

306 Un becoming Cartesian

## "People Should Come to Work": Un-becoming Cartesian Subjects and Objects in Art Education

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When asked about how he wants viewers to engage with his often confrontational and difficult work, performance artist William Pope. L responded, "people should come to work" (personal communication, February 3, 2003). Preparedness to engage, to work, is at the core of considering the connection of art education and democracy. All too often that connection is reduced to the idea of beauty being in the "eye of the beholder" and you can do whatever you want—"it's a free country!"

Re-imagining the work of art education, I want to talk of rhizomes and cyborgs, perhaps at the risk of alienating readers with raised eyebrows and being accused of hiding behind *nouveau* metaphors *d'jour*. But I want to argue for these metaphors because as Nietzsche (1979) suggested, metaphors have life spans: once a metaphor dies, it is time for a new metaphor. The rhizome and the cyborg do what metaphors help us do; think creatively and imaginatively about a previously known idea—in this case the Cartesian seeing subject and seen object. Too frequently art education and democracy get linked at the most superficial level. I argue for new complex metaphors, which require work, to help us understand the relationship of these ideas on a more profound level.

This essay examines the role of the eye of the beholder within art education. The eye here is never simply functioning as a “neutral” process of seeing, but rather it is the contemporary, politically-situated eye. How we see, what we choose to notice, recognize and perceive is very much a political act, one intrinsically linked to ideas of democracy. The association of vision with identification, definition and representation surely has larger implications than just what it means to see and be seen. Could what we see and not see (i.e. *how* we see) play a major role in what constructs the social status quo and continued undemocratic political arenas? How might art education figure into this equation? In what follows, I suggest two metaphors that can be powerful tools for re-envisioning ideas of socio-political art education.

### **The Role of Conflict in Critical Education: What Does It Mean to Work?**

Reconceptualizing vision in order to open up new metaphors with implications for understandings of democracy, bell hooks (1995) explored in her book, *Art on my mind: Visual politics*, how to invent a decolonized self who can envision democratic freedom through art. In her pursuit of democratic participation, she demanded, “There must be a revolution in the way we see, the way we look” (p. 4). hooks further described this revolution of visual politics as beginning with “diverse programs of critical education that would stimulate collective awareness” (p. 4). The current age of US mind-numbing standardized test-prep seems to undermine critical education that would stimulate such collective awareness.

But awareness is not enough; there has to be new creation, the doing of something new. John Dewey (1916) suggested that democratic education is characterized by novel communication among varied social groups. Further, it is the belief that, “every individual brings with him [*sic*] . . . a new way of seeing and feeling that in its interaction with old

material creates something new, something previously not existing in experience" (Dewey, 1934, p. 108). A re-visioned understanding of democratic education also involves a solid pursuit of social justice: "democratic educators seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in schools, but to change the conditions that create them" (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 11).

The novel doing that democratic education requires is typically squelched by monocular vision, perpetuating the status quo of unquestioned cultural reproduction commonly known as public education. We are all too familiar with the status quo in education—public education that fails to meet the needs of all students and provide opportunities for all students to be successful. Annually, as reports of standardized tests fill the pages of the newspapers, it is increasingly apparent that democratic education is really less of an educational goal than the hollow pursuit of numbers and percentiles. The current educational system is limited to the pursuit of Truth (capital T intended), that is somehow quantifiable and definable through our usual, normalized envisionings. These visions of "truth" seem to have "arisen from some immutable, infallible source" (Apple & Beane, 1995, p. 13). The status quo begs for new metaphors to dislodge the reified mythical truths.

In his discussion of power/knowledge marked by their "constitutive interdependence" (p. 239), Foucault (1980) urged us to ask questions about what creates regimes of truth, not in hopes of escaping them, but so that we can change them. The questioning of Cartesian monocular vision is one attempt to isolate a large force in creating unthinking regimes of truth. The implicit trust of the eye and what it defines as knowledge is just such a factor in creating regimes of truth that must be questioned.

## Cartesian Seeing Subjects/Seen Objects

But from where did this knowledge-producing eye come? Descartes claims: "all knowledge is of the same nature throughout, and consists solely in combining what is self evident" (in Lloyd, 1989, p. 115). That which is "self-evident" to the eye is that which has imprisoned us in attitudes of knowing that require external authoritative structures. This external authority may take shape in categorical designations that disallow ambiguous knowing or it may simply be "that which is on the test." Either way, being told what and how to know supersedes experiential knowing; the latter frequently results in murky, unclear, non-categorical knowledge which is often less comfortable and requires more work.

Lorraine Code (1991) expertly traces the origins of what is deemed "self-evident" to "visual metaphors—knowledge as illumination, knowledge as seeing, truth as light" (p. 140) at the root of Platonic philosophy. However she also recognizes that "a dual sense of vision is operative. . . Vision at once severs the object from the subject through perceptual distance, and [yet] connects subject and object across a perceptual distance" (p. 141). The resounding effect in this schema of perceptual epistemology is that of distance between subject and object.

Unpacking Foucault's "truths," requires an analysis of our inheritance from René Descartes with regard to this distance: the subject-object split. In Western philosophy, the cogito, "I think," establishes a dualistic condition between mind and matter. This "Cartesian split" also results in a split between the perceiver and the perceived, the legacy of which lies in terms of a seeing subject and a seen object (Jay, 1993). Thus a Cartesian worldview has reduced visual worlds to a singular visual field and consigned the body to objecthood in it.

The impact of the Cartesian worldview on discourse about vision valorizes the privileged objective eye that Plato conceptualized, and

fortifies the Western subject–object split yielding an institution of domination, hierarchy and exclusion. With such a strongly acculturated worldview behind it, vision, particularly the gaze, has no doubt been manifested in an array of power-lobbying ways: the gaze controls; the gaze is not neutral; the gaze perpetuates patriarchy; the gaze claims epistemic relations. Clearly, an un-becoming of Cartesian seeing subjects and seen objects is required, but how do we begin?

### **Intersubjectivity and Art Education**

A discussion of Cartesian perspectivism and its distance from experience begs the question of what might transpire if we begin to conceptualize something other than domination within a subject–object dichotomy. What happens to vision within an intersubjective worldview as a new millennium ushers in the explosion of the virtual world where experience is an evolving concept? One cannot ask this question without thinking of Donna Haraway's ground-breaking essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1994). In this essay, Haraway calls for a feminist renegotiation of the visual through which the visual field is imploded:

From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters (p. 429).

She goes on to define the cyborg as “a kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self” (p. 437); identities give way to woven, networked affinities and the politics of partiality are bound up with intersubjectivity and vision: “the topography of subjectivity is multidimensional; so therefore is vision” (p.193).

Art can be instrumental in breaking down the Cartesian split by requiring of us multiplicity in our visions and an extension of who we have defined ourselves to be. Art plays itself out through multiple connections and ruptures—connections by virtue of its multiple interpretations over time and space and ruptures within our perceptions of easy recognition, which jolt us out of our complicity. Feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis (1988) asserted the necessity of aesthetic texts to help us “see difference differently” (p. 184) meaning artworks can help us explore and value that which is difficult to categorize. Film theorist Kaja Silverman (1996) maintained that artworks, “can intervene where we cannot. . .[and] at the same time, they are available to scrutiny and interrogation” (p. 4). These ideas about art suggest that indeed the field of art education holds great potential for the un-becoming of limited Cartesian vision and its implications.

There are many reasons why examining the undemocratic effects of limited vision should take place within art education. In my experience, students tend to hesitate when they are asked to comment about their observations of a work of art. They are unsure of the quantifiable “right” answer that they feel they should know or at least be able to arrive at through some formulaic and reliable act of observation. They feel extreme discomfort that their usually powerful eye, skilled in the act of recognition, is somehow failing them. Rarely do educators point out that the processes of schooling, including several aspects of art education, are largely based upon a dismissal of complexity in favor of definitive looking. Even though art education is a discipline born of the multiplicity and complexity of art, often

educators give into the systems' (be they education or larger social institutions) and our students' resistance to ambiguity and multiple meanings by telling students what to see and how to see it. Opening up our vision to different views and beyond certainty asks us to explore a philosophy of alterity, of difference.

### **A Philosophy of Alterity & Rhizomatic *Anding***

British literary scholar Thomas Docherty (1996) refutes the Cartesian worldview as a philosophy of identity, which is characterized by its pursuits of the categorical, a lack of the political, and a dismissal of temporal change (pp. 19-35). This valorizing of the homogenous is countered by Docherty's postmodern proposal of a philosophy of alterity or difference. He, like other vision scholars (e.g. Jay 1993, Levin 1993), acknowledges the proliferation of a philosophy of identity through issues of vision, which have grand repercussions for epistemology:

here the eye is the location of truth. But, more importantly, truth is in an eye which is marked with a specific kind of power, fundamentally the power to reduce alterity to identity. . . Such an eye cannot see alterity at all, in fact; rather, it sees only a mirrored reflection of the self, or it so successfully interiorizes alterity as to reduce it to identity. (pp. 104-5)

A philosophy of identity is what keeps the subject-object dichotomy in operation by employing a sense of definition, a necessity of reductionism. A philosophy of alterity, on the other hand, creates opportunities to engage in the political and the possibilities of change.

Docherty's philosophy of difference resonates strongly with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's conception of the rhizome. In their collaborative thinking, rhizomatic grass is preferred to hierarchical trees:

a rhizome doesn't begin and doesn't end, but is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, exclusively alliance. The tree imposes the verb "to be," but the rhizome is woven together with conjunctions: 'and . . . and . . . and . . .' (1983, p. 57)

The defining feature of a rhizome is its connection and heterogeneity: any point on a rhizome can be connected with any other. There are ruptures in rhizomes (or lines of flight) but these become part of the rhizome. For example, "we can never get rid of ants, because they form an animal rhizome that never ceases to reconstitute itself, even when almost completely destroyed" (p. 18). The rhizome enacts difference and seeks multiplicity.

Another way of understanding the rhizome metaphor is through the AND. The conjunction "and" has profound significance in both the work of John Dewey and Deleuze and Guattari because of the privileging of a conjunctive method of understanding relations. They are interested in the interconnectedness, the interpenetrations of emerging conjunctions rather than attempting to fix identities with equalities. It is not that these conjunctions are predetermined or dualistic linkings of bipolar oppositions, but rather that the connectivity of concepts is predicated on an immanent inseparability of concepts. Of Dewey's many publications during his prolific lifetime, the majority of his titles are conceptually expressed by his use of the conjunction: "The Public and Its Problems," "Experience and Nature," "Democracy and Education," "Art and Civilization." The emphasis in these titles does not lie so much on the two topical elements as it does on the "and" of interpenetrations of the two concepts. Dewey does not assert a bifurcated philosophy of discrete elements but rather conceptualizes how the discrete and the continuous interconnect yielding a better articulated experience.

Likewise, in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, the “and” has special importance. The “and” does a lot of work with regards to denying the conceptuality of a “whole.” Multiplicity is at the heart of Deleuze and Guattari’s obsession with the conjunction because any singularity is always a multiplicity. Therefore, the conjunction exercises a necessary complexity in any encounter.

AND isn’t even a specific conjunction or relation, it brings in all relations, there are as many relations as ANDS, AND doesn’t just upset all relations, it upsets being, the verb... and so on. AND, “and . . . and . . . and . . .” is precisely a creative stammering, a foreign use of language, as opposed to a conformist and dominant use of the verb “to be.” AND is of course diversity, multiplicity, the destruction of identities. (Deleuze 1990, p. 44)

There is a necessity in rhizomatic “anding” to commit to the complex and non-definitive ways of looking in order to cultivate an understanding of vision, which induces double vision, or confusion—not unlike Haraway’s cyborg who sees multidimensionally. This kind of commitment to the unclear, the ambiguous in vision, creates room for those choosing objectification, those rejecting it, those unaware of its process and those deliberately seeing otherwise. In short, by dethroning the Cartesian gaze of its unique corner on the perceptual market, its existence is not disallowed, but rather diminished in power by promoting multiple ways of perceiving.

However, it is often not desirable or possible to commit to the confusing state of a milieu composed of multiple choices and multiple meanings. This very point is the focus of Susan Bordo’s essay “Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender Skepticism” (1993). After dismissing the “view from nowhere,” which she equates with Cartesian (and male) constriction of the possibilities for knowledge, she equally refutes a “dream of everywhere” marked by “recognition of interpretive

multiplicity, of the indeterminacy and heterogeneity of cultural meaning and meaning-production" (p. 460). She says this not in denial of perspectival seeing and knowing, but rather:

this is an inescapable fact of human embodiment, as Nietzsche was the first to point out: "The eye . . . in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking [is] an absurdity and a nonsense. There is only a perspectival seeing, only a perspectival knowing." This selectivity, moreover, is never innocent. We always "see" from points of view that are invested with our social, political and personal interests, inescapably -centric in one way or another, even in the desire to do justice to heterogeneity. (p. 463)

Bordo applauds Haraway's conception of the cyborg as an ambiguous entity but warns against hints of ideal perspectivism from any position. As indicated in her citation of Nietzsche above, such perspectivism is unavoidable because that is the very thing which makes seeing, seeing something, that is to say, meaningful. Perspectivism is not the problem. Rather, it is our attitude toward perspectivism that dethrones spectator ideas of knowledge.

With this realization and my desire to hedge against tendencies for perspectives to become totalizing perspectives, I argue for a committed attitude to the confusing and the connective so as to more fully articulate the important role of art education in the rejection of reductive learning in classrooms and the production instead of an attitude of openness to difficulty and difference in education generally and in a democracy more broadly. In William Pope. L's words, I argue that "people should come to work."

## The Power of Perspective: Art Crawling and William Pope. L

Performance artist William Pope. L has created art crawls in a variety of cities across the country drawing attention to what he deems “the privilege of being a vertical person.” On February 1, 2003, Houston, Texas was the site for such an event, in which William Pope. L, and for the first time volunteer crawl teams, crawled from Freedman’s Town to Downtown Houston, a 10-block stretch connecting a dilapidated historic area of Houston’s black community with the shiny Houston skyscrapers, including Enron’s now vacant tower.

In an Art Education and Technology class in Spring 2003, I encouraged my students to attend the art crawl and/or visit William Pope. L’s mid-career retrospective at a local art space in order to create an interpretative slide that would be added to a collective powerpoint (Fig 1, below, Student’s interpretive slide of William Pope. L’s Art Crawl in Houston, Texas). One student who participated in the crawl created

**crawling**

Your progress is slower than you ever imagined.  
You are intimate with gravity.  
Your vulnerability is inescapable.

You fluctuate between spectacle and invisibility.  
You think only of the next few inches.  
You can not bear to think any further.  
You accept your pain as inevitable.  
You realize that it hurts too much to raise your head, to set your sights.  
You forget that you once could walk.

a slide that effectively shared her experience by revealing how impossible sharing that experience in any way other than experiencing it could.<sup>(1)</sup>

Over a faint background of crawlers approaching towering downtown, text literally crawled in from the right side of the screen to surround images of a crawl team and the singular crawling student. The text invokes the body's intimacy/extension to the street and issues of vision, stating that the crawler fluctuated between spectacle and invisibility and a major effect of crawling was the pain associated with raising your head in order to "set your sights."

In this art crawl, William Pope. L opened up experience to involve other people quite literally enacting a cyborg extension of the body to asphalt and the rhizome of the crawl in that each participant became a singular, yet multiple, grass shoot of the experience. Politically involving the horizontal bodies collectively, yet mobilizing them separately, the art crawl opened up experience rupturing the status quo perceptions of the participants and of the Houston community.

In summary, this experience was one of critical perception—an experience that invited seeing otherwise and enacted imaginative possibilities for looking and experiencing in a social realm. Thoughts were manifested not in the realm of the "what is" but rather in the realm of the "what could be." William Pope. L's art crawl critiqued the social constraints of the privilege of verticality giving us cause to see otherwise, and pause to be otherwise. The revelation of structures of power challenged our usually distanced vision and enacted a situated, attitudinally-open, accumulation of views critically looking for connections.

### **Resistance, Rupture, Art & Democracy**

In the artworld, resistance has always played a major role precisely because of its critical exhortation of experience: "resistance and conflict have always been factors in generating art; and they are, as we have

seen, a necessary part of artistic form" (Dewey 1934, p. 339). Consequently, "the first stirrings of dissatisfaction and the first intimations of a better future are always found in works of art" (p. 346). Arresting the spectacle, uprooting the tree, and rupturing the status quo give art the ability to enact, or at least seriously investigate, virtualities—the realm of what could be. The lines of flight producing virtualities begin from blocs, tension, and resistance. Rupture thus becomes another name for responding in the future to such blockage. Anything that interrupts the proliferation of seamless experience ruptures. To enact the capacity to AND is to rupture, and the infinite variability that inheres in such a capacity is what leads to an active sense of democracy. In this sense, democracy is never achieved but constantly in process.

Art plays a crucial role in critically perceiving experience in ways that activate our ideas of resistance, rupture and democracy. Mapping art as a rhizome suggests future possibilities while subverting stagnating ideas of the status quo. Art education, despite its rhizomatic subject, is one such arena that embodies tendencies to become a tree. What is necessary is a re-situation, that is to say a mapping of the connective and ambiguous routes of the rhizome, so as to open up possibilities for art education in the future.

### **Rhizomatic Art Education: Social Theory in a Post-Cartesian World**

Dewey (1920/1957) argued that "full education comes only when there is a responsible share on the part of each person, in proportion to capacity, in shaping the aims and policies of the social groups to which he [sic] belongs" (p. 209). The realization of each individual's connectedness to the benefits and ills of society echoes the results of critical experience in art education. Openness to such connections is predicated on the ability to perceive them, and as argued previously,

this does not generally occur with Cartesian vision. Previously, democracy was actively positioned, as a verb always in motion. Education must be similarly conceived. Neither should be conceived as a fixed locale at which we rest once we are believed to have achieved them. Rather, democracy and education must constantly vary, change, connect, and move, as along a rhizome. In such conceptions of democracy and education, authoritative vision has no place; multiple perspectives connect to create knowledge and possibility. Rhizomatic art education cultivates this idea.

Dewey (1916) further exhorts an active understanding of both education and democracy by pointing out the oppressive results and abuses of power in a society that does not value or perceive connections:

A society which is mobile, which is full of channels for the distribution of a change occurring anywhere, must see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability. Otherwise, they will be overwhelmed by the changes in which they are caught and whose significance or connections they do not perceive. The result will be a confusion in which a few will appropriate to themselves the results of the blind and externally directed activities of others. (pp. 87-88)

Education in a critical sense has the elimination of such oppressive, non-democratic ways of life at its core, and connective vision as exercised in rhizomatic art education plays a crucial role in achieving such critical education.

The recognition of the intertwining verbing of democracy and education denies the development of trees in preference for rhizomes. Such an idea places a premium on education that is connective and open, ambiguous, imaginative, and dwelling in possibility. Rhizomatic art education enacts such critical components ever striving toward democracy and education. However, responsibility for partial visions

and attitudes toward change and resistance rests with each person because each of us is "subject to the influence of custom and inertia, and has to protect himself [/herself] from its influences by a deliberate openness to life itself" (Dewey, 1934, p. 304). Rhizomatic art education enacts such deliberate openness by emphasizing the partiality and limitations of vision requiring constant re-visioning of imaginative and connective possibilities.

## Conclusion

In her essay "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered" (1992/1997), Susan Buck-Morss explores Marx's factory model as described by Benjamin (p. 389) and argues that in this kind of model the "goal is to *numb* the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory" (p. 390). She goes on to argue that in such a "crisis in perception," education's goal must be in "restoring 'perceptibility'" (p. 390). If this is not the agenda of education, Buck-Morss exhorts that the eyes see too much and yet see nothing: "Thus, the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness ... destroys the human organism's power to respond politically" (p. 390).

The invocation of the metaphors of the rhizome and the cyborg, as Docherty (1996) suggests, requires the abandonment of the idea of education as correction (p. 81). This means abandoning our usual way of understanding wherein alterity is reduced to identity characterized by a "colonization of the space of alterity and the collapsing of that complex and three-dimensional space into the narrow but reassuring confines of the two-dimensional and stereotypical mirror" (p. 83). Such an attitude requires advocacy for the complex, the confusing, the ambiguous.

The costs of continuing to reduce education to a method of correction are far-reaching. Continued monocular views of knowledge in education create a citizenry that is hesitant and unsure of their own

ability to deal with complex ideas and create hypostasized understandings of the world, wherein difference is to be feared, not valued as the basis of democratic life. In conclusion, this essay has explored the problems inherent in unexamined Cartesian vision and explicated the ramifications of such vision continuing to function unchecked. Democracy and education are at stake. Rhizomatic art education keeps a complexified understanding of vision at the forefront. Complexified vision enacts the rhizome celebrating its connectedness and its openness. Such vision requires alternatives to binaries of domination and submission, subject and object and creates corresponding attitudes of openness resulting in multiple active perspectives, aware of their limitations. Such limitations necessitate the cyborg, the rhizome—a connected understanding of who we are that is bigger than ourselves. Even though it means more work, viewing ourselves as connected entities, we see the value of who we are when we are multiplied, when we value difference, as epitomized in another's point of view. Only with this kind of re-visioned vision, can we begin to live in a world where we can go elsewhere, and imagine something else to be.

## Notes

(1) Thanks to Tria Wood for sharing her slide and her ideas about the art crawl.

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