



Breaking the Frame: Aesthetic Encounters with Narrative Practice – Part Three

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As an artist and narrative therapist, aesthetics energize my narrative practices. “The Breaking the Frame” series discusses a brief selection of artworks that highlight alternative ways to engage with life. Each artist’s vision offers novel perspectives for clients’ stories, psychology, and world-making. In this globally challenging time, many people experience stories as fighting for dominance and for reality itself. Art invites us to perceive differently, reminding us that reality has multiple dimensions for thinking, seeing, and imagining. I question the effects of psychology’s implicit categories, divisions, and prevailing beliefs. Aesthetics can help free client stories from the confines of the known and the familiar.

The philosopher Deleuze has said, “There is no work of art that does not indicate an opening for life” (as cited in *Times Flow Stemmed*, 2023, para. 4). This vitality is embodied in my favorite narrative therapy quote, which has inspired my work with clients for over twenty years. Reflecting on Foucault, White and Epston (1990) write that when space is provided for “alternative knowledges” that resist techniques of power, “‘Docile bodies’ become ‘enlivened spirits’” (p. 31). Through art and story, we can break through mediating frames that inhibit clients’ energy and agency. Deleuze (1966/1991) drew on Henri Bergson’s idea of “Èlan Vital” to view life as multiple creative expressions of becoming (p. 107). Avoiding fixed identities or finalized conclusions allows life to unfold through experimentation and play. As an artist practicing narrative therapy, my primary goal is to collaboratively transform the constraints of preconceived notions, inherited concepts, identity conclusions, and client stories into ‘enlivened spirits,’ alive through dialogue, process, and re-visioning.

An aesthetic retelling of narrative therapy fosters interchange between different ‘media of thought.’ Words and the story metaphor may constrain imaginal options, whereas art often challenges common-sense conventions, problematizing naturalistic accounts of space, time, identity, language, and fixity.





In both art and storytelling, we animate the media of creation, and these vital acts reveal hidden values in how we position and organize knowledge. Michael White and David Epston emphasize the need to “...identify the context of ideas in which our practices are situated and explore the history of these ideas” (1990, p. 29). Narrative therapists encourage an ethics of collaboration that investigates what is central to therapeutic conversations. We question our complicity in reinforcing outdated systems rather than conceiving novel ecologies for clients’ lives.

Earlier in the series, I discussed the potential that emerges when “we look to practices and the genesis of performance, rather than representation, as our basis for knowledge” (Cotter, 2025, p. 23). Art interrupts our “habits of meaning making” to expose preconceptions about logic, ordering, and coherence that affect how we see our place in the world (Cotter, 2023, p. 39).

As William Blake (1906) wrote, “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite” (p. 26). The artistic act reveals the contingency that shapes perception and experience. In articles one and two of “Breaking the Frame,” I discuss how art can expand the narrative metaphor and resist the seduction of resemblance, encouraging handmade meanings, abstraction, fluidity, and contextual migration. The second article in the series examines the movement of thought and assemblages of ideas that arise through aesthetic and interdisciplinary approaches, and I learn from the dynamic ways Andy Goldsworthy’s artwork interacts with the environment. Similar to Goldsworthy’s ice sculptures, leaves, and river eddies, the subject is transformed through relational processes. We are in flux, and experience, like art, is a conversation between the world and ourselves, a call-and-response and a reminder of intertextual exchange, layering events with ongoing reauthoring throughout all of life.

A narrative nondual therapy

In this final article of the series, art helps me examine various forms of dualism, such as mind-body, self-world, subject-object, and spirit-matter, that shape story construction. I turn to aesthetics to imagine nondual options for narrative





therapy. It wasn't until the late nineteenth century that psychology became a scientific discipline, separated from the vital and the spiritual through a logical positivist emphasis on what is measurable, generalizable, and evidence-based. This framing of psychology is less relevant in light of current views, such as quantum research and new materialism. Alan Lightman (2023) broadens my understanding of science by aligning it more closely with art, nature, and wonder. Every atom of the universe mixes and scatters the past, present, and future, reenergizing a sense of awe and belonging that extends far beyond psychology's reductive accounts of the human and more-than-human world (Lightman, 2023). Across cultures and time, science, art, and narrative converge in the storytelling of the earth and the cosmos. Art connects me to the miraculous in ways that psychology often denies.

Aesthetics remind me that narrative therapy can evoke virtual energies and encounters that confront the operations of modern power. Our artistic expressions and therapeutic conversations can spark creative resistance to the domestication of daily life. David Epston and Michael White celebrate Bourdieu's exoticizing of the familiar, which highlights the extraordinary in the ordinary (Cotter, 2023). Whereas psychology can support forms of rationalism that regulate conduct, art and narrative can contest the tyrannies of spirit that separate us from untamed innovation. White and Epston write that narrative therapy aims to challenge "... the techniques that subjugate persons to a dominant ideology" (1990, p. 29). Art offers multi-perspectival alternatives that free us from fixed mindsets and overturn dominant truth claims. Incorporating a variety of visual, spatial, and temporal languages into narrative therapy can disrupt systemic ideas that reduce mental health to a single story of isolated individual traits and behaviors.

I am becoming more aware of the connections between my clients' inner and outer experiences, beyond psychology's socially constructed divisions. One client, Jenny, is considering her next steps and says, "We're all participating in this life thing. It's not about me. We're all woven into the fabric as a collective." Concerned about the world, my client Christopher says, "... fear overwhelms everything, and it becomes a power struggle that dims everyone's light."





Aesthetic ideas can decenter and reposition humanity within our narrative practices, fostering alternatives to collective disenfranchisement.

The terrapsychologist Craig Chalquist (2021) asks a crucial question: “What emerges when we ... put the presence of the world at the center of psychology?” (para. 4). Reflecting on Chalquist’s challenge to a narrative approach, I revisit the evolution of Western art discussed in “Breaking the Frame—Part One,” where passive spectators of a fixed, objectified world picture become active participants in immersive environments (Cotter, 2023). We see life and art merge in interactive processes, and media engage us with both nature and technology. Traditional notions of a central protagonist, inner and outer, foreground and background, dissolve into new options for making meaning. Deleuze (1968/1994; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) challenged our reliance on first-person human perspectives, and Foucault (1966/1970) rejected giving “... absolute priority to the observing subject ...” (p. xiv). By breaking the frame of realism and the illusion of separateness between subject and object, our clients’ narratives unfold in co-creation with life’s forces in ways that are inseparable, continuous, and boundless. I am reminded of Deleuze’s (2006) concept of the fold, which draws on Baroque art and Spinoza’s philosophy and, instead of centering the individual, shifts our understanding of inner and outer forms. Aesthetics can help us create a more-than-human, vital, and fluid ecology among our clients, ourselves, and the larger world.

New forms of life

Art and narrative bring new ideas to life, creating encounters and differences that assemble collaborative dialogue between abstract thought and material form. As narrative therapists, we engage in political and philosophical conversations not as intellectual theories but as awakenings to a heart-led life aligned with our values and hopes. I find inspiration in many philosophers and writers whose work supports my artistic interests. Deleuze reminds us of the vitality that arises when our imaginations venture beyond established categories, interpretations, and plots to actively participate in shared acts of becoming. The Colombian scholar Arturo Escobar (2018) describes the pluriverse, a concept that encompasses





multiple visions of politics and culture that promote community, sustainability, and diverse ways of knowing, while challenging the dominance of Eurocentric structures. I am struck by how the philosopher Guattari (1992/1995) wrote of creative acts that demonstrate transversality by crossing boundaries between systems, and by how the feminist scholar Donna Haraway (2016) encourages interconnections between humans, animals, nature, and technology. She wrote, “I admit I am drawn most by the collaborations that entangle people, critters, and apparatuses” (p. 129). In addition, the post-humanist authors Eduardo Kohn, Cary Wolf, and Jane Bennett help me see vibrancy in more-than-human ethnologies and in every encounter as expressions of something new. These examples invite narrative therapy to include transpersonal, relational, multistoried accounts that are alchemical, transforming the world rather than just ourselves.

For Deleuze, the life force manifests in endless variety through all potential acts of creation. Foucault (1970) emphasizes the importance of understanding knowledge as interactive contingencies rather than as a study of static representations. Our Western approaches, which rely on identity and form, can be transmuted into art, liberated from the materialism of objecthood. Our clients can engage in a creative process, freed from essentialist selves constrained by reductive stories of causality and determinism. In a state of constant change, time can be non-linear and simultaneous, surpassing the conventions of mechanical utility, fixed outcomes, or client histories. The feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2007) writes about Deleuze, “Life can be understood as the becoming-artistic of the material world; and art can be understood as the mode of making matter live...” (p. 300). I think of the artist Wassily Kandinsky (1911/2008), who describes the spiritual vitality in art that goes beyond the material. He writes, “Cezanne made a living thing out of a teacup, or rather in a teacup he realized the existence of something alive” (p. 50). Art brings unseen stories to life as part of the animate world.

With these goals in mind, I want to share a few artists’ works that help me reimagine narrative therapy’s approach to space, time, vitality, and identity. I begin with Yayoi Kusama’s *Infinity Mirrored Room*.





Infinity Mirrored Room – The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away

Yayoi Kusama, 2013

Installation

Yayoi Kusama (1929-) is a Japanese artist well-known for her sculptures, paintings, installations, videos, and performances. Although her work is often playful, it stems from memories of trauma and hallucinations. Her ubiquitous motifs of polka dots, flowers, pumpkins, stuffed furniture, and phalluses burst with the energy of Pop Art. *The Infinity Mirrored Room* helps me envision the dialogical space of narrative therapy, with the client as a decentered, small part of the world. Kusama (2002/2015) contributes to this vision of narrative therapy in her description of her art practices. She writes, “My desire was to ... measure the infinity of the unbounded universe, from my own position in it ... I wanted to examine the single dot that was my own life. One polka dot: a single particle among billions” (p. 23).

Standing in *The Infinity Mirrored Room*, I imagine a multidirectional narrative conversation. Its lights evoke a Jorge Luis Borges (1962) quote describing “... one sinuous spreading labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future and in some way involve the stars” (p. 23). Kusama’s points of light hover as simultaneous moments in time, virtual potentials for new storylines. A teaching tool in narrative therapy uses dots on a page to illustrate clients’ lived experiences. As we re-author clients’ stories, we release these dots from dominant narratives, allowing them to be reconfigured into new constellations of meaning. Like Borges’ labyrinth of stars, our conversations are rhizomatic, with an





infinite number of routes. I think of Carl Sagan (1980), who states, “We’re made of star-stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself,” and consider how aesthetics might inspire conversations between our clients and a sense of this larger belonging (6:17).

Michael White and David Epston have extensively used spatial concepts in narrative therapy, including metaphors of landscapes and archipelagos. They draw on practices such as mapping, externalizing, scaffolding, and identifying subordinate storylines. Reflecting teams and Outsider and Insider Witnessing Practices enrich clients’ stories from multiple perspectives. De Certeau (1984) writes, “Stories... traverse and organize places...” and “Every story is ... a spatial practice” (p. 115). Beyond linear emplotment, narrative dimensions can keep dialogue animated and untethered from constraining structures. In my notes from art school in 1990, I wrote about the multiplicity of meaning that becomes possible when our interpretation remains open-ended and intertextual, describing the “endless play of differences” that art enables through a “... non-linear temporality that has no hierarchy,” and noting that our “... interpretations can grow out in all directions.” Similarly, in Kusama’s work, our conversations can illuminate a postmodern, spatial framework. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (1992) states, “A postmodern narrative submits to the sequential nature of language grudgingly and at every juncture keeps alive for readers an awareness of multiple pathways and constantly crossing themes” (p. 53). Memories are never fixed at their moments of origin but are alive with every retelling. I listen to clients’ recollections as they shapeshift within new relational contexts. *Infinity Mirrored Room* inspires us to venture beyond the limitations of linear histories and actively participate in multimedia performances.

Trapped in the mirror

Kusama’s engagement with representation, mirrors, and mimesis is evident in the photograph of *Infinity Mirrored Room*, where the photographer cannot take an objective photo without including themselves. Kusama’s work requires our participation, challenging the idea of humans as spectators or of fixed objects unaffected by our perceptions. We see how Kusama’s *Infinity Mirrored Room*





offers a spatial strategy in which the viewer becomes both the viewer and the viewed, blurring the distinctions between inside and outside. As a narrative therapist, I consider the benefits of clients focusing on their individual, subjective experiences while communicating with the environment as part of the whole.

Artists provide many examples of the interplay between the inner and the outer, as in the sculptures of Anish Kapoor and Ruth Asawa. Kapoor's work incorporates the viewer into its surface reflections. Asawa creates wire sculptures, stating, "What I was excited by was I could make a shape that was inside and outside at the same time" (as cited in Higa, 2014). A related idea appears in literature, where the reader is seen as part of the text's meaning. Similarly, narrative therapists are decentered collaborators who challenge the notion of the therapist as an external, objective observer. Whether we are an audience for Kusama's artwork, a reader, or a therapist, we find ourselves part of the work. Kusama (n.d.) reminds me of Thich Nhat Hanh's idea of 'interbeing.' He writes, "If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper" because the paper cannot exist without the cloud and the rain (1992, p. 95). Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room* presents a counter-narrative of interconnection, with multiple subjectivities, locations, and moments in time.

While the traditional focus on a protagonist as the driver of a story's action may impose a conventional structure, our aesthetic conversations can deconstruct this ordering. Kenneth Gergen (2021) writes about relational ways of being that support this shift in perspective. He critiques the "presumption of separation" underlying our mental states and social systems, including "... families, schools, organizations, and nations" being seen as individual, "independent units" (pp. 2-4). Similar to Craig Chalquist's inquiry, Gergen asks, "What if we reverse the order of significance, and begin with *relational process...*?" (2021, p. 10). Our representational systems are embedded in the inextricable links between knowledge and power. Aesthetics can reveal implicit assumptions within story geography and "the organization of persons in space" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 30). In narrative therapy, we focus on clients' subjective experiences and first-person accounts. In contrast, art invites relational and cultural perspectives that go beyond the boundaries of internal and external, subject and object, and move





us beyond traditional power structures of surveillance and hierarchy. Are we at the margins, at the center of the universe, within a panopticon, or a small part of the larger whole? Art clearly shows the importance of the human subject's location in shaping our stories, depicting multifaceted views of space and time that differ from Western divisions of subject and object. I consider how therapeutic conversations might shift clients from passive observers to interactive participants while also challenging anthropocentric assumptions.

Foucault plays a crucial role in my understanding of the political implications of spatial and organizational strategies. He compares Bentham's panopticon prison model with society's invisible, subjugating gaze and describes the regulatory effects of space, stating, "... space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (1984, pp. 247-252). For White and Epston, narrative therapy offers "counter-practices" to the self-policing and conformity produced by panoptic structures. At Otis College of Art LA, my mentor, Simeon Wade, agreed with White and Epston and challenged his students to imagine "non-panoptic space," asking us, "How does an artist design space to produce the opposite effect of the panopticon?" and "What are spaces that invite participation?" A panoptic space relates to the term 'anthropocene,' the human dominance of Earth, as both refer to arrangements of space that objectify people and the planet through separation and power. Alternatively, the art critic O'Sullivan (2001) writes, "Art opens us up to the non-human universe that we are part of" (p. 128). Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room* helps me imagine a post-humanistic environment beyond the inert silence of traditional Western materialism.

The world speaks

In the 1960s, a shift in the social sciences known as the "spatial turn" recognized that space plays a role in our stories. Rather than a neutral background for the protagonist's main action, space participates in meaning-making through aesthetics, place, culture, and geography. In a solely material world, language is a form of spatial conquest occupying discursive spaces and colonizing geolocations. Narrative therapists demonstrate how "naming" can empower clients to reauthor their relationships to problems as externalized objects. Yet language can objectify





meaning, and naming can lead to commodification and dominance, taming the vitality that imagery brings back to the wild. Words can falsely legitimize, say too much, close spaces of possibility, and lead us in one direction at the expense of another. As in artmaking, our encounters with the living world open space for different modes of representation and thought. The ineffable can also thrive in silence, and the mystery beyond human speech can inspire radical change beyond the constraints of worded designations.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write of relational, territorial expressions in nature, that “... many birds are not only virtuosos but artists...” and that “... art is not the privilege of human beings” (pp. 316-17). The ecologist and writer David Abram (2010) explains that when we speak directly to the world, it responds directly to us. He writes about the more-than-human world and the multiplicity of languages, from trees to hives to thunder. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) coined the term polyphony to describe the coexistence of multiple voices that sustain a multivocal, unfinalizable dialogue, each with its own point of view. The writer Ed Yong (2022) explains the variety of perspectives in the living world:

To us, it feels all-encompassing. It is all that we know, and so we easily mistake it for all there is to know. This is an illusion ... We cannot sense the faint electric fields that sharks and platypuses can.
(p. 6)

To reach beyond the myopic confines of the known and revitalize our flagging spirits, we must participate in nonhuman dialogues as far-reaching as those of technology, as well as those of mice, rocks, and rain.

These dialogues with the world are a recurring theme within the history of art. We can see this in the dynamic processes of earthworks, such as Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, and in Andy Goldsworthy’s work, as discussed in the second article of the series. In addition, the light and space movement, at its height in the 1970s, relies on the intersections of art and science, inner and outer engagement, and the viewer’s active participation and perception. Artists such as James Turrell and Larry Bell present time, space, elements, the body, and





perception as interconnected languages, alive and in motion. These aesthetic conversations continuously shift as we negotiate our perception of reality and the responsive reciprocity of sensory experience. The Icelandic–Danish artist Olafur Eliasson provides another example of interactive media and the viewer’s perception, using large-scale installations and elements such as light, rainbows, ice, and weather to address our engagements with changing environments. I am influenced by the art of the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime, where time is simultaneous, landscapes and their ancestors speak life’s storylines.

Narrative vitality

For many clients, enlivening their spirits means finding freedom from constrained territories and speaking to the inner and outer worlds, the material and immaterial, as one. Although quite different from my approach to art and narrative, I recently encountered Georgi Y. Johnson’s (2017) writing on Nondual Therapy and agree with her idea that dualism contracts the energy of time and space (p. 2, pp. 77-78). This aligns with Deleuze’s immanent vitalism and Michael White’s work on trauma, both of which emphasize the need for lines of flight and the expansion of our energies in time and space beyond rigid representations and diminished narratives. In articles one and two, I describe the imperative of difference, the movement of thought, and the breaking of frames that free us from restricted territories (Cotter, 2023; 2025). Johnson writes, “... there is a sense of contraction or freeze... restraints in the flow of vitality through the body, psyche, and mind ...Where there was freedom, now there is contraction...” (2017, p. 36). In Michael White’s discussion of narrative in the aftermath of trauma, he writes, “This is a recounting of life that lacks vitality and animation - it is flat, dead” (2004, p. 70). He (2004) continues, “We can think of identity as a territory of life ... there is a very significant shrinking of this territory of identity ... ” (p. 46). Honoring a client’s responses, however small, we reinvigorate their sense of self and connection through “... aesthetics of living and, at times, ... specific spiritual notions” (pp. 46-47). We can employ double listening, witnessing, and questions to broaden access to alternative territories. White describes this expansion of the “territories of life” as “islands upon which safety and sustenance can be found, and then archipelagos, and eventually continents of security that open other





worlds of life ...” (pp. 59-60). This repositioning is crucial to the reauthoring of all of our clients’ accounts by animating narratives with renewed liveliness (Johnson, 2017).

In the following conversation, my client, Daniel, has worked hard to overcome childhood trauma that restricted his access to his energy, feelings, preferences, and sense of connection to the larger world. It’s just after Thanksgiving, and we discuss joy and whether it’s an inside job, an outside job, or both. Daniel begins to notice what might spark a sense of agency, vitality, excitement, and expansion.

Daniel: When you said a flock of birds taking off, I thought of a color series of cars. Blues, beiges, greens. It’s a style of color.

Lucy: I love color.

Daniel: This isn’t glossy, it’s muted... it doesn’t have the metallic part. It reflects less light.

Lucy: And the colors create a sense of appreciation or joy?

Daniel: It evokes an emotion, a feeling of joy. That group of colors.

Lucy: So expanding those emotions, hearing the two-year-old say ‘I love you,’ the paint colors that stir the spirit... You’re starting to notice more and more: that song on the radio, that recipe, a look from Stacy, things the pets do. Before you know it, the world is becoming more enchanted.

Daniel: Right, right. It’s really helpful. Sometimes, a sentence in a book or a story. I have to read it to Stacy. Almost, you don’t need the context.

Lucy: Sometimes, you don’t even need the content.

Daniel: There have been some sentences like that. Your bird thing reminded me of a hill on the horizon, it looks like smoke, but it’s a flock of





starlings, and when they're head on, they disappear, but when they turn, then there's a black smudge in the sky.

Lucy: How would you name that, the entity or fascination, the triggering of joy that it really captures? What are you aligning with when things like that happen?

Daniel: The nature one? The universe. The world, the color? Beauty. A strange place to find it, a mass-produced car—not a museum—grabbing me.

Lucy: Do they make you feel alive?

Daniel: Yeah, alive, connected, not just alive in myself, but part of something.

Lucy: In these moments, what were you shifting away from and what were you shifting towards?

Daniel: I was shifting away from somnambulance, being zombie-like. Plodding through the world.

Lucy: What is the shift towards?

Daniel: Joy, awakening. Some diffusion of the boundary between me and other things. More of a part of the world. It brought another meaning to Thanksgiving.

Reflecting on Daniel's story, perhaps a key purpose of psychology is to co-creatively reimagine the self and the world beyond the margins of convention. Our conversation helps me see Foucault's "docile bodies" become "enlivened spirits" as a small part of the world, or, as Kusama states, "one polka dot: a single particle among billions" (2002/2015, p. 23). By exploring Pipilotti Rist's installations, we can see an additional decentered approach to being in the world.





Big Heartedness, Be My Neighbor

Pipilotti Rist, 2021

Installation, The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA

Pipilotti Rist (1962 -) is a Swiss multimedia installation artist who invites visitors to engage in interactive experiences. Similar to Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room*, the viewer becomes part of a unique, aesthetic universe. Here, through Rist's use of diverse spaces, projections on every surface, radiant colors, and sound, we are transformed into nomadic travelers. I was fortunate to visit Pipilotti Rist's MOCA exhibit in 2021. Rist challenges our conventional views of boundaries, including the distinction between being awake and dreaming. Rather than passive spectators, we become part of an immersive environment that blurs the lines between inside and outside, self and other.

We are not alone as spectators of Rist's work, but wander through shared communal spaces. Rist states, "My goal is welcoming guests with their whole physical presence ... they are in a way the actors when they come into the rooms and we are only preparing a stage. I try to melt in and work with ... video, light, sound and make it a full journey" (2016, para. 6). Rist's themes of water, light, liberation, and the body help convey our sense of embodying multilayered, fluid surroundings. In Kusama's *Infinity Mirrored Room*, we stand on a platform inside a mirrored enclosure. In Rist's installation, we voyage without a plan, moving through disparate spaces and encounters as we participate in the decentered organization of Rist's various assemblages.





Aesthetic story maps

Rist deepens my understanding of how story geographies can share alliances that flow across multiple sites of identity. Her decentered spaces remind me of Michael White's discussion of archipelagos and trauma, and our ability to traverse varied locations of meaning. Whereas trauma often reduces access to what clients hold dear, a spatially diffuse conception of identity provides expansive places to stand (White, 2004). Combs and Freedman (2016) use a decentered spatial organization to describe narratives of identity as "*relational, distributed, performed, and fluid*" (p. 3). How "our moment-by-moment sense of 'self' is located in different places—in other people's memories, in hospital records, in anecdotes that get told and retold over family dinners..." (p. 3). Art invites novel spatial and organizational strategies that affect identity within a story's geography.

Pipilotti Rist's environments demonstrate mapping as a nomadic act. The transdisciplinary author Peta Mitchell (2013) writes about postmodern cartography, "The map is no longer a metaphor for representation, signification, and being but for affect, intensity, and becoming" (p. 88). This also describes the uncharted events in the narrative conversations I celebrate.

A map and a picture frame share much in common. Both create a world picture through artificial boundaries. Both evoke a Cartesian dualism as a truth claim, producing a panoptic ownership of space as a demarcated object, with the viewer as master of knowledge. Mitchell writes that, in the Enlightenment, maps began to be about the 'claiming of territory' as real. The whole world became mapped and like a 'closed space' (2013, p. 54). Maps can colonize, defining what belongs within seemingly naturalized organizational systems and eliminating external variables such as culture, difference, and change. Similarly, all stories colonize, reducing our thoughts to simplified versions of vast experiences and linking multidimensional moments into cohesive structures that often subjugate the marginalized, the ephemeral, the contradictory, or the partial. Our "knowing" can imprison our understanding. Whether a map or a story, representations displace alternative accounts (Mitchell, 2013, p. 54). Avoiding the generalities of a





representational history, narrative therapists use exceptions, multistoried perspectives, and reauthoring to liberate story geographies from the subjugation of problem stories, pathologizing labels, and identity conclusions.

Many significant artists use imagery and text to recover captured spaces and identities. For example, South Korean artist Do Ho Suh's *Fallen Star* depicts a house precariously perched on the edge of a library, speaking to identity, displacement, and immigration. Christo describes his and Jeanne-Claude's blue umbrellas occupying a bright green landscape, saying, "What I want to create is a poetical colonization of the space" (as cited in Weisman, 1990, p. 13). The Native American artist Hock E Aye Vi Edgar *Heap of Birds* uses aluminum signs to recover territories through language, reminding us of the geopolitical potential of narrative. Mark Bradford's monumental artworks depict a physical reordering of the personal and the historical. In 2022, I visited *Bradford's Pickett's Charge* at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. Its richly stratified surfaces suggest a palimpsest that, through erasure and layering, offers an alternative to emplotment, with a simultaneous dialogue between the past, present, and future. The sheer heft of abrasion and repurposing in Bradford's paintings turns conflict, excavation, and identity into powerful declarations of who and what has the power to be seen and documented.

As we attend to clients' stories, we hope to uncover the story elements hidden beneath the pretenses of historical truth. Gary Saul Morson (1994) writes that "... the danger of narrative models is that they transform the process of activity into a finished product" (p. 20). Whereas client problems reduce space and totalize meaning, our narrative questions open space and reclaim territorial rights over the telling of our stories.

A conversation with my client, Jackie, illustrates her process of claiming new spaces. We discuss how anxiety and trauma keep her from owning and inhabiting her intuition and wisdom, which she needs to feel safe and present. Our talk touched on her relationships with her mother and daughter. We have done somatic work, and Jackie continues striving to "live with less fear in this world."





Jackie is shifting toward responses that better align with her values. Tearfully, she paraphrases Raf Simons, a Belgian fashion designer.

Jackie: He said something like, “Not a day goes by without considering art.” The way he said it, it was like a necessity. I get it. It’s a way to break through this default of living what’s given. Breaking out of fear is a big part of engaging in these things. I’m tearful talking about my mom... I don’t know if she ever had this, though she must have, because she enjoyed flowers so much. She enjoyed every petal. She marveled at flowers.

Jackie wants to set an example for her child. I ask how she would distill the message of our conversation, and Jackie hopes her child will hear their own voice and intuition over society’s fear.

Jackie: There’s going to be a lot of noise from the outside world, but I hope she will keep listening to her body.

Lucy: And spirit?

Jackie: Her body and spirit. That’s it!

Lucy: And can you give yourself the same message?

Jackie: Yeah, absolutely. That’s the thing about life. There’s always this constant tugging between listening to my body and spirit and getting distracted by what others are saying. There’s a lot of noise.

Lucy: Is it just a lot of conversation?

Jackie: That’s a different way of looking at it.





- Lucy: Like art materials or music to make meaning from?
- Jackie: That's actually a really wonderful way of looking at it. So much of this is being able to hear my own voice instead of my parents' voice in my head.
- Lucy: What's the biggest difference between those voices?
- Jackie: They might talk about everything being us versus them, black and white, good or bad. But it could be a conversation. When I hear this capitalist machine of nonstop advertising or noise trying to get us to buy something, it's not helpful, but it is, in and of itself, interesting art material.
- Lucy: If you choose to engage with it and turn it into new ways of seeing or being. Create with it in dialogue?

Jackie agrees and uses California Governor Gavin Newsom's trolling of President Trump as an example.

- Jackie: He's taking the brainwashing technique of using all caps and using it to illustrate the absurdity of what people are buying into.
- Lucy: I think that's what the Existentialists were trying to do with the Theater of the Absurd. They change the timing and rhythm of the language. It's like wake up! Wake up! See the construct!
- Jackie: Yes, that's it. You wake up and see the construct... It is breaking the thing that is crippling me.





In the first two series articles, I discuss Deleuze's Lines of Flight as counterplots to "outdated representational frames" (Cotter, 2023, p. 30; Cotter, 2025, p. 16). Jackie's story invites alternative meanings that were excluded or unrecognized in the old frame. Deleuze writes, "One's always writing to bring something to life, to free life from where it's trapped..." (1995, p. 141). Ronald Bogue describes lines of flight as a "... drama of imprisonment and escape..." to "... a new terrain" (2004, p. 15).

Rist's environments help me see Deleuze's concepts of lines of flight and deterritorialization, and how our nomadic traversals liberate us from the singular dictates of prescribed thought and behavior. I consider how clients inadvertently maintain the codes of the very territories they're trying to escape. Ana Mendieta's performances offer another means of shifting identity within a story's geography.



Imágen de Yágul

Ana Mendieta, 1973/2018.

Color photograph. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Ana Mendieta (1948 - 1985) was a Cuban-American artist known for performances, photographs, and videos that merge culture, the body, and the land. She transforms the invisible into the tangible through an alchemy of art, psychology, and the organic. Although Mendieta uses molding, burning, and carving of her silhouette and body, her personal identity often seems to dissolve.





Mendieta states, “Using my body as reference in the creation of these works, I am able to transcend myself in a voluntary submersion and total identification with nature” (1988, p. 70). We see complex themes of exile, pain, ancestry, and the maternal feminine in Mendieta’s imagery.

Mendieta’s art helps me understand postmodernism’s dissolution of the subject. As we question the art object, we also interrogate the fixity of identity. Mendieta’s clay-baked bodies and etched silhouettes challenge ideas of a rarified self. In art, identity is intertextual, with a plurality of meanings in flux. Multiple contributors to Western philosophy have us question individualistic, bounded definitions of the human subject as an object (Mitchell, 2013, p. 80). Bakhtin (1984) describes the unfinalizable self. Foucault discusses the subject as “constructed by ... various discursive forces” and operations of power (Mitchell, 2013, p. 85). Michael White deconstructs the idea of the self as personal property (Dulwich Centre Foundation, 2018, 3:22). Deleuze and Guattari (1994) describe art as producing sensations of affect and precepts that are separate from a subject's observations and responses.

The art critic Simon O’Sullivan (2001) explains how affect operates beyond representations and the division between subject and object (pp. 125-134). Although affect is often associated with the somatic embodiment of felt experience, in this context, “affect” refers to the potentials of the virtual. For Deleuze, intensities are emergent encounters that enable creativity to actualize in novel expressions beyond known identities and forms. Art helps me see this life force of difference and becoming, as evident in this Deleuze quote: “What we are interested in, you see, are modes of individuation beyond those of things, persons or subjects: the individuation, say, of a time of day, of a region, a climate, a river or a wind, of an event.” (1995, p. 26)

David Epston speaks of identity, saying, “I was not represented, I was performed” (personal communication, April 30, 2015). Performances of meaning are integral to narrative therapy. They appear in the rich practices of definitional ceremonies and Insider Witnessing Practices, which counteract the effects of pervasive individualism that separate people from one another and from the environment.





We see how performance art challenges our notion of the traditional art object as we shift toward an activated amalgam of artist, audience, space, and time. Freedman and Combs write about narrative therapy, “When we say that our sense of self is *performed* (Combs & Freedman, 1999; Goffman, 1959; Turner, 1986) ... Each of us is always performer and audience at the same time” (2016, p. 3). In Mendieta’s work, we see a blurring of forms as the viewer-artist relationship becomes the work of art. In therapy, these interactions allow the therapist and client to perform collaborative stories of becoming.

I share with most narrative therapists the need to be part of the world’s story and for the world to be part of ours. Our identities manifest relationally, in process, and in public. Maggie Carrie and Shona Russell (2003) write, “Narrative practice is founded on the idea that the stories that we tell about ourselves are not private and individual but are a social achievement” (p. 3).

In *The Process That Is the World*, Joe Panzner (2015) explores the relationship between John Cage’s music and Deleuze’s philosophy. He writes,

For Cage and Deleuze, creativity is a property of the world itself, not a property of individuals. Artists do not exert absolute authorial control – they harness and abstract a kind of dynamism, a multiplicity that opens onto divergent realizations exceeding any kind of prefiguration. (p. 13)

This echoes Mendieta’s (1988) desire to conjure the “... one universal energy which runs through everything from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant, from plant to galaxy” (p. 72). My client, Jen, provides an example of this kind of dynamism and transformation:

Jen: I have to be affecting big change, otherwise I’ll implode. It definitely feels like a volcano.”





Lucy: What allows you to harness energy creatively in the face of that explosive fund? How do you think you are learning to do that?

Jen: I can say that my past habit was to bottle everything up using blame and guilt, being a certain kind of person, not being just happy to settle down with the guy. Crushing myself into this depression. A star super-nova contracts and contracts into a black hole, exploding in a way so violent, ridding people around me, pushing people away, with fiery turmoil, contracting again really quickly. The whole self-policing thing we've been talking about versus creative expansiveness. Now, it's more deliberate and controlled, I'm feeling at peace, it's more gradual... It feels like the black hole has turned into light.

Art, by engaging the vitality and contingencies of life, brings us closer to experiences of the world's energies. As Mendieta herself writes, "My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe" (1988, p. 71).

Conclusion

Art is a bid for conversations with the world, and like Kusama's room full of stars or Rist's adventure in color, sound, and light, our narrative approaches can conjure unimaginable visions. There is growing awareness of the power of art, science, and relational belonging. Deleuze and Guattari teach me about "becoming-artistic," reaching beyond clients' subjective experience to embrace all forms of life (Grosz, 2007, p. 300). Art documents our potential in ways beyond text and logic. By bringing together the vitality of art, creation, and all processes of becoming, we can reimagine the world and ourselves. There are possibilities beyond our perceptions, stories, and beliefs when we step out of conventional systems of representation, sense-making, and the 'self.' Through art and narrative, we can interact with a sentient Earth and situate ourselves within the living geographies of our land and cityscapes, cultures, technologies, imaginations, and relationships.





Throughout the series, art has highlighted the strength of in-process, handmade, and less recognizable ideas. Using aesthetic strategies, narrative therapy can challenge known terrain as our starting points. Clients' stories are filled with vitality when we enlarge our ways of ordering experience and radicalize what we see as possible. In this way, art far exceeds the role of artmaking by exemplifying unseen choices in our lives, worldviews, and narrative practices.

Of course, there are decades of examples and hundreds of artists who could have been included in this project. The definitions of "art" and "aesthetics" continue to expand, and technology is increasingly part of artistic conversations, including digital work. Our therapy offices become their own contingent geographies, hovering on the margins of the commonplace as sites of witnessing and transport. Our Zoom rooms are neither inside nor outside, blurring spatial boundaries.

Art inspires participatory actions and fosters immersive dialogues beyond the human-centric. Our stories can fight back against complicity as we awaken to vital aesthetic performances and animate new options in our daily lives.

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