Between Nonhuman Spirits and Posthuman Futures of Art Education

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Introduction

As this presentation is under the thematic category “Fostering Humanity Through Arts,” I believe I should say a few words on this particular topic and its relation to the presentation I’m about to give.

As art educators, we have accustomed fight for our survival in educational systems where often our job isn’t valued or resourced or both. We know (or, at least, we are taught to know) that we are needed in this world, perhaps now more than ever. However, it is also important to critically investigate how is this need for art and education constituted and what is the language we reside when defending our profession. This paper approaches this task through a philosophical framework in order to question why do we need to “foster humanity” today and what could this fostering mean besides its anthropocentric connotations.

Nonhuman spirits

In European history, secularization has been understood as one of the central epochal denominators of modernity. It is secular governance, secular science, and secular art that distinguishes modernity from its preceding epochs (allegedly embedded in religion and/or superstition) as well as what distinguishes a modern society from a primitive one. According to this narrative, our existence ought not to be traced back to beings or origins outside of the human world (i.e. gods, daemons), but approached in terms of its biological, material and social conditions; conditions that only science (and, to be more precise, reason) can unfold. Science drives both technological and social progress and leads us out from the immaturity of humanity (as Kant had it).

This history, written by Europeans for Europeans in the 19th century and reproduced up to this day, has a difficult relation with what we might understand as spirits. It’s ok to use the term spirit allegorically (as in zeitgeist), but to talk about spirits as such takes the discussion easily to the difficult realm of faith (that is, apart from reason) that, after the Enlightenment, is strictly separated from science and progress.

It’s not that spirits or spirituality are completely absent from the narrative of scientific progress and secularization that labels European modernity: rather, they remain as the other side of reason; a side that, however, eventually secures the primacy of scientific knowledge. It’s worth remembering that one of the mythical moments of this history, Descartes’ enunciation of cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am) is haunted by a malicious demon. The terrifying possibility that an evil spirit might deceive his perception forced Descartes (2010/1637) to imagine himself with “no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, no senses at all” (p. 16) and thus confirmed his existence as a “thinking thing” (p. 20). What is crucial about this evil spirit is that it does not completely halt or destroy the thought that makes Descartes (and us) human, but rather affirms its progression by putting it temporarily in crisis. For Descartes, this crisis unfolded a methodology of doubt, a kind of cognitive self-defense that restored the dominance of mind over matter, of human ability over its material conditions.

Today, it is art that, in many ways, plays the role of such spirit. As the narrative goes, art’s otherness to science (or other school subjects) helps us to feel more human and more alive (hence the need for...
it. Art does not, however, pose a fundamental danger to science; on the contrary, our modern mindset helps us to explain the force of art through sciences like anthropology, psychology, sociology, or biology; meaning that art educators can always rely on the scientific truthfulness of their profession, and subsequently, the scientific construction of human life. The otherness of art is, then, affirmative otherness: it secures our belief in historical as well as evolutionary development of our own species.

When approaching the theme of this conference – Spirit, Art, Digital – and the specific subtheme we’re here to discuss (“Fostering Humanity through Arts”), I see that it’s worth examining the very spirit of art education vis-à-vis the narrative of European modernity discussed above (here, I’m focusing specifically on European and North American art education; not in order to universalize this perspective, but, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s term, to provincialize it: that is, to historicize its seeming universality). After all, public art education in Europe and North America has its roots in the joint process of scientific and social progress: that is, that humans and their societies, when given the right tools, may overcome the problems of the present (the malicious zeitgeist) that stand in their way of the full realization of their humanness (Geist attaining self-awareness, as Hegel would have it).

I suggest – very briefly due to the limited time I have – that art educators could approach the spirit of art education also as a nonhuman force that doesn’t affirm (and thus naturalize) a developmental progression of human life, but, on the contrary, puts it radically in question. In other words, instead of seeing art education as a process of (self)formation (Bildung) where the spirit of art actualizes a set of predetermined potentials of human life, I’m asking, what would it mean to educate a life aside from predetermined direction or use; a life that, to paraphrase Jacques Rancière, has no part in the history of human life and its development.

In the wake of global warming and its possibly catastrophic consequences, it becomes increasingly important to rethink how the concept human is grounded both politically and ecologically. While some art educators are already exploring posthumanist approaches to art and education, there is a tendency to put an emphasis on the possible agencies of the nonhuman matter without, however, investigating the readiness to prioritize agency as a political category. It is precisely here where it might be useful to take a slight detour to the world of spirits, since, historically, the interplay between matter and spirit has served as the very condition of possibility for agency (e.g. life-principle). So, instead of completely doing away with spirits (like Descartes, eventually), I see that they might help us to historicize the current posthumanist thought.

My approach draws from philosopher Eugene Thacker’s (2011) writings on “climatological” or “cosmological” mysticism. Contra historical mysticism where the aim of mystical practice is to initiate oneself to the hidden secrets of creation and restore a fundamental unity between the worldly (created) and the other-worldly (Creator), the mysticism that Thacker discusses mobilizes the thought of the unthinkable, one that “says no to the recuperative habits of human beings to always see the world as the world-for-us” (pp. 154-155). This kind of mysticism does not attempt to bring the nonhuman and its agencies to the history of human, political life (bios politikos in Aristotle), but takes the divide between the human and the nonhuman as an aporia that haunts (like a true spirit) educational thought and the thought of education.

So, let’s see what could we come up with…

**Spiritual Art Education**

To talk about spiritual art education often means, at least in North America, to talk about holistic education that tries to bridge the gap between mind, body, and spirit; a gap that constitutes the
distinctively modern individual à la Descartes. As Peter London (2006), one of the central proponents of a holistic paradigm for art education in the United States, puts it,

In the great moments of life, when the ordinary shudders under the weight of the sheer wonder and mystery of being and nonbeing, we simply cannot help ourselves but to sing and dance and gussy up. Art is not only the spontaneous means of expressing our reactions to great, high, and deep encounters with life, creating and witnessing the arts can also serve as powerful vehicles with which to encounter the great and high and deep dimensions of our being in the world. More than this, the arts can be powerful means with which we may encounter and cultivate the higher and deeper dimensions of ourselves. (p. 12)

While London’s call for a paradigm implies that his characterization of holistic art education differs fundamentally from other paradigms in the field, his words point to a tradition of thought that I’ve already discussed above: that there is a deeper dimension in our lives that only art can reach. This narrative rests dialectically on what London calls “partial” learning and teaching (p. 8) that misses the true, transformative potential of education. Art educators should overcome this incomplete education and bring about the true unity in our “encounters with life.” By rejecting the fragmented subjectivity of modernity, art as spiritual education takes us back to our original being.

What is this “life” we ought to encounter in the “high and deep dimensions of our being in the world”? The problem I have with London is that despite his obvious rejection of Cartesian individual, his holism presents us merely another spirit that, through its wonderful tricks, affirms that “our being in the world” opens up the world for us (a kind of total presence manifested in singing, dancing, and gussying up). Art, in short, initiates us to a fundamental belonging to the world. This easily leads to the kind of mythical historicism and/or New Age exotica where the true unity of life, art, and education is always in a mythic past and/or some primitive culture; a kind of anti-modernity that nevertheless plays into the very mindset of modernity (e.g. by keeping with the divide between spiritual and secular).

However, it is what London calls “the mystery of being and nonbeing” that, going back to Thacker, might actually help us to approach spiritual art education aside from the world-for-us. In its original Greek, mysterion denoted a presence and/or an experience of the otherworldly in this world, a kind of secret presence that was revealed only to the initiated who were able to keep this secret to themselves [myein “to close, shut,” according to Etymonline]. If we turn this muteness embedded in mystery from the initiated to the planet, we are confronted with a world that is fundamentally indifferent to humans; a planet that is certainly affected by our presence but not historically determined by us. What we find from the “great and high and deep dimensions our being in the world” is, then, nothing; or to be more precise, an unintelligible life that is not for us despite the fact that we are completely embedded in it. There is no universal unity or continuity in this Life (a unity that science reveals and art education confirms); it is life that we as humans can’t put in order. In Thacker’s words, it is the world-without-us.

 Granted, this kind of dark, nonhuman mysticism of nonbeing might sound gloomy. Indeed, Thacker evokes the language of horror to discuss these paradoxes of life of the world-without-us in philosophy. As educators, however, I see that it’s not necessarily to escape into Lovecraftian worlds of tentacles and cosmic screams. After all, education itself includes paradoxical states of transformation where knowledges, things, and experiences are both in flux and in stasis (and, I believe, contra Thacker, that this paradoxical existence isn’t necessarily horrifying). While education shares with philosophy the tendency to organize, categorize, and systematize the world in order to speak about it, it is always also a disruption of order, an event of unlearning that leaves the future radically open.
This radical openness is precisely what a nonhuman spiritual art education would be after. It presents a demand for educational ethics aside from historical progress where the world eventually opens itself up to us as well as from mythical origins where we ought to return in order to find a balance between us and the world (e.g. Greek polis, a feudal village). Rather than offering an affirmative crisis that restores the human (or human-like) consciousness at the center of educational thought, it opens up the question of Life as a groundless ground for education; a ground that is not exhausted in biology, psychology, sociology, or theology (i.e. as an object of scientific and/or religious thought). Its spirits would be neither solely human nor nonhuman: instead, they are limit-beings that haunt the thought of Life, resisting its reduction into divine laws or laws of nature.

Such a spiritual art education reminds that a posthuman art education needs to rethink not only the content of art curriculum (e.g. how to include the nonhuman), but the very foundations, or better, the non-foundations of educational thinking and practice. Educating for life – the promise of modern education at least since the 17th century – may still remain at the core of such education, but this life continuously intra-active (to use Karen Barad’s term) with what it is not yet and what it will never become.

References

