

## **Critical Coalitions in Play**

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The theme of Volume 31 of the Journal for Social Theory in Art Education – *Critical Coalitions in Play* – was developed at the Annual Business Meeting of the Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education, during the 2010 National Art Education Association, held in Baltimore, MD. The theme developed from casual conversations and formal discussions held throughout the conference, a process that has a longstanding history in the Caucus. This process relates to the theme itself, in a meaningful, self-reflexive manner: individuals discussed the critical nature of building coalitions within the field and between other related fields, and how these coalitions are both *in play* and deal with elements *of play*.

In the process of developing the theme, the membership of the CSTAE was taking part in the very process that we were discussing. This theme was one of many that were suggested. Those who spoke in its favor appreciated the possibilities for incorporating collaborative writings and playful critical interpretative strategies. As the theme developed, and was eventually chosen by JSTAE editors, not all ideas were incorporated. As is common in coalition-building, some voices became the focal point, drawn into the foreground, while others faded into the periphery. Importantly, all were heard. This is an element of the democratic process that is firmly embedded in the

founding principles of the Caucus on Social Theory, and that finds its way into the essays included in this volume.

Each author responds to the theme in meaningful ways; some present interpretations that align and complement each other, while others coincide and contradict. Such mutability is inherent to the notion of the coalition, a group that is inherently self-defined, fluid, and contentious: “Coalition is universality without conformity, agreement without oneness.” (Mansfield, 2010). One unifying element that can be found in each essay is that the authors assume a position of criticality, which is the first, and perhaps the most important, term in the title of volume 31.

## **Critical**

While this term is first and foremost, it is not uniformly defined or applied. The term is used in a variety of ways within the field of Art Education; from “Critical Thinking Dispositions” (Lampert, 2006) to “Critical Feminism,” (Dalton, 2001), the notion of criticality is interpreted in numerous, often-contradictory fashions, perhaps to the point of near-meaninglessness.<sup>1</sup> Each of the authors in this volume adapts and addresses specific aspects of this term: artistic critiques of material culture and gender; pleasure

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1 A quick search using Google Scholar resulted in 2,180,000 results, referencing phrases such as “Critical Art Pedagogy,” “Art Education: A Critical Necessity,” “Critical Pedagogy of Visual Culture,” and “Socially Critical Art Education.” This is not to mention the 894,000 results that relate to the terms “art criticism, art education.” See <http://preview.tinyurl.com/3votzzj> for more results.

and perversion in prekindergarten criticality; critical communication in digital media; critiques of disciplinary boundaries; middle-class values and self-criticality.

Courtney Lee Weida presents a critique of dolls and action figures, in *Gender, Aesthetics, and Sexuality in Play: Uneasy Lessons from Girls' Dolls, Action Figures, and Television Programs*. She presents numerous examples of the repurposing of iconic cultural objects such as Bratz and Barbie, discussing aspects of gender and violence through acts that begin to align criticality and pleasure. In a similar manner, Marissa McClure questions the variety of subversive forms of expression in the pre-K classroom, in *¡Pendejo! Preschoolers' Profane Play: Why Children Make Art*. Where McClure describes the profane and potentially critical ways that young people use digital media as artistic medium, Jay Hanes and Eleanor Weisman address possibilities for critique in and through digital forms of communication, in *LEGO Brick as Pixel: Self, Community, and Digital Communication*. Shifting the focus of critique onto disciplinary divisions, and the authors themselves, Melanie Buffington and William Muth present an analysis of a collaboration between the visual arts and literacy programs in *Visual Arts and Literacy: The Potential of Interdisciplinary Coalitions for Social Justice*. And finally, Lara Lackey and David G. Murphy shares a critical analysis of 'middle-class-ness' in *Parents, Middle-class-ness, and Out-of-School Art Education*. These last two articles specifically incorporate a direct form of self-critique, a quality that is crucial for the development of meaningful coalitions.

## Coalitions

As previously described, coalitions are collaborative, voluntary, and often borne of necessity. Recent notable examples of political coalitions can be found in the 2007 defeat of the conservative Coalition Government in Australia, the establishment of a British coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in Britain in 2010, as well as the so-called “Coalition of the Willing” that pledged support to the United States in the 2003 War in Iraq (Lambert, Kelly, 2010).

While each of these coalitional forms are overtly political, coalitions can be founded upon diverse sets of social, cultural, and personal inclinations and motivations. The majority of the articles included in this volume are, in fact, co-authored pieces; once again we can see the theme being reflected in the process of researching and writing, with authors responding to and critically assessing the possibilities as well as the limitations of collaboration. The authors describe coalitions that align class and artistic goals in extra-educational settings, that fuse visual art and literacy education with social justice, that blur the digital and the physical, that intertwine higher education and public schooling, and that question relationships between art and material culture.

Lackey and Murphy describes the variable nature of coalitions in educational settings, suggesting that relationships developed between families and non-traditional sites of schooling may negatively affect traditional art educational programs: “To the extent that middle-class parents can activate their resources in obtaining out-of-school

art experiences as cultural capital for their own children, one wonders how motivated they will be to argue for a strong in-school art education.” Where Lackey and Murphy are critical of such coalition-building, Buffington and Muth see positive potential for interdisciplinary connections, presenting suggestions for collaboration between the visual arts and literacy education, and combining higher education and prison outreach. Additional coalitional variations are identified in the volume: Hanes and Weisman describe the collaboration between the professional and the amateur in the ever-shifting spaces of digital communication. McClure points to coalitions between researcher, teacher, and student in the prekindergarten classroom, identifying nuanced moments of subversion, abjection, and pleasure. In a similar manner, Weida looks to potential coalitions that might develop between artists, educators, and students interested in critiquing gender norms within material culture; she describes the pleasure that is often found in the destruction of dolls and action figures, using the meaning-laden phrase “torture play.”

## **Play**

The last element of the current theme has much to do with the field of art education. Play is central to many theories of artistic expression, ranging from descriptions of expressivity in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century child-centered production to current research in digital games and physical computing. In this volume, play takes many

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forms: play as catharsis, as subversive boundary-testing, as artistic reprieve from overscheduled upbringings, as counterpart to emotional reunion, and as collaborative design.

As Weida notes, many young people find opportunities to rewrite prescribed gender narratives in illicit, sexualized, and transgressive forms of dollplay. She suggests that these actions might be productively addressed by art educators looking for opportunities to address gender stereotypes and body image issues in the art classroom. McClure also points to moments when the very young deviate from socially prescribed norms through digital performances that are recorded, viewed, and re-viewed, creating a form of cultural capital in the process. Writing about a similar form of creation, but from the perspective of class distinctions, Lackey and Murphy describe how out-of-school art education helps to establish a form of cultural capital that should be appreciated while simultaneously scrutinized for its potentially-exclusionary characteristics. Play as related to artistic production is described in this article as an antidote to an overscheduled middle-class upbringing. For Buffington and Muth, play is not specifically emphasized; however, when described in the meetings between an incarcerated father and his young daughter, it should remind the reader of the necessity of play in emotionally tense and institutionally monitored situations. And finally, play forms the literal building blocks of Hanes and Weisman's article, building historical connections between constructivist play in Froebel and Papert and collaboration and coalition in the digital age.

While there is no one theory or idea that can adequately unify the disparate ideas represented in this volume, one concept that is referenced both directly and indirectly is that of a hybrid cultural space formed through the process of coalition-building. McClure refers to the third pedagogical site of Brent Wilson (2005), while Buffington and Muth refer to a *thirdspace* developed by Anita Wilson (2001, 2004). In the third pedagogical site, the first site of the self-expressive child and the second site of schooling are potentially fused in and through artistic collaboration. In *thirdspace*, the 'outside' world and the 'inside' prison space are integrated through forms of literacy that are hybridized and unique to those involved in their making.

Both draw from Bhaba's (1994) theorization of a postcolonial 'third space' that negotiates between indigenous culture and colonialist power. It is this negotiation that, perhaps, best relates to the varieties of coalition that are described in this volume. The authors begin to diagram a larger network of interactions that maps, if only temporarily, the spaces in-between art and visual/material culture, disciplinary structures, the digital and the physical, and positions of class, privilege, and power. In this manner, the third spaces formed through development of critical coalitions parallel the sociopolitical potential of the 'multitude' as described by Hardt and Negri (2004). These are the contingent forms of resistance that are generated within the shifting spaces of globalization and postcolonial power. And, as Bhaba (1994) reminds us, these are the in-between spaces theorized by the authors that have the potential to allow us to re-

envision critical coalitions in play, within not only art and its education, but within and between the 'other' and the 'self:'

... it is the 'inter'-- the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* [italics in original] space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture... And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the other of ourselves (56).



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**Visual Arts and Literacy:  
The Potential of Interdisciplinary Coalitions for Social Justice**

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**Abstract**

In this article, we explore the possibilities of creating a coalition of the visual arts with literacy to work toward meaningful integrated learning experiences with a social justice agenda. We discuss the benefits of integrated curriculum and its potential to support learning at many levels. Following that, we introduce the Hope House mural project as an example of an integrated visual arts and literacy program. Through this project, children and their incarcerated fathers grapple with significant issues in their lives and to build a bond while doing so. We argue that this coalition results in learning that is inseparably tied to the technical and the profound, thanks to the synergy of the art and literacy experience.

## Introduction

*Working at a large urban university, I (Melanie) find myself often surprised that I know so few of my colleagues in other departments. In the spring of 2010, I became involved with a new group on campus, Richmond Teachers for Social Justice. Though not an 'official' university group and certainly welcoming of a variety of people, this group predominantly consists of teacher educators at the university from a range of departments. At the first meeting, in our breakout group time, I began chatting with a faculty member in the School of Education (Bill). From our brief conversation, we realized that though we teach different subjects, our underlying theoretical beliefs have similarities and overlap. Further, as we discussed our institutionally differentiated subject areas, we came to see many ways that visual art and literacy could be used to make a coalition to further a social justice agenda.*

Our initial meeting led to discussions of collaboration possibilities, talk of interdisciplinary work, and the impetus for this article. In this article, we explore ideas of integrated curriculum possibilities in a non-traditional educational settings, and explore an example of how these are used in the Hope House summer camp program to further a social justice agenda. We believe that creating coalitions of people from multiple disciplines could lead to meaningful changes and meaningful learning at a variety of levels and in many different settings. Thus, we (Melanie – School of the Arts and Bill –School of Education) collaborated on this article to push our thinking about what we do, how we could do more together, and in what ways we might collaborate in the future. In this

article, we relate to the call of 'critical coalitions in play' through a discussion of integrated collaborative work that has implications in formal and informal learning environments.

### **Integrated/interdisciplinary curriculum**

Certainly, ideas of integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum are not new, with precedents in the U.S. educational system reaching back to at least the late 1800s with periodic reappearances of interest in integrated curriculum (Grady, 1994; Klein, 1990; Parsons, 2004). Different authors use a variety of terms including cross disciplinary, transdisciplinary, intradisciplinary, interdisciplinary, cross-curricular, integrative, or integrated to refer to curriculum that advocates teaching and learning that transcend traditional subject boundaries (Beane, 1997; Jacobs, 1989; Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris, & Sessions, 2006). Krug and Cohen-Evron (2000) describe the need to come to an understanding of the various terms used. Thus, for the purposes of this article, we rely on Burns (1994) who wrote:

Integrated curriculum is a holistic approach to learning that stresses connections and relationships rather than delineations across the disciplines. It is a tool for building bridges instead of boundaries between specific bodies of knowledge....An integrated curriculum focuses on students' needs and interests (p. 12).

Throughout this article, we use the term 'integrated' to refer to curriculum that addresses ideas from multiple disciplines that allows for meaningful connections

to students' lives. As we discussed various ideas for collaborating on a project and what integrated curriculum might be possible, Bill mentioned his ongoing involvement with Hope House, a Washington, DC based non-profit that, among other things, runs a summer camp program for children with incarcerated fathers. Throughout this weeklong camp, students and their fathers participate in arts and literacy based learning activities culminating in a mural project. This project seemed to be a way that we could bring our disciplines together to think through issues of social justice and teacher education.

### **Higher Education and Integrated Curriculum**

At the K-12 and higher education level, there are certainly a variety of barriers to integrated learning experiences including planning time and one subject being seen as 'subservient' or the hand maiden to another (Keifer-Boyd & Smith-Shank, 2007; Stinespring, 2001). Ulbricht (2005) notes one difficulty in establishing integrated experiences is that the literature on such programs is difficult to locate considering that it resides in numerous fields. Thus, faculty members interested in starting integrated programs may struggle in finding information about successful programs.

However, as noted by both Parsons (2004) and Ulbricht (2005) there is an increasing interest in curriculum integration now at both the K-12 and higher education levels. The reasons for this interest may include the shifting notions of faculty to a more postmodern perspective (Ulbricht, 2005), student demand, social concern, administrative decisions, scientific discoveries, and vocational

and training requirements (Klein, 1990). Parsons (2004) describes the current resurgence of interest in integrated curriculum and, drawing from Beane (1997), points to several reasons for integrated curriculum including the need to educate the whole person, the relationship to democratic education, inquiry-based learning, and problem solving related to social issues. Thus, it may be advantageous for higher educators to collaborate on integrated learning projects both within the formal academic setting as well as in informal learning environments.

### **Thinking and Learning Beyond Disciplinary Borders**

Other authors argue for the importance of addressing the information beyond the traditional subject matter, often called '21<sup>st</sup> century skills.' According to the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, these skills include, "creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, information literacy, media literacy" (2010). This group also advocates curricular approaches that allow for applying these skills across disciplines. Further, the argument advanced by Pink (2006) about humans seeking meaning also points to this being a time in which learning information in 'chunks' may be less appropriate. The goal of this type of learning should not be having one subject in a lesser role than another, but rather to find meaningful overlaps and connections between and among various disciplines.

Additionally, Gadsen (2008) suggests that a sea change is underway within education in relationship to how the arts are viewed. She mentions studies

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that promote ideas that the arts should be studied in relationship to larger human experiences and situated with regard to social and cultural groups. This can happen through the use of overarching ideas (big ideas, enduring ideas, themes, etc.), working toward social justice, and providing ways for learners to make meaningful connections between their learning and things that are important in their lives. Apple and Beane (2007) describe aspects of successful schools that overtly work to promote democratic education. They note that the curriculum at the schools that they studied is, “based on the belief that knowledge comes to life for students and teachers only when it is connected to something that is serious” (p. 151). Further, the curriculum in place at these schools tends to work from a thematic approach that encourages learners to apply their knowledge to real-world issues. Instead of knowledge being discrete facts for students to memorize, “knowledge is that which is intimately connected to the communities and biographies of real people. Students learn that knowledge makes a difference in people’s lives, including their own” (p. 151). This view of knowledge, curriculum, and the teaching and learning process suggests a different approach than the traditional segregation of subject matter into discrete units with a teacher functioning as arbiter of what is considered meaningful or important.

### **Suggestions for shaping integrated curriculum**

Ulbricht (2005) encourages art educators to cross boundaries in order to build the necessary coalitions that can lead to meaningful work. He writes, “Interdisciplinary research is about our willingness to take a risk, to discover what



we can learn, and to undertake the hard work that will expand our cognitive, aesthetic, and educational horizons” (p. 17). When working collaboratively with other faculty members, it is important to think through how to structure learning experiences so that the goals of various stakeholders are considered to build a collective understanding of the goals and terminology of the project. Gadsen (2008) delineates different perspectives of the relationship between the arts and education: the arts in education, education in the arts, or art and education. She explains the semantic nuances of these phrases:

These different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between education and the arts point to the plurality of art experiences. They remove the adjectival status of the arts (e.g. art education) in schooling, teaching, and learning and assign the arts equal status to education. (p. 31)

Gadsen further explains how the linguistic difference can set the groundwork for a situation that encourages learners to be, “co constructors of a dynamic education rather than recipients of schooling and shapers of knowledge rather than recipients of knowledge shaped primarily by forces external to them” (2008, p. 31). Her point relates to what many others raise about the need for education to move from being mostly ‘teacher-centered’ to involving ‘student-centered’ learning experiences (Cuban, 2008). As Cuban notes, the physical settings of classrooms, the content of the curriculum, and teachers’ pedagogical approaches all can relate to the power dynamics in the classroom and shape learning

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experiences in a variety of ways. To begin working toward this goal, teachers can select topics that not only meet institutionally sanctioned goals, but also overtly relate to the lives and interests of their students. Further, providing learners with the opportunity to make choices about their learning to direct it in ways that are meaningful to them is paramount. Cuban (2008) advocates this shift as part of a larger agenda toward school reform with the goal of building more democratic schools.

Jacobs advocates organizing integrated curriculum so that it relates to the larger world rather than only to the constructed world of school. She believes that schools and the knowledge they promote may be more related to the past than to the present or the future (1989, 2010). Further, Jacobs (1989) points out that students may begin to see that the way school is organized into discrete sections is not related to the world outside school in which humans encounter situations that require them to gather information, think, and act in ways that reflect multiple traditional school disciplines. Therefore, she encourages schools to utilize features of traditional disciplines as well as interdisciplinary experiences. This combination of experiences, through an organizing big idea, enduring idea, or theme gives focus to the learning and helps prevent the 'potpourri problem' in which integrated learning is merely a sampling of a variety of interesting tidbits.

### **Relationship to Social Justice**

As the 2010 NAEA conference, a recent issue of the journal *Art Education*, and the 2010 publication *Art Education for Social Justice* (Anderson, Gussak,

Hallmark, & Paul, 2010) suggest, the field of art education regularly engages with issues of social justice. According to Garber (2004), "Education for social justice is education for a society where the rights and privileges of democracy are available to all. Art education for social justice places art as a means through which these goals are achieved" (p. 16). Bastos (2010) adds to this point and furthers it by drawing on the work of Freire (2006) in mentioning how education can be a, "vehicle of social transformation" (p. 3). In her editorial of the special issue of the journal *Art Education* devoted to social justice, Bastos mentions that art may be situated in a unique manner to promote the type of discourse that can lead to action. In some cases, working from an integrated perspective enhances these perspectives (Zwirn & Libresco, 2010).

In describing the particulars of social justice art education, Dewhurst (2010) explores the similarities among the multitude of terms used to describe art that works toward social change. Dewhurst notes the similarities among these movements that they tend to involve the creation of art that brings awareness to, that creates a coalition that may become involved in, or may directly intervene in some aspect of society that is not just.

To respond to the needs of the contemporary world including the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills call for teamwork, interdisciplinary thinking, and the need to work with ideas and concepts, we need to move away from isolated thinking and move to multiple ways of knowing. When colleagues create coalitions, we can develop and build programs to work furthering a social justice agenda.

## Hope House as an example

*In 1980, as a reading teacher going to work in a federal prison, I (Bill) immediately felt the profound disconnection (or, as Melanie names it, segregation) of 'subject' from the world outside. "Youthful offenders" floated in and out of my class. They appeared one day and later disappeared—sometimes ending up in segregation (the actual term for disciplinary lock down), sometimes transferred to another prison, sometimes released to...where? The official curriculum contained a scope and sequence chart that listed, in order, every skill my students "needed" —phonics, vocabulary, comprehension— to pass the GED. The chart signified another disconnection, of subject matter with human subjects —as if the students had no life experiences, prior knowledge or personal purposes for learning, no musical or artistic talent, no biography upon which to construct new learning. Nor did the curriculum address larger social issues, such as the vast overrepresentation of minorities in prison, or the devastating effects of prison on families and communities (Hairston, 2007). It did align with the cultural landscape of prison, in which the borderland (Wright, 2006) between staff and prisoners was often a do-not-enter zone and where power relations were explicit. Prisoners were passive recipients of received wisdom, in this case as proclaimed by the American Council on Education.*

Over the 30 years since Bill began prison work, many "connected" prison projects have flourished, though perhaps more in Europe and Canada than in the US, where top-down "criminogenic" models still prevail (Warner, 1998). For Bill, the interdisciplinary nexus between parenting and literacy became increasingly

important, as low literacy and poor spelling skills sometimes precluded his students from writing letters to children and parents at home. Despite the obvious potential for parenting programs to engage learners, most prison-based parenting programs remained wedded to criminogenic methods of identifying deficits (according to a pre-set list of parenting skills) and then prescribing generic fixes.

We discuss Hope House against this rather dismal backdrop to emphasize the merits of working across disciplines—in this case literacy and art—and to describe how an integrated model afforded new ways of making connections from the personal to the disciplinary and the social. We mine data from an earlier study of the Hope House project (Muth, 2011) which were collected during two summer camps and six other prison visits in 2008 and 2009. Data gathering included four focus groups (involving 18 fathers and six children), and seven individual interviews with fathers. All interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and analyzed, in part, through a recursive grounded theory strategy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and in part using thirdspace (Soja, 1996; Wilson, 2004) and timescape (Burgess, 2009) theory. The Hope House project involves a range of programs in eight US prisons that included: video conferencing between family members inside and out, summer camps, weekend activities for prisoners' children, writers' workshops, support groups for caregivers, and a book taping project in which incarcerated parents recorded books and mailed them home to their children. At any one prison, 80-100 fathers record story books for their children every two months. Because many children live 200 or more miles away

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and rarely have a chance to visit, recorded books and phone calls are their primary means of contact. However, each year 45 pre-adolescent boys and girls—primarily African American and Latino/a from poor, urban communities from Boston to Richmond—participate in summer camps at one of three prisons. About half are returning campers; some first timers have not seen their dads for many years and have little or no memories of them. Although there are a wide range of activities throughout the week, the heart of the camp experience is the mural project.

There are many things that distinguish Hope House from more traditional programs, but perhaps most striking are the ways it deliberately strives to humanize prison spaces, locate itself in the borderland between staff and prisoner, nurture prisoners' membership in community, privilege the personal, and position fathers and children as the experts. Thus, the programs share similarities with student-centered approaches to learning rather than teacher-centered approaches.

To describe how this happens, we focus on Hope House's main art-literacy project. Every father-child(ren) team designs and constructs a mural (approximately 6' x 12') over the course of the week. On the first day they brainstorm ideas through free-flowing discussions, sketches and reflections in interactive journals. A Hope House artist makes herself available to assist with ideas for themes and visual layouts, or to help with drawings or selecting fabrics, etc. The design and planning phase involves both visual arts and literacy based

activities designed to help children and their fathers develop their ideas for the mural.

Themes vary, from a father falling off a cliff (only to be rescued by his son and a kindly, feathery eagle) to a daughter kickboxing with her father (and, of course, winning with a KO). One father/son mural appeared mundane—the two sitting together on a sofa watching TV—until the son explained, “I just want to be alone with my dad. I don’t want any distractions.” (It was the 11 year old’s first camp and the first time seeing his father in over a year.) One father/daughter team reconstructed the earliest memory the ten year old girl had of her father—a day at the local swimming pool. She had not communicated with her father since she was five, and the mural project seemed to serve not only as visual art, but as performing art as well. i.e., the two had all week to dwell in a hybrid time/space that tapped into a far away past and brought it forward onto the canvass and into their minds and hearts. By the end of the week they had grown considerably closer, and have maintained close contacts (mostly by phone but also through book tapings) ever since.

The aesthetic, cognitive and literate aspects of mural work are inseparable. For example: One year, a daughter was angry with her father from the beginning of camp until just before their very emotional goodbye hug on Friday. In truth, most of her anger seemed to be a front, a way of relating that kept her guard up and discourse at a playful banter. Their mural depicted a glittery Eiffel Tower and Parisian skyline at sunset and was quite beautiful. The

physical acts of painting, gluing, adding glitter, and focusing outward had a

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subtle, softening effect. Over the week, within these aesthetic structures, the bantering ceased and they delved into family news such as stories about close and distant relatives who were also incarcerated in that prison. Aside from the unfortunate and pervasive role of incarceration in this family script, the two achieved a genuine warmth and closeness that they seemed keep hidden under the cover of painting and artwork.

Art literacy activities seem to open up space and time in ways that enable intimacy and reflection without forcing them. In this typical excerpt from unpublished data collected during the Hope House study (Muth, 2011)—a father relates the experience of on-the-floor mural making with his son, and the profound discussion that could never have taken place in a less intimate space or time.

[On the first day] he was...floodin' me with questions. [laughs]...“What about this!” And “OK... Um – da-da-da-da-da!” “Ah slow down! We got time...”But after he got over that – after we got over the fact that we had more than 15 minutes [the limit that the prison places on phone calls] he was able to kinda settle down, and flow with it, and enjoy it. You know, just enjoy each other. 'Cause that's one of the greatest things that friends, or family can have with each other, is the fact that they don't have to talk to each other. What they don't say to each other says as much, or sometimes more than what they do say to each other. And so we...was able to do these projects together...quietly – you know? And, of course, he's sprinklin' in questions he's been meanin' to ask me. [Laughs]



There were some profound questions too...We was talkin' right? He was askin me, during that little, one minute, moment, he asked me – he said, “Um, did you and my mother ever get married?” – No. He said, “Why didn't you and my mother get married?” Right? And it was a heavy question for me because...his mother and I were married...He's talkin' about – when he says his mother, he's speakin' about my other children's mother, the one that was raisin' him up until my dad took him...I said, “Look, um, me and Gloria – never got married because I was already married to a woman named Cherl” which was his [biological] mother. Right? And I said, “And she had some big beautiful brown eyes, just like you,” right? And so he asked me, you know, the next question. “Um, so where's she at?” So I was like, “You know, she's dead,” right? “How'd she die?” “Well, she killed herself. Suicide.” So he said, “So why'd she kill herself.” I said, “You know, because she was depressed. Some people are stronger than others when it comes to depression. Some people just couldn't take it. You know?” And he says, “I don't care how sad I get, I'll never kill myself.” I'm like, man that's beautiful. [Laughs]. I'm like, that's great 'cause that's one of my biggest concerns—that it's hereditary.

Directly or indirectly, the arts serve human needs such as rebuilding fragile relationships and empowering the voice of the silent and silenced. In the above examples we see how inextricable the various disciplinary ways of knowing become. For example, the aesthetic/creative activities opened up safe spaces for voices to be heard. In turn, this dialogue enabled the cognitive work of schema

building (e.g., the son's determined exploration of his of his custodial and biological family and his location in the extended family) as well as the emotional work of belonging (e.g., a father's chance to share family scripts with his son). The murals themselves may be considered a form of reflective and imaginative text that embodies what Langer (2009, p. 51) calls "literate thinking." They do what other genres of writing do: create narratives, bear witness, engender intimacy and detachment, support exploration and elaboration, create hope and purpose for the future, even establish criterion for judging truthfulness. At another level of literacy-art-cognition integration, the daily journaling that accompanied the mural project fueled and was fueled by the art, and helped crystallize learning (such as when the daughter drew a picture of her expanded family tree in her journal). Beyond social-cognitive learning, intergenerational literacy programs such as these benefit children academically as well. These benefits include improvements in: school achievement and motivation, school attendance, oral language development, reading achievement, social skills and self esteem (Padak & Rasinski, 2003).

Here is Bill's reflection on the current writing collaboration with Melanie:

*Until I began working on this paper with Melanie, I had not thought of interdisciplinary collaboration as coalition building. Yes, we share a strong interest in integrated curriculum such as mural projects that intersect art and literacy. And we both champion work that lends voice, dignity and hope to communities dispatched as broken and hopeless. Now I see how coalition building matters. We are not only writing in/for our academic silos. We are writing*

*for praxis, and I'm keenly aware that I can't humanize US penology on my own. And as I consider the satisfaction derived from this joint project, I realize that we are writing for each other. At a time when government research institutes find little interest in the immeasurable (yet transformative) importance of visual art—literacy integration, it just may be coalitions that sustain us in our efforts to construct 'whole' solutions to massive social injustices—such as the impact of incarceration on families.*

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Building coalitions of faculty/teachers can lead to integrated learning experiences that have profound meaning within the constructs of the lives of learners. The Hope House example demonstrates how art-and-literacy collations can help educators help students learn to navigate the complexities of their lives. Program content that is decontextualized and aligned with discrete outcomes may be measurable, but it rarely supports the immediate and urgent day-to-day issues some learners must otherwise face alone. Conversely, as coalitions come into play, the learning processes inherently become more layered and complex, and the content more connected to life outside of school. While the examples cited in this article were not school-based, they illustrate a central insight that transfers directly to the classroom i.e., with carefully integrated curricula and scaffolding, the acquisition of academic knowledge and self knowledge is synergistic. We need to raise the bar for what counts as instruction, especially for those with little opportunity for expression and so much to say. Furthermore, when we, as educators, reach out to each other to support a social justice

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agenda and find similarities in our purposes and goals, we are modeling ways of building coalitions of people around critical contemporary issues.

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**LEGO Brick as Pixel:  
Self, Community, and Digital Communication**

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**Abstract**

Over the last three years the authors attended Brickworld Conventions for adult and teen fans of LEGO in Chicago. Through interviews, observations, and research they conclude that the LEGO brick is a medium replete with possibilities for creative construction and playful design beyond the expectations of its corporate producers. The history of the brick as a toy infuses play throughout its use, and the Internet provides a forum for adult and teen fans to communicate, critique, and discuss their creations. Online communication is perhaps the most interesting facet of LEGO play. It demonstrates a model of social change with LEGO builders of all ages in dialogue amongst a community of equals. This paper presents a case description of LEGO fans for future research on the burgeoning use of technology for play, communication, and the development of community.



## A LEGO Convention Vignette

It was 10:00am Sunday morning and we watched as the public flooded into four hotel ballrooms transformed into exhibition halls. Insiders, nerds, geeks, and families with children comprised the registered attendees who kept the lobby bustling and the elevators moving. They studied replicas of a Quantas Airbus A380, a wooden structured Comet rollercoaster, Wayne Manor and Batcave, the Sears Tower, Neuschwanstein Castle, Ankor Wat, the Chapel at Mont Sainte-Michael, an aerial steam vessel Pelican, an operating Shay locomotive, and many other creations that filled the exhibit halls. Children and adults alike viewed the models in amazed delight. Complete strangers interacted openly about their shared experiences at an exhibited piece, or next to tables crowded with mini-figure characters in scenes with science fiction settings or city architecture. Discussions of constructions encompassed various levels of sophistication, from admiration to complex analysis. We overheard the word “awesome” too many times to count. Most intriguing to us were the more playful fantasy and nostalgic cars, villages, castles, robots, vignettes and works of art like *Containment* (Figure 1) built by Tyler Clites and Nannan Zhang.



Figure 1. *Containment* by Nannan Zhang and Tyler Clites (2010). "Somewhere on a desolate planet, a one man operated biosphere processing facility looms over the alien wasteland. A threshold separates the two worlds, but which one is contained?"

The scene described above was from Brickworld 2010, a LEGO fan conference in its fourth year. Interest and participation in LEGO building has grown so that attendance registration for the convention has nearly doubled each year, reaching 800 in 2010. Much of the information that follows developed from conversations and interviews with builders exhibiting at the Chicago suburban conference hotel. For example, Clites and Zhang shared details on their collaboration during a lunch interview on their LEGO experience. Later in this paper we discuss the significance of their work as an exemplar of the playful constructions and interactions of the fans of LEGO.

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LEGO. The word may conjure up images of children excitedly opening gift packages and eagerly spreading many small plastic pieces or “bricks” in a frenzy of construction. Commonly, LEGO is analogous with toy or hobby. However, to a select group of adults and teens, the LEGO brick is a means for self and community identity. Many AFOLs (Adult Fans of LEGO) and TFOLs (Teen Fans of LEGO) communicate with each other through Internet sites and come together in person at conventions. Sometimes they gather in a regional LEGO User Group, (LUG) more often found in large cities located in developed countries. Some of the members of this community create, collaborate, and communicate about their constructions using a variety of social Internet sites with the source of their motivation the LEGO brick. Since the advent of the Internet, the A/TFOL population has grown exponentially, a phenomenon unexpected by The LEGO Group (Antorini, 2007).

With computer technology omnipresent as part of the fabric of contemporary life, it is hard to resist the metaphors inherent in an A/TFOL phenomenon. The brick itself can be seen as a multidimensional pixel replete with unlimited possibilities. In 1974 the corporation LEGO Group calculated that the number of ways to combine six  $2 \times 4$  LEGO bricks of the same color in a tower is 102,981,500. A/TFOL innovative use of the brick caused the LEGO Group in 2005 to realize that there are other ways to configure the same bricks and the number was recalculated to be 915,103,765 (Durhuus & Eilers, 2005). The reader can imagine the many factors that determine how each brick can be different. The brick as an object of choice, offers magnified possibilities to include

the number of studs, a multiplicity of shapes, a myriad of sizes, a rainbow of 53 colors including transparent bricks, and vast qualities of surface. Together, the LEGO system combined with a creative imagination becomes a medium of expression.

### **Historical Antecedents: Flow, Play Theory, Constructionism, and the Brick**

From personal experience of having our son in three different Montessori schools, we can attest to the value of manipulatives used in educational settings. Brosterman (2002) discussed Froebel blocks, children's "gifts" or learning tools designed for the original kindergarten conceived by Fredrick Froebel.

Interestingly, Froebel blocks were credited as being instrumental in the education and work of Frank Lloyd Wright (Brosterman, 2002). Wright is well known as one of the great architectural innovators of the twentieth century, and today Wright's architectural sites are transformed into marvelous LEGO models. Adam Reed Tucker, one of the Brickworld Convention organizers, designed models of the Guggenheim and Fallingwater in the Frank Lloyd Wright collection from the Architecture Series for the LEGO Group. Perhaps Wright was able to maintain his childhood pleasure in play as an adult architect.

Children often exhibit a natural engagement in their play activities. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described a similar experience for adults, calling it *flow* or "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it at

great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (p. 4). He discussed flow as a result of dissatisfaction or discontent. Anxiety and boredom create a tension out of which can arise a state of flow, an aspect of the complexity of the human consciousness. Similarly, Dissanayake (1988) equivocated art-making processes with the human act of play. She considered “art to be a derivative of play” (p. 75) where play like art is a rewarding activity, engaged in for intrinsic value.

Play often includes others and can build community. Brown (2009) claimed, “For adults, too, taking part in this play is a way to put us in synch with those around us. It is a way to tap into common emotions and thoughts and share them with others” (p. 63). The socializing characteristics of both play and art become more important when applied to teaching and learning. Building on Piaget’s constructionism learning theory, Papert (1991) posited, “the idea that this [building knowledge structures] happens especially felicitously in a context where the learner is consciously engaged in constructing a public entity, whether it’s a sand castle on the beach or a theory of the universe” (online). Relatedly Gauntlett (2007) referred to Papert’s theory of constructionism in his research on identities and creativity using the LEGO system of bricks (p. 131). His findings demonstrated how LEGO Serious Play in corporate contexts motivated individuals to build metaphoric brick models influenced by individual identity. In contrast, we examined the LEGO brick as the metaphor itself, a pixel in a hyper-mediated world where a self selected community is viewed as a matrix.

## **Playful Creation Built on the Brick**

The LEGO system, not unlike a brush, a chisel, or a camera, is a creative tool to a builder. The plethora of parts and ways to use them make the system a flexible medium for expression. We have seen the LEGO brick sometimes used to parody or pay homage to works from the traditional art canon, not unlike other contemporary art forms. The context of the LEGO work determines whether it is more similar to fine art and self-expression or can be viewed as a work of design and engineering with a focus on function. Frequently, the aspect of human interaction and play that is assumed both by the medium itself and by its users blurs the line between art and design. The brick becomes an alternate medium for voices often unheard in the “art-world.” Simply because LEGO has the reputation of being a toy, its use carries a childlike sense of pleasure, imagination, and play.

Jonathan Bender (2010) described how the community of A/TFOLs, seemingly out of respect for the toy qualities of the brick and the audience of children who are fascinated by LEGO, self-censors itself. There are very few implied pornographic gestures in the creative work of the A/TFOL community. Bender stated simply:

In policing itself, the AFOL community has set up standards and often has been the first to criticize creations that could negatively impact the family-friendly image of LEGO. The rules are simple: no

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booze, no sex, no drugs. It seems there is an unspoken agreement that AFOLs will build in this kids' version of the real world. (2010, p. 113)

Instead, a vibrant sense of humor runs through the range of creative constructions (called "My Own Creations" or MOCs by A/TFOLs) using the brick as the medium of expression. Our examination of Flickr group activity reveals many self referential MOCs and whimsical allusions to popular culture. Within the playful limitations as described by Bender and set by the community, the brick system itself allows the artist to construct with unlimited possibilities.

Some A/TFOLs construct in the original or classic themes established by The LEGO Group, including: space, train and town, and castle. Architectural replicas are another focus for fan builders. There is even a category at the convention called "art" that consists of mosaics. Another form of construction employs motors and LEGO Technic bricks to build robotics and marvels of engineering. The more traditional categories usually describe the work of older generations of AFOL, those we call Gen 1.0. Younger members of the community, usually 25 years and younger, mix and merge categories. We have classified them as Gen 2.0, and will focus on their work as exemplifying contextualization, innovation, and the potential of cyber tools for collaboration and critique.

One of the members of Gen 2.0, Nannan Zhang, first attracted our attention to the world of AFOLs with his Flickr posting of a LEGO surrealistic

vignette titled *A Clean Bathroom Within Reach by Instant Teleportation* (Figure 2). At that time, he was inspired by artists like Salvador Dali and Marcel Duchamp, as well as by the author H. P. Lovecraft. He has since moved on, carving out science fiction themes. His recent collaboration with Tyler Clites, *Containment*, exhibited at Brickworld 2010 in Chicago, demonstrated the possibilities of performance with the medium in a narrative construction including sound, lights, and movement. Prior to the convention the team of Clites and Zhang posted “teasers” of their construction on Flickr. The performance was the actual sharing of the MOC at the convention, culminating the artistic venture.



Figure 2. *A Clean Bathroom Within Reach by Instant Teleportation* by Nannan Zhang (2007).



Although, much of the MOC building activity appears as the sort of aesthetic behavior that is arguably attributed to artists, many LEGO builders want to remain hobbyists. The work of Clites and Zhang is very sophisticated; both think about and discuss their works as artistic expressions. However, they describe their LEGO activity clearly as play. For example, T. Clites (personal communication, June 19, 2010), a film student, was invited to spend a week in Denmark to “work” with The LEGO Group design team. He enjoyed the experience but considered the work aspect of professional LEGO design as one that would eventually wear on his pleasure and creativity because of restrictive expectations placed on his designs by a corporation. N. Zhang (personal communication, June 19, 2010), concurred by discussing that as a premed student, having the time to deeply focus on his creative LEGO activity allowed him to restore himself and be a better student. Perhaps the LEGO constructions by Clites and Zhang are exemplary in their demonstration of artistic creativity and design skill, contextual format, and the emphasis on play. Again referring to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the value of aesthetic play and creativity as a hobby can be seen in that it balances the ‘work’ of life.

In their collaborative process for *Containment*, Clites and Zhang made extensive use of cyber communication. Their Flickr photostreams and private discussion boards provided both visual and verbal contact over long distances. They used Skype to build and converse while simultaneously working from their separate locations in Florida and Missouri. Other A/TFOLs also stay in contact

through cyber networking. Similar to the innovative use of the brick as medium, A/TFOLs have used the Internet in new modes of dialogue through community building formats (Chrisman, Hanes, & Weisman, 2009). LEGO play shared through online modes provides opportunities and arenas for new configurations of self-expression and social interaction. Clay Shirky (2008) described this potential as a method to “organize without organization.” He suggested that the Internet provides users a forum that can be employed in manners and purposes not intended by the developers. In Shirky’s view, the Internet is a tool for creating more social capital, a political and economic characteristic that requires cooperation (p. 50). Undoubtedly, the cyber community and communication has been essential in the A/TFOL phenomenon. It has spawned models and methods of critique, collaboration, and social change. We see the Internet as creating avenues for critical coalitions with conversation that directly follows artistic product and process, an important resource for art educators in understanding aesthetic dialogue and critical conversation.

### **Online Dialogue and Community Critique of MOCs**

There are numerous examples of critical dialogue concerning A/TFOL constructions. We were intrigued by the following conversation on Flickr involving both adults and teens over a MOC built by our son, Hawk Weisman. His participation in the hobby has developed over the years and at the time of this

research he continued to build as well as view MOCs online and contribute to discussion.

The following is a community critique that began with Hawk's short description of his spaceship, *Forsaken* (Figure 3)



Figure 3. *Forsaken* by Hawk Weisman (2010). “Threw this together way back when for the Asymmetry Challenge...never quite finished it until now. Still fleshing out the Syndicate fighters — this is everything the *Pariah* [an earlier shared MOC] was missing.”

Comments from his online friends included the following. The pseudonyms, or online names, have been used as on Flickr. We have added “A” for adult and “T” for teen where known.

**Apocalust (A):** I dig the multiple angles you have going on here.

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**peterlmorris (A):** How'd you not finish this? It's very refreshing, and the asymmetry is great. I think you should go ahead and add it to the thread.

**hawk (T):** What I meant to say was "never quite finished it until now". Shall add it to the thread.

**Jacob (T):** I don't quite see it

**hawk:** I'd be interested to know what you're not feeling.

**Jacob:** I think that as the complexity of the shapes you're dealing with increases, so does the care with which colours must be applied. Now, I won't go any further into the colouring because I'm barely able to articulate what I myself do. The shape is also too nebulous for me. Perhaps more angles would change my mind, but I can barely make out the overall shape—it looks like a bunch of modules connected with no base. With more traditional designs, our mind can fill in the gaps, but I think you need to be clear in what shape you do define when you tackle something as interesting as this.

Does that make any sense? Everyone else seems to love it, so I may be completely wrong, but there you go.

**spook (T):** I'm afraid I'm with Jacob on this one, though I'm not yet sure what to say.

**PeterImorris:** I think you guys are nuts. The lack of coherence and any definable 'cockpit' or 'base' from which to branch out is what makes it refreshing. Also would make it a difficult target to kill from any angle except behind (where presumably the thrusters are) since there's no visual reference for what's critical and what's not.

**Apocalust:** I can partly see what Jacob is talking about. Some parts do feel "rough". I think there are parts that could use emphasis to really dominate the overall structure. I think that lower protruding area could use some love, and that could really take this to another level.

I disagree with Jacob regarding the whole thing feeling nebulous though. It looks like you had a very specific form in mind.

This is of course, my opinion based on my sense of aesthetics, so take or leave it as you wish.

**hawk:** Hi guys, I'm really sorry for the obscenely late responses.

Regarding the shape, I see what you mean once again, but I can't help but feel like if you saw it from more angles, you might understand what's going on better. I can shoot some more angles if you like. Of course, your criticism is totally valid and while I probably won't be modifying this much, I'll keep it in mind on future builds.

To everyone else who left a compliment, thanks a lot!

**Jacob:** You flatter me with your thoughts, sir. It's isn't quite that dislike this *per se*, but that I can't really enjoy it without comprehending the basic idea. More angles? Certainly!

**spook:** I, too, would like more angles. In fact, after staring at it for a long time, I have decided that I quite like the shape. If this were monochrome, I would love it to death. Unfortunately, the color blocking that's going on kind of ruins it for me, I'm afraid. It's not the colors you chose that I don't like.. they just seem about as erratically placed as the way the shapes are placed, and I think in order for this to work, there needs to be a bit more order in the color placement. Just my 2¢.

We believe that this type of dialogue is valuable in demonstrating a primary purpose of critique—to promote the thoughtful growth of the artist. Much of the online conversation involved questions concerning choices and their responses.

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Liz Lerman (2003) outlined similar steps in the critique process that levels the opinion between teacher/student or adult/younger person. As educators, it is our duty to see that our teacher opinions are secondary to the experience and artistic growth of the students. In our mentoring, we must value the intention and response of the student as well as that of their peers, emphasizing the importance of their questions. The artist/creator should be able to explain where and what the appeal is, defining the context of the choices. Equally important, of course, is the acknowledgement that their choices of media, such as the LEGO system, can be used thoughtfully and innovatively. The role of the teacher/mentor is to guide the conversation and to offer questions and opinions as needed.

The story of one AFOL mentor in critical dialogue for this community is particularly meaningful and poignant. Nathan Nielson<sup>1</sup>, or “nnenn”, as the community knew him, inspired many conversations and even started a forum specifically for criticism of MOCs. Nate stayed anonymous, perhaps because he was an academic graphic designer. Color was very important to nnenn and others of the group held his spaceship designs in high esteem. He designed specifications for a particular style of spaceships called Vic Vipers, inspired by the video game *Gradius* from the mid-1980s. In November 2008, there was a Vic Viper online event where anyone could submit a MOC that met the Vic Viper specifications. Dozens of A/TFOLs contributed MOCs to this forum, still accessible online at the time of this publication. Another Flickr conversation demonstrated nenn’s adult interaction in critical response to *Steampunk Walker*

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*Mecha Tank* (Figure 4), a work by Matt Hamann, an adolescent.

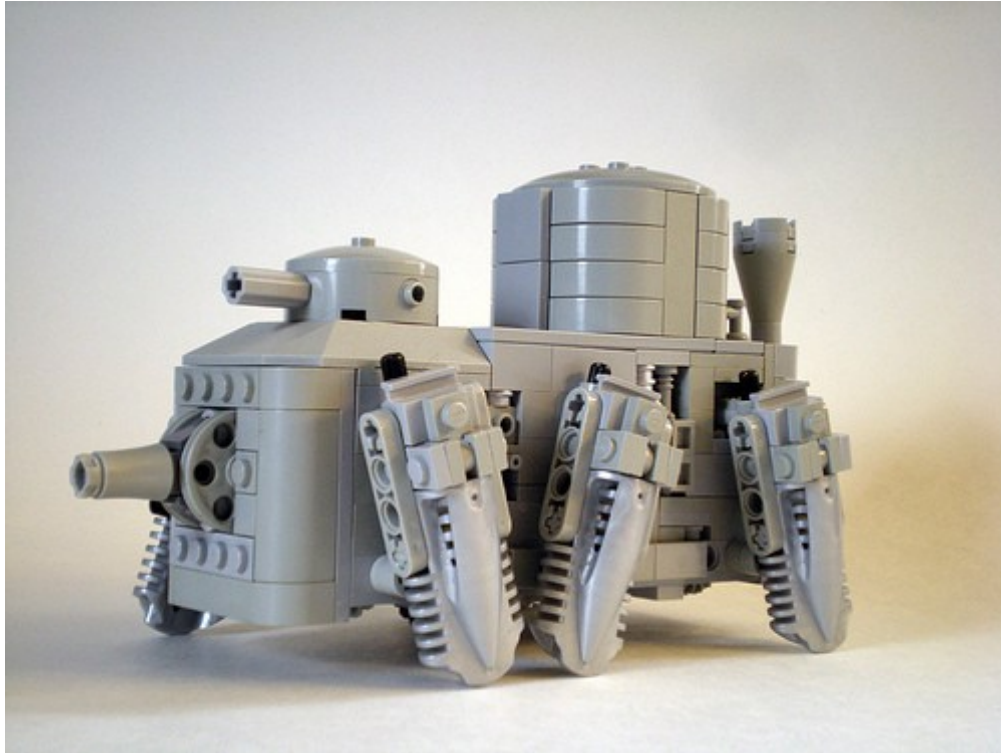


Figure 4. *Steampunk Walker Mecha Tank* by Matt Hamann (2009).

**nnenn (A):** Nice inset turret. (Next time, hit this with a splash of some other color here and there.)

[JordanTNeves](#) (T): Dear Nnenn,

No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No.

No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No.

No. No.

...



No.

**nnenn:** Heh... and why's that?

[gerrit carstensen](#) (**A**): a little bit of color would look good provided its in the right spot

[JordanTNeves](#): I think "moar colors" is an overused sentiment. I really enjoy the starkness of this, personally, and having colors just for the sake of colors would be pointless. I may be ignorant to the fact that [tanks are really, really colorful](#) though.

[nnenn](#): Hmm... so a critique is invalid if it's been used elsewhere, huh? And you feel I was just repeating an overused sentiment, correct?

You're right, 'colors for colors sake' would be pointless... which is why I didn't say such. Perhaps I should have noted the point of adding a bit of color is to break up monotony and provide visual interest.

But, Jordan, I'm hardly suggesting this, am I? (Figure 5)



Figure 5. nenn's suggestion to Jordan (Photographer unknown, n.d.).

The conversation became a discussion among equals focused on the controversy between the TFOLs and nenn concerning the use of color. As an adult, an educator, and a practicing illustrator, nenn's expertise was both valued and disputed. He provoked other builders, both young and old to think critically about their choices and to defend them while offering other perspectives. His influence on future generations of AFOLs will remain a positive one, as the LEGO brick continues to be a foundation for playful artistry and design.

### **Discussing the Future of Play**

Lisbeth Valthar from The LEGO Group used the phrase "inventing the future of play" in her keynote address at Brickworld 2010. Perhaps it is the A/TFOLs who are in a process of re-inventing both play and art in their use of the

brick as a pixel in the construction of cyber generations of LEGO artists who incorporate communication, exhibition and critical dialogue over the Internet. Our examples have come from LEGO enthusiasts who are mainly interested in “space” and science fiction. Not all A/TFOLS communicate through online forums to the degree that these A/TFOLS do nor do they all enjoy the same type of contextualization as our interviewees.

However, we think that the stories of Clites and Zhang as well as nenn demonstrate the evolution of art and play for the twenty-first century. Richard Anderson (1990/2004) provided a cross-cultural analysis of the various roles of art to help people make sense of their world. Because the Internet allows for a diverse global population to connect, perhaps A/TFOLS are participating in a new playful aesthetic behavior as they use the brick plus online communication to fulfill the role of art described by Anderson (1990/2004). The A/TFOLS are using their creative medium as play to build social identity in a contemporary society, often fragmented and violent. We see LEGO as an up-lifting example of a familiar toy with the reputation of use by children having been transformed into a medium for playful art making by teens and adults. People with a similar interest in the use of the LEGO brick may feel isolated without the online community. It is equally important to note the importance of the yearly or regular conventions where in-person sharing or performance of the MOCs solidifies the network of the community. These conventions can be viewed as ritual gatherings, replete with spiritual spending, transformation, and then a return to a renewed normalcy upon departure. One dimension of LEGO adult play is that through sharing of

constructions with critical dialogue, meaningful coalitions can be made through both cyber-space and natural-space.

### **From Bricks to Pixels, Both Educational Toys**

So what does the LEGO example mean for educators? Clearly, there is a distinction between work and play for both adults and young students. When schoolwork retains an element of play, then it engages students. Perhaps only a few students would choose to *play* with LEGO, but many might decide to use media, such as the brick and Internet, to communicate with a peer locally or potentially long-distance. From “here is a model of my house; let’s see yours” to “how can we design together a scene of water purification that aesthetically harmonizes with a location?” teachers and students can create meaningful social change through playful art-making. All this can be possible with the brick and the cyber pixel, creating a new vernacular global art form.

From the technology of the block and brick to those based on the pixel and microchip, much can happen in the human imagination. Art educators have contributed to the literature on technology and education through critical writings on contemporary innovations, software, and devices as well as their use in both the classroom and museum environments (Liu, 2008; Parks, 2009; Taylor, 2009; Yang, Peck, Mozdierz & Waugh-Fleischmann, 2010). Shin (2010) provided an excellent example of integrating digital creativity into art curriculum while urging art educators “to explore, experience, and embrace creative digital world and

technologies” (p. 42). We agree with Shin and further add the encouragement to embrace the element of play possible in digital technologies as evidenced in the A/TFOL cyber community. Possibilities for applications of the lessons from LEGO are endless, limited only by the imagination of the user. Furthermore, the intergenerational dialogue between A/TFOLs could be a model for inter-grade conversation guided by a transgressive art teacher who is not afraid to cross boundaries set by the establishment. In other words, we suggest that educators take the risk to make connections between disciplines and generations in school settings.

Such teachers can redefine curriculum, using art and now the medium of the brick as resources for: historical vignettes, scenes from literature, math calculations, process drama, and structured play as educational method. The LEGO Toy Figure, commonly known as a Minifig, itself fosters discussion of archetypes and identity. A Minifig is a small plastic bipedal form that gesticulates in multiple directions as shown in Figure 6. There are a variety of human and robotic faces and forms available that interchange. Often LEGO users create custom Minifigs for their MOCs that represent themselves metaphorically called sigfigs that are sometimes used as personal icons or avatars in Internet chats. While not easily viewed in Figure 1 of this document, Clites and Zhang carefully placed a lone human Minifig in *Containment* to emphasize the question of who is contained. In addition, Clites and Zhang placed sigfigs that identified themselves in the tableau.<sup>2</sup> The Minifigs extend the practice of play with LEGO bricks in social roles as dolls or action figures often do, thus extending the social aspect of

Hanes, J. & Weisman, E. (2011) LEGO Brick as Pixel: Self, Community, and Digital Communication *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, 31. Retrieved from <http://www.bluedoublewide.com/openJournal/index.php/jstae/index>

coalitions of play. Educators can encourage the use of Minifigs as well as multiple uses of LEGO bricks in a variety of ways to encourage the construction of identity and community.

**United States Patent** [19] [11] **Des. 253,711**  
**Christiansen et al.** [45] **Dec. 18, 1979**

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[54] **TOY FIGURE** 4,103,451 8/1978 Kawada ..... 46/164  
 [75] **Inventors:** Godtfred K. Christiansen; Jens N. Karsden, both of Billund, Denmark Primary Examiner—Melvin B. Feifer  
 Attorney, Agent, or Firm—Davidson C. Miller  
 [73] **Assignee:** Interlego AG, Baar, Switzerland [57] **CLAIM**  
 [\*\*] **Term:** 14 Years The ornamental design for toy figure, as shown.  
 [21] **Appl. No.:** 877,800 **DESCRIPTION**  
 [22] **Filed:** Feb. 14, 1978 FIG. 1 is a front elevation view of the toy figure, showing our new design.  
 [30] **Foreign Application Priority Data** FIG. 2 is a side elevation view of the toy figure,  
 Aug. 29, 1977 [DK] Denmark ..... 650 FIG. 3 is a rear elevation view of the toy figure,  
 [51] **Int. Cl.** ..... D21-01 FIG. 4 is a top plan view of the toy figure,  
 [52] **U.S. Cl.** ..... D21/166 FIG. 5 is a bottom plan view of the toy figure,  
 [58] **Field of Search** ..... D34/4 R, 15 AD, 15 GG; FIG. 6 is a rear perspective view in one position of the toy figure,  
 46/151, 161, 164, 163, 22 FIG. 7 is a front perspective view in the same position of the toy figure,  
 [56] **References Cited** FIG. 8 is a rear perspective view in another position of the toy figure, and  
**U.S. PATENT DOCUMENTS** FIG. 9 is a front perspective view in the same position of the toy figure.  
 D. 247,054 1/1978 Rahstorf ..... D34/4 R  
 D. 248,178 6/1978 Tapdrup ..... D34/4 R

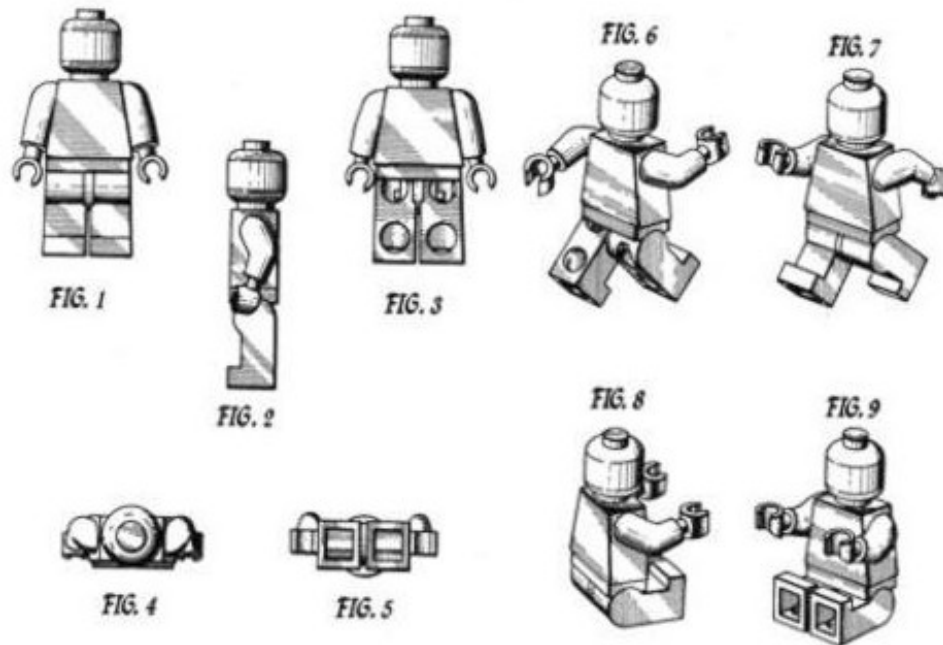


Figure 6. Toy Figure patent (1979).  
 Hanes, J. & Weisman, E. (2011) LEGO Brick as Pixel: Self, Community, and Digital Communication *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, 31. Retrieved from <http://www.bluedoublewide.com/openJournal/index.php/jstae/index>

It is not merely coincidental to this paper that Ole Kirk Christiansen, the originator of LEGO, chose to name his toy from the Danish terms *leg* and *godt* that mean “play well.” It is also interesting to note that in Latin the word *lego* means “I assemble” (Bender, 2010). Similar to the pixel as the building block of digital images, the LEGO brick is the micro-element used by A/TFOLs as a medium to assemble complex constructions. The corporate LEGO Group itself is learning about innovations from A/TFOLS that are not driven by the profit motive, comparable to the manner that open-source software drives the industry. As Shirky (2008) claimed, there is a potential for progressive social change through creative digital organization. Perhaps educators can join the implicit conspiracy of A/TFOLs by infusing play into learning, art, construction, and critique. Our hope is that art teachers will fashion personal inroads into using serious play and alternative media to engage students in the process of seeking better understanding of self and community in an age of digital communication.

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Tragically Nate died in an automobile accident in April 2010; his death inspired over 250 thoughtful comments from A/TFOLs who had never met him in person and knew him only through the cyber-world. After his death, A/TFOLs at Brickworld 2010 created a missing man Vic Viper formation in his memory. His death still brings tears to many members of the community. We value the legacy that nneen left to the playful and meaningful gift of feedback.

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Relatedly, Clites and Zhang included a vignette in *Containment* as a memorial to nneen. An anonymous Minifig chisels a monumental sculpture of his Flickr icon brick.

## **Parents, Middle-class-ness, and Out-of-School Art Education**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the intersections of middle-class parenting practices and out-of-school art education. Drawing on the work of Lareau (2003) and Kusserow (2004) it argues that middle-class parents use a particular logic of parenting that involves the ongoing cultivation of children in hopes of promoting future security and life advantage. I argue that out-of-school art education is often taken up within this parenting practice in ways that serve the cultivation of both general and specific middle-class values.

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With him, I have enrolled him in a variety of different courses up until this year, trying to find one that would inspire him. We did creative movement, we did karate this year, and I never could find the right one. And finally a light went on and he discovered painting and drawing and pottery. And for him art, and being able to represent his thoughts, has become a huge opening. It's a form of expression that he's never had before, and he's just excited by it, which is nice to see. Its been interesting to watch him. He has a passion. (Parent interview transcript, Christa, in Lackey, 1997, p. 144)

The quotation above is an excerpt from an interview conducted in the course of my<sup>2</sup> dissertation project, completed over ten years ago. The speaker, given a fictitious name, is the mother of a six-year-old boy who was at the time enrolled in a children's art class at the West Side Center, a pseudonym for a recreation facility located in an established upper-middle-class, tree-lined neighborhood in Vancouver, British Columbia. The perspectives of parents were not really central to the dissertation, which explored more widely how various actors interacting in two community centers within socio-economically and culturally different neighborhoods, viewed and experienced leisure art programming relative to the more dominant center agendas that promoted sport and fitness. This particular quotation, however, was mysteriously compelling to me at the time, and lingered in the back of my mind for years. I was drawn to it in part because I recognized myself, a white middle-class woman like Christa, in the seemingly

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<sup>2</sup> Although this is a dual-authored article, to avoid confusion it is written from the perspective of the first author.

systematic and almost urgent way in which this mother spoke about finding “the right” activity for her child, one that would match his interests and ignite something (what?) in him. I wondered at the way in which it implied a deeply careful almost scientific observation of her son, both “who” he was and how he responded to each of the experiences that she had him “try on.” I puzzled at why a six-year-old would need a “passion.” More than these, however, was my sudden recognition of her—and my own—taken-for-granted construction of what “good” parenting entailed with respect to children’s education, broadly conceived. The presumption was that good parents took seriously a felt responsibility for seeking supplemental, out-of-school educational experiences that were unique to their children’s personalities. A revelation came when I realized that this parenting practice that seemed normal to me, and was also something about which I felt mysteriously driven, was in fact a cultural assumption, not universal, and arguably grounded in my own middle-class-ness. That the ultimate ‘fit’ in the case of Christa’s son turned out to be an out-of-school art class, cemented her words in my memory and caused me to ponder how these out-of-school forms of art education might be caught up in middle-class parents’ agendas in both general and specific ways.

The purpose of this article is to explore some of the intersections between a particular logic of middle-class parenting and the use of out-of-school art education to foster socialization and cultural capital<sup>3</sup>. I suggest that middle-class parents use extra-

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3 In the Editor’s Introduction to Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production*, Johnson (1993) offers the following definition of cultural capital: “Bourdieu defines cultural capital as a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation of or competence in deciphering cultural relationships and cultural artifacts....The possession of this code, or cultural capital, is accumulated through a long process of acquisition or inculcation which includes the pedagogical action of the family or group members (family education), educated members of the social formation (diffuse education) and social institutions (institutional education).”(p.7)

school art educational programming to promote children's classed values and privilege in general. These parents also, however, view out-of school art education as contributing in distinct and particular ways to sought-after middle-class characteristics for their offspring. In this moment of crisis for public school education, within which school art is persistently constrained by practices of standardization and vulnerable to defunding and de-schooling, scholars and educators increasingly seek ways to re-imagine and re-locate places of learning as well as to forge coalitions with organizations in out-of-school sites (Ellsworth, 2005; Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010). While non-school settings do hold vast potential for re-thinking and invigorating art education, they simultaneously provide fields of play that permit those who already hold power and resources opportunities to activate privilege and maintain inequities in informal ways.

Art educators need to understand the complexity of the social and political environments in which our practices play out and which inevitably mold the nature of our work. Moreover, in general, academics have tended to study working-class realities and oppression, often from the perspective of the "other". We have much less frequently turned our lenses on middle-class-ness and, given that academe is arguably a middle-class domain, on ourselves. We need to look more closely at taken-for-granted middle-class assumptions and forces that permeate and influence our field as well as at the potential complicity of art education practices with the maintenance of inequality. Without making these presumptions and practices more visible, they remain resistant to critique and correction.

This article unfolds by first sharing perspectives about how one might think about 'class' in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I introduce some ways that "middle-class-ness" in particular

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has been described, and note connections between middle-class-ness, parenting, and education. I draw in particular on Lareau's (2003) notion of concerted cultivation as a parental logic that helps to explain middle-class parents' behaviors in selecting out-of-school activities for their children. I argue that parents perceive and use out-of-school art education programming in efforts to promote values, foster cultural capital, and activate privilege for their children in ways that align broadly with middle-class values but that are also seen as specific to art education. In other words, I suggest that non-school art education is used by parents both as a general tool among many others and as one that is seen as holding a unique contribution to the perpetuation of middle-class advantage for the next generation. I illustrate theoretical arguments about this stance with excerpts from interviews with middle-class parents whose children were enrolled in a particular Saturday morning art program during 2004 and 2009. (Appendix)

## **Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The notion of class is a complex and contested construct. As Noblit (2007) notes, popular discourse often frames the United States as a class-less society. Alternatively, he acknowledges that some postmodern scholars view class as merely one of many narratives that run through people's lives, and as such dismiss its usefulness as an analytic category. Noblit and Ball (2003) suggest that traditional conceptions of class grew from modernist thought and reflect social and economic relations at the time of industrialization. They concur, therefore, that such theory may be less applicable in a world profoundly changed by corporate globalization, mass media communication, and

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new social and institutional structures. In particular, they acknowledge the need to examine the ways in which class is inevitably experienced and intertwined with gender, ethnicity, race and other categories of identity and oppression. Rather than dismissing class as a tool of analysis, however, they assert the need to complicate and re-conceptualize it in light of these multiple positions and in consideration of an altered social and economic environment.

In part the issue is whether one views class as an economic or psychological condition. A common way of assigning people to class categories, for example, has been according to levels of education, income, occupation, and wealth (ownership of property). Ball (2003) conceptualizes class as reflected by such categories but emphasizes the ways in which people make sense of and experience class membership. He suggests that while class is not merely a psychological phenomenon, it nevertheless reflects sets of taken-for-granted assumptions that frame the ways in which we see ourselves in relation to others. His view is that class is achieved and enacted or performed, and therefore best understood in the context of daily life and descriptions of it. He draws on the work of Bourdieu (1984) in which class stems from habitus<sup>4</sup>, an enculturated set of family values, goals, deportment and language that are so engrained as to be assumed normal and natural. Habitus plays out as individuals use cultural knowledge (cultural capital) as a vehicle for identifying oneself as a member of a

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4. Lareau (2003) describes Bourdieu's notion of habitus: "Pierre Bourdieu provides a context for examining the impact of social class position. His model draws attention to conflict, change, and systemic inequality, and it highlights the fluid nature of the relationship between structure and agency. Bourdieu argues that individuals of different social locations are socialized differently. This socialization provides children, and later adults, with a sense of what is comfortable or what is natural (he terms this habitus). These background experiences also shape the amount and forms of resources (capital) individuals inherit and draw upon as they confront various institutional arrangements (fields) in the social world." (p. 275)



particular social class, and social knowledge (social capital) to navigate social networks in ways that accrue benefits.

In work that focuses on the worlds of white middle-class women in Britain, Byrne (2006) agrees that class is often visual and visible in “how people look and behave..., how they move through the streets, where they go and what they do”(p.105). She cites Kuhn, however, in arguing that while class is demonstrated in actions it is also engrained and embodied as a sense of self: “Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your psyche, [and] at the very core of your being.” (Kuhn 1995: p.98/Byrne p.106). Moreover, Byrne notes, class is inscribed. While she is careful to acknowledge the multiple ways in which class intertwines with other notions of identity and the many types of class both within and across classed categories, the social expectation and responsibility for inculcating children with particular kinds of values and attitudes generally fall to parents and often, as Byrne’s work demonstrates, especially to mothers.

### **Middle-class-ness, Parenting and Education**

Although class is experienced as a psychological condition, economic circumstances create the context and parameters within which cultural capital, including middle-class cultural capital, can be exchanged for social benefits. The ways in which the economic and psychological intermingle in classed experience is evident in attempts to describe the nature of “being middle-class”. Both Ball (2003) and Ehrenreich (1990) portray middle-class-ness as an insecure state of being “ in”, but also struggling to stay

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within, the middle ground in terms of economic and social status. Ehrenreich (1990) describes middle-class-ness as a state of continuous “fear of falling”. Ball frames being middle-class in terms of recurring themes of dread and confidence. He depicts it as a position of relative privilege in which one has resources that can be activated, but also as a state of increasing insecurity and anxiety about the possibility of losing one’s social position. This sense of vulnerability is further exacerbated by the volatile workplace market of 21<sup>st</sup> century economic globalization and its accompanying discourses promoting a belief that one needs to engage in continuous skill acquisition and the selling or promotion of the self to employers. Current economic conditions and persistent popular discourses about the disappearing middle-class in the United States contribute to a feeling of unease.

### **Out-of-School Education and General Middle-class Perspectives**

Perhaps surprisingly, this sense of anxiety about the future was often evident when I interviewed middle-class parents about their intentions in enrolling their children in Saturday morning art classes. In this interview context, and more than ten years after my interview with Christa, a parent in the Midwestern United States explained why finding a child’s “passion” is so important:

If they are passionate about something, even in a troubled world, they will succeed. Especially in the world today, there are so many bad things and if they can be passionate about something positive, and get excited about it, and do a good job at it, and feel good about themselves about it afterwards, and make a

difference, I guess they will succeed. At least if they try an assortment of things maybe something will just spark them. Maybe they will follow up on it. (Kim, parent interview transcript, 2009)

In other words, for this mother, finding a child's passion is grounded in worry about her child's future and propelled by an effort to secure her child's happiness and success in years to come. This parent, like many others, saw out-of-school art classes not merely as fun or leisure but as contributing to their children's future security.

For Ball, the uneasy economic environment in which we have been living encourages the intensification of what he calls "positional competition" (Ball, 2003, p. 20) in a struggle for the reproduction of class status and social position. In such an environment, parents use their economic, social, and cultural capital resources—their property and financial means; their social and family connections; and their learned dispositions and cultural knowledge—in attempts to support their children. Effectively, if unconsciously, these parents compete with others in a game devoted to improving the odds that current circumstances will be maintained or improved in the future.

Ball's (2003) large study of middle-class parents in Britain and North America, for example, describes their intense work and research surrounding decisions involving university choice. He reveals ways in which these parents are able to activate their various skills and resources—their comfort with speaking to teachers and administrators, and their various professional and social networks—to help their children successfully navigate complicated college application processes and to guide them toward individually designed but economically satisfactory careers.

Because those in the middle-classes generally lack extensive wealth via property ownership or inheritance, education (formal, non-formal and informal) becomes an extremely important vehicle of capital. Ehrenreich actually defines middle-class-ness as “all those people whose economic and social status is based on education rather than on the ownership of capital or property” (p.12). Streaming practices, Gifted and Talented programs, as well as magnet and private schools are sought within the credentialed system of schooling, while a multiplicity of children’s out-of school programming can serve the purpose of promoting cultural capital in leisure time.

Lareau’s (2003) work, which also draws on Bourdieu, seeks an understanding of how privilege and disadvantage is maintained and reproduced in the context of daily life in the United States. Her extensive ethnographic study involved ‘hanging out’ during leisure time with diverse kinds of families—poor, working class, middle-class, and upper-middle-class—in order to experience the day to day realities and family cultures of each. Her findings suggest that middle-class parents and working class parents tend to base child rearing practices on different but equally logical assumptions and values, each with advantages and drawbacks for their children. The practices of middle-class parents, however, tend to imbue children with social skills and psychological perspectives that prepare them for school success and life in more advantaged circles. The dilemma is that the socialization that Lareau (2003) calls ‘home advantage’ is framed as personal accomplishment that merits social rewards.

Lareau argues that middle-class families appear to base child rearing practices on an assumption of the need for ‘concerted cultivation’ of the child. Parents, and particularly mothers, see the need to engage children continually in discussions and

activities geared toward their social and intellectual development. Children are taught to look adults in the eye when speaking to them and to expect adult attention and respect. In the vein of 'hovering helicopter parents' (Gibbs, 2005) the middle-classes are deeply involved in children's lives, intervening in both in and out-of-school activities on children's behalf. These children's lives are often busy to the point of frenzy. Their free time is filled with organized activities of a wide range, and the parents devote extensive time and financial resources to supporting their activities. Much day to day life is spent preparing to go to organized programs or waiting to get picked up. Lareau suggests that these middle-class families engender in their children not only the assumption that adults are there to attend to them, but a general sense of entitlement in which material goods and special leisure activities come to be taken for granted as an ordinary part of life.

Certainly there were many parallels between the perspectives of parents with whom I spoke and the middle-class parenting logic that Lareau articulates. Interviews suggested that parents were uniformly active in orchestrating and managing children's out-of-school educations and took very seriously the job of selecting activities for their children: "Well, I think [these kinds of programs] are very important. We never look at them cavalierly. I think they allow [children's] development in many areas". (Jack and Diana, parent interview transcript, 2009)

The sense of extreme busy-ness that Lareau documented in her work also characterized family life as parents described it to me:

He's booked. It's an amazingly busy life. We are struggling with that all the time.....He gets homework: there is a huge pile of that. He does very well in

school—he's very advanced for his age. [After an extended daycare program at school] he comes home...around 5:30 or 6:00. He falls asleep. He plays the cello.... (Parent interview transcript, Emily, 2004)

My two oldest daughters are involved in band and choir and Girl Scouts. The older one, who is enrolled in Saturday Art School, is also athletic and plays across the country on softball teams. So they are very busy children. Usually in the evening they have either a music lesson or a practice and then once a week they have a Girl Scout meeting. In the evenings we are always doing homework. (Parent interview transcript, Connie, 2004)

Some parents did tell me that they wanted their children to be busy because it demonstrated industriousness and a productive use of leisure time, middle-class values in themselves. More parents, however, explained the many activities in which their children were involved in terms of cultivation for the future:

I want her to be exposed to a lot of different things to see what her interests are...I don't want to force her to like academics and that's it. Now days if you are really good at something you can make a living....as long as you are really good. I want to expose her to a lot of things like sport, and music, and science. She'll be a...well-rounded person in the future. It will help her [both intellectually and socially]. (Parent interview transcript, Sonya, 2009)

We do try to get them involved in as many things as possible,[things] that are interesting and diverse....This mixing of the kind of things they do is important to me so they get exposed to lots of different things. I don't want them to just play basketball....I think it is a matter maybe of exposing them to lots of different

things so that they can pick and choose and return to things in the future or not.

(Parent interview transcript, Ron, 2004)

Here the logic is that deliberately exposing children to many organized activities, including art, will foster “well-rounded-ness”, an advantage that may contribute to social comfort in a wide variety of settings. It may also, however, increase the odds that a child will find a special interest that might be developed into a vocation or be useful in some unknown way in the future.

These descriptions may well read as commonplace and unsurprising to many middle-class readers. A key part of Lareau’s argument, however, is that in the same way that “whiteness” is often assumed to be a neutral rather than a raced experience, middle-class-ness is often presumed to be normal, natural, and “class-less” or unaffected by particular classed values and realities. She makes the assumptions of middle-class parenting visible by contrasting them with what she describes as an alternative logic of parenting used by the working class and poor families who participated in her study and who she describes as embracing the promotion of children’s natural and spontaneous growth. Working class parents, she suggests, are concerned about their children’s education and provide for them in the best ways in which they can. These parents do not hover, however, and their children are encouraged to deal independently with conflicts they may encounter in or out of school wherever possible. Leisure time is not filled with adult-organized programming. Adults and children move in more separate spheres, and adults do not constantly engage children in conversation and stimulating structured activity meant to cultivate their social and intellectual skills. As a result children of these families may participate in more self-

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initiated and unsupervised leisure activities and even have more opportunities to rely on their own imaginations to counteract boredom.

I do not suggest that middle-class parents take up practices of cultivation with a conscious intention to maintain or improve the family's classed position, thereby deliberately advantaging their own children and disadvantaging others. Lareau's work and supporting research by Ball, however, do offer potential paths for making sense of how seemingly innocuous and pleasurable children's out-of-school art activities come to be viewed by middle-class parents as reflecting very high stakes. They suggest a way to understand how art education is taken up as one tool among others, a general good, within a much wider pattern of behavior of competitive position taking and cultivation that seeks middle-class advantage and fosters future social and economic security for children.

### **Middle-class-ness and the Particular Appeals of Non-school Art Education**

Middle-class parents also seek out-of-school art education for the specific advantages that they believe it provides. The themes around this use of extra-school art have to do with personal freedom, creative self-expression, and the ways that middle-class parents perceive these in the context of fostering a particular psychology in their children. In this section I draw on the ethnographic work of Kusserow (2004), who also studied parents living and raising children in different socioeconomic contexts in the United States. Like Lareau, she argues that poor, working class and middle-class parents conceptualize children differently and therefore nurture them differently. Their

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perceptions are, of course, logically grounded within the economic conditions and social environments that they each navigate.

Kusserow's (2004) study of pre-schools located in three different New York communities proposes that parents of different social classes actually have different views and promote different versions of 'self' in their children. Middle-class families fostered what Kusserow deemed a 'soft' permeable psychology, while working class and poor families fostered a psychology that included a tougher, arguably more protective outer shell meant to ward off harm that was everywhere in their children's environments.

[Middle-class] parents stressed the child's cultivation of ... emotions and the development of a good sense of self as crucial foundations for being happy and successful. The child must fully acknowledge and honor... emotions, tastes, and desires so that [he/she] can find the right societal outlet for them. The energy of true desire, authentic preference, feelings and tastes will naturally motivate her to be good at what [he/she] loves. If [he/she] does not know and have confidence in [his/her] unique feelings and preferences, [he/she] will have little momentum to carry [him/her] forward in a quite competitive society. (p. 84)

Among the working class and poor families in Kusserow's study, however, the vulnerability involved in expressing personal feelings was not to be encouraged and might even be dangerous.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Kusserow found alignments between middle-class parents' notions of a 'soft' individualistic self with beliefs about the importance of creativity and children's art:

Creativity was seen as extremely important as an outlet for emotional expression. Given the importance of the unfolding and puffing out of the emotions and feelings of the self, creativity became prized for the way it was an outlet for the child's subjectivity. Creativity was a perfect channel for the release of one's true self, a catalyst in the individuation process. If creativity is encouraged, a stronger self emerges, one that has fully explored its own domains and knows what it wants and needs. It is hard for a child to unfold without knowing what he wants. Creativity is an assertion of the child's unique personality through color, light, paint, voice, song, design, and so on.... (p. 96)

These themes of using out-of-school art classes as means of both expressing the true self and molding a child's personality were also evident in parents with whom I spoke. One parent, for example, spoke about her child as being a "perfectionist" and needing open-ended artmaking experiences to counteract that tendency. An important strand in these conversations also, however, had to do with the importance of providing children with a site of personal freedom in the context of expressing the true self:

I want her to develop; I want to see her for who she is, which is something that I don't think that I was offered. ...she has that interest in art [and] I would like to develop that as much as I can. And at the same time [I want] to expose her to other things. But I won't force her to do things that she is clearly not interested [in]....[I want her to be] able to see things through different eyes, different perspectives, growing in her own confidence....And... I think there is definitely [the issue of building] self esteem. (Parent interview transcript, Connie, 2004)

In selecting children's out-of-school programming, many parents felt strongly that children should not be forced to participate in any activity. Forcing children to attend a program in which the child does not wish to participate is not only difficult for the adult, it is counter-productive in uncovering children's special interests and developing their unique abilities. In this same vein, there seemed to be a high valuing for art experiences that foster independence and the free expression of a unique self. Frequently, the claimed need for children's freedom was a response to perceived restrictions in school in general and even in school-based art education.

I think art is a great way for my daughter, well, for anyone, but especially for this particular child, just to express who she is. I think sometimes in school that's hard to do because maybe there's not...as much freedom to express themselves. ....because the day to day school routine is so rigorous now with academics and things. The creative aspect is kind of gone. (Parent interview transcript, 2004, Connie)

Oh, at school I just think it is...a little more regimented because they have to get certain things at certain times, otherwise they're not following the curriculum. And they might have [a] little more liberty here....They sent home these things for the parents, like magnets and bookmarks and things and they [said] it was your child's design. [But] every kid had the same design. I didn't realize it until I saw a magnet on a friend of mine's refrigerator and went, 'that looks just like my son's magnet!' [And I thought] this isn't what art class is about; it's about freedom of expression and learning different ways of doing things. (Parent interview transcript, Kim, 2009)

Developing the child's authentic self involved cultivating children's perceived special abilities and interests. Byrne (2006) refers to the interesting tendency to talk about children's special interests as something that children have a right to develop and "more as a special need—for a 'gifted' child—rather than as a desire on the part of the parents" (p.123). Certainly this development grows from parents' observations of and careful responses to their child's apparent natures:

She is seven years old. She has always loved art. We call her our sensitive artist type because she is always caring for others and looking at the world. She is very reflective for such a young age...I guess she has always had a strong affinity for art, so we take it a little more seriously. (Parent interview transcript, Janice, 2009)

My six-year-old and my eleven-year-old are both in the program. My [eleven-year-old] daughter is very interested in art. She wants to be a fashion designer when she grows up....My youngest daughter brought the [flyer] home....and I saw she was interested. She had said before that she would like to take some kind of art classes [at the university].

(Parent interview transcript, Carry, 2004)

While these children may certainly have interests in art, it is difficult to know whether their interests are actually unusual. Parents may not be aware of what constitutes average interest and development in visual art, or the fact that many and even most children enjoy some aspect of artmaking at some point.

## Conclusion and Implications

Turning attention from school-based to out-of-school educational sites fosters a re-conceptualization of the field of education. As Ellsworth (2005) argues, re-examining the “places of learning” fundamentally challenges our constructions of knowledge, learning, and pedagogy. Schubert (2010) suggests that a view of education and curriculum as pertaining only to schools is myopic. He argues that the significant curricular questions are not about what people learn in schools, but how people learn to become who they are and how they build their lives. Such questions must, he suggests, move beyond the limits of school institutions. At the same time he acknowledges the complex political forces that flow through out-of-school pedagogical sites. While some educators seek alternative spaces for progressive social action and reconstruction, non-school contexts can also serve conservative ends that buttress dominant and oppressive agendas.

In this article I have looked at parents’ practices of enrolling children in out-of-school art courses through a deliberately sociological lens. Using the ethnographic studies of Lareau (2003) and Kusserow (2006) I have argued that middle-class parents assume a classed notion of what constitutes good parenting. This in turn propels parents to work at cultivating particular values, knowledge, and skills through an out-of-school curriculum in hopes of securing future happiness and advantage for their children. As forms of commodified education positioned in leisure realms, extra-school art classes are available to parents who have both the economic resources and socio-cultural motivation to select them on behalf of their children. Moreover, the discourses

surrounding non-school recreational programming tend to dismiss them as worthwhile sites of education, diverting attention from what I argue are actually significant educational realms.

I have suggested that out-of-school art classes are used by parents both in ways that align with general middle-class values as well as ways that view art as uniquely appropriate. I have depicted out-of-school art education as caught up in parents' senses of obligation to systematically pursue and manage an extra-school curriculum for their children. These parents describe art classes as one of many diverse activities that fill their children's out of school time, satisfying a middle-class valuing for a busy and structured life, but also providing flashpoints of interest that might be developed and become an advantage in later employment or social circles. To the extent that art is popularly perceived as fostering personal self expression requiring a kind of freedom from constraints, these classes seem to fulfill a middle-class need to foster children's unique characteristics, distinguishing them from the crowd and making them special in a competitive world. I suggest that as economic conditions continue to be uncertain and if the arts and creative approaches to learning continue to be pushed out of schools, extra-school art activity will increasingly be a key site for cultural capital acquisition. To the extent that middle-class parents can activate their resources in obtaining out-of-school art experiences as cultural capital for their own children, one wonders how motivated they will be to argue for a strong in-school art education.

This study seems to hold a number of implications for art educators. Those of us who use out-of-school art educational environments for pre-service art teacher education need to consider the complex tacit environments that we provide both for

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novice educators and the children they teach. Significantly, we need to remember that using out-of-school environments for art education does not merely change its location but can alter the meanings that art activities hold. We need to analyze the extent to which our programs may be caught up in parenting agendas that make us complicit in advantaging already advantaged children. It seems imperative that we seek out ways to invite and encourage the participation of children from a range of social and economic circumstances into our classes and to honor parenting logics other than those of the middle-class in our curricula.

In general, the extent to which middle-class assumptions permeate our field seems ripe for further research. While I do not assume that every art educator views her or himself as middle-class, I suspect that most art educators can recognize and describe how class has been an influence in their lives in general as well as how class has affected their connections to art and their attractions to art education as a career. I assert that middle-class values and assumptions permeate the field of art education in ways that have been neither fully brought to light nor appropriately confronted. I suggest that a focus on middle-class-ness in art education offers a point of entry through which to reflect on ourselves as educators and to examine the multiple contexts in which out-of-school art education occurs, but also to analyze some of the most taken-for-granted assumptions and practices in our field.

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## Appendix

### The Participants and the Research

In this article, we interlace excerpts from open-ended parent interviews with scholarship that helps to interpret and analyze them. The excerpts were taken from 13 interviews conducted with 14 parents whose children were at the time participating in a Saturday Art School held at a large Midwestern university. Seven interviews were completed in 2004 and six were completed in 2009. Although all parents of children (over 200 in all) enrolled in the Fall 2004 and Fall 2009 programs were invited to participate, these were the only parents to respond, a fact likely due, at least in part, to these parents' very limited free time.

Of the Saturday School parents who participated, three interviewees were men and eleven were women. They listed their occupations and those of their spouses as university professor, registered nurse, outside salesman, graphic designer, manager, electrical engineer, building contractor, independent consultant, small business owner, artist, consultant, student, stay-at-home mother, university staff, graduate student, psychiatrist, retired, and currently unemployed. All but two identified themselves as, at minimum, second-generation residents of the United States. Interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes long and consisted of 8 to 10 open-ended questions in which parents were asked to describe the kinds of activities in which their children were involved in out-of-school time, how they went about selecting out-of-school activities, and why they decided to enroll their children in the Saturday morning art program.

Interviews were each transcribed verbatim, coded repeatedly, and systematically

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analyzed for emerging themes and insights related to the research questions.

Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the confidentiality of those who took part.

The data reflect the perspectives of a small set of self-selected parents whose children were involved at the time in a particular out-of-school art educational site. This does not mean, however, that what can be gained from this project is without meaning or value. Readers will need to consider the extent to which the words of these parents ring true in light of situations with which they are familiar. Certainly there are more and different stories that can be told from these data. Yet we suggest that those we have selected for discussion here do raise significant questions for art educators and imply avenues for further research.

Also in the tradition of qualitative methodological orientations, we wish to make our subjectivities as researchers and co-authors more transparent. Our perspectives reflect those of individuals with Ph.D.'s in Curriculum Studies (Art Education) and Political Science, respectively. We are of Northwestern European ancestry, white, and our classed backgrounds are complicated by the influences of both middle-class and working class enculturation. We have also been married for a very long time. These circumstances allow us not only to take advantage of our individual academic backgrounds, but to reflect on ways in which class has permeated and caused tensions in our relationship, our work together as parents, and our experiences in higher education. Perhaps more significantly, as researchers this project allows us to turn the lens on ourselves, interrupting a prevalent pattern in which academics study "others." We are grateful to the parents who participated in our interviews and often see ourselves and our own behaviors in their words. This recognition is also, therefore, an

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acknowledgment of our own potential complicity in middle-class practices that have promoted privilege for our own children.

## **¡Pendejo! Preschoolers' Profane Play: Why Children Make Art**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, I address the concept of critical coalitions in play from two perspectives. First, I consider young children's art making with digital video through contemporary play frames that propose moving beyond the dichotomy of subject (child as actor; active meaning-maker) and object (child as dupe; susceptible to media and moral panic). This reaffirms that play is at once contradictory, pleasurable, fantastic, and culturally purposeful. Analysis of young children's digital video as play within frameworks proposed by Wilson (1976), Walkerdine (2007), and Freud (1922/1948) allows for an expansion of philosophical ideas about young children's art making. This coalition between art and play might also expound upon pedagogical ideas about both and their roles in young children's (and adults') lives. Complementarily, I propose that playing with children as a research approach has implications for pedagogy in early childhood art education.

## Motivation and Play: Why Do Children Make Art?

In his 1976 article, "Little Julian's Impure Drawings: Why Children Make Art," Brent Wilson writes with conviction, "Why do children draw in the first place? Until theories of child art attend to the factors that motivate children to make art, we will not have an adequate theory of child art" (p. 46).

In the article, Wilson identifies several significant motivations for children's drawings. Chiefly among these are tension, tension relief, and its resultant pleasure. We might equally identify these attributes of drawing with Freud's (1922/1948) description of the 'pleasure principle' (p. 1), or an organism's psychic drive toward stasis. Yet, Julian Green, the Victorian child whose memoirs Wilson so carefully scrutinized, found pleasure in drawing the very subject matter dually hidden from children and repressed in Victorian society: Nudes, criminals, torturers, hell, battles, riots, coronations, and massacres (p. 51). When Julian drew these scenes, he experienced a not only heightened state of tension that peaked in a crescendo of delight but also what Wilson calls a hallucination (p. 51). In this moment, Julian's experience supersedes the economic logic of the pleasure principle: Pleasure comes not only from the absence of tension, but also from a transformation during Julian's compulsive recreation of displeasing graphic memes. In the midst of these intimate and fantastic moments, Julian felt he *became* what he drew.

Wilson's heady description of Julian's impure drawing mirrors contemporary theories of children's play in three primary ways. First, scholars agree that play, like Julian's drawing, is intrinsically motivated (Sutton-Smith, 2005, p. xiii). Next, play produces a positive affective state—it is pleasurable (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005, p. 14). Third, play often involves role switching, in which children reverse societal rules to become the active party (e.g., a child who watches Power Rangers on television becomes the Pink Power Ranger in an episode of social play). This role switching, which may very well be what Little Julian experienced when he became his drawing, is deeply attached to emotive affect. As Wilson explains: "In some drawing of children there seems to be a fit between the art produced and emotions generated during the production" (p. 51). Writing about Little Julian's pleasure, hallucination, and transformation through drawing, he concludes that through "experiencing [which may include repetition in play], individuals learn to anticipate and actively seek out those experiences that will heighten their awareness and move them to desired emotional states" (1976, p. 51). Wilson's proposal moves beyond children's drawings as objects of study to consider the emotional and affective states of children as producers in the act of drawing.

Freud's (1922/1948) contribution to this idea concerns the realization that, while episodes of play, in their completeness, are pleasurable, children do not always choose to recreate enjoyable scenes in their play. In his example of his grandson's "*fort-da*" game (1922/1948, p. 12), Freud postulates that it is in fact,

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the traumatic event—the child’s mother’s leaving (*fort*, or go away)—that the child repeats most in his game, and the child’s triumph over it, that is most pleasurable for him. Freud terms this self-soothing a cultural achievement, or a suppression of biological predisposition in service of the regulating affects of culture and the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) a child gains through this achievement. He proposes that children express this mastery through role switching and repetition. This suggests to Freud that children’s play may function as an exemplar of something that might supplement the pleasure principle. So, apart from simply transforming pain to pleasure, play might well serve cultural purposes for children beyond mere organizational economy. These purposes range from the gaining and wielding of kindercultural capital (Thompson, 2003) to the exploration of subjectivity through fantasy (Walkerdine, 2007) to the self-soothing deemed necessary by disciplinary structures present in society (McRobbie, 2009). Freud’s postulation foreshadows contemporary play theories, which conjecture a variety of both impulses and outcomes for children’s self-initiated play.

In her study of children playing video games, Walkerdine (2007) conjectures that theories of understanding children’s play must move beyond the Cartesian dichotomy of subject (active) and object (passive) player and viewer. She eschews the split in contemporary children’s studies and the new sociology of childhood that asserts children’s active roles in interpreting mass media.

Finding this opposition, “unhelpful,” (p. 5) she proposes interrogating theories of

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subjectivity and the typical assumption that the subject (actor) who is making meaning from media is always rational, in control, conscious, and resistant. Drawing from multiple theoretical sources (e.g., Deleuze, 1994; Elliot & Spezzano, 1999; Latour, 2005), Walkerdine argues that “engagement with fantasy and imagination in the making of identity is complex and that the dichotomies of active and passive do not adequately account for it” (p. 11). She continues to suggest that we consider children as players within a landscape that accounts for the “circulation of fantasies within social and cultural practices” (p. 11). In this way, she deftly re-introduces the potentials of irrationality and fantasy in play, without relegating children to the affects of recapitulation theory (Hall, 1897) or effects theories (e.g., Singer & Singer, 2001) that emphasize the effects of media on children’s participation in society. Her theories are especially applicable to an understanding of young children’s digital video play art, which like video game play, “demands an interaction with the media form” (p. 12). At once, children become directors, actors, performers, participants, players, and viewers. In this complex view of subjectivity, children’s productions can simultaneously be rational and irrational as they both subvert and reassert dominant cultural narratives.

### **Young Children and Digital Video Play Art**

In this article, I place my argument at the intersection between Wilson’s (1976), Walkerdine’s (2007) and Freud’s (1922/1948) theories of play and McClure, M. (2011) ¡Pendejo! Preschoolers’ Profane Play: Why Children Make Art. *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, 31. Retrieved from <http://www.bluedoublewide.com/openJournal/index.php/jstae/index>

contemporary theories of children's art (e.g., Thompson, 2003) that account for both children's motivations for art making and the manner in which they incorporate cultural influences in their work. I propose that understanding young children's voluntary digital video art through a coalition between play and art theory might enrich contemporary theories of why children make art. Following Walkerdine, I propose moving beyond typical dichotomies that have characterized study of children's art (e.g., that children's art, and therefore art education, must be either expressive or intellectually enriching, and always rational), and previous methods of understanding young children's engagement with mass media/visual culture memes (e.g., violence, profanity, the putrid) in their visual productions (i.e., children as either dupes or active makers of meaning, not as engaging in multiple, embodied fantasies).

Following Wilson, I choose to consider some of the most pleasurable forms of play for young children; those that seem subversive, at least in part because they threaten images of children's growing cultural achievement, rationality, and regulated participation in culture and society. In this article, I choose to discuss profanity and its collusion with a specific art form: Digital video production. These genres seem to hold tremendous enticement for young (and old) players. As Grace & Tobin (2002) found, children's video productions tended to incorporate and dramatize tropes adults find ideologically unsettling (Thompson, 2003). Using Bakhtin's idea of *carnival* as part of their framework for analysis, Grace & Tobin found the following elements to be a predictable part of

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school age children's video productions in an elementary school classroom: Laughter and Parody, The Fantastic and Horrific, The Grotesque Body, and The Forbidden (p. 202-206). As Wilson found with Julian's appropriation of the cultural themes that surrounded him, the videos third grade children produced as part of the curriculum Grace & Tobin developed referenced and in some cases, parodied, the X-men, ninjas, *Beavis and Butthead*, *Studs*, *Child's Play*, and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (2002, p. 198).

Grace & Tobin approach their analysis from the point of view that little is known about children as the producers of 'video texts' (p. 196). They adopt a semiotic discursive frame, in which young children are positioned as active authors and interpreters of cultural texts. Like Walkerdine (2007), I believe supplementing this frame with a psychoanalytic lens when considering young (preschool) children's voluntary digital video production might illuminate the "manner in which children incorporate the material they observed as spectators of adult art into their own productions" (Wilson, 1976, p. 74). This manner, as Walkerdine has proposed, is relational and not necessarily defensive or rational, but fantastic and pleasurable. Further, it is not necessarily always subversive or subaltern. Active or unconscious meaning making does not always mean resistance. Children's reaffirmation of cultural narratives asserts their ability to participate in multiple cultures and societies.

An analysis of children's voluntary use of digital video, then, has a twofold advantage for this project. First, it may further elucidate children's motivations to

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make art by postulating a correlation between play and art making not possible through analysis of other media. Second, understanding children's art through the lens of play, supplemented by an expanded idea about the relation context of subjectivity (Walkerdine, 2007) might well serve to confront and to enrich still-dominant discourses about children's art that relegate art making to isolated, confined purposes (e.g., expression, creativity, individualism, etc.), and understandable purposes (e.g., Cartesian dichotomies about agency or sublimation). These discourses about children's art making, in turn, reflect the historical moments in which they were proposed, as do classical, modern, and postmodern theories of play.

## **A Brief Introduction to Play Theory and Its Usefulness to Art Theory:**

### **Motivation and Fantasy**

Wilson's description of Little Julian's investment in drawing, under the framework of the Kreitlers' (1972) theory of tension relief, correlates to several classical and modern play theories: These include surplus-energy theory, recapitulation theory, and psychodynamic theory. They may help to answer these question that Wilson proposes:

What is the source of tensions in the first place? Do some children have a greater propensity for boredom and its resulting tensions?

Do some have more curiosity and greater conflicts? Do some

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children simply need the high continual states of arousal and turn to an activity that through experience they have learned provides that stimulation? (p. 50)

As Johnson, Christie, & Wardle (2005) explain the idea of surplus-energy theory dates to the eighteenth century German poet Schiller's (1794) *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*. The theory is a common-sense theory of play that is biologically based: An organism generates more energy than it needs to survive and so when that energy builds (i.e., tension), it must release it. This happens through play. Recapitulation theory, proposed by Hall (1897), complements Freud's theory of child development. In this conjecture, children recreate the stages of the human race (animal, savage, tribal member) through play, whose purpose is to "rid children of primitive instincts ... no longer needed in modern adult life" (p. 35). Following this, Freud (1922/1948) postulated psychodynamic theories of play that serve to be cathartic. As stated prior, one of the mechanisms through which play achieves catharsis is role switching (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005). In role switching, the child who was the spectator (or in the case of a negative experience, perhaps the recipient) becomes the actor (or, in the cases I will share, the performer) who can control the situation. As Freud explains, "He was in the first place passive, was overtaken by the experience, but now brings himself in as playing an active part, by repeating the experience as a game in spite of its unpleasing nature"

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(1922/1948, p. 14). Wilson writes that for six-year-old Julian, “just looking [at Gustave Dore’s grotesque and sexual images] was not enough. He found that by becoming an activist through producing his own images ... his intensity of involvement was even greater” (1976, p. 53).

Johnson, Christie, & Wardle explain that the role-switching works along with repetition, which allows children to manage unpleasant events (such as a punishment) in smaller segments that are easier to psychologically assimilate. Freud, who is less generous in his appraisal of children’s good nature, assumes that this role switching (e.g., in the case of a child reenacting a medical procedure or punishment with another child) allows for a reenactment of revenge (1922/1948, p. 16). Nonetheless, theorists seem to agree that play serves a mitigating function. The transformation from recipient to actor (whether manifest from autobiographic experience or the viewing of media) produces not only pleasure but also adaptations necessary for social and cultural participation.

Freud’s conjecture of role switching and repetition holds special promise for understanding how children play through art that I believe will help us to understand why children make art. Just as Julian Green felt he became what he drew, children who stage scenes using digital video become the subjects of their own playful affections and subsequently view themselves repeatedly as loops are engaging in an activity that is not only pleasurable but that may also give them a sense of agency (which is not necessarily wedded to rational control) over their visual and affective worlds. The young children whose videos I will next share

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engage in a creative and re-creative process of choosing images and events from the media culture that surrounds them. Through this process, they assimilate these events into an “enormous visual encyclopedia” (Wilson, 1976, p. 47), and perform in play as actors and spectators of the profane and putrid.

### **Actor/Spectator: Understanding Children’s Digital Video Art**

A four-year-old boy<sup>i</sup> was one of the first children to take to the digital video camera, immediately, as a performer (in other children’s videos), director (of his own staged pieces), actor (in the pieces he directed), and engaging spectator (in the pieces he repeatedly viewed). In the first videos he created, he stood behind a tripod, and acted in front of the screen with action figures found in the play area of his classroom. Using a Flip® video camera, he would record very quick vignettes, and watch them from the viewfinder, make adjustments, re-record, and view, once more, without ever leaving his post behind the camera. After quite a long time of doing so, he made the discovery that he could record himself acting in front of the camera by pressing the ‘red’ button, moving in front of the tripod, and recreating scenes similar to those he had just performed. These scenes ranged from dancing for friends, or imitating media scripts, to those scenes he might generally play out in the play area or outdoor play space but not record. They sometimes involved scatological talk (“poopy!”) and action (making flatulent noises), rough and tumble play, explorations of bodies (Figure 1), and

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declarations that seem racist, like “Aw, a Chinese dude.” In the scene that I focus upon here (Figure 2), the boy recreated an altercation between a police officer (one of the action figures in the classroom) and another man (a more ambiguous action figure), in which the police officer repeatedly calls the other man a *pendejo*, Spanish slang for idiot, stupid, or dumbass. The boy began the play episode by positioning the two action figures perpendicular to one another and muttering under his breath. This kind of profane introduction occurred in other videos made by this child and others. In one case, another five-year-old boy knocked over a tower of blocks as if he were wielding a pool cue and exclaimed, “Damn! That was a good one!”

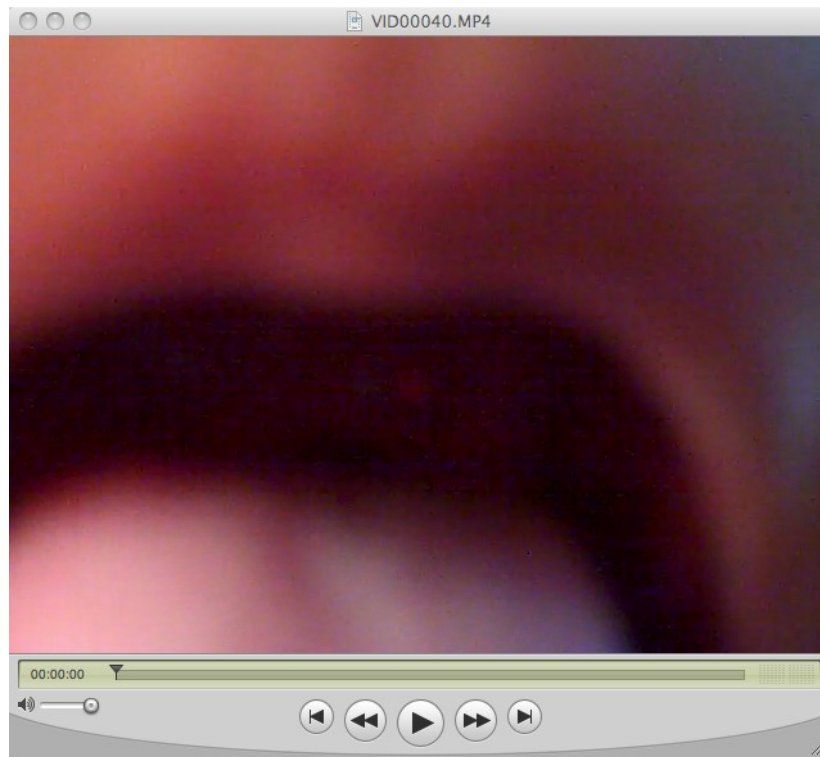


Figure One: A video still from a series in which the children recorded the insides of one another's mouths.

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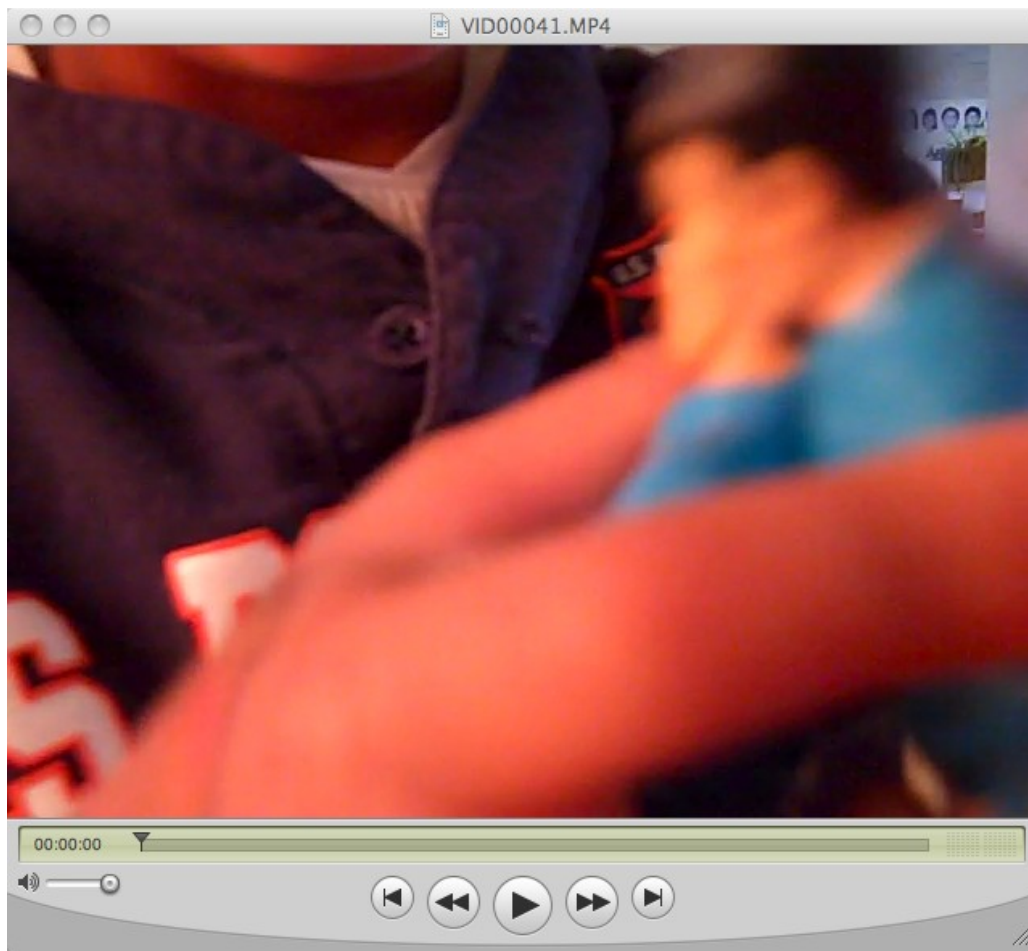


Figure Two: A video still (detail) of the two action figures engaged in a confrontation.

It is possible that the *pendejo* piece was first performed for its actor, who functioned as actor and director (e.g., see Carter, 1998). Yet, a friend can be heard in the video saying *pendejo* over and over, while the two giggled. So, social/cultural implications are twofold: First, it is possible that the boy was either recreating a scene he had witnessed in life, or on television. Next, while some of the video performance might have been private, it occurred in a nonetheless public sphere—the classroom. The cyclical nature of the play, like the game of

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“*fort-da*” was not only in the performance, but also in viewing the performance. This latter engagement, the viewing, seems to be the source of the most profound pleasure for the children, and was the action most repeated. In this way, digital video loops, perhaps more immediately than drawing, have the potential to be “twice behaved” (Schechner, 1993, as cited by Sweeny, 2008) or repeated indefinitely. This repetition compulsion, then, to re-view, provides a heightened state of pleasure for children, who share in the delight of becoming activists through both performing and viewing. Performing, viewing, and re-viewing—a repetition compulsion—might well assist children in developing a kind of ‘mastery’ over the media pleasures that seduce them in the face of the school, social, and organization cultures that they easily recognize, even in preschool, that they must assimilate. At the same time, I would like to suggest, following Walkerdine’s analysis of violence in video game play, that children’s pleasurable relationship to profanity, might well be pedestrian and commonplace were it not typically confined to an adult discourse that represses its significance by overplaying its unlikely dangers. This discourse becomes a regulatory structure in which particular types of childhood attributes are over-valued.

A four-and-a-half-year-old girl was, initially, less interested in directing action with the digital video camera, and more intrigued by becoming an actor in recorded action. She often played with the boy who I just described, punching and feigning hurting him on camera with action figures used as projectiles (Figure 3). The other actions in which she performed range from what might be

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considered small snapshots (analogous in a way to snapshots with a still camera) to what we might view as 'dares.' In the segment I consider here, her friends who were making the video asked her to lick a water sculpture that was a part of the classroom landscape (Figure 4). Essentially a large globe that rolled through a water bath, the sculpture was meant for contemplation, not for bodily interaction. Ostensibly, the water repeatedly circulated, without being flushed, and was touched by many children throughout the day. Licking this water stood in stark contrast to the civilized table manners the children demonstrated in the two or more meals they prepared and ate together. It also contrasted with the respect that they reliably and pleasantly showed for one another and for classroom materials. The video segment was not only recorded five different times, but also watched several more times. This compulsive re-viewing, then, allowed a resuscitation of the initial pleasure the girl felt in its making; an identification with her and her actions by her viewers; and an affront to the image of the 'good girl' most girls strove for and embodied in their classroom, personal lives, and friendships. In this way, viewing the video can be seen, in the extreme, as an affirmation of those sanctioned values as much as it can be a subaltern act.

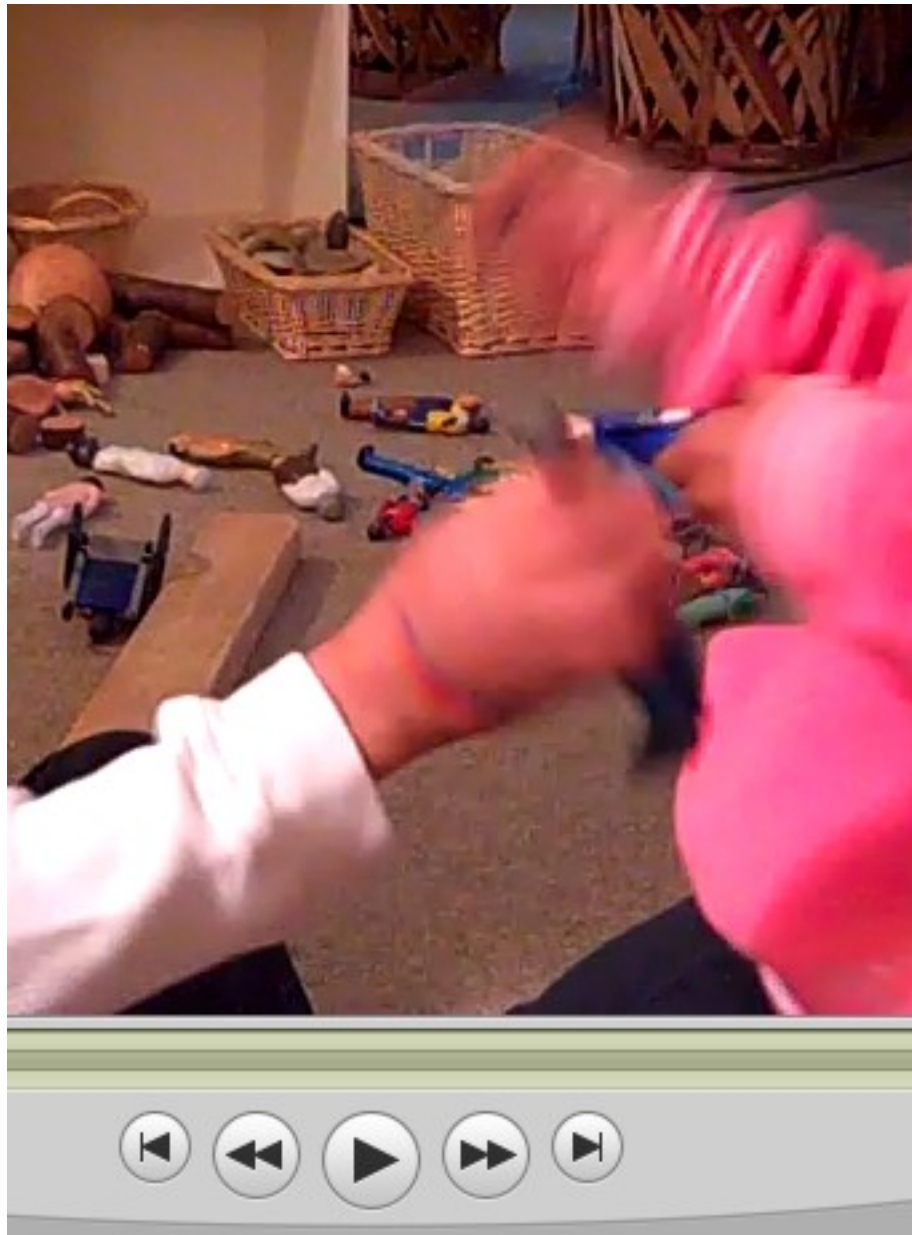


Figure Three: A video still (detail) of a boy and girl engaging in rough and tumble play with action figures.

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Figure Four: A video still (detail) of a girl licking a classroom sculpture.

I have chosen these two actions because they were not only repeated as actions and repeatedly viewed, but also because they represent most emphatically the spectrum of repeated games children invented and enacted, daily, in their digital video production. In the case of the making of each video

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piece, children gave attention to themselves as actors and as audience. Like Julian, their initial audience was often of one (Wilson, 1976, p. 46), but this audience was expanded throughout the social fabric of the classroom. Indeed, it seems that the children's pleasure in their video production became not only more intense through repeated viewing but through shared social viewing, in which classroom customs were simultaneously critiqued and regulated. Further, the children's keen interest in the video pieces I shared was cyclical. There was the fury of acting upon something generally repressed in the classroom; the curious mix of clandestine and public pleasure in repeated viewing; and a predictable waning of interest as other pursuits—many of them neither profane nor putrid—gained fashionable velocity in the classroom collective.

Beyond this, viewing children's digital video productions, and play, in this way might provide a challenge to the idea that children's art is always rational, creative, or expressive. Might children's art making, like their play, be as likely to be unconscious? (Walkerdine, 2007) Its repetition, then, might serve purposes not typically associated with classroom learning or with the positive contributions of art making to intellectual development. Rather, play and art making may be tied to processes of equal or greater significance and pleasure for children, such as playing with boundaries by subverting them or recasting their own identities in fantastic and contradictory ways. If, indeed, the process of play and repetition in digital video making provides children with a safe, supportive, and collaborative site in which they might recognize the polarities of kinderculture and school

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culture, then perhaps, such transgression may not be as threatening to the aims of pedagogy as it first seems: In fact, it may even serve to reinforce the cultural boundaries of groups of children in classrooms.

The danger, then, is not in welcoming children's profane play into research, collaboration, or the art curriculum, but in so doing with an impoverished interpretive framework, and censorship rather than support for children. Philosophical and pedagogical perspectives that seek to encapsulate the range of children's composing, acting in, viewing of, and playing with art within restrictive discourses about childhood impossibly limit the range of acceptable identities for children. The normalizing function of these affronts implicitly recolonizes (McRobbie, 2009) childhood and children's visual productions. This recolonization simultaneously offers children what McRobbie terms a 'new deal' in which they must choose to be good to participate in culture and in which pleasure in the profane, fantasy, and multiplicity incurs shame and banishment.

### **Research as Collaborative Play: Pedagogical Responsibilities**

Such transgressions, with notable exceptions (Duncum, 2009; Grace & Tobin, 2002; Grube, 2010; Thompson, 2009, 2010) rarely cross the impermeable membrane of sanctioned, rational, or ideological curricular spaces. As Wilson (2010, personal communication) points out, this may very well be because they

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are too dangerous. Given that the motivations for young children's art making often resides outside of both the ethical boundaries of classroom exploration and the cognitive boundaries of reason (perhaps within the unconscious), researchers and theorists of children's art are compelled by a daunting responsibility. Walkerdine's (1997, 2007) research and Ewald's (2000) collaborative photographic pieces illustrate the hazards when an adult lurks within childhood spaces; what Wilson calls the 'underground' (1976, p. 54).

In this collaborative research, which is now entering the end of its second year, children show an extraordinary level of comfort with their teacher and with me as a researcher. This does not mean that our adult roles (or as persons of authority) have been revoked. As is customary in classrooms and close relationships, children seek our comfort, participation, support, and guidance in instances of ecstasy and terror. Because our role does not impose censorship or objectivity, the children seem to act as if they would were we not there (and indeed, they have learned and are fully capable of using the complex camera equipment with finesse on their accord). Their subversive making seems, then, at first blush, to not be in response to our particular presence but rather to be in relation to the cultural narratives that surround them (which, undoubtedly, come from their families, the school, and media culture). Certainly, we are members of the same overlapping and contradictory milieus, and this is not lost on the children. The same children who eagerly greet me with hugs, kisses, and earnest explorations of my shoes, hair, nail polish, clothing, and personal life engage in

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profane play seamlessly; directing mashed scenes derived equally, like magpies, from their own personal and cultural lives. Each child, throughout her or his time making with the cameras (often within the space of seconds), recorded pieces both charming and jarring.

Thus, perhaps an alternative approach might emerge, when a researcher's presence is fully known, and she does not endeavor to record the events of art making after their conclusion, but as Thompson (2009) has done, she engages in the research process with children as protagonists—as a player. What is gained and lost in this approach, when children's spaces are shared, and adults function as conspirators in play, rather than as objective recorders or censors? Might pedagogues be afforded the possibility of assuming a similar stance, in which pleasure, pain, and fantasy and their visual and embodied expression are welcomed in classrooms as significant aspects of the experience of childhood and as rich sources of pedagogical content?

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<sup>i</sup>These scenes come from a larger research project, in which I collaborated with fourteen four-and-five year old children over the course of an academic year. During this time, the children produced approximately twenty hours of unedited digital video and 1500 digital photographs. While I provided the children with technical assistance, I neither suggested nor censored subject matter or content.

In this context digital video production functioned as an example of what Wilson (2005) describes as the “third pedagogical site.” (p. 18). He explains that this site is situated, “between school classrooms and kids’ self-initiated visual cultural spaces—a site where adults and kids collaborate in making connections and interpreting webs of relationships” (2005, p. 18). In this case, digital video production might be analogous to the sketchbooks Thompson (e.g., 2003 discussed) in that they provide a space, or site, in a classroom setting where children’s visual culture interests are indulged, outside of the negotiated site of the curriculum. This classroom is an exemplar of such a site, where the curriculum, is both project-based and child-centered, and focused around issues of Human Rights.

**Gender, Aesthetics, and Sexuality in Play:  
Uneasy Lessons from Girls' Dolls, Action Figures, and Television Programs**

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**Abstract**

How does children's play with dolls and action figures engender exploration of gendered identities: from aesthetics and appearances, to social standards, and various rituals and performances? This paper examines recent research in art education and gender studies concerning dolls and figural toys marketed to girls. As an artist and teacher educator, I will draw upon my teaching experiences and examine artifacts of pedagogy from popular material culture. I will address issues of consumption while taking into consideration taboos of gender and sexuality within public and private play. While children's toys as symbolic bodies may pose narrowly gendered and heteronormative models of adulthood, this article argues children may also begin to counter paradigms of gender and sexuality within unintended, subversive play at home and school. I will also propose coalitions of art and material culture, through which teachers can facilitate inquiries and projects around thoughtful juxtapositions of play, performance, and art-making.

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## **Introduction: Material Culture, Gender, and Play**

Art educator Wagner-Ott (2002) suggests in her research that teachers have yet to thoroughly consider students' visual culture of dolls and action figures in the context of gender (p. 246). The pervasive "heterosexual imperatives" that regulate bodies and sexualities (Butler, 1993, p. 2) also surround children's dolls as symbolic bodies. Advertisements and television programming centered on dolls and action figures often poses narrowly gendered and heteronormative models of adulthood to young people. However, play enables children to reconfigure meanings and iconography different from those intended by marketers and/or feared by parents, demonstrating that what is intended may not ultimately designate those messages and images ultimately constructed by young people. Art educators can approach Barbie dolls and other figures from material culture as artifacts of pedagogy, for they are objects that are part of personal histories, narratives, and play that links imagination with learning.

Barbie-play with the doll itself and its accessories and kits can also be conceptualized as a form of craft, for "practices - such as sewing, curio display, baking, and diorama and knickknack making - are fostered in community centers, in national girls clubs such as Girl Scouts or 4-H, and through mass media 'how-to' discourses" (Spigel, 2001, p. 319). I have been inspired by this suggestion to explore, for example, how young girls can craft spaces and narratives for Barbies and similar toys in unexpected and potentially liberatory ways. I will also consider

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the potential of dialogue between contemporary art with dolls and action figures in artistic and political questions of beauty that impact the art curriculum. Works of art that inspire and are inspired by toys will be examined as part of the influence of popular culture on students, artists, and educators. Finally, I will argue that despite stereotypical images and heteronormative models from television, students and teachers may also revise and reconfigure gendered and cultural binaries through unintended juxtapositions of play as performance and artistic production.

### **Princess (Em)Power(ed): My Own Childhood and Gendered Play**

Although Barbie reigned supreme among my female childhood peers, I was not at all interested in her as a young girl. I preferred playing with packages of oozing slime, activity kits relating to monsters and astronauts, and other toys that felt stronger, more colorful, and more active. My one gendered concession to “girls’ toys” was She-Ra. In my recollections, She-Ra: The Princess of Power had a magical sword, a flying horse, and some feisty friends. In my eyes, she represented a balance of beauty, brains, and genuine strength. My favorite toy (the only surviving She-Ra artifact I possess) wasn’t actually an action figure or doll, but rather a hand-made book my mother authored and illustrated for me. Within this narrative, I traveled to She-Ra’s realm to aid her in defeating menacing forces with help from a unicorn friend and my older sister. Looking at

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my much-loved She-Ra text now, I realize how intensely I valued this representation of She-Ra not only as my first reading experience, but also as my earliest visual icon of femininity and feminist agency.

As the teenage daughter of a psychologist, I would later become privy to more adult readings of She-Ra and her cohort. I remember my mother and her friends sharing how Bow, a somewhat ambiguously or androgynously dressed male character on the She-Ra television show, seemed to be homosexual or bisexual. Similarly, non-heteronormative narratives could be readily imagined for other characters that were ambiguously gendered and/or implicitly attached to others of the same or opposite sex, unlike many connotations of conventional relationships present in other television programming. I recall my own joy at the fact that She-Ra was neither married nor cohabitating with anyone as she enjoyed various adventures. Her individualism subverted the common narrative with which I was familiar and tired: that of a female princess or protagonist whose adventure-seeking culminates in marriage. For me, She-Ra was a symbol of my imagination, an adventurous and intelligent being in a fascinating world that I expanded by playing. Over the course of the years that followed as an artist and art educator, I have become very interested in how interpretation and revision of gendered influences from popular culture through play has potential to intersect with iconography, narrative, and imagination.



Figure 1. Image from a hand-made children's book given to the author as a birthday present by Alexandria Weida, 1986.

### **Passing on Play: Teaching Observations From Art Rooms**

In recent discussions with students and student teachers, I noticed some unexpected trends surrounding mass-produced objects of play for young girls. While She-Ra is passé, Barbie persists and takes on an increasing range of real and imagined roles echoing promising shifts in the professional world as well as persisting sexism. Material culture studies can include useful explorations of

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histories and cultures surrounding not only popular manufactured objects such as toys, but also a range of artifacts made by hand, and even fine art (Ulbricht, 2007). Additionally, a material culture studies approach invites us to compare and contrast manufactured objects with works of art and craft. As one example, I recently purchased a hand-made She-Ra purse repurposed from a child's She-Ra bed sheet of the 1980s. Such D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself) practice paired with nostalgic collection subverts typical models of consumption by reinventing and recycling products of the past intended for children into new craft commodities aimed at young adults. Although my female colleagues often lament how She-Ra and other warrior-type dolls and action figures marketed to girls are cancelled and/or discontinued more readily than their male counterparts (e.g. G.I. Joe, or more directly: He-Man), these female figures retain a certain status as cult symbols of nostalgia for teenagers and young adults. In this way, play extends developmentally and artistically beyond consumption across the lifespan, through emotional processes of memory, collection, and (re)making.

### **Deep Play and Artistic Flow: Potential for Passionate States**

As I wrote this article, I was struck by a 2009 episode of the popular show *South Park*, in which a character that obviously parodies Disney's Mickey Mouse makes a controversial revelation about girls' sexuality and their consumption of popular culture: "when little girls' 'ginies tickle, I make money! *Haha*. And that's

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because little girls are fucking stupid!" Girls' engagement with gendered toys and their desires for and about these popular, often lucrative objects can be a taboo topic. Even the notion of discussing the development of sexuality and desire among female children is controversial. We may remember that the *Lilli* dolls that preceded and influenced famed Barbie dolls of today were originally sex toys (Gerber, 2009, p. 9). While Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler, apparently knew nothing of the prototype's sordid past as a tawdry comic book strip and gag gift for bachelor parties, the latent sexuality that surrounds the Barbie doll arguably reemerges in play with these objects. Underlying themes of desire and the body raise questions about how children's play and art-making around dolls and action figures relates to the development of gender identities.

Examining the nature of young children and play, numerous studies identify pleasurable experience in developmentally-based definitions of playful activities with dolls and toys. In their study, Kuther and McDonald (2006) describe play as a rewarding opportunity to converse with the world and internalize particular aspects of society (p. 40). Poet and naturalist Ackerman (1999) proposes play as a process of arousal (p. 14). These characterizations underscore the intensity, sensuality, and illicit (or even sexual) potential of some of the play that can take place with dolls and other toys. For the purposes of this paper, I would emphasize Ackerman's sense of deep play, a special mental space beyond the mundane that involves fantasy and risk-taking (p. 14). This could include, for example, incidences I have witnessed of young people creating

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complex narratives and plays surrounding their action figures that both mimic and improvise social relations. These narratives range from deep conversations between romantic partners, to subtle interactions of friends in public, and many other interpersonal exchanges. Children's play activities at home and school also show processes of thinking, experimenting, and creating around toys. In both the "play" performances of children with dolls and their drawings adorned with popular characters, we can observe an engagement with invented narratives and images that relate to literacy, art, and personal growth.

As an artist, I see such deep play in parallel with Csíkszentmihályi's (1986) notions of flow, or the state he observed in adolescents of profound engagement with an activity and experiences of emotional and physical buoyancy (p. 23). Both young people and adults creating art may experience "deep play as flow" during which "the inner, intuitive self, the *luminous body*, takes over from the willful calculating self" (Beittel, 2000, p. 39). I mention the connection of deep play with artistic flow and intuition because this relates play to artistic making in terms of shared gestures, thoughts, and ideas. In the writings of Ackerman, Csíkszentmihályi, and Beittel, we may locate an intense, embodied pleasure that might be viewed as corporeal, even sexual. I do not raise this point to make playful engagement a site of controversy or even shame, but rather to examine how pleasure and play can be located within the body, and how this embodiment extends public and private spheres of learning and knowing. While these experiences are generally not considered appropriate for pedagogical

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discussion with or even about children, they suggest gender coding relating to play, toys, and relationships that children encounter. Topics of marriage and other romantic relationships often emerge in school settings within fairy tales, stories, and other narratives (Allan, et al, 2008, p. 317). The possibility to expand upon gendered labels and personas may be particularly relevant for teachers of language arts and visual arts. Children might be provided with alternative visions and narratives to those they know already through explorations of otherness within gender, culture, and relationships. Creating such safe spaces for identity exploration is valuable for inclusive, democratic education.

### **Capacity for Corporeal Difference:**

#### **Identity Politics of *South Park* and the Bratz**

While play can be personal and private, some of the more social experimentations with toys I have observed as a teacher also reconfigure play in ways adults might not expect. For example, the Bratz dolls received critical attention from parents as toys that show child-like figures in skimpy and sexually-provocative clothing. At closer inspection, it is also apparent that these dolls have detachable feet, such that changing a pair of shoes actually entails changing their feet as well. Some children often leave body parts unattached during play with other dolls and children, exploring the possibility of an injured doll or a doll

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with a bodily disability. This instance shows play as an exploration of social and corporeal difference.

From my perspective, this playful modification can be a serious re-envisioning of the body, reminiscent of corporeal representations of characters Jimmy and Timmy in toys and figurines from the aforementioned popular show *South Park*. While Jimmy and Timmy are characters who have physical and mental disabilities, they are also shown as children that balance their unique personalities with acceptance in the school community. Notably, television viewers voted Jimmy's character for the distinction of "Greatest Disabled TV Character" in 2005 on OUCH!, a Web site devoted to disability-related content in BBC programming ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ouch/2008/11/south\\_park\\_shortlisted\\_in\\_disa.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ouch/2008/11/south_park_shortlisted_in_disa.html)).

Bratz doll play not only allows for students to create and explore difference in bodily image, but also opens up additional cultural possibilities. While these dolls are provocatively dressed, they more authentically depict non-white ethnicity than their perhaps more appropriately dressed counterparts through varied eyes, noses, and lips. Bratz dolls are ambiguous in their cultural identities, appearing unrecognizably ethnicized, but clearly non-white. In this way, their ethnicity is uncertain, but they have a pervasive, shared youth culture often viewed as promiscuous and sexual. This layered representation of culture is problematic in that it also casts cultural others as sexual objects, and locates this sexuality in dolls that appear to be adolescents or children. It may be noted that

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Bratz were briefly discontinued after a dispute with Barbie's distributor, Mattel, not due to the controversy surrounding their clothing, but because the dolls' creator originally conceived of their design while under contract at Mattel (Reuters, 2008). This event raises interesting artistic issues at the intersection of creativity and consumption that older students might begin to explore critically in the classroom. Additionally, these teenaged (or "tween"aged) dolls might be seen as indoctrinating adolescents into consumption not only of trendy teen clothing, but also of a ghettoized aesthetic of cool that combines minority ethnicity with teenaged sexual promiscuity (Duncum, 2007; p. 289-90). Inviting students to consider these problems and possibilities surrounding objects of youth culture can touch upon issues of race, gender, and sexuality with aesthetic objects that are familiar to them.

### **Radical Modifications: Race, Gender, and Extreme Doll Play**

An examination of both recent and traditional Barbie dolls shows limited concern for realistic visual representations of women, and particularly of non-white ethnic groups. Multicultural/non-white Barbies appear as if they were white dolls merely painted a different color (Wagner-Ott, 2002, p. 255). That is to say that these dolls still have the lips, noses, eyes, hair texture, and figures of impossibly slender white women. How do children approach these idea(l)s of the female form? One response through play is extreme alteration or modification of

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the doll's body. Kuther and McDonald (2006) have observed the widespread tendencies of both male and female adolescents to engage in violent play with Barbies. Violent play included cutting the hair, biting the heads, melting the doll, and placing Barbie in real or simulated peril through play or actual modification of the doll object (p. 42). Many of the students in their study observe (or perhaps mimic the parental concern) that Barbie herself is unrealistic looking. These instances of violence and/or torture play could be seen as a performance responding to resentment and problems of gender and beauty surrounding Barbie's image. This sort of alteration treads the line between art and life, with disturbing and yet compelling implications about visions and treatment of women.

Play can also be a performance connected to the domain of art history and artmaking (Pitri, 2001, p. 48). In the case of Barbie play, I have observed that torture could fit into the continuum of children testing out socially condoned versus socially unacceptable behavior, with Barbie functioning as a complex medium. Torture play directed towards Barbie shows a sort of testing of boundaries, for while cutting the hair and changing the clothes is a part of play modeled by advertisements, more extreme and violent play potentially disrupts the possibility for future engagement with the doll.

### **Willow Rosenberg Toys: Alternative Adolescent Identity**

Beyond childhood Barbie play, toys and action figures for and about adulthood abound and also express otherness, as with some of the *Buffy the*

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*Vampire Slayer* products. Although Joss Whedon's *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (BTVS) television show originally aired from 1997 to 2003, this enterprise has spawned ongoing comic books and action figures that elaborate its cult status. I have been compelled by this particular phenomenon because of representations of one of the lead characters, Willow Rosenberg. Willow, a high school student who attends both high school and college as the show progresses, is a complex character that often defies labels and yet could be referred to as lesbian, Pagan, and "geek." I have frequently encountered BTVS fans in conferences and classrooms who favor Willow above other characters because they feel that they "know" her. As Willow grew up on this long-running series, so too did many of her fans, exemplifying the kinds of collecting and even play that extends from adolescence to adulthood.

UK researcher Jarvis (2005) describes BTVS as a show demonstrating the potential of academic, experiential, spiritual, and many other different types of learning, knowing, and doing (p. 32). Ultimately, Jarvis argues that the resolution of the show suggests that women can appropriate stereotypical male power by leading and fighting like the protagonist, and can also use "powerful arts coded female, like witchcraft" (p. 43) as Willow does. Willow's use of power and authority is not a simple one, but rather a varied negotiation of ideology and identity in which she balances academic intelligence, personal experience, and discourse with others to guide her actions. Willow's negotiations with sexual, religious, and gender mores are made iconic in various action figures that identify

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her experiences and personas as a witch and a lesbian, through objects that accompany the toy. These include spell bottles, cats, clothing, books, and other miniaturized personal effects that mark and signify Willow's identity.

While some aspects of BTVS characters' personalities defy cultural norms, the bodies of Buffy and Willow are still quite slender and representative of Hollywood beauty. Further, crucial points in the show's plot suggest that Willow must be saved or rescued by male characters. However, beyond manufactured busts and action figures of Willow, more playful and diverse representations can be observed in numerous fanfiction, graphica, and art devoted to her character. In this way, sustained playful engagement exists in dialogue with the narrative of the show, including reconfigurations of relationships and revisions of the plot that transform these characters beyond the confines of network television according to the artistic visions of the readers.

### **Artists' Alterations: Building on Barbie and Representing the Figure**

We might consider BTVS a work of art in that its creator, Joss Whedon, has pursued related graphic novels as well as the television series and commercial toys and products. There are also many artists that borrow or reference trademarked or licensed images from popular culture in more traditional formats of paintings and/or sculptures. We may return to the icon of Barbie as an inspiration for works of art by many contemporary artists who

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explore issues of beauty and body. Educators can also invite students to explore the use of popular culture body images in contemporary art. One promising example is Andras Kallai's 2006 terracotta and plastic sculpture entitled *Fat Barbie*. This sculpture takes the nude body of Barbie and creates *Venus of Willendorf* proportions, through the addition of clay. This embellishment is particularly relevant in terms of sexual imagery and symbolism because though Barbie often serves as a sexual object, her proportions are impossible and would seem counterintuitive to fertility. At the same time, the rotund body of *Venus of Willendorf* is also an exaggeration. Such artistic comparisons are neither entirely celebration nor condemnation, but rather engage in the kind of playful dialogues that may be of interest to art educators. In light of the subtractive torture play mentioned earlier, this kind of alteration presents a constructive and perhaps constructivist framework to address symbols of sexuality and femininity.

Most adults realize that Barbie's proportions, if applied to an actual human, would create a giant unable to stand or walk. Notably, Barbie dolls cannot stand unassisted, and most frequently function as a sort of mannequin (or perhaps like an unfinished work of art) for children to act upon or complete. How do these qualities complicate Barbie as a model of female adulthood? Kallai's *Fat Barbie* becomes a powerful image of alternation in the face of news items pertaining to women like Sarah Burge or Cindy Jackson, both of whom underwent major plastic surgery in attempts to look more like Barbie (Rutherford, 2009). There is an unsettling relationship between altering one's body to mirror a

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Barbie doll, not only stemming from issues of sexual objectification surrounding Barbie's image, but also because the doll itself often functions as a symbol of impossibility and a site of alteration.

French performance artist Orlan altered her own face to appear more like a composite of images of classical beauty from the Renaissance, making the act of her plastic surgery public art (*The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, 1990). These imitations have feminist implications, but highlight different aspects of aesthetics and mimesis. We might well encourage students to explore how the aesthetics of beauty influence and reference both art and popular culture in such examples. We can "play around" with notions of how art and life can disturb us, make commentary on social values, and reflect realities in such critical and unresolved ways. More practically, Wertheimer (2006) explored how "play [within pre-teen websites] offers a space where the body becomes a central locale for expression and experimentation with different selves and subjectivities, through the help of technologies such as clothing, toys, and cameras" (p. 220). Educators might take up the photographic work of Cindy Sherman as a parallel artistic reference, allowing students to explore ways in which play and performance intersect around clothing, body image, setting, and social perceptions.

Further, even the body of the art teacher is not safe from corporate imitation, objectification, and production. Art teacher Barbie (one of the most skimpily-dressed of the Barbie teacher line appearing in 2002) was marketed with students who mirror her race, a coloring book curriculum, and art prints that

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primarily feature artworks from deceased white male artists (Blair, 2006, p. 338). These representations clearly not only stereotype art education, but also undervalue the depth and inclusivity of the work art teachers often pursue. It may be noted that one of primary questions young people ask real art teachers about being artists is whether or not they have seen and depicted people in the nude during art training. I mention this popular question not to make artists and educators uncomfortable (although this question sometimes had that effect upon me), but rather to highlight how the looking and representing associated with art-making might provide a useful space for thoughtfully addressing some issues of gender, sexuality, and corporeality. For example, we gain a better understanding of the body and its many types by drawing it in full. Artists may also employ their gazes in attempts to appreciate and represent difference, inviting viewers not only to view images missing from popular culture, but also to identify beauty in difference within art.

### **Art Class Activism:**

#### **Student-Generated Images and Discussions of Pop Culture**

Gender studies researchers like Lamb and Brown (2006) contend that once we are aware of the insidiousness of a curriculum marketing Disney toys and Barbies to girls, there is no going back. This position is both interesting and disturbing. Could art, or rather art education, empower us to pause and speak

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back to these images? In my K-12 and college teaching, I have been surprised by possibilities of student-created and community-based media that re-presents, re-configures, parodies, alters, and even celebrates popular culture images. Collages posted online and in other art spaces outside of galleries often juxtapose popular images in new situations and contexts with changed meanings. A YouTube search of the word “Disney” yields several unexpected juxtapositions of licensed characters in alternative relationships and with altered plots and language that reconfigure the existing narratives. A prime educative example is found in Eric Faden’s review of copyright definitions, *A Fair(y) Use Tale*, which uses selected clips from Disney films that ironically demonstrate and explain ways in which artistic work and ideas can be used and shared by educators and artists without violating copyright law.

While contemporary copyright protects major corporations more fully than individual artists, I maintain that it is important to resist, reclaim, and revise images in art education, playfully. For example, artists like Roger Shimomura and his potentially sinister Disney creatures and comic book action figures (e.g. *Kabuki Play*) are not to be overlooked in consideration of consumer culture. Further, documentary films available to educators like *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* critically examine, among other issues, the problematic romantic relationships of Disney films such as *Beauty and the Beast*, in which the treatment of Belle by the Beast is nearly abusive. So too, the sacrifice of Ariel’s voice and body in *The Little Mermaid* for a romantic relationship is troubling. These kinds of inquiries

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may be increasingly appropriate for adolescent students as they are not only viewing but also planning or experiencing romantic relationships. On a related note, students and teachers may wish to explore popular culture and create activist media and public-service announcements within the framework of *Adbusters Culture Jammers*, a subversive grassroots group with a website and journal that considers contemporary consumer culture and related issues of body, politics, and image through parody and satire.



Figure 2. *Kabuki Play* by Roger Shimomura, 1985.

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Questioning popular culture is not always the same as condemning it, however. My own affinity for She-Ra was perhaps an inspiration for my artistic interest in women as heroines, including characters such as the Greek goddess, Artemis, or the folklore precursor to Disney's *Mulan* noted in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Along this line of thinking, artists and educators might work through issues of consumption and critical literacy with a playful sense of interconnections. Specifically, we can creatively address popular culture as part of art education, as but one of several source materials in the reading and making of all kinds of images and narratives. This valuing of play and creating commentary about mass-produced products also allows for us to address broader continuums of artistic representation, by extending consumer choice and aesthetic canons even while also noting continuities.

One example blurring popular culture and contemporary art is Seattle artist Mike Leavitt's Art Army of action figures that include models of Banksy and R. Crumb (<http://intuitionkitchenproductions.com>). Meanwhile, English teacher Dana St John (2009) has suggested that fellow teachers invite students to create their own action figures based around the lives of artists they are studying. Her "bio-dolls" curriculum inspires students to inquire into the lives and works of artists, symbolically representing or mapping their thoughts and feelings from art historical explorations in the head and heart of the dolls' forms. We might consider Yoshitomo Nara in the classroom as an artist who negotiates the divide of art and popular culture. Inspired by popular culture and manga, his sculptures

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and paintings generate unresolved narratives surrounding frustrated female children. Nara references toys in his aesthetic, and in turn his work has also been transformed and manufactured as toy objects for children, such as plates and figurines. Artists with such diverse artistic references create an ambiguous and interesting backdrop to discuss art and design along with toys and play. Wielding toy-sized weapons of their own, Nara's female figures may also be viewed as exemplifying some of the frustrations of popular culture detailed throughout this paper relating to oppressive body image, restrictive sexuality, and predetermined standards of social behavior.

### **Conclusions: Playful Possibilities in Pedagogy**

In summary, this article has explored some of the ways in which processes of play intersect with gender identity-construction and developing sexualities. This intersection is often problematic and unresolved as a site of pedagogy. In some of my earlier research, I emphasized ambivalence as a useful concept for thinking about art and about identity (Weida, 2009). I believe that ambivalence, as a balancing of opposites and negotiation of tensions, can also be useful to consider in discussions of play and art education where controversial issues of sexuality are involved. Further, as Spigel (2001) observes "the discourse of victimization that surrounds the child might . . . usefully be renamed and reinvestigated as a discourse of power through which adults express their own

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disenfranchisement" (p. 211). It is likely that parents and educators share a great deal of uncertainty about topics of sexuality in K-12 curriculum, yet we may recognize that heteronormative sexuality is already embedded in the popular culture surrounding both children and adolescents. Rather than prescribe particular frameworks for addressing gender and sexuality in the classroom, I have sought to explore ways in which diverse images and interpretations might be made available for learning through play. Specifically, a variety of toys, narratives, and artworks can be presented (or even created) such that students encounter different body types, relationships, and communities pertaining to adulthood. To encounter openness and otherness is often to help de-stigmatize aspects of gender and sexuality that are a part of students' experiences.

Popular culture studies can pose a similar level of controversy as sexuality education in K-12 schools. Some theorists have questioned visual culture approaches to toys and dolls as broadening the scope of art education excessively. Specifically, there is concern that popular culture overshadows art itself. For example, Kamhi (2004) challenged that if a visual culture of toys is considered alongside works of art history, "one can henceforth treat the *Nike of Samothrace* and Michelangelo's *David*, say, on a par with Mattel Toys' Barbie and Ken dolls" (p. 30). While these four examples are perhaps not suited for the same educational exploration, Andras Kallai's *Fat Barbie* might function as a bridge from fine art to visual culture, inviting us to gather works of art and toys

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into related dialogue with focused learning objectives around gender, body image, and aesthetics.

As an educator, I value critical readings of gender with familiar objects of popular culture as well as contemporary and historical works of art. Artworks and examples of popular culture can serve as artifacts of pedagogy that pose complex problems of gender in their juxtaposition of familiar contexts with potent visual symbolism. I propose that children and adults begin to address these problems creatively by conceptualizing ourselves as players and makers, instead of merely viewers, consumers, and censors. We can begin to examine the relationships between toys and art, and between play and education. A playful, yet thoughtful approach to engaging with images of gender and sexuality may provide agency for young people, such that learning communities collaborate to embrace the possibilities of play in art, and of art in play.

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