

AESTHETICS IN CHILDHOOD ART AND PLAY IN AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

NORENSE conference: The value of educational research
Helsinki, April 7th 2017

Pauline von Bonsdorff

Professor of Art Education, University of Jyväskylä
pauline.v.bonsdorff@jyu.fi

1

- Who provides and who needs arts education: children or adults?
- How and on what level do we share artistic authorship?
- Who decides what we do, how we work, and where and to whom we show it?
- Where does art happen and between whom?
- What type of flexibility and sensibility is necessary for intersubjective creativity?
- Is there room for art in the institutions of childhood?
- Can we appreciate the unexpected as produced by children – even look at lying “as an art”?

2

Homo aestheticus

Homo ludens

imagination

Homo faber

Homo politicus

Homo aestheticus

Homo ludens

theory of art

childhood studies

imagination

Homo faber

developmental psychology

Homo politicus

Homo aestheticus

Homo ludens

theory of art

childhood studies

imagination

communication

memory

Homo faber

developmental psychology

Homo politicus

Art (and Play)

- A **naturalist** theory of art * (Pauline von Bonsdorff, "Pending on art", *Contemporary Aesthetics*)
- **Continuity between art and life**: an **open border**, not either or
- Artistic practices exist outside the institutional (professional) artworld
- Art is **social practices**, where works of art are produced
- These works are not necessarily material objects, but can be immaterial and **performative** (as play is)

Existential:

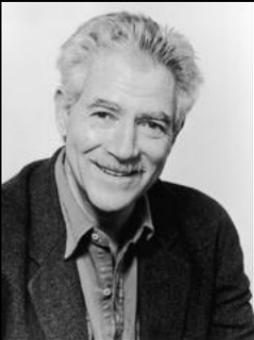
**humans do not grow towards but through art
in childhood, we create our self and world through play**

Aesthetics in childhood

- New understanding of **infants' communication** (research starting in the late 1960s)
- **Aesthetic communication** in early childhood; continuity of gestures and movements from pregnancy onwards (i.e. Trevarthen, Stern, Reddy)
- Three partly overlapping perspectives:
 - **movement and rhythm**
 - **interaction** (creating situations; creating, sharing and modulating emotions)
 - **narratives, play, make-believe** (even as "works")
- **The aesthetic dimension *syntethises* different elements of experience**

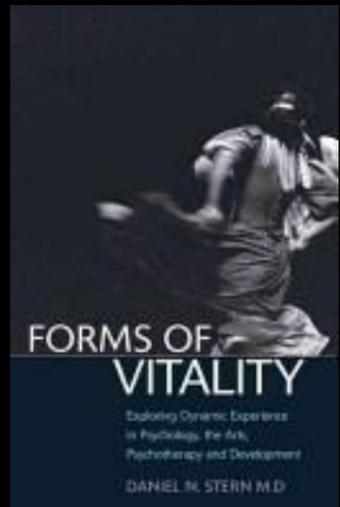
7

Daniel N. Stern



The movements of the foetus are **intentional** at an early stage, rather than mechanical

Individual movements carry meaning also in the (performing) arts



8

Stern's examples of descriptions of forms of vitality. They are very close to the philosopher Frank Sibley's "aesthetic concepts", which point to the properties that carry expressive meaning in the arts

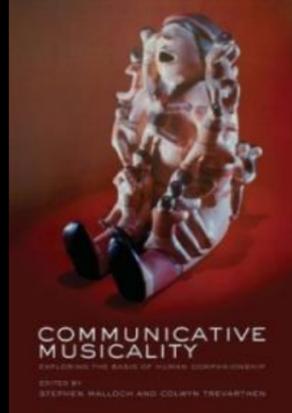
exploding	surging	accelerating
swelling	bursting	fading
drawn out	disappearing	fleeting
forceful	powerful	weak
cresting	pulsing	tentative
rushing	pulling	pushing
relaxing	languorous	floating
fluttering	effortful	easy
tense	gentle	halting
gliding	swinging	tightly
holding still	loosely	bounding

9

- Movement and action come first
- Multimodality: the senses initially function as a whole, not separately
- Development takes place in a continuum, not through "stages" but in overlapping phases
- There is an innate basis of our expressive and communicative abilities

Interaction: communicative musicality

- [Colwyn Trevarthen](#)
- "Love comes before play comes before work"
- Stephen Malloch:
- As I listened, intrigued by the fluid give and take of the communication, and the lilting speech of the mother as she chatted with her baby, I began to tap my foot. I am, by training, a musician, so I was very used to automatically feeling the beat as I listened to musical sounds.... I replaced the tape, and again, I could sense a distinct rhythmicity and melodious give and take to the gentle prompting of Laura's mother and the pitched vocal replies from Laura. .. A few weeks later, as I walked down the stairs to Colwyn's main lab, the words 'communicative musicality' came into my mind as a way of describing what I had heard. (Chapter 1, p.3-4)



11

Culture, play, and the arts

- Broad understanding of musicality (multimodal)
- Infants and parents create melodies through improvising and responding to each other
- These melodies are narratives and presuppose imagination
- Action songs provide opportunities for performing, playing and modifying the piece
- Music also provides company
- Repeated rituals → memory (situated)
- These "modes-of-being-together" (Stern) become part of who we are
- This opens perspectives on meaning and expression in the arts, but also on how we emotionally understand other people

12

Vasudevi Reddy: the "second-person perspective"



- No "gap" between self and other
- An infant's mind is "public" (shared) before it is private:
- "It is only because we can share [the feeling of anger] as an aspect of engagement that it becomes an entity, one which subsequently becomes named and is further shared." (20)

13

The mind

- "mind is better seen as an adverb qualifying action than as a noun. For example, *we sit anxiously, step carefully, move confidently, pause thoughtfully, look attentively, reach purposefully*, and so on. The *mentality in these actions* is not seen as a separate process but rather as *a quality of the action itself*. The implication of such views about mind for knowing about them is obvious. *If minds are what bodies do, they are public, not private.*" (14)
- **Active engagement makes us into who we are** (rather than just providing information about others or the world)

14

Is play a practice (or just an activity); does it produce works? How close is it to art?

- Playfulness is a necessary part of early infancy and develops into play practices among children
- Children's *possibilities to initiate and create in play* grows with experience – their world becomes larger
- Can we look at play as *works* – sophisticated narratives or worlds, where children *articulate issues that are important for them*? Rituals and plays are *remembered*; not just what happened but also its quality ("ways-of-being-together"). *Creative play brings something into the world.*
- *"Art makes culture visible and provides opportunities to critically discuss and reflect on it"* (PvB)

15



Mark Lee, My teacher asked me to draw myself

Forms of imagination

- Arts and play as ways of practising the imagination
- Similarities between art and play:
- Scripted play (between two or several people): performing arts ... presentations for an audience
- The mimetic dimension – parallel worlds with porous boundaries
- Performative lying as activist art etc.

17

Parallel worlds – the mimetic dimension

“[o]ne does not simply ‘pretend’ a world, but may be subject to its evocation in an imaginative mode.”

(Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei 2014, 437)

- Imaginary companions*
- Animated companions
- Representatives of parallel worlds (i.e. Fredrik Backman, *Min mormor hälsar och säger förlåt*)
- *Marjorie Taylor, *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them*, OUP 1999

THE KINGDOM OF STRÖM IN INGÅ



Skrivgörelse
 Anke-Petter anskaffat
 en kontant
 förmögenhet kontant
 100 - gamm. Teater
 sig eller
 skyldig Solle 50.-
 Skrivgörelse
 Anke-Petter anskaffat
 en kontant
 förmögenhet kontant
 100 - gamm. Teater
 sig eller
 skyldig Solle 50.-

The banker Anke-Petter went
 bankrupt after the collapse of
 the stock exchange in 1929

Antal	Varuslag	Pris	Summa
111	pr. bly	12	1332
112	Silke	12	1344
113	Korra	12	1356
114	guld	12	1368
115	högskylla	12	1380
116	paris	12	1392
117	"	12	1404
118	Wolfs	12	1416
119	paris	12	1428
120	epst	12	1440
121	"	12	1452
122	"	12	1464
123	"	12	1476
124	"	12	1488
125	"	12	1500
126	"	12	1512
127	"	12	1524
128	"	12	1536
129	"	12	1548
130	"	12	1560
131	"	12	1572
132	"	12	1584
133	"	12	1596
134	"	12	1608
135	"	12	1620
136	"	12	1632
137	"	12	1644
138	"	12	1656
139	"	12	1668
140	"	12	1680
141	"	12	1692
142	"	12	1704
143	"	12	1716
144	"	12	1728
145	"	12	1740
146	"	12	1752
147	"	12	1764
148	"	12	1776
149	"	12	1788
150	"	12	1800



Integrating art and science



21

- Who provides and who needs arts education: children or adults?
- How and on what level do we share artistic authorship?
- Who decides what we do, how we work, and where and to whom we show it?
- Where does art happen and between whom?
- What type of flexibility and sensibility is necessary for intersubjective creativity?
- Is there room for art in the institutions of childhood?
- Can we appreciate the unexpected as produced by children – even look at lying “as an art”?

22