



Wilson – Child Art After Modernism

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

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

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

The National Society for Education in Art and Design 1989 Conference held at the British Museum in London resulted in the publication of *Drawing Research and Development* (Thistlewood, 1992). The book reveals the growing separation between those who believe that children's imagery is from internal and personal sources and those who explain development in terms of the acquisition of cultural schemata. John Matthews (1992) and Naney Smith (1992) attended to the internal sources, while Elsbeth Court (1992) analyzed universal features and social influences in the drawings of rural Kenyan children. Taha Elatta (1992) documented the distinct patterns of design used by children and youth in different parts of the Sudan. Wilson and Ligtvoet (1992) had Dutch, American, and Italian children (in 1986) complete art assignments originally given to Dutch children in 1937 by a follower of Cizek. Focusing on schemata children used for drawing trees, we found that there were significant cultural differences among the groups of contemporary children and especially between the contemporary children and the 1937 Dutch children. [...]

Two recent anthologies, *The Cultural Context: Comparative Studies of Art Education and Children's Drawings* (Lindstrom, 2000) and *The Arts in Children's Lives: Context, Culture, and Curriculum* (Bresler & Thompson, 2002), deal specifically with the relationships among children, the arts, and culture. Just as its title applies, *The Arts in Children's Lives*, sensitively examines the complex intertextual relationships among the arts, both high and popular; development; cultural contexts; and curriculum. In both anthologies, the selection of papers and their content show a lessening of the tension between modernist/naturalist accounts of artistic development and postmodernist/cultural accounts of artistic achievement. Cultural accounts of children's lives in and out of school are beginning to feel natural." (Wilson, 2004, p. 316-317)

"Children, Art, and Visual Culture in the 21st Century

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

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

A New Paradigm: The Visual Culture of Children and Youth

[...] Modern art educators, like scientists, overlooked most of the evidence that they themselves created "natural" child art. ... In art education, we have come to a time where we must construct a new paradigm that replaces our assumptions about child art and creative expression. I wish to offer a series of propositions that might be useful in constructing the next theories – not a grand narrative, but lots of little stories – pertaining to the visual cultural education of children and youth.

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

There is nothing natural about the artlike activities of children. Art is one aspect of the vast global visual phenomenon constructed within various human cultures. It is important to note

that art teachers, pedagogues, theoreticians, psychologists, art historian; oh, and children have collaboratively constructed child art – which has become a minor aspect of visual culture. Readers will detect that here I am echoing, Barthes's (1977) claim that it is folly to believe that a text – an artwork or a visual cultural artifact – is authored by a single individual. Barthes's "death of the author" applies to the visual culture produced by young people every bit as much (perhaps more) as it pertains to the images produced by adults. Every artifact of visual culture is in actuality a tapestry of interwoven texts.

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

The Term Child Art Is Ideological

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

Every exhibition of children and youth art must be viewed as an ideological statement-if nothing more than to promote the cause of art education in the schools.

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

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

low art, popular art, and mass culture have disintegrated, and the political and ideological are as important in the visual culture of young people as aesthetic and expressive qualities once were in child art.

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

Child art has become a problematic term – Perhaps it was from the beginning. I have concluded, ironically, that the term should probably be reserved for those images children produce under the direct control of adults who engage in the kinds of preliminary motivating activities employed by Cizek, Lowenfeld, and other proponents of 'creative expression.' [...]

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

To state the obvious conclusion from my observations, stage-based developmental accounts based on a natural unfolding fail to stand up to scrutiny. Feldman (1980) has offered a brilliant theoretical and empirical critique of developmental stage theory in which he demonstrates that even with Piaget's cognitively grounded levels of map drawing – levels that are far more rigorously constructed, say than Lowenfeld's or any other stage formulation in art education – children perform in several levels simultaneously. In short, the levels do not exist; nor do stages of artistic development. Moreover, young peoples' development in the realm of visual culture is nonlinear, nonhierarchical, multidimensional, and multipurposeful (Kindler & Darras, 1997).

Young people produce visual artifacts with pencils, markers, pens, brushes, and with cameras, computers, found objects, and their bodies; and in the future, they will produce visual culture in ways that we cannot now imagine. The mastery of skills and concepts relating to new media, new art forms, digital imaging, and other emerging forms of visual culture have hardly been addressed in art education. This brings me to my next point.

The Visual Cultural Artifacts of Children and Youth Must Always Be Viewed in Relationship to Adult Visual Culture

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

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

Multiple Interpretations Based on Interests and Conflicts of Interest

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

At present, we have a growing number of theoretical constructs that may be applied to the visual cultural products of young people. Duncum's article (2001) is especially useful. Even what has been called child art is a collection of narratives, and these narratives are continually being written by a variety of groups – psychologists, art historians, teachers, researchers, advocates, anthropologists, artists, and politicians. Preschool children, elementary school age children, teenagers, I should note, have seldom been invited to create their own narratives about the visual culture they create. Nevertheless, each group creating these narratives have varying and often conflicting interests. And as I have already noted, the authors of these narratives are often unknown to one another. Psychologists and pedagogues often do not read the research conducted by individuals in other fields, and the interpretations and narratives of young people are seldom documented." (Wilson, 2004, p. 320-323)