

Desire Lines as Artographic Crafting: Learning-With Wildlife in Rural Canadian Landscapes



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1 Introduction

Our positionality between the animal, and the human animal, is intended to embrace how we are always co-mingling and co-habiting with multiple species. Much like Haraway suggests, our inquiry is guided with reciprocity in an effort to cultivate mindfulness that opens our conversation to how “companion species are ordinary beings-in-encounter” in our situated locations (2016, p. 13). This positionality is important to our artographic disposition that embraces commitments to learning, creating, and becoming that defy particular research methods in favour of continuous inquiry, ever open to emergence in coming to know our relations differently. In this way, we embrace crafting in form and content. We actively make objects (form), such as our visual expressions in relation to desire lines, as well as artfully recount stories of our process (content). As a pedagogic prompt, crafting together with deer and squirrels suggests a transference of knowing between, with recognition of ingenuity and of abilities that require connectivity and respect inherent in the exchange, suggesting a form of scholarship occurs as we learn together.

In tandem with wildlife, we act as custodians of the geo-spaces we occupy in this time and place, and it is with respect and embrace that we are co-evolving in the moment of the encounter to render heterogeneous assemblages. In this way, our conversation is immersed in thirdness, where we deliberately set out to perceive things differently through living inquiry practices: observing, caring, conversing,

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and documenting our materiality, technology, and organic and geophysical systems (Irwin, 2013; Triggs & Irwin, 2019).

We are further guided by Massumi's (2014) thesis in this inquiry, and while he asks what animals can teach us about politics, our proposition focuses on what animals already teach us about pedagogy, and why such questions matter in arts research (see also Fredriksen, 2019). Like Massumi (2014), we regard humans as animals, and explore the artful role of play, empathy, relationality, connectivity and creativity in our encounters. We consider again how and why we sense a proximity to, and distance from, our animal and human animal encounters, or what Massumi refers to as a continuum of differences in the process that takes into account affect theory, aesthetics and related conceptual potentials (2014, pp. 2–3). We extend this framework to becoming-contemplative, much as Zourabichvili (2012) suggests. We consider more fully the politics of educational inquiry, in particular the qualitative character of terms like sympathy, creativity, and perhaps most importantly in this conversation, play, as part of our thought experiment (see also Massumi, 2014, p. 3). Like Massumi, we are conscious of the close proximity such terms hold in the "accusation of anthropomorphism" (2014, p. 2). We remain heedful of the anthropomorphic, and take up this inquiry "(...) with the goal of envisioning a different politics, one that is not a human politics of the animal, but an integrally animal politics, freed from the traditional paradigms (...)" (Massumi, 2014, p. 2) which guides the artfulness that is our intended thought experiment in this chapter. In response, our animations are much like the rendering of artographic excess, as an excess of energy or spirit, where to venture along desire lines with intensity is an effort to disrupt educational discourse in speculative ways.

Ramsden (2017, p. 74) invokes 'desire lines,' an urban planning term, to denote paths created by animals and humans that diverge from concrete or paved roads and serve as the shortest and/or most easily navigated route between an origin and destination. Desire lines are also known as social trails, or colloquially, as a cow path or goat track, where the width and erosion of desire lines can be indicators of how much traffic a path receives. With animal and human animal connectedness at the fore, we explore our relationality as the desire lines that we encounter shape our ecological systems in ways that embrace mutual intra-dependence with other species. These other species are transforming natural materials as a crafting process, much as we continue to strive to characterise experiences with materiality in ways that bring more response-ability to art education (see also Haraway, 2016). Given that we have both lived much of our lives in close contact with nature, such habits of mind and body are not romanticised efforts to forge an alignment, but rather a commitment to ethical and sustained practices of learning-with, and sensorial forms of mattering with multispecies (Haraway, 2016).

2 Artographic Potentialities: Mapping Desire Lines

Inspired by our current encounters with nature, and our past engagements with improvisation (Sinner, 2017) and slow scholarship (Lasczik Cutcher & Irwin, 2017), we enter our artographic inquiry to “consider the conditions for language” differently (Massumi, 2014, p. 8). In part, we are seeking movements beyond the paradox of the limitations of language, to transcend the conditions that make for anthropocentric boundaries rather than continuums of difference. In earlier, historical approaches, artography has been rendered as a/r/tography with slashes to denote artist/researcher/teacher (see Springgay et al., 2005). The different typographic styles of the words artography and a/r/tography are not only a matter of writing, but also convey different meanings (LeBlanc & Irwin, 2019), including a/r/tographic propositions with walking (see Lee et al., 2019) and being-with (Irwin, 2013), among various perspectives. One abiding premise has been that it should not be stabilized, but rather seen as a living inquiry (Irwin et al., 2018). Artography is open to change and reconceptualization as theory influences how it may be pursued. For instance, over time, several scholars have experimented with adding identities, such as the notion of the artographer being a curator of sorts (e.g. McCartney, 2016). Indeed, Gouzouasis (2013) resisted the forward slashes (it is most often cited as a/r/tography) in an effort to create what he felt was a more holistic orientation. Having explored the inclusion of the slash to articulate a third space in-between identity constructs of artist, researcher, teacher with accompanying commitments to artmaking, inquiring, and learning (see Irwin, 2013; Springgay et al., 2005), and the dash as a conjunctive between these constructs (see Sinner, 2008, 2021), in this conversation, we initiate the potential of another distinction within the artographic opus. For this study, we are sensitive to the need to focus on the fluidity of concepts between and among the animal and human animal, and as a result, like Gouzouasis, we prefer to resist the forward slashes that tend to denote identities and human activities. After all, it is in our openness to the in-between spaces of all of our relations, that an artographic disposition (Leggo & Irwin, 2013) opens to the in-between ‘and’ spaces Ted Aoki refers to as vibrating between and among concepts permeating our relations (see Pinar & Irwin, 2004). We become alert to that which may have not been noticed before: the sensorial, the perceptual, the conceptual. The fluid potential of these in-between or middling spaces is abundant with possibility for rethinking our relations. In so doing, we continue to embrace the fullness of living inquiry through slow scholarship and contemplative dispositions (Lasczik Cutcher & Irwin, 2017) and invite other authors to think about how they would position their work within the overall idea of artography.

This approach brings sensorial possibilities to the fore, and presents another mode of crafting with neither the slash nor the dash, but the in-between spaces, or what Massumi refers to as the *included middle*, a space where differences come actively together and does not “observe the sanctity of the separation of categories, nor respect the rigid segregation of arenas of activity” (Massumi, 2014, p. 6). The vitality of such sensorial attunement with artography offers a productive portal for engaging in the

potential of nature and to articulate a creative commons with desire lines. At the same time it is possible to embrace principles of participatory bodies in movement, and learning in relation to the land, as the cultivation of ethical choices in research. Sensing each other's presence, as both animals and human animals, and sharing in desire lines criss-crossing our everyday moments, as artographers, we are noting, walking, anticipating, listening and keeping stillness as a necessary condition for blurring the borders between us and the other.

3 Deer Trails

In becoming-contemplative, I (Anita) turned to learning-with deer. During the pandemic of 2020, I remained deep in the rainforest of the far west coast of southern Vancouver Island where I reside in the off-season of the academic year. Formed from an island arc, the area is geologically distinct: the shoreline holds fragments of the ocean crust that remain from subduction. The inland is noted for mineral concentrations like quartz and copper that are layered with unique micro-environments of rich biodiversity, often described in lay-terms as a place with 'an unusual feel' (see also Yorath & Nasmith, 1995).

With a resident, multigenerational family of black-tailed deer led by an alpha doe, I map desire lines shaped by difference in repetition (see also Deleuze, 1994). In the radius of this inquiry, deer orient the landscape by adapting animal-human animal presence in eco-zones of forest, field and sea that trace plants, predators, water, berries and trees as a form of materiality in action. Within this fold, we as artographers may enter with a sense of pedagogies of care-full observation, in a protracted quest to learn outside of the regulated curriculum (Somerville & Bodkin, 2016, pp. 75–76). With extended exposure to the daily patterns of deer, in this experiment I follow their pathways, guided by Haraway's (2016) 'tentacular thinking,' in an effort to cultivate response-ability and re-orient my understandings of the land in accordance with their movements. By mapping our bodies in relation to networks, where our trajectories, patterns and lines are lived and form as stories of matter and mattering, and as a "practice of caring and thinking" (Haraway, 2016, p. 37), I venture at times when I do not interrupt their purpose during the early mornings and early evenings while they are grazing, sleeping, and socialising. Nor do I want to draw near, particularly during mating season. If they are suddenly absent, I elect not to walk, for absence is a good indicator of bears and cougars, and like the deer I am alert to potential encounters. For the most part, we—deer and I—walk frequently with the rhythm of seasonal vegetation, and seldom so in winter.

Mapping deer trails requires approximately an hour to wander, stop, consider, meditate, assess, make note and form constellations of crafting a routine that is systematic and repeating twice daily. Across the roadway, under the big leaf maple, to the fence along the perimeter, through the forest, around the bluff, scaling the steep rock to the tall grasses, resting for a time, then embarking down the roadway to the patio, down the stairs to the freshwater pond for a long drink—where I often

linger too—across the field to the bank, down to the seashore to explore, back up to the field—all the while grazing—returning up the far set of stairs, along the side of the house, to the forest once more. With minor variations, the repetition of this circular route ensures members of the small herd (from a couple to eight or more walking together) can canvas the new growth consistently and with precision. Yet it is in their repetitions that differences emerge. Their route is evidenced in the hoof marks and clusters of droppings along the way that help redistribute berries and seeds for the coming year, as well as map the continual intra-action of many more plants and animal species partaking in their desire lines. And notably, their desire lines incorporate human desire-lines as deer take formal pathways to access gardens and expedite movements, suggesting the deer are becoming something else also (see also Deleuze & Guattari, 2005).

3.1 Embodied Documentations

My efforts are not to imitate deer, but to play with spatial thresholds of proximity that inform how and why such sensorial vibrations inform thinking-with. To do so, it requires a re-visioning of the documenting technology, and to be methodologically consistent with the logic of thought. I shift between the eye view and a single-reflex camera that inscribes images with the work of a mirror, to digital video that I think of as allowing a kind of body-in-relation to the viewed perspective, or put another way, “a tool that invents” (Massumi, 2014, p. 63). Renderings are then made with improvisational gestures when attaching a go-pro to the head, arm, leg or foot. Reviewing hours of visual data within this archive of practice attends to encounters with my senses (which unlike deer I cannot always readily detect) of touch, sound, smell, and taste, as well as seeing. From the video, I distilled a triptych to map deer trails in the ecozones of the forest, field and sea, with unexpected perspectives emerging in this series from my forearm (see Fig. 1).

Embracing uncertainty as a photographer, with a sensation of the body passing through, the blurriness and messiness of micro-moments, when enfleshing with salal,



Fig. 1 Ecozones, October 2020 (video stills by Anita Sinner)

enmeshing with variegated grass, and entangling with seagrass. Each zone independently and collectively invigorates how deer are continually bio-crafting, socio-foraging, and politically enacting sustainability for the well-being of this landscape. It is from this understanding that flexible and responsive processes become a form of geostorying (Haraway, 2016), and my wayfinding brings new constructs to the fore in changing seasons, light, climate and more, along desire lines that have no beginnings or ends, and no conclusions (see also Clarke, 2017).

This triptych serves as “a changing field of reciprocally presupposing differencings” (Massumi, 2014, p. 3) that activate mutual inclusion as we “enter into a zone of indiscernibility,” (Massumi, 2014, p. 6) where deer-human relations intensify the scene by co-mingling, co-evolving, co-creating in respective movements. Massumi (2014, p. 12) suggests that such play is “a veritable laboratory of forms of live action” where learning serves adaptive ends. As I continue to unpack mine and the deer’s sensorial encounters, I come to wonder: Is co-habitation a form of trust?

We are careful in our actions with species, always aware that we are moving beyond typical subject boundaries to propose another way of enacting our educational prerogative with desire lines. In this way, desire lines are akin to assemblages, continuously mingling, active and transversal, a configuring of meshwork that weaves trails with the nuance and textures of geographies of self-in-relation. For Deleuze and Guattari (1994), such becoming is always double, where we overlap with another.

How might we reconsider our everyday assumptions that shape intra-actions as mutually inclusive? And, might there be a pedagogy of possibilities emerging in response to our changing ecological modes of becoming-with?

4 Squirrel Routes

The 2020 pandemic created many changes and for me (Rita) that included an unanticipated four month stay on a family farm on the northern Canadian prairie. Far from my urban home, the region was safe from the virus and opened up unexpected opportunities for learning-with domestic and wild animals. In particular, the activities and desire-lines of a single squirrel became daily delights not only for the squirrel but also for me who became enthralled with his performative engagement in the treed landscape. Emerging from bushes after carefully surveying the field, he would dart across the grass to a particular tree and check again. Standing upright and intent on seeing and hearing his field of vision, he would decide his next move. Often darting to the next tree and surveying again, he would trace and retrace his desire lines up and down particular trees, and between them. Yet the route that mesmerized me the most was the one taken in the canopy of tree branches as he ran across them, jumping from branch to branch, with hardly any notice. Following these desire lines, dozens of times a day, became a great curiosity for me. I soon began leaving him peanuts at particular locations along his route and took delight in watching him find them. After some time, I was surprised to find a gift left for me at one of my peanut leaving locations. I instantly recognized it as a gift from the squirrel because it was exactly

where I left a peanut. It was made of natural materials matted together. What did this mean? Was it in appreciation for my gifts left for him or was it an exchange for even more? Or, was it something else? Over the next month or so, I received four such gifts about a week apart. They were always matted materials and never quite the same as the last. I was tempted to retrieve them as aesthetic objects but chose to leave them and eventually he recovered them. Yet, I felt their value as gestures of our relationship, and from a human-centric focus, as gifts.

These nest making materials are vibrantly material (Bennett, 2010) as part of an intraspecies reciprocity. From this perspective, these matted materials are at once alien and common, making them too far and too close to be clearly seen and understood. In acknowledgement and regard for the thing itself, there is also fear of the unknown materiality of the thing. As I began to dwell with the ontological storying of these matted materials, I began to recognize the ecological intensity of the living assemblage of connections around me. Were these discarded items or objects to be appreciate? Were these things to notice or things to ignore? To me, they held a thing-power because they provoked my attention and they commanded my engagement beyond them as things, to something more than things. After all, these matted materials were not only things to be noticed, they were things delivered through desire lines traversed over and over again by a squirrel. The desire lines also held thing-power. Both the matted materials and the desire lines commanded my attention and drew me in to think about the agential nature of every thing, every matter. As I began to appreciate this assemblage of matter, I recognized the rocks where I placed the peanuts, at one time chosen for their size and beauty, but now recognized as stops along desire lines. I recognized the larger ecology of the farm itself. Admittedly there were times I also followed the desire lines of cattle, even deer and moose, and those made by family members. Yet it was the squirrel who caused me to think again and again about my relationship with nature, the non-human, and the ecology of matter (Fig. 2).

Becoming-contemplative within an artographic disposition (Lee et al., 2019) I realized my photographic practice offered opportunities for me to imagine an inter-species ethics. While there is an immediacy within thing-power to notice the thing in a particular time and place, the artist and pedagog in me wants to think again



Fig. 2 Vibrant materials, October 2020 (photographs by Rita L. Irwin)

and again on these moments. Photographs return me to those moments and provoke me once again, often with similar intensity. Through images, my commitment to making, inquiring, and learning (Triggs & Irwin, 2019) between and among animal and human animal bodies and the desire lines became evocations for co-creating and co-learning with wildlife (Massumi, 2014). As I review these images I wonder: Does the squirrel recognize our shared desire lines as shared reciprocity? How might we co-create materials shared among human animals and non-human animals? How might I change my educational practices to embrace the ethical and political dimensions (see Lindgren & Öhman, 2018) as we imagine alternative pedagogical approaches to animal and human-animal relationships in a variety of curricular settings? Perhaps more importantly, how does my new attentiveness to the natural world inspire me to be more critical of my daily actions and the potential harm they may engender? The squirrel is a wild animal that co-exists with me and others on the farm. I am enthralled with what we were able to craft together, in relationship, yet I need to respect his needs as I respect my own. Adopting a position of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions will need to continue.

5 Desire Lines: Initiating Propositions for Sensorial Artography

We locate our inquiries in the contours of our artographic conditions, in relation with animals *and* notions of differences, the production of differences, and evermore variations that activate differences in the moment of the encounters (see also Massumi, 2014). Our response-ability focuses on learning how to engage with species (Weisberg, 2014) as an enactment of presence and absence where we continuously attend to sensorial knowledge by posing experimental ‘what-if’ questions, for as Haraway (2019) suggests, it matters what stories tell stories.

Learning-with animal and human-animal bodies offers speculative possibilities upon a spectrum of thirdness, and we are actively engaged in the porous conditions of emerging ecologies of sensible practice. In so doing, we strive towards *en*-crafting all our relations (Massumi, 2014; Todd et al., 2016). In coming to be (en-), we are making, doing and thinking as an activation—our crafting together. Perhaps in play we nurture new habits of projecting alternate pedagogic imaginaries, where we seek ways to dislocate and disrupt what we know and the educational contexts within which we know, to create a more speculative, contingent and immersive condition where not knowing is intentional, always reformulating understandings in the moment. In this case, we embark on ‘world-making’ with bodies, materialities, differences, intensities, and excess, in contact zones that draw out aesthetic forms of engagement with politics, ethics, environments, technologies and more. By questioning the human and moving to an animal and human animal relation, our desire lines reveal how and why our attachment to sites contributes to the worlds we make.

Such world-making is formed by attentiveness and responsiveness, where our differences are enmeshed with multi-species. By engaging in the conditions that surround us during such spatiotemporal production, our purpose is to open the concept-creation of desire lines as propositions for caring, responding, and envisioning possibilities together (Haraway, 2016).

The emergence of sensorial artography is a catalyst for such creative ecologies, where materialising moments are co-constituted acts and actions with our multi-species kin, as Haraway (2016) advocates. Perhaps in turn our art education classroom of tomorrow moves beyond institutional walls and becomes a site of possibility spaces, an artographic inscribing with geo-stories as ways of proceeding, where materials prioritize ecological renewability as the goal of the curriculum, rather than emphasizing mastery of techniques and mediums. Perhaps a visioning with the abilities of natural systems, where desire lines are pathways to another (speculative) configuration is a worthy deliberation. This is in part our pedagogic imaginings with desire lines, yet to be mapped. As art educators, we continue to cultivate such relationality with a disposition of artisans, and we continue to practice our crafting together.

The vitality of art and education, and the contingencies of situatedness suggest that the resilience of artography resides with living inquiry—our reciprocating energies in action—in becoming-with the environment. The fluidity of our artographic inquiry remains ongoing, unfinished, and ethically so, for as art educators our curiosity with desire lines is premised on how such encounters with materiality remake rural landscapes. Continual processes of reshaping and recrafting conditions of learning-with our networks of relations can transcend traditional pedagogic boundaries to embrace more-than-humanness as a situated and transformative affect and an intimate gesture with materiality. In artographic excess, our text and texturing of creative relations serves a wider methodological assemblage, and an aesthetic embrace of animal and human-animal practices. In desire lines we share with, and synthesize different bodies of knowing, sensing and living our entanglements in the world. Artography enfolds such practices with sustainability, and in turn, evokes more expansive dispositions of crafting-with the environment.

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