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THE CULTURE OF CHILDHOOD
AND THE VISUAL ARTS

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Introduction

> Every visual artifact produced by a young person is a product pervaded by culture.
> (Wilson, 2004, p. 321)

Thirty years ago, Brent Wilson (1974) introduced art educators to a prolific ten-year-old named J. C. Holz, and a nascent theory of children's culture in its relation to child art. Fascinated both by J. C.'s dedication to drawing and by the subjects and sources of his work in popular culture, Wilson pondered the contrast between J. C.'s self-initiated "play art" and the "school art" that children of his age produce under the direction of art teachers. In this early article, Wilson introduced themes which remain central to the study of children's culture in the visual arts, including the importance of the images children draw to please and inform themselves, and the impact of popular culture on the choices children make. As Marilyn Zurmuehlen suggested in a description of conditions that would evoke "meaningful children's art" (1974), "the person making the choices is the person who is learning" (p. 33). Children's culture, much like children's art, is constantly negotiated between adults and children, in classrooms, homes, and communities: Not only is much of what constitutes children's culture made by adults for children, or scavenged by children from sources intended for adult consumption, but the uses to which children put these materials are monitored, worried over, and controlled as far as possible by adults.

Duncum (2002) suggests that the "professional status [of art educators] rests on our expertise regarding both children and images" (p. 105). The study of children's culture in the visual arts focuses both upon the images of the child that inform research and pedagogy in art education, and on the nature of the images that fill children's visual and conceptual fields.

Through much of the twentieth century, children's life experiences were placed squarely at the heart of art education theory and practice. In practice, the strength and focus of this commitment wavered as attitudes toward children and art shifted

(Korzenik, 1981; Leeds, 1989; Wilson, 1997). Often the exigencies of school art (Anderson & Milbrandt, 1998; Bresler, 1996, 1998, 2002; Efland, 1976) and new curricular priorities took precedence over the interests that children brought to classrooms. In recent years, in the wake of radical changes in the ways that childhood is lived and interpreted, interest in reassessing the role of children's lived experience in the construction of curriculum and the conduct of research has emerged, in art education as in other fields of inquiry.

Fundamental to this review is the distinction between childhood as a concept, and children as people, understood as "social actors shaping as well as shaped but their circumstances" (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 6). Important to this changing conception of childhood is the difference Walsh (2002) discerns between the "eternal" and the "historical" child, echoing Vygotsky's (1934/1987, p. 91) insistence that children must be seen as situated individuals, rather than as universally developing beings, unaffected by the contexts in which they are growing up. Equally critical is an acknowledgement of the continuing ambivalence toward childhood which prompts contemporary adults to both disdain and celebrate the child, in "an era marked by both a sustained assault on childhood and a concern for children" (James et al., 1998, p. 3). Assuming this stance toward children prompts us to acknowledge the importance of sociocultural experience in art learning, the significance of peer culture and experiences mediated by adults to the construction of meaning and identities, and the agency that children exercise in selectively appropriating the "tools and symbol systems" (Vygotsky, 1978) available in their culture to represent and to make sense of their experiences.

Children's Culture as Bricolage

The "new social studies of childhood" (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998) sees children's culture as peer culture, the "inevitable and largely benign result of children's collective lives, their existence in groups" (Thompson, 2006). In contrast to traditional conceptions of socialization, which cast children as passive recipients of adult culture and direction, Corsaro (1997) suggests that children engage in a process of "interpretive reproduction," through which children both rely upon the adult world and act creatively upon the materials and "cultural routines" (p. 19) it provides:

> Children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. The term *interpretive reproduction* captures the idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are *actively contributing to cultural production and change*. The term also implies that children are, by their very participation in society, *constrained by the existing social structure and by societal reproduction*. (p. 18)

Corsaro stresses that children's culture is neither autonomous nor isolated from the adult world, as "children are always participating in and part of two cultures – children's and adults' – and these cultures are intricately interwoven" (p. 26). Paley (1995) suggests

that children act as *bricoleurs*, improvising with the materials given to them within a particular environment to create new meanings. Children create rituals that bind their small communities by borrowing familiar structures observed in the world of adults – witness, for example, the reenactments of social rites such as cocktail parties, television shows, and sports events that crop up in children's imaginative play. Yet as Kincheloe (2002) and others (James, 1998) point out, there is an oppositional cast to children's culture, an intentional effort to distinguish themselves from adults.

Culture for Children

Children's attraction to commercial culture is most likely to capture adult attention and to merit concern, whether it is presented in the form of the "corporate kinderculture" designed specifically for children, or more "adult" offerings that pervade the media, ready to be overheard or absorbed through casual contact. Prout points to Elkind (1981), Postman (1994), and Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) as among those who view the ubiquity of mediated experience with alarm:

> Appalled at the breakdown of the boundary between adulthood and childhood … they point the finger of blame at technological innovations such as TV and the internet. These, they argue, are leading to the disappearance of childhood by making a wider range of information available to children. (Prout, 2005, p. 14)

Children's television viewing has been addressed extensively in literature beyond the field of art education, though it remains one of the "contexts and venues that traditional art education has tended to ignore or marginalize" (Hicks, 2004, p. 285). Freedman and Schuler (2003) advocate instructional attention to television which, they assert, "functions as a national curriculum" (p. 163) in the United States. Particularly crucial, they suggest, are questions surrounding "the role television plays in inculcating a consumer culture, offers materials from which students construct identities, and presents images of violence, stereotypes, and sex" (p. 163).

Art Education and the Twentieth Century Child

The theorists whose writing and teaching provided models for the child-centered approaches to art education associated with high modernism (see Wilson, 2004) emphasized – in their rhetoric, if not always in their practice – that children's art making should emerge from and reflect children's lived experiences. The teacher's role, as Lowenfeld (1957) explained it, was to assist in this process by questioning children about "primary experiences" common to all members of a class, helping them to activate the passive knowledge they possessed, to allow vivid impressions of remembered experiences to surface so that they were available for representation in drawings, paintings, or other media. In determining what these primary experiences might be, teachers were encouraged to rely upon a well-developed sense of artistic development, described

in Lowenfeld's texts in its relation to other aspects of children's evolving competencies. Multiple accounts of artistic development were available, and the descriptions they provided were relatively consistent. Many were based on crosscultural collections, providing normative descriptions of central tendencies observed among drawings solicited from large numbers of children, frequently identified only by age, nationality, and, sometimes, gender. Drawings were often obtained in response to a common prompt, and, with subject matter controlled as far as possible, categorized according to the formal conventions the drawings embodied. The universality, rather than the cultural specificity, of children's drawings was of interest to researchers.

Exceptions to this research practice occurred primarily in case studies, in which the child was often closely related to the researcher and could be observed repeatedly in the act of drawing, and the drawings themselves tended to be self-initiated or unsolicited. In such cases, the link between the child's choice of subject matter and his or her enthusiasm for drawing was generally noted: Sylvia Fein's study, *Heidi's Horse* (1984), is an excellent example. Maitland's (1895) early study posed the question, "What do children draw to please themselves?" This question, taken up by Lark-Horovitz, Lewis, and Luca (1973), became central to Wilson and Wilson's (1982) inquiry into the issue of what and why children draw, and to subsequent research on children's culture.

Almost from the beginning of scientific study of child art, there were attempts to collect data across cultures, to investigate the existence and meaning of the apparently universal impulse to make visual images in childhood. Much of this research concluded that the differences that exist among drawings completed in different cultural settings were, as Golomb (1992) and Cox (1992) suggest, ornamental rather than structural. Questioning the accuracy of this interpretation, Wilson (2004) began in the 1970s to review existing collections of child art, finding substantial and important distinctions among works created from one culture to the next. His research indicates that the quality and quantity of graphic models available within a particular culture has a decisive effect on the images children produce. Alland (1983) found that these cultural effects appear even in the prerepresentational markings of very young children, who seem to absorb such subtle cues as density and placement of marks on the page from culturally available models. Recent volumes edited by Lindstrom (2000) and Bresler and Thompson (2002) consider the significance of these differences in international contexts. Studies such as those by Kindler, Darras, and Kuo (2000), Chen (2001), and Cox, Perara, and Fan (1999) continue this tradition of research, venturing increasingly into postmodern concerns of content and concept in the generation and interpretation of data (see, e.g., Gamrandt & Staples, 1994).

Images of the Child

"Child art and beliefs about innocence and creativity are the products of modernism's grand narrative" (Wilson, 2004, p. 320).

Despite the centrality of the developmental perspective in art education throughout much of the twentieth century – or perhaps because our understanding of development prompted us to believe that we knew all that we needed to know about the subjects of

our research and the beneficiaries of our teaching – children often seemed to be taken-for-granted in discussions of art education (Duncum, 2002). It is sometimes difficult to determine how children are conceptualized, what "image of the child" (Malaguzzi, 1993) informs art education theory and practice. Leeds (1989), Korzenik (1981), and Wilson (1997) discuss the complex relationships between attitudes toward child art and prevailing aesthetic judgments, and the ways in which these tacit assumptions influence research and teaching, encouraging adults to value the spontaneity of pre-school painting at one historical moment, and the secretive inscriptions of adolescent marginalia at another as fashions in the art world changed.

In the current historical moment, both the reality and the representation of childhood are in flux, in ways which must impact educational fields. As Prout (2005) explains:

> Traditional ways of representing children in discourse and image no longer seem adequate to its emerging forms. New ways of speaking, writing, and imaging children are providing new ways of seeing them and these children are different from the innocent and dependent creatures that appeared to populate the first half of the twentieth century. These new representations construct children as more active, knowledgeable and socially participative than older discourses allowed. They are more difficult to manage, less biddable and hence are more troublesome and troubling. (p. 7)

Childhood emerged as a focus for study in the modernist era. "The adult-child binary constituted childhood both as a distinct state of being, quite separate from adulthood, and a process of becoming adult that can be described, explored, mapped, and explained" (Prout, 2005, p. 35). The child could be held at arm's length, considered as a distinctive sort of being, "the ultimate 'other' " (Cannella, 1997, p. 19), available for anthropological investigation. Skepticism about claims of universal development emerged within art education as early as the nineteen-seventies, mirroring develop-ments outside the field. The sociocultural perspective associated with Vygotsky (1962, 1978), his insistence on both the inextricable link between development and learning and the inversion of their temporal relationship, accorded well with emerging interest in the influence of conversations among children (Thompson & Bales, 1991) and other forms of cultural influence in art education. Developmental psychologists (Burman,1994; Morss, 1996; Walkerdine, 1997; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000) and educators in fields beyond art education (Egan & Ling, 2002; Stremmel, 2002; Walsh, 2002), continue to question both the assumptions and the "hegemony of developmen-tal psychology in our understanding of the child" (Tarr, 2003, p. 7). Of particular con-cern are the universalizing, essentializing, and normative aspects of the model, and the tendency of developmental theory to portray children as "deficient" adults.

School Art and Self-Initiated Art

As Brent Wilson points out (1997, 2004), child art is itself a cultural construction. Historical and anthropological evidence suggests that children have long made images

without prompting, in the absence of formal provisions for art practice in schooling. However, until adults began to value that activity, noting its resemblance to adults' cultural production, children's art making continued unremarked, much as children's splashing in mud puddles or building with Legos might escape the interest of adults even today (despite their potential relationship to contemporary forms of art practice).

Once child art was recognized as an activity of some aesthetic and psychological interest, the question of how it should be defined, preserved, and shaped emerged. The approaches to teaching which lead to the creation and persistence of the School Art Style (Anderson & Milbrandt, 1998; Bresler, 1994, 1999, 2002; Efland, 1976; Greenberg, 1996; Hamblen, 2002; Pariser, 1981; Smith, 1995; Wilson, 1974) are instructive. Under the influence of the creative expression model, teachers began to select topics and themes for children's art making that accommodated adults' comfort far more effectively than children's interests. Addressing only those topics that adults believed to be appropriate to the interests and understanding of children, school art characteristically hews to a narrowly defined range of subject matter, designed to include everyone and offend no one. Controversial topics, disturbing questions, and issues about which it is possible to hold conflicting points of view (Gaudelius & Speiers, 2002) are avoided, in the interest of both democratization and control. Divorced from the topics that children pursue when left to their own devices, and from issues taken up in the art and visual culture of their times, school art perpetuates certain modernist tendencies, emphasizing colorful, bold, appealing naiveté in elementary schools, and polished technical virtuosity in secondary, effectively narrowing the repertoires (Kindler & Darras, 1997; Wolf & Perry, 1988) and symbolic languages (Dahlberg, Pence, & Moss, 1999; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993; Reggio Children and Harvard Project Zero, 2001) available to children. All too often, what is missing are the primary experiences of contemporary children (Lowenfeld, 1957; Thompson, 2003). School art tends to focus on form and technique to the virtual exclusion of content meaningful to children. School art tends to divide children's interests into official and unofficial spheres (Dyson, 1997; Hamblen, 2002; Tobin, 2004), limiting content for art making and classroom discussion to topics which preserve adults' sense of children's essential innocence (Dyson, 1997; Jenkins, 1998; Seiter, 1999; Wilson, 2004). This stands in stark contrast to the "carnivalesque" (Bakhtin, 1984) productions that children create when spaces are opened in the curriculum that allow them to introduce content of their own choosing (Dyson, 1997, 2003; Grace & Tobin, 2002; Hilton, 1996).

School art strives to eliminate or minimize the possibility that teachers or parents will be confronted with aspects of childhood experience that make us squeamish, that violate our sense of propriety. Bresler (2002) concludes:

> In the schools, emotion, creativity and expression are often considered loose cannons that could fire off with disastrous results. Management is a primary concern for school practitioners. Keeping school art nice, teachers believe, makes art manageable within school confines. The performance and expression of art, then, has to be tightly controlled. In a culture where intensity, passion and ownership are marginalized, the arts assume a decorative and entertaining role. (p. 181)

When children do venture to include difficult content in their work, manifesting interests that are violent, sexual, racist, or macabre, we view these expressions as pathological and interpret them as cries for help. Children's drawings that make adults uncomfortable are frequently seen as aberrations rather than as representations of children's lived experience in all its complexity. As Tobin (1995) notes in his discussion of "the irony of self-expression," wise children quickly learn that certain subjects are taboo in schools – specifically those subjects which manifest children's cultural lives most clearly.

As a curricular issue, the school art style presents the question, How shall art educators conceptualize the relationship between school experience and children's experience beyond the schools? Contemporary curricular recommendations that focus on the exploration of themes (Gude, 2004), big ideas (Walker, 2001), or issues which can be viewed from different perspectives (Gaudelius & Speiers, 2002) promise greater receptivity to children's interests and experiences. As a research issue, school art asks us to consider how we might develop grounded understandings of children's immersion in the multiple cultures of which they are a part.

Self-Initiated or Unsolicited Child Art

There has been an enduring, if muted, interest in what children draw to please themselves (Duncum, 1989, 1997; Kindler, 1994; Kindler & Darras, 1994, 1997, 1998; Thompson, 2002; Thompson & Bales, 1991; Wilson & Wilson, 1977, 1982), the sort of vernacular child art which is produced beyond the control of teachers or the prompting of researchers, an interest focused on the content rather than the form of children's drawings. Lark-Horovitz, Lewis, and Luca, in their text, *Understanding Children's Art for Better Teaching* (1973), provided a typology of child art dependent upon the relative contributions of child and adult in the creation of a particular image:

> Children are often influenced by the circumstances under which they make their drawings. This observation has lead investigators to classify children's drawings into four distinct categories: *spontaneous* drawings made on their own initiative as a play activity or in pursuit of individual interests; *free* or *voluntary* drawings, made on request but with the children choosing their own subjects; *directed* pictures for which the topic is proposed; *copied* or *to-be-completed* drawings. Of these four types, spontaneous and free drawings are the most significant for understanding children's interest in drawing. (p. 35)

Where does the "world making" (Wilson & Wilson, 1982) that occurs in children's self-initiated graphic activity find its sources? What resources does it employ? Can children make visual art without drawing upon the materials available in their culture, a range of materials that continues to expand exponentially in a hypertextual age (Kincheloe, 2002; Thompson, 2002)?

When children draw to please and inform themselves, when they engage in art making that is *spontaneous* or *voluntary* in the sense that Lark-Horovitz, Lewis, & Luca

describe, their concerns, interests, attitudes, and ambitions come to the fore. These issues seldom emerge in uncensored form, as Tobin (1995) and Anning (1999) caution, but in a way that intimates what is on their minds. Self-initiated art making brings children's cultural, as well as personal, sources into play.

Peer Culture

An emerging understanding of the particular connection between peer culture and drawing events, the intertwining of "social and symbolic processes" (Boyatzis & Watson, 2000), particularly in early childhood, has drawn attention to situations in which children make art together. Dyson (1997), Gallas (1994, 1998), Paley (1999), Reynolds and Jones (1997), and Thompson (2002) are among those who have studied the direct influence of one child upon another. The performative aspects of young children's drawing events, particularly the talk and gesture that accompany their actions (Dyson, 1987; Forman, 1993; Thompson & Bales, 1991), give rise to verbal exchanges, visual scrutiny, and reciprocal shaping of the drawing process.

As Zurmuehlen, Sacca, and Richter (1984) concluded in their study of stereotypes in children's drawings, the social value of drawing popular symbols in public spaces, of demonstrating that one is in the know with regard to the latest cultural phenomena, is high. Christensen and James (2000) comment on the same phenomenon:

> A sense of sameness is important for children, providing them a feeling of belonging, a way in which to smooth over the potential which any personal diversity or deviation might have to rupture the social relations that exist between one child and another. (p. 169)

As Corsaro (1985), Dyson (1989, 1990), and Paley (1981) indicate, the things that children most want to know are frequently things that only other children can teach them. This may be particularly true of the transmission of specific methods of drawing crucial to depiction of characters from media sources, that are conveyed from one child to another when they draw together (Thompson, 2002; Thunder-McGuire, 1994).

The Content of Drawings

The impact of peer culture and the influence of the larger culture are seen in the choices children make as they select content for image making. Vygotsky (1978) discusses the distinctive contributions of formal education and play to the acquisition of the tools and symbols systems that predominate in a specific cultural setting. Children's appropriation of cultural materials is always selective. Children are surrounded by many images that seldom become sources for their art making: A notable example is found in the illustrations of beloved children's books which seldom find their way into children's drawings (Thompson, 2006).

In the 30 years since Brent Wilson issued his brief on behalf of "play art," other art educators have echoed his recommendation that children's voluntary art making should be afforded a place of prominence in both curriculum and research. Attempts to honor the interests of children are demonstrated in the inclusion of sketchbooks and journals in the art classroom (Thompson, 1999, 2003), and projects in which children define the subjects of their investigation (Grace & Tobin, 2002; Hafeli, 2002; Thunder-McGuire, 1994). Inspired by vernacular practices in children's culture and developments in literacy learning, including whole language and writing process approaches, applications to art education are particularly evident in research focused on young children, which acknowledges the role of drawing in emergent literacy (Dyson, 1986; Graves, 1984; Hubbard, 1989). When such informal opportunities to draw in the company of other children are provided, the social nature of acquiring and employing symbolic languages becomes evident.

As Wilson (2002), Toku (2001), Kim (2004) and others demonstrate, these exchanges can and do occur outside of schooling, in formal and informal settings. Puzzled by the unique qualities of Japanese children's art, Wilson and Toku became fascinated by the influence of *manga*, Japanese cartoons, both on the graphic sophistication of children's images, and on the formation of personal and cultural identity. The ready availability of varied and compelling graphic models in Japan (and, in Kim's case, in Korea) dramatically affects children's out-of-school drawing experience, their peer relations, and their understanding of cultural narratives well beyond standard popular cultural fare.

Children's Culture as Curriculum: Visual Culture in Art Education

Recent initiatives to expand the focus of art education beyond the Western canon of fine art exemplars and to embrace a wide range of artifacts and events comprising visual culture have gained considerable favor in art education (see, e.g., Duncum, 1997, 1999; Duncum & Bracey, 2001; Stuhr, 2003). This interest emerges from a desire for greater inclusivity in works chosen for discussion in classrooms, an interest in the content of teaching. The shift to visual culture requires a concomitant expansion of the terms of the critical dialogue that ensues in classrooms, if for no other reason than the pragmatic one, that discussion of objects such as action figures and Barbie dolls (Vollrath, 2005; Wagner-Ott, 2002) demands a very different critical vocabulary than would apply in the discussion of Monet's *Water Lillies*.

The current movement to embrace visual culture as a major component of art education continues a discussion long underway in the field. Following Dewey's (1934) admonitions to start where the student is, Vincent Lanier, as early as 1969, suggested that the art curriculum should begin with the objects and images that students admire, introducing, in a tactful and respectful way, related phenomena from more traditional fine art contexts, as well as challenging work from contemporary artists and media. Similar calls for the inclusion of popular and vernacular imagery, design and "everyday aesthetics" were issued during the same era by McFee and Degge (1977) and

Chapman (1978). These earlier calls for attention to everyday visual experiences and emerging media found more rapid acceptance in English education, and in programs in film and media studies than in art education, particularly in the United Kingdom and northern Europe, where, as Wilson (2004) observes, art educators are comparatively advanced "in analyzing and charting the influences that underlie visual cultural artifacts children produce under the direction of teachers" (p. 319).

Current calls for visual culture, either as the primary focus of art education or as an extension of its traditional content, note the greater relevance of "the ordinary vs. the special in visual arts" (Duncum, 1999, p. 297), the ubiquity and influence of popular visual culture in comparison to the relatively isolated and rarified world of the museum. Advocates of visual culture in art education recognize popular culture as a condition of students' lives and a topic for study, "a recurring site of struggle and negotiation" (Seiter, 1999, p. 5), often framed within a critical pedagogy (Tavin, 2003). Recommendations for visual culture curriculum are beginning to appear with great regularity (see special issues of *Art Education* and *Visual Arts Research*, 2002).

In contemporary discussions of visual culture, children are represented primarily in the assumptions made about the conditions of their lives and the effects of growing up in a media-saturated culture. With few exceptions, the commonsense notion that young people must be armed by education against their own victimization by popular media and commercial culture is invoked. An image of the child as innocent victim or pawn of commercial interests is frequently offered as justification for educational interventions aimed at helping children to develop critical perspectives in response to the cultural surround, and to assert the urgency of school-sponsored discussions of extracurricular cultural events (Darts, 2004; Duncum, 2002; Garoian & Gaudelius, 2004). These writers suggest the necessity of debriefing students in regard to their extracurricular experiences with various forms of media, conducting "a collective verbal examination" (Lanier, 1976, p. 50) of students' responses to commercial culture.

The perils inherent in proposals for making popular culture the subject of educational intervention were recognized clearly by Lanier, writing about high school art students in 1976: "In effect, no matter how gently we speak, we exhibit contempt of their tastes, a low opinion of what are the vital arts for them" (p. 49).

The acknowledgement of the power and relevance of out-of-school experience that current discussions of visual culture offer is a healthy development for the field, bringing the complexity of children's participation in culture to the fore (Wilson, 1974, 2003). Missing in much of the current discourse on visual culture, however, is a critical examination of the propositions about contemporary childhood and youth used to justify its inclusion in the curriculum. In the absence of documentation of children's participation in popular culture, the assumption prevails that children must be taught to interpret and critique the messages implicit in visual culture, much as an earlier generation had to be taught to discern formal properties in works of art. Little credit is given to children, who, as Paley (1995) suggests, can (with very little tuition or encouragement) "raise powerful, critical questions about complex and ideological issues, when provided the opportunities to do so" (p. 172).

Despite the current paucity of research on children's participation in visual culture, and persistent resistance to the recognition of self-initiated art making as a activity that

warrants the attention of teachers and researchers, there is potential in both of these movements, leading toward greater acknowledgement of the centrality of children's culture to the project of art education. Inclusion of children's cultural experience in research, curriculum, and pedagogy opens the possibility of a practice which recognizes the fullness of children's being-in-the-world and admits the voices of children to educational discourse, despite the discomfort it may cause us to recognize the disorderly and sometimes precocious interests they manifest.

Directions for the Future

Is children's culture, in either of the manifestations described above, something to be valued and understood, or something to be regretted and replaced by more accurate and acceptable cognitive and interpretive models? Contemporary childhood throughout the world is comprised, at least in part, of images and ideas borrowed from cultural sources beyond those selected and sanctioned by adults. The tensions between a commitment to honor the experience of the child, and the arguments posed by those who object to the incursion of children's culture into the classroom affect curriculum, pedagogy, and research.

Tarr (2003) describes several competing images of childhood at work in contemporary Western culture, prompting adults to envision the child before them as cute object or "wiseass," as consumer, or innocent, or *tabula rasa*. As Malaguzzi (1993) cautioned, it is very difficult to act toward the child in ways that contradict the images we hold. Even when these the images of the child remain implicit and unexamined, they permeate art education research and pedagogy and curriculum development.

As Duncum (2002) suggests, "What we need is a more complete view of children than that found now in art education. We need a view that does justice to children" (p. 99). Research *with* children (Christensen & James, 2000; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002), in the settings and circumstances in which their cultural lives become public in ways that are of interest to art education, is needed to move the field toward that goal.

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INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY

61.1

Children, the Arts, and Research in Reggio Emilia

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In Italian primary schools, arts education is called "Educazione all'immagine" and it is assigned to an external expert or to a specialized teacher. In middle schools it is based mainly on the production of works, generally graphic works. Arts education is taught also in some high schools. The curricula depend on the specific high schools; for example, in lyceums, art education focuses upon history of arts; in Artistic Lyceums, on the history of arts and production (such as graphic arts, painting, sculpture); in Musical Lyceums, on the practice, theory and history of music. Generally these schools are very traditional and no research is carried out. Everything depends on the knowledge, skills and disposition of the single teacher.

As in schools around the world, teaching methods in Italian schools are based on the transmission of knowledge. Even when the students produce works, the techniques they are taught very rarely turn into "languages" that would enable them to narrate or represent the context, the world around.

In recent years we have witnessed a growth in the number of places defined as *ateliers* or workshops which might provide interesting opportunities for children and youth. They are often found outside of schools and offer extracurricular activities. Within school, when they exist at all, they are usually relegated to a marginal cultural position or form part of optional choices. As such, they are far from fitting the image of arts education as coprotagonist in the processes of knowledge-building and of constructing ways of approaching reality (Rabitti, 1994).

The Poetic Languages for the Municipal Infant Toddler Centers and Preschools of Reggio Emilia

The image of arts education as coprotagonist in the processes of knowledge-building and constructing ways of approaching reality has been developed in schools for children from 3 months to 6 years of age in Reggio Emilia for many years. The following

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excerpts from the publication, *Children, Art, & Artists* (2004), describe this approach as possible dialogues between children, education, and arts:

> In the late 1960s, introducing an atelier in every municipal infant-toddler center and preschool in Reggio Emilia and a teacher with an art background in the preschools was a brave cultural (and economic) choice, and certainly an unusual one. Then, as now, it represented a strong and tangible statement of the importance attributed to imagination, creativity, expressiveness, and aesthetics in the education processes of development and knowledge building.
>
> This was the insight, the main idea and driving force behind the comprehensive introduction of the atelier in the preschools and infant-toddler centers of Reggio Emilia, along with the great variety of materials, different techniques, and the process of "thinking" simultaneously with our hands, sensibilities and brain. The presence of the atelier in schools is seen as one of the means to safeguard the complexity of the knowledge-building processes, in the aim of using the imagination as a unifying element of the different activities, and of viewing the "aesthetics of knowledge" (Loris Malaguzzi talked about "aesthetic vibration") as "a drive that is rooted within us and leads us to choose between patterns of behavior, thinking, and our visual images" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993).
>
> The ateliers in the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia have chosen the visual language not as a separate discipline, exclusively devoted to the traditional activities specifically related to it, such as drawing, sculpture, painting, and so on. Rather, they have focused on the visual language as a means of inquiry and investigation of the world, to build bridges and relationships between cognitive and expressive processes in constant dialogue with a pedagogical approach that seeks to work on the connections rather than the separation between different fields of knowledge. We are not only conscious of the value of the processes that the visual language can sustain and the contribution it can make to other languages, but also we are conscious of the fact that the visual language itself can be modified and enriched in turn through a dialogue with the others. These are the links we particularly and consistently focus on in our work and we feel this approach sets us apart from that which the school environment traditionally calls "arts education." (Vecchi, 2004, pp. 138–139)

Note

1. Translation by Giordana Rabitti, Reggio Emilia, Italy.

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