**A Documentation and Interpretation of Four
Children's Art Serials Within the Lived Experience of
a Pedagogical Dialogue** by Nancy Retallack-Lambert,
Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Concordia
University, 1988.

Reviewed by

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Is it possible to identify the aesthetic style of a young person through his or her art work? The stated task behind this thesis is to be able to address, respond to, and understand the way a child creates art. Nancy Retallack-Lambert wants to move beyond the widespread belief that children's art is a particular developmental stage, to look at the art of the young as an aesthetic production, and to discover its particularity of creativity. For this purpose she attempts to create a research method for recognizing the artistic styles of individual children.

In order to see the child as artist she conducted a project that included observing four children over a period of three and a half years. A larger portion of the thesis is a firsthand account of Retallack-Lambert's classroom observations of the children's work in drawings, clay sculptures, and constructions. By keeping notes of the children's handling of materials, taking photographs of their projects, collecting their completed work, taping classroom discussions and interviews, and recording her responses to classroom happenings and their art works, she assembles a serial description of each child's artistic process and products over time.

Importantly, the context for researching the child's artistic style is one in which the author is the art teacher of the children under study. Much is written in this thesis about the author's own pedagogical practice and her relationship to the four children, though the organization of the descriptive chapters do not directly reflect this major concern. At the beginning of the thesis I found its prime focus to be a study of the children's unique art styles, but as I followed the chapters, and (as it appears) as Retallack-Lambert herself discovered over the years of her research, the project shifted its priority from how to interpret the children's art to the ways in which the art teacher

could most effectively bring art into the primary school classroom. The record of her study is, in her own words, how "an art education inquiry becomes an art teaching experience" (p. 176).

What happens to the assembly of the thesis is that, by the final chapter, the purpose of interpreting children's art is absorbed into a pedagogical interest of how to introduce and sustain artistic consciousness within a classroom setting. To learn about child art styles Retallack-Lambert had to construct pedagogical practices that allowed and prompted her students to find and become aware of aesthetic form in their own work. In her final chapter containing conclusions, interpretation of child art becomes, not a search for phenomenological knowledge of children's styles, but rather the art teacher's necessary activity for getting students to discover their own artistic selves.

Unfortunately, the evolutionary shift within the thesis from an emphasis on art style to necessary pedagogical practices is lost within the organizational structure of the chapters. In the third chapter, nine episodes of art work for each of the four children are described in great detail. The theme of pedagogical practice is relegated to a status of context for a primary interest in the text of the child's art. We learn from Retallack-Lambert's writing about the way in which a child draws herself or himself, how children paint with one another, the figurations within the child's art, and her or his responses to these activities. These episodes are returned to in the following chapter which takes up the task of reviewing the child's aesthetic journey in order to identify the individual style of that journey. Here descriptions of each of the children's nine projects presented in the previous chapter are collected and woven together to find the child's particular style. Retallack-Lambert's interpretations are exceptionally sensitive, descriptively lavish, and insightfully probing. From them, we learn about the possibility of interpreting child art but not about concepts and methods for such interpretation. (Can and should it be otherwise for the field of hermeneutics?)

Also in the two-chapter treatment of her students' work, text and interpretation are disconnected. To follow the interpretation, the reader must continually leaf back and forth between two chapters to line up subsequent interpretation with previous descriptions for each of the children.

Though art styles is the foreground of interest in the study, what we are able to glean from Retallack-Lambert's extensive descriptions is her aesthetic involvement with children's expression and her community of understanding with their work. The contribution of her thesis fails at the initial level of inform-

ing us of *how* a child's artistic work comes to be one style or another. While her interpretations of her students' art projects do identify four different styles for the children studied, and though the interpretations are insightful and themselves edifying, they do not culminate in providing an overview of her sense-making practices. We do not learn about the movement and necessary features of those practices. It is here where a hermeneutical treatment should have been followed by an analytical phenomenology of the researcher's interpretive processes, for descriptions of the interpretations provided only exemplars; such descriptions cannot offer an articulated awareness of tacit procedures.

What we do learn is about the art teacher's practices. The art teacher must be one who is aesthetically sensitive and aesthetically receptive. And we are left with a recognition of the crucial place of discourse for the art teacher in her or his relationship with the child artist.

As an art teacher, Retallack-Lambert could not assume that art would be created, that her students would be committed to use materials for expressive purposes. She discovered that only by her own dedication to art, by extending her own appreciation and sense of craft to others in the classroom, and by her maintaining trust in the emergence of art for each student, could the child's attention unfold into artistic activities.

This thesis demonstrates, I believe, that *art* (here, specifically, art for the young) *emerges and takes hold in education as an entrainment between the eros of a teaching artist and the passion of a prospective young artist.... I mean by eros: love that is directed to self-realization.*

The contribution of the thesis is blunted by hanging onto an emphasis on the initial question of how to interpret child art that initiated the research. This question appears to have lost its centrality in the wake of discoveries about the significance of pedagogical practice in art education, yet the initial query continued to be the basis for the organization of the thesis. I find this problem not the exclusive responsibility of the author, but a shared responsibility of academics. It is precisely *our* failure to arrive at forms of organization that are in keeping with the journey behind the search of our research.

The problem of the thesis is a problem that is often found in research projects that extend over years. Initial questions and purposes are overtaken by what the researcher encounters and gives way to. Much of research which combines phenomenology and hermeneutics (of which this thesis is an example) calls on

the researcher to release herself or himself from projected intentions that were established in the planning of the project. This release permits the possibility of recovering basic features and questions that are unanticipated in planning a study. Phenomenological/hermeneutic research involves taking chances by moving into the unknown. That unknown, encountered within the landscape of inquiry, should itself become a subject of study.

Retallack-Lambert had the courage to follow through on the changes she found to be necessary in the conduct of her research: moving from a general question about children's art styles to discovering the pedagogical task of how to share her own commitment and involvement with art. The transformative nature of her research *as an art teacher* should have become the organizing principle for the structure of the thesis.

The author's discovery of transformation proceeds from an authenticity found within art and within teaching: a truth of a teacher's experience in her relationship to a group of children who, through her efforts, ultimately become fellow artists. Unfortunately, this authenticity is not extended to the discourse of the research. What Retallack-Lambert's study establishes in her teaching needs to be established in her writing. The educative process found through research needs to be brought to our ways of communicating research; what we learn about the world through inquiry requires us to face how we organize our own texts. Just as students learn about the possibility of art from the form of the teacher's expressed commitment, so too the reader learns about the "what" of research from the author's form of writing.

Toward the end of her study, Retallack-Lambert discovers that the hermeneutics of her research bring her to confront her own language: she asks us to think about how we speak and write about children. That proposed way of discourse with children, that potential eros of aesthetic communication needs to be brought into an eros of writing about research with the same commitment for authenticity.