

## Modernist artistic thinking, child art and art education

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**Resumo:** A arte/educação<sup>2</sup> europeia do começo do século XX foi fortemente influenciada pelas proposições poéticas dos artistas modernos do período, os quais, em decorrência de suas buscas poéticas, valorizaram a arte infantil. Abriam-se possibilidades para novas configurações das imagens artísticas, em oposição aos cânones acadêmicos. A educação artística do período seguiu as orientações da Escola Nova, na contramão da Escola Tradicional. Neste trabalho, reconhecemos que as proposições da arte/educação modernista, em parte, ainda são válidas, e seu legado reside nas convicções e nos ideais instaurados por seus protagonistas. No decorrer do texto defendemos a ideia de que tanto em arte como em arte/educação, as propostas que transgridem seu tempo precisaram ousar e resistir às pressões políticas, econômicas e sociais conservadoras legitimadas pelo status quo, alheias às reais demandas dos artistas e arte/educadores que protagonizam sua época pela arte e arte/educação como direito de todos. Neste trabalho, queremos mostrar que a ousadia de tais proposições abre veredas para o novo, que, ao ser superado, pedirá outras instaurações.

**Palavras Chave:** arte infantil; arte moderna; arte/educação moderna; arte/educação contemporânea.

**Abstract:** European art education in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century was strongly influenced by the poetic propositions of the modern artists from the period, who, as a result of their poetic pursuits, valued child art, and opened possibilities for new artistic representations that opposed that of the academic canons. The period's Art Education followed the guidelines of the New School that opposed that of the Traditional School. On this paper, we acknowledge that the propositions of the Modernist Art Education are still valid, and their legacy lies in the convictions and ideals established by their protagonists. On this text, we defend the idea that, in Art as well as in Art Education, propositions beyond their time had to dare and resist conservative political, economic and social pressures defended by the status quo, which was oblivious to the actual demands of artists and art educators, who saw Art and Art Education as a right everyone was entitled to. On this text, we want to show that the boldness of such propositions opens paths to what is new, which, once they are overcome, will require further instaurations.

**Keywords:** child art; modern art; Modern Art Education; Contemporary Art Education education.

### Introduction

Art Education in the modern, active or renewed school has its origins in the pedagogical thinking, but also in the practice of art educators in teaching children and teens.

[...]

This practice aimed at defending children from the mechanic, repetitive and passive artistic practices of the traditional school, whose traditional methods had purposes that were unrelated to trends in art, education and modern concept about this target. The modernist art educators extolled children's spontaneous artistic production to liberate their creative acts, and, so, child art started to exist and be validated in education. The shift in paradigm from traditional to modern culture in school education started in the early 18<sup>th</sup> Century (IAVELBERG, 2017, p. 27).

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<sup>2</sup> In Brazil, Art Education has been the term used in curriculums designs since 2000, and before that, the previous terms, including the "Art" word were: Artistic Education (1970); Art Education (1980) and Art Teaching (1990).

Among the modernist art educators who influenced the art production of children in Brazil, Viktor Lowenfeld (1903-1960) stands out, and his propositions reached different parts of the world<sup>3</sup>, predominantly the United States, where he settled, like so many European Jews, who, given the circumstances, were forced to leave Europe in the pre-World War II period.

Lowenfeld writings are connected with the ideas of the Renewed School, whose fundamentals and practices guided paradigms oriented to the active participation of children in Art classes as opposed to the then predominant Traditional School model, which was oriented to the passive role on the children's part. When it comes to Art Education, Lowenfeld's propositions were related to the modern art ideas of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which developed and underwent changes until mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when contemporary art emerged.

Before this period, two artists, Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp were respectively pointed by art theorists (DANTO, 2008; DUVE, 2010) as the precursors of contemporary art, which flourished in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

With a profound meaning, Lowenfeld's work defended the free artistic expression and the development of the child's creative potential, aspects that he regarded as natural forces that need to find room in society to blossom as a right, without aesthetic impediment or judgment on the adult's part.

At that point, for our author and his modernist peers, whether they were artists or art educators, the child's autonomy in art was an end in itself resulting from symbolic search, and art making should not follow external models, or aim at preparing the child to become an artist or an Art Historian later in life. Freedom and self-expression, this one understood as the expression of oneself, were claimed for child art. Every student was regarded as having their own way of being and creating that marked their style; however, the idea that everyone underwent the same art development phases dominated.

The concept of phases distinct students undergo, as an universal aspect of the development of the art of children (LOWENFELD, 1961; LUQUET, 1972; CIZEK, 1910), did not come close to their own personal style, and the singularity was preserved by the strength of the temper and the imagination aspects that constitute every being. Such theories were deconstructed starting in 1970, when transcultural research on art education and genetic- psychologically oriented investigations (CAMBIER, 2000; EISNER, 2004; WILSON, WILSON, HURWITZ, 2004; IAVELBERG, CHUÍ, 2013) showed that different cultures and education opportunities influence the relationship between learning and developing, since they mark the creative production of children with their visual attributes and procedures.

For the European modernist art educators, who started and outlined the natural development of child art, to pass from one creative phase to another was the object of a dynamics where the student treaded the paths of constancy in art production, and their discoveries lead to gradual creative changes in the very process. In other words, there was the belief that the work of students in an ever-changing movement, where shapes, intentions, and use of colors have already been mastered, gradually expands and opens grounds for new visual configurations to be established in their creative production.

The birth of child art was celebrated as a landmark in defense of children against artistic and aesthetic standards that were oblivious to their expression, as a path to development without pre-determined external outline that preserved children's

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<sup>3</sup> Lowenfeld's books were translated into the German, Hebraic, Swedish, Norwegian, Japanese, Arabian, Italian, Spanish, Danish, and Chinese languages.

ability to continue to create with freedom throughout life. That which children created at a certain moment was understood as valuable and corresponding to their expression possibilities. Such concept gains expanded meaning in Art Education in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when the creative production of children were associated to their life experience. Thus, this type of art includes symbols that emerge and dialogue with childhood.

The modernist Art Education envisaged artistically-daring children creating shapes, selecting colors and themes that were in no way similar or molded to what is real, and opening imaginary worlds which adults, when it comes to teachers, are invited to get to know and interact with, since what mattered was every child's artistic development.

By reading and looking into texts that were written by modernist art educators, we believe that it was the respect, interlocution and validation of the artistic possibilities of students on the teachers' part that prompted the acknowledgment of children's ability to develop in a new field, that of child art.

Although art educators back then did not admit they taught art to children, since this placed them side by side with the traditional drawing teaching techniques, now we can notice that they demanded teaching methods, and that it was thanks to the mediation of didactic and artistic propositions occurring in classes those art education pioneers taught that child art took a stand. So, according to our point of view, child art came into being in a field of political and social forces, as we will see later, where it was observed, considered, and simultaneously conceived. However, child art was not free of the ideas that shaped the artists in the period to the European context it was born in, and where part of modern art developed.

The influence Art History had on child art was not accepted in those early days of Art Education; however, theory and practice in Art Education in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe did not randomly emerge from the perception of modern artists, who worked as art educators; thus, the paradigms of modern art affected how child art was viewed. As an example, we have the context of art and education in the city of Vienna, where Lowenfeld graduated and taught.

### **Investigation procedures**

For the purpose of analyzing and reflecting on the correspondence of Lowenfeld's ideas - as well as that of other art educators from the same period that will be mentioned next - with the ideas of modern art from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century to mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in the work we develop here, we will observe how the concepts and procedures of artists and art theorists then were relevant references in the educational interaction in favor of children. We will address the dialogical relationship between artists and child art, a conversation where they found procedural and conceptual references to be reached by their own art production.

### **Child art and the modernist artistic thinking**

Accuracy is not the truth!

Among the forty-eight drawings I very carefully selected for this exhibit, I find four drawings, perhaps portraits, made from my face seen on a mirror. I ask visitors to pay close attention to them. In my opinion, these drawings summarize the result of my long-time observation of the drawing's attributes, which do not depend on accurately copying the shapes in Nature or meeting the exact details patiently brought together, but on the artist's profound

feelings before the objects chosen, on which his attention was retained, and into whose spirit is up to him to penetrate  
[...]  
The four drawings in question were made from the same motif.  
However, each one of them is written with an apparent freedom of lines, outlines, and expression of volumes.  
Indeed, none of these drawings is able to overlap the other, since they have completely different outlines (MATISSE, 1972, p.162, 163).

The accuracy Matisse (1972) rejected, following modern artists' thinking, was equally opposed by European modernist art education thinkers, such as Franz Cizek (1910), Lowenfeld (1961), Luquet (1972), and Stern (1961, 1962, 1965). The artists identified such accuracy as a technical requirement that corresponded to the values academic art used when copying models, and the canons it applied that ruled them. Accuracy was a content to be learned by repetition and skill training.

In turn, in Baudelaire (1996), we find the disregard for accuracy in the artist's work. In his book about modernity, he tells us about a self-taught modern painter, who, alone, found the ways of the craft by facing his own technical inability with tools, just like a child would do. He describes this artist's curiosity as the source of the boldness found in his creative productions and genius, as the starting point of his ingeniousness, which did not come from from the technique or support from the Art History of the past. The author speaks of impressions and imagination as guides of a rising art, of an artist who is the author of his own agenda. Finally, the author once again compares the artist's work to that of a child who is amazed to see something new, a child that happily assimilates shape and color (BAUDELAIRE, 1996).

### **Artists and child art**

It's because art still is in its early stages, unexplored beginnings, such as the ones that are found in ethnographic collections or at home, in the children's bedroom. Do not laugh, reader! Children also have artistic ability, and there is much wisdom in the fact that they have it!  
(KLEE, 1990, p. 300).

How much the artist values child art is found in his texts, and echoes in the narratives by those that became involved in the practice of art education. In the case of the artist, Paul Klee, whose involvement in child art was particularly emphasized, he collected works made by children, and saw in them paths to the art of his own time, and opposed external forces that tried to rule it, such as the academic canons or the imposition of political engagement. For him, the utmost example of artist who had reached this purpose was Kandinsky, the boldest of them all, Klee tells us in his journals (KLEE, 1990).

It is known that Kandinsky was very active in the art renovation movement, by proposing the abstraction beyond figurative shapes that is able to bring the spiritual side of images, while articulating the artist's inner need toward his art, which would make such spirit vibrate inside the viewer. His work would oppose others that tried to affirm the artist by the search for styles and themes that are external to them (KANDINSKY, 1990).

We believe that the absence of what is real is the strength of child art, which captivated artists back then, and whose experience of the world gained visual attributes in the tension between children's spirit and the materialization of images that

expressed their being in the world. They knew that, for children, that which is on paper gains shape and expression, and have as reference their experiences within the field of that which they are interested in and need, under the prism of imagination, memory, curiosity, and child creativity. Accordingly, the power assigned to child art in the period orbits around the idea that their creative production is born from their inner world conversing with their outer world, and not from its representation as such.

For the impressionists of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the deconstruction of the figure turns its attention to the issue concerning sensations before the actual model while painting. Thus, because of the effects light conditions cause at different moments, the model becomes an excuse for the artist to express the changes in perception of the same model, which causes different sensations. This occurs in the known series where Claude Monet (1849-1926), impressionist artist, painted the façade of the Rouen Cathedral early in the morning and under full sun<sup>4</sup>, to mention two works that are part of a sequence of paintings.

That open-air palette that opens to natural light rather than that in the studio delighted the artist until the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and he looked at those works as the ground that guided him, although figurativeness, even with the impressionist image deconstruction, had a much stronger presence than in the works by Klee, Matisse, Picasso and Kandinsky.

In the case of Kandinsky, what inspired him to take the path to rupture with figurative art was to see the “Haystacks” series by the French artist, Claude Monet, at an exhibition in Moscow in 1896, when his theoretical texts paid homage to child art as the source of abstract art in its spirituality.

That dialogue between modern and impressionist artists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was significant for their work. Klee tells us in his journals that he had leaned toward impressionism and moved on, but had learned much from it. He comments that Van Gogh was able to create something new without breaking up with impressionism, because he “had been able to dive deep into his own chest” (KLEE, 1990, p. 294). This phrase exposes the value assigned to the expression supported by the inner world that Klee had detected in Van Gogh's work, which, painted by observation, represented themes such as Nature, still life, self-portraits, and the everyday life of people and workers in his community, among others.

Although the artists' influence was greatly relevant for art in the rising modernist education, art educators also found support in modern pedagogical ideas that inspired them, from Fröebel's thinking to that of the artist and teacher to children, Rudolph Töpffer, who was important in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Töpffer (1858), because he was the first to write two chapters on child art in his book, *Réflexions et menus propos d'un peintre genevois ou essai sur le beau dans les arts [Reflections and menu about a Genoese painter or essay about beauty in art]*, which was published twelve years after his death. The titles of these chapters are: XX – “Where it deals with small dolls”, and XXI – “Where it is seen why the painter apprentice is less of an artist than the street child who is not an apprentice yet.” The work includes seven books, and chapters XX and XXI are found in the sixth book (Livre Sixième) (IAVELBERG, 2017, p. 31).

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<sup>4</sup> "Rouen Cathedral's façade and Saint Roman tower, morning effect, white harmony", 1892/93, oil on canvas, 106x73 cm, Musée d'Orsay. "Rouen Cathedral's façade under the sun", 1892, oil on canvas, 100x65 cm, National Gallery of Art.

## Curiosity and inclusion

Children's curiosity and the shapes in their artwork are qualities that were embraced by the mentality of modernist art educators and artists back then, who included the existence of such creative production in the education agenda and art itself. Many artists, in an inclusive perspective, have also investigated the artwork of the mentally ill, which used to be disregarded. In addition to that, transcending the borders of western art, modernist artists also became interested in other art segments: the art found in ethnographic collections, the art of the African people, and Japanese paintings.

Parallel phenomena are those that provide us with the art of the mentally ill<sup>5</sup>: here, childishness and insanity are not pejorative terms, as they are usually applied. All this must be taken very seriously, way more seriously than all the art galleries combined, if the intention is to reform today's art (KLEE, 1990, p.301).

The act of discovering on one's own, simplification of form, experimentation with non-western art, organic memory as opposed to an external model, the rupture with space that was constructed from the linear perspective were that which drew the attention of artists who wanted to establish new image orders to deconstruct the white, European and hegemonic western art.

Dès les premières années de notre siècle, Matisse affirme sa volonté de rompre avec toute formulation plastique traditionnelle et de transposer dans son langage des solutions expérimentées dans les arts non occidentaux (MOLIN, 1968, p. 7).

The inter-territoriality between distinct cultural, mental and age worlds was possible for the artists thanks to their desire and inclination to find new forms of expression in different springs, aiming at staying far from the academic art canons, and going beyond the impressionist poetic propositions. Accordingly, art educators back then wanted to move away from the copyist propositions and skill training traditional school imposed on children in drawing classes, and proposed new education guidelines to art teaching.

## The artist and children's drawing

In his book, **Modern Art** (1992), Giulio Carlo Argan refers to Kandinsky saying that, fully matured at 40 years old, in 1910, the artist performed as a modern figurative painter, until he started to use scribbles like that of a small child in the first phase of the graphic development on his work.

Kandinsky does not intend to demonstrate how a child sees the world and represents it, which would be foolish; what he intends is to analyze the origin, the primary structure of the aesthetic operation in a child's behavior (ARGAN, 1992, p. 446).

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<sup>5</sup> Term used at that time.

The ideas about inter-subjective communication through art, by abdicating the figurative image, led to valuing the meaning contained in child art from its visually pre-symbolic period, such as scrawls, without being restricted to it. For Klee, according to Argan (1992), child art is a form of thinking that is articulated by images and not totally by concepts.

The idea about scrawls, for modernist Art Education authors was that they were the outcome of an action on a surface with no symbolic intention that was created by the pleasure of visual sensations and movements. In them, his texts state, the coordination of sight, action and balance of the entire body will gradually open the emergency of symbols on the paper surface following the drawing's natural order. However, although scrawls are the outcome of movement and sensory perception, a drawing form to which the child hold on to for a long time, the multimodal aspects of scrawls were only stated in the post-modernity period of Art Education by the artist and art educator, John Matthews (2004), who noticed on children's scribbles the combination with other languages, such as sounds produced by and associated with the pencil or brush movement on the surface, thus configuring an expression that, as a whole, already is symbolic.

### **Inner resonance**

Furthermore, gifted children not only have the ability to eliminate what the object shows externally, but also the power to coat their soul with the form there where they manifest themselves more strongly – by which they act (or speak, as it also said) more intensely (KANDINSKY, 1990, p.142).

A teacher who criticizes their students' drawing in Child Education, by asking that corrections in color and proportion be made, in the attempt at bringing the image closer to the physical world mapping, prevents those children from living their art in resonance with their inner world, leaving the objects of their experiences conditioned to adult canons that are uninformed about art and child art, and this modernist Art Education legacy remains valid to this day.

From a certain moment in his trajectory, Kandinsky created an abstract type of art that established some tension between spirit and matter; in other words, he spoke of the resonance of worldly things with the inner world of the one who creates. The materialization of that poetic proposition in this artist's paintings did not follow the parameters of objectiveness required by painting with the purpose of representing the world. On the contrary, he found in abstract forms and colors that which would touch other spirits, and recover the sensitive, direct, touching, and inter-subjective expression.

Con los años el pintor se despoja cada vez más de la representación para expresar lo más abiertamente posible el "elemento interior". Así, Kandinsky alcanza la anulación de la representación, jugando con figuras geométricas, y por supuesto, con el color y el clima que éste le otorga a la obra (SILENZI, 2009).

It is in this sense that children's painting came close to modern painting, since the spontaneous artwork of children does not represent what is real, meaning that it was not molded to it. Child art brought shapes, colors and the repertoire of children's

experiences filtered by their imagination, creating their inner models that made them think, feel, and perceive their own existence under different views.

It is important to highlight that the value given to artistic procedures of children by Klee, Kandinsky, Miró, among other modern artists, did not make their work childish, since children do not read those images more easily than they read a renaissance work, as many contemporary teachers believe. The complexity of the poetic intentions of any artist we just mentioned distinguishes them from images produced by children (KUDIŁKA, 2002).

## **Conclusions**

The ideas we discussed here reveal the need for joining art as it is taught at schools to the social and historical art production, including that which coexists contemporarily to the didactics of the component, and reiterating the relationship between art and life to artists and children alike.

Today, we can digitally document the art production of children and observe the process, which allow us to find correspondences between advanced artistic thinking today and the art taught at schools that are guided by updated education guidelines.

The creative process of children and artists are qualitatively similar and structurally different to one another because of the action and thinking possibilities existing between the age groups. Longitudinal studies we have conducted on drawings made by a child from 2 to 8 years old (IAVELBERG, 2013) showed us different themes (fairies, lions, trains, mermaids, princesses), which continued as the drawings developed, and reached increasingly complex levels, and the same goes for artists.

Children and artists mobilize their art by building a creative path with the epicenter in themselves, and in a dialogue with artistic cultures that mobilize the authenticity of their poetic aspects. If the pedagogical ideas of the pioneers in art education stemmed from the immersion of their proposers in the framework of modern art and education, this legacy showed us the path to think of a contemporary school art that dialogues with the same elements corresponding to their time.

Believing in the role art plays in society and school life was the agenda of the modern project. Today we recognize the need for studying Art History and Art Critique, in addition to the knowledge about art making in the life of children. Accordingly, beyond poetic issues, political and social decisions that circumscribe the Art History and Critique field permeate the school curriculum. What is necessary is to resist the relations of power and domination that stop genuine art, as the modern artists did.

In Art, as well as in Education, we have hegemonic trends that are linked to financial capital that try to market both of them, by guiding them according to market demands, which pressure public policies into maintaining their privileges. Thus, in education propositions nationwide, the inclusion of art of social minorities as school content has marked curriculum designs. Accordingly, today's political and social issues are part of the work of artists, and affect the work of curators at museums and cultural institutions that resist the capital logic.

Academic art was advertised and commercialized in European halls, which privileged the bourgeois taste, and established the rules for the poetic aspect to be included in their exhibitions. The battle against this status quo was fought by impressionist artists. This restriction to poetic freedom also occurred in political impositions, which demanded the production of engaged art, socialist realism, from



the artists under the oppression of Stalin in the Soviet Union from 1922 to 1953, when artists were persecuted and killed.

The repression of creative themes and forms led a great artist such as Rembrandt, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, to successfully resist in favor of his autonomy in relation to the art market, by leaving the patron and sponsor circuit, and selling his work directly to professionals, such as doctors, butchers and merchants, looking for individual buyers who were outside the purchase power of nobles and aristocrats (ALPERS, 2010).

In Art and Art Education, the propositions that brought revolutionary and innovative forms are the ones that paid off in both fields, and, at the same time, were faced with different obstacles in History. However, because of those bold propositions, we were able to preserve the right of artists and art educators to walk as vanguards of their time, and resist conservative thinking aimed at preserving the rights and the freedom of the few.

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