Can Children Do Aesthetics? A Developmental Account

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This essay will address the question whether there are developmental aspects to learning aesthetics. Do children typically think in ways that are different from those of adults and that affect their abilities to learn aesthetics? Do children hold typical early forms of aesthetic theories? What can we say in general about cognitive development and aesthetics?

In what follows I will argue, mostly by means of brief examples, that children do in fact think in characteristic ways about the arts and have, at least implicitly, philosophies of art. Moreover, these implicit philosophies of art are shaped by the development of important underlying cognitive abilities. In turn, they determine to a large extent the kind and range of aesthetic response that children are capable of. This latter point amounts to the claim that the development of abilities with respect to aesthetics is closely related to the development of the more general abilities required for mature aesthetic response.

Ronald Moore, editor of this collection, framed the question in the following way. Kant's ethics, he suggested, can be read as an attempt to show what are the key abilities required for someone to be a moral adult; for example, autonomous thinking. Kant saw that there are earlier stages of human development in which these key abilities are not yet present but are in preparation, in which one can trace the developmental precursors of those abilities. In the same way, Moore suggested, one might ask parallel questions about aesthetic adulthood. What are the key abilities required for a mature aesthetic response, and what are the steps by which one acquires those abilities? This question comprehends more than just the abilities required to understand aesthetics, though it is important to see that the two are related.

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I

I will begin with the connection between the two sets of abilities: those required to do aesthetics and those required for mature aesthetic response. My claim is that they *are* closely connected. The connection runs both ways. In one direction, one needs to have a mature response to art in order to understand the philosophy of art well; in the other direction, one needs to be able to think philosophically about art to be an aesthetic adult. This means that aesthetic development in general includes the development of abilities with respect to aesthetics (for clarity I will henceforth often say the "philosophy of art" in place of "aesthetics").

The first of these claims seems noncontroversial: that one needs to have a sophisticated response to the arts if one is to do philosophy of art well. The reason lies in the content. Philosophers of art discuss, for example, the nature of aesthetic qualities, the criteria for judgments, the relevance of context. It follows that they need themselves to have experienced aesthetic qualities, have made judgments, have encountered artworks in and out of context.

The second claim is less obviously true and is in fact controversial in art education circles. Does one really need philosophy of art to deal well with art? It seems that there are plenty of counterexamples. In the past, many people have seemed to pick up, in the normal course of socialization, what they needed to understand art without the need for explicit philosophy. And while there is a growing sympathy in art education for teaching art in context—for including art criticism, art history, anthropology of art in art classes—there is less sympathy for teaching aesthetics. For many, it is less intuitively obvious that one needs aesthetics to understand art. But that belief—that the philosophy of art is implicated in an understanding of art—is the primary reason for teaching it in schools. Perhaps this point extends even to undergraduate education.

One way to justify the claim is to point to the character of our contemporary art world and the society it reflects. In a society that is relatively homogenous and changes slowly, people may come to understand their art without needing philosophy. But our world is a world of great variety and rapid change, wherein it is easy to become confused. It is a world where erasing a drawing may count as making an artwork and wrapping a museum as having an exhibition; where the lines between popular, folk, and fine art have almost disappeared; where there is a multiplicity of styles, media, histories, theories; and where no one stream of thought dominates. Arthur Danto has famously said that artworks exist only in "an atmosphere of theory." The dictum seems true of our age, even if it was not true in earlier times. One cannot understand our art world today without some sense of theory.

The other side of this coin may be a shift in one's sense of what teaching philosophy of art is like. If the purpose is to help students (children or undergraduates) with art, rather than with philosophy, then we should perhaps teach it in the context of also teaching art. The "aesthetic adult" is not a professional philosopher of art any more than she is an artist, art critic, art historian or anthropologist of art.

This means that the abilities we are interested in will have less to do with abstract logical reasoning and more to do with the substance of aesthetics than some may suppose. I am not clear whether this marks a difference with the Philosophy for Children movement, in which a major goal seems to be the development of logical reasoning.[1]

II

What do we mean by an "aesthetic adult"? She is a familiar if shadowy figure, for she is the one to whose judgment philosophers of art typically appeal when they argue a point: That *this* is the way experience unfolds, criticism proceeds, concepts are used, or criteria employed. The appeal is usually implicit, of course, but sometimes it is explicit. For example, R. G. Collingwood argues thus:

> Since the artist proper has something to do with emotion. . . . what is it that he does? . . . Nothing could be more entirely commonplace than to say he expresses them. . . . The idea is familiar to every artist and to everyone else who has any acquaintance with the arts. To state it is . . . to state a fact, or supposed fact, about which . . . we shall have later to theorize philosophically.[2]

I have space only to make some preliminary distinctions about aesthetic adulthood. It is clear, however, that, following Moore's suggestion, we should look for a full description to philosophers of art. We can read much of what they say as an attempt to spell out a description or something closely related to it. Obvious examples are Monroe C. Beardsley's discussion of the nature of aesthetic experience and Danto's arguments that responses to artworks are always interpretive.

Aesthetic adulthood, we can say, means being able to respond appropriately to the art of one's society. This includes being able to interpret artworks meaningfully and to respond to them relevantly, to place them in context, to understand their kinds, to value some for relevant reasons, to discuss them in a critical way. This list sounds quite cognitive in character, but it does not exclude strong emotional response. "Responding relevantly" might well include responding with marked emotion. The list reflects the current general consensus in philosophy that aesthetic response, and emotion in general, is cognitively structured and interpretive in character.

One can distinguish this general sense of aesthetic adulthood from the end point of several schemes of development in the arts. Many of these are really about artistic rather than aesthetic development; that is, about the development of abilities required to make art. The best known is the account of the development of children's drawings that stems from Viktor Lowenfeld and has been amplified by many others.[3] According to this account, children begin to draw by making marks whose character is determined mostly by the physiology of arm, hand, and fingers. Then, in a typical developmental sequence, they associate their marks with representational meanings; they produce tadpole figures and other schema that they understand as representations; they gradually elaborate their figures; they begin to master a number of the devices of visual realism. Many children stop drawing at this point, before they attain significant skills of visual realism. If they persist, they may go on to develop various ways of expressing emotions and to experiment with formal arrangements.

There are other similar schemes of artistic development one could mention. Claire Golomb has investigated children's abilities to make small sculpture figures.[4] David Feldman has looked at making maps and painting with watercolors.[5] These schemes are interesting, but they are not well connected with aesthetic adulthood. They are about the development of particular skills in particular artistic domains and not about aesthetic development in general. These skills will at best overlap partially with the development that leads to aesthetic maturity. The overlap occurs because presumably when people make art they attempt to produce the sorts of things that they understand artworks to be. Also, in the process of making, they respond as best they can to the work they are making. In this way, artistic development will reflect aesthetic development. On the other hand, making things as specific as ceramic figures, maps, or watercolors requires particular skills that may not be related to general aesthetic maturity at all.

Howard Gardner and others at Project Zero have looked at the development of abilities to recognize artistic styles, expressive devices, and other specific items of perception.[6] However, in general their investigations have been oriented toward behaviors and not toward the abilities required to understand these things as parts of aesthetic objects, or artworks.

III

A question immediately arises about the culturally specific character of aesthetic adulthood. Collingwood appears to have had in mind well-educated English people of his time, and it is not clear what he would have said about a well-educated person from, say, an Asian or African tradition. Can we talk only about a mature adult in a particular aesthetic traditon, which

means within a particular culture, or are there universals that stretch across different traditions and cultures?

The Kohlbergian stream of moral developmental psychology has often been accused of cultural imperialism, that is, of assuming that the rest of the world can be assessed on a developmental scheme that actually maps only the development of twentieth-century Western moral understanding. I suppose a parallel claim might be levelled against Kant. At this point, I want only to acknowledge the importance and the complexity of this issue. I am much less sure about it than I used to be. For example, I find the question of just what "universal" means, and just what is asserted by Kohlbergian schemes to be universal in character, not an easy one. I am content to acknowledge that what is said here may be relevant only to the understanding of Western art and, correspondingly, of contemporary Anglo-American or Western philosophy of art.

No one doubts that the content of our understanding of art as we grow up is dependent on the art that we encounter and the cultural context in which we encounter it. The quotations that follow make it clear that much of what children say about art is culture bound. What is not obvious is whether underneath the particular content there are some universal achievements or developments, such as the recognition of the subjective character of individual experience.

IV

What is the basic motive behind cognitive development? It is a principle of the pragmatist tradition that lies behind cognitive developmental theory that children are actively engaged in making sense of the society they are born into. They are born into the art world of their society, and they try to make sense of it. In our society, I have claimed, this means that they will encounter conceptual difficulties. They will have to develop theories of art to deal with the difficulties. They may not become self-reflective, systematic, and argumentative philosophers and may not have explicitly formulated general views about art, but they will struggle to make sense of the art they encounter. They will have at least *implicit theories* about art.[7] And they will probably change their theories as they encounter new types of art or as they develop significant new abilities.

Developmentally, we should be able to identify some typical early implicit theories of art. We might also be able to arrange them in some developmental order in light of their adequacy as theories of art. We might also identify some underlying psychological developments presupposed by the theories. I will give some brief and, I hope, suggestive accounts in what follows.

V

I will identify two typical implicit theories of art that might serve as milestones on the road that leads to a mature philosophy of art. The examples come from actual responses of children to paintings. They are drawn from my research interviews with children of several years ago, and I believe they are representative of typical developmental moments.[8] In the discussion I will attempt to identify the implicit theory behind the response.

The first case is a response to a painting by Ivan Albright, *Into the World Came a Soul Called Ida*, which is in the Art Institute of Chicago (fig. 1). It represents, in an exaggerated and dramatic way, an older woman in her dressing room who has been ravaged by ill health or drugs and is looking despondently into a mirror. I have asked many children to talk about reproductions of this work. Many elementary-school-age children reject it quite decidedly as being ugly and unpleasant. Such children attend almost wholly to the appearance of Ida the person and are repelled by it.

Asked what might improve the painting, they often suggest using more cheerful colors, deemphasizing Ida the person, painting over some of her imperfections, and even choosing another subject altogether. For example, Blair, twelve years old, wanted a more conventional subject. He said:

> (How could you improve this painting?)
> Well, if you showed a woman sitting in a boat, and a lake behind her and stuff; or a couple of deer in the mountains . . .

Children who reject the painting in this way usually assume that other viewers will share their reaction. They take Ida's ugliness as a plain and public fact and make no empathetic reading of her state of mind. They cannot imagine that the artist had any different view of it or understand why he chose this subject. An emphatic example comes from Geoffrey, who was fourteen years old:

> (Why did the artist paint this?)
> To show what people are like, people do this all the time. And they just sit around and vegetate and dwindle away. And they look in the mirror and wonder why. "Oh, I'm so depressed! Look at me now!" You know. She should fight it. It wouldn't be a bad time to start, she's not dead yet. Let me tell you, my mom goes to a health spa. So when I see a fat person like this, it really makes me squirm . . .

Another example comes from Debbie, who was age thirteen:

> (What do you see in this painting?)
> There's a lady sitting in a chair with her legs exposed. They're bare and they're really ugly. They've got bumps all over them, and she's sitting there with a powder-puff in one hand and a mirror in the other. . . . She sort of looks like a witch.
> (What's the feeling in this painting?)

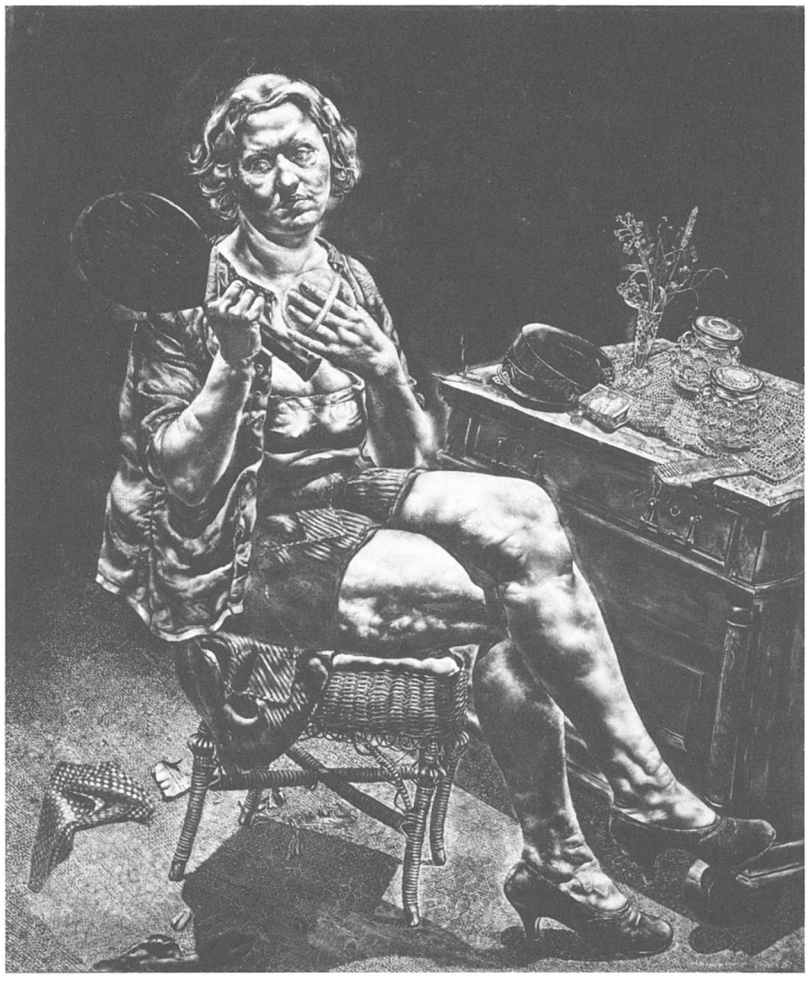

Fig. 1. *Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida* (1929-30), by Ivan Le Lorraine Albright (American, 1897-1983). Oil on canvas, 142.9 x 119.2 cm. Gift of Ivan Albright. The Art Institute of Chicago.

I don't like it.
(Why not?)
I don't know. It's just that the legs are getting on my nerves.
(Why do you suppose the painter painted it?)
He was angry with his mother-in-law (laughs). I don't know. He just felt like it. He saw some lady going down the street and he said "That looks sickening," and so he decided to paint her. He was angry at her for some reason.

These responses have a holistic character. They seem all of one piece;

they have a structure. This is because they are founded on some assumptions about art that I am calling implicit theories. These implicit theories can be seen as developmental precursors of a philosophy of art. The children hold them as a set of unarticulated expectations rather than as explicated theories, it is true. But they can be formulated to reveal their similarity with philosophical views.

For example, one assumption that seems to underlie the opinions quoted above has to do with art as representation. The children seem to believe that there is little important difference between the qualities of the painting and the qualities of what is represented in the painting, between Ida the painting and Ida the person. They respond to the first in much the same way they would respond to the sight of the second. It is as if they hardly attend to the painting itself but only to Ida the person. They talk about Ida as if she were an actual person, they attribute Ida the person's qualities to the painting. The assumption is that as Ida the person is ugly and unpleasant, so is Ida the painting. This pattern is well known in the literature and is sometimes called the "transparency" view. Children tend to look through the painting as if it were transparent and at the objects represented as if they were actual. This comes through in the moralistic overtones of Blair's remarks quoted above: "She should fight it. It wouldn't be a bad time to start, she's not dead yet . . ." The tone suggests a sense of almost moral outrage, clearly directed at the qualities of what is represented rather than at the painting. Incidentally, I think something like this mixture of moral feeling with aesthetic response comes through sometimes in the responses of some adults in our society who object to paintings with religious or sexual subject-matter, archetypally to the portrayal of nudity.

Philosophically, one might say that these children assume a simple form of a representational theory. They seem to believe that painting is documentation, that we look at it as a substitute for the real thing, and that the things represented should be interesting in their own right.

Another assumption has to do with beauty and ugliness. The children seem to believe that beauty and ugliness are objectively identified and that the ugliness of a painting is identical with the ugliness of its subject. Philosophically, this looks like a version of the view that beauty is an objective value, capable of existing independently of people.

I believe these assumptions depend on a typical developmental-psychological situation. Blair, Debbie, and Geoffrey have not yet become aware of their own interpretive activity and how it influences the character of their responses. They assume that they see directly what in fact they interpret. They see Ida's ugliness as fact and not as value judgment, as if they themselves make no contribution to it, as if it lay on the surface of the work to be identified as simply as her hands and legs are identified. They have no reflective sense of their own values and of how those values reflect their socialization. One could say that they are unaware of the subjective character

of their experience and of the extent to which it might differ from that of others.

VI

My second example concerns older students. During adolescence, most people take a marked subjective turn: they become very aware of the character of their own emotions. They also realize that their experience owes much of its qualities to personal factors. They realize that it is determined in part by their history and may differ from that of others. They are also conscious of the difference between how one is supposed to feel in certain situations (such as when looking at a famous painting) and how they actually feel. Their theories of art are much affected by these developments.

This is from a discussion of a reproduction of a Picasso with a student I will call Harriet:

> (Do you think you can give reasons for judgments about art?)
> No, I think it's so—it's your human feelings. I think you can *say*: "This one has great brushstrokes." You can say these things, but when it comes right down to it, I think, from my point of view—I don't know critics that well—I think it finally boils down to just your gut reaction to the painting.
> (Is that more an emotional than a cognitive thing?)
> For me it is. I don't know, I'm not exposed to a great deal of art. So for me it is a total emotional reaction, which is my reaction to stories, or plays, or anything. If I can connect with it somehow emotionally, then I can go with it, and become one with it. But if there's no connection emotionally, I would—you know, it can be the greatest Picasso, and I, generally with his abstract ones, I don't connect at all. And yet he is considered one of the greats. He is all this but I don't connect with it emotionally.

Harriet's theories of art lie close to the surface here. The purpose of art, she suggests, is to provoke emotion in the viewer. Emotion in the viewer is an all-or-nothing affair, not something about which one could easily be mistaken, because it is a matter of immediate experience, a "gut reaction" directly felt. And one's gut reaction may have little to do with what others say we should feel. Often, this insistence on the felt emotion of the viewer is accompanied by a parallel insistence on the emotion of the artist. These too must be actually felt. For example, this is from a conversation with Kathy, an undergraduate student:

> (Is it possible to paint a painting that is expressive without having a deep need to do that?)
> I would think it wouldn't be real, genuine.
> (Can you tell that from the painting?)
> I don't think, I don't think it would be [genuine], if the artist was just painting to put something on the canvas. I tend to see through things

like that. I don't have a trained eye and I wouldn't know for sure whether it was intentional [i.e., genuine] on a how-it-was-done point of view. [But] from an inner sense of myself I would know the artist wasn't trying to express. I couldn't relate to it anyway.
(You are saying you can tell by looking at the painting whether it's honest?)
Kind of an inner feeling about it.

The structure of Kathy's theory of art seems not unlike Harriet's. The artist must have some genuine (i.e., actually experienced) emotion. The work is good only if this emotion is expressed in the work. The viewer can tell in a direct way whether the emotion of the artist is expressed in the work, through an "inner feeling." This structure has strong Tolstoyian overtones, especially if we assume that the viewer's inner feeling is the experience of the same emotion that the artist had.

Finally, such a theory leads easily to skepticism about the value of critical talk or contextual information about artworks, something familiar to all teachers of aesthetics. Ingrid, another undergraduate, said:

(Do you think someone who has studied Picasso could take you through his works and talk about them and change your view?)
I don't know that it would change. I think that my bias might be deeply enough embedded that I would probably say: "Oh, I'm sure he's a very good painter but I still don't like his work . . ."
(Do you think you could be brought to say: "Yes, that is a significant work of art, even though it doesn't connect with me?")
I think a lot of that would be just kind of going along with the flock. If everyone says it's great, then you kind of join in. I guess you could look at something on a technical level and say: "Yes, technically it's a wonderful work of art."
(And what about expression?)
If you don't see it, I don't think you see it . . . For your personal feelings, I don't see how you could say: "I don't really like this, but I'll keep it around anyway to look at because it's technically perfect."

Here Ingrid suggests a theoretical opposition between experienced feeling and what she calls "technique." Technique is something that can be seen, analyzed, discussed, and judged interpersonally. This is the domain of criticism. Its opposite is emotion, which is intuitive, unanalyzable, and individually experienced. These differences are such that the former cannot influence the latter, and consequently criticism has no important effect on experience. And in any conflict of criteria, emotion must win out over the technical. It is no wonder that our three students see little point in art criticism or history.

Behind these theories of art there are probably further theories of the nature of emotions. Harriet, Kathy, and Ingrid all seem to assume that emotion is individually felt, qualitatively distinctive, not easily communicated, and not much affected by other people. They tend to see experience as

noncognitive and are tempted toward solipsism. One could expect them to have difficulty understanding how experience can be shared, how it responds to objective features of a work, and how common standards of relevance can emerge.

VII

There is more to be said about these examples, no doubt. But I hope I have said enough to make the following points plausible:

a. Students make assumptions of a general kind about the nature of art. They hold these assumptions at varying levels of explicitness and rarely examine them critically. But if the assumptions are spelled out, they look in many ways like theories of art. In terms of content, they can be linked developmentally with the philosophy of art, that is, understood as typical early versions of a mature philosophy of art.

b. To call these assumptions philosophical is to say that they have a cognitive structure that has some degree of internal consistency and stability to it. It is also to say that philosophers can recognize in them certain characteristic concepts, moves, and positions familiar from academic philosophy. They can also identify characteristic difficulties and problems to which they are vulnerable.

c. We may be able to relate these cognitive structures to underlying psychological developments, such as a reflective awareness of the subjective character of experience. This is a further reason for describing these assumptions as developmental.

d. Students' assumptions about art are importantly related to their actual aesthetic experience. On the one hand, they are a product of the students' struggles to make sense of the artworks they encounter. On the other hand, they affect students' responses to artworks. They influence what students count as art, what kind of interpretations they make, even their motivation to think about art. This dependence of experience on assumptions allows one to say that one's theory of art is important to one's experience of it.

VIII

I will close by considering briefly the educational consequences of this kind of account of the development of the philosophy of art.

I have already mentioned one consequence. It offers a rationale for giving the philosophy of art an important place in art classes. We should help students develop better theories of art so that they can make better sense of their experience of art and can experience art differently. One might ask whether this rationale also applies to the teaching of aesthetics at the college level, if we think the purpose of that teaching is to help improve undergraduates' theories of art.

There are perhaps two general ways we can help students improve their implicit theories. One is to get them to articulate and clarify their present theories. This is not easy, but it can be a powerful impetus for change. Few students have the stimulus and the opportunity to state and restate their fundamental views about art and to consider their consequences. Pedagogically, it requires careful support, structure, and considerable time. Currently it happens, if at all, during class discussions and when students write papers on art-related topics. A second general method is to choose class materials in light of the students' assumptions and understandings. Their implicit theories will determine what they will understand and which kind of problem they will find provocative. The idea is to present students with materials that challenge or stretch their implicit theories, that cause them problems but that are not out of reach. For example, the students quoted above in section 5 would probably not understand the students quoted in section 6, because they have not yet constructed the possibility of radical subjectivism. The students quoted in 6 would not easily understand the view that emotions are cognitively structured and socially constructed. They would more likely understand Tolstoy than Danto. And they might be provoked by questions about the possibility of cross-cultural understanding, which for the younger children would not be puzzling at all.

A developmental approach is sympathetic with the puzzles of the sort that Battin discusses elsewhere in this collection, though she does not stress their developmental aptness. Another useful kind of material is the writings or talk of the students themselves, such as the quotations in sections 5 and 6. Students are likely to be able to follow and be provoked by each other's interpretations and theories.

Most of all, this approach would tie the teaching of aesthetics closely with the teaching of art. Artworks would be the perpetual point of departure and return for the discussion of philosophical problems. The most motivating problems students have are probably those presented by difficult works of art. For example, the Albright painting referred to in section 5 would be useful for stimulating discussions with those children about beauty, the purposes of art, and the attraction of ugliness. Moreover, constant reference to particular works keeps discussion meaningful. In the schools, I believe aesthetics should be so integrated into art classes that students are hardly aware of the transition from one to the other.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp, eds., *Growing up with Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978).
2. R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 109.

3. See, for example, J. DiLeo, *Young Children and Their Drawing* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1970); R. Kellogg, *Analyzing Children's Art* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publications, 1969); Howard Gardner, *Artful Scribbles* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).
4. Claire Golomb, *Young Children's Sculpture and Drawing: A Study in Representational Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).
5. David Feldman, *Beyond Universals in Cognitive Development* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1980).
6. See, for example, Howard Gardner, "Style Sensitivity in Children," *Human Development* 15, no. 3 (1972): 325-38; Ellen Winner, *Invented Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). For a general review of the work of Project Zero, see the special issue of the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Spring, 1988).
7. The notion of "implicit theories" in psychology is usually associated with the work of George Kelly, see George Kelly, *A Theory of Personality* (New York: Norton, 1955).
8. Michael J. Parsons, *How We Understand Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987)