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COMMENTARY

Partiality and the Art Education Researcher

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We move through this world not ever fully knowledgeable of our existence. This is primarily because the experience of existing is embroiled in ecologies of relations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), relations that are rooted in the past and tethered to the ways that memories are made to recall. The agentic nature of memories is a spatiotemporal affair that takes on and takes up the dynamics of the material and immaterial. As sociologists Fox and Alldred (2019) explained, memories are enabled "partly through the memories that individuals bring to events that link these events across time and space, in the process producing both social continuities and change" (p. 8). And even when the objects of memories have no physical presence, there still exists "a virtual presence via rememberings of earlier events, along with other virtual affects such as expectations, imaginations, fantasies and ideas" (p. 8). The virtualities of recollections and projections play a significant role in realizing how every little thing—the noticed and unnoticed—finds a space to dwell and be. It is in this space that the partialities of relations become present for the art education researcher. To talk and to think about art, education, and research—the inherited and the

"It is critical that we, as researchers, pay close attention to the unstable, changing, partial, fleeting, and indeterminate nature of our encounters with scholarship, participants, environments, histories, oneself, students."

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potential—is talking and thinking about the art education scholar and their sensibilities and willingness to participate with/in the world in ways that open up to the affordances of experience. In the following commentary, I focus on the phenomenological aspects of partiality as an opportunity to consider the ontological turning in art education—a turning that reflects on approaches of understanding phenomena differently from epistemological orientations of the past (Atkinson, 2017; O'Donoghue, 2009; Rolling, 2011; Siegesmund, 2018; Walker, 2015).

In the past, phenomenologists have focused on what it is like for the human being to already be situated in a world alongside things in ways that privilege the individual human. For example, Martin Heidegger (1927/1962), in his seminal text, *Being and Time*, started with an individual for whom the world of objects and things was made available based on utility. In other words, the usefulness of objects becomes a central focus rather than how the individual might be affected by objects. What is missing is a connection among the tools, environments, and bodies as cogenerative, which accounts for more dynamic experiences of being (Peters, 2019). More transdisciplinary phenomenological theories and methods have opened up this line of thinking in ways that work to disrupt the Anthropocene perspective (Bennett, 2009; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Vagle, 2014). In this, the human is not the foundation of experience, but instead, the human is enmeshed and affected in the flux of experience along with everything else. As phenomenologist Mark Vagle (2014) stated, phenomenological research "does not assume that anything, idea, belief, goal, phenomenon, person, animal, object, etc. can be thought of as stable, singular, and final. Instead, all things are connected and interconnected in all sorts of unstable, changing, partial, fleeting ways" (p. 118). If this idea of being *interconnected* in one's encounters is of value within art education, then it is critical that we, as researchers, pay close attention to the unstable, changing, partial, fleeting, and indeterminate nature of our encounters with scholarship, participants, environments, histories, oneself, students, and the like. It might be said that an ontological turning in art education signals to an investment in the affective and nonlinear partialities of existing—an existing that involves bodily encounters marred in complex traces of dynamic exchanges—exchanges that leave everything exposed to the potentialities of change.

A Philosophical Thinking of Partiality

Let us think of partiality as an aspect of being at *home*, meaning implicit knowledge resides as a part of our reality that is most familiar and comfortable. Philosopher Dylan Trigg (2017) put this into perspective when he stated that, "What is real is that which engenders a sense of continuity, unity and integration within the subject and thus reinstates what was already established within a given horizon of experience" (p. 132). Here, one's perception creates a way of sensing the invisible, not necessarily as a factual appearance, but as one that aims to understand "*how well* [one's] experience measures up to [one's] perceptual needs and desires" (Kelly, 2005, p. 97). This is a position that lobbies us to assume a point of view that is situated around familiar things and ideas. What seems critical about being at home or not is the idea that home can, and most often does, become "a silent context against which our security in the world is grounded" (Trigg, 2017, p. 137).

On the other hand, when we move away from a place of home—a familiar place—"the landscape bends and contorts, as though imposing itself upon the subject. Spatiality is not only distorted, but also disintegrating" (Trigg, 2017, p. 132). This might seem like a surrealist kind of world where one finds their body either attempting to comprehend

or flee from distorted unfamiliar or seemingly unfriendly worldviews. However, for the art education researcher, these unsettled, embodied moments of tension are moments that can engender newly realized ways of being with/in the world as a shared experience. Philosopher Erin Manning (2016) reminded us:

> A body is a field of relation out of which and through which worldings occur and evolve. We know neither where a world begins nor where a body ends. What is real, what we know, are relations… relations are real, here and now, but what they can do is unknowable in advance, [they] must continuously be invented. (p. 191)

In this, the operative phase is the *unknowable in advance*, which does labor to orient how one might come to think and talk about the ontological aspects within art education.

The Ontological Turning in Art Education

My landing pad, while wondering about this commentary, led me to art education scholar Sydney Walker's (2015) editorial, "Why Assemblage?" In this piece, she stated that "assemblage is a fulsome concept, a unique and constructive way to ontologically conceptualize the complex processes that concern researchers" (p. 196). She pointed out how ontology opens up a space for researchers to consider relations not as a summation, but in ways that protect the coexistence of alterities. This Deleuze and Guattari (1987) concept of *nomadic rhizomatic assemblages* along with *lines of flight* has influenced art education scholarship in such areas as visual arts–based research (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018; Coats, 2014; Garoian, 2014; LeBlanc, 2018; O'Donoghue, 2007; Rolling, 2016); visual culture (Tavin & Tervo, 2018); a/r/tography (Irwin, 2013; Rousell & Fell, 2018; Shin & Bae, 2019); teacher education (Fendler, 2019; Garoian, 2014; Hellman & Lind, 2017); and early childhood art education (Fendler, 2019; Schulte, 2015, 2019; Trafí-Prats, 2017). Trafí-Prats (2017) used art-based research, childhood studies, and an onto-epistemological concept called compositionism to investigate the relations that 5th graders had with the natural environment. Trafí-Prats (2017) stated that

> a compositionist visual art–based research works in an ethics of immanence and potentiality that allows for partial and provisional encounters with data, showing that the composition of common worlds is a slow, ongoing, discontinuous, fragile, and problematic process with which the researcher and participants engage in acts of response-ability. (p. 333)

It is important to note that a critical aspect of ontological work in art education can move one to consider oneself alongside uncertainties in ways that shape more ethical approaches in art, education, and research.

Art education scholars also have found resonance with other ontological concepts, such as object-oriented ontology (Hood & Kraehe, 2017; Stabler, 2018), posthumanism/new materialism (Keifer-Boyd, 2018), and phenomenology (Lewis, 2015; O'Donoghue, 2007; Vagle & Hofsess, 2015), as a way to consider the partialities of relations and the criticality they can engender. As Hofsess (2013) stated about her research, an orientation toward ontology engenders "a movement that unmoors, and sets one adrift towards unanticipated, surprising possibilities" (p. 20). The encounters that art education researchers are involved with are ambiguous, defining, contentious, dynamic, diverse, and vulnerable (like the times in which we currently live); however, an ontological perspective in art education opens one up to the generative nature of being entangled.

Conclusion

The aspects of partiality, such as familiarities, habits, and other orientating forces, do work to shape one's attention and scholarly endeavors. However, experiences that are not yet realized are made potential when opening oneself up to the partialities of an entangled, historical,

cultural, posthuman enterprise. Amid all their uncertainties, the partialities that exist within our encounters retain a level of *maneuverability* (Massumi, 2015)—that little bit of space that is always available for change and choice to occur. Critical attention to the partialities of one's perceptions might reveal something not only about what we seek to uncover in our research, but also, first and foremost, it might reveal something about where one is positioned as a scholar and how that positionality opens up the field to new ethical horizons of art, education, and research.

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