

“WHAT THIS PICTURE OF A GIRL MEANS TO ME”

The Place of Girlhood Images in
the Art History University Classroom

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In 2010, as an art historian interested in pictures of children, I set out to teach what I thought would be a typical art history seminar. The course objective was to analyze imagery of childhood found in the works of Canadian artists, and then, based on the assignments, to produce a website. Partway through the seminar, as a result of input from the young women in the class, the focus shifted from imagery of childhood to pictures of girls. This new focus motivated me to approach the concept of place differently, not as the place of girls in works of art, but as the place of female students in the university classroom reacting to these works. In this chapter I explore the female environment of the university classroom, as well as the website we created, now called *Picturing Children and Youth: A Canadian Perspective*¹ within a framework that connects an anthropological interpretation of place to feminist pedagogy and art historical ways of seeing. I also consider public pedagogy and virtual networking as ways to introduce girls to works of art that counteract the sexualized images of girls that are so pervasive in the media.

The Concept of Place in Pictures of Girlhood: An Art Historical Perspective

In my study of visual images of Canadian girls, I am particularly interested in the significance of place. By place, I mean setting, the type of surroundings where girls are positioned. The girls might be located at home or at school, or they might be in a park or another public space. I also note how the arrangement of the composition comes together in the setting to effect the desired meaning. This emphasis on place arises from my belief that it strongly links to symbolic references, moral and cultural notions, political contexts, and social and religious undercurrents.

In the *Picturing Her* exhibition I curated at Montreal's McCord Museum in 2009, my exploration of William Notman's photographs revealed the cloistered world inhabited by Montreal's middle-class girls in the late nineteenth century (Lerner 2009a). Notman situated his young female subjects in studio settings that simulated three locations: the home, the garden, and nature. The home was where girls learned how to be good wives and mothers, the garden symbolized their natural innocence, and the winter environments emphasized their Canadian identity. These limited depictions of girlhood were in keeping with the charm and reserve expected of girls whether they were performing the daily routines of domestic life or participating in leisure activities.

In relation to the place of girls in recent artworks, at a Society for the History of Children and Youth conference, I considered the role of the road in the social construction of female adolescence and as a location of passage from girlhood to adulthood. My analysis examined the spatial transformation of the street—from a place of homelessness, vagrancy, and sexual vice for girls in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to a landscape in modern times that resonates with the thoughts and feelings of adolescent girls. This, I explained, was the result of changing attitudes to the female body, the recognition of women's place in society, and the acknowledgment that older girls are allowed to inhabit public spaces.

Female University Students in the Classroom: An Anthropological Definition of Place and Identity

This concept of place that I adopted for my research reflects the work of French anthropologist Marc Augé, who defines place as “relational, historical and concerned with identity” (1995: 77). For Augé, place is an identification with emotions and memories, as well as a space where encounters occur and people create social ties. This concentration on place as a location where we maintain individual identities while meeting others and establishing relationships has continued to guide my research, with one important difference: place is more than where girls appear in specific images. I have broadened my interpretation to include the viewer and the environment where the viewing occurs, and how that environment influences the interpretation of the image. Specifically, I now consider the female students in the university classroom where I teach a course on pictures of children to be the *place* of my new research.

In teaching my undergraduate seminar, entitled *Picturing Children, Envisioning Childhood*, I found that despite prodding the students to explore historical images of children and contemporary pictures of

both boys and girls—whether in paintings, drawings, photographs, or film—the images they preferred to analyze were those of contemporary girls. Of these, the works that attracted their attention the most were the creative responses by Canadian artists to the stereotypical images of girlhood found in the media. Unquestionably, the reason for this interest was that the majority of my students were women, which is the case in most art history classes at the university level.

In response to this development, I adopted a concept of place for the seminar that included the political possibilities inherent in the classroom setting. The classroom is where, if the correct guidance is provided, young women can learn new ways to respond to diverse representations of girls. They can begin to acquire the skills they need to critically resist the notion that images of girls, whether artworks or advertisements, are unmitigated expressions of reality. I actively embraced the opportunity my seminar presented to use the classroom as a place for challenging society’s false ideas and provoking my female students into examining their preconceptions.

The Impact of Media Images on the Mental Health of Girls and Young Women

In my approach to teaching, I am indebted to Henry Giroux, a cultural critic and one of the founding theorists of critical pedagogy in the United States. Giroux looks at the ways youth are being presented in the media and how the use of various critical strategies in the classroom can create new conditions for interpretation and creation. In *America on the Edge*, he argues that America’s current political crisis is threatening the democratic foundation of politics, culture, and education in the United States, and he challenges educators to address the political exploitation and manipulation of American youth. He criticizes the “dominant media” (2006: 30) for proclaiming suburban high school girls to be “vacuous, but also ruthless, arrogant, and sexually manipulative” (1999: n.p.).² In truth, these adjectives describe few girls. As reported in *The Facts about Girls in Canada*, produced by the Canadian Women’s Federation (n.d.), girls typically suffer from low self-esteem, stress, a negative body image, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. They experience dating violence, are victims of unwanted sexual comments and gestures, and a growing number of girls are being victimized by sex trafficking. Depression, high rates of sexual assault, suicide, addiction, poverty, and a sharp decline in mental health in adolescents are major concerns.

Playing a significant role in the deterioration of girls' mental health is the widespread sexualization of females of all ages. The media bombards girls with artificially created images that are considered ideal; girls and women are portrayed as either sexually provocative, with the purpose being to sell consumer products, or as passive. In 2007, the American Psychological Association (APA) formed a Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Long involved in issues relating to the impact of media on children, the goal of the APA was to address the concerns of psychologists, child advocacy organizations, and parents regarding sexual images of young women in television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet, and advertising. The shared consensus was that these images, ever more numerous and more frequently displayed, had a negative effect on girls. The mandate was to examine "psychological theory, research and clinical experience addressing the sexualization of girls via media and other cultural messages, including the prevalence of these messages and their impact on girls and the role and impact of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status" (1).

In its report, the task force concluded that the sexualization of women of all ages is a ballooning problem of major concern. Pictures of girls in suggestive poses and seductive clothing are purposefully designed to imply sexual willingness. These provocative images, as well as the characterization of girls as sexual objects through their focus on female body parts, prevent an appreciation of the girl as a whole person. Such depictions are especially prominent in media, such as teen magazines and video games that target young girls and female adolescents. These pictures display a narrow model of femininity and physical beauty that is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for girls to emulate. Moreover, the studies reveal that parents, teachers, boys, and even girls themselves, when communicating with one another—including communication characterized as harassment, bullying, and sexual abuse—contribute to the media messages that sexualize girls. In brief, the overarching societal message is the belief that physical attractiveness should be the key objective of a girl, the first rule of which is to conform to a thin and therefore sexy body.

The report has been criticized, notably in an interdisciplinary feminist commentary published in 2009 by Lerum and Dworkin that challenged the task force's premise that "sexualization should be designated as a harmful and dangerous process that only has negative impacts on girls and women" (251). A review of the literature published since the report's publication (Hatch 2011) was also critical, particularly because of the continued reliance by more recent literature on the studies cited

in the report. Significantly, however, the corpus of recent research supports the major findings of the task force regarding the detrimental effects of sexualized images on girls.

One of the major recommendations of the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls was to look for "alternative presentations of girlhood, sexuality and power" (4) and to develop programs that encourage discussion about non-objectified models of girlhood. As an art historian, I believe that one method of counteracting these false representations is to provide girls and young women with opportunities to critically interrogate artist-created depictions of girls that oppose the predominant social and cultural messages.

Closely looking at and engaging with works of art of this type can be a meaningful encounter that precipitates what Giroux (1994)³ refers to as the "rupturing spirit" (n.p.) necessary to inform awareness and social activism. In my classroom, where positive reciprocity is encouraged, I witnessed undergraduate female students express their ideas and opinions openly as they shared in the responsibility for creating dialogue about the artworks in question. In so doing, they became more aware of their own learning processes and how to think critically about them. During discussions, my female students demonstrated that visual imagery produced by artists can provide a springboard to connect with the real-life experiences, challenges, and ideals of girls.

Picturing Children and Youth: A Canadian Perspective; Website Exhibitions and Essays

The website my students and I created, entitled *Picturing Children and Youth: A Canadian Perspective*, reflects their classroom discussions. The images and texts are arranged according to the structural organization of the seminar and correspond to the class presentations and written assignments. In the first section, the students were given the assignment to work together to conceptualize virtual exhibitions that related thematically to the essays in *Depicting Canada's Children*, an anthology I edited in 2009. The essays consider pictures of Canadian children and youth and take into account the collective meanings of stories, histories, memories, signs, symbols, and perceptions that contribute to the creative production and critical interpretation of visual imagery. By emphasizing approaches that endorse innovative scholarship and methodological diversity, the essays were intended to be catalysts for further research by scholars and students of art history, visual culture, Canadian studies, and the history of children.

For example, the starting point of the virtual exhibition by students Eliana Stratica-Mihail and Hannah Sutherland was the 2009 essay by Derek Foster, "Locating Children in the Discourse of Squeegee Kids." Foster discusses the disparities between media depictions of squeegee kids in Ontario in the late 1990s and the reality these kids faced. In his analysis of four newspaper cartoons by Gareth Lind, he illustrates the harsh approach taken by Ontario's politicians, who blamed the squeegee kids for all manner of socially disruptive and violent activities. Upon reading Foster's essay, Eliana and Hannah contacted Leave Out Violence, a non-profit organization in Montreal founded in 1993 by Twinkle Rudberg after her husband was murdered by a teenage boy when he went to the aid of an elderly woman whose purse the boy had stolen. Leave Out Violence gives troubled youth between the ages of thirteen and eighteen the opportunity to attend photojournalism classes. There they learn various skills, including how to take pictures and write poems about their violence-related experiences, which range from bullying and physical fighting to assault, homicide, and suicide.

Included in the exhibition of photographs taken by the youth in the Leave Out Violence program is Eliana's analysis of the form and content of a picture of a suicidal adolescent girl. Eliana writes:

This photograph taken by a sixteen-year-old teenager from Toronto depicts a suicide attempt by a young girl who ingested a large amount of medication in the form of pills. This action might have many causes as defined by the Leave Out Violence youth, such as depression, a negative self-image, bullying, and parents who are fighting or are alcoholics. The girl lies on the floor, with her long black hair covering her face and her right arm over her stomach; while in her left hand she is holding pills capable of killing her. Next to her, the viewer can see a small open bottle of pills.

My students invariably selected subjects and themes from *Depicting Canada's Children* that they experienced themselves during their girlhood or witnessed in the lives of girls they knew. For example, what captured the attention of a group of students with Latin American, Iraqi, and Armenian backgrounds were the images related to growing up as part of an ethnic minority. Focusing on the binary concepts of inclusion and exclusion, they compared professional photographs with their own family albums, their goal being to discover visual markers of ethnicity. Regardless of where they found connection, whether in the image of the girl overdosing on drugs or elsewhere, the students were forthcoming in their discussions. Even when the subject matter

was ostensibly objective, such as the realistic depictions of daughters by artist-parents, the students' individual feelings, imaginings, and explanations rose to the surface as they examined the images. Indeed, because art history does not pretend to be a field of scientific objectivity, personal opinions on matters regarding human existence and the changing sphere of the sensible are encouraged. Art history, while identifying with the hermeneutical interpretations of history and culture, leaves room for subjective observations that affirm the expressive qualities of the works of art.

Wanting the students to understand the different frameworks that exist for engaging with images of children, I designed this first assignment as a preparatory exercise that would sensitize them to research on child-related imagery. My principal aim was to develop the newly sensitized students' ability to actively critique dominant stereotypes. Following the assignment, each student dedicated considerable time and effort to developing an essay about two or three works by an artist of her choosing. The students were instructed to consider the diverse social, cultural and historic contexts of particular images, the various ways Canadian artists have chosen to visualize children and youth, and the effects of such explorations on the viewer. Their essays can be found in the second section of the website. Here are synopses of two of them:

In her work on Angela Grossmann's *Gang of Three* (2010), Allison Smith explores how the artist exposes a society that blurs the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. The collage, she explains, uses discarded photographs and acrylic paint on canvas to narrate the emotional world of young teenage girls. The various blacks, whites, and grays, while excluding the skin's fleshy tones, nevertheless allude to the veiling and unveiling of the three girls' physicality. Sexuality, desire, and eroticism are conveyed through the covered and uncovered parts of their bodies. The crossed legs and the girls' unsteadiness in their shoes evoke a sense of their unease and awkwardness. Their upper bodies, however, emanate confidence: backs straight, hands on hips, and heads close together as if the girls are sharing secrets and laughter. Allison argues that *Gang of Three* speaks volumes about the adultification of girls. She also sees a second connotation in this sexualization of young females: that girls mimic the popular imagery they consume. What is disconcerting about *Gang of Three*, Allison writes, is that the girls can be compared to Erin Blackwell, the fourteen-year-old prostitute in Martin Bell's 1984 documentary *Streetwise*. Erin, who goes by the name Tiny, delivers one of the documentary's most powerful statements: "I think that it is very strange that older men like little girls. Because they're perverts that is what they is. I mean, I like the money, but I don't like them." This observation makes tangible a

world in which men have sex with girls. Allison believes that the childhood innocence envisioned by Angela Grossmann is an innocence that is bought, sold, damaged, and, finally, discarded.

In her essay, Alice Stratford-Kurus focuses on the children presented by Ken Lum, a Vancouver artist of Chinese heritage interested in identity, portraiture, and language. In *A Tale of Two Children: A Work for Strathcona* (2005) (see Figure 10.1) the children appear quite ordinary in the context of urban Canada. On view as two billboards in the neighborhood where Stratford-Kurus was raised, the photographs address children's upbringing, not just in terms of the children being a product of their upbringing, but also in terms of their relationship to others and the moments that influence them. Although children are examined in these images, the viewer, too, is drawn in and provoked to reflect on his or her own childhood. For example, the image of the mother and daughter is very disturbing. The woman has her hand tenderly on the girl's shoulder, seemingly a sign of support, comfort, and encouragement. Yet the woman is not sitting beside her daughter; rather, she is standing behind her with the back of the bench between them, which can be interpreted as a barrier between the two. The accompanying text states, "You so smart. You make me proud you so smart. I so proud you so smart." These words support the idea that this is a mother who speaks affectionately to her daughter. They also betray that English is not the woman's first language. The back-

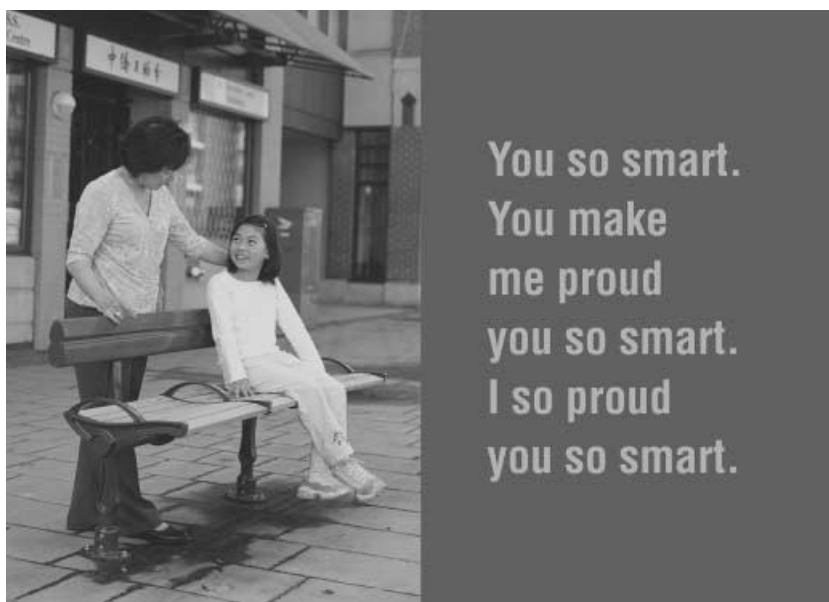


Figure 10.1. Ken Lum, *A Tale of Two Children: A Work for Strathcona*, 2005.

ground in the photograph is Vancouver's Chinatown, so we may surmise that she is a Chinese immigrant who is proud that her child is excelling in Canada. At some level, however, her words may indicate pressure being put on the girl to succeed. Alice points out that it is almost a truism that children are frequently photographed but seldom portrayed. Millions of snapshots attest to the parental proclivity for preserving a record of their offspring's charming childhood, yet few photographs of children in family albums do more than catch a brief moment in time. Alice concludes that by dismantling notions of idealized images of children, Lum creates loaded images—personal, local and intimate yet anonymous, global and public—that mirror the complexities of family life.

Analyzing Images of Girls: The Contributions of Art History and Cultural Studies

As my students and I analyzed these diverse images of girls, we were guided by several critical thinkers associated with the field of art and cultural studies (Lerner 2011). In the process, the insights of these scholars took on new perspectives. Mieke Bal argues, in "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," that the central focus of visuality as an object of study is the relationship between the seen and the seer. When people look at a work of art, Bal writes, what emerges from that act of looking is "a fleeting, fugitive, subjective image accrued to the subject" (2003: 9). In "Enfolding Feminism," Bal borrows the Deleuzian notion of the fold to imagine an embodied vision. The narrative dimension of this vision, she explains, derives "from its appeal to an interaction with the viewer, to its own processing in time ... a bringing into the future." Because of the difficulty posed by the fold to any uniform way of seeing, Bal suggests that the image becomes an allegory for feminism in that it refuses a master viewer. "Looking at a picture requires time," Bal says, and during that time, "the relation between the subject and the object of looking hurts your body" (2001: 328). As such, viewing is an act of intense attention wherein the female body of the viewer connects with the image of the girl in the picture. In fact, what my students, as young seers, offer when describing, analyzing, and critiquing these pictures of girls are their memories, experiences, and personal knowledge.

Also taking on new relevance is Michael Baxandall's (1972) challenge to art historians to consider our role as interpreters of visual objects and to contemplate the limitations of our practices. At earlier times and in certain places, Baxandall reminds us, viewers understood aspects of an image that went unrecognized in later times and other places. He has a

chapter called “Period Eye”⁴ in which he states that developing a period eye helps in the retrieval of the pertinent features of a period’s culture, style, knowledge, and methods of production. The young women in my class certainly helped me develop a period eye by coming up with interpretations linked to the experiences of a generation considerably younger than my own. This is inevitable because, as individuals, we constantly project onto the world interpretative schema whose mental and emotional filters influence our understanding.

With this in mind, more than ever before I am aware that visual thinking—what Rudolf Arnheim defines as “a form of reasoning, in which perceiving and thinking are indivisibly intertwined” (1969: v)—is best when not undertaken alone. Arnheim’s idea of visual thinking involves controlling the urge to immediately identify significance. If one is to comprehend the multifaceted meaning of a painting, he says, one must take the time to study its balance, shape, color, and movement. To this end, I have replaced the *I* with *we* in my teaching. By including in my visual thinking the place of my students in the university classroom, I have arrived at a more nuanced and meaningful relationship with imagery associated with girlhood.

Female Students, the Non-Place of the University Classroom, and Feminist Pedagogy

Returning to Marc Augé’s concept of place, it is crucial to understand the importance of its antithesis, what Augé calls “non-place.” In *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, in which Augé analyzes locations that are lonely, transitory, and sterile, he refers to non-places as “spaces of circulation, consumption and communication,” without individual identity and socially significant connections (1995: 178). Airports, railway stations, superstores, highways, and hotels are on his list of non-places. I would suggest an addition: for female students who pass through the university system without feeling they belong to the learning that occurs in the classroom, the classroom itself is a non-place.

As an adherent of feminist pedagogy I try to make the classroom a place where young women actively engage with the subject matter being discussed in an ongoing reflective process (Luke and Gore 1992; Martin 1994; MacDonald and Sanchez-Casals 2002; Crabtree, Sapp, and Licona 2009). According to Luke and Gore (1992), the objective of the feminist pedagog is to create an environment that empowers students and encourages them to explore the ways in which relations of domi-

nation can subordinate subjects because of gender, race, class, and the many other characteristics of difference. The challenge, Amie MacDonald and Susan Sanchez-Casals (2002) explain, is to break down the binary positioning of teacher and student to open the way for educators to encompass multiple positions that legitimize knowledge gleaned from students of diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Taking this into account, I recognize the classroom to be a place of power, privilege, and hierarchy, and that teaching is an innately political act for which methods of instruction have ideological presumptions, as does the selection of readings and assignments. I consider an undergraduate seminar that focuses on pictures of girls to be an excellent place to counteract the non-place of the university classroom, because it was in that place that I was able to adopt teaching strategies that helped my young women students to combine learning with meaningful engagement. In *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy*, Elizabeth Ellsworth emboldens the teacher to see herself more as a curator of a learning environment than as a teacher, to consider pedagogy not as the transfer of "already-known ideas, curriculums, or knowledges" (2005: 27), but the means for promoting conditions that make the movements of knowledge possible.

As my students analyzed the pictures of girls, I watched them take on the roles of presenter and discussion leader, and collaborate without fear of censure. The classroom setting, imbued as it was with empathy, cultural sensitivity, and respect for ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation, became an inclusive space that recognized the value of personal female experiences. In the concluding chapter of *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy*, Ellsworth sees in William Wordsworth's poem "We are Seven" a young girl immersed in "descriptions of her embodied experiences of continued being." Indeed, for girls of every age, from young child, preteen, and adolescent to young woman, personal female experiences should be understood as the "continuous emergence" (2005: 174) of the learning self.

In my providing my students with an environment that was learner-rather than curriculum-centered, they came to understand that the synergy born of common ground, interpersonal communication, and mutual respect yields new ideas. They engaged with one another in the give and take of intellectual exchange, asking questions and trying out tentative answers in their attempts to comprehend their reactions as visual thinkers and structure their responses to the works. As a result of their dialog, in which they recalled girlhood memories, similar references were revealed and shared interpretations were developed. Without a doubt, being in a classroom setting and looking at images

of girls, particularly recent works by women artists, connected directly with the lives of these young students.

Working together to interpret the images, we recognized two key premises about the artist. The first was that her idea of the girl, rather than being definitive, was a changeable social construction that contained the potential to inform our learning about actual girls. The second was not to interpret representations simply as illustrations of a verifiable external reality. Making images presupposes the agency of a creator and the activity of visual inventiveness, leading us to assume that complex meanings can be embodied in images. A work of art is an artist's construction that involves different modes of production and an artistic consciousness that observes, interprets, references, and transforms external reality in a way that is unique to the artist.

As for the place of the viewer—the person who is critically looking at these works—it is evident from my students' comments and analyses that females studying at the university level face many of the same problems as girls in general: stress, social pressures, academic demands, parental expectations, anxiety, questions related to gender identity, sexual victimization, and suicidal thoughts. Moreover, they continue to be haunted by the apprehensions and insecurities of their girlhood years. Indeed, in key respects women in their late teens and early twenties can be understood as being in the transitional zone between adolescence and adulthood, still actively engaged in the psychological processes by which girls develop into women.

Girl Culture and Photographic Works of University Student Artists: The Catalog Section of the Website

For the seminar's final assignment, my art history students were paired with student artists taking the Boy/Girl Culture photography course taught by artist-photographer Marisa Portolese. In the realm of the visual arts, girl culture has two interrelated meanings. The first, which is the common definition, refers to girls, media, and cultural artifacts, the impact of commodities designed for girls of every age, the struggles girls have with their bodies and identities, and the notion of girls as victims of the culture that surrounds them. This definition includes the alternative viewpoint that girls are free agents able to resist, negotiate, and contribute to cultural messages (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2008). The second definition connects historically to the work of feminist art historians such as Linda Nochlin, who wrote in the influential

text "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" that "the fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education—education understood to include everything that happens to us from the moment we enter this world of meaningful symbols, signs, and signals" (1971: 483).

Writing on why Picasso could not have been born a girl, Nochlin concludes that social structure and social context discriminate against women making art. Throughout the centuries to the present day, this social discrimination still inculcates girls, explicitly and implicitly, at every stage of their development into believing that they cannot pursue art as a serious career. Reacting to this state of affairs, women artists have devoted themselves since the late 1960s to addressing the fact that there are few female subjects and artists represented in major art collections (Armstrong and de Zegher 2006). Despite the occasional dismissal of feminist art for being old-fashioned (Buffington and Lai 2011), women artists continue to purposefully explore subject matter that takes into consideration the circumstances of women's lives and, most importantly, the lives of girls.

Since the majority of students in Marisa Portolese's class were women, it came as no surprise that their work focused on girlhood. My students were tasked with interviewing the artists and writing entries for selected works. Their entries, which constitute the catalog section of the website, took their influence from the classroom environment created for them and an understanding of feminist art-making and art history.

In *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope*, Henry Giroux writes that it is imperative to create classroom conditions "characterized by a pedagogy that demonstrates its commitment to engaging the views and problems that deeply concern students in their everyday lives. Equally important is the need for schools to cultivate a spirit of critique and respect for human dignity that will be capable of linking personal and social issues around the pedagogical project of helping students become active citizens" (1997: 143). This, he says, can create an environment for rewriting the typical scripts of a "commercially saturated and politically reactionary rendering of the ideological and political contours of children's culture" (1995: n.p.), the kind of rendering one might find in Hollywood films about youth.⁵ This rewriting can also refer to imagery of youth created by students in an open university environment. In Portolese's studio course, the students were encouraged to create images that connected with their own lives, interests, and concerns. Below, three of my art history students analyze images of girls created by Portolese's photography students.

In the series *The Seven Deadly Sins* by Carrie Henzie, writes Jodi Schachowskoj, Henzie questions religious theory and how it impacts people and their perceptions of life. More particularly, the artist is commenting on religious ideals and the allegorical manipulation of the young female form. By using the girl as her subject—the girl being a symbol of modern innocence—Henzie criticizes the concept of original sin, which she considers to be a perceived fallacy. For example, in *Pride* (see Figure 10.2), where we see a young girl transfixed by her own reflection, she plays on this fallacy in an attempt to challenge and provoke her audience.



Figure 10.2. Carrie Henzie, *Pride*, from the series *Seven Deadly Sins*, 2010.

In *Family Album*, a series by Julie Morel, the artist examines the relationship between her family and the context of their everyday life, writes Maya Dynbert. Instead of focusing on the kinds of familial events that are typically showcased in a family album, Morel depicts regular day-to-day events, as in the photograph titled *Breakfast* (see Figure 10.3). Here Morel’s two children, Marie-Eve and Philippe, are positioned immediately in front of the observer and presented each in their own little world.



Figure 10.3. Julie Morel, *Breakfast*, from the series *Family Album*, 2009.

Marie-Eve’s direct gaze invites us into the scene, while Philippe focuses on drinking his milk. *Family Album* demonstrates that ordinary events are worth capturing and can be just as memorable, if not more revealing, than a celebratory or supposedly noteworthy family event.

According to Rachel Rotrand, Kinneret Sheetreet’s *Portraits from the Hard Bitches Callout* (see Figure 10.4) questions categories imposed on us by society and the labels we place on ourselves. In this series, all the subjects were friends of the artist and collaborated with her on the shoot. Here, a young woman named Kerri sits on the floor in her own apartment, leaning against the rundown wall moulding while she unconsciously plays with her ear. Her body language is demure, but she stares up at the viewer with strength and defiance. This photograph challenges the



Figure 10.4. Kinneret Sheetreet, *Untitled*, from the series *Portraits from the Hard Bitches Callout*, 2010.

idea of the stereotypical bitch: through her androgynous appearance and body language she simultaneously exudes power and vulnerability. Her inner strength is shown not because she presents a hard countenance, but because she is unafraid to show the viewer a more fragile identity.

Pictorial images shaped by a plethora of assumptions about girlhood have played an important role in identifying the characteristics and traits of girls. The images refuse closure, affirming instead the ambiguous, tenuous nature of female identity. With the help of works by Canadian artists, the students in my art history seminar became more sensitive to the ways in which girls are being exploited in the media and began to consider some of the real experiences of growing up female. We considered physical rites of passage, the social and psychological development of the girl as an individual and in relation to societal structures,

and the ways adolescent identity asserts itself during the transition to adulthood. Key topics that were addressed included sexuality, beauty, body image, self-fashioning, clothing, manufactured goods, the living environments of young people, the upbringing of youth, familial relations, gender issues, and childhood memories. We explored the ramifications of peer pressure, the formation of cliques, and the emotional suffering that can take place during this tumultuous time. We also discussed the importance of the concept of place in the images, noting how the artists articulated psychic spaces as places generated and inhabited by the female figure.

The Networking of Place: Girlhood Artworks on the Internet

In the place of the university classroom, my students formed relationships with one another as they expanded what they knew about culture, society, girlhood, and themselves. But what about the website we produced? By reaching out globally to girls, can *Picturing Children and Youth: A Canadian Perspective* be a place where individual identities and social relationships flourish? In "Place: The Networking of Public Space," a chapter in *Networked Publics* (2008), Augé's definition of place is considered by Kazys Varnelis, a historian and theorist of architecture who specializes in network culture, and Anne Friedberg, a historian and theorist of modern media culture. Taking as their entry point Augé's concept of place as locations in which individuals with distinct identities form human relationships, the two scholars argue that the Internet is one of myriad forms of electronic communication where connections can occur. I believe that Varnelis and Friedberg's assertion is not so much a confirmed reality as a challenge to educators. I say this because as recently as 2012, Henri Giroux reiterated in an interview that the Internet, like other media such as films, newspapers, television programs, cable TV, and cellphones, is "driven by the imperatives of commodification, privatization, consuming and deregulation" (Tristán 2012). Giroux stressed that at issue is "the creation of a human being that views him or herself as a commodity, shopper, autonomous and largely free from any social obligations. This is a human being without ethics, a concern for others, and indifferent to human suffering" (n.p.).⁶

Carefully guided and well-orchestrated programs of public pedagogy have the potential to counteract this state of affairs. As educators, we must expand our reach beyond the classroom into the public places and virtual spaces frequented by our girls and create ethical and caring environments where girls of all ages can interact safely and build

community. We need to design and develop places that enable girls to contribute to the participatory processes of interpretive analysis and positive communication. As teachers, we have the opportunity to extend our teaching environment by becoming public pedagogs who take a critical stance concerning socially pervasive processes, artifacts, and interfaces that influence the lives of our girls as well as girlhood values and beliefs. In the physical place of the classroom, in museums and galleries (Ehrlich 2011), and in the virtual spaces of electronic media, we are in a position to more actively encourage our daughters to criticize pictures that celebrate a paradigm of girlhood that is false. Moreover, we can help them engage with works of art that explore the everyday life actually experienced by girls.

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Notes

1. <http://picturingchildren.concordia.ca/2010/>
2. <http://firgoa.usc.es/drupal/node/22832>
3. http://www.henryagiroux.com/online_articles/doing_cultural.htm
4. <https://books.google.ca/books?id=dmpMcyEX5EC&dq=baxandall+period+eye&q=contents#v=snippet&q=contents&f=false>
5. http://www.henryagiroux.com/online_articles/animating_youth.htm
6. <http://www.globaleducationmagazine.com/critical-interview-henry-giroux/>

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