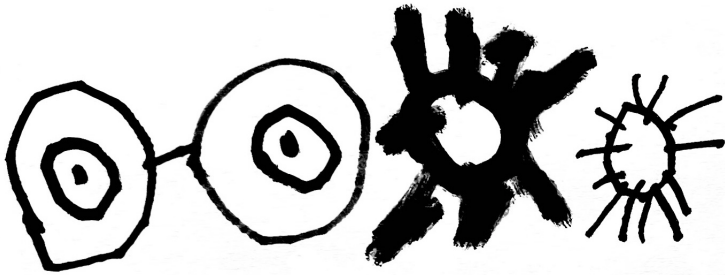


SEEING, THINKING, DRAWING

a preschool art & pedagogy zine

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Photographs & Design by Cristina Ferrigno

“It’s a collaboration between you and the tools. For poetry, it’s language. We don’t make language, we inherit language. It’s ready and we use it. Writing is drawing, drawing is writing. Because it’s the same gesture, they’re close already.”

-Etel Adnan

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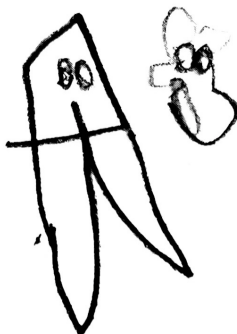
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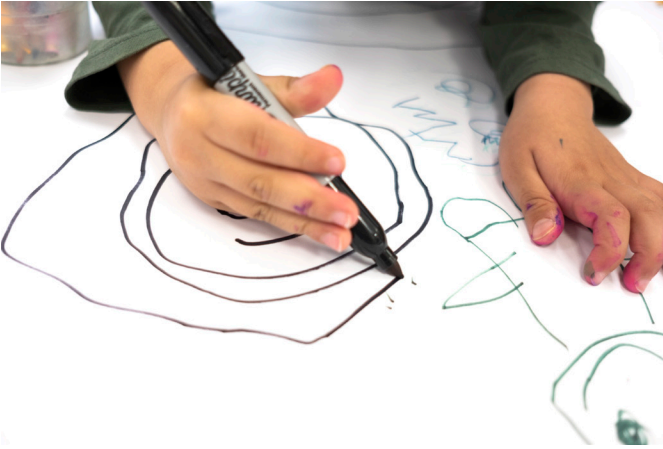


A Note About Context

I became the Studio Director at the 14th Street Y Preschool in September of 2020. Over the last few years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the joy and wonder of the children, and care and love from my colleagues has kept me going. Every day I learn a little more about what it means to be human. I am humbled by and honored to be a part of this intergenerational community.

This little book comes from a desire to share and make visible our approach, informed by Reggio Emilia frameworks, and inspired by the children we work with. I also wanted to contextualize the process of learning that happens within the art studio, in addition to sharing some of the creative outcomes. On a broader scale, I hope to encourage conversations around early childhood, arts education, and process-based learning to expand beyond parents and educators. I believe that, particularly for adults, there is much to be gained from slowing down to observe and learn from the ways children think, interact, play, and create.

-Ari Wolff, Studio Director, 14th Street Y



To make a line is to see and feel proof of your power in the world.

A line may be a path to connect you to another line made by a friend. A line might be a thought that brings you from one end of the room to the other. A line may be so forceful it becomes a hole in the paper which then becomes a part of the classroom floor. A line made in watercolor may be absorbed by pigment, a line made in marker may be absorbed by a swarm of other lines. A line traced by a finger may show someone how a letter can be drawn. A line dug into foam with a

sharp object appears as negative space when ink is applied to the surface of the foam.

A drawing, painting, or print unfolds as part of a line-making process, one that can also be an exercise in storytelling. The narrative is often conceived of at the same time as it is being told by the child. The drawing then becomes an archive of a physical, emotional, and/or conceptual journey. Drawing becomes the process of seeing and feeling and thinking oneself into the world.



Children are fluent in the joy of mark-making. Pre-literate children often embody what curator Andrea Bellini describes as

“...the physical pleasure of writing, an extreme jouissance [enjoyment/delight], the bliss of making a mark with one’s hand, leaving a trace of one’s passage on Earth.” For many young children, drawing can become a full body, sound-sight-movement experience. Byproducts of drawing might include humming, babbling, standing up, falling off one’s chair, rolling,, squealing, twisting, shouting uncontrollably, etc. The eyes map the hand as its marks swirl or stitch across an empty space of paper.

Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of Reggio Emilia schools, developed the concept of the hundred languages of children, which honors the many modes children use to think, theorize, and learn. Away from the idea of singular intelligence, Malaguzzi believed that play, experimentation, and reflection were crucial for developing a child’s many languages. In Reggio-inspired schools like ours, “... Young children are encouraged to explore their environment and express themselves through multiple paths and all their ‘languages’...Contrary to some orientations to skilled performance by young children, the Reggio teachers emphasize



achievement in personal expression and reflection on one's own patterns of thinking." We are extremely fortunate to have the class-sizes, curricular frameworks, and funding to support these explorations and pedagogical choices.

Drawing is an expressive, visual, physical, and imaginative language that is often a stepping stone for children towards writing letters and eventually reading. In the world of early childhood, this process is referred to as emergent literacy. This term encompasses a spectrum of activities, from scribbling to line-making to name-writing, in which young children begin to learn to write and read. Children as young as 2-years-old begin to imitate the act of writing

by creating drawings and symbolic markings that represent their thoughts and ideas. Reggio pedagogistas (pedagogical thinkers) sometimes describe emergent literacy as children transforming language as a way of understanding it. They take apart the letters, shapes, gestures of writing, deconstructing the alphabet in order to eventually be able to reconstruct it using the rules of the code of a writing system.



As an educator and space-holder, I work with my colleagues to create an environment that invites many “languages” and honors children’s individual and

collective interests and desires. Our programs use an emergent curriculum, which sees the children's curiosities as a guidepost for the activities, possibilities, and questions offered by educators. We move from a place of deep respect and reverence for children. Our interest is in process over product, investigation over instruction. This document comes as a part of that process, in which we are experimenting with how to reflect and share ideas within our school community and beyond.



COLLABORATIVE DRAWING (3-4 year-olds)

Collaborative drawing is an intentional way of practicing shared space.

A large sheet of blank paper extends the length of the room. Markers are set in cups across the paper. The children are given minimal prompting. Some children pause before sitting or lying down. They are faced with some questions: how do we begin? How do we make sure everyone has enough space and the markers they want? How do we make new drawings around each other's drawings instead of on top? How do we draw together?

All sorts of experiments ensue. Lines that travel and connect and become wires. Some children practice making dots with paint pens. Some children see how many markers they can fit in their hands at once, how many individual marks they can make simultaneously. Some use the paint pens to create pools of paint, which they then spread with fingers. They help



each other remember which materials you can press hard with and which ones you need to be gentle with. They make bunnies and castles and families and snails and storms and their names.

Unstructured drawing time is crucial for many mental functions that serve as the foundation for literacy and the enjoyment of language. As researcher and expert on children's drawings, Rhoda Kellogg writes:

“Scribbling promotes the eye-hand coordination needed for writing, and the pleasure associated with scribbling may carry over into the more restricted movements of writing... In learning to

read, children must perceive line formations that are like the ones [they have] made spontaneously... As the child teaches [themselves] to draw, they gain the experience of motivation from within.” By allowing drawing to enter the realm of literacy during early childhood, this experimental learning process sets our students up for more success and joy while learning how to read and write. When we expand the ways we measure and think about literacy, it invites students to develop their own ways of thinking, learning, and mark-making. This formative exposure to free drawing encourages a greater sense of self-power and confidence as children enter more traditional reading and learning environments.

PRINTMAKING DOCUMENTATION (4-5 year olds)



Children often gasp, giggle, or become wide-eyed as they gaze upon their first print.

Solid black ink fills the sections that are unmarked and their drawing appears in negative space, lines the color of the paper peaking through. We talk about why the print is “backwards” and how it is different from their drawings on the foam. Many of the children are learning to write their name and excited to see it printed, even if the

letters are backwards. Children conceptualize letters as three-dimensional when they are learning to read and write, so it is natural for children to write or see certain letters backwards. The mirror element of printmaking allows them to continue to consider direction as a component of reading and seeing.

Printmaking is an ancient art which includes numerous techniques and processes. At preschool, we do relief printmaking, which involves engraving on a “plate” and transferring ink from the plate to a piece of paper to create a print. We use pencils to engrave styro-foam rectangles and water-based ink for easy clean-up. Children practice drawing







shapes with big, bold lines on paper and pressing really hard with their pencils. Then we move to styrofoam. In order for the print to work, the pencil has to dig deep into the foam and leave a lasting mark that the child can feel with their fingers. Children who struggle with pushing too hard on markers or ripping paper with the force of their pencil often excel in this activity.



Once they have finished their foam plate, they are ready to make a print. We prepare the ink, and the child rolls it onto their foam using a brayer, covering the entire surface. Then they press their foam onto the paper, ink side down. We flip it over and smooth the back of the paper against the foam, transferring the

ink to the paper. Last, we slowly pull the foam off, revealing the mirror image of their original foam drawing.

During our first print day, I noticed that a child who is not always happy about being in the art studio was very engaged. They loved digging their pencil into the foam as hard as they could and feeling it with their fingers after. When it came time to using the ink, I wanted to acknowledge this child's excitement by calling them up to be one of the first to print. They diligently watched me demonstrate how to roll the ink and then did so with great care. When we pulled the print from the plate, the child's face exploded with joy. Their mask almost fell off and their partially-toothed smile popped out. It felt so contagious- my colleagues and I beamed at each other. Other children ran over to see what was happening: a thought, made into a mark, made into a print. Many people feeling proud.

WATERCOLOR DOCUMENTATION (2-3 year olds)



Water moves like a living thing. When spilled, dropped, or poured, there are infinite possibilities of how it can behave, based on any number of conditions. Children learning to work with watercolor paint are exploring how these conditions interact. They simultaneously negotiate what the water, paint, paper, and tools do, as well as what their fingers, hands, and arms can do.

A blob of color and water on the paper

changes as the paper is tilted, as water is added, as the paper dries. A lot happens when a child uses watercolors to paint. They learn about how colors blend to make other colors, how the paper absorbs paint, and how copious amounts of water affects paint. The act of painting with watercolors also increases their dexterity, problem-solving, fine motor-skills, and motor planning. Elements of self-regulation also become a part of the process, like knowing when to take a break, or when to get a new piece of paper.



During this experiment, children were offered both paintbrushes and pipettes. To use the pipette in the way it was

designed, the child must time their squeezing, dipping, holding, and squeezing again just right. Some children mastered this quickly, while others required some support with motor planning. Some children decided to just use the pipette as a pen, dragging it across their paper to make lines and shapes. Others discovered that dumping was the most exciting thing they could do with the paint and water, watching the colors swirl together and soak their pages, fingers, or clothes.

In a more traditional classroom, children may be dissuaded or even punished for dumping their water or paint out. In certain instances, I encourage

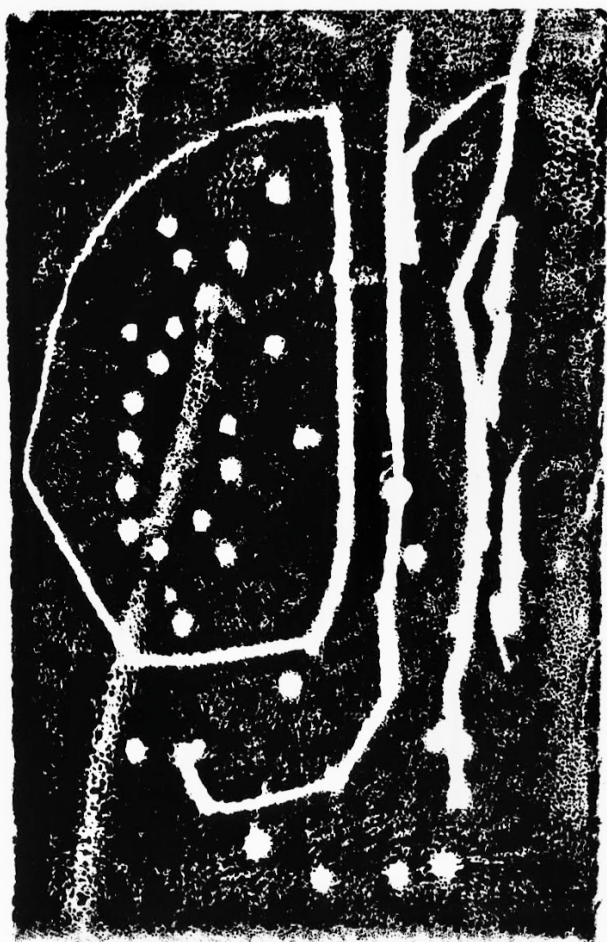




children to keep their paints in the tray- in others, I will shift the activity to become more focused on water-play so that the children can learn about what they are interested in: pouring and dumping.

For this activity, we talked and thought about how lines happen in watercolor, either with a tool or the way the water flows in little streams down the paper. Many lines were created and absorbed as the children painted in layers. Children dumped paint onto the paper, and drew lines with their brushes, pipettes, and fingers.

“It’s not important what happens on a sheet of paper, the important thing is what happens within us.” -Mirtha Dermisache

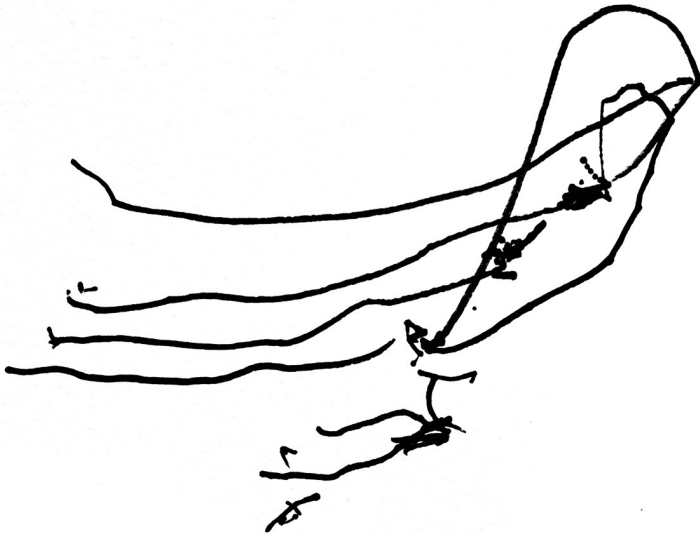




Lingering Questions

As a working artist, I've spent a fair amount of time considering how I might extend the ways I hold space for my students to myself, my colleagues, and other artists and community members. We are all familiar with the pressure to produce, and a lot of my work with children has forced me to ask myself questions around my relationship to creative process and production. How might we approach our practices with less attachment and more joy? How might we embrace the process, 'mistake-making,' and mess? How might we work on transforming something to understand it better? What does it mean for something to be illegible? What does it mean to play? Who says when the process of making has ended or begun?

Special Thank You to Nili Shriber, the 14Y Preschool Director, for your continuous support in this documentation project and your dedication to Reggio Emilia and process-based pedagogy. Thank you to the 2021-2022 educators whose guidance, wisdom, and collaboration make the art studio what it is. Much gratitude to Ashley Hefnaway for content and editing support. Most of all, thank you to children of the 14Y Preschool, whose hands, hearts, and minds inspired and sustained this inquiry.



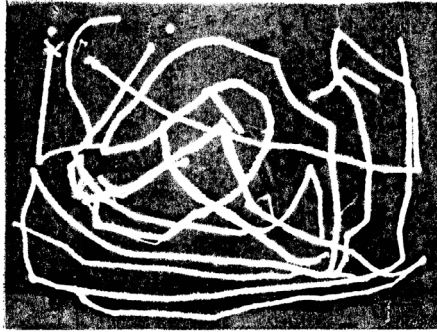
It has been humbling to pull my thoughts together and realize how much I have to learn. Upon compiling photographs from Cristina's visit and notes on the activities, it became very clear to me that children's voices, narrations, and dialogue were missing from this project. Next year, their stories and words will be central to the documentation. I look forward to trying this again.



Ari Wolff is an artist and educator whose practice explores language as a visual object. Ari's work proposes alternate modes of reading and seeing through mark-making, xerography, sculpture, text, and book arts. For the last decade, Ari has worked with schools and community-based organizations to create process-based projects that meet at the intersection of art and literacy. Ari is the current Studio Director at the 14th Street Y and a fellow in the Social Practice program at Queens College.

Cristina Ferrigno is an artist, photographer, and educator based in Queens, NY. Cristina's work explores identity and belonging, through lived experiences, photographs, zines, and an array of socially-engaged local and international projects. Her work has appeared at the Queens Museum, La Bodega Gallery, Local Project Art Space, AS220 Gallery, and Plaxall Gallery, among others. Cristina recently completed her MFA in Social Practice at Queens College and serves as a teaching artist with the Queens Museum.

The 14th Street Y is part of Educational Alliance's network of community centers in Lower Manhattan. We believe strong communities can transform lives. Our programs turn strangers into neighbors and provide New Yorkers access to quality education, health and wellness services, arts and culture, and civic engagement opportunities.



A collaboration between
Ari Wolff & Cristina Ferrigno
and the Children of
The 14th Street Y Preschool

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