

Making Messes and Taking Your Time

Art Making in Infancy

by Dana Frantz Bentley

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It's late Monday morning as I step into the quiet of the infant classroom. True, there is a baby crying in the nap room and a very chatty nine-month-old verbalizing about her Cheerios; compared to the clamor of the preschool classroom, however, the infant room always seems tranquil. I slip off my shoes and leave them at the door, careful not to track Manhattan detritus on the floor. At this age, everything goes in the mouth, including pieces of the carpet. Twenty-two-month-old Sophia looks up at me from her perch at the play kitchen and begins to wave her arms. "Paint! Paint!" she cries with a toothy grin. I hurriedly unpack the supplies for today's art experience. Once the wave of enthusiasm begins, it is important to hop on and let it guide us into the artwork.

When my director first asked me to teach an art class in the infant room, I must admit that I thought she was crazy. I nodded and smiled, pretending confidence, all the while thinking, "Teach art to infants? What does that even mean?" But when you are trying to get a job at one of the best early childhood centers in Manhattan, you nod and agree to even the most seemingly insane requests. Thus began one of the most meaningful and informative journeys of my teaching career.

The following is a mere snippet of a four-year journey spent engaging infants in art experiences. The reality is that this narrative comes at the end

of those four years, after a colorful spectrum of mistakes, messes, and crying. Have you ever had to explain to a parent why his baby is entirely covered in blue paint? Because I have. Did you know that the bristles of large paint brushes are especially soothing to teething infants? That's something important to keep in mind when doling out the paint tools. Yet, emerging from all of the messes—some comical, some frustrating—is an understanding about what it means to create meaningful arts experiences for infants. Their thoughtful innovation, excitement, and unique creativity constantly remind me of the broad artistic abilities of even a very young child.

INTRODUCING MATERIALS: THE ART OF MESSING THINGS UP

As soon as I enter the room, I begin to scatter various art supplies on the floor. I drop huge sheets of black paper down with a swoop; they rustle and sail to the ground. Matilda, a thoughtful 11-month-old, looks up from her teething ring and her eyes grow big as she watches the paper fall. Fifteen-month-old Edward crawls over assertively and begins to explore the paper. First, he pats it with his hands, slapping the paper over and over again, delighted with the sounds that his hands make on the paper surface. He says, "Aaaah!" with each repetition. I crouch down with him, repeating his motions in response. After about three minutes, he tires of this activity, and begins to grip the paper with his fingers. He is startled when it crumples beneath his hands, and says, "Uuuuuaah?!", looking up to me again. I smile as I watch the pristine paper become wrinkled under his touch. Over the years, I have learned to let go of my affinity for pristine materials, as untouched perfection does not communicate well with infants. Instead, Edward and I spend several minutes exploring the paper—wrinkling, rustling, crumpling, and finally tearing it. Edward shouts with excitement, waving his hands in the air at the sound of the tearing. This is a very exciting piece of paper!

To begin an art experience with infants, they must have the opportunity to hold a "conversation" with the materials. And yet, how is that possible, since they do not have language in the traditional sense? I have found new ways to start conversations, methods that do not require words (Garcia, 1993). The first issue to address is one of space. Notice that I have gone into the infant classroom, rather than bringing the infants into a specific art classroom. For an infant, security and familiarity are incredibly important. When engaging with art materials, we are asking the infant to try unfamiliar, new things that can be unnerving and a bit frightening. Each new texture, each new tool, is a leap of faith. Thus, it is important to offer these experiences in a safe, secure environment that invites the child to be brave. Tulia Musarti and Susanna Mayer (2001) refer to this concept in their discussion of facilitating learning experiences that are "varied yet stable" (p. 169). By keeping the children in their familiar classroom space, with their caregivers around them, I help them to feel secure and confident. This choice gives me the opportunity to challenge them with new materials and techniques. Infants are more likely to try out new experiences and rise to new challenges when they are in their most secure environment.

Next, I move on to the introduction of materials. Fogel (2001) describes "unpredictable objects" (p. 297), which have the potential to inspire fear in infants if they are introduced

in abrasive or startling ways. In this instance, it is essential that the child be placed in the role of authority over the new objects. Instead of placing the materials on the classroom table, I initiate the process within the physical domain of the child: the floor. Again, I am engaging feelings of confidence and security by beginning the conversation in the child's space. The introduction of the paper invites excitement and enthusiasm as the materials fall into the play space of the child. Then the conversation begins. It is essential to remember that, no matter the age of the child, conversation is always possible. As Eugene Garcia (1993) tells us: "Regardless of the language environment, all infants can be expected to attempt communication. Young children have not yet learned to be afraid of making mistakes; they 'risk' communicating with care givers regardless of the language they speak" (p. 378).

Thus, the conversation begins, with or without the traditional construction of words. It occurs in different ways, depending upon the age of the child. For the young Matilda, a wide-eyed stare is her conversation. Edward holds an in-depth conversation with the possibilities and potentialities of the paper and his own body. He pats, crumples, and even tears, gaining understanding and mastery over the material with each action. The paper responds in a satisfying manner, making noises and giving under the pressure of his small hands. I had particularly chosen a thin paper that will crumple and tear with the pressure exerted by an infant's hand. It is essential to think about these components of materials when introducing them to an infant classroom. If materials are unresponsive or unsatisfying, it limits the conversation possible for the child.

As a teacher, it is important to consider how you can engage in this conversation with the infant. By sitting down with Edward and repeating his actions, I, too, am participating and supporting his exploration of the paper. Through my positive responses and imitations of Edward's movements, I engage in a kind of "social referencing" (Fogel, 2001, p. 305), in which the child looks to my expressions for guidance and support in an unknown situation. As Edward observes my smiles and imitations, he re-engages in the activity with greater enthusiasm through the social support from his teacher. I am aware of what will happen to the paper when I place it on the floor, and I try not to limit the explorations that happen in this space. While it might seem that Edward is "ruining" the paper, he is actually learning about all of its properties; I am scaffolding his learning through my enthusiastic response. Often, it is through messing up materials that we truly come to understand them.

MAKING OUR WAY TO THE TABLE: THE ART OF SETTING THE STAGE

The paper exploration goes on for about five minutes, and is finally interrupted by an impatient Sophia, whose considerable 1.5 years of experience with art materials

have made her somewhat of an authority in the infant classroom. She holds another large sheet of black paper and is shaking it. "Paint! Paint!" she cries, gesturing toward the tall classroom table. She raises her arms in the air, the signal to be lifted up into a nearby high chair. As she does, the paper shakes and rustles, engaging Edward's attention as well. He scoots over, raising his arms as well. Despite the absence of formal conversation, these two have effectively informed me that they are ready for the next component of the art experience.

After seating them securely in the high chairs, I spread the paper out in front of them, taping it down. Today, we are making our paint, and so I take out flour, water, salt, cups, spoons, and a large bowl. I offer the tools to the kids, letting them pound the spoons, thump the cups, and investigate all sides of the large blue bowl. Edward enthusiastically thumps each tool on the table, laughing at the different sounds that they make. Sophia joins this play as well, but tires of it quickly. Soon, she is stacking the cups and placing the small measuring spoons inside, delicately shifting them with her tiny fingers in order to balance them in the measuring cups. During this time, Matilda and her caregiver join us. Instead of sitting in a high chair, the somewhat timid Matilda remains seated in her caregiver's lap, thoughtfully examining and mouthing a spoon. She watches her older peers as they make a ruckus with the spoons and cups, hammering them against the table. Matilda delicately stretches her spoon out and taps it against the table. Seemingly satisfied that she, too, can make a racket, she returns the spoon to her mouth, and continues to watch the scene around her.

The majority of the children's art experiences occur at the classroom table while they sit securely in high chairs. This allows the infants to be fully physically supported during their engagement with art. It is important to remember that standing up, sitting up, touching paint, and manipulating tools can be an insurmountable number of expectations for an infant. By using the high chairs, I remove many of the demands on their small bodies, inviting them to focus attention on the art materials at hand. This approach encourages experimentation and mastery of the art tools that we are exploring on that particular day.

Once again, I consider the very effective language of these young children. Instead of placing them at the table according to my own time frame, I wait for them to make the decision that it is time to begin. Sophia's enthusiasm engages her younger peer Edward, and the two make the transition to the art table in their own time. While this may seem like a small detail, I assure you that it is of the utmost importance when considering the children's

engagement and autonomy as learners. In this way, I encourage what Fogel (2001) describes as "self-agency," or "the sense that one is capable of generating one's own actions and expecting that these self-generated actions will have consequences" (p. 232). Particularly with an infant population, adults are constantly defining the parameters of their world. They are carried, fed, rocked, given particular toys, and placed in specific locations. Through this simple act of waiting for their signal, the child is offered a level of independence and autonomy. Suddenly, the art experience is not a demand made by an adult, but rather a choice that the children have made as learners. In my four years of working with infants, I can say without a doubt that the most successful art experiences are those that permit the infants to make choices regarding their participation. Dewey's (1902) notion of the positive motivator is essential, even with infants. When the motivation for the activity comes from the child rather than the adult, a longer, more focused engagement almost always results.

Notice that when we arrive at the table, we do not immediately begin with painting. I place implements on the table, allowing for their full exploration. This process of exploration means something different depending upon the child. Edward is a music maker, thoughtfully exploring the myriad sounds he can make with the various tools. Sophia seeks a new challenge with these tools—stacking and balancing, testing her fine-motor abilities. And, finally, we watch Matilda, who takes in information about the tools through what Fogel (2001) calls "cross modal perception" (p. 253), using her hands, mouth, and eyes. When making art with infants, it is essential to consider their need to mouth things. This is a vital component to their acquisition of information. To never allow infants to mouth a tool is to limit their understanding as a whole, as they are in what Fogel (2001) refers to as the "oral stage," which he defines as: "The period during the first eighteen months of life when the infant is particularly aware of sensations of pleasure and displeasure in the mouth region through activities such as sucking, chewing, biting, and swallowing" (Fogel, 2001, p. 73).

I am certainly not arguing that all art materials should be eaten, but with infants it is important that some mouthable tools be made available in order to meet the learning needs of the children. Matilda engages in a complex series of learning steps in her interaction with the spoon. As she mouths the tool, her eyes begin to follow the experiments of her peers. Her bright eyes collect information as her mouth continues to work on the spoon. Finally, she tests out her knowledge, tapping her spoon on the table, much like her friend Edward. After successfully executing this step, she returns to her comfort zone by placing the spoon back in her mouth. By offering her the opportunity to know the materials in her own way, we provide Matilda with the stability necessary to take new risks in her exploration (Musatti & Mayer, 2001).

Each of these tiny steps—toward the tables, into the high chairs, and with the materials—offers the child a wide range of learning opportunities. As the children engage in varied processes of exploration, they take in new knowledge about the world around them, and about their own space and abilities within that world.

INITIATING THE EXPERIENCE: THE ART OF TAKING THINGS SLOWLY

It is time to make the paint. I pull out a clean spoon and cup (this step is essential, because many of the tools on the table have been in the children's mouths). The first ingredient is salt. I sprinkle a bit onto the black surface of the paper. It makes a sprinkling sound as it touches the surface, and Matilda, Sophia, and Edward watch with fascination. Matilda pats it with her hand. Edward extends his fingers into the salt, pushing it around and feeling the texture. Sophia pinches it with her fingers, thoughtfully tasting it. Finally, it is time to measure it out and pour it into the bowl. I break down the measurements into threes so that each child has the opportunity to pour salt into the bowl. Sophia claps with delight, crying "Mas! Mas!" after her turn, but she passes the bowl willingly when told that it is Edward's turn. Edward is intrigued by the sound of the salt pouring into the bowl, and so he tosses the cup, clapping at the new sound. The caregiver holds Matilda's hand to support it as she pours in her portion. Matilda watches wide-eyed at the salt making its way into the bowl. We repeat this process with the flour and water, tasting each as we go. Each ingredient has a distinct texture, and Sophia, Edward, and Matilda experiment with each, dragging their fingers across the paper surface. Sophia's mastery of the pincer grasp makes her the most adept at eating flour and salt, and her round face is soon covered in a dusting of flour.

When all of the ingredients are added, we stop for a moment, passing the bowl around for each child to peer into. When they have had their fill of looking, we begin to stir. Each child gets an opportunity to drag the large spoon around the circumference of the bowl, watching in wonder as the three distinct ingredients come together as one. As they swirl together into one new material, it is finally time to paint.

Making materials can be one of the most satisfying aspects of art experiences with infants. In reality, most of the materials end up in the children's mouths, and so I appreciate the security of knowing every ingredient. Making materials also invites children into the art of transformation, further asserting their authority and agency within the activity (Fogel, 2001). I have found that the most effective experiences are those that are taken slowly,

so that each child has the opportunity to come to know the disparate ingredients, and then to witness the magical moment of their transformation into a new material.

Each material is introduced against the stark contrast of the black paper. Since I was using white materials, this offered the most dramatic visual experience for the children. The materials are then sprinkled into the space of the child so that he or she has the opportunity to get to know them. The act of placing these ingredients at the child's place also reinforces this notion of independence. We do not immediately move to measuring and mixing, but offer the ingredients in the "stable" space (Musatti & Mayer, 2001) of the child for their decision-making and interrogation. Only after each material is explored, is it time for the process of measuring and mixing. Particularly important is that moment of examination prior to mixing the ingredients, because here we stand on the cusp of transformation. Each child has the opportunity to see the materials initially; after acting upon them, they create the transformation through mixing. As adults, we forget the wonder of these experiences. It is an incredible thing to see one material and then to make it into something else. Acknowledging this act and taking time for the full appreciation of the experience casts the child as creator in the process.

Each step of this experience is about taking time. It is about allowing for a full development of exploration and understanding of each ingredient. It is about reining in the adult desire for efficiency and instead allowing for the delicate unfolding of an infant's understanding and wonder. One expedient adult directive is enough to upset the whole balance, recasting the adult as authority and creator while adeptly measuring the ingredients or quickly mixing the batter. It is only through slowing down and restraining our own competencies that young children's abilities can emerge.

EXPERIENCING THE PROCESS: THE ART OF MULTIPLE TECHNIQUES

Now it is time to introduce the paint. I carefully pour it out onto the paper in front of each infant. They sit silently, staring at the material before them. Finally, I pour some paint in front of me as well, and dip my fingers in, pushing it across the table. Sophia breaks out into a huge grin, and immediately sinks her hand into her own share of paint, reaching out her arms to smear it across the table. When I am certain that Sophia is thoroughly engaged, I turn my attention to Matilda and her caregiver. Matilda pats the paint softly and then lifts her hands, looking at the grainy texture with interest. She pushes her hands together, rubbing and interlacing her fingers, exploring all of the possibilities of this unique texture. Her exploration moves away from the paint on the paper, as she focuses on the

effects of the paint on her own hands. Her caregiver responds with smiles and support, offering Matilda confidence and security in her material exploration.

Edward is not so convinced about the merits of this grainy, goopy paint. He tentatively sticks his finger into the mound, poking it into his mouth. "Is it yummy?" his actions ask. Immediately, he pokes his tongue out of his mouth in dislike. We may have made it ourselves, but the combination of salt, flour, and water is definitely not tasty. Again he pushes his finger through the paint with a look of consternation, withdrawing at the texture of the paint. I pull two paintbrushes out of my pocket and offer them to him. He looks up at me animatedly and selects a brush, happily sinking it into the paint. He smears the material across the paper, verbalizing with enthusiasm.

I move back over to Sophia. "Mas! Mas!" she cries, her hands covered with paint. I reach for the ladle and pour paint directly onto her fingers. She laughs and claps her hands, spraying paint everywhere. I laugh in response and clap my hands too. Sophia looks at my relatively dry, paint-free fingers and her brow furrows. She reaches for the ladle. I pass it to her, and she pours paint onto my hands just as I did with hers. We both clap our hands again, and giggle as the paint sprays.

Throughout this interaction, Edward has been watching thoughtfully. His avid brushstrokes begin to slow until he drops the brush altogether. Then he reaches one finger, then two, then his entire hand into the paint. A smile breaks out across his face as he submerges both hands and pushes them across the table. Suddenly, he lifts his arms and slaps his hands onto the table, just as he had done with the spoons and cups. His actions create a dramatic "SPLAT!" sound. Edward grins and giggles, and repeats the action. Sophia and I respond in kind as Edward leads us through his paint-splating exploration. Despite the mess that it makes, Edward is right. Paint splatting is incredibly satisfying.

This component of the art experience demonstrates the importance of offering multiple entry points for infant learners. While all of these children may be quite close in age, this does not mean that their art practices will be at all similar. Each art experience should allow for vast differences, inviting children to participate in ways that meet their developmental needs. Musatti and Mayer (2001) support this diversification of learning opportunities in their examination of educational contexts: "Certainly, the goal cannot be the children's acquisition of a single notion. It is more important to offer a setting that sustains the child's motivation to cognitive activity and makes possible various paths for it" (2001, p. 171).

My "goal" as a teacher is always to create a satisfying engagement with the materials that ignites children's

experimentation and curiosity. This engagement looks different on every single child, and the differentiation is part of the joy when teaching infants. In each of their interactions with the materials, these children become the teacher, offering new ideas and possibilities to their peers. By framing their techniques and choices as the guiding force behind the art experience, we invite these very young children to take on a leadership role among their peers and teachers. They also offer sociocultural support to their peers, who might have been afraid to sink their hands into this goopy paint, but who feel supported and challenged when they see a peer attempting such a practice (Fogel, 2001). Allowing for these diverse components and entry points creates a meaningful, challenging, and supportive environment for these very young artists.

As demonstrated by the narrative above, these three children engage with the materials quite differently. Matilda focuses entirely on the texture of the paint, first patting it on the table and then focusing even more deeply by thoroughly exploring it as she rubs it in between her hands. I would guess that Matilda's extended engagement and focus on rubbing and patting the paint with her fingers is the result of the material's generative nature. The texture of this particular paint is complex; it is gooey from the water, thick and white from the flour, and grainy from the salt. Although Matilda's interaction with the material may appear simple, it is quite purposeful and thoughtful. She is engaging in a deep exploration of a new material, offering diverse opportunities for her as a learner.

Edward and Sophia demonstrate a complex process of challenging and scaffolding one another as they work with the art materials. Sophia is all confidence and exuberance, sinking her hands into the paint without trepidation. Edward, on the other hand, is not quite so confident when faced with this "unpredictable object" (Fogel, 2001, p. 297). In response to his discomfort at sticking his hands in the paint, I offer a choice of paintbrushes, again reinforcing this notion of "self-agency" (Fogel, 2001, p. 232). Again, it is so important to offer a choice. While the red or the blue brush doesn't seem to matter much to an adult, it is very important to offer the child a sense of autonomy, and these small choices provide that opportunity. Notice that I do not attempt to make Edward put his hands into the paint. Making art with infants is all about building bridges to the materials, and these bridges cannot be built with coercion. Thus, I offer Edward a small bridge in the form of the paintbrush. It allows him to work with the materials, while respecting the concern that he has about placing his hands in the paint.

The next step is one of social support. Sophia and I engage in working with the paint together. Assured of her comfort and confidence with the paint, I pour the paint directly onto her hands. When she splatters the paint, I laugh and smile, supporting and encouraging her play. In response, she mimics my behavior, pouring

paint onto my hands. Edward is highly aware of these interactions, carefully studying the play in which Sophia and I are engaging. Again, this example demonstrates the importance of positive motivators (Dewey, 1902). Instead of being pushed by a teacher, Edward studies the situation, collects information from his friends, and makes a choice to delve more deeply into the materials. Sophia has taught him that this exploration is safe.

Once Edward begins working with the paint, he becomes the teacher, and Sophia and I are his students. His discovery of the "splatting" of the paint is very exciting, and we respond positively by imitating his ideas with our own paint. These delicate interactions are infants' artistic conversations. Instead of making demands or choices for the child, we offer the opportunity for engagement and technique to evolve, allowing the child to act as guide and teacher. Young children have an incredible ability to rise to this challenge, if we allow them the time and space to make their own choices.

"ALL DONE!":

THE ART OF EXITING THE EXPERIENCE

There is a feeling when an art experience begins drawing to a close for an infant. It is quite different from working with a vociferous preschooler or toddler, who will inform you in no uncertain terms that he or she is finished. With infants, it is a bit more delicate, and you must watch for the signs of "all doneness." Matilda is the first to finish with her art making. She cannot form the right words yet, but she can tell us what she wants quite clearly nonetheless. Her body language shifts. She stops looking thoughtfully at her hands and begins to stretch her arms out stiffly. Her body tenses and her relaxed posture in her caregiver's lap becomes awkward and wiggly. Small grunts of displeasure begin to emerge. Immediately, her caregiver says, "Are you all done?" and lifts Matilda up and carries her to the sink. Matilda happily splashes in the water, rinsing off the paint.

Edward remains engaged for a few more minutes, but it is clear that his interest is flagging. Soon, he waves his hands in the air and calls out his version of "all done." I swoop in and lift him out of the chair, carrying him over to the sink once Matilda is finished. A veteran of the classroom, Edward turns the water on all by himself and begins to wash his hands. He rubs them together, feeling the texture of the paint change as more water is added. He remains at the sink for several minutes, feeling the grains of salt dissolve on his fingers and watching the paint spin down the drain. I notice his interest and place the messy paintbrushes in the sink with him. Edward immediately picks them up and begins to run them in the water, verbalizing animatedly as he explores the brushes, paints, and

water all together. He remains engaged at the sink for almost 10 minutes, earnestly rinsing the paint from both paintbrushes.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of being "all done." Particularly with infants, this is a delicate moment. As they are often buckled into high chairs, it is up to the teacher to release them from the art table. It is tempting to leave them there for longer, to see if they can do a bit more, but I beg you not to fall victim to this temptation. When children are done, they are done; we should respect this choice in order to maintain a positive relationship between children and art experiences. If we constantly force children to remain in the art experience when they feel they are finished, we risk alienating them from art materials altogether.

Knowing when a child is "all done" can be a challenge. Note that in the above narrative, Matilda does not have the language to tell us that she is finished, and yet she informs us quite clearly of her desires. It is up to the teacher to know and respond to the children. In this context, it is essential to use your teacher knowledge of the child's communication in order to decode their needs. Fogel (2001) states, "[The fact that] infants begin to gesture and use words suggests that they make a deliberate attempt to share what is on their mind with others" (pp. 319-20). It is our responsibility as teachers to read those gestures and initial words, and to respond to their meaning.

In my experience, I find that a point of saturation arrives with art materials. They are generative and engaging, but there comes a point when the child has taken in enough new information and needs to step away. The child is literally and figuratively saturated by all of the stimulation and information offered by this new experience, and needs to stop before the experience becomes negative and overwhelming. Again, I return to the idea of the positive motivator (Dewey, 1902). By responding when a child is "all done," we preserve the positive nature of that art experience. Then, the next time a child engages with that material, he or she will feel secure and confident, and often will be more willing to engage in deeper experimentation and challenge. This is only possible when we respond respectfully to "all doneness." This respect for being "all done" also relates to the prior discussion of control and autonomy in the life of the young child. When we respect "all doneness," we honor the choice of the child, allowing her the independence to shape her experiences.

It is important to note that Edward engages in another component of artistic experimentation even after he is "all done." I respect his choice by removing him from the table immediately, but then he shows me a new method of materials exploration. As he rinses off his hands in the sink, he once again engages with materials. Watching his focus and interest, I respond by offering a new challenge with the

paintbrushes. This challenge extends his engagement, while maintaining his choice to be done at the table.

Being "all done" is serious business. And while many of these children do not have words yet, they do have language that informs us clearly of their needs (Garcia, 1993). It is the responsibility of the teacher to respond to these needs in order to maintain positive relationships with art materials and to offer future opportunities for longer arts engagement.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE: THE ART OF COMPLICATION

Sophia does not notice when Matilda and Edward leave the table to wash their hands. So deep is her involvement with the materials, that it is a few minutes before she looks up to find herself the only child at the table. I position myself beside her, continuing to respond to her hand movements with my own. She looks around the table, and then around the classroom, pointing at her friends who have left the table. "All done?" she asks.

This is the crucial moment. Is she telling me that she is all done? Or is she commenting on her friends being all done? Her hands keep working in the paint, even as she says the words, and I decide that her work with the art is not yet finished.

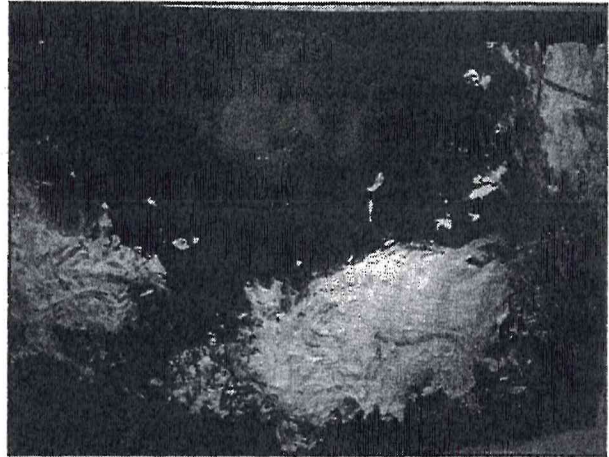
"Are you all done? Or do you want new paper?"

"New paper!" Sophia burbles, and I deftly slide her high chair to a position in front of an untouched portion of the paper surface, watching carefully for her reaction.

"Mas! Mas!" she cries, pointing to the paint.

Relieved that I have made the correct decision, I pour paint onto the new surface of the paper. Sophia spreads her palms flat and slowly smears the paint onto the paper, creating a smooth white surface of paint. I follow suit and find that the grainy paint rolls satisfyingly against my skin. As she lifts her hand, Sophia accidentally drags the nail of her pinky finger across the white surface, creating a distinct black line. Crying out with excitement, she tries it again and again; the result is more and more distinct lines crisscrossing their way across the white paint. She pats my arm and I try her technique too, making my own black line. Sophia claps her hands in excitement, and continues to work. She remains at the table for a total of almost 45 minutes, creating new compositions of sweeping white surface and crisscrossing lines.

The above narrative represents the use of something called teacher knowledge (Gallas, 1994), which is really about the teacher's relationship with and understanding of the child. It may seem confusing that in one breath I

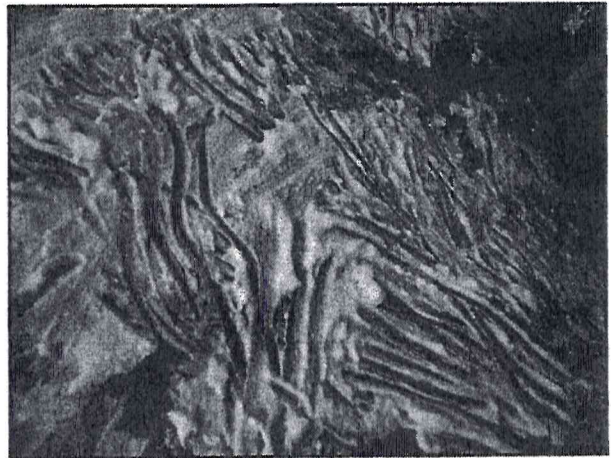


advocate for respecting “all doneness” and then, in the next, I offer a narrative of extending an art activity with a child who just may in fact be “all done.” I can only tell you that a kind of understanding develops from knowing a child well, which led me to believe that Sophia was not actually “all done.” This choice was based on the questioning tone in her voice, the continued engagement of her body with the materials, and her enthusiasm at “new paper.” This is a reading of the infant’s emergent language, or the “total communication” (Basch, 1976) by which the child sends messages to the adult without the use of discursive language. Note that I watched her carefully when I made the choice to extend the art experience; I would have removed her immediately had she appeared frustrated. It is the case in working with all children, but particularly with infants, that sometimes we just know that they have more to do. There are more discoveries to be made, more explorations to be done. In this case, the extension of the art experience led to new learning for the artist.

I have always liked the idea of “complicating” the art experience, when the child is ready. Sophia is an avid artist who cries “Paint! Paint!” every time I walk into the infant classroom. As we watch this particular art experience unfold, she is consistently fearless and rises to each new opportunity with enthusiasm. When working with her, it is important to scaffold not only with positive reinforcement, but also with complications that will challenge and engage her inquisitive nature. When we engage in this extension of the art experience, I notice that her portion of the paper is completely covered with paint. She has done all she can do with this area, and it is no longer generative for her. So, I make the choice to move her to new paper, which may offer different possibilities. When faced with the new paper, Sophia immediately begins using her prior knowledge of the materials to try out new possibilities. Fogel (2001) describes this process as “the beginnings of active experimentation and the search for novelty” (p. 336). Sophia smoothes the paint across the surface, and then makes an entirely new discovery by making an accidental line with her finger. This accidental occurrence leads her to an entirely new line of inquiry.

Sophia’s discovery and her new artistic creation are born of a number of different practices in the infant classroom. One is developing a relationship with the child that allows for understanding and communication, even when a full, spoken conversation is not possible. My knowledge of Sophia as an individual instigated my “complication” of the art experience. The next practice is that of conversation and choices. Instead of demanding that Sophia continue her work, I ask her, and then respond to her enthusiasm. When she continues her work with the paint, I join her, engaging in conversation about the materials by mimicking her actions and pointing to her work.

The final practice, which may be the most important, is taking our time. I do not rush to conclusions about Sophia



Often, it is through messing up materials that we truly come to understand them.

or any of the other children. Art with infants is a slow, evolving process. You must allow time for discovery and invention to emerge. If you are willing to take this long, meandering path through tools, materials, languages, and techniques, new discoveries may emerge.

RE-ENGAGING THE MATERIALS: THE ART OF LONGITUDINAL LEARNING

There is no exact science to creating art experience with infants. I cannot offer all of the answers, nor do I believe that finite answers are a constructive way of creating art in the first place. I can only offer this story, an experience that emerged from my own evolution from disbeliever to believer. Because you can, in fact, make exceptional art with infants. And the reality is that I believe I have learned more from them than they could possibly have learned from me. I will leave you with just a few guidelines that I have found useful in my journey:

- Let the children develop a relationship with the materials by placing materials in the children's space, rather than your own.
- Don't be afraid of messing things up. Pristine materials may look pretty to you, but they have not had any "conversation" with the children.
- Constantly reflect on the "conversations" and choices you might offer the children.
- Build meaningful bridges between the children and the materials through tools, enthusiasm, and peer and teacher scaffolding.
- Respect the child—his or her interests, ideas, and decisions should be at the center of the art experience at all times.
- Respect your own teacher knowledge. Art materials can be daunting, but your relationship with the child affords you the knowledge of when to challenge and when to pull back.
- Leave your own goals at the door. Instead, look to the children's individual discoveries and use those to frame the experience. Each child will bring something meaningful to the art-making process.
- Above all—*take your time*. Art experiences with infants should have an evolution and cadence that reflect the rhythm of an infant's life. Never rush them; by moving too quickly, we inevitably miss out on the best discoveries.

It is over a month later, and I am sitting on the floor of the infant room. I have no art materials today. The classroom is short-staffed, and I have taken the opportunity to spend some time with the infants in their own space, on their own terms. I sit on the floor with Matilda in my arms, leaning against the wall for support. I find it almost unbelievable to see how quickly Matilda is growing up; she wriggles around in my lap, voicing her boredom at our stationary position. I offer her my fingers for support and she hoists herself up, teetering over to the wall next to us. I turn my head to look for her objective, and there it is—our snow painting. Matilda wobbles over to the black paper and the dry, lumpy, white paint. She releases my fingers, supporting herself on the wall with her hands. Her eyes are wide as she looks at the contrast between black and white. I position myself behind her to support her body as she runs her fingers over the rough texture of the paint. She verbalizes excitedly as her hands explore the creation, running quickly over the smooth surfaces, and stopping to stick her fingers into the pat marks she made many weeks ago. When she reaches Sophia's composition of crisscrossing lines, she slides her fingers into the grooves, following their patterns across the paper surface. I marvel at how an ordinary morning has so quickly evolved into a new art experience.

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