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# Archiving spaces: walking, murmuring, and writing with artist Nicole Storm

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Keywords:

artist practice, space, disability, archival performance

## Introduction

This visual essay captures my fieldwork experience working with artist Nicole Storm from October 2018 to March 2019 at Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California, a contemporary art studio for artists with disabilities. Nicole always carries newspapers and markers when walking through the Creative Growth studio. When talking, she references her belongings and posters, speaks while she writes a line, pauses when a line ends, and then resumes speaking with each new line.

Nicole's mother characterizes her art practice as "archiving" (M. D. Storm, personal communication, December 11, 2018). Nicole collects studio handouts, email printouts, napkins from restaurants, and nametags from studio volunteers. In her artwork, she records her personal memories of travel, furniture in the studio, the people around her, and others who no longer work at Creative Growth. Nicole's practice, however, is more than a formal repository of historical documents and events. Her art exists as a living archive in the Creative Growth studio space. As such, Nicole's art practice constitutes archival performance. The *archive* that Nicole is performing resonates with artist Simone Osthoff's conceptualization of the "archive as artwork" (2009, p.11) that disrupts stable representations of history, and Michel Foucault's theorization of the archive as a "discursive practice" (1969/1972, p.128).

In this essay, I perform archival practice through Nicole's work with photos, videos, and conversations collected during my fieldwork. Interview scripts, videos, images, and writings in this essay constitute an archive that is neither "a complete simulation masking" of Nicole's original experience nor tries to store Nicole's art making experience chronologically (Osthoff, 2009, p.182). Rather, this archive encourages readers to walk, write, and murmur with artist Nicole Storm, who experiences "contingent and dynamic histories in flux, often in real



time, unsystematic and generative” (Osthoff, 2009, p.182). I provide the date and time of each photo about Nicole’s practice taken from my fieldwork and include image descriptions for an audience that uses screen readers (Kleege, 2018). Thus, as a researcher, I too am performing a living archive by exploring the contingent relations between disability

and art in the creative work of Nicole Storm. It is through this writing I also invite you as reader to consider your reading of her work as an archival encounter.



Figure 1. Nicole Storm, Untitled, 2017, Watercolor and ink on paper, 30.25 x 44.25 inches. Copyright 2019 by Creative Growth Art Center

[Image description: The left two thirds of the image are covered with orange, yellow, and pink watercolor overlaid with dark lines. Some lines are short and thin while some lines are thick and long. The right side of image is covered with purple, blue, and light pink watercolor, with lines that have different length.]





Figure 2. Nicole Storm\_Feb. 1, 2019\_05:29 pm

[Image description: In a gallery space, Nicole stands in front of her artwork, which is figure 1., the painting that has been described previously. She looks at the camera, poses with her hands, right arm folded across her chest and hand curled downward, left arm folded up at the elbow and pointed in line with her right elbow away from her body and her left hand also curled down. She wears a shawl with blue, pink, and purple colors and a nametag with the word "artist" written on it. A piece of paper with green marks and a green pen sit on a gallery ledge that rises a foot above the floor below her painting. Next to Nicole is a blue handbag sitting on the floor.]

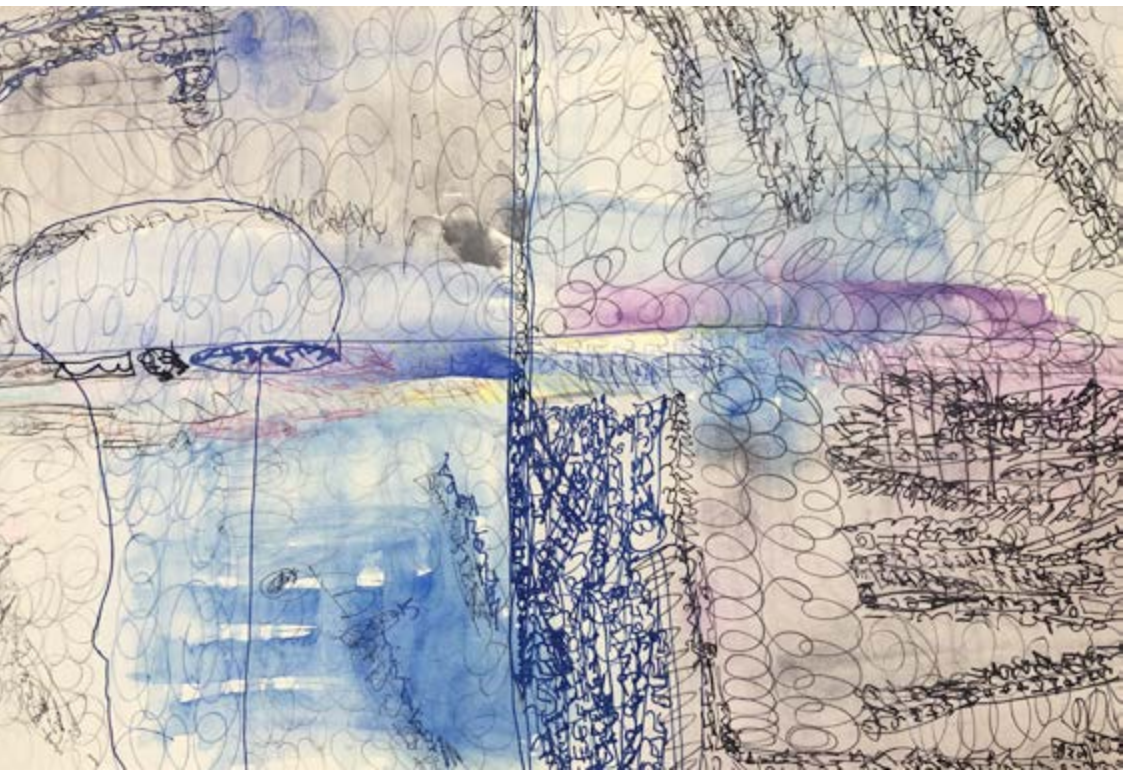
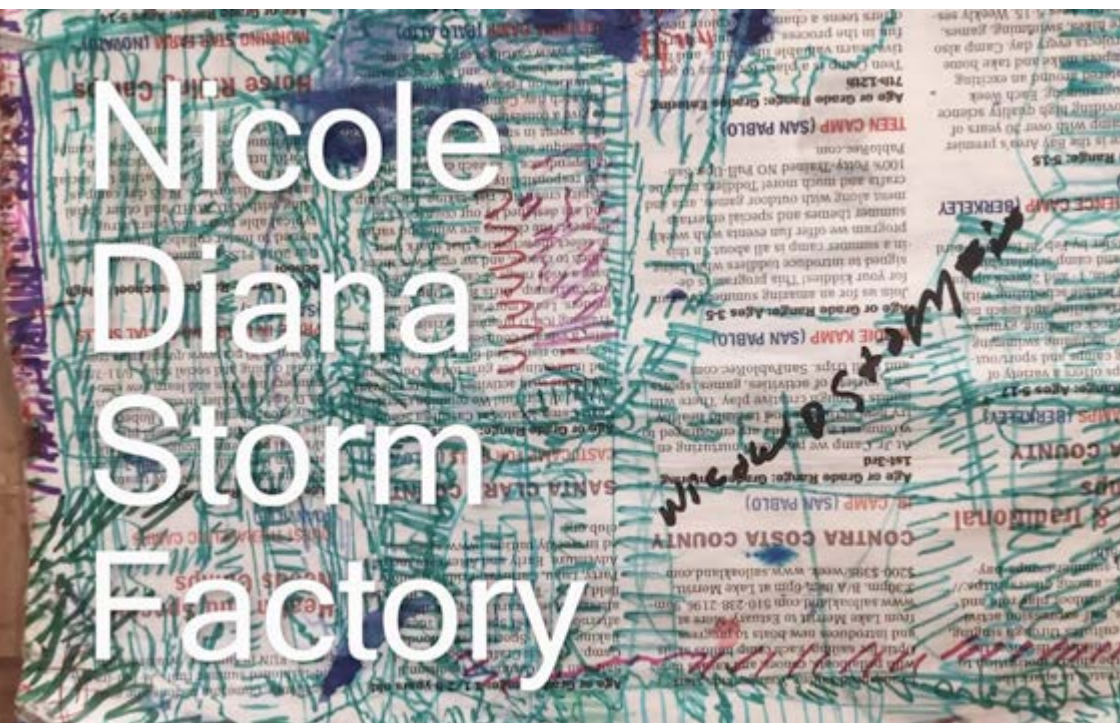


Figure 3. Nicole Storm, Untitled, Watercolor and ink on paper. Photo taken by the author.

[Image description: This rectangular image is divided into four parts by a blue cross. Each quadrant is covered with looping black lines. The right bottom section has layers of blue marks that include waves, letters, cross-hatches, vertical lines, and numbers in the left third of the quadrant and horizontal black markings that include numbers and letters as well as lines. These marking also appear vertically in the right top section in four lined sections coming down from the top vertically and in the left top section's upper left corner. The images are covered by a wash of blue and purple.]





Video 1. Nicole Diane Storm Factory. Link: <https://vimeo.com/314553821>

Nicole Diane Storm shows us her art making process in the studio by wearing a camera. Nicole Storm, the author, and the Digital Media instructor at Creative Growth, Helena Gonzalez, created this video together.

[Video description (Selected scenes): 1) The video Nicole Diane Storm Factory starts with Nicole walking down the stairs towards the X-Frame wood display rack located near the reception desk. She stares at a drawing in the rack that has colorful curved lines and says "wow!" 2) Nicole carries a marker and a stack of newspapers that are heavily marked, walking from the gallery stairs, passing fabric sculptures with faces painted on top of them, the display rack, the reception desk with a staff member sitting next to it, the threshold between the gallery and studio, and looks at the whole studio space. 3) Holding a stack of newspapers in her left hand, Nicole holds an orange marker in her right hand, passing the vending machine on her left and a display rack on her right. Passing by the kitchen area, Nicole arrives in front of the elevator and presses the button, while two artists and one facilitator stand near the elevator. 4) She continues writing on the same newspaper with the orange marker "Ok..." Nicole murmurs while writing and/or drawing on the paper, looking at a pink poster of buildings painted by artist William Scott with the words "who is an outsider?" 4) The scene cuts to the inside of the elevator where Nicole is holding the orange marker and drawing curves on the newspapers. She returns to the first floor. Nicole stops at a rack that has T-shirts with Creative Growth's logo on it. Holding one T-shirt in her left hand, Nicole is writing/drawing with the orange marker on the newspaper, murmuring and looking back and forth between the T-shirt and the newspaper.]





Figure 4. Nicole Storm\_Nov. 06, 2018\_11:54 am

[Image description: In a sunlit studio space, Nicole holds a rectangular white paperboard with black, blue, and purple marks on it. She looks at the camera and wears a green sweatshirt and a pair of black glasses.]



Figure 5. Nicole Storm\_Dec.14, 2018\_01:40 pm

[Image description: Nicole sits on the cement floor in front of several wood cabinets and writes on a stack of cardboard. On her left side are rolls of fabric, a multi-layer drawer, a white cabinet with smaller containers in it, a black backpack, two pieces of white paperboard, and a piece of cardboard covered in markings. Two mannequins with dresses stand on the right of Nicole.]



Figure 6. Nicole Storm\_Oct. 26 2018\_02:19 pm

[Image description: Nicole sits cross-legged on the cement floor leaning back against wood cabinets with a satisfied look. She wears a white T-shirt that says "CAMP HARMON." She is surrounded by a black backpack, a black jacket, three stacks of paper with markings, and three cardboard boxes filled with fabric.]





Figure 7. Nicole Storm\_Dec. 11, 2018\_11:33 am

[Image description: Using her legs as her desk, Nicole holds a bucket full of markers while writing on a stack of paper. She sits on a black leather couch and wears a Santa hat and a green sweatshirt.]



Figure 8. Nicole Storm\_Dec.11, 2018\_11:43 am

[Image description: With her back to the camera, Nicole points at a poster with a marker in her hand. The pink poster has images of buildings and reads, "Who is an outsider". Nicole wears a Santa hat and a green sweatshirt, and she holds a piece of cardboard with black lines on it. She is surrounded by two plastic storage boxes, bottles of paints, brushes, and an in-progress painting of buildings.]



Figure 9. Nicole Storm\_Dec.11, 2018\_11:35 am

[Image description: With her back to the camera, Nicole sits on a wood floor underneath a mobile table, holding a stack of newspaper with markings. A backpack sits behind her. In front of her is a mobile storage cart. She wears a Santa hat and a green sweatshirt.]





Figure 10. Nicole Storm\_Dec.11, 20118\_11:34 am

[Image description: Nicole crouches on a wood floor, bending underneath a mobile table next to a steel storage cart. Bottles of paints, buckets filled with brushes and markers, a bottle of water, and other supplies cover the table. Next to the table, there is a black leather couch with two pillows and a mobile mannequin beside it.]



Figure 11. Nicole Storm\_Dec.11, 2018\_11:56 am

[Image description: Nicole walks by in a blur down a hallway with tables on one side and a wall of cubby holes filled with backpacks and other personal items. She carries a blue backpack and holds a black handbag, a stack of newspapers, and a piece of cardboard. She wears a Santa hat, glasses, a green sweatshirt, black pants, and black shoes.]



Figure 12. Nicole Storm\_Jan.14, 2019\_11:54 am

[Image description: With her back to the camera, Nicole stands by a table and paints on a piece of pink fabric. She wears a rainbow tie dye T-shirt. In front of the table is a clear window with three pieces of paper hanging in it. Outside of the window is an empty street. Buildings can be seen across the street.]



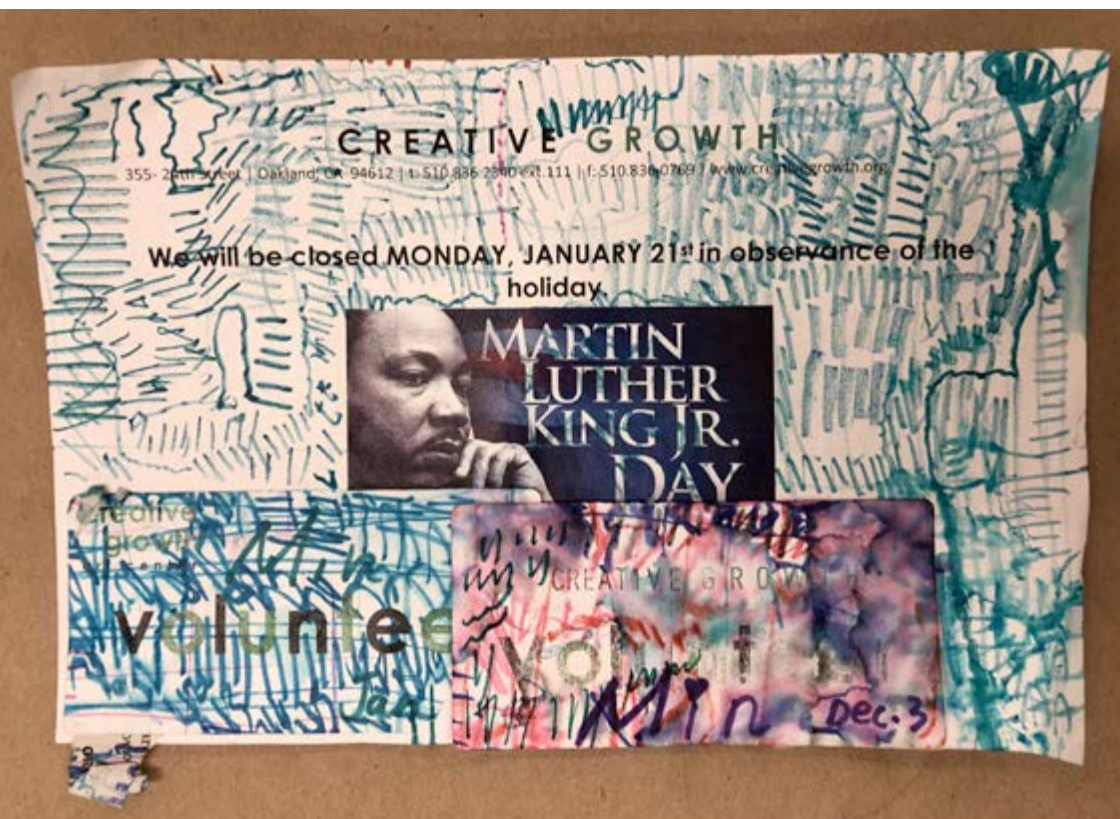


Figure 13. Nicole Storm\_Jan. 17, 20119\_12:59 am

[Image description: A piece of paper with printed words "We will be closed Monday, January 21th in observance of the holiday." Underneath is Martin Luther King Jr.'s image with "Martin Luther King Jr. Day" written next to it. At the bottom of the paper are two nametags that read "Creative Growth" in small letters with "volunteer" centered in big letters. On the right nametag the name "Min" is handwritten with a heart dotting the "i" and the word "Dec. 3" in small black letters. Part of this text is faded with water-markings and black hatching. The left nametag also has the word "Min" written above "volunteer" and "Jan" written below, but much of this text is covered by blue lines, and hatching covers the rest of the white paper in short vertical and horizontal lines.]



Figure 14. Nicole Storm\_Nov. 27 2018\_01:45 pm

[Image description: Nicole Storm sits against a brown leather couch below a collage of wall photos and writes on a large paper frame. Poster board, newspapers, bags, and markers cover the couch.]

In Figure 14, in the early afternoon on November 27, 2018, Nicole Storm sat on a long, brown leather couch in a hallway, wearing two layers of sweaters against the cold of the Creative Growth art studio. The back of the couch leaned against a photo-wall next to a square wood table under a bulletin board. Located in between the studio space and the kitchen, the couch is where artists sit during break time or before class begins in the morning. It is a place where one could see the staff or artists pass as they go to the kitchen or to the bathroom. It is also a place where artists would lay down if they felt sick or sleepy. On the opposite side of the couch, there are two bookshelves that contained the Creative Growth's library. The artists often grab a book from the library and sit reading on the couch. Nicole had a different way of using the couch. With her legs stretched out, she sat slouched against the couch. She would draw on a white mat board with a blue Sharpie marker, murmuring to herself, and gesticulating from time to time. Because it was not break-time, most of the artists were working in the studio, and nobody else was using the couch. On the square table, she put a white storage file box containing papers she was currently working with. Her belongings were strewn across the entire length of the couch.

Nicole's belongings included a whiteboard, two brown paper tubes, a piece of brown paper, a poster board with ripped edges leaning against the wall, a backpack with a slice of fabric on which Nicole had rendered a drawing, a soft fabric handbag with a stack of paper in it, a plastic bag with colorful markers in it, a grey sweater with decorative holes on it, a black lunch bag, a piece of yellow paper from the *Days of the Dead* event<sup>1</sup> organized by the Oakland Museum of California with Nicole's writing on it, a red marker on top of the yellow paper, and a short stack of newspapers with Nicole's drawings on them. All of these assembled elements created by Nicole, including the movements of people passing by the hallway, constituted the environment in which she worked.

Nicole's constructed environment constitutes a milieu that resonates with what Derek McCormack (2013) calls an "affective intensity" in relations or "distinctive spatial sensibilities" (p. 58). The hallway space in which she worked was "not so much [a] three-dimensional container for activity but.

. . . shifting configurations of bodies, materials, and ideas taking place with different degrees of affective intensity and duration" (p. 60). It is through the "shifting configurations" in a milieu of the cardboards she carries, the sound of her murmurs, the photos of retired staff on the wall, the memories of being with the staff, and the interactions with artists passing by, that she is affected by the intensities in the space. Yet, for Nicole, this space is not just the setting for her work, it is her work. Nicole is not just working in the hallway space and experiencing its "affective intensity"; she is archiving its "shifting configurations" and using the "bodies, materials, and ideas taking place" to create art (p. 60).

Nicole's spatial archiving practice resonates with artist Simone Osthoff's definition of "archive as artwork" (2009, p. 11), and philosopher Michel Foucault's conceptualization of archives as the "discursive practices" (1969/1972, p. 128) of things and events. Both Osthoff (2009) and Foucault (1969/1972) argue that the archive is more than a "repository of documents" (Osthoff, 2009, p. 11), a mere collection of materials preserved for the future. Nicole's collection of handouts and printouts records memories through drawing, murmuring, and walking in the studio. This practice, however, functions as more than a formal repository of the past. Her purpose is not to affirm, but to reject archival stability as Osthoff contends (2009).

Osthoff (2009) argues that "archive as artwork" (p. 11) rejects history as a stable archive documented chronologically and instead underlines the "temporal and spatial displacement," "ghosts" in our experience (pp. 178–179). She advocates for archival generativity that considers "dimensions of [the] archive that escape...or disrupt representation" and asks questions such as "Whose memories get to be preserved in archives?" (pp. 179–182). In doing so, Osthoff's (2009) characterization of the archive's performativity as artwork forestalls the ghosts of historical accumulation to make way for the "reveries in thoughts" that she argues generate from the uncertain and contingent dimensions of the archive (p.179). Nicole's art

<sup>1</sup>Day of the Dead or Día de los Muertos is a multi-day Mexican holiday starting on October 31 where people demonstrate love to family members and friends who have deceased. The Oakland Museum of California has organized community celebrations for the Day of the Dead for two decades. On October 21, 2018, several artists and staff from Creative Growth, including Nicole Storm, joined the celebration. The yellow handout in figure 14 was the event procedure printout distributed to all participants by the Museum on that day.



emerges from these contingent dimensions in archival practice and in doing so, challenges foundational assumptions of disability experience and its relation to art.

Murmuring is a significant sonic dimension of Nicole's archival art practice. Like the sustained, monophonic effect of a drone in music, her murmurings provide a sonorous foundation for the contingent polyphonies of her archival art practice. Examples of her murmurings include the following: "Lisa is not here [anymore]..." (Nicole is referring to Lisa Campbell, another artist at Creative Growth who passed away in early 2018; Nicole is writing on a piece of newspaper at the same moment); "Ok, this is the beginning of a..." (Nicole is pointing at a printout of her brother's email); (A studio volunteer in the hallway shouts out 'Zoe') "Did she just say that name? Ok..." (Nicole, sitting on the floor of textile supplies next to the hallway, is adding several short red lines on a magazine that already has red marks on it).

When murmuring, she always references her belongings, posters, memories, murmurs while she writes a line, pauses when a line ends, and then resumes speaking with each new line. This *murmur-write-pause-resume process* performs a rhythm that resonates with what philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980/1987) refer to as "a communication of milieus" or "coordination between heterogenous of space-times" (p. 313). Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) conceptualize rhythm as not occurring in "a homogeneous space-time" that can be measured by chronological or geographical standards. Instead, rhythm is a communication of heterogenous milieus that is always changing and "incommensurable" (p. 313). Nicole's art practice not only highlights the milieu of sound but also underlines the communication between milieus, the sonic milieu (A studio volunteer in the hallway shouts out 'Zoe'), the milieu of memory (Lisa is not here [anymore]), and the milieu of materialized surroundings (an email printout, a magazine, marker).

Nicole murmurs into archival memory different events. She carries objects to different studio spaces and makes temporal marks, layering lines and circles with her *murmur-write-pause-resume process*, on objects on

different days. Put another way, by memorizing, murmuring, walking, and writing, Nicole performs what Deleuze & Guattari refer to as the heterogeneity of space-time (p. 313).

As an archivist artist, Nicole resists archival stabilization. Rather, through archival performance she puts "contingent and dynamic histories in flux, often in real time, unsystematic and generative" (Osthoff, 2009, p. 182). Nicole's mother explains:

In her [Nicole Storm] mind, she is recording events. You noticed there are some letters and some numbers. You and I won't be able to discern them. And I am not sure if she can go back and remember what she is recording at the time. But *in the moment* (emphasized by the speaker), she is recording events and what she is observing or remembering. (M. D. Storm, personal communication, March 7, 2019)

What Nicole's mother suggests is that by observing, taking notes, and drafting her observations, Nicole familiarized with, documented, and archived circumstances and events of her world to memory. Nicole's process of archiving "*in the moment*" resonates with the "very root of [a] statement-event" and "the occurrence of the statement-thing" that emerge from the discursive practice that Foucault defines as archive (1969/1972, pp. 128–129). For Foucault, an archive does not constitute "the library of all libraries" but a dispersive practice that enables statements of things and events to emerge and at the same time, "to undergo...modification" (p. 130). All of Nicole's belongings on the brown couch, her memories with staff, sound emerging from the studio, and people passing by in the hallway allow her to mark and murmur "statements of things and events" occurring around her.

Nicole's mother, as quoted above, also suggests that Nicole might not "go back and remember" the statements that she is making. Rather, Nicole modifies and reenacts the statements in a new way, making another archival performance. In figure 15, Nicole is archiving

her own archival artwork that hangs in the gallery with another piece of paper with a green marker. This performance destabilizes past events. In this way, Nicole's performance disperses the artwork from a fixed representation and modifies it to allow "a multiplicity of statements to emerge" (Foucault, 1969/1972, p. 130). In this archival performance, her art can be seen a "dynamic and generative production tool" (Osthoff, 2009, p. 11). Nicole is performing a living archive in the Creative Growth studio space; but her living archive also extends beyond the physical studio space of Creative Growth with memories of people and outside objects. In other words, she is archiving both physical and contingent spaces.



Figure 15. Nicole Storm\_Feb. 27 2018\_01:45 pm

[Image description: With her back to the camera, Nicole points at the painting with her right hand (which is her own work) in a gallery space. She holds a green marker and a piece of paper with green marks on it. She wears a blue, pink and purple shawl over a pink turtleneck.]

In the following conversation from my fieldnotes, studio manager Matt Dostal asks Nicole to describe what fascinates her about working at Creative Growth, to which she replies “fascinating together”:

Matt Dostal (Creative Growth Studio Manager): What do you like most about Creative Growth?

Nicole: (She sighs twice). I cannot think of anything.

Matt: You cannot think of anything you like most about Creative Growth?

Nicole: I like... we are fascinating together (At the same time, Nicole is using a marker to write on a piece of newspaper).

Matt: You like what we are together?

Nicole: Fascinating together

Matt: Fascinating together...interesting

Author: Oh

Nicole: Exactly.

Matt: When you come here what makes you most happy?

Nicole: Happy? (Nicole is writing on the same piece of newspaper). It is the natagi makes me happy.

Matt: What makes you happy?

Nicole: A natagi table...

Matt: I don't know what that is.

Nicole: A natagi table is like a buffet table (Nicole is moving her hand to describe the shape of the table).

Matt: A buffet table makes you happy. We don't have a buffet table here. Are you thinking of a hotel or something? What about Creative Growth specifically?

Nicole: Specifically? Hmmm

Author: You can say anything

Nicole: I would say about the furniture...

Matt: The furniture! Interesting.

Author: The furniture, wow.

Nicole: The organization of the offices, the organization of the staff like that. Oh! He is talking about people who are not really here (Nicole is pointing at Matt and continues to write on the piece of newspaper). Lisa is not here...

Matt: So this is one of your favorite topics of conversations...is that the staff who are not here anymore...are very important to Nicole...keep track of people who used to work here (Nicole is still writing on the newspaper while Matt is talking).

Nicole: Exactly. (personal communication, March 7, 2019)

## Conclusion

Finally, my experience of Nicole's creative practice is evident in the documentary photographs and video included in this essay. In the above interview, Nicole expressed liking the way everyone and everything “are fascinating together” in Creative Growth Art Center spaces. Rather than liking one particular thing about the spaces, she was enthralled by the Center as a complex of milieus (N. Storm, personal communication, March 7, 2019). These photographic moments show how she assembled materials according to their affective intensities – the way in which Nicole sees space. Each photograph or scene in the video depicts a constructed configuration that when assembled together characterizes the archival performativity of Nicole's art. In doing so, they depict how I experienced the performativity of Nicole's practice: I followed and interacted with Nicole's murmur-write-pause-resume rhythm in different spaces; other times, I was uncertain where she was or where she was moving next. I saw this rhythm in the archival performativity of Nicole's art as layers of circle loops, waves, cross-hatches, vertical lines, numbers, letters, and her walking, murmuring, and gesticulating in different spaces. It is through this rhythm and her contingent relations to memory that Nicole's art rejects archival stability for archival generativity. This essay is generated from my encounter with the archival performativity of Nicole's art and is designed so that the reader may also experience archival generativity. I view this work as functioning as a living archive that allows readers to explore the photographic configurations and rhythmic interactions of Nicole's art through and across spaces.



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