

Children:

Global Posthumanist Perspectives and Materialist Theories

Series Editors: Karen Malone · Marek Tesar · Sonja Arndt

Laura Trafí-Prats

Christopher M. Schulte *Editors*

New Images of Thought in the Study of Childhood Drawing

 Springer

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Series Editors

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Laura Trafi-Prats · Christopher M. Schulte
Editors

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*For Ingrid and her wondrous drawings
For Sophia and Liam, whose artful
adventures continue to inspire*

Acknowledgements

New Images of Thought in the Study of Childhood Drawing is made of nine original contributions and an afterword that elaborate meaningful insights around questions of how drawings come to matter in the lives of children. We are profoundly indebted to the knowledge, curiosity, playfulness, and desire to think children's drawings in the inventive ways that the chapters and visual essays mobilize. We appreciate the precious time and intellectual efforts that have been invested in each piece in a two-year period (2020–2021) when everyone involved confronted overwhelming pandemic conditions.

One possible argument to pose here is that to have the time to develop an inquiry in relation to children's drawings whilst being under a deathly threat is quite a privilege. It certainly is, and we recognize this, but there are also insights in the chapters and visual essays in this volume that invite readers to seriously consider the entangled nature of children's drawings, including the less privileging relations that we live with. After all, drawing is not just a luxury, a form of entertainment or something pretty that inclined children and artists do. Such thinking is a way of attaching to children's drawings certain matters of concern that narrow what a drawing is and can do, and what it can become. It shapes our systems of valuation, the role and visibility of children's drawings in culture, the epistemic status of children, drawing as an inclusive and participative space, and so forth. All the chapters provoke the readers in different ways to leave such thoughts in suspension and to widen their imagination around the rich expressions of life that are present in drawing practices.

* * *

We are very grateful to the series editors, Karen Malone, Marek Tesar, and Sonja Arndt, for believing that the book could constitute a worthy contribution to the remarkable collection of studies which comprises *Children: Global Posthumanist Perspectives and Materialist Theories*. It is an honor to stand side by side with the currently published volumes. A mention should also go to the team at Springer who has supported the book's production. Specifically, we wish to thank Cynthia Kroonen, Astrid Noordermeer, Amudha Vijayarangan, Preetha Kuttiappan, and

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* * *

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* * *

Laura wants to express her appreciation toward Chris' prolific writing on and around the study of children's drawings. It has been a central motivation in making this book a reality, unmistakably influencing the proposition contained in its title. Despite differences in time, space, and academic schedules, we have managed to navigate and conclude a very generative project. Kudos to you, Chris!

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Chapter 1

An Introduction: For New Images of Thought in the Study of Children's Drawings



Laura Trafí-Prats and Christopher M. Schulte

Abstract Childhood drawing has long been a subject of interest for researchers, educators, and other interested adults. What children draw, how they come to engage in this work, the milieus in which it occurs, and the rationales that move them, are considerations that remain at the forefront of existing research and theory. Yet, while there is a sense of continuity among the interests reflected by those who study children's drawing and the questions that are raised may not altogether shift or change, at least not dramatically, the conceptual orientations used to animate this work certainly have. From developmental and sociocultural perspectives to the influence of critical, poststructuralist and posthumanist new materialist approaches, our conceptual orientations give shape to the encounters we have with children and the situatedness of drawing in their lives. Yet, there will always be a need to fashion new images of thought, with the power to orientate us to children's drawing in ways that are more vitalistic and affective and that differently attune us to the relationalities in which children and their drawing come to matter. This chapter provides a sketch of the various conceptual orientations currently structuring the study of childhood drawing. In addition to outlining what these conceptual orientations are and how they remain a shaping presence in our relations to children's art, the chapter also explores the need to engage in the creation of new, different, and unsettling images of thought.

Keywords History of children's drawing · Developmentalism · Socio-cultural perspectives · Post-philosophies · Posthumanism · New materialisms

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Fig. 1.1 Sequence of three images from Sophia’s book, illustrating the event of Sophia and her friends, Vivian and Ellia, preparing to defeat the one-eyed monster known as “cyclops”

Two years ago, Sophia, eight at the time, returned home from school with a small square shaped book that had been created from loose-leaf paper. Inside this small book there were three drawings, each representing a rather significant departure from Sophia’s usual drawing fare, not only from the standpoint of what she would typically create at school but also at home (see Fig. 1.1). Excited by the work and curious to learn more, Chris inquired. “Sophia, these drawings are amazing! What’s happening here? Will you tell me more?” With a snack in hand, Sophia was quick to support Chris’ interest in her work. “Of course. That’s the one-eyed monster, dad. He’s a really really really bad monster. He’s a cyclops.” “A cyclops?” Chris asked, seeking confirmation. “Yeah, he’s a cyclops.” Sensing that [her dad] may require further explanation, Sophia continued. “A cyclops is a one-eyed giant, a monster giant with one giant round eye.” “Oh, my goodness.” [Chris] replied. “The cyclops sounds kind of scary.” Having learned more about the cyclops, [Chris] found [himself] growing increasingly curious about the trio of figures that were standing to the left of this one-eyed creature. “So, who are these people?” he asked, pointing to the three figures. “Oh, that’s me and my friends. You see, that’s Vivian (far left) and that’s Ellia (in the middle). We are going to kill the one-eyed monster, dad.” “You *are*?” “Oh yeah, dad, we are going to kill that monster. But we’ll have to make another book to do it.” Chris was now even more curious to learn about the context in which this book of drawings came about. So, he inquired: “Did you make this in art class?” “Nope. I just made it. I think I was supposed to make something else. I think I was supposed to make something about the book we were reading in class, but I just really wanted to make this book.” To learn more, Chris asked: “What book were you reading in class?” At first, Sophia hesitated. “Ummm...” But then she continued: “I don’t remember. I just really wanted to do this because we were playing monster on the playground and it was really fun. William said he was a one-eyed monster.” As Chris continued to flip through the book and admire the drawings, Sophia returned to her seat and finished her snack. After a few minutes had passed, she spoke up again, this time with a request: “Dad, take this book to work and tell everyone that your daughter made it. Tell them my name is Sophia and I am 8-years old. And tell them I am making another book and that the one-eyed monster will die. That’s my prediction.”¹

¹ Sadly, the book never made it to work. Sophia ended up taking it back to school. As a parent, Chris assumed it would be returned home at the end of the year. Unfortunately, two months after this exchange, Sophia’s school closed due to Covid-19. None of her work was made available for pick-up.

1.1 Childhood Drawing: An Overview

There is no shortage of positions from which the practice of childhood drawing has been considered (for a review, see Thompson & Schulte, 2019). And while these positions may vary with respect to how children come to be understood and the way in which their drawing is valued or attended to, there is no mistake in the fact that *what* ends up being valued, generally speaking, is the idea that drawing—and art making, more broadly—is of considerable importance in children’s lives. Take for example the vignette above, which features a brief exchange between Chris and his daughter, Sophia, about a series of drawings she created while at school. While certainly limited in scope, this vignette does well to position our earlier point that while drawing is routinely framed as a practice of significance in children’s lives and children themselves may well be understood as savvy and capable cultural producers (e.g. de Rijke, 2019), there are still considerable differences at play when it comes to the matter of how these recognitions are brought into focus. In other words, while the importance of children’s drawing is unlikely to be disputed, the nature of how this importance is constituted as such remains a subject of great debate.

1.2 Development: The Dominant Discourse

One perspective that always seems to have the requisite appeal and credibility to outpace or overpower the alternatives is that of development, what is also commonly referred to as the developmental discourse (e.g. Burman, 2016; Moss, 2015; Walkerdine, 2005). In fact, despite an increasingly diverse landscape of inquiries related to childhood drawing, including nearly five decades of research and theory of which a significant portion is critical in orientation (e.g. Duncum, 1993; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017; Thompson, 1990, 1995; Thompson & Bales, 1991; Wilson & Wilson, 1981; Wolf & Perry, 1988), the developmental discourse continues to prevail. For this reason the developmental discourse is often described as the dominant discourse as it relates to the study of art in childhood (Sakr et al., 2018).

Individualized in focus, the developmental discourse is structured around the idea that children’s proficiency as artists is best demonstrated by how they manage to progress towards an increasingly realistic ideal in their drawing and art making. Similar to other developmental accounts of children’s growth and learning, there is a clear and predetermined relationship between age and competence. The result of this relationship, when funnelled through the aesthetic filter of visual realism, is an unyielding emphasis on *what* children draw, with little to no regard for *how* or *why* they have come to draw it. In fact, there was a time when the analysis of children’s drawing focused entirely on this type of sensibility—that is, on the drawing itself—and whereby the outcomes of such analysis would be expressed as a kind of print-out of the child’s mind (Golomb, 1993, p. 7).

In fact, the study of children's drawing has long been dominated by such interests (e.g. Winner & Gardner, 1981; Kerschensteiner, 1905; Lowenfeld, 1957), which is to say a commitment to establishing universal typologies that highlight what children should be able to draw at a particular age. And to be honest, for many, this remains the focus. These stage-based and quasi-predictive accounts, which result in what Sakr (2017) calls "developmental tick lists" (p. 2), rarely hold space for the "conversations and play that surrounds and supplements" (Thompson, 1995, p. 8) children's art. Instead, such complexities tend to face erasure or be reduced to the role of background noise (e.g. Atkinson, 2002; Matthews, 2003; Thompson & Schulte, 2019).

This isn't to suggest that what children come to draw should not be prioritized or understood as important. Rather, the point is to highlight how the dominance of this lens, which tends to favour the residues of children's practice (Pearson, 2001) (see also e.g. Dyson, 2013; Ivashkevich, 2009; Rech Penn, 2019; Schulte, 2011; Sunday, 2015), actually risks marginalizing children and young people whose interests and orientations to drawing are sometimes quite different from the patterns and parameters of normalcy that come to define it (e.g. Knight, 2013; Pearson, 2001; Sakr, 2017; Schulte, 2021). To make this lens the singular story of childhood art (Atkinson, 2016; Thompson, 2021) not only subtracts from view a vast network of child-situated interests, values, and events, but it also unnecessarily pressures artist-educators and other interested adults "to focus children's efforts and energy in particular directions, rather than following the children's lead and being genuinely interested in what children do" (Sakr et al., 2018, p. 11).

Take for example Sophia's book, in which she depicts the demise of the one-eyed monster. While a general plot may be relatively clear at first glance, a traditional semiotic analysis tells us very little about Sophia's intentions or time on the playground, and even less about the game that was played thereabouts. As a result, we are left to wonder about how this idea of the one-eyed monster first came to be, the circumstances that led to William's transformation into a one-eyed monster, the type of conversations that took place among the children who were involved, and how Sophia and her peers—as part of this social contingent—managed to negotiate the likely fragile tensions that mediated this game (Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Hägglund & Löfdahl, 2012; Löfdahl, 2014). After all, were Sophia and her friends able to overcome or overpower the one-eyed monster? Was this experience so exhilarating that Sophia felt compelled to explore it again, through art? Or was the process of creating this book an opportunity to re-play the same game but with a different outcome? Was it rather an opportunity to produce a different result? Of course, we can't really know for sure, can we? Especially if our only strategy is to engage in a reading of the artifact alone. So while the kitchen dialogue may provide some semblance of understanding about this work and the complex social, cultural, and affective milieus of which it was part, we are nonetheless left to speculate on how this event managed to re-materialize indoors, in Sophia's classroom. Nor do we gain clarity about the extent to which it was or was not encouraged in relation to the assigned book project or whether Sophia simply elected to shrink these expectations in favour of her own

interests. The latter point here being the most important, we think. After all, what we fail most to understand through a developmental lens and the use of a traditional semiotic analysis is the matter of why Sophia chose to make this work and the situated and relational complexities that infilled and supplemented her working process.

1.3 A Sociocultural Approach: The Conviviality of Context and Culture

Sensing the tendency of the developmental discourse to obscure more than it reveals (Wilson & Wilson, 1981), researchers of childhood art began to question the dominance of this perspective, both as a guide to practice (e.g. Duncum, 1982, 1988, 1999; Golomb, 2002) and as a reliable grounding for current and future research (e.g. Tarr, 2004; Thompson & Bales, 1991; Wilson & Wilson, 1981, 1982). In an effort to widen the existing network of considerations and to make visible the social content and cultural influences that the developmental perspective had so effectively removed from view (Tarr, 2003), researchers of childhood art began to utilize a socio-cultural approach that focused more intently on the contexts in which children's art was made and the various relationships that informed this work. While the "process of culture" (McClure Vollrath, 2007) has remained a rather consistent presence in the study of children's art (e.g. Wilson, 1976) (see also Golomb, 2002; Ivashkevich, 2009; Hurwitz & Carroll, 2008; Kindler, 1999; Thompson, 2003), it was in the early 1990s that researchers of childhood art began to turn more intensely towards what Tisdall and Punch (2012) call the "socio-cultural geography" of children's art.

As a result of this turn, the study of children's art began to engage more directly the relations and situations that gave rise to and mediated children's making, emphasizing in particular the presence and participation of others and things, and the delicate social dance that occurs while children negotiate their own cultural worlds and those of adults (Thompson, 2006; Wilson, 2007). This focus on the lived experience of children while in the process of making art, often in the context of classrooms and in the company of peers and other interested adults, recentres the timeworn adage that the process of making art is just as important as the product itself (Thompson & Schulte, 2019) (see also Knight, 2013; Pearson, 2001; Wilson & Thompson, 2007). After all, as Pearson (2001) writes:

Whatever value drawing has for children is bound to the context in which it takes place, and as the context shifts so does the value. This is why drawing can be play activity, narrative activity, a measured strategy for social approval, or the equally measured pursuit of the inductively grasped competence appropriate to given representation systems. Drawing is also a strategy for coping with boredom, with isolation. It can be a retreat from violent social relations. It can be the means for pursuing a passionate interest in horses or trains which at the same time achieves some or all of the above ends. (pp. 357–358)

By highlighting the situated, variable, and sometimes inarticulable ways that children come to the process of drawing, the matter of who and what gets to count (Kuby et al., 2018) also shifts and rematerializes, an outcome that continues to pose serious