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Introduction: Art & Early Childhood - Personal Narratives and Social Practices

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Art & Early Childhood: Personal Narratives & Social Practices



Introduction

by Kris Sunday, Marissa McClure, Christopher Schulte

Young children are explorers of their worlds—worlds filled with unfamiliar things, first experiences, and tentative explanations. As Lowenfeld (1957) recognized, art originates with children’s experiences of their immediate surroundings. Young children’s encounters with art provide a means to explore ideas and materials, invent worlds, and set them in motion. As a language and mode of communication, art offers children the opportunity to play with ideas and generate conclusions about themselves and their experiences. The communicative nature of children’s artwork suggests their desire to be heard and understood by those around them.

In this issue of Bank Street’s Occasional Paper Series, we explore the nature of childhood by offering selections that re/imagine the idea of the child as art maker, inquire about the relationships between children and adults when they are making art, and investigate how physical space influences our approaches to art instruction. We invite readers to join a dialogue that questions long-standing traditions of early childhood art—traditions grounded in a modernist view of children’s art as a romantic expression of inner emotional and/or developmental trajectories. We have also selected essays that create liminal spaces for reflection, dialogue, and critique of the views that have heretofore governed understandings of children and their art.

We draw from current perspectives on children’s art making as social practice (Pearson, 2001). In framing our understanding of children’s art within larger conversations about contemporary art, we move beyond the modernist view. Contemporary perspectives recognize that making, viewing, and

interpreting art must be considered within the contexts of the interrelated conditions that encompass art practices. This is to say that making, viewing, and interpreting art emerges from an understanding of the links between broader cultural discourses and when, where, and how an artwork is made, viewed, and interpreted. Individuals bring their local and personal narratives to an artwork and, in so doing, reveal the contradictory and unstable nature of meaning.

Contemporary perspectives give voice to the realities of children's lives in the family, school, community, and broader culture. These wider contexts provide children with both consistent and contradictory information and experiences upon which they draw to make meaning. As both consumers and producers of culture, we see children as people who continuously negotiate a multiplicity of messages, interpreting, integrating, and performing those messages within their own contexts while being shaped by and helping to shape the discursive and cultural experiences and expectations of being a child.

We want to attend to the ways that children move between inner and outer realities, sometimes fluidly, and at other times with trepidation and caution. In this process, children create spaces for themselves in which the instability of knowledge can be temporarily suspended. Within smaller narratives, they generate connecting points between that which is mastered and that which has yet to be mastered.

Art makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. It is a source of meanings that reveals the inescapable dimensions of context, prompting both makers and viewers to engage the senses to think beyond the immediately visible. Art has the capacity to stretch boundaries and to provoke us to re/think what once seemed ordinary. In abandoning the familiar, art prompts the question, what next? Art has the capacity to confront, disrupt, and to challenge the world as we think we know it. The contributing authors to this issue of Occasional Papers unpack the affordances of the arts for taking up the familiar in new ways. They ask us to re/imagine our images of children, the contexts in which children grow and learn, and our approaches to teaching and learning in/through/with visual art.

Editors

Kristine Sunday is a newly appointed assistant professor of teaching and learning at Old Dominion University, where she teaches courses in early childhood education. Formerly an assistant professor at the Pennsylvania State University, she taught courses in early childhood education, language and literacy education, and art education. Her research focuses on young children's thinking in/through/with the visual arts, children's visual and material culture, and relational learning. In addition to editing this issue of the Bank Street Occasional Papers, she is an associate editor of the International Journal of Education and the Arts.



Christopher Schulte is a visiting scholar in art education at the University of Northern Iowa. His research has been published in Studies in Art Education, Visual Arts Research, the International Journal of Education & the Arts, the Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy, and the Handbook of Research Methods in Early Childhood Education. He is currently the editor of media reviews for the International Journal of Education & the Arts, a member of the editorial review board of Visual Arts Research and Art Education, and a guest reviewer for the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education.



As a researcher, artist, and teacher, **Marissa McClure** is interested in contemporary theories of child art, constructions of childhood/children and visual/media culture, community-based art education, feminist theory, and curriculum theory and design. She seeks to enrich understandings of culturally and linguistically diverse groups of young children within the broader context of educational research, curriculum theory, and policy. She has published and exhibited her research and art with young children in a number of venues including a forthcoming co-authored book. Marissa is

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