

“A Door Inside Somebody’s Eye”:

Making a Museum in Preschool

When in a museum, walk slowly but keep walking. —Gertrude Stein

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Art and Visual Perception
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Foundations of the Museum

A small watercolor by Picasso, one of his now famous depictions of a guitar, hangs on the wall of the special exhibition galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (*Figure 1*). Of course this seems like a perfectly appropriate place for this Picasso or any Picasso, but the fact of matter is that the painting originally left Picasso's possession in an envelope addressed to a friend. Sealed in the same envelope were photographs of his current work and a personal note. The whole package was meant to cheer his friend who, by force of circumstances related to World War I, was separated from her beloved art collection. This friend loved Picasso's work before he became *Picasso*, before his name became synonymous with artistic genius. This friend had a keen eye. Her name also came to resound with genius: Gertrude Stein.

Figures like Picasso and Gertrude Stein may come to seem somehow more than human, may belong to a far removed world of ideas, abstraction, transformative vision, but only because of their potent engagement with experience. More to the point, they too slept and ate. They too saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched the world even as their work transformed and informed the way many now see and understand the world. The connection between seeing and understanding, between a sensory and perceptual activity, is a source of endless fascination. The remarkable contrast and connection between the gigantic reputation and tremendously profound creations of geniuses like Picasso and Stein and their lived experience on a human scale is the source of continual reflection about the nature of creative genius. But it also simply serves as powerful reminder of the creative potential of sensory experience. How does the felt and familiar character of

personal sensory experience, particularly visual experience, act as the source material for the “greater” visions of art?

As Rudolf Arnheim (1976) put it, “Vision is not a physical object like the eye but a mental experience, the discrepancy between the smallness of the organ and the immensity of the expanse covered by vision has been a puzzle since antiquity” (p. xiv). Arnheim composed this statement as part of his forward to *Vision and Artifact*, a collection of papers presented to him in recognition of the tremendous contribution he has made to illuminating that ancient puzzle. Those papers were presented on the occasion of his 70th birthday. Even a towering figure in the world of art and psychology has a birthday. The driving concern of this essay lies with linking the smallness of particular eyes and their particular experience, birthdays and all, with the immense expanse of covered by vision—even great artistic vision like Picasso. At the heart of this essay is not Picasso’s art, however, but the artful activity of group of people who many not quite comprehend the intricacies of Arnheim’s scholarship or Picasso’s “genius” but nonetheless manage to illuminate it through their activity. This group of people clearly comprehends the immense importance of birthdays and gifts of art between friends. Who is this collective? The 4 and 5-year-old children at the preschool in which I worked as a graduate student assistant teacher.

What do preschool children have to do with Picasso? A considered admiration for the artistic vision of young children helps to diffuse some of the blinding grandiosity of Picasso’s work. It helps us to look an arresting painting rather than a struggle to see “a Picasso.” Knowing that one is looking at a “great work of art” can induce an eerie sense of inadequacy or incompleteness in the viewer due to the tremendous pressure to see

what one is “supposed to” see. As Jonathan Fineberg (2006), who has produced powerful scholarship on the nature of children’s art, wrote, “Most of us recognize from our own experience that a variety of physical sensations defying verbalization are commonly evoked by a deep encounter with a work of art” (p. 89). Yet the pressure of presumed greatness, the pressure to see and consequently understand what one is “supposed to,” can shut off this important sensation so powerful that it defies speech.

When it comes to children and art the pressure of what they are “supposed to be” can prove damaging. Just as this force may blind one from seeing a Picasso, so too it may dangerously obstruct one’s vision of child—and the child’s own vision. To impose the pressure of what children’s artistic expression is “supposed to be” or to remove art from children’s experience altogether is to fail to respect their whole being. We are whole in every moment even as experience may transform us from one moment to the next. Art is essential to human development and thus especially essential to a child’s development. As Arnheim (1986), a strong advocate for art education in the progressive, developmental-interaction model, wrote in an essay entitled “The Perceptual Challenge in Art Education,” “Children cannot get a grip on what they cannot comprehend, and when they cannot comprehend they can only shut themselves off. But it is precisely this shutting off they we are trying to undo” (pp. 238-239). Art acts as a necessary tool for comprehension of experience because it engages the child’s whole being. Arnheim (1986) wrote, “One of the things a youngster needs to learn is that few efforts are worth while unless he fully invests his mental and physical powers in them” (p. 234). Artistic effort demands the investment the child’s whole being, of his or her “mental and physical power.” It creates the opportunity for the sensation created by a “deep encounter” with a

work of art that Fineberg described. By engaging the child's whole self, the child feels the creative potential of pushing themselves to their limits.

Consequently children's artwork must not be seen as somehow lacking, but as an invention and expression of their developmental stage, as a hard-won achievement: "If the child makes a circle stand for a head, that circle is not given to him in the object. It is a genuine invention, an impressive achievement, at which the child arrives only after laborious experimentation" (Arnheim 1976, p. 168). To see it as a "simple circle" as a sub-par depiction of a human head is to miss the impressive effort of the process of creation entirely, to fail to see the child. A child may not produce a masterpiece nor should they. A child's artistic activity expresses an experience of virtuosity all their own. As Arnheim (1976) explained, "At the highest levels, masters of 'linear style,' such as Picasso and Matisse, move with unswerving precision along a contour that captures all the subtleties of muscle and bone. But considering the basis on which a child operates, even the earliest applications of the method require courage, virtuosity and a differentiated sense of shape" (p.191). It is in the intensity and investment in the activity itself, in the work of creation that great artists like Picasso and Matisse connect with even the youngest children—even preschoolers.

Preschoolers need art and Picasso and Matisse also need preschoolers. The genuine effect and sincere investment that a young child displays when he sits down to paint or draw or sculpt infuses even the "great" work of Picasso and Matisse with an arresting, comprehensible and even pleasurable energy. Both artists revered the creative and artistic energy of children. Employing "naïve," childlike motifs in his work, Matisse is rumored to have created a *salon des enfants* (Fineberg 1997, p. 14). He entitled his

career retrospective “Looking at Life with the Eyes of a Child.” Matisse was also a friend of Gertrude Stein, her brother Leo and their extended family—as he was friends with Picasso. At the encouragement of the Steins he opened an art academy that he operated according to principles that Arnheim and other advocates of a developmental-interaction approach to art education would surely have approved. As another friend of the Steins and Picasso, a student of Matisse, and an artist in her own right, Anna Rosenshine, observed, “Matisse was disappointed if the students were merely following in his footsteps. He struggled desperately for his own artistic freedom and was not interested in creating little Matisses but wished his pupils to find their own artistic expression” (“The Steins Collect” Exhibit). Matisse understood that development is personal and individual, successful educational practices essentially guide students through the struggle to discover their “own artistic freedom.” Matisse’s paintings are creations of stunning artistry but his personal pedagogy acknowledged the artistry within the process itself, the artistry of a deep engagement with experience. Of Picasso Fineberg (1997) writes, “Picasso never made direct use of any motifs from children’s drawings in his own work. He was, however, exceedingly interested in how children see and in the processes by which they create; he observed them at work with rapt attention” (p. 120). Both of these artists and friends were drawn to the world of children, fascinated by how they perceived and created. The world of childhood and great art connect in a profound reverence for process.

Though children served as a source of inspiration and investigation for Matisse and Picasso they also provided fuel for their critics. While many celebrated the childlike quality of their work, there were (and are) those who considered such a description

insulting. For example, Matisse's work was called "childish and ridiculous!" by an enraged fellow artist (Fineberg 1997, p. 14). While such debates may belong to a wider conversation concerning taste and temperament, it speaks to a wide spread resistance to feeling and intuition as a source of knowledge and skill. Matisse and Picasso's reverence for process as displayed by the child's inherent creative energy supports not only a reverence for process but by extension a reverence for intuition.

Intuition and vision are intimately connected. Intuition, that profoundly personal feeling or inclination that defies articulation, finds itself best expressed in the form of art. Children act as a source of fascination for artists because they cannot help but depend upon their intuition. Werner Spies (1994) writes of Picasso's fascination with children, "Modern artists sought to shed their sophistication and see the world with fresh eyes, adopting the values and meanings that children bring to experience and a source of originality and stylistic freedom. The beginnings of this way of seeing reality in unfamiliar and exotic terms can be traced back to the Romantic era" (p.11). Fineberg (1997) expands on this point and this problem in regard to Picasso:

It is by now a cliché in art history to say that every vanguard artist sees things in a way that differs—often disconcertingly—from the way "most people" see them. But nothing could be more shocking than to reveal what all the forces of civilization...have systematically undertaken to repress in the adult unconscious, namely the frank sexuality, aggression, and possessiveness of the young child that lives on hidden in all of us. The more profound Picasso became in revealing the persistence of such inner forces the more he was dismissed by his viewers as a "child." (p. 128)

Perhaps it is the darker "childlike" quality of Picasso's work that makes it, at times, somehow less pleasurable to take in than Matisse's arresting naiveté. But what is so threatening so polarizing about a childlike quality no matter how it manifests itself? In Fineberg's (1997) words:

It is by now commonplace to recognize the freshness of vision that children possess and how it often “innocently” reveals profound insights. Moreover, we admire child art for its expressive directness and its ability to communicate to a wide range of viewers. But aren’t these characterizing traits of child art also the qualities for which we praise the great paintings in museums? Yet no aspect of modern art has elicited more anger from its defenders and its alienated viewers alike than the sense that it looks in some way like what children do. (p. 21)

Some of this anger and frustration connected to children and their fresh, “innocent eyes” seems to stem from the fact that children “don’t know what they’re doing” (Apollinaire qtd. in Fineberg 1997, p. 15). Yet a look a children’s creative process reveals acting according to unconscious intuition demands its own sort of rigor that deserves a respected position alongside the intentional application of refined artistic skill.

Of course it is the intentional application of skill that separates a preschooler from Picasso. E.H. Gombrich (1993) clarifies this distinction:

You know that I do not believe in the innocent eye. If somebody brings me a painting and says: my twelve-year-old son painted this, my attitude will be very different from what it would be if they said Albrecht Durer painted it. I cannot help it. One would be inhuman if one did not react to what one knows is worthy of attention.... I do believe a great work of art strikes a subtle balance between what seems too obvious and what seems too difficult.... (p.170-171)

Children’s art holds a polarizing position in regard to questions of great art because it confuses this sense of balance. Like great art their work is both obvious and difficult but this arresting balance was produced by largely as a function of their temperament and developmental moment. It is even difficult to apply such terms as “difficult” or “obvious” since both apply to children’s work in such a particular way. Still, children use all of their available resources to produce art—limited though they might be. Yet we must return again to the paradoxical limitations imposed upon our visual perception when confronted with “great art,” how when we look at a Picasso and feel a strange panic as we search for

what we are meant to see. Why is it that panic over what we are supposed to see may be more palpable than the painting before us? Why is it so hard to accept or even identify what we do see and feel?

Such questions speak to a discomfort with and resistance to the work of intuition. Children's art and a childlike quality in great art may appear wonderful and threatening depending upon one's relationship with intuition. Dealing with intuition is difficult. Intuition renders us vulnerable, as it demands that we confront the limitations of our knowledge and ability. Whether produced by a child or great artists, art reveals the vast potential of serious engagement with the depths of intuition. Children's comfort with their intuitive capacity deserves to be nurtured. Yet, as Arnheim (1986) writes:

I have it on good authority that there are educators who neglect or even despise intuition. They are certain that the only way of acquiring solid and useful knowledge is the way of the intellect, and that the only mental arena in which the intellect can be trained and applied is that of verbal and mathematical language. (p.13)

Discomfort with intuition appears to be a struggle with translation. It is difficult to translate what is felt into words. Intuition demands that we think in the evocative language of vision and images that we engage with what Arnheim termed "Visual Thinking." This is difficult for adults who may become distracted by the imperfection of their "translation." Children, on the other hand, demonstrate their comfort with such translation through the satisfaction they display with their "imperfect" drawings and paintings. As Arnheim (2006) writes, "The child spontaneously accepts the image as an enlightening equivalent of the model, created with the conditions of a particular medium. The child understands the nature of translation and has no trouble practicing it" (p. 22). Trouble does arise if the adults responsible for the child impose the pressure of what their

translation is “supposed to” be. Children are just as “human” as the great Gombrich and thus hardly immune to the influence of knowledge. Thus it is the essential responsibility of adults and teachers to respect and cultivate children’s remarkable intuitive capacity—that links them to the world of art.

Neither children nor art are easily understood. Perhaps this is why some do battle with their intuitive natures by imposing linear, more comprehensible intellectual structure. As Arnheim (1986) put it, “Intuition is much less easily understood because we know it mostly by its achievements, whereas its modes of operation tends to elude awareness. It is a like a gift from nowhere and therefore has sometimes been attributed to superhuman inspiration or, more recently, to inborn instinct” (p. 15-16). He proceeds to explain that intellect needs intuition:

Intuition compliments the [thought] process by grasping the whole structure in simultaneity and seeing each component in its place of a total hierarchy...From the sum of these linear connections the intellect could derive a pattern as a whole, the way a blind man explores the shape of an object with a stick. That would be the price to be paid if productive thinking were to forgo the help of intuition. (Arnheim 1986, p. 21)

By aligning intuition with sight, Arnheim emphasizes the intuitive essence of our perceptual capacity. Intellectual analysis would prove diffuse and useless without the intuitive vision of a whole. Yet, in Arnheim’s (1969) exceptionally useful words, “The battle against one-sided intellectualism cannot be fought by nourishing a Romantic prejudice against the sciences as agents of mechanization” (p. 296). We must strive to connect, to see and treat each other as creatures of intellect and intuition. This is especially important when it comes to children. While the uses of science may be clear, less clear but no less important are the uses of art. One realm does not diminish the other. Rather, they enhance each other. How odd and frustrating that the artistic and intuitive

realm should need defense. Why do some insist on perceiving only part of experience and resist the whole?

Art is especially effective at nurturing a person's whole, intellectual, intuitive, sensory being. Children's "innocence," complex (and perhaps specious) as it is, might be best understood as the evidence of a stage where they had not yet developed the capacity to be anything other than what they are. It takes a great measure of devotion and courage to see someone for what they are or something for what it is. Art affirms the infinite and, at times, frankly intimidating variety such an effort illuminates. As Arnheim (1969) writes, "But art not only exploits the variety of appearances, it also affirms the validity of individual outlook and thereby admits a further dimension of variety... Both art and science are bent on the forces that shape existence, and both call for an unselfish dedication to what is" (p. 300). This unselfish dedication must persist day-to-day. No wonder we flinch from intuition, no wonder we fail to see the whole; such an undertaking is as exhausting as it is worthwhile.

Such an undertaking is worthwhile because it is absolutely fundamental. Intuition, rooted in sensory experience, is the ground of our being and thus deserves respect. Children's creative comfort with intuitive vision also deserves respect and consideration. Thus it is, as Arnheim (1986) said, "high time to rescue intuition from its mysterious aura of 'poetical' inspiration" (p. 16). Intuition, this "gift from nowhere," deserves a place here on the ground. The purpose of this essay is not to compare the differing nature of a artist's depths and a child's profound, playful creative capacity—I'll leave it Rudolf Arnheim and Jonathan Fineberg to navigate that lovely yet thorny comparison—but to affirm the potency of work of intuition in a child's experience. By doing so I hope to

affirm the need for art in any classroom, any space occupied by children; I hope to affirm the need to recognize art as fundamental part of human experience, not a world above and apart. To turn to Arnheim one last time: “Perhaps the arts have been prevented in our time from fulfilling their most important function by being honored too much. They have been lifted out of the context of daily life, exiled by exultation, imprisoned by awe-inspiring treasure-houses” (p. 295). Out of this conviction, I decided to build a museum with preschool children. I hoped to locate a whole world of artful wonder in the familiar context of the classroom. I believed making a museum with preschool children would reveal the awe-inspiring treasure-house that is the variety of their personal, intuitive visions.

Thanks to Gertrude Stein’s intuition a vast collection dominated by Matisse and Picasso hangs in the galleries at the MET as the special exhibition “The Stein’s Collect: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde.” Upon entering the exhibit a visitor reads Gertrude Stein’s remark, “It is very difficult now that everybody is accustomed to everything to give some idea of the uneasiness once felt when one first looked at these pictures on the walls” (“The Steins Collect” Exhibit). Yet something drew Gertrude, her brother Leo, and their extended family to it. The wonderful thing about this exhibit is in the way it places great art in the context of the day-to-day life of family and friends. Certainly this was a remarkable family with remarkable passion, certainly they supported and cultivated a remarkable collection of art and forged friendships with remarkable artists, but the at once familiar and mysterious force of love and friendship is apparent. Art in this context rescues it from “poetic heights.” Art begins to speak in a new way. Suddenly one of Picasso’s guitars becomes a gift to a friend.

Children make and give art as gifts to the parents, friends, and teachers almost every day. Such an act communicates what words can't. Art stands as a testament to human efforts of affection and comprehension for adults and children alike. For better and worse, museums stand an expression of reverence for such efforts. By proposing that we make a museum I hoped to communicate my reverence for the children's efforts and affirm the importance of their intuitive visions.

Inside the Museum

As one of the children asked as we discussed our plans to make a museum, "Why is art fragile?" This question came after a discussion about what a museum is, an attempt on my part to gauge whether they would like to make one. I wondered if I stood on fragile ground. I needed the children to demonstrate a willingness to participate so that I was not simply imposing upon them and their most artful activity: their play. My greatest hope was that they would integrate the project I proposed into their play. Trusting the children, their vision and intuition, lay at the heart of this project and, luckily for me, at the heart of this preschool. I had firm ground to stand on, a place that embraced the fragile, ethereal quality of children's artful play as demanding firm respect, nurture and cultivation. Over the course of the year teaching in the classroom, I had learned to demonstrate that trust but expressing my sincere interest in the children's perspective and activity. Such respect for the children provides a foundation upon which they can create and grow. For the children to willingly participate in making a museum I knew that I had to present the project to them clearly and honestly, acknowledging that it was an idea I had not something they were "supposed to" do, and see what they thought. Motivated in part by my own disappointment in the tone of "supposed to" that dominates much museum

literature aimed at children, I embarked on this project to see what the children saw, to watch and listen to them.

The particular courage of children's willingness to help, to share what they think, what they have done, what they have made, is wonderful to behold. It reveals itself when they are freed of the panic over some vague notion of how they are "supposed to" be and invited to share what they are. (The vagueness of the imposing pressure of "supposed to" is what proves damaging. Of course children need to learn how they are supposed to treat each other. A teacher demonstrates their respect by teaching them what to do, expressing trust through clarity, but that is for another essay.) I'm speaking in terms of ideals, but I want to emphasize how the most exciting aspect of the way children express of themselves when they have been invited to trust their intuition is that what they say and do will be so particular that it, like a great and famous painting, will appear as a revelation—even if it's not entirely unexpected.

I first asked if they knew what a museum is. The answers were both clear and grounded in their experience. One boy explained, "I've been to the spiral Guggenheim Museum and they have a lot of paintings and drawings." A girl synthesized this information and declared, "A museum is something where there's art." Clear as these statements were, the group appeared disinterested in these broad statements. Another girl had been waiting to speak, raising her hand with a look of earnest concern. She added this important point: "But you can't touch the walls or the paintings or the statues." This observation enlivened the group: "It's fragile! If you touch it it breaks!" "The paintings would fall!" "If you touch it you have to build it again. But I don't know how!" "A guard will say, 'Do not touch!'" Speaking from experience in museums and from the intimate

relationship with sensory experience that exists at their developmental stage, the most potent characteristic of a museum was the strict limits it imposes on sensory experience for the sake of the art. Necessary though we know these are, the children's intuitive focus and frank sense of alarm at art's (seeming) removal from daily, sensory life in to "treasure-houses" provides a wonderful affirmation of Arnheim's concern that art may have become "too honored." However, the children did not rebel or dismiss the Do-Not-Touch rule, but insisted upon it even as they worried over it. It was at this moment that the boy I mentioned asked his question, "Why is art fragile?" Again the children responded with accurate reasonable answers about how it could be damaged, but I heard Arnheim in his voice. Why, oh why, why is art fragile? Why does art, especially the great art in museums, feel so far beyond our grasp?

I put great art into the children's grasp to see what they would see. I showed them paintings from "The Steins Collect" at the MET and asked them what they saw. I hoped to discover what they intuited by viewing an image, whether they strove to perceive a gestalt. But, as Arnheim had well observed, language can fail us in the realm of intuition. Gertrude Stein found her way around this challenge, but how would children's language express a sense of their intuition? Much as adults may be more comfortable with language and its linear properties, language can prove difficult for children. They often show a great reluctance to put words to an image—it's difficult. From an educational perspective this process provides an important intellectual challenge, but it is also an important intuitive challenge. At it's best, asking children to describe and articulate what they see and experience inspires a process of integrating many levels of experience—it can do what art does and demand they draw upon physical, mental, and emotional

capacities. It can be poetry. If I hoped to hear children's poetry, I had to practice the respectful restraint I had learned from the master teacher of my classroom at the preschool. I had to suspend concern over what the children were supposed to see and ask them what they did see.

Whether naming parts or offering a whole name, a title, for the painting before them, it was clear that the children were puzzling out the whole picture. Language did fail in a sense because certain statements by the children don't capture the whole of their expression. Even if they named one piece of a painting it was clearly an attempt to place that piece in relation to the whole. There were moments of poetry. One that stands out concerns the small watercolor Picasso sent to Gertrude Stein (*Figure 1*). The children offered the following descriptions:

"It looks like a heart."

"A door right on top of a kite."

"It looks like a square guitar."

"A door inside somebody's eye."

In these descriptions we can hear the children's willing acceptance of their intuition. Unlike the "uneasiness" Picasso created in his early viewers according to Gertrude Stein, children in their early years embraced this strange image and celebrated its possibility. They enjoyed the work of trying to see what it was they were looking at. Art has the unique ability to cultivate this creative work, this productive willingness, as it presents possibility unconstrained by the rules of reality. Arnheim continually observes the quality of art in his writing. Gertrude Stein offers a wonderful articulation of this phenomenon as it relates to Picasso and children:

A child sees the face of its mother, it sees it in a completely different way than other people see it...the child for a little while only sees a part of the face of its mother, it knows one feature and no another, one side and not the other, and in this way Picasso knows faces as a child knows them...Really most of the time one sees only a feature of a person with whom one is, the other features are covered by a hat, by the light, but clothes for sport and everybody is accustomed to complete the whole from their knowledge, but Picasso when he saw the eye, the other did not exist for him...so the cubism of Picasso was an effort to make a picture of these visible things and the result was disconcerting for him and others...(Stein qtd. in Fineberg 1997, p. 128)

The many different visible pieces the children saw in Picasso's painting speaks to how many parts of experience they're trying to put together in a whole picture. To look at Picasso's small guitar and call it "A door inside somebody's eye" speaks to the puzzling paradox of visual perception: a small organ opens up worlds of possibility. Discussing what they saw soon developed into attempts to assign titles to the paintings by Picasso and Matisse. Of Picasso's portrait of Stein (*Figure 2*) a child declared that it should be called, "So Dark In the Darkness and the Lights Are Off and He Is a Little Kid." To another she was "A Man Sitting On the Couch Getting Ready For School." Another said, "She looks like a god or a vampire." How strange and marvelous that all of the language produced by the children upon seeing that image could be considered poetic meditation on Gertrude Stein, a poet and writer they had yet to encounter. By placing these images of art before them and asking them to speak, we caught a glimpse of what lay behind the doors in their eyes.

Even as art acts to affirm and cultivate one's intuition, it reminds us of the infinity variety of visions, that each person is particular. What's behind the "door in somebody's eye" must ultimately remain mysterious to someone on the outside. Arnheim draws upon this reality to warn us against imposing weighty interpretations on children's

art. Similarly, it is important not to read weighty interpretations into the children's poetic language (though it certainly invites it) but, for now at least, to put that aside and see their words as signals of something more. As Howard Gardiner (1976), in a paper from the collection created to celebrate Arnheim's 70th birthday, insists, this is the most appropriate way to handle language as it relates to art:

[V]erbal labels can provide useful supplements, directing the viewer toward points worthy of his consideration, helping to explicate the significance of elements that have been but dimly discerned. The shortest distance of effective communication is not a direct or literal line, however. Metaphors, personifications, and other figures of speech may well succeed in conveying a crucial point in an especially succinct and effective manner. Particularly in the arts the connotative and allusive qualities of language constitute a rich resource for the sensitive teacher or writer.
(p. 113)

Deeply immersed in the sensory and intuitive realm, a child seems instinctively able to use language in a figurative manner. The question of intention aside, children's language, expressed freely, may illuminate what might only be "dimly discerned." It may also be remarkably evocative. The names the children gave to their museum's galleries illuminated an important facet of their art ("Spongy Sprout Town" or "Color Group") or evoked wider experience ("Colored Town, Beautiful City" or "Looks Like a Garden"). The titles they chose for their paintings did the same.

Interestingly, Gardiner is referring to an exhibit at the Minneapolis Art Institute that compared fakes with the "real" paintings. As we noted earlier the polarizing notion of the "innocent eye" causes children to live forever caught in this comparison, their "reality" questioned or championed. Work making the museum revealed that children exhibited an awareness of this comparison. They eventually insisted that I tell them what the "real" artist called their painting. Though they exhibited comfort and satisfaction with

their own art, one child remarked of his painting “it looks really real” then looked at me for approval. It’s forbidden for teachers to draw for the children at this preschool for it damages their own sense of agency and deprives them of the problem-solving opportunity afforded by composing a work of art as a translation of reality. If a visitor to the classroom inadvertently violates this pedagogical guideline and does begin to draw, many children abandon their own work and make requests of the visiting “artist.”

Children are keenly aware that they are children after all. This means that they know there are many things that they are not. They live in a world of comparison. One child remarked while working on a painting, “I’m going to be an artist soon. Except I don’t live in France and artists usually say, ‘*Bonjour!*’” Where does this cultural capital come from? How had the presence of the Parisian Avant-Garde infiltrated his psyche? Lovely as this remark is in many, many respects, it also speaks to how the pressure of the confining comparison between who they are and who they are “supposed to be” exists in the experience of the child. The playful activity of art offers a means through which children can access the sense of agency to compose their own vision of who they are and what their experience is. In this sense, the force of comparison can be creative. As Gardiner (1976) writes, “When there is no change, no discrepancy, no gap, not perceived distinctions, we cannot learn” (p. 113). By acknowledging the dark side of comparison, the world of “supposed to,” we see how important it is to ensure that comparisons unlock potential rather than prove discouraging through an emphasis on what one is not. The work of making a museum demanded that the children’s art and artful language be treated as markers of possibility, doors to something more. I believe that affirming their potential in this way would illuminate both the children and the art.

When the children agreed that museums had art I asked them that big question: “What is art?” They offered me two definitions then dropped the topic because they wanted to make art. The first: “Art is when you paint something.” The second: “It’s a feeling.” I could not have asked for more; I suppose I got these answers because I didn’t. When the children painted something they did it with feeling. I wish I could describe in words the children’s immersion in their work. It was important and absorbing, it meant something to them, but we can only guess what. Perhaps it is most accurate to write that the children were *in* it. As Arnheim (2006) put it, “[T]he child is...remote from the romantic sensibility of the adult, who savors all this motion as an image of creative energy in action” (p.21). The most powerful observation we can make is that it did, as Arnheim argues, integrate their whole being. By following their intuition and engaging with art the doors in their eyes opened up and integrated experience, pulling together the sensory and mental, the intuitive and intellectual. This is the work of a fleeting moment. That’s why children need the chance to make art over and over again.

They also need the chance to experiment with material, to discover the possibility of different media. While the children loved to paint with the familiar watercolors and tempera paints always available to them, while they loved to draw with trusty crayons, being confronted with new materials or processes afforded the opportunity for discovery and reflection. One child more comfortable in the realm of language, who will willingly turn words over and over, rejected the patient process of visual discovery demanded by drawing with white crayon on white paper then painting over it with watercolor. We can see her abandonment in *Big Stomper Feet (Figure 3)*. It’s a wonderful title though. She wanted to make a clear statement in her painting and with her words. They do fit together

perfectly. Though this wasn't a "wild artistic" process, she did confront her self and sensibility; her intuition and intellect had a useful, if brief, collaboration. On the other hand, another child loved this activity and asked visitors to the museum to see the process behind his painting *Me When I Just Ate Really Messy Food* (Figure 4): "When I was drawing I thought of that. I want everyone to see that I used a white crayon and put paint on top." The painting itself offers its own description. A vision of dynamic process, it is a world of action, experience and a world of color. *Me When I Just Ate Really Messy Food* speaks to all our senses, speaks in the visual language that evokes intuition and imagination. It demonstrates how vision opens up a door to taste, smell, sound, and touch. More than that, the intuitive integration of this sensory experience through the composition of an image has a more direct emotional and imaginative impact than any isolated part.

When the children were given the opportunity to paint in black and white, most briefly enjoyed the discovery of gray tones then moved on. One remained painting for the duration of the school day, at least 45 minutes, however. He offered another remarkable glimpse into the deep integration of experience, the profound and profoundly useful engagement with intuition afforded by art. In his *Four Bunches Paintings* (Figure 5) we see an intense engagement with a particular medium. Every one captures a slightly different quality of light, color, and motion. Every one demanded that the child discern a moment when it was time to stop. For the first three this was dictated by a combination of his own aesthetic and physical judgment: he liked how it looked and he needed a break. In the last painting, however, it was dictated by the medium. He stopped when he sensed the paper was about to give out. We can see the heavy working over of the brush, how the

black and gray paint was mixed and mixed together to form a gray mist. His own words provide a clear and remarkable expression of the nature of the work of intuition and within the creative limits of a particular medium: “I just knew I was going to paint this painting.” Adding later, “When I got the big brush I knew it.”

This was a school that values art so creating pieces for the museum was a familiar process for the children. Ultimately the children revealed the problematic formal remove of museums as “treasure-houses” through their intense sensory engagement with the process of art making. The classroom is not a museum, but a workshop that fits the ideals and ethics of the Bauhaus. How wonderful to look upon classrooms for young children as a place where such aspirations may be realized and sustained. While I hoped to do my best to cultivate a kind of collective investment in the children’s “workshop-museum,” the children did that themselves. I originally proposed that we make a museum about children, hoping that this would act as an expression of trusting affirmation and inspiration. But this was too confining and interpretive. They wanted to make their art, art that concerned rhinos, nighttime, parks, sun, rainbows, dogs, horses, and Batman. There was, of course, more to them than some vague notion of what being a child was “supposed to” be. My flawed plan, a plan against my own interest, was rejected and the children took over, salvaging my own process with theirs.

Moreover, the children expressed a willingness not just to connect with art and the process of making it, but with each other. While they mostly understood art as painting, while it was simply more practical to preserve and display their paintings for the museum, one child did suggest we make cactuses out of clay. This followed on the heels of our discussion of museums as places where one cannot touch. How fascinating and

wonderful that a child would then propose a plan that required her class to use touch to make form. Art became intensely and especially graspable, tangible. How remarkably considerate that she picked the form of a cactus, an accessible yet potent and interesting form, a form that fit the medium, a form that screams “Do not touch!” yet evokes the sensation of touch all the same. The class enjoyed an afternoon of cactus making (*Figure 6*). It was a pleasure to watch the child who proposed the plan realize her intuitive vision. Another remarkable illustration of the children’s intuitive capacity to integrate experience, this illustrated clearly the integrative and multi-faceted nature of the senses. Sight evoked touch that includes kinesthetic movement. Action created a vision that evoked intellectual, intuitive contemplation. What a wonderful process.

To be frank, there was one vision on the walls of the museum that made every adult visitor gasp. (It’s hard to say if the children noticed anything extraordinary. For the artist himself, it was all in a day’s work.) This was the drawing *Batman Curses the Wind* (*Figure 7*). Being breathtaking, it defies description. The drawing bears the earmarks of classic children’s art: circles for hands, a circle head, the swirls of descriptive motion, the developing differentiation of parts. But what we feel, what we intuit, is an awe-inspiring sense of deep engagement. We feel the genuine devotion of the artist. We admire the creative dialog between the drawing’s “imperfect” nature and potent expression. As Arnheim (2006) put it, the “imperfection” of children’s drawings serves “as a lively illustration between the relation between abstract perfection and human endeavor, between rigid geometry and the spontaneity of muscular freedom—an attractively human charm that has not been lost on our artists” (p.21). The sense of striving communicated by this image is both palpable and pleasurable. The colors are also somehow alive and

active. The green grass is perhaps simply accurate if delightfully exaggerated, but the fact that Batman and the wind are both blue is wonderful and fascinating. The artist spoke to this to some degree in his commentary: “He’s frustrated because the wind is changing the color of his cape. Batman is saying, ‘That darn wind!’” The speech bubble in the drawing is meant to read, “Darn!” Language reduces the expressive quality of this work. It’s meant to be intuited. Through crayon and marker this young artist expressed what he thought and felt. The expression on Batman’s face is so particular and so incredible. How did this child capture that in crayon? This image is a gift to the eye and all the senses. It grabs us and pulls us in. This child meant what he drew and he drew what he meant.

The palpable quality of great art, what grabs us and draws us in, has to do with the way it exists on the limits of human vision and ability. Children’s art and artistic process proves particularly arresting because the confrontation with limits is especially clear. The lovely, creative, emotional quality of the “imperfect” nature of children’s has everything do it with the reflection upon human limitation such a vision demands. By engaging with art and the process of art making we throw our whole selves into the project of creation and reach for more. Amazingly, that vast unspecified more can be accessed by striving to see clearly, precisely and with a revitalizing honesty that cannot help but bind sensory experience, intuition, and intellect to imagine a vivid whole. The more familiar such a process is, the more we engage with art the more we might see and learn.

In an early discussion related to the museum, I read a picture book by Leo Lionni entitled *Pezzettino*. The main character of the book is an orange square named Pezzettino, Italian for “little piece.” He is convinced that he is missing piece from some larger creature so he asks the larger creatures, all composed of many little colored squares, if he

is their missing piece. Each one responds with some version of the rhetorical question “How could I be myself if I had a piece missing?” Finally, Pezzettino travels to the Island of Wham where he trips on a rock and smashes into many little pieces. When he puts himself together he joyfully realizes, “I am myself!” and happily returns to his friends. The children listened especially carefully to this story. They never questioned an orange square as the central character or any of the other abstract, geometric creatures. They continued to pull the book off the shelf and reflect on it in the days that followed. It seems that there is something especially compelling about searching for a whole. Perhaps even more amazing was Pezzettino’s declaration, “I am myself!” I have no way of knowing what the children were really reacting to, but my guess is that through art and story, through the experience the words and pictures expressed, the children intuited meaningful notions of searching and wholeness.

Children wrestle with these notions; art offers an important means to support this process without shutting it off through confining declarations of what it should be, but striving to see what it is. As we made the museum, I showed the children the Renoir painting *Girl with a Watering Can* (Figure 8). One child declared that the painting should be called, “The Baby Is Lost” or “The Girl Is Alone.” While one cannot help but hear the emotional weight of these titles, cannot but hear his temperament speak, the important thing is that he engaged with this image with his whole self. What he needs respect for his effort at expression, respect for his intuition. By offering such respect and affirmation he may come to express more than himself or rather to see how he may transform his personal intuition into a broader vision. Perhaps this sense of respect for his endeavor to navigate the world may help him to feel a bit less lost—if that is in fact what he feels.

Though the notion of a museum has a confining and defining formality, I hope it imparted a message of respect for the children's intuition.

One More Museum

I am constantly amazed by how efforts of expression are so often efforts of affection. Knowing that Picasso's guitar was a gift to Gertrude Stein makes me love a painting I originally did not particularly like. Much as children throw themselves into the process of art making, they also love to give their art to others. The generous impulse inspired by the act of creation can't be denied or diminished. Certainly it may grow clouded and complicated when tangled in social strife, but the impulse to share what one has made appears to be fundamental and, to my mind, fundamentally good.

In the best sense, museums are places where art comes together to be shared. Visitors share the experience of seeing the art. Children want to play, but they want even more to play together. While they make art on their own, while they may casually dash off a drawing, it's part of an effort not just to comprehend their experience but also to develop a relationship with the world and people in it. No wonder so much of their art becomes a gift. Surely this impulse deserves respect and cultivation.

In one of the earliest conversations about making a museum a boy declared, "Hey! Wait a minute! Maybe we could make a museum with the big blocks!" Another turned to me and asked, "Can you be one of the guards that say, 'Do Not Touch'?" I did and did not want to, but of course had to decline since it was more important that they execute their own plan on their own steam. They played and built a museum that day. On the last day of school many of them joined together to make another museum in the big

blocks, hanging pictures from “The Steins Collect,” Matisse and Picassos (with a few Klees thrown in as a nod to the Bauhaus), on the wooden blocks that was their museum. There were spats and fight, emotions ran high on the last day of school, but they wanted to build this museum together. Step inside the MET; it may be “treasure-house” but it is also crowded with tired, hungry, happy people. In the classroom or at the museum the useful thing is to notice that we are together. At school and at the museum we come together to see and understand. As a child once explained while he painted, “Artists never have a contest on how many paints they have in their pictures. This isn’t a contest or a game.” Seen in this respectful, collaborative light, art’s generous nature illuminates what is, imperfections and all, and creatively confronts us with our limitations in such a way that we see, we feel, we intuit what might be. As they built a museum out of blocks, the children’s eyes were looking at something very different from the observing adults’, but everyone was trying their best to take in something more.

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