

# 176 Both/And: A Response to De(fence)/Defense

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## Abstract

In this paper we introduce non-dualism and begin by answering the questions posed by the editors of this journal. We address the theme of de(fence) and propose a paradigmatic shift. For many years, art teachers have advocated tirelessly in defense of the field, fighting for funding and legitimacy in an educational landscape that prioritizes other subjects. While the reaction to fight is appropriate, art reveals another way. It aids us in our task of living in the liminal, and it gives us the chance to suspend our judgments and forego meaning in favor of experience. Art can help us transition from the dual mind to a non-dualistic awareness. When we experience art as it is, we stop seeing differences and start to see connections.

### **Both/And: A Response to De(fence)/Defense**

We decided to address the call for submissions from the editors of this journal after reading the questions related to the theme of 'de(fence)/defense' included in the email sent to members of the higher education listserv for the National Art Education Association (NAEA). We are two voices who over the past year and a half have been actively involved in looking at and dialoguing about the divisions within the field of art education. We see these divisions throughout, from the K-12 art teachers in the schools to those in higher education writing in journals, and we wonder how things might be different as we choose to focus our attention not on the fences but on the space both inside and out.

Since the catalyst for this paper came from the questions posed in the call for manuscripts, we will include those with our initial responses. We continue with our premise of advocating for non-dual awareness in art education, and we examine how the waltz can be seen as a metaphor for non-dualism. In effect, we propose to honor the fences and what is beyond the fences and to respect both in an acknowledgment of their inseparable and codependent relationship.

Before we begin to provide responses to some of the questions posed in the call for manuscripts, we want to provide readers with a definition of non-dualism. Non-duality is often associated with Eastern religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism (Rohr, 2009). However, the German theologian Meister Eckhart also embraced the concept of non-duality in the 13th century (Rohr, 2009). The word for non-duality in Sanskrit is *advaita* - simply meaning not two or nonseparate. This is the definition we embrace. There is a website that is dedicated to the connection between non-dual awareness and art (the awakened eye, 2011) and is an outgrowth of research by Alison Catherine Pryer, who studied at the University of British Columbia where she completed her dissertation on non-dualistic pedagogy (2003).

#### **The Editors' Questions and Our Responses**

*Are we, as artists, scholars, and art educators compelled to take a stance in defense of our fields, jobs, or personal politics?*

We begin with a response to this question. As art makers and art educators we do not feel compelled to take a particular stance but rather to embrace the situation as it presents itself in its entirety. Take, for instance, a hypothetical situation where a visual arts teacher loses a job so that a math teacher can be hired. The state chooses to focus on math education and hire an additional teacher of mathematics in hopes that students' test scores will rise. Coming from a dualistic perspective, one might take offense at this situation, especially if one sees the importance of and necessity of a full educational experience that would include the visual arts.

Art teachers may begin to rally around the issue and demand to speak to the superintendent and the board of education, protesting that the arts not take a back seat to mathematics and providing evidence of the benefits of the arts to an overall education. And that is a fine and appropriate response. In addition, those who made the decision to hire another math teacher at the expense of a visual arts teacher are adamant in their position that the decision was appropriate because students need to be competent in math to survive in today's economy. Both arguments are sound, so which one is right? Both are. Both

arguments exist and help to fuel the other. The outcome is not the ultimate issue. There is a potent relationship that emerges between math and art in this example, and it is the experience of this relational potency that is of utmost importance.

For many years, art teachers have advocated tirelessly in defense of the field, fighting for funding and legitimacy in an educational landscape that prioritizes other subjects. Many educators and administrators have heeded this call to fight against the marginalization of art in the schools, but in the throes of this advocacy it is difficult to acknowledge that the opposition that seeks to cut art department budgets and eliminate art educator jobs is the foundation of the fight. It is the people and policies that seek to eliminate arts programs that justify and give grounds for defense. Where on the surface it may be seen as two polar opposite sides coming into conflict, we see the deeply enmeshed relationship shared by the two. This is an important paradigmatic shift that, once adopted, dissipates the dualistic qualities of right/wrong and better/worse. Advocacy transforms into affirmation, and vitality comes not from abolishing “the other” and winning but from the experience of the layered, complex, and interactive relationship of all.

*Are we standing alone or do we feel alone in our positions or vulnerabilities?*

We believe that one of the defining characteristics of dualism is an inherent isolation. Creating binary oppositions simultaneously pushes away and quarantines, establishing demarcations that operate by the word “versus.” If this is our perspective, if our beliefs manifest into behaviors that pit us against that with which we disagree, then yes, we shall be and feel more and more alone.

A non-dualistic perspective considers both sides of a fence as parts of the same whole. It is difficult to regard as partners and collaborators in our own work what we abhor, what we spend so much of our time, energy, and resources fighting against, and what we work so hard to label as wrong or unjust. For us, to “de(fence)” does not necessarily mean to take down the divides (for even fences have their rightful places), but to see past them to the common ground on which both and all stand. In *Re-Visioning Psychology*, Hillman (1992) writes, “[d]ualities are either faces of the same, or assume a unity as their precondition or ultimate goal (identity of opposites). Even a radically irreconcilable dualism is merely the struggle between parallel Ones. Monism and dualism share the same cosmos” (p. 170). Similarly, Joseph Campbell writes, “And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world,” (2004, p. 23). It is easy to see opposite sides of a fence as opposing, but opposites share a relationship revealing that we are never alone and we are inextricably tied to one another.

*Are we divided or fenced in/out from the possibility of sharing any collective efforts to realize a collective vision, and if so, what are the divides?*

The fences that create boundaries, even the ones built by our own design, do not necessarily divide. What fences us in/out from collectivity is a refusal to affirm that which resides in domains other than our own. What robs us of collective vision is an inability to experience the connectedness of our relationships by reducing them to an “us vs. them” dynamic. We are divided if we feel a need to defend.

*On the other hand, what are the challenges or benefits of creating, studying visual culture or teaching art in this uncertain time?*

The creation, study, and teaching of art are codifications of our lives and help us navigate through and into our experiences. Our engagement of art in all ways, be it through methods of visual culture or otherwise, unveils the multiplicity and dynamism of our experiences in times both certain and not.

The challenge is, quite literally, to “de(fence).” To fence is to affix into the ground, to say that this is the spot from which I shall not budge. This is a common position in a dualistic paradigm and is the genesis for conflict, fundamentalism, and singularization. The challenge is to not stick with/get stuck on one, or to say that one is better than the rest. Engagement with art provides a chance to know what it feels like to “unstick” ourselves from narrow, singular fixations. Both art and visual culture (in all of the many ways in which both are defined) cannot be reduced to singularities. Our relationships are fluid, our experiences are dynamic, and while we have been raised to find The One Right Answer, art shows us that there is an infinite number of places on which to stand.

Herein lies the benefit of creating, consuming, and teaching art. Art allows us to properly integrate the shifting of uncertainty. It aids us in our task of living in the liminal, and it gives us the chance to suspend our judgments and forego meaning in favor of experience. It also gives us the assurance that what we’re experiencing is real and present, so that we may, in Campbell’s (1991) words, “feel the rapture of being alive” (p. 5).

*Can we create, innovate, reshape spaces, opportunities or works that engage people or bring us/them from the margins to the center?*

Non-dualism is an understanding of the unified and connected nature of all spaces. It is an innovated reshaping of our perception of spaces. It is an understanding that we have been together in *both* the margins *and* the center all along.

*Is de(fencing) the act of collecting, collaborating, strengthening, supporting, envisioning, protecting, liberating?*

For us, the act of de(fencing) is to experience fences in a multitude of ways. This includes collecting, collaborating, strengthening, supporting, envisioning, protecting, and liberating. But this also includes dividing, quarantining, weakening, limiting vision, and imprisoning. The act of de(fencing) is to understand and experience how fences can be more than one thing simultaneously. To consider fences in a singular way is to create aseptic environments that set the stage for opposition and strife. To focus only on the fence is a narrow perspective that locks us into a dualistic way of thinking.

De(fencing) is non-dualism--an experience of the relationship between both and all. It is an act of concentrating on the connections between spaces because of the fences, and an acknowledgement and affirmation of how fences bind together by separating. This is a paradox whose multiplicity liberates us by keeping us from being locked into one way of being. Once we experience this liberation, we shall find ourselves ready, willing, and open to collaboration with and support of those to whom we were previously opposed.

For us, engaging with art is an act of de(fence). Art helps us transition from the dual mind to a non-dualistic awareness because art helps us experience and affirm life as it is, not in the singular, locked-in ways we will it to be. To work with art is to be involved in process, and process is always shifting. Even the nature of speaking about art is an act of process. And so we acknowledge that by speaking of art we are engaging in the act of de(fence).

### **The Waltz as Metaphor for Non-Dualism**

Recently, numerous email messages from various sources including an NAEA listserv appeared in one of our email inboxes as is the daily pattern. We were struck by the dualistic nature of several of these messages. One message focused on being part of the 99 percent or part of the 1 percent. Another focused on being either pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian. In yet another, one is tenured with a pension or out on the street. Is it possible in such a dualistic paradigm to include everyone? It has only been in the past year and a half that we have begun to think about an alternative to dualistic thinking.

Art can help us transition from the dual mind to a non-dualistic awareness. When we experience art as it is, we stop seeing differences and start to see connections. In dualism we tend to want to experience only certain things and those certain things that we want to experience are the positives. When one looks only at the positives, one misses out on the others. There may be good in those things we perceive as negative. When we approach living from a non-dualistic perspective, we can see both the positives and negatives simultaneously and be present in both. One can think of it mathematically. Both a '-4' and a '+4' have an absolute value of '4'. Each exists on a grid. In order to graph a point on a grid, one would need to see both the positive and negative side of the 'X' axis and the 'Y' axis. The positive side and negative side are irrelevant to finding the point on the graph. They are there to get us there.

Another way of looking at living in a non-dualistic paradigm is to think of the waltz. In the waltz, as in non-dual life, we unite opposites. To waltz, one must move left as the other moves right. Each is necessary, and each is moving in an opposite direction from one's individual perspective. However, when we waltz, we are both right (read correct). We have to accept the paradox of doing the exact opposite in order to be in sync with one another.

Non-duality strives for the affirmation of all things; there is no distinction, hierarchy, or delineation. Duality focuses on a singular, limiting point of view that is often accompanied by an obligatory need to defend that singularity against any other points of view. It is like looking at a large painting and creating a dualistic relationship between one area and the rest of the painting. In the case of Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte-1884*, there is an image near the middle right of the painting of a small child running. If one chooses to focus solely on the small child running in opposition to everything else in the painting, one is robbed of the experience of the entire work. There is so much more to discover in the rest of the work. Yet, when one chooses to be consumed by only a part of the whole, there is no room for anything else. That singular focus leads to blindness to the whole.

If de(fence) is what we want, our participation in life and in the field of art education must not be a fight. Rather, it is a waltz. Art teaches us what it feels like to be dancing, and to dance is to experience non-dual consciousness. Non-dualism gives us the awareness that

we are all in this together. It is how we connect to everything--even that to which we initially felt opposed.

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