

Toggling toward expression:

discursive communications,  
continual recalibrations

A terminal project report by Carol Yahner

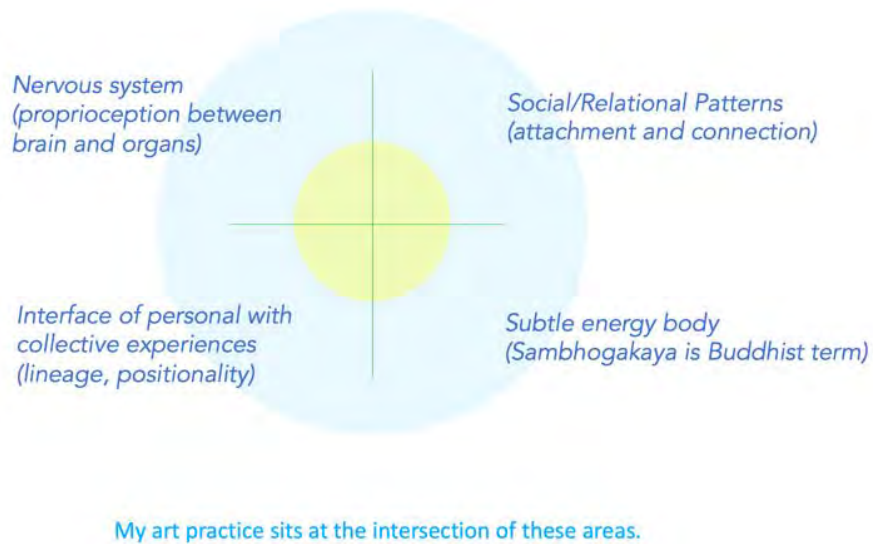
Committee: Tannaz Farsi, Brian Gillis and Amanda Wojick

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Carol Yahner, untitled, 2019

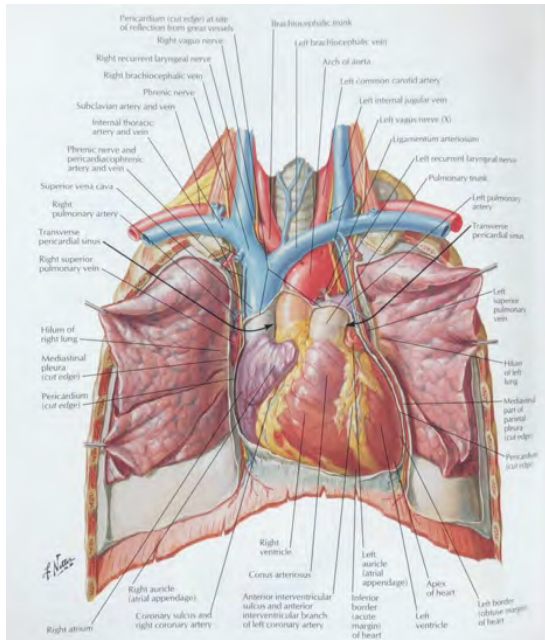
In the studio, I paint toward investigation. Searching for open-ended forms of communication, painting becomes a contemplative practice involving aspects of listening, meditation, and reflection. The physicality of painting allows me to shift and release energy through my body. Listening into my own felt-sense perceptions, this process builds connection to daily life and the world around me. My art practice sits at the intersection of various subject areas; see diagram below.



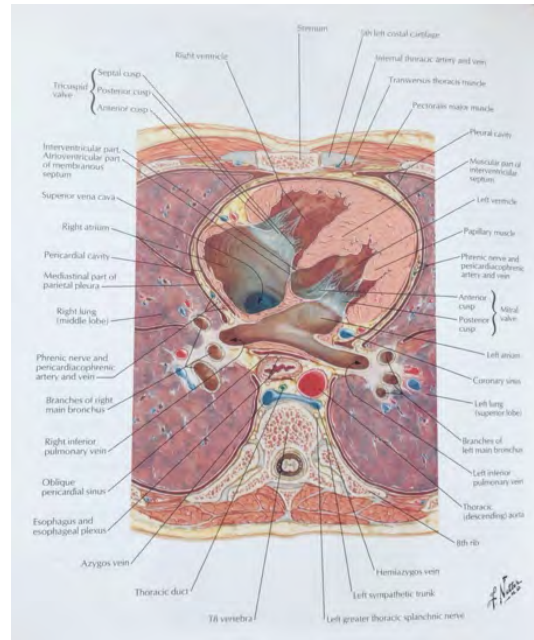
### ART PRECEDENT TO MY WORK

One entry point to the work is my 30-year professional practice as a massage therapist, in which I observe and interact with visceral and cranial rhythms of movement. Through these practices, I have studied human anatomy using a well-known anatomy book illustrated by physician and artist, Frank Netter. The *Atlas of Human Anatomy*, first published in 1989, is filled with over 500 full-color illustrations of the human body's gross anatomy and is classified by system and region of the body. Netter studied art at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design before attending medical school at New York University, where he received his medical degree in 1931. Translated into 16 languages, his efforts have assisted healthcare practitioners around the world. With reference to the continual review and updating of his illustrations, Netter noted that

“Anatomy of course does not change, but our understanding of anatomy and its clinical significance does . . .” (Netter, 2011).



Heart: Anterior Exposure Plate #206  
(Netter, 2011)



Mediastinum: Cross Section Plate #210  
(Netter, 2011)

Netter’s illustrations are drawn from multiple vantage points so the student can gain knowledge of the intricate interconnection of bodily form and function, detailing the minutiae and subtle complexity of the structures that lie below our visible, superficial layer of tissue often referred to as *skin*.

While Netter’s focus was on anatomical illustration, painter Lee Krasner addressed biomorphic forms through abstraction. She considered herself as belonging to Nature, stating that “I merge what I call the organic with what I call the abstract . . . As I see both scales, I need to merge these two into the ever-present” (Krasner, 2019). Krasner worked within cycles and rhythms all her own, periods of intensity and dormancy and often recycled her own works to create new ones. Krasner noted that following her own inner rhythm was an essential part of her process. Art historian Ann Gibson proposes that a more silent narrative was potentially at play in Krasner’s

work as well, one in which Krasner was processing the emotional labor involved in the dynamics surrounding her daily life and intimate relationships (Gibson, 2007).

Krasner's agency, like many painters, was enacted in relation to the canvas; visualized improvisations of her own nervous system at play. Psychiatrist Bessel A. van der Kolk, author of the book *The Body Keeps the Score*, notes that the ability to engage with one's agency begins with "... interoception, our awareness of our subtle sensory, body-based feelings ... ." (Van der Kolk, 2014). In the studio, I listen into my own felt-sense perceptions in connection to daily life and the world around me. I enjoy the pleasure of physical expression and the feeling of quietude, or homeostasis, it creates within my body. Much of the time the work itself becomes secondary; a byproduct to the physiological processes taking place within.



1956 Artist in studio, Lee Krasner  
Photograph by Waintrob Budd (Rutten, 2022)



Carol Yahner, untiled works, 2021

Engaging with the beauty of color, kinesthetic movement and tactile sensations of painting are a way I calibrate and listen into my own system and hear myself think. In my painting process, I consider the painting itself to be somewhat autonomous, guiding me along in relation to what emerges. Feeling my own beingness and being guided by these sensations is akin to a manual therapy technique called Listening (Barral, 2005) wherein the practitioner palpates areas of the physical body and the electromagnetic field surrounding the body, “listens”, then responds to the restrictions within the tissue. By placing myself in relation to the painting, whether standing above or in front of the work, sitting with the work or simply observing it, I engage with the elemental language of line, form, pattern, repetition and texture. I practice opening myself up to listening to my body and mind in response to what presents itself. This process allows connection to the sometimes unrecognized parts of myself creating more cohesion and connection in my daily life. Sometimes these abstract notions and unconscious communications become visible in the work. I focus on the curious nature of this process rather than attempting to articulate an exact explanation or source of the imagery. Carolee Schneemann notes that within our Cartesian culture the unconscious is ignored and denigrated and “its intuitions are feminized and in effect castrated as a force, a power” (Boon and Levine, 2018). Schneemann started out professionally within the Abstract Expressionist movement, with later works expanding to create emphatic and powerful pronouncements with regard to the feminine body.

While Schneemann used her physical body as material in relation to her work, Agnes Martin seemed to operate from her subtle body. In Buddhist theory, the term for subtle body is Sambhogakaya and means “body of joy” (Ray, 2004). Martin wrote “Perceiving is the same as receiving and it is the same as responding. Perception means all of them” (Martin, 2018). Martin’s capacity to make works with simple materials that seemingly transcend space and time reference the ephemeral ways that we all exist in the world. Within her optical paintings, “structure and ground interpenetrate” (Herbert, 2015) making it difficult at times to discern whether the graphite lines are enmeshed within or hovering above the ground.



Carol Yahner, Wave, 2020



While she states that perception is important, she also clarifies that “identify[ing] with our work” with any notion of an end-goal is problematic, as life is a process always unfolding and to perceive its entirety is impossible (Martin, 2018). Rosalind Krauss notes that within Martin’s grid works there is a certain mythic intensity that exists which “makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism . . . while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief” (Krauss, 1985). Martin described her grid paintings as moments of happiness, inspiration, innocence and beauty (Martin, 1989). While she did not contextualize her works as spiritual in nature, Martin, like many artists in the mid 60s, was influenced by Suzuki Roshi’s teaching on Zen Buddhism.



Agnes Martin, Untitled 5, 1998

Photo credit: Estate of Agnes Martin

## PRIORITIES AND AMBITIONS

Working with a sense of freedom, making marks along the canvas, moving my body in moments of quick gesticulation along with moments of reprieve and rest, I allow my body to dictate its own movements. Instead of force, my body requires a certain level of latitude, of freedom, of relaxing into the work. Using movement and repetition of line, of mark, and gesture in the acts of drawing and painting help to open up physical and mental space in which to hold ambiguity. Sometimes I wonder about the source and content of such energy; is it a reflection of my inner states alone or at times does the energy of the collective also move through me? Amy Sillman notes this process of trying to find form as “. . . a very fragile thing to do” (Sillman, 2020). Perhaps the various ways in which artists question the notion of form might come from a deeper examination of energy in relation to the body. Active in the field of micro-phenomenology, Professor Anne C. Klein discusses “bodily dynamism or energy as an organizing principle” within a Buddhist context and mentions how this concept often gets overlooked within Western culture and deserves more attention when we reference “the somatic” (Klein, 2013).

During the years of working toward the MFA I experienced several major life disruptions, all within the larger context of the pandemic. These personal events caused trauma, resulting in an overwhelmed nervous system and a disorganized capacity to engage methodically within the studio. In the Fall term leading up to my final year, I intentionally shifted gears and started to work with very simple processes, for example painting one line in repetition. This modification was necessary as it allowed me to regroup and stay engaged with the work despite the upheaval going on around me. I realize now that I was loosely and intuitively titrating, both with material choices and from a somatic standpoint. Psychotherapist Peter Levine, creator of the Somatic Experiencing technique, draws his definition of titration from organic chemistry and notes that its slow and purposeful intent is to create stability, resilience and organization within the nervous system during times of stress (Levine, 2021).



Carol Yahner, *Dream Sequence*, 2021

Tricia Hersey, artist and founder of the Nap Ministry, addresses this notion of slowing, or titrating, as well. Using content related to her lived experiences she authored a manifesto entitled, *Rest as Resistance*. In her work she incorporates slowing down as a form of engaged social practice, “I took to rest and naps and slowing down as a way to save my life . . . Rest pushes back and disrupts a system that views human bodies as a tool for production and labor” (Ministry, 2022). Within my art practice, an unseen aspect relevant to the work has involved the release of suppressed emotional content. There exists a certain complexity and arduousness in navigating the release of this latent emotion within my physical form. At times the intensity did not seem to match what I superficially understood; disclosing a disconnect between thought and action. I could feel something deeper was being worked through; presenting my body with a certain, abstract understanding. Through painting I navigated this rough and mysterious terrain, releasing this inarticulable content with care and support.

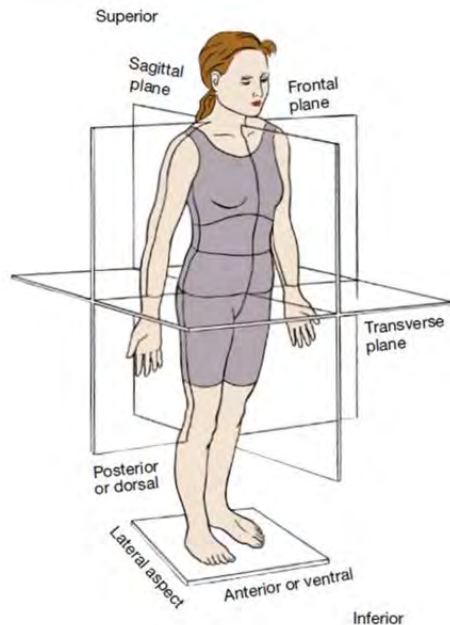
In relation to the thesis works, I was feeling content on one hand and unsure on the other. While I understood there was a level of non-knowing going on, I was also hesitant as to how to proceed. I chose to engage with each work in relation to a prompt: a dream, masking tape, and several works in relation to a specific event occurring in my life at the time. Once the prompts were established, I then let my own discursive listening process unfold. Present in the works are a repetition of line, incremental value adjustments, areas exposed and concealed using tape and sandpaper along with collaged bits of ephemera, text and symbol embedded in the paintings. These works were made in service toward keeping my physical system regulated through a very challenging time. The work focused on my ability to listen into my body's own need for respite and became the only true action I could make during a time of both societal and personal upheaval.

This experience has opened up new lines of inquiry around the possibility of more specified use of art techniques with individuals experiencing stress and challenge. Additionally, I'm curious to experiment further with interoceptive listening as a way of drawing out embodied knowledge. In "Seeing Mind, Being Body" Ann Carolyn Klein states that through meditation "we take interest in the multiple dimensions of learning that these practices are meant to foster: physical, aesthetic, psychological, emotional, energetic, sensory, intentional and attentional" (Klein, 2013).

## FUTURE WORK

I relate to grid structures as a metaphor for both the physical and subtle bodies; the literal body as being grounded in our anatomy and the subtle body which connects to the movement patterns within and around us. Within the study of anatomy, a grid system divides the body using three anatomical planes. From the position of manual therapy, this construct is useful in that it orients the location of inner structures in relation to the exterior boundary of the physical body. In Visceral Manipulation, a technique developed by osteopath Jean-Pierre Barral, the release of internal restrictions are assessed and treated using anatomical position in relation to

the inherent movement patterns of the organs themselves. The movement patterns, called motility, originate from our early embryological stages of development (Barral, 2005).



American Council on Exercise (ACE), image credit

Once positionality has been established and while the client remains relaxed, the practitioner waits, continuing to hold the ‘barrier.’ Shortly thereafter the physiology of the body itself begins to respond, proprioceptive messaging moving from the organ to brain and brain to organ and back again, until the nervous system communications allow the body’s movement patterns and rhythms to directly – or discursively – release their tensional strongholds.

Within visceral work, the importance of not pushing through a barrier aligns with the notion of pacing or titration, terms used in trauma therapy. Peter Levine states that trauma involves the thwarting of instinct (Levine, 2012). Given my propensity to primarily feel my way through things, the academic process, with its focus on dialogue and text intermixed with studio work, required additional effort. The ability to integrate new information while also maintaining a regulated nervous system required focus and attention. This internal focus became a necessity due to the various disruptions that occurred in the last few years. With much trial and error I

have come to understand that the academic experience both helped and hindered my development; at times stifling my instinctual processes while simultaneously developing my capacity to form language where none existed before.

The idea of interoceptively listening, either through bodywork or studio work, leads to a furthering of process, where a letting go can occur. This letting go allows me space to appreciate the sensorial connection to material and helps to cultivate connection. Allowance develops within an interior space that inherently enacts itself without specificity of what type of communication might emerge. In *The Pleasure in Drawing*, philosopher Jean Luc Nancy states that we cannot reduce sensate pleasure to a simplified notion of “positivity” and that it inherently comes from embodied action that simultaneously engages oneself and something beyond the self. “To feel signifies to feel oneself feeling, in other words, quite simply to relate to oneself the effect – and thus the affect – of a non-self . . .” (Nancy, 2013).

Engaging in a form of nonverbal dialogue, my physical system answers questions through action, arriving as various outputs within abstract notions of color, form, symbol, image, sound and language. I integrate feeling and cognition through the use of my hands and sensing my way through things, feeling my way along. This process helps me to access understanding from areas other than my brain and to formulate language. At times the process prioritizes painting and drawing and at other times meditation; toggling between action and rest, gesture and contemplation all the while listening and staying open to what information arises in between.



Carol Yahner, thesis show documentation, 2022



Carol Yahner, thesis show documentation, 2022





Carol Yahner, Dream Sequence II, 2022 (details)



Carol Yahner, thesis works, 2022 (details)

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Carol Yahner, location, 2018



Carol Yahner, location 2, 2018