Identities of art education in contemporary India: Reality, Rhizome and Assemblage

Identidades da Arte Educação na Índia Contemporânea: Realidade, Rizoma e Assembrage

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Abstract: In this paper, I present an understanding of art and visual culture education in India in a framework that employs Deleuze and Guattari's theories. I place this research study in context of contemporary trends in education policy and political climates in India. I suggest that research on understanding art education practices in emerging geographies be conducted with a view to gain a cohesive social understanding, rather that isolated views on curriculum and pedagogy, with pre-determined understandings of what art education is, and what it does. The paper is structured in the following manner: After setting a context for this paper, I provide an overview of the study itself. I then describe the development of my own study exploring the identity of Indian art education and art educators using a hybrid lens of Vedanta philosophy and Deleuze and Guattari's theories of rhizome and assemblage. Explaining these concepts, I illustrate an application of this theoretical lens towards reading art education practices both of my research participants, as well as of developments of art education in contemporary India. This paper thus offers a strategy to conduct research in art education employing a rhizomatic approach to structuring research, and analyzing data using the concept of assemblage. I make these suggestions in order to make multiple experiences and voices within the research relevant and respected, especially when read in international and global contexts.
Keywords: Art. Education. Deleuze. Guattari. Rhizome. Assemblage. Vedanta. India.

Resumo: Neste artigo, apresento uma compreensão da arte e da educação da cultura visual na Índia, em um modelo que emprega as teorias de Deleuze e Guattari. Situo esta pesquisa no contexto das tendências contemporâneas das políticas educacionais e do clima político na Índia. Eu sugiro que a pesquisa para compreender as práticas da arte educação em geografias emergentes sejam conduzidas com uma visão de uma compreensão social antes do que, em vez que os pontos de visões isoladas no currículo e pedagogia, com entendimentos pré-determinados do que a educação artística é, e o que ela faz. O artigo está estruturado da seguinte maneira: Depois de definir um contexto para este artigo, eu forneço uma visão geral do próprio estudo. Descrevo o desenvolvimento do meu estudo explorando a identidade da arte-educação indiana de e arte educadores usando uma lente híbrida da filosofia Vedanta e as teorias de Deleuze e Guattari sobre rizoma e agenciamento. Explicando estes conceitos, eu demostro esta lente teórica para ler as práticas de ensino de arte tanto da minha pesquisa quanto dos participantes, bem como a evolução da educação artística na Índia contemporânea. Este artigo, portanto, oferece uma estratégia para conduzir pesquisas em arte-educação empregando uma abordagem rizomática de estruturação e análise de dados, utilizando o conceito de agenciamento. Eu apresento sugestões, a fim de fazer várias experiências e vozes dentro da investigação pertinente e respeitados, especialmente quando lida em contextos internacionais e globais.
Palavras-chave: Arte. Educação. Deleuze. Guattari. Rizoma. Assemblage. Vedanta. India.

1 Creating Context

The world of art, culture, and education in India is, in this current time, in a state of flux and evolution. Sixty-seven years after Independence from British colonial rule, Indian[1] politics and economy – and consequently policies – appear to be at a significant point of being reviewed, re-examined with a view towards revision. This includes policy revisions in both art and education. Soon after gaining Independence, India adopted a policy leaning towards economic socialism with a strong nationalistic frame of mind and an ambition to becoming an industrialized nation. This agenda was reflected in the uniquely Indianized[2], modern artwork and art education imparted in schools, and the altered but continued adoption of the education systems inherited from British India. By the early 'nineties, India was increasingly modernized, industrialized and somewhat urbanized. Identified as a developing nation the forces of globalization led India to racing towards capitalism with an increasing visibility of the influence of North America in industry, the art market, and visual culture. Subsequently, discourse on the directions Indian education need to take, including those in art and culture, have significant argument and debate for and against *Indianization* of education and culture in contemporary India. This debate has become a tug of war towards biased ideas of tradition and modern, especially in translations in education and culture. In May 2014, the Indian democratic republic of India voted into government a political party with a strong nationalist agenda that promises to emphasize *Indian culture*. This development has brought into focus hopes/fears about the interpretation of *Indianization* in Indian art and education – In curriculum, pedagogy and policy. These changes, along with increased investment into arts and culture education, and arts integrated education in public and private programming raise the need to examine and understand the nature and identity of art education and of art educators in contemporary India. As an indication of the rising interest, globally, New Delhi India plans to host a Regional Congress of the International Society of Education through Art (InSEA) in 2015, presenting self-identified perspectives of the developing form(s) of art education in India. It is in the context of this scenario that I present one strategy to examine the complex and layered world of art education in India – or as I shall refer to it in this article - Indian art education.

2 A synopsis of the research study

In a case study located in two urban centers in India – one in the central north, one in the south – I posited that the identity of contemporary Indian artist educators and consequently Indian art education may be understood as assemblages of (1) socio-cultural experience, (2) ideological influence, and (3) of disciplinary transgressions into pedagogical borderlands (SHARMA, 2012). To construct this particular study, I employed a *conceptual framework* of ontological hybridity that folds ideas Indian *Vedanta* philosophy, such as karma and reincarnation, onto concepts of Deleuze and

[1] Throughout this article, the term *Indian* refers to things pertaining to India.
[2] Adapted for Indian contexts.

Guattari, such as assemblage, rhizome, and space. I did this in context of developments in curriculum and pedagogy in Indian art education on disciplinary and social levels. I place my research within the discourse of postcolonial globalization theory, exploring the concept of ambivalence in relation to identity. In this qualitative case study, I conducted a hybrid methodology of narrative inquiry and grounded theory. The data and consequent analysis were based on the following three perspectives:

1) I interviewed seventeen art educators in India traversing several arenas of practice such as K-12 and higher education, community, classroom, and studio-based practice, and disciplinary boundaries of art, design, and art history. In these interviews, I gathered their perspectives on the meaning of the term art education in India, their practice, objectives and vision, and the structures available and lacking in support of their practices. My own story was included in the analysis of the narrative.

2) I reviewed published literature on these questions, to insert the perspective of researchers, administration and policy-makers, and to see where and how the views and needs of the field that are being published in art magazines, journals, and official reports matched up with the voices of grassroots practitioners.

3) I reviewed curriculum documents in Indian art education, both suggested and in-use, to examine their place in the narratives being revealed in this study. I wanted to see how the tone of the curriculum harmonized or was in dissonance with the voices in the interviews and in the published literature.

Rather than presenting the narratives emerging through the performance of grounded theory as separate and disconnected, I engaged the personal narratives of the interviewees in a fictive dialogue with each other to illustrate the nature and possibility of viewing data and hence knowledge as assemblage. Thus my analysis is based on the narratives of my participants and I. In performing rhizomatic structuring and analysis of data, I identified 3 distinct emerging narratives through which I make my interpretations: these are (a) narratives of learning, (b) narratives of teaching, and (c) narratives of ideology. These three narratives emerged as I layered the composite voices of the participants speaking of their practice, with articulations of contemporary policy and curriculum developing in Indian art education. In analyzing the narratives that emerged from my data in the study, I was able to identify three assemblages that might represent the identity in Indian art education – a reality or truth that is not quite a sliver, yet not quite the whole of its reality. These assemblages are: (1) An assemblage of enunciation, (2) A machinic assemblage of social organization, and (3) A machinic assemblage of disciplinary organization. As such, these narratives and assemblages do not pretend to represent Indian art education as a singular narrative, nor a singular uncomplex entity. Rather, this identity is a multiplicity, unknowable yet knowable when what it is, is understood in context of what it does, or can do, and seen as ever evolving towards a cohesive core where it might hold awhile before breaking into other emergent selves.

3 Vedanta, and Deleuze and Guattari: Reality, rhizome, and assemblage in theory.

Reality

Vedanta philosophy[3] proposes that Reality or a primordial state of existence is paradoxically full of an infinite emptiness. In Sanskrit, this might translate to *shunya* or *shunyata*, which in mathematical terms is known as zero or zero-ness. However, like the mathematical zero, *shunyata* does not equal nothingness in that it does not indicate non- existence since it is fully of energy and consciousness. It is known to be, even as absence. This Reality or singularity is unknowable because it is masked and covered by multiple, infinite manifestations or forms of this energy and consciousness expressed within space-time, which in itself is unknowable in the present (state of our knowledge). In Sanskrit and hence Vedanta, there is no one word for infinity. It is expressed in various ways based on context, such as without beginning or without end. In this belief that Reality is unknowable, what *is* can be understood only in context of what else is, or what is not. Opposites are understood not as polarities but as two aspects of the same coin and *maya* (illusion) of opposites is created only through language and illusory, temporal manifestations of form. It is only in transcending this *maya*-filled space-time of our own minds that we can experientially know this Reality. Reality is thus based on interpretation. It can be shared, expressed, and explained based on experience but it cannot be known by sharing because interpretation involves language and form mediated by space-time.

According to Vedanta, God/Truth is pure consciousness: a sustained state of knowledge of this full-empty singularity and each manifest form has this pure consciousness or Godhood within them. It is through focused and consistent meditation that we become able to see these temporal-spatial manifestations of unknowable Reality. It is in seeing them as such, instead of as Reality itself, that we are able to see through and beyond them, thus coming closer to Reality itself. It is also proposed that this knowing can be achieved only through a combination of logic and rationale with intuition or instinct. (MOORE; RADHAKRISHNAN, 1967, VIVEKANANDA, 1999)

From a western perspective, and more specifically in Deleuzoguattarian terms, we might conceive of this singularity as being not unlike the cohesive core of a rhizome and the *form*al temporal-spatial manifestations as assemblages.

Rhizome

To read Deleuze and Guattari's explanation of the rhizome, is to read the metaphor of the tree and the rhizome. The tree is linear, vertical, finite, and hierarchical. It is genealogical, is a tracing of what exists, has beginnings and endings, and *is* a product. The rhizome is lateral, has lines, and is infinite, symbiotic. It is anti-genealogical, is a mapping, has middles or bridges, and is a conjunction in a process of becoming. The tree is a flowchart, the rhizome a network. The tree displays unity

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[3] Vedanta is a branch of Hindu philosophy, based on the texts collectively called the Vedas, traced back to to 1500 C.E.

in having a central trunk, although its many branches might indicate a pseudo-multiplicity. The rhizome has no center, only points of departure; It is multiplicity (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987b). A rhizome rejects an essential meaning. It "[…] ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles […] there is no speaker-listener…or homogenous linguistic community […]" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987b, p. 6-7). In this emphasis on the non-essentialist, one might point out the difference between Vedanta and Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy. However, I argue that in interpreting the idea of knowing Truth/Reality as experiencing in the now, the larger Reality being unknowable, the essentialist core of Truth or Reality can be read as akin to the rhizome core, that may be shattered (in an essential meaning) but does not end. Rather it begins again with one of the old points of departure or lines of flight, flight here signifying escape as well as leaks and flows into different directions and forms. In applying this conceptualization of the rhizome while constructing my own research study, I looked to the multiplicity within the narratives of the participants in my study, including myself to examine how I might draw out multiplicities within a narrative, to understand the truth of that narrative, and to see it within a whole having many connections, but without reducing it to an essentialist story. This quest led me to identify the concept of assemblage as an apt strategy.

Assemblage

As with most of Deleuzo-Guattarian ideas, the concept of assemblage, translated from the French term *agencement* focuses on "[…] the *process* of arranging, organizing, fitting together […]" (WISE, 2005, p. 77). The idea of assemblage does not assume predetermined pieces that would be put together in a preconceived structure. Nor are assemblages random collections of objects or notions. Rather, any assemblage has context and function. It is a cohesive structure because it can do something. Paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari, Wise summarizes that we cannot know what an assemblage is till we know what it can do (SHARMA, 2012, p. 26-35, 40-45, WISE, 2005, p. 78). Assemblages may be understood as machinic assemblages, or territorialized collections of meaning where the elements of the assemblage include the qualities present in the assemblage, along with its function (i.e, what it can do). Assemblages can also refer to systems of signs and semiotic systems that Deleuze and Guattari call *collective assemblages of enunciation* (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987a) that might include words and meaning, objects, feelings, affects and patterns: in short, signifiers. They are not wholes, which are unitaries that Deleuze and Guattari reject. Instead, they present the concept of assemblage as a metaphor for contemporary and future societies, describing a regime of assemblages that are connected to each other and affect each other in a continuous machine of control and desire and the relinquishing or breaks in them. In application of Vedanta philosophy, I only come closer to an experiential understanding of Indian art education through an identification of the assemblages reflected by spatial-temporal influences that cover and surround it. In sharing my view or experience of such assemblages, I contribute to the discourse attempting to clarify the field; in seeing what art education does, and in the ways it is experienced, we can move closer to explaining and seeing what it is. In the next section I describe my use of Deleuzo-

-Guattarian concepts of rhizome and assemblage in the structure and analysis and interpretation of data in this research study.

4 Vedanta, and Deleuze and Guattari: The role of rhizome and assemblage in understanding a reality of Indian art education

As I explained earlier in this paper, I recognized that a rhizomatic approach was necessary in order to grasp a true understanding of the multiplicity of contemporary Indian art education even in a rather specific case study. In clarifying my data rhizomatically, I identified three narratives of learning, teaching and ideological construction, through the process of seeing the identity of Indian artist educators as assemblages of spatial-temporal practice, presented in the form of composite characters, namely Vidya, Shakti, and Neeta. In defining these three composite forms or assemblages, I illustrate my understanding of how artist educators in India map their practice of learning and teaching art across striations of disciplinary practice marked by institutionalized programs. Identifying these assemblages of identity and seeing what narratives emerged from these assemblages, individually and across the individual assemblages was a rhizomatic process of observation, organization, analysis, and interpretation.

My ontological inclinations towards Vedanta-centric aesthetics became manifest as I visualized personifications in the form of composites of the data. In Vedanta, the meaning and function of a deity, and the aspect of philosophy it explains, is entwined with its form and iconography; in this it is a visualization of data. I visualized my data in the form of characters that were composites or assemblages of these patterns. These composites allowed me to build emerging narratives in a rhizomatic analysis of data forms positioned in dialogue with one another. To briefly elaborate, the name *Vidya*, in Hindi, means knowledge. This fictional character personifies the voices of the senior teachers I interviewed and as a composite character reflects a pattern in the professional journeys of the participants that focuses on experience. The name *Shakti* is synonymous with power and action. She is a composite of the junior and novice teachers and reflects another professional path that focuses more on possibilities. *Neeta* is a modification of the Hindi word *Neeti*, which refers to disciplinary rules and boundaries or alludes to those working within rules and boundaries. This third composite character focuses more on effects of policy and institutions. In naming these composite characters, I acknowledge the three categories of narratives they reflect: learning (Vidya), teaching practice (Shakti) and defined ideological spaces (Neeta). Looking at my data rhizomatically led to a simultaneous process of analysis and interpretation. As meaning emerged in the form of assemblages, certain narratives emerged more strongly than others, allowing a picture to emerge of who Indian art educators are, and in their practice, read through multiple lenses, what they do, and envision. This, in my mind, lends a stronger sense of truth to the emergent narratives and the assemblages.

Conceptualizing these composites as personifications of their perceptions of the visions, motivations and scaffolds of their pedagogies, enabled me to present specific portraits or assemblages of Indian art education: a picture of how it functions and connects with and within its various ele-

ments, such as spaces and places of disciplinarity, policy and curriculum, pedagogical development, socio-political and economic ideologies and histories, and the effects and affects of artist educator identity. This scrutiny has led me to observe that we as artist educators, Indian or otherwise, might be perceived as migrants across striated spaces of discipline. As migrants, we choose locations in which to settle in order to be validated, when instead we could re-think our identities as nomads moving across a smooth disciplinary space who work affectively across these spaces, comfortable in our ambivalence and our borderlands. In this research I read a dialogue on the fostering and furthering of art and arts-based education. Art education in this meaning is alive and well in contemporary India, just not necessarily as licensure programs for artists. In a drive to professionalize the field, organization is in process to put policy and curriculum into place towards more arts in education, arts-based education and arts as cultural and heritage conservation. Although these perspectives on policy and curriculum and research directions act as valuable counterpoints and balances towards a more complete picture, my focus remains on the experiences of the artist educators since their insights, experience and development remain largely invisible in a rich range of developments in the various interpretations and visions of art education in India. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage suggests that when folds (in and between assemblages) cannot be seen, objects seem to emerge from a void. In such cases, it becomes difficult to see them as cohesive, to find contexts and functions that might be reterritorialized. Without folding the narratives of policy and curriculum in art education onto the narrative of artist educators themselves, an assemblage of identity could not emerge. In finding these narratives, I could identify three assemblages of identity. The first is an assemblage where signifiers indicate self-consciousness of postcolonial markers of identity of the artist educators and consequently of Indian art education itself. I believe this to lean more towards the axis of enunciation described by Deleuze and Guattari. The second and third assemblages, which are assemblages of disciplinary and social organization respectively, indicate, in different ways, existing striations in Indian art education in its disciplinary and socio-cultural contexts and how folding thesmooth space of artist educator practice can become an identity of *puissance* rather than of invisibility.

5 Conclusion

In context of Indian and global art education, the concepts of assemblages of identity and hybridity of ontological views that unfold in this research encourage and enable a de-centering of uncritical deference to rooted notions of tradition and culture that influence future directions of discipline, nation, expression in pre-determined ways, subverting hierarchical ways of thinking. They also present an other way of understanding reality without positing the *other* as opposite or hierarchical but as affect, opening up channels of understanding and creative conceptualization. I present this study at a relevant time in history where art education in India and other nations in the developing world are looking to create structured programs and are ready to share stories of research and practice while looking to curriculum experts. The strategies of structuring nation-specific identities of art education presented in this study could help us as a community of artist educators, to think not only

about what we seek to learn from *other* and *new* practices, across space and place, but also about how we present our cultures of pedagogy and artistic cultures to and within the dominant discourses. It is my hope that this study will lead to more nuanced ways of asking about and responding to questions of what art education is like in India and in *other* cultures, as well as in thinking about what is it that art educators do, not only internally but also across cultures and disciplines.

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