

The secret life of objects: an artist residency in an early years classroom

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Background

This paper reflects on my six months artist residency in an English Foundation Stage Unit (a project that will end in the early summer of 2010). The project is the result of AHRC funding for a practice-led enquiry that explores how I might develop my art practice in the context of a long-term residency. While my own practice is integral to the research as it unfolds, it is not intended to take priority over my role as a resident artist. The aim of the project is, through the vehicle of my practice, to explore the possibilities and tensions of working as an artist in residence in an early years classroom. The paper argues that the role of the artist in residence cannot be fully understood or developed without taking seriously the nature of artistic practice itself, and how it operates in the encounter between artist and children, under the special constraints of the school setting. In this way, the paper will identify significant general issues concerning the relationships and dynamics of residency within an educational setting, from a viewpoint that is grounded in the experience of working through one's practice.

Research Questions

My art practice is located in the act of collection. What happens to the object when we choose it? Do the things we collect have a life of their own? How much are they animated by our desire to possess them? I collect second-hand and found objects as a way of exploring these questions. My collection acts as resource for thinking about things in new ways. The objects are always on the move, forming assemblages, displays, recollected on film or as photos. And I find myself caught between them in conflicts of control and disorder, connection, dead ends, excitement and boredom. In relation to the residency I will investigate ways to harness the liveliness of objects so as to develop collaborative work with children that engages with my interest in collecting.

While exploring my practice I will also ask questions about the role of the artist in an early years classroom. How might the presence of an artist that sees children as cultural creators build different classroom relationships to those established by the teacher? How can I develop a reflexive practice that engages with children, parents and teachers in what is often a utilitarian environment of school?

Methods

A long-term residency was proposed in order to challenge existing models of the artist in school. My experience of working as an artist in schools has been that you are seen as a creative expert who comes in to carry out a specific themed/product oriented art project. Research points out the limitations and tensions that lie in this increasingly commonplace model (Sekules, 2003, Reiss and Pringle, 2003). In response to this a recent report calls for pedagogies that "focus primarily on who the children are, what they can do and what they want to express" (C. Hall et al. 2007). This closely connects with my interest in unsettling the idea of the artist as expert, and exploring the potential for a dialogue that sees children's assiduous collecting practices as creative responses in a world where cultural meaning is often narrowly interpreted.

My research methods are drawn from ethnographic documentation and the "reflective practitioner" (Schon, 1983) traditions, but as an artist I use these methods as the starting point for critically engaging with children in a schooled setting, rather than to speak on behalf of the child. Kate Pahl has used an ethnographic lens to study the place of objects in children's lives by creating inventories in order that "the heterogeneity of the objects begins to be dissected and taken apart" (2006, p.112). Where Pahl decodes the object in relation to signification and identity, I am more interested in the potential in the object itself. In previous research, it was through closely observing children's making

that my art practice moved from one that was concerned with the representation of objects, to an engagement with the object itself, as a site of singularity and difference. I am now drawn to the souvenir, ornament, and keepsake because of the “incommensurable stories of ownership, fantasy and labour” (Marks, 2000, p.96) that they contain. It is the process of collection and arrangement of these objects in new groupings as a way to unleash new relationships and as experiments in order and disorder that I intend to document and explore.

Frame

With my practice focussed on collecting objects, it offers points of connection with children's experiences. It is not the physical collection that interests me, so much as the flighty and unpredictable process of collection itself. Desires expressed through the decision to treasure an object usually escape the decrees of necessity and relevance, freeing things from what Walter Benjamin calls the “bondage of being useful” (1983:169). This runs counter to the utilitarian culture of education, which is why I am particularly interested in exploring children's collecting in a schooled context. My aim is not to reify children as unique in their capacity as either artists or collectors. However, I am interested in exploring children's collecting within a schooled discourse, both in terms of questions it may provoke in relation to my own collecting, and in relation to the questions it raises about the values attached to relevance and non-relevance in an educational context.

Research findings

Using cameras – both still and moving - to create what Deleuze and Guattari call a “close vision-haptic” (2002, p.493) both I and the children themselves will build a unique archive of interesting objects. These will form the basis of a web-based space where children, artist, staff and parents can view and comment on objects. My intention is to use documentation from the project to reveal the “sudden and infinite connections between dissimilars in an endless or almost endless process of connection-making and connection-breaking” (Taussig, 1987, p.441) in response to objects. I will also reflect on the final phase of the project where we will produce our own exhibition of objects of curiosity.