

# Children and art in the “Beauty, Children, Mirò and Contemporary Art” experience

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## 1. *Art as experience and creativity*

John Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, upholds that, between the subject who has experiences and the outside world in which the experience itself takes place, there lies a dialectic relationship, and that, in order to grasp this dialectic, it is necessary to maintain a unity between thought and corporeity, knowledge and emotion, activity and passivity. Indeed, «art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature»<sup>1</sup>. It is precisely in the aesthetic dimension that we can get a natural and in-depth grasp of how the various spheres of subjective experience interlock. According to the father of pragmatism, art is that dimension which creates continuity between the subject and everyday experience. Hence, for this very reason, it should be removed from its isolation in museums, thus restoring «the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living»<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, its experience can neither be purely emotional nor purely cognitive. Instead, it should be considered as a reality that involves all the spheres of subjectivity. Indeed, the artistic structure comprises an «emotional quality» that completes an «intellectual activity»<sup>3</sup>. It is once again emotion, for Dewey, that guides the selection of elements deemed coherent; it dyes «what is selected with its colour, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar. It thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of an experience»<sup>4</sup>.

On the basis of his idea of experience as something which is both made and had, Dewey deems that the «creative», «artistic» act of production must not be separated from the «aesthetic» act of perception and use. This can be avoided if aesthetics is conceived of not as an «idle luxury» or something that depends on «transcendent ideality», but as the development of something that belongs

<sup>1</sup> J. Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), New York, Perigee Books, 1980, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

to a normal experience<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, art can neither be understood as an act that is solipsistic, closed in on itself, since, in the relationship with the material, the artist gives rise to a structure that can be used by others. Hence, the work of art is produced in order to be used, it is an act of expression and communication. Dewey therefore asserts art's institutional and social value, underlining its anthropological nature. In this perspective, Dewey places art and technique, art and craftsmanship on a continuous plane, even though the work of art, unlike other objects, possesses a complete form, a totally novel unity of sense, which can be used by the whole human community<sup>6</sup>.

The link between art and technique resides in the creative dimension which, as Vygotsky notes, is an «essential condition for existence»<sup>7</sup> and hence it is at the base of everything that is innovative in every human action, even when it is a small thing, an insignificant detail. Creativity is that active and experiential dimension which «makes the human being a creature oriented toward the future». It is founded on «imagination» or «fantasy»<sup>8</sup>. For Vygotsky, imagination does not just work on the materials derived from the experiences had by the individual, but it is also based on the experiences of others, in other words, the underlying historic and social conditions. Man «can imagine what he has not seen, can conceptualize something from another person's narration and description of what he himself has never directly experienced. He is not limited to the narrow circle and narrow boundaries of his own experience but can venture far beyond these boundaries, assimilating, with the help of his imagination, someone else's historical or social experience»<sup>9</sup>.

For Vygotsky, «drawing [...] is the primary form of creative activity in early childhood»<sup>10</sup>: it develops through a series of stages or fundamental phases, a preliminary stage being scribbling. Creative drawing, more intense until puberty, however cools off with growth, except in exceptional cases<sup>11</sup>.

Cesare Ghezzi, one of the most interesting experimenters of art-based teaching for children, considers graphic-pictorial expression a bridge towards knowledge of the self, others and the world. Art is *paideia* and has the task of educating the gaze to scrutinize outwards and inwards, of educating us talk of ourselves and our own original vision of the world. A child's creativity can develop through a language of signs, graphics and pictures so long as to him the educational environment represents a place of freedom of expression. In this way, educating children towards art enables their broader expressive capacities to develop more and allows them to discover the path of inner narration.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> L.S. Vygotsky, *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood* (1930), in «Journal of Russian and East European Psychology», vol. 42, no. 1, January-February 2004, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 75.

Ghezzi thus transformed his classes into places with a freedom of learning and teaching, in a cultural workshop where no drawing produced by a child is rejected and where everyone can freely live the adventure of their education<sup>12</sup>.

The educator's role in the child's artistic experience is, in this perspective, to accompany her in clarifying her ideas, mental images and the feelings that she has or intends to transfer onto the paper. It is an approach based on the awareness that children's drawings tell a tale and that the educator has the task, together with the child, of analysing the oral narration accompanying or following the creation of the drawing. The educator urges the child to give a voice to his inner images, so that in the creative act he will interpret his experiences and emotions, transforming them. The moment of reflection and re-creation carried out under the educator's guidance allows the child to share her experiences with the other children. It motivates her to represent them in drawings and paintings. Hence the children are not obliged to suffocate their creativity, nor to follow set rules. Instead, they are guided to find solutions to the procedural problems that arise when they draw or paint, thereby discovering and building their own procedure for making art<sup>13</sup>.

From this point of view, technique is not taught, but is gained, a step at a time, as part of a dialogic relationship with the educator. Knowledge of the procedures and the capacity to use equipment are, therefore, not considered the goals of the teaching activity, but means at the service of the child's artistic production<sup>14</sup>. Besides, as Marco Dallari writes, in their interaction the educator is conscious that the child's language of expression is not definite, and of the importance of safeguarding the openness of this language. Hence, the educator «does not teach the rules, does not offer an already given code that the child simply has to fit in with to become more and more similar to the "grown-ups". On the contrary, we need to give the children the greatest opportunity to be more authentically close to their inner needs and originality, with their thoughts, interests, impulses, affections and emotions, to use Vygotsky's words. What is more, we must also enable them to bring out their undoubted capacity to be, to express, and even to teach us, perhaps, what originality and primariness of the species is preserved by their lacking or relative inculturation»<sup>15</sup>.

The 'workshop' pedagogic-didactic model therefore appears, as Dallari and Francucci suggest, the most suited for a similar approach to aesthetic education, since it respects «individual personalities», escaping the «pseudo-scientific and cognitivist epistemological ideal according to which know-how is the same as knowledge, and delivering existential and cultural tools is seen as mere literacy»<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> See C. Ghezzi, *Il bambino e la sua arte. Novantanove tesi*, edited by M. Gennari, Genoa, Il Melangolo, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> M. Dallari, *Pastrocchi, macchie, scarabocchi. Il linguaggio grafico-pittorico da 0 a 3 anni*, Scandicci, La Nuova Italia, 1988, p. 43, own translation.

<sup>16</sup> M. Dallari, C. Francucci, *L'esperienza pedagogica dell'arte*, Scandicci, La Nuova Italia,

## 2. Children's aesthetic experience through Mirò

It is within these theoretical points of reference that one can read the many experiences made since 2011 in numerous crèches and nursery schools both in Tuscany and some European countries – Spain, Slovenia, Croatia and Great Britain – within the project devised by Enzo Catarsi, «Beauty, Children, Mirò and Contemporary Art». The underlying intention of the project is to help fight the adult-centred conception, as yet not totally surpassed, according to which children are imperfect beings. This conception influences how children's work is read in various fields of experience, amongst which their approach to art and drawing. The same negative interpretation of children's first drawings, called scribbles, reflects a comparative attitude, being considered an imperfect step in the development of the capacity to represent reality. The so-called 'scribbles' are in fact cognitive and expressive acts, as demonstrated by those produced by the children during the project. Moreover, as Dallari upholds, «a child's scribbles point us to a dynamic, that is, developing, conception of the self. A conception that does not concern classifying one's body or thought under rules or fixed parts, but that is linked to the intentional relationship with the self and the outside world»<sup>17</sup>. The graphics and pictures produced by young children nevertheless do not just consist of expressions of a motor activity, but give real outlines of a story: through these the child recreates a movement, for example, of an animal, a person, etcetera<sup>18</sup>. For Tilde Giani Gallino, in place of the term 'scribble', with its denigratory overtones, the terms that should instead be used for the graphics produced by very young children are line, circle and mark, which are the production methods prior to drawing<sup>19</sup>. For Claire Golomb, these signs stand for the objects that the children have in their mind. Like in the game of 'let's pretend', real situations are simulated through gestures or objects that symbolically recall them (for example, children using a broom as a horse)<sup>20</sup>.

The blobs produced by young children also refer to a «twofold creation: at the beginning the formation of the blob, then the creation of an imaginary object suggested by that blob»<sup>21</sup>. In other words, the child produces the blob on the paper and then gives it a meaning by associating it with an object.

Owing to these considerations, for some time it has been clear that, in the

1998, p. 59, own translation.

<sup>17</sup> M. Dallari, *Pastrocchi, macchie, scarabocchi. Il linguaggio grafico-pittorico da 0 a 3 anni*, cit., p. 48, own translation.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>19</sup> See T. Giani Gallino, *Il mondo disegnato dai bambini. L'evoluzione grafica e la costruzione dell'identità*, Florence, Giunti, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> See C. Golomb, *Child Art in Context: a cultural and comparative perspective*, Washington DC/London, American Psychology Association, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> A. Stern, *Arte infantile* (1959), trad. it., Rome, Armando, 1966, p. 37, own translation.

educational relationship, blobs, as well as signs traced on the paper, should not be interpreted as a mistake to be corrected, as something needing to be straightened out, but instead as a core that generates sense, as a springboard for children's expression. Hence, even though different methods were used in the different locations, the aim of the project was to think of the child's relationship with art and with the aesthetic experience, by enhancing the creative dimension. This was developed through interaction with a universe of signs, symbols and images, in the framework of an aesthetic type of involvement.

The artistic material used consisted of works by Mirò, and in some cases also by Picasso, Kandinsky and Klee. From these starting points, the work could carry on in different directions: from developing an approach to art in the children, to stimulating creativity, in even the youngest children, prompting them to think in divergent ways, and performing work with signs and colours while handling various materials, including food and products from nature (flowers, berries, etc.). These works of art were not chosen at random: from Cubism onwards, art has substantially valued and drawn inspiration from an openness to sense typical of children's drawing: contemporary art has embraced the creativity and stylistic and perspective invention of children's drawings. In this way, it wants to stimulate an «open intersubjectivity» between the work of art and its user<sup>22</sup>. The reproductions of the works by the aforementioned artists were used in the didactics and pedagogy to develop the children's storytelling skills and to stimulate their artistic literacy for that same end. It was Enzo Catarsi's idea to use art as a stimulation for the adults to educate the children to experience 'beauty' and a positive conception of life and the world, in order to assume a critical and ironic perspective of reality. From this point of view, Mirò's works seemed to be those most capable of representing shapes and colours in different, and personal, ways. Tellingly, as Catarsi observed, many compared Mirò's gaze to that of children, owing to its tendency to diverge and constantly repeat the same graphic signs with a metaphoric meaning.

The experiences gained in the project provided a wealth of innovative suggestions, which I cannot set out here in full. For example, we may quote the fact that the young children not only drew with their fingers, splashing the paper with the colours, or letting the diluted colour move from one part of the paper to another, but they also painted with their eyes closed, allowing themselves to be guided by their emotions. Once they opened their eyes, the children put what they had drawn into words. The older ones, after carefully observing Mirò's self-portrait, used it as a guiding image to draw a picture of

<sup>22</sup> M. Dallari, *Pastrocchi, macchie, scarabocchi. Il linguaggio grafico-pittorico da 0 a 3 anni*, cit., p. 47, own translation. In the case of children's drawings, their meaning needs to be built through intersubjective dialogue between the adult and child in which the adult interprets the child's words, or in the case of very young children, gestures or vocal sounds (see A. Cappelletti, *Nido d'infanzia (Vol. 2) - Il disegno narrativo al nido*, Trento, Erickson, 2009, p. 21).

themselves, or the portrait of a companion. Many of the experiences involved the use of unusual and disparate materials, and in some cases other activities were carried out alongside the graphic-pictorial pursuits, such as reading fairy tales and theatre.

All in all, the activities involved the children's whole sensorial sphere, together with their affective and emotional experiences, arousing curiosity and a desire for discovery. It was observed that children, including the very youngest, showed pleasure and satisfaction in performing the artistic activities; they felt at ease and moved harmoniously, freely, autonomously, expressing their individuality. The experience of painting with their bodies enabled them to strengthen the motor skills required for actions such as running, jumping, bending down, hiding and rolling over.

The results of the project experiences in Italy and abroad were presented at an international conference organised by the Bruno Ciari Study Centre in Empoli in October 2013, after the untimely death of Enzo Catarsi. The conference proceedings are currently under preparation.

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