

## **Children and Contemporary Art at School and in Exhibition Spaces**

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**ABSTRACT – Children and Contemporary Art at School and in Exhibition Spaces.** The text reflects on the relationship between children and contemporary art at school and in exhibition spaces. The study is based on a qualitative doctoral research built on a theoretical and conceptual approach that correlates the fields of study of contemporary art, childhood and education, with emphasis on the relationship between interactivity, children's cultures, multiple languages. The methodology involved a didactic intervention with children of a public school and accompanying children to an exhibition. The particularities of the spaces in the child's experience with contemporary artistic proposals suggest different possibilities of encounters with art and point out some challenges of mediation in this relationship.

**Keywords: Children. Contemporary Art. Children's Cultures. School. Exhibition Spaces.**

**RESUMO – Crianças e Arte Contemporânea na Escola e em Espaços Expositivos.** O texto reflete sobre a relação entre crianças e arte contemporânea na escola e em espaços expositivos. O estudo parte de uma pesquisa de doutorado de abordagem qualitativa fundamentada em um aporte teórico-conceitual que correlaciona os campos de estudo da arte contemporânea, da infância e da educação, com destaque à relação entre interatividade, culturas infantis, múltiplas linguagens. A metodologia envolveu uma intervenção didática com crianças dos anos iniciais de uma escola pública e o acompanhamento de crianças a uma exposição. As particularidades dos espaços na experiência da criança com as propostas artísticas contemporâneas sugerem diferentes possibilidades de encontros com a arte e sinalizam alguns desafios da mediação nesta relação.

**Palavras-chave: Crianças. Arte Contemporânea. Culturas Infantis. Escola. Espaços Expositivos.**

## Introduction

The work *Caminhando* (1964), by the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, presents, implicitly, the need to experience art: the artwork is fulfilled in the act and participation is a condition of experience. One of the first partaking creations of the artist, it consists in cutting a *Moebius* strip, which has a shape very close to the symbol of infinity. Seeing the images of the artist crafting the work and reading her instructions for the *do-it-yourself* invitation are distinct from the act of making and experiencing the work – even though each action offers approximations. The experience of this exercise shows, in metaphor, the uniqueness of walking, of living, of experimenting. Henceforth, Lygia Clark (1983) invites:

Make the *Caminhando* yourself with the white strip of paper, cut it to width, twist it, and glue it so that you get a Moebius strip. Then take a pair of scissors, stick one end on the surface, and cut continuously lengthwise. Be careful not to fall on the part already cut, which would separate the tape into two pieces. When you have gone around the Moebius strip, choose whether to cut to the right or to the left of the cut already made. This notion of choice is decisive, and therein lies the only meaning of this experiment. If I use a Moebius strip for this experience, it is because it breaks our spatial habits: right, left, obverse and reverse, etc. It makes us live the experience of a boundless time and a continuous space.

In the understanding of art as experience, as Dewey (2010) idealized, many contemporary artistic proposals promote experiences beyond the visual, being that, in Dewey's conception, the corporeality is as important in the aesthetic experience as the intellect. On the other hand, in several spheres, it is common to verify a greater relevance to what is linked to rationality, as, for example, when Cocchiarale (2007) mentions the public's desire to *understand* contemporary art, which would reduce the work only to its intelligible sphere. In this perspective, the public would dive into its rationality, relegating the sensible aspect of the aesthetic experience, but what can be felt goes hand in hand with the rational, since they cannot be separated. However, understanding something involves both processes, thinking and feeling, reason and emotion, keeping in mind and heart, Dallari (2005) reminds us.

Awakening the sensorial and the rational, and provoking both what is sensible and intelligible, can be one of the openings to approach the universe of contemporary art. Allied to this context, the attitude of availability to experience art in an integrated manner is often perceived among children. Because they often show themselves as open and spontaneous subjects in their contact with the world in general, and with art in particular, the children's learning process, their multiple languages and their curiosity may contribute to this approaching relationship with contemporary art.

When bringing the reflection on the movement of approximation between the public and contemporary art, it is implied the existence

of a certain distancing, as pointed out by some studies (Barbosa, 2002; 2010; 2011; Bourdieu, 2003; Cauquelin, 2005; Cocchiarale, 2007; Danto, 2006; Orofino, 2010; Trigo, 2009). Such distance is understood as incomprehension, difficulty in producing effects of meaning, in addition to lack of access. On the other hand, amid the extensive variety of established artistic propositions – and the complexity of defining and delimiting contemporary art –, it is considerably difficult to follow every kind of artistic production and become initiated in the totality of this panorama (Trigo, 2009).

Without equalizing the audience or stating that everyone is a beginner, we know that, in addition to distinct repertoires, each individual has his or her affinities, familiarities, and even tastes. What we value is the equality of access, the approximation to contemporary art, and the expansion of experiences and artistic-cultural repertoires, besides seeing in the educational perspective perhaps a possibility of being a facilitator of this process.

Within the context of contemporary art, some artists have been developing propositions in which the public is no longer just an observer to become an active participant in the proposal and be part of the work. The idea of that spectator which supposes a contemplative subject does not fit the intended action for such artistic proposals, because the public is called to be a participant and produce its own effects of meaning, which becomes elementary to give life to the work and share its authorship.

In order to reflect on this distance, the contact of children with contemporary art in exhibition environments arises as a possibility to think about bringing children and contemporary art closer together. Furthermore, how to make such contact possible when there are no exhibition spaces that offer this access? How to think about the child's relationship with contemporary art at school?

Such questions were part of a doctoral research that addresses aspects of the relationship of children with contemporary art at school and in exhibition spaces (Orofino, 2017). As a result of such reflections, this text aims to analyze the ways children interact with artistic proposals that promote participation through the activation of the body in different environments. Artistic proposals and exhibition experiences that allow an active participation – provided to some extent through playfulness, multisensory and interactivity – served as a reference to think about the power of the relationship of children with art in contemporary times and other possibilities of mediation.

## **Interlacing between Contemporary Art, Children and Education**

During the effervescence of the decade of 1960, art was going through a path that indicated not only to transformations in art as a product and work and its relationship with space, but it was also

straightforwardly linked to the change in the way the spectator observes it. Before, the spectator was eye; his or her observation was *retinal*, their action was receptive, restrained and silent. With the eminence of a so-called contemporary art – and all the implication of concepts and senses involved – the spectator is no longer just eye and mind, but the whole body.

With the body on stage, art depended on the experience of the person who lived it, whatever meaning was attached to it. In the Brazilian context of the 1960s, the participation of the spectator was the keynote of many artistic propositions within a Western panorama. According to Basbaum (2007, p. 104), “[...] the contemporary work extends itself over the spectator in an ostentatious way, radically demonstrating the impossibility of an ‘indifferent contemplation’ [...]”. Citing works such as those of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark (2007, p. 105), the author characterizes the incidence of the work on the observer as something impactful that leads him to a real confrontation “[...] as a condition for entering its space of fruition”.

Hélio Oiticica said that the participation of the spectator manifested itself in various ways and it was opposed to *pure transcendental contemplation*. In a text written in 1967, the artist discusses the *new objectivity* as the formulation of a typical state of Brazilian avant-garde art of this period and emphasizes the participation of the spectator as one of its main characteristics. For Oiticica, there are two well-defined ways of participation, one involving *sensory-corporal manipulation or participation*, and another *semantic participation*, and these two modes

[...] seek a fundamental, total, not fractionated participation involving both processes, meaningful, that is, they do not reduce themselves to the pure mechanism of participating, but focus on new meanings, differentiating themselves from pure transcendental contemplation. From ‘playful’ propositions to those of the ‘act’, from the semantic propositions of the ‘pure word’ to those of the ‘object word’, or those of ‘narrative’ works and those of political or social protest, what is sought after is the objective mode of active participation of the spectator in this process: the individual to whom the artwork reaches is asked to contemplate the meanings proposed in it – it is thus an open work (Oiticica, 2010, p. 118, emphasis added).

Lygia Clark also sought the active participation of the viewer in her works, usually provoking the observer to make his or her body available. For her, the artistic object ceased to make sense without the living body, without which the object becomes alienated, like a commodity with its restricted purpose of work of art. Thus, Lygia Clark redefined and reconstituted the public at each stage of her propositions.

Both Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark presented in their researches the interest in inserting the participation of the observer as an element of creation. In the *Parangolés* – covers, banners, flags made from colored cloths and different materials – Oiticica proposes that the viewer wears

them so that the color would gain a dynamism in space by associating the movement and the music through their involvement with samba; consequently, the participant became himself or herself a work of art by dressing and moving with their parangolés. In the same way as in his *Penetráveis*, in which “[...] the relationship between the spectator and the color-structure is one of complete integration, since he or she is virtually placed in its center” (Oiticica Filho, 2011, p. 55). In what the artist called *labyrinths of color, with or without moving doors*, the spectator was invited to fully experience stepping on, smelling and living color (Oiticica Filho, 2011, p. 124).

With the series *Bichos* is no different. The sculptures – made of aluminum with hinges articulating the different parts that make up their *body* – are an invitation from Lygia Clark for the viewer to become a participant and discover the many forms that this open structure offers, handling their metal parts. This series made the artist one of the pioneers in participatory art worldwide. For her, the body of the other was present and constant element in her work, or rather, Clark transformed the body of the other in object of her art.

Both Oiticica’s *Parangolés* and Lygia Clark’s *Bichos* only exist through the body, through the movement of the spectator-participant. In Hélio Oiticica’s words about the definition of the concept of participating as a motto in all creative activities in the 1960s, the act of participating became the decisive step towards a “[...] collectivization of art” (1968, apud Oiticica Filho, 2011, p. 125).

From this dimension of corporal participation, the understanding of the relationship between contemporary art and children highlights the physical interaction (corporal, gestural, tactile, multisensorial) proposed in this spectrum of works by visual artists and has similarities to other playful experiences lived by children in different circumstances. Although the playfulness may not be apparent in the artistic proposition, the child can perceive it from his or her interaction with the work. It is already known that both play and children’s games, sometimes considered synonymous, are the main activities of the child (Vygotsky, 1997). And play can be understood as language and expression, a way of thinking and learning, in addition to its dimension as a sociocultural object (Fantin, 2000).

Along these lines, contemporary artistic propositions considered interactive because they provide the active and corporeal participation of the spectator may encourage and enrich the symbolic thinking and the playful dimension of the child. In this way, certain artistic propositions may become *familiar* to children, as they approach their games and their way of being and being in the world.

In addition to that, the interactivity present in such artistic productions opens space to work the multisensory capabilities in children’s education. Understanding the art as a language, and given the chosen selection of proposals that promote multisensory participation, contemporary art can be explored as content and as a potential procedure

in the education of children, whatever the learning environment. In this perspective, the child's relationship with contemporary art meets the discussions related to the multiple languages of the child (Malaguzzi, 2008) and the development of children's cultures (Sarmiento, 2004; 2005; Fantin, 2011).

When relating art and child, we consider art as culture, as aesthetic experience and, consequently, as an important piece in the education of the child. Malaguzzi (2008, p. 86) considers children as privileged subjects for "[...] not being excessively bound to their own ideas" and, therefore, "[...] they continuously construct and reinvent", being able to "[...] explore, make discoveries, change their points of view and fall in love with forms and meanings that are transformed". By not underestimating the potential of such a relationship, we take into account that "[...] the child demands clear and intelligible explanations from adults, but not childish explanations, and certainly not those that the adult conceives as such. The child perfectly accepts serious things, even the most abstract and weighty, provided they are honest and spontaneous" (Benjamin, 1996, p. 236).

Considered as the subject's historical time and social construction, childhood is a changeable and relational term as opposed to the equally changeable term *adulthood* (Buckingham, 2007). And, in the perspective of tensioning the rights of children that refer to the three p<sup>1</sup>: protection, provision and participation, many times the space of exclusion is revealed: 'this is not for children!' If we adults generally define what adult things are and control their access to children, sometimes we also fail to discover certain attitudes of children in situations that apparently belong to the adult world. Even though such boundaries of the adult world and the child world are increasingly questionable, there are situations in which such a threshold is quite relative. In the specificity of the discussion about the relationship between children and contemporary art, why deny children access to contemporary art works? Why assume denial or underestimate their understanding? And, furthermore, where does this denial present itself? At school, in exhibition spaces, at home? Would you take your children or your students to an art space where there are diverse and even complex performances, where the artist experiences pain, violence, nudity in a critical way? If so, what would be the context? Would there be some kind of adult mediation? Which?

Faced with certain episodes related to this possibility, which have caused some controversy in recent years, much has been debated about the appropriateness of such proposals and experiences. Within the scope of studies on childhood and communication, Buckingham (2007) brings an important reflection on children and media, and makes the observation that the attempt to exclude children from certain situations applies more obviously to the fields of violence, sexuality, economics, and politics, and the fundamental dilemmas to these fields would be related to access and control.

By reflecting on children and media culture in contemporary times, Buckingham (2007, p. 32, emphasis added) ponders about the possibility of failure in “[...] the attempt to *protect* children by restricting access to media” and states the need to “[...] pay much more attention to how to prepare children to deal with these experiences, and in doing so, we must stop defining them simply in terms of what they lack. From such arguments, we can reflect on the role of adult, family or school mediation, in the specificity of the child’s relationship with contemporary art.

In the construction of a repertoire of artistic references aligned with the objectives of this research, there is an intersection of many meanings for contemporary art. From art that destabilizes, provokes, disturbs, through the coziness of the nest or of feeling at home, to art that is allied to play. Construction of meanings without hierarchizations, but making it possible to establish connections for the child’s relationship with art that incites the participation of the public, mainly through the body in contemporaneity.

However, we know that the relationship of children with contemporary art is not restricted to productions that instigate some kind of interaction, much less that somehow mitigate the power of art to disturb, provoke, displace ways of thinking (Loponte, 2014). In this sense, we point out some questions in this regard brought by artists: Ernesto Neto (2014) asks why only art considered *serious* and that points out the *obstacles of life* would have greater value. And Carla Zaccagnini (2008) questions whether there is any prejudice behind works that reach the viewer in a simpler and more direct way.

By bringing the playfulness as an element to reflect upon the art in the poetics of some artists, the playful interaction is not always apparent and explicit. Faced with the proposal of experiencing the work of art with the whole body, it is possible to feel invited to play in many art works, such as the ones by Brazilian Ernesto Neto, in which organicity, textures, scents, and a series of issues related to visual language are made clear. According to the artist, his interest lies mainly in “[...] the capacity that we have to reconfigure the space through our movement over it” (Neto, 2008, p. 10). He clarifies that the basic concepts of his work are in the relationship of inside and outside, body and body contour, reality and fantasy, masculine and feminine.

In the motivation to play, the child transforms the object given by the adult into a toy or a situation into play through imagination, states Benjamin (1996). As a result, the child appropriates himself or herself of what is offered, or often imposed, giving new meaning to this element through play, as Fantin (2000, p. 38) ratifies when he says that “[...] the child builds his or her culture by playing”.

Several artists suggest a type of interaction with the work that favors this playful, interactive and multisensory path. In the research, besides Helio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, mentioned above, some potentialities of such relationship were worked on in reference to the work of

Yayoi Kusama, Toshiko Horiuchi MacAdam, Eduardo Coimbra, Ernesto Neto, Yoko Ono, among others. In Ernesto Neto's works, it is easy to imagine children playing when experiencing his poetics. The proposal of interaction enables the articulation with a possible ludic character, and this does not mean that the work is only for children. Play brings childhood, but it is not exclusive to children, although it is largely associated with the infantile universe. According to Brougère (2010, p. 9), play is characterized "[...] by the possibility of the child being the active subject, in a situation without immediate consequences and uncertain about the results".

When investigating other possibilities of approach to contemporary art, precisely because it is still largely distant from the public – and perhaps even more so from children – we were interested in thinking of the body as a channel for access to contemporary art. Therefore, it made sense to look for works of art that requested the active participation of the public. Furthermore, the association of artistic proposals with play emerged through the articulation between the action of the child's body and the invitation to active participation in contemporary artistic proposals. Thus, through play, the child could spontaneously appropriate that culture, re-signifying it and building its own.

In this process of interaction and cultural appropriation, the child experiences several forms of sociability, and it is possible to identify a specificity in the practices in which children build their childhood cultures, inserted in a broader cultural context, reminds Fantin (2011). The author clarifies that such practices involve "[...] knowledge from the most diverse areas", besides being expressed through "[...] multiple languages – playful, oral, corporal, gestural, artistic, plastic, visual, musical, digital – and in so many other expressive and symbolic capacities that children build when they play and learn" (2011, p. 65). When considering the expressive capacity of children, it is essential to provide and encourage the development of all their languages and not only emphasize the oral and written, because the work with the diversity of languages is more than legitimate, it is necessary and essential for the production, socialization and appropriation of knowledge.

The learning process of children is dynamic and is characterized by being a web of dimensions, between "[...] affective, sensory, symbolic, aesthetic, formal, non-formal, informal and not circumscribed to time/space" (Fantin, 2008, p. 154). In this sense, the author stresses the importance of working from the perspective of multiple languages, in order to enable a multiple literacy, where expressing can be given in any medium and language. Therefore, the recognition of interactions and languages as central to the educational process is seen by Fantin (2008, p. 155) as a way to "[...] discuss the cognitive function of language, understanding it as a meta-education that enables dialogue with other areas".

In interpreting *the hundred languages of the child* (Malaguzzi, 2008) by the sense that all children learn best when given the opportunity to use multiple symbolic systems, Forman (2008, p. 193) highlights



the understanding of complex relationships as part of the “[...] real world that gives these relationships a holistic *gestalt*.” For the author, the symbolic system of languages can converge in a deeper understanding of the world.

It is through multiple languages that children express themselves, says Sarmiento (2004, p. 12), for whom there is still much controversy about the relative autonomy of childhood cultures. Not in relation to the fact that children produce their own meanings, but about how much “[...] these meanings are structured and consolidated in relatively standardized symbolic systems, although dynamic and heterogeneous, that is, in cultures”. However, the author points out that childhood cultures have relational dimensions, which are built in the interactions between peers and between children and adults, having distinct representational forms and contents. Therefore, there is the understanding that childhood cultures are articulated with the macro context in which they are inserted and express themselves differently from adult cultures, “[...] at the same time that they convey specifically infantile forms of intelligibility, representation and symbolization of the world” (Sarmiento, 2004, p. 12).

Understanding children as producers of culture implies considering that each child “[...] actively participates in culture, creating and recreating it with its own features, with particular meanings, with functions similar to the functions of the culture experienced by the adult” (Fantin, 2011, p. 50). In this cultural spectrum, we think of art incorporated to this idea, not only as an integral part of children’s cultures, but also to think how does the access of children to contemporary art is given.

If children appropriate the adult world to build their childhood cultures, the adult world also appropriates this childhood universe to formulate new questions. Art, in particular, proposes not to make us get used to the way we see the world, or to make us experience it in another way. Recalling the figure of childhood as an *event*, proposed by Larrosa, contemporary art is also triggered by countless *events* (Loponte, 2014). When bringing reflections regarding the debate on art, childhood, and education, the author proposes that “[...] the way in which art says things about life and the world has to do with the way in which children say, with which they interpret that same world” (Loponte, 2014, p. 112). And this was one of the horizons of the research.

### **Children’s Encounters with Contemporary Art: Research trajectory**

The research with a qualitative approach, of theoretical and empirical nature, aimed to analyze some children’s experiences with contemporary art at school and in exhibition spaces. As empirical field, we have selected two scenarios for each specificity: the Application School (CA) of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) as a formal learning environment; the exhibition *Experiência da Arte*, held at Sesc

Santo André/SP as a non-formal environment, and the period of this exhibition (21/8 to 25/10/2015) allowed its visitation and the monitoring of two groups of school children. Taking into consideration the specificity of each space, both were considered empirical field experiences for this research, except the degree of involvement and the period of realization – we accompanied a semester in school with weekly meetings during art classes, in which we developed several proposals of didactic interventions related to the theme, and only one day in the exhibition, in which we observed the tour of two classes of children.

In the intersection of interests between the two fields of research, we chose to work with 7 to 8-year-old children in a 2nd grade class in Elementary School I because of the peculiarities of this phase of childhood in the school educational process, since this age group was related to the interests of the art exhibitions that were references in this work.

Since this is a research with children, we did the exercise of thinking about their place in contemporary culture from an educational point of view, considering the ethical issues in research with children. Several studies (Fantin; Girardello, 2019; Faria; Demartini; Prado, 2002) highlight that investigations done with children go beyond *listening to them* and *amplifying their voices*, as they are also concerned with what to do from such listening and its meanings, whether in the ethical and aesthetic, or in the methodological and political.

The analysis of the data constructed in the school space and in the exhibition space was organized by two main axes previously defined: forms of interaction of the children and mediation. Regarding the experience developed in the Colégio de Aplicação, the forms of interaction of the children were based on playfulness, multisensoriality and the creation of children's cultures. In the exhibition *A Experiência da Arte*, similar axes were stipulated, with a small differentiation between them: besides the forms of interaction of the child with contemporary art based on playfulness and multisensoriality and the mediation inserted in the context of a proposal of educational curatorship, we added the notion of art by the children. It is worth mentioning that the creation of children's cultures and the notion about art were analysis axes that emerged after the contact with the children in the field experiences, from the set of data, making us realize its relevance to the discussion of the object in question.

Treating the child as a research subject in which his or her identity can be recognized by the use of the first name – provided that this has been decided and agreed in group and authorized by those responsible without offering embarrassing situations – is based on Kramer (2002, p. 47), when he argues about not erasing who the child is and not relegating him or her “[...] to an anonymity inconsistent with the theoretical framework” of the research presented. From this perspective, in the interaction with the children in the research, human subjectivity was object of investigation and constituted “[...] from an essentially dialogical relationship” (Pereira, 2012, p. 64) that was part of the didactic interventions.

In this constant participative construction between researcher and children, we created a singular experience. Based on reference to the works of Hélio Oiticica and his proposal for the active participation of the spectator, we structured activities to promote interaction through playfulness. As the body and movement are very present in Oiticica's poetics, they were also important axes in the activities proposed to the children based on the Parangolés, which had special emphasis in the proposals developed at the school.

Inspired by the way Oiticica had created his Parangolés from various fabrics, diverse colors and the simplicity when structuring them, we placed the context of such creation as the classroom setting. The children were invited to develop their own parangolés, in pairs and trios, to wear, dance and *play parading* to the samba rhythm as the closing of the activity. For Hélio Oiticica, color gains dynamism when it moves in space, and this is what was attempted with the children, besides demonstrating and operating in practice the concept of participation and interaction with the work of art. Understood as a space of invention and exercise of possibilities, imagination finds favorable conditions for its development through “[...] the contact with nature, artistic experience, adult mediation, free time for play, and the narrative stimulus,” as suggested by Girardello (2008, p. 130). The creation of the parangolés by the children demonstrated how they build their worlds with what is offered to them and how they incorporate it to their imaginary repertoire (usually media) through imagination. For Munari (2007, p. 31), “[...] the product of fantasy, such as that of creativity and invention, is born from relations that thought creates with what it knows” and, therefore, fantasy shall be more or less fruitful if the individual has more or less possibilities to establish *unusual* relations from his or her known experiences.

The creation of their own little world based on fantasy and creativity is evident in what Arthur (8 years old) said when asked about what was most significant in the experience of our meetings: “I liked the parangolé best, because I like to build things! Besides, at my grandma's house I have a little corner where I make several things... [...] I have already made a spaceship out of cardboard!”

Bringing contemporary art to school through playfulness was a strategy to introduce it to children. On the other hand, Fantin (2000) advises about the risks of *schooling* and *didacticizing* culture, in the sense of conceptually impoverishing it as if it were an experience that occurs only at school. As a result, for children to appropriate culture in the context of school, the author asserts the importance of educators being able to “[...] identify the obstacles in this trajectory from culture to school” in order to, “[...] when socializing such manifestations, not ‘pedagogize’ childhood nor ‘didacize and instrumentalize’ – only – art, culture and play” (Fantin, 2000, p. 227).

By choosing contemporary productions that promote the active participation of the spectators, works that allow a multisensorial experience or works by artists that combine playfulness to their poetics, we

presented to the children a segment of contemporary art that highlights the interaction and the relational dimension between artist, work and spectator, being some of the elements brought in the proposals of the activities. Thus, in the didactic intervention proposals, interactivity, multisensoriality and playfulness were central axes to talk about bringing children closer to contemporary art.

In one of the meetings at school, in which we presented several artistic references, the children were asked how they would make an interactive work of art. The answers suggested some worked references, but also opened for their own constructions when they said they would have *holes*, *labyrinths*, which should be made in the school *playground*, in the *soccer field*, spaces recognized as *playgrounds*.

Based on the children's idea and considering the reference to Oiticica's *Penetráveis*, an interactive installation was built in the school space as a synthesis of the proposal. As a consequence, since it was impossible for children to have an interactive and participatory experience of contemporary art in exhibition spaces in the city area, we made other forms of approach available, through creating a playful and multi-sensorial journey, inspired by the work *Entre, a obra está aberta*, by Amelia Toledo, and the exhibition *Proibido não tocar*, by Bruno Munari.

When talking to the children in a sort of group interview, they were asked about what they imagined an interactive work of art would be like, and the answers signaled metaphors such as labyrinth, challenges, and passages: "I thought it was going to be a kind of labyrinth," said Arthur (8 years old), "a challenge," said Erick (8 years old). In turn, Isabela (age 8) said "passages." They were also asked if they knew what interactive was, aiming to understand what they had understood about this concept through their experiences. Several actions came up as answers: touching, entering, moving, feeling – all of them demonstrating something from the activities performed. One of the children exclaimed: Play! And when asked why, he said: "[...] because interactive is all about playing" (Isabela, 8 years old).

The child's answer identifies his or her understanding about the relation that was tried to be established between interactivity and playfulness. In this sense, play appears as constitutive of their child identity when their own understanding of child as a subject who plays emerges in their speech. In a dialog with the students in a group interview, they were asked about the difference between interactive works of art and others that are not. Rodrigo (9 years old), in a brief answer, says: "[...] one is boring and the other is cool". When challenged, others reinforced his answer:

Researcher: Which one is boring and which one is cool?

Rodrigo: The one you just look at it is the boring one and the one with playing is the cool one...

Researcher: But why is it boring to just watch?

Rodrigo: Ah, because then it is boring, right?

Lui: Because it's no fun...

Researcher: But why?

Lui: Because it's really boring, we don't move...

Iago: Because we are children... we like to play and not just watch... (group interview – 12/03/2017).

Iago's (8 years old) answer shows his understanding about being a child based on corporeality and movement. If the interactive work enables movement and allows them to move, it is characterized as *cool* by these children. The very concept of interactive is linked to playing when the child says that the *cool* work is the one to *play* with, referring to the work that would be the interactive one. Moreover, the possibility of movement is seen by Iago as elementary in playing, unlike standing still, *just watching*, which is considered characteristic of something *boring*. For Iago, being a child is to enjoy playing and he affirms: "[...] we live to play!"

Continuing the group interview, a student's statement supports further reflections when she says that "[...] children are made of playing, not of letters!" (Isabela, 8 years old).

By contrasting play and letters in her perception of what it is to be a child, Isabela claims the need and her right to play, reaffirming her identity as a playing subject as if there were an opposition to the literacy process that children go through in the early grades. As art is an experience "[...] not always translatable into words," calling for other ways to live and experience it, Loponte (2012, p. 120) ponders what place art could occupy in this context, where the current education system may mean the diminution of childhood.

The multisensory experience of the proposals experienced by the children is highlighted by them, as when Rafaella (8 years old) says that: "[...] it is cooler to touch than to just stay and watch". In spite of the fact that there are experiences in which *simply* looking is enough, such as when we are watching a movie, we know that the experience can go far beyond a simple look. Still, Munari (2016, p. 3) argues that the child knows the world in a multisensory way and that, among all senses, touch is the most explored, "[...] completes a visual and auditory sensation", besides offering "[...] useful information for the knowledge of everything that surrounds us".

In this sense, the possibility of being in an art exhibition and witnessing artistic productions, whether contemporary or not, is in itself an aesthetic and artistic experience, and the grasping of the concept of art is broadened when we attend art exhibition spaces.

For students, "[...] art will always be what is presented to them by an authority in knowledge about the subject, the teacher or art teacher" (Oliveira; Orofino, 2011, p. 10), because, in the classroom, teachers make their curatorship selecting what they will present as art. Correspondingly, in the various exhibition spaces, we are also presented with what is art. However, in a first visit to an exhibition, the expectation may not always correspond to the concept of art learned in school.

In the field research carried out in the exhibition *A Experiência da Arte*, curated by Evandro Salles, in addition to accompanying the visit of two groups of children and interviewing them, we also interviewed mediators and the administrative team of Sesc that promoted the exhibition, whose curatorial proposal was to offer contemporary art to children without infantilizing art. The exhibition presented the work of several artists<sup>2</sup> based on the curator's idea that children have an extraordinary capacity to experience the poetic in an intense and passionate way.

By accompanying two groups of children between 4 and 6 years old in the exhibition, it was possible to observe them, talk to them and understand their relationship with the works on display and the mediation made by the educators of the exhibition space. It was already expected to observe the children's willingness to play, even more so considering the particularities of this exhibition. In an environment full of concepts and meanings such as a contemporary art exhibit, the children's playful interaction appears as a form of appropriation of the existing contents; the multi-sensorial and interactive experience offered the children a closer approach to the artworks. This integrated experience allowed children to feel at ease and invited to be part of the work.

From the children's contact with one of the works, a fragment of an observed scene reiterates the playful, multisensory and interactive dimension of the child's relationship with contemporary art. In the work by Ernesto Neto called *Riojiboia* – which the artist defines as an adventure sculpture, bringing in itself elements of indigenous culture, the river, and the snake – it was possible to notice the joy of the children when entering what would be the body of the snake with the fluidity of the river. When one of the children says “I was playing there, in those things”, referring to the *Riojiboia*, it reinforces the idea that a work that allows the whole body to be in movement also allows children to use their own language, the playfulness. Also, it is worth highlighting the experience of belonging when the child says the visit to the exhibition was fun “[...] because I had never attended to one”. So, a multisensory and interactive exhibition enhances the aesthetic experience with art, not only for children, but for people of all ages.

## Challenges and Possibilities of Mediation

In this work we are interested in thinking about adult mediation in the experience of children with contemporary art in different educational spaces, whether at school or in art exhibition spaces, even if the performance in each space requires different strategies, methodologies and positions. As pointed out by Fantin (2011, p. 51),

[...] in the relative cultural autonomy of children, we cannot forget that the monitoring of their actions is done by adults, that with the institutionalization of childhood it is the school that controls their daily lives, that their free time is structured by family practices and that the assimi-

lation of information and ways of apprehension conveyed by the media and other means exerts a profound influence or decisively interacts in the construction of such productions [children's culture].

And, if we are considering both schools and exhibition spaces as possible places for the encounter with contemporary art, the training and performance of these mediators and/or teachers will also vary. Regarding the aesthetic education of teachers, especially teachers who work with children, we agree with Loponte (2014, p. 121), that it is necessary to train them aesthetically “[...] with a dive in experiences that displace them, that disturb them, that subvert this linear and continuous way of understanding art and childhood”.

We cannot irreducibly state that adult mediation is necessary in the child's experience with contemporary art. Evandro Salles (2015), when conceiving the curatorship of the series *Arte para criança*<sup>3</sup>, took into consideration the freedom of the child when engaging with art and, for that reason, questioned the adult's intervention in this experience. After all, “[...] children express their cultures in ways distinct from adult culture, practicing specifically infantile forms of intelligibility, representation, and symbolization of the world,” says Fantin (2011, p. 52). On the other hand, when referring to adult intervention in the act of mediating the child's experience with contemporary art, we are taking into consideration the formative and intentional context in which such experience occurs. Although, as Loponte (2014, p. 119) says, “[...] art is perhaps made of the matter of an experience and a language that dance and hover over the senses of things, without worrying whether there is even a truth that must be saluted,” we also want to think about the relationship of the child with art through adult mediation as education. Regarding the educational mediation of play in the school context, Fantin (2000, p. 91) points out that “[...] there is no spontaneous education, but the construction of educational situations by the adult, because education is inseparable from intentionality, whether explicit or implicit”.

In this manner, it is necessary to displace the linearity of our familiar landscapes, to get intoxicated with experiences that transform us, connecting us with art and with by listening to the children, because they tell us about events, experience, creation, and also childhood. And “[...] if art really says what children say,” we are bequeathed with Loponte's (2014, p. 121) question reverberating in our thoughts: “[...] do we, who are think about education, know how to listen?”.

In this sense, listening to the considerations, reflections and questionings from the mediators of the surveyed exhibition was also an opportunity to think, through this point of view, about the relationship between children and contemporary art. With reference to this research, the analysis of mediation was built not from the children's perspective, but through the statements recorded in interviews with the mediators who worked in the exhibition *A Experiência da Arte* at Sesc.

Although Evandro Salles' argument regarding the curatorship of the exhibition was that mediation would not be necessary for the con-

tact of the public with the work, including children, the exhibition had a group of mediators (or educators) with the most diverse backgrounds. The presence of mediators was a condition from Sesc, which understands the importance of an educational action in an exhibition.

By understanding the educational action in an art exhibition, in which mediation is one of the possibilities in the action as a whole, we agree with Camnitzer (2009, p. 19) when he states that “Art and Education are not different things, they are different specifications of a common activity”. In his understanding, art is primarily communication and, consequently, it has “[...] an implicit didactic, an inextricably integrated educational mission”, therefore, the Uruguayan artist highlights the need to introduce art in education as a pedagogical methodology.

Camnitzer’s (2009) argument makes sense in a plan that integrates art and education, artists and teachers with the goal of dissolving the contours and unifying these poles “[...] to accomplish a work in common” (p. 20). Therefore, we cannot see the mediator’s work as something isolated, but integrated not only to the process of educational action but also to the formal process of education. Although there is a personal touch in the individual action of each mediator, their mediation is also built by layers that include their previous references and their constant learning throughout the action.

In conversation with a mediator, we were able to verify his understanding that his mediation is built together with the other mediators and the training team. In turn, the diverse backgrounds of each mediator contribute to the enrichment of mediation through the exchange among colleagues:

[...] each one already brings a different background, not only intellectually, but also in terms of experience. Each one works in a different way. And I think this is very good, because the more different each one’s background is, the more we will complete each other. Because my visit is not totally mine, it is formed today because of the contact I have with my colleagues. I see it as a network, that everything is intertwined and connected (Mediator Victor).

The background brought by each person is (or always will be) the starting point for the construction of the mediator’s action. Martins (2012) states that when we arrive at an exhibition, we bring not only our personal references but also our expectations, our knowledge, our fears. It is with this amount of knowledge and sensations that mediators first deal when they are in front of *children, young people or adults, students, workers, teachers*. In the midst of these networks of meanings and uncertainties is where art is, “[...] itself a multiplier of meanings,” and “[...] all this intricate mesh configures mediation as a difficult and exciting task” (Martins, 2012, p. 16).

By observing the experience of children with contemporary art in an exhibition that encourages interaction and participation, we realize how this experience can contribute to a broad and updated conception of art by children. After all, if there are still indications that many



people feel distant from contemporary art, initiating the approximation process through children may be a possible way.

Still, Dewey (2010, p. 136) already said that “[...] everyone knows that a learning process is required to see through a microscope or a telescope, or to see a landscape as a geologist sees it”. For the author, “[...] the idea that aesthetic perception is a matter of occasional moments is one of the reasons for the belatedness of the arts among us” (Dewey (2010, p. 136), because he understands that for the spectator to perceive he or she must *create an experience*.

From this perspective, the value of mediation and the work of the mediator can be seen as collaborating in the creation of this experimentation until when it is necessary. And when asked about the role of the educator/mediator in the surveyed exhibition, the mediator quoted the line of an author he could not remember the name of, saying that “[...] the educator’s job is to make his work obsolete”.

Undoubtedly it is possible to be in an art exhibition without mediation and have a meaningful moment. We are not tying the mediation to the only possibility of an aesthetic experience with art, but we recall Dewey (2010) when he says that the experience is composed of layers, from previous to posterior. The author states that a child can have an intense experience, “[...] but for lack of a foundation of previous experiences, the relations between being subjected to something and doing are ill grasped, and the experience has neither great depth nor breadth” (Dewey, 2010, p. 123).

Therefore, mediation is seen based on what Martins (2012, p. 29) points out, a process “[...] provocative, instigating to thinking and feeling, perception and imagination”. For the author, to mediate is “[...] an act capable of opening dialogues, also internal ones, amplified by the socialization of knowledge and personal perspectives of each viewer” (Martins, 2012, p. 29). The figure of the mediator, therefore, does not *suppress* the experience of the spectator by the possibility of *always* being a personal experience, although collective, dialogic and shared.

Martins (2012, p. 30) explains that “[...] human and humanizing relationships can offer access to the world of art, so that many learners, whether children, youths and adults, can venture into the magical and vital space of art”. And perhaps this is the reason why, when asking a child what name they would give to the exhibition, the child said “*Gustavo*”, the name of the mediator who accompanied the visit, demonstrating the affection created from a bond in such a short time, but possibly significant in the child’s experience with art.

## **A few Considerations**

In this paper, we understand the intertwining between Art and Education as fields that are not differentiated from each other, but rather diverse specifications that converge towards a common work, according to the thought of Camnitzer (2009). And if art is an aesthetic

experience in which it has at its core life and everyday things, the continuity of experience from the conception of Dewey (2010) is perceived as fundamental in the apprehension of the senses by children.

In the research presented, in which the school and the exhibition space acted as formative environments to observe and analyze the relationship of the child with the contemporary art, it was possible to verify the complementarity of such spaces in the aesthetic formation of children. As a general rule, knowing and experiencing contemporary art in the school context, even if it is through a *didactic transposition* (Chevallard, 2013), it is comprehended not only as an aesthetic experience, but also as an opportunity to rethink education and school practices. In the same way, knowing and experiencing contemporary art directly in exhibition spaces enables children to contact with art not only as a product, but as a process, as moments of sociability (Bourriaud, 2009), even allowing the understanding of the dynamic concept of art in contemporaneity through the approach with different artistic propositions.

Although not essential, adult mediation in the relationship between children and contemporary art is of great relevance and, therefore, it is considered, in the case of exhibition spaces, as one of the possibilities of educational action. We see the mediator's work integrated not only to the process of educational action, but to the formal process of education. It is important to understand mediation as a creative and authorial act, which implies working together, articulating all the spheres of art learning, whether formal or informal. From this perspective, the unfolding of the experience in an exhibition space will be enriched when it is articulated with the work done in the classroom.

Taking into consideration the pedagogical mediation with contemporary art, when bringing closer together the roles of the classroom teacher and the mediator in exhibition spaces, we understand that one of the most important differences is the bond established with the children. On the other hand, the mediator in these spaces often receives a more refined training on contemporary art productions, which many teachers cannot always have access to. It is also possible to find mediators who have no knowledge of subjects related to childhood. That is why the multidisciplinary work found in the exhibition space at Sesc offers an exchange of knowledge that enriches mediation.

Contemporary art in education has been under discussion, with both favorable and unfavorable remarks. Even if the questioning about the function of art in education still comes up, it is necessary for a continuous problematization and to advance in the transformations of these correlated spheres, art and education. Celso Favaretto (2010) brings the problematization of the function of art in education as an issue also of contemporary education and believes that such questioning is important to think about what the involved education implies when talking about art and education. The author highlights the need to think about art at school in a horizon of contemporary transformations from the criticism of modernity and the review of its assumptions.

Therefore, inserting more and more contemporary art in the school context and in the work with children enables a greater proximity with this scenario that is still often identified as strange, hermetic, unusual, different. In this research, the encounter of the child with contemporary art was seen under the aspect of multisensoriality and playfulness, in order to create a favorable scenario for a possible relationship of familiarity with the way children learn, the children's play.

As a result of the research, we consider that attending contemporary art exhibitions collaborates with various aspects of understanding and experiences with art by children, their teachers and families. Therefore, familiarizing children with artistic languages and practices, including contemporary ones, allows the appropriation of such codes and the consequent expansion of their repertoire to the extent that experiences occur as a layered process (Dewey, 2010).

By bringing life, art, and education together, we seek to give meaning to experience and education, as Freire (2005), for whom teaching (and learning) also requires aesthetics, says. In this teaching-learning process, we have the possibility to transform what we know, and also to transform ourselves. And, just as play transforms the real, the transforming potential of art in children's education might ensure the creation of many artistic and frolicsome adventures at school and in exhibition spaces.

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## Notes

- 1 About children's rights, based on discussions from the UN Convention in 1989, are those of *protection*, *provision*, and *participation* - the so-called three 'p's. In relation to the media, Buckingham (2007, p. 280) separates the rights to provision and protection as *passive*, due to the child's condition subordinated to adult care; the right to participation is considered by the author as *active*, by enabling children to be seen as social subjects and *political actors in their own right*.
- 2 Vik Muniz, Ernesto Neto, Wladimir Dias-Pino, Eduardo Coimbra, Eleonora Fabião e Waltercio Caldas.
- 3 Traveling exhibition held between 2007 and 2010 and developed especially for the children's public under the curatorship of Evandro Salles.

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