

mesh/work im/possibilities and inbetweening
Brooke Anne Hofsess and Jayne Osgood

Making and Mothering in the Mesh/work as Ecological Possibility

Brooke Anne Hofsess

Every tree is a knot, and the characteristic feature of all knots is that their constitutive threads are joined not end to end but in the middle, with trailing ends that go in search of other threads to bind with. Life is a meshwork.

(Ingold, 2017, p. 35)

In the spirit of meshwork, this visual essay interlaces threads of artistic collaboration that include mother (me) and daughter (Thea), pokeweed and other plants, local light and weather, photographic exposures made with and without a camera, moving from one home to another, old neighborhood and new neighborhood walks, windows, a flashlight, mosses, leaves, bark, fallen petals, dead birds and butterflies, and markmaking. This essay breathes across the span of time that my daughter was three, four, and then five years old. In what follows, “things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements” (Stewart, 2010, p. 1). Trailing ends coalesce here across a series of mesh/works— knots of images chronicling and tangling a smattering of vital, if ordinary, threads. My hope is that these threads, these trailing ends, continue searching for ecological possibilities in the field of art education; specifically, possibilities that are rooted in attention, rather than based upon place (Hofsess, 2021).¹

When Thea was three, we moved to a new home about six miles away. The house we left was located in an area of town known locally as *the escarpment*—a wide swath of rural land routinely locked within pockets of deep, damp fog. Our family’s need for sky led us to traverse the neighborhood nearly every day. We journeyed up the steep slope to the neighboring farm, with its one adorable donkey, dozens

¹ Scholarship related to attention has bloomed many evocative concepts, including *paying attention* (Kimmerer, 2013), *the arts of attentiveness* (van Dooren et al., 2016), *arts of noticing* (Tsing, 2015), *an art of iterative attention* (Tsing et al., 2020), *attuning ourselves. . . to pay attention to other times* (Davis & Turpin, 2015), and *the arts of witness* (Rose & van Dooren, 2017).

of cows and calves, views of sunrise and sunset, buzzing electric fences, and tire treads stamped into hardening mud and hay.

As our moving day approached, Thea expressed her devastation at leaving behind a specific pokeweed bush. No longer would we pause and marvel at the striking, hot pink stalks and clusters of purple-black berries as the culminating destination of our daily jaunt. Her heartache sparked the making of photographs with this special bush using what we typically had with us on the walk—my iPhone camera.

After we moved, the ways she sought connections with other plant bodies in her new neighborhood began to overlap with her curiosity about my creative practices in alternative photography, specifically making lumens and cyanotypes. From there, Thea imagined and lived out a suite of interlaced practices: composing plant matter on photographic paper and other surfaces like the sun-bleached wood deck, framing drawing paper with tape on light-filled windows (reminiscent of a printing frame), interacting with found light sources including a small flashlight while markmaking, traversing in search of pokeweed, wondering what plants were doing under thick swaths of snow, and performing a “Pink-a-Bloom Festival” in our gravel driveway in celebration of a deliciously fragrant viburnum shrub.

The concept of meshwork invites me to imagine a “(p)roliferation of little worlds” (Stewart, 2010, p. 2)—the snag in my knitted sweater, mistakes penned over with inky doodles, networks of cells and tissues x-rayed, coils and coils of Thea’s red hair on my pillow when I wake in night, the drama of a Northern Flicker woodpecker crashing into our storm door. I’ve added a stroke of attention to this concept, so it becomes mesh/work. In this stroke, there is a tiny fracture, a pause, a tension—an attentive possibility.

Each of the six mesh/works enclosed brings together a proliferation of atmospheric, ecological attention (Ingold, 2017; Stewart, 2010). My hope in bringing this attention to bear in this essay is to suggest corresponding practices more supple than extracted, isolated conventions of “nature art” or “place-based” perspectives. Namely, the ecological possibilities of attending to the *living curriculum* ((Irwin, Wilson Kind, Grauer, & de Cosson, 2005) invited by mesh/work, which I have come to understand as

enduring compositions experienced, sensed, theorized, improvised, worlded—and attended to—by children and caregivers. These compositions carry wisps of this ethos,

An attention to the matterings, the complex emergent worlds, happening in everyday life. The rhythms of living that are addictive or shifting. The kinds of agency that might or might not add up to something with some kind of intensity or duration. The enigmas and oblique events and background noises that might be barely sensed and yet are compelling. (Stewart, 2010, p. 1)

Further, correspondences bring to bear *in-between-ness*; the *in-between-ness* of bodies (plant, bird, insect, human), weather, homes, processes and practices of inquiry and making. In this way, mesh/works become instances of togetherness, in the way that Ingold (2017) envisioned,

The problem in our relations with the natural world, then, is that we have forgotten how to correspond with the beings and things of which it is comprised. We have been so concerned with the interaction *between* ourselves and others that we have failed to notice how both we and they *go along together* in the current of time. This, surely, is what sustainability means: not the perpetuation of a completed form or stable state but the capacity to keep going, to carry on, or to perdure. If interaction is about othering, then correspondence is about togetherness. It is about the ways along which lives, in their perpetual unfolding or becoming, answer to one another. This shift from interaction to correspondence entails a fundamental reorientation, from the between-ness of beings and things to their *in-between-ness*. (Ingold, 2017, p. 41, emphasis in original)

We—as scholars, caregivers, teachers, artists, and community members—may well find ourselves perpetually stuck if we continue to imagine sustainable and ecological possibilities through the lens of curriculum and pedagogy, no matter how well intentioned. Curriculum (matters of what we teach) and pedagogy (matters of how we teach) are terms deeply encoded by *interaction*, rather than *in-between-ness*.

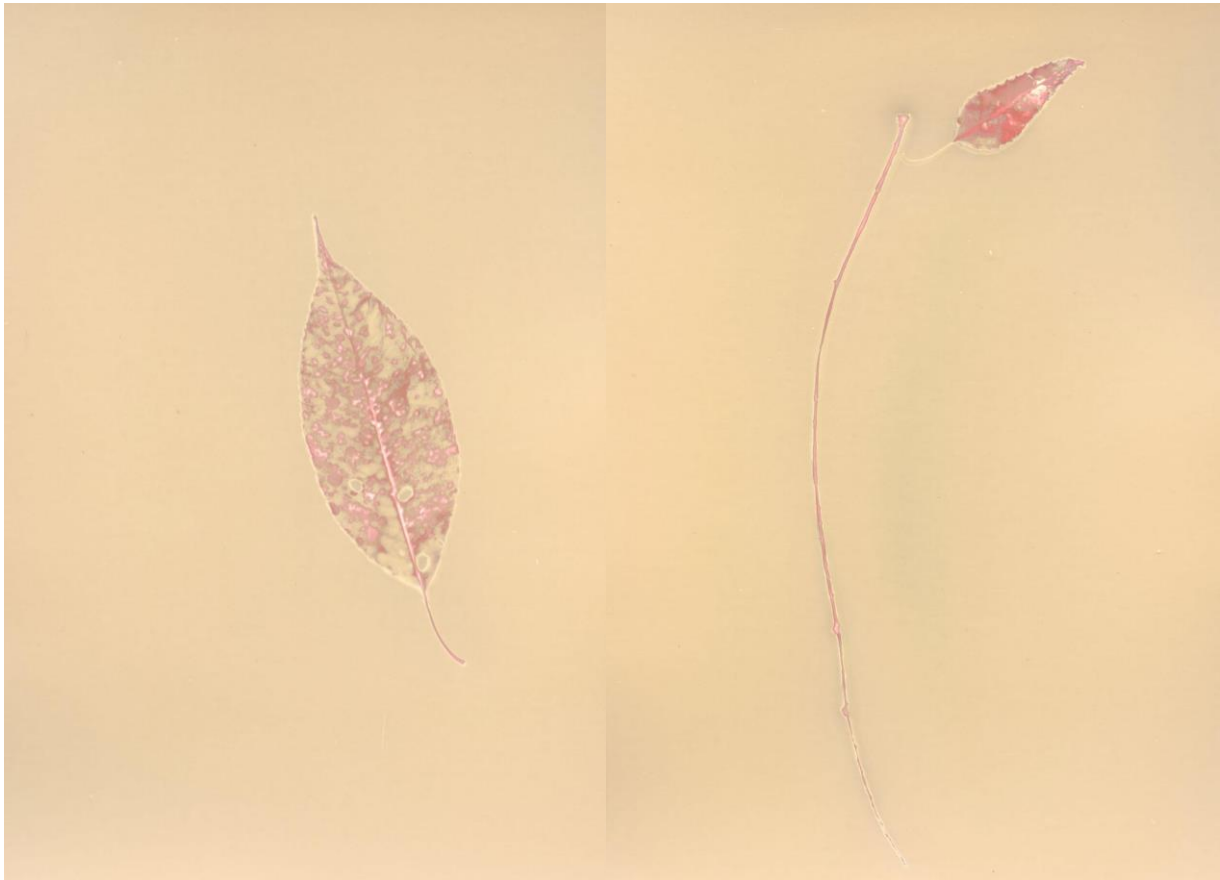
What I find far more generative is renewing a *craftsmanship of attention with the world* (Hofsess, 2021). Therefore I offer these mesh/works, again, as trailing ends seeking other binds, knots, and potentialities—other modes of being and “learning with rather than individual (human) thinking and learning about” (Taylor, 2017, p. 1458). Specifically, what is enclosed here are compelling moments and practices that coalesced in some concrete way through photographic residue. Certainly many other moments and practices were lost to attention in my exhaustion, rushing, overlooking, bias, or simply not having my iPhone nearby. I’ve numbered these mesh/works, six in total, as a nod to their ephemerality

and pliability in life—if not in publication. I invite you to imagine me and Thea singing these numbered knots to you, a playful and ephemeral gesture, an invitation for your attention and your correspondence...

1



2



3



4







This mesh/work is...

Jayne Osgood

Collaboration

Attuning, attending, noticing
Beyond what is present
Sensing non-innocence in worldly connection
Multispecies tensions
Ecological im/possibilities
Human exceptionalism
This mesh/work is transversal and wild

Place

Locked within pockets of deep, damp fog
In search of the sky
Place and history seep into pores
Provoke unanswerable questions
Why is one life worth more?
Donkey, calf, bird and child
This mesh/work is transversal and mean

Child

Curious and wise
Seeking connections to flora and fauna
Actively witnessing
Ecological im/possibilities
In numbered knots
And bodily sinews
This mesh/work is transversal and brave

Curriculum

Instruction and goals
Desirable learning outcomes
Mesh/work is more
Togetherness
Inbetweening
World-making practices
This mesh/work is transversal and more

Sustainability

Capitalist logic
Apocalypse how
Economic development
Linear time
Sustaining what, whom, and why?
Ecological im/possibilities
This mesh/work is transversal and cruel

This Mesh/work is...

A stroke of attention
Unsettling time
Promise of tiny fractures
(Re)awaken capacities to feel
With child-like sensibilities
To grasp ecological im/possibilities
This mesh/work is transversal and free

References

- Davis, H., & Turpin, E. (2015). Art & death: Lives between the fifth assessment & the sixth extinction. In H. Davis & E. Turpin (Eds.), *Art in the anthropocene: Encounters among aesthetics, politics, environments and epistemologies* (pp. 3–29). Open Humanities Press.
- Hofsess, B. A. (2021). Renewing a craftsmanship of attention with the world. *Studies in Art Education*, 62(2), 1–7.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2021.1896266>
- Ingold, Tim. (2017). *Knowing from the inside: Correspondences*. University of Aberdeen.
- Irwin, R., Wilson Kind, S., Grauer, K., de Cosson, A. (2005). Curriculum integration as embodied knowing. In M. Stokrocki (Ed.), *Interdisciplinary art education: Building bridges to connect disciplines and cultures*. Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association.
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed Editions.
- Rose, D. B., & van Dooren, T. (2017). Encountering a more-than-human world: Ethos and the arts of witness. In U. K. Heise, J. Christensen, & M. Niemann (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to the environmental humanities* (pp. 120–128). Routledge.
- Stewart, K. (2011). Atmospheric Attunements. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29(3), 445 - 453.
- Taylor, A. (2017). Beyond stewardship: Common world pedagogies for the Anthropocene. *Environmental Education Research*, 23(10), 1448–1461.
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press.
- Tsing, A. L., Deger, J., Saxena, A. K., & Zhou, F. (Eds.). (2020). *Feral atlas: The more-than-human Anthropocene*. Stanford University Press.
<http://doi.org/10.21627/2020fa>
- van Dooren, T., Kirksey, E., & Münster, U. (2016). Multispecies studies: Cultivating arts of

attentiveness. *Environmental Humanities*, 8(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527695>