

44.4 Art Education and Peace: Exploring the Empathetic Object-ive

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Introduction

This paper was developed as a conversation piece, based on the various presentations and conversations that happened in and around the iJADE conference that took place in November 2024 at Liverpool Hope University (UK). We reconvened as a group more than 8 months later in September 2025, continuing our dialogue in an attempt to capture something of the significance of the issues raised through the conference and to reflect on the meaning of peace for art educators in our current context. Our thoughts are represented here as discrete entries or monologues that address our own understanding of peace and its disruptors, yet these reflect our quiet listening as we attended to each other's attempts at sense-making around the themes of peace, conflict and the nature and potentialities of the empathetic object. The paper exemplifies the use of the empathetic object-ive introduced by John Johnston, as a means of engaging with the complexities of peace education for art educators.

Introducing the empathetic object-ive (John Johnston)

In our first conversation, we talked about the concept of peace and how difficult it was to provide concrete examples of what peace was or, more to the point, what

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it looked like as a physical form. However, it is very easy to visualise and concretise war and conflict. These concepts offer a wealth of objects that form their meaning, such as guns, missiles, helicopter gunships and the like, all commonly known as the weaponry of war. The results of their use provide images; narratives; and histories of pain, destruction and loss. Like the perpetrators of war, weapons of war, including propaganda, are loud mouthed and blunt. They hold a one-dimensional mirror that reflects self-interest, while ignoring our basic human instinct, to think, act and care for others.

The times, place and people of Gaza hung unapologetically in the air of our first conversation. While I was also mindful of the many other conflicts that are taking place at this time, I refrain from naming them or presenting corruptible timelines. As was once said, 'the first casualty of war is truth,' and as we know, truth is highly subjective. However, our theme was simply 'Peace,' and I recall that choosing this title was, in itself, an act of courage, yet it also presented a major challenge as peace in itself is highly subjective. I found myself wondering how a conference (which is ultimately a gathering of individual people) can find a way to concretise or objectify peace as such an abstract concept.

We discussed how peace is described in both a personal and a geopolitical way. We drew attention to Norwegian peace academic Johan Galtung, who describes peace in two ways: negative peace, which is the absence of war, and positive peace, which recognises the ongoing process of preventing war (Galtung *et al.* 2002). The latter, prevention, is quiet, and the vast majority of the world does not know about the work that goes on behind the scenes that prevent war. This work is done at grass roots level and often involves creative interventions that eventually (through various means) reach the negotiation table of the political elite. There is a distinct lack of form to such work, and its ambiguity allows each party to see their interests reflected in whatever may ultimately exist. In this respect, peace calls for imagination, the ability to see something that has yet to become. However, as our conference intended to engage with artist educators and creative activists, I wondered if each of us could select or make an object that could represent peace. In this regard, I became interested in understanding how we could trigger a flow of thought that could lead the conference to objectify peace.

As the conversation progressed, it became clear that we all, in our own ways, could describe what peace felt like or what it felt like to be at peace. However, these descriptions fell into stereotypical notions of serenity and conjured images that are often used to promote naturopathic healing. However, even then, what we described as peace was highly subjective and fell short of what I believe is one of the primary purposes of art education, to problematise and give form to the complexity of life in order to share your quest with others.

I considered how John Paul Lederach drew attention to the value of 'artistic thinking' as an important capacity needed to transform conflict. He describes this well in his book, *The moral imagination: The art and soul of building peace* (Lederach 2005). Lederach provides a sound foundation to explore how the moral imagination compels us to act imaginatively when faced with the challenges of negotiating the materiality of difference and histories of pain. The material I talk of is often found in the detritus of war. It shows itself as symbols, images, stories and is often embedded in the practices, content and language of education. What we could describe as the fabric of art and culture. Art shows us how such tensions and materials are needed to formulate new understandings and give meaning to life. The sharing and learning from creative experiences extend the beneficial elements of a self-imaginary to that of others. Here,

we discover the DNA of peace building and found not in the romanticised language of peace but in the ability to imagine something beyond what we know. In my view, this can only be achieved through artistic, imaginative and pedagogic exchange. These exchanges need to be seen as artistic works in their own right, and with this, we begin to see peace as a composition of both harmonious and discordial parts. As war has its weaponry, we can say the weaponry of peace can be found in the armoury of understanding and learning. As war has its weaponry, we can say the weaponry of peace can be found in the armoury of understanding and learning, comprehending why what has been has been, and learning our way out of conflict through Lederach's moral imagination. To achieve this, we need to understand the various elements that make peace and it would seem that empathy sits firmly at the centre of the peace-builders' weapon of mass construction.

A critical mass can only be created when empathy is fused with other elements such as education, art, imagination and critical thinking. However, both art and education must transcend their own histories and be prepared to lose something of their perceived value in order to construct something new. The notion of new possibilities amplifies the words of Irish poet Seamus Heaney when he states 'The end of art is peace' (Heaney 1979). When I first read these words, I recognised my own battle with art education. I like to think Heaney is suggesting not so much an end to art but moreover, an end to what we know art to be. Whatever the reading, the notion of letting go of one's own prejudices to accommodate the values of the other requires an empathetic mind and, as many would testify, art and education have their own prejudices and beliefs that have proven very difficult to shake off.

With these thoughts, I found myself wondering what if we, as artist educators and promoters of imagination, could actually make something physical of peace. I wanted people to think about how we might objectify the core value of empathy in order to form a concrete representation of peace.

This object (made anew or existing) would represent the feelings of the self and possibly the feelings of an 'other', and with the addition of feeling, we begin to embody peace and the language of peace begins to grow. We recognised that there is something intrinsic in the arts that taps into and evokes our inner feelings. When we externalise this and bring it into the world, we move beyond ourselves towards others, expressing feelings in the production of art. Moreover now, we have six words to consider as we build a lexicon of peace and our weapon of mass construction: art, imagination, education, feeling, expression and production.

My interest is in how we can make these words and ideas into something solid. To move beyond words and give peace a concrete presence in the world. I am mindful that there are many artworks that can be said to aim at promoting empathy, but many of these are reflections of the events of war, such as Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), probably one of the dominant examples of anti-war art. However, I was and am more interested in how we can prevent war by utilising the power of imagination, education and art to form an empathetic world. The conference offered us a unique opportunity to invite people to consider peace as an object. Hence, the conversation led to the concept of an empathetic object-ive and an invitation to all participants to bring peace into the world in their own unique way.

Next, I considered what I would show to represent my empathetic object-ive. To understand my object, I start by making a simple statement that frames all my work: past, present and future. I am a survivor of the Northern Ireland conflict, a dirty war fuelled by religious sectarianism and the residue of British colonial rule

over Ireland. Like many of my age who grew up in the backstreets of Belfast, I witnessed the full force of physical violence in my youth. Moreover, I felt its presence in my body and my everyday experience. This is how terrorism operates in the modern world. It is invasive and normalises the abnormal. Like all wars, we are compelled to choose the side with which we feel the greatest empathy. However, in my case, as with many others in Northern Ireland, I was part of the fabric of war. The tapestry of images, narratives and histories that constitute the concreteness of war is embedded in both the victims and perpetrators of the conflict. I was fortunate to discover art and, in some way, art also discovered me. As a visual artist, I embraced images of hate and tried to dismantle their intentions thread by thread. For my conference keynote, I chose to show a work that more than any other embodies what we have come to call the empathetic object-ive.

On 6 June 2006 (Saturday), a young boy was beaten and left for dead in an alleyway in the town of Ballymena in Northern Ireland. The boy, 15-year-old Michael McIlveen, died in the hospital 5 days later. The killing provided a stark reminder of the fragility of the Irish/British peace process and highlighted the underlying fault lines that continue to rupture community relations in Northern Ireland to this day. Michael's killing came at a time of the year that historically pressurises the fragile relations between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster—the Orange Order Marching season. In the lead-up to Michael's murder, there had been several sectarian clashes in the town; some believed these were fuelled by the removal of flags and the overpainting of murals in both the Catholic (republican) and loyalist (Protestant) areas of the town. Eventually, six young local men were charged and sent for trial for Michael's murder. Tensions were high in the area, and there was significant fear among the police, local community leaders and youth workers that the trial could lead to more violence.

My empathetic object was born from this experience. The work reflects an intense process of reflection, negotiation and compromise. It presents itself as a painting, but the viewer is given access to the process through the window of torn strips that reveal the underpainting that took place during a 5-month process. These windows are intentional and provide a reality check that the images of division are always present, but they also show how they can be understood and transformed into vessels of empathy. This occurs when the opposite group adopts the images of the so-called other and, in some way, claims ownership over them through critical thought and making art.

The triptych was created in two stages. Stage one involved designing and producing two separate artworks. Each was made in response to my prompt of how each group imagined how the other sees you. Images and stories were gathered and I became what could be described as a creative diplomat, engaged in shuttle diplomacy, crossing town with the symbols and signs selected by each group. These depictions were composed into the two paintings shown below (Figures 1 and 2).

The second stage could never be planned, and in that sense, it was open-ended and relational in nature. The process of learning became an artwork in its own right. The artworks were reformed when the two groups combined. Each brought their paintings to pass over to the others. We then engaged in a prolonged discussion that resulted in the new collective deciding to paint over the originals and design a new work that represented their discussions. The subject of killing came to the table, and instead of anger or defence, I heard conciliation and empathy. They went beyond the singularity of Michael's killing and discussed the conditions that needed to be in place to make it happen. Words such as mistrust,



Figure 1

Detail of the Mural Made by the Catholic Showing Icons of Protestant Unionist Culture.



Figure 2

Detail of the Work in Progress Depicting Catholic/Irish Icons. Made by the Protestant Group.

suspicion, hatred and fear emerged. Ultimately, they agreed on one word that was central to the creation of conflict and war. As shown below, the word school was painted across the centre of the final work. School. They singled out education as being central to perpetuating mistrust, hatred, anger and conflict (Figure 3).

Our conference title, Peace, seems to have turned a full circle. The work made in 2006 by young people in Ballymena remains true to this day, and the work sends a message to all involved in education to recognise their role as both war maker and peacemaker. The current political leadership of our world demands us all to make a conscious choice. Moreover, we have only two options on our table. We can continue with the status quo and confine art education to its traditional values and, in doing so, accept our helplessness, or we can choose to draw on the combined power of art, education and imagination to embrace complexity, challenge the culture of conformity and reach new yet to be imagined places of peaceful possibility.



Figure 3

Detail of the Final Mural Showing School (Education) as a Primary Factor in Sustaining the Conflict Between Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland.

First steps (Carly Bagelman)

I learned recently that boxes of family keepsakes, which my mom's friend agreed to store in her garage around the time of my mom's cancer diagnosis, have been, quite inexplicably, discarded (Figure 4). After years of trying to make contact with her friend to collect the boxes, years of messages seen but not answered, I received the 2-sentence-long, matter-of-fact reply through Facebook messenger: 'I don't have them anymore. They were thrown away and donated.'

The only thing I can think is that her friend became a Marie Kondo convert like so many suburban moms, and our mildewy childhood picture books with crayon annotations and other precious artefacts failed to 'spark joy' for the obvious reason that they were never her joys to begin with. This loss, another rosewood



Figure 4

Handmade Baby Mukluks.

bead on the string of losses, is a new one to meditate on. My sister helps me rub the bead: we are rich with good memories, she reminds and in some ways having fewer objects to hold onto has afforded us the freedom to move and live where we wish. This sends me into another thought: I consider the many, many people who do not have the luxury of precious things or the delight in remembering: those who survived a childhood in Canada's residential schools, often leaving traumatised at 18 without a single photograph, toy or beloved book to show for their years or my friends (a mother and young daughter) who fled from Iran to seek refuge in Liverpool, leaving their family heirlooms that were carefully carried through the decades of mothers and daughters before them.

After real grief, the grief of lost things is small. However, because some objects are so deeply imbued with sense and feeling and are thus not inanimate, it is still grief. In both instances, we are called to do the difficult work of tenderly extracting the meaning from the physical form (our mother's body; our grandmother's pottery) that we can no longer hold with our hands. We are called to find some other, much less straightforward, much more effortful way to hold them. I'm grateful for the family artefacts I do have—they're a few things I can hold with ease.

In particular, I have been grateful for the steady presence of my small childhood mukluks. I tried counting, and I think that these mukluks have been with me in at least 11 houses, two continents and three countries by now. Their significance has grown in step with these numbers. The few inches of animal hide, forming the soft sole of the mukluks, have been hand stitched with sinus and adorned with tiny beads (blue, green and pearly white). They are carefully fringed with rabbit fur to insulate against northern winters. Their miniature size, destined for new feet, must have sat comfortably in the palms of the Inuit and Dene women as they cut, tanned and stitched them.

This gift to my pregnant mom, she explained to me (long after I'd outgrown them), was a small act of resistance. As a social worker recently graduated from her training and working in the Canadian Arctic with women who were fleeing domestic violence, she was well versed in the professional standards of her field, some of which made clear that social workers should never accept gifts. This probably seemed sensible in the years when she received her training as a set of academic abstractions in an Ontario lecture hall. This rule prevented unjust power relations and conflicts of interest, she was told. Up north, where the Indigenous peoples she worked with and befriended were rooted in gift-giving societies, in which giving is an ontological necessity, this professional guideline not only lost its significance but was damaging to the kind of relationships she was committed to building. For these women to accept my mom's council, aid and friendship in these moments of conflict, real fear and sadness, while my mom refuses to accept gifts made out of generational knowledge and materials harvested from their lands, would be the unjust power relation here.

Gift giving meant that the Inuit and Dene women were not passive recipients of care which only the social worker had the power to give, but active givers of care themselves. Gift giving for many Indigenous societies is an indication of wealth. How powerful and defiant to sit in a feeling of wealth and abundance when your partner has tried to steal your autonomy and safety with their abuse. She gratefully accepted the gifts, hoping she would not face disciplinary action, but prepared for the possibility. Giving and receiving these mukluks within the safe space of the centre for Indigenous women facing both intimate and state violence was a small and quiet form of peace building. First steps.

At the top of the world, far from her own family, the mukluks, an engraved birthing knife, dried Cariboo meat for cutting infant teeth and a fox fur-trimmed puppet she received, along with mothering wisdom, ushered my mom into a new stage of life. I look to these mukluks, which cushioned my first steps and therefore played a part in my very literal grounding in the world—as a reflection of my own settler ontology. They speak to why and how I came to be here (an academic concerned with displacement and marginalisation of both Indigenous and migrant communities). The mukluks tell the story of how institutional protocol, western professionalism and so-called ‘best practice’ often rely on the disavowal of the real, human protocols and practices that animate friendships, families, communities and cultures. In navigating frustratingly narrow-minded ethics forms to carry out my own research or teaching in higher education, this little gift is a reminder that colonial protocols or practices often need disruption, and the manifold ways non-Indigenous peoples can use their unearned settler privilege to disrupt them and to foster more peaceful, just worlds.

A flag is not simply a piece of fabric (Marlene Wylie)

There were so many different aspects of this theme that have resonated with me and have a direct connection to some of the personal and artistic reflections that I have been making recently. The material and the materiality of the empathetic object as an emotional tool for connection is something I want to delve into here, in this conversation. On a very personal level, my reflections centre around the practice of making and its connection to peace. So much of what I have witnessed around me recently with ‘operation raise the colours’ has disturbed my peace in the most deepest sense and this is why I have decided to make a reflection around the fabric that is used in flag-making, and what I consider to be quite violent expressions of nationalism through the erection of flags across the country, particularly in my hometown a place where otherwise I have a sense of belonging. For me, as a textile artist and designer, there is something very personal about the use of fabric as a means of expression, a material object that conveys a depth of feeling that is in this reflection, contrary to peace in its positioning. I have included here the very object, a Union Flag, which I have in my possession (Figure 5).

This image is of a decommissioned flag, as it were. It is a flag that is now retired. I have called my PEACE, this Piece, ‘A Retired Flag’. I guess with what we have just heard from Carly, there was a great deal that she spoke about that centred around bereavement and loss and I think that certainly over the last couple of weeks where the flags were raised in my hometown overnight, there was a sense of bereavement for me, a sense of loss a loss of peace in a place where I have experienced a sense of harmony and freedom to a certain extent. My peace has been completely shattered over the last couple of weeks, knowing what the flags may well symbolise for many people.

Thinking about the materiality of this object has touched all of my senses, not just visual but also the musty smell of something that has been in use, stored for a very long time. It is frayed and worn through utility, and the image I wanted to capture here is an image of the Union Flag and its current state. There is something about the fraying edges and the rope that is twisted around the fabric. For me, it is not a peaceful image. Interestingly, I did not purposely arrange the image other than framing it. It is a snapshot of the fabric as it was positioned; the flag



Figure 5
A Retired Flag.

was composed naturally as I had placed it on the floor. There was something significant in my view about how the rope and flag were entangled, with frayed sections and hanging threads. I found myself making connections to the reflections I had made on the concept of flag making, flag design and the purpose of flags globally. While they are in use, they have a material wealth. They convey complex stories of nations. I'm just returning to what John mentioned here about wanting to gather and hear the stories of those young people affected by violence. I feel like I'm in a place in my mind and heart that is complex. In my hometown, I represent difference, seen as 'other' as a Black person in a white monocultural space. I regard myself in terms of identity as Black British. With my many positive and negative experiences, I reflect deeply on what it means to be Black British, with profound reflections on how I've come to be here in Britain, in England, in my hometown. The duality of the emotional connections and allegiance that I have to Jamaica, the island of my parents' birth and Britain, my birthplace. Its colonial history is still very much part of my lived experience.

My creative work is about storytelling and life writing, blending it with the creative process that involves deep reflection, so it is a combination of the cerebral aspect of making and what we do with our hands through touch. For me, fabric and the material wealth that we have around us are so abundant that we discard them without thought. We are so readily discarding our material wealth that we are in danger of it making us morally poor. Our textile waste is making us sick. It is

this sickness that has a direct effect on many countries around us globally which brings me back round to why, when I was handed a bag of old union and English flags no longer in use, I seized the opportunity to give them a new life, because I felt that there was something I personally needed to do to repurpose them, to use them as a means of reflection through my own creative practice, as an exploration of who I am as somebody who regards themselves as Black British. I wanted to explore this not only on a personal level but also as an artist educator, as somebody who relishes the opportunity to engage, not only with young people but with anybody who wants to learn about themselves or to learn about other people's lives. Here, I see a connection between what I am processing for myself and what others might be thinking as a result of what I'm sharing with them.

My parents' experience has affected my existence and my lived experience. They came to this country with British passports and regard themselves, having now lived for a lot longer in Britain than they have in Jamaica, as British citizens. What I have come to understand, as a result of that shift, is the creation of some sort of conflict in myself, between having a connection with an island that is 4000 miles away and the memories and stories that my parents share, and the memories and stories that are created in this country, the place of my birth and the place that I call home.

Because of the flags that have been raised in my hometown right now, I am being made to feel as though it is not my home. There is conflict for me in all of that, and it is something that I'm still trying to work through, to understand how that translates in terms of the relationships that I have with people around me, in this space. Hence, I felt a strong connection with Carly, particularly around her empathetic objects that become very precious because they speak of a lived experience, and because Carly chose to focus on objects that were made of fabric and their resonance with people, place and home.

The potentiality of peace (Emma Arya-Manesh)

Before I discuss this image of a kettle, situated in the middle of a candlelit lounge in Abu Dis, a small town in East Jerusalem, I feel it is necessary first to contextualise some of the terms I will use to frame it as an empathetic object (Figure 6). The words to which I refer are peace, conflict and occupation. These terms are informed by a sensitivity towards my Palestinian colleagues not only as teacher educators but also as friends who have shared their lived experiences with me. In other words, this sensitivity arises from relational connections rather than from theoretical assumptions I held before working in Palestine—assumptions that turned out to be misplaced. I came to understand that Western conceptions and promises of peace and, more recently, 'peace deals' have been hollowed out and worn threadbare in the West Bank.

From this point onwards, I frame the West Bank, with both reluctance and intention, as an occupied Palestinian territory (oPt). Though imperfect, this terminology acknowledges the ongoing Occupation at a time when the United Nations (UNA-UK 2025) describes a global consensus supporting Palestinian sovereignty and self-determination. In doing so, I am aware of the implications of defining the Occupation by the Israeli military as a conflict, a term that, according to the Palestinian people I have spoken with, reflects an imperialist position they continue to resist. To describe the Occupation in this way risks obscuring a history of



Figure 6
Kettle on a Portable Stove.

dispossession and colonialism and overlooks the ongoing anti-colonial struggle and the forms of violence that persist under the Occupation itself. Alongside this, those I spoke with asserted that the term conflict fails to recognise their suffering, loss and the steadfast form of everyday resilience and perseverance described as *sumūds* (الصمود).

It was within this understanding that I reimagined this image as an alternative representation of *sumūds*. The photograph was made during a 3-week visit to Bethlehem University as part of a collaborative project with the University of Chester, which explored beginning teachers' perceptions of creative pedagogies in both the United Kingdom and Palestine. Within this project, I conducted a related piece of arts-based research to gain deeper insight into the role of creativity in peace education across the West Bank. This research led me to work closely with a colleague, to whom I refer as Laila. I spent time with Laila and her mother, Hanan, in their family home in Abu Dis—an area under joint Israeli military control and Palestinian civic administration. Their apartment lies perilously close to the Separation Wall, erected by Israeli authorities to divide the West Bank from Jerusalem but with no lawful basis determining the route it follows (United Nations 2019).

The image was made during a raid by Israeli soldiers, when violence had spilt into the street. At that moment, my focus was on the kettle as a stand-in for what was neither safe nor practicable to capture through my camera lens. A window in the neighbouring apartment block had already been shattered. When I peered

outside, I saw Israeli soldiers with helmets, body armour and guns, while Palestinian youths scoured the ground for stones as a form of resistance from and for the land (Childs & Williams 1996). I experienced the tension as close to unbearable, which must have been palpable because Laila gently guided me away from the window into the centre of the room. Hanan gently cupped my face before rolling down the metal shutters. In a state of panic, my tinnitus-addled brain was concerned with what John describes earlier as images of pain, loss and weaponry, or what Möller & Bellmer (2023) consider to be aspirations of peace that depict physical acts of violence, rather than engaging with the plurality of meanings that such images carry with them.

Only later did I appreciate the relational act of peace represented in the image. I had overlooked the stories of Laila and Hanan, who had not only offered practical care but had also demonstrated quiet insistence and resistance in their everyday lives. While Hanan poured tea, Laila spoke about their hopes for community-based projects, where creative acts and making art offer alternative narratives for youths struggling with soldiers on the streets. For Laila, young people are empowered through becoming fully engaged and respected members of their communities as a means of suffering with dignity, rather than throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. Laila told me that the best strategy for peace comes from the freedom for young people to express and share local knowledge in community spaces that value justice and equality. It was through meeting Laila and Hanan on the steps of their stories that I understood how they had made something infinitely complex into something that was also straightforward—to look for and nurture potentialities for peace.

These reflections have made me reconsider the image of the kettle as an empathetic object. I have begun to consider how art might function as a reparative act that reaffirms humanity and connection, both personal and collective. Under the conditions and constraints of the Occupation, such acts of repair may be understood as forms of emotional and material resistance that hold space for hope and help sustain cultural identity. Inspired by Craft's (2010) and Leavy's (2015) interpretation of creativity using little c and big C, I apply the terms little p and big P to represent peace. I frame little p as (extra)ordinary acts of everyday peace. Ordinary in that they are commonplace in the context from which they arise, an oPt, and extraordinary for the same reason. It is through everyday acts and expressions of peace, in which art education can play a vital role in creating anticipatory peace images, that the capacity to reimagine Peace with a big P and the capacity to end the Occupation become possible.

Museum of memory in Colombia (Yesid Paez Cubides)

It has been inspiring to hear these accounts, which take me back to when I was doing my PhD. I was trying to understand notions of peace, initially connected to what I thought, at the time, was a linguistic approach. I was keen to explore definitions of peace with the intention of doing a robust analysis, fully theory-driven. What I found during my fieldwork was something completely different, and it was the human side of this that was deeper and richer. One of the striking things I found was the persistent, deeply rooted and pervasive injustice impacting these communities in Putumayo, Colombia. And that is probably something that you, John, might have witnessed in all the communities you have visited and learned from. It is powerfully revealing that, in the midst of those spaces of injustice, horror and violence, what you

find is people who have decided to resist and go back to the simple, which is, in a way, what we discuss here: a return to the everyday as the site(s) where little steps can be taken daily, contributing to bring about change.

Going back to simple means people become attuned to feelings, their bodies and how their bodies are traversed by emotions, including suffering and anger. Moreover, that anger is rooted in the desire not to accept violence as a project. Therefore, it opens up spaces and opportunities for creative ways of dealing with the conflict and opposing war. As Audre Lorde suggests, what ‘feels right to me’ is compelling, and this transforms into action (Lorde 1978). What I found in the Museum of Memory in Putumayo was an example of the struggle for everyday peace. This used to be an old school that got trapped in the middle of an armed confrontation between guerrilla and paramilitary groups over control of the territory. Children stopped attending their school to protect their lives, and the place deteriorated and became unused. The abandoned space would be transformed into a museum of memory, serving as a testimony to what had happened during the years of intense violence. This was the result of initiatives and hard work of the community, including religious leaders, although it was also contested by some who saw the collection of artefacts as meaningless and irrelevant. Nevertheless, the efforts and the tremendous sense of humanity of these communities bore fruit. They created a museum in the old abandoned school, and with the help of NGOs, intermittent state support and other institutions, they have managed to keep the project afloat (Figure 7).



Figure 7
Hands—Museum of Memory.

For me, it was very interesting to see the hands of people because if you see in this picture, for example, while they talk about people, there is a very strong connection to nature. Hence, territory, essentially and effectively, in Latin America is an interesting category, perhaps very different from the way we understand that in Europe or the United States. It is a very different one, and so, they talk about rivers of life, and they talk about the past and the future as connected, which I find impressive. I would say, more than anything, that I am impressed by this playful temporality and an aesthetics of peace. It is the hands of people working the land, and images of fruit, vegetables and animals which show a connection with nature. When we think about a museum of memory, what we expect is to see are accounts of destruction and war and the toll of death. There is a space for that in the museum, but what is really interesting and inspiring is that it is connected to who they are now, and who they want to be in the future and it starts here with the transmission of feelings and wishful thinking and hope. This is the first step towards the construction of better futures, of different possibilities. I think somehow, in many ways, I see that in the museum. They do quite a lot of that, and then they create those spaces for children, for example, and young people to come in and see and make sense of what has happened, what is happening now and what will happen.

The second picture shows a display of children's pictures, and I thought this was powerful because it is a testament to efforts of the community to humanise their history. Despite the moves up and down of the museum, the discontinuities and lack of support, the museum moves beyond the imagery of the conflict, which is part of it, and extends its narratives to depict the human struggle of the people, their bonding with one another and their place in the exuberant and vibrant amazon region. Hence, in this conversation, we have mentioned anger and other feelings as part of our human experience. This museum shows that clearly the human experience is evident in the hands, faces and smiles of community members making sense of their place and circumstances. However, they also resist and propose alternatives through weaving narratives of imagined and rehearsed futures where violence has no place. There, storytelling is a reflection of the efforts of the community to get over a past of conflict, even when it seems to come back. Those stories escape fixed views on victimhood and stigma, working on peace in a cumulative manner. Sometimes, it seems like nothing has been achieved, and some other times, it seems like a lot has been accomplished. I think both are true, and it is in that tension where peace and opportunities for peace appear to be solid, as the product of little efforts across time (Figure 8).



Figure 8
Narratives of Future.

Flags as em/pathetic objects (Claire Penketh)

I was thinking about John's invitation, to create an empathetic object, particularly in the context of the recent imposition of flags, already explored by Marlene (above). For me, these symbols work in opposition to empathy and I have reflected on the possibility or impossibility of turning those flags into empathetic objects. Initially, I felt desperate to remove the flags and was interested in John's project in Northern Ireland and his methodology for making exchange paintings as a means of generating empathy. I felt perplexed about how I should respond to the flags, feeling an urge to take them down but recognising my move towards a fixed binary position as 'flag remover'.

For context, the iJADE Conference 2024 was motivated by the genocide in Gaza. In November 2024, deaths were occurring as a result of the ongoing bombardment of the civilian population there. By July 2025, Reuters had reported that more than 60,000 Palestinians had been killed, with nearly a third of them under the age of 18, which I think, for our purposes really resonates with the idea of school age and the death of an imagined future. I closed the November conference with a story that I felt held particular significance for a room of art educators. A radio journalist shared a report about the possibilities of prosthetics for a boy in Gaza who had ambitions to be a photographer and who had lost his upper limbs as the result of a bombing injury. The reporter explained how the boy selected an image and carefully and precisely directed his sister to capture the photograph with him, as if through his eyes. Some days when she was away, he would hold onto a particular image until she returned so that they could capture the photograph together. This narrative in itself could be considered an empathetic object.

By September 2025, the number of deaths in Gaza increased due to malnutrition and starvation, employed as an Israeli military strategy. At the time of this conversation in September 2025, Gaza city continued to be demolished, with displaced populations forced to shift between danger zones. There has been international condemnation of the use of starvation as a weapon of war, though little action to prevent Israel from further decimating the Palestinian population. This sets an important context for thinking about the nature of flags. In England, there were regular protests and marches in support of Palestine and its people, but an ex-British MP commented that he was 'sick' of seeing flags raised in support of Palestine. A flag showing solidarity with protests against mass slaughter and support for the recognition of a Palestinian state had become a further site of conflict, used to suggest a kind of betrayal of British identity.

In August 2025, protests took place outside hotels used to house migrants and asylum seekers—otherwise known as people. After a short holiday, I travelled home up the M6 and witnessed an array of England flags as they appeared on motorway bridges with some set high and out of reach on lampposts. A bridge over the M6 near Wigan showed a triptych, the Union flag, the cross of St George and a Reform banner 'Let's make Britain great'. I was struck by the lack of originality in this borrowed slogan with the constant layering of hate speech disguised as national pride. In *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport outlines five stages of prejudice where anti-locution features as the foundational stage in enabling discriminatory behaviours and eventual extermination (Allport 1954). What might be perceived as petty alienation through symbolic flag raising can be recognised as a means of enabling violence, creating the conditions for language acts that make physical aggression, murder and genocide a possibility. For me, the flags sat in opposition to the possibilities John explored in his explanations of an empathetic object. I imagined that, in a few months, they would be pathetic objects, frayed and hanging wet and limp on their posts. For now though, there was a brightness to their violent interjection, set high up and out of reach at a time when we were thinking about the possibilities of connection. To me, they were appropriated not as symbols of national pride but as objects of violence that shouted 'stop the boats' and 'send them back' (Figure 9).

In August 2025, in the midst of the flag raising, I visited the National Portrait Gallery and I was struck by an image made by photographer Jaiyana Chelikha. The image and its title *Jounaid Go Back to Where?* placed a question in response to the nationalist directive implied by the flag raising. Considering the im/possibilities of responding to the flags, I was struck by this image as an empathetic object. The photograph shows an adolescent boy dressed in trainers and tracksuit bottoms, a white thobe with red detail partway down the front, which to me echoed the aesthetic of the England flag. Wearing a black hooded jacket, and a mix of Moroccan and Western contemporary dress, the boy stands in a landscape, reminiscent of the Yorkshire Moors. He stands against this backdrop looking directly into the camera. As if in response to a threatening racist directive to 'send them back', the portrait asks 'back to where' establishing his belonging to the land. I read his gaze as direct, his feet firmly planted with his legs apart, his posture upright yet relaxed, maybe even resigned. His fists are closed, not clenched. His question roots him firmly in this landscape, which we read as his home.

I thought about flags as em/pathetic objects, flags used to identify with a cause and a people, with weakness and manipulation. I thought of them as oppositional to empathetic objects yet apathy, as a synonym of empathy did not seem to



Figure 9
Jounaid Go Back to Where? Credit Jaiyana Chelikha.

do the trick. Apathy is a non-action, a non-emotion distant from the care suggested by empathy. Apathy negates the existence of others by a shrug-induced failure to act, a nothing that underscores the power of empathy in its association with compassion. Writing about the precarity of displaced people, Judith Butler describes the necessity of undoing ourselves as a means of knowing the other via ethical encounters, the type of ethical encounter that I felt was demanded by this photograph and by the reported experiences of the aspiring photographer in Gaza (Butler 2012). This photograph, as an empathetic object, enables a question. It works as a means of promoting a sense of being open to the other, recognising distance without fear, appealing to our common humanity as an ethical project.

In response (John Johnston)

I think that you can tell from our conversation that we truly feel each individual story. This evocation of feeling is an important element of art and education that should not be ignored. Those who perpetuate polarisation weaponise 'feeling' through the corruption of language drawing on symbols such as flags in a manner which has been described by Marlene and Claire. The British and St. George's flag has been claimed as symbols of an outmoded national identity. Of course, as I noted in my story, I come from a country where we are experts in such manipulation. I think everybody in Northern Ireland has a PhD in how to hang a flag and that is why they use them so well. We now see Palestine flags adorning the telegraph poles of nationalist areas with Israeli flags hanging alongside that of the union and Ulster flags. Indeed, the Loyalist community has even designed a composite flag that emphasises the star of David in the blue of Israel surrounding the traditional red hand of Ulster. The idea of hanging these objects high is not just to

set them out of reach; they are there to be seen by the other side. Here, we see the weaponisation of the flag and its definition as an object of both pride and hate.

The challenge we face is how to reverse this process, given that the wind blows strong from a place of division. As artist educators, we are compelled to offer other identity options. We do this by offering the sort of skills and capacities needed to be able to think differently about the world we live in. So, I think now about what I said to you, Claire, about how you felt the need to return and cut the ties that fixed the flags to a bridge on the motorway. I said, we need to untie the hands of those who placed them there. Let me say it loud and clear, education, and I emphasise art education, must play a role in this struggle. That is why our responsibility is to address the fabric that is being woven out of those flags. This is not to condemn the flag or those who hang them it is to pose the question why? Flags in themselves are not so much the problem; it is how the flags are used.

I remember that super Saturday evening in the London 2012 Olympics. Three gold medals won by people with a mixture of cultural identities all holding aloft the Union flag in their celebrations. They reclaimed the flag, on behalf of modern Britain. This was a vision of what Britain could be. The flag is an amazing symbol, but it has been weaponised throughout history by those people who chose to weave a cloth out of fear, anger and disjuncture. While I make the case for education as crucial to learn our way out of conflict, sadly, as noted in my story, it is also a fundamental tool in perpetuating it.

Hence, I think that we are placed in a position now that compels us to act and not just to think and feel but to actually act. Make empathy into an action point—something concretised in our teaching and curriculums. That is why we now talk about the empathetic object-ive. Before we started this conversation, I thought about the many meaningful responses that were generated by the invitation to share an empathetic object. I feel very humble that so many people at the conference responded in the way that they did. It makes me think there is a hunger for more. Moreover, with this, I want to use my position as UNESCO Chair to invite teachers and others to take this conversation further. The fact that a Chair in Issues Based Arts Education was awarded by UNESCO carries with it a responsibility to amplify these ideas and give concrete form to all our work.

Just to finish I want to thank the organisers for having the courage and vision to present this challenge and also the participants for their passion and interest. I hope we can manage the busy shit of education, the endless demands to pay attention to the peripheral and continue to work in solidarity with you to achieve the goal of peaceful existence.

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