

## BECOMING AN ARTIST: EMBODYING EMERGENT ART MAKING PRACTICES

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### **Abstract**

Written in layers, this creative essay invites the reader to consider the relationship between one's own becoming and emergent practices in the teaching and making of art. Weaving between a discussion on the theoretical concept of becoming and emergence, along with a personal narrative presented with images, the author tries to demonstrate what emergence might feel like in the body while creating alongside-and-with her own child. From points of disruption to points of harmonizing with material and material bodies, this essay examines emergence through the lens of an embodied relationality and offers up potential ways to experience such practices.

### **Bio:**

Kate Wurtzel is an Assistant Professor of Art Education at Appalachian State University. Her work, often grounded in the writing of Deleuze and Guattari, explores the practices of art making and its relation to pedagogy as an emergent and embodied experience. As someone who spent many years as a museum educator and public-school art teacher, Kate's approach to teaching takes the whole being into account. Through an emphasis on continued art practice, pedagogical explorations, and constant reflection, she seeks to encourage and support pre-service teachers as they travel through the process of becoming art educators. Contact: [wurtzelkl@appstate.edu](mailto:wurtzelkl@appstate.edu) | [katewurtzelarteducation.squarespace.com](http://katewurtzelarteducation.squarespace.com)



From across the room, I hear a small young boy exclaim, "I want to be an artist when I grow up!" My educator response kicks in nearly automatically, and I holler back across the room, "You already are an artist! You are becoming one all the time!" These sorts of call and response, or cheerful shout outs as I began to call them, were a regular occurrence in my elementary art classroom, often with a projection towards the future and what one wants to become in time. The statement "I want to be an artist when I grow up," in particular, would often surface when students seemed to become more deeply engaged in their work. As the intensity of their process seemed to increase, I would often hear more statements about "becoming an artist" in the future. Yet, the phrasing of this cheerful shout-out points towards an understanding of the artist as something one becomes later in life, like a fixed position of the adult artist achieved in the future. When, in reality, the becoming of an artist in the classroom (and in life) is a constant,

I stand back and look at the canvas.  
Each piece of tape changes the canvas.  
As I walk up to it, red tape in hand, my palms are sweaty.  
Don't overthink.  
Feel. Listen. Feel. Listen.  
Place. Repeat. Pull. Tear. Approach. Place. Repeat.  
I am so nervous, but I know I need to be in this space.  
This space of becoming. This space of complete uncertainty.  
Just feel.

The idea that we are constantly in the state of becoming is situated in the work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the French psychoanalyst Felix Guattari. In their most seminal text, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), they explain how becoming brings about what they identify as a deterritorialization and a reterritorialization; it is the constant break down and the reconstruction not through imitation or likeness, but rather through the explosion of “two heterogeneous series on the line



Fig.1 (untitled), acrylic on canvas with tape

of flight composed by a commonrhizome” (p. 10). For Deleuze and Guattari, these heterogenous lines were the orchid and the wasp coming together to form rhizomatic (lateral rather than hierarchical) connections through the reproduction process, the pollination. In this example, the wasp never actually becomes the orchid, nor does the orchid actually become the wasp, but they become something else, together—they are immanent to one another, the orchid as food for the wasp and the wasp as an extended reproductive organ for the orchid. In other words, the orchid and the wasp are not simply being, as in engaging in a set of fixed relationships central to one thing, one entity. Rather, they are becoming—their relations are always in motion and shifting in response to the assemblage with which one is connected. In the world of the artist and art educator, these heterogenous lines, these rhizomatic connections are those materials and material bodies becoming interlinked, constantly being broken down and reformed together, not through a blending of independent central selves but through an eruption of possibility to create something beyond any individual component. The paint, the canvas, the child, the scrap of tissue paper on the floor, the bit of glitter left behind, all contributing to the undoing of the centralized self and in relations that are emerging in process. As feminist

philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2002) explains, “processes of becoming, in other words, are not predicated on a stable, centralized Self who supervises their unfolding” (p.118). Rather the process of becoming is the work of attempting to cross lines transversally, to connect in unpredictable (and possibly decentered) ways, to see/listen to whatever might occur and emerge from these crossings. It is about engaging beyond reason and calculation, allowing the self to be broken down by the process, decentered, and reformed as part of something other than what was before. Which, I believe, requires a reliance and trust in the concept of emergence as an educational approach in the teaching and learning of how one ‘becomes an artist.’

She presses the paint saturated paper onto the canvas, covering layers of tape.

Squish. Squish.

As the paint shifts from one surface to the other, it gives way under the pressure of small hands.

Sinking into the fibers of the canvas and leaving the paper behind.

Tiny fingers pull back.

The anticipation is palpable.

We both eagerly await to see what is revealed.



Fig. 2 (untitled) Photo of canvas in progress

The idea of emergence, and emergent curriculum, is a concept found in curricular studies for some time now (Aoki, 1986/2005; Jones & Nimno, 1994). Curriculum specialist and scholar Ted Aoki (1986/2005) calls for a curricular landscape that is open and flexible to the unplanned and the unplannable. Dr. Kimberly Powell and Dr. Lisa Lajevic ask how we might prepare students to plan for this way of operating, to plan for the unplannable. In other words, considering how to engage with emergent curriculum or emer-

gent practices that involves a degree of risk/uncertainty is not necessarily new and continues to be prevalent today, especially during these uncertain times (Hegeman, Sanders-Bustle & Hanawalt 2020). However, my interest is in the physical embodiment of these experiences and the creation of a third thing, an undetermined event that unfolds due to the emergent nature of becoming. What are we asking of ourselves in an embodied way to engage in this way of being, teaching, learning, creating? How might we allow the unplanned to occur? In this way becoming and emergence are intimately tied together, both asking us to step in, to commit to an openness to that which is encountered and recognize our reliance on a relational ontology, a relational way of being in the world.

Similar to states of becoming, emergence is the construction of a third entity that goes beyond what is already present in two (or more) parts. Natalie Loveless (2019), who identifies water and snowflakes as emergent, explains emergence and its interdisciplinary nature as “productive of outputs that exceed what is demonstrably present in their constituent parts” (p. 26). Emergence, is the allowing of the creation of something other than, something that is beyond possible for any singular component. The key here though might be in considering how we allow ourselves to do this kind of work—how might we allow ourselves to engage in emergence and emergent practices as a way of committing to the complexity of our own learning and teaching. How can I open myself up to an emergent teaching practice and inspire a similar trust in the process with students? These are questions I continue to ask of myself; considering how to embody the practice of emergence so that one might allow oneself to sink into their own becoming, and welcoming in states of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in the hopes of gaining what may be inconceivable from the perspective of one, a singular entity.

She looks to me for approval.  
I recognize my position of power  
and wonder how I can break free of it.  
I can't. What do I do in this moment?  
Don't panic. Stay open to the moment.  
I give her a head nod, a smile,  
and a nearly failed attempt at a wink.  
I decide to follow her steps, letting her lead.  
Releasing, or at the very least shifting,  
any agenda I might have had.  
I shift my attention and pick up a piece of  
paper.  
A squirt of blue, yellow, and gold.  
I walk up to the canvas and press the paper  
to its surface.  
I feel the squish and turn to her  
with a look of delight.  
Now, it's her turn.  
SHE cheers ME on with a head nod,  
a wildly successful wink, and a huge smile.

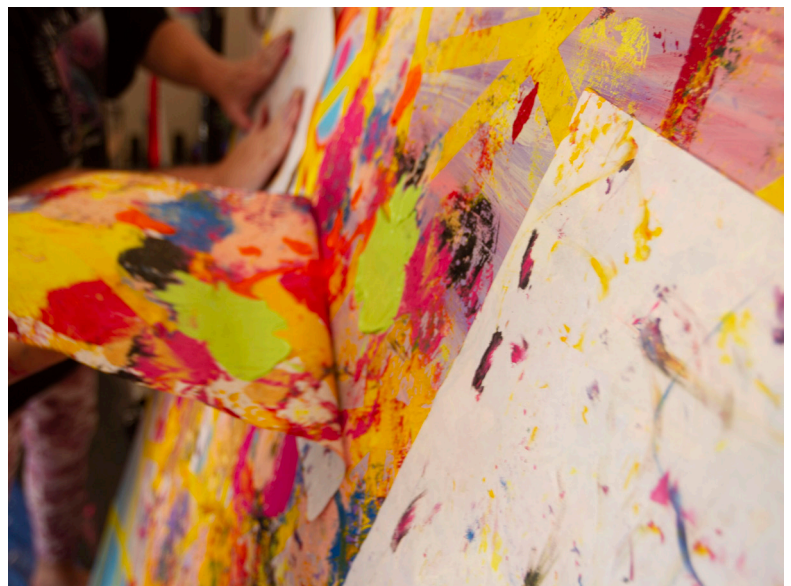


Fig. 3 (untitled) photo of work in progress, acrylic on canvas

## Allowing Emergence

When I speak of embodying emergence and emergent practices, I am referring to the idea of allowing oneself to slow down, to be-with in an experiential way, to consider the space between bifurcations and binaries, the play between self and other, between materials and material bodies. Here, I use the word to allow, or allowing, not in a hierarchical manner with an implied power structure, but rather as presenting a softness, a kindness, an opening towards the self that privileges decentered ways of moving and creating in the world. Dr. Sylvia Kind (2018) explains her use of emergence and experimentation in her teaching practice as “a slow work of noticing (at first)” (p. 8). We slow down, we notice, we pay attention, we feel our own witness—a shared, and potentially de-centered, with-ness that is inherent to the idea of becoming and key to the idea of emergence. Perhaps, if we can open ourselves up to the play between expansion and contraction, between the self and other, between subject and object, and allow ourselves to really embody emergent practices, we might experience shifts in perception. So that the child who calls out I want to be an artist when I grow up, moves from perceiving oneself as a fixed entity to understanding the self as part of ongoing relations that are yet-to-be-defined. I believe cultivating this shift in perception, however, requires seeing the self not as separate from other, but in response-relation with other, like an un-choreographed dance guided by material bodies responding in the moment. In this way, allowing emergence is allowing yourself to be blurred, to actively, responsively, and willingly be of the world in all its unfolding movement.

We press and pull the paint onto the canvas together,  
Like a play between expansion-contraction, subject-object, self-other  
never quite landing but in constant oscillation.  
We (the paint, the child, the canvas, my body, etc.) are dancing,  
responding to shifts from one another.  
Our collective, unexpected movements, driven by curiosity and reached through intuition, are  
activated and surprising to me at times.  
I tell myself to stay open. Slow down. Notice.  
Allow your expanded perception to lead.  
I encounter moments of resistance within my own body—I need to reopen myself to my own  
process of becoming.  
How do I expand in moments where I feel myself contracting?  
Engage. Be present. Stay attuned.  
Allow. Breathe. Listen. Wait. Connect.  
Her hands and mine, we pull back the tape.  
Ripping vigorously, joyfully, until every little bit is pulled from the canvas.  
Together, we stand in silence.  
Looking, feeling, experiencing connection with each other and with that which has emerged.



Fig. 4 (untitled) photo of work in progress, acrylic on canvas



Fig. 5 (untitled) photo of tape with acrylic

**References:**

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