COMMENTARY

Impossible Practice and Theories of the Impossible:
A Response to Helene Illeris's "Potentials of Togetherness"

MIRA KALLIO-TAVIN

Aalto University

In a recent commentary in *Studies in Art Education,* **Helene Illeris (2013) discussed the idea of *performative experimental communities*** via a critique of visual culture pedagogy and the romanticism of community-oriented art education in Nordic countries. Illeris underpinned her arguments with Jean-Luc Nancy's (1997) philosophy on togetherness and community. While I agree in principle with Illeris's movement away from individual learning processes toward community, I find problematic the relationship between a presumed practice of collectivity and the theoretical impossibility of community. In what follows, I also use Nancy's theories to analyze the idea of *performative experimental communities* provided by Illeris and discuss the theoretical impossibility of it.

Traditionally, in community-arts-based projects, the artwork is the outcome of the collaboration—but the work process itself can also be defined as art, as it is a continuous performance (Kantonen, 2005). Artwork, then, becomes a jointly lived event, and the event becomes a shared experienced artwork (Kester, 2004). 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 critical and progressive practice (Kwon, 2004).

Correspondence regarding this commentary may be sent to the author at Mira.Kallio-Tavin@aalto.fi

Community-art-based projects, especially as described in art education, rely on an idea of an already existing community, or presuppose that the act of making art together would build up a purpose of community. Illeris (2013) criticized these kinds of projects, claiming that they often yearn for a mythic past where true belonging still existed. Illeris's argument has reverberated with Nancy's theory (1991) that longing for original and harmonious communities, and for immediate being-together, exists in every generation and in most cultures, and should be seen as mythical thought—an imaginary and nostalgic picture of our past. Nancy (1991, 1997), however, went further and posited that a community *cannot* be a subject with an idea, mind, destiny, or meaning of its own.

Nancy developed his theories of community interactively with Maurice Blanchot (1988). For Nancy and Blanchot, community could only be possible without any shared subjectivities and shared substances. In the so-called world of "practice"—often arbitrarily separated from the "world of philosophical theory"—most art educators understand the idea of community precisely through its subjectivity. For example, many community-arts-based projects, within the field of art education, aim to develop a stronger community identity by distinguishing social needs and community relations at a local level. In practice, the goals are often to improve community relations, to develop feelings of acceptance and belonging in the community, to support active citizenship and local involvement in governance, and so on. Through these practices, community is understood as *presupposed*, already physically and geographically existing. Characteristic to all presupposed communities of practice is that their members are supposedly embedded in some idea of a shared or communal mind. Collective subjectivity is exactly what is offered for members in community-arts-based projects in art education. In other words, in order to belong, in order to "practice collectivity," the only way to remain as a member in the com-

munity is by adopting and holding a position in a collective subjectivity.

For Nancy (1991, 1997), community was not something to which one could belong. Instead, as a presupposed structure, community has rejected all that connects its members and what might offer a persistent essence to it. The *sense* of belonging to a community does not exist as "ready" but can be composed momentarily in togetherness of its members' *sense.* But then, immediately, the community splits. Community is thus impossible, theoretically. For Nancy, it is more relevant to talk about a *sense* of community than anything that could be thought of as a practicing community.

While I agree with Illeris (2013) that the potential of performative experimental communities stems from a group of people temporarily coming together without a fixed idea of togetherness and collaboration, the community still constitutes a structure, with policy and hierarchy about how people are brought together. Although it might not be predetermined to collaborate with other communities and their related social needs, problems, history, traditions, forms, materials, and so on, there is always a need for somebody to bring other people together and make decisions. The community is immediately presupposed and, in theory, immediately vanished.

Another concern I have regarding Illeris's performative experimental communities is the risk of it being romanticized just as much as the community-oriented art education projects that Illeris criticizes. Perhaps unconsciously, performative experimental communities embody similar longings for authenticity as all other community-arts-based projects. The words *performativity* and *experimental* in Illeris's proposal tended to promise something new and unknown and, therefore, provided nonfixed possibilities for true togetherness and community. However, *performativity* and *experimentation* become master signifiers, fantasies, for another idealistic and naïve utopia of freedom, of making art together. As I ultimately understand the idea of

performative experimental communities, such communities would require the kind of shared subjectivity that Nancy thinks is impossible for ontology. Furthermore, ideas embedded in performative experimental communities—shared, social, new, open, and experimental—not only seem idealistic and utopian but, ironically, presuppose a community that follows an already given and quite specific ideology.

While Illeris (2013) suggested that we explore togetherness within community practices as politics for art education, I believe that calling togetherness as politics for art education already confirms that there is some fixed understanding of policy. When subjectivity aims to be shared, there is already a fixed and presupposed program to run somebody's politics where needs and will are driven. This is, of course, the internal and unresolvable antagonism of "community." Perhaps it is important to consider what we can do with the tensions between the potential collective practices of community-based art education projects and their theoretical impos-

sibilities. What might happen, for example, if a *sense* of community is not understood as *given* in a community-based art education project? What are the possibilities when we do not try to resolve supposed conflicts between theory and practice, but embrace the knot between impossible practice and theories of the impossible? Nancy's theories might exemplify this tension because most of his work is an ontological study of the nature of being and existence, not about empirical situations. It is impossible to "practice" any kind of ontology—yet, it is what we practice everyday (Kallio-Tavin, 2013). Perhaps this means we take Illeris's (2013) idea of unbecoming collective seriously, by attaching it theoretically to ideas of the impossible, of coming together and coming apart immediately. Based on the impossibility of practicing togetherness and a "sense of community," art education might not include any presupposition of time, quality, subjectivity, or form of art practice in community-based projects. Perhaps "nothing" becomes art education and "being" unbecomes community.

REFERENCES

Blanchot, M. (1988). *The unavowable community*. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press.

Illeris, H. (2013). Potentials of togetherness: Beyond individualism and community in Nordic art education. *Studies in Art Education*, *55*(1), 79-83.

Kallio-Tavin, M. (2013). *Encountering self, other and the third: Researching the crossroads of art pedagogy: Levinasian ethics and disability studies.* Helsinki, Finland: Aalto Arts Books.

Kantonen, L. (2005). *Teltta*. Helsinki, Finland: University of Art and Design Helsinki.

Kester, G. (2004). *Conversation pieces: Community+Communication in modern art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kwon, M. (2004). *One place after another. Site-specific art and locational identity*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Nancy, J. L. (1991). *The inoperative community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Nancy, J. L. (1997). *The sense of the world*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.