



Special Edition

## **More than meets the eye: An observation on Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy in a child's art experience**

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We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 4)

This is a critical discussion of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'becoming', as related to 'other things' in which multiplicities emerge through de/re/territorialisation of desire, and affect. With the idea that adults "are quite at home with our orthodox thinking" (Olsson, 2013, p. 251), I approach this paper with all openness and anticipation as to what children's engagement in creative processes might reveal. This paper consists of a narration of Paz, a 4 year-old girl in an early childhood centre that I have been working with. It is followed by a brief summary of an interview with her teacher.

### ***Introduction***

I write this having been working as a teacher alongside a team leader in charge of the oldest children at a centre and two other permanent teachers, plus three relief/student teachers, for six months. Things can change very quickly in an early childhood centre, so when the lead teacher {whom we name Pauline} went on a six-week medical leave, I was asked to take her place and become the lead teacher in the room, a class of three and four year olds. Because of this, I had to very quickly adapt to the children in the room and learn their daily practices. In preparation for this role, I asked Pauline if I could observe one of her children engaging in an art experience, to be followed by an interview with her. Pauline granted consent for the interview and I gained consent from Paz's parents for the observation.

### ***Context***

When I attended the first art session, Pauline gave the children an outline to the art activity before the children had their morning tea, reminding them of the story entitled 'Tangaroa and the Tekoteko'. This is a Māori legend about the Tekoteko, a carved wooden image of a human. Pauline showed the children their previous drawings of Tekoteko: "Today, we are going to use darker colours to draw your Tekoteko," Pauline reminded the children. As she was speaking, she said positive things about each child's artwork. When Paz's drawing was shown, Paz exclaimed, "I looked at that one [pointing at the book] when I draw."

While the children were having their morning tea, Pauline was busy setting up the art tables. She put out a tray for each child with a piece of paper with a print-out of their name. In the middle of the table were tubs of pastel pencils and books with images of different Tekoteko. Paz was one of the first to finish her morning tea, but she did not go straight to the table, instead waiting at the book corner. When everyone was ready, Pauline called them all to the tables that were set up for them.



Paz quickly found her tray with her name on it, grabbed a Tekoteko book from the middle of the table and started to flip through the pages. She found a page with a Tekoteko that must have caught her eye. Paz then became very focused on her drawing, frequently looking at the book for reference. She was undistracted by the singing and chatter of some of the children at the table. After a few minutes of drawing, she got up and ran to Pauline, who was attending to some children at the other table. Since Pauline was still busy, she asked Paz to show her drawing to me. "It's a talking wall," she told me. I redirected her to Pauline afterwards, to continue my observation of her. She told Pauline the same thing, that it was a talking wall, similar to the one in the story. Pauline encouraged her to draw another Tekoteko and she complied. She went back to Pauline after drawing another Tekoteko. This went on a couple more times, with each time Pauline suggesting something and Paz coming back to Pauline to show her the drawing again. When Paz was finally done, she showed her drawing to her close friend, then handed her drawing to Pauline before prancing around the room with a smile on her face.

### ***Reflections on Paz***

The interview with Pauline was conducted the day after the observation and shed light on the background to the drawing activity, as well as Pauline's views on children's art experience and learning as a whole.

According to Pauline, the subject for the art work was brought about by the children's exploration of construction, i.e. bridges, maps, patterns etc. Pauline thought the book tied in well with construction and the Māori legends that they learnt about on a regular basis. Her expectations from the artwork was not that the children drew nice looking Tekotekos, nor was 'creativity' her objective; it was clear that she saw the art experience as more concerned with the learning through the process, more than the final product.

Pauline defended her use of books during the art making as a provocation, rather than a template that the children are expected to copy. She also pointed out the behaviour displayed by Paz as she went back and forth from drawing and showing her artwork to Pauline, then back to drawing again. The interview also touched on how Pauline herself felt she was constantly learning from the children and being shaped by their engagement. She ended the interview by saying that her philosophy was to encourage children to encounter themselves through art, while at the same time revealing her own desire to be able to draw: "I can't draw to save myself...I wish I could!"

### ***Artwork, Deleuze and Guattari***

Deleuze suggests we learn through the arts. Looking at children's work in relation to Deleuzian concepts places arts experiences in the early childhood centre as more than mere curricular activities about creating something 'artistic'. Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy "insists on creative thought" (Olsson, 2013, p. 231) in order to thread the unknown, to discover an idea, to be surprised. This implies that art is seen as beyond aesthetic significance and a set of skills; to participate in art is to activate a capacity, to pave the way for understanding one's self and the world — to see art as "a way of revealing the world and ideas rather than representing them" (Grierson, 2011, p. 337). Art, accordingly, allows us to see the world in a different light or illumine the mundane, being open to different intensities. Greene (2000) affirms that the arts "break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" (p. 278), activating the 'rhizomatic' imagination towards the creation of new possibilities.

The *rhizome*, an image taken from the root system of plants, is seen in Deleuzian philosophy as a network of interconnected pathways that intersect, join, and/or flee from each other in random heterogeneous yet lateral connectivity devoid of order, hierarchy, inhibitions, source, or point of ending (Sellers, 2010; Whyte & Naughton, 2014; Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, & Davies, 2010). Whyte and Naughton (2014) see the rhizome as useful for early childhood educators, "as children work in an uninhibited fashion, making connections and surpassing formal rules, which characterise the way children devise their activity" (p. 30). Sellers (2010) adds that rhizomatic thinking "opens (to) endless possibilities for



approaching any thought, activity or concept” (p. 560). With this in mind, we look at the art activity and the participants as being in a rhizome, with different potentialities, creating movement that can be enacted within multiple connections relating to people, place, time and memory.

Although Pauline gave instructions and each child had access to the same materials, in the interview, she did not limit the capacity of any child. Pauline went as far as saying that, although she gives them an idea or a provocation, “they could do what they want with them. If they had all drawn a car that would not have bothered me...” Her nonchalance might be attributed to her view of an art experience as engaging in the process. This is characteristic of a rhizomatic approach where the rhizome is always in the middle, without beginning or end (Sellers, 2010). Knight (2009), who has studied children’s drawing, reiterates that:

A child might draw, not to reach an end goal but to continuously desire to draw, to continuously hook into a need to visualise without reaching a conclusion, to constantly form a relationship with the drawing-act for the value of drawing rather than reaching an ending.  
(p. 14)

As each child was busy with his or her own drawing, they took different directions within the rhizome. As Paz was focused on copying the Tekoteko from the book, other children alongside her were in the same rhizome, involved in one activity but taking different pathways. One child was singing while drawing, which intersected with another child as he joined him in the singing. Each child was seen using different strokes, colours and autonomously and collectively finding his/her/their pathways in the interconnected rhizome.

In rhizome, Pauline needed to hold an image of children as equal to her; to see children as capable and creative beings (Knight, 2009; Sansom, 2011; Tayler, 2006). By desiring for them to be competent and confident, she regarded the children as capable of threading their own way in the rhizome. Pauline saw the educator’s role as responding to the visual experience while maintaining an open-ended approach to the art making. This is congruent with the Deleuzo-Guattarian point of view, where children are always in the process of be(co)ming, in flux, always in continuous perpetual change (Sellers, 2010). This is in contrast with the image of the child as a helpless person who needs to go through successive developmental stages. Less judgement will be made and each child can be seen in his or her own never-ending journey. To see Paz’s drawing, which highly resembled the image that she was copying from the book, and her *seatmate*’s drawing, which barely resembled what a Tekoteko looks like, as equally valid drawings is to see them in their own becoming.

Within the rhizome, although free-flowing, there is still structure (Whyte & Naughton, 2014). In the case of the Tekoteko activity, the structures in place were the set tables with trays for each child, with their own paper and names, the art materials available and unavailable and the task at hand. These structures or striations (Whyte & Naughton, 2014) act like road barriers or lines put in place to slow down vehicles, as an indicator that they are changing lanes, leaving the ‘smooth space’. “Smooth space emphasizes the journey, the line of movement through shifting territorialities, whereas striated space represents systems...infrastructure and boundary systems” (Livesey, 2013, p. 181). This deviation from the striated space, the breaking away from the smooth space, fleeing the boundary is termed a line of flight or lines of de/territorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). “There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9).

In the observation, the de/territorialisation was in the form of deviation from the actual task of drawing a Tekoteko. In Paz’s case, it did not seem very obvious. The only obvious line of flight that she took was when she decided not to copy from the book anymore. However, in Pauline’s interview, she revealed how children de/territorialise when they decide to draw a car, a monster, or anything else instead of a



Tekoteko. Sandvik (2010) reiterates that “all elements of the world are elastic and permeable constantly passing into each other” (p. 203).

This brings us to the point of de/territorialisation and subsequent re/territorialisation. Whyte and Naughton (2014) give a clear-cut example of this when children make a version of an already existing song: they de/territorialise by changing the lyrics, then re/territorialise when they formalise their ‘new’ song. Lines (2013) expounds that re/territorialisation “is when the line of flight leaves the territory altogether transmuting and building another territory” (p. 29). This surfaced in Pauline’s narration of a child who had recently been on a holiday, who kept adding an image of an aeroplane in every visual art activity that she did. She de/territorialised each drawing by adding in something completely ‘out of the box’ and re/territorialised by then making it her own. Pauline added that, due to their previous work on bridges, most of the children incorporated a bridge in the picture of the Tekoteko. Again, this showed how lines rupture, paving a way for new ones but remaining part of the rhizome. When these new lines intersect and flow with others in a constant re/territorialised or chosen formalised state, as in the children deciding on their own new words to the song, this creates a milieu, a plane where imagination flows within the new formalised imaginary (Whyte & Naughton, 2014; Sellers, 2010).

Pauline’s placement of books with Tekoteko pictures can be criticised as providing a model for children to imitate. Knight (2009) views this kind of process to be stifling for the children’s imagination, preventing them from “venturing into the unknown” (p. 15). However, Pauline added that these are mere provocations within a wider context and that the choice was left to the children whether to engage in the Tekoteko or not. These ‘provocations’ can be seen as part of an assemblage of desire, where the children as a group were left to decide.

To understand the concept of assemblages of desire, Olsson (2009) suggests that we turn desire “on its head” (p. 141). This means seeing desire as an “unconscious processes of production of the real” (Deleuze & Guattari, as cited in Olsson, 2009) rather than a reaction to a need or lack. Put more simply, this can be explained as ‘desire’ being a cause for producing new realities and not an effect of lack or deficiency. Assemblages connotes that desire does not exist on its own; rather, it arrives assembled (Olsson, 2009; Wyatt et al., 2010). Olsson (2009) adds that one never desires something or someone, but desires from an “assemblage of relations” (p. 149). Deleuze (as cited in Olsson, 2009) reiterates that “to desire is to construct an assemblage” (p. 149).

Pauline’s provocations could be seen as part of the assemblage of desire of the children. When Paz, by her own volition, referred to the book as she drew the Tekoteko, she used it as part of her assemblage of desire to create her art work, to produce a new actuality. As a result, when she was finally finished with the activity, her joyous feelings indicated that she had experienced movement, an ‘affect’ or change – affect being the body’s capacity to act. Olsson (2009) states that negative and positive emotions reveal our body’s capacity to act, with affect being restricted or extended respectively. In Paz’s case, affect was evident in her prancing around the room with a satisfied smile on her face.

At the end of the art activity, each child, just like Paz, came up to Pauline and talked about their artwork. Pauline would react positively and appropriately, careful not to stifle each child’s imagination, while they described to her what the drawing on the paper was all about for them. In asking the children to talk about their work, Pauline effectively encouraged them to extend their affective response and create their own assemblages. In effect, Pauline allowed the children to “ebb and flow freely through their ideas” embracing their innovation, creativity, and imagination (Sellers, 2010, p. 574).



## Conclusion

Looking at the art experience of a child in an early childhood centre and the interview with the teacher through the inclusive lens of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy reveals so much more beneath the superficial act of making images on a piece of paper, or any artmaking, for that matter. Locating children and adults in the same, non-hierarchical plane of the rhizome elicits profound respect for the child's capacities to create their own virtual/actual meanings. At the same time, I believe Deleuzian philosophy calls for humility, patience, and excitement as early childhood educators like myself recognize the movement that children take and bring in the act of making their own territorialisation.

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