

## Young Children's Philosophy of Art as A Reflection of Culture and Society: A Three Point Perspective

Dr. Ann Cheng Shiang Kuo

Fine Arts Department  
National Taiwan Normal University

This presentation focuses on philosophy of art as a reflection of lived experience of young children who early in life shape their conceptions of art in response to the cultural climate and heritage of societies in which they grow up. Discussion of children's philosophy of art is here powered by results of a crosscultural, collaborative study, that involved interviews with four and five-year-old children in Canada, France, and Taiwan, probing their understanding of the concept of art and selected criteria that determine membership of objects in the art category. Results of the study are presented in the context of cultural heritage and tradition of the three societies and further support the need to carefully consider cultural perspectives in discussing, assessing, and evaluating art. The evidence of children as young as four years of age having developed, through enculturation and social mediation of common values and understandings, their conceptions of art, underscores the importance of quality art education in early childhood years as a means of assisting children in further development of their philosophy of art.

**keywords:** Creativity Children's beliefs Nature of Art Structural Interview Question Cognitive Development Art Education

As we gather at an International Congress of art educators two things bring us all together: concern about education of young people and concern about the arts, their value and role in our respective societies. This morning's address will focus on the understanding of art as a category that defines, to a large extent, the nature of our profession and provides foundations for our engagement in education of children around the world.

When we want to consider the category of art in terms directly applicable and useful to art educators (rather than art historians, art critics, or business people, for example), we need to recognize that: a) art is an open concept (meaning that it requires divergent rather than convergent approach in seeking its understanding); b) art is a changing category (meaning that as a concept it undergoes serious redefinition with time); c) art is a social category (in that it reflects as well as expresses and defines societies); d) art is a cultural category (meaning that it is defined within and functions in close relationship to specific cultural contexts); and

e) art is a living category (in the sense that it is defined through both concepts and conceptions).

In the context of INSEA, when we talk about art education in not just local but also global terms, to what extent do we take under account the existence of these 5 categories and the possibility and significance of multiple interpretations to our discourse? While Weitz's definition of art (1956) as an open concept dependent on context and continuously changing with time offers considerable support in addressing this dilemma, it does not solve the pragmatic question faced by art teachers in their daily practice: what and about what they should teach and what understanding of art should guide their classroom interventions?

In times when we are tuned more than ever to the issues of globalization, multiculturalism, and the need to approach generalizations with caution due to the potential of a cultural bias, a forum such as INSEA provides a particularly relevant place for re-visiting the question of philosophy of art and its implications to art pedagogy. If we wish

to consider the notion of global education in the arts we need to recognize that the culture into which we venture amounts to more than its separate component parts. Global culture and consequently global art education should be thought not only as a collection of respective traditions, beliefs, and attitudes gathered around the world, but should attend to the intricate relationships and transformations that are a result the world pulling closer together through the increased migration, enhanced communication, and new technologies. At the same time, this new culture cannot be understood without a careful consideration of the funding elements, as the initial "component understandings" remain clearly in some relationship to the new emerging entity. Examination of these component understanding cannot be based solely on historical evidence and record. We need to venture into the live culture of societies today and take under account not only the expert opinion, but attitudes and beliefs that are pervasive in societies at large.

### Learners' conceptions about art

one perspective that is of particular reference to any educational enterprise is that constituted by beliefs, attitudes and values of learners. As much as it is important to understand the interpretations of the meaning of art by those who hold the responsibility to deliver instruction to children or adolescents, attitudes and beliefs constitute an important confounding factor in the learning process (e.g., Arends, 1994; Gagne, 1985). If we are willing to accept that human learning does not begin at the time of the onset of formal schooling but occurs through a process of informal social mediation from the first days of life, we need to recognize that children bring to their classrooms preconceptions and values that in some cases may be quite divergent of those of their teachers.

Brent Wilson (in press), in his chapter in the upcoming *Child Development in Art* anthology specifically examines the multiple understandings and conflicts of interests in conceptualization of "child art" and exposes problems that they pose to an effective art education practice. Models of information processing offered by the field of psychology (e.g. Cruickshank et. al, 1995) further point

to the significance of consideration of prior knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs in the learning process. If new information lacks the necessary connectedness and relevance to learners' prior experiences the attainment of it becomes seriously impaired. It is then crucial to understand children's early philosophy of art before we make any attempts to further shape it.

In this context, it is interesting to note a very limited number of earlier studies concerned with children's conceptions of art. A comprehensive search has revealed very few available reports, all of them contained to investigations conducted in North America (Ecker, 1973; Gardner et al., 1975; Rosario, 1977; Johnson, 1982; Russell, 1988). Furthermore, some of these studies (e.g., Gardner et al, 1975) had in their design the embedded definition of what art is derived from the adult understanding and investigated children's ability to perceive and respond to instances that have been designated as art, rather than seeking children's spontaneous definitions.

### Purpose of the study

The study that we will present today is guided by the ambition to assess children's designed to examine the relationship of children's conceptions of art in the early childhood years to their cultural heritage and values.

The metaphor of a three point perspective embedded in the title of our presentation refers to our attempt to provide a representation of this important reality while considering more than one "vanishing point". In the recent times researchers have been increasingly reminded of limitations of "tunnel vision" and consequently, in our study we have resorted to collaborative research strategies.

In addressing the question of children's conceptions about art we have selected three cultural contexts to examine this issue and we have formed a consortium of researchers indigenous to and/or representative of each of these contexts. While this allows us only to slightly broaden our vision, a selection of two societies characterized by long tradition and history less time to evolve to reach its present form: the Canadian, seemed to constitute a good beginning for research that we hope to continue and expand in the years to come.

## Method of the study

The study that we will discuss today was concerned with children's early, spontaneous conceptions about art. Structured interviews were conducted with a total of 118 four and five year old children in Canada, France, and Taiwan. The 41 Canadian informants were children attending preschool/kindergarten programs in seven locations in Vancouver, British Columbia. Forty French participants of this study were drawn from 15 preschools (*ecole maternelle*) in Paris and its suburbs. The remaining 37 children attended three urban schools in Changhua, Taiwan. In all cases, children were from upper-middle class families and were a representative sample of this section of population in each location.

The interview questions were devised jointly by the French, Chinese and Canadian researchers with special attention given to the precision of translations and ensuring the cross-cultural correspondence and applicability of items. Interviews were conducted by researchers indigenous to each setting and the interviewers spent some time getting acquainted with informants before proceeding with the interviews. This study was preceded by an earlier project (Kindler and Darras, 1994; *in press*) where the method of structured interviews with children as young as three and four years of age was piloted and validated.

The collected data was analyzed using quantitative as well as qualitative methods. Responses of open-ended questions were analyzed through the use of taxonomic and componential analysis (Spradley, 1979) and descriptive statistics were used to explore the relative significance of the derived categories responses.

In organizing the obtained data we have considered referring to the taxonomy proposed by Nancy Johnson (1982). We have, however, revisited this notion in the context of the nature of the obtained data. We felt that it was important, especially in the context of a cross-cultural study, not to force the gathered information into a pre-determined and rigid model that have not seemed to satisfy the demands of our task. Instead, we have collaboratively examined the universe of children's responses and have come up with a taxonomy that

seemed appropriate for classification of data at hand.

We have noted that our informants demonstrated two strategies in answering the interview questions that corresponded to two broad cognitive approaches. The first one was a result of wholistic cognitive operations which lead to citation of exemplars and prototypes of chosen categories (Rosch, 1975; Dubois et al., 1991; Cordier, 1993). The second strategy involved reference to known properties, characteristics, and attributes. We were able to identify here five categories of defining characteristics explored by children in their responses.

The first group of responses, which we called poietic (Valery, 1937; Passeron, 1975), is concerned with predicates related to making, producing, and creating and corresponds to Johnson's (1982) "Act" category. The second family of responses combines various semiotic fields historically tied to the concept of aesthetics. This category groups responses relative to the notion of beauty, goodness, and a broadly understood world of human sensations. To ensure the understanding of inclusion of references to emotive domain as well as judgements of taste and other aesthetic considerations we named this category aesthetic/affective. The third, formal (or formal properties) category, classifies all references to elements and principles of art, such as colour, form, texture, composition, etc. The fourth, cognitive category, encompasses comments relative to the domain of knowing, including references to declarative and procedural knowledge. We have also proposed here a sub-category of Learning, for the sake of clarity of our interpretation of the gathered data. The fifth broad category, named institutional, groups responses concerned with purpose, use, and destination of art, as well as comments addressing the presence or role of an artist and his/her relationship with the audience.

We will refer to these categories in the description of the results of our study and in making cross-cultural comparisons. Given the limited time of our presentation we have selected only a small segment of the obtained data for discussion and chose to explore answers to only three out of over twenty questions included in the interview schedule that seemed most relevant to the notion of philos-

ophy of art and allow to expose the cultural foundations of children's early conceptions in this regard. Our focus in today's presentation will be then on three categories of questions: What is art? Can something created by nature be considered a work of art or does art have to be made by a person? Does art have to be beautiful?/Can ugly things be art? We will now present responses to these questions offered by four and five year old children in France, Taiwan, and Canada, framed in the cultural context of the settings where the data were obtained. Dr.

### Art as understood by French preschoolers

In discussions about art we often refer to "Western conception" of art. As much as we seem to take for granted some common and shared understandings of what art is in the Western world we need to recognize that term constitutes a very broad umbrella covering a tremendously vast territory. It is also necessary to keep in mind that the term art has a tradition of definitional problems, fluctuating meanings and confusions, perhaps most pronounced in the twentieth century. The emergence of new art forms and trends characterizing the modern era, and the change of cultural fabric of societies increasingly moving from culturally homogeneous structures to diversified, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural groupings further open the door for a multiplicity of interpretations and definitions of art. In a historical perspective, Western understanding of art can be organized into the following set of categories: art as a cult; art as religion; art as technique; art as imitation; art as creator; art as social consciousness; art as revolution; art as language; art as propaganda; art for art's sake; art as deconstruction; art as social institution; art as expression; art as imagination; art as therapy; art as an open concept and perhaps other delineating a range of distinct perspectives and understandings.

It is important to keep in mind that these diverse understandings have not been aligned in a linear fashion but tended to overlap and superimpose themselves in a fashion where multiple understandings could function at the same time. Weitz's definition grew up from that diversity and institutionally sanctioned art as an open concept.

A common thread throughout these multiple understandings (or at least a great majority of them) can perhaps be the assumed relationship (in very general terms) between art, humanity, nature and the divine. For the most part, the Western tradition is rooted in the principle of separation between these entities. While art may be regarded as intrinsic to humanity, homo sapiens considered a part of the natural world and Christianity offers an account of a very special relationship between God and his people on Earth, there is a clear conceptual separation between these terms, particularly evident since the time of Renaissance and reinforced by modernist thought.

The relationship between art and the concept of beauty been extensively explored within the framework of Western culture, becoming one of the central concerns in the realm of aesthetics. This close association between beauty and art has profound and resistant roots. In fact, it is only in the Modernist revolution that the notion of originality or uniqueness has replaced beauty as a leading indicator of artistic merit and, in the extreme, beauty became an undesirable attribute. Much of the Western artistic production of the twentieth century gives testimony to this dramatic shift. It is necessary to note, however, that as much as the "art world", the world of professional artists, art critics, and connoisseurs have been receptive to this change, the society at large have failed to overwhelmingly embrace it. For many ordinary people, those who do not have extensive academic knowledge of the arts, beauty remains one of the essential, if not defining, characteristics of art.

As I have mentioned earlier, "Western art" or "Western tradition" are very broad terms that embody great generalizations and approximations. In the context of this study, it is necessary to make a distinction between the totality of Western tradition and the segment, or component of it that has been explored in this study. It may be, therefore useful, to briefly attend to the particularities of the French culture and tradition. As we examine French children's responses it is worthwhile to keep in mind that they grow in the country where the arts have enjoyed an elevated status throughout the centuries. This attention to, appreciation and valuing of the arts and aesthetic experience have con-

tributed to the development of a very special cultural ambience characterized not only by the presence of historical monuments and architecture that are a part of children's everyday environment and unmatched museum collections, but also in French love of elegance in fashion, gourmet food, etc.

How do children growing up in a society saturated with Western tradition, a society proud of its cultural heritage marked by a great appreciation and patronage of the arts, form their early conceptions of art? A sample answer to this question comes from the results of our interviews conducted with young children in selected preschools in Paris. (I need to emphasize here the word "sample", as it is not our intention to propose at this point generalizations reaching beyond the scope of our study.)

#### **Question 1: what is art?**

When we asked our informants what is art, we noted that a large proportion of children, over 65%, failed to provide a response. Two hypothesis can be proposed to explain this discrepancy. The first explanation can be offered on the examination of the applications of the linguistic term "art" specific to the French culture and the use of relevant vocabulary and formulation of art-related categories.

In French, the term art defines a very broad, relatively academic category, the usage of which is not frequent in general population. In the context of preschool (*ecole maternelle*), activities of artistic nature are not referred to at this level of generalization. They are instead being called using labels of the appropriate subordinate categories: drawing, painting, etc.

The second hypothesis stems from research on children's use and access to hierarchy of abstractions in classification (Mervis & Cristafi, 1982; Cordier, 1994) Which suggests that age is a factor in the use of different levels of categories. The superordinate level, to which the term "art" belongs, may not be readily accessible to children as young as 4 or 5, especially those who do not have a frequent experience with it and have not had the opportunity to arrive at this concept (Darras & Kindler, *in press*).

Children who responded to this question resorted predominantly to the exemplar-based definitions. Among the exemplar-based responses we

were able to note presence of descriptors indicating that children's category formation was guided by basic level operations (Mervis and Cristafi, 1982). In particular, art was frequently defined as painting or drawing with 10 and 6 quotations, respectively.

The preference given to painting and drawing over other disciplines of art is reflective of common social usage of these terms in relation to the broader category of art as well as immediate children's experience in school and family situations. In spite of the diversity of domains in the visual arts, painting and drawing continue to enjoy a privileged position in the field as the pure, "classical" example of art. It is thus not surprising to observe the presence of these socially confirmed prototypes in conceptions of young children.

Only two preschoolers used attribute-based definitions pointing to the poietic (art as something that you build) or aesthetic (art is pretty things) characteristics.

#### **Question 2: Can something made by nature be considered a work of art or does art have to be made by a person?**

Answers to the second question "Can something made by nature be considered a work of art or does art have to be made by a person?" were more abundant. Children for whom the category of "art" was obscure were provided with citations of exemplars and thus could conceive of this category as a family of the listed prototypes and instances similar to these exemplars.

Over 85% of French youngsters proposed a humanistic interpretation of the nature of art, insisting that art has to be made by a person. This orientation was very well exemplified by a statement of a five year old girl who declared that "people need to invent things not invented by nature". This answer echoed beliefs first expressed by Saint Thomas Aquinas and later reiterated by Klee regarding art not being an imitation of nature, but rather involving replication of the natural creative process in its own terms.

In general, the rationales of children's responses were attribute-based. Almost a third of French respondents noted the absence of hands as a major handicap of nature, preventing it from creating art. The same argument was furthered by

several Canadian children. This argument embodied another commonly assumed necessary condition of art, namely its "manual" dimension. The poietic category of rationales was further explored by children who asserted that art is a human domain because "it has to be build or made". One child remarked the importance of visual awareness in art production and insisted that "nature cannot make art because it does not see".

### **Questions 3 and 4: Does art have to be beautiful? Can ugly things be art?**

Answers to the next two questions add an interesting extension to the philosophical debate initiated in ancient Greece over the relationship between art and beauty. While the questions: "Does art have to be beautiful"? and "Can ugly things be art"? seem somewhat redundant, by offering two different departing points for possible answers they allow to access more in depth the nature of children's beliefs in this regard.

French preschoolers have not experienced here any difficulty verbalizing their opinion. Most of the interviewed children, an overwhelming 94% were very adamant about beauty requirement. They confirmed this assertion by stating that ugly things cannot be considered art (87%). It was clear that our informant's responses reflected a long-standing association between art and beauty, prevalent in the Western culture. With beauty being both "welcome and demanded" in art (Alberti in Goldwater and Treves, 1972) for centuries in the European context, the changing conceptions brought by modernism failed to overturn the popular, tradition-based assumptions, as I have earlier indicated.

The strength of these beliefs was further demonstrated in justifications that children offered for their responses. A great majority of our respondents in the region of paris insisted that art simply has to be beautiful, by definition. Some children mentioned a variety of non-examples, most frequently, scribbles, as instances where the lack of beauty prevents an object from acceding the status of art. Children claimed that "ugly, dark colours and forms" are antithetical to art, with some children specifically indicating that "if art was to be ugly it would not be worth anything".

Several children listed aesthetic characteristics

of art objects, such as pretty colours, or nice shapes. Some pointed to the fact that beauty in art is a result hard work and the "well-made" quality, which characterizes art.

Interviews with French preschoolers suggest a strong link between very early conceptions of art and cultural tradition of a society. The understanding of art as a humanistic phenomenon distinct from all natural creations and as an instance possessing the quality of beauty, echoes values embraced and perpetuated in the Western world, and in France in particular, for centuries. This cultural dependence of conceptual understanding of art already in the early childhood years is further supported by results of research conducted in Taiwan, which Dr. Ann Cheng Shiang Kuo will now present.

### **Young children's conceptions about art in Taiwan**

While the definition of art has received significant attention since the ancient times and this past discourse provides foundations for our current social knowledge in this area, it is necessary to recognize that these foundations are not the same for the European or more generally, Western, and Asian cultures. Asian conceptions of art are rooted in the principle of unity, where a separation between entities can be conceived only in an artificial and superficial manner. In chinese culture art is an integrated phenomenon, destined to enhance harmony and unity. Human and art are embodied in the concept of nature, thus preventing from ever taking an "outsider's" perspective. This can explain certainly the relative stability of the definition of art in Chinese culture.

In Chinese societies the definition of art is vague and if profoundly rooted in Chinese conception of nature and its relationship to humanity. From a Western perspective Chinese view of nature may seem mysterious, with direct communication between humans and nature being the expressed desire of Chinese artists. From this standpoint human being is just a small part of nature, with an equal status to animals, rocks, mountains or flowers. For great Chinese masters there is no separation between nature and "I", which lead to chinese art surpassing realism. In the eyes of Chinese people every tree, stone, or a stream has and

manifests human virtues. Nature for Chinese is God who also lives in human's most profoundly understood being; a human and nature combine to create a unified existence. To exist in harmony with nature is, for the Chinese, the highest and truest meaning of life. Chinese artists endeavour to express in their paintings, calligraphy, sculpture, carving, flying wing-roofed and Buddhist architecture unity, peace, harmony and completeness of nature. It can be said that one of the main distinctions between the Western and Chinese understanding of art lies in the position one takes in regard to the relative alignment of the human, nature and art entities.

### Question 1

When we asked children in Taipei preschools what is art, similarly to their French counterparts many of our informants (over 76%) failed to provide a response. One explanation of this phenomenon can be attributed to breadth of the term art in the Chinese tradition. To contemporary Chinese, life is a form of art, and so is speech, music, and visual arts. Maybe because of this breadth and consequently imprecision of the meaning, the term art does not belong in everyday vocabulary of common people. It is infrequently used around children and, as it is the case in France, precise terms are used to describe art-related activities in which young children may be involved.

Another hypothesis relates to the cultural impoliteness of being outgoing or assertive in Chinese societies. Chinese children early internalize that respect towards older people requires a degree of reservation in communication with adults.

Finally, the explanation offered to account for French youngsters' difficulty in responding to this open-ended question, pointing to the use and access to hierarchy of abstractions in classification, may be proposed.

With Taiwanese children offering such limited responses, it is difficult to formulate a meaningful taxonomy in this case. It may be worthwhile noting, however, that children who did respond have resorted to both the exemplar-based and the attribute-based strategies with about the same frequency. Three children referred specifically to

drawing as an exemplar of art, two mentioned that art involved "fun and play". Other single responses included statements indicating that art is "something that hangs on the wall", "something made by an artist", or "something that is pretty".

### Question 2

Children's responses to the second question concerning the natural vs. human origin of art were much more numerous. While it could be argued that this question was formulated from a Western perspective we were interested in exploring to what extent the Chinese traditional understanding of nature-art relationship will be manifested in responses of children as young as four and five years of age. We curious to what extent the Western cultural influence which can be detected in many facets of contemporary Chinese life will be evident in young children's conceptions.

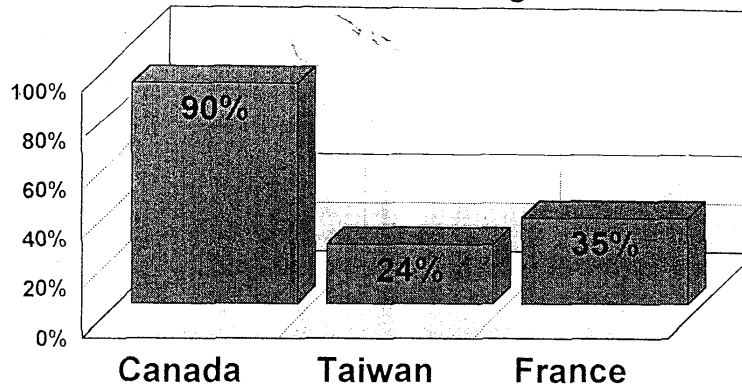
Almost 90% of Chinese respondents regarded art as a phenomenon attributable to nature. This came as a surprise as I have initially hypothesized that the recent Western cultural influences will be reflected in children's responses.

This study indicates, however, that at this early age conceptions of children who have not yet been exposed to formal educational interventions are still more guided by the traditional Chinese understanding of relationships between humans, nature and art. While our young informants were definitive about art being a nature-made phenomenon, they experience difficulty justifying their answers. Less than a fifth of the interviewed children offered explanations of their assertions. These children either pointed to exemplars that they considered art that were part of the natural world (e.g., clouds, mountains, birds), or emphasized that art is "beautiful" or "good", and by inference, objects made by nature that possess these characteristics were attributed the status of art.

Taiwanese children's responses were very different from those of their French counterparts, who, as have been mentioned earlier, favoured the humanistic conception of the origin of art and point to an important cross-cultural difference that can be traced back to the history of thinking about art in the Western and Asian societies.

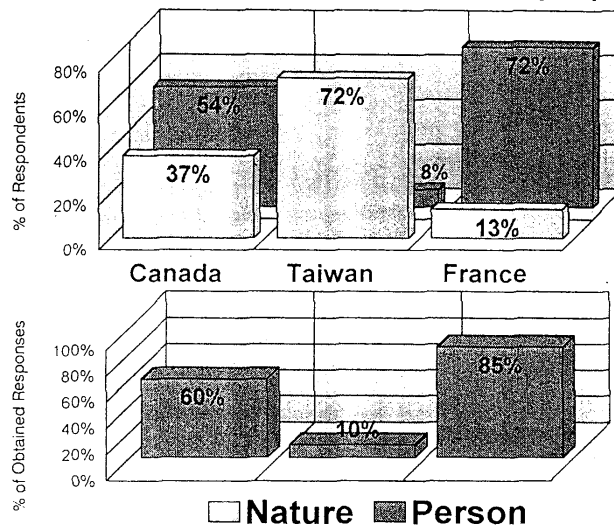
## What is art?

% of Children Providing an Answer



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Can something made by nature be considered a work of art, or does art have to be made by a person?



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### Questions 3 and 4

In Chinese culture the relationship between art and beauty is precisely defined: art has to possess characteristics of truth, goodness, and beauty, a conception close to the Greek notion of art.

Not surprisingly, 92% of Taiwanese youngsters who participated in our interviews insisted that art has to be beautiful and that ugly things cannot be referred to as works of art. Explanations of responses, once again, much more scarce than the declarations of the requirement of beauty, pointed to the inherent perceived relationship between art and beauty. Several children stated that "art has to be beautiful", as though beauty was in fact one of the critical attributes of the concept. About the same number of children argued that art has to be beautiful because they "don't like ugly things", implying that art is something that people have to like.

We were able to observe that our Taiwanese respondents shared views about art and beauty with their French peers. An interesting difference emerged, however, between their conceptions and those of preschoolers interviewed in Western Canada, that will be discussed now by Dr. Anna Kindler.

### Canadian children's conceptions of art

#### Question 1

In contrast to their French and Chinese peers who have experienced difficulty answering this question, an overwhelming 90% of Canadian informants volunteered their opinion about what art is. This was likely due to the fact that, unlike their French and Chinese counterparts, Canadian children are familiarized with the term "art" from early on in their lives. In Canadian society children's early pictorial attempts are commonly called "child's art". Preschool or kindergarten teachers often refer to drawing and painting as "art" and in fact the areas designated in the classrooms on daily bases for activities involving exploration of art media are called "art centres". This reality has been clearly reflected in answer of one four year old Canadian girl who insisted that she is an artist because she "makes things in the art centre". Children in Van-

couver preschool frequently have their "art folders" in which their work is collected and take their "art" home on regular bases. It is worthwhile to note that the term "art" (as opposed to "arts") defines, in the common understanding, the range of activities and artifacts limited to fine arts. This immediate experience and familiarity with the use of the superordinate category level has clearly allowed children to internalize it and make sense of it already in these early stages of their lives.

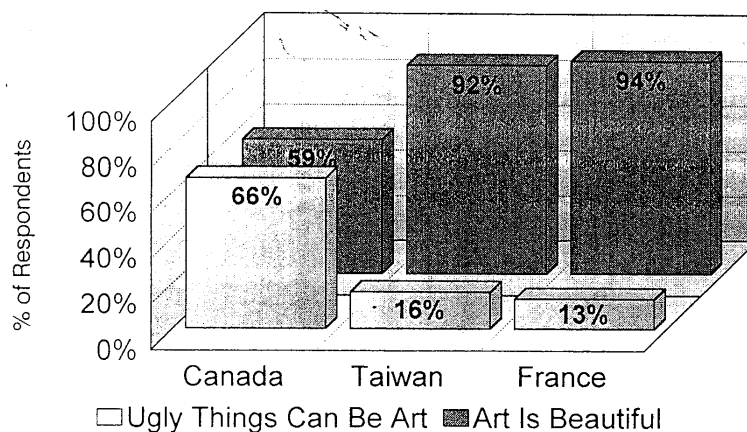
As in the case of French preschoolers, Canadian informants resorted to a great extent to the use of exemplar-strategy in their responses and in particular mentioned drawing and painting as defining of art (with 15 and 17 quotations, respectively.)

Canadian children who have word "art" in their working vocabulary and based on the history of its use had the opportunity to form the category of "art", also offered an abundance of attribute-based responses. These responses could be grouped in four of the classes mentioned earlier in this report: the poietic, the aesthetic/affective, the formal and institutional types of predicates. The poietic category was exemplified by statements indicating that art is "something that you draw", "playing", "making things with paint", "building stuff", etc. The aesthetic/affective category included responses such as "(art) is lots of fun", "when it look nice". or "really good writing". Formal references were mostly concerned with colour, colouring, and designs and "staying within the lines" was listed by one child as a characteristics of pictures that qualify as art. The institutional arguments pointed that art is something that it is displayed and one child specifically indicated that art belongs in art galleries.

#### Question 2

Canadian informants were split in their opinion about the origins of art. 60% supported the humanistic conception congruent with the historically determined European tradition. The remaining 40% of children in this group opted for the "naturalistic" approach. Analysis of specific responses points again to the use of two classification strategies, the exemplar and the attribute-based with about the same frequency. Echoing responses of some French respondents, some Canadian preschoolers noted the absence of hands as a major

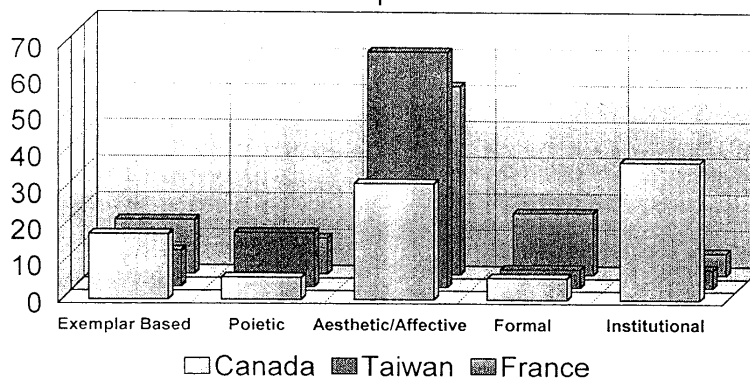
## Does art have to be beautiful? Can ugly things be art?



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## Does art have to be beautiful? Can ugly things be art?

Distribution of Responses



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handicap of nature, preventing it from creating art. The aesthetic/affective dimension was explored by some children and was used to support the "naturalistic" conceptions of art. The cognitive and formal arguments were either not used at all or used very sporadically.

It is worthwhile to note that several Canadian responses pointed to the mixed origins hypothesis. As one five year old stated "art can be made by nature or a person because art can be made in lots of ways".

### Questions 3 and 4

The Canadian children, one more time, were divided in their opinion. 59% agreed that beauty was a necessary condition of art, while the remaining 41% were willing to waive the beauty requirement. In 66% of cases the young Canadians suggested that ugly things can indeed be art and were ready to give sound justifications for their responses.

This difference in responses between the French and Chinese children on one hand and the Canadians on the other is likely related to history of artistic and cultural traditions in these countries. It is possible to suggest that in French and Chinese societies the idea of beauty as a necessary condition for art has been enshrined in a long standing tradition and is commonly shared. Furthermore, it can be argued that for the Chinese and the French the semantic space of "ugly" includes and extension comprised of "bad" or "immoral" and "not true" which is not the case in common Canadian understanding of this term. Canadian children, being products of a "new" society, tend to be much more influenced by the modernist (and post-modernist) thinking. Sociologist J. Baudrillard (1986) in his comparison of the American and European cultures posited that even though Modernism was both American and European phenomenon its impact was exercised in different ways on the two continents, as America has not experienced the earlier artistic movements.

Another interesting cross-cultural difference was observed at the level of categories explored in justification of responses. Unlike the French and Taiwanese respondents, who resorted most readily to the aesthetic/emotive category of rationales, on-

ly 32% of Canadian informants explored this category, with the institutional argument being used the most (38%). These young Canadians seemed to confirm their modernist orientation in understanding of art. Even if they have not totally neglected the aesthetic arguments, they gave the artist a lot of authority in deciding what is and what is not art. As one of the respondents noted an artist can do "his own kind of thing" regardless of its aesthetic merit and another observed that "art doesn't have to be beautiful if you don't want to be beautiful". Yet another Canadian child commented that art doesn't have to be beautiful because "you can draw whatever you want", leaving artists the right to reject the criterion of beauty.

It was also possible to detect a Post-modern openness to diversity exemplified in responses of some Canadian children and their sensitivity to the possibility of multiplicity of perspectives on an issue. The relativity of the judgement of beauty was reflected in a statement of a four and a half year old girl who declared that even if "people who made them (artifacts) think that they are ugly the people that look at them think that they look nice". It can be argued that such considerations of multiplicity of viewpoints could be a reflection of the multicultural fabric of the contemporary Canadian society and the emphasis given to the celebration of diversity in media and schools. It is interesting to note, however, that only about half of the Canadian children seemed receptive to this influence, while the remaining half held views more reminiscent of French and Chinese traditional conceptions of art.

The historical/cultural conditions appear to play an important role in children's assessment of the relationship between beauty and art. Children growing up in societies with long standing tradition of art as manifestation of beauty tend to embrace this understanding early on in their lives. On the other hand, the North American adherence to the modernist and post-modernists values echoes in responses of young Canadians.

It seems that Chinese and French children are very sensitive at this age to the cultural influences rooted in long-standing tradition, while Canadian children respond to a more varied culturally mediated representations.

## Conclusions

Our study demonstrated that understanding of art is a phenomenon determined to a large extent by culture and cultural tradition. The differences found in responses of the French, Canadian, and Chinese children point to the early mediation of socio-cultural knowledge relative to art. Our study also allowed to construct a taxonomy of responses addressing the nature and purpose of art. In addition to the broad distinction between the exemplar-based and attribute-based arguments, we observed the presence of five categories of specific characteristics listed as necessary conditions for art: poietic, aesthetic/affective, formal, cognitive and institutional. We have also noted the distinction between personally-centred and socially-oriented perspectives shaping children's early conception of art.

There are naturally limitations to our study which we readily acknowledge. While for a study of an exploratory and predominantly descriptive nature the sample size which we offer is justifiable, increasing the pool of respondents in each of the cultural groups would allow to further validate our findings. It is also important to remember that even though we have referred in our report to French, Chinese, and Canadian respondent, our interviews were limited to single urban settings in each country and we have examined conception of children from the upper-middle class socio-economic background. It would be therefore inappropriate to generalize our findings to the entire Canadian, Chinese and French populations without further more extensive research.

## Implications of the study

Our study demonstrated that children as young as four or five years age have developed, through enculturation and social mediation of common values and understandings, their conceptions of art. With such beliefs being formed already in early years the role of quality art education at preschool

level becomes underscored. Preschool teachers have a unique opportunity to participate in formation of these beliefs and hold the responsibility of providing children with experiences building a broad a strong base for formation of attitudes and beliefs relative to art.

We also documented the importance of vocabulary and the use of art related terms in children's ability to form conceptions of art, especially at the superordinate level.

Our study indicated that one cannot assume four and five year old children's efficient processing at this level unless they have been exposed to an extensive use of such classification strategy. Our study indicated that socially mediated, inherited complex semantic space is present is available to children even before the label of "art" becomes a part of their working vocabulary. We have also demonstrated that semantic space and inferences that the term "art" generates very greatly across cultures, even though we often take for granted the consensus over the meaning of the word "art".

The discovered cultural differences further support the need to carefully consider cultural perspectives when discussing, assessing, and evaluating art. Some of the differences revealed in our study pointed to interesting variations within so called Western societies. In some instances Canadian children's responses were more congruent with those of their Chinese rather than French peers, casting a shadow of doubt over assumption of overwhelming commonalities of "Western beliefs" and their by-default disparity with non-Western perspectives.

With Canadian children's conceptions bordering European and Asian perspectives, it is possible to propose that this phenomenon might also be a reflections of emergence of a new "multicultural culture" (Kindler, 1994) of which young children growing up in culturally diverse societies are master architects and to which organizations such as the INSEA make important contributions.

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## 反映文化與社會的幼兒藝術哲學：三個觀點

郭禎祥

國立臺灣師範大學美術學系

本文旨在探討反映幼童生活經驗的藝術哲學，幼兒受到成長環境中的文化條件及傳統的影響，從小就形成了對藝術的觀念。本文對兒童藝術哲學的討論，乃根據一項跨文化合作研究的結果。這項研究是訪問加拿大、法國及台灣三地的四、五歲兒童，探討他們對於藝術概念以及藝術作品的標準，有什麼樣的 understanding。我們根據三地社會的文化傳統，分析所得的研究資料，結果也進一步顯示，藝術的討論與評量必須謹慎考慮到文化的因素。本研究證明，透過社會的適應和共同價值觀的影響，四歲的兒童已經形成自己的藝術概念，顯示幼年階段就需要良好的藝術教育，以幫助兒童進一步發展他們的藝術哲學。

**關鍵詞：**創造性 兒童的信念 藝術的本質 結構性訪問的問題 認知發展 藝術教育