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A Case of a Finnish Schoolgirl

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Article abstract

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THE CAPACITY OF ARTMAKING ASSEMBLAGES TO ENABLE POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONS: A CASE OF A FINNISH SCHOOLGIRL

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Marian Tumanyan is a researcher in the University of Oulu, Faculty of Education and Psychology. Her educational background is in pedagogy and psychology. Her research explores how arts-based methods can be used when working with children on sensitive topics. She uses participatory arts-based activities to generate data with children.

Abstract: This article explores how artmaking assemblages bring changes in children's potential to express themselves. Assemblages are a system consisting of human, non-human, material, and relational elements in a given situation. Through the concept of artmaking assemblage, I explore the arts-based effects emerging around a Finnish schoolgirl participating in artmaking research workshops. Analysed video data from the workshops illustrate how her expression and participation change in and through the artmaking assemblages, and how different details in the artmaking assemblages combine to promote those changes. The girl's artworks are used as data, as is an interview with the artist who participated in the workshops. The concept of artmaking assemblage is used as a thinking and writing companion when analysing the events from the artmaking processes. I conclude that artmaking processes, when done in a consistent manner and in a trust-based environment, support children's possibilities to express themselves around sensitive issues.

Keywords: arts-based research; artmaking assemblages; children; sensitive issues; art expression

Arts-based methods have been used in different fields and contexts to work with children; for expressing topics that are difficult to verbalise, for addressing sensitive issues, for supporting research processes and as a form of activism (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020). Feminist new materialist and posthumanist scholars in education have particularly shown an interest in the field of arts-based and creative methods in research (Clark, 2012; Harris, 2012; Hickey-Moody et al., 2021; Huuki, 2019; Ivinson & Renold, 2016; Mayes, 2015; Osgood & Giugni, 2015; Renold, 2017; Springgay & Rotas, 2014).

In our review of academic studies (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020), my colleague and I showed that arts-based methods are useful when working with children on sensitive issues. According to the review, in addition to a variety of benefits arts-based methods give when doing research, they also nurture positive changes in children's lives. There are also studies (Huuki, 2019; Renold, 2017) that explore the micro events of artmaking to highlight the material aspects of artmaking processes. There is a growing interest in arts-based activities in educational research, but there is also a need to explore further how such methods are utilized on sensitive issues in educational settings, and what mechanisms and forces in and around them support their efficacy in working with children.

Many experiences in children's lives require a delicate approach. For example, traumas, violence, sexual harassment, or unequal power relations need to be dealt with by educators, but frequently the adults around children do not have appropriate preventative tools or ways to address difficult experiences when they occur. Art programmes have been successfully used for this purpose (e.g. Kay & Wolf, 2017; Yonas et al., 2007). Nonetheless, educational research needs to offer educators a deeper understanding of how the arts work in children's and young people's lives. For that purpose, more contributions are needed to understand the subtle details of artmaking processes. My interest is specifically in minor but powerful events through which change can happen (e.g., Renold & Ringrose, 2019). I believe that researchers and educators need to learn how to recognize and acknowledge the transformations in artmaking processes and in the ways children participate in those processes, to be able to successfully plan and implement arts-based activities that can nurture positive change in children's lives.

In many studies exploring arts-based methods, we can also find discussions on the benefits of art, and how arts-based processes support children (e.g., Haring et al., 2020; Harris, 2012; Hickey-Moody et al., 2021; Ivinson & Renold, 2016; Peterken, 2019). Undoubtedly, this is an important area which I have contributed to in earlier work (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020). Nonetheless, there remains a gap in the exploration of the vulnerability of participants that can be exposed by arts-based processes.

This article aims to illustrate the transformative capacities of arts-based assemblages through the example of one Finnish schoolgirl, who I will call Hanna¹, who took part in the

children's arts-based workshops described below. In this study, I follow Hanna's artmaking journey as she moves from the state of fearing vulnerability in the artmaking process, to being more comfortable with where she is, and communicating things she was unable to previously express.

Referring to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) work, I propose that artmaking can act as an *assemblage* when the concept is used as a tool to explore different components and changes in the artmaking processes. *Assemblage* here refers to systems consisting of human, non-human, material, social and relational elements in a given situation. Through this study, I show how various art assemblages change and how these changes affect a research participant's expression and ways of embodied being. I illustrate how various *micro events*, such as body movements, pencil strokes, or subtle embodied changes in the artmaking situations change those assemblages, and children's participation in and through them. Focusing on micro events in the exploration of artmaking assemblages, I propose that artmaking processes contain far more elements than we might think. The changes and developments in small components of artmaking influence the whole process and its outcomes. Artmaking processes, when done in safe and trusting ways, at regular and consistent times, and considering all the components, support children's abilities to open up, step-by-step, and finally express their emotions.

In the next sections of this article, I discuss how the events, which I call artmaking assemblages, support children in their diverse becomings, and illustrate artmaking assemblages in which one child's research participation and expression changed through the process.

Artmaking Assemblages in Assisting Diverse Ways of Being

In recent years, there have been academic discussions exploring the ways children perform gender or resist gender-role expectations. For example, in her exploration of girlhood, "Girls Reconstructing Gender," Willis (2009) found that interview participants showed signs of rejecting the polarized subjectivity characterized in dualistic views of gender. The author demonstrated how girls applied and adapted to multiple roles through the example of a girl who wanted to be both an astronaut and an actress. Driscoll (2008) suggested that methodologies of girl studies all face a difficulty in recording the experience of girlhood, as it cannot be universal. There is a clear need in girlhood studies to see the complexity in defining girls, femininity, and their gender roles. I follow the trend in posthuman and new materialist theories to enable this.

Barad (2007) sees the importance of a child in the "intra-action" (p. 33). *Intra-action* is Barad's concept, replacing the word "interaction" to recognise that distinct agencies emerge

through people and things coming together. According to Barad, “intra-actions reconfigure the possibilities for change” (p. 182). Furthermore, posthuman theorists, such as Murriss (2016), understand that a child is constituted by concepts and material forces. Murriss (2017) suggests using her neologism *iii* as a pronoun when referring to the “the posthuman child,” (p. 193), describing them as “relational” (p. 193) and as “‘bodymindmatter,’ an *iii* that is *part* of the world and not in it as an object” (p. 194). According to this line of thinking, the self is not a bounded singular organism.

Through their intra-action with other objects, materials, humans, and non-humans, children are constantly changing and evolving, and thus their relations and ways of expressions also evolve. During the arts-based workshops I observed how arts activities, the intra-actions in and around them, influenced the children, their relations, and ways of expressing themselves.

Putting together the earlier mentioned posthuman views of the child and girlhood studies (Bragg et al., 2018; Murriss, 2016; Reay, 2001; Willis, 2009) allowed me to understand gendered subjectivities as existing not in the individual but emerging in intra-action. For example, in the case of the participant, Hanna, I saw that her femininity and masculinity, her performance of gender roles, and her ways of expressing herself did not and should not fit into one category or way of being. I am aware that we cannot know about a participant before starting our research, before having an intervention; however, we also need to remain open to the reality that a person can have different states and different sides, different ways of expressing their gender and subjectivity, and that these alternatives can exist together at the same time, without contradiction but co-existing alongside each other. Artmaking supports these different ways of being and expression, thus I suggest the term of *artmaking assemblages* as way to have a better understanding of the capacities of artmaking processes.

Different forces in an assemblage can change how the whole assemblage works. Fox and Alldred (2015) define *research assemblages* in terms of “the multiplicity of affective relations in the research process, including the ‘events’ to be researched” (para. 3.2). Deleuze and Guattari (1987), when discussing assemblages, state that there are only “multiplicities of multiplicities forming a single assemblage, operating in the same assemblage” (p. 55) and they see assemblages having elements (or multiplicities) of “several kinds: human, social, and technical machines, organized molar machines” (p. 57). Ringrose and Renold (2014) look into how affective intensities work with what they conceptualise as feminist assemblages, by which researchers enter and leave different relations with schoolchildren.

In this study, I agree with Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) idea that assemblages are constantly in the process of variation and are subject to transformation, and I further suggest

a concept of *artmaking assemblages* to think about the entirety of artmaking processes. In the children's workshops described below, artmaking assemblages were created, and changes happened in and through them with all the multiplicity of human and more-than-human intra-actions. In this article, I propose that the artmaking process amounts to more than just what happens between the child, the pencil, and the paper (in the example of visual artmaking). When discussing the artmaking process, I do not see this as a situation where the child is constantly in front of the paper, drawing or making something. The artmaking process includes the whole assemblage connected with the child, her peers, and even non-human agents, such as the cameras and artmaking materials, and the artworks themselves in-the-making, the movements of bodies and artworks. The intra-actions of the pen, the paper, the child, the movements of peers, the child's own movements and gestures, the sound of the pencil, the bodies of the other humans, the silences and sounds of laughter, the pauses and intense doodling: all of these comprise the artmaking process. Even events that happened in the past—the memories we carry, the traumas, the prior moments of inspiration, frustration, joy and sadness, the visualizations, and dreams for the future—all of these define the process, and what we and our artwork are likely to become.

Manning (2016) notes that artful practices are collective, not just because they are done by several people, but because the knowledge of them is collective. When discussing the definition of art, Manning (2016, p. 24) notes that she sees art not as an object but as a method. She herself urges exploring art by focusing on the process instead of the form. This research follows that same line, and approaches the artmaking not just as a final product or an object but as a process, a becoming. In addition to seeing art as a process, I see it as an assemblage and explore how these assemblages are themselves changed and make changes. Throughout this article, I elaborate on how artmaking assemblages become ways of affirmative engagement, supporting children in doing and being different, and facilitating the exploration and expression of their different sides in the research process.

Methods and Data

The data for this study was generated through arts-based participatory activities in a primary school in Finland and through an interview with the artist involved in the activities. The arts-based activities were part of participatory arts-based research in the mid-2010s in which I was involved. The research was carried out at the University of Oulu, however, further details remain undisclosed for ethical reasons, to protect the anonymity and privacy of the participants in question.

A total of 60 hours of arts-based workshops were offered to 50 children at the primary school, all of whom were around 12 years old during the study. The sessions, which took several hours each, were done regularly during a period of around three months.

The data produced during the workshops included videos, photos, children's artworks, and researchers' field notes. In addition to these, after the workshops, I conducted a follow-up interview with the artist [*pseudonym Aino*] who took part in planning and implementing the workshops with children. The data generation through the workshops was a collective process, the composition of which included two researchers (one of whom was me), a community artist, and, of course, the children. The team designed a participatory project (see e.g., Mand, 2012) using arts-based and other creative methods, which fostered different types of positive transformations in the children through various affirmative intra-actions. These intra-actions included those taking place not only with their peers, the researchers, and the artist, but also with non-human elements such as the cameras, art pieces, the space, imaginary clouds, a tent, the grass. We used the MORE 360° Recording System, and digital camcorders and photo cameras to capture the process of the workshops and generate data for the study.

The researchers also took field notes, documenting what we saw, felt, and experienced during the workshops' processes. Throughout the workshops, the children and the researchers created various artworks, including drawings, collages about their relationships, puzzles, sculptures from strings, collective painting, face art, stickers and much more. These were done either individually, or in pairs or groups. Conversations with the children about their artworks were also carried out. After all the workshops were finished, an exhibition of the resulting artworks was organized. The exhibition had around 500 visitors, including children, school staff, researchers, artists, and other members of the local community.

The arts-based workshops consisted of different types of activities that were planned in advance. Each activity had a specific focus and aim, which will be discussed further in the analysis section of this paper. The children exhibited a playful freedom and enjoyment in the workshop spaces. The workshops had specific exploratory themes connected to power relations in the peer and relationship cultures of the students, gender identities, and other sensitive issues; however, we also left a free space for new things to emerge through intra-action. Themes such as bullying, suicide, loneliness, and various ways of non-normative expressions based on gender were some of the topics that arose during the workshops with children.

In any research process, especially when children are involved and potentially sensitive issues are discussed, it is important to give careful consideration to ethical issues throughout the data generation, analysis, and writing process. This research was reviewed in advance by the Ethics Committee, and the children's participation was approved by their parents through written consent forms. Also, while we, as workshop facilitators, supported and encouraged children's participation, we did not push them to do any activity if we found any child to be unwilling.

To protect the anonymity of the children involved, I have changed the names of the workshop participants. Furthermore, details from their stories which could lead to their identification have also been altered. Seeing arts-based research as creative and experimental, constantly in the process of becoming, our efforts to conduct the research in an ethical way were also in a state of constant becoming during the workshops. We gave space for children to propose new activities and for the new themes of artmaking and discussions to emerge.

Method of Analysis

The data analysed for this article were artmaking assemblages, Hanna's artworks, and the interview with the artist Aino. To approach the data, five stages of analysis were used. In the first stage, I watched all the videos from the workshops and took notes on what I thought were the most interesting parts. After writing general notes, I started looking more closely at what parts of the data could be used as a focus for this article. There was one child who I found to be particularly interesting and warranting more careful consideration. I felt that focusing on her participation in the process could provide useful information on how artmaking assemblages transform during the intra-active process, and what changes these processes produce in the ways the participants engage in the process and express themselves. This child, Hanna, specifically caught my attention because I could clearly see how she changed throughout the workshops in the way she related to others and expressed herself. I wanted to gain a deeper insight into what happened, and how the change occurred.

In the second stage, I went back through the video data, finding and watching all the videos where we could see Hanna. I marked all the parts where Hanna had a role in the videos, noting: instances where it was clear how Hanna participated in arts activities; the ways in which the intra-action happened with other participants and with the space; and what kind of changes the artmaking assemblages produced in her throughout the different stages of workshops.

In the third stage, I shared the videos with some of the members in the research group and we analysed the events of the workshop together. We listened to the audio recordings, and viewed and re-viewed the video recordings. We focused on details: for example, speech, body, movement, and objects. I mapped the memories of the events encountered in the arts-based workshops, and of the artworks that the children generated.

Basing her statements in Deleuze's ideas of knowledge production, Taguchi (2017) suggests using different way of engaging with empirical work, referring to using multiple

ways of knowledge production and having those ways intra-act with each other. I adopted this approach when working with the data, applying the differentiated approach of gathering information about the events, using interviews, different artefacts from the workshop spaces, visual and audio materials, and collaborative analysis.

I watched the same video several times and tried to observe every move and every micro multi-modal instance connected with Hanna. In my analysis, I observed what happened during the workshops, traced small changes in the artmaking assemblages, and observed what those changes produce in a specific situation.

In the fourth stage, I held a semi-structured interview with the community artist Aino, while watching specific workshop videos with her. I used open-ended, guiding questions to encourage her to reflect with me on what was happening in the workshop space. I enquired how she thought Hanna was behaving throughout the workshops, and what kind of actions Aino took to make the workshops go smoothly and to reach their aim. I also asked Aino what kind of things, in her opinion, her intra-action with Hanna produced.

In the fifth and final stage, I used the concept of artmaking assemblages as a method to analyse the artmaking processes. Taguchi and St. Pierre (2017) pointedly agree with Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1994) in seeing a concept as “an act of thought” (p. 21) and write about concepts reorienting not only the thinking but also the practices of researchers. In the case of Hanna, I explored the artmaking assemblages which she was part of, and examined the subtle changes that altered those assemblages and changed the mode of expression for her.

In the following sections of the article, I attend to the analysis and results of the study. Based on the analysis of the video data, fieldnotes, interview with artist Aino, and children’s artworks, I have mapped the ways in which the artmaking assemblages changed throughout the workshops, and how Hanna’s participation and expression of herself also changed. According to my analysis, she went from fearing vulnerability to trusting the process of the artmaking and finding the bravery to express herself.

Artmaking Process and Vulnerability²

In this section, I highlight how the artmaking process can make a child’s fear of vulnerability visible in a new way. This is exemplified in the workshops, where Hanna’s being and actions attracted attention when the workshops started in the autumn. During one of the activities, called line drawings, we saw that the artmaking process created restlessness in Hanna that altered the whole creative atmosphere for the group.

The line drawing activity was done at the beginning of each day to let the children have a moment where they could be by themselves and be aware of their body, their feelings, and their thoughts. The children were provided with colourful pencils and pieces of A3 paper. They could choose the colour of the paper and were asked to start drawing a line and continue drawing without lifting the pen away from the paper. One of the main aims of this activity was to create conditions where the children would be supported in focusing on their own artmaking and emotions, while respecting their peers in the same process. They were instructed by the community artist to focus on their energy, feelings, and power, while trying to not become distracted by all the other forces in the space. They were told to close their eyes and concentrate on their bodies, hand movements, and expression of their emotions through the activity. Below is an extract from my observations when watching the video of the children doing line drawing:

Hanna's head is doing rapid movements in different directions, her hand is pulling her hair behind the ear, and she is looking at her friend and smiling. Then suddenly she drops her head on the cushion and brings it back up. She is looking at Elli's (another child) work and continues to move her head sharply up and down from the pillow. Later, within seconds her head goes to the other side, back to Elli, and again to the other direction. We can see her putting her arm over Elli's head now, hiding her face, while the other hand is still doing movements on the paper. . . She is hiding, her face covered with her hand, then smiling to Elli, and looking to Aino [the artist] to check on her. Those actions are repeated several times. Aino is continuing to give instructions during this. Hanna again then restlessly moves her pencil to her friend's paper and starts drawing there.

Hanna's restless behaviour stood out so clearly from the rest of the group that it often felt like other people's energy—including the researchers/facilitators—started spilling away from their activities, as everyone was looking at Hanna instead of doing their own work.

Indeed, in line with feminist new materialist thinking (see Ringrose et al., 2020), I could say that Hanna was not alone in her artmaking process. Instead, Hanna was together with her quick movements, with her eyes that were wandering, with her pen, which was making fast scratches on the paper. Here I could use the concept of *artmaking assemblage*, which also included her friend, Elli, and the other human participants, the creative space, the researchers and cameras, the artworks and interior design elements of the creative space, all the colours and the artmaking materials. From the extract in the video described above, it could be seen that the artmaking assemblage, in its then current form, was not leading Hanna and Elli towards the aim of the activity. Instead, it was also disrupting the concentration of others present in the situation. I became interested in this observation and wanted to explore this further.

As Leavy (2020) outlined in her book, *Method Meets Art*, creative and arts-based methods work on symbolic and emotional levels. I suggest that working with arts on sensitive topics can evoke the utilization of subconscious defence mechanisms by a participant (Bowins, 2004; Cramer, 2000). Although artmaking with children can seem like an easy and fun thing to do, we need also to consider that it is not necessarily always that way. The kind of disruption demonstrated by Hanna is common in situations which are challenging for people, where they might use avoidance as a way of defending themselves (Elliot, 2006). For example, if a child is asked to draw a bear, replicating it from a picture on a whiteboard, they might not necessarily connect emotions to that process, as they would be using their logical mind to understand the form, colour, and proportions of the bear. If, however, you ask a child to close their eyes for a few moments and to express their own emotions through an arts process in connection with their body, as we did in the line drawing activity, it is a completely different exercise than the previous example of drawing a bear.

In a creative exercise, where concentrating on the body and on emotions is encouraged, a person connects more intensely with their body, with their hand, with the pen they are using. Everything *matters*: the topic of the activity, the environment. In this kind of an exercise, the person doing the artmaking becomes more vulnerable as their emotions and experiences are engaged in the process. Therefore, one can also more easily feel disturbed by the presence of others, which can then result in different kinds of avoidance strategies. Furthermore, one participant's avoidance behaviour may change the artmaking assemblage for the other participants as well.

At certain points, the avoidance motivation may be employed by a participant for the purpose of protecting themselves from being open to the activity and, therefore, vulnerable to experiencing different or unfamiliar emotions. I interpreted Hanna's example as such a situation. Perhaps Hanna's restless action was a way of protecting herself from being open to vulnerabilities which may surface in the activity. How, then, can these types of situations be resolved and the assemblage shifted to a new focus (again)? I will explore this question next through discussing trust development in the artmaking assemblage.

Trust in the Artmaking Assemblage

Researchers such as Van Maele and Van Houtte (2011; see also Van Maele et al., 2014) have suggested that teachers' trust in their students is related to the well-being and academic performance of students in various ways. Thus, I assumed that trust would, in some form, be important in our emerging artmaking assemblages as well. In line with posthuman and materialist methodologies, however, I wanted to remain open to how trust would manifest in the given situation rather than imposing a predetermined definition of trust as a frame. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) note, assemblages are "constantly subject to

transformation” (p. 82) and thus trust could also be manifested differently at any given moment. My previous description of Hanna’s uneasy behaviour during the workshop—behaviour that could be even considered disruptive in a normative sense—would be an example of situational mistrust and shunning away from showing vulnerability. What might then, be an example of another kind of a setting, one which is not disruptive? The following story exemplifies such a situation—a flow of artmaking.

The interactions between Hanna and Elli, the way in which their papers and pens moved, and how these movements affected others in the group, were noticed by Aino who was guiding the group. Aino went to sit between the two girls to change the situation. In the video we could see her move gradually to approach Elli and Hanna. She slowly moved Elli’s paper to one side and put her own paper in between the two girls’ papers. Elli was smiling. In my interview with Aino, she remembered:

I was between them, I already felt there that it’s okay, this is going to be better, this is a better situation now. I can feel like, ok she is now more in her own power, and we were building our own relationship there, and also it’s about trust. I think she started to feel that she can actually trust me, that I respect her, and she started to respect me also.

With this move, the relations of the components of the assemblage changed. When Aino changed her position, the childrens’ papers and pens also moved. Aino noted later in her interview what she was thinking at that moment when changing her position:

They (the girls) were giving so much attention to each other and they are best friends probably, always together. I also wanted to show them that they are also individual people, and they can decide, take their own space, make their own work and own decisions.

The assemblage, which included Hanna, Elli, and their artmaking materials, did not seem to work to enable Hanna to express herself through the activity at hand. By changing her place, Aino tried to support the realization of the potential of both girls and allow for a successful artmaking process for each of them.

Through this example, we see that an artmaking assemblage incorporates the wholeness of what is happening: all the material, the human and nonhuman parts which influence, direct, and change the assemblage. Manning (2016) stated that art is also the intuitive potential which activates the future and invokes the memory, not of what was but of what will be. This can be conceptualized as “art as memory of the future” (Manning, 2016, p. 47). Here we can see that, by noticing the potential of the girls in the artmaking process, Aino, in a gentle and safe way, redirected the situation. Judging the state of the current assemblage, she concentrated not on what was, but on what was possible.

Aino's actions resemble the ways in which researchers engaged with the research participants in Ivins and Renold's 2016 study, "Girls, Camera, (Intra) Action." The researchers were making a film with teenage girls, and, during the filmmaking, the participants were supposed to run but were reluctant to do so; they did not feel comfortable enough in their bodies. The researchers then gently encouraged them by running themselves. With this act, the researchers' own example and repetition of the process supported the girls in overcoming their insecurities. We can see a similar action in the example of Hanna relating with the artist, who was working gently and patiently with the girls, and not getting angry with them because they were not able to instantly be involved in the activities. It was through Aino's example that Hanna and Elli were able to engage in their own artmaking processes.

One aim of the line drawing activity was to trace and make visible the direction where children's concentration was moving. The change in position of Aino's body, and the papers, the pens, and the girls, further changed the process of the artmaking assemblage and a different assemblage was produced.

When Aino sat between the girls, this action worked as an activator that changed the course of events. Her shift in position helped her to attain the trust of Hanna by being patient and understanding. As the workshops progressed, Hanna continued working with the others, and, in contrast to the beginning when her behaviour was restless, something started to change in and around her. I continued to see that, through the repetitive rhythm of artmaking activities in the space and atmosphere provided during the following weeks, Hanna's movements became calmer and her anxious body gestures loosened.

About two weeks after the first session, I observed another line drawing activity with Hanna. In the videos of the session, Hanna was much calmer and more concentrated in her work than in the previous line drawing exercise. Her anxious head movements were relaxed, and I had the impression that she somehow better understood the idea of the activity. It seemed that it was the repetition of the artmaking activities and the support of the facilitator which helped Hanna to overcome her fear of revealing vulnerability, thus helping her to have trust in the process.

All the components of the artmaking assemblage and the change between their relations influenced how the children acted, how the art process unfolded, and how the children were able to express themselves. In the next section, I explore how Hanna opened up to the activities.

Being Brave and Surfacing the More-than

Through repetition and facilitation, Hanna started getting more involved in the artmaking processes and began communicating her thoughts through art. In this section we will see how artmaking assemblages can allow room for the “what else” aspects of Hanna to be communicated: what else she experienced, what else she wanted to communicate, and what else she wanted to be.

To illustrate this point, I will next discuss an activity in which the children were asked to finish incomplete sentences. The group gathered on the floor to discuss ideas stemming from a board on which unfinished sentences had been written. This activity was set up to explore aspects of the children’s lives that were generally left outside the classroom. The beginning of the sentences helped guide them to think about various alternative and more expansive ways of being and expressing themselves and their feelings. A sample of the unfinished sentences are shown below.

I am also...

It’s nice when...

I am at my best...

I would like to...

I can...

I am annoyed by the friendship matters that...

Don’t...!

Let me...

I can be girly/ boyish even though...

I would like an adult to know that...

I wish I could tell someone that...

If nothing is demanded from me...

It hurts me when...

When doing the activity, Hanna was sitting between the artist and one of the researchers. She had a calm smile on her face and raised her hand at the beginning of the activity to be given a turn to share her ideas. In addition, Hanna carefully listened to what her friends were saying. Her body was calm, without any movements that showed irritation or restlessness. After listening to her friends’ answers for a while, she raised her hand again. It appeared that she was trying to be invested in the process, and, when it was her turn to speak, she continued the sentences. At that point, Hanna had a much more serious facial expression and seemed to be serious about the activity. She listened to others and took her time to think before she answered. No one was distracting Hanna in the process, and she was not disturbing anyone. Hanna’s answers to the unfinished sentences can be seen below:

I am hurt when... being called stupid because I talk a lot.

I am annoyed... in a group of friends because I start doing stupid things when the others also do stupid things.

Let me...be me.

I can be girly... even when other people are staring.

Hanna expressed some sentences in a low voice and without much confidence, but it was obvious that she was involved and listening, eagerly wishing to express her thoughts. I think it also helped her that the other children were engaged in the process and talked about their experiences. Hanna got positive feedback from the adults whenever she said a new sentence. I gathered from the video that she was listened to, and her thoughts were encouraged.

The next data excerpt illustrates a phase in the creative process where “more-than” versions of Hanna began to surface. This happened when the previously described activity of finishing sentences was continued in an activity where the children transferred some of the sentences (or new thoughts) to pieces of paper cut into the shape of fish. In an earlier activity with the children, we made a collective painting. The children, researchers, and the artist sat together around a huge piece of blank paper and worked with colourful paints and brushes. There was a space to experiment, to paint what we wanted, and to learn from each other. While engaging in the activity, we kept the boundaries of our own sections of the painting or had the possibility to mix several paintings together. The collective painting was then used for making the above-mentioned fish shaped pieces of paper.

The theme of the fish was chosen as the activities were done in a space close to water (lake/sea), and we were exploring what is “under the surface” of the thoughts, feelings, and expressions that we usually show. In this exercise the children wrote on the fish and hung them from the ceiling on a fishing net made specifically for this purpose. The children could use the ideas they came up with when doing the “unfinished sentences” activity. Before the children made the cut-out fish, they were also asked to write sentences on draft papers. Surprisingly, Hanna wrote “I’ve been called a poo”. I interpreted this as a completely new way of opening up and trusting the process.

At first, Hanna was talking a little with her peers while cutting out the fish, and then just concentrating on her own activity. She took time to carefully look at and choose the right part to cut, and wrote her message on the fish. Then, all of a sudden, she threw one of her fish over to her peers. Hanna declared that her fish was a “boomerang fish”, and that Elli could write a swear word on it and throw it back to her because it was a boomerang. Hanna’s action did not bring her much attention from her peers, however, as they were all carefully concentrated on the activity at hand. This lack of reaction made Hanna stop the disruption, and, eventually, she went to sit with the artist Aino. Hanna and Aino discussed the

fish artwork, and Hanna continued sitting next to her in the corner, making her fish art while Aino was cutting out her own fish. Most of the other children were sitting on the floor doing the same. During the last part of the process, Hanna looked as if she was confident and concentrated. Aino and Hanna exchanged smiles.

In the workshop described above, there was an artmaking assemblage consisting of different components. The collective artwork paper was on the floor and children were sitting on the ground near the artwork. Hanna was sitting next to Aino near the table, and the camera was standing on the floor, recording the moment. The artist and researchers were also cutting out paper fish. What I suggest here, is that Hanna was first using the fish to pass messages, making it travel as she threw the fish towards another child. For Hanna, art became a fish which became a boomerang and passed messages. The throwing of the cut-out paper fish here was a visual representation of what would be children's verbal communication in other situations. I suggest that calling the fish art a "boomerang" and inviting someone to write a swear word on it was not incidental. Already from the earlier activity of finishing sentences, I saw that Hanna had been called names. Perhaps she was throwing these hurtful name-calling events away from herself.

When I was watching this assemblage of the fish throwing from the video, I noticed that, much like the previous occasion of sitting between girls, Aino again acted as a shield between Hanna and the other children. Previously, Aino made the shield as a conscious act herself, but this time Hanna created the already known and trusted shelter for herself. When Hanna made her move to take shelter with Aino, she was smiling, working on her art, and asking for Aino's opinion. She found a crutch to lean on, a place where she could feel safer and do what she wanted to do.

The question arises: how is this artmaking assemblage different from the one at the beginning when Hanna was doing a line drawing? In my previous observations from the video, I noticed that Hanna was not ready to open up in front of the group. On that first occasion, she was sitting close to all the other children, somewhat exposed and not able to work privately. All the children could see what their peers were doing and, thus, they could also have an influence on each other. Hanna was not then yet used to the artmaking activities; however, through small acts and repetition, Hanna started to open up to us (the adult facilitators) and the process. She slowly began expressing herself and creating her own safe space. The emerging trust was visible from Hanna's markings on the fish:

Let me be myself. When nobody sees, I might dance and sing. I am also other things than stupid, strange and babbler (höpöttäjä). I have been called a poo and stupid. When nobody sees, I might play [with toys] and laugh.

Hanna's words clearly showed that she was reaching a state of trust in the process. From the sentences that Hanna wrote on the fish, it can be seen that she was being honest

and open about her feelings, even though the other children could have heard her and might have recognized who wrote the text. It can also be seen from Hanna's messages that it can be tricky being yourself in a group of friends. She wrote that she was not able to do things like singing, dancing, playing while others are present. She also wanted to be seen as something more than just "stupid, strange, and a babbler". The artmaking assemblage helped her express something which would have not been possible without the process.

This piece of data presents a glimpse of the pressures that children can experience. In a group of friends, one sometimes needs to do silly things or act to impress the others. Norms such as those that guide the ages in which you are considered too old to play with toys also influence group dynamics. In the theory section of this article, I cited articles by Reay (2001) and Willis (2009) on the topic of girls trying to resist traditional understandings of what it means to be a girl and striving to be more than just one role. The data explored in the articles support the idea that girls wish to separate themselves from stereotypes and normativities of who they are, how they should act, and what can they be and do. Furthermore, I argue that the creative process of artmaking workshops supported Hanna in exploring and expressing hurtful moments that had happened to her, and her wishes for who she wanted to be. In the usual routine of school days, children do not have many opportunities for taking a moment to think about their emotions, to express sensitive events of their lives, or think how they would wish to be. Creative assemblages, such as the artmaking workshops I have explored, can support children in self-expressions that would otherwise be silenced or hidden.

Conclusions

In this article, I suggested the concept of artmaking assemblage could be useful in exploring the wholeness and complex nature of artmaking, where each component is influencing the becoming of the whole assemblage. In my analysis, I followed the way in which one girl, Hanna, first feared the vulnerability of the artmaking process, then, through building trust, through repetition, slowly became invested in the creative process, exploring and expressing more sides of herself.

I suggest that the artmaking process is a place where conditions and assemblages are created for the participants to have the ability to either overcome or embrace their vulnerabilities; all of which happens during the process. Artmaking assemblages support participants' empathetic attitudes towards each other (as we saw in this example with Aino), and help facilitate their move away from judgement. Artmaking thus provides a space for new realities to emerge.

Like many other scholars (e.g., Hickey-Moody et al., 2021; Huuki, 2019;; Ivinson & Renold, 2016; Mayes, 2015; Osgood & Giugni, 2015; Renold, 2017), I propose that artmaking is a valuable way for working with children, but that careful consideration of the artmaking assemblage is required. Using artmaking to explore sensitive topics can elicit fear of vulnerability in participants, which can then cause defensive behaviours against the artmaking process. It takes trust building, careful consideration of each component of the artmaking assemblage, and repetition, for children to become open to the vulnerability of the artmaking process.

In the example of the line drawing activity, I showed how the small act of the artist changing her seat changed the whole artmaking assemblage. This change in the artmaking assemblage also changed how one child, Hanna, expressed herself. The events of Hanna's artmaking opened her to the fullness of her potential, and every new and repeating activity, every detail of the successful organization of the processes, every moment of trust and safety, worked towards the opening of transformative fullness of the artmaking potential (Manning, 2016).

I suggest that viewing the artmaking process as a complex assemblage can offer new possibilities for artists and researchers. When considering human and non-human components of the artmaking assemblage, such things as the influence of past, present, and future selves of the participants, different ways of interaction between participants and artworks, the importance of artmaking space, and use of different colours and symbols all play a role in possibilities towards new and transformative way of artmaking.

With this article, I hope to encourage educators, art practitioners, art therapists, and researchers to consider human and non-human aspects of artmaking assemblages, and to create possibilities for positive change through artmaking processes. This piece of research also prompts conversations about possible vulnerabilities when addressing sensitive issues through arts. Artmaking includes the potentiality of change, however, artmaking processes should be based on trust and understanding, be non-judgmental, and be built around patience and guidance towards being open to the vulnerability of the process.

My analysis also implies that broader research with more participants and a wider number of artmaking assemblages could explore the mechanisms and potential of artmaking assemblages more deeply, and would thus be important for future research.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The names of all participants, including the artist, are pseudonyms.

² Merriam-Webster (n.d.) online dictionary defines *vulnerable* as “1) capable of being physically or emotionally wounded; 2) open to attack or damage”. I use vulnerability here as the possibility to be emotionally hurt, and the possibility of experiencing emotions which can be difficult to understand or address yourself.