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Confronting (Inter) Subjectivities through Arts-based Research: A Socio-critical Perspective to a Community-based Art Educational Research Project

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Confronting (Inter) Subjectivities through Arts-based Research: A Socio-critical Perspective to a Community-based Art Educational Research Project

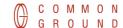Mira Helena Kallio, University of Art and Design, Finland

Abstract: The proposed presentation introduces an on-going dissertation research, which entails an artistic and an experimental interaction between a person with autism and an art educator: an artist, a researcher and a teacher. The work explores the possibilities of different modes of non-verbal inter-action through collaborative artistic work. The methods used are modified from social aware contemporary art theory, community based art, and the wider theoretical focus explores the philosophy of art education and art theory. The focus of this artistic research is the process of co-creation and co-presence instead the analysis of finished paintings. Through performative writing I attempt to understand the relationships between representation, (mis)cognitive, and artistic understanding, and to acknowledge and critically study subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and positionality. The acquired knowledge gains representation in a visual form or in writing and both of these are seen as active forms of producing knowledge. All collaborative sessions have been video taped, which not only allows me to further analyze the various forms of non-verbal interaction between the two of us but aids in the critical analysis of what it means to be a social aware art educator or an artist.

I N THIS PAPER I will critically discuss the complexity of a socially and communally driven artistic and art educational project, which embodies a collaborative artistic work of a person with autism and an art pedagogue, myself. Within this project I worked for two years with my research partner, Thomas, who is a person with autism. This research is part of my on going dissertation studies. Our cooperation was formed through an international project named *Art Without Borders*.

During the two years experimental phase of the project I explored the possibility of varying modes of "dialogue" and non-verbal/non-cognitive interaction through collaborative artistic work. The most meaningful part for me was to realize how scant and few in number are the means learnt in higher art education when working with people with disabilities, and how useless the cognitive paradigm is. What I found meaningful instead, is something very essential in terms of pedagogical matters in present day society: the very existence of the exercise of power, and how the use of power is very often paraded as a noble aspiration.

This working relationship, that is, my artistic research partner and myself, revealed to me whole new dimensions of myself and made me confront my own vulnerability. While facing this new pedagogical understanding I was also able to understand the meaning of working together in a shared space with direct confronting. That was possible only with not really trying to reach any kind of dialogical connection as such. To me, this comes close to Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of confronting a person in a shared space, that he describes through the concept of "being-with". According to Nancy, when working in collaboration it is imperative

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not to aim at solving or developing final definitions of the other person or what it means to be / function in a spatially bound relationship. The other, my partner, will always remain undefined and thus what is to be researched is distinct from mutually agreed-upon time and space of co-operation, in which both people are separate and the shared space creates a sense of "us" (Nancy, 2000). This notion of being-with-one-another is the ontological basis of my research.

Autism is not a monolithic syndrome and with this research I am not aspiring such knowledge or understanding that could be generalized to other/all people with autism. Doing that would make me objectify the person I am working with. Therefore I find it necessary not to try to define autism with the person I work with, as such, as I do not want to define "normality". My research partner is primarily a young man who's personality and modes of behavior must be understood something that belongs to him, not to the syndrome. I believe the concept of "being-with" can be reached by this assumption.

The meaning of progressive and postmodernist writing is to give voice for those who have been silenced. Writing requires moral responsibility and understanding that there is no such thing as "right", without interpretation, as there is no universal knowledge. Understanding, that knowledge is partial and situated, does not mean there would not be knowledge at all (Richardson 1990, 26-27.) This understanding of situated knowledge is similar to the methodology of arts-based research: constructing knowledge from singular experiences is both "true" and partial, as are our conceptions of the world and people in it: historical, temporal, overlapping and contextual, and thereby always subjective (Varto 2000.)

In this paper I will discuss our artistic confronting (and being-with) especially focusing on the socio-cultural issues of the process. In the end I raise questions about these kinds of artistic projects, without trying to give direct answers.

Defining Community-based art Projects in Art Educational Context

First I need to come up with a definition of the concept of community-based art. Community-based art is deconstructed to mean collaborative and interactive art making between an artist and a local group (Foster 1996, Sederholm 1998, 242-246). The artistic process requires some kind of public artistic outcome or artwork in a public site (a gallery/museum/city site/public building) and an audience. Community-based art situates the reciprocal relations between art, artwork and the audience to be reassessed (Sederholm 1998, 242-246). The borderline between the collaborative partners and the artists becomes ambiguous and the role of the artwork is understood in a potentially novel fashion through the collaborative process. The artwork is the outcome of the collaboration, but the work process itself can also be defined as art, as it was continuous performance. (Kantonen 2005, 49). Artwork then becomes a jointly lived event (Kester 2000) as will the event become a shared experienced artwork. Community-based art is considered by many to be a logical step toward a more intimate and meaningful relationship between the artist and his/her local audience or participants, and an efficacious means of shrinking the distance between the traditionally separate poles of production and reception. As such, community-based art is often celebrated as an artistically and politically progressive practice. (Kwon 2004.)

Hal Foster, a North-American art historian, critiques (Kwon 2004, 138:) "the ways in which contemporary art has absorbed certain methodological strategies from anthropology, and deconstructs the "collaborative" interaction between an artist and a local community

group in ethnographical terms. In his view, the artist is typically an outsider who has the institutionally sanctioned authority to engage the locals in the production of their (self-) representation. The key concern for Foster is not only the easy conversion of materials and experiences of local everyday life into an anthropological exhibit, but the ways in which the authority of the artist goes unquestioned, often unacknowledged." Through such ethnographical setting "the 'other' of the dominant culture becomes objectified once again to satisfy the contemporary lust for authentic … identities" by the artist (Kwon 2004, 138).

Miwon Kwon points out how the community-based art projects are usually addressed to concern the marginalized community groups focusing on social issues, such as the homeless, battered women, urban youths, AIDS patients or prisoners, in order to strive toward the development of politically-conscious community events or programs (Kwon 2004, 102). That brings out the question of characterizing the people based on their human diversity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or disability. Especially when working with people with disabilities these kinds of categorizations should have been considered critically. Giving such a "master status" (Couser 2006, 399) to somebody means a certain stigmatization over a person.

A somewhat different perspective comes from Iris Young (2001, 203), who argues for the 'politics of difference'. She states that denying differences among people has led to a crucial development in the struggle against exclusion and status differentiation. The institutional power and privilege being given to everybody is, however, an illusion, and this kind off assimilation or 'path to belonging' needs to be questioned and even rejected. The idea of the 'politics of difference' emphasizes the positive group cultural identity as a better strategy for achieving power and participation in dominant institutions.

I state that it is crucial in community-based art projects to acknowledge who is the one who creates the group and by what means. How to define a community without stigmatizing the participating people? How to see the person's personality over his or her disability when the group is defined through disability by an external definer? How to rather build towards positive identity instead of limiting one's personality? All the definitions for any group, be it self-organized or put together by external authority, tell about the values, wishes and aims in our contemporary society.

The important question within community-based projects is to ponder what kinds of a role an artist and an art educator might be given when s/he is working with a special group or with a special person. It is crucial to have a remarkable social awareness as an art educator or an artist when working with people who are defined through their disability.

Art without Borders – project

The institutional framework in my example project was a European Commission funded international cultural enterprise called, *Art Without Borders*. It took place in the years 2004-2005, in Helsinki, Finland and in 4 other European countries: the Netherlands, Greece, Bulgaria and Lithuania. The partner institutions in the project were a boarding school specialized in mentally disabled children, an educational institute, a university, a development center and an Autism foundation. In each country there were formed ten pairs of a practicing artist and a person with a disability for the purpose of artistic collaboration. The intention was to work on a regular basis to produce a collaborative piece of art and one individual piece from each participant/artist. Each participating country organized a national exhibition

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at the end of the project at a prominent location with grand public exposure. Some of the produced artwork was also chosen to participate in an international exhibition touring the five countries.

In Finland the cooperative institution in the project was the Autism Foundation, in Helsinki. The Foundation produces specialized expert services for adults and young adults within the context of autism. All the participating people in the project were either practicing artists or diagnosed as people with autism or Asperger syndrome. In Finland, as a local official by-product, new alternative ways of communication through art were looked for. The basis of the project underlie in a conviction of the existence of a rich inner life of a person with autism, which nevertheless cannot be expressed by verbal communication, but which possibly could be expressed and communicated through artistic interaction. There was also a need to view autism with a new kind of understanding in the society, and to open new possibilities through visual artistic work as a rehabilitation action. It is my understanding that through the project and the exhibitions the aim was to increase knowledge and awareness of autism amongst those considered "normal" in society and improve the status of people with disabilities in society through artistic dialogue.

Working with My Research Partner

A citation from my research diary:

> "Our painting sessions remind me of a board game, in which each of us aims at conquering an area on the board and making the larger area mimic one's own style. Once conquered, the other is accepted under personally established conditions and style. Sometimes it appears as if we were in a competition: It seems Thomas would not tolerate anything I paint on the paper. Thomas paints to hide the areas I have painted. I switch spots and try to produce something before he manages to hide that too. While I am persistent with my aspirations, I can see how Thomas might get frustrated. When working in collaboration the touch of my paintbrush is lighter and my strokes are shorter. Thomas does not place value on these qualities. Instead, he works systematically towards consistent surfacing and keeps smoothing my loose strokes with a new layer of color. My invasion of his surface must be annoying. Sometimes I invade Thomas´ painting area intentionally. I have considered it my right to disturb his space to evoke reaction. I believe that confronting demands some kind of stimulus to take place. Importantly, Thomas seems to understand the spirit of this game. He never directs his frustration at me. What happens on a paper does not happen between us as persons."

The research structure responds to the artistic ideals by acknowledging the importance of constant relations and interweaving of theory, collaborative and individual artistic work, systematic and analytical diary notes, and video documentations. Our principal medium was painting. Through my work with Thomas I explored different possible ways of artistic confrontation. Spoken conversation was not available as a communication method for us. Thomas used words, but not in communicative sense. He understood some words and sentences, but communicated mainly through gestures, mimics and facial expressions.

I perceive my collaboration between Thomas and myself as visual, material, spatial, sensorial, social and embodied. Contact between us was formed indirectly. Pleasure for example

was created through materiality and the sensory experience of painting. Thomas laughed, on occasion tickled himself or me. According to Nancy being-together is tactful and discreet when pressure or too high expectations do not dominate the experience. Discreetness does not deny, it alters and protects, invites risk and daring.

The confusion in the beginning of the process that arose from speechlessness, and from lack of interaction and events, transformed my work as a pedagogue and cooperating artist, leading to unexpected directions. Coming to grips with the nature of the action – that was unprotected, undefined; unpredictable and prone to make us vulnerable led me to reevaluate my own pedagogical practices. One of the most essential elements for the research is to study what happened to me during the process. In my thesis I am critically analyzing my own behavior and trying to develop understanding, self-recognition and introspection. Throughout the process I earned increased consciousness of the emotions, the educational pre-notions and their regulations.

Values of the Project in the Context of Society

The qualifications of the community-based art project become fulfilled in the *Art Without Borders* by the exposure through the public exhibitions and a TV document. Systematic exposure and the attention in the public gaze tell about a wide public interest toward the project.

It is essential within projects, such as *Art Without Borders*, to ponder what and where is the intended audience for whom the project has been developed. The power relations within and around the project itself and within the exposure need to be studied carefully. As stated earlier, in all the community-based projects it is important to discuss to whom and on which conditions the art is being produced (Kantonen 2005, 51). This is especially important when the social marginalized groups are in the center of public attention.

International and national dialogue is promoted and encouraged through the *Art Without Borders*; however, I question its meaning and purposefulness. The project aims at building dialogue between artists and persons with disabilities in several European countries. I argue that building national exhibitions and circulating the international version of the collected artworks from one country to another does not alone construct communication amongst people. This model demonstrates ambitious goals but also a level of superficiality with its limited attempts to build dialogue and understand the needs of the participants. This is a narrow and somewhat strange approach for interactuality between people; both amongst work partners and between nations. The fundamental questions of the aims in this project remain unanswered. A need for international co-operation is not arising from the needs of a person with autism, who more or less dislikes public places and mass events. My working partner does not long for publicity and recognition of his works. These exhibitions intend to initiate dialogue with the audience. These receptions are interesting for the participating professional artist, but not for the non-professional artists. I question, whose needs are served by these public exhibitions in prominent places and wide media coverage, and what are the ethical values and educational/cultural goals of the project.

What does this urge to produce national/international exhibitions with grand openings and "important" guests tell us about the contemporary society? Just a few decades ago persons with "disorders" were isolated in institutions. Now, we promote positive perception and understanding, but based on whose perception and serving whose benefit? The goals of the

project read noble: Professional artists find new ways of communication with persons with autism, and this is then made available to the wider public. I question what the larger goals of this project tell us about the role of a person as a member in the society. Does the inclusion serve those supposedly now included?

I observed and interviewed some of the participant artistic partners within the project. I found out that the artist had many possibilities how to locate her- or himself in the collaborative work. The roles the artists assumed, varied from democratic settings to teacher-student versions, and to settings where the artist assumed to be a better knowing "artist master". One of the artist, who also is an art educator, has a strong modernist art teacher background. He instructed his partner about the color mixtures and compositions, without wanting to discuss the contents. The person he was working with seemed to be very pleased to get the teaching he was offered.

Another artist was very well known to the partner, who also admired his work a lot. That artist needed to decide if he should stay and enjoy that pre-set admiration role of a master artist or predispose himself and move towards more direct interaction. Third artist had a crisp conception and well planned scenario of the future collaborative work. He even knew beforehand exactly what kind of artworks they would produce together and from what material they would be made of. He was responsible for the work and did not want to take any risk by sharing that responsibility. This did not seem to bother his partner. During the process it seemed that both of the partners remold the work, which transformed from the first idea during the process.

In this kind of project the participating artist has a grand ethical responsibility with the question of inclusion. The work itself can easily be led through the artist's personal conception of art and what s/he is willing to accept as art for public showing. The question also is, whether the artist is willing to accept a more complex outcome as an artwork or is s/he aiming towards artistic standards of her/his alone? And how openly s/he is willing to negotiate with her/his partner and to give up her/his pre-expectations. The artist is supposedly understood as a professional who knows best. The mystified role of the artist and the art itself as something bigger than life, does not help the role that is given to her/him. The external signifiers might disturb the democratic aims in the project.

At the same time, when the relationship with disabled people changes, does the relationship between artists and the meaning of arts as an empowering element in people's lives and in society change? There is a current interest in creating artistic working methods in the social context in order to create effective methods for enhancing health and well-being. In Finland there seems to be a growing demand and financial pressure for finding and developing methods combining art in the context of social, rehabilitation and community purposes. The task for artists and art educators is to understand the different challenges that will come along.

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About the Author

Mira Helena Kallio
Current work as a senior full time lecturer in an art and design university consists of teaching courses for master students and for international students, in curriculum studies and research methods in art education. Seven years of teaching experience in upper secondary schools and high schools empowers university level teaching and research with future art educator students. The themes such as: power in education/ values in education/ community based art education / sexual identity /body/cultural identity/multicultural education are specially emphasized through arts-based and experimentally gained knowledge. Own artistic work is an important part of the work. I understand the academic and professional identity through tree dimensions: being an artist, a researcher and a teacher. I have plenty of experiment in international conferences as well as exhibitions and publications.

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