Let’s begin with Augustine’s (1993) well-known and much analyzed statement about time in the eleventh book of his *Confessions*: “What is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know” (p. 219). This aporia between knowing and unknowing is a central element of Augustine’s treatise on time. While he repeatedly affirms his ignorance concerning the subject matter, he is, however, able to offer a way into the question of time and temporality. For Augustine, time is not a single, unified substance but is divided in three manifestations of *presence*: memory as “present of things past;” sight as “present of things present;” and expectation, as “present of things future” (p. 223). This presence is rooted in the function of the human mind that, according to him, “expects, … attends, and … remembers” (p. 229). To *measure* time is not to measure distances, but to differentiate between modalities of temporal experience: “Thus it is not the future that is long, for the future does not exist: a long future is merely a long expectation of the future; nor is the past long since the past does not exist: a long past is merely a long memory of the past” (p. 230).

The reason why I wanted to start with Augustine is that I wish to give a similar disclaimer as he does: this talk does not try to offer an exhaustive explanation of what time and history are for art education – even though that’s exactly what I’m going to talk about today. All I can say is, with Augustine, that I don’t know. What I would like to do, however, is to utilize this *unknowing* as an approach to art education research – specifically, the politics and poetics of its historiography. For it is this unknowing that, initially, led me write the article to which the kind people of the National Art Education Association (NAEA) decided to grant this prestigious award.

The article, “Always the New: Paradigms and the Inherent Futurity of Art Education Historiography,” (Tervo, 2017) published in Studies in Art Education’s special issue on historical research last year, was an attempt to enter the contested practice of historiography via a single term – paradigm – that has become one of those terms that art educators often use when proposing something new to the field or, alternatively, trying to grasp a conceptual change in research literature. The manuscript went through a number of revisions, mainly because in historical research, paradigm theories, especially Thomas Kuhn’s, have been long more or less passé; today, historians tend to focus on microhistories rather than on universalizing frames of explanation. I see, however, that it is precisely when something seems to have lost its relevancy – become a
thing of the past, part of history – when we should take yet another look and see what kind of inheritance it has left us; that is, in what ways does its seeming past-ness resonate with the present (here, I’m following Derrida’s footsteps in *Specters of Marx*).

Since I can send the article to anyone who’s interested in reading it, I’m not going to discuss the article in detail in this talk. I will just say that its main argument is that in art education research – historiographical or not – there is a tendency to frame the initial reasoning for research (i.e. why do we do research in the first place) in terms of *historical progress*: that, in historical research, we write histories for the future’s sake. This means that historical teleology – something that we might think belongs to the past – is firmly in place: what truly matters, for science, for research, for human knowledge, for education, is an effective *correction* of the present, a way out from it toward a future that we, nevertheless, constitute today.¹

‘What’s wrong with historical progress?’ you might ask. Isn’t a belief in a better future just what we need today, in a present where fascism and nationalism are on the rise globally, as territorialist responses to unequal distribution of wealth, labor, and resources?

To be clear: I’m definitely not arguing for a retreat to a lost time; to an era untouched by the vices of the present, or, alternatively, argue that the future has been canceled and the history has ended. My point is, rather, to try to understand where the division between progress and conservation begins to crumble; where, in other words, a firm belief in progress touches upon the very desire to keep things as they currently are. This is something that intersectional activists and scholars have taught us, repeatedly: that many universalist narratives of future liberation support forms of systematic violence in the present that restrict and control the access to the very liberation they promise.

This is also what Walter Benjamin (2007), in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* – written shortly before his death in 1940 – pointed out. “There is no document of civilization,” he wrote in the seventh thesis, “which is not *at the same time* document of barbarism.” (p. 256). Here, the words “at the same time” carry a profound significance: the present that we are so fond of distinguishing from the past – and, through this separation, grant a transitional status in the face of the future – is not simply an outcome of some progressive narrative, a chain of causally related events that either take us closer to the true fulfillment of humanity or, alternatively, obstruct us from it. Rather, the present – as a *presence* of the past, the present, and future (to take up a stance similar to Augustine) – denotes a time of contestation where the time itself is radically at stake – or, to be more precise, what is at stake is a certain way to think about time: as change that denotes progression. This is why, for Benjamin, “the current amazement [in the turn of the 1930s and 1940s] that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical” (p. 257).

¹ As a side note, this tendency resonates with what John Calvin (1536/2002) wrote, in delightfully Calvinist terms, in *Institutes of Christian Religion*, “…our mind never rises seriously to desire and aspire after the future, until it has learned to despite the present life” (p. 438).
This critical stance toward chronopolitics of progress is not, however, simply philosophical. It is, I would say, first and foremost educational and political: how do we understand art education and its historiography as temporal activities; that is, as a series of events that comprise and belong to various, often conflicting, histories and, moreover, what kind of understanding of politics does this temporal activity adhere to? One possible response is that of Jacques Rancière’s, who claims that a radical emancipation—of women, of working class, of Black and Brown lives, of the indigenous, of the poor, etc.—is not an emancipation as these subject positions (for example, that the working class would actualize its true destiny), but an emancipation from a causal chain of time that gives these subject positions a specific kind of historicity. We are, then, talking about breaks, about untimely fissures, in the present.

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In an article that bears the same name as this talk today, “Studying in the Dark: Notes on Poetic Historiography for Art Education,” (Tervo, 2018) an article that will be published in the next issue of Visual Arts Research guest-edited by Tyson E. Lewis, I further discuss why to write histories in which time itself is at stake; where historiography would align itself with the incoherency of the present. In that article, I question the idea that we should learn from the past and examine what kind of pedagogy of memory do we assign to historical research if we take the critique of chronopolitics of progression seriously. Drawing from Giorgio Agamben’s notion of study—further conceptualized in educational thought by Tyson Lewis—I propose a study of the past that resists the developmental logic of learning and history that assigns the present merely a transitory place between the past and the future. A study of the past is, in short, an attempt to write and read history within the contingency of the present.

To take account on this contingency is certainly not a new insight. Art education historian Karen Hamblen (1985) noted already three decades ago that “just as Magritte’s painting of a pipe is not the pipe, a history of an event is not the event. Rather, a history is the creation of yet another event that results from an attempt to grapple with the nature of meaning, multiple truths, and levels of interpretation” (p. 8). In these past few decades, however, the very event-ness of historiography has attracted less attention than attempts to “grapple with the nature of meaning” of the past, meaning that a critical historiography in art education has been often concerned with the representation of history; that is, what stories do we tell about the past and how. This has helped to pluralize the form and content of art education histories, or, as Dustin Garnet (2017) has recently put it, it has offered “artful” ways of “historying” the past (p. 40) that bring up “plurality of stories that construct a holistic account of art education” (p. 43).

I propose a different path; one that approaches the poetics of historiography not in terms of representation, but through the very event it creates (to follow Hamblen). What is at stake is, then, its poiesis, the act of making. But what kind of poiesis? To quote the recently passed poet Lucie Brock-Broido, “a poem is troubled into its making. It’s not like a thing that blooms; it’s a thing that wounds” (Maso, 1995, para 11).
The reason to take this path is to follow Benjamin’s proposal that instead of aestheticizing politics (which, for him, was what the fascists did), we need to politicize aesthetics. Poetic historiography would be, then, an attempt to politicize the aesthetics of time and the temporalization of the present. While I certainly acknowledge the political importance of offering multiple representations of history – after all, it puts forward the contingency of every historical narrative – I see that we also need pedagogies of memory aside from chronopolitics of progression; that is, forms of historiography that would not strive to offer a “holistic account” of art education for the sake of the future (or, in educational terms, an education that aims at a future actualizations of our true selves), but a historiography that resists the chronologicization of the present. Poetic historiography denotes, then, writing where the time and narrative of history are at stake—writing where memory and learning are both suspended from a linear narrative of origins and ends, thus asking us to rethink the very transmissibility of the histories we write.

This means that artful histories can do more than just communicate the past differently. To paraphrase Brock-Broido, I see that they can wound time, make it tremble.

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What would such a wound be? I don’t know – for sure – perhaps because there is a long tradition in Western thought to treat historical knowledge as a remedy. The search for a forgotten past that we must recuperate in the present in order to constitute a holistic account of our lives today is not only one of the grand narratives of 19th century historiography but is also present in various literary explorations in modernity (in Romantics, for example) as well as constitutes one of the central tropes of modern psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis. While the idea that the present can be healed and/or vitalized (or revitalized) by the past may serve as an important reminder that our view of the world is always partial and situated firmly in the confines of our current historical context – in other words, it is the contingency of the present that gives hope for a future that is not the same as the story of our past – it can also give away to fascists rhetoric such as “Make America Great Again” or “Keep America Great!” (as President Trump’s new, delightfully ‘logical’ slogan goes). Of course, the possibility of such rhetoric should not obstruct us from diving into the past when reflecting the present – what is at stake here is what role does the future play in this scene, especially if future is, as Augustine had it, not a separate point in time, but a presence of expectation – but an expectation of what?

It is, then, this presence, or better, a horizon of expectation – horizon being always the presence of a limit, of a border – that poetic historiography ought to encounter. When earlier, I talked about breaks and fissures in the present, now it seems that we are entering the question of beyond; that is, how something – anything – takes up an existence beyond what seems to exist here and now. This seems, at first, inherently a

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2 On this tradition, see Clift (2014), especially Chapter 5
metaphysical problem: after all, the ultimate beyond has been traditionally reserved to the gods.

But this is not necessarily the case. To write history aside from chronopolitics of progress (politics that, notably, always involves its inverse, decline) is to write history without assigning the past or the future a metaphysical existence of beyond, or, as Benjamin (2007) put it, offering “an eternal image” of them (p. 262). Rather, it is a matter of forming historical constellations – in Benjaminian sense – that point to a particular recognizability of things and concepts in the now. Benjamin’s The Arcades Project (2002) offers an example of what this meant for him: a “literary montage” (p. 460) of fragments, citations, and images that, together, form a study of the “expressive character” (p. 460) of the commodity culture, exemplified by the Parisian arcades of the 19th century. In The Arcades Project, Benjamin was not trying to restore an original image of the past or offer a holistic representation of the present in order to deliver it firmly to the future; rather, the fragmented study itself preforms a break, a wound time that resists the futurity of its own method. It is, in short, a present in the making, a durative process of poiesis, an otherwise rather than beyond.

What has this tentative formulation of a poetic historiography to offer for art educators? Rather than explaining a refined method in order to tell you what art educators should do, I will end this talk a bit like Augustine: with an indirect response that, like his treatise on time, may offer an avenue to the question itself.

I’ve been working on a research project for a few years now where my aim is to understand better how art, education, and human life are so entwined in our professional imagination that we are able – and willing – to say, in this very present, especially in this context, over and over again, something like that art education “shapes human potential” (as NAEA’s slogan goes). For me, this question has a deeply historical core: it has to do with how terms like “shaping,” “human,” and “potential” take up their place in the formation of the present – and the presence it delineates – through art and education. How, in other words, art and education weave the fabric of the present – to borrow a phrase from the poet Robert Duncan’s description of H.D.’s poetry – a present that is not one but many, just like there are many pasts and many futures.

In this project, I have approached this question through a constellation of three writers who have, in different ways and different times, formulated an approach to education that is a life-long, continuous process of formation. As historical antecedents of present-day discourses on lifelong learning, I see that these writers have left us an inheritance that may be partially obsolete today, but it is this very obsoleteness that interests me;

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3 As Benjamin (2002) put it in The Arcades Project, Convolute N2,5: “Overcoming the concept of ‘progress’ and overcoming the concept of ‘period of decline’ are two sides of the one and the same thing” (p. 460).
4 Again, in The Arcades Project, Convolute N3,1: “Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability” (pp. 462-463).
5 For an example of this approach in H.D.’s poetry, see Helen in Egypt.
especially from the perspective of literary figuration of educational philosophy. How, indeed, educational thought figures the thought of life?

Johan Amos Comenius, the so-called father of European schooling system and an ardent proponent of universal education, wrote a partly self-autobiographical allegory *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* (1998) in the mid seventeenth century (the exact date of publication is difficult to give, since he published several versions of it between 1630s and 1660s). The protagonist of the story, the Pilgrim, explores the world – The Labyrinth – with his two guides, Ubiquitous and Delusion, in order to find his true vocation in life. The world, however, repeatedly betrays his expectations: every human endeavor is initially tangled up in deception and fraud. Telling his guides that, “I would rather die a thousand deaths […] than to be here” (p. 185) the Pilgrim continues his journey to “the end of the world and light” where he encounters “fearful darkness and gloom of which neither the bottom nor the end could be fathomed by human reason” (p. 186). Just before he is ready to leap into this darkness, God himself tells him to “return where he came from.” The Pilgrim recounts:

> Then, collecting my thoughts as well as I could and closing my eyes, ears, mouth, nostrils, and all external passages, I entered into my heart and found that it was dark. (p. 187).

Let’s leave Comenius here for a while and jump to the second part of this constellation. Novalis – one of the key figures of Jena Romanticism in the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Germany – never finished his novel fragment *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* before his death in 1801 (in the ripe age of 28). This book, which was an attempt to further poeticize the concept of Bildung as expressed in Goethe’s seminal *Bildungsroman* *Wilhelm Meister*, recounts a story of a young boy who, after dreaming of a beautiful blue flower, takes on a journey (both actual and spiritual) to become a poet. As part of this journey, he ends up in a cave where he meets a hermit who lives in solitude, surrounded by books. There, our protagonist stumbles upon a beautiful, ancient picture book, written in an obscure language. For his amazement, he realizes that the book tells his own life story, showing not only his past and present, but also his future. Shocked, he puts the book away and does not share this disturbing encounter with his companions.

The third writer of this constellation is American art educator John Ward Stimson, who wrote extensively about what he called “vital art education” in the turn of the 19th and 20th century. While he was praised by his some of contemporaries as the John Ruskin or William Morris of the United States, he has remained a rather minor figure in the histories of American art education – possibly due to his highly metaphysical approach (vis-à-vis the pragmatists of his time). Combining theosophical Christianity with scientific discoveries of his time (which, notably, included eugenics and vulgar Darwinist conceptions of cultural evolution), Stimson was convinced that the true aim of art education was an evolutionary progression toward a divine unity with the cosmos and a mystical revelation of its universal order. In his book *The Gate Beautiful* (1903), he wrote, for example, that
The student must remember that he himself and the forms about him are not literally solid substance, but clusters of balanced atoms held in spiritual relations of space, etc., by spirit force; and he should spiritualize and idealize his canvas or paper to simulate, to the vision, these space relations. Its surface should not look flat and dead to him, but full of life and perspective (p. 79).

It is within a constellation of these three elements – the Pilgrim’s entrance to his heart via self-mummification, Heinrich finding an obscure biography of himself from a hermit’s cave, and Stimson’s depiction of students and their work as “clusters of balanced atoms” – that, I see, the entanglement of life and education – and its further figuration through art – may take up forms that make a straightforward actualization of a human potential – in the present – tremble. For all three writers, the thought of education is itself marked by a profound experience of a limit – fearful darkness, an unknown language, the space between atoms – on which the universality of educational figuration hinges. This is not to say that their writings are devoid of chronopolitics of progression; especially Comenius and Stimson are extremely teleological in their thinking. Still, I see that their figurations of educational thought unfold something about the universalized narrative of progression that resists the reduction of the present into a transitory moment in time; that the event of education, taking place within a profound limit, is itself an opening of a difference; a horizon that is not necessarily a beyond, but an otherwise.

It is this something that, I believe, a poetic historiography might offer for art education – at least speculatively. This something is not some artful truth to be revealed for a holistic view, but a way to attune ourselves to the very aporia of historical knowledge; an absence of presence, a presence of an absence (we can think of Hamblen’s example of Magritte’s pipe as well as Augustine’s conception of time here). Isn’t this very aporia also always – in one way or another – present in education, in our attempt to shape human potential? If so, I suggest that we should approach such aporetic shaping as first and foremost a figuration of the possible in the present – an entrance to the darkness of today.

References


