

# Paint, prism and precarity: Edge as mediator for connection making between people and place

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## ABSTRACT

This practice-based inquiry explores the qualities of 'edge' as a concept for fostering relational discourse between instances of situational precariousness and vulnerability. Drawing from Van Stralen's doctoral research, the authorship team articulate a meaning making process from peripatetic speculation and autoethnographic movement between people and place. A process and practice for how edge is conceived to articulate modalities of thinking-through-painting, alongside the use of urban exploration as an intermediary space in which to test and enact ideas is presented. From this, meaning and metaphor are drawn from the act of painting and its available perspectives. It is through this that paint becomes a means to render precarious edge space between people and place, laden with relational possibility.

Through a series of meaning made between textual and pictorial transitions, the possibilities of edge as a mediator for connection-making are considered. In bringing painting, writing, and speculation into a place of urban exploration, new edges are made and exposed. The junkyard as context for practice-based urban exploration enables a relational process for connection making between people, place and precarity. This practice-based research offers inroads to meanings made from edge space between object, form, and place. These painting-generated meanings can inform onto-poetic engagement with edge worlds and new renderings of contemporary precarious experiences.

*Keywords: Practice-based research, autoethnography, metaphor, urban exploration*

## Mapping the edge space: An impetus

This article shares insights from practice-based research investigating the qualities and utility of edge space as mediator for meaning and connection making. Van Stralen's PhD research emerges from her interest in conceiving edge space as a means to render spatial metaphors (pictorial and textual), and the meaning we make from these to highlight connective human experiences of precarity. In this investigation, the physical act of painting is employed to navigate a responsive method for negotiating a language of edgeness. The qualities of what this article refers to as 'the edge', 'edge' and 'edgeness' builds upon the work of three specific scholars and artists: Jo Baer, Judith Butler and Patricia Kelly. This article describes outcomes from a practice-based PhD investigation pertaining to how we conceive edge space as a mediator for connectivity and knowing. Throughout this article, 'edge' and 'edgeness' is a catalyst and conduit for speculation and transition. As a mediator for meaning making, edge can be abrupt, intermingling, overlaid or contested in paint itself and the intangible edge spaces between worlds rendered through paint; be they physical, incorporeal, or subjectively discovered (Van Stralen, 2022).

Minimalist painter Jo Baer's conception of edge resonates, particularly where she describes most sensation being found at the edge of things (as cited in Kelly, 2009). This notion of sensation is important for edge making and finding in practice-based research, with Kelly's (2009) contributions foregrounding the utility of practice-based research for physically rendering contour, boundaries, and transitions between edge space from which further meaning can be made. Further to Baer's notion of edgeness, our examination of edge meaning, and implications segue with Butler's (2013) claim that 'only once we have suffered...are we compelled, ethically, to ask how we will respond' (p.19/21). The subsequent practices and processes elicited in this article reverberate and build upon edge space as the place where we assess our current world and participate in its' transformation and becoming.

Through concepts and tools inherent to paint, prism and precarity, this article examines Van Stralen's lived experiences (identified via 'I' and 'my' voice throughout) of edgeness as a doorway for making meaning of/from discourse pertaining to displacement, precariousness and vulnerability. Through deployment of "imaginative speculation" (Ravetz, 2004, p. 13) the utility of edge as mediator for accessing, making and understanding meaning not only from the outside but from imaginative positions within is considered. This speculative approach for meaning making in, through and from practice-based research posits a distinct approach for self-reflective and reflexive investigation for surfacing possibilities of connectivity between people and place. In so doing, the utility of relational tools inherent to painting and writing are examined by this authorship team under the direction and leadership of Van Stralen (identified via 'we' and 'us' throughout) as is their potential for mediating speculation and slippage between old and new ways of knowing, doing, being and becoming (MacDonald et al., 2022).

Deploying (not certain is Via the right word – something more stronger – perhaps?) an investigative analysis of one's own boundaries of personal experience and subjectivity, we render space to consider the multifaceted role of anticipatory edge as a tool for mediating connection making. This method invites participatory response through two distinct and entwined avenues; the process of conceiving and unpacking metaphoric potential, and in the practical rendering of sites from which meaning making can thrive (Coleman & MacDonald, 2020). A relational methodology for mapping

edge space fosters connection between the human, non-human and more-than-human places we find ourselves in (Coleman, 2018; MacDonald, 2017). It is from this space that this article elicits a process, practice and creative product embracing not knowing, endurance, survival, resilience, and risk (Dow, 2020).

Using this account, we report on the ways edge space can foster relational discourse for capturing moments and movements between destabilisation and change as encountered in exploration of urban environments. In so doing, we converge and explore theoretical, practical and methodological considerations for edge as a mediator for connectivity between people and places. Artist and anthropologist Amanda Ravetz (2002) articulates the concept of “imaginative speculation” as a valuable source of social understanding, accessed “not only from the outside but from an imaginative position from within” (p. 78). This idea has helped inform the approach of self-reflexive investigation adopted by Van Stralen in her PhD research as a source of emerging possibilities for empathy and connectivity with others. This is unfolded through discussion pertaining to how, where and why edginess can be deployed to prosecute meaning of, from and for connectivity is offered. From this, we posit the utility of edge for heightening how people might perceive and observe relationships with things, events and each other.

Negotiation of meaning through the practice and process of painting explored in this article is informed by Matthews’ (2009) concept of onto-poetics through ‘the communicative engagement of self with the world, and the world with self’ (Matthews, 2009, p.1). It is from this that we posit the utility of onto-poetics in/for/from painting practice as a means for rendering an ecology of edginess. Consistent with the process and practices outlined in this article, investigations that recognise a process of urban exploration tend to be far more interested in seeking out onto-poetic (Alt, 2016) qualities for fostering relationality; the Ontopoetic, using the definition of the ‘site of transformation that draw attention to the relations between poetics, life and the political (Alt 2016, p.179)’, is a pertinent and fitting approach to dealing with evolving, politically fraught, neglected and abandoned zones.

Spaces which are viable locations for such exploration tend to be liminal, hierarchically ambiguous, and populated by opportunistic inhabitants. As such, they become rich sources of meaning and interaction beyond the scope of ‘normal’ formal structures of understanding.

## RENDERING NARRATIVE EDGSPACE AS METHOD FOR MAKING MEANING

Making meaning from significant life moments plays a central role in Van Stralen’s approach to painting practice, with storying of personal experience providing emotional substance for relational studio practice. Through storied textual and visual data, Van Stralen explores narratively significant ideas with established frameworks that enable identification, consideration and sense-making of wider uncertainties encountered in place. Visual and textual autoethnographic data is generated, with subsequent meaning made through connecting key story threads to relevant established approaches, deepening knowledge via storied scholarship. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) describe autoethnography as a method which helps researchers to carefully consider the ways we define objectives within research. Personal story-making provides an effective and verified means for capturing complex and meaningful phenomena, through which we can examine morals and ethics to

elucidate and relate purposeful thought and action. Subsequently, the reflexivity of Van Stralen's practice-led research is attended to through her generation and analysis of storied data which give space for further diverse interpretations 'to make meaning of others and themselves' (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.274) in relational ways.

By interweaving textual and visual vignettes of critical events made in relation to the junkyard, these images and texts function as significant plot points for the 'imaginative speculation' (Maliki, 2019) discussed. The following sections are seeded with storylines (indicated through the use of *italics*) from Van Stralen's autoethnographic vignettes to render the 'speculative middle' (Springgay & Truman, 2018). From that space, these vignettes weave their way across this remainder of the article to map a situating and navigation towards broader analytical commentary. Discourse of paint, precarity and perspective are rendered through visual and textual narrative to articulate the activation of edgework as mediator for connection making between people and place.

The following sections explore three distinct stages of painting production practiced by Van Stralen. Each section entwines visual and textual data to elicit Van Stralen's encounter and interfacing with themes of precarity, displacement and edgework. Textual content comprises fragments of self-generated and found narrative seek to activate visual material generated (via drawing and photography) through urban exploration of the junkyard. The late Canadian poet scholar Carl Leggo's (1998) ideas of reflexive writing are leveraged to compose a responsive method of iterative text-driven and text-generative painting. In the practice-based research shared here, we invite the reader to make personally brokered meaning between text and paint. In doing so, we adopt a process which merges more-than-human environments in order to hold space for imagining and grafting new associations and understandings (MacDonald et al., 2022).

## THE JUNKYARD AS SITE FOR URBAN EXPLORATION

Urban exploration, as practiced in this PhD research, involves exercises of reflexive, imaginative listening to the site as an entity. Bachelard (1964) gives expression to this kind of listening as a daydream of 'intimate immensity' (p. 183) that gives meaning to expressions made in relation to and from encounters. When contemplating the junkyard space, the 'ruins' at the centre of this PhD research speak to an illusion of human imperviousness to the evocative paradox of a construction site wasteland. From the speculative middle of the junkyard (Figure 1), an urban exploration unfolds in relation to storying into and out of painterly investigation. The junkyard space is located a short walk from Van Stralen's home, which we observe and describe as an ambiguous space for 'housing' wreckage and waste of destruction and construction. Threaded with pathways, piles of concrete and sudden blooms of feral plants, it is a landscape of perpetual and tenacious evolution. These environs provide rich opportunities for activating thinking through such sites as spaces for opportunity, absence, and intercepting histories and narratives.



Fig. 1. Anna Van Stralen, *Murphy Street Junkyard*, 2018. Digital Photograph, Courtesy of the artist.

As an edge space with boundaries under constant alteration, the junkyard both changes and is changed in the passage of urban exploration and articulation of meaning made from place. The junkyard is a place of onto-poetics, adopted here as a 'site of transformation, that draws attention to the relations between poetics, life and the political' (Alt, 2017, p. 41). Van Stralen embarked upon unfolding praxis 'attentive to the ordinary and overlooked, that which agitates and provokes; to touch, to feel, to walk in a graveyard if you can find one' (Springgay & Truman, 2018, p.138). In context of this practice-based PhD investigation, the junkyard explored in this article constitutes a space akin to a graveyard (Figure 2). Within the context of such a provocative space for speculation, edge spaces of precarity are rendered through creative interpretation, with subsequent meaning expressed and processed via reflexive narratives and paintings.



Fig. 2. Anna Van Stralen, detail, 2018. *Prisms series: Glass Cat*, 2018.  
Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 32 cm. Collection of the Artist.

Images form and offer solidified narratives bound in and at the precipice of edge space for a viewer. These are shaped from bias which compound on confirmations found within the information – with the same image, many narratives can be read in the rich metaphoric spaces between motifs, symbols and settings. Edging into ‘the prism series’, which became a defined stage and integral scaffold of the doctoral investigation, Van Stralen began to construct images using methods inherent to Leggo’s (2008) narrative constructions. By breaking down observed material into components of essential qualities of colour, pattern and form like those offered in *Glass Cat*, each part of the larger composition stands independent from its surroundings. This approach seeks to acquaint the viewer with the transient, the uncertain and the enigmatic elements identified when observing a physical space.

Through relating to space as matter to diffuse and filter through self, a metaphor of light filters through objects to draw out characteristics. This metaphor of making meaning with the diffractive qualities of light through a prism is deployed in Van Stralen’s renderings of the junkyard site. As a tool for considering risk from a vulnerable, contemplative, reflective and refractive stance (Van Stralen,

2022), the prism metaphor is found to be a generative means for speculation and making meaning visible through story and visual interpretation. This strategy does not set out to explain or concretely define ambiguous forms encountered and depicted, but rather compel consideration of their tension and strangeness.

Interestingly, McFarlane & Söderström (2017) describe how urban explorers are reportedly predominantly male, and most frequently preoccupied with risk and transgression. Van Stralen describes her experience of urban exploration as seeking to relate to space and tension of space not through transgression but with vulnerability. In this research, a lens of vulnerability enables alertness to be felt as an aliveness to risk; a risk which is unrealised, but not absent.

As time is spent among the fragments of many ruined safe spaces, the irony and the impact of their new, precarious forms is felt. *I do not step on their piled forms – they are unfixed, a danger to the unwary.* Vulnerability fosters awareness and sensibility for enacting the role of witness, defined as the observer who understands themselves as being exposed to risk, connected to the subject through potential (Landroos & Moller 2017, p. 2). As such, Van Stralen adopts the position – through the metaphor or prism - as an observer and an ‘experiencer’ of life’s inherent lack of stability. The prism has realities which are seen and experienced visually as well as providing a transformative device for what we see, and how we slip between and its new paradigms for knowing (Van Stralen, 2022). As such, the vulnerable and precarious stance brought to this practice-based research enables observation of navigation of risk relationally encountered in surroundings.

## ON WITNESSING AND AN ONTO-POETICS FOR URBAN EXPLORATION

Extrapolating Van Stralen’s encounters with objects in the junkyard space involved negotiating artefacts of chimney pieces, clay pipe, bricks and tangles of domestic rebar. These artefacts offer structural possibilities for thinking in and through the interpretative practice of onto-poetic witnessing (Alt, 2017), practiced through experiencing, drawing, and generating narratives of immersion and relationship made with the junkyard. The term ‘urban exploration’ is enacted in ‘witnessing the past in the present’(Alt, 2017, p. 6), not in the sense that history is recounted, but that through ‘listening to absence’ one gains access through ‘the materiality of site’(p. 6). This same text goes on to describe a process of engaging imaginatively with that which is lost or absent. Connective possibilities emerge from ink paintings made in relation to piles of wreckage (see Figure 3, 4). These notions centre on the precariousness of human life; the deep responsibility of witnessing the struggles of others and our capacity for structure and space to hold meaning for those purposes (Alt, 2017). As a microcosm of the kinds of material and conceptual possibilities of interest, these domestic ruins provide an avenue through to speak about precarity in relation to lived experience.



Figure 3, 4. Anna Van Stralen, 'Wreckage Study #2 and #3', 2019, Ink and acrylic on paper, courtesy of the artist

Speculative exploration the junkyard enables generation of narrative composed of responsive written expressions developed from the experience of what is seen, touched and felt. The material matter drawn into this narrative making include detritus of structures expelled from the other end of developments pursued for place making of the city that Van Stralen calls home, this being Launceston, Tasmania, Australia. This site became a space for engaging in urban explorative practice that give shape to how *I render human precarity encountered in relation. By exploring these notions of wreckage, I embark upon a process for making and responding to edges made from narrative collisions of hope, grief and empathy.* This is where an imagining of and from the speculative middle centres around acts of observing the fragmentation of things destroyed in pursuit of development. These acts included making note of the impact's bodies have in situ and of the junkyard terrain's relational impact upon bodies. This particular urban exploration enabled Van Stralen 1 to *recognise and understand how my encounter with object, form and place facilitates onto-poetic engagement with edge worlds and my rendering of precarity.* Bachelard (1964) notes that strange images can meet in ways akin to poets pursuing separate dreams, whereby they 'strengthen each other through the free play of the imagination' (p. 59). Referring to the practice of comparing poetic themes, Bachelard's observation rationalises what Van Stralen's witnessing in ruins seeks to achieve in this inquiry. As a poetic form in and of itself, the ruin becomes a tool for examining ontological and epistemological relationships and edge spaces between writing and painting practice. Through acts of comparison, the tumult of imagination becomes more orderly as themes and echoes are brought forth through the mediation of one poetic form via another.

#### THE PRISM AS METAPHOR FOR RENDERING THE PRECARIOUS EDGE

Harnessing experiences gained from ongoing encounters in the junkyard, urban exploration of ruined space become a place of possibility for image collection and idea generation. The processes and practices outlined in this article acknowledge tensions for speaking on matters of human hardship that

oscillate in ambiguous edge space between indirect and direct experience. *I paint the junkyard, its' Further slabs of concrete barely visible in a fading winter sunset. Industrial landmarks crown in unnaturally, creating an invented skyline of menace* (Figure 5). Vulnerability and curiosity are considered in context and relation to assertions of protection and risk. In this way, urban encounters serve to shape our perception of the edge spaces they depict. The edge is where the concept of prism offers premise for perception making as a relational act (Hopp, 2020, p. 263). As a metaphor for making meaning in, at and from edges, the prism calls for maneuvering with care and awareness around difference to build a case for the phenomenon of shared experience (Van Stralen, 2022).



Figure 5. Anna Van Stralen, 2018, *'Last light on the ruins'* digital photograph, courtesy of the artist.

Using the metaphor of prism, I explore my connection and meaning making with the child figure as a mediating lens. In the work *Prism #1: Even her shadow was light*, I introduce a lone child figure, wandering an inhospitable landscape as a prism for shaping and considering our encounter with place. In subscribing to the premise of relational perception, Van Stralen's own experience of having a child came to inform and transform Van Stralen's experience of urban encounter. *It is from this unmediated happening that I find a fitting metaphor for the work which I choose to explore for the duration of this series, this being the light-bending alchemy of the prism and its treatment of light* (Figure 6). In light of this relational perception and its metaphoric qualities, the figure of the child becomes a broker of meaning for everything around it. As an attention attuning device, the child leads us into, to and through *scraped back layers, revealing a gradient of colour tracery, calling to mind the*

*light cast from a prism.* In so doing, the image of the child traversing precarious urban environs filter and mediate as a prism for meaning making possibility.



Figure 6. Anna Van Stralen, 2018, 'Prism #1: Even her shadow was light' acrylic on canvas, courtesy of the artist.

In the practice discussed in this article, it is not the forms themselves that are imbued with meaning, but the speculative repositioning of them within new contexts. This positions the chief activity of composition mapped in this inquiry as the rearrangement of the known into a new configuration. *I wondered what would happen if I smeared this tiny figure across the landscape - I took up a palette knife and did it on a whim, but I regretted it at once, and wiped all I could away; restoring her to herself with a delicate brush.* By accessing, reimagining and offering articulated edges of fragility and precarity, Van Stralen's experiential encounters scaffold an understanding and awareness of how others might feel in precarious situations. The prism draws attention to a stance that perceives humans as existing precariously in the world and in relation to others, whereby 'we are mixed up in the world and with others in an inextricable confusion' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 481). *Underneath her feet, a surprising mark remained; bright like the beam of a prism. 'Kids are so impermanent' I thought. 'They're like prisms; even their shadows are light.'* Through the prism metaphor, Van Stralen positions the bending of light as a symbol of multiplicity, multiple meanings, readings and experiences of fragility that humans carry; in memory, knowledge and through empathy.

This notion of perception being relational and built on human interaction, is a matter of complexity in the ways that it impacts our boundaries of experience and truth. "To perceive is to...see

an immanent sense bursting forth from a constellation of givens' (Merleau-Ponty 2012, p. 23), and in this series of paintings, the prism, as a metaphor for multiple perspectives, as well as a symbol of human precarity of existence, is a device which explains the complex process of engagement with others. This reconfiguration of the vulnerable connections in Van Stralen's life reverberates with Butler's notion of 'appealing to the we' (2004, p. 20). This leaves the composition to do the work of describing what is imagined and expressed as empathy for the situations and narratives of others. It is possible to appeal to a 'we' for 'all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody...loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being attached to others' (Butler 2013, p. 5).

## EDGE AS MEDIATOR FOR CONNECTION MAKING BETWEEN PEOPLE AND PLACE – FUTURE MAPPINGS

When the qualitative hallmarks of autoethnography entwine with the discipline of painting, a praxis for experimental, exploratory and relational discourse of world-building and self-knowing can emerge. Through the process, practice and products examined in this article, the authorship team create and make meaning from a speculative space to consider, capture and convey the precarity of a moment. It just so happens that the research reported in this article was undertaken in the midst of a complex global moment – a moment with a very long tail - that has been described as creating the biggest crisis for the arts in Australia in our lifetimes (Croggon, 2020).

On the heels of Australia's 2019 summer of ravaging bushfires, 2020 ushered in the COVID-19 global pandemic (Coleman & MacDonald 2020). The PhD investigation from which this article reports was undertaken between 2018 and 2021, meaning an immediate lived experience of negotiating practice-based research concurrent to global crises arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis prevails and continues to evolve in ways that reveal how governments and public policy actors understand and perceive the economic and social contribution of the Arts (Banks & O'Connor, 2020). The public health responses and the measures of policy makers led to unforeseen and layered consequences for the Arts, which have needed to adapt methods, practices and processes quickly in response (UNESCO, 2020). COVID-19 redirected but did not derail the pursuit of practice-based research reported in this article. Van Stralen found herself speaking into and out of a local, national and global dialogue that was knowingly embroiled in shared precarity, especially in the field of Arts where she is most closely affiliated. In a time when the Arts themselves continue to be challenged to form practices that can transcend platforms and handle sharp discursive processes (Tasmanian Department of State Growth 2021), the need for fresh perspectives that can handle the dynamism of new relationships found in edge spaces is acute in our era of COVID19 (Van Stralen, 2022).

With edge, edge space and edgeness as mediator, this practice-based research allows us to sit with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) of anthropocentrism is in its centring of human, which by [dishonourable] 'virtue' bestows person with the privilege of planetary dominance, resource extraction, mastery, and stewardship (Braidotti, 2013). This is acknowledged and attended to through the practice of reflexivity, where self is recognised as one source of knowledge, and a medium of expression in relation (Maliki, 2017). Turkish art theorist Maliki speaks to this kinship and synergy between autoethnography and artistry for entwining phenomena and methodology 'as a source of knowledge, and as a medium of expression' (p. 487). This article elucidates an approach for fostering generative

methodological edge space, out of which meaning is made from things unearthed and put to work manifesting a symbolic and metaphorically potent painting. As a respondent to a 'call of conscience' (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p.81), Van Stralen practiced reflexivity in establishing a relational edge space and connections between self, meaning, making and the curiosities encountered in urban exploration. Bochner and Ellis refer to this practice as being the 'vulnerable observer', who is able to make their work personally important at the same time as raising ideas of responsibility, otherness, and difference 'by sharing their faces' (p.82).

While edge space and its accompanying prism metaphor offer the authorship team an architecture of and for meaning making between people and place, Roussell (2020) reminds us of the precarity of threshold, where potential exists for the emergence of divisive ecologies (p.1). The tenuousness of this threshold edginess of a 'shared human precarity' (Butler, 2015) is rendered in the painted outcomes, where structure and environment reveal spaces of tension and transition, situating humans as living in and with fundamental instability. These elements have the potential to impact on one another, generating rich new investigative pathways to further examine relationships between form and context, people and place. Bochner and Ellis (2016) write about the potential for such investigation to deeply ground the self in material of 'practical, moral, aesthetic, and emotional importance' (p.80). The reflexive tools of autoethnography practiced in this practice-based investigation enabled Van Stralen to consider the significance, versatility and transferability of personal experience. The textual and visual narratives elicited through urban exploration practiced in traversal of the junkyard suggest ways in which painting practice and metaphors of edginess can mediate an affective response to emotionally driven content.

In eliciting an approach for anticipating and leveraging precarity, this article reveals a process and practice for how paint can be used to conceive and describe a metaphoric edge space where environmental, political, social and natural phenomena meet. By adopting the onto-poetic practice of engaging with space and environment to make meaning of self and surrounds (Matthews, 2009), these findings extend on the practical means for how this might be done in reflexive arts practice, not only as the source of knowing, but as an entry into expression. Through the processes, practices and products examined in this article, speculative ways of knowing are converged to reveal an articulated point of view made legible through 'edginess'.

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