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What is Happening in the Doing: hunched over a consideration

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ABSTRACT What is the importance of matter in the art making of children? This article introduces the notion that inorganic matter is much more diverse and creative than previously thought. By taking time to putter, pause, and to perceive objects, humans may seize a material vitality with these nonhumans. Perhaps any one thing whether a pencil, a tube of glue, a piece of paper, or a young artist are neither subject nor object but Nature. Spinoza finds entanglements, the assemblage of things, as Nature enriching the human. In the theories of new materialisms, matter is a vital entanglement in the creation of knowledge. It follows that the teacher must value the unorthodox in the learning of the child. What does the art making of children look like when they intra-act with matter to conceive phenomena? This article engages in these questions and challenges the priority of a preconceived product as a goal in art making. Rather a teacher might ask ,'what is happening in the doing'?

Taking aim and squeezing the trigger, a young girl outlines a felt square with hot glue, and flips the bright patch onto a hand-sewn cloth purse. She is up and moving, selecting from a container of materials to attach here and now. Ada's purse is built from upholstery fabric, trimmed in pink pom-poms, with a thick button sewn on the front flap. A thin whip of black elastic is sewn to the purse to loop around the button to keep the purse closed. Ada is especially fond of this innovation. 'Look how I made the button really work to hold the purse closed!' I was intrigued by Ada's confidence with the materials. Ada, eight years old, arrives breathing the air, hearing a polyphony of animated voices, chairs being adjusted, nails being struck. The art studio classroom itself is a material assemblage, stuff on hand to uncover knowledge, inviting the palimpsest, imagining possibilities and experiencing decisions entangled in affect.

I am the art teacher in this studio space where 18 children aged 6 to 12 are free to explore a salmagundi of materials. As the children rework the space by bringing their energies, ideas and disruptive tendencies into the room, their

edges of knowledge shift. I see this as the children ignore old patterns and generate new possibilities. How children come to know events is not based on their interaction with independent objects, nor on revering the object's known attributes. Knowledge or arriving at the observable fact occurs from the intertwining differences, reconfiguring, reworkings, of what was known before. Children do not hop from rail to rail to figure things out, but in the ribald studio experience they intra-act with their culture, nature and technology. Using their senses, the child finds the world is intra-active, making one part of itself known to another part of itself (Barad, 2008).

I am startled by the child's flexibility, bravado and innovation. Ada made choices about fabric, adhesives, and an array of unlikely reticule materials. Her work was the doing, folding, gluing, attaching, demolishing. There was no hierarchy of importance in her choices nor in the shared space. There was no degradation. She was in the thick of an intra-action, being within a room of others making, choosing from a broad selection of materials. There were traditional school art supplies on hand, but Ada and the other children gravitated to adult-world things. Tire tubes, broken and preserved statuettes, animal skeletons, wire, dryer tubes, car steering wheels were found treasures. The children were transformed by the materials, learning to destroy, uncouple, regenerate to other uses. The context of the room permeated Ada's dignity and goodness.

The studio space is an assemblage of mobile work spaces, eclectic accumulations of materials, shutting down, intersecting, disregarding the old patterns and looking to the new. The boundaries of gender, class and ethics affect this assemblage, but so do the clock ticking, the freedom to get messy, the presence of the human and the non-human, co-emerging. This distance-in-proximity is not without affect. The entanglements among Ada as a person, the materials, the energy in the studio, the community of artists all created a context for Ada to conceive of a new reality. From the sensation of intra-action with materials, Ada formed a new fragment of the world. Ada, who arrived only an hour ago, has since built new knowledge in the free choices she made and visibly expressed in feelings. Ada's agency or ability to act was 'thing power materialism ... figur[ing] things as more than mere objects, emphasizing their powers of life resistance and even a kind of will' (Bennett, 2004, p. 361). There was an embeddedness of curiosity, pleasure, all entangled in the materiality of the art making.

How an Object Can Breathe

I am intrigued by the current theories of new feminist materialisms. Karen Barad writes that 'matter and meaning are not separate entities' (2007, p. 3). Matter is not static nor a dramatic setting for human activity. It is not only the human who creates. Barad (2007) finds the human and the non-human share an intra-action. This direction of thinking does not privilege the human as the center of knowledge construction and urges us towards 'thing power materialism'

(Bennett, 2010). The person is not situated as solely determining knowledge production. As a collaborator with the non-human, a person can realize their own clumsy, disjointed, damaged, connected and full-body emotional memory, impacting what they come to know.

It takes time to know how to be in this world. There is going backwards and forwards. There is the encountering of all fields: brittle, bright, rustling, damp; the searching for a towpath; there is the two-foot-tall tower of buttons, glistening with glue, teetering up as a thin line. The non-human and human body are 'a series of surfaces, energies, forms, a mode of linkage' (Groz, 1994, p. 120). Data collected to decode the meaning of children's artwork are often located in the limited and tiresome categories. For assessment purposes, art teachers are often required to construct an image of the child based on race, gender, class and past behaviors. School systems adopt general perceptions of a child that perpetuate stereotypes in order to measure change. How a teacher knows a child is often chained to a static definition of identity that can be measured. Perhaps, INSTEAD, the child could be known from their reaction to experiences. As they intra-act in the studio assemblage, could teachers record 'what are the juicy connections the child creates between the human and the non-human? How does the child challenge assumptions? How do materials impact how children come to care for others?'

In this realization that matter matters, as teachers we can accept uncertainty and not prioritize fast and firm solutions. Rather, as teachers we champion an 'ethics of care' or being responsible for the others in our intra-actions and the innumerable ways of being in the world that emerge from material entanglements (Taylor & Ivinson, 2013).

Lucky Life

Years ago, I ran an arts-based early childhood program. Ruth, a four-year-old, was painting at the easel mid-morning when I asked her what interested her most. She answered, 'Pigs, Wonder Woman, Luke Skywalker as a kid, wiggling my ears [her grandfather taught her], bunnies and five cats, I wish I could marry them.' Ruth finishes her painting, 'The pink is the pink milk and the red is the red lava. I am on the pink milk jumping over the red lava.' I saw the paint and the easel empowering Ruth to create a visual story. The studio with its four easels, its liquid paints is transformed every time Ruth re-inserts her soaked brush dripping with a prior color; the brushes worn as various life cycles, certain deterioration, particular attributes; the linoleum floor tiles surrounding the easels washed and scrubbed more often than the tiles in the library corner; these are matter that matters. The matter illuminated Ruth's presence in the studio where knowledge is partnered with affect and deserves to be treated with an ethics of care.

The vibrancy of matter, the affect created in the intra-action between the human and the non-human, gently turns our thoughts to the gorgeous poetry of being part of this world. It is liberating to see the world as possibility. Children

lean into the easels, their paint selves bristling with Ruth's theories: 'if I step back my painting looks like it is going away from me.' Ruth's theories emerge within the action of painting; punctuated by sounds of others stirring paint, the wooden handles ring against the baby food jars of paint; how the ethics of caring for these materials comes naturally when the non-human intra-actions fill the children with longing, gasps, revered moments.

Institutional boundaries, categories, inventories, taped lines on the linoleum to designate where each child should stand are the stuff of schools. This art studio has none of that. Ruth arrives with a backpack filled with what traditional school rooms would see as deviant and contraband. Ruth unzips the main compartment. 'This is from a toy car I got for Christmas that does not work.' The bag also holds a putty-colored rotary-dial phone handpiece, a black walkie talkie, a gold hinge, a small round mirror (Ruth looks intently at her eyeball) and a green folder, with Ruth saying, 'That little drop of blood on the front happened when I was three years old.' Then she says, 'Maybe I'll have some of this,' reaching deep inside and pulling out a package of pink Extra gum and a remote-control device. Ruth waved a small green book – *Iowa's Book of Trees*. 'My mom gave me this little book and I use it to learn about the trees. See!' She opens the worn cover where she has printed her name in pencil and drawn a good likeness of a Christmas tree.

The studio space is an assemblage of traditional art supplies (crayons, construction paper, paste, markers, colored masking tape and scissors), flotsam of childhood culture (comic books, plastic figures, stickers, candy-flavored ChapSticks) and objects from adult culture (broken cell phones, colorful netting bags that once held fresh fruit, unpainted plaster statues, discarded sunglasses, rubber tire tubing, hammers, nails, wood scraps, sponges, wooden shoe inserts). Everything oozes together, inviting matter to entangle and become something else. Discarded sunglasses get painted a solid blue. Once dry, the child takes a pair of scissors and scrapes a tiny peep hole in the center of each indigo lens. Tucking the arms of the glasses over her ears, she says, 'I am in disguise.'

When the rare, fragile, smudged, worn and common are placed beside the fragments of others' lives with art supplies free for the using, new associations are formed: child/adult, popular/obscure, examined/unknown, chewable/foul, sound-producing/tiny, swollen, secret spaces, to make this sound, image/text, severed/whole... And the child's world becomes expansive.

Back to Ruth's collection, where the singular life of Ruth imprints her life onto this studio. The collection holds an emotional significance for Ruth, comes from fragments of lush memories made visible through these materials. The entanglements of the human and non-human things of the world are how Ruth comes to know and to be in the world. Ruth's mark making, through her painting and her collections, influences more complex assemblages, broadens definitions, challenges differences, and prods others' stubbornness, whimsy, melancholy and theories, as they form their own ideas.

What Brings Me Here

It is not the individual pieces in Ruth's collection that stimulate her critical thinking. Furthermore, the separate items in the collection cannot be used as data to predict understanding or change. The collection is best seen as a whole. Matter as assemblage provides interference, intervention and interruptions as situated in a fluid intra-active studio space. When children have free access to a plethora of art materials, new uses and combinations of materials will occur. Children working in a studio where eclectic materials stimulate innovative possibilities. Teachers can further enhance the child's connection between ambiguity and critical thinking by asking challenging questions like: 'What can this do?'. Maximum gratification comes from solving challenging problems: 'What do these objects do together? What happens when this collection is added to or dismantled or moved to another setting or set in plaster?'

Could puzzling through how a collection moves and changes from place to place or what happens to the child with haptic intra-action with materials of innumerable properties offer a wiser insight into learning? I think of this *as mind walking through cultural life to experience affect.* A child imagines, daydreams, becomes stimulated by the assemblage in the studio. This person is in the future and the past at the same time. What of these materials triggers a feeling of what happened once? How can these things become something else? Walking through the cultural life of the studio is invigorating and reminds the child that the world can be refigured, conjoined, disrupted, demolished, refashioned. The learning child is always in-between, pursuing, thinking, intra-acting, in the throes of materials.

I now realize my questions about materials and children lay in the child's activity of doing. In the recent past I found myself electrified by the child's completed hat, painting, stacked sculpture. Entranced by their use of materials, I found the children's innovative solutions fueling my admiration for their final art piece. I took lots of photographs and interviewed children about their work. 'Tell me about that part of your painting. What is happening there?' I wanted to preserve this magical phenomenon of a child refiguring their world from materials. Nothing the children made from their own imaginations was corny, trite, Disney-ish, messy or unimportant. I felt the children's projects, in the display case, were near genius. I had a hundred photographs of children's inventions made from re-purposing materials: catapults from wood scraps and rubber bands, bombs from balls of masking tape, papier-mâché, black paint and glitter, cotton ball dispensers, button picture frames, cannons from oatmeal containers and tiny strands of twine, chainsaws from aluminum pie pans and boxes with cardboard handles. What really stabs at my heartstrings is a witnessing of the child's ability to manipulate, change or alter a space through materials. What I have come to realize is that the vibrancy of the art making was not found in the finished work. 'It is sad that an adult should assume that every lesson must culminate in a tangible end product,' says W. Lambert Brittain (1979, p. 229).

While taking photos of the completed project made me a co-performer, like having skin in the game, over time the snapshots felt merely representational and dead. Does this data as photograph really represent the heart of creation? For example, once the child announced they were done, I took a photo of their work. Days passed, and I felt a growing estrangement from the child's art piece. I felt the affect of the piece begin hemorrhaging energy. Does the photo convey what is truly the significance of the art piece? Is the child's uncanny fitting, removing and adjusting until their vision is satisfied apparent in the photograph? If not, what does the photograph do? Is it an authentic representation of the child's creative process as it really was?

Wearing a Tape Measure as a Shawl

Representation is revered by teachers as the way to gauge likeness and as an indication of what learning has occurred. But does the child's finished object have the lowdown on what became learned or felt? I fear the final art work is privileged. It is 'more accessible to us than the things they really represent' (Rouse, 1987, p. 125). I have come to believe true assessment must be performative, with the teacher considering the materials, the human and the non-human, the natural and the cultural influences. This is a non-linear path of zeroing in on actions as inseparable from combinations. These are vital intra-actions among materials: the thinking about what these materials can do, and what the child might want them to do, is a significant variation on how teachers measure learning.

The child's actions are open-ended and often involve material iterative configurations, repeated conjoining to push limits, to discover phenomena. How can the performative actions of the materials and the child's engagement be documented? In the child's continual intra-action with matter, how can the teacher see what learning is happening?

Throughout the year I had collected brief videos of the children's art making. I had children making movies of other children. I had university students collecting clips of the children intra-acting with the materials. I relished these slices of activity. There was life in the video documenting. I heard bewildered interviewers ask, 'So what are you going to do with all those corks?' To my pleasure, these video narratives had shifting momentum and had an immediacy that roused my affect for this art making. There was something alive and sensual in these movies. I saw the entanglement among the interviewer, the child and the materials, the embodied interviewer sharing the moment with the materials and the artist as a 'sensory materiality' (Taylor, 2013, p. 57).

I watched, affected by the passionate expressive movement of the artist's face, the material as prop and actor, and the voice of the interviewer. In the close-ups of the child's hands or face I was struck with wondering, 'What are you feeling right now?'

Carol Taylor, in her chapter 'Mobile Sections and Flowing Matter in Participant Generated Video: exploring a Deleuzian approach to visual sociology', writes:

> affection image ... is not a gateway to uncovering ... emotional 'depths' hidden behind the surface of her image, rather it points to how the 'surface' (of the image, of the skin) is already pleated or folded affectively with the forces of matter or memory, senses and spirit and culture and history. (2013, p. 92)

The video clips offer the same sensory materiality in the ebb and flow of the art making. I am reminded that art is a language of sensations. The ability of materials to adjust what a person can feel, understand or connect to is how the art was made. Wandering about to observe the child intra-act with materials, I am affected by the immediacy and the intimacy of witnessing the becoming of the child. The videos allow me to revisit this unfolding.

I am still ruminating on how performativity can be preserved. When video-taped, the unfinished – caught in mid-air – the process of art making maintains a vitality. Perhaps the still image, the photograph of the object, works as a representation of the real thing, and therefore is like a static mirror image. In contrast, the video of the making is about documenting phenomena through 'doings/actions/practices' (Barad, 2008, p. 122). The teacher asks, 'What is happening here? What is meaningful?'

Concluding Thoughts

When John Currin wrote (as quoted in Waters, 2016, p. 14) that 'all art is about its own making', perhaps he saw as inseparable the process of the art making and the feeling embedded in the piece. So, too, anything the child refigures in the freedom to vary, to build, to make relates back to experience and has emotive possibility. In the freedom to manipulate materials, to expand what a material can do, to let the object come to the child also comes a feeling and greater ethical appreciation for the non-human (Bennett, 2004).

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