

Aesthetics of Childhood — Phenomenology and Beyond

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Following Lloyd de Mause's classical work, David Kennedy has suggested that in Western understanding, the adult and the child are dialectically opposed, the child appearing as the shadow of enlightened man.¹ In Jungian parlance, the shadow refers to characteristics that are part of man but not of our ideal and normalised picture of him. Historically, the understanding of and place of children and childhood in culture and society have varied, as have ideas about education understood as the basic formation of children into full members of society. One more or less permanent trait in the understanding of children is however the view that they are less rational than adults; as well as "less" in most other respects too. They are less truthful, less knowledgeable, less experienced — on the whole lacking in both cognitive and moral abilities, as compared to adults.

If there is one area where the view of children as inferior and/or deficient beings has been less dominant, this might be the area of aesthetics. As is well known, modern aesthetics was born in the latter half of the 18th century. Interestingly, it was also during this time that the view of children as inferior beings was turned upside down in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile* (1762). In Rousseau, the child became if not a norm, then at least an example and a reminder for adults about our full human potential — a potential which, according to Rousseau, is stifled by civilization when it instead should be allowed to develop freely, under the tutelage of a wise teacher. It can be argued that the human potential, according to Rousseau, is about our aesthetic side, or, should we say, shadow. The time of Rousseau is of course the time when Enlightenment and Romanticism clash and aesthetics is established, first as a critical idea, then, gradually, as a philosophical discipline. In the childhood of aesthetics, then, it exists

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¹ Kennedy 2006b; de Mause 1980.

side by side with the child: both as shadows of adult, rational and, needless to say, also male and white selfhood.

My topic is however not the childhood of aesthetics but rather the aesthetics of childhood, a by and large unexplored area in philosophical aesthetics. Work on children's expressive activities (art), on art made for children and on the representation of children in art certainly exist, and there is an increasing number of studies on children and popular culture.² There is also a growing field of research on philosophy for children — which more precisely is about philosophy with and by children. But aesthetics remains in this respect more or less unmapped terrain.³

The first question — an introductory one — in exploring the aesthetics of childhood is, “what aesthetics”? Intuitively, one might want to answer “all aesthetics”, referring here to the agenda of recent childhood studies to establish a view of children as full human beings and cultural subjects.⁴ But even if we grant the legitimacy of an aesthetics of childhood on the level of individual children, there might be institutional problems, especially with respect to art. The question about whether children make art is, for example, challenged by the absence of a children's art-world, whether we understand it in a more philosophical way, following Danto, or give it an institutional emphasis as Dickie and many sociologists have done. Children's art is certainly problematic. On the other hand, it is clear that children are aesthetically active in a number of ways, and generally more so than adults. It is this overall aesthetic agency I want to focus upon here, and I do it through focusing upon the child's relationship to language. Lan-

² For an overview of research on children and visual art, see Fineberg, Ivaskevich and Rizk 2006. Much of earlier research was guided by various versions of developmental psychology and aimed at generalisations of particular age groups.

³ To be sure, there are exceptions. One notable example is Juncker 2006; which on the other hand only shows more clearly the lack of a tradition of discussing children and aesthetics. Among Juncker's references are Alexander Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant, but in addition to them her references to philosophical aesthetics are sparse. It is however noteworthy that *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* holds an article on “Children's art”; Rostankowski 1998.

⁴ This agenda is central in childhood studies, a research area that has developed during the last decades. See, for example, James, Jenks and Prout 1998; Corsaro 2003 and 2005. The issues raised by such an approach have not been investigated philosophically to the full, not to speak of a reflection from aesthetics.

guage is a fruitful topic in this respect because it is, in the adult world, seen as the prime medium of rational thought and connected to an ideal of rationality and clarity (not least in philosophical contexts). The child's language is different. In this paper, I shall draw upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the acquisition of language and language itself, later on briefly comparing it to Michael Tomasello's views on human verbal communication and language learning. Towards the end of the paper, I reflect upon what is gained and lost — both with respect to philosophical aesthetics and with respect to childhood studies — if we extend aesthetics and art to encompass children.

I. Phenomenology and Childhood

Reflecting on the aesthetics of childhood, the easiest way to start is to start from a broad conception of aesthetics, one that sees the existence and relevance of aesthetic experience, appreciation, qualities, values etc. as not limited to art.⁵ One such conception, although it was never explicitly presented as aesthetics, is the philosophy of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In addition to art (especially painting and literature) sensuous knowledge, embodiment, emotions were central themes of his philosophy, which has also repeatedly been described as a philosophy of the body.⁶ What is more (and less well known), Merleau-Ponty dealt extensively with the child during the years 1949-1952, when he was a professor of the psychology and pedagogy of the child at Sorbonne. This part of the work has been published in 2001 as a large volume, *Psychologie et pédagogie de l'enfant. Cours de Sorbonne 1949 — 1952*. The breadth and depth of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic thinking together with his explicit interest in the child are two reasons for choosing Merleau-Ponty as a starting-point for reflections on the aesthetics of childhood. In addition, there is a third reason. Child research and childhood studies, each by itself but even more together, constitute a multidisciplinary field of research. Child research was until recently dominated by psychological and

⁵ See, for example, Armstrong 2000, Berleant 1991, Böhme 2001, Welsch 1995 and 1996.

⁶ To my knowledge, there are not many works which analyse the aesthetic dimension of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a whole; one example is, however, Bonan 1997.

educational theories, challenged in the last decades by sociologically and culturally oriented childhood studies. The third aspect of Merleau-Ponty that makes him appropriate in this context is, then, his keen interest in life sciences such as psychology (notable Gestalt psychology), physiology, biology, but also in anthropological, pedagogical and psychoanalytic research. In his critical discussions of the sciences he always remembered to look at the phenomena themselves and be wary of the potential fallacies of theory, which aims at generalisations and may thereby distort its human subject. This makes his discussions still stimulating.

The aesthetics of childhood demands a balance between science, common knowledge and attention to children, and vigilance with respect to science and common knowledge. It cannot be enough emphasised that childhood is, like human existence on the whole, a through and through historical phenomenon: a *Dasein*.⁷ It is not only the educational views and practices — the child as perceived by the adult — that changes, so do children's self-understanding of themselves as children. Children are, in other words, not unreflective with respect to their status as children — as it would be hard to be for anyone who is repeatedly reminded of such a status, not seldom in reductive terms. In addition, children as a group are today increasingly subjected to “scientific” theories, programmes and measures (including medicalisation). This is true of adults as well, but a significant difference between the two groups lies in their possibilities to make their own voice heard.

Merleau-Ponty's critical appreciation of science and his perceptiveness when it comes to the subject — be it art or children — is characteristic of his approach. This is not to say that he is always right. My suggestion is nevertheless that the aesthetics of childhood might do well to follow the phenomenological path indicated by Merleau-Ponty. — I should emphasise, however, that my exposition by no means attempts to cover the area of childhood and aesthetics, only to explore some parts of it.

⁷ Heidegger 1949. A discussion of the applicability of Heidegger's philosophy to children — by no means unproblematic — must be postponed for another occasion.

II. Merleau-Ponty on Language

In his discussions of the child's relationship to language, Merleau-Ponty describes language as a thoroughly aesthetic world. Language, in particular the language that is spoken and heard, is indeed a world, and the child's existence is from the start a life in language. In this section, I hope to outline this full and even aesthetic conception of language.⁸

To clear the ground a little, we might start with what language is not. Merleau-Ponty is critical of the view that language is learnt through imitation — a view he shows to be absurd, since it would presuppose that the child knows how to produce sounds before it utters words. The child neither has an articulated knowledge of nor a mastery of its body (the vocal organs etc.). Therefore, it cannot first listen and then make the same sounds as someone else.⁹ The second point is that language is not just, nor primarily, about representation; it has other and more basic functions as well. According to Merleau-Ponty, to think about language in terms of representations is to objectify it. Language then appears as a ready-made system, which is how it appears in the traditional teaching of foreign languages with the help of grammar and vocabularies.¹⁰ But language is more; and for us, speaking beings, it is primarily something else than a system. It is even more than an instrument; it is a habitat, a world, and a way of being.

Having briefly indicated what language is not, I shall now describe what language is, if we follow Merleau-Ponty. Language has three central functions. It is indeed a medium of representation, but perhaps more fundamentally, at least for the acquisition of language, it is a medium of expression and of addressing other persons. These are, then, the three basic functions of language: to express, to address, and to represent.¹¹

In his lectures on the psychology and pedagogy of the child Merleau-Ponty states that the child intends before it speaks, if we understand speech

⁸ See Merleau-Ponty 2001.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty 2001, 31-34. Further, the child's actions are always intentional, not "pure movements". Thus, Merleau-Ponty mentions the example of an infant, aged 9 months, who was able to comb her hair with a brush in hand but not to mime this gesture without hairbrush; *ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰ Compare Tomasello's (2005, 5) critique of formal views of language.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty 2001, 29, 30. This is an idea he borrows from Karl Bühler.

as the communication of meaning through a correct use of words. How is this possible? First we have to remember that before any perception or thought can take place, the world has to be there. “Experience does not begin from chaos, but from an already existing world”.¹² The child enters language in its phonetic dimension. This constitutes a world of humanly uttered sounds where the child gradually learns to differentiate them from each other, much in the same way as it learns to differentiate between shapes and colours.¹³ Both worlds, that of sounds and that of colours and shapes, are however from the start weakly structured rather than without structure. But there is a difference, at least of degree, since with sounds the young child is more clearly simultaneously a producer and a listener (or appreciator¹⁴). This simultaneity of creating and appreciating is typical for the child, but merits general attention as well.

In acquiring our first language, our mother tongue, we do not interpret its phonetic system, as Roman Jakobson suggested; we rather enter a world of sounds and appropriate its register or “style”, a word Merleau-Ponty uses to single out the phonetic characteristics of one particular language. In other words, the child learns the differences between the phonetic units of a language in a functional way, through use and situations, not through logical inference. Learning takes place through doing, testing, playing.

Play is here more (and less) than intellectual gaming. Remembering the aesthetic role of the concept of play in authors such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich von Schiller or Hans-Georg Gadamer¹⁵, one should here insist on an interpretation of the aesthetic as pointing to a fully sensuous realm, including emotions and imagination. To produce sounds or speech is to feel (or have the opportunity of perceiving) language as a resonance in one’s body, in particular in one’s mouth. The play with language, which in particular is typical for younger children, is compared by Merleau-Ponty to the actor’s relationship to his role: “the child like the actor neither feigns

¹² Merleau-Ponty 2001, 192 (“un monde déjà”).

¹³ Ellen Dissanayake suggests that the early rhythmic, vocal and facial communication between mother and infant is the ontogenetic origin of art; Dissanayake 2000. Expression and interaction are more important at this stage than the communication of “thoughts”.

¹⁴ It is worth savouring the nuances of this traditional aesthetic term in this context.

¹⁵ Kant 1990; Schiller 1946; Gadamer 1965 and 1995.

nor is in the illusion: he leaves the level of habitual life for a dreamlike [*onirique*] life which he really lives. He irrealises himself in the role.”¹⁶

For playacting the audience is crucial. So it is for the child, although children may play alone. But language is a social phenomenon and so is children’s play, as it takes up elements from life and combines them in new ways. The intersubjective character of language is emphasised by Merleau-Ponty, as expression and addressing the other are more primary in the acquisition of language than representation. “The child’s movement towards the word is a constant appeal for the other.”¹⁷ Already before proper speech, the child intends and wills, although she probably cannot intend in precisely the way an adult does, since she is only on the threshold of language. On the other hand, also for adults the intention can sometimes only be linguistically approximated. In Merleau-Ponty’s perspective, it is however essential that there is no leap, no definite boundary between babble and speech.¹⁸ The child communicates (or tries to do so) before she speaks precisely because approaching other humans is a central function of language. Likewise, the priority of expression and of addressing the other as compared to representation affirms the idea that the world has to be there for us, as a field in which we live, before we can cognitively map it.

Intersubjectivity is, on the other hand, not a dimension of language only, but a dimension that characterises the child’s being as a whole. Many of us may find this true of adults as well; yet there seems to be at least a difference in degree in this respect between those who are in the stage of intense growth (children) and those who grow less, or less apparently (grownups).¹⁹ To come back to the child, Merleau-Ponty pays attention to the phenomenon singled out by Jean Piaget as the young child’s “egocentrism”, and argues for a contrary interpretation. Rather than being too much occupied with itself, the young child is characterised by a *lack* of ego, a world-openness and an accompanying tendency not to put a boundary

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty 2001, 48. Later Merleau-Ponty writes on drawing: “[The child] draws in the way we sing.”, 513.

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty 2001, 30.

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty 2001, 18-19.

¹⁹ Growth can be claimed to characterise virtually our whole lifespan; since there is always the possibility of new experiences and maturation. This is not to deny that we also lose capacities on the way.

between myself and the other. While this world-openness may take many forms and go through many stages, it is worth observing that it points to the sharing of meaning — in situations of play and language use, and in interpreting or understanding, and producing meaning.²⁰ If Merleau-Ponty is right, the child's existence is therefore more one of *Mitsein*, of being-with-others, than of self-centredness. For the child, in a shared situation there is not one centre, but two or several — as many as there are participating agents.

The sharing of situations which establishes community through doing, feeling and thinking together in interesting ways seems to relate to *sensus communis*, although this would certainly merit a more thorough discussion.²¹ I shall only add a couple of remarks on the intersubjectivity involved in the playful appropriation of language, which is at the same time an appropriation of the world and an expropriation of oneself in the world. First, to learn to speak is at the same time to learn to listen. Speaking and listening is, further, not just about understanding the more narrowly cognitive, rational meanings and intentions; if we follow Merleau-Ponty it is also to learn the *hows* of life, what it is like to be here (in this life, this situation) and how we may exist with each other. Second, the spoken word (*parole*) is a way of placing oneself in the world, among others.²² The spoken word is *particular* since it arises from a particular context, a particular place or node in being; yet it may also be “anonymous” since its meaning and import is dependent upon the networks and structures where it exists, rather than upon the supposed inner life of a speaking individual.²³

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty 2001, 35-37. David Kennedy suggests that children's conversations differ from those of adults in being more directed towards collective meaning-making; 1996a, 174-251. Like Merleau-Ponty, he criticizes the supposition of children's “egocentrism”. What appeared to Piaget as egocentrism is instead “the mark of a subject that dwells within the intentional field as a whole”; *ibid.*, 235.

²¹ Merleau-Ponty 2001, 38-48. Kant emphasises the communicability of taste, based on a shareable feeling, in his discussions of taste and *sensus communis*; Kant 1990, §§20, 21, 40. It should however be emphasised that this theoretical, assumed shareability differs in decisive ways from the much more empirical and heterogeneous situations Merleau-Ponty seems to have in mind. Whereas Kant's focus is on aesthetic judgement, Merleau-Ponty's is on experience. In different ways both however deal with the constitution of a common human world.

²² This function is similar to that of a painting; Merleau-Ponty 1995, 204-211.

²³ On anonymity as a dimension both of embodiment and of our being born into a

Before proceeding, I want to add a few critical and methodological points that are relevant to the significance of the aesthetics of childhood. Again, first an observation about the way we should not proceed. Piaget's developmental psychology is here the main target. It is not that Merleau-Ponty would not recognise the theoretical creativity of Piaget and the importance of his work. The main problem is however, that Piaget was too occupied with his theory, and tended to project it onto the children he studied. His mistakes were to not ask the right questions, and not to listen very well to what the children were actually saying.²⁴ Instead, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we should take heed of the proper rationality (broadly conceived) of the child. This may demand something close to the aesthetic thinking described by Wolfgang Iser.²⁵ In other words, theory should serve the understanding of the phenomena we investigate rather than control them. This approach, whether we call it aesthetic or phenomenological, is all the more appropriate as we study human beings, a topic which is both ethically and politically charged. To look and listen to the individual child or children — who are finally the most reliable source for knowing what children may mean and think — is also similar to the way in which we often discuss art: starting from particular works and their individual circumstances.

III. Naturalising Aesthetics?

I have emphasised the aesthetic dimension of children's relationship to language; a dimension that does not go away later but is commonly seen as less important and sometimes unwished for in adult normative and especially professional language use. In the adult world, aesthetic language use typically becomes a sphere of its own: poetry, literature, jokes. Exaggerating only a little: the aesthetic has to be marked and set apart in order

world that is already given (natural and social), see Merleau-Ponty 1992, 180-202, 398-419.

²⁴ Thus, for example: "It must be admitted that the materials of Piaget's works are often more convincing than his interpretations: there is often a rather big marginal between what the child expresses and what Piaget understands."; Merleau-Ponty 2001, 184. Piaget's claims about what children can and cannot understand at a certain age have also been questioned in recent childhood studies.

²⁵ Iser 1995.

for us to dare to enjoy it.

In addition to children's use of language, which appears as part of the poetry of the world, not its prose,²⁶ Merleau-Ponty also wrote about children's drawings in ways that are closely reminiscent of his discussions of the art of painting.²⁷ In both contexts, the freshness of perception is emphasised, a going beyond our conventional ways of looking and mapping the world. We should note, however, that he was careful to emphasise the difference between the child's and the artist's creativity; for the artist, the activity is one of consciously retrieving a perception that has been lost on the way. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the child's relationship to language is richer than the adult's; the adult being in fact the poorer of the two.

Is it legitimate to naturalise aesthetics and even art in the way Merleau-Ponty implicitly does and I have done more explicitly? Here it is important to be clear about what naturalisation or naturalism means. Following Sami Pihlström, we might describe reductivist or "bald" naturalism as a view that conceives "of nature simply as the realm of natural law and seek[s] to reduce human beings' conceptual powers ... to this realm".²⁸ Pihlström points out that this is the most common form of contemporary naturalism in philosophy. It is hard to say how common it is in aesthetics, but it certainly exists. At worst it means that aesthetic values, aesthetic activities (or agency), and so forth, are reduced to quasi-biological functions, typically related to reproduction.²⁹ This form of naturalism is on the whole of little interest for aesthetics, since the explanations it offers leave the most interesting questions unanswered. By saying this, I do not mean to deny that natural science can help to clarify some of the problems we discuss and add to our understanding of what art is about.

The more promising form of naturalism is the "naturalism of second nature".³⁰ It takes as its point of departure that nature and human history

²⁶ See Merleau-Ponty 1995.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty 1995 and 2001 (on children's drawings); 1966, 1996, 1993 (on painting).

²⁸ Pihlström 2003, 206. Pihlström here comments and draws upon the philosophy of John McDowell.

²⁹ I say "quasi", because a significant speculative element is involved. Etcoff (1999) is an example of such views.

³⁰ Pihlström 2003, 206-208.

are necessarily intertwined, both on the collective and on the individual level, and that culture is part of human nature. In other words, it is part of our nature as human beings to be cultural and moral beings in addition to being biological ones. Freedom and reason belong with the natural human condition, and here we can with equal legitimacy put the emphasis either on “natural” or “human”. It seems that on the basis of this version of naturalism we can very well think of both aesthetics and art as natural to human beings. Would there then be a borderline between the child and the adult? To draw such a line is either to fall back into reductivist naturalism, or to expatriate the child into the realm of natural law. Of course, such a move has been more of a rule than an exception in the history of ideas on childhood in the West. But at what precise point should the line be drawn between the rational human being and those who are not rational?

On the other hand, what precisely is at stake in the question whether children make art or not? Would it not be simpler to grant them aesthetic agency but reserve the word “art” (here referring to any medium of expression) for adults? After all, human beings make many interesting and valuable things which are not art, and we can appreciate what children do without calling their works art. But there may also be something to say in favour of children’s art. There are two things I want to bring in at the end of this paper. One is a view from contemporary research on language; the other an argument about freedom.

If the naturalism of second nature emphasises the intertwining of nature and culture, it should welcome the interaction between humanities and sciences. Although we may not want to reduce our topics to the natural sciences, we should be interested in their findings. Here I shall only briefly refer to Michael Tomasello’s views on the character of human communication.³¹ Tomasello has conducted empirical work both on our closest animal relatives, chimpanzees and bonobos, and on human infants aged 1–4. His points are of interest to my specific topic but also for aesthetics on the whole.

First, “intention-reading skills” — the ability to understand the intention of another, instead of just reacting to what the other does — is, according to Tomasello, what distinguishes human from primate vocal com-

³¹ See Tomasello 1999, 2005, 2008a and 2008b.

munication. Human beings, and already small children, are through and through social animals in a way other animals are not.³² In fact, in comparing primates and human two-year olds, the only cognitive skills where the children were considerably stronger were social skills, including the ability to read the intentions of another. Further, it is not only *children's* meaning-making that is collective; collective (not individual) cognition is in fact the decisive human, as compared to other species, talent. Second, Tomasello points out that young children, but not chimpanzees, are moral agents. Early on, children recognise the obligation to help the group, and they want to share information with others. They also want to share emotions and attitudes. The emphasis on an inborn moral agency of humans in interesting way challenges popular ideas about nature, whether human or non-human, as fundamentally selfish.³³ This is challenging with respect both to aesthetics (and moral philosophy) and childhood studies. Third, we find a suggestion that constitutes a bridge not just to individual aesthetic agency (play, drawings, singing, etc.) but to art and other institutions too. Human infants “put their heads together in pretense”; and Tomasello suggests that the fact that children create roles in play indicates that they “have taken their first step on the road not just to Oz but also toward inhabiting human institutional reality”.³⁴ The recognition of roles (performativity), whether implicit or explicit, is crucial for being able to act in society.

A second argument about the possibility of children's art revolves around freedom; and I now return to Merleau-Ponty. In his discussions about painting and drawing, freedom is mentioned in several passages and with at least four different emphases. First, it has to do with the painter's freedom to perceive differently, since he can approach his objects disinterestedly, without regard for their theoretical or practical use.³⁵ But, unlike in Kant, this freedom of perception is not a turning away from the reality

³² More specifically, apes are able to use gestures flexibly, but their vocal communication is restricted to signalling; Tomasello 2008b, 13-55. Tomasello (ibid., 55) therefore suggests that “ape gestures [...] and not ape vocalizations [...] are the original font from which the richness and complexities of human communication and language have flowed.”

³³ This view is common in many discourses today, for example in referring to the selfishness of genes or, even more dubitably, in defending the naturalness and ensuing goodness of capitalism as it supposedly takes advantage of individuals' “natural” selfishness.

³⁴ Tomasello 2008a.

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty 1993, 14, 90.

of the world (or the flesh) in any of its dimensions, but a turning towards them. Reflexivity is the second aspect of art's freedom. Thus Merleau-Ponty observes that Cézanne's "turning back" towards pure perception, a perception before conventions and habits have taken hold of us, is possible only for a human being; not for an animal; for the animal cannot see how it sees.³⁶ In this respect, the adult has more freedom than the child, the child's drawing being only a distant early version of adult art. The child's relationship to the world is one of immediate contact; it is "total" and "affective" rather than reflexively aware of its own status.³⁷ But precisely because of this immersion in a situation, the third aspect of freedom appears to be stronger in the child than in the adult. According to Merleau-Ponty, freedom is possible only in the world and in particular circumstances, to which freedom is always relative.³⁸ Most children have a greater capacity than adults to take hold of the situation, use available means, make the potential actual and transform the everyday; whereas the adult, because of the "influence of and obedience to cultural schemes," has lost the ability of "certain spontaneous actions".³⁹ Fourth and last, freedom is related to the possibility of bringing forth the new and unexpected.⁴⁰ This has been hailed as central in art for the last two hundred years, and it is an essential aspect of the child's polymorphic existence.

Do these various aspects of freedom make up for true artistic agency? Does a child claim something in her works? I think it would be a mistake to categorically deny this possibility, even with smaller children. Let me take an example. Some time ago, I witnessed two boys, aged 7 or 8, perform a poem by the Swedish poet Sonja Åkesson, originally written in 1969 and entitled "Rearmament", in a poetry reading event in their school.⁴¹ The boys — and if they are artists, their names must be mentioned: Richard Bergström and Sebastian Soikkanen — had chosen the poem themselves and recited it together, one line at a turn. Here is the beginning of the poem, in free translation only of the first five lines: "Don't lie on the chair!

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty 1966, 28.

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty 2001, 520-1.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty 1966, 36-7, 43-4.

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty 2001, 173.

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty 1993, 89, 91-3.

⁴¹ The event took place on April 1st, 2009.

/ Don't sit on the table! / Don't stand and stare! / Pull yourself together! / Do you want a smacking!" Read by two boys with blank, expression-less faces, who have recently started their educative career, in front of an audience of schoolmates, teachers and parents, the performance struck me as a both political and artistic statement. In this example, to grant the role of (performing) artists to the boys might mean to recognise them in a way that differs significantly from perceiving them merely as children. The question of recognition is, as Judith Butler has emphasised in another context, about what ways of being human are possible and acceptable in a particular culture.⁴² Whether art, one of the central (although contested) forms of self-expression and communication in Western modernity, is a practice children are able to participate in, is a question about to what extent we accept them as full human beings. The possibility of children's artistic agency is therefore not a purely philosophical question; it is importantly critical and political too.

IV. To End

Merleau-Ponty's time was the time of modern art, and he was passionately involved with its questions and inspired by it. If we want to think seriously about what art may mean in relation to children, or whether one may speak of art in the world (or worlds) of children — which overlap with adult worlds — we should note not only the historicity of art and its institutional character, but also the plurality of art which has increased rather than decreased in recent times. There may not be one, but several concepts of art; in other words, different good reasons for calling something art.⁴³

Nevertheless, it may seem that I have been placing aesthetics and art in places where they do not belong. Even if this were true it could still be said that both aesthetics and art are needed in these places. What I have been doing is, among other things, to point to our aesthetic shadow as a cognitive, ethical and expressive resource and investigating (once again) the place of aesthetics within a larger picture. In the larger picture, we

⁴² Butler 2004, 2-4. Recognition is one of the central themes of the book.

⁴³ Welsch 2005.

may question the present position of children with regard to culture. In this context, aesthetics can become a means of emancipation — or at least a resource for finding new perspectives. On the other hand, if aesthetics is to have a more significant future, it should be able to contribute to other areas. I think it both can and should. The aesthetics of childhood is not just about children, but about the human situation. We were all children once, and childhood is on the whole a permanent structure of individual lives, of culture and society.⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ For a sociological argument, see Corsaro 2005.

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