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Art, Disobedience and Ethics: The Adventure of Pedagogy

Dennis Atkinson, 2018, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 236 pages,

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In these times of challenge for the arts in education and society, Dennis Atkinson has tracked a path through theories that provide a release of “the force of art” (p. 1). For those who may be unsure of how contemporary philosophy can relate to art practice, Atkinson provides an accessible introduction to a range of theorists and explores ways in which their ideas can be seen to connect, with relevance to teachers, artists, and students. Atkinson invites us to look beyond the political context to art practice as it is moving into new forms of existence that are “beyond the human” (p. 1). These new forms of existence reach away from past frameworks of understanding towards new experiences of being.

Atkinson presents an encouraging vision of art pedagogies that are “disobedient” to the expectations of standardizing institutional structures (p. 5). In doing so, Atkinson denies the presumed importance of obstructive social factors, moving from the general and external to the specific and immediate, in situating the value of art practice (p. 7). For example, Atkinson discusses a collaborative artwork called “Rogue Game” (2010): artists Can Altay, Sophie Warren, and Jonathan Mosley worked with curator Emily Pethick to create a space in which the markings for different sports overlapped, so that players had to negotiate the rules of other games in playing their chosen sport. In this case the known rules had to be adjusted, calling

upon the spontaneous reactions of participants as they negotiated a shared space (p. 26).

Accompanying the spring into “the suddenly possible” as discussed by Susan Buck-Morss (2013), there are thematic threads that track through the chapters and their different theoretical relations. Atkinson explores what may appear to be the uncomfortable theme of the teacher “becoming undone” (p. 4), by encountering student work that does not fit a prior framework of expectations, or existing theories of learning. One instance of this need to reframe theory in relation to experience in practice, occurs in Atkinson’s description of how he observed “sophisticated and novel drawing practices” in the artwork of young children; he notes how the forms represented in their drawings moved beyond the expectations of developmental psychology (p. 159).

An important concept in this book is Atkinson’s perspective of learning processes as “building a life” (p. 6), through evolving experiences in art education. For me, this concept has great resonance, and its pragmatic approach to the shifting positions of art in society and education offers a strong impression of the author’s long-term contribution to art in education.

Another thematic inquiry that leaps out is the focus on Alfred North Whitehead’s (1968) simple but convincing statement , “Have a care, here is something that matters” (p. 3). The author presents a well explained account of this “ethics of inquiry” (p. 9) as a value for arts practice, and for the lives in which it plays a co-constructive role, through the discussion of artworks by young children, students of art education, and artists.

It is apparent that the political context provides a background for, and not the substance of, what Atkinson (2011) calls “*real learning*” (p. 9). For learning to be

significant or “real”, the student needs to make “a leap into a new or modified ontological state whose affects and relations produce an expansion of acting and thinking” (p. 9). This statement locates what it means to “learn” in the ways we can extend what it means to exist, through feeling emotion in the present moment of experience, as well as exploring dynamic cognitive processes.

In *Chapter 2*, “Restoring Pedagogic Work to the Incipience and Immanence of Learning: Disobedient Pedagogies”, Atkinson looks further into how we might open routes towards the “not-known and subjects yet to come” (p. 19) in art education. He presents the concept of “hylomorphism”, that is “the imposition of form on matter, as when for example, particular modes of learning or teaching are imposed upon learners or teachers to determine their conduct” (p. 21). External criteria shape the experience of the learner. Some questions around agency arise for me in whether therefore learners may have the capacity to shape their own experience. The posthuman perspective would be that there is no privilege of human agency over material, natural, and empirical forces.

Atkinson moves between the theories of Whitehead and post human theorist Karan Barad. He explains Barad’s (2003) concept of “*intra-action*” as a combination of forces and processes “between a maker, the subject matter of practice and the means or materials for accomplishing this practice” (p. 32). The artist matters because they make art, as in “The process of mattering through making a drawing” (p. 33). We can relate again to the theme of “having a care” for the artist and their artwork, since they are integral to each other. Atkinson responds to Barad by thinking about what her theory might mean in terms of art pedagogy, and he puts forward questions we could be asking ourselves as educators.

Developing the theme of “Building a Life” through Baruch Spinoza is the focus of *Chapter 3*. This connection to Spinoza is an important historical link to more recent theories of learning as it is explained through mind-body connection and affect, without the Cartesian division of mind and body. Atkinson describes how we may encounter various types of emotion through Spinoza. He considers Spinoza’s idea (1996) that in addressing embodiment and physicality in practice “we don’t know what a body is capable of doing or what the mind is capable of thinking” (p. 41). This puts us beyond our rational outline of physiological processes, but we could question whether this is always a good thing. Atkinson later notes that we “put aside” (p. 142) our prior frameworks for experience; perhaps there is an inevitability of taking up some of these guidelines again.

The energy of affect rather than reason appears through *Chapter 4*, which looks into “The Force of Art and Learning.” It expands Atkinson’s definition of “disobedience” as it “does not denote opposition, but a possibility for an opening, resisting normalizing forces” (p. 60). This approach relates well with earlier forms of critical pedagogy through Paulo Freire (1970/ 1996), since the life constructing processes involve “*joining with learners*” (p. 61). Atkinson also links to poets and films as well as visual artists, to demonstrate how we may draw upon a wider range of sources in our understandings of the relevance of theory to learning in the arts.

Art, Disobedience and Ethics is noted as original in the field of art education for its treatment of Whitehead. In *Chapter 5* there is a great illumination of “Whitehead’s Adventure”. Atkinson has forged an in-depth investigation of a philosophy that avoids preconception and external criteria: “Whitehead’s process philosophy encourages us not to be trapped by what he terms ‘abstractions’” (p. 67). Abstractions for Whitehead are what Atkinson terms “the sedimented power of

concepts” (p. 67). Whitehead’s concept of creativity in *Process and Reality* (1929) as “the principle of novelty” (p. 82), of always finding something new, and the connection of this approach with posthumanism is well explained in accessible language. Atkinson writes that Whitehead recognised “some degree of experience and value” in “humans, animals and plants” – a scientific observation of being that does not privilege the human in the same way as Cartesian philosophy (p. 69).

In *Chapter 6* “Ethics and Politics in Pedagogic Work” Atkinson moves the rhythmic dance of theory and education to a discussion of Alain Badiou’s (2005) concept of the immanent *event* “as something that opens a space for a truth procedure” (p. 91). Interesting examples of artists’ work involve trying out different frameworks for knowledge that cross boundaries of rules and regulations. Atkinson connects with Rancière (1991), through “the relation between ethics and immanence apropos teaching and learning” (p. 107) and through discussing “the act of revealing “an intelligence to itself”” p.107. The question of whether it is “possible to teach without an explicative order?” (p.109) also develops the concept of working without criteria in art education and Atkinson’s earlier work on this (2017).

Then *Chapter 7* “Becoming in the Middle” focuses on Gilles Deleuze, in relation to Atkinson’s aim of avoiding a drive towards transcendence through learning, Atkinson says, “The force of thought is a disobedient force that questions established ways of thinking, seeing and acting and their respective methodologies.” (p. 121). He discusses *Bergsonism* (Deleuze, 1988) in forming an understanding of “multiplicity”, in learning processes that are not so much events, but rather “foldings, unfoldings and refoldings” (p. 124). Here we go back to the theme of “becoming undone” and beginning again, avoiding the purchase of a “hylomorphic” framework on education.

Pursuing the focus on the transformative potential of art, *Chapter 8* concentrates on “The Force of Art”, which is a motif Atkinson uses that has particular effect, if we look at the background of a political climate. Atkinson reflects on artists that exemplify this inspirational force, for example Marcel Duchamp, the Situationists, Joseph Beuys, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein (p. 158).

The final chapter of this rhythmic dance between theoretical zones draws in the significance of the “processes and adventures of building a life” (p. 221) to students, in working with them to find out what makes their practice leap into possibility, while acknowledging that pedagogy has a “fallibility”. Perhaps the theoretical approaches addressed here have historically situated momentum, in recognising the wonder of making art, despite the difficulties of the social context. Perhaps also this momentum may shift in the future to different territories. However Atkinson has seized the significance of concepts of affect, immanence, and disobedience, as they inform routes of inquiry that could enable a transition to the next phase of the new in art practice.

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