

Art as Social Practice: Imitation, Collaboration, and the Calling of the Unforeseen

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Abstract

This paper explores art as a social practice and questions the idea that art is purely an independent practice. This is discussed through three narratives describing moments that took place during an Atelierista course at the School of Education and Childhood Studies of Capilano University in which students, in groups, set up provocations for a group of infants from Capilano University's Children's Centre. The author is one of four or five students who participated as group facilitators in painting provocations and these experiences are explored from a first-person narrative perspective. This paper uses these narratives to explore concepts of copying, collaboration, and the variety of ways in which a material can call to us while we are engaged in an artistic process. Although there is no definite conclusion, the paper calls on educators to think beyond the current parameters, that are often placed around what is considered art, and how the act of "doing art" should be carried out. What is being proposed is the notion that art is a social practice; a practice which consists of gathering inspiration and ideas from a limitless variety of sources, including each other.

Keywords: *early childhood; young children; education; pedagogy; art; artistic practices; Atelierista; art and young children; infant and toddler.*



Introduction

Over the course of four weeks, along with a few of my colleagues, I spent time with a group of infants in their outdoor space at the Capilano University Children's Centre. We decided to explore ways of using paint with the children and to create provoking, simple, yet very carefully thought-out encounters. For example, the tones and colours of the paint were carefully chosen to reflect the West Coast environment that the children were in conversation with daily. We used berry tones to evoke the blooming huckleberries and salmon berries in and around the outdoor space, and dark earthy greens to echo the cedar trees and lush forest across the road. I also approached these encounters through the lens of an artist, typically one who works in complete solitude. However, through the children's encounters with paint, what emerged was that art itself is inherently a social practice and can be experienced through imitation, collaboration, and provocations that call out to us, not necessarily through any form of verbalization. I align with Grube's (2008) inquiry into exploring "how ideas travel among children" (p. 99) and concur that if an idea can travel, then art is not truly an act of pure autonomy.

A Choreography of Imitation

A child dips their paintbrush into a jar of white paint, eyes telling the story of an idea taking shape as they focus intensely on the paintbrush swirling in the cloud-coloured paint. A hand is outstretched, ready to receive the paint as the child moves the paintbrush from the jar to the center of their palm. After a few careful circular motions, a thick, goopy white dot appears. From across the tree stump another pair of cautious eyes squint and watch intensely as the child paints on their hand. In this moment I make a choice as an educator to simply respond to what is unfolding in front of me, not with verbal questions, but with the silence of slow, careful body movements. I decide to grab a paint brush and dip it into the white paint too. I then bring the paintbrush to the center of my palm and feel the bristles tickle my skin. Both sets of eyes are on me as I imitate the exact process of painting a white dot right into the center of my hand. As I pull the paint brush away to reveal what I had done one of the children immediately says "more," and that was the beginning of a journey, the choreography of imitation.

Imitation, or copying, carries with it a heavy stigma of negativity, partly due to our intense focus on, and preference for, an idea of individuality in the creative process. It is often perceived as a negative thing to copy someone else's work or ideas and sometimes that is valid, as in the case of plagiarism, however, I'm discussing copying in a way that sets ideas in motion and propels us into new avenues to navigate. It is not that copying is always a good thing, but that at times we need to shift our thinking into seeing art as a collaborative, social pursuit and acknowledge that our ideas don't always come from only within ourselves, possibly calling into question whether art is ever truly original. Ask any artist where they draw their inspiration from and many will mention at least one other person's work has influenced their path to develop their own style. As an artist, I have been influenced by many people over the years, yet this was also accompanied by the stress of simultaneously trying to be "truly original." As I navigated through the palm painting moment, as an educator, I began to see a shift in my perspective on imitation. It is not that directly copying someone else's work should always be a step in the creative process, but rather we should accept it as something that happens when we respond to certain ideas that help unblock a creative dam and facilitate a flow. Or, perhaps we should consider copying as a complex form of research, that is collaborative, rather than solitary.

Ingold and Hallam (2007) discuss the idea of copying as a process that is much more complex than just a simple regurgitation of what is seen and then translated into a copy through a simple, almost mechanical, process. Rather, they argue that within the act of copying lies improvisation, which is quite a juxtaposition when compared to our common outlook on imitation. The improvisation lies within an "alignment of observation" of what is being observed and what is happening within the world surrounding the moment of observation (Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 6). This view places copying as much more than an act done in solitude, free of any engagement with anything other than our inner selves, but instead creates an understanding of copying as a component of creating. Using the opening narrative as an example, my role as an educator was copying, or imitating, the actions of another child. From a fixed world view this might be interpreted as simply trying to become the child, or a mindless part of "playing" with the child that will eventually be something forgotten. However, in Ingold and Hallam's (2007) view, my act of "copying" is a form of improvisation that made this moment more than just regurgitation; it was an "alignment" (p. 6) in a social act that responded to the idea of another; it was research in action. Research is often the compiling of ideas together from various other sources, much like I am doing with this paper right now, to help give voice to the ideas I feel are the most important. I feel that copying within the artistic process can be considered a form of research as well, and in this case the research was taking place by borrowing the acts of



others around us and imitating them. What will become of it is yet to be known, but the simple gestures of painting white dots in the middle of our palms was the process of figuring out something and often that “something” is not known until much later.

This leads to a notion that has begun to interest me, a question that has been stirred and shaken even more after my four weeks of being with paint with the group of children: what is a truly new, untouched, authentic, autonomous idea? Does it even exist? Outside my life as an educator I began my artistic endeavours with paint. I feel a very close relationship with paint as a material, and I understand from my heart its ebbs and flows, its limitations and its animations. However, I have begun to question whether my “works of art” were truly unique to me; I painted them, but within the ebbs and flows, the limitations and animations of the paint and the act of painting are the collective ideas of others as well. When I stand back and look at my paintings, especially after working with the infants’ explorations with paint, I can see the traces of other things, other ideas that are not solely my own solitary creations. I could go so far as to say that my painting is often a copy, an imitation of my experiences and inspirations, resulting in a product that was generated through only the ideas of others that my brain compiled into one and produced what is now in front of me. Ingold and Hallam (2007) state that our common perception of art is that something is not “created” or “creative” unless it is “new” (p. 5). Further, when discussing tradition, they touch on the notion that to be “creative” one must be in a constant state of pushing against the common collective, generating “newness” everywhere they go (Ingold & Hallam, 2007, p. 6). This perception influences why many of us find imitation to be in a different category than that of “art”. Imitation is not “new,” rather it is the replication or repetition of something that we perceive already exists. However, what is missed is that within imitation is the figuring out, the careful observation, the doing as you see it that eventually becomes the doing how you feel it, the collaboration with others; imitation is usually at the heart of everything we do and is often the starting point, whether we want to acknowledge it or not.

Collaboration in Silence

Paintbrushes are dancing across a sheet of clear plastic leaving an array of pinks, yellows, and oranges trailing behind. The strokes are fast and lively with experimentation. A child turns around and their hair glides through the bright paint creating what looks like a meadow of spring-coloured flowers on the strands of hair. Another child begins to paint

on the clothes of their friend, possibly seeing them as a blank canvas and their friend agreeably lets the process unfold. Then, under a giant cedar tree, children have gathered to dump and smear paint all over one of the many tree stumps. The brown tones of the wood are soon turned coral as the colours begin to blend together from the children's brushes gliding back and forth over and over again. However, what is most captivating about this whole moment, a moment that reads much like chaos, clutter, and loud voices, was that it was full of silence.

To collaborate in silence almost seems like an impossibility, because collaboration is often associated with animated exchanges of ideas through vocal means, however, collaboration in silence happens when we pay attention to the nuances of what is happening around us. Within the collection of vignettes, in the narrative above, was the capturing of moments that together created a process of collaboration that intersected, folded over and under, and intertwined around us all. However, what is usually presented in moments like these is something Cinquemani (2018) describes as an art educator taking on one of two roles: one who facilitates and guides and the other who draws lines to define rules or relay knowledge (p. 64). But within collaboration, in the context of artistic processes, is a blurring of many worlds to create a co-choreography between educator and child (Cinquemani, 2018, p. 64). Collaborating in silence, as we did there, was a soundless co-choreography between educators, children, and the more than human world within the outdoor space that was used for our painting explorations.

There is something magical about working in a space together and watching an entanglement of moments in constant motion unfold. Although many of the moments may not seem to have any relationship with each other, when working in any space, moments are in fact constantly playing off one another, whether we realize it or not. Also, these moments do not necessarily need to be anything ground breaking in terms of constant discovery or even carried over into the following days as explorations continued; there is something within the collective that shouldn't be overlooked because it's often what keeps all the later discoveries and experiences in constant motion. Cinquemani (2018) describes what it's like to work in collaboration with others as being "stretched" into unexpected areas full of unknown and wonder, and these areas create the possibility for us to become something other than once previously was (p. 68). Cinquemani (2018) continues this notion, stating that this is not where we go to lose ourselves completely, but to create a "third independent existence" where our differences remain intact, but boundaries became a haze rather than a strong static line and we begin to work in new ways with one another (p. 68).

This hazing of boundaries paints a very beautiful, idealized picture of collaborative work, but I feel that it is important to touch on the frustrations that happen as well. Within



the moments that were chosen for the narrative, there were also pauses for moving through conflict, feelings of apprehension, as well as navigations through our own personal barriers as educators. These narratives are not meant to be deceptive, but often we are deceived by choosing to observe and document what we want to see happening. There is importance in the struggle, because without it, I don't think there can be progression. Knight (2008) touches on the aspect of struggle within collaboration by stating that although the word "collaboration" creates a mental picture of everyone constantly working in harmony with one another, this actually is not the case because we are all bringing tensions and "newness" to a project, and that's what makes the complex journey of figuring out how to work together worth it (p. 308).

Knight (2008) discusses educator and child interactions, specifically the times when children draw, as being important and beneficial aspects of the child's drawing experience, not because the child is always passive and in need of adult interaction, but because of what partnership does to create a choreography of actions presented through gestures, expressions or verbalization (p. 307). It is about what social interaction does to propel things in motion and highlights that art is not always an act of independence and, arguably, that art is never a truly autonomous act. Ideas are always linked to somewhere. Whether it is through a person, memory, place, or a non-human entity, we are never free from the influences of the world around us; we are never alone.

What Calls to Us

Tap, tap, tap, tap goes my paintbrush on a long piece of translucent plastic that is strung up between multiple wooden poles. Tap, tap, tap, tap again, and tiny feet rush by me with paintbrushes in hand. Tap, tap, tap, tap, and suddenly a child stops mid walk and turns towards the noise, our eyes meet, and we stand in silence for just a moment. Then tap, tap, tap, tap, I go again on the plastic and the child turns and walks around another stump and meanders through this long pathway she seemed to have created moments before hearing my tapping. Tap, tap, tap, tap again and the child keeps walking around seemingly uninterested in what I am doing. Then, all of a sudden, the child appears on the other side of the plastic with a paintbrush; tap, tap, tap, tap they go and I smile. For a few minutes the child and I tap back and forth to each other; however, no words are spoken. I ask no "leading" questions, I don't talk about what I hear or what the child might be noticing, and the only sounds being made are the tapping of our paintbrushes against the plastic. Body gestures and eye contact keep the choreography going until inevitably one of us decides to

stop. Something else catches the child's eye and they turn their back to me and continue along on their journey towards yet another way of being with paint that has called out to them.

What can call to us is often beyond the distinct lines of a verbal question. Questions can stimulate, but they are only one component of an endless array of artistic possibilities. Something can be set in motion through a simple gesture, such as an outstretched hand making a silent offering or, in this case, a sound that didn't quite belong with the often-silent movement of paintbrushes. How can the simple act of tapping call out to a child and become something much more complex? Grube (2012) describes an encounter beautifully by stating that when we participate either as an instigator or observer, it does not always mean it will be a vivacious stream of endless ideas, rather the encounter does something at the core of artistic experiences; it has an effect. Art is the dwelling together with others, materials, or a space and is a constant rhythm of starts, stops, and pauses. Within the fluidity of these encounters we meet each other, and in the process of encountering another body, one is enveloped into a state of "*becoming*" (p. 41). An encounter is never straightforward; things can call to us, but through a variety of means that are beyond the conventional. The tapping was an encounter that placed the child into a position where the social interaction was not made up of just educator and child, but also of material because the tapping was the instigator. The rhythm in this case was not one of beautiful musical magic that carries someone from beginning to end in a predictable way, this rhythm was made up of uncertainty, confusion and a sense that what was being provoked may not have caught the attention of anyone or anything; however, that's what the rhythm of an encounter is, it's the unknowability that creates a fluidity riddled with unexpected textures.

To expand on how something may call to us that is beyond our usual identification of being called out to, Thompson's (2015) statement about a "prosthetic pedagogy" is one that encompasses and acknowledges the importance of difference (p. 558). Without the acceptance of difference, in its endless forms, there would be no way to recognize this small encounter of tapping as anything more than me tapping on a plastic shower curtain with a paintbrush. Difference creates room for "the other," whether it be another way of coming to know or, in this case, a way of proposing another way of being with paint with sound, when paint is often a silent act. Thompson (2015) further states that a prosthetic pedagogy eliminates the borders we create and allow for the unlikely to be seen as linked instead of forever standing in a place of difference on two opposite sides (p. 558). So, instead of paint having a boundary around it of what it *can* do, we instead allow for, as Thompson (2015) states "bits and fragments and flows of experiences," (p. 558) to take place, so that what



calls to us is not simply coming from fragments of ourselves, but is made up of fragments from everyone and everything.

My process of creating has changed now. I no longer view myself as the sole artist in complete control of my thoughts, but rather I view myself as an artist made up of many things from many different sources. The experience with the infants highlighted how art is indeed a social practice, and whether we are searching for it or not, we are never alone in our wonderings, doings and makings. Through the process of imitation, collaboration and the unlikely moments that call out to us to pay attention, we begin, as Thompson (2015) states, to view art as something that welcomes the testing of boundaries and disrupts, morphs, and eventually contaminates everything around it in order to create room for the “unthought and unimagined” (p. 555).

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