

Background to the manifesto

I wrote this manifesto in response to a vacuum that exists in art education for young children. Teachers seem to be at a loss as to how to support young children's art making. This manifesto is offered as a catalyst to help us rethink how we engage, talk, provide for and respond to the visual arts with young children.

It is not surprising that teachers are feeling lost. The visual arts have changed dramatically this century. No longer do we just have pictures hung, and sculptures positioned, in a gallery. Now we have a whole new range of genres that takes art off the wall and out of the gallery. The rules have changed. The traditional elements of design (line, shape, form, etc.) do not always apply to contemporary genres like Social Sculpture, Installation, Conceptualism, Performance, Happenings, Earthworks and Projection art. We need to reconsider how we think and talk about art. At the heart of contemporary art is the notion of meaning making through art. It is a good match for young children who do art for similar reasons. We are asked to engage with contemporary art at a personal and conceptual level. We have to consider the meaning behind the art piece. Art often problematizes social, environmental and political issues. It tries to jog your taken for granted beliefs into seeing things from a different perspective. Engaging with contemporary visual art requires a whole new framework for interpretation. Faced with such dramatic changes, early childhood teachers and lecturers often struggle with the provision of a meaningful and quality visual arts program for young children; one that reflects the changes that contemporary art brings. This manifesto attempts to give you a framework and script that more closely aligns with contemporary art practices.

Along with a deeper understanding of contemporary visual art, I believe we also need to have a deeper understanding of socio cultural theories in relation to the visual arts. Socio cultural theories underpin many practices in early childhood. However, they suffer a similar inaccessibility and lack of deep understanding. We pay lip service to notions of 'scaffolding' and 'sustained shared thinking'. We still subscribe to the myth of a 'hands off approach' to visual art with young children. We are stuck in a developmentally appropriate practice discourse of conservative early childhood art education theories like Discipline Based Art. Socio cultural theories have not really been embraced by art education in early childhood. Early childhood art education in Australia and New Zealand have yet to develop a robust theoretical frame work for art that is synchronous with contemporary arts. When we don't have a clear framework for understanding why we do what we do, our pedagogy is driven by market forces (e.g. Pinterest and 'process art') and we have few resources for effective reflection on our practice.

This manifesto attempts to challenge some of our taken for granted discourses and offer alternative ways of thinking and talking about visual art, while also honoring what we do well. Over the past twenty years my research focus has been on developing a socio cultural framework for the visual arts. As an artist I have also mapped studio practices to more usefully describe a little of what it is contemporary artists do. This manifesto braids these theory/practice elements together to create some statements that might help us think and talk about the visual arts in different ways and act as a guide for a more appropriately responsive pedagogy in the visual arts in early childhood.