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Anton Ehrenzweig, the Artist Teacher and a Psychoanalytic Approach to School Art Education

Neil Walton - November 2019

Abstract

In the 1960s Anton Ehrenzweig devised an experimental course for school art teachers based on his deep knowledge of British psychoanalytic theory, especially Melanie Klein's ideas of projection and introjection. Ehrenzweig's early advocacy for the idea of an artist teacher, which formed a key element of his Art Teachers Certificate course at Goldsmiths, could be seen as ahead of its time, anticipating some of the ideas and practices of the past couple of decades. However, his claim that good teachers use their pupils as a medium for the teacher's own creativity raises ethical questions that still resonate today. In this article, I will draw out some comparisons between Ehrenzweig's theories of creativity and art education, and recent writing on the artist teacher. I will consider ways in which Ehrenzweig's development of Kleinian psychoanalytic theory can both complement and challenge current thinking about the merging and differentiation of artist, teacher and student identities.

Keywords

art, education, psychoanalysis, history, creativity, Ehrenzweig

The artist teacher as a model of educational practice is a well-established feature of art education theory. In what follows I do three things with this model. Firstly, I suggest there is an interesting historical precedent in an experimental course for art teachers that was run in the mid-1960s by the educator and theorist Anton Ehrenzweig. Secondly, I point to an ethical problem in teaching Art and Design and artist teacher–student relationships. I suggest the historical example of Ehrenzweig's approach both vividly highlights the ethical problem and points to some theoretical resources for understanding it. A broader underlying claim is that historical material can shed valuable light on contemporary debates in art and design pedagogy. To this end I will compare Ehrenzweig's theories of creativity and art education with recent writing on the artist teacher by Adams et al. (2008), Thornton (2011), Atkinson (2018) and others. In grouping these recent writers, I am seeking to draw out some common themes, admittedly at the risk of passing over some distinctiveness in their positions.

My starting point is a document relating to Ehrenzweig's course, a slim eight-page report titled *Towards a Theory of Art Education: Report on an Experimental Course for Art Teachers* (Ehrenzweig 1965). Ehrenzweig wrote extensively on aesthetics and psychoanalysis, including two books, one of which is a classic text of art theory, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Ehrenzweig 1967). My references to Ehrenzweig here will be selective, with the aim of developing an argument about the artist teacher. To understand Ehrenzweig's work more broadly I recommend Beth Williamson's comprehensive and authoritative writings. Her monograph on Ehrenzweig, *Between Art Practice and Psychoanalysis* Mid-

Twentieth Century (Williamson2015) explores his psychoanalytic ideas and their relevance to post-war artists such as Eduardo Paolozzi, Bridget Riley, Robert Smithson and Robert Morris. Williamson has also published an article in this journal about Ehrenzweig's experimental course (Williamson 2009).

Ehrenzweig conceived his course for art teachers drawing on his thorough knowledge of British psychoanalytic theory and psychoanalytic aesthetics. The one-year course, which ran at Goldsmiths between 1964 and 1966, placed an emphasis on teachers as artists, proposing that through exploring the resistances and flows of their creative processes they would be better equipped to understand similar problems in the students they were teaching. When Ehrenzweig took over the running of the Art Teachers Certificate course at Goldsmiths in 1964, courses of this type were the standard route for intending art teachers to enter the profession. Typically, they centred on teaching methods and the relation of art to the community and industry (MacDonald 1970, 304), but in a bold departure from established practice, Ehrenzweig devised a radical alternative to the usual programme as a way of testing out aesthetic theories that he had been working on since the 1940s.

The course was based on a simple premise: that the work of teaching and the work of art-making depended on the same capacities to be open and responsive to some 'other', whether that other was a learner or an artistic medium. In the educational context, the good teacher needs the ability at least to tolerate or, better, delight in children's spontaneity and independence. This mirrors the good artist who avoids preconceptions and clichés by discovering the independent life of materials, inviting accidents and scanning the emerging artwork for new clues and images. Conversely, both teachers and artists fail when they rigidly impose their narrow and restrictive intentions onto seemingly recalcitrant matter (Ehrenzweig1965, 2).

Underpinning the apparent simplicity of this premise is the developed theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, including, though not limited to, the object relations theories of Melanie Klein and her followers. Drawing on Kleinian theory, Ehrenzweig viewed an overly rigid approach in an artist or teacher as the product of unconscious defences first established in infancy. Summarising roughly, these archaic defences provoke in deep unconscious imagination the splitting off and expulsion of anxiety-provoking fragments of personality. Unbearable, dissociated parts are projected variously onto the artwork or onto the student, where they appear as troublesome and frustrating aspects of external reality. It is only when the artist teacher has developed the ego flexibility to reintegrate excluded elements of their personality that they can more perspicuously assess the material, be open to unplanned developments and achieve a more creative outcome (Ehrenzweig 1965, 7).

If the psychoanalytic language here seems specialist, and it certainly deserves more explanation than I have space to give it, the attitude at least, of advocating an open responsiveness to the student, is consonant with recent conceptions of the artist teacher. For example, in discussing a dialogic model of learning, Thornton (2011) has drawn a similar parallel between how an artist responds to materials and how a teacher enters into an 'intimate, amicable conversation' with a learner. He writes: 'the spirit of dialogue can be made manifest in the relationship artists have with their creations. Artists sometimes talk of

respecting and responding to the materials or media with which they create' (Thornton 2011, 33).

Ehrenzweig's way of describing the parallel between what teachers and artists do involves a far wider emotional range than respect and amity. It includes, among other things, anxiety, aggression, envy and disgust. It also at times positions the student in a subsidiary role. In the Goldsmiths report he wrote, 'Good teachers are like artists who are capable of using other people as their "medium"'; and further on, 'a good teacher paints through his pupils, using them as it were as his "brushes"' (Ehrenzweig 1965, 3). This characterisation invokes a notion of the artist as a discoverer of expressive resources through sensitive exploration of the resistances of a medium, and transposes this notion onto the teacher-learner relationship. It allows Ehrenzweig to cast the teacher as an artist working authentically from the centre of their personality. He considers that good, creative teachers will devote a large part of their energy to self-discovery (Ehrenzweig 1965, 2), and will use students in this process by setting them to work on the creative problems, the themes and images, that currently concern the teacher. He also observes that at other times an artist teacher will lose momentum in their independent work, diverting their creative energy into their students (Ehrenzweig 1967, 100).

The role of the learner in this conception of the pedagogical situation is complex. Ehrenzweig does not mean the learner is a passive resource at the teacher's disposal, since he holds that a good artist welcomes the independent life of the medium and treats the artwork as an independent being that necessarily resists and answers back (Ehrenzweig 1965, 1). He makes it clear that the teacher and student will be working together on a collective endeavour (Ehrenzweig 1965, 3). Nevertheless, there is on the face of it something unethical about the idea of the artist teacher using students as materials in their own process of self-discovery, even if that process is of benefit to both teacher and student.

Writing from a contemporary perspective, Thornton is emphatic that the teacher-student relationship should be equal and amicable: 'The notion of entering into dialogue with students and understanding them as co-learners and teachers reflects a central conceptualisation of dialogue as...two interlocutors striving for trust and mutual respect' (Thornton 2011, 33). In advocating a fusion of the roles of artist, teacher and learner, Thornton, reflects a common theme in recent writing on the artist-teacher model. In the same vein, Adams et al. (2008, 12) have written of the shared ownership of ideas in communities of practice: 'The material and theoretical production of the artist-learner and artist-teacher serves as a means of acquiring new insights and expertise, and for the learner-producers to teach others, even their teacher.' Similar points about merging these identities are made by Stanhope and by Pringle (Stanhope 2011, 391; Pringle 2009, n.p.).

This transposable, non-hierarchical, amicable characterisation of the artist teacher-student relationship, which must seem more ethically appealing than Ehrenzweig's view of the artist teacher as a self-exploring user of students, draws on a particular view of what it is to be a contemporary artist. In place of the modernist artist who works expressively from the centre of their personality, recent writing positions the contemporary artist as a creative investigator and collaborator, a co-worker whose shifting, contingent identity is

continuously produced in the flow of social interaction (Adams 2007, 266). Rejecting a modernist view of the artist, Dennis Atkinson has written that 'the notion of self-expression qua uniqueness, originality and authenticity was relinquished long ago. The idea of a self signifying an accessible original entity or presence has been replaced by understanding the self as a socio-psychic and affective performance'(Atkinson 2006, 18). The questions that arise in the comparison of Ehrenzweig's theory with recent writing are of how fluid or fixed and how harmonious or conflicting are the identities of artist, teacher and learner.

It would be misleading to draw the contrast too sharply. Although in the mid-1960s Ehrenzweig was writing from within the prevailing modernist paradigm, his views about artistic identity, expression and the creative process are rich and nuanced, anticipating many contemporary ideas. In his fullest statement, *The Hidden Order of Art*, he wrote:

Creativity, then, may be self-creation, but it is possible only through social intercourse...The work of art is certainly not merely a projection and direct reflection of our inner world through 'self-expression' as is often assumed. It receives the fragmented projections of our inner world only to nurture and transform them.
(Ehrenzweig 1967, 223)

On the other side, a certain type of psychoanalytic theory has been much used by recent writing on the artist teacher, namely Judith Butler's theory of mourning and performative identity (Adams 2007, 266; Atkinson 2006, 20; Butler 1997, 132). An important area of overlap then between Ehrenzweig and some recent writing is the centrality given to the psychoanalytic notion of introjection and its relation to mourning (also relevant here is Adam Phillips' commentary on Judith Butler, Phillips 1997, 151). I return to the ideas of introjection and mourning below.

What is distinctive about Ehrenzweig's account here, and worthy of fresh consideration, is how it explores the identities of artist, teacher and student both merging *and* separating in the emotional dynamics of education and creativity. Recent writings on the artist teacher sometimes convey the impression that these roles and identities can be performed interchangeably or perhaps that they have become redundant altogether (Stanhope 2011, 391). Ehrenzweig's theory suggests there remains a need for a distinct role for the artist teacher at certain points in the process of education. A similar argument has been well made by Gert Biesta (Biesta 2017) in his critique of 'learnification'. It is interesting to note that Biesta, though drawing on different theoretical sources, also highlights the importance of working through an experience of resistance in the teacher-student relationship (Biesta 2017, 19). Perhaps it could be said that recent views on the artist teacher underplay the extent to which participants in education carry with them the legacy of established identities and deep-seated, unconscious patterns of relating. Just as difficult aspects of inherited cultural ideas and practices need to be brought out, engaged with and made sense of, so too the legacies of residual psychic patterns need to be worked through rather than wishfully passed over.

The value of Ehrenzweig's theory is how he explores the dynamics of these inherited psychic patterns of conflict as they unfold, through an account of three phases of creativity. In

developing this account he adapts and revises Melanie Klein's ideas of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions and the mechanisms of projection and introjection. These are patterns and mechanisms which we develop in infancy to cope with extreme vulnerability and which continue to shape mental life into adulthood. Both teaching and art-making are demanding, unpredictable tasks. If their challenges reawaken unbearable infantile anxiety they may trigger defensive splitting and projection. Ehrenzweig thought such experiences of fragmentation were an inevitable first stage in art-making (Ehrenzweig 1967, 102). What distinguishes the creative artist is their more flexible response. A rigid-defensive response leads to hackneyed formulas and mannerisms. An alternative response, which is also defensive, is to enter an integrated state where attention is open but unfocused. In this state, troubling fragmentation is suspended through submerging perception to a level at which parts are blurred and fused; chaotic-seeming to conscious perception but possessing a complex order that is available to unconscious scanning. This phase of 'dedifferentiation', to use Ehrenzweig's term, involves a surrender or even death of the ego into an 'oceanic' state, which is also paradoxically experienced as a limitless expansion and omnipotence, 'a "full" emptiness' (Ehrenzweig 1967, 25).

The second creative phase, the phase of dedifferentiation, suggests a further connection between Ehrenzweig's theory and recent writing on the artist teacher in its emphasis on merging identities and suspending hierarchies. Here the dedifferentiation goes beyond merely democratising the roles of artist, teacher and student. It erases more fundamental distinctions between human and non-human, object and process. For example, Dennis Atkinson has written about the value of destabilising our usual assumptions about matter and agency in educational contexts, recommending instead that we

think of a learning encounter as a specific phenomenon consisting of a series of ongoing intra-relations composed of specific material engagements of human and non-human processes within a specific phenomenal space prior to any differentiation between learner, materials, bodies and so on. (Atkinson 2018, 32)

Writing in a strikingly similar vein some four decades earlier, Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his introduction to the French edition of *The Hidden Order of Art*, suggests that the essence of Ehrenzweig's contribution is an emphasis on how the artist lowers barriers between interior and exterior reality creating a single libidinous surface without limits, a 'heterogeneous surface that includes skins, organs, streets, walls, canvases, instruments' (Lyotard 1989, 164). Here Lyotard seizes on what he calls the radical 'laxity' of the phase of dedifferentiation which, he claims, produces an extended 'artistic body', 'beyond the body of the artist and beyond any body closed in on itself', across which intensities are communicated between one unconscious and another (Lyotard 1989, 164).

Some recent writing elaborates the artist teacher model in relation to the transgressive and open-ended character of contemporary art, seeing art as an arena of limitless possibilities, a release from established ideas and practices (Adams et al. 2008, 22; Atkinson 2018, 166). A common emphasis is on process and improvisation, free from preconceived aims or even rejecting determinate out-comes altogether (Pringle 2009, n.p.; Atkinson 2018, 168). Ehrenzweig's phase of dedifferentiation is comparable in its dissolution of boundaries and

sense of endlessly open possibility. However, for Ehrenzweig this phase is only one aspect of art-making, only one moment in a cyclical creative process. Dedifferentiation is a central part of the creative process, but it also entails a manic denial of reality. Although the exhilaration of this state of mind is in its simultaneous feelings of unbounded omnipotence and dissolution of self, if it relentlessly defers any reckoning, any testing of reality, it can also become a defensive avoidance of otherness.

In Ehrenzweig's model, the phase of dedifferentiation is a state of suspension that can be escaped only if the artist overcomes anxiety sufficiently to defuse the manic defences of omnipotence and denial. If this is accomplished, a new phase follows, what Ehrenzweig calls, adapting the terminology of Kleinian theory, the depressive stage. In this third creative phase, the manic state in which all seemed possible or all seemed resolved gives way to 'the grey feeling of the "morning after"' (Ehrenzweig 1967, 103). In this phase, the artist faces up to the successes and failures of the work, 'taking in' or 'introjecting' both the good and the bad. This amounts to a kind of mourning for the lost fantasy of an ideal work or the loss of unrealised possibilities, but correspondingly a newly heightened perception of the actuality of what has been accomplished and an impulse to repair the now-revealed fragmentation and incompleteness. Ehrenzweig writes: 'It is the third phase of re-introjection when the independent existence of the work of art is felt most strongly. The work of art acts like another living person with whom we are conversing' (Ehrenzweig 1967, 104). In the initial, most acutely anxious, phases of projection, fragmentation and dedifferentiation, the artist (and by implication, the teacher) was immersed in phantasy, trapped in a bubble of immanence. It is only with the shift to the depressive phase that the reality of the other emerges fully as a centre of concern. The other, be it an artwork or a student, is no longer regarded as a means of gratification or a source of threat, but as having an independent life. It is in this way that Ehrenzweig's account brings together aesthetic and ethical considerations. As he writes: 'To accept the work's independent life requires a humility that is an essential part of creativity' (Ehrenzweig 1967, 105).

In the light of these comments about the depressive phase, it seems even more surprising that Ehrenzweig could write so emphatically of the good teacher using students as tools or materials for a personal creative exploration. It would seem more in keeping with the implication of his theory that a good teacher will discover the student's independent otherness by fully working through the creative cycle. Perhaps he meant to suggest that the artist teacher and the student pass through phases of creative self-centredness followed by reality testing and reparation, merging at times, at others generating rivalry and conflict. But though these ideas may be implied by the theory, they are nowhere made explicit. Rather, the issue is left awkwardly unresolved. For the most part Ehrenzweig focuses elsewhere, on the intrapsychic dynamics of the creative process, on the shifting ego-states of the individual artist, with only suggestions thrown out about the teacher-student relationship. Nevertheless, although Ehrenzweig did not resolve these relational questions, his writings still provide rich resources for further thinking.

In comparing Ehrenzweig's psychoanalytic theories of creativity and art education with recent writing on the artist teacher, I have not sought to present the older approach as

straightforwardly preferable. For the purposes of thinking about artist teacher—student relationships it has some gaps and shortcomings. I have tried to draw out links between Ehrenzweig’s theory and current discussion of the artist teacher, and in doing so, I have placed some emphasis on the importance of the depressive phase because of its ethical implications, but I hope it is clear how Ehrenzweig’s writing opens up a range of positions and related ideas of art through its phasic analysis of creativity. Various emphases and artistic impulses can find support within this complex theory. It sheds light on the emotional dynamics and differentiated identities involved in art-making and education. It also, through developing an artistic account of projection, introjection and the depressive position, suggests how an openness to the possibilities of creating new art can be reconciled with the need to work through the legacies of the past.

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