



Turning Points

RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGIES
IN STUDIO ART EDUCATION

EDITORS

RICHARD JOCHUM • JUDITH M. BURTON • JASON WATSON

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KAITLIN POMERANTZ

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?

—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,”
Sister Outsider

This essay summons words around urgent reorientations in art teaching and learning in higher education and beyond, as we emerge from (dwell in?) the first years of what Arundhati Roy referred to as the “pandemic portal” (Roy, 2020). It finds form in a time of global grief, mass awakening to raging systemic inequity and racial violence, continued war and empire, corporate greed and extraction, rising sea levels and temperatures, and other terrestrial havocs. Speaking from the wounds of these times, staring back into the lineages of the violences that caused them, it offers possibilities toward equity, sustainability, and liberation in spaces of learning and creating. It does so by orienting attention toward the necessity for greater care in how we think about arts materials, as well as the actual material conditions of art teachers and learners.

The words speak to and from my experience as a multivalent practitioner in the arts and education—as an interdisciplinary artist dealing with issues of ecology and place, an independent educator in higher ed and in youth and community contexts, a student of pedagogical scholarship myself, a land/water-steward, and an engaged neighbor—working from the position of an able-bodied, White, cis-gendered, queer identity with diasporic roots, writing from the privileges and limitations thereof. They are the words of a person entangled, through an alternating current of necessity and choice, in the

potentials and precarities of the frontline of education and cultural production. I thank other (en)tangled thinkers (many directly cited in this essay), with identities not easily circumscribed by academia's categorizing imperative, whose wisdom broke through the cracks of my own academic learning, undergirding all that I share here.

Words of the Not-Yet

Audre Lorde called for the *words of the not-yet, right-now* at a panel in 1977, in the face of a cancer scare, peering into her own mortality. We—artists, educators, students, multitudinous practitioners—can engage with these questions as a visioning framework, peering into our own micro and macrocosmic collective mortalities: the exacerbated perils threatening our democracies, lands, human and interspecies relationships, air, planet, lives. May the concert of our answers join in a collective soil that might alight upon, and remediate, our current wreckage.

As you read through this essay, my attempt to do my version of this work—I would raise up a final query, from Lorde herself, and ask: “are you doing yours?” (Lorde, 1984). What are the tyrannies holding you in silence? What are your words of the not-yet, right-now?

Here's to the embodied energy of our future plantsong.

Material Matters

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

—Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*

This essay is the ideas, incantations, and experiences alluded to in the introduction. But also, more importantly, this essay is matter itself. And that—matter—is what is, and will be, the essay's subject, and the heart of my vision for moving forward in educating artists. Matter is substance, and in this context, the stuff of art making and learning before it has even become material for creative use. Matter could be clay, fibers for paper, wood from trees, metals, oils, light, electricity, the body. Matter is inherently connected to the earth, to place, to the environmental conditions of its own genesis, as well as to the labor involved in its procurement. The word *matter* also operates to mean “holding meaning.” What I endeavor to convey here is a vision for arts

learning that is directly engaged with matter itself and material conditions. So let us begin with this very essay.

If this essay is coming to you as printed matter, it is commercial ink on a stack of bound papers. The ink is made of vegetable or petroleum oil mixed with lamp black, which the EPA defines as, “an extremely fine black fluffy particle ... produced by the reaction of a hydrocarbon fuel such as oil or gas with a limited supply of combustion air” (Serth & Hughes, 1977). So, the words of this essay are made of compressed oil, hailing from any number of subterranean extraction points, rearranged on the molecular level, to meet you right here.

These oil-words catch a ride atop a substrate of dried pulverized pulp of trees, likely pines, hemlocks, and spruces, from managed timberlands or cultivated tree farms. So, this paper that you are holding in your hand may have come from trees that were planted by humans or through the incredible and various methods of seed dispersal and were likely between 10 and 20 years old. The trees undoubtedly traveled far distances—if grown on U.S. soil, it is likely they went to other continents to become paper (as EPA restrictions surrounding papermaking have tightened in the United States, paper manufacturing has gone “elsewhere”). The trees used to make this paper are numerous. As you flip through this book, you are flipping through forests.

If this essay is coming to you virtually, it is equally embodied, just in other ways. This essay is light, pulsating through cables spanning oceans, gleaming forth from a screen of plastic, glass, electrodes, lithium-ion batteries of nickel, copper, and lead, mined from salt beds or ore deposits in the earth's crust, from any number of deposits throughout the world. The essay is saved as some kind of file, perhaps a pdf (“portable document format”). The pdf was born in 1990, via a six-page physical paper written by Dr. John Warnock, the creator of Adobe (which, interestingly, takes its name from Adobe Creek in Los Altos, California, which was an actual adobe clay bed—the name of the company intending to reflect the creative nature of its program by invoking the material of adobe). So, the ideas for the pdf first came together on paper, and fomented a vision for a generally accessible, digitally transmissible document.

Does thinking about this essay as matter, matter? And how? What does it mean, or do, to see it as paper, petroleum, cables, light? As trees, crude oil, plastic? We have naturalized the acceptance of different materials and mediums in our lives and creative work without questioning their origin stories. What would it mean, in the teaching and making of art especially, to take these matters literally and seriously?

At present, foundational art classes in U.S. higher education contexts are typically divided by medium (drawing, painting, sculpture, etc.) or “the mediums” grouped together as “Foundations.” In these courses, the discussions

of the materials of themselves—beyond how to prepare them for artistic use—are scant. Pedagogical trends in arts education in U.S. higher education emphasize unrestrained material experimentation and vigorous productivity, in contrast to creative traditions where material usage comes only after learning. Most syllabi feature that common addendum of the “materials list,” and a student’s first engagement with arts learning might actually take place at the store. This introductory framework offers materials neatly packaged, but stripped of originating qualities and stories, and also links art making immediately to commerce, consumption, and even disposability (have you ever seen an art school dumpster at the end of a semester?). A prevailing art school ethos today could be phrased as: *Material, at all costs, for art’s sake.*

Deeper discussion of the material of art is often relegated to artworks that happen to approach these topics head on, leading for those works to be categorized—and othered—with identifiers like “eco-art,” “land art,” and the like (even the “readymade” others the impulse to use already-existing materials). These categorizations exempt “standard” art-making practices from having to do any kind of careful self-examination vis-à-vis materials and the labors and lands that wrought them. But before and outside of global commerce and extractive capitalism (and an industry of arts pedagogy framed around colonialist concepts), art materials were earth materials, and they were local. Their procurement was part of the artistic process. Cultural production was inextricably bound to place. Many practices and knowledges still center sensitivity to place, process, and matter. They are commonly not the focus of standard academic arts learning, due to a tangle of systemic exclusions and hierarchizations.

We know that nothing is “from scratch,” and nothing goes “away.” And we know that these systems of extraction, consumption, and production are inextricably bound in the logics of those who, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs describes, “somehow think that it is wise to boil the world” (Gumbs, 2021). It is possible and necessary to imagine artistic studies starting elsewhere—as they have and still do in creative traditions that have survived and skirted colonial logics. Not at the art supply store, but with the plant, the pigment, the charred branch, the water source—and with discussions around the seriousness and responsibility of turning these matters into material for artistic use. Studies could also begin with the transoceanic Internet cable. Or at the dump, municipal waste center, salvage yard, or recycling plant. Or—if at the store—with consideration of supply chains, labor, footprint, or in the very least, a list of ingredients comprising the “art materials.” The point is not to encourage anachronism or curb experimentation, but simply to decouple art making from an unexamined relationship to consumption, disposability, and waste, and to encourage an engagement with material as more than just a means to an end.

To do this would be to acknowledge the devastations and devastators of the Anthropocene, to—as Kathryn Yussoff writes—“name the masters of broken earths” (Yusoff, 2018) and connect to creative approaches operating outside of extractive logics.

And if practices of art pedagogy were to shift out frameworks that focus solely on ease and convenience and refocus on logics of locality, care, and responsibility, it could only follow suit that artistic practices themselves might necessarily also rearrange. The “art career” could move away from toxic individualism and art-star-ism (the barely attainable pursuit of which causes so many artists so much disillusionment and grief) and toward modalities of greater collectivity. “Medium specificity” could take on meaning beyond aesthetics, rooted instead in awareness of the teeming material ecosystems and relationship with place.

After years of thinking on these matters, I am piloting a course devoted to them, appropriately called *Matters: Connecting Arts + Design to Materials, and Materials to Labor + Land* at the University of Pennsylvania, made possible by a Sachs Arts curricular development grant for adjunct lecturers. The course “connects art and design learners to considerations, sites, and cycles around production and disposal of the defining materials of their creative fields, laying groundwork for creative practice rooted in social and ecological awareness, repair and care.” It is a hybrid research seminar, field exploration, and studio investigation aimed toward forming a material ethics to guide future creative work. So far, we have visited a materials library, a construction and demolition waste management facility, a colonial papermill at the seat of an important Indigenous watershed, and more; students have responded heartfully in their presence and written and material reflections, noting how different this learning is from other arts and design courses that they have taken. I share these details to offer a more practical shape to the pedagogy I am urging here. I also know that ultimately, the concerns of this course should be part of all arts education today, and not topically sequestered. Lest we choose to continue to live with floods and fires, fracking and monocultures, wars waged on stolen lands, and to unquestioningly teach students to “represent these times” using tubes of plastic paint, purchased with student loans.

While artists are not, categorically, the primary agents of ecological devastation, it still holds immense meaning and influence for arts learning to shift to encompass values rooted in justice, regeneration, and care. “Sustainability” on the level of materials will not exist without corporate accountability and major systems overhaul, and the fight for those transformations hinges on ideological reconfiguration, which the arts can embody. Ursula Le Guin wrote, in her final year of life, that: “To use the world

well, to be able to stop wasting it and our time in it, we need to relearn our being in it” (Le Guin, 2016). Art students are in a prime position for such re- and un-learning and are fortunate to live in a time of abundant teachers and access to their teachings beyond limited canons. Arts pedagogy must align in solidarity and center the leadership of those making connections between sustainable ecological and creative futures: Indigenous leaders and Land Back initiatives offering pathways to wider publics for right relationship with more-than-human life, cultural producers and activists of the Global South exposing the disproportionate harms of colonialism and global capitalist extraction, and Black and Brown leaders with diasporic roots claiming new relationships to land, its caretaking, and reparations for enacted harms. Teaching about current conditions of material and its procurement, supply chain, waste, land and its peoples, labor, and alternatives within the context of creative practice is a way to foster those alignments; and furthermore, to call in the more major structural upheavals necessary to any meaningful transformation of academic spaces and the logics within, going forward.

Material Lives

Precarity once seemed the fate of the less fortunate. Now it seems that all our lives are precarious, even when, for a moment, our pockets are lined ... now many of us ... confront the condition of trouble without end.

—Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*

This essay, finally, is labor. It is the hours spent between teaching and freelance work and art practice, life necessities and relations, revisiting the thoughts of mentors, wrangling words as the world unfolds with intensity, to create something worth sharing. A vision for a more conscientious engagement with materials in the arts and arts pedagogy, which depends on a set of shifted relations to place, land, and planet, must necessarily extend to the material conditions—living and labor—of arts practitioners, teachers, and learners. Most educators and students know, in the words of bell hooks, that “The academy is not paradise” (hooks, 1994)—but there is myopia (perhaps necessary to avoiding utter disgust, or perhaps a fear-based silence), that propels an ongoing tacit relationship to these major issues. These conditions are the “tyrannies swallowed day by day” by the majority of faculty and students (Lorde, 1984), the seeming “trouble without end” referred to by Tsing (Tsing et al., 2017).

These conditions can be summarized as follows: the *majority* of art educators in higher education are working in exploitative and precarious

positions, leading an equally under-supported student base saddled with loans and untenable living conditions that drive *nearly half of students to drop out* before degree completion. This is not hyperbolic, but a confirmed crisis. A look at current data attests to the urgency. According to the most recent statistics, 75% percent of teachers in higher education are contingent laborers making below subsistence wages, often without benefits, job security, academic freedom, or channels of advancement (AFT, n.d.a). This is *7 out of 10 faculty members not making a living wage or having access to the full range of teaching tools and supports, having to work beyond full course loads and multiple jobs. One in three adjunct professors lives below the federal poverty line* (AFT, n.d.b). These realities are not a reflection of the abilities, skill sets, training, or intelligence of these teachers, but rather an institutional strategy to maintain cheap labor. The original function of the “adjunct,” a part-time teaching role for professionals with other careers for their main sources of income, stood in contrast to tenure, a system that emerged in the 1940s to protect the academic liberties of career professors. Once school administrations saw that they could get highly qualified teachers for piecemeal pay, they ran with it—and the percentages totally flipped—with 69% of higher ed teachers holding full-time positions in 1969, to 75% of higher ed teachers as contingent laborers now (Colby, 2023).

And so, this so-called “precarariat” of highly qualified, under-supported teachers is leading students who are up against surging tuition costs (a 173% increase in the last 40 years, while earning has increased by just 19%) (Colby, 2023). Currently, 40% of college students drop out before the completion of their degrees, in massive debt, without the “earning potential” to get out of the debt, and therefore likely to default on their loans. Again, only 6 out of 10 students who enroll in university will earn a degree (Colby, 2023).

These percentages become more disturbing when gender and race are taken into account. Of the 40% of undergraduates who do not finish their degree, the majority are Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students. And for faculty, 80% of tenured and tenure-track positions are White (and 53 percent of them are male) and of the contingent (adjunct, non-tenure track), 73 percent are White (34 percent male), and 27 percent are Latinx, Asian, African American, and Indigenous American (15 percent male, 13 percent female) (Colby, 2023). As of studies conducted in 2020, only 3 out of 10 tenured faculty are women. Pay for women in academia continues to be significantly lower as well (80% of what men earn) (AAUP, 2020).

These percentages indicate that for students, pressures leading to noncompletion fall along racial lines, and for faculty, positions in higher education viable to sustainable careers are still held nearly exclusively by White men. Although there is a rise in underrepresented identities in the

faculty base in higher education, most of this increase is in contingent positions. There is also correlation between schools with students at risk of noncompletion and higher concentrations of contingent faculty (again, faculty with less support to be supportive to students). The American Association of University Professors sums up the overarching concern and interconnectedness: “Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions” (AAUP, 2006). And faculty systems of oppression are student systems of oppression.

The pandemic has brought some of these realities to a more widespread light, as awareness around work conditions has increased, furthered by incredible waves of collectivizing, strikes, and demands in higher ed across the United States, as well as a halted presidential plan to forgive student debt that has captivated public attention. But there is still a veil of quiet politesse, fear, ignorance, and cultivated silence that pervades academia and preserves an abusive status quo. In addition to the more major waves of collective action, there are micro-advocacies that can and must happen within departments, classrooms, and schools and homes to illuminate and denormalize these entrenched and ubiquitous systems of harm. These center largely on transforming silence into language (and action).

For transforming silence into language, a first step could look like educating colleagues and students on the foregoing realities and statistics. More and more adjunct professors that I know are including “labor transparency” clauses in their syllabi explaining what it means to be an adjunct and how students might be impacted by adjunct labor. Here is an example from my own:

I am one of the 70% of professors in higher education known as an “adjunct” instructor. Adjuncts are hired on a semester-to-semester basis, paid below “full-time” professors, and do not have protections and privileges. Adjuncts are as qualified as their appointed peers, yet are operating within a system of structural exploitation now endemic to the American University system. The majority of adjuncts are women, NB, and people of color. Students are ultimately the most affected by these labor conditions. The more we know, the more we are able to advocate for more equitable systems. Happy to discuss further.

Individuals within the system with any privilege to do so could be frank during faculty meetings about conditions and pay, engage in the sharing of earnings (wage transparency) and start internal documents at their own institutions. Faculty can also look up the 990 tax forms of their schools to find out who are the highest paid employees of the school; I regularly encourage students to do

this, as seeing the figures for what deans and administrators are earning can really throw into perspective the perplexing mysteries around where tuition dollars go. Open discussion that emphasizes the ubiquity of this systemic problem can be a bridge into more localized institutional and departmental self-examination.

Learning about historic and present tactics for equity in higher ed is also necessary in addition to learning what ails it. Adjuncts can consider how to protect their intellectual property by looking up their institution’s specific rules on copyright and syllabus ownership. Recent collectivizing wins at schools such as The New School, NYU, Temple University, Rutgers, and the UC System can offer models for study and emulation, including the fractional appointment model (pay that is proportionately equal), salary caps and floors, examples of student and faculty solidarity, and more.

All of this work is better, and more safely done, in collectivity; however, I do think that some of the foregoing can be initiated by individual members of academic communities, regardless of whether there is a union or not (when done judiciously, of course). It may behoove outspoken educators in vulnerable positions to familiarize themselves with retaliation laws, and to partner with pro bono lawyers from national organizations like the Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts. *To be in, not of, the university* (to draw on Moten and Harney’s characterization of the “subversive intellectual”) demands that one resource oneself with knowledge toward protection and care and advocacy (Harney & Moten, 2013). This is the only way forward and through. And is certainly not part of the job description.

For art students, teaching artists, and educators, these forms of inquiry, ingenuity, communication, and circumnavigation are integral to the life of an artist today. They are necessary tools for figuring out how to live, make work, support one another, learn, and combat systems of oppression. Teaching students critical consciousness is not possible without turning the same lens on the structures surrounding that very teaching.

Words of Right-Now

To bear witness is not a passive act, it is an act of consciousness that leads to consequence.

—Terry Tempest Williams

This essay offers analogy between two major ailments in arts pedagogy in higher education, pertaining to the physical matter, and the material conditions, of our teaching, learning, and making. By laying them out in parallel, they can

be faced more fully, considered in all of their interconnection, and acted upon. This is what Lorde offered with the transformation of silence into language and action—that in giving expression even to pieces of experience and ideas, we gift fragments for others to build with, for action to grow, for reimagining the systems that have brought us to these points of breakage. Because the not-yet is always, and especially in this moment, right-now.

Many of us come to art specifically to be involved in imagining, visioning, dreaming, and creating the hitherto unthinkable and unrealized. We come because we do not see ourselves elsewhere and want to dream capacious dreams and bring them to reality. And we come to education to do this in community, to become *tentacular* (in the words of Haraway) and grow into forms of ourselves and our collectivities that we could never have known could be. We come to art and to education for its possibility, its anticipated becoming, hoping for what Paulo Friere described: “revolutionary futurity ... [which is] prophetic, (and as such, hopeful)” (Freire, 1972).

There is, as such, *hope* in knowing that transformation is possible and abundant because we have seen it in our communities, work, and selves; in knowing that trees can be words, and labor, and action, that can lead us, together, to trees again.

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