Third Text

Distance in Proximity

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Spiral Garden, Community-based Art, and Friendship

Heather Davis

One must keep an open mind. The series of events I will relate will demand much from the listener not the least of which is the suspension of disbelief. In fact, suspension of many things: judgment, logic, convention, and certainty are required to encounter the unknown on its own terms. This encounter with the unknown, the mystery, is at the heart of many a good story . . .

Cosmic Bird Feeder Summer Story[1]

. . . what precisely is an encounter with someone you like? Is it an encounter with someone, or with the animals who come to populate you, or with the ideas which take you over, the movements which move you, the sounds which run through you? And how do you separate these things?

Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*[2]

From the first moment I entered Spiral Garden there was something indescribable about it, a certain kind of magic; its twenty-year history revealed through the well-tended vegetable and native perennial gardens, the slightly overgrown paths, the trodden grass around the spiral and in the little creatures, puppets and clay figures strewn throughout. Many small painted sticks, stars, wheelchair sculptures and tiny amorphous animals were hidden under leaves, rested on top of tree stumps, or were woven into larger structures, quietly animating the space. Other sculptures, like the giant butterfly puppet suspended between two trees whose wings flap when someone pulls on the string, were prominently on display. But this feeling of magic, of vibrancy, was not simply about the physical artefacts, remarkable as such an eclectic collection of hand-made articles were in their diversity, skill, and charm. It was as if the intention, the stories and feelings of all those years had been trodden into the ground, composted, turned over, still emitting joy. And stepping into Spiral Garden felt like entering a parallel

1 *Spiral Garden and Cosmic Bird Feeder: Annual Report*, Bloorview MacMillan Children's Rehabilitation Center, Toronto, 2002, no pagination

2 Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, Columbia Classics in Philosophy, Columbia University Press, New York, Chichester, West Sussex, 2007, p 2
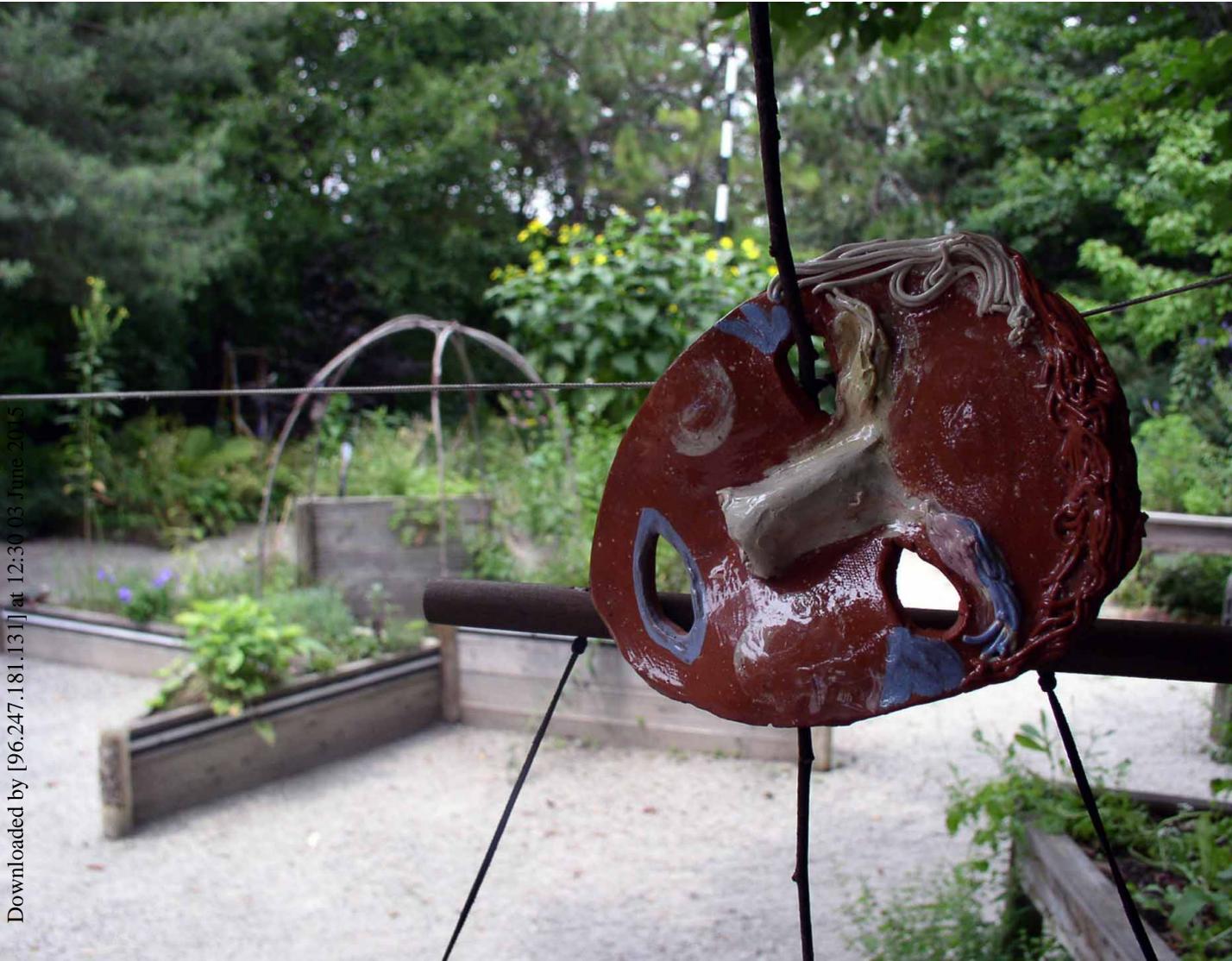
The star garden at the centre of Cosmic Birdfeeder; photo: Galen Kuellmer, courtesy of Micah Donovan

world, one inhabited by a full band of other-worldly creatures and people, each of the objects containing a story within them, or rather, multiple stories, stories written and rewritten, waiting to be written over again, held together through friendship as a structure for relation.

I returned to Spiral Garden in late August 2009, as returning to a dear and sorely missed friend, having worked there previously for one year, at Cosmic Bird Feeder, its sister site, for four years, and intermittently with various Open Studio and March Break programmes at Bloorview Kids Rehab, its host organisation, for three years.[3] I returned out of friendship, out of love, out of commitment to a place and programme that I felt reflected so many thoughts and questions that registered and reverberated for me in the realm of philosophy and critical theory. The garden seemed,

3 The hospital has since been renamed Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital.

4 Charles Stivale, *Gilles Deleuze's ABCs: The Folds of Friendship*, Stephen Nichols, Gerald Prince and Wendy Steiner, series eds, Parallax: Re-visions of Culture and Society, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2008, p 2

5 For an excellent analysis of the way in which vulnerability accumulates within art and social justice projects see Paige Sarlin, 'Vulnerable Accumulation: A Practical Guide', *Scapegoat: Architecture/ Landscape/Political Economy, Currency* 4, February 2013, pp 337–358.

6 See Paul De Bruyne and Pascal Gielen, eds, *Community Art: The Politics of Trespassing*, Valiz/Antennae Series, Amsterdam, 2011; Arlene Goldbard, *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, New Village Press, Oakland, California, 2006; Suzanne Lacy, ed, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995.

7 For some of the most important debates in the field that mix contemporary, public art with community-based art see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship,* Verso, New York and London, 2012, especially pp 11–40 and pp 163–192; Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2012; Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Routledge, London, 2011; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004; Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002; Grant Kester,

in some sense, to be a place of enacted thought. As Charles Stivale demonstrates, 'the status of the friend as a conceptual persona who appears in philosophy stands "for a presence that is intrinsic to thought, a condition of possibility of thought itself"'.[4] Between oneself and the friend, thought emerges; the friend gives reason, meaning and consistency to thought.

My passion for this site was cultivated and shared by many of the people involved in my research, just as the garden itself is the result of intimate friendships. Many of the people who attended as children grew up to become staff members, and the friendships made at the garden have been, in many cases, lifelong. In fact, I argue that much of community-based art is enacted on precisely these same affective tones, of fostering bonds and community, and the yearning for individual or collective transformation through friendship. This utilisation of friendship within research and community-based arts can be extremely positive, creating ties across differences to create new and vibrant worlds. However, this method also includes the romantic impulse that can sometimes prove a liability – glossing over, forgiving, or overlooking oppressive acts, words, gestures. Friendship in large part acts as a process of normalisation (even if the 'normal' of a certain group may not be otherwise hegemonic). But it is with the risk of these intensely vulnerable contradictions that both this research and community-based art itself proceeds.[5]

Before continuing any further, I will take a moment to define some key terms. Spiral Garden is exemplary of community-based arts, a type of art practice that privileges process over product, taking the social itself as the medium of artistic production.[6] In community-based arts, professional artists work with non-professional artists to create various performances or art objects, everything from theatre, to hip hop, to dance, to photography, to video, to murals, to sculpture, through various long-term collaborations. Community-based arts have a long history, but have been receiving more critical attention since the beginning of the 1990s as these practices are beginning to merge with and enter into the broader discourses and circuits of contemporary art.[7] Community-based arts, at least for my purposes here, are differentiated through their longevity – that is, projects or organisations that make long-standing links to people or communities, some for twenty years or more – and for the generation of these spaces with a certain deliberate and critical distance from galleries, museums, biennials, art journals and the other mechanisms of artworld production. In recent years this distance has been challenged, as traditional forms of funding become increasingly unavailable and as it blends with other forms of social practice. Community-based art grows out of a fundamental belief in the democratisation of art, in both its production and reception. Due to its instrumental status it has been difficult to evaluate community-based arts, as this was often left up to funding bodies.[8] When taken up by critics, community-based art has been evaluated in terms of community, notions of empowerment, dialogue as a principle of political engagement and social infrastructures.[9] Building upon the work of Laurie McGauley,[10] I argue that friendship, specifically 'friendship as method' as developed and articulated by sociologist Lisa Tillman-Healy and others, creates a useful and generative resonance between the practices of community-based art and research on this subject.[11] That is, friendship as method both describes the procedures of community-based art, and offers a nuanced and implicated take on

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'Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art', *Afterimage* 22, January 1995, pp 5–11.

8 One of the reasons why community-based art often receives much criticism from the larger artworld is precisely because of the dependence upon government funding and the ways in which art becomes instrumentalised for the purposes of providing services that the state has cut back on. See, as one of the most blatant examples of the relationship between funding and the structure and evaluation of community-based art, François Matarasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, Comedia, Stroud, UK, 1997. See also Arlene Goldbard, 'Postscript to the Past: Notes Toward a History of Community Arts', *High Performance* 64, winter 1993, pp 23–27 for an account of the difficulties of these relationships of evaluation.

9 For works that take up the rubric of community as one of the ways of thinking about method and evaluation in community-based arts see Gillian Rose, 'Performing Inoperative Community: The Space and the Resistance of Some Community Arts Projects', in Steve Pile and Michael Keith, eds, *Geographies of Resistance*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp 184–202 and Grant Kester, 'Aesthetic Evangelists', *Afterimage* 22, op cit. For more recent accounts of how to think through the practices of community-based arts, Grant Kester provides the model of dialogue in *Conversation Pieces*, op cit, and Shannon Jackson offers the idea of support within a rubric of social infrastructure in Shannon Jackson, *Social Works*, op cit.

their practices. The longevity of these practices would not be possible without the kinds of bonds generated through friendship and other relations.

Nikos Papastergiadis has also argued for a new conceptualisation of art practices that operate within the expanded social field, conveying the necessity for different methodological approaches while adopting ethnographic practices within art criticism for works that defy strict classification. He writes in relation to the practices of Stalker, an art collective that was working with refugees and former PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) members on the Greek island of Makronisos:

> Such an artistic event has no essence. There is no iconic moment – no gesture which captured the 'spirit' of hospitality, or an object that symbolised the experience of momentary solidarity. It was a day in which one incident clipped onto the next. The participating artists had no doubt that their art was in the whole of the day. There was no predetermined time or specified place that framed the ordinary flow of social activities, at no point could I distinguish a zone that would resemble a performance space.[12]

As such, he advocates for the necessity of *being there* as central to a critical project of engagement, drawing on an argument also made by Gerald Raunig and Brian Holmes.[13] I would go even further, making explicit what is already alluded to in Papastergiadis' text by claiming that friendship is what draws people into projects such as these and that it can also be employed as a method to evoke the practices themselves. Papastergiadis makes it clear that this shift in methodological engagement, which the work itself necessitates, also calls for new forms of writing. He says:

> What matters for [Stalker] is the subtle transformation that occurs through these experiences . . . How does art criticism, which has turned its analytic skills to the interpretation of an image, suddenly turn to address the temporality of an ephemeral spatial manifestation – what Pierre Huyghe (2008) recently called the art that appears as an 'apparition'?[14]

What Papastergiadis points to are the ways in which these types of art practices demand new methods that must also be reflected in the process of writing itself. In other words, friendship as method implies both a methodology for artists and researches, but it also implies a challenge for those who wish to write about these practices – how to convey the daily, incremental, small affective ties and breaks between people.

Transforming various ethnographic practices, such as field journals – as Papastergiadis does and as I will also do later in this article – into art criticism offers one answer to this problem. This approach also benefits from a dialogue with ethnography. Art criticism can learn from the critiques and alternatives offered from within ethnographic practices themselves, especially those stemming from postcolonial critique.[15] As Stephen Tyler points out,

> . . . the rhetoric of ethnography is neither scientific nor political, but is, as the prefix *ethno-* implies, ethical. They also speak of the suffix *-graphy* in reminder of the fact that ethnography itself is contextualised by a technology of written communication.[16]

Ethnography, as highlighted here, is about ethical writing, the imperative of doing justice to those who consent to participate in a given study, to

10 Laurie McGauley, *Utopian Longings: Romanticism, Subversion and Democracy in Community Arts*, doctoral dissertation, retrieved from Library and Archives Canada, AMICUS no 33568396, Laurentian University, Canada, 2007

11 See Lisa Tillman-Healy, 'Friendship as Method', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol 9, no 5, 2003, pp 729–749; as well as Leslie Rebecca Bloom, 'Locked in Uneasy Sisterhood: Reflections on Feminist Methodology and Research Relations', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, vol 28, no 1, 1997, pp 111–122; Jolley Bruce Christman, 'Working in the Field as the Female Friend', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, vol 19, no 2, 1988, pp 70–85; David M Hayano, 'Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects', *Human Organization*, vol 38, no 1, spring 1979, pp 99–104; Lisa M Tillman, 'Father's Blessing: Ethnographic Drama, Poetry, and Prose', *Symbolic Interaction*, vol 31, issue 4, autumn 2008, pp 376–399; Lisa M Tillman, 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Coming Out in an Alcoholic Family', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol 38, no 6, December 2009, pp 677–712; Lisa M Tillman, 'Coming Out and Going Home: A Family Ethnography', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol 16, no 2, February 2010, pp 116–129.

12 Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2012, p 179

13 See Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, Active Agents, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2007, p 17; and Brian Holmes, 'Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World', in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, eds,

adopt an approach that does not attempt to 'represent', but rather to 'evoke', the experience of an 'other'. Tyler goes on to say:

> The whole point of 'evoking' rather than 'representing' is that it frees ethnography from *mimesis* and the inappropriate mode of scientific rhetoric that entails 'objects', 'facts', 'descriptions', 'inductions', 'generalisations', 'verification', 'experiment', 'truth', and like concepts that, except as empty invocations, have no parallels either in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork or in the writing of ethnographies.[17]

Leaving space for others, as a feminist ethics, does not try to subsume the other into myself, but attempts, as Kathleen Stewart says, to 'write not as a trusted guide carefully laying out the links between theoretical categories and the real world, but as a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter'.[18] This, I argue, is precisely the work of both community-based art, as a specific art practice, and friendship as method in relation to these practices.

FRIENDSHIP AS METHOD

Friendship as method explicitly positions itself as emerging from feminist and other anti-oppressive qualitative methodologies, whilst implicitly critiquing the role of researcher as a distanced and objective observer. It is therefore situated as part of the critical turn in ethnography from within the domains of sociology and anthropology. Due to the care and personal commitment that this methodology involves, these ethics of attention and compassion are also carried into the research itself. The hope is that this will allow for more complex, located and ethical modes of research (and, as I am arguing, if this method can be thought of as the practice of community-based arts, it provides another framework from which to evaluate those practices). As Tillman-Healy writes, 'Because of the power imbalance between researcher and participants, field relationships always have the potential for colonisation and exploitation. Friendship as method seeks to undermine and disrupt this.'[19] This is because 'when we engage others' humanity, struggles, and oppression, we cannot simply shut off the recorder, turn our backs, and exit the field'.[20] This description of the power imbalance between researcher and participant is paralleled in concerns surrounding the relation of artists to a given 'community'. Tillman-Healy notes that although friendship usually happens within rather than across racial, class, ability and other kinds of social divisions, when we use these same principles to challenge these barriers, those with more privilege can become powerful allies for people traditionally marginalised, implicitly making everyone more compassionate and capable political actors. However, as Sassi and Thomas identify:

> Although much of the literature on friendship-as-method affirms its affordances, there are serious concerns about how friendly relations between the researcher and researched can obscure the power imbalances inherent in the enterprise of research.[21]

Friendship can build bridges across, but does not erase power imbalances between people, even as we may be more inclined to ignore, or elide these questions in friendship.

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Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007, p 290. A similar ethnographic approach is also used by many of the authors in Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty, eds, *Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art*, Valiz/Antennae, Amsterdam, 2011.

14 Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture*, op cit, p 189

15 See George Marcus and Michael Fischer, eds, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1986; Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Beacon, Boston, 1989; Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, eds, *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, 1997; Minh-ha Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1989.

16 Stephen Tyler, 'Post-modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document', in James Clifford and George E Marcus, eds, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, pp 122–140, p 122

17 Ibid, p 130

18 Stewart, 2007, p 5

19 Lisa Tillman-Healy, 'Friendship as Method', op cit, p 744

20 Ibid, p 743

21 Kelly Sassi and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, '"If You Weren't Researching Me and a Friend ...": The Mobius of Friendship and

My research with Spiral Garden certainly exposed the position of researcher in uncomfortable ways, but ways that may help to address the complicated entanglements of research into community arts and the practices of community arts themselves. It showed that complexity by living within it, rather than trying to harmonise it into a particular position or specific evaluative response. My research began in relation to those to whom I am already deeply attached, who are already a part of my life in a long-standing way. This attachment, although usually a benefit, sometimes proved quite difficult. The formal mechanisms of an ethnographic practice distanced me from my friends, acquaintances and former colleagues, by placing me outside of the more organic flows of friendship. The position of the researcher then became one of estrangement, both in the sense of leaving what is familiar, making oneself strange in order to see again, but also in the sense of disconnection, recognising that my place was slightly outside of what I had, in the past, felt deeply attached to. This was made especially clear to me when, abiding by the protocols handed down through two sets of ethics review boards (one from the university, the other from the children's hospital), I had to get children to sign consent forms to interview them. In that moment, that awkward moment of having to solicit information and consent from children – whom, in some cases I had known for years – I watched them step back. These children and young adults, as well as staff members and friends, became my 'objects of research', regardless of my personal intentions, through the apparatus of the interview: microphone, digital sound recorder, consent forms, pointed questions – and they knew it. From the normal flow of conversation to the almost instantaneous and intensely awkward switch to 'research', these children I knew became shy, introverted, put on the spot. In stepping into the role of researcher, I somehow stepped outside of what I wanted to research, the play and natural connection of the garden, outside the way friendship grows between people organically and in unlikely formations. Additionally, many of the children who attend Spiral Garden do not use language as their primary mode of communication. This might be true of all children, but it is especially true in a context where many use facilitators or sign language or a digital or analogue communication board, as well as facial expressions and other physical gestures, to communicate. This complicated the necessity to make sure that consent was given, and also revealed the way that interviews necessarily presuppose a certain kind of subject. Despite the assertion Tillman-Healy makes that 'Friendship as method demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying "them" to studying *us*,' what she glosses over is the way in which, through the apparatuses of power and knowledge, the researcher becomes dislocated from this holistic sense of friendship, especially in the case where these friendships are already established and not just developed through the research process itself.[22] The 'us', then, is far from transparent, and may in fact disappear in the moment of research.

What is interesting and valuable in this approach, however, is that it foregrounds how friendship is not simply about harmony or ease. Instead of being understood strictly as a mode of connection or intimacy, it allows for a certain distance, a space, a drawing into and out of friendship. Friendship, as many of us know from our own experiences, often involves conflict, tension and distance. Additionally, Tillman-Healy

Mentorship as Methodological Approaches to Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Inquiry,* vol 18, no 10, December 2012, p 830

22 Lisa Tillman-Healy, 'Friendship as Method', op cit, p 735

rightfully asserts that friendship as method can be a way to challenge the predetermined categories of researcher and subject. Being a researcher is not an easy posture to assume in the context of friendship. Friendship makes the position of the researcher productively uncomfortable, causing the research itself to be generated from a slightly different stand-point, challenging the matrix of power and knowledge. It forces a kind of self-consciousness that can be usefully self-reflexive about the ways in which research is conducted and how we then choose to write. But it was primarily through friendship that my own research proceeded. Tony Gross, a parent who has been actively involved in the gardens for over nine years, described Spiral Garden as:

> … a community because it extends beyond the garden itself. It's social; it's friendships, clearly. It's not just people going to work, or we wouldn't be here [participating in a research discussion, eating dinner together]? Would we? No.[23]

SPIRAL GARDEN

Spiral Garden is a long-term community art project sustained by a committed but rotating group of artists. Based out of Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto, Ontario, it began as a reverse-integration art, garden and play programme for differently-abled and able-bodied children. At the heart of Spiral is a communal story that develops throughout its eight-week summer session. This story is integrated and extended through all of the artistic media and practices on site, turning Spiral into a world where the boundaries between imagination and reality are blurred, where an imaginary reality does not supersede, but coexists beside a more mundane reality. It is, as one former staff member evocatively described it, a 'living story space'.

Spiral Garden was established in 1984 as an initiative of the Creative Arts Department of the Hugh MacMillan Centre, comprising Nancy Brown, an educator and play-space designer, Paul Hogan, a painter particularly interested in story and myth, and Michelle Jennings, a special education teacher who had been working with children in Hugh MacMillan's school. It was intended to be a counter-institutional space, designed to balance the experience of the rehab hospital, a space for children outside, in a child-directed environment, away from the restrictive schedules and appointments that override children's lives generally, but especially those that are dealing with illness or disability. It was and is a place for children who are clients of the hospital to play and meet community children. It is located on the grounds, in the backyard so to speak, of the Rehab Hospital.

It is so hard to describe Spiral and its incredible cast of characters, the rhythms of the day, the bonds between people. The space of the site itself is a palimpsest of the living stories that are continually generated and re-told through the years. It is a site of local, and conscious, culture-making, a space where almost everything is made on-site: from art, to food, to music, to artefacts and history. The collaborations that happen between people, plants and animals are difficult to translate without the experience of being there. Despite its durability, it remains a kind of apparition,

23 Tony Gross in discussion with the author, 20 August 2009, Toronto, Ontario.

Owl puppet on parade; photo: Micah Donovan, courtesy of the artist

Ceremony for the newly arrived eggs, photo: Micah Donovan, courtesy of the artist

where everything that is important carries the ephemerality, tenderness and banality of the everyday. And so it remains, and reveals, the primary affective and phenomenological nature of the site.

FRIENDSHIP

Laurie McGauley uses friendship to think past the impasse of the romantic utopianism found in much community-based art literature and practice. She describes this utopianism as a drive that limits the ability of practitioners to think critically about their practice as facilitators of

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community relationships as well as artists. Basing her argument on the French theorist Miguel Abensour, McGauley points to how friendship, because it avoids the pitfalls of both a social contract as well as an unquestioned affirmation of community, can become a fundamentally political principle.[24] Counter to the blinding faith of romantic love, or the perfected oneness vaunted by uncritical accounts of community, friendship offers a way to think about human relations as distance in proximity. 'This attitude' of friendship writes Maurice de Gandillac,

> … allows us to greet a friend simply, without drama, without fixed agenda … making room for change, for silence, for inspiration, even for absence, this is perhaps the secret of an accord that defies any technique.[25]

'An accord that defies any technique' – this means that, when I think of my friends, despite my attachments (my love and dedication) they resist subsumption to myself, or any sense of strict reciprocity. In friendship, my identity is not necessarily pre-determined, nor does it govern the structure of my relationship with others, as can sometimes be the prerequisite for entry into a community. Jean-Luc Nancy explores this at length, making a useful and sustained critique of both the reliance upon the indivisibility of the individual within conceptualisations of community and the ways in which community needs to be dissociated from both communion (which would lead to a fascistic annihilation of community) and from work, as work is necessarily produced and completed (as opposed to processes of becoming).[26] The structure of friendship allows for a certain openness to the other, to oneself and to a critical space in-between. The distance in friendship is what paradoxically also makes our ties stronger and generates proximity.

Friendship maintains this complex distance partially through its non-categorisable quality, as Giorgio Agamben argues:

> I maintain, rather, that 'friend' belongs to the class of terms that linguists define as non-predicative; these are terms from which it is not possible to establish a class that includes all the things to which the predicate in question is attributed.[27]

To call someone a friend is therefore not a description, it is simultaneously empty and full, performing a relation that functions in the same manner as an insult, as well as occupying the category of words that simply signify being. Being, here, is not a body divorced from its environment, but a being-there, a being-in-common, a being-with-others – in short – it is a being whose whole insertion into the world defies strict delineation or categorisation. Being in the garden takes up this modality as people slip in and out of the imaginary world, becoming characters, empathising with a lost slug, or challenging stereotypes or one's own conceptions of ability. It is existence, where existence necessarily implies an other, the other, the friend. Being, in this sense, does not privilege the individual, but instead the relation. Relation moves in this space where I, and the friend, cannot be disentangled.

To love before being loved is the ethical act of friendship, as articulated through Emmanuel Levinas' notion of unconditional hospitality.[28] It allows the borders of whom we call 'friend' to expand. Unconditional hospitality is especially important in a place where the range of disability extends the full gamut of special needs,

24 McGauley, 'Utopian Language', op cit

25 Maurice de Gandillac, 'Approches de l'amitié', in A de Wachlens, ed, L'Existence, Gallimard, Paris, 1945, p 64

26 Jean-Luc Nancy, The Inoperative Community, Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney, eds, Christopher Fynsk, Foreword, Theory and History of Literature, vol 76, Wlad Godzik and Jochen Schulte-Sasse, series eds, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991

27 Giorgio Agamben, What is an Apparatus?: And Other Essays, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2009, p 29

28 Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, Alphonso Lingis, trans, Philosophical Series, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1969

> … from kids that you would not recognise as having a disability at first glance to those in power wheelchairs with life-support systems and a nurse in attendance at all times.[29]

This gesture of unconditionality is both practical and preserves space for difference. To welcome without the assumption of reciprocity is a practical gesture in a space where abilities are radically different, but this points to the ways in which this kind of gesture is necessary for all art projects that involve people. However, establishing and diffusing this structure is not uncomplicated or without struggle. In fact, it is intensely difficult and fraught with questions. This was made especially clear to me through my encounters with differently-abled children.

One of the people who I got to know quite well for a time was a child I met the first year I worked at Cosmic. She had just suffered a brain injury and as a result of this went from being a very mobile, lively, capable child to a child whose communication abilities were limited to eye movements and who was then almost completely paralyzed (she has since regained some mobility as well as the ability to use simple sign language). My friendship with her troubled me as much as it touched and moved me. I was troubled because, despite the fact that it was obvious that she was paying attention, how was I to define a friendship where she could have so little input, conventionally understood? How was I to know when she had had enough of me or when she completely disagreed, when she wanted to be alone, or with someone else?

Despite these doubts, I believe the pleasure I found in her company was mutual. We spent a lot of time staring at the red lily beetles on yellow cornflowers. I have no idea how much she could see, and I will never know what she thought of these encounters, this splitting and sharing of time together. What my closeness with her made me understand is that, ultimately, it is in the space and distance of friendship that we are paradoxically connected to others. We can ask how particular shared experiences make our friends feel, but what that feeling is, is completely beyond our own comprehension. Our splitting and sharing of experience is simply that – it is a way to open up to foreignness while accepting the impossibility of knowing the other.

Although we try to accommodate everyone at Spiral and Cosmic, the knowledge that many people there cannot share their experiences through language always makes me question the limits of accommodation generally. It is true that it is a program designed for reverse-integration, which structures the program in a particular, ethical, manner. But it is also true that there are many parades, puppet shows, and gatherings where numerous children look bored, disinterested or verbally express their discomfort. And this kind of social inclusion, of wanting everyone to have a shared experience, to enjoy the same moment, is a problem in itself. We try to leave space for separateness, for distance, for love and acceptance regardless of the amount of 'participation', but the fundamental problem remains. There have been so many moments while working there that I am left astonished at someone else's experience, with no way to close that gap, and no way to express my bewilderment, pain, and sorrow for the perceived pain of someone else; all the while recognising that I both need to express my empathy and need to keep a space of distance, of silence, for the other to have her experience on her own terms, and for the meaning of that experience to shift and change.[30]

29 Jan MacKie, quoted in Stephen Levine, 'The Spiral Garden: An Interview with Jan MacKie and Bohdan Petryk', *Poesis* 4, 2002, p 47

30 Excerpt from author's Field Journal, 28 August 2009

Silence and distance provide the mechanisms for paradoxically enabling the relation of friendship. At Spiral this is heightened because so many children interact without language, or primarily through the use of a facilitator. This problem paradoxically highlights how we are completely intertwined with others, ultimately made up of relations; complicating any notion of individuality while recognising the risks of vulnerability.[31] In other words, it is in our separateness that we also recognise our interdependence, that the distances of friendship are crossed as much by feelings that move through multiple people at once, while refracting differently in each. Friendship as method provides a way to think through these relations as social infrastructures. It offers a way of welcoming and implicating oneself with others while foregoing a sense of reciprocity. It acknowledges the impossible debt that we owe to the world, to each other, while structuring that relation in a particular manner, framed by the parameters of a given project. Unlike in an actual friendship, friendship as method or friendship at the garden, with children and in a space of work, is one that adopts the tone, implication and affections of friendship while maintaining a certain boundary and responsibility that may not be a part of the regular experience of friendship. In assuming responsibility, the researcher or artist has to forego a sense of reciprocity from the people she/he interacts with, offering friendship as delineated by the space without expecting it in return. This offer enables a certain unfolding of friendship less as an inter-subjective sense of affection and more towards an understanding of the sharing or splitting of existence, where the sense of self is refracted through the experiences of others. This is indeed a kind of proximity that is generated through distance; letting others have their space in order to share experience.

Friendship, as a method, can become a way to structure these relations more ethically, one that preserves the friend's otherness. It is the distance preserved that allows for difference, for becoming-other. Maurice Blanchot fleshes out the implications of this idea, where friendship passes by way of the recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak 'to' them... the movement of an understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even on the most familiar terms, an infinite distance, the fundamental separation on the basis of which 'what separates becomes relation'.[32]

The separateness of friendship *is* the relation. Separateness can then be understood as a form of the open structure of friendship. Friendship is the way in which two people can share a life together, recognising that that sharing does not subsume the other to them, to their knowledge; whether we wish this to be the case or not. This knowledge is especially highlighted when friendship is generated without the use of spoken language.

The experiential processes of friendship, to which these theoretical frameworks attune themselves, are not simply transposed into a method. Indeed, the call for working within the framework of friendship as method within an arts setting entails a careful re-working of this rather taken-for-granted position, one that means a kind of practice that is responsive to a *particular* environment, to *particular* people. Friendship as method requires a kind of dissolution of the comforting barriers that come with institutional privilege. Yet, it also requires the relinquishment

31 Carol Breckenridge and Candace Vogler argue, from within the field of disability studies, that the figure of the disabled adult in particular draws attention to the ways in which Western contemporary versions of democracy, subjectivity, and citizenship are all tied into a sovereign, able body. They say, 'Disability studies teaches that an assumed able body is crucial to the smooth operation of traditional theories of democracy, citizenship, subjectivity, beauty, and capital ... However, the mere possibility of a severely cognitively disabled adult citizen disrupts the liberal equations of representation and voice, desire and interest ... More generally, the intricate practical dialectics of dependence and independence in the lives of many disabled people unsettle ideals of social organisation as freely chosen expressions of mutual desire.' Carol A Breckenridge and Candace Vogler, 'The Critical Limits of Embodiment: Disability's Criticism', *Public Culture*, vol 13, no 3, autumn 2001, p 350

32 Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1997, p 290, emphasis added
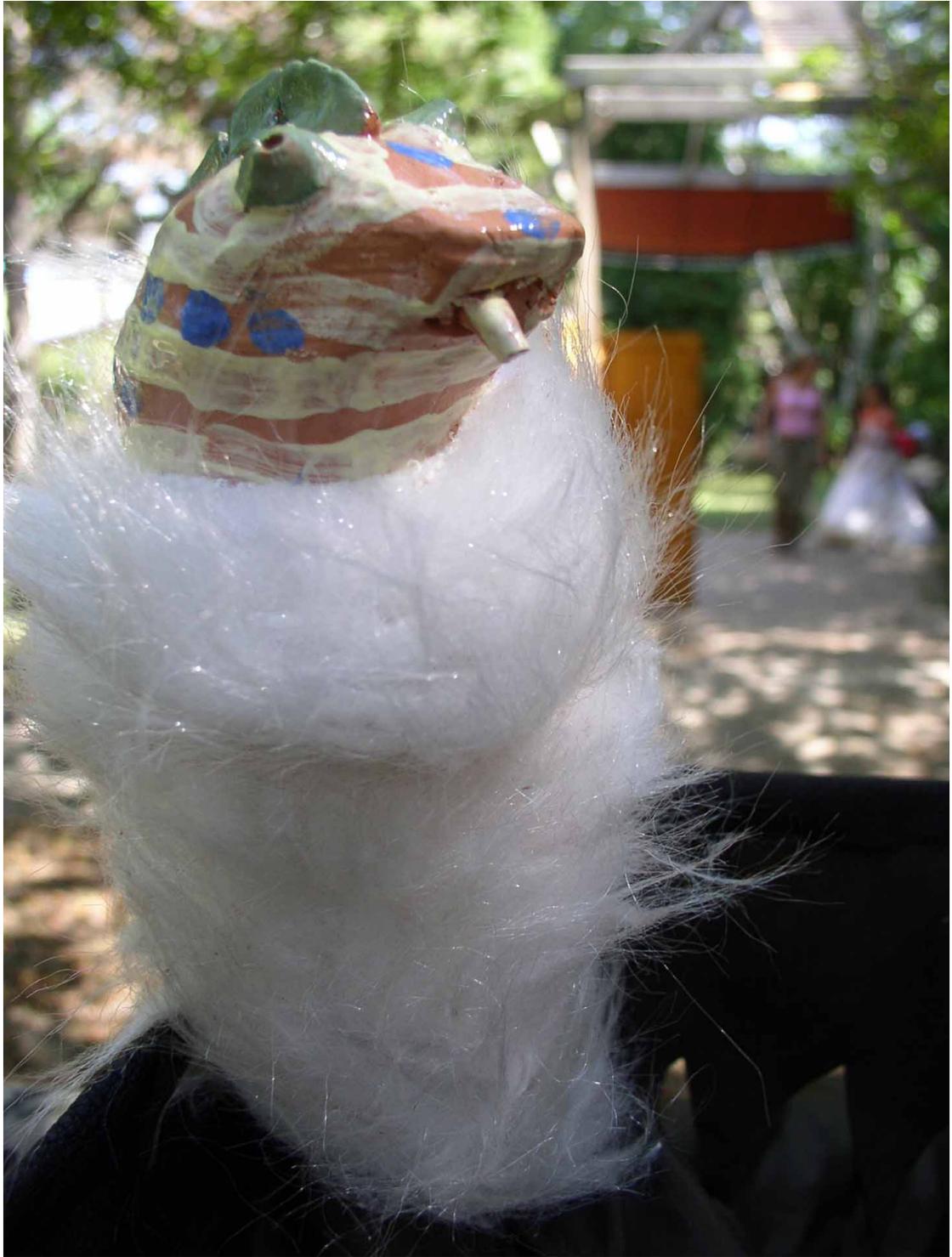
Puppet at Cosmic Birdfeeder; photo: Micah Donovan, courtesy of the artist

of a reciprocal relation found in other kinds of experiences of friendship. Further, by understanding friendship as a method where duration, through sharing life, is central, the imperative to discourse is lessened. In other words, the friendships that I am describing here are not predicated on dialogue, on conversation, but on experiencing moments together, making stories, singing, lying in the sun. By not centralising the role of dialogue, community-based art can be understood as an ephemeral art practice that accumulates artefacts, affects over time; where gardens are tended and where watching the joy of someone else splits and doubles your own experience.

Friendship as method requires a rethinking of the hierarchies that come both through the positions of artistic facilitator within community art spaces, and as a researcher entering into these spaces. It is not with an eye to rid ourselves of hierarchies – as if this could even be accomplished – but to find ways of living more ethically within the subjective positions that we must assume. The recognition, rather than elision, of authority forces the artist and researcher to live within that uncomfortable space and to work to change it. By assuming a certain distance to begin with, we can begin to generate proximity. And so, friendship, a structure taken from everyday experience which maintains its relation through distance, is one that can usefully be transformed into a working methodology for artists and researchers to work through distance, rather than presume proximity to begin with. From here, the demand becomes how to adequately convey this complex relation: one held in tension between two poles of experience; one that contains silences, affects and movements, while maintaining a consistency that can, in slow increments, work to create radical change. There is no universal answer to this demand, but simply the careful, slow work of writing and re-writing, again and in relation to each context, stories that compel and move us to continue to create art, to write, and demand of us complicated and knotted entanglements.