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Encountering the image of thought in artmaking

ABSTRACT

Drawing from observations by contemporary art critic Jerry Saltz that recent art-school graduates are producing work that imitates the styles of successful and established artists and movements, this article explores how the ways in which artist-students are taught in university art programmes might potentially impact their postgraduate art practices. If art-school-educated professional artists do indeed tend to adhere to prescriptive modes of artmaking, what are some ways in which university art educators might disrupt these habits at the outset for art students who are just starting out in a college art programme? To contemplate this question, this article engages Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's philosophical concept of the encounter *as one approach that might trigger a new kind of thought in learning and artmaking, which informed a teaching experiment that I undertook with one of my introductory art courses. The implantation and reflection on this teaching experiment illustrates how teachers at all levels of art education might create their own adaptive forms of experimenting with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the encounter to short circuit such emulative modes of thinking in students' approaches to artmaking.*

KEYWORDS

contemporary art; higher art education; art foundations; Deleuze and Guattari; the encounter; image of thought

> Galleries everywhere are awash in these brand-name reductivist canvases, all more or less handsome, harmless, supposedly metacritical, and just 'new' or 'dangerous'-looking enough not to violate anyone's sense of what 'new' or 'dangerous' really is, all of it impersonal, mimicking a set of preapproved influences.
>
> (Saltz 2015: 347)

The above passage is taken from an essay by art critic Jerry Saltz on the recent state of the contemporary art market, in which speculator-collectors have been driving the demand for abstract painting. Saltz claims that in response to this demand, young artists – almost all of whom have 'come through art school' – are producing 'ersatz art' that generally 'looks the way other art looks' (2015: 347). This art, which he calls 'Zombie Formalism' (a term coined by artist and critic Walter Robinson), is the core example of his contention that the history of modern art has always been one where art movements rise and escape from the dominant art regime, but the inverse of this history has been happening recently in painting and other areas of contemporary art. Saltz suggests that this 'onslaught of copycat mediocrity and mechanical art' (2015: 347) is being made by younger artists who are imitating the styles of successful and estab- lished artists and movements. It is prescriptive insofar as it follows an established and successful formula, and according to Saltz, this trend will continue to proliferate through the art world as long as the market continues to support and encourage these practices through a high demand for this form of emula- tive production.

While other commentators have analysed Saltz's essay from the perspective of the contemporary art market (Dillon 2014; Jeppesen 2015; Wiley 2018a, 2018b; Gardner 2019), the objective of this article is to contemplate Saltz's observations from the perspective of higher art education institutions. Specifically, it will explore how the ways in which artist-students are taught in university art programmes might potentially impact their postgraduate art practices. Following Saltz's argument, if we are seeing so many art-school-educated professional artists adhering to such prescriptive modes of artmaking, what are some ways in which university art educators might disrupt these habits at the outset for art students who are just starting out in a college art programme, or for students taking introductory art courses who have little or no artmaking experience? In this article I will briefly explore the history of art foundations in the United States and contemplate few assumptions about learning in the traditional classroom setting. I will then turn to philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of *the encounter* to serve as one approach that might trigger a new kind of thought in learning and artmaking, which informed a teaching experiment that I undertook with one of my introductory art courses. As such, this article seeks to explore how teachers might create their own adaptive forms of experimenting with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the encounter to short circuit such emulative modes of thinking in approaching artmaking.

ART EDUCATION BACKGROUND: THE IMAGE OF ART FOUNDATIONS

To begin with a 'foundations' framework for contemporary art education, it is valuable to turn to the historical grounding of Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's Bauhaus-era writing on art instruction, which still has a significant influence on the twenty-first-century art education. It frames the first step of creative production in higher education as 'not immediately interested in the personal quality of expression which is usually called "art", but its primordial, basic elements, the ABC of expression itself' (cited in Singerman 1999: 113). This mid-twentieth-century shift in foundations practices in the United States and Europe reflected a vision, shared in Moholy-Nagy's assessment, that the objective of foundations education should follow 'the difference of being an artist but the sameness and sharedness of seeing and expressing

as an artist', which is taught in these art rudiments 'as the language of art' (cited in Singerman 1999: 113). The objective for contemporary art foundation programmes assumes that, following the development of the ABCs of art, the student advances onto higher levels of art education and art practice, making use of the simple foundations tools to build a practice that may modify or work against these very tenets. This is the process of what Wilson articulates as the 'artistic rules, conventions, and skills' that we must learn before we can then turn towards 'playing with those rules and images – stretching them and recombining them in one way or another to create something new' (2004: 312).

This presents an image of a post-foundation art-school experience as a laboratory of experimentation that, in theory, puts the weight of focus for students on the *process* of artmaking. Yet this image of an open and fluid art school often tends to be an illusion, or as Madoff frames it, a 'false state of exception' (2009: 276), in which constraining forces are always at play, thus limiting the potential for unfettered experimentation with new and innovative artmaking. Madoff (2009) contends that such uninhibited exploration is often limited by the significant influence of the marketplace as an external cultural and economic force of control and conformity that affects the organization of art schools. This involves, among other factors, curators and their galleries and institutions, critics and media publications, and collectors and dealers – all of whom form interconnected lines of control and influence that determine the styles and trends that establish the hierarchical organization of contemporary art value systems. These systems and structures are constantly permeating throughout the discourses in art schools, reinforcing for students and teachers alike an image of the styles, genres and mediums that comprise the accepted contemporary school of thought. As such, the role of foundations is to instil the fixed rudiments of skills and techniques of artmaking, but contrary to the assumptions and expectations of post-foundation art education, art students remain constrained in their artmaking in upper-level coursework as they wrangle with the styles and trends of the dominant art regimes that serve as models for what students think they *ought to be* making. In this sense, the entire art school experience for students might often be one of following a *dogmatic image of thought* that determines how art should be made rather than becoming an engagement with experimentation through which new lines of artistic inquiry could emerge.

PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND: DISRUPTING THE DOGMATIC IMAGE OF THOUGHT

Gilles Deleuze is concerned with our reliance on this 'dogmatic image of thought' (1994: 148) that influences these latter forces of constraints and expectations that inhibit thinking differently. Deleuze implicates Kant's notion of 'common sense' and 'good sense' as the attributes that compose this image. Common sense involves the 'partition of concepts' and a 'hierarchization' (Deleuze 1994: 33). It functions as the faculty of recognition through representation. For example, Deleuze asserts that common sense gives us the ability to recognize a cow in a meadow based on how it matches our preconceived notion of a cow stored in our minds. He views 'good sense' as the measuring of subjects to ensure that what one is recognizing is a cow and not a horse or a dog, and as such this differentiates between various phenomena that we experience.

Both common sense and good sense work together to stabilize our experiences in accordance with our preconceived image of thought. This is not necessarily a problem for Deleuze. If we did not possess common sense or good sense, we would not be able to function in daily life within our respective societies and cultures; we need these senses, and we need this image of thought to be human. What troubles Deleuze is not the fact that this structuring of phenomena exists. The complications arise when this structure is so heavily relied upon that it becomes impossible to see any ways of approaching phenomena that function outside of the constraints of our preconceived image of thought. In other words, the issue is that the image of thought has become *dogmatic* in our reliance on it in the way we think in such a way in so many areas of our lives.

In Deleuze's collaborative philosophical work with Felix Guattari, they call for the intentional creation of encounters to break from that dogmatic image of thought by enacting slices of experimentation or 'lines of flight', which break away from the rigid structure of thought and move towards unfamiliar or unexpected experiences (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 3). It is in this sense that they present their concept of the encounter as a way to trigger new pathways of creation. Ronald Bogue articulates how Deleuze's encounter supplants the dogmatic image of thought in this respect as a call for a 'genuinely "new" […] imageless thought' of difference that 'must be forced into action through the disruption of ordinary habits and notions' (2004: 333). Following Deleuze (1993), this latter form of thinking embraces 'nonsense', which is not the opposite or effacement of sense. On the contrary, it is a productive force that fragments linear or representational forms of thought. Bogue describes nonsense as 'a thought of problems, and learning, rather than occupying the gap between non-knowledge and knowledge [...] the process whereby thought explores the domain of problems' (2004: 333).

Problems are valuable 'according to their importance, their ability to generate new questions' (Bogue 2004: 334). This is often reflected in the open-endedness of the artistic process, which produces the potential to explore trajectories in multiple, unpredictable directions, rather than a specific linear direction of execution of a work. I view this as a starting point for considering ways of approaching experiences teaching in the art classroom. These key ideas have served as ways through which I have created the conditions for a different kind of art educational environment for my students that disrupts those ordinary habits of learning and produces new lines of flight into a multiplicity of open-ended, productive problems in artmaking.

LOCATING THE (ZOMBIE) PROBLEMS WITH MY ART ASSIGNMENTS

I have taught introductory art courses in university settings for nearly fifteen years. One offering I have consistently taught over my university teaching career has been some variation of an introductory photography course. The first course I taught was called Introduction to Digital Photography when I was a graduate teaching associate during my first year as an MFA student. I often think back to that experience of teaching a university art course for the first time. I was mostly concerned with gaining my bearings as a new teacher, and so my focus in the first year of teaching was to very closely follow the pre-established assignment structure that was provided to me by the supervising professor for the course.

The curriculum for the introductory photography course consisted of four studio assignments and a final project. Each of the studio assignments addressed a specific photographic genre: documentary, portrait, landscape and narrative. To prepare the students for their assignments, teachers were encouraged to show a selection of examples of art history and contemporary art photography from each genre to give the students an idea of how artists have approached the different genres from various technical, formal, historical and conceptual perspectives. We were also encouraged to select short readings from the canon of photography history, theory and other relevant image-related texts to add a basic historical and theoretical context for each assignment. After my first semester of teaching I had begun to collect a selection of student work, and I began showing examples of that work to students in subsequent semesters as a reference point to how those previous students had approached the course assignments.

The intention of these lectures and viewings leading up to each assignment was to familiarize the students with a broad survey of past examples of photography and related texts as a framework to approaching their artmaking assignments. Importantly, I emphasized in the lectures that any examples I had shown of artist work were merely for inspirational purposes, and that the students were expected to create new work that was driven by their own interests and ideas. I assumed that the students would be making entirely new and unique works based on their innovative approaches for each assignment topic. However, I quickly realized that my focus on thoroughly demonstrating various thematic examples was having an opposite effect. It was instead creating the conditions for the students to reinforce a dogmatic image of thought in relation to how one ought to approach each genre through their assignments. This is a common way of learning through STEM education organized by solution-driven results, and most of the students in my courses were only one or two years removed from that type of learning environment in their K–12 education. Studio art classrooms have the potential to present unique learning environments for introductory students who have been conditioned by a teaching and learning environment in conventional educational settings. The introductory art courses that I teach often require no prerequisites, and many students who enrol in my courses do so to fulfil a general elective requirement. This presents a certain challenge as a teacher to find ways to shift their approaches away from solution-driven results in their artmaking. While I stressed the importance of creative approaches to their assignments, I realized very quickly in my introductory art teaching that I was unwittingly presenting the students with a similar mode of finding solutions to problems by showing examples of work from established artists and former students as a prescribed way to facilitate the students' artistic exploration of their assignments. I did not realize how habitual exposure to solution-driven learning had produced minds that had such difficulty breaking away from an adherence to a way of thinking that was conditioned by nearly fifteen years of a certain kind of limited approach to problem-solving. As a result, most of the work submitted for the first semester's assignments followed a dogmatic image of thought of each genre, in which students tended to very closely mimic the thematic and formal approaches of the artists in the examples and texts that I had shared with the class. Without a suitable framework for which a transformative process of thought and action through artmaking might emerge, the students fell back on the only way they could conceive of approaching these assignments. In this sense, the assignment was viewed by most of the students as an

exam that they were taking to demonstrate that they could identify, replicate or illustrate the specific ideas and approaches presented by my lectures.

Something need to be changed if the students were to utilize a new kind of thinking in approaching their assignments for the course. By the end of my first year of teaching, I received permission from my course supervisor to change some of the elements of the assignments, as long as the overall structure of working with the four photography genres remained the same.

EXPERIMENTING WITH ENCOUNTERS IN THE ART ASSIGNMENT

For the next semester, I planned to restructure the third assignment (landscape) as a quasi-experiment to compare with the other assignments, which retained the same structure as in previous offerings of the course. The students produced the same results for the first two assignments (documentary and portrait) as I had experienced in previous semesters; nearly all of the works were operating under their preconceived notions of what documentary and portrait photography ought to be, reinforced by my lectures that gave examples of the work of established artists and past students.

For the third assignment, the landscape assignment, I changed the requirements significantly. Crucially, I did not show the students any examples of landscape photography prior to each respective assignment. We would only look at examples from artists, previous students and historical/theoretical texts *after* our discussion of the completed assignment. This would ensure that students would still be receiving lectures that contextualized their assignment with art history, theory and contemporary art practices. However, by avoiding these lectures in preparation for the assignment, the students did not have any examples given in class that would further develop or reify their image of thought of what landscape photography should look like.

In the first step of this reconfigured landscape photography assignment, we read a short excerpt from Lewis Carroll's classic novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* ([1865] 2005). This introduced us to the notion of nonsense through Carroll's storytelling. I arrived at this idea after reading Deleuze's book *The Logic of Sense* (1993), which engages the relationship between sense and nonsense and refers to Carroll's work as a key exemplar of such experimentation from a literary perspective. Sense and nonsense are not binary oppositions. Nonsense is posited as sense without a stabilizing ground; it is what happens when the structure of meaning (what Deleuze calls 'the logic of sense') breaks down. Deleuze explores the playful language that Carroll uses in constructing portmanteau words, such as *frumious*, which is a combination of furious and fuming. While Deleuze explores nonsense in terms of language from a literary perspective, I attempted to transpose these concepts into ideas for artmaking with my photography students. The intention of this short reading assignment was to familiarize the students with the concept of nonsense as a way to disrupt their preconceived images of thought of what landscape photography is, and more towards what it could *become*. Thinking about Carroll's unique forms of storytelling might help to dislodge and destabilize what Deleuze calls 'the forces of recognition' and instead encourage a model of thinking that approaches an 'unrecognized and unrecognizable terra incognita' (1994: 136).

The intention of the second step of the assignment was to engage in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the encounter, in which they encourage us to experiment with alternative ways of approaching the world:

> Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times.
>
> (1987: 161)

But how should we experiment, and where are these advantageous places that offer us opportunities to do so? How do we locate moments of deterritorialization, and how can we create lines of flight? I attempted to create this mode of experimentation for the students by presenting various obstacles or disruptions for the students in the form of an 'object list' from which the students were required to choose various physical objects to incorporate into their works. It was as simple as requiring the students to make a landscape portrait that in some way incorporated a block of cheese. While such an object is still strongly associated with recognition, classification and identity, it could also function to 'trigger' or 'jolt' a move away from routine thinking. The objects could be viewed as ways to open up new lines of escape that emerge from the rigidly segmented thinking of how landscape is conventionally defined. Some of the encounters were more complex, offering multiple objects that would require new approaches to the construction of the photographic composition. For example, how can a block of cheese, a small mirror and a computer screen become entwined in the creation of a landscape photograph? By requiring the students to create a landscape work that forced them to somehow incorporate all three objects into the photograph, they had no choice but to open up to new questions of surface, composition, space and perspective in their approaches to the assignment.

STUDENT RESPONSES TO ENCOUNTERING THEIR IMAGE OF THOUGHT

One student viewed the block of cheese itself as a miniature landscape by using a macro lens to photograph the surface of the cheese up close. Another student created a composition by taking a digital photograph of a traditional landscape scene and displaying it on the computer screen directly behind the cheese. This presented an alien terrain by integrating the block of cheese in the foreground and the computer screen as a background, which still allowed the student an opportunity to explore and incorporate the more conventional forms of landscape photography within the experimental context of the assignment. Another student cut thin slices of the cheese and laid them horizontally to construct the image of a larger terrain, which was vastly expanded through pictorial illusion by the strategic placement of the mirror on one side and the computer screen on the other. Yet another student photographed the block of cheese and duplicated its image in Photoshop to create a digital collage – the image layers of blocks of cheese became marks of the digital paintbrush, and the composition was framed by the computer screen and then re-photographed. This exercise allowed the students to work *through* their preconceived notions of what a landscape is, while disrupting the reification of those notions by forcing them to negotiate obstacles to present landscape as something unexpected and unusual.

At one end of the spectrum, simply asking the students to present their idea of a landscape in an introductory class without any kind of foundational

structure would be a disservice to their learning experience. Bogue asserts that 'a problem […] is not an amorphous muddle' (2004: 33), and thus, requiring the students to consider landscape from that muddle results in a kind of paralysis that tends to result when one is overwhelmed by a lack of structure or order. As Deleuze and Guattari dramatically illustrate, 'if you blow apart the strata without taking precautions then instead of drawing the plane you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe' (1987: 178).

On the other end of the spectrum, by only providing introductory students with an archive of examples of professional artists and former students' work, or with texts that define the expectations of landscape photography, I am creating a rigid structure of what their work ought to look like. It should not be, as Bogue claims, 'a kind of shadowy double of its eventual resolution within a specific solution' (2004: 33). Instead, the revised landscape assignment provided a 'structured field of potential actualizations' (Bogue 2004: 33). It created the conditions for the students to step away from their reliance on good sense and common sense to embrace the lines of flight that the encounter activates by touching upon nonsense.

The students' journal entries depicted a broad spectrum of responses to the assignment. Many were frustrated by the requirement to incorporate unusual objects and strange perspectives into their photographs. Nearly all of the students who felt this way indicated that the images they were making did not fit the preconceived image of landscape that they were familiar with coming into the course. Some students were irritated that this assignment did not teach them how to produce picturesque landscape photographs that they could post on social media, hang on the wall of their home or give as a gift to a family member. In this revised assignment, the image compositions the students were creating were not aligned with the dogmatic image of thought of what a landscape photograph should be, which suggests that the landscape photographs that they produced were not acceptable to display or share with others.

Most of the students who shared their displeasure with the constraints of the assignment did acknowledge that they understood my intentions for framing the assignment in this way. I presented the lectures and discussions leading up to the assignment deadline in a way that ensured that the students grasped these ideas about disrupting their preconceived images of what landscape photography should be. Nevertheless, most of the students reflected that they had various degrees of difficulty getting used to engaging with landscape in a way that was outside of their preconceived notions of the genre. Encouragingly, several of the students shared that the process produced new ways of reflecting on their preconceived notions of landscape, as challenging as it was to get used to these constraining ways of working with the genre. In other words, the students felt that the artmaking process for this experimental assignment was uncomfortable and unfamiliar, but that it was rewarding to create works that were so vastly unexpected as landscape photographs. It required them to actively work around and through the problems that the assignment presented, rather than passively replicating or slightly diverging from the examples of how other artists have approached the landscape photography genre. There was a pervasive sense of surprise depicted throughout the text reflections of many of the students' journal entries, insofar as they had not initially thought of the variety of ways in which landscapes could be produced as something so radically unfamiliar

and new. It was the act of doing and making that exceeded the assumptions and expectations of their capabilities in considering the photography of space and place.

CONCLUSION

This reframing of specific art assignments to engage in the creation of the encounter in artmaking has become significant in thinking through my teaching philosophy in working with students at the introductory level of art education. In this instance, the beginner-level students' artistic inquiries were addressing the problems and provocations that art creates at a fundamental level of thought and action. The problem for them became open-ended and did not serve as a double to the solution in the form of the output of their work. The provocations took shape as inventive, critical perspectives on the idea of landscape photography, a position that embraces nonsense as a creative act. It was a process of emergence, not through a rigid sense of recollection, recognition and identification, but rather through negotiation and innovation through the art encounter. Working with the constraints of the photographic framing, screen and surface, as well as the specific requirements and rules of the assignment, the students were faced with the unfamiliar conditions through which new and unanticipated thought and action emerged as artmaking.

I have taken this example as a small, but important step in my research towards considering how similar experiences with encounters might affect the artmaking process in course and curriculum development. Over the past thirteen years since teaching my first university art course, I have worked towards taking concepts and plugging them into the creation of new thinking through productive disruptions for students to sense anew in their own creative transformation through artmaking. None of these activities are separate from one another. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest,'have a small plot of new land at all times' (1987: 161). The question reverberates: Where do we plot our locations along the normalizing constraints of order and the indecipherable openness of chaos to create the conditions for new cartographies of thinking through artmaking?

The task of an educator is an immense undertaking when a teacher is attempting to rupture the image of art education in order to create new approaches to artmaking for introductory students to explore. An art curriculum that embraces the Deleuzian encounter produces subjectivities of students that think of a world of yet-to-be-traversed paths. Art education could take on the tremendous responsibility of laying the groundwork for artistic thinking of expressions that may seem unimaginable now – what Deleuze refers to as 'unheard music' (2004: 77). If art education can lead the way in thinking and creating expressions of unknown worlds through artmaking, it could open up a creative transformation in students that disturbs the constraints of good sense and common sense and disentangles from the constraints of the dogmatic image of thought.

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