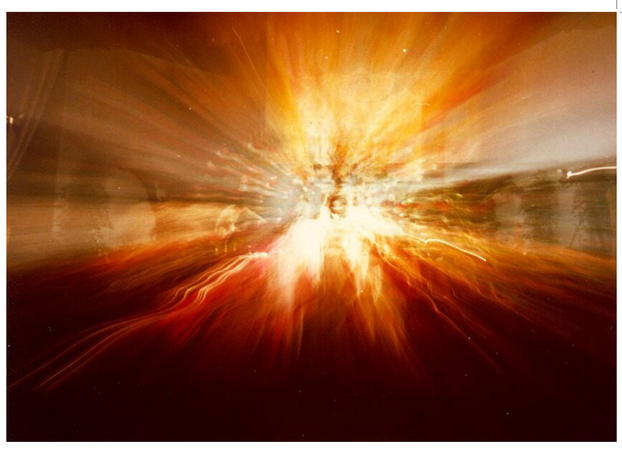


A Collective Imaginary

and a Proposition for Change

Dear Reader

There are some worrying facts regarding mental health, some aspects of which we encounter every day as educators and parents: One in four New Zealanders experience anxiety, depression, panic attacks or phobias, while worldwide the statistics aren't too positive either. This letter focuses upon young people's anxiety in an education setting through a metamodern lens, where the metamodern is a paradigm of care, self-transformation, and interconnections (Nirmala Devi 1996, Dumitrescu 2016). The driving questions of this project are the recurring issues: in multicultural Aotearoa New Zealand and the world, where many inhabit at least two cultures – for example, the Western post-colonial "Pākehā" culture and the indigenous Māori one – what stresses young people these days and how can we address those stressors?

In approaching these issues we are drawing upon our personal experiences, creative processes, and recognised research from multicultural practitioners in the disciplines of medicine, education, art, philosophy, and spirituality such as Ramesh Manocha, Barbara Tversky, Roger Horrocks, Luce Irigary, and Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi.

Within an auto-theoretical frame (Maggie Nelson) and with transformative pedagogy overtones (Patrick Farren), this is a subjective response that is presented as a proposition for change. Questions raised across the following paragraphs consider solutions in terms of the everyday as "constellations of meaning" or relational cosmology, as imagined through the eyes of an artist, teacher, and researcher within the field of gesture (movement) studies and relational aesthetics, as well as a poet's and essayist's explorations at the cusp of the metamodern paradigm.

Propositions for change are presented as "mappings", or neural network-like patterns, realised through language and storytelling, the non-linearity of which recalls the stream of consciousness of modernist writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Modernism challenged the entrenched perception that mental processes are/ must be linear, conforming to a pattern that mimicked or reflected the accepted conception of progress from undesirable obscurantism, ignorance or underdevelopment, to wished-for enlightenment, scientific knowledge, and technical advancement.

Turn of the 21st century metamodernism, however, builds on the concept of flow and acknowledges that mental processes could follow network-like patterns, where linearity is supplemented by a concurrent train of thought that might connect with other constellations of meaning. Below are such examples of thought.[1]

A patterning of thought (after Bateson)

In *Small Arcs of Larger Circles* (2016) Nora Bateson asks us to consider society as a living ecosystem that is undergoing intense change at this moment in time. These changes pertain to the relationships between individuals and groups:

"What changes is not the 'parts' but the patterns among the living participants. Understanding ecology is not like understanding how a clock or an algorithm work. Ecology takes us into the realms of shifting patterns, living communication, symbiosis, and mutual learning".[2]

Such changes that Bateson observes affect young people the most, while their mechanisms of coping with ever fluid circumstances are still work in progress. Earlier this year, in response to a pop-culture magazine brief that asked students to empathise, identify and design a digital publication for an audience "in need", second year Bachelor of Media Design student Clare Thompson proposed FEMPOP, a digital magazine to inspire and empower young women. Aimed at Gen Y, Thompson's on-line magazine highlighted the need for a digital "safe space" to support young people manage mental health and self-love. Citing insight from Pew Research (2015), Thompson suggests that millennials are "obsessed with self-care" via the daily use of work out apps, regimes, diet plans and life coaching apps. Thompson notes "they've even created self-care Twitter bots."

Perhaps more intensely than previous ones, this generation is seeking out personal improvement, well-being and happiness solutions. In the generation of "emotional intelligence" Thompson observed a trend that points to the use of poetry within the arts — naming key figures such as Cleo Wade, Ruby Core (with a 4 million reach) and influencers/podcasters, Florence Gibbon and Mica Montana — as the "go-to" form of communication, to make sense of the world, to bridge the gap between daily encounters (stressful or otherwise), and one's inner being. Thompson's insight is but one example of a growing number of student outcomes that seek design solutions to quality of life issues that affect our physical, psychological and social well being. More than ever before, our young generation are seeking answers.

How can we, as educators, respond to such societal change and better support our student body from a pedagogical perspective? Does it require change at policy level? Or at human level? Or both?

The metaphor of a tangled ball of wool springs to mind. It is a "social mess". In 1974, systems thinker Russell L. Ackoff wrote about complex problems as messes: "Every problem interacts with other problems and is therefore part of a set of interrelated problems, a system of problems […] I choose to call such a system a mess."[3] In 2007, extending Ackoff, Robert Horn said that "a Social Mess is a set of interrelated problems and other messes. Complexity — systems of systems — is among the factors that makes Social Messes so resistant to analysis and, more importantly, to resolution."

According to Horn, the defining characteristics of a social mess are:

No unique "correct" view of the problem; different views of the problem and contradictory solutions; most problems are connected to other problems; data are often uncertain or missing; multiple value conflicts; ideological and cultural constraints; political constraints; economic constraints; often a-logical or illogical or multi-valued thinking; numerous possible intervention points; consequences difficult to imagine; considerable uncertainty, ambiguity; great resistance to change; and problem solver(s) out of contact with the problems and potential solutions.[4]

Horn's list could describe the tightly tangled, interrelational complexity of tackling a quality of life issue, such as stress and anxiety, in an education setting.

In search of answers, let us first turn to a concurrent train of thought and a recorded success story, published in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine (2012), about the positive effects of Sahaja Meditation on quality of life, anxiety, and blood pressure control.

"Simple applications of silent affirmations and breathing techniques assist an individual to achieve a state of mental silence in which the entire attention is on the present moment and one is free from unnecessary mental activity. The experience is often described by its practitioners as soothing, relaxing, and enjoyable. The tranquility experienced during meditation is marked by change in electroencephalography (EEG) patterns in the cortical activity of the brain, where elevated a and h oscillating frequencies and reduced EEG complexity mark a better internal attentional control and positive emotional feedback".[5]

In this meditation the physiological indicators of stress leave room to those that indicate deep relaxation, thus offering scientifically measurable outcomes.

The method appears radically different from other practices, the authors insist:

"The unique EEG patterns observed in Sahaja yoga meditation distinguishes it from the other two popular meditation practices in the West — the Transcendental meditation (TM), in which practitioners repeat a word or phrase silently to quiet and ultimately transcend the internal mental dialogue, and the Mindfulness meditation, in which practitioners simply observe or attend to thoughts, emotions, sensations, or perceptions without judgments.

The study concludes with a list of the benefits of meditation for one's well being and related aspects:

Patients who receive Sahaja yoga meditation treatment, in conjunction with conventional treatment, benefit in perceived quality of life, anxiety, and hypertension control, recommending the effectiveness of Sahaja yoga meditation for managing such conditions".[6]

In search of a healthy life, practitioners seem to find objectively better positionings of the self in terms of stress, anxiety, and hypertension, through an enjoyment of mental silence and "internal attentional control."

A second patterning

For some, attention-as-method can be said to be part of the creative process. Creativity is by nature processual; it is time based. It may capture (then convey) a single gesture, or many. For contemporary artists such as Michelle Mayn, Dane Mitchell, and Nina Cannell that look to sense-perception as a medium to explore thinking and being as a "making sense of the world" – in time, space, and intimately, with oneself, with others and with a wider "whole" – it is a relational journey.

For New Zealand born modernist artist, Len Lye (1901–1980), such "acts of process" took shape across a wide variety of media; from motion drawings to filmmaking, *Free Radicals* (1958), creative writing, *Song Time Stuff* (1938), and sculptural form, *Universe* (1967). Lye extended the self by making visible internal and/or external attention through sensory awareness and movement.

Like many artists, writers, and thinkers of his time, Lye was motivated by a desire for change during some of the most troubling times that Western society experienced (WWII and its aftermath). In questioning 'what are we fighting for?' Lye responded with a written work, inspired by J.B.Preistley's questioning of Western values, that took shape with the help of British poet and writer, Robert Graves: *Individual Happiness Now: A Definition of Common Purpose* (IHN).

At first sight we may translate the title (IHN) to mean a position of self-centeredness; in fact, our immediate reaction could well be a negative one. But for Lye, the self was something universal, cosmological one could say, and "centeredness" was about the now. In piecing together three words: individuality, happiness and now, Lye "represented three interconnected values he felt could form the basis of a humane society transcending nationalism, political ideology and religious difference."[7] Lye's theory proposed "a fundamental truth unifying humanity"; a distillation of selfhood that was not solely accessible to artists, but inherent in us all. Lye's belief originated from a lifetime of living, breathing and studying movement, realised through an "unique experience of the body and its relation to the external world" – it gave Lye a definite sense of purpose and identity.

For sensory awareness to be *affective*, it must be ground in the present. For Lye, ideas of individuality and happiness (now), proved to be the driving force behind much of his work for the remaining years of his life. At the time, Lye hoped to share his concept upon a global stage, and for its fundamental values to be adopted by governments "as a matter of practical policy". (Mutatis mutandis, we are taking up the mantle.)

A question of timing

To consider Lye's ideas within the context of this letter is to respond "in the now of immediate action". It is a question of timing and of our position in the world (wherever that may be), and it is about an ethics of care (Nel Noddings) that could be universal without being essentialistic, a sentiment echoed by Lye when he confessed, "I think we could stimulate this dormant intensity" – a suggestion that invites one to consider the awakening of energies.

Traditional and indigenous cultures allude to such awakenings, while complementary medicine techniques, such as Sahaja yoga - as a free and readily available method - could not only help provide health benefits but also a collective method of practice to awaken such energies.

How are we enjoying being alive "in the now"?

"And if you insist on having one, well, it's like a ball of twine wound around the 'now' of the day, age, moment, and life of a human being…Time is a core, and the present, or 'now' is the centre from which short-cut lines can be drawn to all circumferences."[8]

A site of nowness was important to Lye. In recent conversation with Len Lye biographer, Roger Horrocks, Boermans has observed multiple points of connection and similar purpose to that of Lye in her own interdisciplinary practice – specifically, relational aesthetics, gestural movement, resonance and the affective nature of sound. Lye's ideas were not new ideas; he drew from modernism and romanticism. Bringing together the two, with the notion of sharp, concise form, and an ever present questioning like "how are we enjoying being alive in the now?", Lye believed that everything relates to the now, which can be also said of world politics today. As Horrocks intimates, You could call it the ripple effect. But, as a Buddhist monk may suggest, in the moment of "now", everything is given up. At that moment, we are devoid of effect (from the ripples). Horrocks gives the example of a president sweeping the floor of his home: at that moment he would be a floor sweeper; the action of sweeping the floor in the now would take precedence. In this simple example, the value of the lived moment is given to the action of "sweeping".

Further examples of similar immediacy and connection (affective resonance) are illustrated in an autobiographical publication of Lye's texts and notes, *Happy Moments* (2002). Boermans considers Lye's ability to recognise such energies, musical synergies, or harmonics – inherent in such "minor gestures" – as the strength of his practice. Horrocks notes: Lye believed we block out many of these life forces. Lye sought to articulate the self through the unblocking of such forces (energies), as a means to combat dirty politics. His project was about "an individual life formula", and, affirming as an artist, about the individual's conviction that I have something to say "and not leaving it to the politicians". His was a political campaign of the self.

> "…resonance is not a "thing" that exists in space; resonance implies a relationship. This is where imagination becomes as important as rigorous science or politics. The creative arts serve as a metaphor for social change because art is not about an explanation, but about play, feeling, and relationships. "Art is relationship," Bateson observes. Art is where we learn about grace, contradiction, and about the integration of apparent opposites. Art is about pattern."[16]

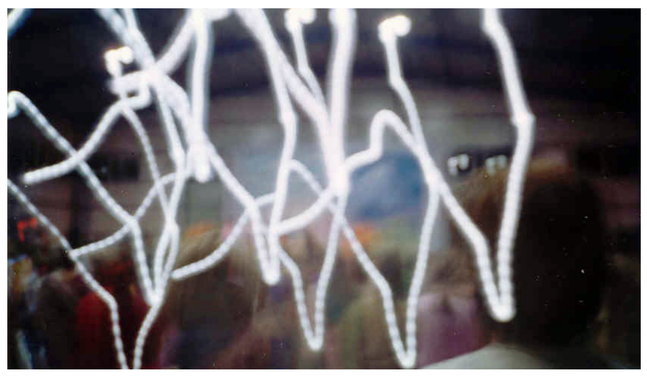
The lived moment

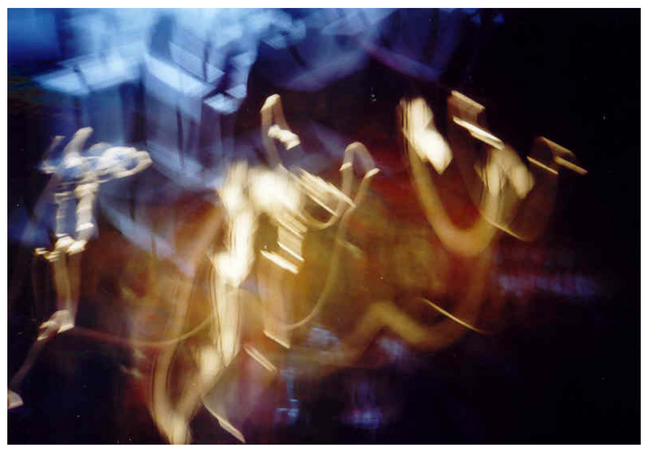
Let us follow the thread of "a site of nowness" and the value of the lived moment in an educational context. What ripple effects spring to mind? If we are to respond today to observations made by learners such as Thompson at ground level, with a desire to make positive change, acknowledging the now – what form could this response take?

Learning is about relational values and sensemaking *in* the world. To reduce the process of learning down to bite-size chunks of information and assessment criteria in a lab or a classroom, online or otherwise, is to not only miss its value, but to ignore changes in society that demand our attention in terms of relational being.

In simple terms, learning is about understanding a task, a problem solving journey, and a (considered) response; it is about relationships - individually, with oneself, with others and with the world.

> "Look at the little cell at the tip of a root, how it moves with complete intelligence, understanding and wisdom. Supposing it is hit by a stone, it doesn't feel bad, it goes back. It knows where to recede, where to go further, where to go round the thing and how to use the same stone for making the tree very strong. All this education you have to get through your experiences and by all the time saying humbly: "I have to learn." That is very important, that we have to have that humility to educate ourselves."[17]





Dear Reader,
Granted that this generation (Gen Y) has transcended the Western obsession with rationality in favour of "emotional intelligence", our question to you is how can we co-design more effective pedagogies that recognise this new level of awareness? Every one of us has life-reflections of practice that are invaluable responses to this question. One could take inspiration from organisations such as The Human Library (HLO); originating in Denmark and now a global initiative, it was designed as a "positive framework for conversations that can challenge stereotypes and prejudices through dialogue". Knowledge exchange could collectively realise the solution to an endemic mental health world problem through data collection, whereby qualitative data is a collection of empathetic responses exchanged, between one another, the trajectories of which establish a collective network that brings to mind Nick Hornby's character Marcus' aspirations in About a Boy.

"Suddenly I realized - two people isn't enough. You need backup. If you're only two people, and someone drops off the edge, then you're on your own. Two isn't a large enough number. You need three at least." Or better still, a net to keep you from falling.

Could such a method of "patterning of collectivity" realise a new creative pedagogy in Aotearoa New Zealand and the world?

Western-centric learning environments, known for their institutional hierarchy, top-down structure and performance-related methods of practice, call for positive solutions to affect or flatten structure. A solution appears to come from an increased awareness that non-hierarchical, culturally situated perspectives enrich most conversations. Since 2015, leading from a position of inclusivity, co-design is a method of practice that "has become ubiquitous across government, includ[ed] in significant strategies, reports, engagement models and procurement requirements".[9]

In 2020, Auckland Council Co-Design Lab commissioned Toi Āria, Design for Public Good and Toi Āria (a research unit based in the College of Creative Arts at Massey University's Wellington campus), "to review the current body of work available around co-design practice in a Aotearoa New Zealand context, and to provide an independent view of the scholarship and its scope".[10] The report noted that co-design, when practiced well, "and used to refer to culturally grounded participatory and developmental design practices shaped by and with people in place," offers "the potential for improved community wellbeing".[11]

However, navigating co-design methods of practice (in search of solutions to messy problems) is fraught with risk. "To honour the 'co' in co-design requires conditions for a relational and value-based, culturally grounded practice based on reciprocity and shared decision-making".[12] There is a clear and definite risk of it "being an imported process that perpetuates colonial and Eurocentric mindsets and values, rather than providing a means to enact" the equitable tenets of "Te Tiriti o Waitangi/ The Treaty of Waitangi 2 ('Te Tiriti') or be understood as related to practice already existing within te ao Māori."

Sadly, the report concludes there is growing co-design fatigue; "from our own experience and from practitioner reports, we know that many in the community already distrust the term co-design […] and can consider the term to be devalued of meaning."[13]

In response to the Toi Āria findings above, we are suggesting an agile approach that seeks out a new, positive term and mode of practice that draws from its (2020) conclusions, redefining itself as a paradigm of care and transformation that looks to patterns-of-parts, in the now. As Bateson noted "understanding ecology is not like understanding how a clock or an algorithm work".

As mentioned above, ecosystem change is about "identifying patterns among the living participants with an emphasis on shifting patterns, living communication, symbiosis, and mutual learning."[14]

Rewilding learning

Dr Matthew Stevens' research project, Rewilding Learning, may provide connections and insight over the coming months as he "investigates nomadic agile forms of learning across and beyond the boundaries of formal qualification frameworks and educational institutions" (Stevens, 2020). As part of Rewilding Learning, students have relevant, edifying experiences by working "collaboratively on 'real-world' projects — alongside clients, professional practitioners, teachers and community groups — as instances (or prototypes) of nomadic agile learning situations, out in-the-wild of the wider domain of practice."

Responding to deepening issues of stress and anxiety at societal level - that impact student health and well being - requires movement beyond previous boundaries of learning (and place). This is a sort of action that necessitates global threads of understanding which actively respond in the now.

Dear Reader,

We are hereby asking for your contribution to an intercultural proposition for change that focuses upon:

- an ethics of care for self and for the other;
- attention as a method of looking, sensing and being in the world;
- a rethinking of digital and physical learning spaces ("re-balancing");
- learning through movement (such as peripatetics), participation (co-action), and storytelling, as well as connecting to our "minds in motion" (after Barbara Tversky);
- a cross-generational learning journey, as a "giving back", reciprocated in exchange.

We are suggesting a proposition for change that actively embraces multicultural values at several levels. In practice this means responding to insight gained from the sharing of this collective imaginary, embracing interrelational values of care in partnership with indigenous values, and working through a new participatory, co-design method, with learners as the 'co' in co-design, to honour "and enact Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi 2 ('Te Tiriti'), that is to be understood as related to practice already existing within te ao Māori."[15]

With interrelational values at its heart, we can perhaps inch closer to the latent intensity that metamodern authors like Luce Irigaray or Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi hope to stimulate, to perceptions of the world and of the self, respectively, that diverge from the traditional Western culture of the gaze, on the one hand, and from a culture of appearance built on ignoring the spirit. Against these, they hope to edify cultures of listening to the other's voice and of realising one's own. Similarly, encouraged to reflect on their metamodern condition, some of the young people that we have interacted with suggest solutions that point in the direction of relationships and interconnectedness, of reinforced connections to one's cultures and family, of self-actualisation or self-realisation.

We look forward to receiving your response at the following link: **www.metamoderncreatives.com**

Ngā mihi,
Lucinda Boermans and Alexandra Dumitrescu

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(9) https://knowledgeauckland.org.nz/media/1900/co-design-in-aotearoa-new-zealand-a-snapshot-of-the-literature-s-mark-p-hagen-tsi-june-2020.pdf

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid.

(12) Ibid.

(13) Ibid.

(14) https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/16799/small-arcs-of-larger-circles-a-new-approach-to-changing-the-world/

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