

## The Meaning of Flux: Discussion

**Janine Marchessault:** I'd like to start with a general question. What I noticed across all four papers was a relationship between art and everyday life. You all talked about it in terms of bringing it into the classroom. Warren talked about it in terms of making art education into something which is not separated from the rest of the pedagogical program. Johanne talked about art and landscape, and Ron talked about it in relation to machine and bodies. A couple of weeks ago Larry Grossberg, a cultural theorist, was here giving a talk at York University on childhood and he talked about the way in which childhood is being represented and reconceptualised in popular culture as linked to a sense of having no future—as a dystopia rather than a utopia—and it seemed to me there was a utopian thrust to all your papers. Do you have any thoughts on the function of utopia now, how to think about or imagine a future?

**Johanne Sloan:** Well, I guess utopia as a concept is difficult to talk about in relation to the present era, as compared to say the proto-avant garde of the early twentieth century, or the constructivists in Russia, who tried to offer a renewed perception and at the same time transform society. They regarded certain kinds of habits and gestures, but also shapes and colours, as well as forms of social organisations that could be transformed at the same time, so that the utopian project became a kind of totalising vision. So I'm not sure that whatever kind of idea of utopia that we have now can be that kind of utopian vision. I nonetheless do think that there are utopian possibilities. There's still a kind of new vision or some kind of new bringing together of ideas and images that can be startling and/or have that kind of utopian edge.

**Warren Crichlow:** My sense is that the question of utopia seems to be the most important thing, because when you think about it we're sitting in this school, perhaps one of the quintessential examples of utopia. My interest in utopia is how utopias always seem to fail. I think it wondrous that the Being on Time exhibition is putting that kind of invention into art education as a kind of challenge to the notion of utopian culture. But what it also suggests is that on the other side of that critique, of the place of the sublime, the artist tries to bring it down to the ground to determine what possibilities may be left, to imagine something different and to incorporate notions of flux.

**Chloë Brushwood Rose:** For me looking at new media and the way education has started to respond to technologies is interesting, not just computer technologies but also the television and the radio and the airplane. – I discovered a book in the library with this picture of a teacher teaching a geography lesson on an airplane. Education has always attached these hopes and ideas to the technology itself. I think what the exhibit speaks to is that although there may be movement, a passage of time, it is not necessarily a linear passage. The time the students are in may be very troubled. There’s a sense that we need to resist the educational impulse to only focus on the bright future of the student. This can be a very conflicted impulse. In that sense the work of art may make us face education as being conflicted, and not necessarily move us towards a utopia.

**Ron Burnett:** The other side of utopia is the imaginary, and the release (however often we fail) of that imaginary, the ability to create that space where you can allow this to occur. Schools, when they first started, were places of imagining. They were places of iconological worship, of ritual. They generated carotene kinds of experiences that weren’t necessarily linear. I use the metaphor of getting on a train, which you board in elementary school, and you think “I can’t wait to get out!” Then you hit high school and you think “Wow! I can’t wait to get out of high school.” Then you enter university – “I can’t wait to finish my degree!” and then you get your job and you’re watching the clock and you can’t wait to get out of there and then you die. You spend a lot of time inside someone else’s assumptions of the imaginary, but really if you focus on this example and think about allowing the autonomy of students inside the curriculum, it makes sense – let the students make the decisions about where knowledge is for them. Let them define how they understand the world around them. This notion of recovering self, at least through that momentary, sometimes epiphanous moment, where you create something that says something back to you.

**Johanne:** Are you saying that elementary kids should be deciding their own curriculum?

**Ron:** Absolutely! I’m actually saying that in the elementary classroom the students are actually in charge. The teacher is desperately trying to reign that in. The teacher is trying to provide information and be the source of that information. Meanwhile, the students are all over the place, as they should be, trying to figure out what they’re doing.

**Johanne:** For me that’s not something that’s very viable, this notion of

the wild and natural, and that this will make the classroom utopian. There's something else which is about the order of social formation and the way that we organise information and organise those of kinds of structures, and there's a dialectic between the two. We can aim for some kind of freedom within the structure that could be considered utopian, rather than saying we should be totally free all the time from a very young age.

**Ron:** No, I'm not saying that. You know most of the interesting experiments of the early twentieth century, such as Montessori, are conducted around that early stage. In these situations, enough space is created and enough time is given over to the exploration by the children, giving them a recognition of why they're there that can offset the class in a new direction in terms of the choices they make. There is a structure because the teacher often has something in mind, but they are definitely far freer. Montessori is famous for allowing that freedom early on but then clamping down later on the work of the students. You walk into a classroom now as a teacher in front of your older students and presume to know what they're thinking, and you make the assumption that they will listen to what you have to say, whereas the key process is interpersonal.

**Question:** Isn't the key process in education that people show up on time? It sounds like the problem in education is that people will show up on time and they only express themselves in the time that you give them. My sense of education was that nothing mattered if you didn't show up on time. If you're not in the right class at the right time in the right order, only then are you supposed to speak. Education to me is like a penal colony. I mean, if I asked any kid, "what's your definition of utopia?" I can't imagine any of them would say the classroom. So it seems to me that time is really important, and the fact that it's not your time, that it's someone else's time your on and not your own, this seems significant to me.

**Chloë:** I guess I would respond in that I agree with a lot of what you are saying. Yes, there are bells and periods, writing on chalkboards telling you where you have to be, people running around from room to room. However, I've spent many days in elementary schools conducting my research—and I mean I really hadn't been back there since I was eight years old—but I actually have to say that I've been really surprised at how much free time there is in school. One of the things I'm fascinated by is kid culture and how kids resist structural systems. For example, the ways in which the playground functions as this amazing unconscious space in school, and the exploration of that tension. Although I agree that education in Ontario or Upper Canada was established not so much to educate

as to organise the children, to keep them somewhere and to keep them healthy, at the same time I think if you did ask a kid what their sense of utopia was it might be skipping class with their friend or sleeping over at school. So that there are these kinds of fissures, so that is a kind of dialectic again.

**Question:** Why should all kids show up at the same time? I've heard so many discussions over the years about education and the school's curriculum has never questioned that. As society becomes more delinquent so schools become more delinquent. More penal.

**Warren:** In the United States there's talk about school as an institution. I think the question about students already resenting that aspect of school and trying to think of ways to get out of it is accurate. There's an interesting movement going on in the States called "Education not Incarceration," and the question in that movement is not so much about time, about being on time, as it is about school not so much educating like a penal institution but being displaced by real penal institutions. There was a demonstration in Harlem last week protesting an abandoned school being turned into a prison. So I think the question of being on time might be turned around to ask "Why be on time, to be on time for what?" You will never hear the phrase "learn from art," you will really only read the phrase "learn about art." This always implies a demand for some kind of detachment or distance from the object so that the object is not really something that we want to learn from, but just learn about, keeping us as far away as possible from the object. So I think when we have exhibitions like *Being on Time*, we can twist the title to *Time and Being* because it really does challenge the notion of being that might change the way we want to be on time for school.

**Question:** I wanted to ask you about a phrase that came up while this was being discussed, and the phrase is being on someone else's time. I'm not sure how its possible to be on someone else's time and not to be existing on your own time. But I wonder how this is possible?

**Ron:** Can you explore this idea a little more? Why does this phrase hit you?

**Question:** Well, it strikes me as being impossible—while you exist on your own time, say the framework of your day—there's no question in my mind that I'm experiencing this day on my time. I recognise that the phrase comes up repeatedly that you are meeting deadlines on someone else's schedule, or I have to sit through this because I'm not on my own

time, but is there a way to remove ourselves from this situation to reposition ourselves?

**Ron:** I think that one of the ways to get to this might be that the fundamentally subjective space that I (not we) inhabit is a mixture of presence and present, daydream and anticipation, past reflection and future, and the term 'time' and the discursive use that I make of it becomes far more specific and becomes a good set of relations, which is why sometimes time seems to be passing quickly and at other times it seems to go on and on and on. Somehow we want to try and locate meaning on a personal level of that interiority that can actually allow for a richer exposition of how often somebody else is demanding of me a temporal relationship that is not my own. It's not that they're forcing me but they're demanding that I fit into a predetermined, if not linear, relationship when I'm actually in this multiplicity, inhabiting levels of positions inside my body and outside my body, struggling with what it means to be situated at all. I think that can be a tremendous stress in an institution. The demand is being made absolutely, so that if you're not on their time you could be punished—you'd be suspended, you are treated as though you have done something terrible—simply because you were daydreaming and forgot time. There is an issue there about the structure that institutions developed and how they impose themselves on that fluidity. The other issue is an issue of finding the discourse, of finding a measure for what it means to be very young or very old. That is how do they define themselves, how does the experience of time unfold for them, and clearly school is not a place or a space—let alone time—in which much thought is given over to that. That's seen as being too subjective and therefore not suitable. There isn't a place for it. That's where I see art coming in. When you go into art classes across Canada, in particular in grades 1, 2 and 3, . . . (I have revisited elementary school classes a great many times) there's a tremendous amount of energy there. It's rich, it's engaged, it's pretty atemporal. But there's a sense of that loss of the controlling features of the conventional narrative. It's fascinating to me that so much is being taken in and taken on by those students. There actually giving so much in that moment, and suddenly bang! The bell rings and they're back into a penal like (actually, that's a bit of a stretch for me) rhythm. So I guess what I'm trying to say is that the terminology we use to describe that relationship has to be carefully thought out, where it's the resistance that's really the key and not the acceptance. And that's where the utopian comes back. I would prefer to be utopian about the extent to which students exist in that space where that resistance gathers its strength, even sometimes hurting themselves and others seriously in that space. Ultimately we are not rhythms in a

process. If it were political at that level, this would be highly depoliticized and neutralised. And it remains a site of resistance.

**Question:** I wanted to pick up on Chloë's idea of resistance and that resistance is everywhere—not only in the classroom. But I have another comment. When you [Johanne Sloan] were talking about landscape painting, for example, when you are discussing the stillness of that sort atemporal space in relation to new media—for example the way MTV evolved—I was thinking about the way that digital media operates to speed things up, and the contrast of the speed of that in relation to my own experiences of it. For me it does have this atemporal quality you describe in landscape painting, that sensation of stillness. I would put this question to everybody: is it too early to tell yet about whether or not the new media will affect our sense of time? Does it speed things up? Can we really say that?

**Ron:** I'm trying to relate my experience of hangliding because it was terrifying. In some sense I think you are right—time did slow down quite a bit, although my anxiety increased it. But I think your question is a very interesting one. I believe that our culture is at the embryonic stage—the baby stage hasn't even been born yet. There's a sense that we've been in this stage for a long time (in terms of technology), but I think we are just beginning to understand the implications. I'm not entirely sure what is happening to the body and our sense of time. I don't necessarily agree with Donna Haraway's jump to cyborg spaces—she jumped very quickly there. It may be unanswerable at this point.

**Warren:** I read about an interesting intervention that occurred in a competition between Seiko and Swatch watch companies, where Swatch came out with a set of advertising that had to do with the new digital technology and the digitization of time. Swatch turned that on its head and came out with a watch that kept the hands, but they took the numbers right off it. In this way, you could enter a new kind of relationship with time, and they would also customise the watches in different shapes and colours. So it suggests to me that—going along with the idea that more new medias and digital technologies create new narratives of time—there are always ways to invert that, whether its in the modification of a watch, or in other dimensions of everyday life. I tend to like the kind of new media and art that tries to play with time through the emergence of repetition and looping, so that we continue to slow down time through things that move and transform very slowly or very rapidly. An example of this is Douglas Gordon's *Twenty-Four Hours*, which was twenty-four hours of watching

Hitchcock's *Psycho*. I mean to me, that's a very interesting way of thinking about time. The work of Stan Douglas, which I like very much, constantly turns to history and utopia by actually slowing it down through various kinds of looping effects. In terms of utopia, we are still in that place where despite the fact that time is being messed with and will continue to be messed with, there will continue to be ways that technology allows us to work with time in different ways, ways that encourage the imagination, that allow people to see things differently.