



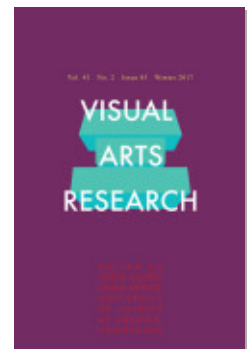
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The Polyptych Methodology and New Histories in Art Education: Charting a Legacy of Stories From Central Technical School, 1896–2014

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The art education program at Central Technical School (CTS) in Toronto, Canada, is so vast in terms of longevity and curriculum that it will never be documented in its totality. My research on this institution of applied and fine art does not provide a definitive story of the past, but a reflexive history self-consciously produced: selected, ordered, and interpreted to make sense of the oral histories, archival sources, and material culture of students and teachers viewed through a postmodern lens. In the following invited article, I have not attempted to summarize my qualitative dissertation; instead, I peel back the layers of stories that form my program of research to focus in on the theoretical and methodological foundations supporting my new history of art education.

The Art Department at Central Technical School (CTS) in Toronto, Canada, supports the country's first and only specialized technical fine art program for adults and high school students. My purpose in this research is to provide one version of this institution's history utilizing the lived experiences of the men and women who shared in its legacy. I explore how stories as a form of historical research provide insights into the everyday lives and artistic culture of CTS, resulting in more localized and relational accounts of the past. Questions guiding this study include: Who were the forces behind the growth of the CTS art program? What are the factors that have helped sustain this publicly funded institution? What were the major historical events that shaped the history of CTS? And, why is the Art Department at CTS rarely mentioned in written histories of Canadian art education?

In the following article, I will expand on the theory and methodology that underpin my research. I utilize contemporary historiographic theory to construct a

new history that articulates a sociohistorical literary account of CTS as part of the field of art education. Through new history, I link stories and emplot characters in ways that provide multiple forms and contexts to understand the institution from more holistic perspectives. These perspectives are transgenerational, dynamic, and multilayered, requiring the development of an arts-based methodology. The visual and textual hybrid methodology took the form of a permeable polyptych structure where my collection of historical stories hinge together, but can be separated and reconfigured to tell multiple stories from personal, external, and internal perspectives. Stories are at the heart of my research, and within them lies much more than individual oral histories. The new history I construct speaks to an expanding artistic culture built on relationships and networks that directly contribute to shaping the visual culture of Canada.

Theoretical Foundations of New History

Constructing history can be thought of as gathering and organizing a selection of fragments to develop a telling of the past. The theorists of new histories (Ankersmit & Kellner, 1995; Jenkins, 2009; Munslow, 2012; Tosh & Lang, 2009; White & Doran, 2010) help me to consider my authorial subjectivity and how to emplot the fragments found in oral histories, archives, and material culture. A new history as a contemporary historiographic concept requires a brief elaboration of how I define and write about its plurality. Throughout this discussion, I use the term “new histories” or “new history” interchangeably. While “new histories” is written at times in its singular form, it is important to note that its meaning is always plural.

My program of research takes on the margins and edges of historical writing in art education in three distinct ways: by confronting history as a literary artistic tool, by reconfiguring the conception of the ways to present the past, and by positioning the author as a participating actor in the constructed history. I draw from recent historiographic theory and adapt the literary practices of new historians as a way to develop this multigenerational rendering. Proponents of new history believe that there is no way that any historical closure can ever be achieved. This unavoidable openness allows for new radical readings, re-readings, writings, and rewritings of the past (Jenkins, 2003). Historians constantly make choices and, despite the completeness of evidence, sophistication of theories, and complexity of methods, history is an authoring process “shaped by the historian and his or her aesthetic choices. The emotional input of the historian thus becomes a central issue in meaning creation” (Munslow, 2010, p. 138). The lens of new histories discussed by Munslow (2015) accepts that there is no one true history or meta-narrative, and that, in reality, every history embeds traces of the historian

who in some way imparts a bias that affects the reality of the story told. Through the artful practice of historying, I was able to construct a series of aesthetic and relational stories offering rich insights into the past. History has been exposed as “emplotted”: as Munslow argues, “the meaning of the past does not lie in the absolute significance of a single event but how that event is fitted into an appropriate story narrative” (Munslow, 2007, p. 38). Munslow identifies the creative process of writing history as the “story space” model of what, how, when, why, and to whom things happened in the past, “which the reader/consumer enters into when they read, view, or ‘experience’ the past, constituted as history” (2007, p. 6). Thinking in terms of historical periods is helpful in conceptualizing the past, but Munslow suggests that “how and why [historians construct history] depends ultimately on . . . epistemological choices” (2007, p. 19). New history is about multiplicity as a broad theoretical position or movement: new historians believe that there is no single truth to be understood from looking to the past, although there can be many accurate descriptions of events. Just because statements of justified and reasonable belief exist, they do not necessarily stand in for the reality of the past.

According to Burke (1991), Munslow (2012), and Jenkins (2009), historians have used the term “new history” since the 1950s, but greater recognition in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s has advanced traditional historians’ conventional methods, resulting in evolutionary changes affecting historical writing across the disciplines. Art education historian Paul Bolin (1995) discusses disciplinary reconstructions in the contemporary field of historiography that advocate for the paradigm of new history. I believe that a historian who attempts this kind of artful creation must have an understanding that “facts” and “factual events” do not equate with meaning. It is the historian-author who constructs historical representations, and it is his or her engagement and personal understanding that will help determine the reliability of the history told.

North American accounts of art education in the last decade consistently push the expanding edges of postmodern art education history by uncovering the lives of instructors, students, and institutions (Bolin, 2006, 2009; Pearse, 2006a; Romans, 2005; Stankiewicz, 2016). These art education historians probe “more deeply into the social contexts where art education has occurred, examining the functions it has been asked to serve, and questioning the varied stakeholders who have advocated art education for themselves or others” (Stankiewicz, Amburgy, & Bolin, 2004, p. 34). The scholarly work of these groundbreaking art education historians has forged a path that I have explored, and that now, in response to this body of literature and advances in historiography, I will continue to forge. Scholars focused on art education history (Chalmers, 2004; Pearse, 2006b; Soucy, 1985) have speculated and taken up more dynamic versions of history, and I have followed their lead by bringing new histories into the field. Historians of art edu-

cation have shown interest in conducting new forms of historical investigation utilizing a postmodern framework, foregrounding gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other hierarchies of access and power. These histories are often informed by methods of investigation that include oral history (e.g., Blandy, 2008; Stephenson, 2006; Stokrocki, 1992, 1995), archives (Morris & Raunft, 1995), and the use of material culture from the past to initiate historical inquiry (Ashwin, 1975; Bolin & Blandy, 2011; Korzenik, 1983, 1985; Pinto & Smith 1999). The methods of historical research produce data that can, and often do, construct a multilayered story of the past.

For almost 20 years, educationists have been pressing for academic legitimization of storytelling genres (Barone & Eisner, 1997). The “narrative turn” in human studies and social sciences was largely the result of the ascendance of literary theory to prominence in academic research, which has arguably become a cornerstone of arts-based educational research (Gallagher, 2011; Sinner, 2013; van Manen, 1990). Barone (1995) argues that the story format is best suited to promoting epiphanic moments (Denzin, 1989) in its readers. These are major transactional moments that disrupt the ordinary flow of life by questioning the usual definitions of important facets of one’s world. This power of story derives from its capacity to entice the reader into a powerful vicarious experience (Barone & Eisner, 1997). Interest in the storytelling form began brewing in the field of education (and the field of curriculum, in particular) with the reconceptualist movement inspired by William F. Pinar and Madeleine Grumet (Grumet, 1987; Pinar, 2011; Pinar & Grumet, 1976). Theorists in this movement have encouraged the use of written and oral biographies and autobiographies for the study of educational experiences. The aim in these studies is to entice the reader to articulate the educational process through intimate disclosures from the lives of individual educators and students (Barone & Eisner, 1997).

Invoking the use of stories as an aesthetic means of constructing history has permitted me to expand on significant historical issues specifically addressing the domains of art, education, social structure, and culture. In an effort to promote genealogical continuity rather than disparity between historical realities and historical narratives, I engaged in primary sources of information that link five generations and identify four thematic threads including identity politics, institutional identity, school culture, and social networks, which braid and create continuity over time. Working with the people who lived the history of CTS, as well as published sources and material culture, I have constructed this history to present a version of the past that is multidimensional, opening the possibility for multiple relational threads to make connections to our lives today. Challenges to the field of education history can be overcome by reorienting our thinking away from “creating a cultural product for cultural consumption towards a more dynamic

development of public histories which are meaningful in the daily lives of working people” (Heron, 2000, p. 197). The relational threads throughout my data sources build connections between the past, present, and possibly the future, as my new histories leave openings and hooks upon which to build.

Methodological Innovation: Using Polyptychs

With the perspective of openings, I recognize that my research offers more than the novelty of stories. This led me to introduce a structural framework, borrowed from art history, of polyptychs as a visual rendering of methodology that mirrors the complexity of our stories. Through polyptychs, I embrace the contributing multiplicity of perspectives that compose a life (Bateson, 2001) and constitute how we know the world around us. An expanded methodological architecture privileges process and flux to avoid definitive judgments, yet I remain cautious that my tailored methodological framework might be perceived as what Phillips and Shaw (2011) warn against: equating innovation with progress and reform in “an uncritical romanticisation of any research practice because of its novelty or technological prowess” (p. 610).

Constructing an innovative methodology entails adapting existing methods or transferring and adapting methods from other disciplines (Phillips & Shaw, 2011; Wiles, Crow, & Pain, 2011). Xenitidou and Gilbert (2012) have concluded that innovative methodologies “primarily entail crossing disciplinary boundaries, . . . entail the use of existing theoretical approaches and methods in reformed or mixed and applied ways, [and] entail the use of technological innovation” (p. 2). Nind, Wiles, Bengry-Howell, and Crow (2013) also argue that innovative methodologies can be located “both inside and outside traditional academic institutions” (p. 652). For Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008), “innovation in the practice of social research is crucial . . . for enhancing our understanding of the human condition” (p. 12). I believe that my innovative methodology is a form of relational research practice. The relational, O’Donoghue (2013) suggests, requires “that we pay attention to the possibilities, promise and actualities of our encounters and exchanges with our research” (p. 402). He argues that “the process itself not only creates the conditions for coming to know, but also creates the object of inquiry” (p. 402). There is fluidity inherent in this process, allowing my methodological innovation to remain flexible and open to the new lines of inquiry that may arise throughout the research process. As McCall (2005) puts it, “ideally, a methodology is a coherent set of ideas about the philosophy, methods and data that underlie the research process and production of knowledge” (p. 1774).

My methodological framework visually rendered through polyptychs brings forward a customized approach to research (Gwyther & Possamai-Inesedy, 2009)

that is coherent and well grounded, clearly forming links between the methods and data, the theoretical lenses informing the work, and the epistemological positioning of the design framework. Gwyther and Possamai-Inesedy (2009) discuss methodological innovation and argue that

as a genre, new qualitative methodologies have quite porous definitional borders (Horsfall & Higgs, 2007). Importantly, however, the methodologies are all premised on various notions of social justice as practice (Denzin, 2003; Minge, 2007), brought to fruition through the validation of new ways of knowing and consequently new knowledge (Simons & McCormack, 2007). The methodologies also attempt to bridge the divide between the researcher and the researched (Pink, 2001) . . . [and] to provide space and method for the ‘researched’ to be an integral part of the research itself, beyond just informants ‘giving voice’ (Dennis, 2005; La Jevic & Springgay, 2008). (Gwyther and Possamai-Inesedy, 2009, p. 106)

My methodological innovation utilizing the rendering of a polyptych to organize a multi-case study creates an architecture that constantly grows and changes with history. Conceiving of an alternative means to visualize the complexity of a multiple case study has forced me to become more conscious of the uses and limitations of traditional qualitative approaches. In the following discussion, I unfold the process of coming to my customized methodology and discuss its functionality as a framework for presenting multiple stories from various perspectives.

Visually Rendering a Methodology: Polyptychs

In the course of my research, I have visited a number of archives that hold material directly related to the CTS art program. I have also interviewed more than 20 former students and teachers who have shared their oral histories and a wealth of material culture, such as photos, documents, curriculum notes, and artwork. All of this data was examined and reflected on through my own lived experiences as an instructor in the CTS art department for over a decade. After the initial stages of data collection, an in-depth literature review, and long lists of ideas, I felt overwhelmed and stretched thin as a researcher, unable to conceptualize the enormity and complexity that an institutional history encompasses.

As I completed the data collection on my new history of this institution, I began to see the organization of people and stories by charting the relationships I found. Using a cork board, a printout of a standard linear time line, push pins, and large rubber bands, I plotted patterns of noted relationships stemming from the CTS art program. The resulting visual imagery from the map did not produce a parallel linear structure. Instead, the relationships I recorded over time told stories that grouped and zigzagged (see Figure 1). My completed map depicted a

densely packed cluster, overlapping and intersecting at junctions, highlighting a rich complexity of relationships that reached from the past into the present. The resulting visual diagram helped to guide my decisions concerning what stories to focus on and the parameters of my research. The diagram also added an unexpected dimension to the research: revealed in my diagram were “transgenerational” connections (Löfström, 2014; Maxwell, 2014) that I discovered through the correlation and comparisons with my participants’ lives.

Within my mapping, I recognized two visual concepts that contributed to the conceptualization of my methodology. The first connection I made was through my knowledge of art history and the artistic conventions utilized by artists to build a narrative. As an artist and art instructor, I have used diptychs, triptychs, and polyptychs as visual narrative structures in my pedagogy and personal practice for many years, but I never envisioned them as part of my program of research. I began to make the conceptual jump from application in a classroom to using the artistic convention of the polyptych as an organizing architecture for the many stories I had been constructing. The second connection I made to my original visual mapping was its resemblance to the structure of a rhizome. Similar to a rhizome, which connects any point to any other point with no beginning or end, the polyptych functions as a series of story frames that connect to each other and offer openings (physical and conceptual) between stories. The architecture of a polyptych is non-hierarchical and decentralized, allowing the clustered stories to be rearranged and overlapped.

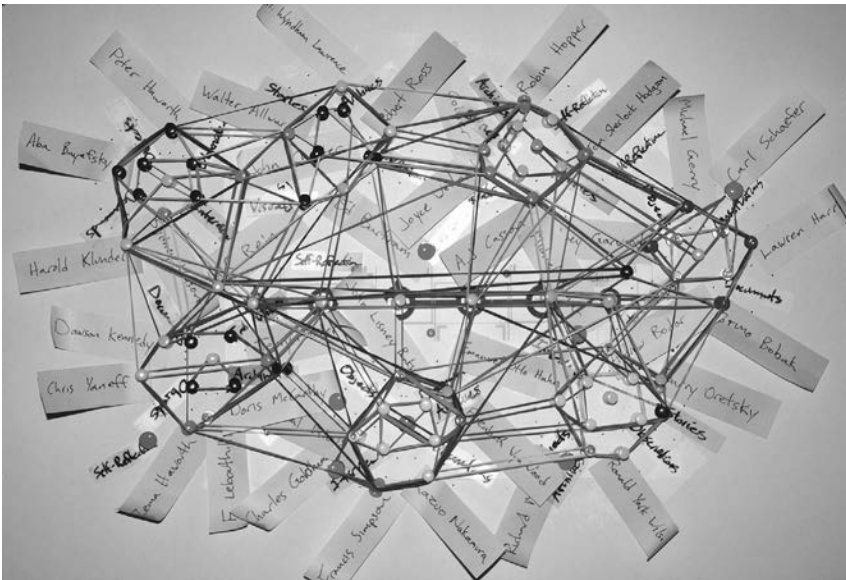


Figure 1. Initial visual mapping of my polyptych design. Image courtesy of Dustin Garnet.

What Is a Polyptych?

The polyptych is a complex structure with a multifaceted history that continues to be shaped to the present day. Since the 5th century BCE, artists have been using large and small panels that are physically connected and arranged in a variety of ways (Frazer, 2012). Interestingly, “ptych” comes from a Greek word for “fold,” so polyptych more or less means “many folds.” Polyptychs typically display one central panel, usually the largest of the attachments, while the other panels are called side panels or wings (van Asperen de Boer, 2004, p. 108). Sometimes, the hinged panels can be varied in arrangement to show different views of the piece. The polyptych can also contain frames within frames and can consist of a variety of geometric shapes (National Gallery, London, 2014). Renaissance polyptychs were often built around a central panel containing the main character(s). The central frame is then surrounded by smaller frames placed on hinged wings. Inside the small frames, narrative images of characters, places, and symbols are purposefully aligned on angles to make connections with other small frames and the central panel. The “connections” are not depicted literally; instead, they are constructed by the viewer’s imagination in an in-between space, engaging the viewer as an active contributor or narrator (Garnet, 2015). New narratives are told as the hinged polyptych is unfolded and positioned by the viewer.

To date, the structure of the polyptych has remained consistent with the historic form. In moving from the arts to multidisciplinary orientations, however, the idea of the polyptych as a structural framework has been adopted by architecture (Salomon, 2011), literary studies (Root, 2003), and a variety of newer, media-based artistic forms like video installation (Sébire, 2012), comics (McCloud, 1993), and digital photography (Starn & Starn, 2003). In turn, I have applied the organizational framework of the polyptych to my study, where I believe historical perspectives can be enhanced by this rendering.

Polyptych Architecture and Method Assemblage

My polyptych architecture is akin to a cluster of cells bringing together place, events, and people to define the form. Borrowing terminology from biology, I imagine the permeable membranes of webbed story spheres that hold individual narratives and stick together: some merge, some multiply, and some bend and fold into each other. My clustered polyptych is a horizontal construction constantly in the process of generation. As the stories are read in different ways, different relational connections are made, leading to different interpretations and understandings. The individual storied spheres share a relationship with each other and the reader, whose perspective will inevitably shape the meanings derived from the new histories I construct (see Figure 2).

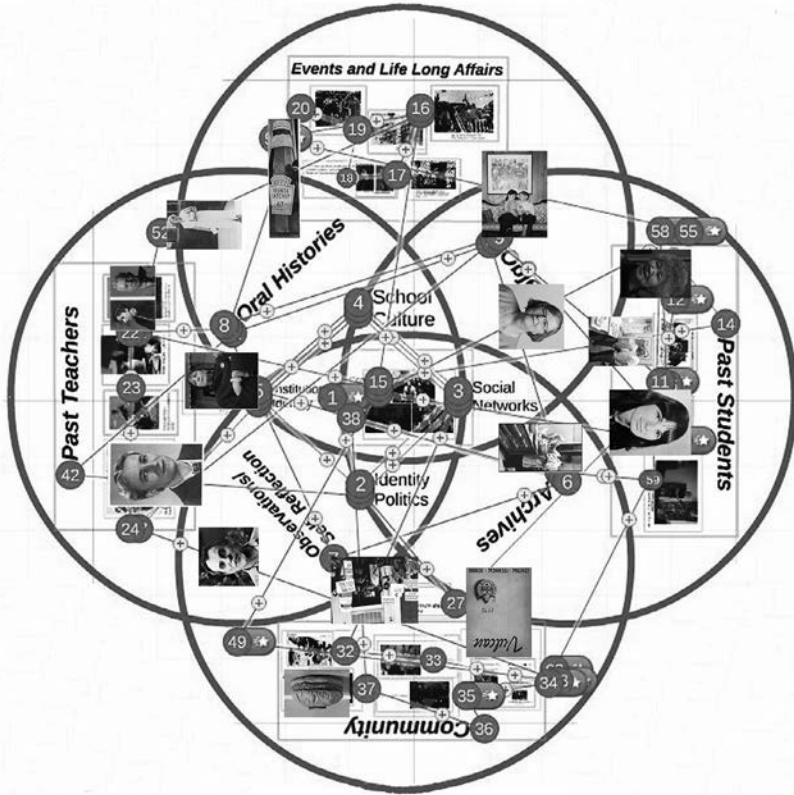


Figure 2. Polptych rendering of my visual methodology.

An individual story sphere consists of a narrative comprised of various forms (a short story, journal entry, newspaper article, student reflection, photograph, and objects) and various perspectives (external, internal, personal). Each story sphere is generated in a non-hierarchical way using a unique set of methods to construct the story. Generations as time periods utilize actors and events as dynamic trans-generational strands that connect to dominant themes (school culture, social networks, school identity, and identity politics) and form complex webs. The connective strands pull individual story frames together, creating a cluster and thus building a larger overall story made up of a series of smaller narratives.

The polptych rendering I employ also supports Law's (2004) theoretical conception of method assemblage. A clustered polptych is asymmetrical and messy, yet each story frame in the cluster is bound in its own permeable membrane (Garnet, 2015). The permeable membranes are conductive, and when one membrane comes in contact with another, the information bound in a single

frame amalgamates and filters throughout the entire design. Permeable membranes are conductive because they are fluid and dynamic, constantly exchanging and diffusing information. The clustered polyptych is crafted of an assemblage of methods that perform inside the fluid membranes surrounding every story frame.

My polyptych rendering utilizes a method of assemblage made up of three distinct sources of historical data. The primary method I utilize is gathering oral histories, the secondary method of data collection is through archival research, and the tertiary method is material culture analysis. While I use these methods to different degrees, I conceptualize them working within a rhizomatic three-dimensional architecture of intersecting spheres where there is primary, secondary, and tertiary data converging and diverging. For example, oral history transcripts produced names, dates, and events, which I then organized with elements of archival research and material culture to create a much larger, more complex narrative.

Cho and Trent (2006) suggest that a research write-up should reflect a process of “thinking out loud” so that readers can understand, holistically, how the research was conceived and carried out, and how interpretations of the data were developed (p. 327). Borrowing from my visual rendering, the polyptych cluster in this case occupies a number of shifting planes. The arrangement of stories creates chronological (or literal) connections, as well as metaphorical (or conceptual) connections across stories. This allows stories in different areas of the polyptych architecture to speak to one another with a fluid aesthetic relationship, articulating movement with, in, and between stories. Conceptually, I envision webs that are shaped into three-dimensional spheres holding different stories from each generation of the school. Each webbed sphere connects into a cluster allowing each of the stories to inform one another. This rendering is different from a standard web in that it presents the reader with an option to enter stories from different positions on the sphere as well as on the larger cluster of stories.

Each story sphere possesses connective strands (names, places, events) that allow the reader to latch on and pull themselves through all the stories regardless of where they enter the cluster. I recognize that multiple interpretations of the stories, in addition to my own interpretations, offer an opportunity and the required agency to make different links between the story panels. There are always connections, but they might not always be found in a linear or a two-dimensional perspective. Similar to a Renaissance polyptych, which can be folded and arranged to allow the hinged images to “speak” to each other, the clustered stories of my polyptych are linked in a complex three-dimensional construction in which storylines diffuse and create bonds between categories, or specific people, places, and things. This rendering lends itself to a comprehensive analysis of personal stories, archival documents, and material culture contributing to a broad and robust study of the Art Department at CTS.

Foregrounding my multiple perspectives through the figure of the artist/teacher/researcher (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004), I approach the writing of my literary history from an educative standpoint. My immersion in curriculum writing, pedagogy, and interpersonal relationships, as well as my own personal life stories, have all sharpened my skills as a storyteller. As an artist, teacher, and researcher, I know that the literary educative history I produce conforms to academic standards, but also achieves an artistic quality that moves my work from a static formal piece of writing to a relational one, capturing a sense of intuition gained through ongoing praxis. Bateson (2001) calls this a “wisdom that is born of the overlapping of lives, the resonances between stories” (p. 242). By following my intuition, I have formed stories that provide educative qualities at their core, but I have also formed an artful methodology that positions new histories into a polyptych framework, breaking from formal parameters and genres. The academic standards of educative value remain intact, yet the presentation is more artful, offering a different kind of knowledge or experience not available through traditional scientific, objective history. The stories I construct are messy texts that provide beginnings, middles, and endings, but they also provide strands that weave through every story, creating a conductivity and potential for readers to construct their own meanings as they discover the relations between them (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo, & Sinner, 2012).

While my intent is for the stories to trigger the reader’s curiosity and open up a space for engagement, they also create the conditions for engagement. The institutional history I have constructed “serves as a site of knowledge and meaning making—as a place from which we can engage in a series of reflective, reflexive, and relational acts” (O’Donoghue, 2009, p. 357). I have engaged in a process of searching for innovative ways to illuminate history, to have some resonance with the practical concerns of education today. The result is that my stories are both sites for research and representations of research involvement in the history of the art program at CTS.

My work and work practices also generate questions about interpretation. In addressing, in a narrative manner, the construction of new histories, I attend to the relationships in and among the conceptual, theoretical, and practical, and I find ways of generating and conveying ideas that are not actually present in the work itself. The work suggests a certain degree of “productive ambiguity” (Eisner, 2005, p. 180). My new histories tease out, unravel, and make connections among and across the stories of experience I construct. This is a necessary condition of the work. Meaning is open, unfixd, and fluid. The stories I construct bring forward voices that speak to a range of experiences, alternate perspectives, or “alternative realities,” enticing readers into “vicariously experiencing educational events and confronting educational issues from vantage points previously unavailable to [them]” (Barone, 2001, p. 25).

Contribution to Art Education History

The heart of my dissertation is a network of 11 representative stories that together demonstrate the application of the polyptych construction as a means to generate a new history. Stories were chosen and constructed to provide maximum variation of student and teacher perspectives across time, including a 99-year-old former student and past instructors, many whose careers at CTS spanned several generations. In this way, I engage with traditional modes of doing history, collecting the names, dates, and facts that begin to give us an understanding of the past, but also with postmodern sociocultural issues, providing layers of context that are often missing from historical accounts.

Through my analysis, I examine how the stories, supported by primary and secondary sources found in oral histories, archives, newspapers, yearbooks, and promotional materials, result in four core narrative strands of institutional identity, identity politics, school culture, and social networks that work to weave and connect the histories together. These narrative strands are the cornerstones of my new history of CTS, created from the complexity and richness generated from each strand as a connection between stories from different generations that emerged during the course of this research study.

The educational significance of this research adds to a conversation about innovative schools, standardization, and educational change. The plurality of the new histories I bring forward is formed in the multiple tensions between technical and fine art education and shifts to educational standardization. The outcomes of this study contribute to the field of art education by expanding on significant historical issues specifically addressing the domains of art, education, social structure, and culture. An examination of school culture, the importance of role models, and historical methods associated with contextual research, rendered in this case as a literary historical narrative, have resulted in findings that provide practitioners of history and art education with an innovative interpretation that moves beyond traditional modes of retelling the past. Engaging in the history of art education is vital to understanding not only how and why the field developed, but also where the field could and should go in the future. With a qualitative and arts-based orientation, this study adds to the already rich aesthetically informed research concerning the history of art education, motivating me to produce a new history that neither simply valorizes nor objectifies the art institution at CTS, but instead respects its rich legacy and attempts to present the contextualized memories and lives of those connected to this site of art education.

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