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Child Art After Modernism: Visual Culture and New Narratives

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INTRODUCTION: CHILDHOOD AND THE DISCOVERY OF CHILD ART

This chapter is built on an ironic assumption that child art, which is generally assumed to be a natural artifact of childhood which is essentially unaffected by culture, is itself a cultural construction. For more than a century, the practices of art education have been based on the notion that child art is something that children make by themselves and that children are creative in ways different from those of adults. Like the French philosopher Lyotard’s (1984) claims about modernism, this belief was the “grand narrative” of art education. It unified our values and guided our practices. Now, in the postmodern era, that unifying narrative has fragmented into a surprisingly varied surfeit of little stories. I wish to examine the evolution of our grand narrative and to employ the very evidence that the proponents of child art have used to make the case for its naturalness and its creativeness to argue that child art is not natural, that its special character is the result of adult intervention, and that children are no more, and perhaps less, likely to be creative than are adults. Then I will have the task of characterizing some of the new stories that are beginning to be told about children’s visual cultural activities—and, of course, I will need to point to the ideologies and theories underlying then.

The child art master narrative existed in two separate versions that will take some time to untangle. Beginning in the mid-19th century, one was told by modern artists and their ideological co-conspirators, the critics. The other was recounted by pedagogues and art educators who were sometimes joined by psychologists—who were not so much concerned with art as they were with the contents of children’s minds revealed by their drawings. Interestingly, the groups, whose stories were so ideologically similar, hardly took note of the other. Nevertheless, both versions of the child art/modernist master narrative revealed a rebellion against the rule-governed ways that art was taught and learned in the premodernist era. They championed the “natural,” freedom from rules, creativity, and individual expression. The best place to begin my tale is with the era before these beloved modernist traits mattered.
HISTORICAL EVIDENCE OF THE ART-LIKE PRODUCTS OF CHILDREN: MANIFESTATIONS OF CULTURAL STYLES

The story of the cultural influences on child art began in the West long before adults conceived of child art. Nevertheless, modernist blinders led us to see only the similarities in children’s drawings from different times and places, not the differences.

In an interview with Ernst Gombrich, Jonathan Miller (1983) commented:

Now you say in Art and Illusion that we can learn a lot about the use of schemata by looking at the way in which the child draws. This has changed very little in 500 years, even 2000 years, and I’m sure that the pictures by Egyptian children were exactly the same [as today].

To which Gombrich replied:

Yes, I think that’s roughly true. Though our children are influenced nowadays by picture books they see or the shows they watch they are pretty much impermeable to these influences.

Gombrich’s response is surprising because more than any other art historian he has shown that even when an artist makes a careful observational drawing, say of a person’s head, the artist relies on culturally acquired schemata for how to draw noses, eyes, faces, heads, and hair. The artist, as Gombrich has shown so convincingly in his Art and Illusion, adjusts or customizes the acquired general schemata in order to reproduce the model’s individual features (1965, pp. 146–178). It is fascinating that at the beginning of his chapter, Formula and Experience, he quotes from Ayer’s 1916 pedagogically oriented writing,

The trained drawer acquires a mass of schemata by which he can produce a schema of an animal, a flower or a house quickly upon paper. This serves as support for the representation of his memory images and he gradually modifies the schema until it corresponds with that which he would express. (pp. 146–147)

Gombrich’s thesis is that for more than 500 years artists in both the East and the West have used “how to draw” books as their source for general schemata.

In responding to Miller, perhaps Gombrich wished not to appear to disagree with his interviewer. In a later piece of writing about child art, Gombrich notes that it is a mistake to believe that the child draws without rules (1998). I think, however, that Gombrich, who did not direct much attention to the study of children’s drawings, underestimated the extent to which schemata and rules are casually acquired. Children acquire all sorts of schemata from other children. And, of course, drawing schemata and rules are constructed within cultures. Gombrich’s thesis can be applied more generally than he may have realized.

A very long time ago I learned that whatever influences affect adults’ behaviors, also affect the behaviors of children. This is why, when I examined the images of children drawn from, say, 100 to 700 years ago, I saw in them characteristics not found in children’s images today. I had no difficulty detecting stylistic differences. Those differences, manifestations of various forms of cultural influence, may come in the form of either specific adult direction willingly accepted by children or more general cultural schemata that children acquire from a variety of visual cultural sources, often other children, and which they in turn use and pass on to other children. Let’s look at the evidence.
From Graphic Play to Art: Apprenticeships in a Time When There Was No Child Art

Surely for as long as adults have carved and modeled sculpture, painted designs and narratives on walls, and made and decorated the ritual objects that we in Western civilization have come to call art, we can be certain that children have watched their elders shape things and then made their own naive versions of adult art. But to claim that these early manifestations of children’s graphic and plastic play was child art would be wrong. The concept, ‘child art,’ had not yet been invented. There is scant evidence that adults paid attention to the visual artifacts that resulted from children’s play. If we want to gain an historical perspective on the graphic products of young people we must go to two sources. The first is art history and the second is the few self-initiated images that, through quirks of fate, have survived.

In recounting the Lives of the Artists, Vasari describes how gifted artists-to-be attracted the attention of adults. His story of the image of a sheep scratched on a smooth rock by the young shepherd boy, Giotto, is the perfect example. The drawing so astounded Cimabue that the artist immediately asked for permission to have the boy as his apprentice (Vasari, 1894, p. 94). The story may be apocryphal, but it tells an essential truth. Adults paid attention to the artlike things children produced only when they showed evidence of precocity—when the child, at a very early age, could imitate the art of adults.

We are still fascinated by artistic prodigies today. Take, for example, the case of Wang, Yani (Ho, 1989), whose astonishing images captivated the world. At the age of 3, after using her father’s paints without his permission, Yani, who possessed a passion for artmaking, began to paint monkeys that resembled the xieyi hua, or a freer more naive-appearing style of Chinese ink and brush painting. At age 4, Yani traveled around China giving painting demonstrations, and by the time she was a teenager she had a traveling retrospective exhibition that began at the Smithsonian’s Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC. Yani’s precocity and her output provide a fascinating view of the interaction of early interest, talent, and tutoring, however informal, by her father and her use of the modes and models she found in traditional Chinese painting. Indeed, it was her early mastery of elements of the traditional xieyi hua style that led to Yani’s notoriety and our fascination with her artworks. Yani’s story both reaffirms our beliefs in the innocence of children and their innate creativity, while, ironically, at the same time it reinforces our belief that everyone who achieves mastery in any disciplined undertaking must master rule-governed skills—which Yani mastered precociously.

For more than 500 years, young boys (seldom girls—Artemisia Gentileschi, Vigée LeBrun, and Rosa Bonheuer are among the notable exceptions—as are the young girls shown receiving instruction in Jan Steen’s The Drawing Lesson (Walsh, 1996)) perceived to have artistic talent were apprenticed to a master. We have a sizable collection of prints, drawings, and paintings that reveal the history of how young artists were educated in the Western world. Many of these prints and drawings were shown together for the first time in a remarkable exhibition, The Children of Mercury: The Education of Artists in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Muller, 1984). For example, an anonymous Florentine engraving, ca. 1460 shows “Children of Mercury” applying their skills to painting, modeling, and carving—sureness of hand counted most because the young, like their masters, were artisans (Rubin, 1984, p. 12.) Fialetti’s etching, Artist’s Studio, Venice, 1608, shows a group of five apprentices, the youngest of whom appears to be no more than 5, drawing from plaster casts (Amornpichetkul, 1984, p. 108). Another fascinating print of an artist’s studio, The Invention of Oil Painting (Fig 14.1), made during the second half of the 16th century by Theodor Galle (after Johannes Stradanus), shows a young 7- or 8-year-old apprentice drawing images probably taken from a copy book; a slightly older 9- or 10-year-old apprentice drawing from a plaster cast; and an apprentice in his late teens or early 20s painting a portrait from a sitter; while at the center of his studio, the master
paints the allegorical St. George and the Dragon (Bleeke-Byrne, 1984, p. 31). Artists-to-be were treated as much more than mere artisans. They learned the theory and philosophy of art along with skills. No drawing shows this better than Lomazzo's *Art Academy* (ca. 1565–1570) where the aspiring artist is encouraged by Mercury, who symbolizes skill, and by Minerva who symbolizes wisdom and learning in the liberal arts. Art making was seen as an activity of the hand and the brain.

These prints reveal one thing: Becoming an artist meant acquiring skills and following rules—the rules established by adults to which Gombrich points in his “Formula and Experience” (1965, pp. 146–147). The art of young people counted, only when, after a long apprenticeship, their drawing, painting, and sculpture had acquired the look and styles of adult artists. But surely, children who were selected, usually because they were perceived as having talent, had to do something to attract the attention of adults. In the West we have a small body of evidence that reveals the self-initiated graphic works of children and young people.

**Historical Evidence of Self-Initiated Drawing and Cultural Style: A Sampling of Cases**

From medieval to modern times, the results of graphic play provided adults with evidence that some children should be apprenticed to a master. The few remnants of their graphic play also provide little glimpses into the influence of visual culture on children’s drawings—the kind
of visual culture to which Gombrich and other art historians (and art educators) have paid little attention. For example, the frozen tundra of Russia has provided the drawings of young Onfim who, at some time between the years 1224 and 1238, drew pictures of battles on birch bark tablets that had been prepared for his school lessons (Yanin, 1985). Interestingly young Onfim’s figures (Figure 14.2) contain hands that look like rakes—the same configuration found in the drawings that Sully collected in Britain 750 years later—and seldom found elsewhere. It is as if the configuration used by Onfim spread throughout Europe and was one of the preferred ways of making hands for more than half a millennium. The rakehands seen pervasively in late-19th-century European children’s drawings and seldom in children’s drawings in other parts of the world point to the most common form of influence on children’s drawings: schemata acquired from other children. Indeed, as I studied Egyptian children’s drawings and observed numerous instances of bodies made with an X-form, because contemporary Egyptian children have little access to images from ancient Egypt, I became convinced that they had acquired the X-body from other children who had passed the form down from Pharaonic times (Wilson & Wilson, 1984).

Jean Héoard, the tutor to Louis XIII, saved the drawings of the young prince, from the time when he was 4 years of age, and they are now in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris (Rubin, 1984, p. 14). After examining the human figure drawn by the future king at age 6, one is led to wonder if, in 1607 at the age of 6, the young prince might have copied from an artist’s portrait when he drew a detailed and realistic face on a crude head and body. In a single drawing it is possible to see how, when a child observes the work of an adult, the child’s drawing reveals the direct influence of the style of the adult graphic model.

In the drawings of older children and adolescents it is possible to see the influence of what might be thought of as a general era style. For example, Johannes, a young Dutch boy, drew figures (Figure 14.3) in his school text book in the early 16th century (Rubin, 1984, pp. 16–17). At nearly the same time, in about 1520, the Italian artist Gian Francesco Coroto painted the portrait of a young boy shown holding a drawing of a human figure—perhaps his self-portrait
It is fascinating that both the drawings by Johannes and the drawing held by the young boy painted by Coroto exhibit a similar style—a small circular body and very long legs. It is as if the two boys had mastered an era style, perhaps influenced by the costumes of their day as well as by the work of adult artists. These drawings were not based on schemata learned by apprentices; they are what young people learn merely by looking at the drawings of their peers.

(Gardner, 1980, p. 9)
Young people’s drawings also reveal the influence of their visual culture—and even a longing for the culture from which they have been removed. In the 1870s, youth from Native American tribes were sent to the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. For a short period of time, before their teachers began to see their drawing as subversive, young boys drew pictures of battles and buffalo hunts. Interestingly, their horses have the characteristics of a common Plains Indian style as well as the distinct stylistic differences of the Sioux and the Comanche adults found in the ledger books (Wilson, 1997a).

From the scant bits of evidence to which I have pointed we can be fairly certain that children have probably made artlike things for as long as adults have made what we now call art. Moreover, the self-initiated artlike things children made were products of their time—Children’s drawings, just as those of adult artists, possess the style and character of a time and place. They provide evidence for my claim that even when young people do not receive formal instruction they borrow graphic schemata from the surrounding visual culture. These drawings also provide evidence to support and to broaden Gombrich’s “Formula and Experience” thesis. Nevertheless, these remnants should not be considered child art; they should merely be considered the residue of graphic play.

However, before I complicate the notion of child art even further, I must provide a brief account of how child art was “discovered.” At what point did adults begin to think of the drawings of children as art? When did children’s drawing cease to be merely the byproducts of children’s graphic play or the precursor of an apprenticeship in an artist’s studio? When and why did children’s graphic play become art?

CHILDHOOD CREATIVITY AND THE MODERN ARTIST

In the mid-19th century, something quite extraordinary occurred. It was a Swiss pedagogue and graphic narrator Rudolph Topffer who, so far as we know, first wrote about child art as a special category. In 1848, Topffer’s posthumously published book, Reflections et Menus Propos d’un Peintre Genevois, contained two chapters devoted to child art (Schapiro, 1979, p. 61). Topffer was a teacher, caricaturist, and illustrator of children’s stories and perhaps with his education as an artist, with his own work as a graphic narrator—now we would call him a cartoonist—and with his schoolteacher’s insights into the drawings of children, he could raise questions about the little mannequin or rudimentary figures drawn by children.

One of the most fascinating aspects of his writing is his speculation about childhood creativity. He wondered if the apprentice painter was less an artist than the young child who has received no formal instruction in art! Indeed, Topffer makes the astonishing statement that there is less difference between Michelangelo-the-untutored-child artist and Michelangelo-the-immortal than between Michelangelo-the-immortal and Michelangelo-the-apprentice (Shapiro, 1979, p. 61). To Topffer, the child’s spontaneous graphic inventions were seen as closer to the creative expressions of great artists than were the works of artists whose drawings displayed mere conventional skill.

Gautier in his L’art Moderne was, according to Schapiro, “enchanted by Topffer’s assertion of the superiority of children’s art” (1979, p. 62). In the opinion of Schapiro (1979, p. 63) Topffer’s ideas also influenced Champfleury. It is through Champfleury that child art came to be linked with modernism. And it is modernism that holds the key to the idea that the child could create art.

In writing about the work of Courbet in 1855, Champfleury echoed Topffer and said of the painter, “between Courbet as a child and Courbet as a master, there was no Courbet ‘apprenti’” (Schapiro, 1979, p. 82). Now we have the opportunity to see the full extent of the relationship between child art and the embryonic notion of modern art. Each in his own way, Champfleury
and his colleague Courbet, championed popular and naive images. Let me try to illustrate how important this idea is to the development of the idea of child art.

In his enormous 1854–1855 painting, *L’Atelier* (the long title is *The Painter’s Studio, Real Allegory, Resolving a Phase of Seven Years in My Artistic Life*) Courbet presents himself at work on a painting while a model and a little boy observe. On the right, Courbet paints friends and colleagues from the artistic and literary world, Baudelaire and Champfleury notably among them. Courbet has painted what Werner Hofmann has called a “*Tableau clef*.” One of its many interpretations is as an allegory of the ages of man (Hofmann, 1977). The artistic journey begins with an infant being nourished by its mother. Next one of the two young boys representing childhood stands watching, seemingly transfixed by the painter’s power to create visions of reality from mere paint. The second boy is show drawing at the feet of Champfleury, the critic who first drew Courbet’s attention to the supposed freshness of folk art. Is it possible that Courbet presents little boy drawing at Champfleury’s feet as a sign of a creative power which flows directly from childhood spontaneity to adult boundary breaking?

In this monumental painting in which Alan Bowness (1972) claims Courbet invented modern art, we glimpse (through the triangle formed by Courbet, Champfleury, and the child) the first chronicle in paint of childhood creativity. It is auspicious, to say the least, that, in this first major dramatic production of modernism, the child has been cast in the role of the artist, placed among artists, and given nearly equal billing. In this painting, a radical view of creativity and the supposed inventive force of children’s drawing entered if not the consciousness at least the subconscious of the artistic avant-garde—but not of the pedagogues.

It was not long before the seemingly spontaneous images of children that appeared so devoid of conventional artistic rules were woven into the ideology of modernism. Artists were adamant in their beliefs about the creativity and originality of child art. In an article he contributed to the *Blaue Reiter* almanac (probably the first journal to publish children’s art for artistic reasons (Miesel, 1970, p. 44), Macke praised the art of children and aborigines “who have their own form, strong as the form of thunder.” And in a letter to his fellow artist Macke, Marc proclaimed,

> We must be brave and turn our backs on almost everything that until now good Europeans like ourselves have thought precious and indispensable. Our ideas and ideals must be clad in hairshirts, they must be fed on locusts and wild honey, not on history, if we are ever to escape the exhaustion of our European bad taste. (Wiedmann, 1979, p. 223)

Kandinsky wrote of the cosmic and spiritual forces that could be sensed and expressed when free of convention. And children who had not had the time to be enslaved by convention were, along with primitive peoples, the possessors of clear channels to the primal forces of creativity. In Kandinsky’s own words:

> We shall appreciate that the inner sound is intensified when it is separated from conventional practical meanings. That is why children’s drawings have such a powerful effect upon independent-thinking, unprejudiced observers. Children are not worried about conventional and practical meanings, since they look at the world with unspoiled eyes and are able to experience things as they are, effortlessly. . . . Thus, without exception, every child’s drawing reveals the inner sound of objects.

Kandinsky goes on to decry adult efforts to instruct children in their artistic endeavors and concludes with, “Now the gifted child not only ignores externals but has the power to express the internal so directly that it is revealed with exceptional force (as they say, ‘so that it speaks!’).” (Miesel, 1970, p. 59).

In effect, if this unconventional, untrammeled, unfiltered creative expression, which children possessed, was regained by artists, it would be, they reasoned, the means by which they
could capture the essence of objects rather than their external appearances. The simplicity, directness, and apparent abstractness of children’s images reinforced the idea that children saw and expressed reality with a universal wholeness that any modern artist would hope to emulate.

In the postmodern era it is somewhat surprising that the notion that children’s art is uninfluenced by culture persists both in art education and, interestingly, in art history. Jonathan Fineberg (1997) has written an entire book, *The Innocent Eye: Children’s Art and the Modernist Artist*, chronicling the influence of child art on artists. Fineberg provides a chronicle of the beliefs that the artist possesses a childlike spirit, that the child is closer to nature than is the adult, and that the child is an unknowing seer (1997, pp. 2–3). These are his beliefs, too. He writes:

> It is, by now, commonplace to recognize the freshness of vision that children possess and how often it “innocently” reveals profound insights. Moreover, we admire child art for its expressive directness and its ability to communicate an emotion to a wide range of viewers. But aren’t these characterizing traits of child art also qualities for which we praise the great paintings in museums? (Fineberg, 1997, p. 21)

Fineberg never questions the modernist assumption that children’s art is creative or that it originates entirely with the child. Of course his interest is the influence of child art on modern artists, not child art per se.

It is difficult to deny that artists saw in the images of children the expressive qualities that they had already begun to achieve in their own work. Nevertheless, it is misguided to believe that in appropriating the images of children, artists freed themselves from cultural influences. Hofmann, for example, writes, “In the case of Klee and Penck, of Miró and Dubuffet... the ‘natural’ is the result of a learned, artistic skill... Has someone used naïveté here in order to disguise himself? This potential ambivalence is overlooked by most supporters of modern “primitivism” (Hofmann, 1977, p. 13). In short, the adoption of images from child art may have resulted from artists’ desire, in the spirit of Rousseau, to free themselves from societal norms and academic rules, but in so doing they merely adopted another set of “rules” or conventional schemata found in the images of children.

It is also notable that in his writing about the discovery of child art Fineberg makes virtually no mention of the art educators and pedagogues who have studied children’s art whose views are contrary to his own, and whose views lead to very different conclusions about the character of childhood innocence and creativity. It’s time to look at the second discovery of the “art” of children.

**PEDAGOGUES AND POETS DISCOVER CHILD ART**

Pedagogues discovered child art on walls. In Milan in the winter of 1883/1884, Corrado Ricci, the Italian poet and philosopher, took refuge under a portico to escape a sudden shower. While waiting for the rain to subside he observed the drawings that children had scrawled spontaneously on the walls. The drawings by older children which were high on the wall he thought crude; those lowest, and presumably by the youngest, were, Ricci (1887) wrote, “least technical and logical; they were nevertheless, characterized by a greater decency.” The experience was sufficiently moving that they “reconciled me to the art of the little ones and suggested to me the present study” (translated by Maitland, 1894) which became *L’arte dei Bambini* published in 1887 which was the first entire book devoted to child art. Interestingly, it came a full generation after Topffer’s two chapters on the art of the child and Courbet’s *The
It is just as interesting that the setting in which Ricci discovered the art of little children was a social one in which they could borrow graphic schemata from one another.

Ricci was not alone in his discovery of child art. At nearly the same time the Austrian art student, Franz Cizek, observed children drawing on a wall opposite his room in Vienna (Viola, 1936). Fascinated by children’s strong desire to draw, Cizek provided children with art materials. On his return to his native Bohemia, Cizek was surprised to discover that children there made drawings that were virtually the same as those made by the children he had encouraged in Vienna. He concluded that children’s drawings developed according to natural laws, showed the drawings to his expressionist artist friends (one of the few documented points of contact between modern artists and a pedagogue), and eventually, after several tries, received permission to establish a juvenile art class for children where the educational philosophy was “let the child create.” For his pioneering efforts he became known as the “father of child art.”

Of course there were many other fathers and mothers of child art in the United States and in Europe. In 1893, the American, Earl Barnes (1893), unaware of the work of Ricci, published his own study of children’s drawings, and when he learned of Ricci’s book, he had a portion of it translated and published in the United States (Maitland, 1894), so that differences between his research and that of Ricci could be noted, and so that he would escape the charge of plagiarism that he feared someone might level at him. But Barnes should not have been concerned with plagiarism; he and a sizable number of his colleagues, frequently unbeknownst to one another, were affected by the spirit of their time as they all enthusiastically discovered child art. In the space of the dozen years before the turn of the century, psychologists, philosophers, educators, and art educators had published an enormous number of important studies on child art. In 1904 in Britain, Partridge published what was the first visual account of developmental stages in the art of the child. In Munich in 1905, Kerschensteiner, who had just been appointed as our equivalent of art supervisor for the city, collected many thousands of children’s drawings and data on the children and published them in one of the most impressive books on child art that has ever been written. In France in 1913, Luquet published a marvelous book on the story drawings of his daughter; and in 1927, another, relating to the art of children in general (translated in English, Costall, 2001). Cizek’s disciple Viola gave a detailed account of a year of Cizek’s teaching—a topic to which I shall return shortly. Lowenfeld, who was acquainted with Cizek’s juvenile art classes in Vienna considered Cizek an intuitive teacher whose pedagogy had no theoretical underpinning. Lowenfeld filled the theoretical void by writing of the haptic and visual types of creation in his The Nature of Creative Activity (1939), and then his Creative and Mental Growth (1947). With Spontaneous and Deliberate Ways of Learning (1962), Burkhart and a host of researchers at Penn State and around the world followed Lowenfeld’s lead in providing a framework of empirical data to support the ideology that children’s art was creative.

Although the artists and their informants and the pedagogues and psychologists took their separate courses through the world of child art, they arrived at a nearly identical set of beliefs about that world. The literature reveals the nearly universal collective unquestioned set of assumptions: (a) The child is a natural artist who needs only encouragement, not formal instruction. Indeed adult influence will disrupt the natural flowering of artistic creative expression. (b) Children’s art comes from “deep down inside” (Cole, 1966)—from individual and innate sources. (c) Art provides a way for children to express feelings about themselves and their worlds. Children have no need to depict the exterior appearance of things. (d) Form and abstraction are intrinsic to child art, and the artist and the child see the world as light, color, and mass. (e) The art of children and of tribal peoples are a model of primal and unfettered creativity for modern artists to emulate. (f) All former artistic conventions (at least of the Western variety) were to be avoided. Every artist and every child had the obligation to invent an individual style of art, and through the harnessing of individual creative energies art could then remain in a perpetual state of renewal, modernism could last forever, and there would
be a perennial avant-garde. (g) In this ideal modernist state, artistic growth came not through formal instruction but through nature and the organic unfolding of intrinsic creative energy. Indeed, Cizek spoke wistfully of an island in the sea where the world’s children could be sent to unfold naturally, free from the influence of adult visual culture. It is amazing to me that many art educators still believe these assumptions to be true and continue to construct their pedagogical practices in light of them. I wish to argue that it is art educators, not children, who created what we call child art.

**SCHOOL ART AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION: THE MOST CULTURALLY CONTROLLED IMAGERY**

Perhaps the best place to begin is with Arthur Efland’s “The School Art Style: A Functional Analysis” (1977). Efland claims, as I do, that art pedagogues created child art—a form of art that “doesn’t exist anywhere else except in schools, and it exists in schools around the world” (p. 38). Efland characterizes its principal products, media, and topics, and writes of two primary functions of school art. One is that “the school art style is to provide behaviors and products that have the look of humanistic learning”—the appearance of creativity. The second function is that because school art is fun and easy, it has a morale-boosting function—It leads children to enjoy school (p. 41).

I wish to extend Efland’s argument by showing how teachers create child art (the term that I wish to substitute for Efland’s “school art”). For my illustration, I’ll go to the pedagogy of “the father of child art.” By the 1920s, Franz Cizek’s juvenile art classes in Vienna (Figure 14.4) had become the Mecca to which art teachers from Europe, Britain, and America traveled to learn from the Father of Child Art how to stimulate and motivate children’s creative expression. In 1942, Cizek’s disciple, Wilhelm Viola, wrote of a year of Cizek’s teaching. A close examination of the transcript of one of Cizek’s lessons is revealing.

On the 30th of November, 30, 1935, Cizek asks his young students:

What nice things would you like to do to-day? Think about it and tell me! Child: I shall make a doll’s pram. I shall make a “Krampus”¹ Child: I should like to make a window where Santa Claus has put something. Cizek: We shall take a block [a sheet of paper] with the long side at the bottom. Or would you prefer it the other way round. Children: No! Cizek: Who wants it in this way? (shows the block with the long side at the bottom. All the children want it this way.) Cizek: We shall draw a line down the center. This is a wall. At one side of the wall Santa Claus will stand, and on the other side—who will stand there? The “Krampus.” At the side of the paper near the window² we have Santa Claus, and at the side of the paper near the door we have the “Krampus.” How does Santa Claus look? Child: He wears a mitre. Child: And a long coat. Cizek: Yes, a long coat. But you should begin with the head. How does his head look? Child: It’s like a man’s head. Cizek: What kind of head has he? Child: A very funny head. Cizek: He has a long beard and beautiful white hair. Child: No I don’t believe it. Cizek: What has he on his head? Child: A mitre. Cizek: Do you know hat a mitre looks like? But you can draw it better than describe it. Who can describe the mitre? Child: I. Child: I. Child: I. Child: Like a bishop. Child: There is an arch and it closes down and at the top is a cross, and that is all. Cizek: I shan’t bother you to describe it—draw it. Begin with the head, then the mitre, and then the rest. Start! But don’t make the head too small!

¹“Krampus” and Santa Claus come to the children on the evening of December 5th. “Krampus” is the devil and Santa Claus is the good bishop. It is a kind of forerunner of Christmas and a great event in children’s lives in Roman Catholic countries. Santa Claus brings fruits and sweets to the good children, and “Krampus” is supposed to thrash the naughty ones.

²Undoubtedly some of the very young children would not know left and right.
Cizek (later): You all must begin with the mitre near the top of the paper—as Trude did. Not in the middle! Otherwise it would be a wee Santa Claus. Cizek (to one child): You have done the head and mitre, but don’t forget his eyes and eyebrows. (Viola, 1942, pp. 112–113)

Through his careful use of language, Cizek has instructed the children to paint a particular subject, to orient their paper horizontally, to divide the page in half, to paint large, to use specific colors. Before the session is over, Viola has recorded Cizek saying “You should draw each hair separately.” “You must make your decorations thicker. “Don’t make a few quick strokes, but cover your paper carefully.” “You can’t paint a single line. You can only paint what is between two lines. You must have double lines.” “When I say, Now do the eyes, you should not make blots, but eyes with lids, pupils, and all the parts of the eyes” (Viola, 1942, pp. 114–115).

What I wish to claim is that the teachers of child art, the Cizeks, the Lowenfelds, the Frank Wachowiaks, the Blanche Jeffersons, the Natalie Robinson Coles, and all the other gifted art teachers—the teachers whose students created such luscious examples of child art, themselves, through their language, their motivations, and their instructions, their guiding techniques and processes—created child art! Ironically, the art of children, which we art educators have assumed to be the most spontaneous, the freest, the most creative, the least influenced, is actually the foremost example of cultural influence. This influence was noted as early as 1925, when, after his visit to Professor Cizek’s classes in Vienna, Thomas Munro (1956) concluded:

In short, it was obvious that in spite of the attempt at preserving spontaneity, several different types of influence had affected the work of both groups (the younger and older children). The teacher himself, first of all, was doing more than he realized; in no other way could the marked likeness between the pictures, which stamped them at once as Cizek products, be explained. (pp. 237–241)
In addition to Cizek’s directions to his students, Munro lists children copying from one another, and especially the children’s seeing, in the works displayed in the school, the kinds of works that they themselves should create. Munro (1956) concludes his critique of Cizek’s teaching with two astonishing statements:

The idea of keeping a child’s imagination in a state of absolute purity and freedom is from the start impossible. The very attempt at such an end is evidence of the false psychology which has affected much writing on art education: of the old belief that some ‘self’ within the child is bursting for expression and release, and that all outside forces tend to repress and enslave it. (p. 239)

Munro concludes his critique with:

The old academic methods tends to be restrictive; not, as the free expressionists suppose, because it imparts traditions, but because it imparts too few traditions. . . . The Cizek plan, far from achieving its end of freedom, robs and restricts the student when it shuts out all but a few influences, and these few none of the best. (pp. 240–241)

_The Cult of Childhood_ (George Boas, 1990) has had a very long run. In some parts of the world—I could cite Japan where Lowenfeld in the 1980s and 1990s was still the most quoted art educator—beliefs about the natural art of the child show few signs of diminishing. It is difficult to believe that “cultural primitivism”—the nearly 150-year-old belief that earlier states are better and purer because they are more innocent—continues to shape art educational practices.

If we art educational researchers were interested in the complete spectrum of cultural influences on children’s images, we would direct our studies to the products of art classrooms present and past. We could become historians of child art conducting analyses of the styles of art produced by the students of the gifted practitioners of child art. Our studies of children’s artworks would reveal the remarkable differences in the visual culture of, say, Cizek’s and Natalie Robinson Cole’s classrooms. Our studies could be directed to the striking differences in the school art within China, Taiwan, and Japan and the even greater differences when “child art” of the East is compared to products from Western art classrooms. Yes, our studies would surely show that art teachers and their pedagogical practices have created distinct styles of child art.

**MODERNIST NOTIONS OF CREATIVITY: THE MISGUIDED AVOIDANCE OF CONVENTION**

Modernist ideologists, whether the artists or the pedagogues such as Cizek, prized child art because of its apparent creativity and freedom from conventional imagery. They viewed the spontaneous and unrestrained images as evidence that the child had not yet succumbed to the confining affects of artistic rules. Indeed, it was their goal to keep the child artist and the adult that the child would become forever free from such restrictions. They believed that, through the positive outcomes of art education, adults—perhaps even entire societies—might be transformed from a state of unimaginative slavery to rules to a condition of never-ending creative well-being. The goal was admirable, but the understanding of creativity and the means through which it is achieved was hopelessly flawed. Of course “insidious” society and its conventions always prevailed. As children grew older, their painting and drawings appeared to become less spontaneous, more deliberate, and they were filled with images that seemed to have been copied from a great variety of conventional sources.
The child art ideologues had missed one important point—that there is a crucial distinction between (a) avoiding artistic rules altogether; and on the other hand, (b) acquiring artistic rules, conventions, and skills and then playing with those rules and images—stretching them and inventively recombining them to in one way or another to create something new. The story of 20th-century art is filled with examples of artists such as Duchamp, Picasso, and Calder, who rejected conventional rules and replaced them with new images, new functions, and new definitions that actually redirected the history of art into new channels. But is it possible to extend, combine, and go beyond rules and conventions—if they haven’t been acquired? It is this aspect of artistic creativity that the proponents of child art and creative expression had not understood—perhaps have still not understood.

There is a simple way to think about the child and artistic creativity. It has to do with states that I refer to as preconventionality, conventionality, and postconventionality. The young child, at the very beginning of his or her mark-making, exploratory modeling, and assembling/constructing phase, exists in a state where he or she knows very little of artistic conventions. Almost immediately, however, the child begins to notice and use the configurations, marking patterns, and various kinds of art-making activities of other children and adults. For example, some Egyptian children make tadpole figures with square heads—a convention that they learn from other children. What I have termed the preconventional stage is actually a very short-lived period characterized by the acquisition of conventional images that pervade child subcultures within larger cultures. Most of the images and configurations used by children are not invented by them; they are borrowed from other children. In other words, the preconventional is actually characterized by considerable borrowing. And as I have already indicated, this preconventional period was capitalized on by child art pedagogues such as Cizek who unknowingly encouraged children to emulate the art of other children.

I think of the conventional phase as the time when, in one way or another, young people begin to acquire the rudiments of such things as perspective, conventional ways to draw human figures, facial features, landscapes, and the like—the sorts of things acquired from how-to-draw books and from some art teachers. It is fascinating to note that Gombrich (1998), in his essay of Violett-le-Duc’s *Histoire d’un dessinateur* (1879), provides an insightful account of how young people acquire rules. The young apprentices about which I have already written provide the paradigm example of the conventional phase. In the West very few art programs currently exist, either in schools or in special art classes, that provide comprehensive instruction in the rules and conventions of traditional artistic production—a fact for which we should, perhaps, be grateful. In Taiwan, for example, where entrance to some schools requires young applicants to demonstrate mastery of conventional artistic skills, I have examined children’s portfolios filled with ordinary carefully rendered Western-style still-life drawings and paintings produced in special outside-school art classes. Nevertheless, where instruction does not exist formally, some young people often informally acquire conventions of drawing. Most notably, the conventional phase is a time when children emulate images from the popular media (Wilson & Wilson, 1977). My studies show that most Japanese children learn to draw in the manga style—and many master the style to a remarkably high degree (Figure 14.5) (Wilson, 1997b, 2000a, 2002).

The postconventional phase, in my view, is reached by only a few individuals who have sufficiently mastered conventional art styles and ideologies to the point that they have become dissatisfied by their limitations. The dissatisfaction leads to such things as rejection, significant extension, reapplication of images of one mode of art to another mode of art, or on rare occasions, to the creation of an entirely new form of art. The extensions, reapplications, new combinations, and especially the new forms, I think, must result in the creation of something of cultural and historical significance to qualify as postconventional. In short, I have set the bar high—so high that no child, and few if any youth, is capable of reaching it. After all, only a few adults do.
When Japanese Children were asked to draw stories, over half the kindergarten children drew characters derived from manga; two thirds of the characters drawn by sixth-grade children were based on manga. The large-eyed female figures at the upper left were made by kindergarten children; those in the middle were drawn by second- and fourth-grade children; and those at the lower part of the page were drawn by sixth-grade children.

The child art pedagogues did not distinguish between child “art” that was preconventional and the postconventional and creative work of rule-breaking artists (who sometimes appropriated children’s images). Art teachers mistakenly believed that they could hold children in a permanent preconventional state and that their young charges, thus free of convention, could be forever creative. This feat was both practically and logically impossible.

Of course what I have not taken into account is idiosyncratic longings, gifts, quirks, handicaps, whatever, that lead nearly every individual to produce artlike things that are, to a lesser—a very lesser—or a greater degree, unique. This uniqueness may occur at the preconventional
and the conventional phases as well as at the postconventional phase. Indeed, in my view, art educators should encourage idiosyncratic behavior, the minor breaking of artistic rules and conventions, inventive and imaginative combining of images, and a stretching from the known to the unknown at any phase of a young person’s development. This is precisely what Wilson, Hurwitz, and Wilson (1987) tried to encourage in *Teaching Drawing from Art*. It is probably time for art educators to rethink the meaning of the term *creativity*, especially when creativity is defined as working without constraints. It is through conventional constraints first acquired, then subsequently rejected and subverted that creativity arises.

**POSTMODERNISM ENTERS ART EDUCATION: QUESTIONING THE MODERNIST NARRATIVE**

Through much of the 20th century, art educators felt the pangs of defeat whenever they saw evidence that children’s drawing and painting had become corrupted by adult imagery—often imagery of the “worst” sort, stolen from popular visual culture. In the 21st century, as we now know, children are always “corrupted” by cultural conventions. This, however, was not a popular position to take in the 1970s. In 1977, Wilson and Wilson published “An Iconoclastic View of the Imagery Sources of Young People.” In it we claimed that virtually every image drawn by teenagers could be traced to sources such as popular visual culture, how-to-draw books, and by the schemata used by other young people. The article was greeted by some art educators as an affirmation of how they themselves had learned to draw; and by others, as an outrageous attack on the basic principles of modern art education. Rudolph Arnheim (1978) was the most eloquent critic. He wrote, “Iconoclasm, I thought was the smashing of traditional icons. Instead what Brent and Marjorie Wilson attempted to do with their ‘Iconoclastic View’ was the opposite, namely the exhumation of the mummies of nineteenth century art drill.” Of course we had not made any claims about pedagogy—just that young people usually borrowed their images rather than invent them. Arnheim’s and others’ criticism notwithstanding, we knew that our eyes were not deceiving us; we could see that children’s imagery was highly influenced by culture. Consequently we set out to take the very evidence that was used to support the claim that children’s images unfolded naturally and show that those same drawings contained powerful evidence of cultural influence.

**The Disappearing Two-Eyed Profile**

In his *L’arte Dei Bambini*, Ricci (1887) noted that 70% of the profiles drawn by Italian children showed the two eyes of the full face. Sully (1896) presented scores of children’s drawings, of which 54% are two-eyed profiles. Partridge, in 1902, wrote that the mixed profile, which included the two-eyed profile, was one of the developmental characteristics of children’s drawings—that they began by showing figures from a frontal view, then drew profiles with two eyes, and finally profiles with only one eye showing. In the hundreds of figure drawings collected by Kerschensteiner (1905) in Munich prior to 1905, approximately 30% were two-eyed profiles, and Levinstein (1905) in Germany also reported that 34% of children’s figure drawings were two-eyed profiles. In her book on the Draw-a-Man test, Goodenough (1926) shows two-eyed-profiles, but does not analyze them. About 5% of Goodenough’s sample from American children’s drawings made between the years 1917 and 1923 are two-eyed profiles (Figure 14.6). In Lowenfeld’s books, *The Nature of Creative Activity* (1939) and *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947, 1957), the partially sighted boy, D. H. who searches for his lost pencil, is a two-eyed profile. However, in the figure drawings collected for the 1960s standardization of the Draw-a-Man test (Harris, 1963) there are no two-eyed profiles. This once common
feature of children’s drawings declined and disappeared in Europe and America. Why? Wilson and Wilson (1981) speculate that perhaps more than 200 years ago, somewhere in Europe, a young child drawing on a wall looked higher up and seeing the profile of face drawn by an older child thought to himself or herself, I should draw like that. After completing a profile, the child might have puzzled, thought to herself, don’t people have two eyes (explained by Luquet, 1927, as intellectual realism)? A second eye was added, and the two-eyed profile was born. Other children in the town copied it on other walls; one child from the village visited another town, drew it on another wall, and soon other children were carrying the schema from town to town; and in time the image spread throughout Europe, to Britain, and with schemata carrying children it emigrated to America.

But why was the two-eyed-profile so common, and why did it disappear? When it was present in high numbers, children (and adults who drew much like children) were nearly the sole source of imagery (usually found on walls) from which children could acquire their graphic schemata. Around the beginning of the 20th century with the increased availability of paper for drawing and the invention of rapid printing, children were presented with a myriad of graphic sources in comics and illustrated books from which to borrow schemata. When the two-eyed profile was only one schema among many, its potency was first diminished and then lost entirely—except that Picasso began painting the two-eyed profile in 1927. Actually, Picasso may have drawn it as a child, and if not, he probably saw it in the drawings of Spanish and French children.

It is also worth noting that the two-eyed profile is still being drawn by some children. In the early 1980s in Egyptian villages where there were virtually no magazine or book illustrations, I found a sizable number of children who drew the two-eyed profile (Wilson & Wilson, 1984). Egyptian children draw a profile face with their numeral 4—which looks like a 3 drawn in reverse. The presence of the profile was an invitation for some children, who as Luquet has theorized sometimes draw what they know, not what they see (Luquet, 1927), to draw the

FIG. 14.6. Three two-eyed profile figures, reproduced in J. Sully (1896), Studies of childhood (p. 341). London: Longmans, Green, and Co. Fifty-four percent of the human figures reproduced in Sully’s chapter on “The Young Draftsman” are two-eyed profiles. The figure on the left has a rake hand, the same schema used by Onfim in the 13th century, and seldom used by American children today.
two-eyed profile—and its presence was an invitation for many other Egyptian village children to draw what they had seen other children draw.

An Overview of Studies of Cultural Influences on Children’s Drawings

Since the 1970s, researchers have been studying manifestations of cultural influence in the drawings of children and youth. I wish to note some of the major contributions to this growing body of literature—a literature that reveals the tension between modernist and postmodernist views of the images of children, the sources of those images, and how students should be educated in art.

The anthropologist Alexander Alland, Jr. in his book *Playing with Form: Children Draw in Six Cultures* (1983), filmed children, ages 2 to 8 in Japan, Bali, Taiwan, Ponape, France, and the United States in order to analyze their step-by-step drawing process. He used his insights to challenge modernist beliefs about the universality of developmental stages and to argue that the differences he observed reflect rules that are specific to cultures. His attention to rules rather than to style and his inattention to the drawings of older children resulted in his ignoring many of the most obvious manifestations of visual cultural differences.

The National Society for Education in Art and Design 1989 Conference held at the British Museum in London resulted in the publication of *Drawing Research and Development* (Thistlewood, 1992). The book reveals the growing separation between those who believe that children’s imagery is from internal and personal sources and those who explain development in terms of the acquisition of cultural schemata. John Matthews (1992) and Nancy Smith (1992) attended to the internal sources, while Elsbeth Court (1992) analyzed universal features and social influences in the drawings of rural Kenyan children. Taha Elatta (1992) documented the distinct patterns of design used by children and youth in different parts of the Sudan. Wilson and Ligtvoet (1992) had Dutch, American, and Italian children (in 1986) complete art assignments originally given to Dutch children in 1937 by a follower of Cizek. Focusing on schemata children used for drawing trees, we found that there were significant cultural differences among the groups of contemporary children and especially between the contemporary children and the 1937 Dutch children. One of our most important conclusions was that, ironically, the Dutch follower of Cizek had managed to entice children to produce drawings that were far more elaborate, detailed, and exquisite than those of today’s children who were used to working with less teacher supervision and considerably less discipline. After completing the study, I was reminded of a statement attributed to Lowenfeld as he registered his disappointment at the rather dismal results achieved by some of the student teachers in Penn State’s Saturday morning art classes: “It may be child art, but it isn’t good child art!” Cizek, Lowenfeld, and their followers everywhere know how to create the visual cultural conditions that encourage—or direct—children to produce gorgeous things.

This apparent decline in the quality of child art has attracted a variety of speculations regarding the underlying causes. For example, in *Child Development in Art* an anthology published by the National Art Education Association (Kindler, 1997), Rudolf Arnheim praises the “overall quality, variety, and originality of works chosen by teachers and a Japanese jury” for an international exhibition of children’s art. He then speculates that perhaps it is the mass media such as television that detract children’s attention from art making. He goes on to claim that “We see children losing their spontaneous creativity when they copy comic strips and similar commercial imagery, and there have been art educators who neglected their mission by asking their pupils to faithfully imitate inferior models” (Arnheim, 1997, pp. 14–15). Arnheim has not examined teaching practices. Nevertheless, the decline in “spontaneous creativity,” he notes, probably results because many American art teachers do not acquire the skills and techniques employed by Cizek, Lowenfeld, and their followers to make child art appear spontaneous and expressive. In the time after modernism, should they? In *Child Development in Art*, Duncum
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(1997) examines the sex, power, and violence, and the many other subjects and themes of children’s unsolicited drawings. Together they present a striking contrast to the topics typically assigned by teachers. In my own chapter in the same book (Wilson, 1997a), I claim that child art is an open concept, subject to debate, redefinition, and multiple interpretations. In a tremendously important chapter mapping artistic development, Kindler and Darras (1997) provide a theory that specifies the complex sets of factors, cultural and natural, and their relationships needed to account for the many different strands of artistic development.

Two recent anthologies, The Cultural Context: Comparative Studies of Art Education and Children’s Drawings (Lindström, 2000) and The Arts in Children’s Lives: Context, Culture, and Curriculum (Bresler & Thompson, 2002), deal specifically with the relationships among children, the arts, and culture. Just at its title applies, The Arts in Children’s Lives, sensitively examines the complex intertextual relationships among the arts, both high and popular; development; cultural contexts; and curriculum. In both anthologies, the selection of papers and their content show a lessening of the tension between modernist/naturalist accounts of artistic development and postmodernist/cultural accounts of artistic achievement. Cultural accounts of children’s lives in and out of school are beginning to feel natural.

Studies of Cultural Influence That Might Be Conducted

Every textbook in art education, every art education magazine, and every exhibition and catalog of exhibition of children’s art contain the raw material for studies of cultural influences on the art of children. They call for the question: Why do these images look as they do? How does the visual culture of school-based art education programs interact with students’ and teachers’ interests in popular visual culture and other aspects of visual culture to shape the images made in school?

For example, I open a catalog of children’s art: Shen Zhen Shi Er Hui Hua Zuo Pin Xuan Ji printed in China (Zhang, 1997). On pages 14 and 15, six works are reproduced. The first image on page 14 shows a woodcut or linoleum cut by a 13-year-old whose teacher and her print, it appears, were influenced by Russian art educational media and practices in a time when Russian and Chinese relations were closer than they are today. The image is reminiscent of European 20th-century woodcuts, and, especially, it has the character of the prints of the Swiss-French artist Felix Vallotton (1865–1925), whose woodcuts were influential in reviving interest in the medium. Many school images have a similar complex visual cultural lineage. Below the print on the left is a charming ink and brush painting of a cat and basket of flowers by a 7-year-old (Figure 14.7A and 14.7B). It is painted in a style similar, very similar, to that of Yani whom I mentioned earlier. And, of course, Yani’s work is related to that of Xi Bi-shi (1863–1957), who is sometimes called the Chinese Picasso; and that of Shi Lu (1919–1982), whose paintings of cats could have been the model for the child’s painting. The 86-page catalog has a dozen other works that show the influence of Yani or of Xi Bi-shi or of Shi Lu. My hunch is that it is the child prodigy Yani, more than artists Xi Bi-shi and Shi Lu, who has inspired innumerable Chinese children and their teachers to emulate her images and bask in the glow of her fame. Next to the Yani-like painting is another ink and brush painting of lotus blossoms and a bird by a 9-year-old. It is rendered in a precise and elegant linear style of brush painting. Page 15, at the top and at the bottom, shows two typical child art images done in what appears to be combinations of marker and water-based paint. One painting, by a 10-year-old, is of a family festival with children dancing while parents look on. The second work, at the bottom, shows 14 children around a building. The animals fill the building—We know this because we have a characteristic child art x-ray view of its contents. The eye-shaped clouds, however, each have spiral-formed interiors—typical Chinese cloud designs. The middle work on page 15 is by a 9-year-old. It shows an aspiring young master of ceremonies holding a microphone as he entertains animals—the most prominent of which is a King Kong-like guerilla looking over
the boy’s right shoulder. The boy and the animals are done in the “cute” style of comics and cartoons. These six works reveal the school art educational world of Chinese children and their teachers. It is a world where myriad bits of visual culture swirl around the globe and around China before they settle in fascinating ways in children’s school art. For every image produced in school, we need to ask: What are the sources of the images that have settled within the students’ works? What did the teacher ask the students to do, and why? What conditions did the teacher impose? How many degrees of freedom were the children allowed? What do the images mean to the teacher, to the children who produced them, and to the children’s parents? Do these images matter, and if so, then why?
Colleagues in the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, and Finland are way ahead of art educators in the United States in analyzing and charting the influences that underlie the visual cultural artifacts children produce under the direction of teachers. Pirkko Pohjakallio (1998) has asked: “What can we learn from children’s pictures?” She has collected Finish school art products and uses them to answer questions about the role of art education in shaping things such as national identity and gender roles. *Kind und Kunst: Zur Geschichte des Zeichen—und Kunstunterrichts* (1977) (Child and Art: On the History of Drawing and Art Education) produced by the Society of German Art Educators provides a marvelous critical overview of German art education and its practices. The visual images by themselves reveal the social, cultural, political, and ideological forces that have shaped German art education since the 1870s. Like their German colleagues, Dutch scholars Ben Koevoets and Herbert van Rheeden wrote *Geen dag sonder lijn: Honderd jaar tekenonderwijs in Nederland 1880–1980* (1980). Their
100-year history reveals international currents that have washed over Dutch art education. It is fascinating to note the political concerns that underlie the German view of art education that are largely absent from the Dutch history. These two books tell us about art in two European countries’ education, and they tell us something about the interests and ideologies of their authors. The visual cultural histories of art education in the United States await their writers.

CHILDREN, ART, AND VISUAL CULTURE IN THE 21st CENTURY

From our contemporary perspective, it is possible to look on the era which saw the “discovery of child art” and see it differently. Child art and beliefs about innocence and creativity are the products of modernism’s grand narrative (Lyotard, 1984). At the beginning of the 21st century, we art educators have the task of creating our own narratives, and it is not and will not be a single postmodern narrative. Rather, I think that we will critically construct and reconstruct many small narratives that account for children’s and for the art educators’ use of visual culture—and perhaps these narratives will include the creation of minor aspects of postmodern visual culture. We art educators must base our narratives on new sets of beliefs about children, art, visual culture, and education in art and visual culture. We must begin to contemplate how our practices will continue to change as we relinquish many of our cherished modernist beliefs about child art, creative expression, and about the desirability rather than about the undesirability of cultural influences.

We must ask ourselves the following questions: (a) How would art education change if we no longer believed that every child is an artist? (b) Would we teach differently if we believed that artistic conventions must necessarily be acquired before creativity is possible? (c) Would we treat our students differently if we understood that there are no developmental stages and no natural unfolding in art—if we assumed that artistic development depends on various forms of cultural influence and instruction, that artistic development is the acquisition of a variety of different cultural schemata and forms? (d) How would art education change if we were to assume that child art is a product of adult art educators? Would we art educators still wish to continue creating child art if we were to realize that it is our creation more than the children’s creations? (e) What would art education be like if we assumed that there were many forms of visual culture produced by children and youth—and that these visual cultural forms have many different functions and purposes for the child, for education, and for society? (f) What challenges would art education face if we were to assume that the benefits children derive from art-making activities flowed from the popular as well as from the high arts? These are only a few of the challenges we face as we construct art and visual cultural curricula and instructional practices for the new century.

A New Paradigm: The Visual Culture of Children and Youth

In his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), Thomas Kuhn characterized “normal science” as periods of time when a theory or a set of theories dominate. These theories provide the hypotheses that are tested. The assumptions underlying the theories are so strong and so pervasive that when empirical data emerge that would disprove the theories, the evidence is overlooked for surprisingly long periods of time. It is only when the evidence becomes so pervasive and so obvious that it cannot be ignored that new theories are constructed to account for the evidence. Modern art educators, like scientists, overlooked most of the evidence that they themselves created “natural” child art. Observations such as those made by Thomas Munro: that Cizek controlled the “art” created by his students and that children in his classes were
merely copying one another, were ignored for most of the 20th century, because we wanted to believe that children were naturally creative artists. In art education, we have come to a time where we must construct a new paradigm that replaces our assumptions about child art and creative expression. I wish to offer a series of propositions that might be useful in constructing the next theories—not a grand narrative, but lots of little stories—pertaining to the visual cultural education of children and youth.

**Child Art Is a Construct: The Visual Culture of Children and Youth Is Also a Construct**

There is nothing natural about the artlike activities of children. Art is one aspect of the vast global visual phenomenon constructed within various human cultures. It is important to note that art teachers, pedagogues, theoreticians, psychologists, art historian; oh, and children have collaboratively constructed child art—which has become a minor aspect of visual culture. Readers will detect that here I am echoing, Barthes’s (1977) claim that it is folly to believe that a text—an artwork or a visual cultural artifact—is authored by a single individual. Barthes’s “death of the author” applies to the visual culture produced by young people every bit as much (perhaps more) as it pertains to the images produced by adults. Every artifact of visual culture is in actuality a tapestry of interwoven texts.

Every visual artifact produced by a young person is a product pervaded by culture. The very possibility that children might engage in artlike behavior is a cultural construct, and children’s early mark-making, modeling, and constructing activities are frequently initiated by adults and then viewed by and classified by them through cultural lenses. Every example of child art—and even the paradigm collections of the art of the child become candidates for reinterpretation as visual culture shaped primarily by adults. As such, when interpreted as cultural products, these collections of child art will probably reveal more about, say, adult pedagogical intentions than about children and their motives and desires (Wilson, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c).

**The Term Child Art Is Ideological**

Every visual artifact produced by a young person may and should be considered from ideological perspectives. That is to say from political perspectives, colonial and postcolonial perspectives, from philosophical perspectives, from modern and postmodern perspectives. The most revealing, and perhaps the most important ideologies surrounding the visual products of young people are also those that are most hidden. It is much easier for me to recognize the ideologies that motivate others than it is to recognize my own. I assume that this is frequently the case for others as well. One of the most important tasks for those of us who teach art and who inquire into the visual cultural products of young people is to uncover hidden ideological positions held by ourselves and other pedagogues who have initiated students’ art-making activities and to recognize our own biases.

This point is so important that I think an illustration is in order. Adults have used child art for blatant propaganda purposes—and they have gotten away with it because children are assumed to be innocent and unbiased observers or victims of the events that surround them. Japanese children’s drawings were sent to the United States just prior to World War II to extol Japan’s peaceful intentions. Collections of children’s drawings from Spain showing the bombing of towns were circulated in Britain and in the United States during the Spanish Civil War to promote the Spanish Republican cause. German art textbooks contain children’s images that denigrate the Allied forces. In my “Innocent Graphic Accounts or Adult Propaganda: A Critical History of Children’s War Art” (Wilson, 1997c), I provide an overview of a variety of additional cases where adults either wittingly or unwittingly use children’s art to promote adult causes.
Every exhibition of children and youth art must be viewed as an ideological statement—if nothing more than to promote the cause of art education in the schools. Frequently, however, the intentions are less benign. The “Kids Guernica” project initiated in the 1900s, motivated by adults’ desires for world peace, as worthy as its goal may be, is just another example of how adults shape the images of children to promote adult purposes.

The Emergence of Visual Culture: Multiple Forms of Child and Youth Culture

The discipline of visual culture reflects a growing tendency to reject conventional classifications of art and replace them with critical studies of image making within and among different groups and strata of human cultures. Young peoples’ self-initiated images and performances either relate to or reflect advertisements, television, photography, and video and cinema in their various guises, various forms of digital imagery, the internet, comic strips, material culture, crafts, folk images, world art, the images of amateur and professional artists, new and emerging art forms such as performance and installation, and intermedia forms of art. Moreover each of these aspects of visual culture has the potential to become the content of art programs for children and youth. The various established and emerging forms of visual culture and the ways in which children and educators use them should also become the content of research in art education. In our postmodern time, distinctions among high art, low art, popular art, and mass culture have disintegrated, and the political and ideological are as important in the visual culture of young people as aesthetic and expressive qualities once were in child art.

Visual culture presents challenges to the way in which we art educators have traditionally thought about our field. It also presents opportunities to reconceive and broaden our thinking about the images that children and youth make and use.

Child art has become a problematic term—Perhaps it was from the beginning. I have concluded, ironically, that the term should probably be reserved for those images children produce under the direct control of adults who engage in the kinds of preliminary motivating activities employed by Cizek, Lowenfeld, and other proponents of “creative expression.” (Cizek’s lesson presented earlier in this chapter is a paradigm example.)

Kindler and Darras have theorized about the vast terrain of children’s imagery development and to its “pluri-media” character (1997). As we begin to broaden our study of the image-making capacities of young people, the discipline of visual culture reminds us that the “map” will show how children and youth emerge as photographers, makers of films and video art, the producers of a multitude of forms of digital imagery, how they become quasi-performance artists, installation artists, comic book artists (Wilson, 2000b).

To state the obvious conclusion from my observations, stage-based developmental accounts based on a natural unfolding fail to stand up to scrutiny. Feldman (1980) has offered a brilliant theoretical and empirical critique of developmental stage theory in which he demonstrates that even with Piaget’s cognitively grounded levels of map drawing—levels that are far more rigorously constructed, say than Lowenfeld’s or any other stage formulation in art education—children perform in several levels simultaneously. In short, the levels do not exist; nor do stages of artistic development. Moreover, young peoples’ development in the realm of visual culture is nonlinear, nonhierarchical, multidimensional, and multipurposeful (Kindler & Darras, 1997). Young people produce visual artifacts with pencils, markers, pens, brushes, and with cameras, computers, found objects, and their bodies; and in the future, they will produce visual culture in ways that we cannot now imagine. The mastery of skills and concepts relating to new media, new art forms, digital imaging, and other emerging forms of visual culture have hardly been addressed in art education. This brings me to my next point.
The Visual Cultural Artifacts of Children and Youth Must Always Be Viewed in Relationship to Adult Visual Culture

Any visual artifact produced by a young person has cultural antecedents. These forms that exist prior to their emulation by young people provide the models and the technologies. These visual cultural forms are also surrounded by theories that define their characteristics, functions, and values. As new forms of visual cultural texts emerge and attract theory and criticism—and this is especially the case with the visual arts which, continually redefine themselves through subversion and rejection of previous forms, conceptions, and styles—we must be prepared to redefine our conceptions of child and youth visual culture—including our conceptions of the kinds of artlike things that young people make, might make, and might be encouraged to make in and around schools.

As art and visual cultural theorists explore issues such as gender, colonialism, and postcolonialism, politics, the environment, various forms of globalism, class, race, economics, technology, the body, and cyborgs, we art educators should probably assume that each new area of exploration provides an opportunity to understand young peoples’ visual culture in new ways.

Multiple Interpretations Based on Interests and Conflicts of Interest

In our postmodern era we no longer assume that there is a single privileged “true” interpretation of an artwork, visual cultural artifact, or other text. We have entered a time when multiple interpretations are not just desirable, they are necessary. The interests and conflicts of interest, differing experiences and viewpoints, values, and assumptions of interpreters add meaning to visual cultural texts. When it comes to the visual culture and artlike products of children and youth, we have hardly begun to consider the implications of images interpreted from different perspectives—from the vantage point of the child, the teacher, the empirical researcher, the semiotician, the postmodern philosopher (Wilson, 1997a, 1997b, 2000b).

At present, we have a growing number of theoretical constructs that may be applied to the visual cultural products of young people. Duncum’s article (2001) is especially useful. Even what has been called child art is a collection of narratives, and these narratives are continually being written by a variety of groups—psychologists, art historians, teachers, researchers, advocates, anthropologists, artists, and politicians. Preschool children, elementary school age children, teenagers, I should note, have seldom been invited to create their own narratives about the visual culture they create. Nevertheless, each group creating these narratives have varying and often conflicting interests. And as I have already noted, the authors of these narratives are often unknown to one another. Psychologists and pedagogues often do not read the research conducted by individuals in other fields, and the interpretations and narratives of young people are seldom documented.

School Art Education Must Be Viewed in Terms of Power and Control

Since the late 19th century when art pedagogues began to promote and produce the “natural” art of children, they were dismayed by children’s attraction to images from the popular visual culture and took various steps to discourage their production. To the child art pedagogues, these images were evidence of an insidious infiltrating of undesirable cultural images that would corrupt and impede the naturally flowering childhood creativity. As the pedagogues went about their task of thwarting popular visual culture, as I have already argued, they engaged in practices that quite utterly shaped children’s within-school visual output in order to conform to expectations of what child art should look like in subject matter, theme, style, and expression. This exercise of power in the control of children’s images was, of course, conducted with the best of intentions and genuine concern for the well-being of children.
We art pedagogues have no choice; although thoughts of power and control over the images of children may make us feel uncomfortable, still we will shape the visual products of our students. The questions that we must continually ask ourselves are: How am I controlling my students? What are the consequences of encouraging some forms of children’s and youths’ visual culture and discouraging other forms? I think that we must engage in the continual interpretation of the products of art schooling. The visual products of young people should be interpreted in light of who benefits and even who gains advantage over whom and for what purposes. There are motives for making, for controlling making, and for interpreting the visual cultural products made by young people. Each motive serves different interests. Art teachers’ interests are different from young peoples’ interests. Young peoples’ interests are different from researchers’ interests. Arts education advocates’ interests may differ from both young peoples’ and art teachers’ interests.

Is it possible to develop pedagogical practices that no longer pit school art against out-of-school visual cultural products; that no longer pit the interests of children against those of their teachers; that no longer pit high art against popular visual culture; that pit political, ideological, and narrative art against art that glorifies sumptuous aesthetic qualities, expressiveness, design, and pleasing form? Perhaps the resolution of these dialectics is impossible. Nevertheless, surely the sensitive examination of the ideologies underlying the opposing interests would benefit art education.

School Art and Children’s Out-of-School Visual Culture: A Continuing Dialectic

School art and children’s art are marginal classifications within the larger world of art and the enormous realm of visual culture. Child art is shaped by conventional classifications of art. If we say that children make art, and for me this is still an open question, it is because the category “art” exists within a culture. The forms of art such as painting, sculpture, printmaking, crafts—and, for child art, the more problematic classifications such as photography, digital art forms, video, installation, and performance affect the way children’s visual cultural productions are classified and interpreted. As forms of visual culture evolve to include things such as MTV and video games, children and young people will make visual cultural forms based on them. Because children create visual culture that is nothing like school art, will we art educators take note and incorporate these forms into schooling?

The media with which children are permitted to work in schools comprise cultural influences that shape child art. The differences between children’s school art and their out-of-school visual cultural artifacts can often be detected by media alone. School art is produced on standard sheets of paper and made with soft media such as colorful tempera and acrylic paint, whereas out-of-school visual culture is enormously varied—from fine-tipped gel pens on lined paper to huge constructions of cardboard boxes, board, and other found objects. Regardless of how open school art practices might become, it is likely that the rhizomatic (Wilson, 2002) character of the visual culture children produce outside the school will always be more varied and unpredictable than school art.

The themes, topics, and subject matter around which children are encouraged to create school art reflect educators’ cultural beliefs about the innocence of children. School art is concerned primarily with topics from everyday life, holidays, festivals, and illustrations of fairy and folktales. Children’s out-of-school visual cultural artifacts, again, have an enormous range which includes diagrams, narratives, exercises that reveal struggles to master cultural conventions—often borrowed from popular culture, themes of war, love, hate, sexual relationships, death, struggle, and other topics from which many teachers believe children should be protected. Do art educators have something to learn from children and young people?
The within-school/outside-school dialectic has many more dimensions than I can point to at this time. Nevertheless, I should note that while teaching in Taiwan, I observed that elementary school art teachers and classroom teachers give students art homework assignments. The products of these assignments have characteristics of both in-school and out-of-school visual culture. In them, children have more degrees of freedom to experiment with the themes, subjects, and styles of popular visual culture. In some ways they bring to resolution a dialectic that I had assumed would never be resolved.

**The Philosophy of Child and Youth Visual Cultural Education**

Much of what I have written in this chapter would have been strengthened if it had been written from a cohesive philosophy of art or a comprehensive theory of visual culture. I have claimed (Wilson, 2000b) that a philosophy of art is the singlemost underdeveloped area pertaining to the visual artifacts produced by children and youth. If an art object becomes a work of art by virtue of the interpretations that it attracts, as Danto claims (1986, p. 4), then we art educators have lots of interpreting to do before we transform the things children make (and that we compel them to make) into artworks. The interpretative task becomes all the more complicated when visual appearance and aesthetic qualities no longer count and when art is anything that is interpreted as art (Danto, 1997, p. 13). About the possibility of a philosophy of child art I have written:

I end my plea for a philosophy of art pertaining to young people with this thought: If art has entered its post-historical phase where artworks can be anything and where they can have any conceivable look, and since teachers exert considerable control—and in many instances nearly complete control—over the images created by children in their classroom, then in this time after the end of art, should teachers consciously assign children to create all sorts of art? Should art teachers use children’s acquiescence and malleability to get them, for example, to create artworks that question the assumed nature of child art, to produce child-artworks that look like adult-artworks, to make artworks in which there is a conscious effort to mix child-like and artist-like images, to make artworks that mimic and mix styles, to make artworks that are consciously anti-visual or anti-aesthetic, to make works for the purpose of attempting to transform them into artworks through multiple acts of interpretation?

If teachers were deliberately to persuade young people to work ironically—for that is what I have just suggested, then would the purpose of children’s image-making be in effect to raise philosophical questions about the nature of child art? Does this kind of activity have a desirable educational payoff? (Wilson, 2000b, p. 244)

**CONCLUSION**

The Japanese artist Takashi Murakami (2000) has written the Super Flat Manifesto in which he claims:

The world of the future might be like Japan today—super flat.

Society, customs, art, culture: all extremely two-dimensional. It is particularly apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history. Today, the sensibility is most present in Japanese games and anime, which have become powerful parts of world culture. One way to imagine super flatness is to think of the moment when, in creating a desktop graphic for your computer, you merge a number of distinct layers into one. (p. 5)

Murakami writes that although this “is not a terribly clear example,” the feeling he gets from this flattening is “a sense of reality that is very nearly a physical sensation.” He continues,
the reason I have lined up both the high and low of Japanese art... is to convey this feeling. I would like you, the reader, to experience the moment when the layers of Japanese culture, such as pop, erotic pop, otaku, and H.I.S.-ism, fuse into one" (Murakami, 2000, p. 20)

I wonder if, perhaps, there is a theory of art and visual cultural education embedded within Murakami’s manifesto. I must confess, however, that I am as intrigued with the layers that are flattened as with the flattening—which I am not sure I understand. If art education were to celebrate visual culture, what might an instructional unit look like. Surely it would consist of layers—lots of layers. I believe that artworks and visual cultural artifacts that are designated for inclusion in art curricula should be drawn simultaneously from global/universal sources, from East and West, from national sources, and from local sources. They call out for interconnecting and contesting. This is the basis for the new visual cultural narratives that underlie art education. I have tried to approach the topic from multiethnic and multiarts positions. I have rejected the notion that there is a common language for dealing with young peoples’ visual cultural products. Pedagogues and researchers must subject their own practices and inquiry to ongoing critique. I have claimed that opposing views are useful, that local knowledge should compete with the notion of a world system, and that in the 21st century the study of children’s images will most likely consist of many intersecting intertextual stories rather than one master modernist narrative.

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