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ARTIST PEDAGOGY, ART SCHOOLS, AND BELONGING

Despite long histories of collectivism, individualism still dominates so much the art world. Forms of collaboration and collectivism are typically treated as novelties and the enduring romantic notion of the artist as an individual on the margins of society perpetuates. Often our pedagogies reproduce these conditions rather than rethinking or challenging them. In the ever more plural critical and material landscapes of contemporary art, where students arrive as atomized individuals, should our pedagogies seek to foster a sense of belonging and how might this be achieved? To what degree do we need to foster community in our pedagogies for students to develop as artists? How do institutional traditions frame and develop particular notions of community? Can belonging be radically reconceptualized through a greater critical attention to what constitutes the "we" within an art school community? Are students still experiencing belonging even if their ways of coming together collectively resists assimilation into a larger school community?

As a core component of humans' need to connect, create, and sustain community bonding with others, fostering belonging is contingent upon "multifaceted components, predictors, and outcomes" (Allen et al. 2021, 1134). While attempting to pinpoint a sense of belonging in higher education must acknowledge that it is "interweaving, experienced relationally, and [has] a multiplicity of meanings, stories, and possibilities (Gravett & Ajjawi 2022, 1387).

Allen and colleagues (2021) note two approaches to student belonging that come from very different ideologies. The first approach involves assimilation, which aims for a broad grouping of diverse students coming together, fitting in, conforming to a particular homogenized notion of student identity. Following the work of Brewer (1991), Verbree et al. (2024) describe assimilation as "the need for validation and similarity to others". An assimilating grouping could be defined by the shared desire to be identified strongly as being a student enrolled in the university, being part of the cohort on a particular program of study, or even being a member of a specific university club or informal grouping. At the same time, members of a particular group typically desire to be distinct within that group. Verbree et al. (2024) refer to this as differentiation, or "the need for uniqueness and individuation". Assimilation though is as much about the expectations set by the institution as it is the desire of the individual and we need to ask who decides the ideals that are to be assimilated to, leading us to the second approach.

The second approach for belonging in higher education is one of inclusion, which aims to "prioritise the value contribution of students' uniqueness (i.e., educational, cultural backgrounds) to the campus community" (Allen et al 2024, np). Inclusive approaches open space for the opposing needs of assimilation and differentiation to play out in a creative tension. Brewer (1991, 478) perceives this interplay between assimilation and differentiation as a striving toward "optimal distinctiveness", or "the realm in which the need for differentiation and of the need for assimilation are exactly equal". However, this navigation and negotiation of assimilation and inclusive approaches to belonging is not conceived or enacted toward a "bounded or achievable state, located in stable or neutral places and spaces" (Gravett & Ajjawi 2022, 1391). As such, a relational understanding of belonging resists universal and fixed state into which students are integrated to conform to a universal ideal of what an art school community may be. Resisting this assimilationist framing lifts the burden from the students to need to adapt to become part of the community, and instead challenges institutions to attend to belonging as a "constellation of relations, intimately entangled with identities, becoming and learning" (Gravett & Ajjawi 2022, 1391).

Indeed, if art schools approach belonging through an uncritical one-size-fits-all lens of assimilation, students who do not fit the universalizing moulds "may actively choose not to belong" as a rejection of conforming their "identity, purpose and value in order to be a member" (Gravett & Ajjawi 2022, 1389). As Tomlinson and Tennison's articulate in their article in this issue, the formation of community on the margins of the predominant art school community and its formal curricula can be empowering and vitally enriching for students (and teachers) who come together in solidarity around their minoritized lived experiences. The challenge for institutional leadership is to determine whether belonging might be forged through the self-segregating safer spaces that affirm the lived experience of certain groups of (again, mostly marginalized) students. Or, following Chou's article in this issue, could a broader group composed of diverse bodies and minds together build alternative, multimodal conceptions of belonging by interrogating what the "we" of community could become in practice? Neither of these two proposals are more or less valid than the other insofar as they adhere and advocate for resisting and reorienting normative framings of belonging that seek to reify a fixed, universal image of a university art student.

It is crucial to note that the terms "belonging" and "community" are having a unique moment in higher education discourses in the mid–2020s following a surge of political backlash and direct attacks on institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, particularly in the United States but also emerging in the UK and some parts of Europe (Blanchette 2025; Musafer & Acheson 2025; Raval et al. 2025). Universities may create policies and initiatives to be *inclusive* of a greater *diversity* of minoritized students into the university, but if their institutional frameworks are created and maintained as a reflection of a universalized image of majoritarian students, then minoritized students will not experience belonging and community — at least not if they wish to live as their authentic selves. This is where *equity* and *justice* are essential components in creating transformational institutional change that fosters belonging and community in the university. Equity foments qualitative structural changes that are embedded into the groundwater of university frameworks that proactively support and bolster the lived

experiences of minoritized students. Justice is the undoing and reparation of current and past inequitable frameworks of the university.

In the past two years, a number of universities in North America have been removing equity — the most pivotal component of DEI — from their values and action initiatives and replacing it with vague conceptions of belonging and community. For Blanchett (2025, np) this is an attempt "to sidestep accountability, obscure inequities and replace measurable equity frameworks with vague platitudes". The contributions of this special issue are committed to maintaining and further enriching equity and justice as core components of cultivating and fostering belonging and community for university art students.

There are also philosophical questions about the function of the art school and its basic mission. If that mission is to allow artists to realise their potential at a particular moment in their artistic development, often within a limited time, then we need to understand how the individual develops. Returning to the notion of individuation touched upon earlier, Bernard Stiegler has claimed, an individual emerges from processes of *transindividuation*: "The *I,* as *psychic individual,*" Stiegler tells us "cannot be thought except to the extent that it belongs to a *we*, which is a *collective individual:* the *I* constitutes itself through the adoption of a collective history, which it inherits and with which a plurality of *I*s identify." And significantly, he tells us that "A *we* is also this kind of process (this is the process of collective individuation), the individuation of the *I* being always inscribed in that of the *we*, while, inversely, the individuation of the *we* only takes place through the conflicting individuation of the *I*s that compose it." (Stiegler 2014, 50–51). Academies and schools of art in higher education might then have to rethink how they place community more centrally to the development of their students, and to reconsider how this might be achieved in the light of relatively recent changes, some of which we have outlined above.

These are lenses through which can understand different kinds of community, from the relatively stable faculty, to the administration (who often hold claims to institutional knowledge) to the student body who flow through. Then there are the communities around the art school, the people who live and work nearby, and our alumni that include artists and art workers who have dispersed internationally. If one aim of developing community has the students not just as its focus, but invites them to construct the ideals that they will assimilate too and individuate from in the forming of community, then the temporary and transient must be a factor. These may be impermanent communities or they might disperse becoming more defuse after a period of intensity afforded by being together in an educational setting. It is perhaps not surprising then that the four essays in this issue deal with the idea of community in art schools in different ways.

We can begin to understand that the concept of belonging resists a fixed definition, hence the four articles in this themed issue of Synteesi approach the notion from varying perspectives. In the essay "*Common Contexts, Singular Pathways:* Envisioning the Shared Concerns of Art Students through Diagram-Based Pedagogies", Dean Kenning critically questions the typical pedagogical approach of treating students as "already artists." He argues this has become an "outdated and ideologically problematic" model for contemporary art education. "Can the artistic procedure of self-directed production and auto-didactic exploration be maintained as a basis for student learning without losing a

sense of art education's wider purposes – purposes which connect it both to the different traditions from which it emerged, to contemporary art and culture, and the wider world?" Kenning asks. He draws on Mulholland 2019 to unpick the problematics of a system in which the students are expected to the job of defining "what is to be learned," in the context of the ever more plural and diverse critical and theoretical landscape of contemporary art.

Kenning cautions against approaches to teaching in which theory and practice are not understood as separate, arguing instead for "intersubjective modes of learning, utilising methodological tools that connect things and people rather than separating them into isolated units of attention." He returns to familiar territory of Donald Barthelme's idea of artistic "not knowing" to remind us of a focus "not on the creative freedom of the artist, but on a connection of practice to larger "problems", which constrain and influence the development of a work." To make the point that:

"Discovering wider problems and engaging with them in artistic form, discovering them *through* practical engagement, could be said to constitute knowledge and proficiency that is not necessarily tied to competence in and appetite for creative making in general, but is something that occurs specifically through art school education."

The art teacher can facilitate the students' practical absorption and understanding of this through making explicit the hidden criteria that drive their "aesthetic-symbolic choice and judgement."

Kenning goes on to share two practical pedagogical approaches for diagraming as a learning technique: "Social Body Mind Mapping" (SBMM) and "Redrawing the Art School" (RAS), both of which he has developed as innovative aspects of his own teaching practice. These are tools which are designed to allow the student to deepen their understanding of where their ideas emerge from and how they narrativize those ideas, something which Kenning has observed as problematic within the frames of the signature art and design pedagogy of group critique. Kenning concludes by asking whether, because these pedagogic techniques are intended "to extend student thinking with a view to benefitting future practice," they might be understood as a form of "Scaffolding" a term taken from Lev Vygotsky to explain that what matters is not the students current level of attainment but that which they can reach with the help of teachers and peers. He argues that "good learning does not keep pace with but is in "advance of development" (Vygotsky. 1978, 89)." It is clear that for Kenning forms of learning together as a community are an essential part of this.

Anikó Bojtos and Patrick Tayler also explore forms of learning together but by contrast their focus is on the development of the masterclass system at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts (HUFA). In the paper *Inhabiting the Masterclass:* The Masterclasses of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in Historical Context*,* rather than aiming to develop a general theory of the master class they explain how the Hungarian "notion of *mesterosztály*, or *masterclass*, is entangled with specific institutional legacies and post-socialist discontinuities, shaping the dynamics of hierarchy, mentorship and artistic autonomy." In doing so they unpack the specifics of its development in context of HUFA and its emergence from German influence.

They outline the roots of the current masterclass system in the late 18th century and the Romantic idea that foregrounded the notion of genius. They trace the development

from Paris through Germany in the early part of the 19th century, through the establishment of the first master class in Hungary in 1883. They highlight early critiques of the dominating influence of one master from whom the students emerged as imitators, and the dated idealistic vision of another. Then through the reforms of the late century and the stylistic intergenerational divides between Masters and their former students.

They highlight the tensions between more collective possibilities that might emerge from a pedagogical grounding in the shared world view of the medieval workshop and the liberal individualism which was central to the 19th century model. While on the one hand "the hierarchical and patriarchal dynamics observed in contemporary master-apprentice models emerge as extensions of longstanding social and economic patterns" which included lineages within families as well as German influence. They also point out that the contemporary masterclass is a "palimpsest-like pedagogical model" and of course the palimpsest involves erasure, hence as it has evolved some of the original intentions while maintaining an influence may not be visible in the model we see today.

For Bojtos and Tayler, the art university can be a place where peer-to-peer learning thrives in physical spaces where students are able to experiment with their developing individual practices and the togetherness of the students can be equally important to the development of an artist as the influence of the master. They suggest that "If peer learning offers a corrective, it does so not by abolishing hierarchy but by rendering it visible – transforming domination into negotiation." Critiques of the Masterclass system they explain often rely on a strawman figure, while ignoring the potential issues of modular alternatives within which students' attention is fragmented across rigid outcome driven units of study. Ultimately, they argue, that within the Hungarian context the Masterclass has "persisted through social, political, and ideological transformations as a paradoxical site, a testing ground for alternative forms of belonging." And "The contemporary masterclass inherits a paradoxical legacy: a form both haunted by patriarchal power plays and sustained by the need for micro-communities of care."

In the article "How to Say We in an Hour", Sabrina Chou explores the "plurivocal" process that is always ongoing and always being formed and reformed in questioning how the "we" is articulated and comprehended in coming together within the art school. Chou starts from the position that the notion of "we" is so often used as a taken-for-granted assumption of universal claims or a particular epistemic ideal, whether in a local context such as a classroom, a program cohort, a university community, to broader global notions of a public or of human nature.

Key to Chou's framing of plurivocal processes is how they are enacted in the collective utterance through an assemblage of contingent material emergence that unmoors the universal from the "we". The framing of this concept is exemplified by a lecture that Chou developed with first year BA Fine Art students, in which a temporary "we" emerges through collective texts, materials, and ephemera that afford a qualitative texture of collective utterances refined through the connective traces enmeshing the personal, social, and material in a given moment.

From this starting point of the lecture-form, Chou traces historical and contemporary lineages of decentering the Western-centered, abstracted, universal "we" in favor of "a theoretical opening up of a provisional we, towards the other, towards difference, towards relationality." Moving away from this binary opposition of "we" and "the other" or

"not-we", Chou cultivates "collected fragments and collective utterances as a set of theoretical propositions" from a number of theorists in the last half-century. Each of these collective utterances entwine to form a re-conception of belonging in the art school, constructing a "we" through the oral transmissions of local groups in ethnopoetics (Quasha, 1976); a concrete grounding in the global (Wynter, 1976/2022); the entanglement of assemblages (Braidotti, 2019); the fostering of a counterpublics and the unknowing of strangerhood (Warner, 2002); the vernacular as sustenance of the commons (Robertson, 2012); the social poetics of the undercommons (Moten, 2016); and the entanglements and (intra)actions as processes of belonging-becoming and world-making (Barad, 2007).

These conceptual underpinnings comingle "as a set of theoretical propositions towards possible modes of making, studying, and belonging" that encompasses a qualitative reorientation of collectivity in art school. Herein lies the openness and fluidity of Chou's interweaving of theory and practice while not forming prescriptive frameworks that replicate a fixed conception of belonging. Rather these moves become intentionally unsteady pillars that bend and shape in new and unexpected ways through the provisional, plurivocal, collective utterances that (form) a "poetics of the local" in art schools, and give rise to art's "transformative potential" insofar as it is "necessarily engaged in the projection and making of alternate scenes, or possible forms of life".

Katie Tomlinson and Chester Tennison collaboratively author their article, "On Queer Belonging in Art School", which primarily takes form as an interview format with Tennison sharing the evolution of his Fine Art Queer Research Group (QRG) created with students at Manchester School of Art in the UK. Tennison's conception of the QRG starts from the crucial point of understanding failure for art students as a privileged position. This privilege framing assumes all that all bodies and minds are equally safe in their exploration of failure within the art school framework. Within this founding context of QRG, failure in art school is entwined with and complicated by Halberstom's notion of Queer failure, which so thoroughly permeates and conditions Queer lived experience as failing to "live up to a certain heteronormative relational ideal" (Halberstam 2011, 1). Tomlinson and Tennison discuss the complex navigation and negotiation for Queer students cultivating safer spaces of artistic engagement within the pervasive framings of failure in art schools that are heavily tied to *learning to fail better* when a significant proportion of its students — very often the school's minoritized students — experience a conception of failure that has been more harmful than constructive throughout their lives.

Tennison's creation of the QRG was created with the aim of reframing this relationship with failure for Queer students and as a means to "celebrate our strengths, be defiant, and be a supportive, collective force through empowering language". Following Ahmed's conception of *solidarity*, the group operates with the acknowledgement that Queer lived experiences are not monolithic or essentialist, but rather the multiplicity of Queer experiences within the group cultivates strength in unity as "a shared commitment to collective growth while honouring their individual experiences".

The organization of QRG aims to de-emphasize conventional teaching and learning in favor of a more collaborative and horizontal group dynamic; Tennison is positioned as a facilitator rather than as the teacher and authority figure within the group. As a para-curricular project, the QRG opens alternative spaces for Queer students to

come-together, while still engaging in activities — readings, discussions, studio visits, and crits — that mirror those found in the curricula found in most art courses. In this sense, it seems evident that the key components of collectivism and solidarity foster not only greater trust, support, and camaraderie, but they also have a transformative impact on participants' motivation to cultivate rich forms of artistic and academic engagement, while forging broader networks of professional development beyond art school.

Collectively these essays suggest that the problematics of community and belonging in our art schools are multiple, situated, and specific. Each points to either an existing structure or emerging practice that might help us reconsider or reinvent aspects of pedagogical practices in art schools with the aim of fostering more meaningful forms of community. Each acknowledges the agency of the pedagogue to facilitate community and suggest possibilities to work within, outwith, or even against institutional structures. Most fundamentally they provide various levels of specificity through which we might better understand our own practices.

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