

Reverse Blackboard: Teaching and the Unseen

By Nicholas Paley & Anne McCrary Sullivan

Nicholas Paley

For some time now, I have been experimenting with a series of research projects (both individually and in collaboration) as part of my ongoing inquiry into the craft of teaching. These explorations have crossed diversified analytic space, reflecting critical, narrative, autobiographical, conceptual, and poetic approaches to specific educational issues including pedagogy, research, mentoring, collaboration, and curriculum. These projects have emerged from my own instructional practice at George Washington University, where I teach courses in educational foundations and curriculum, and from my work with students and colleagues in researching what we may know, what we can know, and how we can communicate such understandings in expressive form (Kawamata, Paley & Kumakura, 2001; Paley, 1995; Paley & Jipson, 1997, 2000).

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Exploring the varied dimensions of teaching through this diversified approach has been a conscious choice; and its multi-genre perspective is designed to simultaneously evoke and respond to the increasingly complex realities of teachers' lives as they move across swiftly tilting landscapes whose boundaries

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of location, meaning-making, and exchange are increasingly shifting in relation to new technologies, new discourses, and new forms of cultural production.

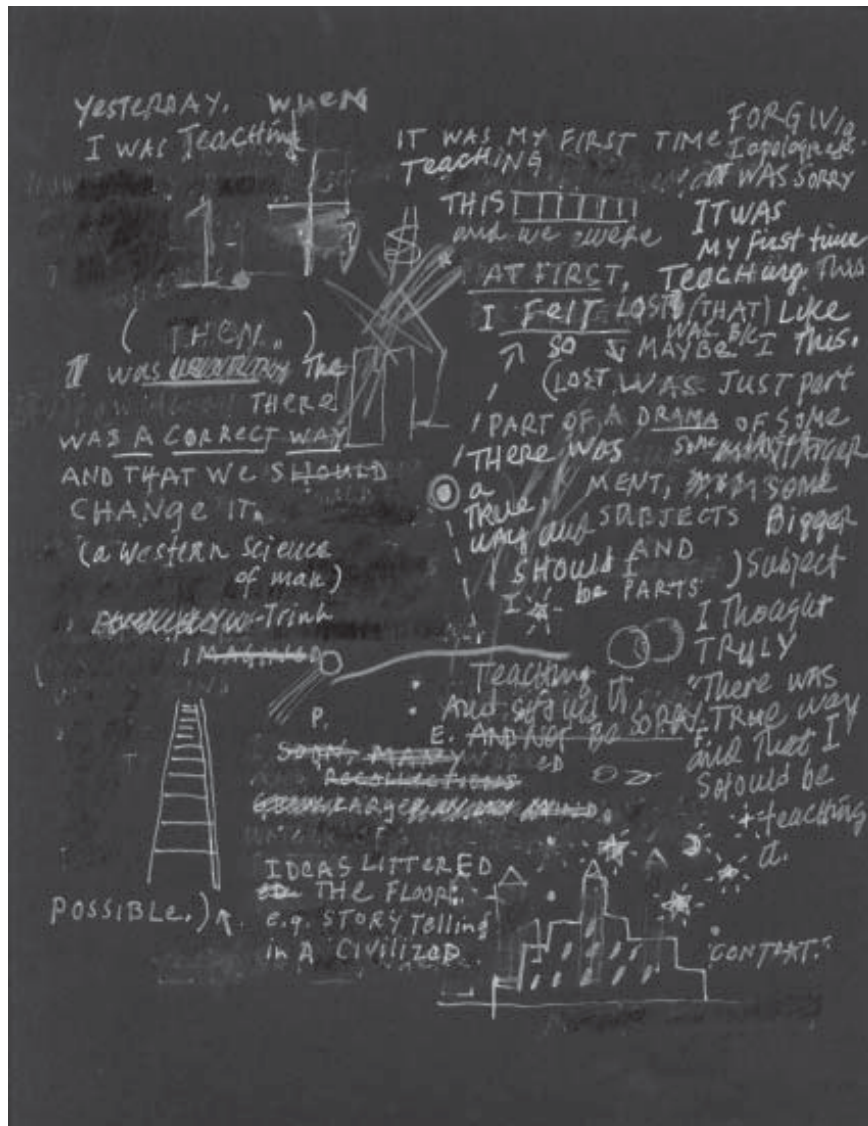
This specific project, *Reverse Blackboard*, is a continuation of a series of experiments initiated during this (2001-2002) academic year, and which explores—from a still different, arts-based perspective—some of the mysteries and materials, the passions and ambiguities of the teaching process. Its origin grew out of the courses I teach, and from my invitation to students to keep a daily journal—largely visual in nature—that might serve as a launch pad to generate responses to the operation of class teachings and learnings, as well as to the processes by which knowledge finds its complex formations. I participate in this experience, too, and the format of what we each do in our journal is completely open. This approach creates an informal space where issues for analysis are personally produced, and where methodologies are multiple and surprising. In this space, we “exercise the right to our curiosity” (Freire, 1998, p. 60) in different ways, and “there are no themes or values of which we cannot speak, no areas in which [we] must be silent”(p. 58).

These experiences produce understandings outside the conventions of normalized analysis and response, and generate pathways for reflection that are lively and unpredictable. We make time to share our work with each other—not just as a politics of representation—but as a form of critical inquiry as we try, through our artwork, to organically connect our imaginations to issues of power, hierarchy, and authority relations in the wider effort “to [not just] read texts but to understand contexts” (McLaren, 1996, p. 143) in which the course we make is studied and produced.

My specific goal in the *Reverse Blackboard* series is to explore those seemingly random dreams and memories, fragments and anxieties, contradictions and fantasies that may well exist on just the other side of formal productions of classroom knowledge: What, for instance, are the private reveries that pulse through my mind when I’m engaged in the more public act of teaching? What kinds of subjectivities—or silences—are generated by a particular line of class discussion? By a single word? What happens to the formation of ideas as they scatter in the air? What anarchies emerge when a class isn’t going well? What wrecks of thoughts and phrases and words? Why all these messy, never-really erased emotions and doubts? I’ve been trying “write” one reverse blackboard after every class I teach, usually in the evenings when I have more time to reflect on my notes of what transpired in class on that particular day. Sometimes I complete this process at one sitting; in other instances, the recordings can take days or weeks, and I am “done” with this kind of teaching when a series of representations emerge that, to me, seem the most sincere and moving. The particular drawings reproduced here were selected from a larger number done during the fall semester, 2001 as I was engaged in teaching an introductory, Masters-level educational foundations course that is required for all teacher education candidates at GW.

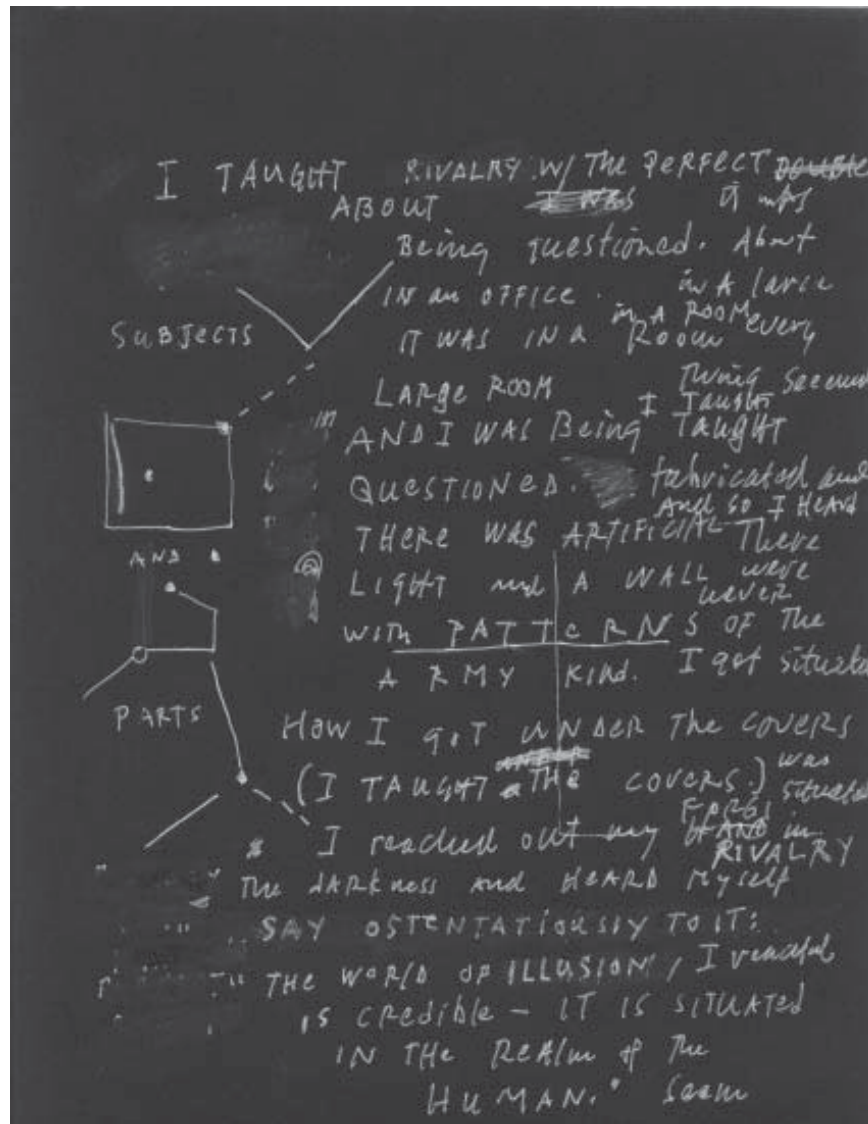
Reverse Blackboard Series

Figure 1



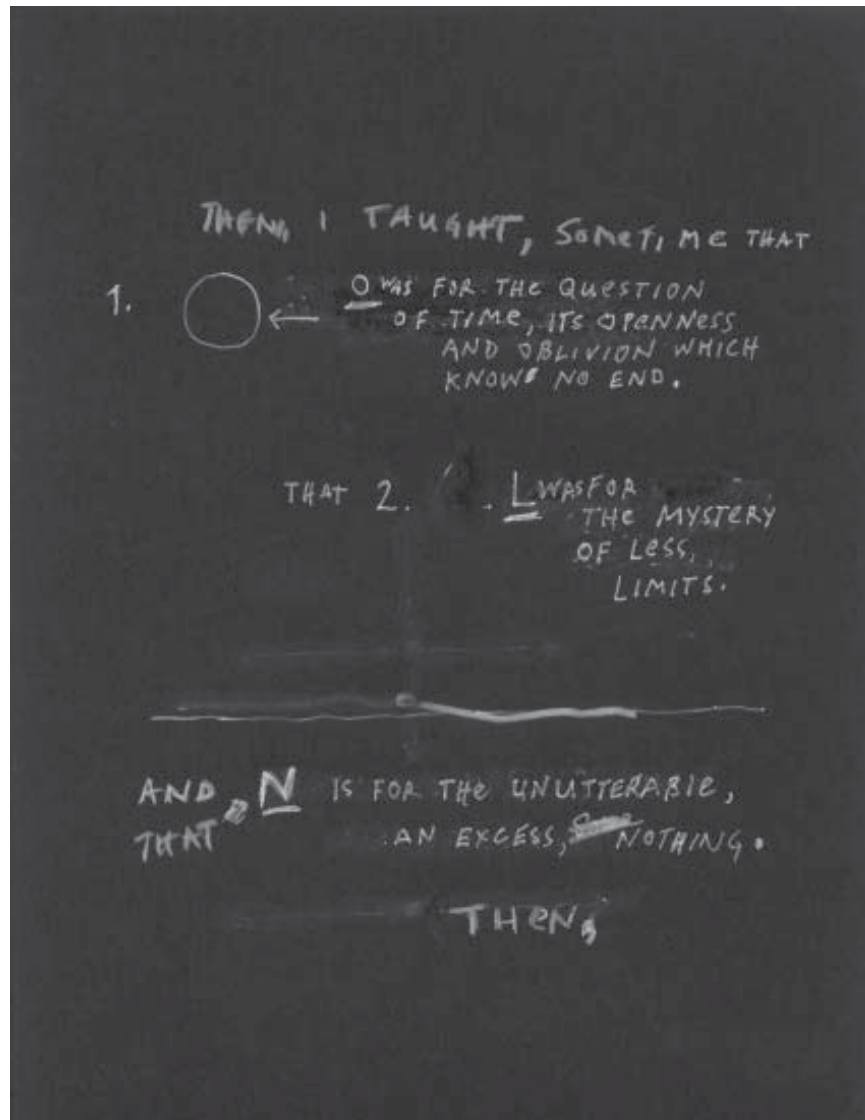
Reverse Blackboard Series

Figure 2



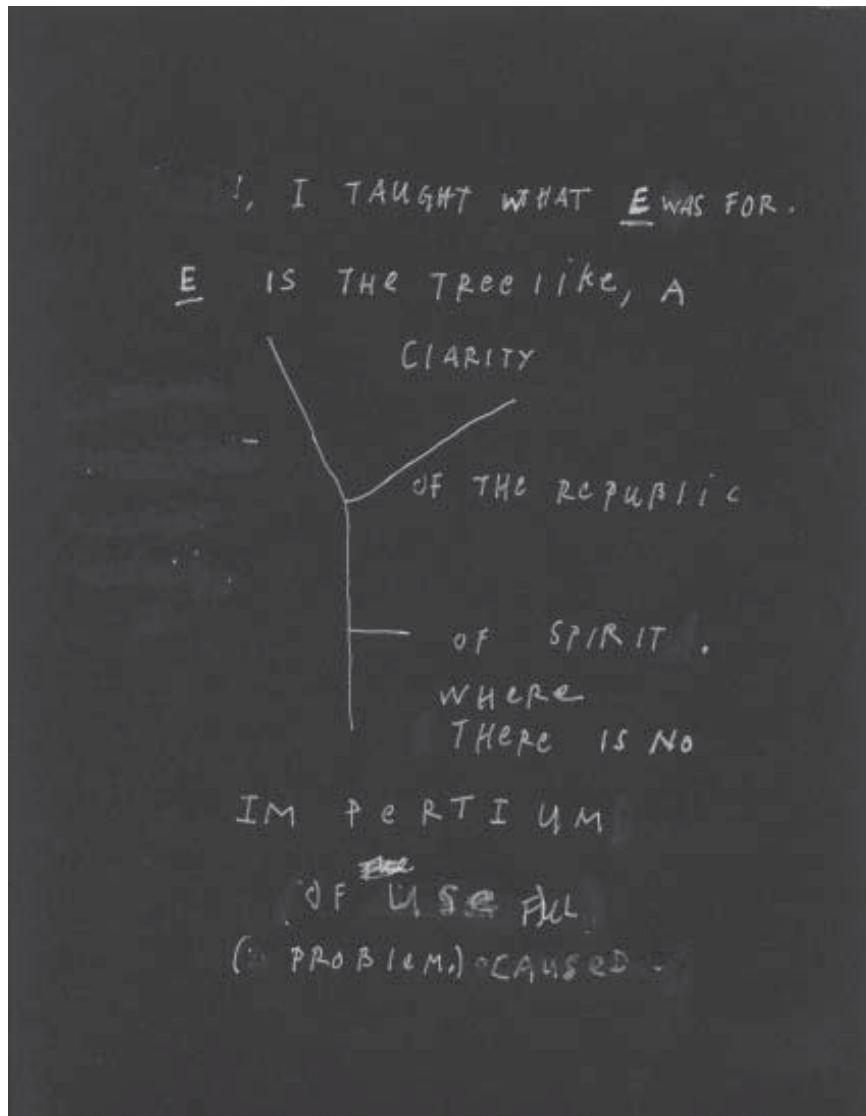
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Figure 3



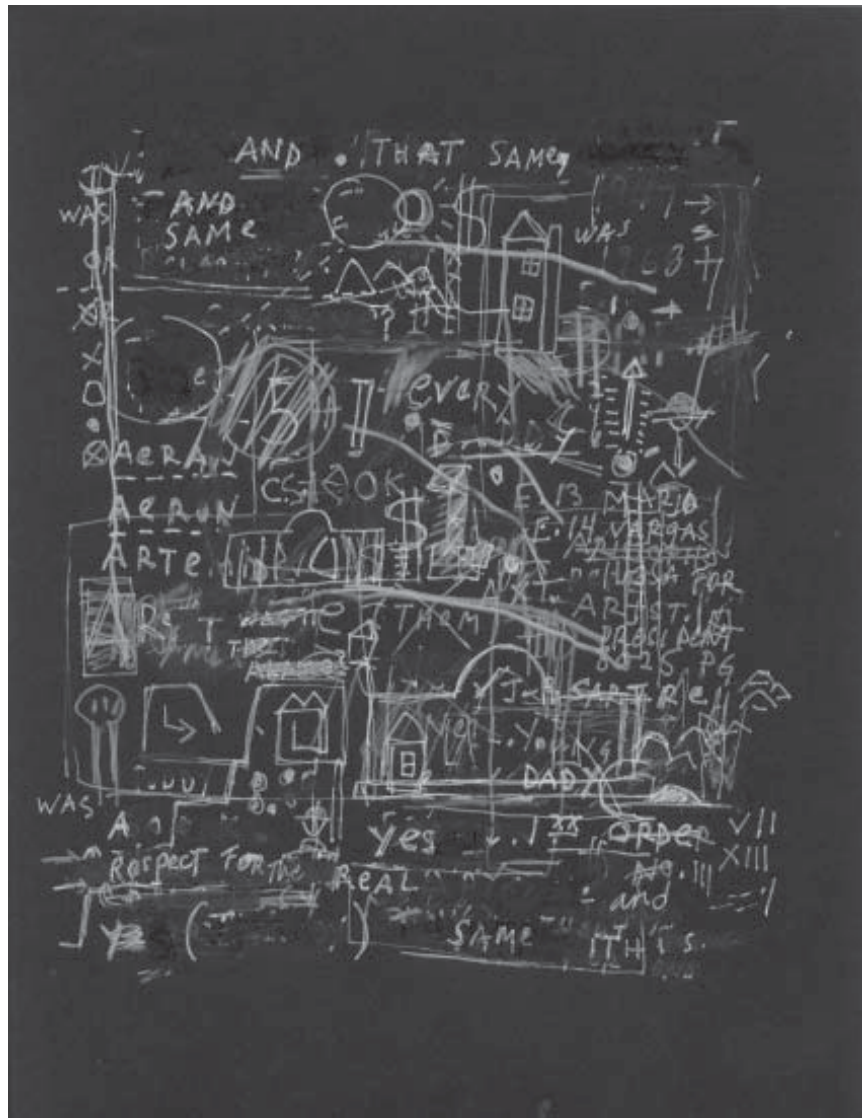
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Figure 4



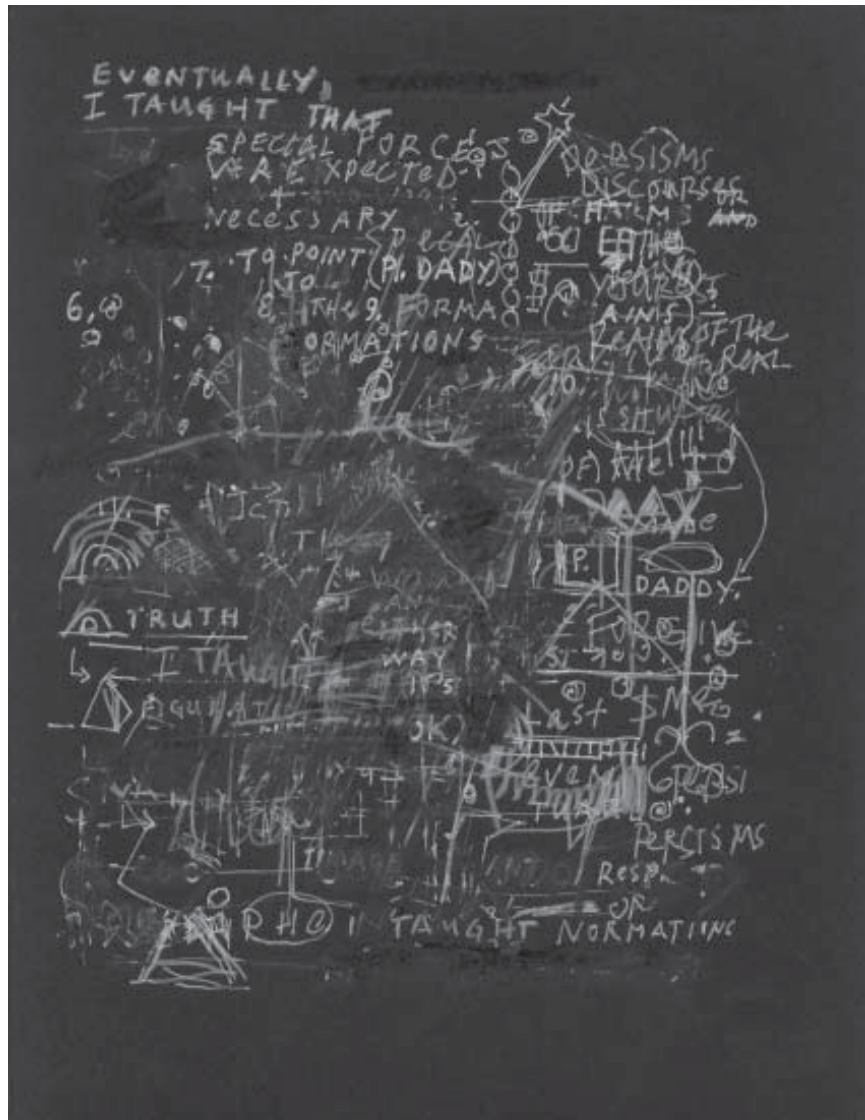
Reverse Blackboard Series

Figure 5



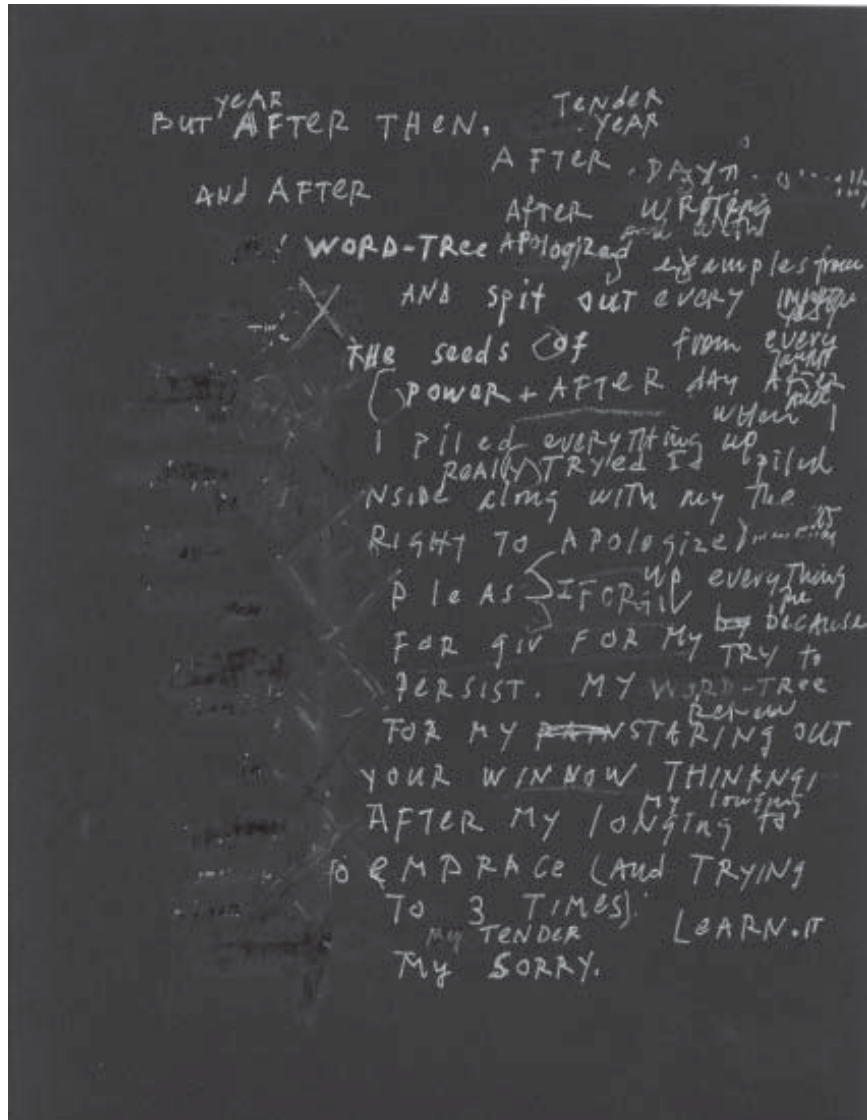
Reverse Blackboard Series

Figure 6



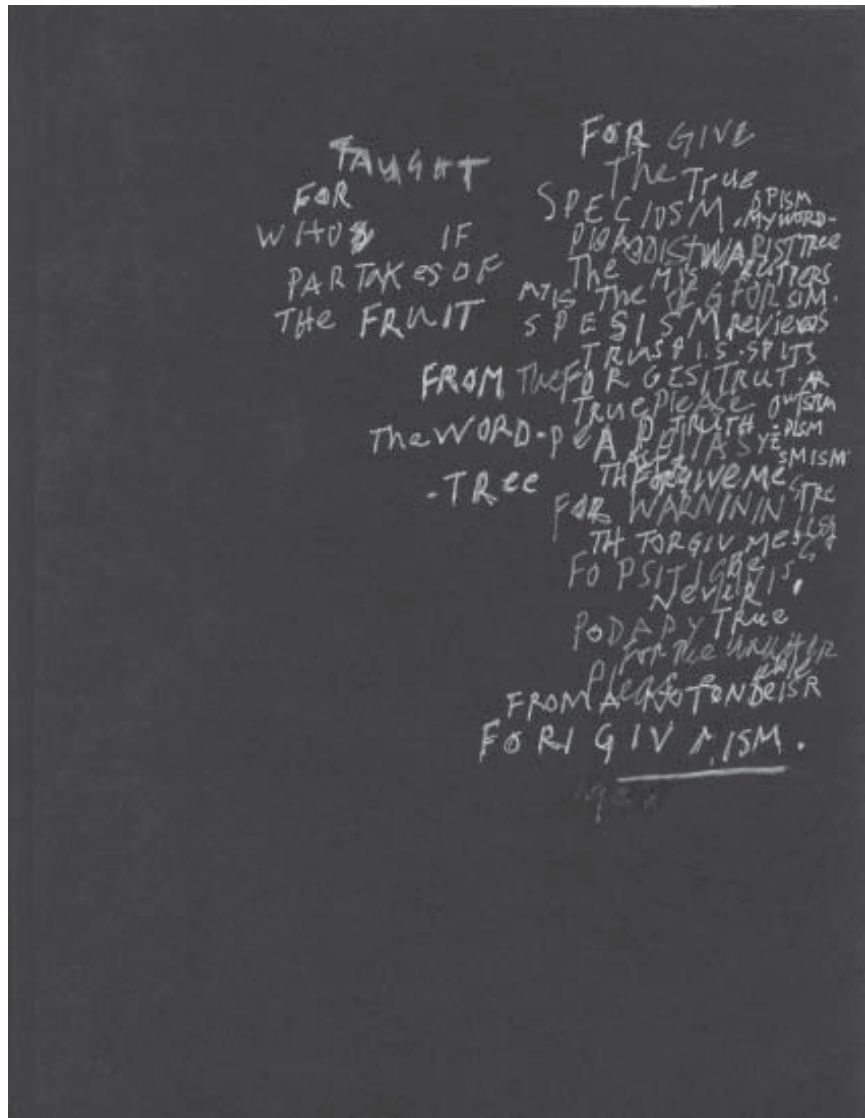
Reverse Blackboard Series

Figure 7



Reverse Blackboard Series

Figure 8



References

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Anne McCrary Sullivan

The Blackboard Poem

1.

Imagine is crossed out
"Ideas littered the floor"

No easy way to get through this
No easy way to read

Confusion – and earnestness

"I thought truly there was a true way
and that I should be teaching it."

It was my first time.

1 † \$

2.

A constellation of subjects and parts
An interrogation under artificial light

A wall

Patterns

Coverage

I taught and I was being taught.

Illusion is human.

Reverse Blackboard

3 & 4.

O-L-N-E

L-O-N-E

Openness, Mystery
Unutterable

Clarity is redefined.
(Or is it a lie?)

5.

Complexity is real
Respect it

Overlappings, intersections
Arte creeps in
and Sartre

“I saw the figure 5
... and wheels rumbling
through the dark city”¹

constructed and deconstructed

Dady, Dady, Dady

Who is teaching?
And what?

6.

Daddy, Daddy, Daddy
Spell it right

I taught necessary
discourses

Truth

I taught
I taught

7.

Tender
Staring out your winnow
Longing

Trying to learn it
Spit out the seeds

Longing
Staring

8.

I have partaken
the fruit
from the word tree

taught the true
spit it out
Where is the ladder of the possible?
This is a warning.

Forgive me.

Notes on reading "Reverse Blackboard"

I laid the panels out on the floor in sequence, began reading the first panel. My immediate first response was a sort of anxiety. *How am I supposed to read this?* I couldn't tell how to follow the broken lines—left to right? top to bottom? right top to bottom, then left top to bottom? I got past that pretty quickly, however, realizing after the initial panic that this was not *supposed* to be read in a linear way. I turned my reading over to intuition, allowed my eyes to move to whatever drew their attention, reading bits here and bits there, looking at the drawings. When I had attended for a few minutes, I began to make notes, just a list of what I saw or what I thought while seeing—a few prominent observations. I wrote these on a sheet of paper which I placed below the first blackboard panel. Moving to the next panel, I repeated the process and continued in that way until I had read and annotated all eight panels (combining notes for #3 & #4).

Then I went back to see what the accumulated notes might suggest, what clues they might give me that I could use in constructing a brief analysis. I gathered the 7 pages and read through them, realizing very quickly (and to my astonishment) that the notes were making a sort of poem. In retrospect this makes sense. Poetry is my primary strategy for dealing with experiences characterized

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by ambiguity and tension. At the moment, however, this surprised me. I hadn't done it on purpose!

I remembered then something that I have often quoted from John Dewey's *Art As Experience*: "There is something stupid about turning poetry into a prose that is supposed to explain the meaning of poetry." Was "Reverse Blackboard"—a highly concentrated expression of simultaneous and overlapping meanings—a sort of visual poem? I hadn't had that thought before, but having had it, it seemed right. And a poetic response to the poem seemed more "right" than a rational, abstract analysis of it, claiming completeness and clarity. I abandoned the "analysis" project as inappropriate and undesirable. Instead, I made minor revisions to what I was already committed to calling "the blackboard poem."

Now I find myself confronting the question: *Is any of this useful?* I suspect that it is, or has potential to be, for those who have the patience and ingenuity to engage with it. I think that "Reverse Blackboard" offers an occasion for/lesson in reading of nonlinear, mixed verbal and visual text. It's a sort of lesson that our traditional educations have rarely offered us. And yet, as researchers, when we read educational events and contexts, we are, in fact, challenging ourselves to decode a complex, simultaneous mix of visual and verbal text.

Clearly, no two readings of "Reverse Blackboard" will be the same. If I were to read it again now, I would read it differently myself. There is no one truth to be decoded here—just as there is no single, unique truth to be derived from a richly enacted poem or from a complex educational event. The value of a text like this lies in the very experience of interpretation; in the discussions that arise from compared meanings; and in compared articulations of meaning-making strategies.

Nicholas Paley

Foldings, Unfoldings, Refoldings

Maybe risky to start this way, but here goes.

In the concluding section of his mapping of the work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, John Rajchman (2000) addresses the relationship of art and philosophy in the Deleuzian landscape, finding this connection "a delicate one, fraught . . . with a strange rivalry and identification" (p. 114). Rajchman then points out how Deleuze figures this "strange" relationship, seeing in it a series of unexpected "interferences" which operate across two fundamentally different kinds of practices, or planes—that of philosophy (or the plane of organization) and that of art (or the plane of immanence)—neither of which is above or below the other. The unpredictable interactions ("interferences") that crackle across these two practices cast thinking into zones of the unseen and the "unthought," and produce new, often unexpected situations where both "thought and art can come alive and discover their resonances with one another" (p. 115).

“Tender
Staring out your winnow . . .”

I raise this seemingly obscure gem of Deleuzian thought in order to generate a series of speculations related to teaching and its relation to the artistic imagination. Could the same tension that Deleuze imagines between art and philosophy be equally expressive of the complex relationship between art and education as well—“a delicate one,” and “fraught . . . with strange rivalry and identification . . . interferences and resonances”?

“It’s a sort of lesson that our traditional educations have rarely offered us . . .”

If this might be so, what kinds of stances could we—as educators or educator/artists—assume to it? What kinds of work would we produce and with what languages? For what purposes? What kinds of relations would these creations heat up? What kinds of responses? Could it even be conceivable that a kind of non-educational understanding of education might be produced through the arts—indeed that the educational always presupposes such production, subconsciously invites it, is in some ways addressed to it, and yet all the while remains consciously uncertain of it? (My language here is Deleuzian, but the questions can be folded over and, I believe, can pertain equally to educational landscapes as well.)

“I saw the figure 5
. . . and wheels rumbling
through the dark city . . .”¹

The reviewer’s commentary of *Reverse Blackboard* was forwarded to me by the guest editors. I was invited to respond to it in any way I chose. It was the editors’ idea to generate a larger, multi-level conversation located in the original visual production, and yet which might extend in unplanned ways from it through a series of following commentaries. I was immediately intrigued by this suggestion for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that it provided an opportunity for experimenting with the construction of a dialectical exploration of issues where specific intersections of the artistic and the educational could be investigated and made central to pedagogical understanding.

“I thought truly there was a true way
and that I should be teaching it . . .”

I was also sympathetic to the chance to further explore questions related to research, representation, and genre within this context, especially where multiple understandings might flourish and where separate and connected voices might be heard. So this is where my reading of the reviewer’s complex, layered responses to “Reverse Blackboard” began. But almost immediately I found myself warped back to the re-readings of Deleuze above—which flashed me back to still other connections—i.e., John Dewey’s notions about the endless layerings and re-layerings of

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thought and how the ways of knowing involve a continuous, creative reconstruction; and Paulo Freire's insistence that we know with the whole of who we are — memory and imagination, history and difference, experience and enchantment, touch and mind.

“If I were to read it again now, I would read it differently myself . . .”

I love the wonderful, complicated dialogue at work in the commentary—it's like a deuce lingo whose tensions and formations dance across both poetic and notational language. For me, this structure echoes the Deleuzian landscape I perseverated about above: *Reading “Reverse Blackboard”* is figured here across a kind of plane of immanence (“*The Blackboard Poem*”) and a kind of plane of organization (“*Notes on reading “Reverse Blackboard”*”). So such planes really do exist in some locations of the concrete! And while one of these responses (or planes) precedes the other in the discursive format of the review, it nowhere suggests an essential ordering or hierarchy. Rather, the author analyzes how specific connections, abandonments, and relations are personally and epistemologically produced; how they interfere with each other in and across each of these dimensions; and how they spark conversations about practices of interpretation and experience, knowing and being, meaning-making and meaning-breaking, in ways that integrate non-educational imaginations into the educational process. Wish we could have talked about this face to face . . .

“bits here and bits there . . .”

So much of teaching is produced in the public world. And yet so much of its drama is so deeply subjective and intimate. Its performances are daily suspensions between belief and imagination, the concrete and the hypothetical, the mysterious and the routine, the foldings of who/what you are and of who/what you are not yet. Madeline Grumet (1988) reminds us of the value of these metaphorical and epistemological foldings, unfoldings, refoldings in the analysis of teaching, as they productively “inform, confront, and mystify each other” (p. 6). And yet there are moments when even these constructions break down; when even these meanings escape their inconsistent coherence. Chelsea Bailey's (1997) retellings of her teaching experiences call our attention to “*that which cannot be accounted for* [original italics] . . . that which cannot be contained by the bounds of the self-text” (p. 147), even as this experience desperately struggles to unfold what it seeks to be. These kinds of analytic choreographies can say something about teaching that should not be overlooked simply because their presence is so difficult to see. “Who's there? . . . “Stand and unfold yourself”—the ghostly nightwatch call that opens *Hamlet*—always extends beyond dramatic reference for those interested enough to care.

“Complexity is real
Respect it . . .”

Put another way: can such productions help diagnose the conditions of this new age of performance-achievement-cognitivism by which we increasingly work and find ourselves produced? Will some of the dialogues they stimulate—confusing, confronting, questioning, overlapping, strange, estranging—extend the boundaries by which teaching (and inquiry of it) is defined? Might this occasion the conditions where both “thought and art can come alive and discover their resonances with one another”?

Or will teaching continue to reproduce what it consciously desires after all?

“. . . the broken lines—left to right? top to bottom?. . .”

Note

¹ Quoted from "The Great Figure" by William Carlos Williams.

References

- Bailey, C. (1997). A place from which to speak: Stories of memory, crisis, and struggle from the preschool classroom. In J. Jipson & N. Paley (Eds.), *Daredevil research: Re-creating analytic practice*, 21 (pp. 137-157). New York: Peter Lang.
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