

LEARNING THROUGH ART:

SPECULATIVE PASTS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMAGINARIES

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RE/IMAGINING THE INTERSECTION OF CREATIVE DESTRUCTION AND LIBERATION

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Can we unlearn the past and re/imagine the future by creatively destroying, manipulating, and re/integrating text?

The intersection of text and aesthetics lends awe and power to some ideas through glorious presentation while less splendid fonts are lightly discarded (Leavy, 2012).

In art education, the sheer quantity and repetitious use of text is far removed from celebratory beauty. We receive and send communications, read and produce academic research, write assignments, assess student work, and more--with varying degrees of stress and interest. We have many relationships with the numerous texts in our field, yet we rarely consider how the perceived immobility of written policy stagnates educational systems, pedagogical approaches, and emotional wellbeing.

As a disruption, I asked artist educators to join me in a creative re/imagining of arts pedagogy and engage with me in arts-based inquiry (Rollings, 2010 & Darts, 2004). Together, we explored subtle and overt qualities in our relationships to and with professional text during four different workshops. Participants were tasked with creating a multimedia piece reflecting their lived classroom experiences, from cheering celebrations to profound challenges. I offered as media an array of text from the field: colorful lesson plans, scholarly readings, news articles about legislation and school funding, teaching manuals, and brochures about addiction and crime related to children and schools. Texts that were intended to support or influence education were thus rendered as media, tools for visual expression. Art educators were invited to adapt and craft these materials, to tear up such text and reform it into new and personally relevant ideas. Destruction and creation were encouraged within the space of questioning our relationships with each text yielding intriguing results.

Text as Art

Words are embedded with meaning, myriad conceptual meanings, and the potential to convey ideas that we are yet to conceive. Across the globe, modern languages present symbols and sounds that are infinitely interchangeable to deliver messages in immeasurable combinations – what a miracle is human language!

This investigation began with a question: *Why do humans sometimes elevate writing to the level of Art, and how do others respond to it?* This query emerged provocatively as I prepared an art history lecture on medieval European art. Gazing at the golden lettering from a page of the Book of Kells, I was reminded of glorious lettering found in the grand mosque in Cordoba (Figure 1). I placed the images side by side in my slideshow to consider with my university art students. Both were crafted to express adulation, ‘glory to god,’ using expensive materials in exquisitely beautiful designs. Both were European in geography and medieval in time frame. The text was legible, certainly, but artistry elevated the impact to a level far more majestic than the mere definition of each word.

Humans respond to beauty in a physiological way. Our personal tastes, cultural experiences, or individual preferences vary widely across global human history, yet we all have the capacity to respond aesthetically to beauty (Magsamen & Ross, 2023, p. 17-19). In our modern era, scientists and psychologists have conducted

Figure 1
The Mesquita at Cordoba (c970 CE)



focused tests on our biological responses to primordial sources of beauty such as landscapes and faces, and more recently the complex levels of aesthetic experiences generated by viewing and making art. They have found clear evidence that these encounters consistently generate the release of positive chemicals in the body such as dopamine, and the reduction of stress related hormones such as cortisol (Magsamen & Ross, 2023, p. 27-30). Such studies reinforce what artists and arts educators intrinsically know as we view, ponder, and discuss matters of aesthetics. Yet outside of our studies and the formality of the art world, all of us at any age can find ourselves floored by the rather magical pleasures of a glorious sunset, a stunning painting, or a beloved face.

Here, I propose that the long societal tradition of elevating text is closely aligned with maintaining power through aesthetics and beauty. While this chapter is not a deep dive into ancient monuments around the world, we can acknowledge significant evidence left from widespread historic cultures. For example, the ancient Assyrian and Egyptian leaders utilized a combination of text and images in numerous buildings, monuments, and stele to assert authority and impress the masses they intended to rule. In tenth century Japan, Shinto artists created a detailed scroll, the Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Tenjin Shrine¹. Each vibrant segment depicts scenes narrating the origin of the shrine with lively energy and lyrical text. Religious texts have been elevated to art from across histories and cultures, making a powerful impact upon the viewers. The Book of Kells,² copies of the Christian Bible, exemplifies the European tradition of illuminated manuscripts that combined writing, drawing, and design with expensive materials such as gold leaf and paint colored with ground semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli. The books themselves were a treasury of expensive materials, adding importance to the religious message.

In the mosque in Cordoba (Figure 1), holy texts were crafted in the style of Byzantine mosaics. Shimmering gold, embedded in dark blue or black marble is framed by gleaming white sandstone, floral motifs, and undulating arches reaching always towards the heavens. The first time I walked into the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul,

I was stunned by the soaring architecture, the majesty of the domes far overhead, and the elegance of the golden script honoring Allah. A unified visual feast designed to focus the mind on a holy purpose. Deep into ancient history, humans have experienced the elevated heart rate, excitement, and rush of pleasurable chemicals through the body during aesthetic encounters with beauty, including glorious text emblazoned across temples, palaces, and monuments. Organically, therefore, religious experiences can be elevated through intertwining aesthetics with belief, ideas, and worship.

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The converse is obviously true as well. Text can be designed to intimidate or terrify, to persuade and deceive. Carved, painted, printed, or projected – formal text presents an idea of finality, permanence, and immobility. Especially in an enduring format (stone carvings, books, laws) the message conveyed is also authoritarian: Here is the information, it is accurate, permanent, and cannot be swayed by emotion or argument. This is a daunting challenge in education, where institutions assert authority through all of these textual devices. Resistance to change is as enduring as the stone edifice housing the administration offices.

¹See drawings and text from the 13th century scroll, *The Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Tenjin Shrine*, in the collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/25.224>

²Learn more about the Book of Kells from the website at Trinity College, Dublin: <https://www.visittrinity.ie/book-of-kells-pages-on-display/>

The Con/text of Art Education

As art educators, we experience life through overlapping identities of artist (performing creativity) and educator (empowering others to create), in addition to individual identities of culture, language, race, gender, and many others. Text is a continuous and useful element in our work. Even in this volume, as I write I hold an active hope that these words will be insightful and beneficial to each reader. Yet the weight of text grows heavy in the twenty first century. An abundance of negative messaging surrounds us on digital media. Our field is often micromanaged by ambitious administrators who churn out assessment data with deeply negative directives for classroom teachers. Documents that are intended to inform or support education sometimes add to the emotional burden of caring for young people in our classrooms.

Figure 2a
Participant response during a workshop



Figure 2b
Participant response during a workshop

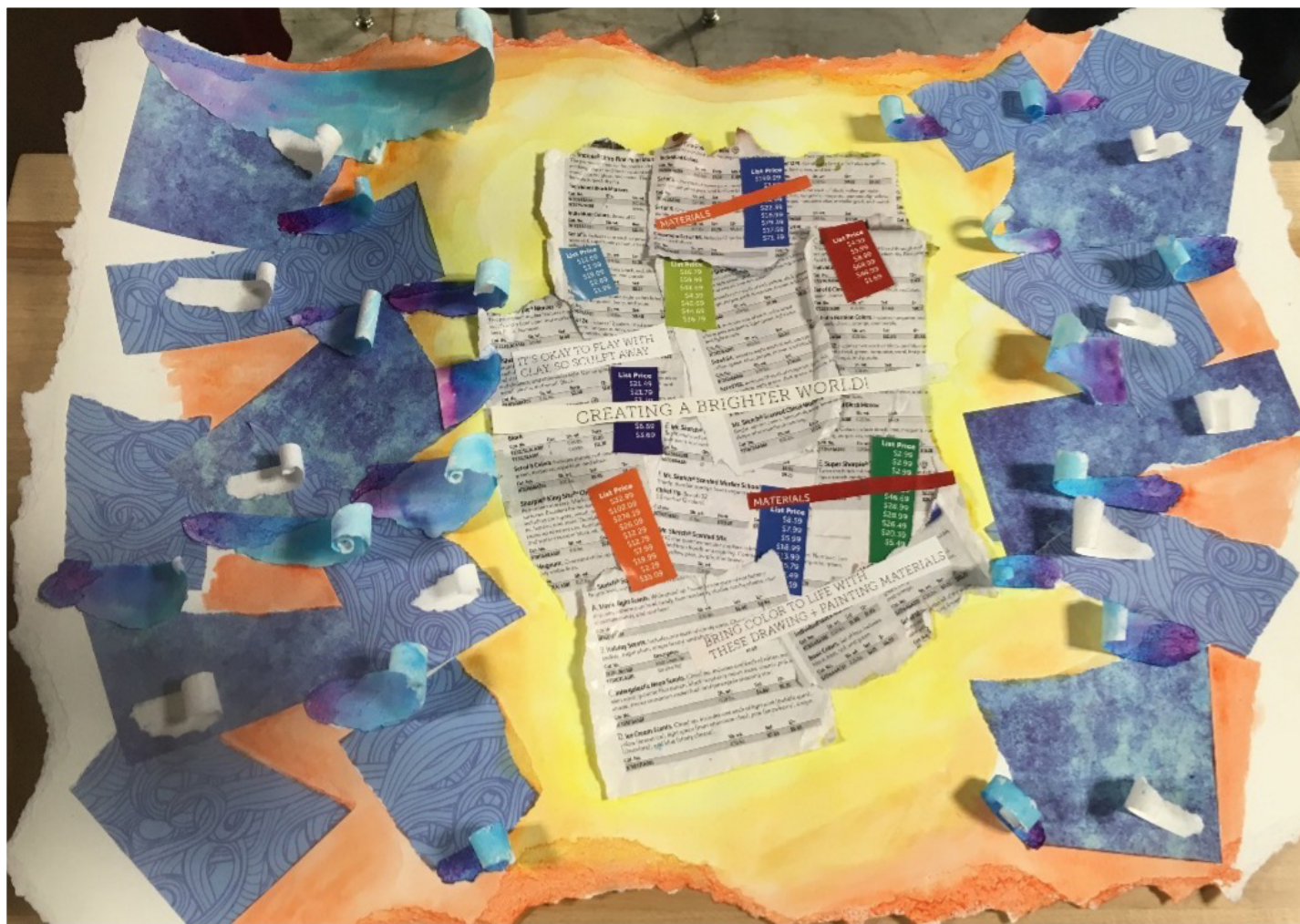


In this context, the workshops for this project offered relief through creativity. The creative process encourages reflection and opens new avenues of thought and insight. Artist educators were first invited to reflect about their teaching experiences through these two prompts: *Why did you become a teacher? Why are you still teaching?* They were encouraged to create mind maps, write a paragraph, or sketch out a response. The discussions that followed were insightful and thoughtful. One participant said, "I got into teaching art because I thought I could help kids make great art, like impressive artwork. Now what I care about is helping them use creativity to cope with their lives." They shared examples of how stressful teaching can be and commiserated about lack of support (financial and professional). At all four sessions, participants shared an overarching purpose and satisfaction from guiding children in their own art making, skill building and discovery that was highly valuable to them.

Next, we discussed the texts that make up our lives as artist educators. We write lesson plans, read about artists, design and create slideshows and posters, and generate numerous teaching materials. We assign written work to students, then we must evaluate their texts and provide feedback and grades. Outside the classroom, we visit museums and galleries where we encounter more text about the artworks and sometimes encounter texts as visual elements. In academia, we read and research dense scholarly material, and soon generate more academic text for others to consume.

Participants were tasked with utilizing all manner of texts as media, to manipulate and reform in any way they chose. The energy these educators brought to the challenge, and the resulting variety and power in their artwork, was illuminating and inspiring. But the texts that truly energized the educators in my workshops were endowed with negative connotations: directives and top-down curriculum orders from administrators, commentary from legislators about education, news stories about school violence, low funding, and shrinking retirement.

Figure 3
Participant response during a workshop



At the first workshop I took apart a binder with prescribed art curriculum from an area school district, not realizing that some of the participants would recognize that material. One young man held up several of these pages and said "They keep telling us what to teach but then they don't give us enough money to pay for the materials. There's no funding for all these lessons." With a fiery gleam in his eye, he tore up these pages into small pieces for his collage. In that moment I realized that this project had struck a raw nerve.

Another participant cut out small flame shapes and arranged them in a circle. She filled this circle with text written in black ink. As I came around to talk with her table she quickly covered the writing with her hand. "Please don't take a picture of this. It's private," she said. As I slipped my camera into my pocket she added, "It's about my principal. About things he said to me that I'm still trying to process." Later she painted some red flames around the paper ones, concentric red circles beyond that, and finally bright green around the edges. At the end of the session, she carefully covered her work and slipped it into her backpack. "This helped me see my situation in a way I can deal with," she said. Although she was not specific, the implications were clear. A negative experience

Figure 4
Participant response during a workshop.



with her administrator, a type of professional wound, had been reconsidered carefully. She had a chance to visually ‘speak her mind,’ defend herself through her artwork, and regain a sense of self-worth.

As I gathered photographic evidence and recorded data, the implications that began to emerge were intriguing (Figures 2-5). Art educators in this setting were reconsidering the nature and meaning of the texts, tearing up topics that were frustrating or heartbreaking, and building something new which gave them a sense of autonomy. In some cases, their artwork was intensely private, revealing a deep relationship with texts and the emotions they stir. Others expressed a cathartic release or a jubilant moment of control over a frustrating type of document (Figure 5).

Creative expression and art making has physiological benefits, reducing stress-related hormones and increasing positive brain chemistry after just forty-five minutes (Magsamen & Ross, 2023, p. 28). An intriguing perception emerged as their physiological elevation of mood gave them a sense of

“This helped me see my situation in a way I can deal with,” she said. Although she was not specific, the implications were clear. A negative experience with her administrator, a type of professional wound, had been reconsidered carefully. She had a chance to visually ‘speak her mind,’ defend herself through her artwork, and regain a sense of self-worth.

Arts based participatory research asserts that the process of art making opens pathways of understanding, the potential to reorganize prior perspectives, and is generative of new knowledge (Rolling, 2010, p. 107-109.)

empowerment over the negative burdens of educational pasts. They simultaneously unlearned and released the demolished texts while feeling a surge of positive energy to re/imagine a future of overcoming.

The fullness of this research endeavor required my own embodied participation along with observations of the workshop participants. Arts based participatory research asserts that the process of art making opens pathways of understanding, the potential to reorganize prior perspectives, and is generative of new knowledge (Rolling, 2010, p. 107-109.) Thus, I began by mining a looming personal frustration from the past few years. In higher education, the laws of 'publish or perish' remain intensely present. My relationship with academic writing is creative at first. Concepts, questions, ideas, and issues that inspire me also energize me, and I begin each research endeavor with intense interest. But this energy is burdened with professional anxiety. Along with successful publications I have received plenty of rejections, sometimes after many months of waiting for a response or multiple demands for edits and

Figure 5
Participant response during a workshop



Note. At the close of the workshop, this art educator said "That felt great. So freeing!" and then she dropped this artwork into the trash as she left the room. This surprising gesture emphasizes the intensity of her need for catharsis and demonstrates a pathway to liberation from traditional paradigms in art education.

changes. I contemplated the emotional space—those feelings of frustration about wasted time and bitter disappointment—for my text-inspired artwork of creative destruction. Words of rejection, thoughtless reviewer comments, the number of months I waited for responses, were the first marks I placed on the canvas like dirty strings hanging in the air. Next, I scrawled words from those negative emails on drawing paper, then crumpled it up. Several times. I slopped paint across the page, then cut out the shape of a victorious figure – me!

I felt a sense of conquering the experience of rejection, spurning hurtful words, and crushing the casually anonymous professional disregard. I returned to the canvas to make sweeping gestures with the brush, blending shades of blue and black, murky whites that covered over the first strings of words. Energetic, concentric yet not geometric. I cut up the text and scattered it into the whorl. My small figure reaches towards the central orb-like form, towards the center of energy (Figure 6). I added a shadow as she enters the cyclone, swept up in the debris. And now, high above, she emerges through the storm, triumphant. She is resilient, unafraid, and ever reaches forward.

Figure 6
Conquering the Cyclone, by the author.



Note. Sweeping gestures with the brush, blending shades of blue and black, murky whites [Collage & Painting], by Lucy Bartholomee, 2024.

Unlearning the power structures of our past and present is a daunting challenge. This inquiry reveals that damaging texts that seem permanent can literally be torn up, reimagined, and conquered physically and emotionally through creativity. This therapeutic process renders text art media “used to give shape to thoughts, feelings, and memories and that embodies the healing experience” in a process of “self-discovery and wellbeing” (Kay, 2020, p. 56-57). In education, text is only authoritarian if we give it authority, and creative destruction is a powerful tool for breaking down the past and inventing the future. In that space, we can find aesthetic joy in the luminous radiance of artistically crafted words, especially when they convey affirmations and uplifting ideas. Aesthetic experiences, especially engagement with beauty or intense emotional experiences, yields swift physiological health benefits (Magsamen & Ross, 2023, p. xi) and elevates your ability to thrive and find happiness (Magsamen & Ross, 2023, p. 3). Liberation from the ideological confines represented on each page as we tore, crumpled, glued, and painted over the text yielded confidence to challenge institutional restraints and authentically re/imagine pedagogy and curriculum, and even our own futures.

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