

DEMOS

Speech

**So Giotto Drew On Rocks...
*Children's Right to Art and Everyday
Democracy***

Delivered by Tom Bentley at 'How
old do you have to be to be an
artist?'

Tate Modern

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Samuel Jones

Check against delivery

So Giotto drew on rocks...

Children's Art, Creativity, and Everyday Democracy

In a speech at the British Council last year, the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, set an important challenge: 'how, from the foundation of British values', might 'we refashion the settlement between individual, community, and government?'

Amongst the areas in which he suggested we could achieve this, he singled out 'the expression of civic purpose' that can be found in 'our great municipal art galleries, museums and the BBC'.

In light of Demos' work on Everyday Democracy, this is an important point. We have just experienced an election during the run up to which, disengagement became increasingly apparent. Parties fought more on issues of personality than policy, and a greater proportion of the electorate declined to poll than actually voted for the winning Labour party.

But that disengagement was with political processes and professionals and did not represent a renunciation of politics and society *per se*. In fact, the will to express civic purpose remains as strong as ever. New contexts of engagement have emerged by virtue of the fact that people consider them to be more effective than voting in exercising and expressing their will. People march through the streets to demonstrate against issues that range from war to fox hunting and pedal-powered rickshaws, and sport wristbands and ribbons to demonstrate their sympathy with given causes. On a daily basis, they are also thinking more about how the choices they make impact upon the wider world, from the products they buy, to the places they visit on holiday, and the banks they boycott.

This is not divorced from our discussion of children's art. Quite the contrary, it raises a new agenda that we would do well to consider. In the context of disengagement, we will have to renegotiate the relationship between our governance and our society, economy, and culture.

Our education in the arts, as both producers and viewers, and the maintenance of the skills that we learn, therefore takes on crucial value as facilitating a means by which civic purpose might be expressed. As if to illustrate this, where only 61% of the nation voted on May 5 this year, according to a survey conducted by the Office of National Statistics on behalf of Arts Council England, 87% of us had participated in at least one arts activity in 2003.

Last month, the National Gallery announced a poll to discover what is considered 'the greatest painting in Britain'. The final decision will be but a footnote, even to the history of the painting itself. However, what it reveals about its electorate will be important. Who will vote? What factors will people consider 'national' about our greatest painting? Will it be on the grounds of 'British values', either past, present, or emergent, or will it be another *cause célèbre*? Will it be a Rubens or a Rolf? Will it be *Whistlejacket*, or the *Madonna of the Pinks*? Perhaps more to the point, how will we continue to create artworks that can claim to be great?

From the starting point of children's art and education in the arts, I want to think anew about the challenges we face. More particularly, I want to think about how we can use the arts to meet the challenges of today's society and, in so doing, set the agenda for a debate that encompasses the arts, education, and politics.

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It is useful to start this discussion with a story that is not only distant from the classroom floor, but also one of the most famous primal myths in the history of art.

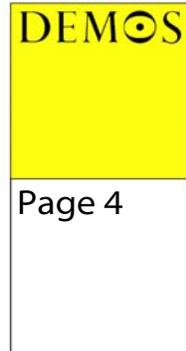
It is the story of how the Florentine master, Cimabue, chanced upon a young shepherd boy. The boy was busy sketching his sheep on the white rocks of a Tuscan hillside. Noticing that these sketches were something out of the ordinary, something special, something more than childish drawing, Cimabue asked the boy if he would like to become his apprentice.



The boy was Giotto. Today, we visit San Francesco in Assisi, the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, and the Baroncelli Chapel in Florence and thank Cimabue that he took the time to stop.

This story is integral to the myth of the artistic Renaissance: it was Giotto who would befriend Dante and, amongst many other achievements, inspire generations of artists. Significantly, it is also Giotto to whom many give the credit of being the first really to link art with the world around him.

So, just why was the young Giotto drawing sheep? We might – somewhat romantically – like to think that this was the genesis of a talented young artist, straining to free himself from the ligatures of pastoral life. But this is to look at things the wrong way round. Giotto was drawing sheep because he encountered sheep in his everyday. Just as a child today might draw his or her family car, or parents, so the young Giotto was *creating* an articulation of his experience: he was drawing the means by which he fitted into a wider community.



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Thinking about children's art raises many questions. Are we right to call it art? At the other extreme, must we qualify it as being 'by children'?

When we see children's art, more often than not, we will recognise it as such. It is art, but not quite, and is usually seen to require further definition as being 'by children'. Essentially, this is to classify it from an adult point of view. The problem is that such judgements are based on assumptions of pictorial quality, and not the value that the child has derived from producing the work.

Take an image that recurs consistently in pictures by early years students: the so-called 'tadpole'. A circle represents both head and body, and two attached, spindly lines represent legs. It is what one of the leading theorists in the field, Viktor Lowenfeld, has termed the 'preschematic' stage. For those looking at it, it is acceptable that the figure depicted has neither arms nor a clearly separated torso because, according to the textbooks, this is the way that children learn to draw.



My Daddy
Esther Bentley

Is that really all that it is about? Are children drawing or creating art so that they might one day reach the point at which their drawings become more realistic, become 'art'? The psychologist, Jean Piaget, and others believe that young children draw what they know, as opposed to what they see: the tadpole is in some ways less about the child's progression towards artistic achievement than it is an articulation of his or her current knowledge and understanding.

Children's art is thus not solely about learning how to draw, paint, sculpt or work in any other media. To see the child as producing 'art' is to think of him or her as a conscious participant in what is essentially an adult process. Far better, instead, to think of what the child is getting out of its creative engagement and what, consequently, the effect might be as the child grows up.

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As Gordon Brown's question implies, he or she will grow up in a changing world. In particular, thoughts have turned to the role that creativity will play in this world.

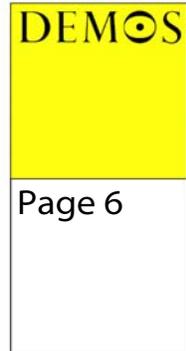
We have been witness to the rise of a 'Creative Class', and live in a 'creative age' in which 'Creative Independents' have increasing impact upon the economy and the 'creative industries' can be grouped together in governmental documents. Creativity, we understand, is to be desired, and attracts such public goods as development, regeneration, and diverse enterprise and trades - but what does it actually look like?

When Tessa Jowell speaks of Creative Sparks, the question we should ask is how those sparks can go on to fire not only the Turbine Hall but also our economy and society at large. If creativity is so important, to what extent can it equip children to develop in more competitive and open spheres of society, economics, and politics?

The snag is that creativity is neither easy to define, nor is it easy to visualise in an educational system. It varies in different contexts. The 'creative' element in an advertising agency, for instance, is very different from that in Creative Partnerships. In part, this reflects the essence of creativity: the capacity to make imaginative and original connections in order to produce new and original solutions in a wide range of human endeavour.

Creativity has also come to define the way that we lead our lives. Career paths and choices have changed dramatically, and new 'creative' pursuits such as fitness – and, indeed, artistic endeavour such as dance and photography - are being used to fill time that is increasingly pressured. Creative 'people' are spoken of as workers to be attracted, migrants to be encouraged, and influences to be sought.

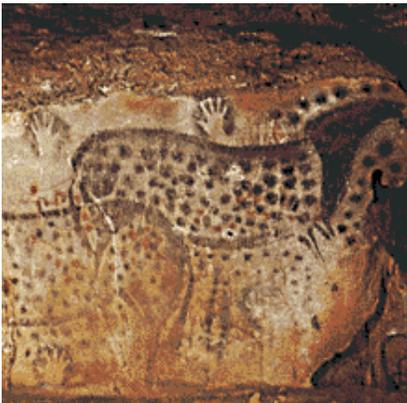
There is, however, no pool or spring from which to draw creative people. We need to think about how our schools, museums and other educational and inspirational institutions can encourage creativity. More particularly, we need to understand and work towards using creativity to link the individual to society and governance in more coherent and effective ways.



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Richard Florida's *Rise of the Creative Class* has, in some circles, become a *vade mecum* of today's creative world. In it, he tells us that 'the creative impulse' is 'the attribute that distinguishes us, as humans, from other species' ... Art, too, distinguishes us from other species. It is an articulation of that creative impulse.

We have evidence of this from our earliest days. Paintings in the caves of Lascaux, Pech Merle and Altamira might well represent a deliberate effort to communicate individual and isolated experience to others, relating the self to a community.



In fact, our infancy as a species has parallels with our infancy as individuals. Henry Pluckrose - an experienced primary school headteacher - referred to the 'insulation' of the arts in 'the everyday life of the majority of people'. This insulation often remains today. 'The arts', he went on 'are not ... in isolation, as a thing apart from the rest of life. The primary school is perhaps the only place where the arts are used successfully to comment upon and give meaning to the whole of the child's experience'.

These words echo in another context. In his speech, Gordon Brown railed against what he saw as the 'crude ideology of individualism - which leaves the individual isolated, stranded, on his own, detached from society around him'.

The contrast is stark. In conventional adult-life, by not using the arts to the potential that they are used in primary schools, we effectively close ourselves to a significant medium of meaning.

The challenge is to extend this use of the arts beyond childhood. Alongside efforts to *use* the arts to encourage other public goods, we must also work to redress the concept of their role as a public good in their own right. Not only can artistic production be an effective medium of citizenship, but our creative output, past and present, also represents a common resource from which we, as citizens, can draw.

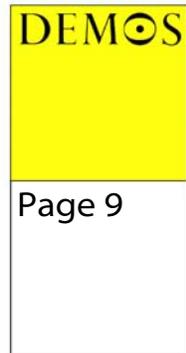
By applying some of the thinking that we do to primary school arts education to the arts in a wider sense, it becomes apparent that significant avenues of experience and expression are lacking. Just as we use the arts in primary schools to encourage children to interact with the world around them, so we must work to recapture the value of art as a general civic enterprise. By creating and engaging in the arts, we have the opportunity to express ourselves, and by visiting galleries or attending artistic events, we can express communality, sharing values, British or otherwise.

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There are certain widely recognised benefits of artistic practise in a child's general development. Importantly, it provides a means of articulating ideas and understanding that goes beyond the verbal. For Lowenfeld, children's art expresses emotional response to the world. It is also thought to encourage skills in visual thinking, perception and problem-solving, demanding concentration, levels of self-discipline and, in the finished product, providing a tangible process and outcome of achievement.

Different media can be used to encourage children to experiment and be flexible in different ways of thinking. Claire Golomb, for instance, has analysed the cognitive

requirements of children working in clay, revealing what she terms the 'unsuspected competence in our youngest subjects' in working to achieve balance and three dimensions. By choosing media appropriate to the meaning that they wish to articulate, children exercise judgement ... Perhaps most importantly in the context of creativity and citizenship, this might also imply an awareness of audience: it presents the child with the challenge of achieving what it perceives as satisfactory representation.



It would be easy to posit creativity as an ideal, an answer to the challenges of today's society. It would likewise be easy to fall into the trap of assuming that creativity can be 'taught'. Unfortunately, there is no formula – and can be no syllabus – for creativity.

What we can, however, do is develop the conditions within which it can flourish and the challenges to which it can respond. Creativity is more an outlook that can be encouraged, a way of identifying and approaching problems with innovation, confidence, and anticipation. As such, it emerges as a crucial means by which the individual can engage with his or her wider communities.

In *The Creative Age*, Demos put the case that the school curriculum should change to meet the demands of a changing society. While 'rigour and understanding in traditional subjects would remain a foundation of educational achievement, ... the ways in which this knowledge is used should ... become one of the primary criterion of educational performance'. The arts are particularly suited to this, encouraging and rewarding original thought and the taking of risk. This means that schools and museums should encourage children to engage with and produce work in relation to the world around them. They must lead children to make the leaps and links that define creativity. Curricula, displays and exhibitions should be cross-disciplinary and connective. Physically and attitudinally, schools, museums and galleries must be spaces in which children can take interpretative and creative

risks, developing confidence through the trial and error of ideas. With this infrastructure of learning in place, we will have the environment and ecology in which to nurture creativity.

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This is a discussion that has implications beyond the school gates. Children's art is useful not only in building pools of creative talent for the future, but also in providing an *example* of how creativity might be applied, and just what it could mean in the context of our society.

Specifically, it can be considered in the light of social capital. In expressing outlooks and opinions of the world around them, children are contributing their own point of view to wider discourse.

This is not to maintain that the artwork produced by children represents overt political statements. Rather, it is intended to draw out the fact that contained within the work that children produce are levels of meaning, understanding and interpretation that are frequently lacking in later life. Political engagement need not be through the ballot box: citizenship - participation in the community - is just as important. What this requires is the articulation of individual perspectives, something achieved day in, day out in children's art classes.

In the world beyond the classroom - or any other arena of children's artistic production - we are seeing a revolution in the way that people engage with the world around them, their everyday. And yet, by thinking about children's engagement with art, it becomes clear that a significant medium of engagement remains neglected.

A remedy might lie in connecting the arts more logically with the concept of engagement. This is a significant factor of children's education that is lost as the

child ages and the arts take their regrettable descent down the hierarchy of precedence in the school curriculum.

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Recently, an exhibition – *Young at Art* – was shown at the University of the Arts. One of the exhibits was a large collage of sketches produced by children aged between 8 and 11 at a South London primary school. It was called ‘Our Streets’. The children had drawn pictures of their local surroundings and, collectively, the decision was made to collate these to form a topographical map of South London. Very literally, this was the children’s view of the world around them.



Our Streets
Reay Primary School,
Years 4, 5, and 6
Teacher/Artist, Rebecca McLynn

The sketches depicted scenes important to them, from Pizza Hut to Brixton Market - '5 for £1.00' - the London Eye, and even a nail bar. 'The view from my block' was the title of one picture. 'My room', and 'by Ruby' read others. On one level, these represent very personal snapshots of London life, but on another, they can be seen as youthful interjections in a wider social conversation: this is what South London means to its younger inhabitants.

While we cannot ignore the extent to which the project and teachers may have influenced the children's production of this image, orchestrated artistic production is not the purpose of the present discussion. Rather, the point is in the opinions articulated in the work. The children's artistic production is infused with their social experience, and this was a means of expressing it.

Artistic activity and production is a means of facilitating engagement. Demos has defined creativity as the application of knowledge and skills to achieve a valued goal. In the context of political disengagement, might it not be that artistic engagement has significant potential and value as a more widespread medium of citizenship?