

**Title: In/Visibility of the Abandoned School: Intervention as Innovation in Arts-Based Educational Research**

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**Abstract:**

Intervention artwork is a re-territorialization of space that draws participants' attention to the cracks, openings, and cavities in society; the economy; academia; or spaces locked by legal disputes in which flows of capital or information are closed off and made inaccessible to the public (Deutsche, 1992; Doherty, 2009; Kester, 2004; Miwon Kwon, 2000; Pinder, 2005, 2008; Smith 2010; Suderburg, 2000). Intervention art emphasizes the inter-subjectivity; the encounter; and the 'being-together' of an experience that occurs because of art (Bishop, 2006; Bourriaud, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2006; Thompson, 2012). This presentation will discuss recent and on-going doctoral research in which photography is used to create a situational provocation generating political, social, economic, and technological investigations into an abandoned school. Images projected onto the building will make historical information physically present; creating a space for signification and presenting the community with an opportunity for re-imagining relationships between space, time, place, and memory.

## **Título: In/Visibilidad de la Escuela Abandonada: La intervención como innovación en la Investigación Basada en las Artes**

Resumen:

La intervención artística es una re-territorialización del espacio que llama la atención de los participantes a las grietas, aperturas y cavidades en la sociedad: la economía, el mundo académico o los espacios cerrados por las disputas legales en los cuales los flujos de capital o de información están cerrados y se hacen inaccesibles al público (Deutsche, 1992; Doherty, 2009; Kester, 2004; Miwon Kwon, 2000; Pinder, 2005, 2008; Smith 2010; Suderburg, 2000). La intervención artística enfatiza la intersubjetividad, el encuentro y el “ser-juntos” de una experiencia que tiene lugar en lo artístico (Bishop, 2006; Bourriaud, 2002; O’Sullivan, 2006; Thompson, 2012). Esta presentación explorará la investigación doctoral en curso en la cual la fotografía es utilizada para crear una provocación situacional generando investigaciones políticas, sociales, económicas y tecnológicas en el sí de una escuela abandonada. Las imágenes proyectadas sobre el edificio, harán físicamente presente la información histórica, creando así un espacio para la significación y ofreciendo a la comunidad una oportunidad para re-imaginar las relaciones entre el espacio, el lugar, el tiempo y la memoria.

## **Introduction**

In British Columbia (Canada), school closure has become a political, social, and cultural hot topic. Between 2002-2014, over 200 public schools have closed and over 27,000 students have been displaced due to closure. According to the British Columbia's Teacher's 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 coming years."<sup>1</sup> This paper discusses an on-going doctoral research project in which I am studying school closure through photography. This visual essay will explore how my practice as a photographer has led to the design of an artistic intervention. It will also discuss how an artistic intervention can become a generative pedagogical event that can work to create an archive - a narrative representative of a collective memory.

## **Art Practice as Inquiry**

Graeme Sullivan (2010) proposes that we look at research practices conceptualized and explored by artists because 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 "site for raising theoretically profound questions" (p. 119) and for exploring "important cultural and educational ideas" (p. 95). O Donoghue (2009), in taking a critical stance to what Sullivan (2005; 2010) coins is "art practice as research," draws on

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from the BCTF School Closure Database: <https://www.bctf.ca/SchoolClosures.aspx>



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 why and how art can be conceptualized as a form of inquiry (p. 355). Foremost, is the curiosity that is 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). As a form of inquiry, it opens up a space for the artist, and for the viewer to think, while generating more questions about its interpretation. For my research, I am proposing to utilize the three areas listed by O Donoghue (2009) in order to examine how and why my artistic practice can become a form of inquiry. Therefore: 1) The production of the work, 2) The work, and 3) The interpretation of the work will be important parts of the study.

### **The Production of the Work: Photography as Provocation**

The production of the artwork makes reference to my practice as a photographer dedicated to documenting abandoned schools in various communities in Canada. Over the last four years, my photography has centered on schools that have been closed and are left waiting to be unloaded by the school board, community, or government that bears the burden of owning them during their time in transition. I am most drawn to the schools that are deteriorating due to neglect, weather, and other natural forces, such as erosion, corrosion, or disintegration. My

process of working is similar to an urban explorer searching out the landscape for derelict buildings in order to experience them, commemorate them, and memorialize them before they are torn down and forgotten forever. My practice is informed by contemporary art photographers such as Sophie Ristelhueber and Willie Doherty who are working in a “counter-photojournalistic approach,” also known as “aftermath photography” (Cotton, 2009, p. 9; 167-168). Artists working in this method travel to sites of war, social or ecological disasters after they have been annihilated in order to document the “literal scarification of the place” but also to “present allegories of the consequences of political and human upheaval” (Cotton, 2009, p. 9). Likewise, I am influenced by the discourses of de-industrialization and what Dylan Trigg (2006) refers to as the aesthetics of decay. In many cities in the world today, urban explorers are drawn to areas that are deemed “off-limits” (High & Lewis, 2007, p. 42) - to abandoned buildings, factories and



facilities; rooftops, tunnels, drains. Documenting economic crises, gentrification and deindustrialization, they are producing portraits of mines, mills, and factories as they sit boarded up, desolate and falling apart. Places that were once a 'proud' image of "human progress" and "modernity" (High & Lewis, 2007) are depicted as ruins - remnants that have fallen into disrepair - and structures that have endured a withdrawal of investment, attention, and life. Comparable to these places are neglected farms, foreclosed homes, and closed schools - extensions of the direct ramifications of de-industrialization that have just as much (if not more) allure due to personal and individualized significance. The matter that I am drawn to is how these places can direct us toward 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. This interruption has a future directedness - a future that is unseen - but felt. A future that remains





unknown and uncertain. What will happen when these places are demolished? 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 buildings and the people that (used to) inhabit them? (Cowie & al., 2003; High & Lewis, 2007; Mack, 2004; van der Hoorn, 2009)

Along the lines of Ristelhueber and Doherty and the work of many urban explorers, my images of closed schools are situated between two genres of contemporary photographic practices - 1) aftermath documentary and 2) pictorial narratives - also sometimes referred to as “tableaux vivants” - images “loaded” with a narrative (Cotton, 2009, p. 49). The story that is presented however, is in an open-ended manner whereby the meaning is reliant on how the viewer invests in the image - or projects onto the image. In this sense, the viewer is not a passive





spectator, but rather an active participant who has to piece together clues - both found and made - in order to construct the bigger picture. These conceptual photographic practices suggest that an artwork is always 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.



### **Inside/Out: Re-Working the Photographic Archive**

In documenting the exterior and interior of closed schools, I have been creating an archive on school closure. As such, my practice as a photographer shares many similarities with an archival worker. For one thing, it is melancholic and always incomplete; for another, it

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, I have found there to be something missing - something needed in order to attest to its value and to its very existence. Derrida (1995) argues that “there is no archive without a place of consignment, 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. The act of archiving is dependent on the trace, and the trace produces the act of archiving. But for Derrida (1995) the archive is hypomnesic - it is an impaired memory, “one that happens only in consignment in an external place which assures the possibility of reimpression” (Derrida, 1995, p. 11). Therefore, an archive is always a repository of the private and the personal. It is one that requires multiple interpretations and multiple testimonies.

### **The Interpretation of the Work: In/Visibility of the Archive**

Shimon Attie, photographer and historian, utilizes performance and technology 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.” Inspired by taking long walks in the urban environment, Attie found himself contemplating the aura of the place and its absent residents.

Projecting fragments of archival photographs taken by people who were forced into seclusion by the Nazis prior to WWII onto their present and actual location, he states that his work is “a kind of peeling back of the wallpaper of today to reveal the histories buried

underneath.”<sup>2</sup> Visually, he is re-introducing a historical artifact onto the physical landscape and he is re-connecting it to the place in which it shares a past. Although the work produced by Attie is highly provocative, what Attie’s viewers experience remains uncertain. The viewer’s position in relation to the archive is not explored and as such, we are unable to see how personal interpretations and testimonies are able to add to, change, or bring forth more questions as a result of the encounter with the work.



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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.jackshainman.com/artists/shimon-attie/>

My research will comprise of an art installation in which photographs of the interior of the closed school will be enlarged and projected onto its outside walls. The public will not only be invited to come and see the projections, but to take part in the event. A selection of participants will then be interviewed regarding their interpretations of the work. The installation will be a response to the place in which projections of the interior will be used to re/imagine relationships between space, time, place, and memory. The public will be invited to visit the work as a means of exploring the generative possibility of an abandoned school and to engage with the meanings that may be attached to it due to their own personal narrative/lived experience/and/or psychological thought.



As an intervention artwork, it will draw participants' attention to the closed school as an empty, de-commissioned and de-institutionalized place that has not yet legally been re-zoned, re-sold or repurposed. The intervention will emphasize how the closed school - a once public facility - has been closed off and made inaccessible to the community. The reterritorialization of the closed school, in the context of its socio-political state, will ask participants how it has ironically become an anomalous place of learning (Ellsworth, 2005) - how, as a pedagogical force, it can direct us to the notion of what was - is - and can be?

### **Conclusion: The Archival Impulse**

The archive is 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 are meant to 1) draw attention to the architecture of the school as a repository of memories (both individual and collective) that has been locked and boarded up from the community from which it exists, and 2) to provide the viewer with a means to reassert a certain control over the closed school's image and history. The archive is a place where authority "resides" (Joyce, 1999, p. 38). A consideration of the role in which ethics play in understanding the archive as a form of authority requires revealing how it locates political action (Bradley, 1999; Joyce, 1999). Within the archive resides the possibility (however partial) to re-construct, re-store, and re-present stories of the past with our own current and present narratives. The closed-school-as-archive is a product of history, however it also has the potential to re-produce history. Retelling its stories through photography and through an



artistic intervention will not only be an endeavor of writing history - but it will possibly re-write the school's history and re-create its past in new forms.

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