Three Silences: Infection . . . Abjection . . . Art Education

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“fucking fagot”

The students were waiting for the bus that would take them home after Drama Club, Intramurals, detention. Some students were sitting on the steps, as instructed by another teacher and myself who had either been assigned or volunteered for ‘bus duty’ that afternoon. The majority of the students were in various states of agitation, fueled by hormones that had just recently been switched into overdrive by developing pituitary glands. Buying sodas, ‘athletic’ drinks, and junk food from the vending machines, chasing each other around the bathrooms that separated the cafeteria from the exits, most of the students seemed like a research group which had been recently injected with near-lethal mixtures of sugar and Ritalin.

Arthur (note: names of students and school have been changed) had ingested his share of caffeine, beginning to work on a body which was forced to sit in a room of mandatory quiet, punctuated by the bellowing of the room monitor, the giggles of students seeing an adult lose it over a kid tapping his pencil, the occasional ‘bullshit’ coughed out, resulting in yet another day in detention. This body, seated in a molded plastic chair-desk combo, had been still for long enough. The bell rung, the room monitor shouting “The bell did not dismiss you...” as students poured out of the room, out of the school, to walk along the four-lane road where students were occasionally hit, one infamously
killed, returning to their (town)home or hanging out with other kids at the strip mall across the street, stealing from the grocery store where they were only allowed two at a time. Those who could not walk home waited for the bus: waited with Arthur.

The first bus pulled up to the school, and the student activity level lowered a bit. Most were unaffected by the arrival of their transport. Arthur continued to chase the occasional girl, stopping only to talk to friends, each statement filled with cuss-words that had accumulated over the school day, finding release among friends. While most students had begun to line up and present their bus passes — given out to those who had participated in school sanctioned activities — Arthur and his crew continued to socialize, each inflated by their down-filled jackets. As I walked over to the group, most broke from their social mode, gathered their things, and prepared to board the bus. Arthur continued to talk until none of his friends remained. When I asked Arthur to get out his pass and line up, he did not respond.

A teacher’s commands are not external or additional to what he or she teaches us. They do not flow from primary significations or result from information: an order always and already concerns prior orders, which is why ordering is redundancy. The compulsory education machine does not communicate information; it imposes upon the child semiotic coordinates possessing all of the dual foundations of grammar (masculine-feminine, singular - plural, noun - verb, subject of the statement-subject of enunciation) (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980, p. 75-6).

Deleuze and Guattari have done much to challenge notions of binary relationships upon which much of Western thought is based. Their description of the imposition of language inherent in educational systems does not, however, take into account the fluctuations that take place when the order is received. The responses formed by students as receivers in classroom settings vary significantly, and often go unrecognized, specifically when they are nonverbal in nature. Art educators have the opportunity to reorder classroom spaces to accommodate multiple voices (or lack thereof) through experiences that acknowledge the possibilities for silence as an aesthetic approach. An analysis of the relationship between silence imposed upon the body of the student and the physical response this silence provokes may lead to such possibilities.

Many students do follow the ordering nature of instruction as described by Deleuze and Guattari, whether implicit or explicit. This transference is not entirely efficient, however. Students are confused by commands. They resist institutional structures to varying degrees. They drift away, turn off, space out. The educator performs language, which is inscribed upon the student. The student is not a passive receptor in every scenario; they react, they respond, they refuse to speak.

“What activity were you in, Arthur?”
“Is something the matter?”
“Do you have a bus pass?”
“If you don’t answer me, you can’t ride the bus home.”

Arthur remained silent through each of these questions. The rest of his social circle had broken rank, and were lined up, ready to board the bus. His four-foot frame remained erect, unmoved, puffed up by his winter coat and reinforced by twelve-year-old bravado. His hazy brown eyes locked on mine. He had stood his ground. I had done the same.

Arthur and I walked to the main office, where he was to call for a ride home. After briefly describing what had happened to his sister, I handed the phone to him. He mumbled a bit and hung up the phone. His mother either could not, or would not, pick him up from school.
He was visibly disturbed, but still said nothing. He stormed out of the office and ran across the parking lot, towards his townhouse where he, his sisters, and his mother lived. As he neared the road, he turned back towards the school, still moving in an outward trajectory. He shouted the first words since I had unsuccessfully forced him to speak. "Fucking Faggot."

Confrontations such as this were fairly common at Aspen, as they probably are at most middle schools. In thinking about the effects of order words on student receivers, I have been recalling my days in the classroom, specifically reviewing incidents where my authority as a teacher was directly challenged. Most of the memorable events, such as my after-school interaction with Arthur, seem to have been at least partially influenced by my lack of experience in the classroom. I look back on many of these episodes of conflict and am a bit embarrassed, realizing that I had exacerbated a tense situation through my rigid enforcement of the rules, in an effort to keep order: an inflexible approach met with linguistic silence, physical rigidity.

"... for which it stands"

The pledge of allegiance is a public school tradition that is still rehearsed throughout the United States. In my experience this routine is not treated with the respect it may have once been afforded; students are urged to stand, mumble a few rhythmic words, and slump back into their seats. At the beginning of first period Ceramics class, students were in the midst of this automated procedure. As they finished listening to the announcements broadcast over the loudspeaker and took their seats, one student remained standing. Robert. I began to discuss the activities for the day, expecting Robert to take his seat. He did not. I asked him to have a seat. He would not respond, he would not move. As the rest of the students watched, seated, Robert and I stood face to face, the distance shrinking, a disciplinary duel acted out at short range, each armed only with individual will.

Robert's silence was matched by his erect posture, defiant in the face of order. Was this a response to being asked to stand for something with which he did not agree? His nonverbal response to my commands were embodied, acted out through a gesture that a few minutes earlier was a sign of respect for flag, republic, God. What had Robert meant by this act? Was it simple hard-headedness? Could it be seen as an act of political defiance? As I stood there, staring back into eyes that seemed not to reflect my image, I thought about the rumors.

Robert was in the seventh grade, attending Aspen with his brother Barney. Both were infamous in the school for their antics: disruptive bordering on antisocial. It had been said that they were recent immigrants from Africa. They had lost their father. They had witnessed unspeakable things that might have contributed to their unruly behavior. It is only now that I have begun to research these myths and uncover fragments of their family history, thinking of Robert standing rigid in the face of authority.

Liberia is the oldest of African republics, established by American philanthropists and settled by freed American slaves in 1822. This era of rule ended in 1980, when African soldier Samuel Doe led a coup in which the existing president was assassinated. Doe assumed power, suspended the constitution, and carried out his rule through a People's Redemption Council that approved a new constitution in 1984. Doe was made president after an election many feel was blatantly rigged (Peace Pledge Union, 2001).

The military takeover of the long-established government — engineered by American interests — created an unstable political situation in Liberia. A number of attempted coups failed to unseat the Doe regime. His reign came to an end when Charles Taylor, descendent
of freed slaves and a soldier from Côte D'Ivoire, led an uprising that successfully overthrew the ruling body. It is suspected that Taylor, who was imprisoned in the United States at the time, was freed and returned to Africa at the request of the CIA.

Samuel Doe was captured by the rebel forces, tortured, possibly sodomized, and killed. The details of his torture vary. One account states that his ear was cut off, eventually bleeding to death. Nowhere does it discuss the fate of his family, who may have immigrated to the United States, to live in the northeast, where his sons would attend Aspen Middle School, become objects of speculation, and stand defiantly when asked to sit.

I have long since left Aspen, teaching for two more years at the high school level before returning to Penn State to work on my doctoral degree in Art Education. As I think back to my interactions with Arthur and Robert, I remember the impact each carried, intensified through their refusal to speak. The recent removal of Taylor from power in Liberia has only caused these events to resonate further: the current media silence in the U.S. regarding this situation reminds me of my efforts to retain control in my classroom. Am I taking advantage of these students in order to further my own pedagogical interests, only to discard their stories when something more provocative comes along?

I hope not. I have not thought of these students in some time; writing our stories helps me to better appreciate my current educational struggles. Their silence helps me to understand my own potential leanings towards authoritarianism in the classroom, and our individual conflicts led to healthy student/teacher relationships. Although I got to know both a bit better, and learned to be more flexible in the classroom, I knew that they — and possibly all of my students — held within them this capability for silence, a silence which disrupts in a way that nothing spoken could.

pissed off by Piss Christ

Recently a student of mine addressed this topic in a course that I teach at Penn State University, titled Art 100: Concepts and Creations in the Visual Arts. Amie recently remarked in class that she chose not to speak when viewing an artwork that she thought offensive — Andres Serrano's Piss Christ (1989). She said that she thought that we (the teachers) were showing this particular work in order to try and provoke a response. By remaining silent, she had hoped to disrupt this provocation — "I wanted to piss you guys off" — based upon her interpretation of our pedagogical intent, and possibly the artist's as well.

No one in the class would have known about this action had she not brought it to our attention in a later class, when the issue of offensive works of art was again being discussed. Her activity that had initially been about resisting language eventually was expressed verbally. This resistance, which had been effective for her as receiver, was still a response to the ordering inherent in education. Her verbal feedback afforded the other instructors and myself the opportunity to assess our intent. Did her silence piss me off? No more than any of the other moments when carefully crafted questions are met with blank stares and zipped lips. Regardless of our reaction, her silence must be seen as yet another order. Willfully withdrawing from discourse seems to be one of the most extreme acts a student can perform, disrupting the ordering of the educator through a nonlinguistic act.

Was this initial silent act disruptive within the class? I see it having this potential only within the context of prior interactions, which seems to follow the ordering process as described by Deleuze and Guattari. Silence on the part of this student could only be acknowledged as such if it stood in opposition to what she had said previously: an absence of
language, a pregnant pause, failing to yell “FIRE” in the theatre as the velvet seats are lapped by flames.

“... try as we may to make a silence, we cannot” (Cage, 1961, p. 8). While silence as John Cage describes it may be unattainable, there can be an act which stands for silence, a null set within the mathematics of classroom interaction. This performed silence subverts order by doing nothing. Do nothing: Each student that refused to speak nonetheless interacted, a linguistic withdrawal matched with a physical response: rigor. As Cage (1961) writes, the ability for humans to experience silence is eliminated through bodily functions. The body speaks while we remain mute. The consistent rhythm of the heart, the atonal whine of the nervous system, improvisations provided by the lungs, the sphincter. This bodily refrain is rarely heard in the classroom; every opportunity for silence is muffled by overanxious educators bent on exercising their particular horror vacui. The act that stands in — the metonym for silence — is as performative as language; it is indeed still language, masquerading as other. It is abject.

silence as the abject (viral) self

In abjection, revolt is completely within being. Within the being of language. Contrary to hysteria which brings about, ignores, or seduces the symbolic but does not produce it, the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages (Kristeva, 1982, p. 45).

The attempt to expel this non-language from the body is evident in the events discussed previously; Arthur spews possibly the worst insult he could muster — Fucking Faggot — from across the parking lot. He invests his slur with all of the anger that had been building inside, combined with what he undoubtedly sees as an insult to my notion of masculinity. In using the term ‘faggot’ he both vents his anger, aggressively reaffirming his male-ness while simultaneously challenging mine. He breaks his silence at a distance, creating a divide between he and myself: between self and ‘other.’

Robert refuses language as his body performs the opposite of what is instructed. In fact, he appropriates the gesture that had earlier been requested of him. He rejects the language of submission, reconstructing his stance as an act of defiance. While Arthur eventually breaks this tension — in fact he has to in order to reaffirm his sense of self — Robert remains silent. His body becomes language, becomes linguistic, is reduced to a sign. Literally becoming ‘I.’

Amie negates, then confesses to her negation, her refusal. Her confession acknowledges the critical, performed nature of her silence, allowing the act to resonate within the classroom, as opposed to the distance that is enacted by Arthur and Robert. Amie reterritorializes her own deterritorializing action — a self-negating abjection that closes the loop between rejection and reconstruction.

These versions of abjection each rely upon the linguistic mechanism, just as the bulimic must eat in order to vomit. Swallowing one’s tongue, only to regurgitate later in public. It would seem that within these descriptions there is nothing outside of language. Each silence is eventually registered through a linguistic act. Language has embedded itself within the body, influencing the various interactions. What once might have been a symbiotic relationship has since soured. Language has become virus.

William S. Burroughs describes the process by which language has become parasite in Nova Express (1964). Initially existing harmoniously within the body, language gradually became embedded within the human organism, just as the flu virus might have once been a healthy lung cell. “From symbiosis to parasitism is a short step” (Burroughs, 2002, p. 208). Pulsing with the rhythm of the heart,
reverberating in the lungs, language is omnipresent, eliminating the possibility of silence.

Burroughs temporarily disables the viral nature of language through his use of ‘cut-ups.’ Disrupting text — the code — through random interaction, resulting in passages of nonsense, silencing logic. These students disrupt the ordering of language through a performed silence, nonetheless encoding responses upon their bodies. Language is code, contrary to what Deleuze and Guattari write. It is a code that transposes itself onto, into the body. Line up for the bus. Stand for the pledge. React to this work of art. The abjected, refused language comes back to fester within the organism of origin. In doing so it both are transformed. Language utilizes code and performs it, distorts it, but at the same time language is distorted by code. The body uses language and language uses the body. Suppression of language is registered on the body. It may be that these distinctions are blurred indefinitely. Body/language are deterritorialized.

art education and silent bodies

Education is often described as if it were a tool, one that allows students access to bright futures through the development of knowledge and self-worth. Interpreting language as virus in this process represents a much different operation at work; the virus works from within a cell, disabling the predetermined means of reproduction through alteration of the genetic code, producing infected progeny: “Successful infection requires transfer of the genetic information of the virus from the external environment to the interior of the cell with the conversion of the genome to a form suitable to allow expression” (Smith and Ritchie, 1980, 116). The body resists infection, but is fooled by viral trickery. The teacher attempts to order — infect — the student, who resists through silence. Language is insidious. The body eventually succumbs. The interaction between the body and language, cell and virus, implies a relationship based upon constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization, similar to the interaction described by Deleuze and Guattari in their famous description of wasp and orchid. “We form a rhizome with our viruses” (1980, p.10).

Education in this sense is as much weapon as tool, relying upon language to deterritorialize as orders reterritorialize the body of the student. In the case of many viral strains, successful infection results in the eventual death of the host. *Silence = Death*, the Gran Fury poster states, although Cage (1962) suggests that there is no silence, even in death. There simply is no receiver. What of the students who never speak in class? Is this a death of knowledge, of language? Are they to be considered failures of the educational system, or do they represent the effect of a system of language which orders — reterritorializes — without thinking of the bodies which have been deterritorialized in the process?

The space between the binary verbal-nonverbal dichotomy should be explored as an aesthetic approach in the visual art classroom, as students may find opportunities for responses that resonate at multiple levels: personal, social, political. The performativity of silence creates possibilities for breaking the binary ordering of language as described by Deleuze and Guattari, acknowledging the often-overlooked role that individual bodies play in classroom interaction. Approaches such as the cut-ups carried out by Burroughs — closely related to the montage projects that are quite common in art classrooms — might begin to open up spaces for silence in the classroom, a silence that exists between modes of knowing, between the binary logic of language and body.

Conceiving of montage as a practice that disrupts linguistic ordering points to the existence of silence in art education practice. This is not a new vocabulary to be learned, not a ‘radical’ critique of
Three Silences

DBAE. This is not a push for Visual Culture, although it is about the visual that takes place in the classroom (usually outside of the vision of the pushers). This is a shift in perception, an ear that performs beyond its limits, or an eye that hears. This is a synaesthetics.

Art educators have much to learn from those who refuse to speak, students who stand when asked to sit, students who defy the dictatorial impulse available to all educators, students who remain mute when expected to scream. This embodied silence has the potential to re-order, to open new possibilities for critique and creation, to inform our practice more than hearing the echoes of our own voices in the classroom.

Notes

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References


