

In Pursuit of the Idea That the Child Art Process Can Be Disclosed

Nancy Lambert

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IN PURSUIT OF THE IDEA THAT THE CHILD ART PROCESS
CAN BE DISCLOSED

Nancy Lambert

What is the living narrative played out in the theatre of the school art room, visible to me through the art series of my young friends? This question is based upon the notion that the 'self' of the child is not an obscure idea but the movement of working as agent between pure potentiality and contingency. It is available to me as an emerging perspective which, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) says, is "making itself progressively explicit" (p. 407).

The setting of my inquiry is first of all political and geographical. I am an art educator in the province of Quebec, where a derivative of Sartrean existentialism has had a profound and transformative effect upon the social fabric of the past quarter-century. In keeping with social theory which posits that for every action there is a reaction, this existential move to affirm the free will of the individual, (particularly evident within the arts), was followed by a rapid move on the part of administrators to centralize education and institutionalize that notion of the free person. The arts program conceived in this system proclaimed that art in the elementary schools should be evaluated according to the 'authenticity' of the art products (Gouvernement du quebec, Note 1). Curriculum planners were trying to relate 'authenticity' with what could be realistically tended toward in the classroom. Art educators were at a loss to provide an example of what 'authentic' child art could be, and I found myself with a ground for the project I shall now briefly describe.

Convinced that only by attending to the individual child's artmaking process would a better understanding be found, I decided to meet weekly with one group of children, from the time they began kindergarten until they had completed third year elementary school, and to gather in as aesthetic a manner as possible "evidence" of that process. Previous experience in public schools as art teacher to children of all ages had made me aware of the importance of competency with tools and materials for children in their imagemaking and had enabled me to acquire a certain competency in the sequencing of these activities. I am also a parent. My experience in meticulously documenting each of my three children's art processes has shown me, on the other hand, that more important than the acquisition of technical skill to the quality of this process are: (1) the fit between the child and the situation, that is, the way the child interprets and appropriates certain aspects of the art making context, (2) whether the child has established an ongoing dialogue with a medium in such a way as to belong with it. . . this implies a necessary choosing on the part of the child, (3) how the medium works for the child and discloses to him or her, his or her own mythic tale. While my pedagogical values favour a more child-centered than discipline-centered approach, the necessity of a long-term rapport with the school milieu within which I was working precluded the "atelier libre" format I was able to achieve at home with my children. From within the home workshop it was possible to learn more about the

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actual diversity of each child, while in the school, I learned how each child's diversity manifests itself in the classroom. Over 3½ years an art series of 150–200 pieces was produced by each of the children in my school art room. What I learned about the children, myself, and the nature of art in the school by way of this privileged and engaging relationship, is more than I can probably ever tell.

Equally special was the process of documenting the sessions and the art work. Each week after class, now alone in a strangely silent space, I began the ritual of photographing the children's work, placing it carefully in folders or on shelves, listening to the tape-recording of the session. . . hearing the voices (theirs and mine) in conversations I had not before perceived. . . jotting in my journal a few reflections, questions or suggestions to myself for the next class. This handling of the children's work. . . arranging it under the lights, distancing the tripod, focusing the camera. . . , then putting it on display, . . . this could not be done rapidly. It was at this moment each week, when in the absence of the children but in the presence of their artifacts, I attended to their "makings" while still suffused with the intensity of the group's energetic and enthusiastic participation in this particular event. Each child became progressively more visible to me through the revelation of his or her very different relationship with the world.

As I got deeper into the project, I was confronted with the growing problem of finding a model of research that adequately fulfilled my goal of disclosure of individual meaning. There seemed to be little in art education research, either conceptually or methodologically, which gave a compatible philosophical ground for the nature of my inquiry. It was with great interest that I followed a suggestion made to me by Elizabeth Sacca to contact Patricia Carini, Director of The Prospect Archive of Children's Work, The Prospect Institute for the Study of Meaning and the founder of the Prospect School. While participating in the Prospect's Summer Institutes on inquiry, I came to know an important network of educators and researchers (most of whom publish with The North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation on the University of North Dakota) who are concerned with the elementary school and the larger social issues around it. Pat Carini has developed an approach to research that shows how gathered empirical material can disclose meaning. In her "Observation and Description: An Alternative Methodology for the Investigation of Human Phenomena" Pat says:

The phenomenological orientation, whether as philosophic outlook or method of inquiry, cannot be formulated in models, nor can it insure uniformity, 'product', or efficiency. It seeks responsibility and articulatedness in carrying through a process of reflection, and it seeks responsiveness in constituting personal settings. . . settings in which the points of view and thoughts of persons are extended and deepened. (p. 42)

This has been one of the underlying themes of Kenneth Beittel's writing in art education for the past decade. As early as 1973, he hinted that the main difference between himself and other researchers of the art-making process (he singles out particularly Lowenfeld, Schaefer-

Simmern and Arnheim), is that he has more patience before the elusive quality of the art process and is less ready to subscribe to the notion of 'types' to describe the phenomenon.

I also found a model for description and interpretation of lived experience in Cathy Mullen Brooks' hermeneutic of a childhood art series. In it, she points to the dynamic tension of the child's personal intentions and those of the school, the larger community and the family.

These three sources have served as landmarks in my own journey toward articulating my research project. With the help of Cathy, I am organizing the material which has been gathered over the past four years. It remains to be seen how the boundaries of the study will establish themselves, where my eye will focus, what the work of the children will disclose to me and how I will render it visible to others.

As Merleau-Ponty (1962) pointed out, our tale is convincing to others to the degree that we are able to be with it (p. 452), and to language it well (p. 69). He also tells us that trusting our subjectivity within a situation does not preclude universals since "both universality and the world lie at the core of individuality and the subject, and this will never be understood as long as the world is made into an ob-ject" (p. 406). However, just as for little people art is a making activity, so for big people phenomenology is a doing activity. There simply is no substitute.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Gouvernement du Quebec, Minstere de l'Education, Programme d-Etudes, Primaire Art, Fevrier 1981. p. 69.
2. Carini, Patricia F. The monograph quoted was, Observation and description: an alternative methodology for the investigation of human phenomena (1975). This was followed by two other monographs: The art of seeing and the visibility of the person (1979) and The school lives of seven children: a five year study (1982).

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- Brooks, Cathy Mullen. The meaning of childhood art experiences: a dialectical hermeneutic. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1980.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. Phenomenology of Perception. London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1962.