Troubling the Narrative of Social Justice in Art Education: The Necessity of Non-representational Theory

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Abstract

This essay is an attempt to question the social justice agenda in art education as it is currently theorized via identity politics and through philosophies of representation. It is thus a form of 'betrayal' in the best sense of that word as the attempt is to reorient art education along the non-representational theories of Deleuze and Guattari.

Keywords: social justice, representation, identity politics, Deleuze and Guattari, non-representation, unthought

What else can the loss of self-transcendence breed but a profound narcissism?

(Sandy Grande, 2004, p. 322)

The subject is a question.

(Jacques Lacan, 1977, p. 198)

As is well known, in North America social justice has long been a theme in education and art education in particular ever since the advent of critical theory entered into the scene of education through the influential writings of Paolo Friere beginning in 1970 with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It continued to flourish through the dominance of such theorists as Henry Giroux (1981) and Peter McLaren (1997). There is now an Internet site devoted to continuing this legacy (http://www.critical-theory.com/).It has taken the National Art Education Association (NAEA), the dominant art education organization in the United States, fifty-two years to finally identify social justice as the theme of its Baltimore conference held in 2010, a theme that the Social Theory Caucus has always had its sights on.[1] But rather than praising this as an achievement, in this brief essay I feel compelled to betray the field by raising a number of concerns that plague the direction of critical pedagogy, and the social justice agenda as applied to what has become visual arts education with its attendant arts based research.

Such a 'betrayal' must be understood for what it is. To truly betray is not to be disloyal to friends by acting in the interests of enemies. It is rather, an absolute fidelity to the idealization that is sought (social justice and equality), and at the same time struggling with the limitations of that idealization so that other ways might be thought, that are as yet, unthought. Such an act is made in the sacrifice of love, since it is never easy. The driving force of this betrayal targets two central theoretical edifices-*representation and subjectivity*. The first (representation) is the overwhelming approach to art education and to visual cultural studies in particular-this seems obvious since these fields take the visual as an essential dominant sense, and the

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[1] The Social Theory Caucus is one of the interest groups that is an affiliate of the NAEA. It was founded in 1980.

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second (subjectivity) is overwhelmingly saturated with a self-serving narcissism that is overwrought in many arts based research approaches. The artist remains the agent of the work. In such research directions as a/r/tography, the artist as agent even wears three 'hats': researcher, artist and educator, or in ethnographic research shared authority is subtly negotiated, yet the 'findings' are never 'owned' by participants. Participation is continually subverted, like the *faux* participation that appears daily on our television screens that is touted as democratic (Not an Alternative, Jodi Dean, and John Hawke, 2010).

In what follows I want to turn *representation into difference*, not difference as its simple bifurcation to *sameness* which neo-liberal forms of democratic pluralism have managed to do through identity politics, but difference in and of itself, the distinction between difference in degree versus difference in kind, and to treat subjectivity as a question, as Lacan(1977) and Deleuze|Guattari(1987) do, where it becomes a non-representational entity by remaining in a 'larval' stage. Identity cannot be articulated or objectified, but because of this very impossibility, it can be the force behind art teaching and visual research.

The social justice agenda, as I read it in the literature, is driven by multicultural education, democratic education, critical race theory, critical pedagogy, postmodernism, feminisms, (dis)ability studies, postcolonialism, and/or queer theory. This is a long list where the focus is on racism, ethnicity, special needs, and linguistic diversity where anti-oppressive and democratic grounds are sought as forms of change. The Caucus on Social Theory throughout its history has engaged in all of these issues before special interest groups began forming in the '90s presenting a crisis of identity within the National Art Education Association itself. Throughout my thirty-year teaching careerin the Academe, I was determined to make society more humane and just, politicize what I was teaching in both art education and curriculum studies. As a result, I was almost dismissed in my first university position (jagodzinski, 1996). So, does this now mean, in my senior years, I have finally seen the light and turned conservative after all these years? Hardly. However, there are disturbing and uncomfortable issues that have arisen during the history and development of critical pedagogy as applied to

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social justice agenda via its multi-dimensional outreached arms of feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory, and so on, which are continuously applied to art education research and art education praxis. To question this certainly seems a worrisome thing to do. A betrayal.

Identity Politics

The first and most obvious complaint is the question of identity politics, and identity politics that specifically target that nebulous word "culture," which art educators have found to be such a panacea for organizing visual images. This is the legacy of multiculturalism that continues to permeate classrooms. Art teachers are asked to be cultural brokers who understand different cultural systems, who are then able to interpret cultural symbols and build bridges across cultures to facilitate learning. Seems noble enough goal?

Culture in this sense is always representationally idealized, that is as beliefs and practices that belong together, rather than belief and practices that are continually happening and changing-that is 'becoming.' Because art educators like to categorize, we have learnt our lessons especially well from art history and criticism, culture ends up as a way that perpetuates racial thought. *Hybridity* is no better a solution. It is the same representational thought brought under complexity theory; or, more crassly put, its 'going Native' like the top grossing film of all time: James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009)- a cross between *Pocahontas* and *Dancing with Wolves*, two films that have a special place in the popular imagination. The first film is an outright Disney myth for redeeming the character of John Smith. The Powhatan Nation has bitterly complained about this, while the second promotes Lt. John Dunbar as the outsider who befriends indigenous Indians. This is the trap of a visual minority based on the 'pure' or idealized signifier of color. The 'signifier' in general is caught by semiotic systems of representation that stem from the linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure(1983). Identity representations ends up recapitulating their own internal hierarchies as to who represents who-which artist represents his or her national country at a biennale, who has their art hung at embassy buildings, who has the right to speak as a feminist, and so on. An historical example here are artists who

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have gone 'Native:' Emil Carr being one, and Paul Gauguin another. In the former case, the question of cultural appropriation emerges, and is never quite resolved. Carr is either forgiven for her interest in West Coast indigenous peoples or demonized as a narcissistic white colonizer, and in some instances placed in a space between redemption and condemnation (Stewart, 2005). In the latter case, Gauguin is chastised for not learning the language, living off the Tahitian women (Solomon-Godeau, 1989), at the same time causing a revolution in the conception of the nude in western art as well as rethinking the colonial legacy of the island by reworking Christian iconography (Brooks, 1993). Such 'readings' based on the signifier of race are both sexually and powerfully politically charged as to how a particular artist becomes represented in the historical record. Art educational research that that continues to forward an identity politics finds itself in such impossible quandaries as the signifiers continually are repositioned in whatever category is deemed necessary to gain a political advantage. This is no different from the way designer capitalism operates when it comes to marketing (jagodzinski, 2010).

These problematic signifiers-feminism, postcolonialism, racism, queer theory and so on, aren't likely to go away. Their effects operate on contested fantasy scenarios and passionate attachments whose deconstruction takes more than merely contestations at the discursive and visual psychic levels. They support ideations that are directly tied to socio-political realities. To take a remote example: it has been long known that the Untouchables in East India as a class prevents the country from furthering their economic and democratic social net, yet it is precisely due to this category that the caste system is able to maintain the fantasies of sustained capitalist growth by a well-to-do middle class that is itself a hold over from the Brahmin dynasty. Difference, based on the signifiers of identity, always operates on an established ideal of sameness. What appears as democratic redistribution simply obfuscates the power struggles that are at play amongst the players making the most noise of mistreatment.

Poststructuralism, unfortunately, is no better a research position for art education. It does nothing more than divide the self into so many socio-political interests, depending on which signifier happens to fit the

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situation. For example, sexual orientation may trump ethnicity, depending on the context. A poststructuralist subject is precisely what designer capitalism needs to continue its global reach. The confusion between who one 'is' with what one 'thinks,' which then is furthered by a reduction of who one 'is' and what one thinks in relation to race, ethnicity, queerness, class, and position of privilege short circuits the *virtual potential* of exploring what exists outside such bracketing, whether it be personal memory, history, belief and so on. What happens are conversations that often chastise privilege: being white, being well-off, being straight, without the potentiality of opening up the space-time for an open exchange. The reification of cultural and social identity as essentialism has now moved to its more nuanced dimensions through these poststructuralist approaches. The old nationalist subject supported by self-expression has been a hindrance for quite some time, long abandoned by the compradors of corporate think tanks. The idea is to sell goods to a subject that desires what she or he lacks, or a subject that needs to aggrandize his or her worth. For the education of art not to turn simply into a designer commodity has always been a struggle now based on poststructuralist tenants.

The Question of Romanticism

The second complaint I have against the social justice agenda is the romantic narrative it engenders to heroically 'save' the world, perpetuated by its foremost writers and practitioners such as Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux. Social activists, change agents, community workers, revolutionaries often present fantasies where exposing students to the anti-democratic dynamics of socio-reproduction in schools is to somehow 'magically' turn around capitalist, neoliberalist, racist, heterosexist, Eurocentric and Christianized world. While this current hegemony of beliefs requires a sobering analysis, analysis alone is never enough. Designer capitalism isn't going away just because I personally wrote a number of books on its devastating affects. Most often any critique can be circumvented as just being yet another opinion in a democratic pluralist society, simply part of the claim of an ongoing 'democratic' process. Unfortunately, too much of the social justice agenda in visual art education is governed by a subject who is

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'supposed to know,' well meaning but prone to self-narcissism. If students know what the teacher or professor knows, all will be solved. This is another fantasy that drives a missionary zeal, and perhaps enables professors to meet their quota of publications, absolutely essential given that we are all held hostage to performance standards in neoliberal societies. Besides, often such work is very gratifying. The psychoanalytic idea of *transference* often eludes teacher education: how is it that students may not want to develop their own critical stance to the world, who want to be told what to do, or who insist that the teacher take the position of authority despite the teacher's belief that he or she is trying to be equitable and deferring power? For domination to work, it has to be denied so that it appears we are free and equal despite the obvious socio-cultural reality that we are not. As a number of critics (Badiou, 2001) have claimed, the West has used the charter of human rights to invade countries to establish a particular neoliberalist democracy along with all trapping of consumerism that it brings.

This savior fantasy-we might now call it the 'Avatar Syndrome' since it seems to affect so deeply the American psyche as further evidence by the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, is generally promoted through Hollywood films where it is always the gifted teacher, through her or his use of popular culture (like rap, art, music). or clever motivation techniques (recall the film *Stand and Deliver*) that open the door to learning. This fantasy has arisen with edutainment where the video game industry is wedded to learning through the conflation of military, industry and high-flying universities such as MIT where technology continues to be the new panacea (Okan, 2003). It is here, once more, that the question of a narcissistic ego, as an overinflated superego that is trying to save the world emerges. A Hollywood movie like *Half Nelson*(2007) brings with it a mixed bag of anti-heroism as to how self-destructive this fantasy truly is. Presenting such a fantasy within art education programs can only lead to more disillusionment, and I feel that has been a serious failure of the social justice agenda.

Art Education in Ruins

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Another emergent fantasy with the social justice agenda, and the way it has approached to expose what I call 'designer capitalism,' is the harnessing of affect and aesthetics for its own gains for profit. Unfortunately, this is also the way universities have managed to contain the *potential radicalism* of the social justice agenda. This is a bitter pill to swallow when analyzed and painful to accept its full implications. The late Bill Readings in his *University in Ruins*(1997) had already exposed this fantasy by pointing out how the discourse on excellence, standards and accountability manages to incorporate campus radicalism as proof of campus life or students' commitment. Social justice and diversity is incorporated into mission statements (it certainly is at my university and my department) as a need to attend to social issues. What happens is that these issues of social justice are once again cast in identity politics, that is racial and cultural identity. Perhaps not surprisingly, it's the voices with the loudest representation that clamors for their turn to be heard. At my university the mission statement is directed at profiling and making more visible First Nation students since they will potentially constitute a growing political mass in the near future.   Once upon a time feminism held that high ground in this regard, but this movement has fallen off as postfeminism in its designer mode has recuperated narcissism through 'girl power' and 'sexuality' (McRobbie, 2004). The hierarchy of social justice grievances fuels the emergence of commitment, and establishes the profiles of particular professors. University expectations and teaching standards push such commitment as a way of gauging evaluation for teaching portfolios and faculty evaluation committee reports. It seems there is a hierarchy of social issues-racial and ethnic equality and disabilities, precede sexuality, gender and class issues. This hierarchy of differences sets up the standardization of achievement through the establishment of research centers and institutes.

Through the hard work and commitment of one individual, we now have an Institute for Sexual Minority Studies & Services in my faculty. All well and good, but this breeds a resentment amongst the faculty, as it seems the social justice agenda becomes a means to gain achievement and recognition for a particular special interest. This appears to be a misdirection in terms of what the social agenda should be about.   Higher education has

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begun to manage the social justice agenda solely for political justification, to remain politically correct. Managing diversity has taken over where issues of poverty, health, justice, and kids at risk become ways to keep students in school. In my province of Alberta, Canada, for every 'head' lost, either through failure or dropping out of school, means a cut in the school's budget. Failure is not an option. For art educators, we have long been accused of not failing students. And yet now, assessment of art in the United States has become a major concern as performance standards are the measure of all things.

Because pluralistic nature of exploration, art education and research finds itself, confronted with a surprising dilemma of hyper-conservatism. How? David Joel Horowitz, a prominent neo-conservative writer, activist and founder of the David Horowitz Freedom Center (www.horowitzfreedomcenter.org/), and his supporter are extremely nervous about the outright politicization of knowledge that the social justice agenda provides. A ratherobvious dichotomy is established by his Freedom Center, which assumes that the neoliberal narcissistic self is the 'norm' of what constitutes part of the central value system (CVS) of capitalistic societies. Individuality is perceived as a core value and henceapolitical. Those who question an individual's right to choose, or what she or he wishes within the law are accused of being ideologically political within the classroom. A simple example at one time was smoking, which was perceived to be a *right*, and still is but set within boundaries. Horowitz is just one of many intellectuals who continue to hold this line of 'enlightenment thought'—from the late Alan Bloom's (1987) chastisement of the university's radicalism through to Stanley Fish (1980) and Richard Rorty's (1998) much publicized defense of letting the student's think critically for themselves. The standard view here is to allow a thousand interpretations bloom, the chant of democratic populism. This enables two significant rhetorical moves: first, it appears that all interpretations are equally valid, and hence diversity is managed; and secondly, it leaves the status quo in place. It is quite a brilliant neoconservative play. Who doesn't want their opinion heard? After all, isn't that what voting is all about? You can vote for your American Idol, you can vote players off on reality shows. You can set up your own website and blog away with your opinions. You can

even Tweet newscasts to have your opinion heard. Your question or comment may even be selected and read to the viewing or listening audience. Everywhere you look, you seem to be able to have the freedom to say what you will, emote, give interpretations on talk radio, reality television and so on. You can fill the 'air time' as much as you want as long as in the last instance *you obey*. Not everything is allowed.

Teachers are not privileged to do that since they are civic servants, while professors are expected to do just that-this is the contradictory dividing line that makes the social justice agenda caught by the managed system of neoliberal designer capitalism. On the one hand the teacher has to function within a pc (politically correct) environment defined by identity politics, which delimits the social justice agenda, reducing subjectivity along poststructuralist pluralist terms. On the other hand, higher education aids and abets the parameters of this very discourse, often with prestigious results. The dichotomy between these two positions overlooks the teacher's own situatedness, recalling Lacan's (1977) claim that subjectivity is a question. To politicize or not to politicize knowledge is a false dichotomy, drawing on a fantasy that there is indeed no fantasy that doesn't already support knowledge and beliefs, maintaining that fantasy and reality are false dichotomies rather than an understating how they support one another, a fundamental psychoanalytic insight. Such a situation continually plays itself out throughout the many art classes in various democratically 'free' classes. 'Everything' in art is accepted (a policy of no failure), and at the same time the edges of what is considered 'everything' is already in place.

Reorientations for Art Education?

What is the way out of these concerns that I have raised concerning the well-intentioned social justice agenda for transformative change? One way is certainly to reorientate theory, to move from representationalist theory that characterizes the field of art education presently to non-representational grounds. One approach is to recognize difference *in itself*, not caught by the binary of sameness. The 'difference' theorists have been Deleuze and Guattari (1987), where 'becoming' replaces 'being,' thus escaping the constant categorizing that representational cognitive thought takes as a way

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of 'constructing' the world (reality). The advantage of reorienting art education to the non-representational dimensions of life is to escape the frame of art as a commodity. All art is doing, a process-'arting' is a process of ceaseless becoming. The subject is never finished. In the Lacanian sense it is a question, and not some sort of semiotic construction that characterizes the current hegemony of identity. For art education a non-representational trajectory is a radical change since it recognizes two major issues that fall outside its current paradigm.

The first issue, a non-representational theory along Deleuze and Guattarian lines means a radical deanthropomorphization of the human. Such an anti-enlightenment and anti-humaniststance is unlikely to be celebrated by arts educators who focus their work on humanly constructed worlds via research orientations like ethnography and phenomenology being the most prominent, rather than recognizing that what is 'human' is modified both by Nature and Technology. As Bruno Latour (1993) put it, "we have never been human."The essentialism of the 'human' is done away with. Agency is no longer confined to the human but is *distributed* within an assemblage that is held together through desire; the symbiosis of the parts coming together for purpose. This means a new materialism and vitalism is introduced. As Deleuze and Guattari put it:

> If resemblance haunts the work of art it is because sensation refers only to its material: it is the percept or affect of the material itself, the smile of oil, the gesture of fired clay, the thrust of metal, the crouch of Romanesque stone, and the ascent of Gothic stone (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 166).

Non-representational theory takes 'representation' seriously, but not as representational*ism* of the signifier, or discursive idealism where sameness is introduced; rather 'representation' does not have a 'message'; it is rather exemplary: *singular*, rather than being an example and simply pluralistic in possibilities. It is what the representation can *do*, how it can *affect*, and the ethico-political consequences of this for a social justice agenda. In this view, meaning is not first and foremost a picture that is formed in the mind; it is not a cause of action nor is it a precondition of understanding social action,

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identity or 'art' in general. So there is no such thing as 'culture' *in itself*. There is only the event of culture. And, there is no 'method' in itself, only a *way* of making—like the Tao. As Deleuze writes, "Method in general is a means by which we avoid going to a particular place, or by which we maintain the means of escaping it" (1983, p. 110).

'A Life,' the second issue to discuss, when it comes to a non-representational theory of art education, also rethinks the social agenda of equality. It does so by extending equality to inhuman and non-human aspects of co-existence; that is, to the anorganic life (viruses bacteria) and organic(animals) and to the non-human (artificial intelligence). Art and its education witness *A Life* through the singularities of art's presentations. What do I mean by A Life? This comes from Deleuze's (2001) last essay. A Life is not the Life of an already constituted individual or subject. A Life is made up of singularities that are outside the human as well as constituting our symbiotic relationships to this outside so that it becomes possible to say 'we,' as well as 'I." The attention is to life that occurs before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across the human-inhuman-non-human divides. It is an attempt to take into account the world's own forces: affects and percepts as relations rather than affections and perceptions that are all *too human*. The processes of 'arting' are about the emergent eventuality of the world, its becoming where subject and object meet. A Life is captured in the tensions of the present tense of becoming and the not yet formed moment that is to come. Becoming is always an in-between process where A Life is to be revealed. It is these artistic performances as events that 'make' us. In this regard 'experience' does not belong to the self; it is always trans-subjective and a-personal. There are many agents involved.

It will take sometime before the field will take up these propositions of a non-representational theory of art and its education. The investment is too great in posthumanism, however this may change as the Anthropocene approaches and we can no longer ignore our inhuman and non-human agents. They will have to be included in a new arrangement of social equality and justice.'

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