this section reveals, juxtapositions between the real and the virtual, the tangible and the intangible, the light and the dark, the positive and negative, the open and the closed, the seen and the unseen created a tension in the viewing experience. The decommissioned school, inhabiting the participants more than the participants could inhabit the building, disrupted the habitual ways that the viewers had previously moved about the space. It provoked thoughts pertaining to how the closed school was situated in the present as an inaccessible, impassable, and unattainable place. The virtual interior, surging forward, penetrated the viewers’ thoughts and emotions while the actual physical building seemed to play a secondary role. A dialogue centered on what could not be seen in the installation, and more precisely, the photographs/projections, quickly emerged. One viewer commented, “I don’t see any people. There are no books. There are no signs of activity.” While another viewer commented on how the photographs were “missing children.” One viewer stated, “I wish I could go inside and see how the interior has changed since I was a pupil in the 1950’s.” While another wanted “to see the music room” because it was her “favorite place in the school.”

‘Dreams of intimacy’ is a term that I am borrowing from Bachelard (1994, p. 24) to reference how the installation created virtual punctures into the physical building and the landscape. In this context, it was almost as if the projections transformed the flat walls into giant
dream-like windows granting viewers an opportunity to see inside. Like a “brief light” from “a narrow window” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 24), the projections, only lasting for a limited amount of time, and suggesting only limited areas of the school, prompted viewers to call on their memories of being inside the school. As a result, many voiced a desire to enter the building, to see what they could not see in the installation.

**Centers of Reverie**

Not only did the projections provoke memories, they brought forth questions and recollections of people and places that viewers had forgotten while demonstrating how the same projection could have a different effect and/or affect on different viewers. One sequence of images including a long row of coat-hooks individually labeled with (student) names caused an older viewer to think back to her own children's youth. Recalling, “both my children brought home lice! The lice jumped from coat to coat along those coat-hooks” (Viewer). Whereas, a little girl, quite engaged with the names labeled under each hook, excitedly called out the names of her (past) classmates, “There’s Sarah, and Kylie, and Michael, and Galen ... but I don’t know what happened to Eric — he doesn’t go to my new school” (Viewer). When the projections changed to a large mural made by the school children, one witness, a retired teacher from another school in the same area, stated, “Oh, yes. We had a mural like that in my school. It reminds me of so many previous schools that I have been in or worked at” (Viewer). At the same time, a ten-year-old girl squealed, “That one’s mine! That’s my self-portrait! You found it! You found it in the school! I’m amazed that it’s still there!” Running to the building, standing beside her projected portrait in the bright light of the projector, she asked me to take her photograph so that she could “remember it” (Viewer).
The event enabled unlikely creative and intellectual associations, and it elicited a diversity of expressions and performances. The response resulted either in action (in movement or in dialogue) or in reflection (looking, reading, listening to oneself and/or others). The personal memories, histories, and subjective experiences that viewers brought to the work became the content of the work. The spatiotemporal organization not only asked viewers to engage in a physical interaction between the land, the building-façade-turned screen, the projector(s), and each other, it invited them into relation with these things, and with each other, as contributing components of the work, that in turn, produced new relations and new connections.

The installation not only prompted a perceptual experience but also an immersive one that demanded for participation and for a multi-sensorial engagement. Rather than a closed system, detached from nature and cut off from society as it had been made to appear within the processes of school closure, the decommissioned school created new formations opening it up to possibility. One viewer curious as to why I selected not to utilize the oldest part of the school as a pivotal component of the installation observed,

It’s interesting that you chose not to include the oldest part of the school — the old school house that was built in 1914. I was told that the community is going to keep [the old building] as part of the historical society of [the area]. The other two sections, added sometime in the 1950’s and 1970’s, will most likely be turned into something else, removed, or torn down altogether. It’s ok—as long as they keep the old school. That’s where the history is. (Viewer)

This comment captivated the imagination of several viewers. Thoughts were quickly carried to places inside and outside of the decommissioned school that were considered ‘historical.’ Upon hearing this comment, my thoughts quickly scanned the images in my memory from all of my experiences photographing the interior of the de-commissioned school(s). Thinking of all the
Figure 3.4, *Projections III* (2014)
Documentation of the installation, *In/Visibility of the Abandoned School.*
Photograph by the author.
objects that I consider ‘historical.’ This process asked me to question when and why I consider things as being ‘historical.’ As I was witnessing in the present situation, I wondered when and why certain objects are overlooked as being ‘historical’? Recalling the materials that I encountered while inside the de-commissioned school, the “materials of the 1950’s and 1970’s” — the wood, concrete, steel, copper, aluminum, laminate, linoleum, marmoleum, glass, plastic, plaster, paper, masking tape, cinder blocks, bricks, mortar, tar, carpet, lead-based paint, and all of the asbestos-filled components and equipment — the materials that people are quick to forget — or erase. The things that are not often perceived as national heritage objects, the things that are rarely preserved for their historical or cultural significance, the things that are not/or cannot be maintained in order to benefit current or future generations, the things that are perceived as having little, or no value. Although I had witnessed how these very materials can become justifications for why a school building should be torn down, I was left wondering, do they not also speak to the significance of the place just as much as the “old section that was built in 1914”? Do they not also define the de-commissioned school? Situating it within a particular time in history? This response drew my curiosity and other participants’ curiosity to “where the history is” located with/in the de-commissioned school. This question challenges us to think about where the contents, the substance, or the value of the closed school resides. Is it inside the de-commissioned school? In certain areas of the de-commissioned school? Is it in the viewers’ thoughts, memories, and/or personal lived experiences, that, similar to the installation, remains outside of the building, projected onto the de-commissioned school?

The installation, in its limited materials and relatively simple construction, was envisioned as a reconfiguration of space, place, and time. By provoking movement, dialogue, and thought, it resisted a traditional narrative structure comprising of a beginning, middle, and end, and it
produced multiple beginnings and multiple middles while resisting closure altogether. Utilizing what Garoian & Gaudelius (2008) refer to as “a collage narrative” (p. 36), it became a visual and immersive method of juxtaposing images, ideas, objects, and actions as a means of bringing new associations and new questions to the fore. Instead of producing a totalized entity, these disparate elements created various in-between spaces where meanings could be re-examined, re-made and re-negotiated (Ellsworth, 2005; Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008).

Bachelard (1994) once stated “everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate” (p. 39). This was evident in one projection in particular, (See Figure 3.4) in which the image of a post-it note with the words, “Please do not disturb” sparked much dialogue. Although the note was found inside the school, tacked to an office door, when it was projected onto the outside wall and placed with/in the context of the installation, witnesses experienced it as a political statement that was symbolic for their resistance against building’s closure and subsequent erasure. One viewer said, “Now that’s interesting. I wish that the post-it note could stay on the building like that so that no one will move it or tear it down” (Viewer). As a ‘center of reverie’ the post-it note, projected onto the building in this way, not only transformed from a small, mundane material in the everyday, it was used to provoke further thought and dialogue among the viewers present.
Figure 3.5, *Projections IV* (2014)
Documentation of the installation, *In/Visibility of the Abandoned School.*
Photograph by the author.
“I can’t get used to the silence. I miss the sounds of the children at play and running in the fields. It’s a loss in our community—a loss of history to the area” (Viewer)

Shimon Attie is a photographer and an historian who utilizes performance and new media to create public, site-specific, and installation art. Born in California to parents with German and Syrian roots, Attie moved to Berlin in 1991 and produced the installation entitled The Writing on the Wall: Projections in Berlin’s Jewish Quarter (Figures 3.6 and 3.7). Attie was inspired to create the work by taking long walks in the urban environment. Contemplating what happened to the missing residents who used to live and inhabit the city caused him to think of his own experiences. The body of work was composed of various site-specific compositions in which Attie projected fragments of archival photographs taken by people who were forced into seclusion by the Nazis, prior to WWII onto their present location (Attie, 2003; Muir, 2007; Propst, 2012)

Figure 3.6 Visual Quotation: Shimon Attie
*Almstadtstrasse 43 (fruhere Grenadierstrasse 7)*, Berlin, edition 24/25, 1992
Ektacolor print
dimensions variable
Inventory #SA93.007
Many of the original structures, destroyed during the war, sent Attie searching through archival records of the city in order to find the actual locations through several decades or processes in which addresses were re-named and re-numbered. Attie utilized the historical images in order to visually (re)introduce them to the physical landscape. By projecting them onto the surface, he ‘re-connected’ them with a past in which they share(d) a connection. In doing so, he was performing “a kind of peeling back of the wallpaper of today to reveal the histories buried underneath” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 65-66).

Visible for two evenings, Attie’s projections could be viewed from street level. In taking part in the reception of the work, Attie also walked around observing the work and the reactions from the viewers, which ranged from surprise, to fascination, to grief, and even annoyance. During this stage of the event, Attie also worked to preserve the work by photographing it (Attie, 2003; Muir, 2007).
Although *In/Visibility of the Abandoned School* marked the one hundredth anniversary of the oldest section of the school building, in speaking with the community, I learned that the history of the de-commissioned school preceded its physical structure. The school started in 1882, when a group of parents rallied together and transformed an old abandoned cookhouse into a temporary school for their children. After receiving a grant in the form of sixty dollars, and a generous donation of land to build the school on, the parents built the first school on its current site in 1883. This schoolhouse eventually burned down and was replaced in 1914 by the one that currently stands on site, boarded up and abandoned by the school district that commissioned it for almost 100 years.

In the early 20th century, people in the area either worked at the sawmill, in logging, or in gravel extraction. Not only did everyone in town have a direct connection with the land, but they consciously and collectively wove a rural appreciation into the history of the school. For the viewers that I had an opportunity to speak with, I discovered that the school was more than an institution, and more than a systemic structure put in place by the government with the sole purpose of housing the community’s public educational encounters, it was a place erected by the community to help foster their social, cultural, and political linkages in the community, while providing opportunities for inter-personal relationships. The school helped bring individuals together despite being separated by large pieces of land. Right up until it’s closing, programs had been put in place to celebrate its rural location helping to create cross-cultural relationships with/in the community.

Viewers revealed that they had a past that was connected to the school, and for some this connection spanned several decades. For one viewer in particular, the connection to the school extended several generations going as far back as the 1800s. This viewer was the great-
grandchild of the man who had donated the land that the (de-commissioned) school was built on. She revealed to me that she has lived next door to the school her entire life (70 years) and that she and her siblings attended the school as children. Even after 10 months after its closure, she revealed to me that she still couldn’t get used to the silence. She often found herself washing dishes and looking out the window towards the location in which the (de-commissioned) school stood. Although she cannot see the building from her kitchen window, she revealed that she had never realized until now that she always listened for the chorus of children running in and out of the building, and for the bell that used to help “regulate” her own days. With this newfound silence, she revealed that she often found herself looking towards the empty building, waiting for the bell to ring and waiting for the children to laugh and yell as they had in all of her past days living next to the building.

I also had the opportunity of speaking to a young girl who was ten years old. When I asked her how she felt seeing the installation, she responded with a quick shrug of her shoulders and a one-word reply, “sad,” she said. As we spoke, I learned how much she loved the decommisioned school, and also her friends, her teachers and the garden that they had built together with the help of parents from the community who volunteered their time during the lunch break and after school. The garden, started by her grade three teacher, taught her how to grow arugula, broccoli, tomatoes, potatoes, spinach, beans, lettuce, raspberries, currants, and pumpkins. The young girl explained how her teacher liked to use the garden as an outdoor classroom, where they learned how to plant seeds and harvest crops. She confided in me that her new school was “just not the same.” The two programs that she enjoyed the most (music and gardening) in her previous school were not offered at her new school. The young girl’s mother, who was also present, described how her new school had a very different “climate.” She conceded, “[the old] school
was different because we helped make it what it was. Not only are things tougher now because of the time and the cost of traveling to the new school, we just don’t feel as welcome as we did before. It just doesn’t feel like it’s… ours.” I am unable to communicate how I felt in hearing the young girl’s one-word response to my installation. In this instance, Roland Barthes’ (1981) concept of the ‘punctum’ as an ‘unexpected poignancy’ (Propst, 2012) entered a new dimension. In this moment, I felt the community’s sense of displacement and longing for the past.
Figure 3.8, Projections V (2014) Documentation of the installation, In/Visibility of the Abandoned School. Photograph by the author.
The Interpretation of Dreams

Abraham and Török’s book (2005) entitled, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*, is a literary analysis of Freud’s psychological interpretations of a patient’s dreams. In the foreword, written by Jacques Derrida, he asks, “What is a crypt?” In true Derridian style, he begins to answer his question by stating what it is not. For Derrida, the crypt is not a metaphor “in any ordinary sense” (p. xiii), that is, it is not a metaphor for the unconscious, the hidden, the secret, the underground or the latent, nor is it a metaphor for repressed desires or internal conflicts. He argues, it is not “a sum of any psychoanalysis”, a “false” or “artificial” unconscious (p. xiii). This de-signifying conversion allows Derrida to think from within psychoanalysis, to the *anasemic*, which “serves as an active analytic tool, enabling us to search for the meaning of phenomena in something that is by nature inaccessible to direct apprehension” (Rand, 1994, p. 77). For Derrida, the crypt is inaccessible through ordinary measures. To access the crypt, we must first meet the ghost, which requires encountering the void in absolute knowledge. This is the ‘phantom effect’ that is brought forth by Abraham and Török (2005), which applies to the psychotherapist’s perspective, situated in the margins of the event of trauma, whereby an experience of the event is achieved through indirect means. Derrida (2005) argues that the crypt signifies someone else's loss, which is both a never-ending loss and not a loss at all. Derrida’s foreword reveals that the crypt can be best understood as a metaphor for the self who is building an understanding through engaging in external events and objects. Most importantly, Derrida reveals that the crypt is not an external object because it is something that resides inside the individual, where as a lost object, it remains forever preserved. In this sense, the crypt is something that can never truly be revealed to anyone else. For Derrida, this is the power of the crypt, where as an invisible being, it holds an uncanny ability of haunting our thoughts, our dreams, and our imaginations.
The Palimpsest

Trained as a photographer, Shimon Attie has said that he often creates multi-media installations for the sole purpose of photographing them. In one way, you can say that I did the same. However as this concession attests, viewers were invited to take part in the event and they showed up. Therefore, their responses became an integral component of the work. Although viewers engaged in reflections and in memories that the installation provoked, it also called on them to pay attention to the decommissioned school as it stood in the present. The dialogue and the conversations that took place on site between the decommissioned school, the viewer(s), the landscape, and myself, the artist/researcher, who was present during the installation, refused to let the abandoned school ‘settle’ into the background — or be forgotten.

The images that are presented here have a similar quality. As a layering of multiple images, they form a palimpsest of multiple times, places and spaces that create a rich fabric of associations. For cultural researcher, Peter Muir (2007), images of Shimon Attie’s installations have a spectral appearance in which the layered archival images from the past contrast with the ghostly projections of the present. Muir (2007) describes this layering as a folding of time in which time no longer forms a continuous line, but a spatially (re)imagined space. For Muir (2007), the layering process creates the potential for carrying the event forward into new and unknown circumstances.

As palimpsests, the images presented here, render the abandoned school as being partial and open. No longer fixed, static, or whole, the abandoned school is aptly positioned as to connect with other spaces, places, people, and events. As a palimpsest, the abandoned school is an invitation to imagine other cracks, crevices, and cavities into (over and under) things that normally go unnoticed or unseen.
"Without the breath of life the human body is a corpse; without thinking the human body is dead."

(Arendt, 1978: 1, p. 123)

"What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing."

(Arendt, 1998, p. 5)
cancelled

dissolved

eradicated

negated, nixed, nullified

obliterated
On this cold, dark night, with nothing behind me but a long rural road separating the abandoned school from a large mass of forested space, my projections cut through the darkness with a gorgeous and luminous light. The projections melt the solid walls, allowing the inside to slip outside. The naked, empty rooms projected onto the flat un-moving structure in combination with the soft amber light from the nearby street produces a disorienting, ethereal scene. I am delighted and in awe of what I have made. Four mouths sit agape, where, like a monstrous beast, the abandoned school sits floating, half here, half there, and half nowhere. As I wander around, in and through the projections, the cold wet grass penetrates through the soft leather of my boots, wetting my toes and freezing my feet. I am literally having trouble feeling my body due to being exposed to this cold for such an extended length of time. Yet in this moment, I am touched by wonder and by curiosity.

Aptly named the corpse, this concession speaks to the site-specific installation that was performed on-site with an abandoned school from my perspective as an artist-academic who is entertaining activist, interventionist and participatory forms of engagement. Utilizing Arendt’s notion of storytelling, this concession speaks to what it felt like, for me alone, to be part of, and bodily present, on the night that “In/Visibility of The Abandoned School” was installed. Focusing on some of the textures that the event opened up through remembering, forgetting, fragments, and w/holes — a “tangled, murky zone where fantasy and images, desire and loss, and wit and guilt reside” (Morris, 1978, p. 92) — it is an invitation to contemplate life, death, dead space, live space, and spaces in-between. Drawing from my own perceptions of the event, I linger in the interstitial spaces that the installation produced, and I draw from two contemporary installation artists that I am familiar with, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rachel Whiteread, who also engage in site-specific installation art practices, inviting viewers to witness relationships between
aesthetics, memory and political space. As the concession unfolds, I describe how I am coming to understand my own artistic practice through Hannah Arendt’s notion of ‘appearance.’

**Site-Specificity**

Art historian and critic Miwon Kwon (2000) describes site-specific art as an object or event that is not only placed in an actual, or real, location (i.e. outside an institution such as a gallery or museum), but is guided and directed by the ‘site’ that it is placed with/in. In other words, the location is not coincidental, it is not an afterthought, nor is it simply where the work of art is exhibited. Rather, the location is the *primary element* of the artwork’s composition that takes “the fabric of the time and place” as its starting point for a critical intervention into how it is historically located and/or culturally determined (Kwon, 2000, p. 54).

The installation, following in the tradition of site-specific art beginning in the 1960s and 1970s with Fluxus happenings, Minimalism, Dadaism, and Environmental and Land art (Bishop, 2005; Grande, 2004; Lippard, 2014), produced a ‘situation’ (Doherty, 2009) that adopted a performative, relational, and process-based approach to art prompting dialogue and exchange (Bishop, 2006; Bourriaud, 2002, Kester, 2004).

The sheer amount of time in which I have spent with/in the abandoned school, has caused it to permeate my mind but also my other senses. As something that is part of my private world, the ‘situation’ (Doherty, 2009), was an invitation for others to see and hear and also witness the abandoned school in all its grandeur, as a liminal shape and form. In this concession, I utilize a mode of storytelling to help capture the intensity that this encounter produced. In its ambiguity, it is a testament to my will to keep the force of the abandoned school alive. Arendt’s notion of storytelling, similar to a work of art, is inherently political (Jackson, 2002). As an immortalizing
act, it gives fleeting events a worldly permanence (Arendt, 1998). Storytelling, however, is more than an act of narration, it is an “artistic transposition of individual experience” (Arendt, 1998, p. 50) — a life force that can potentially affect others in its wake.

The ‘Situation’: The Death of the School

In British Columbia, Canada, the location in which the installation took place, school closure has become a political, economic, social, and cultural issue (BCTF, 2014; Chambers, 2007; Poole, 2007; Ross & Vinson, 2013). Since 2002, over two hundred public schools have closed and over twenty-seven thousand students have been displaced due to closure. According to the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, “this number of closures in such a narrow space of time is unprecedented in our province’s public school history [and] more schools are slated to close in the coming years” (BCTF, 2014).

School closure is not a new phenomenon. In the second half of the 20th century, many Canadian provinces witnessed school closure due to urbanization that forced small community schools to amalgamate into larger schools (Chambers, 2007). Ross & Vinson (2013) argue that today, Canadian schools are closing for a different reason, namely neoliberalism, a political ideology grounded in the belief that market principles led by private enterprise and consumer choice applied to the public sector contributes to greater efficiency and economic prosperity. For Ross & Vinson (2013), school closure in British Columbia is a visible example of the financial cuts being made to the public education system as a result of a neoliberal agenda based on educational reform. In their opinion, the government’s decisions and policies are designed to maximize profits rather than serve the community’s needs (Ross & Gibson, 2007; Ross & Vinson, 2013).
Figure 4.1, *Corpse*, 2010
Photography by the author
The de-commissioned school selected for my site-specific installation closed in June 2013 just short of its one hundredth anniversary. The decision to close the school came along with five other schools in the district to save a $3.7 million deficit (Steffenhagen, 2013).

Situations like that in British Columbia are happening on a global scale. In the United States, school closure has become a frequent response to underperforming schools since the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in which high stakes testing and accountability are penalizing public schools with closure when they fail to meet uniform standards (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). Districts in urban centers such as Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, New York, New Orleans, Oakland, Philadelphia, Pittsburg, St. Louis, and Washington, DC, have recently witnessed manifold closures where ‘failing schools’ have had their funds evoked and their schools shut down (see Aggarwal, Mayorga, & Nevel, 2012; Ayala & Galetta, 2012; Brummet, 2012; The Coalition for Educational Justice, 2010; de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2005; Hursh, 2007; Jack & Sludden, 2013; Kretchmar, 2011; Lipman & Person, 2007). School closings are also occurring in the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand (see Blackmore, 2004; Cheng, 2009; Cheng & Walker, 2008; Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Haiming, et al. 2013; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Kearns, et al. 2009; & Walker, 2010).

Tightly woven into neoliberal educational reform are many social, economic, cultural, and political inequalities. Kirshner & Pozzoboni (2011) reveal that closures in the United States are “disproportionately falling on schools with high percentages of poor and working class students of color” (p. 1635). Case studies performed in Chicago (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Lipman & Haines, 2007), New Orleans (Buras, 2014), and most recently, Philadelphia (Jack & Sludden, 2013) support this argument further, revealing that school closure is a broader effort to gentrify
low income African American neighborhoods (Aggarwal, Mayorga, & Nevel, 2012). In many instances, public schools are closing to re-open as private, for-profit, competitive, market-based schools such as charter schools and schools of choice (Buras, 2014). In British Columbia, rural schools have been particularly hard-hit by closures because they are located in areas with a lower density population making them more vulnerable to the government’s per-pupil funding allocation formula. Pupil-led funding is regulated by the number of pupils in attendance, forcing schools to compete for pupils with neighboring schools and putting pressure on parents to become astute consumers (Poole, 2007; Ross & Vinson, 2013; Walker, 2010).

School closure has raised many issues and questions intersecting with, and relating to, social justice, citizenship, and human rights. It is often portrayed as a representation of a cultural struggle over race, ethnicity, and power (Lipman, 2007). As such, schools are seldom to close silently or without conflict. The community invited to take part in my site-specific installation took action; they demonstrated civic participation and attempted to challenge the policy collectively. They organized protests, wrote letters, and attended public hearings to voice their opinions pertaining to reasons why they thought their school should stay open. The decision to close the school revealed that the school trustee who held legal responsibility of the school, also held substantial power to close the five schools when the decision fulfilled the character of their own closure policies and ministry regulations. Undermining ‘procedural fairness,’ a policy put in place by the government insuring that the community is given a meaningful opportunity to present their case “fully and fairly” (Chambers, 2007, p. 16), a decision was reached to eliminate middle schools in favor of kindergarten to grade seven elementary schools and grade eight to twelve secondary schools (Steffenhagen, 2013).
Unlike an event or action that is immediate or instantaneous, school closure often occurs gradually and out of sight (Aggarwal, Mayorga, & Nevel, 2012). It embodies a process that is not easy for the community involved; it forces people (on all sides) to make difficult changes that affect their everyday lives and for many, to experience a loss that can bring forth feelings of anger, sadness, fear, depression, and confusion (Blandy, 2008; Chambers, 2007; Oncescu & Giles, 2012). Surrendering a place that once played a pivotal role in housing their social and educational encounters, the community witnesses their school become stripped of its name and its identity, and pushed to the margins of society. Not only does the fate of the de-commissioned school become unknown, but the fate of the community also becomes uncertain, bringing forth a mixture of feelings based on ambiguity, even anxiety.

The location of In/Visibility of the Abandoned School was not coincidental nor was it an afterthought. Conceptualized as an ‘antimonument’ (Curtis, 2004), it was designed to honour the decommissioned school and the surrounding community, while avoiding traditional means to do so. A monument is usually erected on a site in order to commemorate a notable person or event. It normally takes the form of a statue, a building, or another ‘fixed’ structure. Although the location was the primary element of the artwork’s composition, as a temporary (re)configuration, the installation ‘marked’ the decommissioned school, then promptly abandoned it. The installation was not meant to endure, but to come down. As such, it was an invitation to be singularly experienced “in the present tense of space” (Morris, 1978, p. 27) and in the bodily presence of the viewer who witnessed it during its very brief existence. In a similar mode, this concession follows suit. It refuses to speak of the installation in the mode of a grand master narrative that inscribes “a single, monolithic, static, privileged, authoritative, dominant point of view” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. 133). Instead, it adopts a more fragmented and tentative
design pointing to the abandoned school’s catalytic potential. Beginning with a discussion of Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rachel Whiteread’s artwork, I weave in a series of personal memories and experiences that emerged on-site during In/Visibility of the Abandoned School as a ‘living recollection’ (Arendt, 1998) of the event.

The ‘Antimonumental’ Artwork of
Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rachel Whiteread

Krzysztof Wodiczko, born in 1943 in Warsaw, Poland, spends most of his time in the United States where he utilizes buildings and monuments as ‘backdrops’ for his large-scale slide and video projections. Since the 1980s, he has created over seventy projections onto various architectural façades and monuments worldwide focusing his attention on “ways in which architecture and monuments reflect collective memory and history” (art21, n.d.). In the late nineteen-nineties, Wodiczko added sound and movement to his still projections so that he not only projected still images of peoples’ hands, faces, and bodies onto architectural façades; he utilized combinations of bodies with voices and testimonies so that he could confront ‘fixed truths’ about violence, alienation, and inhumanity; issues that underlie many aspects of social interaction in present-day society and have important implications for human rights and democracy (see Figure 4.2).

Wodiczko’s work intentionally challenges the silent, stark, monumentality of buildings, provoking communication about contested topics such as homelessness, immigration, physical/emotional disabilities, economic hardships, emotional trauma, and psychological distress. By utilizing technological prosthetics such as cameras, microphones, speakers, and professional grade/scale projectors, he extends human (cap)abilities (Garoian & Gaudelius,
2008), to create ‘counter-memorials,’ that deconstruct the traditional monument to reveal what is ‘hidden’ underneath the neutral-looking façade. Wodiczko argues that monuments, in the traditional sense, silently validate institutions and states of authority, whereas his site-specific installations act as *interventions*, opening places, spaces and people up to a dialogical exchange of ideas. Borrowing Michel Foucault’s term ‘parrhesia’ Wodiczko refers to his art as “fearless public speaking” (Wodiczko, 1999 Cited by Ascher, 2010, n. p.), a critical confrontation between the individual and the monument “to penetrate the silent assent of community” (Ascher, 2010, n.p.).

Wodiczko is essentially arguing that architecture often establishes an absent-minded and passive relation in which our daily movements comprise of unconscious, “ritualistic” (Wodiczko, 1999, p. 46) patterns governed by a belief that buildings are meant to be stationary, static and “rooted permanently to the ground” (p. 46). For Wodiczko (1999), a building, whether public or private, is not only one of the most valuable and expensive investments in the built environment, it is also one of the most secretive and protected; the most disciplined and disciplining; and the most controlled and controlling objects that punctuate the landscape (Wodiczko, 1999).

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**Figure 4.2, Visual Quotation: Krzysztof Wodiczko**

Left: *Tijuana Projection*, 2001 Public projection of live images and sound at the Centro Cultural de Tijuana, as part of InSite 2000 © Krzysztof Wodiczko; Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Lelong, New York, NY.

Wodiczko brings forth an interesting (visual) argument, contending, “not to speak through city monuments is to abandon them and to abandon ourselves, losing both a sense of history and the present” (p. 63). His work is a reminder that there is a need to think through public space and urban monuments — that as citizens of the world, we should avoid blindly accepting the built environment as being unbiased or impartial. As we will see next, Rachel Whiteread’s work takes a similar stance.

Rachel Whiteread is an English sculptor who works with traditional casting methods and materials (such as plaster, rubber, cement, and resin) to create life-sized everyday objects. Instead of discarding the moulds used for casting, Whiteread (re)considers the forgotten form, making it the primary means for her expression (Richards, 2008). A distinguishing aspect of Whiteread’s work is how she makes present the negative space in and surrounding objects, materializing the un/familiar space of everyday, domestic objects such as the space underneath beds, within bathtubs, around bookshelves, and even entire rooms (Figure 4.3). In materializing these spaces, Whiteread makes an invisible volume of space, normally taken for granted (in the everyday), visible (Bolt, 2011). As such, her work is an invitation to see familiar objects/spaces in a very different light, and to stage a perceptual disruption (Kester, 2004).

One of Whiteread’s most contentious works to date was a site-specific installation entitled *House* (Figure 4.4), a life size sculpture cast from the interior space of a post world war two era row home in the Docklands, a low income community on the East side of London, England. The actual two-story house utilized for the mould of the sculpture was discarded after the sculpture was made to much of the dismay of local community members, including housing rights activists and politicians envisioning gentrification (Pollack, 2013). Whiteread’s work, less didactic than that of Wodiczko’s, asks that we allow our curiosity to lead our inquiry. Erected the same year
that Whiteread won the prestigious Turner prize, *House*, sparked so much outrage and hostility that it was destroyed having only existed for a few months (Kester, 2004; Richards, 2008). Conceptualized as an invitation for viewers to remember the neighbourhood before it had disappeared; the most interesting aspect of the installation was the physicality of the structure; the appearance of the house as if it were turned inside-out; a heavy mass of concrete that operated more like a tombstone than an actual home. Contrasting the work of Wodiczko, Whiteread’s installations do not recount past events in a narrative or anecdotal form. Rather, in utilizing a minimalist sensibility, or allowing the simplicity of form to guide the viewing experience, Whiteread invites her viewers to think about (larger) issues associated with commemoration, remembrance, history, and mourning.

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**Figure 4.3, Visual Quotation: Rachel Whiteread**

*Left:* *Valley*, 1990, Plaster and glass
37 ½ x 73 x 38”
*Right:* *Ghost*, 1990, Plaster on steel frame
106 x 140 x 125”


**Figure 4.4, Visual Quotation: Rachel Whiteread**

*House*, 1993, Concrete
Commissioned by Artangel © Rachel Whiteread. Photo credit: Sue Omerod.
House confronts viewers with an absence that lies beneath the surface of the house’s non-existent walls. Although appearing very much like a house in shape and in size, it differs significantly in its ability to affect the viewer through an active engagement of absence. Similar to the experience of looking at a photograph, the viewer is not necessarily looking at the house-like object, but to the void that the house-like object produces. Instead of witnessing the lost house per say, the viewer, responds to a void, witnessing loss itself (Pollack, 2013).

In the article, “Spaces of anamnesis: Art and the immemorial,” Neal Curtis (2004) elaborates on Whiteread’s work Untitled Monument (Figure 4.5), a site-specific sculpture that was given brief exposure in the fourth plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square. As a commemoration of the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, the sculpture was made of clear resin that was cast from the actual empty plinth. Again, we see how Whiteread is emphasizing the void space of the (everyday) object, yet in this case, she is intentionally challenging the ideological power of the memorial.23

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23 Whiteread also challenges the memorial structure in her work Holocaust Monument, a.k.a. Nameless Library (2000).
Curtis (2004) argues that Whiteread’s work creates a space of *anamnesis*, meaning, it testifies to the unrepresentable, the immemorial, and the incommunicable by disrupting ritualized memory. Both Wodiczko and Whiteread’s work acts to disrupt ritualized memory. Unlike a monument, which can often be overlooked in the built environment, their work intentionally interrupts and disturbs. They speak to the ‘durability’ of a work of art in an Arendtian sense, in that they help preserve human action from the ruin of time while preserving the public realm, also called the ‘space of appearance’ (Arendt, 1998) by calling forth human plurality as the work's main objective. However, unlike traditional artistic ‘reifications’ (Arendt, 1998) such as the traditional monument, they confront remembrance as an un-representable thing. This difference, although subtle, plays pivotal importance in their work as it does mine, because it emphasizes the intangibility of the in-between, which Arendt (1998) reminds us is “no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common” (p. 183).

Similar to the work of Wodiczko and Whiteread, *In/Visibility of the Abandoned School* was a site-specific installation that, rather than being presented as a static, objective artifact or representation, was designed as a provocation, meaning it was open to more dynamic, participatory forms of engagement and interaction, modes of being that are considered fluid, performative, and reflexive in character. *In/Visibility of the Abandoned School* was staged for action, something yet to arrive …

*tap-tap… tap-tap…tap-tap…*

When I was a child, my Father invited my Grandfather to live with my family against my Mother’s wishes. My Grandfather, known to me as ‘small Granddad’ was my Mother’s Father.
This helped distinguish him from my ‘big Granddad,’ my Dad’s Dad, who, standing at six feet tall, was a full foot taller. My small Granddad moved to Montreal not long after the death of my Grandmother, having lived in Glasgow his whole life. My Grandfather was not kind to my mother growing up in Scotland and she didn’t want the judgment, the negativity, the harshness, or the physical or mental abuse that my Grandfather induced on her to bleed into her own family — one that she fought so hard to keep at bay when she moved to Canada as soon as she had finished high school at the age of seventeen. But my Father, believing in the ties of family, thought that it wasn’t right for my Granddad to be left to live alone in an unfamiliar city.

My Grandfather was very kind to me. He showed me patience. And I tested that patience. Especially when he fell asleep in his favourite chair in the afternoons before supper. I used to paint his fingernails and toenails with my mum’s nail polish and I even applied her make-up to his old, wrinkly face. I took risks that I never dared take with any one else. Only the brightest fuchsia and the most sparkling blue would do for my Granddad. I even put rollers in the few hairs that he had left on his head under the thick shellac of his Brylcreem. When I was done, I would hide behind his red velour chair in the small gap of the bay window, shielded by my mother’s long sheer curtains. If I waited long enough, I would see the signal. I had to be patient though. The minutes seemed like hours until finally, it began. It always started with the slightest tap. His fingers, lifting up from the arm of the chair, dropped back down in a cascade of movement. It began with such a slight motion that I often thought I saw it several times while he slept. But no, this one — the real one — was different. It was quickly followed by another tap, one that was more intentional — quicker and louder than the first.

tap- tap
Until they stopped just as suddenly as they began. My Grandfather’s hand, suspended in the air, confirmed what I had waited so long to see. He was looking at the frosted pink polish that I had delicately painted on his nails. “N-A-T-A-L-E!” he yelled, not knowing that I was hidden, so close to where he sat. “What have yer gone an’ done now, ya bloody child!” My Mother, preparing supper in the kitchen, always minded her own business at that very moment. Without a word, she busily chopped vegetables, stirred a pot, or rinsed a dish. Her back, turned towards me, was hiding the smile she bore for all the tests and trials I put her Father through.

The Dis/Ordering of Space: Dead Space, Live Space and Spaces ‘In-Between’

As a quiet and somewhat withdrawn child, I was intrigued by certain places though I didn’t know why at the time. My family’s basement was one such place. It was always capable of provoking emotions and sensations that I had never encountered before. It was an intensity that frightened me to my very core. Going downstairs presented me with a remarkable experience, one that was very different from any other room in my house and any other room that I had ever known (at that time). In comparison, every other room that I encountered seemed insignificant, dull, neutral or — dead.

Marc Augé’s (2008) theory of non-lieux, or ‘non-places’ (re)considers spaces that are often overlooked in society. Places such as shopping malls, motorways and airport lounges that have been created for “circulation, consumption and communication” (Augé, 2008, p. viii).
Figure 4.6, *Corpse II*, 2015
Photography by the author
A ‘non-place,’ is similar to what urban historian Richard Sennett once called a ‘dead space,’ — an empty space,” a place meant to be “passed through, not to be used” (Sennett, 1977, p. 12-14, cited by Latham, 1999, p. 161). Contrasting both non-places and dead spaces are ‘live spaces’ (Latham, 1999), spaces in which people are engaged and stimulated — however minor— because this engagement creates the potential for appropriation (O’Beirne, 2010) or for mutation (Latham, 1999).

A ‘live space’ can bring about unforeseeable and powerful forces that far exceed its geopolitical ‘fixed’ or ‘static’ location in the world by its capacity “to stimulate, to arouse interest, [and] to open people out of them” (Latham, 1999, p. 162). A ‘live space’ asks us “to imagine, to play, [and] to open [our]selves up” (Latham, 1999, p. 162). It is a ‘live space’ because of its ‘powers of engagement’ (Latham, 1999) — an invitation for stretching, transforming, and engaging with place, even a place that is seemingly ‘dead,’ ordinary, or forgotten.

As I walk around the installation, I hear the sounds of people chatting; snippets of stories are weaving in and out of earshot. Standing here, in front of the de-commissioned school, I am among people that I have never seen before. Everything is shifting — words, memories, fantasies, reflections and series of images are flashing in my mind’s eye. Someone exclaims, “heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy
Figure 4.3, *Corpse III*, 2015
Photography by the author
My Grandfather died when I was eight. I remember seeing his body at the funeral home. It didn’t look like my Granddad. His skin, normally a rosy tan colour, was blueish-grey with an odd matte finish. It was the make-up, my mother told me. I imagined the man who ran the funeral home applying the make-up to his lifeless face and I thought how weird it must have been to touch it. It reminded me of the times I used to put make up on his face as he slept in his favourite chair in the living room. But this time, everything was different. He looked like a clown doll I once saw in an old lady’s house, a friend of my Granddad’s, who’s head and hands were made of china but who’s body was made of fabric, a black and red striped silk clown suit with billowy pants and puffy sleeves. Sitting on her buffet table, the old lady warned me, “It’s NOT a toy!” Though I had absolutely no intention of playing with it. The menacing expression on the clown’s face and the weight of its china head made it fall to the side in an eerie and uncomfortable-looking position. No, this time everything was very different indeed. This time, my Granddad wouldn’t wake up.

*tap-tap…tap-tap…tap-tap…*

I am inside the abandoned school, on a journey led by curiosity and discovery. I open closed drawers, cupboards, and closets. I even look through garbage. *How far do I dare look?* As I navigate further into the bowels of the building, finding myself in unnamable features of the body. I am excited to be in and a part of this uncharted corpus. I read paperwork and writing — everything I can possibly find. I search for traces of things that have been removed and I carefully inspect the objects that have been left behind. I am moving differently that I normally move in my everyday horizontal, vertical, linear and rigid paths. I am crouching down low,
Figure 4.8, *Corpse IV, 2015*
(Diptych) Photography by the author
stepping over things, and weaving around through darkness. I am moving more slowly and more carefully. Utilizing all of my senses, I am paying attention to the unexpected, which in turn, is guiding my trajectory. As such, my decisions are functioning on chance, on coincidence, and on intuition. This stuff – this junk — this trash — this building — deemed useless by somebody at some point and at some time, is dead and it is I — who is performing the walking, moving, breathing, living corpse.

.tap-tap…tap-tap…tap-tap…

There is long corridor before me and I see a faint light at the very end. I want to move towards it, but every inch of my body is on fire. I can’t tell if the floor is shiny because the waxy linoleum has been buffed to a shine, or if it is wet. A chill runs down my spine and every hair on the back of my neck is called to attention.


About a week after my Granddad’s funeral, I was playing in the basement just outside of his bedroom. My parents still had to sort through his belongings, donating the little that he owned to the Sally-Anne. Focused on my dolls that lay before me, something caught my eye from the corner of the room. I looked up to see my Granddad standing in the doorway looking at me not unlike he had done when he was alive. *Only, I knew he was dead.* I shot up off the floor and ran up the stairs as fast as I could as if someone, or something was going to grab me back down the stairs. Entering the kitchen, both my parents were busy making supper. It must have been a
Sunday night because it was the only night of the week my Dad cooked. “Granddad ...” I managed to say as I burst into tears. Pulling a kitchen chair out from the table, my mother gathered me onto her lap hugging me close as I sobbed. After a few moments, she tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear as she said, “You know it’s okay to cry about Granddad. He’s gone and it’s okay to be sad.”

“I know,” I replied, “...but, he’s not gone.”

“What do you mean?” She asked.

“He’s downstairs.” My father turned to face me, dropping the wooden spoon he was using to stir the contents of a pan that was on high heat.

“Listen to me,” my Mother said. She turned my small body on her lap so that she could look me in the eyes, something she did when she was very serious. “Was your Granddad good to you when he was alive?”

I nodded through my tears.

“Well then, you need to know that he won’t harm you now. He only ever wanted what was best for you and he still does. If you see him again, don’t be afraid.”

My Grandfather’s sighting didn’t keep me away from that nook in the basement; it only caused my curiosity to grow. I would creep into his room when my parents and my brothers were out or busy doing something else in another part of the house. I would slowly open the door, then, allowing the door to close behind me, I would feel the abyss of darkness envelope my body. Reaching out for the light-switch by his bed, I imagined feeling someone or something in the darkness and I always conjured a small astral body standing before me once the light was illuminated.
It was a small room. My Dad had built a wall separating it from the large storage area that formed the whole eastern half of the basement. It had a bright red carpet, wood paneled walls, a single bed and a small white television set. I imagined my Grandfather sitting on the corner of the bed with his headphones plugged into one ear as he did when he watched the hockey game on cold winter evenings when the glow of the TV changed the whole room to a cool ubiquitous blue. Lying on the dresser were a few inconsequential items — some silver coins and an open package of Certs, the green spearmint kind. I wondered if it was the same package that he had offered me one from on our last walk together, from the corner store, or the ‘dep’ as it’s called in Montreal — but I couldn’t tell. The wrapper seemed darker and more worn out. No, it couldn’t be, I thought to myself. It looked much older like it had been put through the wash a few times, collecting lint.

*tap-tap*… *tap-tap*… *tap-tap*…

Urban planner William Harvey (1578-1659) once described the city in relation to parts of the human body. For Harvey, spaces where citizens could move and breathe freely were reminiscent of the circulation of blood (Nas & Brakus, 2004). As I move about the decommissioned school, I realize that I am its (blood) force. Navigating its cavities as if I am inside a (dead) body, I enter and I exit openings that look like nostrils — eyes, ears, and mouth, parts of the head, organs and limbs. At (un)certain turns, I encounter materials and substances that I cannot recognize. I stop to examine the strange, unknown fluids that the building appears to be emanating.

*tap-tap*… *tap-tap*… *tap-tap*…
Figure 4.9, Corpse V, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 4.10, Corpse VI, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 4.11, *Corpse VII*, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 4.12, Corpse VIII, 2015
Photography by the author
The walls, the membranes of the decommissioned school are not neutral nor are they flat. In the light of the projector they assimilate, they discharge, they recede and they jump forward. They are penetrable. Standing directly in front of the projector, walking closer to the building, my body becomes part of the projection. My silhouette exaggerates in size, growing so big that it bleeds into the entire frame causing the image to disappear from sight. Stepping backwards, I witness my silhouette return to the scene. I am a giant. Walking from side to side, I am bigger than the bigger-than-life-sized objects in the frame. Walking backwards, my silhouette slips further and (and smaller) away.

*tap-tap… tap-tap… tap-tap…*

The geometric features of the building look like they are growing while other parts look sick, diseased, or in a state of dying. Everything emerges with/in this paradox, revealing how in being-towards-death, the abandoned school has come alive. Running through its apertures are the colours blue and red. This is my body, the major veins and arteries keeping the abandoned school open to fluidity and to (re)generation.

*tap-tap… tap-tap… tap-tap…*

The physical interaction between the projector, the light, my body, and the building-façade-turned-screen, creates a context for participation. I realize that my body projects and it is, in turn, being projected on. I am a thinking, sensing, moving body somewhere between the material and the immaterial, and between memory, space, place and time.
Figure 4.13, Corpse IX, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 4.14, Corpse X, 2015
Photography by the author
Fighting this feeling for some time, I finally succumb to the realization that the work is over — that it has come to an end. As I reach down to turn off the generator, mucous drips out of my nose in such an abrupt and slimy stream that it lands on my jacket while still connected to my face. Wiping it with my sleeve, it continues, mutating, and expanding from somewhere deep within my sinus cavity. This uncomfortable feeling forces me to stand upright and to tilt my head backwards, stopping the stream from pouring out of my head. I realize that this position is only a temporary solace for even the slightest movement is threatening to send the stream a flow again. In this moment, I recognize that my body, laden with its abilities and limitations, is stopping me from pulling the plug. It is literally keeping the projections lit and the installation alive. Every time I try to reach for the generator, a discharge so heavy and wet breaks free from my faculty that I now have multiple snot-streams collected on the cuff of my sleeve. Feeling numb, dirty, sad, and little annoyed, I reach for the switch. The stream of mucus pooling inside of my head runs freely out of my nose, down over my lips, and under my chin.

Too exhausted to wipe it away. I stand in the darkness allowing my eyes to grow accustomed to the dark. It is a stark contrast to the scene that I have just witnessed in which four projectors lit the monumental walls of the de-commissioned school ablaze. The constant drone of the generator is an echo receding into the deep reaches of my body and a soft crescendo of creatures is gradually emerging in its place. Some of which I identify — chirping crickets, squeaking bats,
leaves whistling in the breeze — and others, I am too exhausted to name.

I reach out and place my palm on the hard surface of the wall. It is warm from being so close to the generator but I can feel it quickly dissipating. The cold is returning too quickly, and I wonder if this is the underworld that Arendt (1978) speaks of — from which all living creatures grow out of and return to.

**The Space of Appearance**

For Martin Heidegger, the primary mode of being is anxiety. This pertains to *Dasein* as something that is futural, something that is always already underway and something that is always already partially forming the decisions we make and will continue to make along a process of being-towards-death (Bolt, 2011; Heidegger, 2010; O’Byrne, 2011). Utilizing Heidegger’s concept of ‘thrownness,’ artist and educator Barbara Bolt (2011) posits that *Dasein* pertains to being or existence in terms of being-in-the-world. It pertains to how in our everyday experience, "we are always already in the world, thrown into it and carried along by its momentum" (Bolt, 2011, p. 3). She writes,

> Thrownness is momentum, the flux or process of life. In being thrown into the world we get caught up and carried along by the forces of chance and randomness. We never get control of it or step aside from it. This is at the base of our anxiety. We are always already in it. We are thrown from the past into the present and from this present we project into the future. (p. 183)

Arendt, one of Heidegger’s most “acute and thoughtful critics” (Bernstein, 1997, p. 159), often employed Heideggerian tropes and vocabulary in her own work to purposefully think through and sometimes against him. A close reading of her work reveals that her own concepts and vocabulary are a specific critique of Heideggerian thought (Barash, 2002; Bernstein, 1997;
For Arendt (1978), “Being and Appearing *coincide*” (p. 19, italics from the original). As sentient beings, with the ability to perceive, to hear, and to feel, we have the ability “both to see and be seen, hear and be heard, touch and be touched” (Arendt, 1978, p. 19). As such we are not merely in the world, we are *of* the world by virtue of arriving and departing, and of appearing and disappearing. In coming from a nowhere and returning to a nowhere, it is Arendt’s belief that we are well equipped to deal with whatever appears to us while taking part in the play of the world (Arendt, 1978). Arendt’s point here is that we have not been ‘thrown’ into this world in order to die, but in order to begin. ‘Natality,’ thus marks Arendt’s turn away from Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein* as a being-towards-death. Although Arendt agrees with Heidegger that we are temporal beings, Arendt argues that ‘thrownness’ overshadows and obscures the ‘whence’ of our thrownness, distinguishing it as a “thrownness toward-death” (O’Byrne, 2010, p. 17). Bringing forth the notion of ‘appearance,’ Arendt draws our attention to a very important part of the human condition, that as living beings, we have the capacity to begin and we have the amplitude of bringing something new into the world.

Mainly concerned with “the inescapable conditions which limit, shape, and inspire what humans do and become” (Higgins, 2010, p. 277), Arendt identified the conditions of human existence as: life itself, natality, mortality, worldliness, plurality, man-made (or human-made) things, and relations. As humans, our very survival depends on an engagement in certain things and activities in order to sustain our living. As humans devoted to worldly things, however, Arendt attests that we don’t actually inhabit a world composed of things but of occurrences. Importance therefore does not reside in things, but in what they mean to us as humans and how we respond to them.
Figure 4.15, *Corpse XI, 2015*
Photography by the author
In/Visibility of the Abandoned School echoes the concept of natality in that it created a space for me to realize that I have been born into a world that has come before me. Situating my work into the space of appearance, allowed me to take a step outside of my everyday, enabling me to realize that my position is not something that is beyond my control — it is something that demands an action, or a response. Instead of being “unthinkingly absorbed in the everyday way of living, to do what is the done thing and to be guided by whatever ‘they’ say” (O’Byrne, 2011, p. 5), as a temporal being, mysteriously ‘thrown’ into this world, I realize that I have not come into this world in order to die but in order to begin.

For Arendt, making an appearance in the world is like an actor who makes an appearance on a stage. It is not about being extraordinary rather it is about becoming a member of the community of human beings in the world (Arendt, 1978). As Arendt reveals in The Origins of Totalitarianism (1994), past events have demonstrated how appearingness is a condition that can be lost or even stripped from us. Our human condition is something that we must create by making our appearance in the world and by fighting against conditions of invisibility (Han, n.d.).

In/Visibility of the Abandoned School produced an ‘antimonument’ (Curtis, 2004) that created a synergy between its seemingly simple construction and the intricate and difficult context that it was situated with/in. A predominant significance of the work resides in its ambiguous essence, where, as a short-lived entity, it exemplified a profound elegance. As human life attests, things come and go— they live and die, and they appear and disappear. Throughout our lives, we witness the people and the places that we love come and go, live and die, appear

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24 As an emergent and unexpected situation, the abandoned school, something placed in the margins of society, became a possibility for remembrance and for further exploration, a reminder that “the capacity to act is present even in unlikely circumstances” (Arendt, 1998, p. viii). This speaks to the agency of artistic inquiry, that as a practitioner, I am afforded the ability to call the abandoned school to thought in artistic and creative ways.
and disappear. We live with this knowledge, yet we still live not knowing where people — places and things — go when they are no longer. How can we prepare for such loss? How do we live with such uncertainty?

Appearing and disappearing in the night, In/Visibility of the Abandoned School echoed life itself in the sheer manner in which it existed as a temporal being, “limited by a beginning and an end” (Arendt, 1998, p. 97). However, rather than producing a fixed, stationary work of remembrance, its ephemeral quality was a reminder that things — people and places included— do not and cannot stay (forever). As a provocation for the contemplation of human temporality, the site-specific installation brings forth multiple subjective emotions and private feelings that helped (re)assure me of the reality of the world, which in turn, intensified the world.

Similar to the work of Wodiczko and Whiteread, In/Visibility of the Abandoned School took art outside of the institution, and (re)positioned it with/in the community, the local and everyday places and events in which it belongs. In doing so, it was an invitation to challenge institutional norms, organizational structures, and scientific ways of knowing (Finley, 2008).

Arendt (1998) argues that activities in which plural individuals are brought together to speak and to act create a common world between them in a manner that is not violent. In her opinion, this is a distinct political activity, in which political action requires a plurality of diverse actors and speakers, where, through speech and action, they create spaces ‘in-between.’ With this understanding, the abandoned school produces a void in a different sense. It produces a world in-between people, and it creates the potential for a world to endure beyond this coming together.

In/Visibility of the Abandoned School is an invitation to understand place through relations between subjects, places, and spaces. It is an invitation to (re)think and (re)write the decommissioned school by incorporating the lived experiences of people in place, and people in
relation to place, that in turn, can contribute to an alternate and emergent history.

This quality was also seen in the two artists that were described here, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Rachel Whiteread, both contemporary and conceptual ‘storytellers’ of our time.

tap…tap…tap…tap…tap…tap…tap…tap…

Witnessing the de-commissioned school bleed in and out of the darkness in the manner that I did tonight made it appear as though it were a live, breathing, shifting, and mutating being. The walls, acting both as a structure and a surface, a form and a substance, pulled me into a different space and time — holding me into a different (inter)corporeal universe. As such, the installation evoked “an alternative universe of utopian possibility: a world of colour and sensibility, perceptual complexity and nuance” (Kester, 2004, p. 32). As a complex, dynamic, porous, and malleable space, it did not provide any definitive answers it only produced more questions. Seeing my photographs in place, physically weaving in and out of them, and feeling the glow of their light on my skin as I moved about the cold, wet grass, I was not sure where I was going, if something was going to pass, allow me to pass with it, or if it would bring me further, closer, or elsewhere. As an aporia (Derrida, 1993), the abandoned school required that I refrain from moving against it as an impasse. It demanded a different way of thinking.
Isn’t it Ironic?

One such way this concession demands a different way of thinking resides in my use of the literary trope of irony. Dwelling with the installation in this manner, in-between and after the viewers were present, provoked a *heaviness* — something I can only articulate as a dense feeling residing somewhere inside of me and in the space of appearance.

Both the void and the corpse have been used in a contradictory way and I would like to elaborate in fear that they may have been misread or misinterpreted. First, the void speaks to the absence of the other witnesses that were present (previously) in *the crypt*. The void not only speaks to the space between, but it also speaks to some of the challenges associated with appearing in the world and of bearing witness to this appearance.

Through planning and implementing *In/Visibility of Abandoned School*, I met a community that is committed to the location in which the decommissioned school (still) stands. Based on an appreciation of history, place, connections, environment, and culture, through their stories, I learned about their concerns for and about place in which opinions and fears about political events were vocalized. With an understanding that school closure is something that cannot be stopped, many witnesses revealed how the area has experienced cycles of economic expansion and contraction in the past. They also voiced concerns for the changes that they are currently facing in the flux of diminishing school enrollment and in the changing and mutating role that civil and social institutions are playing with/in their community.

Prompting an assemblage of multiple voices, the site-specific installation was an invitation for me to think about some of the complexity that school closure brings forth while providing an opportunity for inter-personal relationships. Entering the rural community as an artist/researcher allowed me to become aware of some of the challenges of doing this type of work as an
outsider.’ This process taught me that it requires gaining trust, learning specific protocols in and of place and practicing reciprocity.25

The site-specific installation was an entry-point for both myself, the artist/researcher, and the viewer/community to enter into a conversation about school closure by provoking multiple, alternate (porous) narratives from the perspectives of the individuals faced with the reality of school closure. As a catalyst for dialogue and conversation, the installation deepened my inquiry by encountering the cultural wealth, resilience, and lived experience of the participants living with/in the area.

In the text, Notes from a Recent Arrival, American art critic and activist, Lucy Lippard (1995) asks a very interesting series of questions, “if place is defined by memory, but no one with memories is left to bring them to the surface, does a place become no-place? What if there are people with memories but no one to transmit them to? Are their memories invalidated by being unspoken? Are they still valuable to others with less personal connection?” (p. 155) These questions help speak to In/Visibility of the Abandoned School and particularly the space of appearance in which the memories spoken on-site became integral to the work. The void helps capture the complexity of the negative space that I encountered on-site through an active engagement with absence. Even though I spent a considerable time listening to viewers’ memories, I was not hearing the memories per say but feeling the void that these memories produced.

With this idea in mind, the next concept that was used (ironically) in this concession consequently frames the entire section, this of course being the corpse. To a certain extent, the

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25 Some of the ideas presented here and particularly the concept of cultural reciprocity first emerged in work that I have been collaborating on with Dr. Ruth Beer at Emily Carr University of Art + Design and her research-creation project entitled “Trading Routes: Grease Trails Oil Futures.” See http://tradingroutes.ca/ for more information pertaining to some of the intersections between art practice and place.
corpse points to the idea that the school is something that has been terminated, killed, or eradicated. Re-visiting Lippard’s questions, does the corpse imply that the decommissioned school has become a no-place? An invalid place? A worthless place? In one regard, I would answer yes, it is a no-place because a sovereign power has deemed it so — and perhaps this is the heaviness that I felt in place on-site the night the event unfolded. The very term conjures disturbance, yet it also signifies the sense of spirit that the place embodies, nonetheless. This, however, leaves me questioning, who am I to speak of this as a disturbance? (When it is not my disturbance to speak of?) Instead, I speak to the difficulty of bearing witness to the disturbance through the heaviness that I felt in place on that night and as such have selected to render it here as I have as a form of cultural reciprocity.
Figure 4.16, Corpse XII, 2015
Photography by the author
In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt (1994) reminds us of the imperial regimes who wanted “expansion of political power without the foundation of a body politic” (p. 135). Under such reign, no authentic political action was possible, only exploitive measures and ideological expansion. The concentration camps of World War II are brought forward as a brutal case in history; designed as laboratories in which “all men were remade into one man and all human beings were made into one ‘living corpse’, a body that was in ‘the process of dying’” (Kohn, n.d.). For Arendt, reducing human beings to a common denominator is contradictory to political equality (Antaki, 2010; Arendt, 1998; Kohn, n.d.; Spector, 2014). For political equality to exist, human beings must not be rendered as predictable but uniquely distinct and capable of new actions and new beginnings. Even in the direst circumstances, human beings hold the capacity to act (Arendt, 1994) — what Arendt (1998) refers to as “the political activity par excellence” (p. 9), something that occurs in-between people and can only occur in this connection (Barash, 2002; Barbour & Zolkos, 2011; Biesta, 2012; Britzman, 2003).

Utilizing the corpse here, as I have done, places emphasis on a politics of ontology, which accosts the abandoned school as an unknown and anonymous force. Although the rendering of my corpse is seemingly very different from how Arendt rendered her corpse (as I do not speak of the corpse as a dead, non-thinking being), it has more in common with Arendt, as it would first initially appear. The corpse is fitting because it signals that in death, life seems whole (Arendt, 1978). Marked by a beginning and an end, it can easily be subjected to judgment. This is exactly what I have been conscious to avoid.

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26 This also speaks to the corpse that Arendt (1994) renders in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Like a murderer who leaves a corpse behind and attempts “to efface the traces of his own identity” (p. 434), cannot “erase the identity of the victim or its memory from the surviving world” (p. 435).
Figure 4.18, Corpse XIV, 2015
Photography by the author
“By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.”

(Benjamin, 1968, p. 236)
The Photograph as Provocation: Inquiring into my Practice

Rita Irwin (2003), an advocate for a ‘living inquiry,’ suggests that as practitioners, when we remain open during our practice, we can become attuned to the ideas, feelings, and meanings as they emerge during the process. In doing so, we can discover “places of difficulty” encouraging us to attend to “what matters” (p. 76). As someone who relies on intuition and on simply knowing when things are right (or wrong), I trust that I am not trapped by my own subjectivity. In contemplating how my present practice can implicate my future practice, I am deliberately and consciously asking myself: What is it that draws me to an abandoned school? What makes me come back to the abandoned school time and time again?

Inquiry, for Dewey (whether scientific or commonsense) follows a certain pattern. It usually begins with a situation such as a need, or even a doubt that calls for a resolution. As such, a question, a statement, or a parameter of space is created in order to narrow the inquiry and for generating the emergence of a new perspective. As even more ideas surface during the process of searching and re-searching, ideas become possible suggestions and possible solutions until the situation is resolved, and the initial inquiry is ended (Dewey, 1991). For Graeme Sullivan (2010), inquiry seeks an understanding as opposed to an explanation. The matter of inquiry in his opinion is not so much that it is “statistically significant” but that it is meaningful (p. 44). In this sense, I see potential for what Dewey (2005) describes as ‘expression’ as being an intrinsic part of this artistic inquiry.

The act of expression, for Dewey (2005) is an “impulsion” (p. 61). It marks the beginning of an experience that stems from a need, or to use his words, a “hunger” (p. 61). For Dewey, when excitement about the subject matter is deep, it stirs up attitudes and meanings derived from prior experience that arouses an activity in which we may become conscious of our thoughts and
our emotions as “emotionalized images” (Dewey, 2005, p. 68). Art practice, in this sense is not a routine: it is an artistic and aesthetic experience that simultaneously controls the doing with perception. It is a vital and intimate connection that is reciprocal and cumulative (Dewey, 2005; Siegesmund, 2012).

In *Art and Experience*, Dewey (2005) describes the artistic process as a series of events that utilize intuition, rhythm, and a combination of periods of work and reflection. He refers to the artistic process as a ‘consummatory’ experience, an experience that is fulfilling, satisfying, self-sufficient and "intrinsically worthwhile" (Dewey, 2005, p. 37). Dewey's aesthetic philosophy has helped me (re)shape and (re)form my own artistic philosophy where importance is placed upon the continuity within the art object during the aesthetic experience. When I am visiting with an abandoned school, photographing it, ‘documenting’ it, I am appreciating it, perceiving it, and enjoying it. It is an act of surrender. I am attuned to what is presented before me, and I am selecting frames according to my own interest and my own point of view. As I capture different shots, I also touch, feel, look, see, hear, and listen to the abandoned school. My body moves while my eye attends.
Dwelling in Corners

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (1994) uses *topoanalysis* as an artful examination of the sites in our intimate lives. He believes that the house was a privileged entity for a phenomenological study. In his opinion it provides intimate values when both the unity and the complexity of the space are taken into consideration. In order to understand the house’s significance, he attests that we should consider the house not as an ‘object’ for which we merely describe, give facts, or make impressions, but that as phenomenologists, we recognize the subtle shadings of a place, that we become attuned to how we inhabit it “in accord with all the dialectics of life, how we take root, day after day, in a corner of the world” (p. 4).
The abandoned school is a corner of the world. As a ‘corner dweller,’ I am a dreamer, I am someone who likes to hide and someone who is drawn to darkness, but never finds it gloomy, or empty. Like the flâneur described previously by Walter Benjamin (2002), I journey through the abandoned school both visually and abstractly, “as something experienced and lived through” (p. 417). In seeking “the soul” of old dust forgotten by brooms (Bachelard, 1994, p. 141), I see it as a possibility for imagination, and I take refuge in its ambivalence. From the depth of the corner, I become attuned to the mystery of things and to the sensations contained there/in. In this sense, I do not only experience the abandoned school in its day-to-day reality — I experience it in the mind. As Bachelard notes, we experience corners in their “virtuality, by means of thought and dreams” (p. 5). Corners can also make one feel safe and they are the “germ” of the room (Bachelard, 1994, p. 136). Not only is the abandoned school a place where I can withdraw into myself, it is the hiding place and the home of ghosts who are lurking in the shadows. They are the places in which things have been missed, neglected, or forgotten by others. Architecturally speaking, there is no other element or structure that bears the physical evidence of its occupants more than a corner. On close inspection, the corner collects traces and marks that can attest to the lives that were once contained therein, they are testaments to the lives that have passed through them.

Letting The Photograph ‘Find’ Me

During the ‘post-production’ of my photographs, I engage in many pauses, and many places of rest. These pauses punctuate and define the quality of movement, and cause the experience of ‘taking’ to stand out. This becomes what Dewey (2005) refers to as “an enduring memorial” (p. 37). The experience of ‘making’ refers to the act of production, to the process of creation that I engage in while creating the photograph. During this stage I spend a large amount of time
selecting, and recognizing that my selections are different due to my space and time away from
the physical experience inside the abandoned school. Here, I sometimes opt for post-production
processes in order to simplify or clarify my previous work. Through perception and observation I
continue to shape and re-shape the photograph until I am satisfied with the result. I pivot
between looking and making in which the result is achieved and experienced through intellect,
judgment, and sensitivity to the qualities of my own “doings” (Dewey, 2005, p. 51).

Although expression is an important factor in my artistic inquiry, it is not only emotional,
but guided on purpose. It is acute and intense. In Dewey’s (2005) opinion, when something is
created mechanically or by rote, then the producer falls back on some previously formed scheme,
where monotony and repetition become an impediment. In his opinion, art practice is dynamic
when it takes time to complete: when it involves materials that are both “ingested” and digested”
(p. 57). Ultimately viewing this type of experience as “growth” (Dewey, 2005, p. 57).

My photographs take time to be experienced and understood. The relations, connections,
and modes of interaction call for whole work to be mutual dependent on actions/reactions,
pushes/pulls, contractions/expansions. These forces carry the experience of the event, object,
scene, and situation to its own integral fulfillment. Through periods of work, and periods of
incubation, I reach a decision that the photograph is just ‘right,’ that the form fits the matter of
experience and carries it to consummation. This consummation is not only characterized by an
intensified awareness of the qualities of the object, but an intensified awareness of the experience
that renders it aesthetic.

A rigid predetermination of the end product would only lead to a turning out of what
Dewey calls a mechanical or an academic product. The consummatory phase of experience on
the other hand, always presents something new and it always includes an element of wonder and
a delight in discovery. In Dewey’s (2005) opinion, “those who carry on their work as a demonstration of a preconceived thesis may have the joys of egotistical success but not that of fulfillment of an experience, for its own sake” (p. 144).

The temporal takes on an important role that is marked by an aesthetic rhythm. Although aesthetic recurrence is a repeated unit, it is not mechanical. It pertains to the relationship between the parts and the sum of the parts that carry them forward. The parts and the whole of the work are reciprocally interpreted, building up to the actual experience for when consummation comes, at the very end. Consummation is the experience’s final phase. It is the phase of experience that is characterized by a felt sense that in the immediacy of the present moment one’s prior efforts are brought into fruition” (Dewey, 2005, p. 23).

Dewey regards an artist as someone who is sensitive and has a special awareness of his or her medium. He regards the artistic process as a series of events in which the artist utilizes intuition, rhythm, and a combination of periods of work and reflection. The artistic process is foremost an experience that reaches consummation. All consummatory experiences, however, are distinguished by their sense of continuity. Dewey considers art to be about organic unity and he places importance on the continuity within the art object during the aesthetic experience. In this sense, the experience is not a means to an end; it is as a means that leads to new experiences.
Figure 5.2, *Wake II*, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 5.3, *Wake III*, 2015
Photography by the author
Disrupting the Photographic ‘Truth’: Shifting Perspective through Inquiry

Whether photographs are ‘real’ is an interesting topic. For Derrida, the absent referent is what makes the photograph difficult, if not impossible, to ever really know, or be certain of. The archive for Derrida, is what disappears, whereas, the photograph becomes what remains in the world, long after the archive, as the archive. The archive, however, is not a copy. It is something else. For Derrida, “it is the imprint of another present” (Richter, 2010, p. 3).

The camera, capable of capturing fleeting appearances with clarity and detail, derives from a formula of likeness that can be best described as a resemblance. It creates an effect of likeness through such things as focus, framing, and lighting. This resemblance, however, is uncanny. With a smooth, lustrous finish, we are easily seduced into believing the photograph as truth. But for Derrida, it is only a trace. It is more akin to a footprint or a shadow (Richter, 2010).

Although the camera lucida and the camera obscura are documented as the first image-capturing systems, artists have been using optical instruments made out of lenses and mirrors as tools for their creative process as early as the fifteenth century (Steadman, 2001; Hockney, 2001). These are all forerunners to the daguerreotype and to the calotype, which in 1839 became the first contraptions capable of capturing light and fixing it onto a surface, rendering an image ‘permanent.’ By the 1900s, photography underwent a series of improvements; the paper print replaced the silver and copper plate, and smaller equipment replaced larger more cumbersome models (Trachtenberg, 1998). Today, many people believe that the history of photography is understood as the history of technological change (Snyder, 1998). Although the photograph first began with capturing the action of light on a chemically prepared surface, the term ‘photography’ has been replaced by the more elusive term ‘photo-technology’ which takes into consideration its performance as an electronic agent; first composing of transient light and
screens (such as television and cinema), and now, with the invention of the computer, the digital image, which is composed of pixels (literally meaning, picture point). Although quite different from the photograph, the digital image falls under the umbrella of photo-technology even though its image process and make-up is very different. Bypassing photochemical processes altogether; the digital image can easily be stored, copied, and transmitted electronically. It can be altered and even printed on paper to appear like a photograph made from traditional processes (Maynard, 1998; Savedoff, 1998).

The word photography means a ‘mark produced by light’ (Richter, 2010). In its essence, it came into being as an image of light, and according to Derrida, it is a form of “light-writing” (Richter, 2010, p. xxxvii). Whether or not this is still the case today with digital processes, we have to bear in mind, that photographs are still made. When photography first emerged, it stirred much controversy in the discourse of art, mainly painting, in which many painters initially saw photography as a threat to their livelihood and to their craft (LeBlanc, 2008). Over time, however, photography has changed the way we see, the way we perceive, and the way we have come to know art (Benjamin, 1968). A photo’s glossy surface, though printed by a machine, is by no means made automatically. Although many cameras have ‘auto’ functions, such as focus and exposure, cameras do not, as Baudelaire believed in his infamous essay, “The Salon of 1859,” simply “replicate the visible” (Trachtenberg, 1998, p. 491).

In terms of digital technology, what photographs are, and whether or not they are ‘real,’ has sparked much debate (Barrett, 2006; Trachtenberg, 1998). Through photographic software, and even in many in-camera features, photographers are afforded many quick and easy manipulations, such as repositioning and deleting certain elements, and even combining and blending different images together to appear seamless. The photographer has gained the control
and the freedom to depict almost whatever he or she desires even if it requires ‘making’ the image as opposed to ‘finding’ it. As a result, digital alterations have changed the way in which we see all photographs. Questions surrounding the practice have emerged such as; does the photograph capture a moment? Does it reveal something uncanny about the world? Or has it been constructed by the photographer to seduce the viewer into believing that it is ‘real’? How can we find the line between what is real and what is imaginary, when the trace, the evidence, or the archive has been removed?

**In/Visibility of the Photograph**

“*A photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see*”

(*Barthes, 1981, p. 6*).

In order to understand the meaning of the photograph, we are required to avoid perceiving it as something that is separate from human experience. When an artwork is identified as an object, or when it is simply viewed as a well-crafted product, it becomes isolated from “the human conditions under which it was brought into being” (Dewey, 2005, p. 1). The photograph requires that we take into consideration the processes involved in creating it, but also the processes involved in looking at it and interpreting it. Borrowing artistic and educational cues from Dónal O’Donoghue (2009), attuning our attention to the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of photography plays a significant role in understanding how it can be conceptualized as a form of inquiry.

Photography is commonly regarded as “an instrument for knowing things” (Trachtenberg, 1998, p. 93). As a practicing photographer, I prefer to see photography as a provocation; an approach that raises questions pertaining to what I think I know, and how I think I know them. Photography repeatedly acts to disrupt my previous understandings; opening up a time and a
space for thinking, imagining, and asking questions. Dewey (2005) claimed that the artist engages in a process that is similar to a philosopher because he or she engages in an approach that “accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience onto itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities (p. 35). The photographer endures and thrives on ambiguity. As a form of inquiry, my photographic practice is led and guided by an acute sense of wonder and curiosity about the world and my place with/in it. But additionally, when the photograph, or the photographic practice is examined, elaborated, generalized, or individualized as Derrida reminds us, it “can be seen as an operational network and a metalanguage through which larger philosophical, historical, aesthetic, and political questions can be brought into focus” (Richter, 2010, p. xxiii). Two such positions that the photograph, as provocation, has directed my attention towards, is a ‘being-towards death’ and a ‘being-towards nothing’.

**Being-Towards Death**

Derrida (2010) states that the question “who is death?” can be posed at each and every step of a photographic journey through archeological sites; decapitated statues; ruins; and other monumental signs of death. For Derrida, the photographer can even see the places that he (or she) has photographed disappear as time passes — places that were ‘living’ but are now since ‘gone’ or ‘departed’. For some things, and some places, the photograph is the only “telling archive” of these places (p. 6). Thus, photography can become an intervention into the history of the city and a compilation of photographs can become the signature of the person who is “keeping vigil” and “bearing more than one mourning” (p. 6). The places and things that are dying thus die more than once. In visiting and re-visiting these photographs, the living takes part
Figure 5.5, *Wake V*, 2015
Photography by the author
in their death over and over again. Derrida states that “we owe ourself to death” (p. 7), and that this is how we pay our debt towards death. In photographing something, we accept it, we distance ourselves from it, but we do so without ever abandoning it.

The aesthetics of decay (Trigg, 2006) is initially directed towards the past because the world comes before the photographer. However, through inquiry, when the photographer takes responsibility for themselves in relation to others while directing their actions towards the (unpredictable) future, they are engaging in what Arendt (1998) refers to as natality. Although similar to Heidegger’s being-towards-death, natality resonates here because it brings to our attention the newness, or the life that is generated from such experience. It reminds us that though we must die, we “are not born in order to die but in order to begin” (Arendt, 1998, p. 246). Natality also places emphasis on the notion that we are not expected to grasp life as a complete or coherent totality, but to perform a miracle of beginning that is similar to the unexpected and unanticipated results that are innate in birth (Arendt, 1998).

Derrida believed that photography performs a miracle “by giving something to be seen” (Richter, 2010, p. 3). His concept of a miracle creates an opportunity for thinking about the relationship between what is finite and infinite, and the role that a photograph can play in understanding perception and imagination. In a similar vein, Bachelard (1994), turning to poetry, argues for immensity, a philosophical category that is similar to a daydream. Bachelard (1994) argues that art is capable of transporting us out of the immediate world to a “world that bears the mark of infinity” (p. 183) by feeding on sights that contemplate grandeur. Images of immensity, allow us to realize that within ourselves lays a pure being of imagination. Art, for Bachelard (1994) is the by-product of, and the catalyst for, the imagining being. Daydreams of immensity remind us of the ‘real’ product of art — the enlargement of consciousness (p. 183-184).
Figure 5.6, Wake VI, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 5.8, *Wake VIII*, 2015
Photography by the author
More common than not, an object is defined as something that is material or perceptible by touch. However, it can also be defined as a thing, a person, or matter to which thought, feeling or action is directed (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). An aesthetic of ‘nothing’ pertains to the subsequent definition of the object. It is the process for which I am trying to conceptualize the ‘thingness’ of the abandoned school, which I have come to understand as something that is not there, but something that is conjured, or imagined as being there as a result of what remains in and of the de-commissioned school.

My photographs depict objects that can be perceived in the everyday as being mundane, ordinary, or even ugly. The objects that I am drawn to are not usually considered as having artistic potential. For most, they are probably not even considered to be aesthetically pleasing. These things, however, change when they are photographed. When they are portrayed in close-up, or placed in juxtaposition, they are given a “visual charge” and an “imaginative possibility beyond [their] everyday function” (Cotton, 2009, p. 115). Susan Sontag (1977) argues, “an ugly or grotesque subject may be moving because it has been dignified by the attention of the photographer” (p. 15). In selecting these objects, I am rendering them significant and I am framing them in such a way as to stimulate the viewer into looking and seeing them differently.

My photography centers on architecture that has been abandoned: buildings that have endured their original function. Focusing on abandoned schools, places that are left waiting to be unloaded by the school board, the community, or the government that bears the burden of owning them and being responsible for financing them during their time in transition. I am most drawn to abandoned schools that are deteriorating due to neglect, weather, and other natural forces, such as erosion, corrosion, or disintegration.
In subtle ways, I am altering the ways in which we can perceive everydayness. I am emphasizing the sensual qualities that are often overlooked. I am giving them a sense of physicality. In materializing these things, I am taking a micro universe and fueling it with imaginative connotations. I am exemplifying the pictorial charge that can be found in any place, only if one looks. Additionally, the minimalist compositions of my work intentionally leaves them open-ended whereby meaning is reliant on how the viewer invests in the image, or projects onto the image with their own narrative/lived experience/ or psychological thought.

On some occasions, I frame a scene so that it appears awkwardly cropped. In doing so, the object that is overlooked in an everyday context, or the object that is rarely glanced at or given any attention, becomes the focal point. My intention in working in this manner is to place emphasis on the ways in which we see or respectively, don’t see, the things around us while drawing attention to how something can be seen. For example, the photo above focuses on the
space between things. The image captures a cobweb that was found in the corner of a window of a de-commissioned elementary school. The web creates a filter, or a film that reminds us of the window’s presence. Rather than a transparent vortex that we simply look through, it becomes a material that separates the near from the far. The blurry background brings attention to the fact that we are unable to see inside the building, or what lies on the other side of the pane of glass. We therefore, cannot define the subject that cannot be seen. The interplay between space and subject, seeing and not seeing become the intention of the image.

The image below is an example of a photograph that ‘found’ me. In cropping the original image from which it derives, I was able to remove what was once in focus so that it retains an imaginative realm. Appearing as though it was created, or built upon multiple layers, this image

Figure 5.10, *Wake X*, 2015
Photography by the author
is of the same cobweb as previously discussed, but it is captured at a different angle, using a different focus. The reflection in the windows may appear familiar, but the multiple light sources captured in one frame creates a visual and dynamic play on how we are seeing. The light coming in the window is actually the reflections made onto its surface from the outside as we are looking ‘in’, creating a tension between the two directions. Two places, caught in one image, asks the viewer to place his or her stance into the equation of the viewing experience. *What is before you? (What is behind?)* In emphasizing the spaces between the image and the object, I am asking the viewer to recall the places that have played a role in heightening their perception.  

Revisiting the questions that I asked at the beginning of this concession, *What is it that draws me to an abandoned school? What makes me come back to the abandoned school, time and time again?* I realize that my inquiry has shifted to what cannot be seen in the abandoned school, which has consequently become the ‘real’ object of my attention. As Derrida argues, the photograph, as an object “announces its presence, but resists definition” (Richter, 2010, p. xxiii). The photograph also helps make what is absent become the topic of discussion. As deconstruction, and the theory of the trace reveals, every present bears the trace of an absent which helps define it. Therefore, not only the photograph, but photographic inquiry, encourages me to be moved by something that is not there. As Derrida argues, the photograph provides “the elusive trace of vigilant thought itself, mediated and exposed by the image” (Richter, 2010, p. xxviii). It acts to preserve memory, yet it also does so much more. Working in a temporal and even spatial delay, the photograph, marked by movement, welcomes invention, production, and performance (Bolt, 2004). Staging a future, or what Derrida posits, ‘l’à venir’, it creates a space and a time for something that is always yet to come (Hodge, 2007).

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1 These two examples are inspired, in part, by Charlotte Cotton’s (2009) discussion on the photographic works of Uta Barth and Sabine Hornig in which photographs of everyday familiar places can “invite us to think about the way we see and experience our environments” (p. 134).
Pedagogical Statement

This project delves into the relations between the self and the abandoned school, not only emphasizing the qualities of a de-institutionalized place, but rendering these qualities as embodied and perceptually felt. This relation is both spatial and temporal. It locates the space between the self and the abandoned school, and also the space between the past and the future. As a deferred action, it becomes a lived expression of time, prompting a mode of being in which the in and the through become necessary conditions for the production of the new.

Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) argues that the occurrent arts transform ways of knowing because spatio-temporal (re)configurations that engage the body disrupt habitual ways that the body inhabits space. Being-in and being-with the abandoned school provokes experiences that are immediate and palpable. It produces an embodied sensitivity where emotional response, affections, reflections, stimuli, and aversions come together to form a clamorous heterogeneity. In this space, I feel my own being/becoming within an aesthetic dimension that is distributed in time and space. As the metaphor of the wake implies, it is a stance that requires surrender: a pivot point where I can become conscious to how my movements are being affected by this change. Inquiry, as a disposition, alludes to the uncertainty and to the vulnerability that I embody in and through practice where affect, movement, and sensation are felt in all their complexity. The photograph, like the wake, is the semblance of an event, a lived abstraction of the event that makes it qualitatively more intense (Massumi, 2011). As an awakening, it operates on multiple registers of sensation in combination with a continuity of movement that is not measurable or easily defined. It is a series of qualitative changes that are the effects of a passing event. The wake, like a ‘semblance,’ is the emergent space where as an artist, researcher, educator, and learner, I have come to recognize how my processes of perception endure a constant change; this
is both a retrospective and an introspective awareness that requires movement. The wake, like
the close-up, protrudes out of nowhere and disappears out of site into the nowhere (Arendt,
1978), rendering the past in continuity with the future. It is a provocation that does not bring
thinking to an end, but an event that provokes further thinking (Ellsworth 2005). Instead of
marching “habitually and half-consciously from one drop of life to the next” (Massumi 2011, p.
51), it asks that we attend to the ripples and recognize the semblance of the event as a force.

**Decay & Emergence**

Decay is defined as a state or process of rotting or disintegration (Trigg, 2006). As such it brings
attention to thing that is aging, withering, or dying. It also brings forth an experience with a thing
that is in the process of disappearing into the abyss of the nothing (Heidegger, 2010). Although
my photographic practices allows for a witnessing of phenomena, the emphasis is taken away
from the object’s material properties; it places emphasis on my own bodily affects that offer an
invitation for being-with my own mortality. Susan Sontag (1977) once declared, “all photographs
are *momento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s)
mortality” (p. 15). Decay brings forth an interesting and perplexing paradox: as a thing falls apart
and dies, something new grows out of it.

In *The Aesthetics of Decay; Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason*, Dylan
Trigg (2006), working through the effects of post-industrialism, reconsiders how memory, place
and nostalgia can offer a new critique concerning human progress. Utilizing derelicts of the
everyday, such as alleyways and places associated with society’s waste, Trigg (2006) describes
the aesthetic of decay as something that develops over time and as something that thrives among
architecture in the absence of human interaction. When a building ceases to function in the way
Figure 5.11, *Wake XI*, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 5.12, *Wake XII*, 2015
Photography by the author
that it was originally intended, it becomes leftover, forgotten, and overlooked. Sometimes it is only regarded useful for its illicit uses. By addressing the phenomenological function of aesthetic revulsion, Trigg (2006) argues that decay asks us to draw from our memory and our imaginations in order to (re)construct the matter that is in a process of dissolution and fragmentation. Decay can thus become the medium through which the past can be (re)created, reinforcing its mutability.

For Arendt, decay reminds us of the maintenance required in life; the activities required to keep up with the natural processes that are cyclical and move contiguously with our own biological needs (Arendt, 1998). Arendt’s notion of labour, mirrors the deathless repetition of the cycle of nature, it was her opinion that “when nature ‘dictates,’ human beings are characterized principally by their sameness” (Buckner, 2011, p. 87). Unlike labour, where products are consumed by decay, work generates lasting products. As Arendt (1998) attests, the work made by the homer faber is not made for consumption, but for use.

The Close-Up

With a close-up, the frame of reference is reduced; rendering a focus that paradoxically broadens perspective. This approach requires that we look more deeply into things so that “a wider constellation of memories and associations can emerge” (Rendell, 2010, p. 121). This perspective seduces with rich sensual qualities and electrifying and expressive colours. The stylistic elements, inspired by surrealist abstraction, provoke an array of subjective narratives.

In its ambiguity, the close-up presents a mix of feelings, sensations and emotions that characterize the experience of being-in and being-with the abandoned school as an unknown and uncertain event. They indicate all at once, decay, death, love and fantasy. These images produce
joy and excitement, working against the transcription of memory by offering *fragments* of memories, which as Jill Bennett argues, (2005) “can be read only in reference to the viewer’s bodily sensation. To be moved by them — not in the sense that one is touched by the plight of a character in a fictional narrative, but on the more literal sense being affected, stricken with affect” (p. 29). In this sense, the photograph denies a static or fixed ‘truth,’ provoking affect, in which all of the sensations, uncertainties and questions refuse to adopt a language of external, common memory. Rather, they work to archive my process as an active search for language.

As Bennett reveals (2005) images “evince a process of coming into view” (p. 31). I particularly take issue with what Bennett (2005) posits is the ‘unspeakability’ of an image, which pertains to a realm of sense memory in which the unspoken is contained within everything that is un/heard, un/seen, un/touched, un/felt, un/smelled, and un/tasted with/in the photograph. This emphasizes the photograph’s fragmented quality while drawing attention to the idea that the ‘thingness’ of the abandoned school is something that can never be seen. As such, the photograph makes the viewer a witness to an unknown story. Bennett (2005), drawing on Gille Deleuze’s notion of affect, argues that art produces intensity or ‘a dynamic encounter’ rather than a narrative. She addresses the limitations of a narrative while drawing attention to the corporeal in which the art is more than one *thing* simultaneously. As Bennett (2005) argues, the form “provides a means of reading encounters between ‘insides’ and ‘outsides’ — as between sense memory and common memory — within any given pictorial or performative field” (p. 32). As such, my photographs depict memory as something poised at a point of entry into common language. They emphasize an expression, or rather, an emergence into what Bennett (2005) argues is ‘a rupture’ within the field of common representation. As such, the photograph tests your limits as the viewer, producing an invitation into an ambiguous space where you too, may
Figure 5.14, *Wake XIV*, 2015
Photography by the author
feel the work before recognizing its ‘contents.’ On presenting you with these photographs, you may even encounter an experience that is difficult to articulate.

It is my intention to trigger an affective response, where you may feel the photograph viscerally. Drawing on Deleuze’s work *Proust and Signs*, Bennett (2005) explains the phenomenon of the “encountered sign,” which “agitates, compelling and fuelling inquiry rather than simply placating the subject” (p. 36). An art encounter links the affective actions of the image with a thinking process without asserting the primacy of either one. For Deleuze, an artist thinks in sensations. Bennett (2005) argues, that what is depicted before the audience is a *body*, “not insofar as it is represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining this sensation” (p. 37). The photograph, in turn, may also be understood as a fragmented body that is undergoing sensation during an affective response.

In photographing the abandoned school and not what causes the abandoned school, as the viewer, you are presented a moment, yet you are unable to see the cause of this moment. Bennett (2005) reminds us that thinking in sense memory is a mode of thought, where the sensation is brought forth by the artist who does not reflect on a past experience, but registers the lived process of memory. As opposed to a representation of feeling, it enacts a state or an experience that becomes more aligned with a post-memory. It asks that you shift your attention from asking what does the photograph represent? —to *what does the photograph do?* This idea relates to Elizabeth Ellsworth’s text *Places of Learning* (2005) in which she brings forth the concept of “a pedagogical pivot point” (p. 37). Drawing from Winnicott’s concept of a transitional object, Ellsworth describes how art is capable of putting the self in relation to others and the world. This ‘transitional space’ is a place intentionally designed “to keep questions unanswered in any once and for all way” (p. 56). The pedagogical significance of the transitional object resides in the
moving subject who “is in a continuous passage toward knowings that are forever incomplete” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 57). The ambiguous and paradoxical characteristics of the experience, resists a singular definition. It is intentionally “designed not to be the kind of answer that brings thinking to an end, but an ‘answer’ that provokes us to keep thinking” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 59).

The transitional space creates the possibility for both myself, as the artist and yourself, as the viewer to become not only a spectator of the work but also a participant in the work. The work thus renders an affective and sensorial experience because it produces an encounter, something that is activated and staged. Furthermore, the unfamiliar and extraordinary nature of the photograph renders the abandoned school as being somewhat unintelligible to thought. Its affective character renders it as something that is not simply looked at, but something that involves bodily responses that may even lie outside verbal-semantic-linguistic representation (Bennett, 2005).
Figure 5.15,Wake XV, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 5.16, *Wake XVI, 2015*
Photography by the author
Deferred Action²

“All there is to thinking is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren’t noticing which makes you see something that isn’t even visible.”


“It makes no sense to expect to claim to ‘make the invisible visible,’ or the unknown known, or the unthinkable thinkable. We can draw conclusions about the invisible; we can postulate its existence with relative certainty. But all we can represent is an analogy, which stands for the invisible but is not it.”

(Gerhard Richter, 1995, p. 11)

In/Visibility of the Abandoned School: Beyond Representations of School Closure creates a space for projections: for memories and for affect that speaks in dialogue with narrative but is not meant to replace, or become narrative. Taking into consideration the subject, that is, the self in relation to the abandoned school, the photograph takes on an historical, social, cultural and political significance. Borrowing a question posed by visual and linguistic historian W. J. T. Mitchell (2009), who asks, “what does it mean to be ‘visible,’ and how [can] we quantify it?”(p. 125) First, as a receptacle for projections, the abandoned school possesses a sublime quality that is both intimate and immense. Second, as something that transcends intellectual certainty, it does not capture history at a standstill, but points to “its actual motion towards an open, indeterminate and ambiguous future” (Mitchell, 2009, p. 128).

Figure 5.17, *Wake XVII*, 2015
Photography by the author
Images play an invaluable role in art, scholarship, and research (Barthes, 1981; Prosser, 1998, Sontag, 1977; Weber, 2008). Image-based inquiry (Prosser, 1998) has become an extensive field of its own, overlapping with other forms of inquiry that include but are not limited to visual anthropology (Banks, 1998), visual sociology (Becker, 1998), visual ethnography (Harper, 2008), and numerous forms of arts-based research such as arts-based educational research, practice-based research, arts-informed research and a/r/tography (Sullivan, 2006). This exegesis creates an argument for placing photography in the center of an arts-based research project, acting as a provocation in and for research.

I am telling a story through photography and through writing with a commitment to art and reciprocity so that you, as the viewer/reader can participate in the meaning of the work while making further connections, questions, and insights, thereby opening the work up to possibility and to multiple interpretations. In this next section, I briefly review the five concessions that were so integral to this project:

1) The Void: Beginning with Heidegger, what draws me to his texts are not only his thoughts, but how he writes, including the mood, the feeling, and the atmosphere in which he delivers his ideas. Recursive and cyclical in style, his writing stirs my imagination and produces an engagement that is more akin to a performance than to a reading. Anne O’Byrne (2010) posits that Heidegger’s philosophical provocations produce “a distinctive structure, one that frustrates the desire for definitive answers or even complete descriptions” (p. 15). Sometimes my thoughts converge with his and at other times they diverge, but they always mutate into something more.

Heidegger’s approach to philosophy, grounded on a “fundamental ontology” (2010, p. 301/288), or the investigation of being, resonates most in his essay, The Thing (1950) when he
inquires into the essential ‘thingness of a thing’ while utilizing a ceramic jug as an example. First, Heidegger determines that the jug is a vessel, meaning it is something that holds something else within it, yet it is also something that stands on its own, or is self-supporting. In pondering the jug, Heidegger establishes that it can never be a mere an object, because it has been brought to stand (i.e. it has been set forth and produced by the means and the processes to do so), it literally consists of the earth, and it has been put before us in space and in our minds as a container, with the specific task of containing. Heidegger’s point here is that the jug cannot be understood in looking at it as a mere object, or in looking at it solely based on its outward appearance. Drawing our attention to the interior of the jug, he emphasizes “the void that holds” (p. 408). In doing so, Heidegger reminds us that the jug both shapes the void and is shaped by it. In its ‘thingness,’ however, it actually shapes nothing. But rather than perceiving the thing as a shaper of ‘nothingness,’ Heidegger argues that it is more worthwhile to understand it as a shaper of ‘no-thing-ness,’ or in other words, a space necessary for things to appear. This lecture is striking because it deviates from the style of writing he used in Being and Time. Although the notion of being is endorsed by both texts, the notion of being as ‘nothing,’ resonates in this lecture because it approaches being “by sneaking up on it backward” (Taussig, 2004, cited by Adamson, 2010, p. 404). The parable of the jug implies that being is always a being-in. When water is poured into the jug, both the jug and water are in space, at a location, at the same time. They both have the same kind of being, meaning they are both present as things occurring within the world. However, ‘in’ signifies more than a mere spatial relation, ‘in’ pertains to the manner in which we dwell, the manner in which we stay with things, and the manner in which we care for them.
In dwelling with the jug as a no-thing, Heidegger is present with it. He is exemplifying human life as a “being-together-with” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 55/55). Dasein, translated as being-there/there-being, is demonstrated as he attends to the ‘phenomena,’ or the essence of the jug as it appears to him in his experience with it. Being, for Heidegger, is not present in the attributes of the jug or in its outward appearance, but rather in imagining “possible ways for it to be, and only this” (Heidegger, 2010, p. 41/42). The void does not bring forth an imagining of “not being,” rather; it speaks to the ‘nothing’ as a mode of being in which we may “ask beyond the usual, beyond the ordinary that is ordered in the everyday” (p. 13/10). It emphasizes the very act of philosophizing, which for Heidegger (2010) is about questioning the extra-ordinary so that “not only what is asked about is extraordinary, but also the questioning itself.” (p. 13/10). The ‘nothing’ draws attention to the things that cannot be seen. It asks that we shift our focus, our framing, and our angle. It asks that we look at things more closely, and that we look at things again.

The void speaks to the negative space that appears and re-appears as a visual (and spatial) motif in this entire photo-essay. Bachelard (1994) argues that the negative space “gives evidence of a dynamism in combat” (p.42), which “intensifies the drama” attached to a place (p. 43). For Bachelard (1994), the negative space is where the dialectics between place and universe come together to create a force, capable of awakening daydreams in their opposition. As such, the hollow space, the gaps, the crevices, the holes, the half removed and the half open do not necessarily connote destruction, emptiness or deprivation. The void, swarming with invisible activity, is a nesting ground for carrying out ‘disembodied conversations’ (Russek, 2008). As such, the abandoned school provokes a narrative, but punctuates it with empty space, affecting the reader/viewer by ‘work of omission’ (Russek, 2008).
Beginning with the void, I situate this inquiry as a project driven by desire. As opposed to a lack within the discourse of psychoanalysis (Spivak, 1987), it shares more in common with Deleuze and Guattari (1987) who argue that desire is not one single identifiable thing but an ‘assemblage’ capable of mobilizing passions. It also acts as a reminder of the initial appearance of the abandoned school as an inaccessible place in the distance in which the boarded windows and lack of openings became a provocation for further exploration. As Bachelard (1994) contends, “all locks are an invitation to thieves” (p. 81). As such, the lock has become a ‘psychological threshold’ (Bachelard, 1994), calling on my insurgent nature to search for ways inside. A once seemingly impassable place has transformed into a new world in which I can exit the everyday (even if only temporarily), into an “aesthetic remove” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 21) producing an interstice into “a new psychological landscape, into a possible, as if world” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 22).

In Heidegger’s (2001) seminal essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” he asks, "what does the work, as work, set up?” He states, “the work opens up a world and keeps it abidingly in force” (p. 43, italics from the original). The work of art — like the ‘thingly’ character of a thing — can never be a thing per say or an object that merely stands before us. As Heidegger (2001) reminds us, “thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds” (p. 167). As a ‘world’ it is something that can never be seen. As such, the work of art pertains to the happening, or the movement that has been set in motion. Therefore, for Heidegger, the responsibility of the artist is to commit to maintaining ‘strife’ (Bolt, 2011). Rather than solving a riddle, the artist’s task is to make the riddle visible. The void, allowing for mystifications of the abandoned school to materialize, entices — even seduces the viewer for an interpretation. As a provocation for curiosity, wonder, mystery, and desire, the void is an
ambiguous space/place that keeps in/visibility in play. It is something that can never be filled.

Forever remaining open, it keeps thought in motion and it keeps it alive.

Each concession is an extension of the void where it “moves beneath multiple forms, showing us at each pause in its displacement, a new face” (Trinh Minh-ha, 1982, p. 41). As such, the abandoned school is characterized by a metonymic and more precisely, a synecdoche relationship (a part-to-whole relationship) that exists in the spaces between each metaphor and each concession. Each one, connecting with the others, constitutes the abandoned school, which in turn forms the whole of this work. With this understanding, each concession functions at a level of perception, creating relationships accompanying the meaning-generating potentiality of this work.

2) It is in The Ghost-Town where we encounter a consistent absence. There are no people, no paperwork, no books, no voices, and no footsteps in the halls. All of which become a set of signifiers that somehow become more powerful than if these things were present. The interior of the abandoned school presents a challenge, testing our abilities of interpretation, creativity, and perception. How are we ever to make sense of this place when there is ‘nothing’ to see?

Art educator Charles Garoian (2010) refers to sightlessness or ‘points of blindness,’ as ‘slippages of perception.’ Where the void of signification has the ability of opening our eyes and minds to other ways of seeing and thinking. For Garoian (2010), lacunas, blindspots and aporias “enable insightful and multivalent ways of seeing and understanding the complexities of alterity” (p. 179), by revealing powerful paradoxes in life and in art and by creating processes of deferral in which “seeing and not seeing resist dialectic closure” (Garoian, 2010, p. 180).
Figure 5.18, *Wake XVIII (Contents Erased II)*, 2012
Photography by the author
The abandoned school demands careful observations. It asks that we take into consideration what is included in its visual and spatial composition and what is excluded. It requires that we pay attention to the subtle nuances of the place while taking into consideration our implicit assumptions. With this stance, we may begin to see how the abandoned school begins to tell an alternate story to that of ‘closure.’ Here, we encounter a multi-dimensional place, where countless cultural, historical, political, and social lineages are at work in a single image/place-space.

In this concession, the unseen takes precedence, hinting to the immanence of the abandoned school, staging it as something that can only be imagined. Evoking the subterranean, the hidden and the ghostly, it also suggests my power as the photographer, someone who sees but is not seen. Cultural scholar Esther Peeren, claims that the power of the invisible resides in the ‘avisual,’ in which the things that are unseen are an accumulation of sensing the visual without actually observing anything visual. As such, the ‘avisual’ becomes a ‘phantom temporality’ — something that continues to haunt us because it never achieves “full visibility” (p. 36).

3) In The Crypt, the abandoned school is portrayed as a palimpsest that layers ghosts from the past with performances of the present (Muir, 2007). As a ‘dream scene’ (Bishop, 2005), the installation produced a secret enclave of “the half-spoken losses that society and culture fail to address” (Salvio, 2001, p. 95). Brought forth as a spectacle form of pedagogy (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008), the crypt produced another type of love-object (Abraham & Török, 2005), a porous and multilayered document of the event that as a form of afterlife, acts to mark loss as something that cannot be represented because “loss fractures representation itself and loss precipitates its own modes of expression” (Butler, 2003, p. 467).
Figure 5.19, *Wake XIX*, 2015
Photography by the author
Figure 5.20, *Wake XX*, 2015
Photography by the author
4) It is in The Corpse, where the abandoned school, reminiscent of a human body, generates and exceeds beyond its limits. Instead of ‘a dead zone of imagination’ (Giroux, 2013), the abandoned school (re)enters the context of the living, where it is transformed and re-imagined. Maxine Greene (2010) argues that pedagogy of imagination enlarges and expands thoughtfulness. Instead of succumbing to the perspective that there is nothing left to do (but to give in), the site-specific installation allows us “to think of things being otherwise” (Greene, 2010, p. 30). The installation, enabling spatio-temporal relations and connections between representations of the abandoned school and the actual decommissioned building produces an emergent space in which the decommissioned school can be (re)examined and (re)critiqued. Extending beyond my own consciousness, beyond the photographic frame, and beyond the actual abandoned school, it becomes something that is lived through. As such, it extends beyond art, beyond research, beyond pedagogy, beyond the academy, beyond the institution, and beyond the community where it will forever remain open, indeterminate, and mutable.

5) And finally, it is here, in The Wake, where all five concessions come together as a commemoration of life. The wake, as a deferral, collects and in turn, disseminates all of the ripples from the previous concessions producing new images of thought. Although the wake is a series of autobiographical traces, as a (continual) form of provocation, it is not the outcome of thinking, but a process of thinking itself. In the chapter, “From Possible Worlds to Future Folds” Simon O’Sullivan (2006), draws on the work of Gerhard Richter through Deleuze’s theory of the fold, demonstrating how “art is an expression of possible worlds” (p. 121, italics in the original). As a deferred possibility, the abandoned school perpetually moves beyond my grasp. As a result, I am always coming to understand it belatedly, after having already moved elsewhere. Being in
the abandoned school produces intensities (Deleuze, 1994), something that I understand as combinations, or assemblages of movement, sensations and affects. Inside, I feel what visual ethnographer Justin Armstrong refers to as the politics of abandonment, or “the tactile and accumulated wake of history” (Armstrong, 2011, p. 274).

Blurring the line between photography and painting, the photographs presented in this concession are the most abstract of the whole archive. Contrary to the concession of the ghost town, where my photographs present a ‘seriality’ and a ‘sameness,’ these images demonstrate my movement towards difference. The atmosphere in the abandoned school is tactile — the “walls ooze ghosts” (Munt, 2013, p. 10). Returning to the work of Zarina Bhimji, an artist that I have come to admire even more so through this project, writing about her work entitled, “Out of Blue” (2002), a project archiving the political disturbances of Kosovo and Rwanda, she writes, “this project is about learning to listen to ‘difference,’ the difference in shadows, microcosms and sensitivity to difference in its various forms. Listening to changes in tone, difference of colour” (Bhimji, n.d.).

This project is about learning to listen to difference and it is about my coming to understand the importance of ‘practicing’ to a resolution (Haseman, 2007). I never know how long I spend inside the abandoned school; I lose all sense of time. I also don’t always know where I am, what room I am in. I imagine what rooms used to be, or how the previous inhabitants used them. I also imagine how they can look, given a little creativity. Although there are remnants of furniture, much has been removed and the few items that are left have been moved. There are no signs indicating why things have been moved causing my mind to veer to the uncanny, the ghostly, the paranormal and the supernatural. As such, I entertain the mystic, dreams and hallucinations, other worlds, and phantoms — some of the oddest of all curiosities.
Once inside,

I am not looking for a possible ‘natural’ explanation for things.

I am searching for the unfamiliar.

I am searching for the unknown.

I listen.

Are those the cries of a child?

The groans of an old man?

I watch as images and objects appear before me for unexplained reasons.

Things are unnaturally still.

Shadows are a deeper shade of purple,

some veering towards ultramarine.

There are half tones in places that previously appeared black

and I find all kinds of colours and textures in the negative space

when I allow my eyes to linger there.

As my eyes drift from object to object,

from object to space

I witness how the spaces between become blurry in my peripheral vision.

As I move my eyes from object to object,

from object to negative space,

from negative space to negative space,

I realize that I can make light dance and I can make a place, so seemingly still

— move.
Figure 5.21, *Wake XXI*, 2015
Photography by the author
My eyes fall on things that hold me though I cannot always say why. As Barthes (1981) notes, this is the power of expansion, he writes, “the incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance” (p. 51). The emergent and the not-quite-yet-apprehended pertains to what O’Sullivan (2006) calls a “genuine” encounter (p. 1). Challenging our typical ways of being in the world, it is a point of “rupture” in which our systems of knowledge are disrupted and we are “forced to thought” (p. 1). However, the rupture, best described as a cut, a crack, or a fissure to our habitual modes of being and to our habitual subjectivities also attests that the rupture produces an affirmation of the new, bringing one to think the world differently (O’Sullivan, 2006).

**Performing Interventions**

It is my intention that this exegesis be regarded as an artistic work in its own right, drawing attention to both the form and the formlessness of artistic inquiry, delivering a message that things can be different.

There has been a recent surge of a/r/tographers (see Irwin & O’Donoghue, 2012; May, O’Donoghue & Irwin, 2014) and arts-based researchers (see Boulton-Funke, Irwin, LeBlanc, & May, in press; Rolling, 2015) drawing from interventionist art practices, purposely staging interruptions to the mundane, everyday events and activities in order to produce new ways of thinking. An intervention is most commonly used in daily vocabulary as a method of psychoanalysis or counseling in which a person, or a group of people come together to confront someone to seek help with a problem, a dependency, or a substance abuse of some kind. In the discourse of contemporary art, however, the term intervention refers to an artwork that is installed in a broad range and most often, public site (Suderberg, 2000). It is sometimes defined
as a social practice or a relational form of aesthetics that takes over an urban site to speak of, address, or influence the political, historical, or cultural perspectives of the time. An intervention is a way of interacting with the public, it can be conceptualized as a shock meant to generate a certain reaction, a debate, or it can simply be a way of imagining something as something else — a taking action for something ‘to be otherwise’ (Debord, 1973, 2006; Pinder, 2005, 2008; Smith, 2010).

Intervention artwork commonly takes shape as an event; a ‘re-territorialization’ of a space that draws spectators’ and participants’ attention to the cracks, openings, and cavities in the economy; academia; publicly-funded art/social developments; redundant/incomplete properties; spaces locked by legal disputes; and economically/ecologically projects in which flows of capital and/or information are closed off/ or made inaccessible to the public (Smith, 2010). It focuses on inter-subjectivity; the encounter; and the being-together of an experience that occurs because of art, or because of the artist(s) working as a catalyst within the context of the everyday (Loftus, 2009). In this sense, the work of art represents a social void that opens up an interstice in human relations while finding a place within the current social system as actual “ways of living” and “models of action within the existing real” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 13). Although it sometimes functions under many different names such as socially-engaged art, community-based art, dialogic art, participatory art, collaborative art, and research-based art, interventionist art functions under the premise of empowering the creativity of the collective; emphasizing its act, and the shared ideas that emerge as a result of it (Bishop, 2006; Suderberg, 2000).

A phenomenological method usually suggests that we lay aside our prevailing understandings and visit with our immediate experience of phenomena, so that new meanings are given the possibility to emerge and enhance their former meaning (Crotty, 1998).
Phenomenologists believe that the lifeworld is central to all activity. Ironically however, it is this centrality that makes it difficult to become fully aware of the lifeworld (Pinar, 1994). Perhaps this is the contradiction presented in phenomenologist thought. William F. Pinar emphasizes that when we are submerged in something perpetually we tend to take the reality and the validity of daily, practical life for granted (Pinar, 2004, 2008). When we are dwelling in an urban environment or when we are submerged in a method of working that has become comfortable to us, how can we lay aside prevailing understandings in order to visit with immediate experiences of phenomena? Such a task seems difficult, if not impossible. It calls for a disruption, an interruption, or an intervention that can help bracket the taken for granted within a biographical situation. The origin of the word intervention comes from the Latin word interventiōn meaning, a coming between. To intervene means to appear; to lie; or to situate oneself between two things; two periods in time; or two events. An intervention disrupts an on-going or normal circumstance as a way to breath in a new vitality and breath out stale devitalized energy (Edwards, 2001). In this sense, this research creates two layers of intervention: first, the creation of an intervention into my own practice(s) as an artist who was in search of ways in which my work could become more politically significant, and second, the creation of an intervention artwork that (re)utilized the exterior of a closed school so that photography, as a situational provocation, could bring forth some of the political, social, cultural, and economic implications of an abandoned school.
Figure 5.22, *Wake XXII*, 2015
Photography by the author
Performing Intraventions

As an intervention, this work challenges authority by encouraging a dialectical, participatory, and collaborative approach to art and thus pedagogy. It demonstrates how learning in and through art is something that is deferred. As such, it creates a space for the things that can never truly be made present. Yet, as a critical intervention, it is “a promise to openness that marks a responsibility to the other” (Coole, 2000, p. 234).

Drawing from the work of Augustine, Arendt believed that thought was infinite, with infinite possible future anticipations and infinite possible interpretation of past memories. Arendt described thinking as a thought-train, a ‘force’ that intersects the past and the future in the present. She explains,

The two antagonistic forces of past and future are both indefinite as to their origin; seen from the viewpoint of the present in the middle, the one comes from an infinite past and the other from an infinite future. But though they have no beginning, they have a terminal ending, the point at which they meet and clash, which is the present. (Arendt, 1978: 1, p. 209)

The ‘thought-train,’ taking place in the present, produces a possibility for new promise, which in turn, can produce spontaneity, natality, and new beginnings (Calcagno, 2011). For Arendt, the space between the past and the future is timeless. It is a “small non-time space in the very heart of time” (Arendt, 1978: 1, p. 210) where “thinking collapses all temporal dimensions because it gathers the absent, that is, the not-yet and the no-more together — in the present” (Arendt, 1978: 1, p. 211).

Acting as a diagonal force, the thought-train, taking off from the present, is what makes history, biography, narrative, and other world issues, timeless. Living between the past and future
requires that we utilize our faculty of thinking, but it also requires that we draw on our faculties of imagination, which for Arendt, includes both remembrance and willing.

This inquiry marks a quest that involved thinking, the soundless dialogue between me and myself (Arendt, 1978) and to a certain extent, a withdrawal from the world of appearances and from external determinations towards an “intra-activity” (Young-Bruehl, 1982, p. 280), which required letting my imagination ‘go visiting’. Contrary to The Human Condition in which Arendt explores the Vita Activa, in The Life of the Mind, Hannah Arendt explores the Vita Contemplativa, the activity of thinking, which she describes as “sheer and complete quietness,” and “the soundless dialogue we carry on with ourselves that serves to open the eyes of the mind” (1978: 1, p. 6). As humans, Arendt reminds us that we are thinking beings driven by a need to think beyond the limitations of knowledge. However, as thinking beings, we do not simply thirst for knowledge, we quest for meaning (Arendt, 1978; Young-Bruehl, 1982). In the abandoned school, where I withdraw from ‘this’ world, the world of the everyday, I seek an ‘aesthetic remove’ (Barone & Eisner, 2012) which ultimately causes me to think — however it is in and through artistic practice in which I discover new points of wonder.

As an ‘intravention’ (see Boulton-Funke, Irwin, LeBlanc & May, In Press), this study marks my concern with ontology, the study of being and existence. Although intersecting with epistemology throughout, the theoretical perspectives that have been brought forth in this exegesis have enabled me to analyze my previous understandings and to entertain new insights, and therefore new ways of being in the world. It marks the journey for how I have come to make meaning in and through artistic practice while keeping one subject — the abandoned school — in constant view. Actively searching for the thingness of the abandoned school propelled my inquiry forward allowing an artistic engagement in which I can continue to build an
understanding of the world and my place with/in it. As such, I have made a philosophical shift from that of Being to an ontology of *becoming* where “it is the work and the play of difference that drives the ferment of becoming” (Coole, 2000, p. 231). *Becoming* produces a number of different approaches to democracy in which authority can be challenged through what is possible instead of through what is ‘prescribed’ (Coole, 2000). As “an attentive practice of thoughtfulness” (van Manen, 1984, p. 38), this project has enabled me to come to a deeper understanding of my everyday experiences, allowing me to investigate concepts through living them, and in the process, gaining insightful descriptions of the ways in which I experience the world.

**The Role of Imagination in Curriculum Studies and Arts Based Research**

Hannah Arendt was mainly concerned with public space and with thinking. Making connections between imagination and politics, she argued that everyday politics demands that we use our imaginations so that we not only understand what is going on politically, but so that we may imagine things differently. Paying attention to what appears and what does not appear in the space of appearance, allows us to delve into the world in an emergent and on-going way. Utilizing our imaginations, our minds are permitted to go visiting, and “to give credence to alternative realities” (Harwood, 2010, p. 364).

According to Pinar (2008), “curriculum theory is a complex, multidiscursive academic discipline devoted to understanding educational experience, focused on, but hardly limited to, the encoding of such experience” (p. 502). Situated within the context of curriculum studies, this work speaks to the significance that academic and artistic knowledge holds for subjective experience (and perhaps even social reconstruction). As an experiential journey, it emphasizes
creative insubordination, while reminding us that the embodied, the experienced, the outside and the hidden (or null) curriculum (Eisner, 1994) holds the potential for (re)shaping perspectives, dispositions, skills, and knowledge (Schubert, 2008). As a form of invention, it asks that we position ourselves within the work (Stewart, 2007) so that we can place emphasis on discovering and exploring new and alternative ways of teaching and learning.

Taking into consideration my multiple roles in this research, I began as a photographer, which like a stranger, started from a position of an outsider, looking in on the closed school. Like a voyeur, I chose to submerge myself into a foreign place ‘inhabited’ by unfamiliar people. This is not a negative perspective; rather, this is the allure of such practice. In the book Architecture from the Outside, Elizabeth Grosz (2001) brings together philosophy and architecture through the space of the outside. She argues that the outside provides an ability “to see what cannot be seen from the inside” (p. xv). Exploring the abandoned school from the ‘outside’ allowed me to document the disappearing schools while imagining, considering, and wondering about the people who were excluded from the frame of the photograph and who, situated beyond its edges, were made absent from its operations.

Second, taking into consideration my role as a catalyst working within the context of the everyday (Loftus, 2009), the site-specific installation performed with the abandoned school required many organizational and administrative skills, but more importantly, it required that I trust the situation and relinquish control so that the event, and thus, the artwork, could unfold at its own pace and on its own accord—in time and space—through the participants’ active involvement. In adopting the role of context provider as opposed to content provider (Kester, 2004), I assumed a performative commitment that provoked a plurality of responses.
Third, bringing forth my ethical and political encounters as the photographer-turned-performer-turned-interventionist, living in the intersections between artist, researcher, and pedagogue required that I proceed in a critical, yet socially responsive manner. Urban exploration, guerilla activism, interventionist, and other anti-authoritative practices that break the law present a challenge to artists working within the academy. Seeking permission to utilize the closed schools required that I subject myself to rejection. As a result, I often had to change my course of action and begin anew. These restrictions challenged my artistic conceptualizations and demanded on-going revisions. However, seeking city permits, special event liability insurance, and ethical consent for engaging with human subjects did not cause my project to lose its appeal, rather, it made the not-quite-private/not-quite-public site more alluring. The process, although at times difficult, presented me with opportunities for re-thinking issues regarding privilege and power, power relationships, and competing values.

My position asked that I adopt a stance of “epistemological humility” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 128); that I take into consideration the partial, multiple, and local counter-narratives, that I become ethically responsive to the fragile, porous, fluid, and even conflicting perspectives that emerged; and that I resist representing them in an oversimplified and systematic manner. Living in this shifting and mutable role places me in relation to the abandoned school, allowing me to recognize how the abandoned school comprises what is we bring to it from our own internal realities (Ellsworth, 2005). This research project, transforming from a conventional relationship between artist, artwork and audience, generated an exchange between my artistic practice, social engagement, and knowledge production. Revealing how art can allow for an exploration of critical social issues through creative processes, and develop understanding through shared experiences.
Engaging in the roles of photographer, catalyst, and arts-based researcher demanded that I work in ways that were not always familiar and comfortable for me. Working in the space between artist, researcher and pedagogue pointed to a knowledge that was in the making as opposed to knowledge that was already made (Ellsworth, 2005). It produced a space of emergence—a location for the new, the unthought, and the unrealized (Ellsworth, 2005; Grosz, 2001).

This project contributes to arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008), by attending to the role that photography, as inquiry, can play in the provocation of a practice-led art project. It helps to demonstrate the recursive and idiosyncratic nature of artistic practice, particularly how “theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time that practice is formed by theory” (Bolt, 2007, p. 29). It posits that arts-based research, framed from contemporary art practices, can produce a valid site for research by promoting pedagogy that is non-conformist. When research is structured on “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action” (Haseman, 2007, p. 153), learning becomes more fluid, open-ended, and open to possibility. As such, it disrupts and destabilizes a traditional approach to research and in turn, it helped me to develop a more hybrid art practice.

In considering the social implications of art and how art allows for participation in political processes, I engaged in and through, allowing me to see, feel, experience, and commit to the politics of image-making (Chalmers, 2007). This study is about the production of art in and with abandoned places, and with the abandoned school in particular, rupturing the myth that abandoned places are nothing more than “wastelands” (Edensor, 2005). Interventions performed with the abandoned school, challenged practices of remembering and forgetting by bringing forth abandoned school as an ‘antimonument.’
Art Practice as Inquiry

Research in art education involves asking questions and seeking answers that allow us to better understand how to make art, how to study art, and how to teach art. For Graeme Sullivan (2004), the goal of art education research is to contribute to human understanding, thereby leading to philosophical analysis, historical and cultural commentaries and educational praxis. Sullivan (2004) brings forth the need for research in art education to move beyond the “institutionalized tradition” (p. 795) and calls upon art educators to break the historical, conventional, and power hierarchies that do not accept insight, imagination or intuition. He suggests that we discard a positivist approach, where emphasis is placed on objective observation and rational prediction, and that we replace it with a post positivist approach, one that embraces the complex ways in which humans encounter the world around them. This entails that we identify the interdependent elements within complex educational phenomena, and that we make a distinction between “specific outcomes” and “multiple meanings” (Salomon, 1991 Cited by Sullivan, 2006, p. 796). With this lens, Sullivan (2004; 2006) attests that art education research can become more fluid and dynamic, and that it can place emphasis on human agency and the kinds of decisions and influences that are made while acknowledging the interrelationships that shape human understanding.

In Art Practice as Research, Sullivan (2010) proposes that we look at research practices conceptualized and explored by artists because in his opinion, they are reflexive forms of inquiry that place emphasis on “the role that the imaginative intellect and visualization play in creating and constructing knowledge” (p. 244). For Sullivan (2010), art practice is an individual, social, and cultural form of inquiry that is “grossly undervalued” (p. xix); but can be “a valuable site for raising theoretically profound questions” (p. 119), for “raising significant life questions” and for
exploring “important cultural and educational ideas” (p. 95).

Asking, “Are we asking the wrong questions in art education?” O’Donoghue (2009) takes a critical stance to what Sullivan (2005; 2010) coins “art practice as research,” and draws on practice theory in order to find parallels, connections, and resonances between the work of contemporary artists and the work of arts-based researchers. For O’Donoghue (2009) the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ artists make art are significant factors in examining how art can be conceptualized as a form of inquiry (p. 355). Foremost, is the curiosity cultivated in ambiguity. This curiosity directs the spectator’s consciousness to the things that are taken for granted, and to the things that normally go “unseen” (p. 357). The processes used to create the work, the materials chosen, and the manner in which they are placed together all factor into the reception of the work. Therefore, for O’Donoghue (2009) “meaning resides in the production of the work, in the work itself, as well as in the interpretation of the work” (p. 357). This approach remains dedicated to inquiry, in which a space is opened for the artist and for the viewer to think, while generating more questions about its interpretation. In these spaces, O’Donoghue (2009) finds that the ambiguity of the work is a “necessary condition” making its meaning “open, unfixed and fluid” (p. 359).

Framed by the areas listed by O’Donoghue (2009), this research is an exploration of how my artistic practice became a mode of inquiry. Borrowing the areas listed by O’Donoghue (2009), the production of the work, the work, and interpretations of the work were essential components to the study. For the purposes of my study, however, the term ‘work’ has been replaced by ‘archive.’
The Production of the Archive

As I was documenting the abandoned schools, I often made reference to my growing collection of photographs as an ‘archive.’ In thinking conceptually about the archive, I realized that my practice shares similarities with an archival worker. For one, it holds a melancholic tone. Two, the process is one that is perpetually incomplete. Third, the archive functions as a portal between an unfinished past and an uncertain future. The reason why the archive resonates with me is that in its creation there was something missing and something needed in order to attest to its value and to its very existence.

Derrida (1998) argues “there is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside” (p. 11). The archive is especially important to Derrida as it pertains to the theory of deconstruction and to the theory of the trace. For Derrida, “the words and signs we use are nothing more than traces — traces of that which never had a ‘real’ existence” (Hardiman, 2009, p. 43). The act of archiving is dependent on the trace, and the trace produces the act of archiving. For Brothman (2001), “each one of this pair provides the conditions for the other’s continual emergence into a deferral of being” (p. 72). Derrida forever reminds us that we are caught between two alternatives that contain each other. In his opinion, the technique of repetition is required in order to create a possibility for difference.

This ‘something’ that was missing from my collection of photographs as an archive, was taking into consideration its public identity or the public’s perception of them. For Derrida (1998) the archive is hypomnesic, in other words, it is an impaired memory, “one that happens only in consignment in external place which assures the possibility of reimpersion” (Derrida, 1998, p. 11). For Derrida (1998) an archive is always a repository of the private and the personal,
it is one that requires multiple interpretations and testimonies. It is through the concept of the
archive that I became sensitive to how the photograph could act as a provocation. As such, an art
installation, in which photographs of the interior of a closed school were enlarged and projected
onto the outside walls was envisioned, where the public, the community who experienced the
closure of the school, were invited to take part in the event and to witness the projections. A
selection of participants, sharing their interpretations of the work, created further relationships
between space, time, place, and memory. Within the context of the abandoned school, the
photographs produced the means for exploring it as a generative possibility.

Encounters with the Archive

Archival art, according to art critic Hal Foster (2004) is a genre of a contemporary, conceptual
practice. He argues, “archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced,
physically present” (p. 4). For Foster, archival artists commonly elaborate on found images,
texts, or objects from mass culture. They compile them into obscure combinations (often in
sculptural, site specific, or installation format), and they “push the postmodernist complications
of originality and authorship to extreme” (p. 4). As its name suggests, archival art draws
attention to the archive, a material that is fragmented and incomplete. It encourages viewers to
become active participants — presenting a body of work that requires human interpretation.
Archival artists play on the notion of the collection in which each piece can be seen as “data”
that can be inventoried, sampled, and shared. Through juxtaposition, however, they become
something both found and constructed, factual and fictive, public and private. The combination,
as an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), creates a space for signification, which in turn,
creates possibilities for new connections.
Rather than borrowing Derrida’s term “archive fever,” Foster (2004) creates the term ‘archival impulse’ to break away from the idea that the archive is necessarily a cynical repetition-compulsion death-drive, but rather, a Deleuzean rhizome that develops through mutations of connections and disconnections. For Foster (2004), archival art transforms failure into possible scenarios, excavation sites into construction sites, and belatedness into becomingness. Although my site-specific installation utilized my own photographs and as opposed to the images of others, it also argues for the value of the archive by demonstrating how the archive “is a useful focal point for bringing together issues of representation, interpretation and reason with questions of identity, evidence and authenticity” (Osborne, 1999, p. 51).

The archive is most commonly understood as a pre-existing documentary collection that is housed in a site that has been purposely built to protect it (Bradley, 1999). The images of the interior of the school projected onto the outside walls 1) drew attention to the architecture of the school as a repository of memories (individual and collective) that had been locked up from the community from which it existed, and 2) the event demanded for a consideration of the role in which the archive plays in collective history. There are many forms of archives and there are various forms of public and private records. Who decides which archives are records? Which ones are official? Which ones are legitimate? For Osborne (1999),

The bureaucratic state-sponsored archive is a predominant mechanism which modern liberal societies have developed for the handling of the past (and its physical relics) and of memory. In pre-literate societies the storyteller served the same function, becoming a living and walking archive of the memories of the tribe. And memory, for individuals and societies, is the key to unlocking the past: that which is lost. Through the archive we strive to recover what we (and the thousands that constitute that we) have lost, and to relive the lost past by retelling its stories. (p. 109)
Osborne (1999) reminds us that within the archive resides the possibility (however partial) to reconstruct, (re)store, and (re)present stories of the past within our own existing narratives. This perspective renders the abandoned-school-as-archive as a product of history, but it also brings forth an ability to (re)write history and to (re)create it in new forms.

Cultural theorist Kevin Lynch (1990) once argued that the difference between a ruin and an abandoned place is that ruins are generally perceived as being pleasant, whereas abandoned places are associated with entropy, dereliction and death, provoking more of an abject response. For Lynch (1990), abandoned places differ from ruins because of how they are situated in space and time. Unlike ruins, the abandoned place is not as divorced from current sociopolitical tensions related to, and connected with, the everyday. Rooted in matters of spatiality and temporality, this inquiry provokes spatio-temporal encounters; sensational and emotional responses that are affective in character. As such, Heidegger’s theory of the ‘nothing,’ Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, and Arendt’s notion of appearance were all important to this endeavor because they provoked various encounters with the ‘no-thing’ (Heidegger, 2010). As such, I have come to realize that the ‘thingness’ of the abandoned school resides in the effects and the affects of material excess and in the forms of otherness that the abandoned school provokes, which as this exegesis attests, brings forth things that are forgotten, hidden, and invisible as well as the things that are remembered, revealed, and (made) visible. In the process, it challenged ideas and assumptions that I had about art, research, and pedagogy. In the words of O’Sullivan (2006) it produced “a new way of looking at the world and of positioning my own practices within that world” (p. 2).

My photographic practice, guided by a counter-photo-journalistic approach, remained devoted to capturing the aftermath of events through lost object(s) and the absence of the human
Interpreting my photographs, however, demands a performance, demonstrating how absence hinges on viewers to think, fantasize, and assemble what cannot be seen into a polyvocal or rather multivocal way of seeing. The viewing experience asks that we not only pay attention to the past, but that we direct our curiosity and imagination to the people excluded from the photographic frame, thereby asking that we think (critically) about the future.

The situational provocation in which a community that had experienced the closure of their school witnessed an event in which art took over the decommissioned site, bringing something new into existence. By “recontextualizing” the familiar (and even the mundane) so that aspects of the world could take on a new significance (Eisner, 1995, p. 2), it heightened awareness of previously unseen qualities of the closed school in order to help me to notice what I had not seen. Generating multiple perspectives, the installation disrupted the dominant, static, privileged, and authoritative narrative of school closure by creating a more open-ended and evocative way of dealing with the representation of history and with the neoliberal regime that is affecting communities.

*In/Visibility of the Abandoned School: Beyond Representations of School Closure* operates beyond representation because it produces an encounter—a rupture that “obliges us to think otherwise” (O’Sullivan, 2006, p. 1). This rupture is the imaginative ‘substance’ that gets created and re-created through the plurality of emotions, memories, thought, affect, sensation, and movement that are projected onto the abandoned school in the advent of its closure. It becomes something that is neither inside nor outside of the abandoned school, but something that exceeds, multiplies, and moves beyond the abandoned school through its very potential.
bare, barren, cleared, drained, emptied, free
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