Learning and Experiencing Intra-active Public Pedagogies in Melbourne's Laneways: Becoming Part of the Palimpsest

Jayson Cooper and Jennifer Sandlin
University of Melbourne and Arizona State University

Abstract

Through an analysis of street art in Melbourne, Australia, we re-think pedagogies in the interest of publicness as being activist, experimental, and demonstrative, showing how these aspects can be problematised through a new materialist lens. In doing so, we begin to flesh out what we are calling a pedagogy of intra-action. We first briefly define street art, discussing how it has been presented as a democratising practice much in the spirit of Gert Biesta's 'pedagogy in the interest of publicness'. We then provide a brief historical overview of street art in Melbourne as well as present some current issues surrounding it. Finally, we consider the phenomenon of street art with new materialist theories, using Karen Barad's idea of intra-action to re-think Biesta's ideas about how pedagogies in the interest of publicness are activist, experimental, and demonstrative. ın this paper, we seek to further understand Gert Biesta's pedagogy in the interest of publicness.

Keywords

street art; new materialim; activist pedagogies; publicness; intra-action

We are a multidisciplinary (curriculum studies and art education) team of education scholars; we are each interested in how art can facilitate the creation or enactment of various kinds of publics and pedagogies. We represent two very different backgrounds and cultures (Jenny is based in Tempe, AZ, USA and Jayson in Melbourne, VIC, Australia), and have recently come together via the Public Pedagogies Institute in Melbourne, Australia to study the histories and pedagogies of street art in Melbourne, which is one of the most popular sites of and for street art across the globe. In this visual essay, we focus on how street art in Melbourne operates as a "pedagogy in the interest of publicness" (Biesta, 2012) that cannot be understood without taking account of its very material physicality. While we cannot reproduce the full materiality of street art in the medium of a print/online journal article, we can express some of it visually via a photographic essay, which conveys more meaning regarding how this art teaches the public and enacts various publics than can ever be captured via text alone.

We place our work within the realm of interdisciplinary educational scholarship that uses pedagogy as a conceptual lens through which to understand the nexus of culture, learning, and social change. In this work, scholars have sought to understand how sites or practices of art, social movement activism, media, literature, or popular culture operate *pedagogically*. Recently, scholars have also begun problematising public pedagogy, outlining its overly broad conceptualization (Savage, 2010), its lack of theoretical explication (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013; Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011) and its vagueness concerning pedagogical processes (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013; O'Malley, Sandlin, & Burdick, 2020). One particularly vexing issue concerns how to understand and theorise conceptualizations of the *public* and what it might mean to enact public pedagogy in a way that opens up possibilities for a more just and democratic public sphere. To address these questions, scholars have begun taking up Gert Biesta's (2012, 2014) theorizations of public pedagogy. Biesta (2012) is concerned with how to conceive and enact public pedagogy as an "active and deliberate intervention in the 'public' domain" (p. 691) and he focuses on how collective action can create enactments of togetherness that help articulate "an interest in a common *world*" (Biesta, 2012, p. 684). Biesta is concerned about how relationships between the public pedagogue(s) and the *public* are conceptualized, and posits three ways this relationship can be viewed, and public pedagogy can be enacted: *for* the public, *of* the public, and *in the interest of publicness*, which works at the '*intersection* of education and politics' (Biesta, 2014, p. 23).

While the goals of pedagogies *for* the public, of the public, and *in the interest of publicness* might be different, Biesta (2014) sees much more promise for creating democratic public spheres in *pedagogies in the interest of publicness*, as he posits that pedagogical enactments such as artistic interruptions can reignite the public sphere through civic action because those pedagogies are more activist, experimental, and demonstrative. For Biesta, these pedagogies are *activist* because they involve individuals 'acting in concert' to create alternative ways of being and doing 'public relationships-in-plurality' (Biesta, 2014, p. 22) that resist private and corporate spheres; they are *experimental*, because they are about creating and enacting 'new ways of being and doing' (p. 23)—for example new ways of doing economy or schooling—that have not already been thought or enacted; and they are *demonstrative* because they show that 'it is possible to do things differently' (Biesta, 2014, p. 22).

Biesta's (2012, 2014) conceptualization of pedagogy in the interest of publicness has been embraced by many scholars researching and writing about public pedagogy, and especially scholars interested in arts-based social activism (see examples of such work in Christensen-Scheel, 2017; Kitagawa, 2017; Phillips & Montes, 2017; Rosario, 2015; Walter & Earl, 2017). These art/activist projects are typically described by scholars as having great critical promise to foster democratic public spheres. However, scholars have begun raising questions

about how to expand this concept to take into account aspects of public pedagogy that Biesta and others using his work have not fully explored, *especially those aspects that move beyond the human* (Phillips & Montes, 2017; Truman, 2016). Walter and Earl (2017), for example, discuss the 'anthropocentric bias' in Biesta's concept of pedagogy in the interest of publicness, explaining that the eco-artists they researched 'focus attention, create, reclaim, inform, and re-envision possibilities for human-nature interactions, and have many educative outcomes depending on who is creating and viewing them at a particular time and place' (p. 147). Biesta's conception of publicness focuses on *human* togetherness, whereas the eco-artists Walter and Earl (2017) researched understand the "public" to be "not just the plurality of human beings, but also the plurality of 'all our relations'" (p. 147). In fact, these artists insist that the public "includes non-human beings inhabiting the natural world as well" (p. 147). Other scholars (Phillips & Montes, 2017; Truman, 2016) are also interested in expanding the idea of publicness beyond Beista's focus on *human togetherness* and do this via the theoretical realm of new materialisms. Phillips and Montes (2017), for example, conducted sensory ethnographic research, in which they forwarded sensorial, embodied, and emplaced 'lifeworld entanglements' (p. 5), with/in an arts activism project focused on increasing awareness of refugee rights. They explored the importance of considering affective, aesthetic, and embodied learnings about the policing of space when seeking to understand pedagogies in the interest of the public and what it means to foster citizenship that takes into account place, environment, ontology, and action.
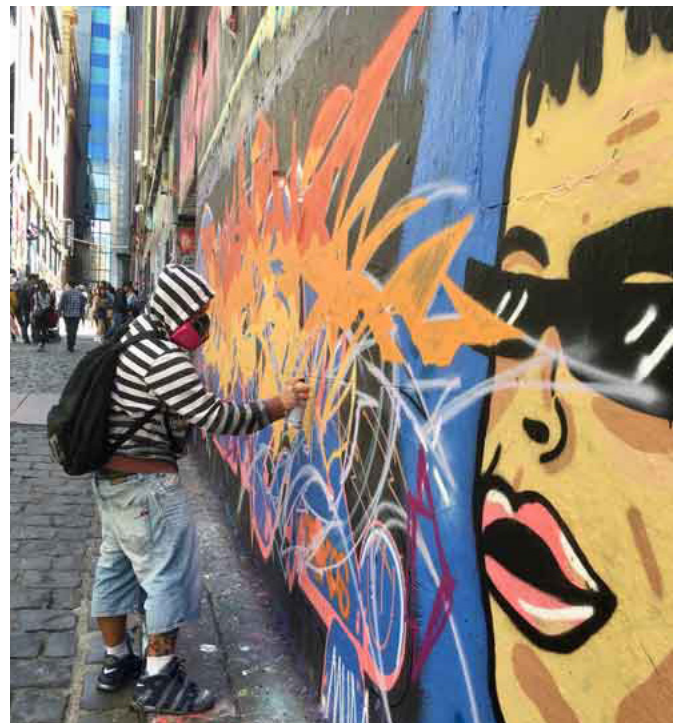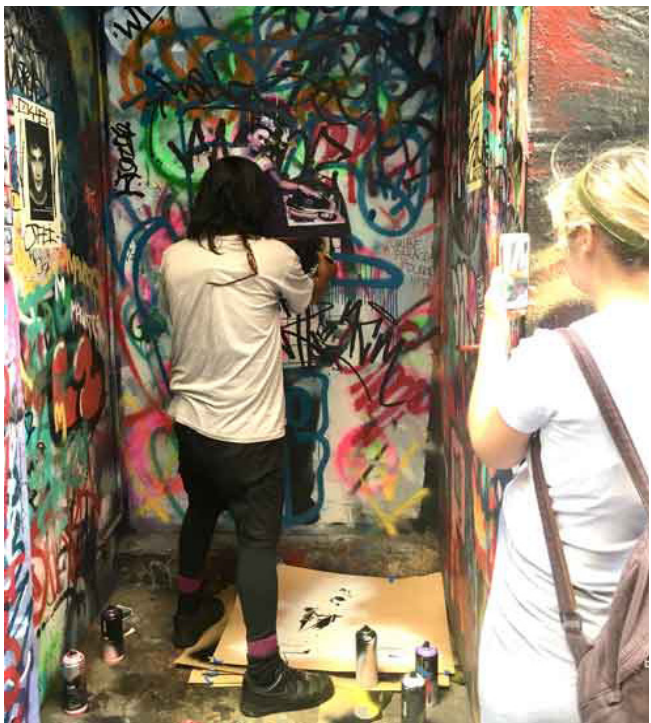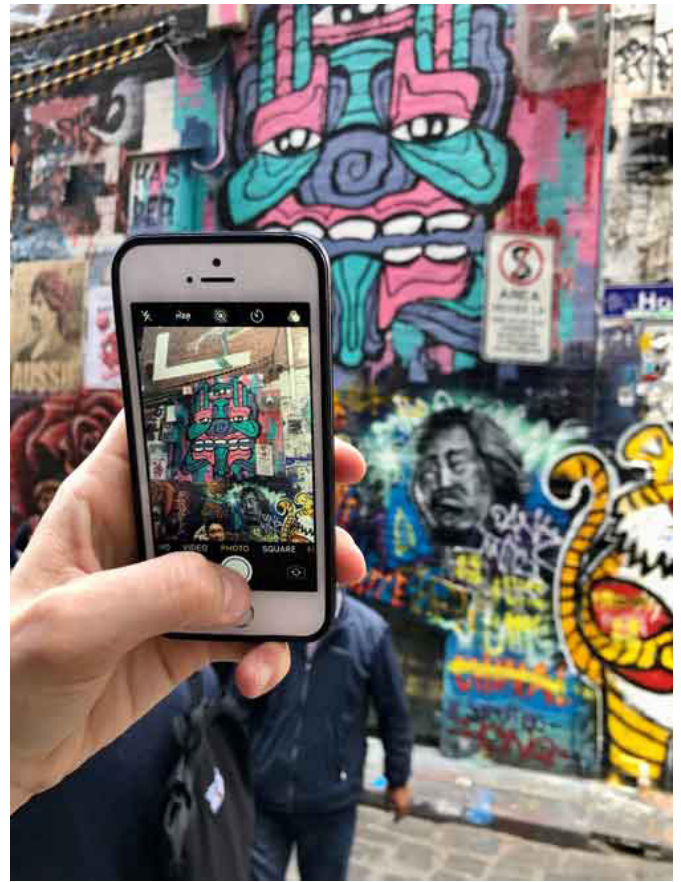
Here, building upon this work, we hope to bring a new perspective to this scholarship as we expand and complicate Biesta's (2012, 2014) concept of pedagogies in the interest of publicness into what we are calling a "pedagogy of intra-action," drawing upon Karen Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action, which highlights the entangled and co-created nature of all individuals and entities. This idea points to "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (p. 33). With **inter**action, various entities entering into a relationship exist independently before their encounters with each other. The concept of **intra**-action, however, forwards the idea that entities only emerge or become what they are through encounters with others. With intra-action, the ability to act grows out of the relationship or interaction (Truman, 2016, p. 94). As Barad explains, 'Agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements' (p. 33). The concept of intra-action is part of Barad's larger theory of agential realism, which posits that the universe is made up of a series of inseparable intra-acting agencies. This conceptualization of how things become and interact changes how we think about knowledge creation and how we categorise and create boundaries around and between entities. Because everything is so deeply entangled, when we focus on any one part of this entanglement in order to study it, or create artificial boundaries between entities, we are making 'cuts' that inevitably include certain things and exclude others, draw attention to certain things and ignore others, facilitate certain actions and discourage others. Think, for instance, about how we create artificial separations through constructing sociocultural categories such as object and subject or human and nature. Such 'agential cuts' (Barad, 2007) are tied up with power and ethics, as they help determine what gets attention, socially, politically, economically, and historically, and what does not. When we consider everything as entangled with everything else, we also, then, must rethink relationships with other humans, non-humans, materials, and discourses, and thus must revise our own ethical obligations with/in the world (Kerr, 2014). Through this visual essay we are attempting to think with and enact new materialist ways of being, thinking, doing, and valuing through experiencing street art intra-actively.

We donned these metaphorical lenses of intra-action as we wandered Melbourne's laneways and viewed and experienced the laneways' pedagogies, as we took the photos for this

essay, and as we curated this collection. Through this work we are attempting to re-think Biesta's ideas about how publics and pedagogies in the interest of publicness are *activist*, *experimental*, and *demonstrative*. We reconceptualize activist pedagogies to highlight how our ability to act relies on both *human* and *nonhuman* agents, and forward the idea that nonhuman entities are agential as well. We reconceptualize *experimental pedagogies* to highlight the emergent, unfinished, and unplanned nature of pedagogy, and consider the numerous possible outcomes that could emerge as spatial, temporal, historical, social, ethical, cultural, environmental and political materialities come together. We reconceptualize *demonstrative pedagogies* to focus on how they embody and enact entangled ontologies and intra-activity themselves via the ways in which they reveal how the categories and false binaries used to define and regulate street art practices are leaky and porous (Cooper & Sandlin, 2020).

Activist Pedagogies: Togetherness and Mutual Constitution—The Artist, the Wall, the Paint, the Stencil, the Street, the Photographer, the Tourist, the Laneway

Biesta's *activist* pedagogies involve individuals "acting in concert" to create alternative ways of being and doing "public relationships-in-plurality" (Biesta, 2014, p. 22). Because for Biesta, humans never act alone or in isolation, action and activism thus necessarily involve other people and things to react to our actions and to take up the activities we start. Intra-action expands this idea of relationship even further, and helps us recognise that our ability to act relies on human and nonhuman agents, and that nonhuman entities are agential as well. As Shabbar (2016) posits, Barad's work reveals "how experience and knowledge emerge out of multiple interactions between human bodies and the environments in which they are embedded" (para. 16). Barad's (2007) way of viewing material-discursive practices thus "cuts [agency] loose from its traditional human orbit" (p. 235). One way our work is expanding Biesta's of activism, then, involves broadening who/what counts as the actors that create pedaogies via the enactments of relationships. In the case of street art as pedagogy, we posit that the actors creating those pedagogies include a host of human and nonhuman agents; paint and clay and paper on walls are not just representational but are *material phenomena* that have the agential capacity to "affect bodies in new and unpredicted ways" and to "produce political potentials" (Shabbar, 2016, para. 4). To re-imagine street art as a pedagogy in the interest of publicness through the lens of a *pedagogy of intra-action*, we must consider the specific walls, buildings, and other objects where street art is created, the people it speaks to, the political commentary it expresses, the aesthetics of its design, the slate of bluestone it may be written on, or the bitumen surface of the roads or walls after the rain has made designs seep and transform; the scratching in the back of a tram chair or the sharpie marks on the public seats are all part of the pedagogical possibilities. Stickers, poles, trees, laneways are all active parts, creating a pedagogy of togetherness. Through intra-action this togetherness is morethanhuman-human. These relationships through their mutual constitutions intra-act, and perform enactments of pedagogies as relationships. In doing so the pedagogical is also transformed and in a constant state of performativity.
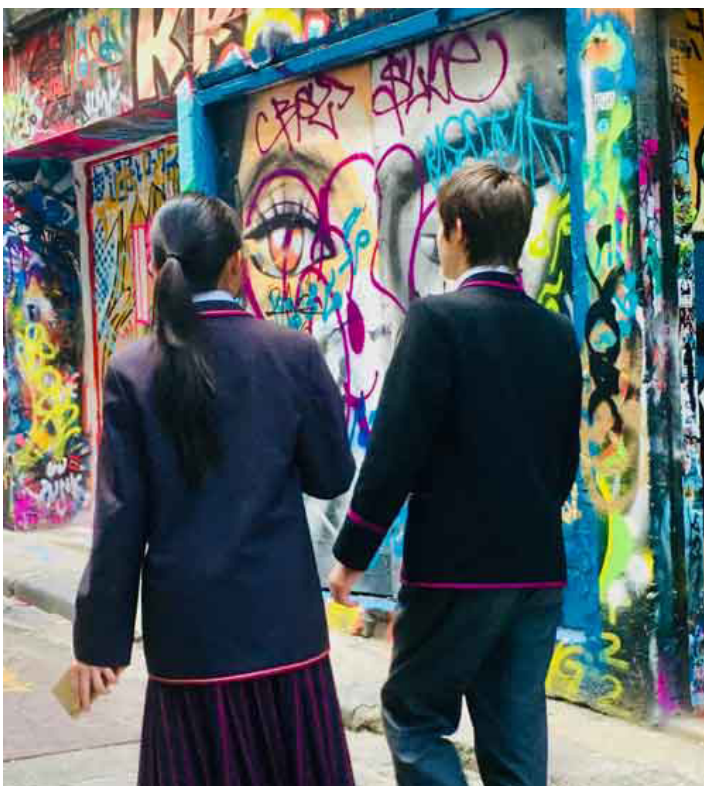
Experimental Pedagogies: Emergent, Unstable, Unfinished, Polyphonic Meanings

Biesta's pedagogies in the interest of publicness are also experimental because they help generate new ways of being and doing. Applying an intra-active lens to experimental pedagogies, we see this notion of unplanned-ness expand, as intra-active experimental pedagogies consider the numerous possible outcomes that could emerge as spatial, temporal, historical, social, ethical, cultural, environmental and political materialities come together. There is an intensity of new-ness and open-endedness as human and morethanhuman entities intra-act—in the case of street art, these include the laws and policies that regulate street art, and also the ways of being and doing that construct each laneway's aesthetic and materiality. These pedagogies are emergent and neither pre-determined nor already known. The material art itself is emerging, unknown, and unplanned, as it is "unstable and permanently unfinished" and susceptible to both "material decay and erasure and to semantic refashioning" (MacDowall, 2015, pp. 26-37). The materiality of Melbourne's laneways are betwixt and between and thus are temporal, ephemeral, and transformative. Likewise, how various publics will understand or experience street art pedagogies is also unknown in advance; these liminal spaces are also contextual and subjective and can be read in polyphonic ways. The intra-activity of these streets is embodied and experimental and each time they are revisited these spaces become layered with meanings contexts, times, and places. Likewise, we can also never know in advance who publics will be. In Melbourne's laneways, one piece of art responds, interacts, intra-acts with other pieces of art, with the walls they are written upon, with those who make and those who view, those who regulate and those who capitalise. Publicness is created in rich layered environments and with the materiality of such spaces becomes part of the pedagogical experiment. As Evans (2016) notes "The public is of course no longer homogenous as major cosmopolitan cities and historic towns mix tourists and a range of business, education and leisure visitors with residents and commuting workers from many countries with differing aesthetic and moral positions" (p. 174). The dynamism of these publics is caught in a deep entanglement of meanings.
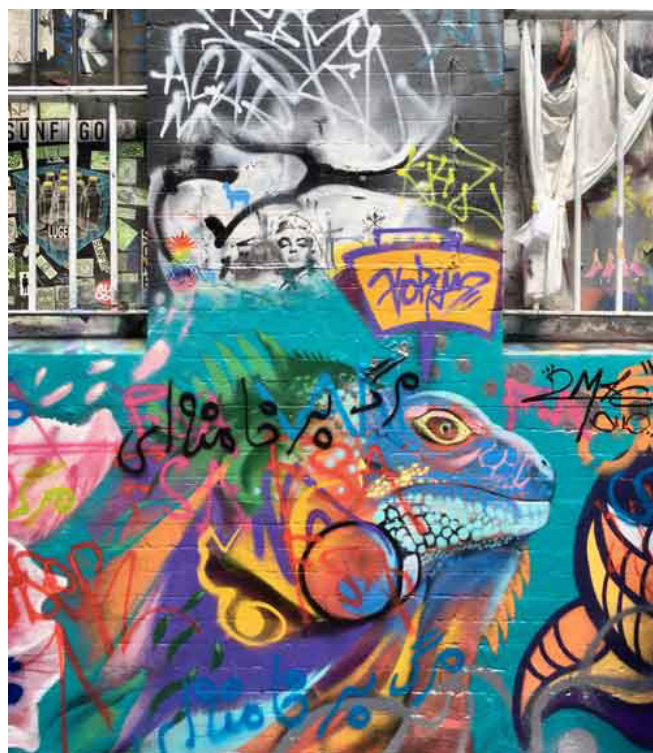
Demonstrative Pedagogies: Beyond Dichotomous Binaries, Interim Spaces, Resisting Definition and Censure, Revealing Complicated Relations

Finally, Biesta's (2014) pedagogies in the interest of publicness are *demonstrative* because they show that "it is possible to do things differently" (p. 22). Laneway pedagogies, viewed through an intra-active lens, also demonstrate new possible ways of being and relating as they embody and enact entangled ontologies and intra-activity themselves. One way they do this is revealing how the categories and false binaries that are used to define and regulate street art practices are leaky and porous. Discourses surrounding graffiti have been "framed and mapped through a series of twofold constructs: public/private space, visible/invisible walls, legal/illegal practices, vandalism/art and art/advertising" (Dovey, Wollan, & Woodcock, 2012, p. 38). In some stores you cannot purchase spray paint without identification or their sale is limited to a few cans as legal measures are enforced to curb graffiti. At the same time thousands of tourists flood these laneways every day, led by local tour guides promoting the creative vibrancy, diversity, and ingenuity of Melbourne. The material reality encountered and experienced when meandering through the actual streets and laneways of Melbourne demonstrates more complicated messages. These intra-active entanglements destabilise such falsely constructed binaries and focus on a more onto-epistemological understanding of how such sites are pedagogical. Within the laneways of Melbourne there is a complex web of relations, some sanctioned and permissible, and others illegal. The walls and poles are covered in stickers, stencils, and tags. Some of the art is in a constant state of movement and change while other aspects stay forever silently clinging to the walls. Graffiti tags sit atop or next to stencil art; stickers affix to small sculptures that are placed on larger murals. The messages communicated through the art also reveal the intra-active nature of relations, as they provide critical commentary on the unequal relations between Aboriginal Australians and settler-born soldiers in Australia's wars, and reveal how the families that have contributed most soldiers to wars across the Commonwealth are from the Lovett family, from Gunditjmara land. These entanglements reveal how street art operates in the spaces between the dichotomous binaries. The material experience of these streets demonstrates how graffiti is "regarded as both street-art and vandalism; it seeks both the privacy of crime and the publicity of exhibition. Graffiti takes on both positive and negative symbolic capital; it both sells and pollutes these places, streets and buildings" (Dovey, Wollan, & Woodcock, 2012, p. 38).

The walls also demonstrate that the authority attempting to control street art is never complete or lasting. This authority can and always will be resisted and within the ethos of street art graffiti and hip-hop counter culture these spaces are interim. The walls are palimpsests thick with paint, as layers peek through and reveal how the art always persists, despite attempt to constantly patrol and erase it. The art gets removed, built upon, and re-written. The walls themselves reveal how power dynamics are always resisted, as street artists will "continue to create those signs in the city's *interim* spaces: the spaces of what Dickens calls the 'in-between,' in which 'urban inscription' allows the city to become 'known through the bodily, rhythmic writing and re-writing of it'" (Young, 2010, p. 113). Finally, intra-activity is revealed as our own subjectivities became entangled with the walls, the streets, and with each other as we walked together photographing and talking about Australian musicians, about politics in the United States, and about refugees being detained at Australia's shores.

Rethinking Publics, Becoming Part of the Palimpsest

Through this work we are seeking to reconceptualize public pedagogies through the geographically located graffiti/street art of Melbourne, as we think-with these concepts as laneway pedagogies. Laneway pedagogies are more than tags, stencils, legalities, artists, audiences, and cleaners who tabula rasa unsanctioned walls, and the values held toward street art; all these and more are part of the intra-acting entanglement of street art. Street art is a performance, a dance between all of these elements, and within this dance new iterations and meanings fold in and over one another. In this visual essay we 're-turn' (Barad, 2014) to the same locations; we walk the same laneways as we fold into and become-with the mattering of these living laneway pedagogies. We become part of the palimpsest that claims and reclaims the public sphere. In doing so, we develop a unique politics of public pedagogy that speaks with, and back to democracy—its consumption, its demise, and its renewal.

Viewing street art through an agential realist lens complicates all dualistic notions of graffiti, and positions these entities as entangled, agentic actors. Viewing the pedagogies of Melbourne's laneways as an entanglement of the morethanhuman helps us envision a more complicated public and to view 'publicness' beyond only a consideration of individual, separate human actors. Using intra-action we must consider the public as a web of entanglements that are social, political, environmental, ethical, material, spiritual, cultural and subjective, and thus must address the new responsibilities emerging from such entanglements. In this way we de-center the anthropocentric by exploring both the tangible and intangible as they create publicness that operates in multiplicities, entanglements, and assemblages. In doing so, we also expand our ethical obligations beyond other humans, to include non-human entities. These new ethical obligations require us to view Melbourne's street art pedagogies as constituted through intra-actions among many entities, including artists, local residents, visitors from all over the world, business owners, politicians, law makers, cleaning crews, physical places, walls, streets, painting materials, and discourses about street art and graffiti, vandalism, tourism, and commercial value, processes of commodification, privatization, and securitization and, finally, geographical and historical contexts. An intra-active lens that disrupts bounded and dichotomous thinking also helps us recognize understand how boundary-making practices create material consequences for Melbourne's street artists and street art, making some people and practices more visible and others impossible to see, making some valued and others discarded, making some praised and some criminal. The lens of intra-action also helps us see that these divisions are false and can be re-created differently in ways that disrupt these taken-for-granted categories and the unequal power relationships they are steeped in.

References

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2014). Diffracting diffraction: Cutting together-apart. *parallax*, 20(3), 168-187.

Biesta, G. (2012). Becoming public: Public pedagogy, citizenship and the public sphere. *Social & Cultural Geography,* 13(7):683-97.

Biesta, G. (2014). Making pedagogy public: For the public, of the public, or in the interest of publicness? In Burdick, J., Sandlin, J. A., & O'Malley, M. P., *Problematizing Public Pedagogy* (pp. 15-25). New York: Routledge.

Burdick, J. & Sandlin, J. A. (2013). Learning, becoming, and the unknowable: Conceptualizations, mechanisms, and process in public pedagogy literature. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), 142-177.

Cooper, J., & Sandlin, J. A. (2020) Intra-active pedagogies of publicness: Exploring street art in Melbourne, Australia. *Pedagogy, Culture, and Society*, 28(3), 421-443.

Christensen-Scheel, B. (2017). An art museum in the interest of publicness: A discussion of educational strategies at Tate Exchange. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 37(1), 103-19.

Kerr, S. 2014. "Three minute theory: What is intra-action?" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0SnstJoEec

Dovey, K., Wollan, S., & an Woodcock, I. (2012). Placing graffiti: Creating and contesting character in inner-city Melbourne. *Journal of Urban Design*, 17(1), 21-41.

Evans, G. (2016). Graffiti art & the city: From piece-making to place-making. In J. I. Ross (Ed.), Routledge *Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art* (pp. 168-182). New York: Routledge.

Kitagawa, K.(2017). Situating preparedness education within public pedagogy. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 25(1), 1-13.

MacDowall, L. (2015). Graffiti, street art and theories of stigmergy. In J. Lossau & Q. Stevens (Eds.), *The Uses of Art in Public Space* (pp. 33-48). New York: Routledge.

O'Malley, M. P., Sandlin, J. A., & Burdick, J. (2020). Public pedagogy theories, methodologies, and ethics. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, July 2020, 1-16. Oxford University Press.

Phillips, L. G., & Montes, C. (2017). Walking borders: Explorations of aesthetics in ephemeral arts activism for asylum seeker rights. *Space and Culture*, 21(2), 92-107.

Rosario, M. (2015). Public pedagogy in the creative strike: Destabilizing boundaries and re-imagining resistance in the University of Puerto Rico. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 45(1), 52-68.

Sandlin, J. A., O'Malley, M. P., & Burdick, J. (2011). Mapping the complexity of public pedagogy scholarship: 1894-2010. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(3), 338-375.

Savage, G. (2010). Problematizing 'public pedagogy' in educational research." In J. A. Sandln, B. D. Schultz, & J. Burdick (Eds.), *Handbook of Public Pedagogy* (pp. 103-115). New York: Routledge.

Shabbar, A. E. (2016). Queer bathroom graffiti matters: Agential realism and affective temporalities. *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge* (30), http://www.rhizomes.net/issue30/shabbar/index.html

Truman, S. (2016). Intratextual entanglements: Emergent pedagogies and the productive potential of texts. In N. Snaza, D. Sonu, S. Truman, & Z. Zaliwska (Eds.), *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies* (pp. 91-108). New York: Peter Lang.

Walter, P. & Earl, A. (2017). Public pedagogies of arts-based environmental learning and education for adults. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 8(1), 145-63.

Young, A. (2010). Negotiated consent or zero tolerance? Responding to graffiti and street art in Melbourne. *City*, 14(1-2), 99-114.