

Mentor's Introduction to Danielle Ayelet Aldouby-Efraim

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There has been a long history of human creativity embracing collaborative endeavors, from small networks of like-minded artists widening over time to communities and practices that bring diversity and difference into shared embrace. Within this ever-expanding field of artistic enterprise are urgent questions about how artist-leaders enable creativity and collaboration and the social-aesthetic outcomes to which they aspire. Noting that many arts-based participatory projects come to grief in contexts of relational and structural ambiguity, the fine dissertation of Danielle Ayelet Aldouby-Efraim calls for a redefinition of an Ethics of Care in socio-aesthetic practice.

Ayelet is a long-time social practitioner who has used the visual arts to bring communities together in shared creative enterprises of making. She embarked upon her dissertation to investigate her own practices and, by extension, those of six other experienced leader-practitioners representing different kinds of collaborations set within strikingly different geographical locations and along transgenerational lines. Would she find shared definitions and practices across such diversity, she wondered, and if so, were they inflected by the life experiences these particular creatives brought to their community arts work?

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Ayelet's own background as a second-generation holocaust survivor makes her exquisitely sensitive to a sense of moral obligation toward caring for others. Not surprisingly, then, she digs deep in shaping a theoretical framework within which to settle her inquiry. Here, she looks back at the works of Gilligan and Noddings, revisiting commitments to caring as non-judgmental moral dimensions within relationships. Threaded through community arts practices, reciprocity becomes performance engaging heart-mind-body making possible the kind of flexibility of informed thought and action designed to serves collaborative acts of artistry imbued with an ethics of care.

The wonderfully rich, moving, and extensive interview data that gives presence to Ayelet's dissertation findings makes clear that for these experienced practitioners, at least, the obligation to care emerged from early experiences within diverse family practices from Nigeria, the Middle East, and the United States. In general terms, her findings cohere across different kinds of practice in which flexibility and responsibility allow for a balancing of self and other and a caring concern for the individual's participation in the collective's aesthetic outcome. What makes Ayelet's work so powerful is the recasting of her findings in terms of what she identifies as their hidden dimensions as these cluster around three categories: discomfort, boundaries and reciprocity.

As in any shared art practice the setting of boundaries is usually defined by stated guidelines--indications of acceptable practices and project goals. Within Ayelet's study, however, other kinds of hidden boundaries become evident, interweaving cultural, emotional, and bodily responses as free-flowing agents, sometimes interjecting innovation and open reciprocity with rigidity and discomfort. In fact, discomfort emerges as an essential ingredient in successful community arts practice as it not only acts as an impediment to innovations and openness to challenge, but it also opens doors to them by challenging long-held beliefs about art, creativity, and aesthetic expression. At the heart of everything is, of course, a creative leader's ability to scale the multiple dimensions of reciprocity with alacrity and felicity while holding fast to an ethics of care for the individual, the emerging community, and the aesthetic presence of a final artwork.

The field of art education, in general, will benefit much from the future work of this practiced community art educator and innovative researcher.