

THE WORK OF ART+
DOCUMENTATION AS
MATERIAL+
ART AS EVENT

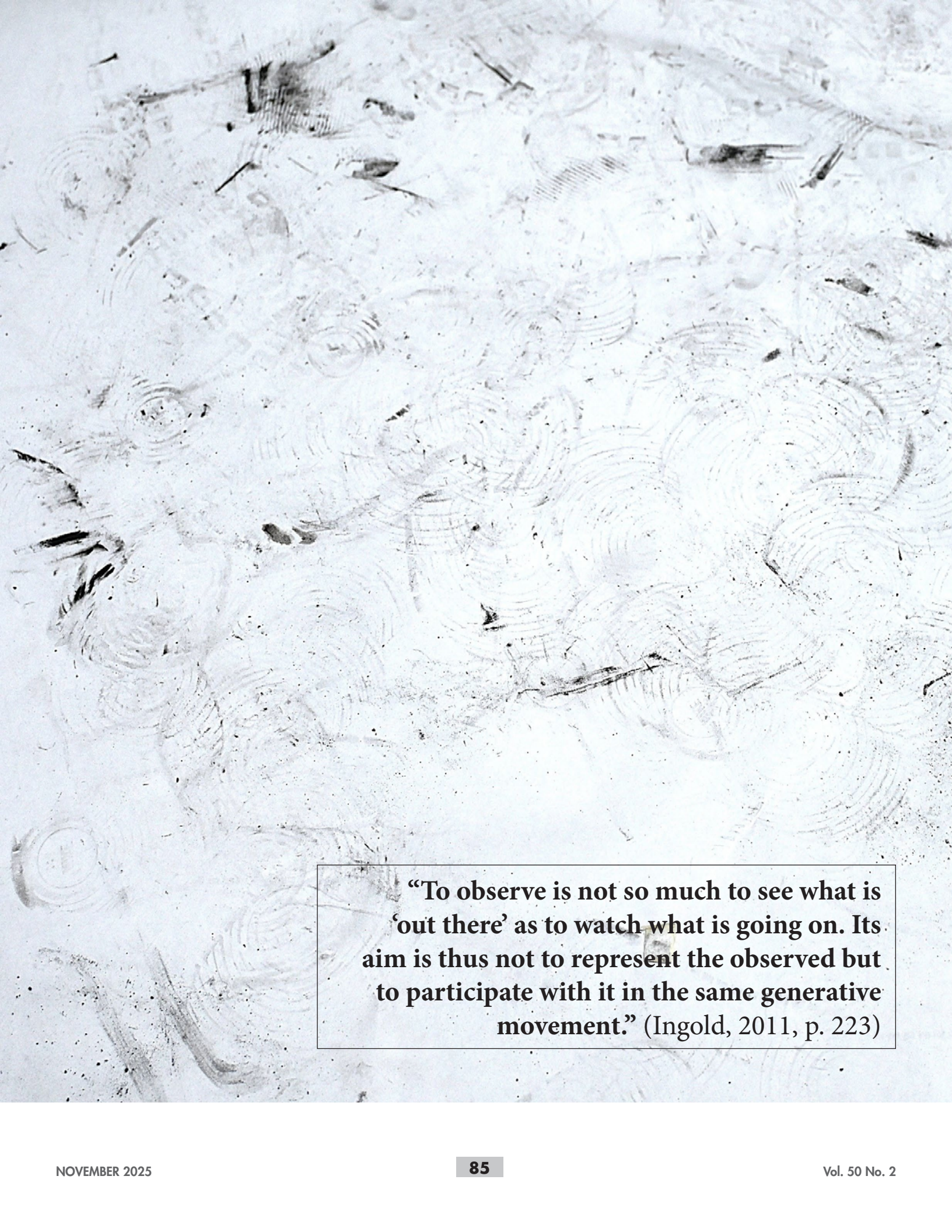
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Abstract: With children aged 2–5, we explored concepts around the ephemeral, temporal, and intangible aspects of artistic encounters and what these things do to us during an inquiry project. We entered into this with curiosity about the ways in which the unplanned and unknown aspects of an artistic encounter might push inquiry forward in unexpected ways that always require some sort of response. Situated the research within a posthumanist perspective, we explored some of the ways art as an event makes possible the ways that art and curriculum can and should be considered co-constructors of inquiry and sense making. A significant part of the project worked to disrupt conventions around documentation or pedagogical narration and to push the researcher (as well as the children and educators) to think of how we might incorporate documentation as a living, moving, active part of the process during artistic encounters and/or inquiry.

Key words: drawing, art as event, pedagogical documentation, traces





“To observe is not so much to see what is ‘out there’ as to watch what is going on. Its aim is thus not to represent the observed but to participate with it in the same generative movement.” (Ingold, 2011, p. 223)

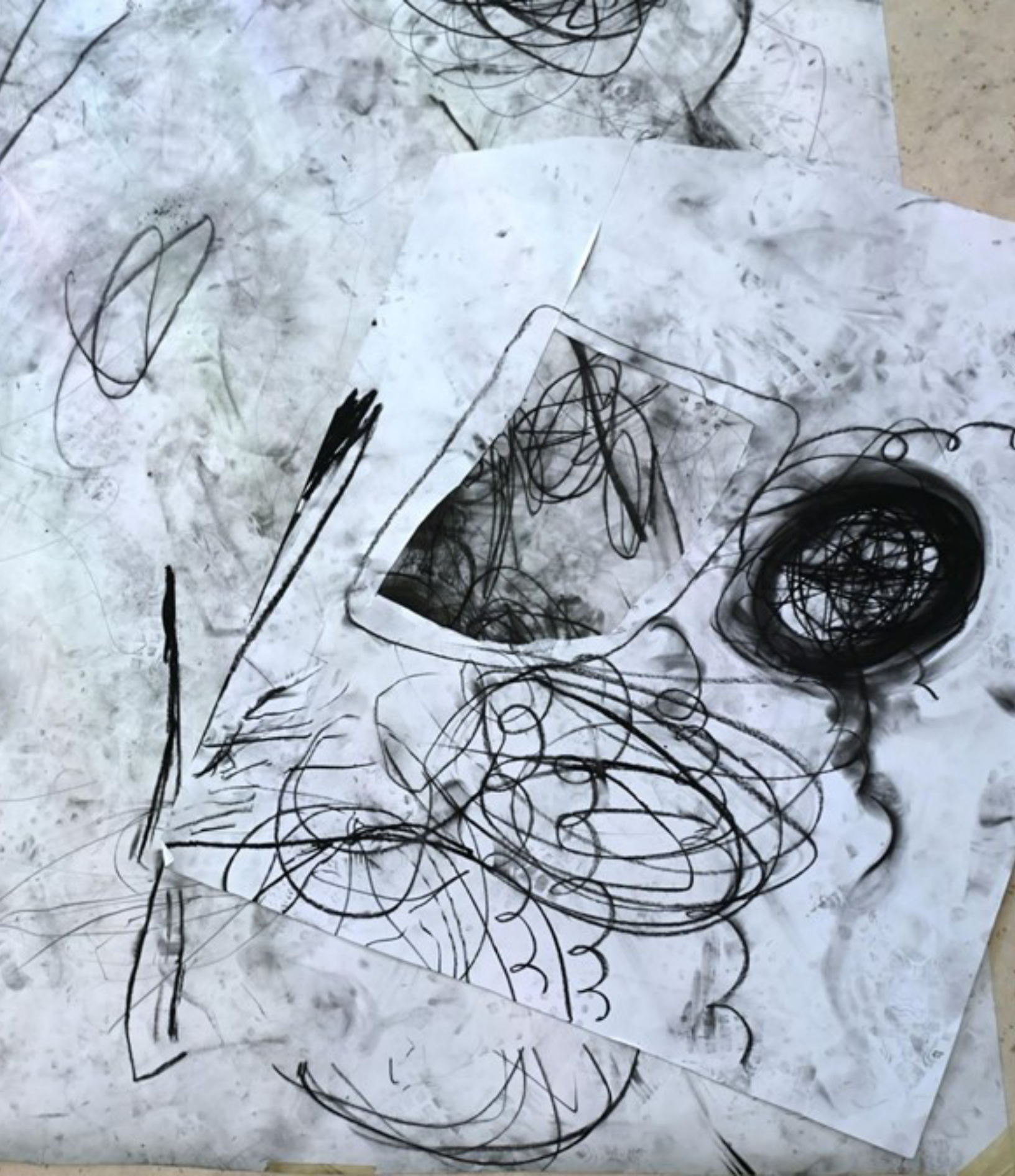
LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This Ideas From Practice article draws on my Capstone research project, Documenting the *Never Entirely Knowable*, which was taken up during my final year at Capilano University as a way of making visible some of the ideas and moments that began to emerge (or disappear) while the children and educators attempted to think together with the work of art and documentation. It provided the time and space for hypotheticals and theories previously understood only within a university classroom to slowly transform into dynamic lived experiences. This collaborative work took place in the Children's Centre at Capilano University, which is located on the unceded lands of the Líl'wat, x̣ẉṃə̣θ̣ḳẉə̣ỵəṃ (Musqueam), shíshálh (Sechelt), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) & Səlil-wətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

+ SITUATING OURSELVES

Situating ourselves within a specific time and space is also an important part of the process when thinking with art as event. Approaching art in this way asks us to fully immerse ourselves within a constellation of relations, being aware of the myriad ways histories, stories, and lived experiences of a time and place may contribute to the artistic processes that unfold within the event. Making sure we understand where and when we are can help us become better attuned to the subtle but important nuances within an event. This act of noticing the smallest shifts in tone, energy, or atmosphere and allowing them to propel us in new ways is what Erin Manning (2016) might describe as working with “the minor gesture” (pp.1-2).

Within this article I am hoping to draw attention to the ways in which we might rethink what art and documentation *do*, to situate ourselves fully within the discomfort of dwelling on the incomplete and agentic aspects of working with traces of documentation. Thinking with documentation as an agentic material within an artistic event asks us questions rather than providing answers. It pushes us to think beyond only what is already known and opens up ways of thinking and being that are perhaps more abstract or diffractive than we are used to engaging with. These diverse ways of thinking about what documentation as a material can do are what I am hoping to explore more fully here.



PARTICIPANTS

This project only exists because of the collaborative work that was taken up by the children and educators in the Capilano Children's Centre. The educators and children in Dogwood welcomed me into their culture and space before I even knew what form this project was going to take. As the project expanded, the educators and children in Oak invited me into their ways of living and being with artistic practices. Even though I did not get to spend much time in the other classrooms, there are many more educators and children within the centre who contributed to this project in some way. This project truly was a collaborative research process that would not have been possible without such active engagement from everyone at the centre.

glow
studio,
paint &
charcoal

- resistance
- qualities of d
- hidden & "se
- symbols



AN INITIAL INVITATION

This project is a story told in pieces, a nonlinear, noncohesive experiment with art, time, and traces of documentation. Due to the nature of this project, it does not necessarily lend itself to a clear, concise, or highly structured explanation. This means the words you're reading and the photos you're seeing may not initially seem to connect with each other. This is somewhat of an intentional choice as I do not want you to feel as though there is only ever one way to make meaning from documentation. When working with documentation as an agentic material, the images are meant to, at least in some ways, stand on their own, to provoke their own wonderings while weaving their way in and out of the accompanying writing. Rather than focusing on exactly what is or isn't happening in each photograph, I am hoping to bring attention to the processes of (re)creation and (un)becoming, drawing on the idea that "nothing makes itself: all ... is made in-relation-with" (Harris & Holman Jones, 2022, p. 525). Ideas, art, materials, documentation, and children all interconnected and affecting one another as traces are made and unmade together. When engaging with this project I encourage you to think about what might be made possible, or impossible, within each of the photos as you're reading. What matters more to me are the questions, not the explanations.

... drum with the drumstick, top, top,
tap on the paper with the paintbrush,
graphite or fingers spreads to paper to
table to bodies to drum. we pause,
Robama says to stop, to notice the marks
making their way onto the drum. She
explains an anipah gave up its life for
this drum. It is made special in the
interaction with wet graphite marks as
they try to rise both without getting
marks on the drum. The messy spreading
nature of the graphite invites us to pause,
to notice, to be aware of how the graphite
and water travel between bodies, paper,
table, drum. Movements meeting each other
and changing the rhythm, inviting us to
rise, disrupting but also creating new
lines and patterns.



THE MATERIAL NATURE OF
THE ELUSIVE AND INTANGIBLE
UNKNOWNNS WITHIN THE
WORK OF ART



INTRODUCTION: BECOMING SITUATED WITHIN A SPACE OF DISRUPTION

To parse out only one or two specific concepts when thinking about art as event seems to be a truly impossible task, mostly due to the ways in which each individual concept seeps over into so many others. However, I will try to make sense of a couple of concepts through the theoretical frameworks of new materialism and posthumanism, which allow for us to think with materials as agentic forces within artistic encounters while also decentering (but not entirely removing) the human from within artistic processes. When we think of art as event, we must consider the many interconnected relations existing between both the human and more than human, being open to the affective nature of what is easily seen and knowable, but also what is intangible and elusive (Ingold, 2013, pp. 22–23). Shifting how we think about *the work of art* allows us to engage differently with materials, documentation, time, the space, and each other.



If we think of documentation as something always in process, as traces and pieces, as memories and layers of time, then how might documentation activate or provoke new ways of thinking and being within an artistic event?

Thinking with the work of art in this way means to think alongside the myriad bits and pieces within a constellation of relations, as a nonlinear and noncohesive experiment that works with traces of documentation as they are being created, an ongoing and active processual *work* of art rather than a finished artwork. Shifting the focus away from what has already been created and onto what is currently in process allows for engaging with ideas that may only exist as ephemeral and elusive moments that can often only truly be taken up and worked with when we think with art and documentation as part of the ongoing movement within an artistic event. This working within the complexities of each unfolding moment encourages us to think differently and to consider how art and documentation are always incomplete and in the midst of things rather than ever fully finished and completely knowable. Thinking alongside art and documentation in these ways means valuing the seemingly insignificant traces, and yet also not valuing those same traces to the point that they become untouchable; we must resist the urge to strive for finality. To work with the work of art is to invite the unsettling and unknowable into our artistic practice, disrupting the comfortable to make space for the potentially impossible.

Situating myself within these theoretical frameworks gives my project the ability to unfold in ways that are as yet unknown and unknowable, making space for the work of art to support the process of meaning making within the artistic event, relying less on what is being done and more on what that process might make possible (Cornwall & Park, 2022, p. 891). In this way of thinking, the work of art supports the material nature of documentation, while the agentic force of the documentation as a material provokes new ways of thinking about art and curriculum inquiry. Despite the way there is always and inevitably a continual, layered, complex, and messy process of “conceptual leaking” (Cornwall & Park, 2022, p. 890) when thinking of art in this way, I will only try and make the most inchoate sort of sense around what it might mean to think with *the work of art*, as well as how documentation might be considered an active and agentic material within the space-time of the *work* of art during an artistic event.



What are traces?

What can traces be?

What can traces do?

paper, charcoal, notes,
challenge, drawing, paint,
marks, smudge, reach,
uncover, hide, stomp, blend,
shout, huge, share, lines,
dance, sing, twirl, run,
graphite, dots, splash, seeds,
stories, ideas, movement,
mess, invite, pens, song,
pencils, meeting, growing,
unknown, time, slow, spin,
layers, mix, pull apart, build,
tear, lights, tape, darkness

How can traces provoke?



THE WORK OF ART + ART AS EVENT [OR, ART AS ALWAYS MOVING INTO & TOWARDS THE UNKNOWN]

To think with the *work* of art requires us to think differently about what we consider art to be, as well as what art might make possible, leaning into art as a process of generating impossible problems, not just products. This idea of art as full of unknowns, or art as processual and becoming, invites us to consider how art is always in motion, more of an active and evolving movement than a fixed or static entity (Kontturi, 2018, pp. 9 & 51). This means we must go beyond thinking of what art will create and instead go along with the process of creating, both following and responding to what might be happening within the artistic event (Kontturi, 2018, p. 10). Thinking of art in this way allows us the opportunity to go beyond perceiving art as only about the creation of a “finished artwork” and to instead consider what the process of the work might open up and make possible, or impossible, where the process of encountering problems becomes a generative focus for the *work* of art (Kontturi, 2018, p. 10). If we are only willing to think of art as what has been created, what is finished, or what is representational of an encounter, then we are cutting ourselves off from accessing new ways of thinking and being within an artistic event (Kontturi, 2018, p. 12).

If the work of art is always in movement, then there is also always the potential for new ideas to come into focus, taking shape as problems worth thinking with, but only if we are willing to exist within the unknowable space-time that is at the heart of an artistic event. In this way engaging with the work of art asks us to consider how we are all always present within complex layers of time, bringing our past-present-future with us into each event, where the complexities of time indicate both a revisiting of the past and a moving towards the as yet undiscovered, both always existing together within the present moment (Manning, 2015, p. 46). Thinking of the work of art in this way pushes us to think beyond materials as being worked with and instead to how those materials affect or provoke a response (Kontturi, 2018, p. 15). Thinking with the work of art in this way seemingly excludes the possibility of ever being truly finished, instead opening up to the way art and documentation are always waiting to be picked up and worked with again and again, revisiting and rethinking what art can do rather than what art is (Kontturi, 2018, p. 10).





OFF THE WALL: REIMAGINING DOCUMENTATION AS AN ACTIVE AND AGENTIC MATERIAL ENCOUNTER

To engage with documentation as part of the work of art means to think of documentation in a material way, as an active and agentic force within the artistic event, resisting ideas of ever being finished or complete and instead considering how traces of documentation are able to generate new ways of thinking and understanding. Engaging with documentation as an agentic material invites different ways of thinking and being, encouraging a thinking *with* rather than a doing *to*, which lends itself to the idea that documentation itself is always in movement, becoming an essential part of the *work* of art (Cornwall & Park, 2022, p. 888; Kontturi, 2018, pp. 7–8). If we are able to think about documentation as always in movement, then we must also consider the intangible and elusive aspects of documentation as well, the sound of a song being slowly sung as it is pieced together word by word, the movement of a paintbrush drenched only in clear water as it moves across paper, or the cacophony of voices that interrupt an intensely focused moment of painting when the jar of water is knocked over onto the floor (Kind, 2023, p. 58).

When we hear the tap-tap-tap of a drum as it follows the tap-tap-tap of a paintbrush on paper, each ephemeral sound and movement, action and response actively contributes to the materiality of documentation as an agentic force, living within the moment of its happening but also living within our bodies and memories, able to be picked up again as we re-turn to past moments and move with them as they become transformed into something different (Murriss & Zhao, 2022, p. 112). If we are willing to work with documentation as an active part of the artistic event, or as part of the *work* of art, then we must resist thinking of documentation as only a finished product that exists up on a wall. This is not to try and argue that all previous understandings of documentation must be discarded but is instead an opportunity to try and consider what documentation might do if only we shift the ways in which we think and engage with these processes.



[THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF] UNDERSTANDING ART CONCEPTUALLY THROUGH THEORY

Attempting to make sense of the work of art and how documentation is an active and agentic material force within the artistic event can only be taken so far before inevitably running into the metaphorical wall of practicality. If art is movement, then art can never truly be understood through the stillness of writing or reading; it is something that must be experienced as being *in media res*, so that we might begin to understand the intricacies and interconnected nature of its many processes. While theoretical concepts are admittedly a necessary part of the meaning-making processes and construction of knowledge, engaging with the work of art asks us to be much more active and present within the event itself. Within each moment we are asked to respond, existing in a space-time where we are both applying the theoretical as well as pushing past it (Ingold, 2013, p. 31). Theoretical concepts about understanding art as event, or of the material nature of documentation, may be able to bring us right to the edge of the unknown, but to fully step into unknowable possibility we must first allow ourselves to become active participants within the elusive space-time of the always moving *work* of art, existing within the past-present-future of being within the middle of an active constellation of relations.





THE PROCESS OF AN INQUIRY
THINKING WITH THE WORK
OF ART: FROM MIDDLE TO
BEGINNING



THE BEGINNING [OR, STARTING IN THE MIDDLE]

In mid November when I first entered the Dogwood room in the Children's Centre, I had little more than a vague but persistent idea that there must be *more* to documentation than what we currently understand as pedagogical narration, that this boundary of containment might become flexible if only we could think of documentation through what Konturri (2018) describes as *the work of art* (p. 54). To write and photograph, to observe and story, these are all doubtless very important aspects of being an early childhood educator engaging with documentation processes. Yet the finality of it all, the goal of reaching an end point and placing it up on the wall, static and unchanging, forever only telling a story of what has already happened, rarely of what might still be possible, seemed to continually be asking what else documentation might be capable of. Challenging this somewhat sedimented understanding of documentation as simply a source of meaning making meant unsettling ideas around what documentation is and also what it might make possible. What might documentation *do* if only we engage with it as an active and agentic material within an artistic encounter? How might artistic events help disrupt the idea that documentation exists primarily as a finished piece of work placed up on a wall? How might we engage with documentation in a way that invites us to lean into the complexities associated with what might be in process, as something that could exist beyond a narration of past events and instead as something that might contribute to the ongoing meaning-making process?





With very little actual idea of what might be possible, I set out to see how educators and children might work together to push documentation into the present tense of the happening right now, not only as a memory of what has already happened, but as an active, ongoing, and ever-changing part of the inquiry and artistic process. These questions about disruption and possibility were quickly taken up by the mostly two-year-old children in Dogwood. Entering into their space, I immediately noticed the ways in which they were already using bits and pieces from the past to story into the present, children and ideas constantly in motion, truly embodying art as movement. These bits and pieces, drawings and notations, memories and stories eventually spilled over into other spaces and classrooms, slowly weaving their way into the fabric of the centre (at one point quite literally weaving and unweaving in Oak). Some ideas and traces would resonate and echo into future events, while others seemed to unravel and come loose from the collective as we all struggled together to think of documentation as part of the *work* of art.



NOTICING WHAT MIGHT BECOME POSSIBLE

Thinking with art as event, the work of art, and what sort of documentation might be created in this context started with pens and notebooks, writing and drawing moments as they were happening. This putting pen to paper as drawings and written notes is an important part of thinking of documentation as moveable and changeable traces. These traces became an important part of sharing ideas between classrooms and a way of connecting time and moments over the months this project took place. Early on we engaged with water-soluble graphite and then later, water-soluble charcoal as well, as dark bold lines seemed to become important to the work that was being created and recreated. Some of the artistic events took place with careful forethought given to the space and materials used, inside or outside, brushes or pencils, small space or large, each variable considered before being included. However, many others unfolded in unexpected and sometimes delightfully chaotic ways, unplanned moments that may have been ignited from a specific coloured pen, a certain page in one of the notebooks, or the possibility presented by stains across the page while eating blueberries together at the snack table. Each of these small moments seemed to build upon each other, some being remembered again and again, some being put aside, possibly to be revisited at a later date but also possibly not. The tangible and yet ephemeral holding of ideas within the notebooks offered a means for traces to travel between children and rooms, pieces being added or ripped out as new ideas were taken up from old, returning to layerings of past/present/future, much like our layers of charcoal on paper, as documentation was made and unmade over and over again.





Both seeing and being seen are important and necessary parts of the documentation process. This is work that must be done in collaboration as a dynamic experience while in the midst of it, not just as a static recording of past events.

*What might become possible when we invite
movement, emotion, and mark making/unmaking
into our documentation practice?*

What if we consider them necessary pieces of the process?

Thinking with the always incomplete nature of these traces pushed us forward into attempting to take seriously documentation as an agentic force within this inquiry. Charcoal and fragments of drawings coming together to evoke storms and songs, while graphite lines join with movement to invite dancing and sounds. As the ephemeral and occasionally intangible traces of documentation became understood as holding potential memories of stories, moments, and movements, the traces became active and interactive, asking us to respond to them in some way as they were drawn on, ripped up, stomped all over, taped together, folded and unfolded, picked up, and sometimes left behind. Each of these encounters brought forth new questions and wonderings, seeking ways of discovering the never entirely knowable, working within what Erin Manning describes as “the art of time” (2015, p. 47) as we co-exist within what has happened and what could happen. We can see this middle space in action as fragments of an idea about paper airplanes became messages delivering secrets while other traces of documentation became instructions for how dinosaurs roar as seeds grow-die-grow again, again, again. The potentialities of these traces and fragments at times seemed infinite and unknowable, wanting to spiral off into a hundred different directions at once, while children and educators both seemed caught in a constant back and forth of chasing after these possibilities while also occasionally putting them down and moving on without them.





Documentation as a way of inviting the undoing, erasing, opening up, taking apart, creating space.



CONCLUSION: OR, ONLY JUST BEGINNING

Having spent a handful of months visiting the Children's Centre and working mostly with the children and educators in Dogwood and Oak, it seems as though this project is only just in the earliest stages of even beginning. If we always only ever start in the middle of things, then it feels as though we also only ever end things in the beginning. While it might seem paradoxical, this layering and fragmentation of time as it is experienced during this sort of inquiry speaks to the ways in which we are always re-turning to our ideas and experiences, layering moments and events with additional meaning as we re-member and revisit them (Murriss & Zhao, 2022, p. 112). If we continue to think diffractively while we engage with the *work* of art, then we open ourselves up to the possibility of what documentation might *do*. Thinking of documentation in this way creates space for different potentialities, for ideas and documentation to travel together amid children, classrooms, and educators as Post-it notes, notebooks, drawings, photos, songs, and messages transform as they come together. Following these ways of thinking throughout this project has demonstrated how documentation can provoke and disrupt, often in frustrating and uncomfortable ways, providing insight, not only into what has taken place, but also into what might still be possible, or even impossible, as those are quite often the most generative problems to work within.



Can we think of documentation as always incomplete, moveable, changeable, temporal, and ephemeral?



CLOSING THOUGHTS & PROPOSITIONS

In Carl Leggo's "Living Poetry: Five Ruminations" (1944) he speaks to how language plays an integral role in the ways poetry comes into being, describing language almost as an agentic material in such a way that it "*animates* knowing and understanding" (p. 2, emphasis added). I wonder what sort of rich complexity might become possible if we were to think with documentation as a language, as an agentic material within artistic encounters. Not necessarily language as a means of making meaning from an experience, but more as in the sense of poetry, where documentation as language helps give shape to the inquiry with traces of documentation being utilized for communicating, questioning, noticing, and storying with. Thinking of documentation as language could invite us to think and respond differently, allowing us to focus more on the process, inviting in the often unsettling idea of being always changing and always incomplete. What if, because of this, documentation as language could *animate* the work of art? If we think with documentation as traces of language, then we make space for an abundance of complexity. Just like words can have several meanings and can start or stop a conversation, traces of documentation are layered with meanings and relevance, some perhaps quite obvious but some never entirely knowable. While this whole project feels entirely incomplete, I think that actually makes sense. It leaves spaces and openings for experimentation and different ways of thinking with art, curriculum, and documentation. As I work toward piecing together these many traces of art, documentation, and curriculum inquiry into a cohesive yet incomplete project, I am curious about what new pathways might emerge as these traces meet each other and invite us to think about what else might be(come) possible. While this inquiry research project highlighted for me the ways in which art, documentation, and curriculum inquiry are so tightly interwoven as to be basically inseparable, I can't help but wonder what else might be possible within these complex and yet interconnected ideas.



POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS

This project is many things, but it is not filled with simple explanations or a search for extremely specific answers. In all its chaotic layers and nascent tangents, this project is more of an initial starting point, a place to raise questions about ideas and processes that have not yet been fully explored within early childhood spaces. It is less about making sense of children's art and more about what exploring the relationship between children, art, and documentation might make possible. My intention is only to provoke wonderings about an area of inquiry that requires much more research and investigation before coming to any sort of definitive conclusions. After all, there is vast potentiality in shifting the focus away from what a specific child is doing and to notice instead how documentation exists within a constellation of relations, where multiple forces are always affecting and being affected. In terms of pedagogical implications for educators, it is my sincerest hope that this project provokes you to invite curiosity and creativity into your practice with young children, to lean into the discomfort of the never entirely knowable and really embrace *the work of art*.

Arthur spinning
and bumping along
the walls

WITH MANY THANKS

I would like to say thank you to all the educators and children at the Children's Centre for welcoming me in and letting me disrupt your space every week. The time I spent learning alongside you all was invaluable. I am truly grateful that you all welcomed me and this project into your classrooms. I am especially grateful to the educators and children in Dogwood who first welcomed me into the centre and supported me throughout this process. I am also grateful for the educators and children in Oak who welcomed me into their ways of thinking and wondering together. Many thanks to all of the other educators that I may not have worked with directly but who all contribute to such an amazing culture within the centre. Thank you also to everyone who works on the admin side of things in the office. Your support in bringing this project to life is very much appreciated. And thank you to Sylvia Kind, who encouraged this project to be as weird as it needed to be.



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