THE INTEGRITY OF PERSONAL, EXPERIENCE, OR, THE PRESENCE OF LIFE IN ART

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... as the imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to any noting
A local habitation and a name.
Wm Shakespeare, Midsummer Night’s Dream

Thoughtful consideration of what learners bring to acts of artistic learning in terms of their real world experiences is often overlooked in the literature on instruction. The result is that what I will call the ‘livingness’ of art works—both personal and cultural—frequently does not find a place in classroom practice, either in making or appraising art. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of reform and focus on authenticity, the holistic “lens” through which personal experience grounds artistic encounters and open them to reflective consideration is too often replaced with the imposition of
What learners bring to acts of artistry:

Art education like other disciplines of mind, has expressed itself in many different forms of theory, instruction and practice. Historians in the West have charted an evolution in the discipline that has given alternative salience to the learner, the shaping influence of the socio-cultural environment, and the importance of outcome or the aesthetic object of art. Each trend has set itself in tension with its forebears by re-casting such notions as artistic purpose, development, creativity, expressivity, aesthetic import and meaning, seemingly in efforts to assert a new moral or aesthetic high ground. There is often little explicit carry forward or evolution of central concepts from one position to the next. Today for example, even a cursory reading of art education literature reveals that child centered learning with its focus on what the learner brings to artistry, to making and responding, is out of fashion as a guiding principle of instruction. The driving favorite, at present is a focus on the socio-cultural conditions believed to shape human consciousness, determine artistic forms and the diversity of their expression.

In this chapter, I want to share some thoughts about two distinctive leanings in our discipline: the psychological and socio-cultural, by re-casting them as the central paradox of human development; as the foundation for the tension between any given social order and its artistic tool box, and an individual self grappling with contending influences from inside and outside. The human mind is not a tabula rasa, but an active agent fashioned from an intermingling of socio-cultural experiences and personal temperamental leanings. In short there is an individual, sentient person at the heart of the construction of the world-views we make our own and in which the interplay of inner and outer tensions constitute an important condition of selfhood and growth.

I want to explore the idea that while it is quite common for us to
acknowledge the presence of the person or self when we speak of mature art, or art of the past, we are in present danger of forgetting the power of this presence in the art of children and adolescents—equally as we ignore the productive tensions that drive young people, and artists, to make art in the first place. By ignoring the person or the self, of course, we are also ignoring the elusive presence of ‘life’ in art. Before going any further, let me immediately offer some caveats. I am not referring to some cult or theory of personality here, or to a conception of self sharply drawn in its own autonomy, nor am I clinging to outmoded romantic notions of, creativity and expressivity—about both of which I have many reservations. While I take it that self is a multidimensional construct forged from an evolving dialectic with others and events in the socio-cultural environment, this does not preclude an absence of contact with our own unique human consciousness made vital and expressible by the continuing life of the imagination. Thus, the stories artists tell, the positions they take, the questions they ask and the aesthetic meaning their works embody, are contextualized by the histories of self and experience that they bring to the act of making and responding. What makes a Xi ‘An Warrior, a Rembrandt self portrait, or a New Hebridean mask, that which it is, derives from a complex layering of socio-cultural influences in which glimpses of personal selves refract from canvas, wood, clay and stone, and have the effect of situating the maker in the context of the work and opening it to deep meaning for others. It is this human situatedness called forth by the imagination at work in artistic consciousness that offers the grounds for the expression of life in art. It is also this human situatedness which in engagement with materials in creative practice establishes the possibility of a relationship between maker and perceiver grounded in a sense of life in art. Paradoxically it is also the presence of the self, vitalized by the imagination, that allows the artist to transcend the very socio-cultural conventions that shaped their art in the first place.

Yet, how does what I am calling the ‘personal’ or the ‘self’ or ‘life’ get into the art work of children and adolescence growing up at they do in cultures which are so heavily accented towards the visual and in which they are urged to be compliant with the predetermined and conventional? How do they establish their own individual artistic world-views without sacrificing what the
culture offers them? How do they speak in their own voice and also transcend conventions? What are the artistic roots from which they draw in the construction of their own voices able to endow art with life? I would like to argue here that there are two critical times in the artistic development of children and adolescents when the tension between inner and outer experiences of self and world provoke the kinds of uncertainties and ambiguities out of which the struggle for individual voice emerges. It is in very early childhood and later in the transitional period of early adolescence that the dialectic between personal voice and socio-cultural tradition results in the creation of aesthetic forms, or visual narratives, that provide the repertoire for the expression of life in art.

Naming

The phase of development which Lowenfeld (1957)1 termed the stage of Naming, has traditionally been passed over rather rapidly in theories of artistic development. Noted to be of short duration, occurring sometime between ages of 4 to 6 years, it was thought that children passed rapidly from kinesthetic to imaginative thinking. This short phase was either seen as a continuation of pre-representational development (Scribbling), or as the first stage in the emergence of visual schemas. The phase was understood to correspond roughly to Piaget’s period of pre-operational thinking wherein language as it emerged over-rode action as the primary mechanisms for directing attention to things, making needs known, shaping early concepts, and expressing feelings to others.

Those who noted the phenomena of naming tended to interpret it in deficit terms as a time when children had in mind clear visual images that they were unable to express within their repertoire of scribbling. Alternatively it was thought that children were “romancing” or making up stories to please adults. There was a general consensus among writers at mid-century, however, that the works created at this time did not “look like” the images or events to which they were said to refer. This was more often problematic for

1 The ideas in this chapter are more fully explored in: Burton, J.M Creative and Mental Growth: Lowenfeld Revisited. (Forthcoming, Prentice Hall)
adults than it was for children who seemed perfectly comfortable with their early named works and the stories they evoked; it was only well meaning adults who cast doubt upon their intentions. Maria Montessori was not untypical in condemning early named works as “horrible daubs—monstrous expressions of intellectual lawlessness.” In the western world, grown-ups were not so comfortable with works that denied acceptable standards of beauty or realism in the art of children however young.

Naming, as Lowenfeld and others described it, involved a progressive harnessing of scribbling to symbolic ends. In this process kinesthetic action was thought to lose ground to the imagination which was called into play to connect inner mental images to the lines and marks young children already knew how to make. In the beginning, only certain lines, marks, shapes or patches were thought to connect to meaning, which was then generalized to the work as a whole. For instance, a set of squiggles embedded within an enclosure might capture attention as “smoke” this response would then be extended to the whole configuration which became a “train.” Many writers thought that as children worked with materials they happened on such chance semblance between marks on paper and experiences of the real world and, thus, naming occurred as an attempt to give coherence to what were essentially arbitrary discoveries.

Those who were not so outspoken in their belief that named works were unsuccessful attempts to copy nature or a well-defined memory image, nonetheless, offered different interpretations of what exactly named works did express. Reflecting the theories of early psychoanalysts such as Freud and Jung, the rather abstract looking configurations that prompted early naming were seen to be direct expressions of young children’s inner worlds, attempts to capture feelings associated with objects. Others, like Anheim (1976), who saw early naming arising more frequently from enclosures interpreted this as a structural equivalent of a person or other object within children’s direct experiences. Lowenfeld, who argued that the pleasure of kinesthetic action for itself now transferred to the expressive outcome of that action suggested, as did Gombrich in his Meditations on a Hobby Horse (1978), that certain lines and marks carried dynamic and functional equivalence to experiences in the everyday world. Thus, lines seeing
upwards on a page might be named “running up a hill” or even “taking off to Mars.”

If adults were dichotomized about the appearances of these early named works, they were certainly perturbed by some of the announced subject matter which often included mixtures of fantasy and real experiences, sometimes highly imaginative or even violent. Not untypical themes might include being gobbled up by a giant fly or animal’s fighting. The general assumption was, however, that subject matter as it emerged would call upon real-world experiences and that once children had seen ‘semblances’ in their work the mental images evoked would drive more purposeful behavior. The trajectory of creative practice was assumed to be dominated by the drive to make forms of ever-greater clarity, semblance, or ‘truth-to-appearance.’ The every-day subject matter examples offered by Lowenfeld and others as typical of this time in development, included trains, airplanes, parents, going shopping, and the effects of weather. It was perhaps no wonder that themes more resonant with a fairy story world were seen as romances, not serious, and of separate consequence to the real business of making art. For how could semblances be judged, or even encouraged, if the configurations that alluded to them referred to experiences that had no grounding in actual reality? Outside psychoanalysis, there was, moreover, a tendency to believe that untrammeled expression of feelings of the kind often suggested by young children’s naming was something to be discouraged and brought within the controls of concrete every-day imagery and verisimilitude.

The outcome of this relatively short period of development was envisioned as the conclusion of the scribbling stage and the ending of motor development as more and more components of the early repertoire were brought within representational intentions. While many writers acknowledged this time as important in development they actually dedicated very little attention to it for they have envisioned it as a transitional rather than a formative stage in the journey of development. Moreover, Lowenfeld was not alone in urging teachers to encourage and extend the new imaginative thinking of this time by helping children to identify with every-day memory experiences as sources for their art both to give it clear direction and, perhaps to forestall the overly emotional and idiosyncratic subject matter it
called forth.

A picture of my mommy with an alligator in her pocket

Looked at carefully, we now understand more fully how the learning of pre-representational development will have equipped children with the concepts, understandings and actions they will need to create first representations. Early learning offers young children some important tools consisting of critical formative ideas about pre-representational space: acknowledging paper as a target for action, and as a surface that is simultaneously divisible, and continuous. They will also have acquired formative ideas about relationships: lines and marks can be combined according to principles of proximity, connection, separation, enclosure, relative length and size. They will have learned that lines, marks, shapes, and colors have perceptual-dynamic salience such as sharpness, bend ability, brightness, dullness, and a range of movement qualities such as going fast, slow, dragging, floating, breaking and so forth. It is during this pre-representational period of development that the repertoire takes on a new set of expressive possibilities as actions with lines, marks, colors, shapes, and forms come to embody a whole range of body feelings and sensations such as happiness, sadness, love, and anger.2

Pre-representational collage: A happy place.

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2 See forthcoming
From what we now understand, the time in very early childhood when youngsters begin to name or title their paintings, drawings and three-dimensional works occur for children around the world. This phase is often brief and remains the least enlightened in the art education literature. In essence, children begin to attach names to configurations that they have been creating during pre-representational development. In the first instance names appear to emerge from the works once they are made, appearing as a kind of magical after thought. “This is a picture of my mommy with an alligator in her pocket,” or “My grandma’s house with lots of animals living underground” or “Lots of little birds trying to find food” are not unusual titles.

The flexibility of children’s thinking at this age is such that sometimes the same work will have different titles attributed to it within hours or even on different days.

Over time naming begins to accompany the act of making and themes often change as the work evolves and in response to the action of a material. For example, Mary began her painting as if to make a design, then stopped and said, “This yellow patch moves up and down”. She continued to add

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shapes to her painting then “It’s an indoor place” and with a final flourish she announced, “It’s me, me in bed when I did not feel well and did not go to school the other day.” Stephanie begin in the same way but announced early in her painting that this is “gonna be dragons house” then, with a few more sweeps of her brush, “but its all watery.” Finally, as she worked on “I think is all floaty, yes, bad weather.” After considerable over-painting she told her teacher “This is a picture of a boat on the sea on a windy day with lots of clouds in the sky.”

Once naming begins to precede the act of making this then guides action on and with a material in a new goal directed fashion. Thus, when children announce that are going to make a “Picture of me playing football,” or “A spotted toad” they will pursue this idea to its conclusion and not become sidetracked by compelling occurrences in their material; rather they will incorporate new and interesting effects into the ongoing construction of their idea. Despite the goal directedness of young children’s intentions subject matter remains highly idiosyncratic and its content embedded in profound individual feelings about self and world, real and imagined.

It is interesting to note that as adults confronted by figurative and abstract art works of art we very often speculate on several potential readings as we seek to construct our own responses. The notion that one configuration might be subject to different interpretations is, thus, an experience which has its origins in this early moment of development.

4 Proto symbolic is used here to refer to the earliest form of symbolization in childhood.
The emergence of proto-symbols

Working within their pre-representational, or proto-symbolic repertoire, thus, young children arrive at this new phase in development with quite complex abilities, to think, imagine, reflect and learn. The attribution of feeling states to lines or whole configurations, may occur almost at any time during pre-symbolic development. As youngsters move into this new phase where naming begins to include more definite themes and subject matter this too can occur at any time. Thus, young children may name their purposeful marks, enclosures or designs or mixed configurations. They may name early on and then not for a while, or naming may exist in parallel to non-named works. What is important is that naming arises out of young children’s responses to their materials, the configurations they know already how to make, and the expressive possibilities that exist within their repertoires.

For parents and teachers who have listened entranced to the stories and themes recounted at this time, subject matter does not always reflect pragmatic everyday memory experiences as Lowenfeld and others thought. Rather, subject matter often consists of an imaginative intermingling of two worlds: the world of actual experiences--of parents, pets and other cherished objects, along with another world of fantasy in which all things become possible. Young children will include in their paintings, drawings, collages and clay works, references to themes or characters from fairy stories, or media characters that have caught their interest. It is not unusual to have “Batman flying over our back yard,” or “The friendly dragon, that sleeps under my bed.” Sometimes they will bring the animal kingdom more into the human as in “A fight between a spider and a turtle,” or seize on an important moment such as the receiving of a birthday present as in “The inside of my new pocket book.” They will also imagine a much anticipated holiday, “This is Rome” or a hoped for event “My first airplane ride,” or reflect on a moment fraught with feeling as in “Getting up at night to get a drink of water” or “A

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4 Proto symbolic is used here to refer to the earliest form of symbolization in childhood.
5 Pre-symbolic development can occur anytime between the ages of 6 months to six years depending upon young children’s exposure to play and work with materials. Naming can occur as early as two years and as late as six.
As young children enter this new world of re-presentation they are acquiring the capacity to engage with an ‘as if world’ which, in time and with refinement will become fundamental to their ability look at art, listen to music or read poetry and be transported into other realities.

As body-feelings characterized the expressive concepts that culminated the pre-representational phase, so feelings that arise in the new merging of real and fantasy worlds have ready vehicle of expression. For animate and inanimate objects that can do weird, magical and wonderful things in the safety of a work of art, become catalysts for the first direct expression of relationships between self and world. We get hints of this from the children who accompany their creative practice with delightful running commentaries, songs, actions, and sometimes dances that extend the ideas that emerge from their materials. These early works, and the events that surround them, act rather like traditional fairy stories, told to children in the safety of home and family, except now children are telling their own stories about monsters and galactic happenings. In the safety of creative practice such stories help youngsters to contextualize difficult, confusing or pleasing content within larger schemas of their understanding. Here, inner feelings of fear, confusion, ambiguity, longing and happiness are evoked and for the first time embedded in subject matter outside the self. Moreover, young children are not confined to a present world, but in these early named works can go both forward and back in time.
Sensory logic

Named work can emerge from almost any of the configurations of the pre-representational phase, but whenever they emerge, they herald the beginnings of visual narrative, early excursions in the imaginative intermingling of real world and fantasy experiences. What is important is that named works have their origins in responses to materials. Paper, paint and clay, and all other materials, have distinguishing properties and qualities that are known through kinesthetic and sensory explorations and organizations. The sensory and dynamic (embodied) grounds of youngster’s early repertoires, thus, offer a potential conduit to the world of lived-in and imagined experience.

The kinds of connections young children make between their materials and experiences at this early age are basically what the psychologists Heinz Werner and Bernard Kaplan (1963) called physiognomic. Here, connections, or correspondences, are not constructed around what children know, or what they perceive, but in relation to the dynamic and global qualities inherent in their perceptions and understandings of the world. Because of the nature of early experiences, young children’s thinking is highly attuned to movement, sensory, and feeling qualities in their perceptions and this includes the materials they are given to play with. It appears likely that the dynamic, sensory and embodied dimensions of young children’s experiences with materials actually call forth the same dimensions in their experiences of the world thus coming to ‘stand for’ them pictorially. What was first a tenuous connection between material and experience, made almost by chance, becomes over time, more firmly endowed with an intermingling of structural and functional significance. It is in this process that young children recognize that their materials have become an aesthetic medium enabling them to stretch out to worlds beyond themselves, and that creative practice is safe arena for the organization and expression of important feelings.

With early naming children begin to understand that one thing (a material) can be taken to re-present another (an experience), and that what is created can also be communicated to another as we see from the wondrous stories that accompany so many of the works made at this time. In these protosymbolic works, then we encounter a mode of thinking that can best be
thought of as ‘sensory logic.’ In other words, as works that have their origins in elements originating in embodied experiences in materials. It is typically the case that adults attempting to read named works from visual cues are unable to do so, yet when told their meaning are able to access the subject matter quite readily at a sensory level. We might think here about how we as adults access the feeling of loneliness and despair in Picasso’s portrait of the Absinthe Drinker, or the feeling of age and pathos in a self-portrait of Rembrandt, or feel the spirituality in the holy elongations of El Greco or the indignity of splayed flesh in DeKooning’s Women. It seems that the early configurations of young children make sense at a sensory-feeling level of experience, rather than in purely visual terms alone and that this may well echo later in adult responses to works of art. For children this is important as it grounds the re-presentation of early meaning in embodied and profoundly personal experience. For adults, the lingering ability to make sense of art works beyond their literal or visual surfaces is critical to aesthetic insights and understanding both in relation to great works of art and to those made by children.

Fast forward

Let me now fast forward through the middle years of childhood and say simply that the groundwork, set down in pre-symbolic and proto-symbolic phases of development is critical to the emergence of more concrete and literal attempts to re-present the world of experience. Earlier phases are not, thus, irrelevant preludes to more conventional forms of re-presentation, nor do they disappear over time, but they remain embedded in youngsters’ repertoires and are called upon when the tensions between the inner and outer worlds, bring to the fore sensory, emotional and embodied ways of knowing that seek new forms of balance and expression. Here, the richness and flexibility of the early repertoire, placed at the service of the imagination, continues to participate in the structuring of new self-other world views in which the presence of the self offers life and vitality to the whole.

As children enter the middle to late years of childhood, so their expanding view of self and world incorporates new ideas about people and their many and sometimes conflicting needs and motivations. Such new ideas give
children an appreciation for rules and they develop new skills for operating within them. As they enter into new forms of cooperative behavior children become curious about the values and conventions that inform the rules of everyday life and the consequences of breaking them. Children also turn their attention to the world of adult behavior and observe the limits and extensions that govern their parents' lives, social situations, sporting events and, not infrequently, spiritual, religious and political positions of the time. It is at this age, too, that children join clubs, take out-of-school classes in music, dance, horseback riding, karate, baseball, swimming and such like. They also love to demonstrate their new insights, perceptions and skills before admiring audiences and find ways to do this is through their artwork.

It is important to understand that in their art most children at this age are not creating faithful depictions of the appearances of the visual world that surrounds them. Children's agendas are somewhat richer that simply recording what they see. Children are, in fact, creating re-presentations of their experiences and this incorporates information deriving from what they see, what they know and understand and, above all, what and how they feel, brought together by the work of the imagination. It is the significant contribution of the visual arts to education that when they create paintings, drawings, collages and clay pieces children are continuing to tell stories which interplay different often conflicting aspects of their experiences, thus, forging more reflective, comprehensive, multi-dimensional, conceptions of self and world. What we see by late childhood in children's engagements with different materials of art is the interweaving of several new levels of competence. At one level, there comes into being a culture-specific set of skills in structuring, or composing visual ideas; at another level, the inclusion of increasingly complex visual details in capturing the particular character or nuance of an idea or subject; and, at another are sensory--feeling responses which carry the deepest levels of meanings. It is at this deeper level that we encounter children attempting to make sense of the diverse forces that impinge upon their inner and outer lives. It is here that issues of power, happiness, anger, industriousness, helplessness and confusion, love and hate, find expression. Forming the underpinnings of the more literal and concrete modes of thought and expression of middle childhood is the work
of the imagination that allows for the emergence of new meanings in which interpersonal relationships and personal responses and feelings are held in productive tension.

The dilemmas of adolescence

It has almost become a leitmotif of artistic developmental, indeed of pedagogical theory, that the years of late childhood herald a slow decline in the dynamic responses to materials characteristic of earlier years. It is generally assumed that with attention increasingly focused on acquiring the representational conventions of the culture in drawing, painting, clay, and collage, the natural artistry and craft of the young child is subsumed by interest in technique and skill acquisition as determined by teachers and, even, parents. As children acquire the more formal skills of their culture in the preadolescent years this is thought to over-ride their personal and idiosyncratic artistic interests. Scores of anecdotal accounts tell us that for most youngsters much now appears to be missing from their art: a sense of freedom, flexibility, personal nuance and life.

Adolescence, as we know, is a time of unpredictable physical change, strange new emotions, mood swings, new curiosities and questions about identity and relationship. It is a time when youngsters begin to envision their worlds from new perspectives and become confused among all the vantage points they can now call to mind. It is a time when, as we can see, youngster’s ideas about self and world become more complex and are often out of step with their ideas about what materials can and cannot do for them in the complex shaping of visual meaning. It is also a time when confused thoughts and feelings emerge about place-in-the-world and about self as simultaneous subject and object of contemplation. In creative practice, the powerful affective and dynamic roots of such new experiences compel youngsters to search for new means of visual organization. In short, what we encounter is a rather lengthy and unpredictable transitional period in artistic development when a number of new ideas, questions, skills and interests emerge but are not yet fully formed.
Transitions and transformations: “The eyes looked out at me”

Given the enormous inequalities in art education provision in secondary schools, it is perhaps better to look outside for clues to what interest young people most in visual expression. One focus of interest and, perhaps, unlikely source of new learning is to be found in the doodling and cartooning that we encountered in late childhood and which comes to preoccupy much adolescent time. Interestingly this would be the last place that Lowenfeld and other mid twentieth century writers would have considered to be a fruitful source for understanding early adolescent art as they had great antipathy for copying and other forms of media inspired conventions which he thought should be expunged from youngster’s repertoires. However, anyone who has examined the private notebooks, sketchbooks and portfolios of young adolescents will be acutely aware that are often replete with doodle drawings of great invention and complexity. Sometimes such drawings incorporate recognizable images or part images, or images transforming into other configurations entirely. Sometimes these images are borrowed from the media culture or graffiti, sometimes from the history of art, and sometimes they are idiosyncratic to their inventor; more often than not however images are constructed from a merging of several types of influence. Such images often burst forth from sketchbooks or private portfolios into public display in the form of spontaneous graffiti or wall murals that decorate the corners of much urban life. Whether they exist in private or in public such images are vastly different from the more constrained efforts that so often passes as ‘school art’ and are, perhaps, more fruitful sources for understanding some of the intricacies of adolescent artistic aspirations.

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6 Brent Wilson (1974a; 2005) has been among the few writers in the field to take seriously the doodling and image play of young adolescents, although he takes a rather different perspective than the one suggested here.
What we are beginning to realize is that doodling, or the activity of making and repeating lines upon lines while exploring rhythms of the hand and arm, may have a fundamental role to play in adolescent learning. Like very young children who first explore lines and marks in order to build a repertoire of expressive possibility that will later serve their image making needs, adolescent doodling may well serve a similar purpose. We must remember that the artistic repertoire of late childhood while wonderfully expressive and multi layered is largely a concrete construction. By early adolescence, however, there is a need for a different kind of expressive repertoire, one that serves newly emergent sensory and emotional responses. For, the physical and biological changes that take place in adolescence make volatile their sensory and emotional reactions to self and world, and these seek new and different outlets of expression. We see this in many forms of their behavior in music and poetry, in dress and in the secret languages they invent to communicate with each other.

Is this doodling and play with images a sign of regression to actions of earlier childhood? Certainly, writers such as Lowenfeld and Herbert Read (1943) were not alone in surmising a regression in some aspects of adolescent artistic practice. Indeed writers like Blo (1967), and Erikson (1968) also speculated that as part of normative development a revisiting of childhood emotional affiliations paves the way for the emergence of a new and independent self able to construct relationships at a new level of maturity. Indeed, later researchers have also designated the childish behavior of young adolescents as a necessary and healthy revisiting of childhood emotional affiliations.

One wonders if the designers of computer games took their early cues from observing the natural graphic inclinations of young adolescents!
earlier bonds in order to both test their resiliency and set them within more complex self-other relationship. While many writers might not have fully understood or appreciated the role of ‘revisiting’ to future creative practice, there seems abundant reason to assume that this activity is critical to the emergence of a more complex artistic repertoire. For in conversation about their creative practice youngsters in early adolescence tells us they need to know that the lines, marks, shapes and forms that they create can carry new levels of meaning more calibrated to their dynamic and sensory sensibilities. They need to know, for example, that one and the same line can depict the nuance of contour, the effects of movement, the sensory feel of surface and the emotional intensity of their own relationship to the act of perception. They need to know that subtle modulations to the same line can carry other depths of meaning such as those associated with light, atmospheres and spatial position. There is good reason to believe that this new knowledge is acquired by young people through exploration and the spontaneous activities of doodling and cartooning. What is important is that these activities not only offer an open-ended context for exploration but also serve as socially sanctioned arenas for re-visiting and revising past artistic conceptions.

A return to serious play

If the emergence of new understandings about line, surface and form is made possible through spontaneous acts of doodling, cartooning, and play with images, then the subject matter that often filters in and out of such graphic activity also serve an important developmental purpose. Not infrequently, images emerge one from the other: an octopus can serve as the head of a human body whose legs are transformed into skates, or guns or a fence roaming over hills.

A drawing can begin with a portrait and attention becomes diverted because “the eyes looked out at me.” A lengthy cartoon style adventure based on the exploits of one character can explore the extremes of bodily suffering yet, can be saved for the next adventure because he exists only within the control of his makers re-presentational activity. Many of the works of this kind are also

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8 One wonders if the designers of computer games took their early cues from observing the natural graphic inclinations of young adolescents!
blatantly sexual. Proportions can be changed and the inanimate can be made animate and visa versa. Whatever the contortions of the actual configurations in adolescent out-of school art, we find the suggestion of an explanation for these transformational images by revisiting the repertoire of early childhood.

As we have seen, young children move into the creation of proto-symbols as they begin to name their configurations. The lines, marks and shapes they make refer to the sensory and affective dimensions of their experiences rather than to visual perceptual cues. The first connections that young children make between their artistic repertoires and their experiences in the world are based in a kind of sensory logic in which, as we have seen, responses to feelings, movement and touch are embedded in configurations of great emotional import. These configurations, in paint, crayon, clay or collage, usually carry with them highly imaginative narratives or stories and are characteristically very fluid and changeable.

Looked at carefully, the transformational images that emerge from adolescent’s doodle play have many of the characteristics of sensory logic. While on the one hand, they reflect artistic abilities acquired throughout the years of childhood in that they capture the details and contours observed in the real world, on the other hand images are intersected by lines and references that are less literal and refer more directly to the fluctuations of movement or express an array of different kinds of sensory qualities. Such transformational images are also highly imaginative, fluid and changeable,
and appear to make connections among diverse and unusual items of experience, and between experiences and materials, at new depths and reach. Similarly, transformational images also appear to carry both literal and non-literal narratives that together transcend everyday logic and common sense. Moreover the experiences depicted in these transformational images are frequently emotionally charged for they deal with issues of sexuality ambiguity, power, loss and bodily vulnerability.

It seems likely that transformational images allow adolescents to play with ideas, to foray beyond the literal world of appearance and find new levels of expressive possibility that serve the emerging complexity of their own sense of self and relationship. Here, they discover that in the world of representation all things, including the unthinkable, are possible and changeable and within their invention and control. It is in the creation of such transformational images that in later development young people will foray more fully into the construction of visual metaphors.⁹

In addition to the new reach of representational understanding that transformational images appear to serve, they also carry another dimension of learning. While many of the images that emerge in such drawings are

⁹ See forthcoming.
intensely personal inventions, some are borrowed in part or whole from
media or other cultural or artistic conventions. While many writers have
inveighed against this form of cultural invasion, and advised teachers, to fight
against, there is abundant evidence that youngsters themselves enjoy
exploring cultural imagery. This is not surprising as from their earliest
schooling, young people have grown up in a culture represented by their
teachers and parents and the environment in which they live. They will have
learned within its forms, values and expectations, and much of the work
young people will have accomplished outside school will have already
involved exploring the images created by others. Indeed, prior to
adolescence, youngsters will likely have experimented with incorporating
features of conventional imagery into their own artistic constructions; they will
copy or elaborate on images made by others, and what they learn will filter
into their own repertoires. In this way, young people learn about the forms of
the culture, equally as they find social sanctions for their own efforts.

Within the changing panorama of the adolescent experience, within the
refashioning of the self's relationship with the wider world of others and of
culture, new distillations from artistic conventions offer important
contributions to youngsters creative practice. The borrowing that takes place
within the activity of doodling assumes the guise of serious exploratory play
in which imagination and invention are harnessed to the creation of
transformational configurations. Here, the creation of paintings, drawings,
collages and sculptures become venues for acting on, critiquing, and
transforming social norms, and for working through to new and more
personal interpretations. For many artists and psychologists have long
suggested that, play offers the kind of open flexible venue for exploration and
testing that makes creativity possible. Creative practice outside school,
thus, becomes a venue for serious play in which the personal and the cultural
can intermingle in the construction of new types of images that resonate with
youngsters changing ideas about self and world.

The new repertoire that emerges through what appears to be spontaneous explorations on the part of adolescents is also accompanied by unbounded curiosity and imagination; again, more often seen outside school than in. As part of the cognitive tools of adolescence the work of the imagination is often overlooked and underplayed, yet there is plenty of evidence that young people employ their imaginations both in play and in attempts to push the conventional boundaries by which their world is known—sometimes to the distress of parents and teachers. However, we can perhaps see in youngsters abilities to apply their imaginations to acts of drawing in particular, how they are able to make connections between their perceptions of form and about the lines they need to capture the forms they seek; how the imagination liberates them from conventions and opens them to the possibility of transforming what they observe into the meanings they intend.

Thematic Content

Many of the apparent struggles of young adolescents in creative practice are actually in the service of acquiring new and more flexible repertoires of expressive possibility. The new and more multi-faceted repertoire, as it emerges, gives voice to the tension between confused, experiences of self and world. Indeed, the content of much of the more conventional works of adolescents reveals their confusions rather clearly, particularly in works where they have chosen their own subject matter. Young people tell us about, their own struggles with such experiences as: personal identity, their preoccupation with being looked at, their experience of changing and becoming multiple selves, falling apart, and the discrepancy they experience between a seeing self and an unseeing self.
They are curious about sex, they fear violence and death, and explore relationships of caring with a parent, power and protection, and make critical and sometimes unflattering observations on marriage. In many of their art works they show the ability to endow powerful aesthetic presence on relatively mundane objects, and show insight about the intermingling of life and art.

This kind of profound content is not new to the history of art practice of course, but it is new within the experience of young adolescents and therefore it carries with it deep levels of personal feeling. For this reason the images that are fashioned in response to such experiences are often questioning, provocative, difficult and aesthetically challenging. Faced with such images well-meaning adults not infrequently think that youngsters are being perverse or deliberately striving to criticize and shock, much as they were confused by the non-visual character and subject matter of the earlier works of childhood. This is usually far from the truth, for driven by the new affective power that attaches to their own confused experiences, youngsters are entering the time honored tradition of using their visual voices to ask difficult questions and to say something important about themselves and their world. To do this, they must acquire new expressive repertoires within which they can construct the many and different levels of responsibility that now inform their life worlds. Here, earlier experiences of self-world and material re-emerge as a foundation for the development of more complex (in the sense of adaptive rather than better!), and multi-dimensional forms of understanding and expression. It is the re-emergence of these earlier experiences, I would suggest, that re-vitalizes the imagination, and makes salient the new and more complex contents of their life worlds. It is the imagination that penetrates the many and different levels of responsibility and moves artistic thinking beyond the literal and concrete. The capacity for metaphor, for keeping ‘life’ and ‘self’ present in art is, I would argue, grounded in the proto-symbolic works and sensory logic thinking of early childhood.

One should point out that the artistic developmental trajectory of the adolescent years is far from smooth and consistent. The confusions of early adolescence mark some individuals more radically than others. For some
The mature world

Very young children and adolescents are not alone in their access to embodied responses to materials which is, perhaps, why they are so critical for us to consider in our efforts to keep artistic development alive throughout schooling. It is perhaps why artists admire the work of children so often. This way of thinking is highly characteristic of traditional myths, bardic and Homeric poems, and ancient folk law of many cultures. Furthermore, in our every day lives as adults we all know that when a work of art moves us, it effects us physically and emotionally and we respond initially with our senses: our eyes move, sometimes our skin tingles or our fingers twitch, our hearts may ever beat faster, we gasp in amazement or frown in puzzlement--whatever, our bodies react viscerally. All this is, of course, often fleeting and unconscious and is a prelude to a journey of engagement with a work that will become much more complex and multi-dimensional. But, this initial encounter shapes the course of our contemplation and interest and is deeply embedded in the meanings we construct. The writings of mature poets, novelists, musicians, painters and sculptors are replete with examples of experiences which have their origins in dynamic-affective embodied responses. For example, Arthur Rimbaud tells us that his vowel sounds were endowed with color, Joseph Albers writes of his attempt to make black and white behave instead of shouting at each other, Kandinsky describes the
musical qualities of paint as it is squeezed from the tube or sits on his palette. Indeed, in the works of the great visual artists we cannot remain unaffected by the expressive power of such responses: from the holy elongations of El Greco, the delicate feeling for skin of Velasquez, the more stident confrontation with flesh of Francis Bacon, the world weariness of Rembrandt and the human agitations of DeKooning. I would argue that we would just not 'get' paintings, sculptures made in other cultures and at other times unless we could meet the artist at that moment of responsivity that has its first flowering in the embodies responses of infancy and adolescence. Indeed, when we speak of the authenticity of art, perhaps what we speak of resides in the physical-body identification of the onlooker with the artist made present in the aesthetic organization of the work.

Implications for art education

What are the implications of all this for education? There are after all many reasons why people make art: for utilitarian purposes, aesthetic pleasure, communication, personal meaning, play, emulation and psychological well-being. Maybe these reasons exist on a continuum, each privileging a distinctive vantage point on the construction of meaning, some viewpoints erring more towards the personal and some more towards the socio-cultural. Today, I have attempted to tease a little more mileage out of a somewhat maligned tradition in art education, at least in the West, namely, that of making art with traditional concrete materials. While I do not condone the deadly traditions of what is euphemistically called 'school art', I nonetheless believe that there is something very central to human need in the ability to create drawings, paintings, collages, clay and sculptural works. For it is out of inauspicious discoveries in materials, as we have seen, that symbolic or re-presentational forms emerge in which young people structure and express ideas about self and world; forms in which mind and imagination interplay in the invention of aesthetic outcomes, or presences in the world, where none were before. Through experiences in materials the imagination is harnessed to carry inner ideas into outer expressive forms. Through experiences in materials young people acquire a vernacular which takes thinking beyond words and which allows them to stretch out to other
people in other cultures who speak though materials in a shared language. While development has primed children with these capacities, ones that are most certainly not dependent upon talent or giftedness, it is a sad state of affairs that education neither recognizes, supports nor disciplines these capacities in a productive way.

Howard Gardner (1991) has urged us to take seriously the presence of the unschooled mind, out of which rational thought both emerges and returns. Jerome Bruner (1996) has urged us to recognize the role of narrative, in both anchoring us within our socio-cultural worlds and privileging personal voice. Countless philosophers and psychologists have called attention to the importance of honoring the presence of inner and outer worlds of experience and accepting the tensions and paradoxes this provokes. My colleague Maxine Greene urges us to nurture minds that stretch towards limitless possibilities of knowing, sensing, imagining, feeling, and giving form to our personal voices. As children attempt to forge these voices within the constructed narratives of the worlds in which they live, educators must recognize the complexity of what is involved.

We continuously underestimate children, the power of their minds, the reach of their imaginations, and the resourcefulness of their exploratory activity with materials. In many corners of the Western World we seem bent on reducing youngsters needs and capacities to simplistic sound bites, slogans and fixed standards. Let me play two stories off against each other. Some years ago I saw an exhibition in the great Ancient Egyptian Hall of the British Museum in which ten American and ten British artists had been invited to respond to the objects on display; these contemporary works were then hung alongside the object that had inspired it. The new works were radically different in form, style, material and mode of presentation. What then happened for the viewer was an incredible sense of interpersonal dialogue, one that had clear archaic antecedents, but carried into the present transcended traditional notions of time, place, and culture. Contemporary works made salient aspects of the older forms, while they in turn posed questions of the contemporary both acting through the exercise of personal voice. Now contrast this with a story I heard just last week, when a teacher explained to me that her school principal required her to demonstrate or
otherwise model exactly what she wanted her pupils to make (no learning here) so their works could be evaluated and graded for conformity to the required outcome and according to the rubrics of local standards.

These are extreme examples, I know, but they do capture something of the wonderful possibilities of art on the one hand, and the destructive actuality of education on the other. In cherishing a tradition, and in acknowledging its power, we cherish both the life of children and adolescents and their need to have this life made present in their art. In the denigrating of art, its power and possibility, we denigrate children and adolescents and their capacities to both sustain and change the shaping mechanism of the socio-cultural worlds, through the exercise of their visual voices.
References


