

Self-willed Learning: Experiments in Wild Pedagogy

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This work—written and photographic art—consists of a series of ontological experiments that engaged two young participants with experiences in a new landscape, ideas about wildness in that landscape, and ways to represent their experiences and ideas. Taken together, this is also an experiment with self-willed learning, or a kind of wild pedagogy.

The experiments began with a workshop on pinhole photography. I described and demonstrated techniques of this art form, including making pictures and developing them in the field. We then made photographs reflecting the participants' interpretations of wildness while travelling by canoe and on foot. The photographs, artistic expressions of these experiences, have been made with a homemade pinhole camera that has neither a lens nor a viewfinder. Making photographs thus demanded special sensual presence during creation.

The written expression of this work is comprised, in part, of reflections gathered through interviews that asked participants to consider the photographic images and, in some cases, experiences making them. These reflections are conjoined with philosophical analysis of wildness, and the wild learning, experienced in the new landscapes.

The representation of this work is reminiscent of a lyric philosophy (Zwicky, 1992, 2003) that seeks to engage the connoisseur —reader of text and viewer of images—with our experiments. Component pairings are arranged for viewing with text on the left and photographs on the right. Together these pairings invite participants to explore patterned resonances in the world and to probe ontological positioning in spaces beyond what linguistic expression and artistic representation can singularly provide.

The experiments were situated on the Snake River in Canada's Yukon (my home), during July 2010.

Note to Readers

The following pages should be viewed in pairs simultaneously facing the participant. To minimize distractions for the reader, I have used endnotes to identify references. And, all quotations have been placed in italics. An "Afterword" reflects briefly on some theoretical underpinnings of this work.

Frame 1: The Wernecke Mountains

Stephanie is 15. And, determined to make a pinhole picture of camp.

That Wernecke gap really caught me. I loved the mountains, and that small area where we camped, just at the end of it. Those two mountains with the water represent life and the place. The tent in front represents us passing through, and living there and being there.

In a place, attention is in response to particularities: This pair of mountains, this gap, this waterfall, this camp, this tent.

Jan Zwicky says we are pierced: *The **this** strikes into us like a shaft of light.*

A bolt of **thisness**.

A wild education in these Wernecke mountains.

When you're in the place, whether you like it or you absolutely hate it, you have a feeling for that place, says Stephanie, and when you take the pinhole picture, after all the steps, it captures the feeling because you have the bond, after having spent so much time with it.

What did you learn, Stephanie?

Going out and actually doing it and getting the feel of every thing that's around you, and what it means to you, and how it affects you, and everything.



Frame 2: The Unlanguaged World

Andrew's 13. Together we walk ahead, up this valley of limestone cliffs and lemonade poppies.

Well, Andrew, what do you think?

I don't have a word to describe it.

What do you mean?

It's like the flowers, the birds, the animals, the scenery—everything.

His wild understanding of this place just announced itself. A gestalt, a coherent whole, an ecology of connections, intelligible in an unlanguaged world.

Cool winds shiver the poppies, and the idea of framed objectivity.

Legs shiver too, pierced by the chill and the stillness of a 30 second exposure. A pinhole gestalt is always more than a moment in time.



Frame 3: What Cannot Be Said

Andrew, what do you feel when you see the picture we made at the end of that valley?

Wow!

What else? No answer.

He grasps this place in an exclamation of recognition, *the vibrant spoor of what cannot be said.*

The cliff will no longer announce cliffness when reduced to a pile of boulders. And more questions will turn Andrew's wonder to rubble.

With their own loss of this youthful perspective, educators can be awestruck by joy exhibited by students on field trips, freed from the constraints of systematized learning.

It is sometimes enough to just point and show... or wander.



Frame 4: Three Canoes

For Stephanie the three canoes are: *being with the river, paddling, learning about different parts of the river, the pinhole, canoeing, camping, how you have to respect the environment, different things...*

Oh yes, Andrew adds, what I remember about that photo was being tired, and skipping rocks, and having twizzlers.

That's enough questions!

Dennis Lee asks, *How should we test a gestalt when it is simply **shown**? Not by hacking its bounty back into logical form and subjugating it to analytic verification; everything of substance is likely to be leached out in the process.*

Self-willed learning is unaccountable in the language of learning outcomes and measurable achievements.

It just announces itself.
And, that's its joy.



Afterword

The promise of wildness, it seems, is access to a sensuous world, and a way home. Outdoor life may provide a necessarily a part of this access, but it may not be sufficient. What may be required is a more profound disruption of one's ontological positioning (i.e., Jickling, 2009).

The methodological shape of this work is in three parts. The first is art creation in the form of pinhole photographs. The artistic theme explores the "experience of wildness." The second takes the form of qualitative interviews, asking participants to reflect on their experiences visiting landscapes and making photographs. In the third part, qualitative work is placed alongside the artistic creation. Thus, in the final reporting, the research resembles Jan Zwicky's lyric philosophy (1992, 2003). Tensions between the visual and linguistic representations are presented in a way that challenges readers/viewers to consider their own responses to similar landscapes and to explore their own notions of wildness and wild pedagogy.

Pinhole photography is, importantly, more than a historical artefact. In a rapidly digitizing era, it offers another way of experiencing the world. It uses a simple camera with a small hole, instead of a lens, to allow light to reach photosensitive paper, and it employs a photographer who is, in varying degrees, present during the artistic process. The process places sensuous demands on the imagination and, indeed, the participant-artist's whole being. The pinhole photographer literally feels his or her way across the landscape—sensing movements in the vegetation and changing light. He or she must learn to see without staring through a viewfinder. And, this encourages ontological repositioning.

In this spirit, I invite readers to engage in this crucible of linguistic, lyric, and visual tension to consider patterns that resonate, and reveal positions that can connect us sensuously *and* analytically to landscapes that lead us to a home we can inhabit and love. Following Zwicky (2003), again:

One might say: ontological understanding is rooted in the perception of patterned resonance in the world.

Philosophy, practised as a setting of things side by side until the similarity dawns, is a form of ontological appreciation. (p. LEFT 7)

This presentation aspires to create contexts that enable ontological appreciation.

I remain eager to develop the work through a continuation of experiments. Wildness is conceived most often in wilderness, but occurs in urban and human landscapes too. These wild spaces need representation, too.

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Endotes

Frame 1

The pinhole pictures were made collaboratively by Bob Jickling and Stephanie and Andrew Potter. Stephanie and Andrew also answered my questions.

The conversational quotations are by Stephanie Potter.

*The **this** strikes into us....* Jan Zwicky (2002, p. 53, left).

Frame 2

All quotations are by Andrew Potter.

Frame 3

... the vibrant spoor.... Dennis Lee (2010, p. 22).

Frame 4

How should we test a gestalt.... Dennis Lee (2010, p. 37).

References

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