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Abstract

This paper draws on a co-productive, arts-based study, in Northern Finland, of forty children from ten to eleven years of age. Applying Gilles Deleuze's idea of the *virtual*, the author maps the journey of the children's creative activities, as developed through a series of workshops over one academic year. This paper demonstrates how repetitive crafting and photographing can accelerate an actualisation of expansive ideas of gender and "self-hood," ideas emerging in manners that disrupt rigid expectations of girlhood and boyhood.

There is an increasing awareness that fluidity, diversity, and complexity characterise the formation of gender in childhood (Francis and Paechter, 2015; Meyer and Carlson, 2014). While gender norms heavily regulate everyday sociocultural worlds, children have an array of avenues through which to negotiate, contest, and transgress dominant ways of '*doing*' boyhood and girlhood (Blaise, 2010; Paechter, 2007; Francis, 2010; 2012; Renold, 2013; Renold and Mellor, 2013; Holford, Renold and Huuki, 2013; Gowlett and Rasmussen, 2014; Bragg et al., 2018).

Diverse ways of '*doing*' gender, particularly in relation to identity formation, have been documented in queer and feminist studies that examine both young people who identify as trans* (see Halberstam, 2018)—in other words, who trouble their assigned sex and assumed gender expression—and young people who do not. For example, in their 2018 qualitative study of UK students from twelve to fourteen years of age, Sara Bragg and colleagues show gender to be constantly made and remade in various manners among children and teenagers. However, many young people studied by Bragg et. al. also felt themselves to be strongly regulated by heteronormative assumptions of gender, including a constant risk of gender-based violence.

Some studies on the gender cultures of young people have engaged with and built on recent feminist, new-materialist philosophies (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2018; van der Tuin, 2016). Those studies do not regard gender and expressions of gender principally as the foundation of identity, as a bodily attribute of a subject, or as exclusively performative, located in discursive realms or in subject positions. Instead, the research in

question views gender as emerging through material–discursive human and non-human actors, through ongoing and re-iterative intra-action, becoming, and change (Alldred and Fox, 2015).

Considering gender, in this fashion, as a “dynamic play of in/determinacy” (Barad, 2015: 401) engages in a dialogue with ontologies of childhood as *becoming* (Mayes, 2016), ontologies that reject viewing childhood as more or less essentially fixed—as simplified, individualist teleological-developmental discourses of childhood often assume. Instead, the studies in question argue that one should view childhood as multiple (Lee and Motzkau, 2011), as open to the not-yet-known and as constituted in affective assemblages of other things, bodies, matter (Rautio, 2013; Mayes, 2016), nature-cultures (Taylor, 2011; Hohti and Tammi, 2019), and technologies (Helgesen, 2015), for example.

In aiming to consider the lives, bodies, cultures, and practices of children differently, some feminist new-materialist scholars have begun to employ creative and arts-based methods to create pathways through which children may safely articulate experiences and capacities that are often hidden or unarticulated (Ivinson and Renold, 2016; Osgood and Giugni, 2015; Gonick, 2013; Hickey-Moody, 2013; Mayes, 2016; Renold, 2018; Huuki, forthcoming; Pihkala and Huuki, forthcoming) and which are frequently obfuscated, undermined, or pathologised in schools and in the territorialisations of developmental literature. For example, regarding an Australian-based study of a puppet show created by high school students, Eve Mayes (2016) notes that the puppets in the production allowed its participants to feel more confident about expressing power relations between students and teachers in the organisation of the school.

Arts-based methodologies can also help children and young people to express painful experiences in empowering ways. Emma Renold (2018) studied teenage girls who, through the visual arts, shared and communicated experiences of sexual harassment that they had found difficult to express through words. Renold and Jessica Ringrose (2019) use an innovative “JARing” methodology to explore how contemporary complex gender assemblages matter to children and young people, mediating their lives and imagined futures (Renold and Ringrose, 2019). Moreover, in examining the creation by teenage girls of a short film on the activity of running, Gabrielle Ivinson and Renold (2016) demonstrate the increase of the embodied capacities of those girls during the film’s iterative three-day production, making plain how art aids in the recognition or development of forgotten skills or qualities that are not easily revealed.

However, few empirical analyses exist that map how children transgress normative gender classifications, upsetting binary productions of gender. A need also exists to find new, innovative methods—sensitive to a complex socio-cultural modelling of gender—of

encouraging children to communicate gender issues they regard as important but difficult to express. Responding to that need, this paper aims to provide insights into how pre-teen children explored and communicated the imaginative potentialities of gender or self-expression via experimental arts-based, creative workshops implemented in a primary school in Northern Finland. To achieve this goal, I will begin by exploring feminist new-materialist and posthuman methodologies, employing Gilles Deleuze's notions of "virtuality." I will unpack the generation of data in the workshops described, exploring how arts-based methods help children communicate gendered power in peer cultures. My analysis will show how repetitive intra-action (Barad, 2007) functioned in and between each creative session, creating pathways to the virtual potentialities of 'girls' and 'boys'—the gender expression the children preferred to use—in their own rhythms, engendering gender expressions that retain and disrupt gender categories in children.

I will conclude by proposing, that in order to better understand how children's bodies open up "to the more-than of [their] expressibility" (Manning, 2013: 158), it is vital to comprehend that gender, as a pedagogical, methodological tool, may at times restrict more than it enables. This study, in developing and implementing research methods and practical action, suggests creative methods of both making use of and *un-doing* gender in a flexible fashion, so as to support children in a more expansive expression of gender and self-hood.

Carving multiple actualisations of young gendered selves from the virtual

The point of departure in Deleuze's idea of *virtuality* is that life is not simply the actual world, but the actual world *and* all its virtual potentials. To echo Bergson, for Deleuze the 'virtual' is a potentiality that becomes fulfilled in the actual (Deleuze, 1968/1994: 269-277):

"Ideas contain all the varieties of differential relations and all the distributions of singular points coexisting in diverse orders "perpllicated" in on another. When the virtual content of an idea is actualised, the varieties of relation are incarnated in distinct species while the singular points which correspond to the values of one variety are incarnated in the distinct parts characteristic of this or that species. The idea of colour, for example, is like white light which perplicates in itself the genetic elements and relations of all the colours, but is actualized in the diverse colours with their respective spaces." (Deleuze, 1968/1994: 269.)

In a similar vein, one may consider virtuality in terms of gender in the lives of children, as containing all the relations and characteristics destined for actualisation in diverse human bodies and in the distinctive parts of a specific body. As the artist and philosopher Erin Manning (2013: 17) writes, in actualisation, a new type of specific, partitive distinction takes the place of fluent, ideal distinctions. Every actual body carries within itself the ‘more-than’ of its ‘taking-form,’ existing as ‘more-than’ the forms it inhabits. Colebrook (2006, 7) clarifies the actualisation of the virtual as follows:

“Any actualization of a power is only a specific limitation of that power's potential. The world we see is one possible world, one expression or actualization of a world of powers and potentials that hold other worlds, or 'lines of flight'; these lines can be released *not* by intensifying who we already are and realizing our humanity, but by creating new relations, new actualizations of the potentials that have, up until now, produced the 'man' of good sense, common sense and Western reason.” (Colebrook 2006: 7)

By employing the idea of ‘virtuality’ in the context of this study, I do not claim that gender fluidity among children must mean a mismatch of the sex or gender assigned to a child at birth. Rather, as Deleuze might say, while every potential actualisation of gender is in the virtual, gender emerges in socio-cultural-historical-discursive-material entanglements. Such entanglements produce strong affective flows that foster, nourish, and maintain the actualisation of symbolic resources, in line with culturally valued notions of “doing” gender—while striving to dismiss actualisations that work against the grain of gender conformity.

Concurring with Colebrook, I contend that a need exists to create conditions to release the imaginative potentialities of children into realms that gesture beyond the illusory ‘performatives’ of normative gender. This paper strives, therefore, to show how the cyclical function of arts-based practices loads an environment with elements that increase the charge of potential of that environment towards alternative gender expressions. Using Deleuze’s idea of the virtual, I demonstrate an iterative process of working with criss-crossing vectors of gender (Renold, Ivinson, and Angharad, 2017; Renold and Ringrose, 2019) in order that, at particular junctures, the registers of the virtual become open, actualising more expansive gender expression in children.

Capacitating bodies, and creating powers of emergence

The workshops that shaped the direction of this paper originated *Gender-based violence in pre-teen relationship cultures: How history, place, affect and arts interventions matter*, a research project funded by the Academy of Finland. That project examined how arts-based methods enabled children from ten to twelve years of age to safely explore and express their entanglements in assemblages of gendered power in their peer and relationship cultures. The project's fieldwork was conducted in a school, attended by four hundred pupils and with pre-school and primary school departments, in a white 'middle-class' suburban residential area in a Northern Finnish city. The study focused on two primary school classes of forty pupils of ten to eleven years of age, a total of twenty girls and twenty boys.

We—me, two class teachers, and a master's student, in different combinations—designed several sets of arts-based and creative workshops *for* and *with* children attending fourth grade over the course of one academic year. Dividing the school classes flexibly into groups of ten to twenty pupils and integrating each session into their regular curriculum, we implemented an array of experimental activities based on drawing, painting, writing, crafting, and photography. Depending on the task, the children worked in pairs, individually, or in small groups in a classroom or other spaces in the school building. (Huuki et. al., 2017)

Our point of departure in organising the activities in question was what Brian Massumi (2015) calls "enabling constraint." We endeavoured to build specific conditions to enable creative, inclusive, supportive "intra-action" (Barad, 2007), so as to explore how such an approach might surface different manners in which pre-teen children become entangled in assemblages of gender and power in their peer cultures, however, without imposing a prepossessed perception of the precise final destination of each path (Massumi, 2015: 73). The impossibility of predicting the process precisely became apparent. Some children worked intensively and perseveringly on the task given; others appeared to experience difficulties engaging in the arts-based activity at hand. However, we had anticipated diverging reactions as part of the workshops.¹ The atmosphere was joyful and playful in general; all the children participated and many offered very positive feedback on the experience. Moreover, observing

¹ Participation in the workshops was voluntary. We aimed to generate creative ways of seeking ongoing informed consent from the children. The children could choose not to participate and to opt for informed dissent at any point in the activities.

lively discussions on gender, sexuality, and power within the workshops, we perceived a clear need to address issues related to gender and power in the classroom.

We devised the creative, arts-based methods in this study to enable the children to express their experiences of gendered power and other sensitive gender-related topics through means other than the usual confessional spoken or written word, striving to move beyond talk-based and textual manners (see Taylor and Hughes, 2016) of producing and exploring mutual entanglements of data and art (see Renold, 2018 and her concept ‘da(r)ta’). The workshops produced a rich set of data comprising the children’s artwork, extended field notes, and forty hours of oral and visual records, captured through digital camcorders.

Focusing on the artwork and arts processes in this study, I followed the analytical trails through which the children addressed ideas and experiences of gender. I concentrated in particular on when themes concerning what gender is and might be seemed to ‘interfere’ (Barad, 2007: 72) with the children’s ideas of themselves as they talked, clipped, glued, and crafted—and chatted and relaxed between such activities.

The analysis shows that addressing gender with the children was an iterative process in which crafting and discussing gender occurred through different activities. Experimenting with the data, I consider the iterative process as happening through four cycles, each cycle comprised of the children’s artwork and of its processes of creation. They are, one, ‘*Start-stop plates*,’ two, ‘*Everyday me portrait photographs*,’ three, ‘*Unrestricted me portrait photographs*,’ and four, ‘*Unrestricted me collage work*.’ Following methodology that is inspired by Karen Barad’s ideas, I recognise that the repetitions of art-making intra-acted *in* and *between* each cycle. I examine how encounters of gender converged in the process of becoming, in which each cycle “iteratively enfolds into its ongoing differential materialization” (Barad, 2007: 234). By offering detail on each cycle, I strive to draw attention to the children’s speech and artwork and to the objects and body postures involved in creating that artwork. I consider how the children were “moving in and out of gender categories” (Bragg et. al., 2018: 4). The analysis aims to offer glimpses into what Erin Manning (2013: 169) calls “realms of pure experience,” meaning the virtual spheres in which the “polyphonic multiplicity” of the capacities of children is *in-forming* and becomes available, if only momentarily, for activation and articulation in forms of expression such as utterances (for example “In movies, men are expected to save the whole world before women become interested in them”), movement (for example in stretching or sedimentary body postures), and objects (for example flowers and hover boards) (see Manning, 2013: 169).

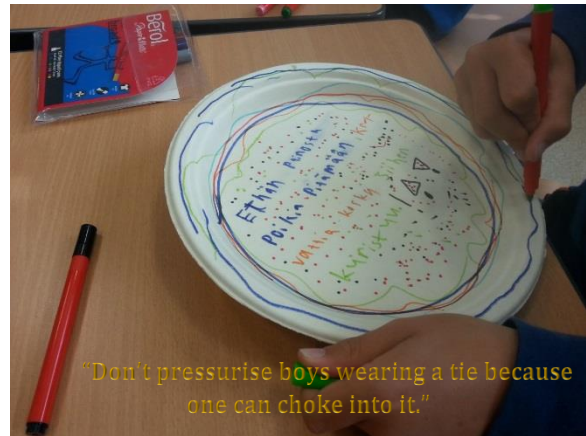
The aim of this approach was to pursue and to discuss critically a wide variety of positions on gender, as Judith Butler (2014) might state, or multiple coexisting *possibilities* or *impossibilities* of gender, as Barad (2015) might declare. The analysis also led me to consider manners of approaching the topic other than through the idea of gender. This approach enabled *already-always* queerness to surface, allowing children's genders to wander (Barad, 2015) across the virtual and actual (Deleuze 1968/1994), crossing the customary border lines (Thorne 1993) of gender in childhood.

The four cycles: 'Start-stop' plates, 'Everyday me' photographs, 'Unrestricted me' photographs, and 'Unrestricted me' collages

Cycle 1: The 'Start-Stop' plates

Session one with the children began by examining gender as identity; in particular, by discussing the restrictions and expansions the children perceived in relation to gender. Inspired by the research activism of Renold, in Wales—who sought to help young people to speak out about gender-based and sexual violence and inequalities—we implemented an activity entitled 'Start-Stop plates' (Renold, 2019). In 'Start-Stop plates,' we gave the children coloured markers and green and red pieces of paper, asking them to record positive observations about gender on green paper and negative observations about gender on red. While positive utterances echoed ideas of gender as essentially more or less fixed, an exploration of restrictive gender-related issues allowed the children to write remarks such as, "Boys are given the most difficult and risky tasks," "Boys are pressured to do foolhardy and stupid things, such as swearing," "Boys are required to be stronger than girls, and they're supposed to be heroic and protective," "In movies, men are expected to save the whole world before women become interested in them," "Boys must adjust to the idea of 'ladies first,' even when it's unfair," and, "Boys can't go shopping in a girls' clothing department."

The discussion continued by inviting the children to elaborate creatively on their statements on a white cardboard plate. We asked that they pick one statement that resonated for them (for example, "Boys are assumed to be toughies") and to transform that statement into a prohibition (such as "Don't force me to be a toughie!"), decorating the plate. We then asked them to describe, on the other side of the plate, what they would have preferred instead ("Remember I wanna be soft, too") (see Picture 1 and Picture 2).



Picture 1 and Picture 2. The ‘Start-stop’ plates.

Once the plates were finished, we continued to explore ideas of gender in a gathering of the students of both school classes, which generated a lively discussion on the pains and pleasures of ‘doing’ gender in the worlds of children. That discussion also resonated powerfully with my personal, continually intensifying methodological orientation of *becoming-researcher-activist*. Obligated to leave the school after the workshop for other work duties, I was haunted in particular by the affective residues of the desire of the boys to express feelings considered girlish such as fear or hurt—and by their obvious discontentment with the gendered expectations they face in their everyday lives. We were curious to discover if we could help children gain more freedom from expected gender norms. These intra-acting forces were my reasons for deciding to continue the fieldwork when I returned to the school during the subsequent spring, five months after the initial workshop. The continuation was unplanned and unforeseen.

Cycle 2: Photographing the ‘*Everyday me*’ photographs

We continued our experimental project by exploring gender expressions through photographs. The activity began with a class discussion of gender and of how the children felt they must be, act, and wear in order to fit into their local peer cultures. I then invited each child to an individual photo shoot, to be photographed in a manner that she or he felt was imperative to *being* in everyday life, in order ‘to fit in.’ In the photo shoot, gender was disguised primarily in the ‘everyday ordinary’: most of the children chose to stand in a basic position without communicating much enthusiasm for the activity.

However, a striking incident arose in the photo shoots of six girls. Soon after the session began, each girl began spontaneously to express their resentment about the acceptability for them, as girls, to form certain body poses and gestures, with other poses and gestures more or less ‘banned’ in local peer cultures. The girls’ frustration soon became intermingled with joy and amusement when they asked to be photographed in the unacceptable poses in question, assuming one new position after another, in many cases including variations of facial expressions that did not conform to normative gender stereotypes (see Picture 3).



Picture 3. A collage of six girls’ ‘*Everyday me*.²’.

Cycle 3: Photographing the ‘*Unrestricted me*’ photographs

If the previous activity encouraged girls to play with gender conformity and consider it critically, we removed gender as an explicit idea from the introductory discussion of the next

² Pictures 3–5 are printed line-art computer renderings of portrait photographs; to preserve anonymity while retaining the content of each pose, the original photographs were processed using image-editing software.

task³. The activity began by imagining a reality without any limitations or pressures. Approaching the activity through concepts such as ‘me,’ ‘the self,’ and ‘self-hood,’ we asked, “*How would I be?*” “*Where would I be?*” and “*What would I do?*” We then arranged a photo shoot in a vein similar to the shoot in the previous cycle, taking individual photographs (see Picture 4 and Picture 5).

I had anticipated the usual more-or-less dynamic performances of activity and adventurousness from many boys. Much to my surprise, however, as we talked of being and behaving without outside pressures, every boy but one remarked in turn that if no expectations of them existed, they would prefer a quiet, relaxing activity in a favourite private place—for instance reading in bed, sitting on a chair, climbing a secret tree, or just ‘being’ (see Picture 4). Four boys requested photographs of themselves hiding behind their arms, in a ‘Dab’ pose⁴. Two wanted to be photographed on a mountain, one standing still, gazing at the sky, the other climbing.⁵ Two boys chose not to be photographed at all. All the boys expressed satisfaction with one or more photographs taken in the first or second shoot, perhaps showing that they did not feel strong pressures to invest in their appearance or demeanour or feel expected to draw on contemporary, appearance-oriented media representations.

The girls’ photo shoots differed remarkably from those of the boys. Only two girls wanted to be photographed in a static, basic position. One girl decided she did not want to be photographed at all, because she intended to do the forthcoming action-oriented collage (in Cycle 4), for which a photo was not needed. All the other girls were eager to try numerous poses, angles, and positions over many different shoots and experimental postures, asking to see the outcome and to delete certain versions while aspiring to new results in new shoots, one after another. In most cases, the girls extended their bodies as far as they could possibly reach. This is reflected in the following collage of the photographs chosen, a collage in which we can observe the girls in positions that reflect movement and, in many cases, ‘over-articulating’ their bodies or assuming a pose as if flying (see Picture 5).

³ Gender was certainly implicitly present, I contend, in the imaginations of the children, in many ways and for many reasons. While understanding that it may be impossible to move beyond gender, I propose the importance of attempting to find ways to discuss gender through methods not locked into a strict differentiation between *boyhood* and *girlhood*.

⁴ The ‘Dab’ is a gesture in which a person drops their head into the bent crook of a slanted, upwardly angled arm, while raising the opposite arm out straight in a parallel direction (Wikipedia).

⁵ One may consider both of these boys as having low-ranked positions in local peer group hierarchies; neither of them conformed to the locally valued masculinity.



Pictures 4 and 5. The collage of the boys' and girls' '*Unrestricted me*'.

Cycle 4. The '*Unrestricted me*' collage

We next asked the children to create a collage entitled '*Unrestricted me*,' again without discussing gender. The children had complete freedom to craft the reality of their choice and to locate themselves in that context if they wished, in the format they preferred. They could add items and objects according to their tastes and decorate the paper using pens, stickers, glitter, colour markers, printed pictures, and any other craft items available.

While engaging in supporting the crafting of the collage, I did not talk to any great extent with the children, who did not seem to require my intervention. Indeed, most of the children worked intensively, bent over their desks or lying on the floor in a peaceful corner, so I preferred not to interfere by asking questions. When the work was finished, I drew attention to the reluctance of children to describe or discuss their works or show them to others. Half of the children refused to hang their collages on the classroom wall; our suggestion to discuss the works in a gathering of participants was met with deafening silence.

In the girls' collage pieces, the alternative aspects of embodied selves literally take wings (see Picture 6):



Picture 6. A selection of the girls' *Unrestricted me* collage pieces.

In nearly half of the artwork, the girls portrayed themselves as *more-than-human* characters. In a quarter of the artwork, the main character is shown as an animal character; in another quarter, the girl portrayed the main character as an individual human being. A great number of animals of various species were attached to the collage works. Unlike in the boys' pieces, in no artwork by a girl does the main character sit or stand in a basic position. Instead, the bodies are all stretching, extending, or reaching out in height, width, or length—or stand on all fours

or in close contact with an animal character. Movement and action are palpably present in nearly every piece, forming an unearthly ethos that becomes particularly strongly visible in how, in nearly half of the artwork, wings are attached to the back of the main character. In more than half of the pieces by girls, the spacious location is further strengthened in the context of a sky, nature, a skyscraper, or a fantasy world.

In only one artwork by a girl is the main character at home. While domestic spaces are associated traditionally with girls and women, in the collage piece in question, the main character lies relaxed in bed, using a mobile phone, on her back on a bed with her legs crossed, rupturing that traditional association. The girls attached material objects in either textual or visual form to all the collages, including nearly a hundred natural objects, such as the sun, stars, and clouds; other objects included food and brand products.

In the boys' pieces, the task—to create a collage entitled 'Unrestricted me'—seemed to further amplify their creative force by seizing a desire to slow down (see Picture 7).



Picture 7. A selection of the boys' '*Unrestricted me*' collage pieces.

The boys' desire to become *other-than-usual* is present in their contextualised compositions, reflected in the earthy objects, domestic contexts, and depictions of reduced human bodies and compacted body positions. All but two of the main character bodies are human and all but one main character body is compact, portrayed as sitting or standing sedentarily with a still or focused ethos. One in four of the collages depict the main character as part of a sports team, while the remaining pieces are individual portraits. Nearly all the pieces have a clear context with an earthy ethos in or around the domestic realm or on a sports field, the collage creating an impression of the main character as part of a whole, instead of—for example—conquering that context. In most of the boys' pieces, the collage includes attached visual or textual representations of material objects related to games, the digital world, motor vehicles, brand products, or sports equipment.

Extracting virtual capacities through an iterative process of creative activity

Expressions of submitting to and resisting gender conformity fluctuated rhythmically throughout each cycle. I will attempt, curiously and speculatively, to map the activities as they helped the children to realise sides of themselves they often feel compelled to leave outside the classroom.

In **Cycle 1**, the expansive potentialities of the girls remained in liminal realms of emergence, as reflected in opinions adhering to more traditional notions of western girlhood. However, Cycle 1 went against the grain of rigid gender expectations in the children's remarks on boyhood. Viewed alongside the lively discussion after the plates were ready, these remarks formed a powerful 'kick-off,' in which plates, paper, children, coloured markers, jocular giggles, and serious discussions intra-acted in manners that may have initiated what Erin Manning (2013: 158) calls a "pre-acceleration of a virtual field," a pre-acceleration preceding *yet-to-come, more-than* expressions by the children.

In **Cycle 2**, in most instances, the photo shoots and their outcomes did not appear particularly revealing to the researcher in terms of gender expression. For example, the more expansive embodied vocabularies of the boys stayed beneath the actual, 'keeping the virtual registers practically closed,' as Deleuze might put it. In the case of six girls, however, the process seemed to produce phenomena that Emma Renold (2018: 42)—in her creative research-activist project

on sexual violence with teen girls—has called moments in which “experiences... [are]...expressed in ways that enable them to shape shift and expand out in all directions.”

The girls’ photos and photo shoots are not, I contend, to be read simplistically as role reversals; in other words, as girls expressing boyish body postures. Through a feminist new-materialist lens, one may instead consider that the girls, the photo shoots, the girls’ ideas of gender, the postures themselves, and critique of gender conformity *intra-acted* in ways that actualised the desire of the girls to become *more-than* (Manning, 2016), composing themselves something other than “the ‘[girl]’ of...common sense” (Colebrook 2006: 7). One may view the photo shoots as an opening for sudden, affective ‘bursts’ in postures and movements that rupture rigid cultural ideas of girlhood in the girls, on their own terms. The photo shoots appeared to release the bodies of the girls into a trajectory that loosened momentarily the hold of a static, spastic, wary, wrapped girl body—of which, for instance, Iris Marion Young (2005) has written in her research, giving a vivid account of practices and processes through which girls become trained over time into a type of fragility and an awareness that their bodies will be seen as objects.

If the expansive qualities of the children’s being had remained, since Cycle 1, on the verge of unfolding into a more open state, the process of the ‘*Unrestricted-me*’ photo shoots in **Cycle 3** and ‘*Unrestricted-me*’ collage pieces in **Cycle 4** further carried the children beyond familiar territories of self-expression. They offer a fruitful ground for speculating about how one might understand arts processes with and without an idea of gendered territorialisations. If we prefer to consider the processes described as gender expressions specifically, gender in Cycle 3 and Cycle 4 was actualised in manners that disrupt and conform to gendered expectations simultaneously. For example, girls’ smooth, flowing gymnastic postures, amplified by a powerful ethos of striving to spread out and reach ever-wider spaces, unsettle normative gender, because, as the girls often remarked, no opportunity exists for them to prove their worth in terms of athletic skills and knowledge, for fear of disparaging gazes or comments from boys and, indeed, other girls. Conversely, one may regard gymnastics and animal care as signs of gender conformity. However, according with Butler, one may also see the girls’ pictures and collage pieces as “an important domain of pleasure” for the girls, reflecting a “strong sense of self bound up with their genders” (Butler and Williams, 2014).

If gender is characterised as multiplicity, however, the children’s creating art enables a critical consideration of certain limitations of gender as a workable concept, in cases in which children adopt practices other than the practices they are expected to follow. Taking Butler’s advice, we attempted—therefore—to minimise the importance of gender by not a-priori pre-

supposing gender, thereby disarming its “descriptive power” (Butler and Williams, 2014) towards the end of the creative process. Our then spontaneous use of the concept “self-hood” (see also Butler and Williams, 2014) released space for a greater “variety of differential relations” (Deleuze, 1968/1994: 269) to emerge. Consequently, what appears to be transgression of gender normativity when viewed through lenses of gender *diffracts* through lenses that eradicate gender—becoming what Manning (2013) calls “a dance of individuation”. By causing movement to slow, and by working on the thresholds of the actual and virtual on a micro level, Manning examines how individuation forms gradually, without settling experiences into any predefined categories (Manning 2013). In the context of this study, this ‘individuation-in-information’ was made visible by approaching children’s ideas of themselves through the use of the gender concepts “boyhood” and “girlhood” when the themes of the session related to restrictive gender processes and practices. When its focus widened to examining more expansive ideas of self, the approach moved to a refusal to consider predetermined gender—or even, in the final activity, any distinguishable body form. This type of fluctuation between approaches helped to offer brief glimpses into children’s experiences of selfhoods of various kinds, and perhaps into “processes of individuation that are transformed – transduced – to create new iterations not of what a body *is* but of what a body *can do*” (Manning 2013: 19).

Conclusion

Not everything is possible, given the particularity of setting itself, but an immeasurable set of possibilities exist, as Deleuze (1968/1994: 269) writes. In an attempt to seek a “wide[r] variety of positions on gender” and, indeed, of “self-hood” (Butler and Williams, 2014) in children, this study has endeavoured to map how creative and arts-based research setting enable data, children, and gender “to become expressive, to not just satisfy but also to intensify—to resonate and become more than itself” (Grosz, 2008: 4). I have mapped the path of the ‘*Start-Stop*’ plates, ‘*Everyday me*’ photographs, and ‘*Unrestricted me*’ portrait photographs and collage pieces in this study, produced through a series of workshop sessions over one school year with children from ten to eleven years of age.

The workshops formed an experimental process that aligned artistry, children, researchers, teachers, creative activities, a climate of safety, a playful freedom, and usually unspoken-of issues of gender that were examined by crafting and recrafting the artwork in question and

through discussion and ‘re-discussion,’ in repetitive cycles. This iterative repetition of workshop cycles adhered to the following structure: *one*, an opening discussion on gender, gender conformity, gender fluidity, or self-hood; *two*, a creative act of crafting, drawing, colouring, photographing, or making sculptures; and *three*, a closing discussion after the production of the artwork ended, when the children felt eager to discuss making the artwork and the pieces themselves, in their final forms. This rhythmic, repetitive alignment of discussion and creation produced a self-amplifying process that began to tend to exceed the children’s more usual expressions, ‘triggering’ an emergence of expansive, less-considered aspects of self-hood. As Deleuze (1994) expresses in terms of virtuality, one might view less-usual, expansive expressions as existing, in the virtual, as potentials for emergence and activation in manners that disrupt fixed ideas of gender.

In the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari, difference always exists in repetition; this was true for the workshops in question. Each activity created a new entanglement charged with potentiality. The workshops helped render visible childhood gender as multiple; they made plain how creative and arts-based methodologies, with an ‘un-doing’ of gender, may create “constraints that enable” new subject positions (Massumi 2015: 73), enabling multiplicity or even ‘queerness’ not only for children who identify as ‘trans’* but for others additionally. This study offers a perspective that may be helpful in seeking, in an ethical-political-pedagogical manner, to find ways to allow gender to “wander” (Barad 2015) more freely and expansively in childhood.

Irrespective of age, sex, and gender, processes of becoming include moments when different types of capability, such as from inwardness to dynamic expressiveness, or from adaptivity to assertiveness, are required. Now perhaps more than ever, it is important to be able to activate those types of capability in order to meet the challenges people face personally and collectively in a modern world, in becoming ethically response-able (*more-than-human*) agents (Barad, 2003).

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