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Note

Merging perspectives of learners: Corporeality, intersubjectivity and coexistence in art education☆

Fusionar perspectivas de los estudiantes: corporealidad, intersubjetividad y convivencia en la educación artística

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Introduction

Humiliation of body and feelings is deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition of the West. In Western history of philosophy, the body has always been under suspicion and the rational power has been considered as holding the responsibility of restraining and guiding one toward excellence. From the Ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato to modern philosophers such as Descartes, it was constantly stated in this tradition that real knowledge must be independent from physical perception and feelings, because sensual and emotional experiences distort the nature of reality. The view in Cartesian philosophy became an absolute and established form and left a profound impact on modern view on the priority of wisdom. For modern perception, also, the body used to be considered an unreliable and uncertain basis for recognition. The idea of thinking in modern philosophy is coupled with Descartes' well-known quote, "I think, therefore I am". Descartes stated that to achieve the truth, bodily senses are not essentially required, and thus, he separated mind and body and divided them into two independent and distinct elements. Descartes believed that human mind and wisdom are prior to physical feelings and desires, and the only way to achieve recognition and truth is to rely on mind without body, because body and physical senses might misguide the seeker in the way of recognition.

Western dualism in relation with mind/body led to the formation of a hierarchical system in which the body was placed in a position lower than the mind. Affected by the domination of this view, Western education philosophy can also be considered as the philosophy of mind training. Emphasis on recognition via mind and thinking denied the continuity of mind, body, and sense in the process of learning. Therefore, focus on non-embodied education dominated the western educational discourse, and as John Dewey states, education became far from its goal and turned into a way for turning the learner into a "thoughtful and knowledge-oriented creature" (Dewey, 2004:256). Abandoning rational and Cartesian views, which implied cognitive and wisdom-based approaches, in recent years a trend emerged from mind to body (La Caze & Lloyd, 2011). This trend is in contrast to Platonic and Cartesian views and seeks to find a non-dualistic view on the concept of self. This turn toward body in connection with education seems very necessary, and attention to embodiment in the works of some contemporary education theorists has found a bold position.

Literature review

Among theorists who emphasized the importance of body-oriented education, John Dewey, Henry Giroux, Hunter, Peter McLaren, and Elizabeth Grosz can be mentioned. Affected by the school of pragmatism, John Dewey (2004) believed that in the process of learning, the learner perceives based on their lived experiences. He assumed education as a set of experiences where the learner therefore acquires an embodied presence in the educational environment. Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux (1991) suggest in the article *Radical Pedagogy as Cultural Politics: Beyond the Discourse of Critique and Anti-Utopianism* that students respond to information in a physical way, asserting that knowledge is not something that can only be perceived

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mentally, but it has to be sensed somehow physically as well. Hunter challenges absence and ignorance of body and feelings in education, suggesting that in education approaches, embodiment and sensual aspects of pupils should also be considered (Ollis, 2012:174). In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz argues that bodies are not what we give meaning to, but they are meanings per se. Understanding the body as meaning, in contrast to body as a wrapper and conveyor we place and record meaning in, physical embodiment-based education emphasizes an education on the basis of bodies's interaction with each other.

Physical perception according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, French phenomenologist, is known as one of the basic foci in contemporary discourses on embodiment, who tried to configure the relationship between individual and the world by considering perceptive experience as a basic source of awareness and perception (Diprose, 2012). Merleau-Ponty, by challenging the dominant Cartesian view of subjectivity and by disintegration from the mind/body dualism of Western philosophy, stresses the importance of body in human encounters with each other and with the world. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy based idea is that "Perception is a physical phenomenon, rather than mental. In other words, we are, not subjects standing with eyes, but rather embodied subjects in the world perceiving it." (Carman, 2011:48–49). For Merleau-Ponty, body is the base and primary principle through which the subject expresses themselves. He argues that body is not a merely distinct and separate object; it is not a material position through which we understand the world; rather, we perceive the world with our bodies. Effects of the ideas of Nietzsche and Husserl on Merleau-Ponty regarding physical perceptions cannot be ignored. Criticizing the Western philosophical tradition in denying bodily senses and pure rationalism, Nietzsche confirmed bodily aspects of knowledge and perception. Among Nietzsche's favorite discourses was attention to physical individual experiences, and he used to emphasize the important role body plays in development of knowledge. Nietzsche considered perception of energy and powers of human body as constant human concern and believed that all human activities are physical and body denotes energy and tendency to power (Peery, 2008). Praising pre-Plato Greek tradition, which valued human body greatly, he ridiculed the Platonic body-humiliating tradition, stating citing Zoroaster as saying, "But, the conscious wise man says: I am all body and nothing beyond, and soul is the only word for something in body . . . body is a big wisdom; a plurality with a single meaning, adversary and peaceful, cattle or shepherd. Brother, your little wisdom soul of which you call is your body instrument as well. A small tool and plaything for your big wisdom" (Nietzsche, 2001:45–57). By distinguishing between physical body *korper* and lived body *leib*, he enabled the body to be viewed much beyond a physical and natural phenomenon. Influence of Husserl's philosophy on Merleau-Ponty's perception of the concept of body is quite clear, and inspired by Husserl's idea of lived body and moving body *leib*, he expands his ideology. In *Structure of Behavior* affected by Gestalt's psychology, Merleau-Ponty propounded this idea for the first time that man is an embodied subject (Premuzic, 2009:10–12). In line with the theory of Gestalt's school, Merleau-Ponty believes in unity and integration between human senses, in which eyesight and other senses are not separate and irrelevant and therefore, perception does not consist of a set of data acquired from sight, tactility, hearing, etc., but it is a set the individual perceives as a whole. Experience from the world, according to Merleau-Ponty, is multisensory, with all senses interacting as a bow: "The quintuple senses which are our first means of access to the world, are not separate from one another. Rather, they form a structure organized in a general gestalt. Body is ultimately, a bodily whole" (Piravi Vanak, 2010:70). Merleau-Ponty shows that avoiding to confirm integration of senses and physical reality of perception in philosophical tradition, has overshadowed the role of body in Western civilization, reducing it to a situation lower than mind. He believes that body and mind in the reality of lived world are inseparable and existentially, no accurate boundary can be specified between mind and body: "Our bodies and minds are located in a united world, on condition that we consider the world not just a set of objects which are or can be in front of our eyes, but a place of coexistence of everything" (Premuzic, 2009:80). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he suggests that perception is not just a cognitive practice and activity, but it is the embodied person who achieves perception by seeing, moving, and putting their body subject to contact with objects. Embodiment and incarnation is a state through which the subject expresses themselves in the world; a situation for development of the relationship between self and other things. Thus, Merleau-Ponty suggests that body is not only a residence place for mind, but it is center of gravity of human presence in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:80). According to Merleau-Ponty, instead of a passive capacity in the face of received effects, perception is a creative and active practice and creativity of perception is a type of activity which is never separate from physics. As idea and awareness is no recognizable from perception, perception is also inseparable from the body and "The theory of the body is already a theory of perception." (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:181). Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty, perception "is not active practice of mind, but is existential method of an embodied subject in the preconscious stage. It is a dialog between the embodied subject and his/her worl" (Piravi Vanak, 2010:101). Seeing perception as an essentially physical practice, instead of considering it as a practical result of unembodied thinking, Merleau-Ponty confirms physics as necessary pre-requisite for experiment and acquiring knowledge.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that we are not just a body in the world's space, but a body of the world. Therefore, existence of body is pre-requisite to all our experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:162). He suggests that consciousness is not something beyond a physical being, and in fact, body's presence is an essential pre-requisite for human knowledge subject. Through embodiment and their lived experience in the world, individuals expand their perception and body cannot be separated from way of thinking.

Physical reflection in encounter with artworks

In art history, often little attention has been paid to the fact that interaction of spectator and audience encountering a painting, sculpture, or even architecture can lead to physical and sensual reactions in them. Although in mid nineteenth century theory circle of German art and theorists such as Theodor Lipps, Robert Lipps, Robert Wisher, and Heinrich Wolfflin had extensively addressed sensual and physical reactions of the audience in encounter with artwork, their views were often ignored by dominant academic artistic views of the nineteenth century (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007). In these academic views, feelings were often considered as a characteristic lowering excellent values of the artwork. The belief that art has nothing to do with motivating senses and feelings and must be distinguished from physical and bodily territories and studied as a merely cognitive topic formed the dominant view of the theory of art. Some other artistic historians believed that although some artistic images are able to stimulate feelings and desires of spectators, artistic aspect of artworks, is not discussed in the history and theory of art. In contemporary art theory, affected by Merleau-Ponty's views, a clear and quite sensible attention has been dedicated to physical empathy of audience with artwork, and theorists underline the extraordinary importance of audience body in development of these feelings. People such as Michael Freed, Rozalin Crows, Ant Michelsen, and Robert Maurice, influenced by Merleau-Ponty, made many attempts in understanding and analyzing the bodily and sensual relationship of audience with art-work. Borrowing Merleau-Ponty's discourses regarding physical perception, these theorists argue that in encountering with artworks, body acts as a ground on which relations of the spectator with the observed artwork is developed, and given meaning.

As discussed, according to Merleau-Ponty, body is the center of perceptive experience in esthetic experience. For Merleau-Ponty, perception and understanding of spectator from art work is, in essence, as much physical as it is mental. In the process of spectating an artwork, in addition to visual interaction between spectator and the work, a sense of dynamic and tactile interaction emerges. Therefore, in Merleau-Ponty's view, "Seeing and moving are also interwoven in such a way that in visible phenomena, dynamic inference is always present" (Carman, 2011:269). Seeing is never merely optical, but seeing something calls to participation inner awareness of the individual from their surrounding environment and how they can move and interact with the environment. According to Merleau-Ponty, light, color, and depth embedded in an artwork only find meaning because they can create a physical reflection in the body of the audience. Merleau-Ponty addresses the physical basis in painting and mentions Cézanne's paintings as the most distinguished samples of physical perception. In *Cézanne's Doubt*, Merleau-Ponty sees Cézanne's method of pressing paintbrush in his paintings as a way of mixing the painting with the surrounding world and believes that each spot of color in Cézanne's works can be considered as a representation of a moment of feeling and experience. In encounter with Cézanne's works, our perception of the color of things is not limited to visual experience, but is like a context that involves other senses such as tactility and olfaction: "We see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects; Cezanne even claimed that we see their odor. If the painter is to express the ·world, the arrangement of his colors must carry with it this indivisible whole, or else his picture wil only hint at things and wil not give 'them in the imperious unity, the presence, the insurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of the real" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964:15).

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that viewing an object means getting inhabiting that object and "visual involvement with things is not understanding their appearance, but is sensing physical affinity of them with us, in mixing with things and inhabiting them" (Carman, 2011:270). Merleau-Ponty stresses location-orientation of painting and the fact that "painting is a type of local art" and considers it as a context in which "the eye dwells in the same way a human being lives in their home" (Carman, 2011:272–275). The most important thing in the visual perception process of artworks, as suggested by Merleau-Ponty, is to emphasize that spectating is interwoven with presence and physical interaction with the work's space. Merleau-Ponty's theory of interweaving, meaning being in the world, is like fluctuation and fluidity between self and others and propounds physical relationship between subject and body of the world. This idea which was explained in Merleau-Ponty's works, refers to interweaving of self and others, and a type of gestalt overlapping between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. Merleau-Ponty's famous example of the contact and friction between two hands greatly helps in understanding this point: "when I touch my right hand with my left, my right hand, as an object, has the strange property of being able to feel too. We have just seen that the two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and touching to each other. When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the rôles of 'touching' and being 'touched"' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:80). According to Merleau-Ponty's intertwined phenomenology, in the process of viewing an artwork, the act of *looking at* always leads to *looked at*, and therefore, there is nothing as perception without concert. From this point of view, in encounter with artistic works, Merleau-Ponty, rejecting the idea of disengagement and distinction, suggests that, encountering an artwork, the spectator is able to enter perception of things that have been sketched in the artwork, and this occurs through empathic sympathy of the spectator with the work. Although Merleau-Ponty stresses the importance of subject in his philosophy, his important point of discussion is to emphasize movement and transition from Cartesian single thinking mind-oriented cognition to a participating embodied subject entangled with the world and connected with other embodied subjects. Therefore, to Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity is not an independent, static, and individual identity; rather, it is necessary for subjectivity to open itself to others and move from self to others; "as parts of my body together form a structure, body of another individual and mine are also a united whole; two aspects of a single phenomenon. It is my body that unveils me to the universe, creating a status for me there among others humans (It is what advances me toward the world, future, and others)" (Piravi Vanak, 2010:117–118). From this point of

view, Merleau-Ponty uses inter-subjectivity instead of subjective activeness and stresses that subjectivity, per se, apart from the world and inaccessible for others, does not exist; rather, it is a relation with the world, an openness to others. Embodied subject, in its openness, seeks an endless dialog and always flowing with others (Glen, 2010:20–21). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that encounter through dialog and invoking changes can leave great effects in involved individuals (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:240–241).

Encounter and symbiosis based on embodiment in art education

Using Merleau-Ponty's views can also be very helpful in relation to art education. In the process of art education, instead of considering itself and others as opposite poles, encounter and dialog configure the concept of self and other in a quite dynamic and always metamorphosing relationship. Merleau-Ponty places emotion and empathy as the root and basis of all inter-subjective encounters. Empathy is the act of "feeling inside another individual". In German, einfuhlung (=empathy) is derived from fuhlen (=to feel) and coefuhl (=emotion) (Barasch, 1998). In Greek etymology, the term empathy is derived from *empatheia*, which is in turn, derived from the term *pathein*, and refers to feeling inside another individual. Through empathy, body moves toward the outside world and does not remain limited in its range. Empathy can, from this point of view, be assumed as projecting outside, moving outside of oneself, and an expansion to the outside world. In *On the Problem of Empathy*, Edith Stein analyzes the concept of empathy. Stein writes, "When I now interpret it as a sensing living body and empathically project myself into it, I obtain a new image1 of the spatial world and a new zero point of orientation" (Stein, 1989:69). She addresses the location-oriented and space-oriented nature of empathy, stressing that putting oneself in another's place, in exact sense of the word, means being located in the other's place and space. In the process of dialog and interaction concerning artworks, each learner empathizes with other learners and their lived worlds, thus developing a movement beyond his/her limitations. From this viewpoint, the importance of empathy-based art education can be addressed, where the individual attempts to put themselves in others' perspectives and look at the subject through others' eyes, thus surpassing the limitations of single-eye vision, with this surpassing being accompanied with a type of expansion to experiencing others' lived experience (Yacek, 2014). Through empathic reactions, the learner attempts to view the world through others' perspective, which essentially means that the individual is involved in space and time occupied by others. After the individual placed themselves in the place of another individual and looked at the artwork through their perspective, he/she tries to match that view with his/her lived experience, and therefore, the learner gets involved in a state of "self-unleashing", which means by disengagement from oneself and limitations of Cartesian subjectivity, the individual can open and expand themselves to other plausible horizons (Premuzic, 2009:46). Therefore, in the process of art education, plurality of statuses and variety of perspectives through which subjects view the artwork must be considered. So, as a result of the produced spatial fluid quality, learners will be able to move along plural perspectives produced through other participants, looking at the artwork through their angle of view. The multi-perspectivity developed through variety of perspectives creates a stimulating and always flowing space that, by stimulating people to thinking and involving their lived experiences in the process of artwork perception, gives emergence opportunity to different creations. In this space, people are encouraged to see their lived worlds in a dynamic and always flowing relation with lived worlds of other people. This dynamic interaction of ideas and lived spaces in dialog process allows students to put together and form discrete segments by gestalt thinking on their desired totalities, and each constructed whole is subject to constant changes and metamorphoses. It could be argued that art education space must be considered as an environment providing "encounters" through which and by highlighting the view through other perspectives and expansion of oneself to others, awareness and personal perception of self and the world expands.

Another very important point, also addressed in Husserl's works apart from Merleau-Ponty's, is timing and dynamism of the process of perception. For Merleau-Ponty, viewing is not a process involving look at a series of constant images, semi-photographed images, but an always changing perception of the things that expand over time and are only perceivable through our bodily movements. Merleau-Ponty states that no artist completes the painting of their work; that is, an artwork is not a defining event, but just a beginning opened to a perspective and will never be closed. From this point of view, it could be argued that in art education, neither teacher nor pupil no educational environment, do exist in a predefined way. Rather, they are created in the process of dialog and encounter instantly (Springgay, 2008). This type of art education does not mean attempting to learn, know, and then teach others, but such an artwork is a type of participation and "encounter" with an event, which is indefinite. This withdrawal means freeing the individual from definitions and identities that restrict him in their being, thus enabling emergence of many possibilities. Another point Merleau-Ponty discusses and is essential with regard to art is the idea of "coexistence" which deals with inter-subjectivity and negation of absolutism: "our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world." (Merleau-Ponty, 2004:153). Teaching art based on encounter and coexistence always presumes another in itself, which means that individuals cannot recognize themselves without connecting with each other and the world. Unlike traditional classes where learners act independently, this type of education based on embodiment, seeks to secure an environment that can, by shaping interaction between learners in their relationship with artworks, create a dynamism and motion in feelings of individuals.

Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty's critique on mind-oriented mind of enlightenment, addresses the role of embodiment as a fundamental subject in educational discussions. Merleau-Ponty's discussion stresses the necessity of attention to lived participation of

embodied subject in educational space and addresses the significance of intersubjective relationship in advancement of the process of education and learning. While in Cartesian philosophy, what can be learnt from the world, is only obtained from a subjective position, in Merleau-Ponty's discourse, it is intertwinement with the world the results in meaning. Borrowing Merleau-Ponty's discourse, art education can be viewed as a physical and location-oriented phenomenon which is related with location-orientation and physicality of other learners. Reviewing the concept of body in art education process, emotions and empathy also play a significant and valuable role in how learners encounter artworks, and individuals can perceive artworks based on their lived experiences and, in the dialog process, become acquainted with lived worlds of other learners. It could be argued that stressing embodied experience as essential focus of perception in art education and paying attention to education based on sensual experience will result in deeper and more effective learning.

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