

Giving space to the unknown and transcendence – Art education as guardian of the child’s authentic gesture

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ABSTRACT

The main concern of this article is to introduce the concept of the authentic gesture as a vital, largely self-determined expression of the child and to make it fruitful for art education. Because of the assumed educational importance of the concept, some hints to other learning areas will also be given. This should be done from a historical and systematic perspective against the background of relevant literature, above all the German-language literature and some other important voices, in which a number of further leading ideas can be found and discussed. Explicated in this way, the concept at issue leads to the question of the unknown per se, to which art education and education in general should open itself. This means that education opens up to something that, in its material and/or social form, evades a final assessment. Something enigmatic thus comes into view, because the unknown, by definition, is beyond exact description and external evaluation. However, in and for the modern world, it can be paraphrased with a secular approach of transcendence as an inner-psycho space which is withdrawn from instrumental intervention including educational intervention and which must be protected at all costs as a central condition of freedom and human dignity.

KEYWORDS

art education, philosophy of education, authentic gesture, free expression, secular transcendence

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INTRODUCTION: THE AUTHENTIC GESTURE OF THE CHILD IN THE HORIZON OF A SECULARLY UNDERSTOOD TRANSCENDENCE, IN ART EDUCATION AND IN EDUCATION IN GENERAL – AN OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE OF THOUGHT

The history of art education shows an impressive variety of conceptions. This is partly due to the impulses that emanated from the so-called art education movement in its connection with contemporary art, with reform pedagogy and with the Lebensreform (life reform) in the first third of the 20th century. In addition to the concepts of instrumental utilisation of art and art education for economic, political (even military!) and educational intentions that continued to be propagated in the movement, a new idea gradually emerged, namely the view that artistic expression can and should be a medium of liberation – towards a creative and self-determined life that gives space to the as yet unknown and unexpected.

Understood in this way, art education is the guardian of the child's free, spontaneous gesture. It gives the child the feeling of expressing something truly his or her own. The child acts him/herself. He/she is not an automaton that has to follow a fixed programme. If one accepts this idea and its implicit ethics, the main task of art education is to break through the widely accepted end-means relationship in (school) education (i.e. courses with defined goals and examination criteria) and thus to enable a free space of self-expression. Nevertheless education remains an ambivalent endeavour, namely because of the authoritative power imbalances inscribed in the relationship of the generations to one another. But an art education that refrains from or criticises self-alienating indoctrination and that does not submit to a "Great Prescript" is aware of that fundamental ambivalence of the educational. There can be the offer (or the attempt) of a non-invasive education, an education that helpfully accompanies the child in its search for its own way, for its self-understanding, for its "true self".

After the Enlightenment dismissed (expelled?) the human being from „being a child of God" (by concepts of l'homme machine, evolution, social technology, atheistic movements etc.), a non-instrumental and subject-sensitive education keeps alive the memory of the existential meaning of transcendence. Philosophically speaking, this means the radical antithesis – or, more precisely, the "Complete and Utter Other" – to the modern vision of the predictability and availability of man and the world. A subject-sensitive and authority-critical education therefore tries to justify and shape education theoretically and practically in such a way that it is not conceived as the ideological occupation of the child's psychic space.

Spontaneity and authenticity of expression thus can find their didactic concretisation above all in art education. The new, the unexpected, the creative impulses in the emotional as well as the cognitive sphere push their way into perceptibility in art as well as in art education. However, a corresponding educational approach is also possible in other areas of learning, with some compromises due to possibly necessary or useful standardisation of the courses. And there have been such efforts in this direction for a long time.

The connections implied here shall in the following be discussed in more detail.

- In a first historically oriented step, it will become clear how the idea of free creativity gradually developed. Like many other ideas of enlightened thought such as freedom, autonomy and emancipation, it first had to free itself *theoretically* from all kinds of rigid purposes, foreign impositions and aesthetic normative constraints.



- In the next step, some anthropological, social and existential philosophical aspects will be addressed. The following questions will be in focus: Where does freedom remain in the face of social coercion? How can an authentic self (or self-consciousness) be formed and maintained? How is the relationship between the self and the other (as its counterpart and co-determiner) to be thought? Does the authentic gesture exist as the evidenced experiencing/feeling and presenting of a truly own impulse from within? And finally, it is about the question of the personal meaning of a (secular) transcendence as the non-available or non-normable of the human being.
- The third step is about the prerequisites of an art education that protects the child's authentic gesture as an expression of a truly own emotional, mental or physical (or a somehow „mixed”) impulse from within. It would have to create a space that is (as far as possible) free of aesthetic standardisation and external education purposes – and thus prepare the ground for an experience that the child can accept “for good reasons” as something that really has something to do with him- or herself, with the „deep self” of the individual person. With the help of Donald W. Winnicott, we go in search of the “dynamic zero point” where a spontaneous impulse arises from which an authentic gesture can emerge.¹
- With the following step, we go to the school and ask more precisely in which learning areas such a free space of authentic expression could be created and protected.
- In the fifth step, some examples from school practice are shown to illustrate that there can be a space for free expression.

Free expression in the sense of an authentic gesture is primarily at the heart of the arts, but it can also be understood as principle. It can be at work wherever the child's own voice, his or her free expression, is respected. This should at least be hinted at in a few comments on other learning areas.

THE ART EDUCATION MOVEMENT AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY – IMPULSES AND DISTORTIONS

The subtitle – impulses and distortions – already indicates that the art education movement was an ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand, there was the idea, which is close to us today, of a liberation of childlike expression, right up to the pathetic idea of a “genius in the child” (according to a book title by Gustav Friedrich [Hartlaub, 1922](#)); on the other hand, this was often closely tied to economic and/or political interests.

Unlike work, which is ultimately assigned to the realm of necessity, art points to another dimension of life. Art is, as it were, a luxury product, and paradoxically a necessary one. It is based in material surplus production, and releases or liberates the spirit as well as the creativity of man from economic constraints. This tends to create a *realm of freedom* in which people can

¹It would be an appealing task to search for pioneering traces in the traditional concepts of art education or aesthetic education in general in connection with the concept of authentic gesture explicated here. (Cf. e.g. [Kerbs, 1976](#); [Meyer & Kolb, 2015](#)) Apart from the references given below, such an endeavour requires a more extensive study. The present text is primarily concerned with discussing the possibility of the concept of the authentic gesture with regard to a secular-anthropological and – as far as possible – rational understanding of transcendence, i.e. one that lies outside theological, mythological, religious, esoteric or ontological approaches.



express themselves or what is essential to them in images, sculpture, gestures, language, music, dance, theatre, i.e. in a tangible or materially concrete form that can be perceived by others. In this realm of freedom – insofar as it exists – he or she is not subject to any external aesthetic, economic or political-pedagogical standardisation.

What artistic creation could be in school, however, was hardly visible in the school of the 19th century. Essentially, it was a matter of studying the great models that had become classical and thus training one's own expressive ability on them or simply imitating or copying what was given.

Certainly, the peculiarities of free children's drawing had been known for centuries. This is shown, for example, in the painting "Portrait of a Child with a Drawing" by Giovanni Francesco Caroto (c. 1480–1555) from 1520, which shows an imitated child's drawing. One might say that a certain interest in children's drawing is visible here. But the way it is presented in the context of a very artistic painting obviously shows a certain condescension or even mockery towards the child's drawing. There is admittedly no recognition of the child's gesture.²

An open-minded appreciation of childlike expression only began to emerge towards the end of the 19th century. In 1887, the Italian art historian Corrado Ricci presented an epoch-making study entitled "L'Arte dei Bambini". In the title itself, a special appreciation is expressed that is quite new and provides the impetus for many further studies. And gradually the idea of promoting the "creative self-expression of the child" was articulated in pedagogy – this was the title of the first major international conference of educators of the "New Education Fellowship" in 1921 (Boyd & Rawson, 1965). Around the turn of the last century, numerous individual efforts, collectively referred to as the "art education movement", turned against the "ossified forms of art teaching" (Konrad Lange, 1902, p. 30) and – often in connection with hygienic and life-reform aspects – soon had an influence on the artistic-aesthetic area of education, on the organisation of school life as a whole (school music, theatre, dance, festivals) and, beyond that, on the architecture of the school buildings and the design of the classrooms (bright, high windows, friezes, picture decorations). The word "free" – free student drawing, free essay, free expression, free dance – gradually takes on a new meaning in education.

This new sense of the moment of freedom in art education, which we are familiar with today and which is widely accepted in education in general, was not to be heard throughout the many-voiced chorus of the art education movement. Nationalist connotations, socio-political fantasies of harmonisation and unification, even martial and racist ideas could articulate themselves on the basis of a rhetoric of freedom and creativity.

Carl Götze, for example, author of "Das Kind als Künstler. Ausstellung von freien Kinderzeichnungen in der Kunsthalle zu Hamburg" ("Exhibition of free children's drawings in the Kunsthalle in Hamburg") published in 1898, sees in connection with "Unsere(n) Kunsterziehungstagen" (Our art education days) in Hamburg in 1905 the dawning of an "inner culture" that is to be turned "in one direction" and cultivated as a "lasting basis for the supremacy that is promised to German beings in the world". A "tremendous life instinct" kindled in the "like-minded", "a strict, combative, well-disciplined enthusiasm, ..." would lead to a "freer higher life". And Georg Fuchs, at the same conference in Hamburg, determined the "physical

²Recent research makes it plausible to assume that spontaneous children's drawings were already known in ancient times. However, one can only speculate about adults' perception and evaluation of them. – See for example: Langner, 2001.



and mental development of our race into a beautiful, healthy type and not least for its (the German people's – E.S.) fitness for war" as the popular educational goal of the new "theatre and the dance sport associated with it". The reawakening of the art of dance would be of immense importance, so that one can expect the support of "our German princes and state governments" for the creation of a "German way of dancing and a German stage" (All quotes from: [Zentralinstitut, 1929](#)). – Art and art education are instrumentalised ideologically, in terms of power and socio-politics by means of a perverted concept of freedom and creativity, and are robbed of their possibility to form a space for free expression. (For more details see: [Skiera, 2010](#), p. 103ff.)

However, there are also those other voices that – often based on their own experiences – actually want to expand the creative scope of children's expression in the areas of arts learning. Early evidence of this effort is Siegfried Levinstein's book "Das Kind als Künstler" (Leipzig 1905: R. Voigtländer's Verlag), an extensive international comparative study of free children's drawings, and Hartlaub's aforementioned book "Der Genius im Kinde" (Breslau 1922).

Hartlaub is concerned with "respecting and promoting the child's 'style'", i.e. not with its intentional development by eradicating mistakes. Development progresses, as it were, of its own accord, when a new stage arises out of inner necessity after the previous stage has been lived out in the child, announces itself and finally asserts itself. The leitmotif of reform pedagogy, "starting from the child", is to be supplemented by Hartlaub in relation to art by the sentence: taking into account the respective cultural stages of humanity that express themselves in the development of the child. This means – no matter what one thinks of the assumptions on which it is based – a new didactic approach to art education that was theoretically prepared by [Levinstein in 1905](#). It is no longer primarily a matter of education in art in the sense of leading to aesthetic enjoyment, nor is it primarily a matter of (aesthetic, intellectual and/or moral) education through art, but rather of the expression and development of the creative power inherent in the child itself; in other words, the development of the child's ability to create images as a genuine process that draws on experience, fantasy and the inner world of imagination.

Hartlaub: "In the case of the less able child, often only grotesque or pathetic things may come out; even in this case, however, the teacher touches the actual artistic-productive point, the creative point of freedom in every little human being".³ ([Hartlaub, 1922](#) – "Der Genius im Kinde")⁴ Gustav Kolb in particular was inspired by Hartlaub in his work "Bildhaftes Gestalten als Aufgabe der Volkserziehung" (Stuttgart 1927, en: "Visual design as a task of people's education"),⁵ although without specific recourse to the "psychogenetic basic law".

³Orig. German: "Es mag bei dem wenig befähigten Kinde oft nur Groteskes oder auch Kümmerliches herauskommen; selbst in diesem Falle aber rührt der Lehrer an den eigentlich künstlerisch-produktiven Punkt, an den schöpferischen Freiheitspunkt in jedem kleinen Menschen."

⁴[Hartlaub, Gustav F. \(1922\)](#): *Der Genius im Kinde. Zeichnungen und Malversuche begabter Kinder. Zusammengestellt und eingeleitet von G.F. Hartlaub*, Breslau: Verlag von Ferdinand Hirt; quoted here from Lorenzen's source text collection (1965), p.65ff.

⁵Note: "Volkserziehung" had a nationalistic and biological-ethnic overtone in Germany at that time. As is well known, the myths associated with this continue to live on in the movements of the radical right to this day.



All in all, a hitherto unknown variety of artistic possibilities for the child found their way into the school – partly as a result of this new approach. The examples documented in the relevant works of art didactics and in the extremely numerous “Zeitschriften für den Zeichen- und Kunstunterricht” from the first third of the 20th century and beyond until today show this clearly. (Cf. Diethart Kerbs, 1976: *Historische Kunstpädagogik*, Cologne: Dumont)

In this context, Hartlaub rightly speaks, as quoted above, of the “creative point of freedom in every little person”, although this point of freedom was of course often embedded in ideological presuppositions – even martial ones – that stood in the way of the liberation of the child’s individual possibilities of expression.

WHERE REMAINS THE FREEDOM IN THE CONSTRAINT? IN SEARCH OF THE AUTHENTIC GESTURE OF THE CHILD

It is well known that Immanuel Kant, in view of the numerous constraints in education, summarised the educator’s dilemma in the question: “How do I cultivate freedom in the presence of constraint?” The question is important in our context because a gesture or an action can only be authentic, that is, come from one’s own, if it is not a forced reaction or compliance to foreign demands.

With his predilection for antinomic or paradoxical turns of phrase in philosophy, Immanuel Kant was able to locate the possibility of the freedom of all in the absolute subordination to a general, a priori good will. In metaphorical speech, Kant calls this General Will the “Ruler” (Herrscher).

Let us listen to Immanuel Kant: “Man is an animal which, when he lives among others of his species, needs a lord. For he certainly abuses his freedom in regard to others of his kind; and although, as a rational creature, he desires a law which sets limits to the freedom of all, yet his selfish animal tendency tempts him, where he may, to take exceptions for himself. It therefore needs a lord to break his own will and compel him to obey a generally valid will, since everyone can be free.” (See Kant’s “Sechster Satz” in: “Idee ...”, first published in 1784).⁶

With regard to education, Kant formulated a famous and often quoted question in a similar form and with a similar intention: “How do I cultivate freedom in the face of coercion?” In connection with the political dimension of obedience (to the ruler), which is directed towards the general good and the freedom of all, Kant makes an analogous demand, namely to gradually lead the child to the rational use of freedom. In this context, Kant emphasises that the promotion of reason cannot take place through coercion, but only through Socratic-maëutic conversations, which ultimately count on insight. (Cf. Giesinger, 2011, pp. 259–270).

⁶In the German original, the quoted passage in the Sixth Sentence reads: “Der Mensch ist ein Tier, das, wenn es unter anderen seiner Gattung lebt, einen Herrn nötig hat. Denn er missbraucht gewiss seine Freiheit in Ansehung anderer seinesgleichen; und ob er gleich als vernünftiges Geschöpf ein Gesetz wünscht, welches der Freiheit aller Schranken setze, so verleitet ihn doch seine selbstsüchtige tierische Neigung, wo er darf, sich selbst auszunehmen. Es bedarf also eines Herrn, der ihm den eigenen Willen breche und ihn nötige, einem allgemein gültigen Willen, da jeder frei sein kann, zu gehorchen.”



The conciseness and popularity of Kant's definition of the educative cannot hide the fact that it contains a problematic operation in connection with the "ruler" (as the representative of the general will), namely the substitution of the selfish and animal instinct by the "moral law within us". This restrains and socialises the wild freedom or arbitrariness of the child under the care of the educator. As such, the moral law is given a priori (or divinely), is non-negotiable, and is the ultimate reference point of any reasonable human order. The authority of education is then no longer based on the deputyship of God, but on the advocacy of (universal, basically inscribed in every human being) reason. Both forms of educational legitimacy, theological and philosophical (as an universal inner-psychic fact), have an element of the unconditional that cannot be surrendered to human will. In contrast to this is the view of a non-dogmatic Enlightenment (Wellmer, 1986) that the order of human things lies solely in the will of man. If this is the case, the ultimate direction and reference points of order can be found neither in God nor in the nature of man. The social order must then be "invented" – in consequence by accepting the risks, which include not only error but also explicit and latent moments of coercion and domination.

I therefore change Kant's question to: "Where is the freedom in the coercion?", because it is conceded that education is not possible without (at least) a certain amount of coercion.

Recognising the compulsion, however, can be difficult. For it may have taken the internalised and invisible form of self-discipline, of which no disciplined person, and still less the other, can ever say with certainty whether it is the result of external coercion (submission) or the result of a free decision (choice).

After the mythical primal scene of sin ("fall of man") and the beginning of man's history of disaster, coercion emerges in individually different primal scenes, namely at the point and in the moment where the already resistant of the world and of life is supplemented by the educational intention of correcting the child or the child's (mis)behaviour. The individual primal scene is followed by countless other scenes of coercion. The educator's will meets the child's counterwill. And in everything there is the sting of freedom, which it is the task of liberal education to socialise and the task of totalitarian education to remove completely.

Thus, if coercion fundamentally contradicts the idea of authentic gesture (and free expression), then – in relation to the pedagogical situation – we must first ask about the concept of freedom, and secondly, how the educator, as a representative of social and/or pedagogical intentions, can nevertheless see herself as the guardian of the child's authentic gesture.

First, I explicate an experiential or subject-related concept of freedom, because only the subject him/herself can adequately judge a situation or action in terms of its moments of freedom. Anything else would be a problematic heteronomy. An educator who wants to value and protect the child's freedom – and thus his or her authentic gesture – must then enter into a reflexive relationship with the coercion represented or emanating from him or her. The protection of the child's authentic gesture can only be based in a negation: namely, in the educator's refusal to identify completely with the curriculum or – generally speaking – with an *Unconditional Great Prescript*.

With regard to a real society or a social ideal, the die is already cast with regard to the thorny question of one's own and free will before the question enters the consciousness of the actors as a real social and psychological problem. The resistant are recommended: Conformity, subordination, obedience, obedient following of the curriculum, observance of the Great Rule and all the rules derived from it – all this for the protection of oneself and



the maintenance of the social order. For free will as such knows no normative intrapsychic instance that could protect against fantasies of omnipotence and form a reliable corrective in the social world.

This means: *the truly free will is not given by the community or society, except in a more or less restricted, moralised or “healed” form of itself.*

Now – who should be this “it” that gives us free will, if not “oneself”? *Free will is thus a cheeky self-attribution.*

This is and remains contestable in theoretical, political-pedagogical, empirical and, more recently, neurophysiological terms; and it is permanently contested or denigrated or relativised or denounced as a baseless illusion for the most diverse reasons (cf. [Schmidinger & Sedmark, 2005](#)). – Free will is also relativised or denied on a case-by-case basis by the accused or defendant, possibly by the “we” of a collective subject, with reference to an unconditional duty of obedience, external constraints that cannot be circumvented, diminished sanity or a special emergency situation, if this enables the responsibility (warning, punishment, exclusion, conviction) attributed by others and, under certain circumstances, full of consequences, to be averted or minimised: “I (unfortunately) could not or was not allowed to act otherwise.” “Our hands were (unfortunately) tied.”

As the self-will of the other, free will is always a thorn in the side of the autocrat, the ruler and in general of any authority – including education authority. For free will is only conscious and experienced in resistance, on both sides: by the one who ascribes it to himself as well as by the one against whom it is directed. One’s own can thus only be imagined, experienced and finally cognitively grasped in difference to the limiting other.

Self-being presupposes an awareness of the other as being different from one’s own and an always uncertain knowledge or inner image of the other, just as one’s own/the self can only be formed through the other or the opposite. Even the friendly other does not overcome difference.

Now to the aspects of own and free will in connection with education.

If the child’s own will comes into play as resistance, the question of the function and form of coercion is unavoidable.

In the public space of education, the social order is first and foremost represented by the educator or the teacher. However, in the modern secular world, it is (only) a representation that is intuitively or reflexively “broken” by the humanity and creativity of the educator. She must, because she is denied the appeal to God or a Great Rule, and she may (within certain limits), for the sake of the child, “turn a blind eye”. For: “If man identifies himself completely with the law, he degrades himself to a wolf-being.” ([Vasse, 1973](#), p. 148)

That is to say: in the multiply conditioned and necessarily socially regulated life, this life nevertheless contains, insofar as it is not subject to the total control of a Great Rule, a congruently embedded freedom, as it were, i.e. an implication of the possibility of decision-making that is not subject to the rule or regulation, which not only calls for a personal statement in the concrete situation, but compels it. – Following Paul Watzlawick’s famous phrase that “you cannot not communicate”, the same can be said of decision-making: “You cannot not decide.”

In the social situation, especially in education, a personal response is required that mediates different demands: demands of the child and of the teacher as a fellow human being as well as the individual-relative representative of a social order. Both sensitivity and indifference (or ignorance) to the different claims have the quality of a response that can be momentous



– e.g. recognising and heeding as well as not recognising and not heeding a child’s claim or need. The educator’s response is only possible as a personal and thus responsible one if she is not under the delusion that she can identify “completely with the law” or with a particular social order or curriculum. Only this non-complete identification opens up the necessary space of freedom, of free decision, and thus of the possibility of responsibility. And it is this space in which the child can make its own heard and assert itself. In this, the child is not subjected to a Great Prescript.

In this space of freedom lies the possibility of the authentic gesture. It is a gesture that is based on a spontaneous inner impulse and still retains a moment of spontaneity in the visible gesture even when social and mental-reflexive moments flow into the gesture. This enables the child to feel and recognise him/herself as an active and creative – and not merely reactive – being.

The spontaneous impulse together with its more or less reflected expression together form the ground of an authentic self-experience. And the many, indeed countless, moments of such an experience form the building blocks of the “True Self”; that is a self and a self-consciousness that has not been overwhelmed by foreign demands, foreign requests and external attempts at standardisation.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS: THE AUTHENTIC GESTURE IN THE HORIZON OF ALTERITY AND TRANSCENDENCE

Let us move on to the traces, conditions and forms of the authentic gesture. The first task is to search out the psychogenetic incubation space of the authentic gesture, as it were.

“Authentic” can be called a gesture (a pure or a pictorial movement, a word, a vocal sound) when it springs from the self, i.e. from a deep need or desire; when it thus retains the quality of a spontaneous impulse (from within). Hartlaub speaks of the “genius of the child” and the “creative point of freedom” in the context of the pathetic discourse on genius in art. “Free” and/or “creative” this point can only be if it gives space to the (previously) unknown. This is a space that is not precisely defined normatively or curricularly.

As the spontaneous impulse becomes creative, i.e. it leads into something that has not existed before, namely as a sign and gesture of the child’s own or “true self”, this gesture itself is not only an expression of a previously given freedom, but *the gesture itself creates freedom in the social world*. In a nutshell, this means: without the possibility of spontaneous or authentic expression, there is no freedom. Or to put it another way: *the spontaneous or authentic gesture is the concretion of freedom*.

This thought also contains another, a genuinely anthropological one: namely, that the human being, every human being and every child, is an undefined and non-definable being. Man is different from what he thinks of himself or from what another thinks of him. The poet Robert Walser formulates a similar thought, and in doing so he opposes the encroachment to which people are often subjected by other people, especially in education. Walser has a person say under the heading “The Child III”: “No one is entitled to behave towards me as if he knew me.” (Walser 1925/1977, p. 83) For the “Child III” also experiences himself as someone “who does not know exactly what he actually is.” (ibid.)



It is this thought that connects the human being with transcendence.⁷ It can be understood – as history teaches – both religiously and existentially. Every human being has a share in absolute transcendence insofar as he/she is and remains a mystery to himself and to others. All technocrats in whatever field will be outraged by this statement, and as technocrats they must try to refute it. Since there always remains at least a rest of unavailability, it is part of the task of any totalitarian politics and education to eliminate this annoying remnant completely, and to transfer the human being into availability or controllability.

At this point in our intellectual journey, it is appropriate to refer to the theoretical endeavours of Denis Vasse (1933–2018), a French-Algerian philosopher, Jesuit and psychoanalyst, with regard to a secular transcendence – ideas and reflections which have unfortunately received little attention to date. Vasse convincingly demonstrates how the dimension of transcendence can be developed within the framework of a needs-theoretical and psychoanalytical argumentation as well as a Christian-oriented philosophy of alterity. The other (the other person – lowercase initial letter of the word “other”) appears in a recognisable or perceptible “nourishing” or destructive relationship to the self or the ego, while the Other in contrast (initial uppercase letter of the word: “Other”) symbolises the absolute Otherness that God and/or non-objectifiable transcendence has today: today, that is, in the post-mythical age, which is able to understand and appreciate the ideas of God as poetic ciphers and no longer understands them as essential characteristics of God. In existential interpretation, a moment of transcendence as the unavailable Other is also attributed to every (fellow) human being. It is impossible to want to recognise the other person completely, the attempt is transgressive and a sin; it is also a sin to want to recognise oneself completely. *Nobody is able to solve the final enigma of himself*, and even the attempt is foolish and dangerous. (Cf. Vasse, 1973, p. 23ff) This idea is of decisive importance in the context of education. It is the result of a transcendental perspective, which – in the Kantian sense – emerges and belongs to the intelligible sphere, i.e. transcends empirical experience of man. If thus recognised it is the ground of an important argument for the unconditional dignity of the human being and the child, as well as a reason for an ethical imperative as an ethical axiom of education, namely to recognise the child’s fundamental psychological needs for belonging, recognition, new experiences, self-efficacy, self- and co-responsibility, aesthetic perception and free self-expression; further to allow this appreciation of the child’s fundamental needs to become effective in practice (see Skiera, 2022, p. 287ff). – Against this background,

⁷The distance to non-rational approaches to transcendence visible here does not mean that these approaches are criticised. From a subjective (or existential) and socio-cultural perspective, these are undoubtedly of great importance (also in relation to their ambivalences in the lifeworld). A more precise analysis would also have to address the question of the extent to which non-rational (e.g. religious) approaches have found their way into the secular concept. If we think of Denis Vasse, an important reference author of my theoretical endeavour, this question is obvious, because Vasse develops a secular concept of transcendence although he is deeply religious. Perhaps Vasse even develops the secular approach *because* he is deeply religious and wants to save anthropological essentials from his Christian faith for the modern “unbelieving” world. – The understanding of a secular transcendence developed here in the text is not founded in the sense of the modern concept of empiricism (as the intersubjective verifiability of statements by rational individuals). Nevertheless, from an epistemological point of view, one could speak of an empirical reference, albeit one that presupposes the possibility of intersubjective empathy. Therefore, it can only be approximated in subjective terms of experience and self-perception, e.g. in the way that is attempted in this text. This prerequisite makes the statements on secular transcendence as they are presented here vulnerable from the outset, because the objection that they are (inadmissible) transfers of one’s own experience to the experience of other persons can hardly be completely refuted.



we can now explain more precisely the character of the spontaneous impulse and the authentic gesture.

In our search for the place and value of these moments of freedom and self-expression, we can be guided by reflections shared by Donald W. Winnicott (1896–1971), an English paediatrician and psychoanalyst, based on a rich clinical experience, especially with deprived and traumatised children from bomb-ravaged London. It is significant that he bases his reflections on the – perhaps disputable – insight that the child, and even the infant, for a healthy development must have the chance to be alone in the protection of a holding environment or co-world, namely as a possible incubation period of a spontaneous impulse. In acting out this impulse, the actor experiences himself as alive. Winnicott himself usually speaks here of the “creative impulse” (Winnicott, 2006, p. 78ff). Its characteristic is spontaneity, because it lies outside the realm of forced or enforceable adaptation or compliance.

In this way, he would have invalidated the almost always possible objection of the sociologist and the behaviourist, namely that the impulse represents a reaction to a social or external stimulus, i.e. that it does not spontaneously arise. What is indisputable, however, is that the acting out of the impulse takes place in the factually and socially conditioned, i.e. in the limited space. The latter, however, is to be accepted as an anthropological invariant, as it were, and does not impair the feeling of freedom, wideness and liveliness if the freedom of expression is sufficiently possible (or given).

Being alone determines a moment in the course of life in which the social – as a determining influence from the outside – does not play a decisive role. Here, too, it is appropriate to remember scenes with children (or corresponding moments in one’s own life), if they have been experienced, in which a (creative) impulse arises from a point of rest, from a moment of inactive existence that is not disturbed or controlled from the outside.

You should appreciate the occasional inactive existence and not forcibly interrupt it with a “He’s dozing off again” or something similar.

Winnicott’s view can be briefly described as follows. The other – the caregiver – is present and the child feels “held”, that is, not lonely or even lost; but the mother or the caregiver make no demands on the child at this moment. This is the moment when the infant or child, becoming aware of an inner impulse, can feel itself as a person; the child *is*, he/she is “being”, not reacting compulsively; or more elaborately in Winnicott’s own words, “Only when alone (i.e. in the presence of another person) can the infant discover its own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli. When the infant is alone, ..., the infant can do what would be called ‘relaxing’ in the adult. The infant can become unintegrated, groping around, being in a state where there is no orientation; ... The scene is set for an ‘it’ experience. In time, a sensation or impulse comes.” This will “feel real, and really be a personal experience.” (Cf. Winnicott, 2006, p. 78 ff.) The “object” of the impulse may be the mother or some other person present, though by “object” in psychoanalytically inspired thought is usually meant a “subject”, a person with whom the child enters into an aggressive or libidinous or ambivalent relationship on the basis of vital impulses.

Winnicott’s concept of the “transitional object” also plays a role in this context. He uses this term to describe an object occupied with “holding” fantasies (it is often a doll, a stuffed animal, a perhaps already smelly little cloth or a sometimes badly damaged pillow), which can also serve as a relational object. The relationship to the “transitional object” compensates for or reduces the remaining anxiety of the situation (e.g. when going to bed or having to



go to bed or when the caregiver is physically absent for a short time). This too, if I understand Winnicott correctly, can be a spontaneous, life-enhancing gesture by compensating for a deficiency. And almost everyone knows from themselves or from their surroundings that “transitional objects” often enjoy a long life, loved, respected and protected long after they have successfully fulfilled their protective function. By the way, the term “transitional object” only makes sense from a developmental perspective, because the child lives primarily in the “here and now”. It does not (yet) know anything about the future in which the beloved object will lose its significance.

Before we turn to more didactic questions, the following should be noted as an interim balance:

The spontaneous impulse gives birth to itself in a non-normative and externally non-constricted situation. The situation offers the child emotional security and the feeling of being welcomed as a person and fellow human being. Even if the child intuitively or reflexively knows about the social limitations, it maintains a living relationship to its own inner self as its “true self”. It may express itself, but it does not have to. Its voice is in demand and is respected, also its resistance, its “no”, to external demands. So it is not a paradisiacal situation without conflicts. His/her actions, even the resistant ones, are experienced as “authentic gestures” insofar as they reflect his/her inner self in an affirmative way. This gives the child a feeling – necessary for his/her healthy emotional and cognitive development – of relevant participation in life and thus of being alive. – The opposite would be forced compliance with external demands, which – as Winnicott shares elsewhere – is associated with a feeling of meaninglessness and worthlessness.

If we value the spontaneous inner impulse as the basis of an authentic gesture, and this as an expression of the child’s creativity, and if we continue to regard this as significant for personal development, we should ask how this can be taken into account in the necessarily normatively determined (sometimes normatively overloaded) situation of school.

ON THE POSSIBILITY OF THE AUTHENTIC GESTURE AS A PREREQUISITE FOR CREATIVE ACTION IN THE SPACE OF EDUCATION AND AS A SHELTER FOR AN OPEN FUTURE

When we look at areas of learning in which the authentic gesture could play a constitutive role, it is obvious to look at the area of artistic expression. The fact that this area of learning is often also standardised in curricula, sometimes also politically and nationalistically charged, must be viewed critically, but need not discourage us. For where else if not here could free expression, the authentic gesture, be valued and protected? This line of search receives encouragement in free art itself. For it is not in pleasing commercial art but in free art that the force is at work that time and again criticises its external attempts at instrumentalisation, subverts them if necessary, and thus creates a space in which “wild thinking and being” are given a chance.

If it is true, as the philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels emphasises, that every social order “feeds on the extraordinary”, namely as the place of other, possibly even more desirable, orders, or – as the author says with Merleau-Ponty – as the place of a still untamed being (“be brut or be savage”), then with its suppression and destruction the future would be closed off as a relatively open space of possibilities. Everything would already have been said and determined.



“A domesticated world that had rid itself of the traces of a wild thinking and acting might be all right, a life-world it would no longer be.”⁸ (Waldenfels, 1985, p. 147) Life in it would be “extraordinarily” constricted, even threatened, and breathing would be difficult.

It would therefore be a matter of developing an antithesis to the rigid regulation of life and learning – precisely as a free space of expression that is not overshadowed or even stifled by rigid demands for conformity and demands that do not take into account the neediness and vulnerability of the child. In the social world, however, we must be content with a relative conceptualisation and ask for the better conditions of free or creative expression in each case.

- First and foremost, all external normative factors would have to be dispensed with, i.e. no grades, no qualitative assessments, no special rewards or even punishments.
- Nevertheless, the space would be a social one, but now one in which dialogue, enquiry, conversation, the effort to achieve understanding can take on a much greater role than in the more curricularly standardised learning areas and courses.
- Art education would develop in the direction of a space of creative possibilities, a special space that gives the as yet unknown, the new, the emotionally and cognitively really significant a chance to be articulated.
- The teacher would have a new role in this. She can/must (as in other areas of learning) be an interlocutor, but also a stimulator and helper, especially for anxious or hesitant or traumatised children. What is new is the resolute attitude of care towards the children entrusted to her. She tries to sense and promote the child’s own. In doing so, she is aware of the danger of projective attributions (in depth psychology terms: transferences) that have nothing to do with the child’s life. – NB: Numerous psychotherapeutic and pedagogical-therapeutic approaches focus precisely on finding an internal point of reference to restore self-esteem and basic trust. This is where the individual can experience a gesture as truly his or her own, arising from an authentic impulse or feeling. In art and art education we know the term “free expression”, in dance and dance therapy “authentic movement” (Pallaro, 1999) as an experience and performance that follows an inner impulse in a trustworthy, stress-free environment and community almost without intention, transforming it into a creative movement, thereby also strengthening it and bringing it into awareness and consciousness. This is what is creative and healing – and the injured soul no longer has to turn to auto-aggressive means, anti-social behaviour and psychostimulants in order to feel “right” and alive. To paraphrase Winnicott, education and therapy are also about *preparing* the space for an “id experience”, for a vital impulse and its expression. Its (unenforceable) realisation is an achievement of the *whole* ego. By expressing itself, it not only strengthens the “id” (in the Freudian sense), but also the “I am” and thus the feeling of vitality, being held and joy of life. If successful, it can be the beginning of a journey in which self-affirmation, together with the affirmation of relevant others and their reciprocal affirmation, is (once again) an inspiring source of active life shaping.
- The teacher responds to the child’s authentic gestures with “friendly gestures”. A “friendly gesture” in the context of a subject-sensitive or responsive education (as in any benevolent action) should be any act which, based on an empathic understanding and goodwill towards the child, “transports” something conducive, which can be “understood” or pre-consciously

⁸In the German original: “Eine domestizierte Welt, die sich der Spuren eines wilden Denkens und Handelns entledigt hätte, wäre vielleicht in Ordnung, eine Lebenswelt wäre sie nicht mehr.”



perceived by the child as recognition of himself or appreciation of his person, his individual being.

These statements can be understood as important ethical guidelines for responsive education in general. It recognises the child's claim to respect and consideration of his or her basic needs (see above), an unconditional claim to life that arises from the child's social integration, neediness and vulnerability, but is also due to his or her power. Due to the power of the child? As a result of prolonged failures on the part of the educational world and the community, the child may develop a willingness to use violence against him/herself and others. This may be an understandable reaction of self-defence, e.g. the consequences of permanently frustrated basic needs such as belonging, recognition and self-efficacy. However, the child's extremely aggressive behaviour may still be the result of a deep desire to improve his/her situation: a cry for help by the soul (Mentzos, 2017; Winnicott, 2002) that wants to be perceived as such.⁹

DIDACTIC HINTS – IN SEARCH OF THE NICHES OF FREE EXPRESSION IN GENERAL AND IN ART EDUCATION

In the search for didactic alternatives to curricular standardisation, we by no means have to start from zero. Efforts to make learning processes freer and more child-oriented have led to a multitude of didactic concepts that have in the meantime significantly changed the face of the school and individual learning areas within it in the direction of participatory forms of learning and creative participation. Despite its many irrational, even covertly authoritarian moments, reform pedagogy (including the art education movement) played a significant role in this development. Of course, these moments were and still are often embedded in a dogmatic worldview structure that pretends to know the essence of the human being as well as the dynamics and goal of history, even – as in anthroposophy – of the whole cosmos.

Hartlaub also formulated his ideas on the “genius of the child” and the “creative point of freedom” on the – as we now know: erroneous – assumption that the child's development recapitulates that of humanity (keyword: “psychogenetic basic law”).

With regard to the didactic concretisation of the concept of the free and authentic gesture just developed as one that is not subjected to a prior anthropological or ideological schema, Freinet pedagogy and Reggio Pedagogy in particular are of outstanding importance, as well as some other more limited initiatives such as open teaching, free work, group and project teaching. (In detail in international view: Skiera, 2010)

⁹Incidentally, such a cry for help can also be an authentic gesture. In its violent form, it can be the desperate expression of freedom (as an action against injustice suffered). From an epistemological point of view, this means that the authentic gesture cannot be identified with the good from the outset. However, in the context of a benevolent, need-sensitive and empathetic education there is the prospect that authentic gestures can serve individual development in a constructive, socially and personally beneficial sense. This is precisely the difficult task of responsive education as a concern for the individual and social good. Because of its mutual dependence and determinacy as well as its epistemic indeterminacy in individual situations, it is a matter of sounding out the respective limits of authentic reactions (the still or no longer tolerable) within the horizon of universal values (such as the worldwide protection of all life and the foundations of life, the legitimate interest of others, the rights of freedom of all people, justice and peaceful coexistence, solidarity with the weak, the suffering and the socially disadvantaged) in the social dynamic itself. Finding the balance between individual and community is an ongoing task that can never be finally solved.



Furthermore, it is worth remembering all initiatives that attempt in a relevant – i.e. not just rhetorically acclaimed – way to take the child's personal experience as the starting point of learning. Especially in some methods for initial reading and writing, the child's experience has been given a central place. There is now a wealth of literature on this.

In everything, the aim is to promote the child's self-expression. This is already creative as such, i.e. it brings something previously unheard of to expression, if the process of expression itself is not subject to strict external standardisation. This is always the case when in the child's experience the moment of self-expression prevails over external demands. Then we are dealing with an authentic gesture.

On the question of the significance of self-expression, I would like to refer at this point to an important voice from empirically supported psychology and personality theory. Velibor Kovač presented a concept of motivation or need in which he describes self-expression as equally important as the “basic motivational system” of human beings, alongside the “basic need” for affiliation and control. He also brings this together with the aspect of the artistic. In Kovač's sober words, it reads like this: “All in all, art is considered to be a prototype of self-expression motivation. However, as noted above, many different activities could easily be called artistic as they also are motivated by expressing the inner state. This should be the case regardless of success, talent or public recognition for what these artistic acts produce. Without self-expression motivation many ideas and emotions would simply remain buried in the artist (i.e. people in general) without ever being transferred to visible forms. More dramatically perhaps, we could say that humans could exist merely by controlling and belonging, but without expression we would have limited knowledge about the way we are, who we are and who we could be in terms of variations of behavioural manifestations.” (Kovač, 2016, p. 151)

Let us now turn to two concrete examples in the pedagogical space. The first is a child's text in which he or she is confronted with the claim to believe something that contradicts his or her experience and cognitive development. The text reflects the – unavoidable – drama between stubbornness and expectations of others. “Es war einmal ein Hase. Er hieß Osterhase. Es gibt ihn aber nicht. Nur die Eltern tun so, als ob es ihn gibt. Ich tue aber so, als ob ich es auch glaube. “Once upon a time there was a rabbit. His name was the Easter Bunny. But he doesn't exist. Only the parents pretend that he does exist. But I pretend to believe it too.” (Andresen, 1986, p. 6)

The second example is an exercise that we can easily do in the dance academy or in another suitable space, of course also in any school class. I have often practised this with students in my university courses to exercise perceptual skills – and here in particular to explore the inside-outside correspondences. (Cf. Skiera, 2011) – Imagine you heard a rhythmically appealing music. Now the task is not to dance to this music, but to first go on an inner journey. Your goal would be to search for a spontaneous impulse to move that develops – of its own accord, as it were – into an authentic gesture that is not choreographed in advance and, above all, not censored from the outside. In other words, *not to move to the music, but to be moved by the music*. What “comes to light”? Perhaps nothing at all, perhaps an inner resonance. Or perhaps a nod of the head, a drumming of the fingers, a movement of the arms or legs – or even a whole-body movement? No one knows, no one knows in advance about oneself, it can, but doesn't have to, get quite wild. In any case, we would set out on the path to an authentic gesture, which in dance theory and dance education is called “authentic movement”.



A FINAL WORD – WITH A WARM REFERENCE TO MAX REINHARDT, THE GREAT THEATRE DIREKTOR OF OLD BERLIN

Art education may continue to serve many important purposes, such as the formation of the sense of form and colour, manual dexterity, moral consolidation, the strengthening of visual, pictorial, musical, aesthetic, physical and social competences, linguistic as well as symbolic expressiveness in general. Any rule, especially an authoritarian rule or ruler, will also use it for political purposes and ward off or restrict the moment of freedom inherent in art by pointing to the danger of chaos. Art education thus becomes an emotionally coloured instrument of unquestioning conformity: a means of dictators. The postulate of Enlightenment, namely to think for oneself and to form one's own judgement, is thus undermined and replaced by the imperative to follow an external opinion leadership. Its ultimate goal would be – to recall Denis Vasse's turn of phrase above – the "complete identification" of every child and the youth with the Great Prescript, which claims to represent the true and heroic.

However, the subversive and freedom moment inherent in art can also find its way into arts education, but only if it is recognised, acknowledged and appreciated. In this way, the freedom moment becomes the key point of a development that defends a space of expression in which the child can freely express him- or herself. This would still be a space of social responsibility and inclusion; but it would be one in which the first law of an authoritarian education, which identifies itself completely with the law, i.e. with the Great Prescript and the Curriculum, is suspended. According to the great theatre director Max Reinhardt this first law of an authoritarian education is: "You shall conceal what is going on inside you."¹⁰

No: You don't have to, but you may show and express what moves you and what is going on inside you. And you will receive a personal response that respects you, reflects your actions in the compassionate, benevolent educator and in an appropriate environment, and thus strengthens your self.

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¹⁰Du sollst verbergen, was in dir vorgeht". Max Reinhardt in his speech "Rede über den Schauspieler", held in February 1928 at Columbia University in New York: https://www.philoso.de/de_neu/000007links/000001besprochene%20Texte/Max%20Reinhardt%20Rede%20ueber%20den%20Schauspieler.pdf (April 2, 2024). Note: Max Reinhardt (1873–1943) fled Nazi Germany to the United States in 1937 where he died in New York.



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