

Toward Proleptic Experience in Arts-Based Educational Research and Practice

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CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANSELM KIEFER was born a German citizen at the end of World War II. He challenged his German contemporaries—indeed all modern persons—to ponder and deconstruct those aspects of German history that many repress or forget. Kiefer is attentive to the complexities of memory construction and anti-memory deconstruction—both important elements of my thesis in this presentation of proleptic experience in arts-based educational research and practice. Gilmour (1990) explains the purpose behind Kiefer’s artistic approach to memory:

Kiefer moves beyond modernism by violating its taboos against representation, narrative, and historical allusion and by the decisive ways in which he employs art to confront reality. At the same time, he raises fundamental doubts about the received world view of modernity. Although the avant-garde were radical in their criticism of the art world, Kiefer's challenge extends further toward the roots of modern humanity's outlook. He does so by turning the canvas into a theater of interacting forces that exposes tragic conflicts engendered by modern life. By synthesizing the traditional and the modern, the mythological and the rational, the simulated and the real, Kiefer achieves a puzzling and provocative mixture of elements that inspire us to reconsider our assumptions and formulate our visions anew. (p. 5)

For example, Kiefer’s painting Lot's Frau¹, completed in 1989 and found in the collection at the Cleveland Museum of Art, depicts a barren and scorched landscape with two sets of converging railroad tracks at the horizon. Constructed with a substructure of lead mounted on wood and overlaid with canvas, the work evokes images of abandonment, suffering, and deep loneliness. Above the horizon explode huge white puffs of what might be seen as smoke, explosions, clouds, or ashes.

This painting challenges us to look back at tragedies such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and environmental disasters. The viewer becomes like Lot's Frau (Lot's wife) who looked back on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as they were being destroyed in the biblical story. Traditional religious authorities have argued that she was cast into a pillar of salt for her disobedience to a vengeful God who had commanded that Lot and his family move away without turning around. Other exegesis contends that Lot's wife ignored the patriarchy to look back for her daughters in compassion and love, but upon seeing Yahweh raining down fire and brimstone, she turned to a pillar of salt because the majesty and power of Yahweh cannot be visibly withstood. I take a different approach to Lot's wife. In the agony of her exodus, she would not erase the memory of her loved ones. In the looking back, she is transformed and becomes the salt of the Earth, not as a patriarchal punishment, but rather as a model of the prophetic vision—for salt is the substance of wisdom in alchemy and salt is used metaphorically to signify permanence, loyalty, fidelity, value, and purification in sacred literature. In Jewish Midrash, Lot's wife has the name Edith, which in the Old English is ead, meaning, "riches and blessings."

Kiefer has been known to mix salt, ash, and semen in the paint, assuring us that there is life, healing, and preservation in the backward glance and in uncovering the unrecognizable. It is the attempt to erase memories, to walk forward without looking back and becoming salt, which is most dangerous. Without healing salt, Lot's semen produces a dysfunctional progeny that eventually self-destructs as he is either raped by or seduces his two daughters whom he impregnates at the end of the biblical story—the part of the narrative that most preachers ignore.

Kiefer has called us to become the pillar of salt for an Earth where global powers have repeatedly burned and bombed cities, scorched the earth, and obliterated the innocent. As in the regressive moment of *currere*, we must look back in compassion for understanding. Gilmour (1990) concludes:

Kiefer's palpable grasp of the powers of imagination enables him to fulfill one pedagogical task of postmodern art: teaching us the importance of the habitat of the earth. His refusal to forget the consequences of war, the threat of nuclear destruction, and the negative outcomes of technology keeps being projected, in his Theater of Cruelty staging, against the symbol of the earth. But even more than that, this artist brings fire to the earth, which purifies our vision of the abstract images of nature and history that stand at the root of so many of these consequences. His visionary sketch of the habitat for postmodern humans recalls us to the elemental relationship we have to the earth, to its place within the cosmos, and to previous human cultures who have understood so well the limits of human powers. (p. 175)

Kiefer allows us to enter the landscape of ecological concern in the broadest sense. He challenges our most intuitive and rational assumptions about our relationship to nature. As our imaginations are engaged through our interaction with his art, the voice of imagination and change may emerge. The call is compelling; the response is vital.

Kiefer confronts us with the naked ravages of post-war terrain. The landscape is barren in Kiefer and depicts two abandoned and bombed out railroad tracks vanishing into a desolate

plateau on the horizon at the center of the canvas and a allusion to the backward glance of Lot's wife. The backward glance transforms our lives. With Nietzsche, this takes us to the point of becoming more of what we are not so as to free ourselves from the limits of what we live. We do this in order to illuminate that which has remained unrecognizable. Nietzsche (1968) writes about "dangerous books" and concludes:

Somebody remarked: "I can tell by my own reaction to it that this book is harmful." But let him only wait and perhaps one day he will admit to himself [sic] that this same book has done him a great service by bringing out the hidden sickness of his heart and making it visible. Altered opinions do not alter a man's character (or do so very little); but they do illuminate individual aspects of the constellation of his personality which with a different constellation of opinions had hitherto remained dark and unrecognizable. (p. 15)

Nietzsche's "dangerous books" are parallel to the "dangerous looks" described above. It is our challenge in museums and classrooms to create spaces where the dangerous can prod us to construct and re-construct memories to illuminate aspects of our autobiography and our culture that have remained hidden or unrecognizable. It is in this spirit that I took my students to visit Lot's Frau in the Cleveland Museum of Art when I was a professor in Ohio. Typical of the reaction of my students is the response of David, an eighteen year old freshman. After meditating before this painting with the class, David insisted that he felt the very real presence of Auschwitz. He told the class that for the first time in his life he truly understood the Holocaust, and he was haunted by the intensity of Kiefer's desolate landscape. Why, he asked me, was the memory so haunting? Why did he feel so present in this desolate landscape, especially since he had never traveled to Germany or Poland?

Early in the next semester David contacted me to say that over the winter break he had discussed his experience at the museum with his devoutly Christian parents. David's glance had uncovered a purposeful erasure of a family memory, the death of Jewish grandparents in the Holocaust. His parents for the first time revealed to him that their parents were children of Jewish parents killed at Auschwitz. David, like Lot's wife, found himself in the powerful imagery of smoke, clouds, salt, and ashes on Kiefer's canvas. David is not unlike many of us who discover ourselves within the phenomenological lived experience in nature and experience proleptic insights. This is my aesthetic vision. We must re-member our bodies and re-connect our lives if erasure is to be resisted and overcome. Literally, we are holistically and proleptically a part of the landscape and the historical event; the aesthetic experience allows us to enter the process of healing and understanding.

Like Foucault's notion of "simulated surveillance" that engenders the kind of blind obedience that regulated Lot and persuaded him not to look back, the refusal of museums and classrooms to challenge sedimented perceptors and explode colonizing structures of power also regulates our bodies and imprisons our minds. Most tragically, it also stifles the aesthetic imagination and silences the creative urge. The artwork of Anselm Kiefer deconstructs educational, political, and social structures that have created such surveillance and sought to extinguished the passion for justice.

One of the central features of Curriculum Theory is attentiveness to autobiographical and

phenomenological experience. This is described by William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet in the classic text *Toward a Poor Curriculum*, where the authors outline some of the early thinking about a change of focus in curriculum studies. Pinar and Grumet (1976) challenged the field to focus on internal experiences rather than external objectives. The writing of the existentialists and psychoanalytic work of Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan is integral to their curriculum theory. The imaginative literature of stream-of-consciousness authors such as Joyce, Proust, Woolf, and Faulkner and the expressionist painting of the artists Pollock, Krasner, and Klein had a major influence on Pinar and Grumet. It is important to note the authors' intention in using the fields of philosophy, psychology, literature, and art to inform a reconceptualized curriculum theory. Pinar (1976) explains:

The sort of inquiry I want shares the focus of these fields but not their methods of looking. We cannot solely rely on the imagination, however artful its expression, or reports of psychological problems or philosophic accounts of experience. Some synthesis of these methods needs to be formulated to give us a uniquely educational method of inquiry, one that will allow us to give truthful, public and usable form to our inner observations. It is this search for a method I am on now. (p. 5)

The method that Pinar describes is committed to an etymological understanding of curriculum as *curre* where the method is described in four stages of autobiographical reflection: regressive, progressive, analytical, synthetical. In my own work, I call the synthetical moment prolepsis to add a theological foundation. Pinar (1976) writes:

It is therefore temporal and conceptual in nature, and it aims for the cultivation of a developmental point of view that is transtemporal and transconceptual. From another perspective, the method is the self-conscious conceptualization of the temporal, and from another, it is the viewing of what is conceptualized through time. So it is that we hope to explore the complex relation between the temporal and the conceptual. (p. 51)

The first step is the regressive moment where one returns to the past as it impinges on the present. The present is veiled because the past is manifested in who we are and what we do in the existential now. We enter the past, live in it, observe oneself functioning in the past but not succumb to it. We regress to the past but always with an eye toward a return to the present and to the next step, the progressive moment. The word progressive derives from *pro* meaning "before" and *gradi* meaning "to step, go." Here we look, in Jean Paul Sartre and Ernst Bloch's language of what is not yet present. We imagine a future, envision possibilities, and discern where our meditative images may appear to be leading us. The third step, the analytical moment, describes the biographic present, exclusive of the past and future but inclusive of responses to both. Pinar (1976) writes: "Bracketing what is, what was, and what can be, one is loosened from it, potentially more free of it, and hence more free to choose the present" (p. 60). This bracketing allows one to juxtapose the past, present, and future and evaluate the complexity of their intersectionalities. After the analytical moment, a synthetical moment puts the three steps together to help inform the present. Pinar (1976) concludes:

The Self is available to itself in physical form. The intellect, residing in the physical form, is part of the Self. Thus, the Self is not a concept the intellect has of itself. The intellect is

thus an appendage of the Self, a medium, like the body, through which the Self, the world are accessible to themselves. No longer am I completely identified with my mind. My mind is identified as a part of me. (Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" is thus corrected.) Mind in its place, I conceptualize the present situation. I am placed together. Synthesis. (p. 61)

Pinar's method of currere challenges educators to begin with individual experience and then make broader connections. Curriculum is attentive to both the interconnectedness of all experiences and the importance of the autobiographical perspective. Pinar (1994) concludes that autobiographical studies are

Windows which permit us to see again that which we loved before, and in so doing, see more clearly what and whom we love in the present. The regressive phase of currere asks us to speak again in the lost language of cranes, to see again what was outside our windows, and to become married—that is, in unison—with ourselves and with those around us, by renewing our vows to those who are past, exchanging vows with those who are present, and dancing our way until the morning dawns" (p. 267).

Curriculum theory understands time and history as proleptic, that is, as the confluence of past, present, and future in the synthetical moment. I suggest that my student had a synthetical and proleptic experience with Kiefer's Lot's Frau.



We will now view a ten minute video of some of my artwork to introduce my concept of prolepsis in arts based research and practice. The film can be found at <http://www.psartworks.com/videotour.html>.

Following the film, we will discuss a few images on the gallery tab of my web page to illustrate prolepsis in arts-based educational research.

The first is The Hypostatic Union, a vertical assemblage of mirrors and driftwood mounted on a varnished plywood base. The title of this piece is derived from Catholic theology. The term Hypostatic is used to refer to the union of divine and human natures in the one person, or hypostasis, of Jesus Christ—represented by the twisted piece of driftwood. It is classically expressed in the dogmatic definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451 C. E.), which taught that Christ exists in two “natures,” each of which retains its own characteristics. The council also asserted that each nature comes together in one “person” (or

hypostasis in Greek). Literally, this piece has three mirrors of 12" diameter circles,

representing the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Christian theology. The driftwood is an abstraction of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. Together these abstracted symbols recall the Trinity, Crucifixion, and Resurrection that are represented on all Catholic altars. However, the three circular mirrors in this abstract representation also allow viewers to interrupt and problematize the traditional notions of the Christian Trinity and the Hypostatic Union. Where does the union of the human and divine occur: above, beyond, within, between, among? The viewer now becomes a part of the Hypostatic Union, uniting the human and divine in multiple combinations. From various angles the viewer can see herself or himself—as well as other gallery visitors and artwork—reflected in the mirrors of the abstracted religious symbols. The Hypostatic Union then becomes open to fresh interpretations as the space between divine nature and human nature is reconceptualized. The imagined viewer can now see herself or himself as a Hypostatic Union reflected in the mirrors—although fragmented into multiple postmodern selves by the six vertical panels of mirrors. This insight gives agency to those who have been indoctrinated in the old catechism of a single Christian interpretation of Hypostatic Union – a theology which often repressed and sometimes deformed their human passions and divine natures.

Betsy, 1965 is acrylic on canvas with collage photographs from erotica magazines,

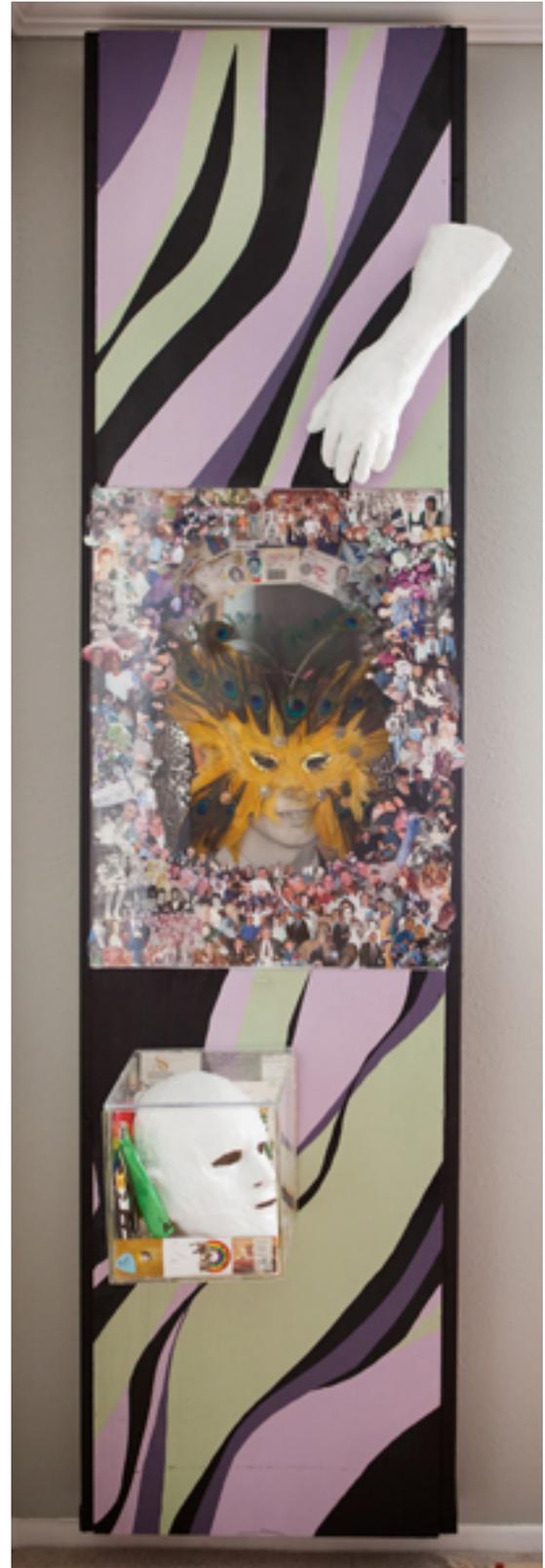


reproductions of statues by Bernini and Michelangelo, Catholic communion wafers, and Catholic Holy Cards presented to the artist as a child. It juxtaposes religious iconography and Catholic communion wafers with images from erotica and Renaissance Art. This piece is one of several collages that hang on the walls of the Catholic elementary classroom in a larger installation

titled 10,000 Ejaculations. Betsy, 1965 deliberately juxtaposes expressions of religious ecstasy and sexual orgasm. The Holy Card in the bottom left is an actual artifact from my First Holy Communion at Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church in New Orleans in 1962. The hand on the holy card presents a communion wafer to the reverent young student while the hand of the young man in the larger adjoining photograph masturbates. The images in the upper left corner of Michelangelo's unfinished stone Giant and a muscular man standing in a shower with an erection both strike similar poses to the young man masturbating. The woman being penetrated on the right side of the canvas is carefully guarded by a Catholic nun in prayer (or disgust? Or envy? Or denial?). The Holy Card in the upper right hand corner reads "In Remembrance of

my First Holy Communion.” All of these images swirl around the eye of a storm – in this case Hurricane Betsy which struck New Orleans and destroyed parts of my home while I was huddled in the center closet with my family on my twelfth birthday on September 9, 1965. At the eye of the hurricane is Bernini’s *Estasi Di Santa Teresa* [The Ecstasy of St. Theresa]. The religious dimension of the unconscious spiritual and sexual ecstasy of my adolescent life when Hurricane Betsy struck my home is expressed in the Holy Communion wafers swirling around the canvas. The wafers cover the genitalia and the explicit eroticism of the images, suggesting several possible scenarios to the viewer: does the spiritual precede the sexual?; is the spiritual orgasmic and sexual?; does religion repress or diminish orgasm?; are spiritual and sexual ecstasy, as in Buddhism, holistically entwined? In any case, the viewer may become aroused and tempted to uncover the erotic images by removing the communion wafers (either psychologically or even literally). As a part of the entire installation, the viewer is invited to re-experience the confusion, excitement, guilt, and joy of arousal, complex sexualities, and emerging spiritualities. In this sense, the painting has the potential to elicit proleptic experiences of the past, present and future sensual and erotic life of the viewer all in relation to spiritual and religious contexts.

The next work of art is a mixed media tableau titled *My Mardi Gras Life: A Self-Portrait of Intercorporeal Metamorphosis and Carnavalesque*. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) writes: “The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis of death and birth, growth and becoming” (p. 24). Like Bakhtin, I believe that by ignoring the material body and its degenerative and regenerative functions we are prevented from understanding our connection with the cosmos, our regeneration through reincarnations, our mystical metamorphosis in daily living, and proleptic experiences in our lives. Consistent with Michel Foucault’s (1978) historical account of the codification and repression of desire in the seventeenth century, Bakhtin refers to that point in history when bodies became private and individual, where “the link with essential aspects of being with the one organic system of popular festive images has been broken.” Anything



associated with the lower bodily stratum is seen as “narrowly sexual, isolated, individual and has no place in the new official system of philosophy and imagery” (1984, p. 109) (see also, Krasny, 1994 and Slattery, Krasny, & O’Malley, 2007).

In this mixed media tableau I seek to evoke a rediscovery of the universal through ambiguous juxtapositions, grotesque imagery, and a return to the intercorporeal world of carnivalesque. I intuitively understand the nature of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque having grown up in New Orleans on the Mardi Gras parade routes of St. Charles Avenue. In this tableau I present multiple images of myself in complex and disjointed forms, but all within the context of the flow of regenerative life forces. Sixty-two years of personal photos in the center of the tableau under the watchful gaze of my teenage photograph behind a Mardi Gras mask tell my life story from 1953-2015. However, the Mardi Gras masks remind the viewer that the intercorporeal self- portrait must be deconstructed because conscious and unconscious omissions—as well as ambiguous juxtapositions—confound the logic of an integrated and imperial self. What is true is false, what is revealed is distorted, what is expected is subverted, what is concealed is revealed, and what is subverted is exposed. Metamorphosis and Carnavalesque reign!

These three images and the video tour point to the possibility of creating proleptic experiences in arts-based educational research and practice. Thank you for viewing these images and considering the possibilities.

Note

¹<http://goo.gl/QEAFxa>

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