

Lessons from the junk drawer: Possibilities for sustainability in art education

Vers une éducation artistique, environnementale et néo-matérialiste

Jackie Stendel

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Article abstract

From planetary warming and natural disasters to pollution and community unrest, the sensorium of the climate crisis pervades our daily life. Art education has the potential to help us better understand the sensory reality of the climate crisis. However, the materials used in artistic creation are ecologically unsustainable and therefore may hinder learner's connection to ecology. Through exploring the metaphor of the junk drawer, the author positions materials as potential teachers and, subsequently, as important parts of meaningful teaching and learning. The article explores the pedagogical impacts of different art materials while arguing that sustainable materials can lead to eco-consciousness for educators and students.



LESSONS FROM THE JUNK DRAWER: POSSIBILITIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN ART EDUCATION

JACKIE STENDEL *McGill University*

ABSTRACT. From planetary warming and natural disasters to pollution and community unrest, the sensorium of the climate crisis pervades our daily life. Art education has the potential to help us better understand the sensory reality of the climate crisis. However, the materials used in artistic creation are ecologically unsustainable and therefore may hinder learner's connection to ecology. Through exploring the metaphor of the junk drawer, the author positions materials as potential teachers and, subsequently, as important parts of meaningful teaching and learning. The article explores the pedagogical impacts of different art materials while arguing that sustainable materials can lead to eco-consciousness for educators and students.

VERS UNE ÉDUCATION ARTISTIQUE, ENVIRONNEMENTALE ET NÉO-MATÉRIALISTE

RÉSUMÉ. De réchauffements planétaires et catastrophes naturelles à la pollution et les troubles communautaires, le sensorium de la crise climatique imprègne notre vie quotidienne. L'éducation artistique a le potentiel de nous aider à mieux comprendre la réalité sensorielle de la crise climatique. Cependant, les matériaux utilisés dans la création artistique ne sont pas écologiquement durables et peuvent entraver la connexion des apprenants avec l'écologie. En explorant la métaphore du tiroir fourre-tout, l'auteur positionne les matériaux comme des enseignants potentiels et comme des éléments importants de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage. L'article examine les impacts pédagogiques de différents matériaux artistiques tout en soutenant que des matériaux durables peuvent conduire à une meilleure conscience écologique pour les enseignants et les étudiants.

“Objects, materials, and the processes surrounding them have roles in the decisions and choices we make in our lives.” (Garber, 2019, p. 9)

As a child, I loved the junk drawer. I noticed this was a place where things went to die. Things went in and rarely went out. I would spend afternoons rifling through the drawer and fashioning new objects with the dead ones — guitars that were elastic bands connecting every knob in the kitchen, games that were played

with old coins and balls of tape that could never quite bounce. My early life was also coloured with memories of mixing plastic paint with plastic brushes onto canvas. When I painted with purple paint, I could feel the lilac and lavender we had in our garden. When I painted the white birch tree, I could almost feel my feet climbing it. I didn't know the toxicity of art materials and that I was hurting our planet and myself when I was trying to deeply connect with the beauty of creation. These materials were not good teachers, not only because they created pollution but because of what they communicated. They taught me that abundance did not necessitate connection. They taught me that excess should be the expectation. They taught me to make art in the way our production system makes goods – quick, and in excess. They didn't shed any light on the complicated relationships between material and culture – but the junk drawer did. Throughout this article, I will be expanding on the lessons of the junk drawer by asking the following question: could reusing materials promise a more sustainable future for the creation of art and for our relationship to the land?

As a white settler-Canadian, I will be investigating this through a limited and potentially biased perspective (Sensory & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 39). I will be referring to Art Education in the North American settler context, which leaves out other experiences of Art Education, creative reuse, and environmentalism. I will be looking through the lens of new materialism and Indigenous materialism (Rosiek et al., 2020) – both of which explore on non-human agency and new materialism view objects as potential teachers.

“Who and what teaches?”, is a question that post-humanist and new materialist frameworks explore while discussing pedagogy (Bayley, 2018; Garber, 2019). We usually consider teachers to be ‘living’ entities that deliberately deliver information to other ‘living’ entities. What if we expanded our definition on teaching by considering our role in the realm of matter? Through considering the “dynamism of forces” (Barad, 2007, p. 141), we can become cognizant of our entanglement to matter and intra-action with objects. To be entangled with an object is to be surrounded by, immersed in, and composed of matter. A new materialist philosophy of immanence assumes “all matter is one, intelligent, and self-organizing and includes assemblages of both human and non-human, organic and techno-others” (Braidotti, 2019, p.45). This definition allows for the complex “relationship between people and things, including political, economic, technological, aesthetic, sensorial and emotional processes” (Fuglerude & Wainwright, 2015, p. 1) to become all part of one connected material world. Rather than coming to understand our surroundings through thought, we come to understand our environment through messy-meaning and intra-action (Fuglerude & Wainwright, 2015, Rosiek et al., 2020). Therefore, matter is not passive but informs our ways of being and mirrors our current world (Garber, 2019).

Our current world is facing the materiality of the climate crisis. From plastic beaches and violent storms, to mass planetary movement and toxic bodies, the sensorium of climate crisis defines our current ethos. It not only an environmental, but is a human crisis because it means a slow, painful devastation of our personal ecologies and communities (Graham, 2007, Solnit, 2014). Art education often brings communities together and elicits social change (Hicks and King, 2007). Paradoxically, the materials used in artistic creation can lead to environmental issues and may not further a learner's connection to ecology (Davis, 2015). Since visual art centers around the creation of objects using matter, it has the potential to inspire people to reconsider how they relate to objects and matter (Garber, 2019). Creating art using solely materials that are divorced from nature further segregates us from our environment. Through recent years, it has been shown that reusing materials for artistic means can lead to sustainable awareness through redefining consumption and materiality (Garber, 2019; Girak, 2019; Inwood, 2013; Sang, 2010). I am concerned with how creative reuse in art education can instill a different relationship to objects - one that can lead to an expanded environmental and material awareness.

My interest in creative reuse has always been a hobby that ran parallel to my art practice. I have been fascinated by the artists like Valerie Blass, Louise Bourgeois, David Altmejd, Eva Hesse, Giorgia Violpe and Yevgeniya Gaganovich who used found materials in their works. I have built small dioramas with recycled materials and translated these 3D assemblage works into big paintings, made sculptures using old fruits, wax and hair, and made quilts using old fabrics found at depots. Sadly, nothing seemed compete with the vibrancy of oil paints or the flat void of acrylics. These were the materials that raised me and taught me what art is. When I studied art technique, these materials were presented as the objective framework of artistic creation. Later, when I taught art to my students, these were the materials that filled the storage unit, coloured the canvases, and clogged the drains. I was bringing up a future generation of artists the same way I was brought up, under the assumption that I was their teacher, and the materials were merely tools of the imagination.

This artistic approach seemed to be fulfilling for my students, until I had a student challenge this framework by refusing to take a canvas for the project we were working on. When I asked why, they responded by saying "I am just going to make something and then throw it out, which will hurt the planet even more." Despite my prior interest in environmental anthropology and ecologies, this was a paramount moment for me as an educator. I began to ask myself bigger questions about art, education and climate crisis such as, "What is pedagogy when all of the tools are treated as separate material entities? How can a philosophy of immanence lead to a more holistic art education that leads to planet preservation?" I started to research my art materials from their production to their demise on the ACMI (The Art and Creative Materials Institute) and the chemical safety page on the Government of Canada website.

Through this formative research, I learned how the oil economy defines our current epistemologies. Common pedagogical art materials like gel watercolour paints, Crayola markers and tempera paint all contain plastic and are produced as cheap and quick as possible. Their fate in the classroom is of a similar nature - they are used quickly due to the expectation that learning happens through ample production. The materials dictate speed through their fast-drying qualities and through this, embed the capitalistic epistemology that quick production is the proof of learning. Aesthetics are necessitated through consumption - this is what these materials taught me. Once the materials have been used up, they are discarded down the drain or into the garbage. Their ghosts live on as micro-plastics haunting the water and making their way into our food and bodies, further blurring the line between human and plastic (Davis, 2015).

Is creative reuse a solution to the aforementioned educational issues without current art materials? Reusing old materials can be a transient solution that allows us to deal with our waste as the means of production slows down (Lorrie Blair, personal communication, 2018). However, an all-encompassing material shift is necessary to combat the climate crisis, and each discipline must look at what this means for them (Inwood & Kennedy, 2020). I argue that in art education, we have to start asking what our materials are teaching us and we have to base our material choices on what is safest for the earth and what can impact our understanding of nature and the climate crisis best.

Art educators can do this by turning back to the lessons of the junk drawer. It was in this small space that I first saw the epistemological potential in discarded objects. Certain objects from that drawer still remain my teachers. The string that seemingly lasted forever was a metaphor for how materials transcend time. The elastics that I stretched out and plucked showed me that music is everywhere. The styrofoam balls taught me that plastic can become so small that it pretends to disappear. Through connecting to the lessons of the junk drawer, I will continue to research the potential power creative reuse may have to harness a philosophical shift that moves us further from petrocultural practices and closer to “art for earth’s sake” (Gablik, 2002, pp. 7-21).

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JACKIE STENDEL is an award-winning art educator and community organizer from Tkaronto/Toronto, currently living in Tiohtiá:ke/Montréal. They hold a BFA in Art Education from Concordia University and an MA from McGill University in Education and Society. Enchanted by the more-than-human world, Jackie investigates foraged and found objects as pedagogical agents and potential collaborators through material inquiry, art-creation, writing, and education. They have presented their research in several conferences such as the CSSE, EGSS, and the RBJSE, have taught countless workshops across Canada, shared their artworks in numerous group and solo shows, and have received numerous grants to undergo their research and art practice, such as the SSHRC and the PFF. Due to a deep passion for environmentalism and community, Jax founded [C.R.O.W](#) — a network for community members to trade materials destined for the landfill for future use. This group has now expanded into a community of 3K+ individuals who are brought together through frequent trading, exhibitions, and online workshops. Currently, Jax is developing Root-to-Branch, an organization that features arts-based environmental programs for youth and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. jacqueline.stendel@mail.mcgill.ca

JACKIE STENDEL est éducateur artistique primé et organisateur communautaire de Tkaronto/Toronto, vivant actuellement à Tiohtiá:ke/Montréal. Ils détiennent un baccalauréat en éducation artistique de l'Université Concordia et une maîtrise en éducation et société de l'Université McGill. Enchantée par le monde plus qu'humain, Jackie étudie les objets recherchés et trouvés en tant qu'agents pédagogiques et collaborateurs potentiels à travers la recherche matérielle, la création artistique, l'écriture et l'éducation. Ils ont présenté leurs recherches dans plusieurs conférences telles que le CSSE, l'EGSS et le RBJSE, ont animé d'innombrables ateliers à travers le Canada, partagé leurs œuvres dans de nombreuses expositions collectives et individuelles et ont reçu de nombreuses subventions pour mener à bien leur recherche et leur pratique artistique, telle que comme le CRSH et le PFF. En raison d'une profonde passion pour l'environnementalisme et la communauté, Jax a fondé [C.R.O.W](#) — un réseau permettant aux membres de la communauté d'échanger des matériaux destinés à la décharge pour une utilisation future. Ce groupe s'est maintenant étendu à une communauté de plus de 3 000 personnes qui sont réunies par le biais d'échanges fréquents, d'expositions et d'ateliers en ligne. Actuellement, Jax développe Root-to-Branch, une organisation qui propose des programmes environnementaux basés sur les arts pour les jeunes et les communautés 2SLGBTQIA+. jacqueline.stendel@mail.mcgill.ca