As the title implies, the Penn State symposium on "The Visual Culture of Childhood: Child Art after Modernism," had modernist beliefs as its backdrop. When it was painted more than a century ago, the familiar but now faded modernist scenario outlined beliefs about childhood creativity and artistry in the most brilliant and seductive colors. Good modernists believed that children were innocent natural artists whose unfettered artistic originality needed protection from cultural contamination. Images from the popular visual culture exemplified the worst form of pollution and art teachers appointed themselves guardians of childhood purity. Artists and their historian chroniclers glorified the art of children because children's images appeared so unconventional, so unbound by rules. Psychologists peered through children's images to gain flickering glimpses of the pristine and unspoiled human mind. In an effort to keep children and their images pure, art teachers such as Cizek (Viola, 1936), Lowenfeld (1947), and Merema (1939) actually created the class of visual culture that we call child art. Are we now at the point where we might accept the possibility that child art was a myth created by modernism?

When, in the 1970s, modernist myths pertaining to originality and universality began to fade, the century-old beliefs surrounding children's creativity and the originality of their images were also increasingly subjected to critical scrutiny—an examination that continues (Wilson, 1974; Wilson & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 1997a, 1997b, 2004). Modernist assumptions began to lose some of their color; and the cult of individualism was challenged by collective concerns and social interests. Now, in the 21st century, and more than 3 decades after the first postmodern challenges to modernist beliefs about children and their image-making, perhaps it is time to construct a new scenario for the new postmodern play whose scripts are still being written. The symposium on the “the visual culture of childhood” provides a series of snapshots of the kinds of scripts that are being prepared collectively.

In the United States, a group of influential art educators have undertaken the task of redefining their field (Bolin & Blandy, 2003; Chapman, 2003; Duncum, 2002; Freedman, 2000; Pauly, 2003; Sullivan, 2003; Tavin, 2003; Wilson, 2003). Indeed, these theoreticians and practitioners propose that the traditional field of art education—consisting of painting, drawing, sculpture, printmaking, collage, photography, the various crafts, the design fields, and their history, philosophy, and criticism (if this were not enough)—be reconceived and expanded to include the entire realm of visual culture. In addition to the traditional categories, digital technologies, video, film, and advertising in all of their popular and not-so-popular manifestations, material objects, architecture, interior, product, and costume design as well as newer art forms such as installation and performance might be included. In effect, as Moxey (1996) writes, visual culture opens the field of art education to the possibility of attending to the "image-making capacity of human cultures in all their manifestations. On this model, visual studies would pay attention to all image-producing cultures both past and present. It would study digital and electronic imagery along with comic strips and advertisements without making qualitative distinctions between them" (p. 57).
If we art educators were to direct our critical attention to the entire range of human images, then, is there a better place to begin than with the images that children are purported to make?

The Penn State symposium on the visual culture of childhood provided an opportunity to critically examine theories and practices relating to the visual culture produced by children and youth, to report and examine research directed toward this special class of visual culture. In particular, the symposium provided an opportunity to study the pedagogical conditions that have led to the production of what modernists called child art. And now postmodernist pedagogical practices are leading to new classes of visual culture that may or may not be distinguished by the honorific term “art.” Indeed, a new critical awareness of the pedagogical conditions under which young people produce visual culture in schools, museums, and other teaching venues could lead us to question the extent to which young people actually produce the visual culture attributed to them.

The term pedagogy may be defined in a variety of ways. In its most desirable forms we might conceive of pedagogical settings consisting of communities of individuals, and the things with which they are interested in interacting, such as networks of images, artworks, artifacts, and texts. In an ideal pedagogical setting we might be expected to find an absence of rigid hierarchies of individuals and of visual cultural artifacts and texts. In other words, the values of both students and teachers would exist on a flattened plane where the interests of any individual or group within a learning community would be sufficient reason to add an idea, a text, or an artifact to the learning and creating agenda. This notion of a community of learners and creators may sound very much like the classrooms modernist art teachers tried to create. But should we not examine this assumption more closely? The visual products and interpretations made in modernist classrooms were attributed only to students—almost never to the teachers who often directed, even dictated, how the images would look. Of the postmodernist visual culture classroom, however, we have grown more wary, more critical, more suspicious. If images and interpretations are produced in communities, then to whom do we attribute those images and interpretations? To what extent was an image produced by an individual, a group, a child, an adult, a society, human nature, culture, etc.? This is the big question that might guide the reader of this selection of papers delivered at the Penn State symposium. Perhaps it would be useful to break this larger question into a set of smaller questions and issues that branch from it.

Here are some criteria that might be used to analyze and evaluate the emerging literature of children’s visual culture and the pedagogies associated with it:

Regarding any text, piece of knowledge, artifact, interpretation, event, or product emerging from a visual cultural pedagogical or research setting, we might ask, who—what individual or collection of individuals—made this, in whose interest was it made, what values and assumptions underlie its appearance and its interpretation?

Was it made by a single student, or was it made through the collaborative efforts of a group of students, the collaboration of a student or students and a teacher? Did the product result from a collaboration between or among researchers and subjects and who is credited with the creation, interpretation, or research finding?

When we examine pedagogical processes, things such as choosing, conceiving, designing, forming, negotiating, interpreting, judging, etc., which of these processes is performed almost solely by students and which by adults, which of these processes are performed jointly and equitably, and which are typically fulfilled almost exclusively by students or subjects and which by teachers or researchers?

What were the conditions under which the text or artifact was produced? Who held power, what kinds of power, and how was that power exercised? Did the thing
emerge under conditions in which the producers were actually coerced or coaxed by adults, as is the case with some modernist child art; did the image or interpretation emerge as the result of equitable negotiation and collaboration; or was the artifact or text attributable almost entirely to individual and undirected initiative? How might these various conditions affect our assessments and judgments of educational and pedagogical merit?

Regarding the interpretation of visual cultural images produced and studied in pedagogical settings, do those interpretations represent a variety of different interests, meanings, purposes, beliefs, assumptions, and values regarding children, creativity, art, and pedagogy? Are results subjected to alternative interpretations representing the interests of both young people and adults? Do interpretations reflect awareness of multiple and even opposing interests? Children's and adults' interests are often at variance, frequently remain hidden, and most will be revealed only through critical understanding of the motives and conditions under which they were produced.

Do the artifacts, texts, and their interpretations reflect a deconstruction or dissolution of hierarchies? Is one class of visual cultural artifacts deemed as educationally and pedagogically valuable and viable as any other? Are intertextual relationships between images and ideas valued and explored?

These criteria are not unlike the characterization of Reggio Emilia put forth by Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999). They see pedagogical works as the:

co-construction of knowledge and identity and opening up new possibilities for democracy [which] can be viewed as contributing to the exercise of freedom, understood in a Foucauldian sense as being able to think critically—to think opposition, to promote 'reflective indisciplinarity'—and by so doing to take more control of our lives, through questioning the way we view the world and increasing our ability to shape our own subjectivity. Thinking critically makes it possible to unmask and free us from existing discourses, concepts and constructions, and to move on by producing different ones (p. 79).

In her article Rebecca New also examines the social underpinnings that underlie Reggio Emilia's "hundred languages of children." Interestingly, images are central to several, perhaps even to a preponderance of those languages that provided a means for communication and negotiation among children and adults in Reggio Emilia's preschools and kindergartens. But with the program's strong connections to a particular society and its politics, just how portable is this pedagogy?

Surely those aspects of Reggio Emilia's pedagogy characterized by collaboration and negotiation are portable—and applicable in other settings, say in the Netherlands or the United States. And just as surely, similar forms of visual cultural collaboration emerge in other settings. Indeed it would be interesting to study the pedagogical relationships that might exist between the collaboration exemplified in the photographs of Wendy Ewald and her co-producers and the visual products of Reggio Emilia. To whom do we attribute the images made in Reggio Emilia's preschools or by Wendy Ewald and her collaborators? Are they all co-productions of adults and young people, and if so, then what are the different kinds of collaborative processes and negotiations that formed them? To what extent did young people and adults share power?

Power sharing becomes more problematic when researchers and their subjects are involved. Lynn Liben and Lisa Szechter pose fascinating issues regarding this relationship as they inquire into the nature of "children's photographic eyes." Their studies illuminate the progression of humans' realizations that photographs are versions of constructed worlds. Their studies also help us to realize how little we know regarding why some adults remain like little children, believing that there is no difference between a world and its representations—and how ineffective educational programs are in changing those beliefs.
Finally, perhaps their work might help us to see the desirability of involving subjects in the inquiry process—or at least a fuller qualitative probing of the subjects' interpretations of their own behaviors.

Studies by David Pariser, Anna Kindler, Axel van den Berg, Belidson Dias, and Wan Chen Liu serve as a model for both transcultural collaboration and inquiry. And what their studies reveal is that in different cultures a gulf separates the refined aesthetic tastes of art teachers and the children they teach—and that neither modernist nor postmodernist aesthetic tastes are widely acquired by young people, adults, or artists. Perhaps most importantly, their work provides support for the existence of an interplay between cultural biases and universal predilections in the making and judging of images. Marissa McClure Vollrath shares her experiences in opening her classroom to images and objects that children value most highly, and alerts us to how much can be learned from children when their interests and involvements within and beyond the classroom are allowed to merge.

Articles in this volume by Moniques Richard, and Steven Carpenter and Pamela Taylor suggest how necessary it has become to recognize that the children we teach live in worlds transformed by the proliferation of digital media and electronic technologies of many kinds. In doing so, they present models of pedagogical practice which recognize the permutation of identities made possible by young people's immersion in popular culture and nurtured through encounters with contemporary art. The negotiation that occurs between teachers and students in the liminal spaces created by the "digital conditions" of our lives recommends rhizomatic and nonhierarchical approaches to education, emerging from the students' engagement with ideas and practices that may well elude their teachers' areas of expertise or understanding. Stephanie Springgay provides additional perspective, situating the body at the center of the process of knowing, in relation to other bodies encountered within the spaces students inhabit.

Finally, Mary Ann Stankiewicz offers an alternative vision of the genesis of child art through an examination of its prehistory in American schools. Her attention to the gendered nature and purposes of early drawing instruction in 19th century schools suggests that the relationships between art education and identity, contemporary visual culture and curriculum, the ambitions of adults, and the cultural experience of children are deeply ingrained in the practices of art education.

References


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