

Article

Zoom in on *Dry Joy*—Dissensus, Agonism and Democracy in Art Education

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Abstract: Literature on art education often emphasizes dialogue as a preferred approach and as a way of practicing democratic education in museums and galleries. Dialogue-based tours in such contexts are often characterized by a sense of harmony and agreement. In contrast, this article discusses the democratic aspect and political potentiality when dissensus and agonism are used as central educational strategies. The point of departure for the discussion was a teaching session on the online platform Zoom with student teachers as part of their module on art and crafts at the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway, in spring 2020. Artworks from the exhibition *Dry Joy*, in Sørlandet Art Museum, by Finnish photographer Iiu Susiraja, were the pivot point in the session. Before the lockdown caused by COVID-19, the exhibition caused intense debates. The strong reactions were particularly prevalent amongst parents whose children had witnessed the exhibition as part of a school trip. A central part of the teaching session was encouraging students to come up with and explore arguments both for and against exposure of school children to these images. This article aims to contribute to knowledge about how educational strategies that challenge consensus may enable democratic arenas beyond hegemony.

Keywords: art education; museum; online platform; dissensus; agonism; democracy



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1. Introduction

Parents rage against school after visit to art museum—perverted and sexualized. A group of 10-year-old school pupils were taken to a controversial art exhibition. Several parents were shocked when they saw the artworks. Now the school regrets taking the kids to the exhibition [1].

A reference to the above headline and ingress was sent to me via email on March 5th, 2020, by a colleague from my university with four words in the email subject: “Here we go again . . . ” My colleague was hinting at the reaction by members of the public to the exhibition *Dry Joy* by Finnish photographer Iiu Susiraja at Sørlandet Art Museum in Kristiansand, Norway. The news piece included in the email referred to the ongoing upheaval and heated debate in local news and social media [1,2]. For years, Kristiansand had been Norway’s metropolis for intense debates on art. Once again, an exhibition was being criticized for being too controversial and not suitable for children to see and experience—and once again, an exhibition had caused a media storm.

While the reactions of the raging parents triggered my curiosity, I was also fascinated to know more, as I have a particular interest in how children and youngsters respond to art that is considered offensive and too challenging [3,4]. The responses encouraged me to engage with student teachers and expose them to this exhibition to see how they might interpret the relevance of such images and the social debates such works promote for educational purposes. These largely negative responses of parents also made me ask questions about how such art can be used to explore issues of free speech, or in this instance, artistic freedom as a platform to engage directly with the subject of democracy.

A few days after I had received the information regarding Susiraja’s artworks, coronavirus hit and led to border closures, university lockdowns, museum closures, and in

essence a total lockdown of educational, social, and cultural life. I was thus forced to alter my planned workshop at the art museum with the student teachers.

This article describes how the planned teaching session was altered due to the coronavirus situation, resulting in a workshop delivered through the online platform Zoom. A central part of the workshop was that students were expected to come up with and share arguments both for and against why the exhibition was suitable to show to 10-year-old pupils. Afterwards, students wrote a reflection in which I asked them to explain their positions. This also included thoughts on the online teaching session approach I had deployed. The students' reflections form the basis of the empirical material for the present article and provided me with the opportunity to discuss the following question: what are the democratic potentialities in art educational practice when dissensus and agonism are used as central strategies? By discussing this, I hope to contribute to the growing knowledge around how some characteristics of art and political theory are productive in promoting criticality in general educational contexts. My aim is also to explore the potential of educational dissensus and agonism as approaches for preserving hegemonies, democracy and freedom of speech within an art educational context.

2. A Debated Exhibition as a Starting Point for Debate

The exhibition *Dry Joy*, was a solo display by Finnish photographer Iiu Susiraja, who was born in 1975 and lives in Turku, Finland. Susiraja works primarily using the media of photography and video, drawing on self-portraiture that she relates to feminine performance, psychoanalysis, and physical comedy. Her approach can be seen as brutally honest, sometimes surreal, funny, and ironic, using her own body and everyday objects as the subject of her work.

In an interview in 2016, Susiraja stated: "I find inspiration when having a moment of rest on the couch. I am thinking of different objects in my mind. The most important matter is what kind of feelings objects generates" [5]. Susiraja does not include other people in her photos. She chooses to focus the attention of the viewer on herself in what could be seen as a form of self-humiliation. She is clear in that she sees photo sessions as very intimate and private. Therefore, images are made in private settings such as that of her own home or her parents' home. She prefers not to elaborate on or talk about her own images as she says: "That's why I don't tell stories" [5].

Thus, the viewer is more or less left with their own readings and associations. What happens, then, when the audience encounters such intimate images, and what happens when the audience are children, or, as I explore in this article, student teachers?

The exhibition in Kristiansand evoked strong reactions from parents, schools, and social commentators after its opening [1,2]. Both the school in question and the museum were shocked by the reaction and regretted that the exhibition had been viewed by 10-year-olds. Art critics, on the other hand, believed that the exhibition was successful and harmless [6]. These debates and reactions were important premises for how I developed the workshop for the student teachers. However, I felt it was essential not to introduce the students to these debates before they had encountered the artworks themselves and discussed them with their fellow students. This would allow them to make up their own minds up about the art.

3. Pre-Workshop

Digital solutions are increasingly being developed in art museums for outreach and educational purposes [7,8]. Throughout 2020, an increasing number of galleries and museums created online exhibitions, so that they could be accessible even if one is not physically present at the gallery or museum.

The *Dry Joy* exhibition was also presented in a virtual format after Sørlandet Art Museum was closed due to the coronavirus lockdown. Thus, I became interested in how the debate about the artworks could be advanced through a digital platform as an

alternative to the student teachers' workshop at the art museum and in discussing the potential of encountering and debating Susiraja's art online in a controlled context.

Prior to the workshop, I sent the students information about the alternative online context of the teaching session. I wanted the group to be prepared in regard to the format and the content of the session. Therefore, I sent them two images by Susiraja: *You did not call* (2018) (Figure 1) and *Broom* (2010) (Figure 2). I encouraged them to reflect on the following questions: 1. What do you see in the two artworks? (Describe as detailed as you can.) 2. What questions and thoughts do the images recall in you? 3. Do you think some societal issues are thematized in the images? If so, which ones? In reference to their role as upcoming teachers, I asked them to make arguments for and against why children at the age of ten should be exposed to this particular art exhibition. In addition, I presented them with a reading that I found to be relevant for the workshop.



Figure 1. Iiu Susiraja: *You did not call*, 2018. © Iiu Susiraja 2020.

However, at this point, I feel it necessary to engage with two contrasting pedagogies: the first describes the dominance of dialogue-based art educational approaches in museums, while the second introduces the terms agonism and educational dissensus. I will proceed to explain where these derive from and how they informed this particular workshop with the student teachers.

4. Dialogue as Normal Order

Literature on art education often emphasizes dialogue as a preferred approach as a way of practicing democratic education in museums and galleries [9]. Thus, dialogue-based tours, often characterized by harmony and agreement, are very much the normal order in such contexts, as stated by the Norwegian educational researcher Olga Dysthe. Dysthe draws on the theories of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin [10], who argues for polyphonic tensions in his theorizing of dialogue. However, Dysthe recognizes that this approach leads to an unrealized potential in the art museum context [11]. The exchange of ideas and experiences tending to look for associations between the artworks and the viewer is often formed around agreed values. These exchanges of experiences between spectators and gallery educators are often reached around a pre-selected artwork and as such form an orthodoxy that shapes the organization of such tours. For example, in the program 'Conversation Pieces' at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery (USA), the monthly tours are described as follows:

The session starts silently, as each viewer sizes up the artwork, looking closely, contemplating quietly, thinking freely for two minutes. Then the conversation begins. Some come to talk. Others prefer to listen. The dialogue is fueled by participant contributions and facilitated by a museum educator who judiciously shares information about the art work as it becomes relevant. No prior knowledge of art is needed. The conversation is fluid, open-ended and democratic. Everyone's voice is heard and perspective validated. Meaning is made together, not by one but by many [12].

Dialogue or dialogic pedagogy is often seen as a democratic approach to learning events such as that outlined above. The possibilities for the directions in conversation seems endless, no prior knowledge is needed, and all readings and interpretations are welcome. As such, these approaches seem to be both inclusive and democratic and are often based on reaching agreed or validated readings as noted in the final sentence of the above paragraph: "Meaning is made together" [12]. But is this consensual approach enabling criticality and promoting a questioning that I believe is vital for democracy to flourish? I assert that challenging consensual approaches is relevant for art educational contexts.

5. Agonism

Through the work of Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe [13,14], we see challenges to this consensual form of democracy. She criticizes the practice of dialogue and asks what are the point of such words if there are no alternatives to those that are under debate? By introducing the concept of agonism, Mouffe [15] argues for the potentialities of disagreement and conflicts particularly in political contexts to promote democracy. To qualify, it is important that this conflict does not take the form of antagonism, a term she explains is a struggle between opposing sides that often leads to the formation of enemies. It must take form "[. . .] as an agonism, a struggle between adversaries", she says ([15], p. 7). She sees conflicts as necessary and inescapable dimensions of political process and discourse and connects agonism to pluralism, and in this way she sees society as more open and porous to the rise of multiple social identities. In an interview conducted in 1998, she tells how her account of agonistic pluralism contrasts consensus-driven forms of liberalism:

I use the concept of agonistic pluralism to present a new way to think about democracy that is different from the traditional liberal conception of democracy

as a negotiation among interests and is also different to the model that is currently being developed by people like Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls. While they have many differences, Rawls and Habermas have in common the idea that the aim of the democratic society is the creation of a consensus, and that consensus is possible if people are only able to leave aside their particular interest and think as rational beings. However, while we desire an end to conflict, if we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to provide an arena where differences can be confronted. The democratic process should apply that arena [16].

With this in mind, I drew on the concept of agonism as described by Mouffe for my Zoom workshop with the teachers. I enabled a pedagogy of agonism and dissensus by inviting the students to make arguments both for and against seeing the exhibition, and thereby constructing a space for disagreement and conflicting positions to emerge. Even if they personally found the exhibition not suitable for children, they had to make arguments for seeing the exhibition and vice versa. Thereby, creating a space for multiple voices to be heard was important. This is an issue I will return to later in this article.

As noted above, the concept of dissensus also played a major role in my pedagogical work with the teachers. In the following I introduce educational dissensus, as a pedagogy that I have developed from the French philosopher Jacques Rancière's philosophy and his concept of dissensus [17,18]. In this specific workshop, educational dissensus can be seen as a strategy aiming to realize the agonistic potential that may lie unprovoked in an art museum setting. Therefore, I see agonism as an associated concept to dissensus. Mouffe [15] also states: "While consensus is no doubt necessary, it must be accompanied by dissent" ([15], p. 8).

6. Educational Dissensus

My initial construction of educational dissensus derives from a study involving two groups of secondary school students and their visit to three contemporary art exhibitions at Sørlandet Art Museum over a period of three years [4]. One of the exhibitions in the study displayed the work of Norwegian artist Morten Viskum, who is considered to be one of Norway's most controversial artists. His display was the last of the three exhibitions I explored with the students. Similar to the general public, the students reacted strongly, and in some cases, negatively to Viskum's use of dead animals and parts of human bodies in his art. Similar to the student teachers involved in the *Dry Joy* workshop, I asked this group to construct arguments for seeing or for not seeing the exhibition.

While their initial reaction to the exhibition was one of confusion and even shock, this changed through the questions I had presented, and gradually as they engaged with both the work and the questions, they became more open and accepting of Viskum's art. I realized that the way we organized the visit and the pre-workshop and follow-up activities at school were important in moving them from a place of skepticism to a place of interest and curiosity. In my PhD [4], the book [19], and follow-up based on this research, I write about the Viskum exhibition in some detail [20,21] and refer to the importance of initiating a debate which is open to different and nuanced views on such challenging art. Hence, I reflected on this past research and decided to use a similar methodology with the *Dry Joy* encounter.

This staging of debate and the conscious application of agonism expands educational dissensus and offers the potentiality for students to adopt complex concepts within the framework of engaging with challenging art. Educational dissensus can introduce what could be seen as disturbing art and initiate situations that offer resistance and through an agonistic lens and as such invite disagreement and uncertainty and celebrate the possibilities of the unforeseen. I also see educational dissensus as a praxis that aims to challenge regular ways of teaching and open up new possible avenues of knowledge based on a positive prospect of disagreement and disruption. I see this as a pedagogical form that contrasts and creates a tension in the normal order and offers possibilities for valuable disruptions. This disorder and rupture may lead to resistance, as is highlighted before, but

I see this as a resource that leads to change in perceptions and attitudes. From this I argue that educational dissensus enables the subject to come into existence, or what I frame as ‘events of subjectivation’ [4,21].

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière [17] writes about dissensus as “[...] an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all” ([17], p. 48). Here, he states that dissensus breaks with habitual forms of imagination and contributes to new ways of seeing, hearing, and sensing.

Based on Rancière’s understanding, it is difficult to see art independently of the spectator. His interest revolves around the democratic free space between the viewers and the art, what he refers to as a “third element” where there is no connection between the artist’s intention and the spectator’s translation ([17], p. 15). Rancière emphasizes the openness of art and since there is no coherence between the artists’ intentions and how art is sensed, negotiations arise both between art, individuals, and groups of people. Encountering art is always about a translation that often takes place in a “community of narrators and translators” ([17], p. 22). This community has been created through a disidentification which, according to Rancière, is characterized by dissensus. Possibilities for disagreement and differences in opinions thus appear, but more importantly, opportunities for neglected voices may speak and be heard. The premise of equality is deeply rooted in Rancière’s philosophy [22]. This also seen in the book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* [23]. The unconventional ideas on education presented in this book also inform my construction of educational dissensus.

Rancière [17] sees dissensus as part of the process of political subjectivation. By raising voices that disturb the normal order, the obviousness of the visible might “sketch a new topography of the possible” ([17], p. 49). Even though he says that dissensus is not a conflict of interests, I find dissensus relevant to apply when readings of art differ.

We can relate Rancière’s way of understanding the political subject to the British professor of art education Dennis Atkinson’s [24,25] and the Dutch professor in education Gert Biesta’s [26–29] conceptions of the subject. Although they disagree on the usefulness of the term ‘learning’, they both argue for education that risks and offers resistance in order for the subject to exist and to come into presence. Atkinson [24] makes use of the term ‘real learning’, which is close to Biesta’s [26] notion of subjectification as they both talk about the knowledge that emerges, that was not there, and that could not be anticipated. Biesta [26] talks about the role of the teacher needed for the dimension of subjectification to take place: “The responsibility for the educator is a responsibility for what is to come, without knowledge of what is to come” ([26], p. 148). Atkinson [24] refers to the event and real learning as a “new order of becoming” ([24], p. 9) and “a leap into a new space” ([24], p. 9). He calls for accommodating “the unpredictable” ([24], p. 15) and challenging the students out of their comfort zone. Atkinson’s and Biesta’s theories on the subject and interruptive teaching have inspired my way of seeing dissensus as a premise for events of subjectivation and an educational strategy.

The Irish artist educator John Johnston [30] is also relevant to bring into this collective of inspiration. Johnston refers to Rancière, and dissensus explicitly, when arguing for disruption and disturbance as common features in his art educational praxis involving street art and political murals. Johnston states:

The intention to disturb these existing norms is central to my praxis and it is through reflection that I recognize a close connection between this intention and Rancière’s (2010) thoughts on the relationship between Art and Politics and in particular the concept of dissensus ([30] p. 7–8).

Johnston believes that when artistic action is combined with educational intention, a new pedagogical force of transformation can emerge that challenges conventions and enables new pathways of thought to come into being.

Atkinson [24,25], Biesta [28,29], and Johnston [30] all also acknowledge, as I do, art’s capacity to disturb established norms, and thus they claim “the educative power of the

arts" [29], p. 18). Johnston proceeds to emphasize the value of the visual arts in situations of conflict, saying:

The arts, but in particular the visual arts, offer a language that enables the disruption of existing norms to take place through a direct engagement with the language of division. As such a critical visual arts pedagogy as a force for transformation embodies the potential to shift, alter, disrupt, disturb existing behaviors, perceptions and attitudes ([30], p. 8).

The ideas explored by Atkinson, Biesta, and Johnston on the need for disruption are furthered by my adaption of dissensus as an educational strategy and the possibilities for subjectivation and transformation inherent in this approach informed the workshop on Zoom. I will now address how this approach relates to the concept of democracy through the lenses of the some of the scholars mentioned above.

7. The Workshop on Zoom and Methodology

When we started the session on Zoom, I wanted the students to share their personal experiences of encountering art when at school, either as a pupil or during school teaching practice. Most acknowledged that they had not seen or engaged much with art before this specific session at university. Following on, I wanted them to share their descriptions of and associations to the two images I had sent them in advance, and also to explore these further with questions, etc. Despite my years of art educational experience and knowledge, I always chose to hold back and ask the students speak first and share their concerns and questions, rather than interpret the work and presume they will understand or even be interested in such translations. This is a conscious method I employ to practice Rancière's ideas of equality and education and embed such ideas into my own pedagogy [23].

Yet, I acknowledge my role as a teacher as someone who introduces students to something new. So, after we had discussed whether the exhibition should be exposed to 10-year-old pupils or not, I provided the students with links to the news about the angry parents, as well as other reactions to the exhibition. We ended the session with a discussion on whether they agreed with the parents or not. We also discussed whether the educational dissensus strategy that I had introduced to them previously was beneficial.

Ethical considerations regarding the participation of the students were reflected on throughout the duration of the study. After the workshop, I asked the students to respond to the questions referred to earlier in writing, ensuring that they were aware that any responses would be anonymized in the event of any future publications. Ten of twelve students accepted my use of their reflection notes and provided written consent. In keeping with the University's ethical code, I masked their identity with generic identification by gender and numbering as opposed to naming. I also downloaded their responses on a locked online folder to ensure their identity would not to be exposed.

Through the use of their anonymized writings and my own observations, I have constructed my research within qualitative methodologies, with the proposition that both the theoretical point of departure and the comments of the students would create a discussion on the potential of agonism and dissensus in educational context to enhance a democratic free space. In support of my use of this research paradigm, I draw on the work of May Britt Postholm [31], a Norwegian professor in teacher educational research. She alternates between using descriptive and theoretical strategies to structure the material in qualitative research ([31], p. 86). Here, I make use of both to some extent, with the main emphasis on the theoretical approach.

8. Students Intrigued and Troubled by the Questions and Uncertainty

To give the reader context for the images used in workshop, I will refer to the descriptions and the associations the students made rather than those used in the museum. My intention in asking for these descriptions was to encourage each of them to reflect on what feelings were evoked and what questions were raised when they encountered the art of Susiraja. In his description of *Broom* (2010) (Figure 2), one male student states:



Figure 2. Iiu Susiraja: *Broom*, (2010). © Iiu Susiraja 2020.

In the first picture, there is a picture of a lady who has a broom between her breasts and belly. She has short hair and looks quite angry, but also sad. She wears a black skirt and a gray top. The hair is short. She's a pretty big lady. She is standing in what looks like a kitchen, where the furniture looks quite worn/old. On the wall hangs a rug that appears to be handmade (Male 1).

My research and educational practice demonstrate that engaging with such controversial art raises important and critical questions about our levels of tolerance and the values that shape this tolerance [4]. In my observation of the following comment, I see that the student is raising fundamental questions about the nature of art and more precisely why it is made in this way. "When it comes to the two pictures we were sent, I am left with a number of questions that I cannot quite answer myself. Why a broom under the breasts? What makes it art? Why have bacon on your face and on a chair? [. . .]" (Male 4).

These questions and the following comment demonstrate the ambiguity in the images by Susiraja and shows how relevant Rancière's concept of dissensus can be when sited in art and educational contexts. The remarks reveal how Susiraja's art plays with ambiguity and disturbs the audience by making it uncertain when confronted with the images.

For my part, I was a little confused by the art. I did not quite understand what was going on in the pictures, except for this lady in different situations, where she neither smiles nor seems to be comfortable. What does the artist want to say? (Female 3).

While the uncertainty is confusing to some of the students, the ambiguity is explicitly embraced by others, for example:

The first thing I thought when I saw the pictures and videos was that this is a tough woman who opposes today's beauty ideals and body pressure. It was incredibly refreshing to come into the museum and see something completely new that I have never seen before, as well as see a natural, large body in a different context than before. Susiraja manages to create curiosity, wonder and humor, still the images have painful and sad layers as well (Female 8).

Another student reported on how the uncertainty made her feel very uncomfortable. She said she does not like the way Susiraja has positioned herself. She claimed the artist is provocative and that her purpose is to get attention:

It's not art I would pay to see in a museum. I thought it was a stupid way to portray her overweight. We often hear that you look good in the body you have, but here I just thought she was trying to make herself as ugly as possible. To create as much fuss as possible around the photos. She wants attention. She wants to be seen as an artist. And that's something I can understand. One has to dare to stand out. So that one can get a name out in the big art world. But when I heard my fellow students' opinions and views on art, I began to study the images in a different way (Female 9).

The final sentence signals a transformation in her own view, or what I would call an event of subjectivation [21]. What her fellow students said about the images affected her. This can be related to what Rancière [17] calls political subjectivation that might "sketch a new topography of the possible" ([17], p. 49). Both her own and her fellow student's different opinions disturb the initial approach to Susiraja's art, and thereby demonstrating that disagreement is vital for changes to emerge and for subjects to appear, as stated by Rancière [32]. I refer more to how the students responded to the pluralism and the multiple voices that were raised in the group through an exploration of the polyphonic voices as it emerged in the dialogues.

9. The Appearance of Polyphonic, Multiple Voices

In the above reflections and multiple associations made in response to the artwork of Susiraja, the polyphonic voices began to appear. Some commented explicitly on how their fellow students affected what they thought about the art. They also mentioned how their fellow students made them aware of what societal themes the artworks invited discussion of, taking them beyond their initial considerations. It is possible that this extension beyond what is seen and into possible meanings and associations needed time to be absorbed? One of the students stated: "My fellow students had other thoughts about the images that dealt with beauty ideals and health. In retrospect, these ideas have also struck me when I look back at the *Dry Joy* exhibition" (Female 3). A male student commented on the importance of time and reflection: "Several of my thoughts have appeared afterwards after hearing my fellow students' thoughts. Often there are things that I have not noticed or contexts I have not thought about that are highlighted by the fellow students" (Male 2).

I would suggest this time to reflect on the particular questions, both in the Zoom session and afterwards, played a role in bringing forward these new possible understandings and enabled the students to be more conscious, and most importantly, welcoming of the variety of opinions that exist. The opportunity to reflect and the Zoom workshop itself provided a space to become aware about the change in their own and other's perceptions of the art. Many students wrote long passages about how the session transformed their initial way of looking at Susiraja's art:

[. . .] The photos made me ask questions about the concept of art and whether this could also be categorized as art. [. . .] Initially, I was negative about Susiraja's contribution to the art world and regarded her exhibition as provocative work, not art (Female 3).

She continued to say that my pedagogy and teaching methods provoked her by introducing this artist and asking her to focus on something she did not accept as art. She

proceeded to write about the uncertainty she felt when encountering the art and also she started asking herself about her strong aversion and the feelings that the images aroused: “What was it that made me feel such disgust? Was it a fat female body? Perverted use of objects?” Another girl wrote about how this effect on the spectators could be seen as a positive aspect of Susiraja’s art. When asked to mention arguments both for and against why the exhibition was worth visiting, she said this:

After a while, I formulated that an advantage could be spectators’ emotional response to the provocative aspect of the exhibition, could be questioned and examined by the visitor. This as part of revealing underlying thoughts and opinions we may not know we had, as I myself was in the process of doing. While something negative could be that the art provoked so much that it could prevent the visitors from opening up to alternative ways of seeing the art, as I did before and during parts of the session (Female 6).

The same student continued to write about how her fellow students presented other views on the exhibition that she had not been able to see for herself. She talks about issues of gender, discrimination, domination, and marginalized values.

It was interesting to see how the introduction of other views on the exhibition affected the students. One student wrote about how she struggled with Susiraja’s art, but when exploring it, “[. . .] my eyes opened up more”, she said. Then, she read the newspaper article I shared with the students where a woman being interviewed about the exhibition responded with disgust [2]. The student commented thus on this woman’s view, compared to how the group of student teachers responded to it:

She believed that Susiraja portrays the overweight body in an unpleasant way and does not see anything positive in the pictures. The interpretations we came up with in the class were a little different than this woman’s view of the exhibition. Several of us agreed that this could be a good exhibition for drawing attention to concerns about the body amongst young people. In today’s society and social media, bodies are often presented very skinny and tall. Susiraja opposes this ‘perfection’ and exhibits her large body (Female 7).

The balancing between accepting and not accepting the artworks by Susiraja was also seen when the students reported about their arguments for exposing 10-year-old pupils to the exhibition or not. In the following, I refer to how the students responded to this through the lens of agonism.

10. Agonism at Play

I come back to my question when I asked the students to make both for and against arguments for children seeing the exhibition. Many of the students in the group said that school children, even those as young as 10 years old, should be able to see the art by Susiraja. This should be pursued without hesitation.

Many raised the point that the artworks pose open questions about how the body is portrayed in today’s society, and that such an exhibition gives the opportunity to have interesting discussions about it in a relatively safe and controlled form. Another topic that was mentioned is gender discrimination. The students recognized that children should be able to experience what Johnston (in [24]) describes as “issues-based” art ([24], p. 62), along with a range of different art exhibitions, and thereby realize, explore, and discuss the immense diversity of art. Another student stated that Susiraja’s art might expand the children’s notion of art and that such art can become an inspiration that enables new ideas to emerge. As one girl put it: “I think that art like this is absolutely fine to expose to 5th graders. Yes, it can be difficult to understand, and it can be provocative for some, but that is what art is in many cases” (Female 3).

When it comes to the counter-arguments, some found the art to be too sexualized. They considered that a 10-year-old pupil might not have the maturity to see it, for they may have no understanding of the context or purpose of such pictures. One student pointed

out two images in the exhibition that she considered as violent that could be inappropriate for youngsters to encounter. Another issue touched upon was that some might find the art so strange or even alienating that they would withdraw from the work altogether. She stated that the art might be so different from what they have experienced before, and their impression of art will just continue to be something they find to be strange. Another problematized the pictures from an anti-social and discriminatory context, saying that the images may lead to children making fun of oversized people in general, and in particular, Susiraja's body. Going even further, some considered that the use of food in the works as objects and not for eating could also present the idea that art allows us to waste food. In the online discussion, there seemed to be a consensus and agreement that despite the possible drawbacks and the arguments for not seeing the exhibition:

Finally, we agreed that if a school wants to bring a class to such an exhibition, it is important to carefully prepare and plan the event. This would include a critical engagement that enables good reflections, preferably before, but also after the exhibition (Female 8).

This consensus was, however, contested in an individual reflection, where one of the students maintained that she does not think children aged 10 should see such works: "I felt I was a little nauseous looking at them. Then imagine what a 10 year old will feel when they see these!" (Female 9).

11. Importance of the Role of the Teacher

In the previous paragraph, I referred to a student who highlighted the importance of the work that teachers do prior to and after visiting exhibitions. In fact, many of the students wrote about the importance of the teacher's role in such contexts. One stated "[...] it's perfectly fine to show students in 5th grade such an exhibition, but it all depends on the work the teachers do before and after". The same student continued to say that there should be both preparatory work and follow-up activities to extend the understanding and learning of the process. Such activities were important premises for engaging with the art of Viskum, as mentioned earlier [4].

Another student recognized that the teacher needs to consider whether the class is mature enough to deal with the artwork on display and whether the psychosocial environment is stable to allow for a safe engagement. She continued to say that as long as the teacher plans well and provides the parents with some information, it should be ok to expose 10-year-olds to such an exhibition. Furthermore, she remarked that she would like to take to her future pupils to a similar exhibition, saying: "[...] it is extremely important that the teacher knows the art presented in advance, and that the teachers provides opportunities to discuss their own thoughts and opinions". (Female 6). She continues by saying: "I have now changed my mind somewhat from considering Susiraja's art as not only provocative, but as art that can affect our emotions and encourage self-examination" (Female 6).

I believe this statement is representative of a transformative moment taking place.

12. Online Platforms for Discussing Art

I see excellent potentialities in arranging debates and discussions as described in this article. The Zoom platform was an emergency solution, but it also provided an interesting and possibly safe arena for discussions on art in a relatively contained educational context. In recent years, we have witnessed freedom of speech becoming out of control online. The language used in the comment fields is getting more and more offensive, and in the worst cases, it leads to harassment and incitement [33,34]. This also applies in the fields of art and culture.

Compared to many open online debates, the discussion referred to here was controlled and enabled multiple and disagreeing voices in a polite atmosphere and in a socially acceptable manner. As one student said: "It was a great way to get everyone's opinions across" (Female 8). Another one said:

I think Zoom worked very well, it was easy to follow when the teacher shares the screen and explains. In addition, there was a lot of activity among us students both in the chat field and we got to answer questions from the teacher by raising our hand and have the possibility to speak (Male 10).

In the workshop, we discussed the potential of arranging similar online sessions as preparatory work and follow-up work in relation to visits to museums and galleries for teachers. It would provide an opportunity to share associations and even concerns about the art before taking classes to exhibitions like this. If a discussion had been arranged between members from the museum and teachers before visiting *Dry Joy*, I do not think the strong reactions like the ones we saw would have happened. The potential of online-led discussions need to be further explored in future studies, but I think this 'forced pedagogy' of online teaching offers countless possibilities, particularly in regard to preparatory and follow-up work by museum and gallery educators in collaboration with schools. Hopefully also the student teachers in this study will consider this experience when designing visits for their future pupils to art museums and galleries.

13. Dissensus, Agonism, and Democracy

In my research, I have made calls for dissensus as an educational strategy relevant for teaching art, and indeed, for education in general [4,35,36]. I have argued for encounters with art as arenas for the exchange of opinions and debate [19–21]. The teaching session described in this article further demonstrates the democratic potential of bringing dissensus and agonism into education, and what role art can play in creating productive arenas of disagreement. Since art can be ambiguous, open, thoughtful, unpredictable, and incomprehensible, it seems a perfect arena for real democratic practice the way Mouffe [14,15] understands democracy, with agonism as an essential dimension of this real democracy. Art becomes an important space where consensus is challenged and where societal and ethical issues can be raised. Rather than striving for equal views on art and consensus, the process I talk of here provides opportunities for different opinions to emerge and contest, something I see as essential elements of education. Being confronted with other people's attitudes in the art space can also contribute to us becoming more nuanced and more tolerant of others, thereby extending the influence of these 'thinking processes' outside and beyond the art space and into society.

The session on Zoom had an intention to disturb the students by enabling them to see the art from different positions and perspectives. I think the responses from the students show us that this approach contributed to new ways of relating to Susiraja's art and possibly art in general, and thereby realizing events of subjectivation. I think the teaching session suggested the potential of art and education to contribute to new ways of seeing, hearing, and sensing the world. And to continue with the rhetoric of Rancière [17], I think the session demonstrated how art and education might "sketch a new topography of the possible" ([17], p. 49).

I connect the educational dissensus strategy to 'doing or performing democracy' or what I term 'political existence' [4], which I believe is relevant for the current Norwegian educational context, where democracy and citizenship was introduced as one of three new interdisciplinary subjects in the latest national curriculum implemented in 2020 [37]. Biesta's [26] skepticism to teaching democracy is also important to consider when exploring these agendas. Biesta states that one should not teach, but practice, perform, and live democracy, and he in this sense sees school as a perfect context to practice democracy. It is the plurality and the diversity in schools which makes that institution a particularly relevant place for political existence. The school also represents the diversity of the population, and thus it is a possible place for raising multiple voices and political subjectivation [26]. In the epilogue 'A Pedagogy of Interruption' from *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*, Biesta [26] writes about the importance of diversity for democracy and freedom: "Democracy itself is, after all, a commitment to a world of plurality and difference, a commitment to a world where freedom can appear" ([26], p. 151). Biesta [27]

also uses the term ‘The Moment of Democracy’ for the disruption of an existing order, which, if successful, “[...] results in a restructuring of this order so that it becomes an order where there are new ways of behaving and acting (...) where the democratic subject is ‘born’” ([27], p. 116). This corresponds to my understanding of dissensus and sheds light on the connection between democracy, agonism, and the concept of dissensus. It is not a matter of ‘maximizing’ the individual’s desires, but of disturbing these desires. I assert that dissensus in education contributes to the moments of democracy and the coming into being of a political existence. Furthermore, I believe that art education can be seen as what Biesta [27] refers to as “the democratic experiment” ([27], p. 118), where democracy is realized. Relevant for what happened in the session on Zoom, Rancière [22] writes about how democracy can be characterized as disagreement, a disagreement that is practiced and exercised, not just a result: “The forms of democracy are the forms of dispute” ([22], p. 225). He is also concerned about that equality is a premise for how political, free, and democratic subjects can appear, and a premise for what he also refers to as ‘a poetic creature’.

The democratic experience is thus one of a particular aesthetic of politics. The democratic man is a being who speaks, which is also to say a poetic being, a being capable of embracing a distance between words and things which is not deception, not trickery, but humanity; a being capable of embracing the unreality of representation. A poetic virtue, then, and a virtue grounded in trust. This means starting from the point of view of equality, asserting equality, assuming equality as a given, working out from equality, trying to see how productive it can be and thus maximizing all possible liberty and equality ([38], p. 51–52).

According to Rancière [22], politics will always be democratic, since politics presupposes equality. In an interview with the Canadian Peter Hallward [39], Rancière explains, in a similar way to Biesta, how democracy is about political existence: “For me, democracy is not a form of power but the very existence of the political [...] precisely because it defines a paradoxical power—one that does not allow anyone legally to claim a place on the basis of his or her competencies” ([39], p. 199).

In the teaching session described in this article, I believe that it is the premise of equality that informed the session, and through this, I enabled dissensus and that ultimately contributed to the rise of the students’ different opinions and utterances. Insisting on equality of competences firstly between me and the students and secondly between the students themselves, the democratic foundation of the session was formed. In this way, the roles of students and teacher were blurred. The students were just as much teachers as I was, and I departed that session with a lot more knowledge than I entered with. Therefore, I was also taught by the students in this context. Still, my role as a teacher was recognized. I made sure that all voices were heard and prioritized, and as mentioned before, I brought in new elements, such as different views about the art of Susiraja into the discussion, and thus acting as more than a facilitator. I also initiated the session and asked the students to reflect on it, and thus demonstrated the importance of the role of the teacher and art educator.

Rancière’s [17] thoughts on the openness in arts are demonstrated in the diversity of stories, interpretations, and utterances, to a large extent also conflicting utterances about Susiraja’s art. Dissensus in the form of differences of opinion that can arise in encounters with art can be seen as an aesthetic practice, and as such, helps to form the connection between Rancière’s concept of dissensus and politics and art education. It is when students’ utterances are sharpened against each other that I believe the emergence of democracy becomes a reality.

In conclusion, I make a call for the democratic potentials that exist in bringing dissensus and agonism together as educational strategies. We should enable and embrace conflicting opinions in encounters with art, as these help us realize the doing of democracy in a safe yet meaningful setting.

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