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Expression and Art Education

Alexandra Mouriki - Zervou and Antonis Vaos

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Ways of Making, Seeing and Thinking about Art: Art Expression and Art Education

Alexandra Mouriki - Zervou, University of Patras, Greece

Antonis Vaos, University of Patras, Greece

Abstract: In this paper we argue that the arts (visual arts) constitute a kind of an expressive gesture (as conceived by the French philosopher M. Merleau-Ponty), and on the basis of this hypothesis, we shall try to show that they can fulfil the presuppositions required to be addressed in comprehensive and meaningful school programs. Our central argument is that artistic activity is an expressive activity par excellence: it is an “advent”, an original operation, i.e., which, constitutes a sign as a sign, implants a meaning in that which did not have one and thus, inaugurates an order and founds an institution or tradition. Accordingly, this meaning is on principle a meaning in genesis, ever to be re-created and re-interpreted. Given that, we claim that just as the arts are an attempt to visually articulate meanings, to create meaningful forms, correspondingly art education is an attempt to cultivate children’s ability to grasp, understand and respond to such meanings available from art’s expressive forms. We maintain that the role of art education is to facilitate access to various artistic approaches and to help to the development of a reflective attitude towards their significance as expressive advents (as described above).

Keywords: Art, Art Education, Expression, Meaning, Advent

Art Expression

WHEN MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY commented on how the visible world is being rendered, according to the established /classical perception of what painting is, he noted that this method is not at all “natural”, and therefore not realistic, as we may have been led to believe. In fact it is an “objectivist illusion” depicting the world as it would look through the eyes of a god who is not immersed into the human finitude. And yet, he writes, this may not be our intention in relation to the portrayal of the world:

“We could try not to render our relation to the world, in accordance with what it is under the gaze of an infinite intelligence. Then, at a stroke, the canonical, normal, or ‘true’ type of expression would be liberated from the constraints that perspective imposes upon drawing –free, for example, to express a cube by six squares ‘disjointed’ and juxtaposed on the paper, free to draw in the two faces of a bobbin and join them by a sort of bent store-pipe, to represent death by transparency in its coffin or the look by the two eyes separated from the head, free to have to mark the ‘objective’ contours of the alley or of the face and in contrast to indicate the cheeks by a circle. This is what the child does.” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 150)

But it's also what an artist chooses to do, as in the case of Claude Lorrain who renders the presence of light not by painting the light beam itself but rather by the surrounding shadows (M.-P. 1973: 150). In both cases what we have is a different way of portraying the relation with the world, a view unlike that of the infinite intelligence but rather and instead a human view of the world. From a simple child's drawing to a grand painting, the work of art, employing this different perspective creates the need to be seen not as the reconstruction of an object or scene – one that furnishes us with information – but as the trace of its author's contact with an object or a spectacle. It claims the status of a personal testament. And this because it presupposes full involvement of the perceiving subject; in other words, it involves the transfer onto paper or canvas of that special “vibration of the eye” – and quite possibly of a sense of touch and hearing –, as well as of the sense of randomness, of the fate or freedom born by the touch with objects or phenomena of the world (M.-P. 1973: 150).

The drawing or the painting does not intend to portray an objective (M.-P calls it “inhuman”) appearance of the world, it doesn't provide an image of the world that the gaze dominates. On the contrary, it adopts a “lived perspective” instead of the geometric perspective of classical depictions, and thus, more than mere appearances it manages to portray the appearance of the world as it comes into being in the percipients view of it. We are not dealing with a portrayal of the world as it is but rather with the opening of the finite human perception to the being of the world. Thus, from the factual prosaic we enter into poetry, into new ways with which objects are given meaning and form. The passage from prose to poetry, however, is not achieved with children's involuntary drawings – this residue of an indivisible experience (to which M.-P. refers as “faux dessin”, drawing a parallel with the “faux parole” of baby babbling). The prosaic of the world becomes poetry from the moment an artist, through a truly creative gesture, undertakes the expressive means of the child “to completely awaken and recall our sheer power of expressing beyond things already said or seen” (M.-P. 1993b: 89). The artist adds to this impulsive, non intentional child drawing, another dimension, more deliberate and more systematic. However, once child drawing, regarded as a self-sufficient work (and not as an incomplete stage in the process of acquiring the techniques for realistic representations), i.e. once it is examined as a positive accomplishment, it offers something very important to our understanding of painting: it makes us rearrange all painting methods (from the most realistic ones to those considered less representative all the way to abstract ones) as moments in a series of expressional processes all of which seek, without warranties, to recover the ‘being of the world’ as well as our own way of being within the world. Being evidence of a child's particular contact with its world, the child drawing speaks for the possibility of a non-conventional, non-habitual way of seeing and making and urges us to redefine our attitudes towards visual arts. And this is, as M.-P argues against the classical approach for children's drawing, because the latter illustrates children's independence from the restrictions imposed by the tradition of visual art. Although children live in this tradition and they are shaped by it, child drawing calls us to detach ourselves from what this particular tradition considers “obvious” ever since the Renaissance era, i.e. the geometrically applied “objective representation”. The scope of this freedom leads to a re-interpretation of the alleged irregularities in child drawings, such as those mentioned above (that, for example, they portray the two faces of a bobbin or the dead in its coffin by transparency); irregularities

which had been interpreted by psychologists such as Luquet¹ as signs that children do not pay proper attention to what they see or that they are incapable for synthesis. On the other hand, M.-P. sees the child's ignorance of geometric perspective as an expression of immeasurable objectivity (*objectivité sans mesure*), i.e. as the child's attempt to transport us into the thing itself (*la chose elle-même*), including the affective resonances of things, instead of copying their visual appearance (M.-P. 1988: 513-514). In this context, expressive efforts by children are comparable to those of master painters; they make us more sensitive to other dimensions of painting representation, beyond what we are used to in the classical sense and invite us to re-examine our commonplaces and whatever fixed notions we may have about it.

As a result, a painting (whether in its classical or modern form) is restored into its poetic power and this means that its communication with us is not founded on the prosaic objectivity of numerical relations that may be there. It takes place on the level of a constellation of signs ("constellation de signes") leading us to a signification that didn't exist anywhere before the appearance of this constellation (M.-P. 1973: 151). Beyond what has already been told or been seen, it strives to change the world of passive existence into a significant system, to metamorphose an experience into its meaning.

Therefore art acts as language. It's not like the language in its common use or like the systematic coded language studied by linguistics; it has no structured syntax or vocabulary dependant on specific rules. It is language in its fundamental form or in its expressive-creative use, language as speech (*parole*)². *Parole*, in Merleau-Ponty's definition, is not made up by univocal, fixed and explicit meanings; it's an aggregation of converging movements of discourse and invention of new expressive means. It embodies significative intentions which arrange the existing signifying instruments and available significations so as new, unprecedented significations can take root amidst the existing ones, to be integrated into a culture and at the same time to shape it, transforming the meaning of cultural tools (M.-P. 1964: 91-92). Similarly, an artist uses methods and art codes, transforming them in such a way so that new elements can penetrate the existing structured system available to him, opening new dimensions or new frontiers for our experience.

The description of the signifying power of speech as well as the signifying gesture of the artist shows that every act of expression contributes towards the fulfilment of a wish to retrieve the world. It is a primordial expression, i.e., an expression that is not

“that derivative labor which substitutes for what is expressed signs which are given elsewhere with their meaning and rule of usage, but the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs, makes that which is expressed dwell in them through the eloquence of their arrangement and configuration alone, implants a meaning in that

¹ Cf. Georges-Henri Luquet, *Le Dessin enfantin*, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1991 (11927). At the end of this book, there is a section with children drawings where we can see, among others, the particular children's drawings being commented from very different points of view by Luquet and M.-P.

² Merleau-Ponty defines two usages of the language: a) the secondary or spoken speech (*parole parlée*), which is the empirical use of language (where language acts as a reminder of already established signs); b) the primary or speaking speech (*parole parlante*), which represents the creative use of language, i.e. installation of new significations through a certain transformation (or "coherent deformation" as M.-P. sometimes calls it, following Malraux) of a given significative system.

which did not have one, and thus –far from exhausting itself in the instant at which it occurs– inaugurates an order and founds an institution or tradition” (M.-P. 1993b: 104).

The inauguration of this order constitutes a passage as well as a transformation at the same time; from the order of (factual) events we shift to the order of meaning; the same circumstances to which we previously submitted now become a signifying system – and this of course doesn’t mean that, despite how much they have been transformed, they cease to exist. In other words, when we move to the order of expression we don’t change worlds, the world of artistic creation is not *another* world; it is this world that the painter wishes to retrieve as paintable. As he strives to realize this wish, he brings into life something that was only barely, if at all, conceived before it was given form. The meaning intended by his expressive acts didn’t exist beforehand in a heaven of ideas nor inside things that are still without meaning nor within himself and his unformulated life. It emerges at a specific moment and within the sphere of an already constituted reason claiming its own path and trying to take root into other consciousness, despite the fact that there is no warranty that it will succeed. The only thing the painter can do towards this aim is to paint the world, to transform the world completely into a spectacle and make us see how the world affects us. He makes a picture and then he needs to wait until this picture comes to life for other people (M.-P. 1993: 70).

Painting creations are thus born as a new way of seeing the world and begin to reside within a specific social and cultural context, being already impregnated with the seed of their own change. No work is ever fully completed, Merleau-Ponty says, no creation is ever a permanent acquisition and yet each creation “changes, alters, clarifies, deepens, confirms, exalts, re-creates, or creates by anticipation all the others” (M.-P. 1993c: 149). In this context it’s never exhausted the moment is made, it is not an *event* but inaugurates an order of *advent*.

“Creations are not acquisitions in the sense of the deeds done once and for all, events that have definitively taken place. But they open up onto a perspective that will never again be closed: they are of the order of the *advent* rather than of the event” (Smith: 209).

Yet, this order of advent – although clearly distinct from the empirical order of events– doesn’t constitute an ‘out of this world’ order; it is not linked with some kind of Painting Spirit (as Hegel may have put it) revealing itself gradually. “There is not, above and beyond the causality of events, a second causality which would make the world of art ‘a supra-sensible’ world with its own laws” (M.-P. 1993b: 105). The order of meaning installed by art is neither transcendental nor eternal and although “it does not follow each zigzag of empirical history, it sketches out, it calls for, a series of successive steps.” (M.-P. 1993b: 106). Hence art appears in the form of history, not history in the sense of linear progress but as *another history*, considered as a perpetual conversation between expressive gestures contradicting and validating one another, where each one recreates (transforms) all others. The unity of art is based upon the meaning of an expressive gesture, an original function, which, starting with the basic orientation of the human body in the world and continuing with all kinds of human gestures, develops into painting and art. We need not prescribe historicity of art as historicity of expression to something outside the world; we can adequately perceive it in the functionality and motion of our own body as part of a sole world and in the growing of our perception.

“The quasi-eternity of art is of a piece with the quasi-eternity of incarnate existence; and in the use of our bodies and our senses, insofar as they involve us in the world, we have the means of understanding our cultural gesticulation insofar as it involves us in history” (M.-P. 1993b: 107).

We can thus conclude that the language of painting is always in space and time, universal, while linked to a specific individual, and always open to transformation because the meaning it founds its unity upon is a meaning in genesis (M.-P. 1993b: 106).

After all this, we can now make an attempt to answer the question underlying all of the above commentary and observations: what does art do? How does the artist function?

Art is neither objective representation nor construction, according to the rules formulated within the artistic and aesthetic tradition. It's a process of expression and the artist is the person who “recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness” (M.-P. 1993a: 68). This doesn't mean that the only thing an artist does is to articulate something that's already formulated in his mind³ or to simply convey sensations. The images he/she creates communicate a way of seeing, that of a human embedded in the world – of a person who neither surrenders himself passively to the sensation neither imposes himself upon it rearranging it with his reasoning– “neither the painter who sees nor the painter who thinks –captures the experience of seeing as a being in the world” (Gilmore: 298). Only a painter as perceiving subject is able to capture this experience, a painter who is neither pure conscience nor mere physical body, standing in front of the “external” self-enclosed reality of physical objects. Both the individual subject as well as the isolated world of objects constitute theoretical constructions of modernity that need to be reduced, in the phenomenological sense of the term, to allow us a glimmer of hope in rediscovering the world before it becomes subject of metaphysical or scientific speculation. The painter arrives promising that glimmer of hope. He/she is the one who, in a way, applies the reduction (an into-the-world reduction), presenting through his/her expressive gesture the inner link between meaning and expression, the link connecting the subject (the embodied, perceiving subject) with the object (the perceived world). And in this sense, he/she meets the children's ways of seeing and expressing their contact with the world. He recuperates this rich vision of which the child's drawings give evidence as they try to transport us into the thing in what it is in itself⁴.

Subject and world, long before the arrival of spoken language, these two lead one another in expression; they articulate themselves in what they are: a certain style and, in the case of the subject, a way to reside in the world. The painter's way is to express everything visually, (a painter in touch with his world transforms the world into paintings) and, with this one stroke, he reveals the world as it really is, an inexhaustible, polymorphous being that allows all possible forms of expression without subscribing to any one exclusively. This is the

³ The meaning of expression suggested here doesn't follow the idealistic tradition, as it has been mainly suggested by Croce, which equals expression to intuition and sees the work of art as a clear and distinct image conceived by the artist, during the process of expression which, should be noted, is a clearly spiritual and inner process. On the other hand Merleau-Ponty argues that “Conception cannot precede ‘execution’” (M.-P. 1993a: 69).

⁴ Merleau-Ponty compares children's drawings with adults' drawings and he concludes that the difference between them is that the aim of the child's drawing is to give us the unity of the thing while that of the adult's is to account for only one of the object's perspective visions (M.-P. 1988: 516). Adult's drawing is a kind of substitute, a manageable equivalent of the thing and, in that sense, it can be considered as an impoverishment of the perceived (M.-P. 1988: 517).

“truth” of art, a truth that is not considered as correspondence to an external reality nor as an arbitrary voluntarism of an absolute subjectivity – neither objectivistic prejudice nor unconditional surrender to subjectivism. At the same time it’s also the ‘truth’ of the artist – truth as a constant return to the polymorphous being – that he tries to establish in the inter-subjective ground of history.

In retrospect: Art opens towards the world, a world it doesn’t seek to simply represent, exactly as word (*parole*) doesn’t constitute translation of thought. It’s an attempt to articulate and, as in every articulation effort, it doesn’t coincide precisely with the object it tries to give voice to, it’s not an expression of absolute certainty. The artist doesn’t try to recreate the world as it appears to common perception or scientific speculation. His/her aim is to make visible aspects of things that are not usually visible in every day reality, to invent a way of expression that allows the advent of new meanings and the emergence of new orientation indicators in the constantly changing field of experience. Between the already present and the one that is not here yet, the place of his/her ‘*parole*’ (primordial expression) is at that ‘between’ point, which also serves as the birthplace of thought that stays above all certainties or absolute truths and calls them into question. Artworks therefore are moments of that unfinished expressive effort, which transverse the history of civilization; they do not reflect a pre-existing truth but, rather, they realize it (see M.-P. 1962: xxii-xxiii).

Art Expression and Art Education

Adhering to this particular theory of expression (as *advent*, as expression of meaning) we can put forward a proposal for art education that undertakes and deals with uncertainty and joins art and thought as an expressive–reflexive process, a fundamental query. This approach manages to overcome the one-sidedness, the limitations and prejudices of both objectivist and subjectivist approaches for art education, while at the same time it finds itself concurrent with the way children express themselves.

Adopting an objectivist attitude, with regard to dealing with a work of art, is similar to the prejudice which states, at a philosophical level, that the world needs to be led to absolute clarity, full visibility or in other words to get rid from all the shades and density of its polymorphous richness. Similarly, as far as art education is concerned, there is a bias in favour of an absolutely explainable artistic universe, inside which the work of art becomes the object of an approach focusing on the artwork’s stable structures and identifiable formal characteristics independently of any external (cultural) or other reference (e.g., of any pragmatic reference to the people who experience the work) – of a formalistic approach.

However, the relation to the world cannot be, as we saw earlier, a purely causal, external relation between two independent entities where one stands over against and reflects the other but rather an internal relation, a relation of signification or meaning that is never broken up. Respectively, contact with art and the work of art is not an external relationship but a personal relation, a relation for change and internal transformation as to how we see and perceive our world.

Of course we can’t refuse that it is a good and useful thing for the students to learn how to ‘read’ the works of art in their syntactic organization, to be able to recognize the materials, the figures, the relations between colours and lines, etc. But this is not enough; it is not the best they can draw from their contact with works of art. Besides, artistic reality casts a shadow of doubt on such formalistic approaches, even if such a method claims to adhere to

strict scientific principles applied by experts. What, for example, would be the formalistic analysis of a work of conceptual art and how such an approach could be effective in cases of contemporary works unfolding as free activities, open installations or changing environments? How applicable can it be in cases of interactive works or those that incorporate ready-made objects or even living and breathing beings? This widening of art's field emphasises the narrowness and partiality of formalistic approaches. On the other hand, works of art have never stopped one way or another to make up worlds or to call on us to ponder and look into emerging meanings. And it's within this context that they get in touch with all other works of art, considered as significant forms (at least in the history of western art). Besides, never, neither now nor in modern or in traditional art, a work of art has ever been mere form and this is the key point where formalism errs, not because it overvalues form but rather because the approach is one-sided and incomplete, founded on the prosaic objectivity of numerical relations contained in the work; because it appreciates form so little that it detaches it from meaning, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us (M.-P. 1993b: 114).

Despite how interesting it may be in the context of art education to cultivate the ability of students to identify and process the internal structure of a work, the aim is not achieved until they are familiarized with ways that allow them not only to look for the way a work is organized but to look as well for that which comes into being by the expressive gesture of the work, based on the way it is organized.

On the opposing end of the objectivist theory on art and art education, is another equally single-sided approach, which also suffers from prejudice, the subjectivist prejudice of immediacy of the innate states of consciousness, which, at the level of artistic expression, translates into an immediate internal consciousness of feelings reflected by an art form. Under this prism art is defined as a purely subjective expression and art creation is seen as the externalization of the artist's states of consciousness. And this, as far as art education is concerned, leads to the conclusion that art is the product of impulsive actions, without rules or limitations, and thus it can't and doesn't need to be taught. The educator becomes a detached observer who merely waits for students to unfold their "free" visual expression. Visual arts are seen as an area overflowing with impulsive and unprocessed emotions; to come in contact with them is almost like 'éducation sentimentale'.

However, when we accept that a work of art is expressive doesn't mean that we agree that it 'translates' subjective conditions. "If expression were merely a duplication of subjective feelings, it would not amount to anything", Adorno assures us (Adorno: 163). The ideal in artistic expression is not to imprint such emotions:

"If the latter [the expressed substance] is seen as the tangible psychic content of the artist and his work as the replica of this content, then art degenerates into a fuzzy photograph" (Adorno: 164).

The work of art doesn't intend to convey inner content and emotions via expression. Of course, authentic works of art do speak out, but not about chance subjectivity, nor for some special inner content (feeling). Their language is mainly an expressive one, as we saw earlier, and this is precisely why it is completely free from the widely accepted bias expecting it to be the direct expression of emotions by an individual subject. On the one hand, "expression is not one of the curiosities that the mind may propose to examine but is its existence in act" (M.-P. 1993b: 115); it is a development out of one's existence within the world and

not an external sign of his or her subjective states. And on the other, art as expression is an originating, primary operation, same as language in its creative aspect and, same as language, through this operation it goes beyond itself as system of given signs and established meanings transforming existing codes towards the emergence of new meanings. Artists draw from the reserve of tools they have been supplied by art history and their own education, with the ease they draw on the background and earlier understanding of their language and linguistic forms. The artists's expressive acts may emerge spontaneously, but they draw upon visual sources which are not their own personal inventory, and they carry them into a common universe –historical and cultural– into which they strive to establish their own world of meaning. The language of art doesn't constitute expression of some inner thing but creation of a thing that was not available before and it brings into being.

As a result subjectivist approaches err because they insist on an individualistic account of the artist's intentions, while they fail to see that the person expressing through art is not the artist as private subjectivity. The artist, processing the material available by his/her art (all of which is an inherited socio-cultural product), makes visible aspects of his/her own personal contact with the world and the things he/she sees. Hence, he disassociates these aspects from the private region of empirical ego and assigns them with an element of universality –this means that they can be shared and felt by all those who are interconnected by this network of meanings that constitutes a common ground of understanding (within a historical community and culture). Presented in his work, the expression of his personal contact with the world reveals its inter-subjective character; it opens possibilities of understanding and of sharing: "Expression", as Dewey used to say, "strikes below the barriers that separate human beings from one another..." (Dewey: 270) and this surpassing or crossing boundaries, we could say today, is the very condition of art's existence in our globalized and yet conflictual and contradictory world. And for this same reason, the necessity of art education becomes obvious.

Therefore, art education insisting in this expression-centred orientation would fail, similarly to the objectivist-formalistic approach, to help children learn how to search for that which comes into being by the expressive gesture of the work of art. We need a different approach to help us move in this other direction, which would recognize artistic expression as *advent* and would look for ways this (the emergent meaning) is related with children as viewers, the way it puts their lives in perspective (see Danto: 142) and helps them "understand that there is another way to live, another way to think, another way to be in the world" (Eisner: 9).

And this means that just as art is an attempt to visually articulate meanings, to create meaningful forms, and to establish a common universe by drawing artists and viewers toward these new meanings, correspondingly, art education is an attempt to cultivate students' ability to grasp, understand and respond to such meanings available from art's expressive forms. Encounter with art then, is not to be conceived as exclusively connected to seeing but more as something which also stimulates thought and opens to other ways of grasping meanings different from the conventional ones⁵; as something which offers humans an op-

⁵ Contact with art can provide a reminder that there are other ways of seeing the world and human activity, apart from the instrumental views and commerce, as Andrew Bowie reminds (see Bowie: 1-14).

portunity to enlarge⁶ or even to alter their understanding. It would be a reminiscence of a different contact with the world: an opening to that kind of experience which can lead to an inner understanding of the possibility for a total and global relation with the world and others⁷; a relation similar to the one we can find in children's drawings (M.-P. 1988: 520-521). It is therefore necessary for contemporary art education to re-examine its role and scope into the curriculum, focusing on art's expression value; a value connected with advancing possibilities to surpass the narrow confines of individuality allowing participation in ever changing ways of perception or even transforming aspects of our relation with our world and other people.

Despite how hard it is to shake pre-formed concepts and attitudes for art and art education it's equally important to ensure this other way of approaching art, one that will open for children – as well as us – new ways of seeing and thinking.

“What is irreplaceable in the work of art, what makes it, far more than a means of pleasure, a spiritual organ [...] is the fact that it contains, better than *ideas, matrices of ideas* – providing us with emblems whose meaning we never stop developing. Precisely because it dwells and makes us dwell in a world we do not have the key to, the work of art teaches us to see and ultimately gives us something to think about as no analytical work can” (M.-P. 1993b: 114).

In other words, it opens a way leading from the prose of the world (events) to the poetry of its making (*a d vent*).

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⁶ The arts, as Nelson Goodman has argued, are, just like the sciences, modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding. “Cervantes and Bosch and Goya, no less than Boswell and Newton and Darwin, take and unmake and remake and retake familiar worlds, recasting them in remarkable and sometimes recondite but eventually recognizable – that is *re-cognizable* – ways” (Goodman: 102).

⁷ “Through the action of culture, I take up my dwelling in lives which are not mine», says Merleau-Ponty. “I confront them, I make one known to the other, I make them co-possible in an order of truth, I make myself responsible for all of them, and I create a universal life, just as by the thick and living presence of my body, in one fell swoop I take up my dwelling in space” (M.-P. 1993b: 112).

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About the Authors

Dr. Alexandra Mouriki - Zervou

Alexandra Mouriki (Dipl. of Philosophy, University of Athens. Ph.D. in Philosophy of Art, University Paris I - Panthéon - Sorbonne) is Assistant Professor at the University of Patras, where she teaches Aesthetics, Art History and Art Pedagogies. Fields of interest and research: Philosophy of art, aesthetics and aesthetic education. Publications: She has published a book: *Transformations of Aesthetics* (Athens 2003), as well as several articles on art theory, aesthetics and aesthetic education. She has also translated essays of Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricœur.

Dr. Antonis Vaos

Antonis Vaos was born in Milos Island –Greece. He studied Fine Arts in Rome and he earned his Ph.D. from the Panteion University in Athens. He is presently teaching as an Assistant Professor at the University of Patras, Early Childhood Education Department (Art Education). He has published two books on Aesthetic Education and Art Education in Greece, as well as several articles on art pedagogies and aesthetic education. He has also presented his work in various exhibitions in Greece and abroad.

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