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Anna Schürch

‘Natural Art Education’ – On Biologisms in Art Educational Discourse

What does it mean to deal with one’s own discipline from the perspective of historical discourse analysis?

Analyzing discourses means reconstructing what is visible and sayable at certain historical moments. In order to identify the visible and sayable one has to bare in mind that only very specific understandings were valid at those particular moments in time, and that things were thought of and perceived according to certain patterns. Thus, things are not merely the way they are. They are how they are because they are thought, understood and explained in a specific way.

If these analyses, as in my case, concern one’s own discipline – art education, in the case of my education as a teacher of visual design – they directly affect me as a researcher. My own ways of thinking and knowing are perpetuated by these very discourses. Thus, the more I address them, the more I become aware of how my own conceptions and their limitations came into being: The suchness of things loses its quality of being taken for granted. Why, for example, is the school subject called *Bildnerisches Gestalten* (Visual Design)? Things that have been thought of as valid and true, suddenly become questionable, and contradictions become evident. If one wants to know more precisely where things come from one needs tenacity, for historical awareness is not exactly one of our discipline’s strengths.

The result of this work of historicization is an irreversible change in thought. This is particularly true when thinking about the *raison d’être*: Why do we need this discipline? By now, I think of possible answers to this question less in terms of certainties, but rather as historically conditioned parts of an argumentative repertoire: I am interested in how people at a specific historical point in time created perceptions of a particular nature, rather than a different one. Naturally, this work also creates a certain distance: believing in something has become difficult.

I want to present the creation of one of such perceptions today, one that has shaped what is sayable in the realm of art education in the 20th century for several decades and still has, in my opinion, a subliminal impact, primarily because in Switzerland (as opposed to Germany) it was never subject to criticism.

THE ART EDUCATION MOVEMENT

My account begins in the 1920s. Since the turn of the century, in German-speaking countries, the demands made by the art education movement and the progressive educational movement had gained some recognition in professional circles in several national and international conferences. As a Swiss drawing teacher retrospectively summarized, it was the time of an “innovation movement in drawing education, where one turned to the form-creative strengths of the child as the starting point of education, rather than focusing on portraying nature” (-Jeltsch 1949/2: 168). Influenced by the debates on child development and education in the early 20th century, those theories in the discipline that aimed to take the child as a starting point, rather than focusing on technical skills and their seminar-like instruction, were considered ‘progressive’.

The following remarks by Hermann Kienzle, who was the director of the *Gewerbeschule* (Vocational School) and the *Gewerbemuseum Basel* (Museum of Applied Arts), as well as an influential *Werkbund* member, illustrate how this progressive drawing education was conceived around 1930 – in contrast to the idea of seminar-like instruction and practices such as replication and duplication:

“The ‘education principle’ shall replace the ‘studying principle’ in the framework of drawing education as well. Self-evidently, it shall no longer begin by letting the child replicate ornaments, barely recognizable distillates of a nowadays inanimate art form [...] The drawing of a still life, or the portrayal of a green or dry tree branch is a task that derives from the painter’s studio, but is entirely foreign to the child’s world of experience. Tasks of this nature can only result in worthless imitations and delusions about the true capabilities of the child” (Kienzle 1930: 13).

Following this distinction, Kienzle formulates what is at stake in drawing education that is truly suitable for children:

“The aim of drawing education for children thus can only consist in, firstly, encouraging and freeing the child’s innate joy to illustrate; secondly, to direct the child in this period of creative urge in an appropriate way to his own child-like mode, for the freeing of the child’s strengths is the true purpose of this education” (Ibid.: 13).

This conception of drawing education also became the foundation of Kienzle’s revision of the Basel drawing teacher’s education in 1929. As early as 1928 the “significance of the creative capabilities of the child and the question of their nurturing and development” (Gewerbemuseum Basel 1928: 3) prompted him to organize an exhibition of children and youth drawings in the Baseler Gewerbemuseum. These new objectives, that Kienzle (among others) was promoting in Basel among others, also influenced drawing teachers on a national level in Switzerland, as well as their professional association. Until their change of editor in 1928, the magazine of the *Gesellschaft Schweizerischer Zeichenlehrer* (GSZ) (association of Swiss drawing teachers), called *Schulzeichnen*, was the journalistic platform for exchanges on the latest art educational ideas in Switzerland. The magazine’s editor Jakob Weidmann also founded the *Internationales Institut für das Studium der Jugendzeichnung* (IJ) (International Institute for the Research on Youth Drawings) in 1932 at the Pestalozzianum in Zurich (Heller 1981 and 1983). Progressive education ideas were thus not only disseminated in the context of the Swiss art education innovation movement in the 1920s, they also entered the education and advanced training of art teachers.

THE BRITSCH/KORNMANN THEORY AND ITS RECEPTION

All these progressive education-oriented contexts were in part influenced by the theory of German art historian Gustav Britsch, whose approach was represented by Egon Kornmann, who adapted it for the art educational context. The Britsch/Kornmann theory significantly shaped what was sayable in the realm of the German-speaking art educational context from the end of the 1920s onward. In Germany this theory and its compatibility with *völkisch* and national-socialist objectives drew repeated criticism (Möller 1967, Otto, 1969, Ehmer 1977, Reiss 1981, Schütz 1993, Zuber 2009, Legler 2011). In Switzerland, on the other hand, there were no further debates apart from the discussions at the time of its publication. By hereafter discussing this mostly forgotten, but nevertheless still implicitly effective reference, by example of its reception in Switzerland, I aim to show how it created scientific evidence by borrowing from biological theories, and thereby fulfilled the need to legitimize this newly emerging conception of drawing education. Before illustrating, elucidating and analyzing the argumentative lines of this conception, I will first make a few remarks about its context.

On the occasion of the Sixth International Congress for Drawing and Art Education, and Applied Arts in Prague

in 1928, Egon Kornmann presented the *Theory of the Visual Arts* – written by the late Gustaf Britsch – to a larger art educational professional audience.¹ His remarks on the objective definition of ‘artistic quality’, and the conclusions he drew from this art-scientific concern for art education, attracted some attention. In his conference report to the Prague Congress, Weidmann stated that a German colleague had shouted: “The Gustaf Britsch theory is the sharpened sword of the drawing teacher, with which he conquers the position befitting him and his discipline!” after Kornmann’s lecture (Weidmann 1928: 56). In addition to this report, Weidmann published Kornmann’s lecture in three episodes in the *Schulzeichnen* magazine, which was widely distributed as the pull-out supplement of the *Schweizerische Lehrerzeitung* (Swiss teacher magazine).² A short version of these remarks was also included in the catalog for the exhibition of children’s and youth drawings in the Basler Gewerbemuseum in 1928.

THINKING IN FORM-ANALOGIES

Britsch’s aim was to define the artistic quality of works of visual art independent of time and place. In other words, he wanted to find ‘supra-temporal’ criteria for that which constitutes art. Kornmann took this as a starting point and postulated the ‘uniformity of form-creation’ as the absolute criterion and quality standard of the ‘artistic’ in his speech in Prague in 1928, whereby he demarcated ‘form-creation’ from content-related provisions:

“While all content-related meanings may evade the descendants, the unity of form-creation will persist for thousands of years and across all cultures as an absolute and autonomous intellectual value” (Kornmann 1929: 2).

Kornmann found this eternal and universal validity of ‘pure form-creation’ that he attributed to art in children’s drawings:

“We see the timeless validity of the child’s creation, we recognize its similarity with the primitive art of all peoples at all times” (Ibid.: 28f).

However, drawing a parallel between children’s drawings and ‘primitive art’, among which Kornmann counted for instance Egyptian, early Greek, or early Chinese art (Cf. *ibid.*: 11), was not a new idea. According to art historian Otfried Schütz, the description of such ‘similarities in form’ can be found in almost all debates on children’s drawings since the end of the 19th century; that is, ever since they – as well as the ‘early cultures’ – had become

1 Kornmann had edited and completed Britsch’s fragmentary scripts and published them posthumously under the title *Theorie der bildenden Kunst* in 1926.

2 The lecture had previously been published in the *Jugend und Kunst* magazine of the *Bund Deutscher Kunstzieher* (Association of German Art Teachers).

the object of scientific interest (Cf. Schütz 1993: 86). Kornmann, who concretized the artistic theory of Britsch in the context of an artistic-scientific perspective, finally generalized this speculative link as follows:

“The visual-artistic process unfolds – both in human history as well as in individual human beings – in stages from undifferentiated, primitive towards more differentiated levels. And every stage has its timeless validity as a pure stage of form-creation” (Kornmann 1928: 16).

This statement provided a strong argument for children’s drawings as a legitimate point of reference for pedagogical concerns in the field of art education: According to this argument, the child’s drawing was no longer to be regarded as faulty or defective, but rather as the beginning of a regular sequence of steps. This sequence continues in the child’s upcoming developmental stages and proceeds analogous to the development of human artistic expressions. Without referencing it, the Britsch/Kornmann theory drew on the concept of ‘biogenetic law’, postulated by the zoologist and Darwinist Ernst Haeckel in 1866. According to this evolutionary-biology thesis, the individual development of an organism (ontogenesis) proceeds analogous to the development of the species (phylogenesis). According to this logic, the observation of formal similarities between children’s drawings and ‘primitive art’ could now be interpreted as a natural correlation, as an expression of a developmental logic that follows certain natural laws. In this biologicistic reading, historically grown cultural phenomena acquired something compelling – an evidence. If one is aware of what was at stake at the time, namely the question of shifting the focus in drawing lessons from the training of precision in tried-and-tested courses towards the child’s independent artistic capabilities, one can begin to grasp how this biologicistic evidence-explanation could be used as legitimization and insurance for a pedagogically risky reform project.

THE METHOD OF UNFOLDING

The idea that children develop analogous to ‘early cultures’ in terms of their drawing abilities also had an impact on teaching methods. According to Kornmann, “the form-creation of the child is pure form-creation” (Kornmann 1929: 14), consequently, ‘natural art education’ consists in ‘continuing it organically’ and ‘unfolding it uniformly” (Ibid.: 24). And this, in turn, means protecting the form-creation process from everything that the child would not do “on his own”, that is, to “preserve these unadulterated form-creations of the child from any corrosion caused by the intellectualistic aims of accurately depicting nature, unadulterated by kitsch of all kinds” (Ibid.: 29). The pedagogical program as well as the tasks of the teacher are determined by these assumptions: The primary goal is to protect the naturally good and pure aptitudes of the child, which unfold according to universal laws, from any harmful influence. Given these circumstances, the ‘uniform form-creation’, or rather the

‘evident relationships of form’ which Britsch and Kornmann had defined as the supra-temporal characteristic of art, would develop properly all by itself. The child does not yet know ‘non-art’ (Ibid.: 11). In fact, “parallels to historical primitive art, for example to original folk art, would inevitably emerge time and again, without any imitation of style” (Ibid.: 18). While the assertion of the inevitability of this development certainly helped children’s drawings find recognition, it also led to an essentialist understanding of art: The correlation between normative ideas of art and a logic of development and unfolding not only allowed the differentiation and hierarchization of different levels of art, but also the classification of everything that differs from the quasi-natural norm of ‘pure form-creation’ as ‘non-art’. Kornmann also imagined that art education “can lay the foundation for a future in which all the non-art of our time will be overcome” (Ibid.: 29). This vision, as well as the strong reference to folk art as the epitome of “‘pure form-creation’, served as point of reference for anti-cultural, anti-modern, nationalistic concepts.

In addition, it is important to discuss the theory’s problematic measuring of the art of ‘all peoples and times’ by means of a normative grid, which is designed according to Western-hegemonic parameters. The structure of this pattern allows a colonial characterization, subordination and devaluation of some of the artistic expressions deemed ‘early’ or ‘primitive’. By positing this grid as natural law one naturalizes this order.

Following the Prague lecture of 1928, the Britsch/Kornmann theory found strong resonance and established itself permanently as the theoretical basis of German-language art education, particularly after 1945 in the framework of the *Musische Bildung* (Aesthetic Artistic Education) – a concept of aesthetic-artistic education that embraced all the arts. The underlying speculative thesis of a biogenetic or psychogenetic law, according to which the development of a child’s drawings is analogous to the development of art at large, remained unchallenged. In the following remarks I aim to illustrate how this figure of argumentation and other associated biologies were discussed in Switzerland, while their basic assumptions were at the same time accepted without being scrutinized, despite increasingly generating contradictions.

MUSISCHE BILDUNG

At the end of 1949, a large congress dedicated to *Musische Bildung* took place in Fulda. The Basel Methodist Paul Hulliger reported on the meeting in January 1950 in the journal of the Swiss Drawing School Association. After the war, this congress was the first of its kind, and in the first sentence of his report Hulliger already shows great hope for a new beginning when he writes, “A miracle happened in Fulda [...]” and claims to have recognized the art educator and initiator of the conference, Leo Weismantel, as a “seer” (Hulliger 1950/1: 21).

To Weismantel, the aim of the congress was to seek „healing powers” for this “perishing world” in order to

avoid “further catastrophes”. He identified the root of the problem as mankind “suffering from the sickness of the irreverent intellect” (Cf. Weismantel 1950).

Referring to Goethe and Pestalozzi, Weismantel suggested to “follow the paths of nature”, and to take them as guidelines and humbly trust in their evolutionary-linear consistency. He based this conception on the “existence of a biogenetic basic law within the visual”. According to Weismantel the teacher’s measure should “be based on the precise scientific mastery of the regularity of organic development” (Ibid.: 251f). Subsequently, he understood the notion of “organic pedagogy”, as a pedagogy that “seeks to identify the goals in the sprout and finds them by taking the sprout as starting point” (Ibid.: 249).

Weismantel’s concern was to align himself with the second phase of the art education movement and its demand that “the forces living in the child shall be developed from within, in accordance with the laws of nature” (Ibid.: 249). He called to “reverently look into the child’s becoming, to look reverentially into the unfolding of his strengths”, and also deemed that “a new branch of education begins to form out of art education, one that no longer aims at imparting knowledge like the previous school, but rather at unfolding creative strengths.” According to him, “the nature of creation lays out the plant nurseries of the future by itself!” (Ibid.: 255).

Weismantel’s vocabulary for the description of the task of arts education is riddled with metaphors that refer to biological processes: germination, evolution, unfolding, but also growth. He saw these quasi-organic processes in the child threatened by the “imparting of knowledge of the previous school” and the ‘irreverent intellect’ whose harmfulness he underlined by using the metaphor of disease. The development ‘from within’, following natural law, is contrasted by ‘purely external knowledge’, or the imposition of ‘externally set goals’. By making use of the strong polarization between the inside and the outside, all things coming from the exterior are portrayed as a menacing manipulation of the interior, which ought to be protected.

CRITICISMS AND CONTRADICTIONS

How was this exemplary position of the *Musische Erziehung* received at that time? In his report on the conference Paul Hulliger discussed the “great polarities that held the congress in suspense [...],” while taking the opportunity to set out his own point of view, which often occupied an in-between position. As head of the methodology courses for the Basel drawing teachers since the 1920s, he dealt intensively with questions regarding writing and drawing methods. Hulliger saw great tension between ‘biogenetic development’ and ‘individuality’. He recognized the legitimacy of the model of developmental stages, but also feared its overuse, “There is a danger of schematization and uniformity in schools. It is also necessary to reject any stabilization.” In his opinion, this posed a threat to the ‘individual manifoldness of the child’s being’. Accordingly, he highlighted the emphasis on the

‘personal character’ in alternative concepts, amongst others those of Richard Ott (Cf. Hulliger 1950/1: 24).

In his review of Ott’s publication in the late 1950s, Hulliger details Ott’s criticism of the Britsch/Kornmann theory. He notes that this theory has found its way into German schools in particular, and that the vehemence of Ott’s attack seems understandable in view of the theory’s widespread dissemination. The review also gives an insight into the theory’s reception in Switzerland, “In Switzerland, the theory was not able to establish itself. Its most important representative, colleague Jakob Weidmann, never adhered to it dogmatically” (Hulliger 1950/5: 702f). According to Hulliger, the Britsch/Kornmann theory’s emphasis on the form-logical aspects dominates the field at the cost of vital and personal aspects. Thus, Ott’s accusation of a ‘rationalist aesthetics’ would be appropriate. He justified this assessment with his many years of experience as a juror of drawing competitions:

“To someone who has repeatedly experienced the development from kindergarten to high school in drawing competition work, the different types of expression, the great inequality in the developmental pace or even the possibility of remaining at an early stage are self-evident phenomena, [...] This individual variation existed and still exists at all levels of phylogenesis and ontogenesis” (Ibid.: 702).

In this reasoning, Hulliger does not fundamentally reject the Britsch/Kornmann theory and holds that the “one-sided formalistic and impersonal application” of the psychogenetic principle is no reason to banish the theory from schools altogether. Its knowledge facilitates a great overview and helps to better and faster understand some of the phenomena and needs of the students. However to him, ‘individual variation’ is just as important a criterion as age development, and he thus relativizes the validity of the laws of development from an empirical-practical vantage point. Finally, Hulliger’s assessment shows some similarities with that of the Basel zoologist Adolf Portman, who in his lecture before the Basel school syndicate in 1948, had already critically examined the risk of exclusions inherent in the evolutionary perspective, “[...] the depiction of the well-rehearsed presentations of historical development will have to pay close attention that the ‘laws of development’ are not being simulated at the expense of the wealth of that which exists simultaneously” (Portmann 1973: 209).

By the end of the 1950s at the latest, new art pedagogical concepts began to question the hegemonic presence of the *Musische Erziehung*-approach. In his review of the International FEA Congress³ in Berlin in 1962, the Basel methodology teacher and FEA president Erich Müller stated that “an extreme group” had advocated a visual education based almost exclusively on contem-

³ FEA is the abbreviation for *Fédération Internationale pour l’Education Artistique*. Founded in 1904, the FEA was merged with the UNESCO sub-organization InSEA (International Society for Education through Art) in 1963.

porary art. Its main concern was “to make even twelve to sixteen year olds awake and mature for understanding informalist painting”. According to Müller, this logic would transform the ‘education through art’ principle into an ‘education for art’ principle, whereby a ‘decisive shift in weight’ takes place from postulating the human being as the center of educational efforts, towards making contemporary art itself the area of focus. “An art education of such an imposed nature”, he continues, “acknowledges neither developmental stages nor psychological conditions”. The modern aspect of this kind of art education lies solely in its subject – that is, in modern art – while “in pedagogical terms it amounts to a relapse into the 19th century,” where ‘faith in the educative force of matter’ determined art education lessons. For the time being, however, Müller was able to give the all-clear, “Besides this extreme group, however, a clear majority held the opinion that the developmental stages of the child and the pupil should be considered as central, and that art should merely have an ancillary function” (Cf. Müller 1962/6: 262).

The vehemence of the rejection of alternative art education concepts goes a long way to show how dominant the concept of the “*Musische Erziehung* was. Anything that differed from it was hardly conceivable and had to be delegitimized as a relapse into the 19th century. It also illustrates the rigidity of the schema that shaped this conception and how difficult it was for their representatives to go beyond the achievements of *Musische Erziehung*.

Müller’s entrenchment in the idea of biogenetic parallelism made it difficult for him to recognize modern art as a possible central point of reference for art education. In his Berlin lecture in 1962, he stated, “The development of Western art from early Romanticism to the Renaissance is in some ways analogous to that of children’s drawings.” According to Müller, photography and film represent the last stage of this development. From then on, “as it were, a retrograde movement of art towards the subjective emerged”, with Expressionism and Tachisme being quoted as examples for the latter. These – in his opinion contrary – movements thereby resulted in a “contradiction between the objective tendency of the pupil and the subjective tendency of the newer art”, which “constituted the true difficulty for art education” (Cf. Müller 1962/4: 150). He visualized the emerging gap he perceived between “tendencies of the pupil” and the “direction of newer art” with the following illustration.

Müller’s account is a continuation of the problematic depiction of art history as a history of development and progress, in which the European Renaissance is the pinnacle and central point of reference.

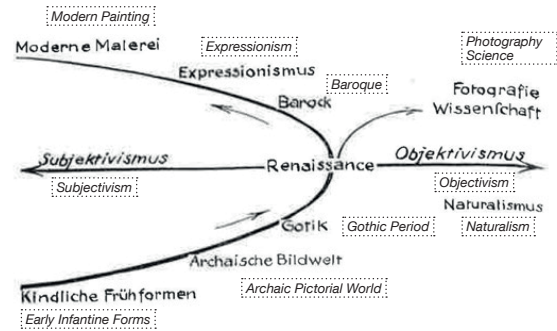


Illustration 1 (Müller 1962/4: 150)

Rather than questioning this conceptual construction, critics focused on the kind of art that began to more clearly contradict the pattern of an analogous ‘regular development’. In a 1970 essay, Müller finally claimed that the visual arts of the previous twenty years had completed a development towards a zero point, “The act of affixing remnants of a meal complete with plates, emptied glasses and a filled ashtray in their random order, or wheat grains filled in a plastic sack, constitutes an absolute zero point” (Müller 1970: 53). Referring to this development, he raised the question of whether works like those of Marcel Duchamp, or of Robert Smithson and Dennis Oppenheim, which he had seen at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, were still to be considered as art. “We may bend the definitions as we like, but the concepts of intellect and form-creation will always be inextricably linked to the notion of art.” The referenced works, according to him, renounce form-creative work altogether and are therefore merely “manifestations in the field of art”. In stark contrast he cited Picasso’s sculptures, “We are not dealing with an imitation of nature here, but rather with exceptionally concise and idiosyncratic form-creation” (Ibid.: 46f). The essentialist understanding of art and its production stands out in this argument. In this manner it had also featured in Kornmann’s thesis, and had timelessly coined the program of art education in the framework of the notion of ‘pure form-creation’.

The contribution of Heiny Widmer to the newly-developed exhibition *Kreativität, Schule und Gesellschaft* (Creativity, School and Society), curated by him at the Kunsthhaus Aarau in 1984, illustrates how unrivaled the presence of the idea of biogenetic parallelism as the basis of art education was in Switzerland in the mid-1980s. In a lengthy introduction to the ‘development of visual expression’, he pointed out that Schiller, Goethe, Kant, Pestalozzi and others had already described the ‘principled stylistic synchronization’ between the ‘development of art since its beginnings’ and the ‘development of an individual’ in the 18th century, but that this was never presented in the ‘scientifically accurate sense’. For seventy years pedagogy and didactics have made this psychogenetic law the basis of all their efforts. This effectively means:

“The lessons are based on individual stages of development, which in reality can be experienced very differently,

and tries by means of all sorts of methodical systems, to ‘enrich’ and ‘perfect’ the child’s, the adolescent’s expression, to ‘perfect’ it, so that they may – after an intense experience of the current level – move on to the next stage. Psychological studies accompany this process and foster the belief in the pedagogical validity of this procedure” (Widmer 1984: 47).

While this description primarily focuses on the developmental-psychological dimension, Widmer’s illustrations once again show the juxtaposition of images “from the history of the development of art” (as ‘evidence of phylogenesis’) and images ‘from the development of the artistic expression of children and adolescents’ (as a ‘proof of ontogenesis’) (Cf. *ibid.*: 47-57). For a development-psychological foundation of art education, this comparison would not have been necessary, since it is possible to describe the stages of development of children independently of the development of human history.

It illustrates the historical persistence of the argumentative basis or *the legitimization* of art education: My aim was to disrupt this strategy of argumentation and to problematize its underlying presuppositions (namely):

- the idea of a transferability of biologic developmental logic to cultural phenomena

- a normative hegemonic Western understanding of art, and consequently
- the assertion of eternal and universally valid criteria of ‘pure form-creation’

FINAL FOOTNOTE

In Switzerland, the school subject *Zeichnen* (drawing) was renamed *Bildnerisches Gestalten* (Visual Design) in the 1990s. While working on this contribution, I became aware of the fact that the choice of this name draws on the discussed discourses of the 1920s and is thus deeply entangled with them. The German art educator Hermann K. Ehmer has already engaged with the notion of form-creation from a historical-critical perspective in 1977 and stated that it had been incorporated into art didactics by Kornmann in 1928. He states that until today the term “conveys the contents with which it was loaded, when the art education which had hitherto been without theory tried to obtain a theory for itself” (Ehmer 1977: 89). The need to be aware of this foundation and to question it as a particular moment in time that permanently shaped the sayable in art-pedagogy, is a necessity that is relevant until today, forty years after Ehmer’s criticism.

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