

Book Reviews

Creative Expression, Creative Education: Creativity as a Primary Rationale for Education.

Robert Kelly and Carl Leggo.

Calgary, AB: Detselig, 2008, 268 pages.

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Forgoing the popular maxim, I begin this review approaching *Creative Expression, Creative Education* by way of its cover. Juxtaposed against a background of diagrammatic doodles, improvised musical compositions, and impromptu screenplay edits, birds plot variegated lines of flight. Over the course of *Creative Expression, Creative Education*'s 22 essays, the imagistic concept of the cover insists: *this collection captures creativity in the act of composing itself*. In other words, this collection is not simply *about* creativity as a *thing* one can know, master, and put to *use*. Rather, the multiplicity of artists' narratives comprising this collection creates ways of thinking about the character of creativity as it emerges *in the middle of things*. As birds take flight across the cover's unfolding compositions, a second key concept of this collection is brought into play: creativity is not a *noun*, but rather a *verb*. Creativity is not a passive object to manage, but an active potential that takes flight, productively escaping the mechanisms of habit in the composition new social, political, and identitarian forms. It is in this vein that *Creative Expression, Creative Education* successfully avoids a post-Renaissance fetishization of creativity by situating it within the practical problems faced by its contributing poets, playwrights, artists, authors, composers, and performers. As the contributors to this book elucidate through specific examples, vignettes, and works-in-progress, creativity does not emerge *ex nihilo*. Rather, the creative act requires concepts, ideas, and images—albeit unfettered from their orthodox constraints. The project of *Creative Expression, Creative Education* extends from this task of concept creation, the intent of which aims at snatching the notion of creativity back from obscurity while accentuating its critical importance for education today.

An emphasis on the creation of new concepts for thinking is palpable throughout the book. Organized into three sections, the myriad authors and artists of this collection investigate and experiment with the notion of creativity immanent to artistic practice. Robert Kelly opens the first section by providing a brief topography of psychological and qualitative research on creative thought and production. In this opening gambit, Kelly aims to demystify the familiar rhetoric of creativity by reorienting the reader to the social, historical,

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and personal significance attached to the term. Further, he aims to produce a cursory sketch of the particular characteristics intimate to creativity. The culmination of this section provides a window into Kelly's own working process as he documents his creative journey in a studio exploration entitled "The Concept of Raven." In the articulation of his own process, Kelly bears candid witness to the instigating moment, unconstrained research, and the selection of ideas and materials intimate to the actualization of his final studio work(s). In this incisive section, Kelly lays his own creative process bare for readers, inviting them into the often unseen exploratory processes that undergird the artistic product.

The second section of *Creative Expression, Creative Education* delves further into the creative working processes of contemporary cultural producers. Composed of 20 short articles, this section marks an engagement with the practical creative challenges faced by premier Canadian poets, playwrights, musicians, authors, and performers. Japreet Singh's "Beethoven in Kashmir" comments on the potential for creative innovation amid disquiet and creative paralysis. Annie Roy and Pierre Allard's "Attack" articulates a case where the spectacle of contemporary media is co-opted and repurposed to support local ecological, political, and social action. Brian Quirt, artistic director of Toronto's *Nightswimming*, documents the creation of a generative organizational body capable of supporting open-ended collaboration and exploratory arts research.

At their best, the diverse articles that appear in the second section create myriad transdisciplinary, transcultural, and experimental approaches for believing the character of creativity unfettered from orthodox appeals for standardization or homogeneity. However, it is important to add that this section avoids a suicidal romance with relativism. Although punctuated by vital differences, each of the 20 articles in the second section make tangible connections to practical socio-historical, political, and identitarian issues. By situating creative action within the material conditions of life itself, *Creative Expression, Creative Education* refuses to slip into a solipsistic account of its topic.

The collection concludes with Carl Leggo's dialogue between autobiographical vignettes and their poetic reprise. Leggo creates an assemblage of texts that articulate a palpable tension between artistic desire and the demands of the Other (the teacher, the textbook, the reviewer). Beginning with the words of a critic, Leggo unfolds a personal narrative in which figures of authority consistently attempt to capture and fix his desire to write. Although the pedagogical tension articulated by Leggo is woven throughout the collection, it most fully unfolds in this final section, culminating in a meditation on how one might live differently in an age obsessed with clarity, certainty, and utility.

Creative Expression, Creative Education is not only a book aimed at altering how artists, teachers, and students think and act. It bears an implicit critique on those educational values that continue to labor under the banner of modernity, standardization, and uniformity of expression. Against a system that would demand the passivity of its teachers and students, *Creative Expression, Creative Education* advocates that both educators and students become active cultural creators. In contrast to the ideal of passive consumption prevalent throughout modernism, this collection argues for the creation of new terms, concepts, and relationships not yet anticipated. For example, Gu Xiong's "In My Own

Words" grapples with the creation of hybrid identity through artistic practices that bring multiple cultural histories and identity politics into productive assemblage. In another instance, Ker Wells' "Work With Your Hands" documents how a cross-cultural exchange and the unique, unanticipated resonance between a German contemporary painter and a village elder in southern Italy became a productive passage for thinking about the character of artistic vigor. Jettisoning the transcendent for the immanent, the artists in this collection link creativity to the unique conceptual resources, inspirations, and events of their lives. This differentiation is key, for it asserts that the ends-means instrumentalism lauded in many schools today marks an enmity toward creative thought. Further, it points to a particular creative poverty that is endemic in classrooms where conceptual resources are constrained by the ideals of standardization and homogeneity.

Amid this challenge, *Creative Expression, Creative Education* asserts that there are always creative escapes. In "Notes on the Art of Doodling," Judd Palmer avers that although classroom practices might privilege inert bodies and on-task time ratios, peripheral inspiration and subconscious mark-making is difficult, perhaps impossible to stay. In this vein, the focus on artistic production evinced in this collection departs significantly from the product-oriented character of much institutional education. Not only does *Creative Expression, Creative Education* focus on the inspirations, experimentations, decisions, and research actualized in a particular artistic work, it questions our investment in the meaning of art by acknowledging experiments in high-doodling, non-signifying text, and choral music as opportunities to understand better the living character of creativity. Similarly, this collection dispels the myth of the creative act as a "pure event," insisting instead that art sometimes proceeds by distorting, prevaricating, unlinking, and relinking the ideas, concepts, and experiences of others. At times *Creative Expression, Creative Education* works outside established disciplinary boundaries, creating new potentials for inquiry through its transdisciplinary experiments. For example, the exemplary design of the collection itself breaks from the conceit of the orthodox text, becoming in some sections a sketchbook and in others alluding to photo-documentary. The text is journalistic or autobiographic at some junctures, whereas at others it provides a window on rough drafts, impromptu notes, and germinal sketches. In this way *Creative Expression, Creative Education* returns art-making to its difficulty and toil, enacting a didactic turn for an amnesiac culture obsessed with the certitude of predetermined outcomes.

In contrast to this cultural predisposition, Kelly and Leggo advance an image of pedagogy that departs from the familiar scenario where students simply "discover" outcomes established in advance. Advocating for a vagabond pedagogy, *Creative Expression, Creative Education* documents the necessity for improvisation, experimentation, and research freed from immediate rational purpose. One consistent thread that pervades this collection is about the intimate relationship between the unknown and creative thought. That is, one must not simply tolerate the unknown or colonize it in a ready-made image. Instead *Creative Expression, Creative Education* affirms that our encounter with the unknown is necessary for the instantiation of the new. Although *Creative Expression, Creative Education* is occasionally haunted by the

specter of Freud and an odd celebration of creative thinking as the new “cultural capital,” its relationship to the potential of the unknown highlights its most productive Nietzschean/Dionysian character. As Winnipeg poet Dennis Cooley avers in “We Are Not Amused,” the creative act requires that we affirm what meets us, encountering uncertainty as an opportunity to imagine the future as more than the reductive representation of the past. This affirmative approach to life, Cooley claims, necessitates a playful disposition toward one’s lifework. Although this concept is evoked throughout *Creative Expression, Creative Education*, it is never suggestive of regression or infantilism. Rather, the character of play intimate to the artistic works that appear in this collection is almost always connected to a sense of productive desire: a desire that is not yet shackled to a particular ideal, but rather one that revels in the joy of invention, chance, and transformation.

As Zarathustra expounds in the eponymously titled work by Nietzsche (1969), “I came to my truth by diverse paths and in diverse ways” (p. 213). Through its heterogenic approach to the creative arts, *Creative Expression, Creative Education* not only performs Zarathustra’s insight, but advances an image of creative pedagogical practice as necessarily diverse, for the way to the truth does not exist. That is, through the work of its myriad contributors, *Creative Expression, Creative Education* argues that contemporary education must not simply embrace the diverse epistemological and ontological passages enabled through creative experimentation, but further, understand the diversity of truth as “foundational.” Permeating the works in this collection, this nascent argument opens privileged forms of institutional meaning and method to a more nuanced and complicated conversation. This pedagogical move is aptly detailed in Kelly’s opening focus on “The Concept of Raven.” Here Kelly affirms something new and unanticipated from sedimented disciplinary knowledge and taken-for-granted truth claims. In turn, his affirmative pedagogical approach suggests interminability, for as *Creative Expression, Creative Education* illustrates, the creative arts are an expression of the absence of a final truth. At its best, this collection demonstrates that for pedagogy to have a vital future, it must be rethought less as an endeavor that aspires to the reproduction of past forms of Being than a praxis of active creation.

Despite the relatively unproblematized conceptualization of creativity as the new cultural capital for contemporary market economics, the potential radicalism of *Creative Expression, Creative Education* insists nonetheless. In turn, this insistence constitutes a vital foil for the often impoverished images of pedagogical life that circulate today. Institutional life, and perhaps life in general, has increasingly assumed a mortified, neurotic, and obsessive quality, overencumbered by its desire for the accumulation of knowledge, models, and edicts. As such, it encourages us in a culture that grows increasingly ill to take seriously the insights of *Creative Expression, Creative Education*, not simply as a metaphor, but as a conceptual resource for transforming how we think about pedagogy today.

Reference

- Nietzsche, F. (1969). *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. (D. Smith, Trans.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. (Originally published in 1885)