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Beautiful Nonsense: children's authentic art-making and Deleuzian difference

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ABSTRACT When we join with another who shares our sensibilities, we have potential for doing good. This article explores how the self-initiated art making of children that happens outside the classroom challenges the child emotionally and intellectually more than teacher-directed school art. Furthermore, authentic collaborative art making creates a site where a child can affect and be affected by others. This freedom opens shared spaces to encounter joy in otherness.

> Spinoza wrote that there is nothing more excellent than those things that agree entirely with our nature. We come to know ourselves in our interactions with others, and to the extent that we have inadequate knowledge of others, we have inadequate knowledge of ourselves. (Nadler, 2006)

This morning I was jogging before sunrise. The air was still and cold. I was running at a slow pace on a curved road up a thick wooded hillside. In this dark void I lost the feeling of where I was. It was weird to be moving and not to feel my body. A low moon appeared some distance ahead, almost at eye level. The glow brightened and in this shadowed stretch of pavement, I imagined the headlights of a solitary driver heading home. Then I realized that I was the one moving, circling a bend. The golden orb rose fast, as I ran uphill towards the one streetlight.

Schoolsville

Bud sat down at one of the four large tables to draw. He was not alone. The room was filled with children describing their drawings: cool dragons with talons and fangs; Electrocution Super Girl inspired 'by a light switch, tanks and missile blasters'; a portrait of legendary American footballer Mike Singletary

memorializing early years with the Chicago Bears; a paragon falcon 'that can dive 240 miles per hour, with eyes circled in black so you know it's a falcon, and a beak that is totally powerful to rip open tons of stuff like prey'. All of this description spun from representative drawings except for Mike Singletary, who was portrayed as a walnut-sized crayon sketch of a football. A seven-year-old girl waved a portrait of either her first cat or her first try drawing a cat. 'This is my first cat!' she shouted.

In this after-school art program children aged six to twelve sit elbow to elbow and draw what comes to mind. Their drawings are quite different from typical school art. Most noticeable is the difference in materials. American school art supplies are conventional and have varied little in forty years. Construction paper, copier paper with stencilled figures, crayons, Elmers School Glue and markers are school art materials. Conversely, in the drawing club, children use Post-its, ballpoint pens, lined notebook paper, rubber bands, masking tape, glitter, Ebony drawing pencils, kneaded erasers and fine-line Sharpies to draw and tell stories.

As an art educator and a researcher, I want to challenge a traditional art education pedagogy that reflects an image of the child as naïve, developmentally situated, lacking an informed aesthetic and undesirably disruptive. Traditional teaching methods view children as receptors of knowledge and incapable of making an impact on culture, which annuls the child's potential for creativity. The ideal passive child arrives at school ready to soak up knowledge handed down from the teacher. The typical 'teacher prepared lesson' is detached from the child's reality and reiterates a common story that advocates a single view (Gielen & Lavaert, 2013, p. 168).

As a cultural group, the child is often treated as a 'deficit model', existing in some stage of development. Not fully acclimated to adult behaviors, the child is usually not taken seriously. The developing child, lacking all maturity, is seen poised, treading water, living to internalize adult skills and knowledge (Corsaro, 2005). In this fix, children never realize their true worth and are innocent of their impact on the teacher (Freire, 1970).

The authentic art work of children can disrupt the adults' image of the child as innocent. Left to their discretion, children often draw narratives of violent and gross themes. Many adults avert their eyes, finding little value for the ribald drawings even if the work is chockfull of inventiveness and rich detail and shows effort put into researching accurate source material. Coming from the minds of children, subject matter like carnage, explosions and attacks can unsettle adults. Traditional school art, with its concern about appropriateness, conceals the passions of the child. While each viewer will have their own interpretation, art has an availability that can link the viewers' bodies and emotions with those of the artist.

For example, a four-year-old makes a crown for a tiny finger-sized doll using the frayed paper edges pulled from a spiral notebook. I am impressed with the child's ability to use metaphor (this is like that) and narrative ('Look, I made a crown for a queen!'). This self-directed art making creates an affective

relationship between the artist and the viewer. The child's authentic artwork taps into a collective memory shared with the audience (what is known about hats, crowns, royalty, gender and what it is like to make something personal). When children are allowed to have intimate experiences with art making, their hand is visible in the work. Art emancipates the young artist, revealing their individual struggles and beliefs.

Mystory

When I was in high school, I changed hairstyles year to year. I noticed this when I was sixteen. I began high school with a ponytail, the next year wore a bun and bangs and the following year styled my hair as a Marlo Thomas long flip. My senior year I wore a smooth cool Jane Asher look that required the heavy upkeep of sprays, gels and enormous rollers. In the hallways at school I observed older girls who walked past me looking perky and sexy. This was what I desired, to look different from the year before, for my hairstyle to reflect my growing confidence. It was great fun imagining my future style. The high school annual chronicled my yearly hairstyles. When I was 16, I flipped through previous yearbooks and noticed that each year my hairstyle changed radically. Each back-to-school hairdo was very different from the year before. Mind you, I did not see my previous year's hairdo as lacking but was mesmerized by others' differences – maybe what they were wearing was the Real Me. At sixteen I also wondered if my self-image was changing as dramatically as the hairstyles.

I am a professor in art education at Appalachian State University. Six years ago I began offering a free drawing club for children aged six to twelve. Located behind an art museum, this studio has a line of windows facing molars of mountains in North Carolina. One day a week after school two dozen or so children hurry up two flights of stairs, to sketch whatever they choose. This drawing club seems to offer children a social experience that involves their truths being heard by others. Through narrative inquiry, 'meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience' (Chase, 2013, p. 74), I have come to discover that through this free arts program, children experience art making as a place to encounter the physical and the corporeal as well as the feelings and sensuousness of another human being and to learn about difference.

After observing children being affected by others in the drawing class, I began researching difference. Deleuze positioned the concept of difference as a continual shifting of rhythms versus a collection of distinct identities (Williams, 2013). James Williams (2013) illustrates Deleuze's notion of difference using the analogy of an ocean storm. In a typhoon wave patterns can have numerous variations: colors, curvature, velocity. One wave pattern will align for a moment with another and then shift to other patterns. In crowds, bodies are unstable, in flux, and complex assemblages that affect other bodies. Common notions interlace, step together, unclench, entangle and couple spontaneously. Confronting another can be disastrous or unfortunate but always is disjointed,

full of silences, and can give ideas that can be added to. Joy occurs when the new possibilities posed by another overlap your own and increase the capacity for self-understanding (Bignall, 2010).

Methodology or Special Glasses

Narrative inquiry is a method to research pedagogies, organizations and interactions that create social inequalities (Chase, 2013). Using methods of narrative inquiry, the impact on collaborative learning of a creative and reflective pedagogy – defined in *Researching Children Researching the World: 5x5x5=creativity* (Hay, 2008, p. 5) as 'adults learning from and supporting children in their development as makers and creators' – will be studied. The self-determined curriculum, as seen in the drawing club, respects the ideas of children and encourages aesthetic ideas to be shared with others. This article will describe an art-making environment that recognizes the child's capacity as a thinker, friend and collaborator, and will connect this freedom to the development of ethical relationships.

The article will begin with a brief history of art education and will describe the narrative art making of children in a social setting that is open ended, fluid and thus transformative. This research will show how a narrative environment (I am defining 'narrative environment' as the intimate relationships among children) affects and is affected by the children's art making. The article will also touch on the intrinsic value of free drawing. Specifically, the writing will evidence how self-determined art making allows children to realize their own potential when seeing what another can do.

Drawing Class

In 1885, while he was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Franz Cižek welcomed the children of his landlord into his studio. Cižek, who became internationally known as 'the father of child art' (Wilson, 2004, p. 308), reveled in children's natural ease with materials and began to offer children's art classes, watchful not to impose his aesthetic onto the children. Yet, Cižek limited materials and coached the children to create work 'in a child art style' that in later years became 'a school art style' (Efland, 1976). Still seen in schools today, this 'school art style' is an attempt by teachers to make school more fun. This decorative art is colorful and easy to do and comes with quick results. School art promotes an image of the child that is innocent and non-intellectual.

More recently, school art curricula included lessons in aesthetic values, art history, art criticism and studio techniques. This popular national curriculum called DBAE (Discipline-Based Art Education) in the United States positioned the teacher 'as the center of knowing and all that can be known' (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 481) for the classroom aesthetic. Buried deep in the margins of schoolwork, on the sides of sneakers, on notebook covers, were subjects truly favored by children like volcanoes, sharks, cannons, knives, crude jokes, cartoon

characters and wrecked cars. School art forbade children to draw images suggesting danger, sorrow, remorse, anxiety or craziness. In stultifying silence, children were taught that the highest art was a product of Greco-Roman traditions and that art geniuses painted peaches and ballet dancers. In such art classrooms, children contemplated cooked art versus raw life (Schechner, 1988, p. 191).

Conservative school practices have threatened arts education. To avoid continued serious cutbacks in art education, a standardized arts education curriculum has been adopted by American public schools with a focus on teaching 'children to be a good audience for the arts, not strong producers or critics' (Finley, 2013, p. 90). The curriculum is often limited to studying a narrow collection of token masterpieces to later identify in a multiple-choice test.

Figure 1. Demented Man.

Figure 2. Troll boy.

This week I watched two nine-year-old boys, Avery and Cosmo, collaborate on a large portrait of a super-villain named Demented Man.

'He should have squid arms with little suction cups.' This is sketched.

'And he's kind of an alien with a little goatee.' This is added.

'I was thinking something looks wrong here.' (Pause)

'He has cat ears. And he trails toxic waste behind.' This too is drawn.

'No, that makes no sense.'

The boys concocted this evil character and agreed to place him in New York City. 'We were going to put him behind bars but there's not many interesting

things to draw in a jail.' Propped next to their drawing of Demented Man was *Art in America*, back-cover-side up, revealing the skyline of New York City. 'We found this picture of New York and are keeping it right here.' The two boys were referring to this photograph as source material. Next, I asked the boys how the collaboration worked. Avery, wearing prescription underwater goggles complete with encircling elastic headband, answered, 'I get good ideas and he's good at drawing them down.' In front of the boy wearing goggles was a second portrait. I saw a swollen head and jagged teeth.

'I am working on Balloon Man. His weakness is needles.' Balloon Man's portrait was without a background. The pencil lines were light and overall the head had few details.

'No,' said Cosmo, 'let's make Balloon Man into a regular Troll.'

'Yes! Troll Boy! Draw him on top of the buildings,' added Avery. With Avery as Idea Man, Cosmo gave the drawing villain's eyes that were blackened orbs, no nose, two attachments on top of the head and sharp pointy teeth around the internal circumference of the mouth (a few teeth more than a shark). Instead of the tiny goatee like Demented Man, Troll Boy had a narrow tongue that lapped downward, mirroring a tiny beard.

To adults, this collaboration may seem silly and casual, but it was one of careful choosing. The boys became collaborators not to glean the other's skills, not to overcome difference, not to understand each other, nor to possess a more talented part of the other. In fact, figuring out what anything was like for the other was not on anyone's mind. Through their serious work, the boys brought each other an experience of difference. By listening and observing, being in free physical proximity, sharing an experience, and the drama of contingency, the boys surprised each other by what they knew (Ahmed, 2010). In short, through this contact at the drawing table, each boy saw the limits of what he could do and was shown more of the other than he could grasp.

In life there are overturned beliefs, cataclysms, upheavals and missed opportunities that can liberate habitual practices (St. Pierre, 2013). The body, that is always in flux and on the brink of change (Gibbs, 2010), experiences moments where something happens (a conversation, a spilled coffee, lost keys). Gilles Deleuze, who described a body as 'a composition of relations between parts' (Deleuze, 1990, pp. 218-219; Bignall, 2010), perceived that even random actions affect the body's memories and passions. These passions are fluid and hold the greatest potential either to warp the idea beyond recognition or to celebrate what is possible. In this interaction new feelings take shape, and this, in turn, adjusts our sense of self.

Besides the encounters that disrupt our feelings and incite questions, our astatic identity, like tremors that roll outward, affects bodies nearby (Probyn, 2010). The boys begin their relationship with some understanding of shared beliefs. These overlaps can create discomfort or signal great changes. Affective relations, appealing or not, create synergy, or more than what each contributes. Different bodies join in partial ways, each unfolds new ideas and we become

more than just two. Children learn to seek out such joyful encounters and tend to jump in with both feet (Bignall, 2010).

Encounters/Influences

I imagine an ethical life that begins with the notion that our identities are fluid and shifting. We are thrown together by the light toss of circumstance and our minds and bodies are ever-changing collections of what life has to offer. Bodies, then, have the 'capacity for affecting and being affected' (Lloyd, 1996, p. 134), and the effect is directed outward. 'Here I am. You can use me for something. I can tell you what to ask and what to answer.' If we can see ourselves in the trace of another, we realize our limits and in the other find more than we could imagine. We learn about difference from what is right in front of us and find more than we thought possible (O'Sullivan, 2008). In the vigilant search, not just any collaborator will do. Instead we discern 'what we certainly know to be useful to us' (Lloyd, 1996, p. 134).

The boys interacted with congenial affection that expressed their own vulnerability and a willingness to face difference and exposure to conflict. In harmony, their bodies and emotions performed how toxic slime would ooze from Troll Boy, who would recoil at salt, '[t]hat dries him up'. They each performed how Demented Man would move with squid arms. Collaborating on portraits, the boys were emotive and open while listening to each other, voicing their own ideas and feeling unperturbed in the moments of not knowing what to suggest next.

Concluding Thoughts

Falling Short

While I have criticized art educators who do not allow children to choose their own problems, I admit to a level of complicity, fashioning children's art making according to my aesthetic. Designing the environment for the drawing club, I chose the materials, the location and the adult artist/teachers. How I publicized the Drawing Club had a bearing on which children attended. I read texts, visited museums, studied certain artists and visited art programs for children that supported my beliefs about art. In decisions concerning the drawing club, I seldom doubted my judgment.

A Messy Process

The collaborative drawings were very complex and highly detailed. This was not rote learning. The Demented Man and Troll Boy narrative drawings were created with the innovation that comes from tentative interpretations and where conscious and unconscious negotiation led to embracing difference. One boy made a wild guess, revealed, tossed out, affirmed the preposterous, and the other was enthralled. Reactions were unpredictable and could suddenly reverse

or swerve off in a wild direction, or collaborators might link arms, nod and celebrate the moment. There certainly was the feeling of the children being in the thick of things. I heard a courteous sincerity that brought the boys closer. In such collaborations, differences flushed out uncertainty, disappointment, desire, possibility, randomness, life slowed down to make sure everything was heard. In the collaborative drawing of Demented Man, I observed the openness of joining with another (Bignall, 2010) and the thrill of hurling forward.

Curiously, the following week only one of the boys came to the drawing club. This boy continued drawing portraits of imaginary characters but his work was fairly formulaic and static. There was the same commitment to drawing but the innovation and detail seen in the collaborative drawings of Demented Man and Troll Boy were missing.

If the aesthetic governs every free human response and if truly knowing another is impossible, what can I glean from this research? What is useful for children in free drawing? Spinoza felt that being good was possible by 'strengthening of bodies through composition' (Lloyd, 1996, p. 134). For Spinoza, creating an ethical life required joining with another who is a little like us. In this joy we find difference and the great potential in disruption, sensation and collaborative art making. It's always one thing and another. Combining energies with others doubles the likelihood that we'll find the right door. With this shift in focus, I learned about difference.

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