

Ephemeral Encounters: Metaphors for an Archipelagic Pedagogy

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Biography

Raphael Vella is Associate Professor of Art Education and Head of the Department of Arts, Open Communities and Adult Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malta. He has published papers and books that research the overlaps between art practice and education, especially the complex issue of identity in art education, contemporary art and the Mediterranean. Edited volumes include *Artist-teachers in Context: International Dialogues* (Sense Publishers, 2016) and *Mediterranean Art and Education: Navigating local, regional and global imaginaries through the lens of the arts and learning* with John Baldacchino (Sense Publishers, 2013). For many years, he has been active in curating, having directed the Valletta International Visual Art festival (VIVA) in 2014 and 2015, and is currently co-curating the Malta Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2017. He is also a practising artist, having shown his work at Modern Art Oxford, the Venice Biennale and several other international venues.

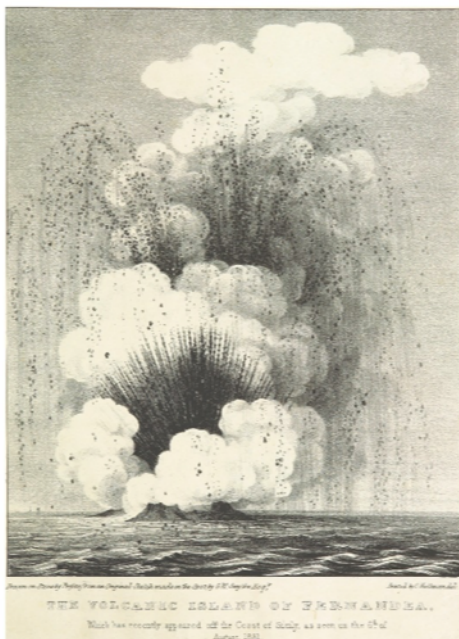
Abstract

In this visual essay, two artistic projects conducted with pre-service art teachers, irregular migrants and emerging artists from around the Mediterranean region are employed as metaphors for an art pedagogy that revolves around relational and collaborative practices. Informed by the work of Édouard Glissant, this ‘archipelagic pedagogy’ focuses on the unexpected and ephemeral

nature of exchange and translation rather than individualistic and prescribed outcomes.

Keywords

Mediterranean, island, archipelago, relations, ephemerality.



“We are in search of an islet.”
“Yes, signor.”
“Is there an islet anywhere near here?”
“An islet?”
“Yes.”
“Do you mean an island?”
“An island!” said Antifer, shrugging his shoulders.
“Yes, an island! a pretty little island! an islet! an icky little isliekie of an islet! Do you not understand?”

Jules Verne, 1895, p. 316

Figure 1: Image from Smythe, G.W. (1832). *Views and Description of the late Volcanic Island off the coast of Sicily*. London: Joseph Booker, p. 25. (Public domain)

Can pedagogical relations in art education be mapped out or reimagined on the basis of the twin metaphors of island and archipelago? Evolving out of Martinican writer Édouard Glissant’s distinction (2010, pp. 143-144) between a “root identity”—founded in a distant past and strengthened by a sense of entitlement that is attached to a specific land and the need to colonise other lands—and a “relation identity”—linked to a more chaotic and contradictory world made of contacts of cultures—the idea of an archipelagic pedagogy that is being explored here is one that focuses on dialogic and collaborative practices in the field of the arts. Various forms of collaboration have existed in art for a number of decades, often revolving around the need for

collective social action and the questioning of artistic agency (Lind, 2007; Kester, 2011). By focusing on collaboration as an end in itself rather than a means to achieving other ends, an art pedagogy informed by such practices potentially redirects our attention away from the popularised notion of an art world built on competitiveness, individual stardom, spectacle and commercialisation. Through a more relational understanding of meaning-making and knowledge creation, it also subverts part of the tradition of art education itself, whose studio methods and role models lifted from Western culture sometimes perpetuate hierarchies and notions of individualism transplanted from the field of art. On a wider, cultural and political level, archipelagic thought dissociates itself from an imperialist worldview, replacing annexation with notions of connection, participation and inheritance. The fact that Europe and other parts of the world are witnessing an upsurge of nationalism, populist anti-immigration rhetoric and xenophobia only serves to make the kind of relational thinking that Glissant proposed even more urgent.

In the teaching profession, the implementation of collaborative art projects is sometimes obstructed by assessment criteria and school attainment targets (Horn 2008). The ability of art educators to think beyond commodification and excessive individualism therefore needs to start at a pre-service stage, when teacher or artist-teacher identities are in the process of being formed and pedagogical skills are being refined. At this stage, prospective art teachers can work collectively to generate new ways of knowing: knowledge that produces a critical consciousness and relies on open-ended interactions, not structured outcomes (Lasczik Cutcher, 2018). Needless to say, such learning spaces are brimming with uncertainties and doubts that can impinge on the outcome of educational and artistic activities. This is perhaps the most crucial dimension of an art education that embraces the challenge of engaging with group dynamics and changing the nature of artistic work, finding new ways of evaluating 'success' and deconstructing the idea of authorship.

These uncertainties were palpable at the start of a collaborative project I undertook with



Figure 2 & 3: Photographs taken during the project *Your eyes, my eyes: Images of displacement* a group of prospective art teachers and young irregular migrants from different parts of the African continent soon after I began to coordinate the art education programme at the University of Malta in 2004. At the time, the number of irregular migrants and asylum seekers arriving by boat on the small island of Malta from northern Africa was on the rise and simply broaching the subject in any public forum or educational context was potentially contentious. Our aim was to work with a group of migrants who had been separated from the larger community of African migrants because they were minors who had arrived in Maltese territorial waters without legal guardians. Using cameras, some basic training in photography and discussions about framing strategies, each group would tell its 'story' about itself in relation to the other group, beginning from the same location (Malta) but becoming critically aware of the limited parameters of one's personal vision and the educational obligation to transcend an oppositional discourse. Initial hesitation in the early sessions and fear of objectification of members of the other group led some Maltese students to portray their encounters indirectly, by focusing on close-up fragments and textures, but follow-up meetings helped them to become more uninhibited and friendly. Some Eritrean, Somali and other migrants shot images of the open sea and landing sites, indicating the route that could possibly take them back to their starting point in Libya. Others photographed daily activities or celebrations, including their meetings with the undergraduate



Figure 4: Photograph taken during the project *Your eyes, my eyes: Images of displacement* students. A Somali adolescent took photos with her best Maltese friend—a teenage girl with Down syndrome (“she is the only person here who doesn’t care about the colour of my skin”). Images were exchanged and discussed (Fig. 4). The project culminated in a collective exhibition called *Your eyes, my eyes: Images of displacement* in a cultural centre, in which printed photographs by participants in both groups were shown without categorisations, hierarchies or captions. The latter was a deliberate strategy that ensured that the result would be seen as a collective enterprise.

The project described briefly above can be understood as a meeting-point, a ‘sea’ that displaces and connects lands and itineraries. Nevertheless, engaging in projects like this also makes participants cognisant of the difficulties involved in any encounter. The shared processes and outcomes in the project—a direct engagement with a separate cohort of participants using a single, shared medium, leading to a combined public presentation—were rewarding yet strained at times. Broadly speaking, the difficulties were ‘political’ in nature, expressed in questions

about the conflict between aesthetic and social concerns, the feasibility of reaching some sort of consensus, and the sensitive issue of representation. However, these challenges are inherent to any educational or cultural project which questions perceptions built on entrenched notions of difference and accepts the existence of opacity in its midst. For Glissant, the right to opacity emerges from a reaction to the Western desire and reductive demand for transparency or knowability: “Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components” (2010, p. 190). This fabric implies a move from exclusionary to archipelagic thinking, from a fear of dilution to the potentiality of connections between land and sea as well as other lands. Within this weave one senses an awareness of difference existing not as an affirmation of distinction but already extant within one’s own immediate environment. Art is brought to life at a juncture, just as the paintings on Lascaux’s walls show evidence of the centrality of animal life to human survival at the time. For Glissant, beauty happens when such encounters are made possible:

For we have an intuition of beauty every time we sense in an object or an idea or a work of art or a passion, not simply the encounter of same and other (that would be a cliché), nor the alleged perfection of forms (that would be a tautology), but the tension of something that is a difference in itself and also opens itself to other differences to be known and encountered. (2013, p. 858)

Archipelagic relations are therefore inherent to the process of making art. As the title of Glissant’s best-known book *Poetics of Relation* informs us, our engagement with these relations is a poetic, not a rational, venture; we must imagine what archipelagic thought beyond territorial claims can be. In this sense, the results obtained in collaborative projects cannot be predetermined or ‘measured’ in conventional ways but imagined.

In arts education, an archipelagic pedagogy would require measures that encourage networking situations which expose participants to the opacity and multiplicity of other partici-



Figure 5: The installation *Arçipelagu* in an old examination centre in Valletta, Malta (2018)

pants as well as oneself. This brings me to a more recent artistic project that I initiated in 2017 and presented in public in 2018, with the participation of over thirty emerging artists based on islands around the Mediterranean. Called *Arçipelagu* (Archipelago), the project formed part of a larger exhibition and was influenced by the recent field of island studies and linked art practice with education and curation. The venue chosen by the exhibition's curator Maren Richter provided the project with a direct and historical connection with the educational domain as well as, more indirectly, the hegemonic influence of a history reeking of colonisation. This was an old examination centre in the St Elmo area of Valletta in Malta, a place that had been associated for many years in the last century with Ordinary and Advanced level examinations that the Maltese had inherited from the British educational system. In 2017, the derelict building still contained scores of school tables and chairs used during examination sessions, and some of these were retained for *Arçipelagu*. An international open call for participation was issued and disseminated with the help of online journals, academics and cultural workers based on different islands in the Mediterranean region. Using images, text and video, all potential participants were asked to

respond to a single question: Is an island a place one escapes to or escapes from? The question was intended to elicit reflections about the localised epistemologies of different islanders and the mediated narratives that reduce the value of the coastline to a more recent form of conquest and exploitation, that of the tourism industry.



Figure 6: Images by emerging artists from different islands around the Mediterranean



Figure 7: One of the artists' images, *Isolitudine (Murati dal mare)*, 2017, by Sicilian artist Giuseppe Di Liberto

Images by the selected participants, who lived or were born in various islands like Corsica, Sicily, Cyprus, Malta, Corfu, Rhodes and Mallorca, were installed on one wall of a traditional classroom that was purposely built within the examination centre to echo the history of the place (Fig. 5). Lasting between 30 and 60 seconds each, the artists' short videos were looped and presented on a large monitor on another wall, while their texts and images were included in an artist's book shown in the same exhibition. The 'archipelago' in the work's title came to life in the collaborative process itself and in the multilingual nature of the book (Fig. 8) and videos. Extracts in Greek, Maltese, Turkish, Italian, Corsican and other languages floated around this educational forum that deliberately avoided translation, because translation is ultimately the responsibility of every participant, including members of the public. The lack of sub-titles or translated texts also meant that the question of arbitration or assessment was kept wide open—despite the historical links the building had with imported assessment systems.



Figure 8: Artist's book with multilingual texts, 2018

Of course, other archipelagos are possible, involving different islands, languages and classroom arrangements. If we are to keep archipelagic options as open-ended as possible, the very land we inhabit needs to be a place fraught with various tensions, an ephemeral site in motion or dis-placed land. A land that comes and goes. To imagine such a place, it would help if we employed yet another island trope which undermines the solidity and permanence of land, for there can be no “root identity” if the very land one feels rooted to is impermanent. I am referring to the existence of ephemeral islands—seamounts that occasionally rise to the surface of the sea as a result of volcanic activity, only to get eroded and disappear after some months or years. A good example of such a natural phenomenon lies around 30km southwest of the island of Sicily, not far from the island of Pantelleria (Fig. 1). This is a volcanic area which has, at different times in history, given rise—quite literally—to a submerged island with a handful of names (Kozák & Čermák, 2010, pp. 77-78). Its emergence and growth to around sixty metres above sea level in July 1831, along with a very visible display of volcanic gases, instantly transformed it into a new patch of land to colonise. A British ship was dispatched to plant the Union Jack on the island, its captain naming the strange crop of volcanic tephra Graham Island. The Kingdom

of the two Sicilies also claimed the island, calling it Ferdinanda, while the French named it Julia. Within a few months, however, the political squabble over ownership of the land was brought to a anti-climactic close by another natural occurrence, that of the island's disappearance beneath the waves of the Mediterranean. The island's quirkiness also inspired one of Jules Verne's adventure novels, in which a sea captain called Antifer searches in vain for a buried treasure, only to find out that the island it was hidden on was in fact Ferdinanda, now fifty fathoms below the surface along with its single, most valuable asset. Even here, in the world of fiction, the human fixation on possession is sabotaged by nature, which teases colonising and treasure-hunting parties by playing a cruel Freudian game of *fort/da* (gone/there).

This missing island spins a tale about the ephemerality of claims tethered to land and identity and alludes to the blurring of territorial lines. In the absence of a stable distinction between land and sea, here and there, or authorial figure and participant, all of us are called upon to become translator-sailors, navigating a sea of relations that converts the local into the global. By transferring this strange phenomenon to the field of education, one could say that an archipelagic pedagogy is one in which learners come face to face with the temporary disappearance of the ground beneath their feet. As educators, we open our classrooms to unfamiliar histories, to Glissant's "opacities", to a sense of loss and wandering that has accompanied us in the great epics of literature for millennia. The value of these collaborative openings in the spaces of art education is critical because it permits us to destabilise relations of power and language, discovering the new in others, in ourselves and in how others make use of what we might have previously defined as 'ours'. At a time when speakers of the Spanish language in the US feel at risk of various forms of abuse due to increasing resentment towards minorities, educators must rely on this sensation of bewilderment as they and their learners encounter the unexpected: the 'other' in our midst, the 'other' within us, the 'other' speaking 'our' language.

This sensation is aptly described by André Breton soon after his wartime arrival in *outr-*

mer Martinique, where he was happy to meet and befriend Glissant's compatriot Aimé Césaire, one of the founders of the francophone Négritude movement. Here was, for Breton, a surrealist inversion of colonised and coloniser, an explosion of language from within, a liberation from Western consciousness and rationality. Here was, in Breton's words,

a black man who handles the French language as no white man today is capable of handling it. And it is a black man who is the one guiding us today into the unexplored, seeming to play as he goes [...] And it is a black man who, not only for blacks but for all humankind, expresses all the questions, all the anguish, all the hopes and all the ecstasy and who becomes more and more crucial as the supreme example of dignity. (quoted in Sayer, 2017, p. 45)

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