

Our people, our place, our time

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WHEN THE EYE INHABITS AN IMAGE

What can we learn from the very young?

Abstract

This keynote offers an artist-teacher's perspective on children's spontaneous responses to certain visual images. These images (their own, those by peers, a reproduction and a video) attracted passionate attention and seemed to inspire children to make conceptual leaps in thinking and drawing. What do these examples tell us about visual perception? What do they reveal about factors that prompt children to set themselves new graphic challenges? By unpacking these examples and considering various pictorial repertoires and factors such as visual surprise and defamiliarisation, I hope to provide a window onto kinds of action research that practitioners are uniquely able to undertake.

It is a great honour to have been invited to address this conference. On thinking through what I could offer, I realised that here was an opportunity to revisit certain goose-bump inducing moments that gave me new insights into children's thinking. I decided my focus today would be on unpacking these moments in order to raise new questions.

As a part-time artist-teacher in day care centres I have occasionally observed children suddenly see in certain images something utterly surprising - something that aroused strong feelings. More than that, their findings prompted them into making conceptual leaps in thinking, drawing or painting. It was not simply content that excited them. Other factors were at work too. What were they?

These chance observations - made at different times and in various centres - may appear unconnected, yet to me they seem powerfully linked. In each incident, the children seemed to regard the images with the same degree of curiosity as they do any unfamiliar object. They saw these images as *invitations* for action and interaction. They seemed to exult in 'seeing' as an active

process: doing, creating, entering, inhabiting and understanding. Significantly, these intense moments appeared to inspire them to try new graphic challenges.

Now that theorists, and many artist educators too, have moved on from the step-by-step stage theories of graphic development - with pictorial realism as defined by Western tradition as the endpoint (Anning & Rink (2004), Kindler (1997), Matthews (2003) - there are many more questions to pursue. (It is a concern that early childhood educational texts still tend to refer to graphic development unfolding in stages in a linear fashion.) According to Willats (2005, p.1) "Children learn to draw by acquiring increasingly complex and effective drawing rules". Evidence bears this out. But what prompts children to adopt new rules to add to their growing repertoires of graphic systems or strategies? And when does this occur? It strikes me that close observation of such moments is the kind of action research that practitioners are uniquely able to do and write about.

The philosopher and art educator Eulalia Bosch speaking at the Landscapes of Listening conference (2005) suggested that a way to explore ideas about education is to tell "short stories with long endings" - endings that explore ideas and ask questions with no prescribed end point. I like this idea: within any vignette we can find a microcosm to explore, learn from and reflect upon.

So in this spirit I offer some short stories - with potentially long endings - about children and found images. Let's marvel at the *to and fro* between what the eye does and what the mind does.

Walt Disney, Joan Miro, and Simon (36 months)

This episode took place in a playroom for two- to three year-olds where I had placed a book about the art of 20th century Spanish artist, Joan Miro, for children to browse through - or ignore. Simon (just three, a child who rarely drew or painted) sat down to look at it. As I knew he liked looking at large reference books (common in this playroom), I was not surprised that he leafed through the book eagerly. I watched closely, but said nothing.

The paintings ranged from Miro's early work of figures and animals to his later work filled with biomorphic shapes and calligraphic lines. Simon soon commented on paintings that contained a lot of black, gleefully dismissing them as being "Too scary!" Then suddenly he stopped at one painting, utterly riveted. "Matians! Matians!" he exclaimed, jabbing his finger on it. What was exciting him? I couldn't guess.

SLIDE: The painting: Joan Miro, *Blue II*, 1961. (This image can be found on the internet by typing the artist's name and the title into a search engine.)

This is a late painting of Miro's. Simon was rapt. Flipping rapidly past other paintings, he constantly returned to this one, repeatedly exclaiming "Matians!" Later, fellow teacher Janet Robertson, by showing plastic animals to Simon, learned that 'matians' meant Dalmatians. Good. But why was he so excited? Robertson subsequently learned from Simon's mother that he adored the video, *101 Dalmatians*, and his favourite images are ones in which Dalmatians streak across the screen like a sea of dots.

Shortly after looking at the book, Simon unexpectedly made a painting. Unfortunately I do not have a photo of it, only my sketch.

SLIDE: Adult sketch of Simon's painting

Simon worked with colours that were at hand on the first available piece of paper (already vertically placed on an easel). He painted three circular shapes in red, yellow and blue in a vertical row beside a vertical line. He then went to the Miro book, found his favourite, and said to himself with satisfaction, "The same!" Although Miro's twelve black blobs are arranged horizontally, not vertically, Simon's comment, "The same", showed an astute awareness: for him his painting reproduced the very features that excited him in the Miro. (As he had worked on a vertically placed piece of paper it is not surprising that he painted, from the top down, what were for him the salient features.) Let's now look at an excerpt from *101 Dalmatians*.

VIDEO CLIP: Excerpt from *101 Dalmatians*

On seeing Disney's squirming dogs, you can't help but think that whatever Simon wanted to make, it was unlikely to be about stationary dogs. Note that I used the word 'about'. While we usually assume a drawing or painting is *of* something (say, a dog) it can, however, be *about* something (say, 'dog-ness' or doggishness) - a point I was delighted to see artist educator Neville Weston raise at the Drawing Is Everything conference (Weston, 2005). The mark making of the very young often seems to stand for multiple aspects of something - how it moves, sounds, feels, and even becomes transformed.

Clearly Simon had seen something in Miro's painting that not only connected with his passion for Dalmatians, but contained imagery that he could use to suit his own purposes. We can only guess at what these may have been, but it seems likely that what he wanted to represent had to do with what excited him on screen. This begs the question: do we remind ourselves often enough that what children might be trying to represent may be a *moving* image?

Over ensuing days Simon drew several 'Matians'. He had found a visual language that *he* could use, and that we could now all appreciate. Significantly, perhaps this was the first time that he had used marks *to stand for* something. As he had

rarely drawn or painted before, and had not said much if anything about his marks, it was possible that this was his first foray into graphic symbol making.

You may ask what had prompted me to bring the Miro book? I had been fascinated to hear from Robertson that some of Simon's two- to three-year-old peers had recently come to the odd conclusion that lightning, which was a topic of interest at the time, was *pink* in colour. It turned out that this notion had arisen because a photo of lightning in a large reference book that the children often paged through had a slight pinkish tinge to it - something few adults would pick up on! Intrigued by these visually astute children, I decided to bring them something visually complex to engage with - if interested. I chose Miro because my daughter at a young age had spontaneously delighted in one of his paintings. I was curious to see what I might learn about children's thinking.

Another question: would Simon have responded in the same way had he only looked at a reproduction of the painting on its own, say, up on a wall? My guess is possibly not. Being able to page through a whole book at his own pace and seeing up-close a varied pictorial repertoire unfold almost cinematically meant that Simon could interact with and become attuned to Miro's work. Being watched closely by an interested adult added to the intimacy of the experience. It suggests to me that images that are relatively small, portable, able to be handled, seen up-close, and revisited - have special appeal.

These factors are also present in my other stories.

When the Ordinary Becomes Extraordinary

This vignette is also about visual surprise but of a different kind. When children placed their cut out drawings of dinosaurs on top of a photo (Kolbe 2005, pp. 92-93), the new composite image drew children like a magnet. What made it so compelling?

It offered what the writer Jeannette Winterson (2005) calls "the paradox of recognition and surprise".

It all began when I offered a new challenge to a small group of keen dinosaur drawers by giving them photocopies of their drawings to cut out and place in new contexts. Possible backgrounds for the cut outs included coloured and textured paper as well as an enlarged photo. The photo showed the forest of gum trees that was outside the centre. It was in a plastic sleeve.

SLIDE: Photo: Boy with drawing of dinosaur and cut out drawing

As soon as four-year-old Max slid a dinosaur on the photo he exclaimed, " Oh! I never knew trees were bigger than dinosaurs!" Since Max often drew trees

noticeably taller than his dinosaurs (see his uncut drawing), this says to me two things: either Max did not necessarily 'read' his drawing as adults would, or he suddenly saw his drawings differently. Had the cut out dinosaur now taken on a life of its own? Did it suddenly seem more real?

SLIDE: Photo: Cut out drawings of dinosaurs on a photo of trees

This new image instantly attracted two girls passing by. Even though previously neither had shown any interest in dinosaurs, the sight of dinosaurs in this new context so excited them that they instantly sat down to draw some as fast as they could - just so they could slide them into the forest.

They found the drawing difficult as they had neither played with nor drawn dinosaurs before. But they were so eager to use the photo (which they seemed to assume could only be used with dinosaurs) that they persevered with much determination.

SLIDE: Photo: Girl drawing dinosaur

Five-year-old Samantha included in her drawing what looked like two protrusions from the dinosaur's back extending into the sky. "That's trees behind the dinosaur", she spontaneously told me. Here was a completely new graphic development: an attempt to draw objects *behind* a foreground figure. Until then, Samantha's drawings had never included overlapping.

Not waiting for a photocopy to be made, so eager was she to see the dinosaur in the forest, Samantha immediately cut out her dinosaur and so of course cut away the protruding trees. (Fortunately I had taken a photo.) As her dinosaur dwarfed the trees, its size added fuel to the discussion about sizes of dinosaurs relative to trees.

SLIDE: Photo: The same dinosaur drawing, cut out and placed on the photo

I want to draw attention to the significance of the surprise element in confounding expectations, and disrupting or changing perceptions. Defamiliarization, a device well known to writers and artists, is something the Reggio Emilia educators have long used as a means to trigger new ways of seeing (Rabitti, 1994, p.61). By providing children with provocations that introduce a level of disequilibrium, the educators create conditions that inspire children to rethink their theories and stir up new questions.

Clearly, isolating the dinosaurs from their original contexts and transposing them elsewhere challenged children's perceptions. The changes in scale and proportion, in providing cognitive dissonance, added to the surprise. The contrast between the black and white drawings and the coloured photo also added to the strangeness. That the children could make the dinosaurs *move*

within a scene gave another dimension to the experience. Lastly, the plastic sleeve serving as a framing device helped children to see their work differently.

All these factors, then, contributed to making the sight of Max's cut-outs on the photo so arresting that it inspired Samantha to depict a spatial relationship that she would not have otherwise.

My next vignette again shows how seeing each other's images anew can inspire children to try new things.

The Ant, the Crumb and the Queen of Ants

A five-year-old boy at a centre where I had recently become a weekly visitor told me, half apologetically as he and friends rushed outside, "We don't like drawing!" Within weeks however, they were all furiously drawing. What had changed was their perception of drawing. They had discovered (or rediscovered) that drawing enabled them to speculate on things, in this case, ant life. What gave them the confidence to try was a type of resource new to them: a booklet of their drawings and photos for them to page through. (Ongoing documentation of this kind was unfamiliar to them.) Growing fatter by the week, it proved to be the glue that kept this ever-growing group of boys united as they acted like scientists speculating on aspects of ant life (Kolbe, 2005, pp. 50-57). (Meanwhile the girls normally keen drawers, haughtily kept an eye on them from a distance.)

The investigation began when a small group of boys and one girl (Eleni) spent time looking at ants through magnifying glasses. When asked to tell what they knew about ants, it transpired that collectively they already knew quite a bit. After dispersing, two four-year-old boys came to the drawing table, eager to talk and draw. I repeated to them Eleni's comment: 'They take food to the ant home and share it with the ants'. How might you draw ants doing this?" After a pause, Michael replied, "I saw one with a crumb once". Which prompted me to ask, "How could you draw an ant picking up a crumb?"

Here is the first drawing that was to prove pivotal.

SLIDE: Photo: Boy pointing to drawing of ant with a crumb

SLIDE: Drawing: ant with crumb

The drawing shows an ant with a crumb. When he had finished, Michael agreed after much persuasion, to leave the drawing on the table when he left. (Usually children put their work in their lockers to take home.) Little did I know how influential it was to become.

The next child to arrive at the table was Thomas (5 years). Although he hadn't participated in looking at ants, he had heard that they were a topic of interest,

and so wanted to draw one. He began hesitantly. Thinking he might want something to 'bounce off', I showed him Michael's drawing. On seeing it he was instantly galvanized. Wordlessly, he storyboarded this journey of an ant.

SLIDE: Drawings of ant carrying crumb to the queen + Caption:
"A worker ant carries the crumb. It brings the crumb to the queen". Thomas (5 years).

View from right to left: an ant alone, the ant sees a crumb, the ant picks up the crumb, the ant drops the crumb before the queen. On my next visit I placed a homemade booklet with the previous drawings and photos on the drawing table.

SLIDE: Photo: boy with booklet

The children who had originally been involved were not present, however Scott (4 years) found the crumb sequence riveting. Excitedly, he proceeded to reinterpret and reconstruct the scenario for himself. It took four drawings before he was satisfied.

SLIDE: Four drawings. Caption: "Ant home with ant and a crumb coming in with the queen in the middle", Scott (4 years).

Scott used a circle with radiating lines, a configuration typical of many children's drawings, as a base on which to graft the new idea of queen and nest. In his fourth drawing he has achieved his goal. It is interesting to see how he has combined Michael's ant-with-crumb and Thomas's story line to create his own scenario.

By my next visit the group had again expanded. The energy around the drawing table was almost palpable. Of their own accord, newcomers were exploring ideas about where ants might live. Significantly, they did so from a single ant's point of view. Here is how Hamish (5 years) incorporated Michael's configuration and Thomas's scenario of an ant's journey.

SLIDE: Drawing. Caption: Untitled. Hamish (5 years).

This drawing shows a simultaneous view of above and below ground. Above are sun and clouds, while below, underground, is an ant with crumb approaching an ant nest. Here surely is another example of the social construction of ideas.

The investigation into ant life continued to deepen over days but I end my story here. And I will let this drawing by a one-time reluctant drawer speak for itself on the power of images to circulate ideas.

A New Genre?

My last story is different as it involves a child's response to his own drawing. I therefore deliberated long as to whether I should include it here. But on balance I think it belongs here as it adds another example of how one image can not only give rise to another image, but also lead to deeper thinking. The anecdote comes from documentation by teacher/director Sally Jeffrey (Kolbe, 2005, p. 26). Apparently an altercation had taken place in the playroom between four-year-old Arkie and another child. Unsure as to what exactly had occurred, Jeffrey asked Arkie to draw what had happened. This defused the situation. Arkie had time to reflect on his actions, and made two drawings. Here is the first.

SLIDE: Drawing with caption: *Mean Words*, Arkie (4 years).

The figure on the right is saying 'mean words' to the ear of the figure on the left. Here is a marvelously succinct (and honest!) description of what had happened. I find Arkie's use of a zigzag line to depict unpleasantness particularly interesting. Of course it is a graphic device used in cartoons and comic books, but it is also one that four- to five-year-olds seem to invent for their own purposes to depict dangerous or unpleasant matters, and also movement.

Now look at Arkie's second drawing. While he had made the first in response to a request, he had then been moved to try another version.

SLIDE: Drawing with caption: *Mean Words* (in close-up)

On the left, a 'smiley mouth' utters firstly 'nice words' (the straight line) and then 'mean words' (the jagged line). In reducing the essence of the action to a diagram, Arkie took his drawing to another level. It may not accord with general ideas about drawing, yet as a piece of visual communication I find it remarkable.

Arkie was unaware of the word 'close-up' nevertheless he arrived at this graphic concept on his own - presumably because he *needed* it in order to get at the nub of what had happened. The close-up allowed him to show graphically the process of reasonable words *transforming* into 'mean words'. So here we see a child's invention of a new 'genre': a close up or diagram to explain something. My point here is that Arkie's innovation seems to have been triggered by his earlier drawing.

Some Reflections

Picasso once said, "I do not seek. I find." Of course, I think he was being more than a little disingenuous: clearly he was an intensely curious seeker all his life. However he probably meant that for him, being ever open to surprise and ready to take risks, the sheer act of *finding* was in itself a creative act. And it is in this

respect that I think we should appreciate the children's responses. In finding something exciting in the images they were being genuinely creative.

The fact that these images all depicted, or embodied, action is I think significant. For let's be clear, from Miro's vibrating spots of energy to the dinosaurs in the forest, from travelling ants to 'mean words' between a boy and a girl, in each something is *happening*. Imbedded are the threads of some kind of narrative.

As I reflect on what may have helped shape the children's various drawings, I am reminded of words by Loris Malaguzzi, the philosopher and guiding spirit of the Reggio Emilia educational experience: "Nothing is born of nothing; everything continues and is transformed. Imagination and logic, as well as feelings, creativity, and aesthetics, have a hundred roots and a hundred geneses ..." (1996, p.30). Awareness of at least some of the "hundred roots" helps us to understand why children do what they do, and to appreciate how they use, alter, supplement and transform whatever they encounter.

Also noteworthy is the fact that all the children's findings were charged with passion. Passion is a word that rarely appears in educational writing but, emboldened by the philosophy of the scientist Michael Polanyi (1958, 1998) who believed that passion was at the heart of scientific discovery, I use it here. Passion, it seems, sparked action, firing children to set themselves new graphic challenges.

To return to my subtitle: *What can we learn from the very young?* Whatever my sample of vignettes reveals, I am moved by a powerful observation. It seems that despite having grown into a world awash with seductive prefabricated imagery, young children are able to tune into specific images on their own terms, for their own purposes. The vignettes suggest that children are drawn to the unexpected, to images that excite the imagination - in tandem with images that connect with what they have already experienced. Just as we adults appear drawn to "the paradox of recognition and surprise", so too, it seems, are children.

Most importantly, I think, the vignettes show how capable children can be in finding in images the spur to further their own image making, thinking and learning.

The challenge for us - in the role of *teacher as researcher* - is to continue exploring ways to support and further these dispositions and capabilities, and, I suggest, documenting our findings in "short stories with long endings".

In conclusion, let me say that it has been a delight to have had the opportunity to reflect on and share with you some goose-bump inducing moments, moments that I hope will resonate with you - at least long enough to fire new ideas!

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