Art’s Way Out

Exit Pedagogy and the Cultural Condition

John Baldacchino

In taking the critique of inclusion and entry as a first step, Art’s Way Out’s discussion of art, politics and learning aims to delineate what an exit pedagogy would look like: where culture is neither seen as a benign form of inclusion nor as a hegemonic veil by which we are all subscribed to the system via popularized forms of artistic and cultural immediacy. An exit pedagogy—as prefigured in what could be called art’s way out through the implements of negative recognition qua impasse—would not only avoid the all too facile symmetrical dualism between conservative and progressive, liberal and critical pedagogies, but also seek the continuous referral of such symmetries by setting them aside and look for a way out of the confined edifices of education and culture per se. An exit pedagogy seeks its way out by reasserting representation in the comedic, the jocular, and more effectively in the arts’ power of pausing, as that most effective way by which aesthetics comes to effect in its autonomist and radical essence.

In this fluent, limpid, and scholarly work, Baldacchino examines, inter alia, the problem of empathy in relation to art as an event (or series of events), drawing upon a wide and rich range of sources to inform what in effect is his manifesto. With a profound understanding of its philosophical basis, Baldacchino unfolds his argument in an internally consistent and elegantly structured way. This is not a book to be ‘dipped into’, to do so would miss the development of Baldacchino’s philosophical position; like an art work itself, Art’s Way Out has coherent structure, and a complex, interrelation between form and content, reflecting an artist’s concern for getting things right.

Richard Hickman. Cambridge University

Although art has a limitless capacity to take on myriad responsibilities, according to Baldacchino we also need to consider a ‘way out’ because only then will we understand how art goes beyond the “boundaries of possibility.” As he explains, “our way into reason also comes from an ability to move outside the limits that reasons sets.” This is the ‘exit pedagogy’ that he advocates. And here exit does not mean to leave, but rather to reach beyond, to extend and explore outside the borders we impose on learning, teaching, schooling and most forms of cultural agency. The need to embrace the capacity of art to cycle beyond the contingencies we impose on it also helps to clarify the limits of inclusive arguments for deploying art education for various individual, institutional, and socio-political ends: art as self expression, art as interdisciplinary method, art as culture industry, art as social justice and so on. This image invokes for me part of the legacy of Maxine Greene that Baldacchino revealed in his earlier text, Education Beyond Education (2009), when he explained her thesis of the social imagination, which is best, achieved when teaching becomes “reaching.” What Art’s Way Out gives us is an exit strategy from the deadening tendency to ignore the enduring capacity of art to give life to learning, teaching and the very culture of our being.

Penn State University

This is the sixth book authored by John Baldacchino, the other most recent books being Education Beyond Education. Self and the Imaginary in Maxine Greene’s Philosophy (2009) and Makings of the Sea: Journey, Doubt, and Nostalgia (2010). Currently Associate Dean at the School of Art & Design, University College Falmouth in England, he was full time member of faculty at Columbia University’s Teachers College in New York, Gray’s School of Art in Scotland and Warwick University in England.

Front cover image: Monument to Marx / we should have spoken more (2009) by Mike Ting
ART’S WAY OUT
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity—youth identity in particular—the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant. But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfulfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
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JOHN BALDACCHINO

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καθελε δυνάστας ἀπὸ θρόνων καὶ ὑψωσε ταπεινοὺς

He put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree
(Luke 1: 52)

For my parents

Joseph and Maria-Concetta Lourdes
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The following chapters began their life as papers read in conferences and published in journals. However in this volume, these papers have been greatly extended and rewritten to work together in one volume. Here I would like to acknowledge their original titles while thanking the respective journal editors who allowed me to reproduce these essays (though now expanded and changed).

In the order that they appear in this book the following are the original titles and contexts within which these papers originally appeared:


John Baldacchino
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&
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CHAPTER 1

ART’S WAY

If fascism is the triumph of civil society, the triumph of enraged particular interests, then the subject of representation does not need to be superseded: the danger of its experience needs to be exposed. And the same danger will be the means of exposition.

Otherwise we remain at a beginning of the day.


Art’s way resists definition. Yet we never seem to get tired or even bored of posing the same question: “Is it art?” The problem with this question is not that one cannot answer questions about art. The issue lies with the tautological import of the question’s subject: *art*. Anyone who is engaged in art or lays claim to it would know that to ask whether something is or is not art is at best misleading. There are three reasons for this. First, to ask whether something is art is to assume already what art should be. Second, to do so would mean that art is being posed as a question when the question is not about art but whether x or y is art. Third, one cannot question something twice over.

To claim its truth-value an answer requires a question. But as we have seen “Is it art?” is not a question, given that the subject of this non-question would have to be itself and would be something like “art is art”, which is nonsense.

… OUT?

The above would make no sense unless we recognise that art’s autonomy is art’s antinomy. As an antinomy art claims to be both *form* and *non-form*. For art to be *form* it needs to also play the part of *non-form*. Thus for art to be art it must also be *non-art* or *anti-art*. If art were done only for its sake or for the sake of history, artworks would lose the autonomy by which we claim a right for art to exist as *form*. But if art is entered in strict contexts such as history, meaning, use or even *form per se*, then art as *non-form* is excluded by what we consider as being *not art*. To transfer a question about an object x or y onto a question on art would hide art’s antinomic *way of being*.

Art’s antinomic way of being is at the heart of its aporetic *nature*. An aporia is an impassable passage. As it opens an entrance it perplexes whoever enters it by refusing them an exit. Somehow in an aporetic context, an entrance is the only possible exit. To exit an aporia one must enter it looking backwards while taking an uncharted route. In this book I argue that the claim to this perplexing route for
art is its most direct approach: its entrance is also a mode of exiting, a way out. By
doing art we give ourselves a degree of autonomy. In doing art women and men
could not only speculate, experiment and create possibilities beyond the limits
posed by historical contingency, but would in turn recognize the same limits as
being truthful without having to quibble whether works of art have to be true, good
or beautiful.

As art’s audience we must keep the aporia of art’s autonomy in mind while we
discuss both the art that we do and the works of art that we make. This has nothing
to do with useless reverence towards art objects or artistic processes. Neither is it
an excuse to elevate artists to the state of quasi eunuchs whose virtual castration
hides other forms of promiscuity. On the contrary, this line of argument pertains to
the understanding of art within a context that historically plays up with its
autonomy, giving it an apparent freedom where in effect art finds itself
instrumentalized. So the claim to autonomy is neither a fanciful idea of art for art’s
sake, nor an attempt to idealize the act of art, and less so to force some social or
political content on works of art. Jacques Rancière (2009) explains this succinctly
when he speaks of contemporary art and the political nature of art. “What the term
‘art’ designates in its singularity,” he says “is the framing of a space of
presentation by which the things of art are identified as such. And what links the
practice of art to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material
and symbolic, of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary
forms of sensory experience.” (p. 23)

Without claiming that this would be Rancière’s position, I would add that the
image and object that art would frame and articulate in its autonomous space
emerges from a desire and need to claim a ground on which human beings could
question certainty without the risk of fallacy, self-righteousness or dogma. Yet as
such, this ground must be assumed as a temporary, or at best a suspended one,
because much of what art articulates comes by dint of its groundlessness.
(Baldacchino 2005) We can never define art as being good or evil, true or false.
Art is an activity by which we absolve ourselves from the duties of language and
the power structure that it represents, and instead take on the needs of our
ambitions and projections beyond the limits of what we have.

In this book, readers are invited to speak of and discuss art’s way out. “Out of
what?” one might ask.

In doing art, women and men participate in what they so often refuse to accept
by dint of inclusive reason. Yet our way into reason also comes from an ability to
move outside the limits that reason sets. To think beyond the limits does not mean
to deny the limits. A way out is not a way of refusing responsibility for what is
inside. On the contrary, art’s way out is a full acknowledgement of what defines
and represents the world within its given boundaries of possibility. To exit simply
means to reach and take presentation outside the limits that set such boundaries.
This rejects any simplistic binary that flips between an outside and an inside. Art’s
way out is a radical form of representation and not a denial of representation. As
such, it never remains.
What Gillian Rose recognizes as the predicament by which “we remain at a beginning of the day,” (1997, p. 58) has to do with the “beginning of the day” which is, by logical sequence, located at the tail end of “the uncertainty of the remains of the day.” She describes the condition of this uncertainty through the eyes of the butler Stevens, in Ishiguro’s novel (then made film) *Remains of the Day*. Stevens witnesses his master’s fascist sympathies and collaboration with a sense of loyalty split between his duties to the household and its tradition, and his own humanity and principles. This split left him in an impasse; like a voyeur who, as Rose puts it, “is brought flat against equally the *representation of Fascism*, the *honourable* tradition which could not recognize the evils of Nazism, and the corporate order of the great house, and the *fascism of representation*, a political culture which we identify as our own, and hence an emotional economy which we cannot project or disown.” (1997, pp. 53–54)

Whereas the “*representation of Fascism* leaves the identity of the voyeur intact, at a remove from the grievous events which she observes,” Rose describes the *fascism of representation* as moving “beyond the limit of voyeurism.” It “provokes the grief of encountering the violence normally legitimised by the individual moral will, with which we defend our own particular interests, and see only the egoism of the other—these may be interests of disinterested service, race, gender, religion, class.” (1997, p. 54)

What seems most pertinent to our argument here is whether the political culture within which we seem to oscillate between these two forms of representation is adequate, particularly when we witness overt or hidden forms of transgression. I would argue that our ability to establish this adequacy comes up against the real import of those patterns of power by which representation seems to confuse the cyclic tautologies of power with what is often presented as a democratic, and even liberating, dialectic. Without this distinction, and without such an understanding, what often gives the semblance of moving towards wider democratic participation is more likely to turn onto itself under the pretence that it is making inroads towards social inclusion and political (though never economic) equity. Going by the complex contingencies of history, we realize that inclusion becomes a tautology, with the political consequence of a reinforcement of the established credo based on personal interest, competition and socio-economic exclusion.

“The representation of Fascism and the fascism of representation” Rose argues, “presupposes the definition of the modern, liberal state as the *monopoly of the means of legitimate violence*; it is thus able to explore the changing configurations of violence and legality on which fascism in all its modes relies.” (1997, p. 59) I would add that this is where the notion of a civil society based on individual interest that presumes the conflict of such interests as its condition for freedom, remains wide open to inequality and political transgression; and where more often than not this transgression is legitimized under the pretext of a social order that presumes to “include” and “emancipate” everyone under the banner of social equity, liberty and meritocracy. To this double-edged aggression we become
increasingly numb. We tend to forget that when we are presented with a politics of inclusion what is on offer is a “middle” that presumes to bring together negative and positive liberty, and where we are told that equality could still be attained even within an economic system that is radically inequitable and discriminatory. Rose rightly argues that “it is possible to anticipate that states which combine social libertarianism with political authoritarianism, whether they have traditional class parties or not, could become susceptible to fascist movements.” (p. 60)

What I take from Rose’s analysis is that as we “remain” with the day’s remains, we also remain desperately fanciful of a history that was supposed to have “ended”. We assume that this “dead” history has been sealed and its contingencies forgotten once and for all. We seem to believe that what caused all evil is now gone and that we enjoy a democracy that works simply by the fact that it is under siege by those outside its walls. As keepers of the gates of our democracy we have closed ourselves in. This also means that we remain closed to any possibility of making the same concept of democracy work for everyone even when the rhetoric is that we want to spread democracy. We keep sustaining and reinforcing a war mentality that is not dissimilar from those post-revolutionary conditions where terror ensues—whether under the guillotine in the squares; in the massacre of the natives in the New World; or in the Gulags. In the name of the universality by which they claim their freedom, men and women always seem willing to stay put and become voyeurs stuck in between representations.

What is more poignant is that in getting there, many claim to be politically active—whether in joining the vociferous Tea Party Patriots of latter-day conservatism in middle America, or militate within the Peace Movement in the streets of London, Paris, Berlin or New York. But even if some opt to refrain from political activism, Rose tells us that “we are always staking ourselves in the representation of Fascism and fascism of representation throughout the range of quotidian practices and cultural rituals—when we go to the cinema, for instance.” (1997, p. 61)

While indeed, there is always a backdrop to everything, I would argue that every thing invariably finds its way into the mayhem that we create in order to justify our staying put inside. And this seems to be more intense once we make a decision to stay inside and claim wrongly—though with conviction—that beyond the walls of the polis there is only ignorance and barbarism.

THE REJECTION OF IGNORANCE

As children we’ve been taught that ignorance is the source of all evil and as we were urged to continuously look “at those others who are worse than us” and consider ourselves fortunate, we were fed with one morality lesson after another—from the godly and the atheist alike—that we should endeavour to merit our place in a society whose doors must remain open to all, except of course, those who appear to oppose us or do not make it; in other words, those outside the walls of “our” polis.
Somehow we have come to believe that these “open” doors are reserved to our “fortunate” stead. Those who do not “make it” are either unfortunate not to have a meritocracy that allowed them to aspire to become President, Entrepreneur, Bank tsar or Prime Minister, or they are not lucky to legally live in a prosperous society where, as we are told, capital is the guarantee of meritocracy. And even when meritocracy is not prominent in the narratives of prosperity, there are always liberal and progressive models to make up for the inequity that may well be caused by the same prosperous system that leaves so many behind. While decrying mammon or the free-flowing myth of negative liberty, progressivism gives us another option for self-realization by its egalitarian promise. Such promise would guarantee the unfortunate with a way into the flow, where though the progressive notion of merit would never imply that those who do not make it have not worked hard enough—as some libertarians would be prompt to suggest—we are still reassured that social justice will prevail.

In both these routes towards inclusion—that of merit and that of right—we are urged to engage and appropriate the world with our own images, our own representations. At face value this seems to be an option even when in effect we are also told that the grand narratives of possibility by which we have sustained our traditional, liberal and progressive hopes, are effectively gone. As we realize that what we must contend with are the grounds of popular and visual culture, on which we seem to be allowed to express ourselves so freely that as yet there seems to be no proper law that impedes us from simply flashing out whatever we want to say, do or show (even when what we actually are in control of is next to none) we appear to be happy enough with the noises that we have adequately made across all levels. As we get angrier and angrier at the status quo—or at too much “socialism”, as the neo-cons would tell us—we somehow assume that at the end of the day, we have our representational politics to play with and by hook or by crook, we shall prevail.

The “miracle” of democracy in that it has finally asserted freedom and equality on the liberal grounds that stretch from the Right to the Left almost seamlessly, is safe ... unless we dare ask for more! But then again, the latter-day Oliver Twists of liberal and social democracy seem to agree that once we get rid of extremists and once we stop the fundamentalists, the excesses of fascism and communism are no more.

One wonders where is the problem. Is it found in the insufficiency of a political representation of “truth”? Or is the problem more organic, where the refusal to represent reality has to do with the assumption that somehow we must not represent it because, we are told, representation is just a form of hegemony, or a meta-narrative past its sell-by date? But in doing so, don’t we abdicate from the wider order of representation? Don’t we reject the possibility of the aesthetic? And by rejecting the aesthetic don’t we absolve ourselves from the prohibition of the image by engaging in the excess of what has become the other Mecca of representation—that of the immediacy by which everything is fed through a closely included (read well-monitored) popular culture?
A polity that is all too quick to claim inclusion as a shibboleth of social justice and equality often backfires and turns out to be very misleading. To argue that inclusion is the mechanism by which we begin to have equality, is to forget that social politics, which include schooling, health and other forms of social provision, are invariably established on a State that is never open to concrete redistribution of means, knowledge, and ultimately wealth or power. An inclusion that would effectively bring redistribution must never reinforce the radical inequalities by which our sensibility, ownership and understanding of the world are being formed.

While we mean one thing when we insist—and rightly so—that everyone is entitled to an equal right to being, knowledge and power, the actual forms of inclusion on the agenda mostly reinforce those ways of imposing who must be included. In other words, to claim inclusiveness is not necessarily conducive to a redistribution of knowledge or sensibility—let alone wealth. Neither does it give any more power to those who are supposedly included. More often than not, inclusion soon becomes another instrument of discrimination.

The privileging of the “popular” arts and culture as would-be “progressive” and “inclusive” entries into the School and the Culture industry is indicative of the same dilemmas that we confront with that of political representation. Often the assumption of inclusion perverts the radical essence of aesthetic education, a radicalism which begins with Schiller who unequivocally tells us that “the artist is indeed the child of his age; but woe to him if he is at the same time its ward or, worse still its minion!” (1967, Letter IX, §4, p. 56).

This book presents a discussion of art, education and culture that is proposed from the very lens of the politics of aesthetics. A main concern in this discussion is not some re-vindication, repetition, or critique of pedagogy per se—be it traditional, liberal, progressive or critical. Rather, this is a discussion that returns to art and reads it from what us moderns tend to assume as the origin of the many debates in which we remain engrossed. Somehow we often grapple with the same questions that drove Walter Benjamin into exile, fleeing a polity that plundered any residue of hope, freedom and justice that may have survived the horrors of World War I but which soon vanished when humankind was plunged into further carnage.

In revisiting some of these questions while seeking to make some sense of what we are engaged with now, also returns us to art as a formative space. It is in this space that we realize that we are political not because we do politics through art or culture or education, but by drawing and securing distinctions by which we can ultimately recognise the impasse and turn it into a revolt against the predicament that traps us between the representation of Fascism and the fascism of representation.

To clarify the various aspects and wider questions discussed in this book, I divide it in three parts: Infant Modernity, Empathic Recurrence and Impasse as Revolution.
Infant modernity

When we speak of childhood, we also speak childhood. We speak about children, but we also speak as children. We do so by retaining a memory of childhood as a common ground, a kind of grammar that allows us to understand what it is to be a child. The chapter which follows and opens the first part of this book is titled Childhood’s Grammar. As this might suggest, the discussion deals with the child. But unlike books on education that begin with a psychological and sociological take on childhood, here childhood is discussed from a very different perspective. Rather than developmental issues, this discussion is prompted by two paintings: Carlo Carrà’s Antígrazioso (Bambina) (The Ungracious [Girl], 1916) and Giorgio De Chirico’s Il cervello del bambino (The child’s brain, 1914). As it engages with these works, this chapter is mainly concerned with the notion that childhood provides us with a common ground of understanding, over which we then construct our understanding of the world. This form of understanding relates to issues of formation where learning is distanced from a way of assuming knowledge and being—as some sort of bridge between an epistemological structure that awaits an ontological realization—but where learning is more akin to play and semblance.

As semblance, learning is mimetically assumed by means of culture—a culture that reflects and conditions how we form and inform the world. Yet learning as a formative assumption based on semblance remains passive unless it is realized through the recognition of the power—and limits—of interpretation. This is where play comes in. To test and tease out further questions, a reading of Schiller’s notion of semblance and play is proposed vis-à-vis Carrà’s work, whereas a discussion of interpretation finds context in De Chirico. The discussion of a “metaphysics” of childhood is partly related to Carrà’s and De Chirico’s Metaphysical Art and to how, as a common “grammar”, a discourse on “childhood” is akin to the definition that Bergson (1992) gives to metaphysics as a means to “possess a reality absolutely.” More importantly the issue of origin and genesis comes in against a reading of Benjamin’s early works, including his essay The Metaphysics of Youth and his work on German Tragic Drama. In this respect, the question of childhood supplements, as a metaphor, the infancy with which we came to assume the narratives of Modernity—of which we could argue that we remain the critical offspring, and by which we could even call ourselves Modernity’s children.

Modernity’s Children is the title of the third chapter, where two images of childhood, one by Rousseau Le Douanier, L’enfant au polichinelle (Child with a Marionette, 1903) and another painting by Carlo Carrà, Ricordi d’Infanzia (Memories of Childhood, 1916), begin to suggest what an infant Modernity could imply. These works operate on two levels. The first is their immediate representation of a child that is depicted, albeit stylized, in what amounts to a naïf genre. The second level opens up the definition of infancy at a time when Modernism was considered to be in its childhood in terms of aesthetics, discourse and the polity. In the dual meaning of a naïve art and a modernity in its infancy, the guise of “innocence” is another entry—often characterized by hegemonic
deception—into the problematic of the modern and its ensuing cultural condition. In the context of the ferrous historicity by which Modernity left its mark on art—not to mention the cultural polity that sustained art—we find in these images a response where the naïve purports an incisive narrative that knows no innocence at all but which becomes a categorical description of existence.

This presents an invitation to play with narratives, where from an art historical position one desires to briefly look at particular instances of Modernism and its depiction of childhood; while from a political-philosophical stance, one must look beyond the invitation to educate the child, and engage with what art has entered—only to quickly exit—when it gets entangled with the cultural maturity of the discourse of the naïve. But here a quandary emerges in terms of how the categorical image in Le Douanier and the enigmatic figuration in Carrà could both and at the same time claim the same childhood in terms of Modernism. To address this issue, I refer to Rancière’s discussion of Schiller’s notion of play vis-à-vis the politics of the aesthetic in his Malaise dans l’esthétique (Aesthetic and its Discontents [2009]) and Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of toys in his essay on play and toys, “Il Paese dei Balocchi” (which refers to Pinocchio’s trip to Funland) in his book Infanzia e Storia (Childhood and History [2001]).

**Empathic recurrence**

If childhood takes on the issue of an origin, which is dialectically construed as it is continuously brushed against the dialectical grain of historical contingency, the direction of art and the self in a formative-aesthetic context must somewhere and somehow start touching on the idea of empathy. In chapter 4, Strong Empathy, a discussion of empathy as an aesthetic category begins to alter how we define the actuality of our own modern stance—where the modern is the modo, the immediate act, by which we see, touch and do the world within the political and aesthetic sphere. This happens not only as an act (through art) that educes and alters the apparent infancy of the naïve form, but more by way of assuming hybrid meanings by which art continues to find excuses to pause. It is in such a pause from the immediately “infant” that the naïve becomes empathic by way of its antipathy with the first person notion of the artistic act.

Beyond the cultural condition of a first person notion of art—where the “I” is assumed as the embryonic world that grows into a case for everything—new hybrid forms of doing by which we are invited to exit the visual certainty of the polity, continue to alter the grounds of aesthetic definition, and with it, the pedagogical possibilities that emerge from this exit. In this state of affairs, temporal duration and spatial presencing are no longer curtailed by a tension between social responsibility on one hand and individual freedom on the other. Rather, a ground of convergence seems to expand into a certain form of empathy that becomes itself an aesthetic category as identified (and uttered) by the self as a convergent “I”. By taking this position, art shifts the emphasis of convergence from that of the artistic medium to an intentionality that is purported by convergence per se. Here we are not simply assuming a relational geometry of
intentionality within art’s propensity to a hybridity of learning and making (as Art Educators often claim). Rather, this convergence is supplemented by art as a possibility that operates from the immediate empathic assumptions by which women and men could begin to assume a constellation of subsequent actions—be they aesthetic, cultural, political or pedagogical. In the narrative of empathy, the hybridity of the “intended forms” of art becomes synonymous with the work as an “inherent form” where, one would add, the self evolves beyond the circumstantial (and commonplace) economies of artistic-pedagogical practices. It is also in this way that art seeks to move out of the circumscribed assumptions of empathy, by actually assuming parallels with phenomena where the structure of empathy lends itself to the problematic of contemporary arts practice as an argument for a reality that also refuses to be all embracing and “strong”, but which in turn assumes a “weak” position.

As the title of chapter 5 suggests, the notion of a Weak Reality has nothing to do with the disregard of the truth or reality, but rather, it takes on the very idea of reality from a position that retreats into the background without ever losing sight of what matters. This directly relates to the work of Gianni Vattimo (1988), on “weak thought” (pensiero debole). Our ability to engage in illusion through the implements of art is a way for us to reinforce the case for reality in terms of its centrality within the study of both art and philosophy. Yet here the argument for reality is not taken from the position of strength where everything is subsumed under the culture of comprehensive construction, but where instead reality takes on a “weak” stance. The need to move from reality as an historically or socially constructed strength to reality as a ground that, by dint of its willed retreat becomes a horizon that is open to all, is becoming more urgent. Such urgency comes from the need to rebut the assumption that any argument for reality is an illusion because of the relativity by which truth is dismissed in certain artistic, philosophical, political and pedagogical quarters.

By assuming art’s ability to exchange reality with illusion, I am reiterating the case for reality as Truth—truth in the sense of what we assume, hermeneutically, by the limits of what we could possibly describe, depict, and therefore interpret. In this respect the truth is that we are limited by our interpretation, and it is within such an assumption that reality is assumed as weak. To do this I would suggest that we reconsider the idea of equivalence between representation and presentation in art forms. I will be arguing that this form of equivalence has been historically useful in specific works of art in order to diffuse a number of ideological illusions by which art has been alienated from truth. In this respect this chapter turns its attention to two forms of illusion: instrumental (qua ideological-political) illusion, and critical (qua artistic-pedagogical) illusion.

What is illusive becomes a form of sustaining the space within which we claim autonomy through art. Chapter 6, Weak Art? takes the discussion of a weakening of thought and reality further into that of art. It first revisits the idea of illusion in contemporary art, as it oscillates between the notion of a language and that of a space. Here I inquire whether the usage of the term language with respect to contemporary art has become a fixed ground by which art loses its ability to
purport groundlessness, and whether a notion of weakened art would regain that ability. This is also done via a discussion of the idea of space as it emerges from the notion of the khôra—a discussion that keeps resurfacing around prominent discussions (like Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida’s) of Plato’s Timeus. Mindful of the established philosophical discussions around logos, mythos and khôra I frame the relationship between word, image and space by discussing a number of works by Antoni Tàpies. I argue that in Tàpies’s work binary assumptions such as those of word and image, language and space, or logos and mythos tend to leave us with a transient ground—which ultimately necessitates an overcoming of the very idea of ground. This overcoming happens in a “bastard space” identified with that of the khôra. It is also in this transience that I seek to identify illusion. One would assume that in the way transience becomes illusionary, the illusion that emerges is not the kind of illusion by which, in common parlance, one assumes tropes or tricks of the eye. Rather, the illusion that emerges from this process is closely bound to art’s criticality, and more specifically it is intrinsic to the (often disturbing) questions that are prompted by contemporary art.

A political pedagogy of art that exits the realm of strong constructed reality cannot avoid the issue of beauty. The seventh chapter seeks to discuss this Outwith Beauty where the relationship between art and beauty often falls between two stools. This relationship is either overtaken by the notion of aesthetics, where art must follow in the assumed paths of the beautiful; or it forsakes the idea of beauty in order to “free” itself from the perceived reification of art as an aesthetized thing. To mend this apparent paradox many have come up with the notion that a set of conventions could define art and beauty (separately or as one) through the identification of specific norms and standards by which the relationship between art and beauty will be redressed, institutionalised and made rational so that both art and beauty are seen for what they are supposed to be. Yet the history of art and beauty shows that these attempts have confirmed—rather than mended—a “broken” middle (as Rose would call it) between art and beauty by actually revealing a further aporia—that of the relationship between value and standard. This chapter argues that the relationship between art and beauty is embedded in the peculiar conditions that make it. These conditions are often expressed in the form of a parallel symmetry between value and standard as represented by the economy of constructed reality. In order to exit such conditions, the specificity of art and beauty as distinct categories must be resumed through the method of epoché where beauty and art are spared from the morass of either value or standard. In such context this chapter draws specific arguments from both phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics where beauty and art are revealed as transient grounds of the subject on the one hand, and as processes of interpretation on the other.

However, while a method of epoché might afford a temporary suspension from the constructed necessities which standardise the relationship between beauty and art, the aporetic nature of art dictates that this method continuously slips into a myriad tangential modes where what is ultimately asserted is the contingency by which reality retains its “weak” position. But for what sake? In the eighth chapter Within Happiness the discussion turns to the notion of happiness, adopting the lens
of contemporary art’s “language” of historical contingency. The discussion is contextualized by the relationship between contemporary art and the idea of human happiness. This reflects an interest in seeking a definition of happiness between two forms (or rather, two mediators) of human happiness: (a) an ironic engagement with the world: which serves as a way of understanding the world from a humorous viewpoint that is equally critical as well as “formative” and “transformative”; and (b) the irenic ideals of human consciousness: representing the realization of our teleological projects that would transcend the accidental nature of the human condition. Far from a classical divide between contingency and universality, the relationship between the ironic and the irenic in contemporary art attests to an understanding of the dynamics of human happiness in the forms of hope, empathy, love, friendship, community, philanthropy, etc.

While these human qualities are indeed a must in our desire to fulfill and make sense of our lives, contemporary art also warns us off any hope to achieve happiness through identitarian and (or) universalized routes; especially when throughout history, we know that such qualities have been deformed and manipulated by oligarchs and hegemonies of all sorts and persuasion. Another question that emerges from this discussion has to do with the variegated philosophical distinctions that have emerged around the notion of happiness—from that of eudaimonia to agathon; from happiness derived from eros to that derived from the ethical imperative that is signalled by the communitarian ideal of agape. This is assessed via art and it is through art (and perhaps within the context of a discourse on art) that this chapter takes on the question as to whether happiness is indeed a suspended question, and whether this could only be sustained as a form of constant recurrence—maybe a constant exit.

**Impasse as revolution**

The last part of this book moves within the realms of what is here identified as the cultural condition. This condition is neither described through schooling nor through the often-expected discussions of how the arts provide the event of egalitarian inclusiveness. Instead, this book closes with two chapters that deal with a discussion of formative politics; more specifically that of the discussion of cultural theory as read from the debate on a third way in the politics of equality; and last but not surely least on the notion of revolution read from the lenses of art, comedy and the critique of the critique of representation.

In chapter 9, *Culture’s Learning*, it is argued that ultimately art’s exit and resistance to the conditions of cultural necessity, has to be addressed from the horizons on which culture is read as a pedagogical form that is distanced from the all inclusive notion of a cultural-pedagogical machine (often referred to as Bildung). Here, culture is seen from its pedagogical and theoretical reification where learning must be reconstructed from within a critical programme that rejects the teleological construction of culture itself. If culture is ever going to be sustained as a formative horizon, this formation needs to yield to a “space” where the notions of logic (read: method, process, instruction, etc) and programme (read:
knowledge, teaching, learning, etc.) are steered away from the quandaries that plagued the philosophical and pedagogical assumptions of Cultural Studies. Key is the concept of struggle in pedagogy where the whole notion of formation must be questioned on the basis of other, third spaces that do not simply pertain to Third Way socio-liberal discourses. Such spaces have their root in earlier debates within the European Left, particularly those spaces that would claim a Gramscian context, as further elaborated by the experience of the Italian labour movement, as lead by political leaders like Enrico Berlinguer, who already in the 1970s was speaking of a terza via, a third way by proposing forms of rapprochement with the centre while offering a democratic alternative (alternativa democratica) that would be ideologically secular. Similar forms of reasoning came from philosophical quarters such as Cornelius Castoriadis and Jean François Lyotard’s critical, though different, positions on Marxism which originate from a platform that they once held in common through political groups like Socialisme ou Barbarie.

Just as this seems to lend itself to a proposition that pertains to critical pedagogy, this chapter proposes something radically different, which seems to fall out of kilter with the expectancies of a politics of emancipation. Here it is argued that an exit from identitarian cultural-pedagogical formation (as Bildung) must assume a radical route that may have to reject the constructivist assumptions that have always underlined liberal-progressive and critical pedagogies. In this respect, the assumption of a third space is neither a form of straight-laced emancipation, nor a positive dialectic that would presume some spontaneous-historical moment of revolution, where somehow the unexpected will change the cultural conditions that sustain prevalent hegemonies. Instead, it may well be a case where the very idea of impasse—as suggested by art’s excuse to pause—becomes a form of Revolution.

So how would impasse become revolution? This discussion frames the concluding chapter, titled Exit Pedagogy. To appear to justify impasse as a revolutionary form, one must qualify what this means. The parameters where such a statement could be held would be that of contemporary art. Contemporary art’s “political” nature is often confused with an expensive appropriation of popular culture’s tendency to “shock” and “scandalize”. However we know that any attempt to politicise art by turning it into a form of direct action results in fetishist consumption. Here it is argued that any assumption of the political in art must be sought in the condition of impasse, where art emerges in its “total” (read: paralysed) form. It is in this impasse that through art we reject the myth of benign emancipation—as often assumed by liberal, progressive and critical pedagogists—and propose that as a political act, art is located in “what we have not yet found.” Not unlike the perennial “crisis of the Left”, art’s impasse is that horizon over which we come to understand the notion of “condition” — be it human, modern or postmodern — as the paradoxical logic by which we could, once more, politicise the world (rather than simply change it).

Thus the concept of an exit pedagogy begins to suggest how one could argue that art’s predicament—where its sole revolutionary choice is that of impasse—would translate into a pedagogical and political stalemate. The question here lies
squarely with how pedagogy could assume a programmatic strategy of exit. An exit pedagogy would have to take a political stance that seeks to move out of the limits of interpretative truths by recognizing the limit as the universal singularity by which truth is seen as the event of multiplicity on which to operate politically as well as pedagogically. Such a pedagogical position begins to shift the affirmative and inclusive illusions by which the horizons of human learning and cultural formation have been stultified within the constructed confines of a “strong” reality where forms of populism have stifled the radical essence of aesthetics and subsequently aesthetics education. In taking the critique of inclusion and entry as a first step, this book’s discussion of art, politics and learning aims to delineate what an exit pedagogy would look like: where culture is neither seen as a benign form of inclusion nor as a hegemonic veil by which we are all subscribed to the system via popularized forms of artistic and cultural immediacy.

An exit pedagogy—as prefigured in what could be called art’s way out through the implements of negative recognition qua impasse—would not only avoid the all too facile symmetrical dualism between conservative and progressive, liberal and critical pedagogies, but also seek the continuous referral of such symmetries by simply setting them aside and look for a way out of the confined edifices of education and culture per se. Also this pedagogy would need to suggest new spaces of learning such as that which lies between schooling and deschooling. Like Gramsci’s notion of the folklore of philosophy and Lyotard’s redefinition of paganism, an exit pedagogy seeks its way out by reasserting representation in the comedic, the jocular, and more effectively in what I would argue to be the arts’ power of pausing, as that most effective way by which aesthetics comes to effect in its autonomist and radical essence.
PART I. INFANT MODERNITY

The artist is indeed the child of his age; but woe to him if he is at the same time its ward or, worse still its minion!

FRIEDRICH SCHILLER
CHAPTER 2

CHILDHOOD’S GRAMMAR

The course of history forces materialism on metaphysics, traditionally the direct antithesis of materialism (…) Children sense some of this in the fascination that issues from the flayer’s zone, from carcasses, from the repulsively sweet odor of putrefaction, and from the opprobrious terms used for that zone. (…) An unconscious knowledge whispers to the child what is repressed by civilized education; this is what matters, says the whispering voice. And the wretched physical existence strikes a spark in the supreme interest that is scarcely less repressed; it kindles a “What is that?” and “Where is it going?”

Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics (1990, pp. 365–6)

In 1916 Carlo Carrà (1881-1966) painted Antigrazioso (Bambina) (literally: Anti-Gracious [Girl]). His art had then reached a stage that would leave behind the idea of a futurist utopia. By 1916, just two years into World War I, Carrà’s dream of a new world sustained by a freedom borne of a technological absolute was shattered by the terror of the trenches. The war that he and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla and other futurists hailed as the world’s “only hygiene” (Marinetti et al., 1914), echoing Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1969, pp. 202ff), turned into one of the worst nightmares in modern history.

In 1916 Boccioni died, aged 34, falling off a horse. It was a death that lent itself to a degree of cruel irony. As young anarcho-syndicalists, Boccioni and Carrà adhered to the heroic ideals that were supposed to wipe the world clean from an imperialist past while stopping the advancing plutocracy of a brutal bourgeoisie in its tracks. They thought the war would finally get rid of the dead wood accumulated by an ailing and corrupt aristocracy that held Europe back. They hoped that war would clear the way for the advancement of new technology that would lay the foundations for a new society, sustained by a young political vision.

Instead, the First World War accelerated the course for previously unimagined plutocracies. The young and creatively “virile” society that was supposed to emerge from the detritus of war was no less brutal than the old aristocracy which now turned to unlikely allies—the social democrats and liberals—to keep together a series of weak governments that would soon succumb to Fascism. Unlike Boccioni and Carrà, Marinetti was enamoured by the dark side of the “young and virile” bourgeoisie. He would try to salvage futurism by forming his own Partito Politico Futurista (Futurist Political Party) in 1918. But far from realizing the avant-garde which Boccioni and Carrà dreamt of in their vision of a newly freed
technological polity, the Futurist Party confirmed how Marinetti’s politics was nothing but another brand of aesthetized fascism. This would seal the end of futurism as its platitudes for the new were quickly absorbed into Mussolini’s grotesque Caesarism.

As to Carrà’s and Boccioni’s teacher Giacomo Balla, who would live to the age of 87, and who like his students grew within the social realist and symbolist traditions of Pellizza da Volpedo, Giovanni Segantini and Gaetano Previati, he would seek refuge in more abstraction, as if he were seeking a lost childhood. In synchrony with the demise of futurism, Balla’s dynamic work found itself eclipsed by the delusions that followed from Fascism. Like that other great futurist Fortunato Depero, Balla took refuge in form, while his vision for a heroic future was gradually internalized into a kind of neo-symbolism.

“YOUNG AS IT IS …”

Beyond what never became a specifically identified “post-futurist” art, the signs of what would become of the Italian historical avant-garde are best represented in the phase that Boccioni’s art was already entering just before his untimely death when he painted his *Ritratto del Maestro Ferruccio Busoni* (Portrait of Maestro Ferruccio Busoni, 1916), and what Carrà began in the same year with his *Antigrazioso (Bambina)*.

In Boccioni’s last works there is a return to a figuration that could be retraced through a sense of painted materiality, which to a degree is initially made manifest as an apparent send-back to the social realist chromatism of his youth. In the *Ferruccio Busoni* portrait, we find a sense of materiality expressed by the sheer mark of paint. In returning to the genre of portraiture Boccioni appears to revisit his pre-futurist sense of figuration. The portrait’s rendition expresses the masterly hand of a painter who sustains the tradition, even when as a futurist he loudly declares that art museums should be burnt and tradition consigned to cemeteries.

The sense of painted materiality is a hallmark of all of Boccioni’s paintings throughout his entire career before, during and after the heyday of his futurist activism. However in his Busoni portrait one does not find the same approach to time as found in his futurist works. In Boccioni’s futurist work, materiality entwines in dynamic simultaneity where art aims to gain what Bergson (1992) characterizes as a duration that is materially sympathetic by capturing universality in one act of intuition. Yet in the Busoni portrait, simultaneity is internalized. It becomes immanent. By such immanence, Boccioni captures duration more as a recuperation of time than as a reach towards the future.

In his *Abbozzo di una Nuova Estetica Della Musica* (A sketch for a New Aesthetic of Music, written in 1907) Ferruccio Busoni takes the view that “there is nothing properly modern—only things which have come into being earlier or later; longer in bloom, or sooner withered. The Modern and the Old have always been.” (1962, p. 76) A composer of new music and a copious editor and re-interpreter of the standard *classical* repertoire, Busoni was attracted to the futurist vision. The attraction was mutual and Busoni’s work fascinated the futurists. Yet as one listens to Busoni’s
music the sense of the modern recalls the old, while under his editorship, the old takes a modern turn. In effect Busoni liberates the arts from the dualistic idea of the old and the new, and instead he presents the arts in their perennial actuality within a sense of history that is not tied to such categories. This is not alien to the futurist sense of the painterly and sculptural, where notwithstanding their rhetoric against the past, futurists worked from the strengths of the solid realism and symbolism learnt from Previati and Segantini, not to mention the symbolist-impressionist works of the sculptor Medardo Rosso. So it is from within—and because of—this received tradition that futurists could reject the past.

In a way Apollinaire was right to be suspicious of the Italian futurists. His first impression was that they looked like clumsy students of a Derain or a Picasso (1972, p. 200). But this description is clearly distorted, mostly because Apollinaire fails to see how in futurism’s modern idiom there remained a deeply rooted sense of tradition—notwithstanding all their bombast against l’arte passatista (passéist art). There are some who would claim that Apollinaire’s free verse prose-poem titled L’Antitradition futuriste. Manifeste=Synthèse (Futurist Antitradition. Manifesto=Synthesis, 1913) published in Marinetti’s paper Lacerba, was not short of being ironic in that Apollinaire’s scepticism over the Italian avant-garde was never really allayed.

It is not farfetched to realize how the dialectic of the modernist avant-garde of the early 20th century could never operate unless it was rooted in what it claimed to dispense with. Busoni, like others before and after him knew this well. If, like Busoni, one casts her eyes on the short-lived distinction between the Modern and the old, one would, in the same manner, discern in the modern the same sense of childhood that the composer recognizes in western music. “Music as an art” argues Busoni, “our so-called occidental music, is hardly four hundred years old; its state is one of development, perhaps the very first stage of a development beyond present conception, and we—we talk of ‘classics’ and ‘hallowed traditions’! And we have talked of them for a long time.” (1962, p. 77)

In Busoni’s approach to the arts one must not read tradition by its longevity, but by its recurrence, by the multiplicity with which it re-emerges, ever new. In a footnote, Busoni offers a curious definition of tradition. It is “a plaster mask taken from life, which in the course of many years, and after passing through the hands of innumerable artisans, leaves its resemblance to the original largely a matter of imagination.” (1962, p. 77n) While the mask of tradition could be seen as one, those who re-define it are many. From this one takes it that the arts could not be uniformly defined within one long tradition, and that the idea of an unbroken line that sustains its longevity as one coherent tradition is a myth.

Tradition becomes a matter of the imagination because just as music and art cannot be deemed as uninterrupted traditions—even when the arts would claim their traditions as spanning back to over four centuries—univocal definitions and uninterrupted identities amount to nothing. In what one might anxiously identify as the “occidental arts”, virtually no one would be able to identify a unitary, and less so unique, sense of art. If one were to speak of a tradition, one would have to
engage with a perpetual sense of childhood—or inversely, a sense of perpetual childhood (which is never the same).

Young as it is, this child, we already recognize that it possesses one radiant attribute which signalizes it beyond all its elder sisters. And the lawgivers will not see this marvelous attribute, lest their laws should be thrown to the winds. This child—*it floats on air!* It touches not the earth with its feet. It knows no law of gravitation. It is wellnigh incorporeal. Its material is transparent. It is sonorous air. It is almost Nature herself. It is—free. (Busoni, *ibid.* p. 77).

Yet Busoni laments that freedom is never understood by the world—and here one presumes he is speaking of an “occidental” outlook. This is a world that does everything to “disavow the mission of this child; they hang weights upon it.” He declares that music must remain free because that is its destiny. Unlike the painter or sculptor, who “can represent only one side or one moment”, or the poet who “tardily communicates a temperament and its manifestations by words”, music “realizes a temperament without describing it” and in its swiftness it moves through consecutive moments. (*Ibid.* pp. 77–78)

This is the futurists’ ambition: to achieve for the arts a simultaneity by which time is grasped in its essence as *durée*, and where the whole is grasped not gradually and therefore in a *relative* way, but as Bergson suggests in its simple and therefore *absolute* way: at one go in intuition. (1992, p. 59) This is also the kind of childhood that Modernism sought to restore in terms of forgetting about the past and seeing the future. Not unlike Busoni, Boccioni and Carrà wanted to take the weights off the arts and see them *float on air*. And yet what they restored was neither the lightness of childhood nor their dreamt utopia of a future, but what Walter Benjamin calls in his essay *The Metaphysics of Youth* (written in 1913/14), the “emptiness of the present”:

> We wish to pay heed to the sources of the unnameable despair that flows in every soul. The souls listen expectantly to the melody of their youth—a youth that guaranteed them a thousandfold. But the more they immerse themselves in the uncertain decades and broach that part of their youth which is more laden with the future, *the more orphaned they are in the emptiness of the present.* (Benjamin 1996, p. 10, my emphasis)

**THE METAPHYSICS OF CHILDHOOD**

Unlike Boccioni, whose painted materiality finds its solace in chromatism, Carrà returns to an earlier history by reclaiming a period in art that he considers as a kind of aesthetic *youth*. This is expressed in a palette that reconfigures what the painter deemed as the first principles of paint—light and shade. It begins to reconcile the modern with another way of asserting the *real*, while cautiously refusing Modernity’s progressive scientism. In moving on, in looking beyond futurism, Carrà looks back. He seeks a palette that recaptures the earthly *sensation* of the
rendition of paint in the work of early Renaissance artists, particularly Paolo Uccello, Fra Angelico and Giotto. In Carrà’s work this sensation inaugurates a formal choice that rejects the simultaneity of futurist chromatism, and instead “returns” to an archaism that looks naïve, if only in the way Carrà aims at capturing a sense of “primitivism” that to his mind equates with first principles, not only of art but also of existence and reality in general.

Elsewhere I have argued that in 1916 Carrà was once more at the threshold of history. Just as when, as a futurist, he endeavoured to capture the universal in the intuitive moment of “art’s individuation”, so in his post-futurist period Carrà seeks to restore a hierarchy of significance in terms of form as a dialectic between nature and reality. (Baldacchino 1996, p. 76) While for Carrà the futurist, art was in a perpetual sense of becoming, Carrà the metaphysical artist returns art to being. As being, art seeks meaning in what it is. Being does not emerge from the now, but from what Carrà regards as the world’s essence. In Antigrazioso Carrà seeks to reveal this ontological meaning in art. Somehow he traces back the notion of plastic dynamism to the Aristotelian original meaning of dynamism as dynamis (as power in potentiality). Form is actualized when it reaches the state of enérgeia (as power in actuality). In this way being actualised fulfils the potentiality of form. In the humanist tradition we are told how the artwork already resides in potentiality, not only in the mind of the artist, but more so in the material from which it emerges. Thus as a block of marble, a sculpture awaits its fulfilment until it is actualised as an artwork by the sculptor. In an Aristotelian approach art is an actual representation of reality’s potentiality. In its continuous search to fulfil our sense of being in the world art comes to represent reality by fulfilling it.

Read against this Aristotelian process between dynamis and enérgeia Carrà’s metaphysical art gives the impression of a “recovered” lost origin, aimed at taking art back to a sense of essence. Its aim is the reconstruction of a beginning presumed to be full of potential. Metaphysical art returns the futurist’s vision of a plastic dynamism to a sense of dynamism that stands for the origin as a potential essence. Yet to invoke an essence does not come without risks of invoking first principles—which Carrà seems to do in his approach to “primitivism”. But while he claims back the “primitive” in art, Carrà is also too aware of art’s historicity. His sense of essence remains grounded within the limits of history.

In the aftermath of the Modernist avant-garde one must qualify essence from the lens of historical contingency. Any context that purports itself to be historical confirms the idea of history as that which remains contingent on what we say and do. This relates to the limits within which we assume, narrate or even declare truth. Such limits cannot afford to become formulaic. Here the metaphysical and the pragmatic come to signify each other in curious ways. What is defined as metaphysical must be read from how we choose to understand the world as a repository of things—as pragmata—of which we constantly try to make sense.

By saying that the world is a repository of things, one means that the world is all we have and all that we know. In other words, the world is every thing. This everything would include external forms that we attribute to the presumed immanence by which we seek to imbue the world. This also means that everything...
becomes the limit that asserts the truth of our historically contingent humanity and
its situatedness. And yet it is because of this situatedness and the limits by which it
claims truth that humanity takes an aesthetic leap into what it considers to be art.

Read within the parameters of everything, an ontological return is a return to
where we think we are in the world. This impresses on art the idea of a
metaphysical retracing that in turn constructs the idea of an origin. Any idea of
origin may just be a way—even an excuse—by which the artist seeks to resolve a
series of formal problems that would put him or her in a better position to address
(the idea of) existence that is presented by art as a phenomenological puzzle. Yet
more than a puzzle this reveals a dilemma. A return to childhood forwards a vision
by which children would, as Adorno says, take pleasure in “the fascination that
issues from the flayer’s zone, from carcasses, from the repulsively sweet odor of
putrefaction.” (1990, pp. 365–6) This is where metaphysics is revealed for what it
is: as other than an idealisation of everything, but as an expression of the limits that
are revealed by the same sense of essence with which we seek to make sense of the
world. As a stage in one’s life that is deemed to be “nearer” to existence’s first
principles (if birth is to be considered as a continuous return to the first principles
of an individual) childhood reveals the truth of the human and with it, that of art’s
ability to capture the limits of any search for an essence of being.

To the question “In what time does man live?” Benjamin answers that going by
what philosophy tells us “he does not live in any time at all.” (1996, p. 10) But
while the emptiness of time—that of the present—surrounds men and women, this
is not the case with immortality. Writing in the same year that World War I began,
Benjamin already senses the end of what Boccioni and Carrà hail as a future full of
time. The sense of the present that emptied any sense of time from the living left
Benjamin with no choice but to take succour in the recollection of one’s childhood:

In despair, he thus recalls his childhood. In those days there was time without
flight and an “I” without death. He gazes down and down into the current
whence he had emerged and slowly, finally, he is redeemed by losing his
comprehension. Amid such obliviousness, not knowing what he thinks and
yet thinking himself redeemed, he begins the diary. It is the unfathomable
document of a life never lived, the book of a life in whose time everything
that we experienced inadequately is transformed into experience perfected.
(1996, p. 11)

So to claim back an origin—as Carrà seems to do in his metaphysical art—one
cannot restore or reconstruct a genesis. What Carrà claims in 1916 is the same
sense of origin which a decade later Benjamin describes as “that which emerges
from the process of becoming and disappearance.” (1985, p. 45) Origin emerges
from historicity and not factuality. As a stream of becoming, the currents of the
origin swallow “the material involved in the process of genesis.” In this respect the
historicity of the origin is inherently dialectical, where history is not recounted by
going through its facts but by understanding its development. If one were to tally
this concept of origin with Benjamin’s earlier identification of the here and now of
a history bereft of time, then any “return” to one’s childhood presumes a dialectical
reconstruction of a life that may have never been lived but which recoups its sense of living. To live, one cannot simply experience facts. Beyond facts, one must reclaim and transform experience itself. As an author who “begins a diary,” Benjamin wants to see experience perfected. Maybe it is in this inability to claim experience as a child—because in childhood there is no such thing as experience (Benjamin 1996, pp. 3–5)—that youth becomes metaphysical.

The sense of the metaphysical in Carrà’s immediate post-futurist work of 1916, particularly his Antigrazioso (Bambina), cannot simply correspond with a pictorial meaning. Antigrazioso carries a deeper philosophical narrative in terms of how Carrà’s lost futurist utopia is transformed by a sense of dejection that makes time look impossible. This impossibility of time, this emptying of all that was once supposed to redeem the present from the past into a future, leaves no choice but to “return” to an origin that would somehow perfect an experience that was once proscribed.

Here Carrà’s art slowly moves towards Metaphysical Art. At this point the shell-shocked futurist crosses paths with another artist, also a casualty of the same once-“redemptive” war: Giorgio de Chirico. De Chirico’s metaphysical art brings up the relationship between memory and life—that is, the memory of life and life as a series of memories. As attested by the empty spaces and tall architectural structures that characterise works like La Nostalgia dell’Infinito (The Nostalgia of the Infinite, 1912), De Chirico’s works raise questions that orbit around nostalgia, the meaning of space and place in the making of the psyche, the hidden segments of childhood and a sense of origin whose dialectic moves beyond facts of behaviour. In these works the artist internalizes a sense of historicity by giving image to the unconscious. Although the image of children does not appear to be central to De Chirico’s work (because he does not paint images of children), childhood is ever present—sometimes in disguise, so to speak. This is particularly the case in his painting Il cervello del bambino (The child’s brain, 1914).

As fate threw them in each other’s way, De Chirico and Carrà had no choice but to reassess what art should be doing from then on. Putting aside the mutual accusations and counter-accusations over who did what with respect to the very concept of Metaphysical Art, the way their works coincide begins to tell us something more radical and extremely profound about childhood as a grammar. In this grammar form does not stop with art, even when it is art that allows women and men to metaphysically reclaim their own inexperienced youth.

CHILDHOOD AS A FORMATIVE GRAMMAR

De Chirico and Carrà’s work offer another take on childhood, by which we could begin to approach art pedagogically, and therefore investigate what one might call art’s philosophy of learning. Yet even if one were to begin with art’s inherent pedagogy, this is not where it would stop. The very assumption of a grammar of childhood must raise a wider critical discussion about the image of the child and childhood, as well as that of learning with a view to the problematic of experience and its (im)possibility. This is because if as Agamben (2001) contends, “the
expropriation of experience was implicit in the fundamental project of modern science” (p. 11), then the impossibility of experience now would imply other than an attempt to restore it. Rather it would involve a restoration of a sense of childhood where the lack of experience affords us with the sight of the real face behind what Benjamin (1996, p. 3) calls the “mask of the adult” that is experience itself.

But how is childhood ever restored? How is experience, in its ambiguous history and science, ever presumed in terms of possibility? In this respect one must begin from two ends: that of art and that of learning. These two ends must operate on a ground that remains disputable—as well as disputed—by how it could never aspire to be resolved in any form or message. In other words, the presumed ground on which art and learning operate must remain philosophical, just as the aporia by which these two ends are disputed pertains to the paradoxical nature by which art and learning sustain human creation. Both cases—that of a philosophical ground and the aporia of art and learning—hold the same reason by which neither could be read in vacuo, especially when brought together critically and where the aim is to retain the agôn that sustains such a critique.

The artistic context takes a foundational aspect in that it enables us to find and give further meaning to three key words: the child, the image, and what is here being identified as a metaphysics of childhood. Although philosophical in its tenor and inasmuch as it appears to approach Benjamin’s reflections on the “metaphysics of youth”, the term metaphysics must be played by a desire to claim an origin (understood as per above), which reminds us that we all share childhood. By this I do not mean that we all agree what childhood is or should be. Neither does it follow that childhood is key to everything—whether existential, artistic or pedagogical.

In this case childhood is related to metaphysics—that is, with an origin “that emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance” (Benjamin 1985, p. 45). In this respect a metaphysics of childhood would stand for other than knowing what childhood is all about. Childhood is not a first principle, and therefore it holds no key to subsequent teleological projects. As we speak of it, we speak of childhood as adults. As we experience it, we experience childhood from an impossibility that reminds us that we can only discern what it might be by observing others who are still children. This means that we speak of childhood from two immediate levels: a personal reflection of one’s own childhood, which is invariably full of memories but also replete with inaccuracies, projections and experiential anathemata (as experiences that we transcend, deeming them as beyond our temporal limits); and a presumed universal level, which stems from the simple fact that we were all children and that there will always be a childhood as long as there are humans left on Earth.

To take on the personal level of childhood first would only require a few seconds of reflection: Everyone was a child; the five, six, seven, eight year old who lived at a specific address, and went to a particular school in a specific country. Like many, though not every child, one lived with one’s parents. Sometimes, though not always, one shares childhood with one or many siblings. Siblings share
their childhood with their immediate family as well as a larger, wider, family of younger and older cousins. One shares childhood with other (unrelated) children: friends and schoolmates, children living in the same neighbourhood, etc. As an adult and parent one experiences another individual level of childhood. As a parent, one shares childhood with one’s child’s personal experience, which she shares with other children, girls and boys, who are her relatives, friends, etc.

Yet this means as much to me as it might mean nothing to anyone else. My childhood is one amongst billions. This may say several things about my individuality, but it also means that as an adult I belong to a universal childhood that we can only assume as being “universal” because we all have been children—nothing more, nothing less. Somehow this universality turns into its other: it becomes contingent to sheer number. As such, the universality of childhood comes from a rational accommodation of quantity. By the convenience of reason we all recognise ourselves as a universal species that perceives within the experience and notion of childhood a common grammar of humanity. By dint of this humanity—or lack of it—individuals are or have once been children, and would always share and continuously construct myriad definitions of childhood. In their plurality these definitions are disparate, but they also provide a common point of reference. The latter looks more like a point of departure to which we always return by the habit of making sense of what the adult’s experience could never really explain. We all know what childhood is, even when we have very different experiences of it. But this experience is by definition never one that could be either resolved or relied upon, given that childhood also indicates a stage of continuous movement and, by implication, a continuous return to the same desire to know the world.

When we speak of childhood, we also speak childhood. We speak about children, but we also speak as children. We do so by holding onto the idea that a memory of childhood is one of those few common grounds that we might be able to claim. Even if this ground is invariably constructed and could be disputed on every possible other ground—be it cultural, historical, sexual, racial, etc.—the notion of a memory of childhood constructs a kind of grammar that helps us articulate what it is to be a child. Yet the physicality of these constructs always reminds us that they are manufactured origins; they are exclusive as soon as they include new elements in what we conveniently find more accommodating. In this way childhood becomes “metaphysical”—it precedes the physical actuality by which we project it. Bearing this paradox in mind, the metaphysics of childhood cannot be limited to children. It must also refer to a state of mind that stays with us beyond childhood itself.

One could argue that the metaphysics of childhood is a grammar of memory. It constitutes the structure within which we tend to construct myriad identities for ourselves. Beyond its developmental structures, whose properties constitute the most tangible constructs of this grammar, childhood is metaphysical by the sheer fact that it remains—just as in Busoni’s analogy, the plaster mask of tradition remains, even when it appears to change in each and every re-emergence. Because it remains, childhood retains a language of Being that overcomes any limit by way of age, development or circumstance. Inversely, age, development and
circumstance become other than personal, and would become everyone’s concern. In this way, the developmental properties of childhood are externalized and seen for the constructs that they are. As it remains, childhood also becomes a form of representation that allows us to move between other forms of representation.

The constructed character of human development must be kept in mind as discussions of childhood move into matters of reason, the imagination and morality—in other words, when we engage with the dilemmas of truth, beauty and goodness in matters of learning. As a mediator (or signifier) of a human community, childhood provides us with an infrastructure for the construction of a moral imagination by which we judge and define a continuously changing set of values. The moral imagination is central to issues of formativity. I say formativity and not formation because I want to distinguish between a passive formation of knowledge (by accumulation and experience) and an ability and activity of reforming—as a process from becoming to knowing. Formativity is ontological first, epistemological later. (In other words, it pertains to being so as to become knowable.) As a process, learning as formativity indicates that first the learner is, after which the learner knows. This distinction helps me, later on in this chapter, to latch onto the notion of image as a doing, and therefore an image as a form of knowledge that comes from within a relationship that provides a point of origin from within the self—as being.

Formativity falls within the boundaries of a sense of being by which we continuously inhabit and construct ethical spaces that provide an edifice of knowledge, and within which we construct those values that enable us to move on and develop strategies for life in the form of learning. By inhabiting (and constructing) our spaces we learn to be. By being, we learn to know. The catalyst of formativity provides an ever-changing terrain on which we assemble both space and knowledge.

**PED(AGO)GY**

The ancient Greek word for this terrain of assembly is **agôn**. Etymologically, **agôn** is retained in the word **pedagogy**. In ancient Greek **agôn** (and its derivatives **agônos** and **agonô**), denotes many meanings. It means an assembly in the sense of both a meeting-place, as well as a place of combat. It also implies a moving agent towards a legal dispute (as a lawsuit), which suggests other forms of intention such as exertion and struggle. In other words, the edifice for formativity within the meaning of the word **pedagogy** is not entirely benign or straightforward. Formativity implies a negotiation of values and actions where the experience of individual knowledge and the construction of social morality cannot be assumed as “natural” or as a set of procedures that one could take for granted. Pedagogy in this wider context implies a formative process that is contested and fought for. This
context is therefore sustained by a continuous construction (and reconstruction) of a plurality of narratives—be they legal, epistemological, ethical or aesthetical.\footnote{For a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between agón and learning, see also my \textit{Education Beyond Education} (Baldacchino 2009a).}

Understood in terms of the Latinised \textit{pedagogia}, we often make of pedagogy a method of teaching the child. However we should keep in mind the notion of \textit{agón} as foundational to the other Greek term \textit{paidagogéo}—a term which, unfortunately, in English lost its original meaning to the rather brutish notion of the \textit{pedagogue}, when in effect it should belong to the notion of a leader and \textit{facilitator}. As understood in its Greek meaning, pedagogues facilitate a journey that takes place on the grounds of the same \textit{agón} over which, as members of a community, we share \textit{being} through processes of \textit{learning} and \textit{doing}. If we keep in mind the notion of childhood as a metaphysical grammar by which we share \textit{being}, we could then argue that education implies an act of sharing our understanding of \textit{being} in the world on the universal grounds of childhood, reconstructed as a \textit{common origin}.

This humanist notion of education has somehow been lost in the intricate polity of language. Even after the Enlightenment, education wavered between a rationalistic view of the world and that of a more culturally and poetically embedded vision. Perhaps these two poles are emblematized in the rational and scientistic certainties by which Rene Descartes sets out his \textit{Regulae ad directionem ingenii} (Rules for the Direction of the Mind, written in 1628) on one hand, and in Giambattista Vico’s response in \textit{Scienza Nuova} (The New Science, written in 1725) where he proposed a poetic development of humanity founded on knowledge, learning and culture.

As we still struggle between learning by standards and method, and learning through creativity and the imagination, our concepts of learning seem to have forgotten another ancient concept of learning; this time related to the notion and definition of memory and, as Socrates tells us in Plato’s \textit{Phaedo}, to that of \textit{immortality}. For obvious reasons the Socratic notion that learning is indicative of a recollection of an omniscience which the soul allegedly enjoyed before it was burdened by the mortal body, may not sound attractive (or indeed effective) in our modern attempts to put up with the challenges of curricular politics. Yet I would like to think that beyond its \textit{poetry} Plato’s notion of learning remains an effective safeguard of what we are all about—as individuals that have an invariably diverse, yet somehow common interest in the process of learning. After all is said and done, the whole notion of childhood does not pertain to education simply because we presume to \textit{educate} the younger generation. Rather, we have a direct interest in education because we all share a grammar of childhood through which we sustain a modicum of \textit{hope} in a world that always presents us, in its factual state, with the loss and fragmentation that questioned the bond between the true, the beautiful and the good.

Referring back to the citation from Adorno’s \textit{Negative Dialectics} which opens this chapter, one finds how \textit{en passant}, Adorno suggests that what the “unconscious knowledge whispers to the child” is “repressed by civilized
education.” Yet the wretchedness of physical existence “strikes a spark in the supreme interest that is scarcely less repressed; it kindles a ‘What is that?’ and ‘Where is it going?’” (1990, pp. 365–6). As to how these questions come to be answered is a matter that strikes at the heart of formativity and the contingency by which learning is politicised through education. If the moral constructs by which we also reconstruct our sense of childhood still sustains the repression sponsored by “civilized education” then the assumed bond between reason, the imagination and morality is bound to be questioned, and with it the very idea of the “good”. Somehow childhood remains just about a tangible point of reference over which we could all claim a right to memory, even when the “good” is in itself defied by the very myth that sustained it in the first place and the political mechanisms that continue to instrumentalize its assumptions.

Child psychologists often tell us that childhood is a signifier of adulthood. If there is still place for the word “essence” in our contemporary vocabulary, we might be correct to claim that childhood just about approximates a representation of what essence may be. But as argued above, any sense of essence remains contingent upon the historical character of our constructions of the idea of origin and childhood. This is where the first entry (that of learning) stops, and where the second one (that of art) begins to peel away our constructed positing of childhood. Through art, childhood cannot be simply equated with a prospective return to genesis. We must take serious note of Benjamin’s warning over conflating genesis with origin. While a concept of genesis remains adept to a mechanised—dare I say, positivist—temptation to fabricate unwarranted forms of causality; in reasserting origin dialectically we would not only claim the historical dialectic that comes with the idea of an origin, but we might begin to understand why Adorno defines metaphysics “as the product of a breach between essences—the gods secularized as ideas—and the phenomenal world.”

(…) a breach which is inevitable as soon as the gods become concepts and being becomes a relation to existing things; at the same time, however, these two moments cannot be naively related together or formulated concurrently. I believe this way of stating the matter may better define the locus of metaphysics in the history of philosophy, and thus define the essence of metaphysics as well (for I believe the essential is always historical). (Adorno 2001, p. 19, my emphasis)

With “the essential” firmly understood as “always historical” one recalls once more Benjamin (1996, p. 46), when he states that the task of the investigator begins just as we realize that every “primitive ‘fact’” cannot be considered as a “constitutive determinant”, and therefore as constitutive of any claim to origin. Assuming that the present argument—as it starts from the two points, of learning and art—begins with a task to investigate; another warning of Benjamin’s must be heeded. He states that the investigator “cannot regard such a fact as certain until its innermost structure appears to be so essential as to reveal it as an origin.” In Benjamin’s line of argument this serves as cue to investigating what the origin implies and what essence it portends:
The authentic—the hallmark of origin in phenomena—is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition. And the act of discovery can reveal it in the most singular and eccentric of phenomena, in both the weakest and the clumsiest experiments and in the overripe fruits of a period of decadence. When the idea absorbs a sequence of historical formulations, it does not do so in order to construct a unity out of them, let alone to abstract something common to them all. (Benjamin 1996, p. 46, my emphasis)

One must bear in mind that here Benjamin is making an historical overture about the present (i.e. his present) while introducing his study of German tragic drama. Reading, as it were, Benjamin after Adorno, we would find that as a philosophical narrative that seeks to articulate the broken space between essence and phenomena, metaphysics takes us back to the same grounds on which Carrà and De Chirico found themselves. This ground was not alien to Benjamin’s present. It is also on this ground as a period of decadence that art is confronted with the overripe fruits of a history in need of a restart. Only in this respect would metaphysics begin to make some sense; precisely when it articulates the moment when our historical sense of the world’s essence is evidently in breach of the world that appears to those who are not only bereft of their once-held experiential certainty, but also nostalgic for a childhood where experience is spared from materializing.

TOY-LIKE WORLDS, MEMORY AND THE ENIGMA

Let’s focus on Carrà’s Antigrazioso (Bambina) and De Chirico’s Il Cervello del Bambino. I would suggest that we engage with these as they are without trying to anticipate anything further than what they appear to be to us. As works of art, Antigrazioso and Il Cervello construct a narrative that may or may not belong to the daily encounters by which both artists suggest an image of the world. Somehow in entering the realm of daily use, these works choose to exit familiar assumptions. The latter would include both the assumptions we make about life in general and those we attribute to art in particular. This is where the antinomic character of art comes in full play.

Carrà: Play and the delight of semblance

Antigrazioso was a term used by the Italian avant-garde to denote the negation of grazioso (the gracious, or the beautiful). Hence antigracious as the anti-gracious implies the “ugly” as an aesthetic term that aims to rebut the traditional and romantic notion of aesthetics as a philosophy concerned with beauty as the gracious and the good. Also Antigrazioso (Bambina) should not be read as “the anti-gracious girl” but as two separate titles: Antigrazioso and Girl.

The child in the painting looks quite ugly. However it embodies childhood even when one is tempted to consider this painting as a depiction of a small adult. We
know that this is not an image of a small adult. We know this not only because the other name for the painting is Bambina (Girl), but because the toy-like world that the figure inhabits suggests a playful world; a world still to be discovered and uncovered by the usage of apparent toys that would suggest other than child play. While the suggestion of play in this work retains a form of childhood, the representation of a child confuses the rest and somehow frustrates us from assuming that this is a primitive image of a child at play. In many ways, this confusion is what makes Antigrazioso (Bambina) fascinating. Fascinating, perhaps in the sense that it presents the viewer with an equally curious (though perhaps bewildered) definition of childhood. It is bewildering and therefore attractive. It is archaic, yet remains fresh by dint of the audacity by which Carrà makes a statement that contradicts and rejects his Futurist utopianism.

In this painting Carrà becomes avant-nostalgic. The avant-guardism of yesterday has now become an avant-nostalgia for a history that is no more split between the past and the future. Carrà’s face is now fixed on a series of narratives found in a notion akin to a past (not the past), and yet his new work points to what might become of us, thus suggesting a concept of the future. History takes over these categories and in the place of past, present or future, Carrà’s art enters the realm of memory and homecoming, which are neither yearning for a lost past, nor romantically reclaiming the world of Giotto or Uccello. Carrà’s claim is fundamentally different from his romantic and symbolic forebears. Unlike romantic nostalgia, avant-nostalgia claims history by continuously engaging with the present as a recollected recurrence whose memory does not pine for the myth of a lost genesis. Instead, avant-nostalgia dialectically re-originate history by transcending the artificial chasm between tradition and progress. (see Baldacchino 2002 and 2010)

Carrà’s Bambina looks at the present with an eye on a future that is insecure and obscure. The girl is looking awkward because the present is ill at ease and because the notion of the child is neither benign nor innocent but a tragedy anachronistically kept in store for adulthood. This reclaims a wider sense of playfulness, both as a representation of childhood and in terms of the playfulness that childhood stands for. This work of art claims play as the child’s right. Hence the toys lying around: the trumpet and the house. The toys are toys because they are jocular—visually and symbolically. They imply a game that art is now playing and claiming back as a right to life. This is what in his 26th Aesthetic Letter Schiller calls an “entry upon humanity.”

And what are the outward and visible signs of the savage’s entry upon humanity? If we inquire of history, however far back, we find that they are the same in all races which have emerged from the slavery of animal

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I develop this concept in Avant-Nostalgia: An Excuse to Pause (Baldacchino 2002) and in Makings of the Sea: Journey, Doubt and Nostalgia (Baldacchino 2010) particularly with regards to Salvador Dali and Federico Garcia Lorca.
condition: delight in semblance, and a propensity to ornamentation and play (Schiller 1967, Letter xxvi, §3, pp. 192–3).

Speaking of “the savage’s entry upon humanity” Schiller’s words would appear very awkward. At first glance he seems to be implying that the “savage” is the “pre-civilized” person, indeed the pre-bourgeois, or even the non-Westerner. Yet on a closer reading, Schiller’s comments gain correctness and truth, especially in the light of how historically, aesthetic experience remains an effective weapon in the struggle against racism and oppression. There is no doubt that the savagery of the white slave-owners was effectively confronted and ultimately beaten by the affirmation of the arts within the enslaved peoples. If we are to speak of savagery then we must speak of the savagery of Empire that put thousands of women and men in “the slavery of animal condition.” Reading “the savage’s entry upon humanity” in the latter context, the savage is he whose brutality has enslaved others. The liberation from this savage state would therefore apply to this kind of savagery.

More to the point of Carrà’s work, we see how in Antigrazioioso the “delight in semblance” and the “propensity to ornamentation and play” rise from the debris of the savagery of World War I. One could even claim that alas this did nothing to stop the savagery of Fascism and Stalinism. The delight in ornamentation and play once more survived the horrors of the ultimate savagery in Auschwitz, some twenty-nine years after Antigrazioioso, where composers continued to write music even when, as Adorno suggests, it was dubious whether after Auschwitz we could still write poetry. (Adorno 1984, pp. 361ff.) It still remains to be seen whether the savagery of September the 11th 2001 and the wars that ensued could fit this line of inquiry. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the Taleban hated ornament, music and image to the extents of what they imposed during their regime in Afghanistan. Which is not to say that the Taleban’s savagery could justify or absolve the other savageries happening elsewhere.

The girl in Antigrazioioso is by no means an innocent child. The childhood by which Carrà reclaims his delight in semblance is sustained by the right to play, and not by an assumed innocence. Play is not conditioned on innocence. Rather the play that this image suggests is awkward, because though the trumpet and the house look like children’s toys, they come to signify other than the child per se. Again I refer to Schiller when he says that “the only kind of semblance I am here concerned with is aesthetic semblance (which we distinguish from actuality and truth) and not logical semblance (which we confuse with these): semblance, therefore which we love just because it is semblance, and not because we take it to be something better. Only the first is play, whereas the latter is mere deception.” (1967, Letter xxvi, §5, p. 193)

Schiller’s line of argument fits the notion of an awkward childhood in Carrà’s work. Semblance and play are not utilities or instruments of change per se. They change and critique the world by absolving themselves from the structures of logical semblance. By “possessing reality absolutely” they take a metaphysical
approach, which Henri Bergson defines as “the science which claims to dispense with symbols.”

If there exists a means of possessing a reality absolutely, instead of knowing it relatively, of placing oneself within it instead of adopting points of view towards it, of having the intuition of it, instead of making the analysis of it, in short, of grasping it over and above all expression, translation or symbolical representation, metaphysics is that very means (Bergson 1992, p. 162).

Like Boccioni, Carrà read and knew his Bergson well. The metaphysics by which Bergson seems to approach the world, comes to a fuller and less literate fruition in Carrà’s post-futurist works, as in his other work on childhood Ricordi d’Infanzia (Memories of Childhood, 1916), which will be discussed in the next chapter. Like Schiller’s notion of aesthetic semblance Bergson’s intuitive means of possessing reality suggests a form of absolute play. Play becomes synonymous with the moment of absolute intuition in what Bergson articulates as “placing oneself within” reality without any use of symbol or translation.

Both Antigrazioso and Ricordi d’Infanzia suggest a way in via a point of exit. We as an audience could see ourselves view the world through the eyes of the girl, though we know that we have long exited and left behind the perspectival situatedness of childhood. Our memory of childhood is avant-nostalgic because it reconstructs and simulates a recurrence of a childhood that is no more. The memory that we recollect is consciously re-presented but it is no less valuable or potent. Antigrazioso invites us to cast our eyes and take delight in the ornament of a chequered floor, the play of a toy trumpet and what appears to be a doll’s house. Ricordi d’Infanzia suggests an eerie world of toys that resemble the implements of war. These toys are as awkward as the girl’s trumpet and doll’s house in Antigrazioso. There is always a feeling that our gazing at these works is turned on us and it belongs to another gaze, by which we are being seen. As viewers that are in turn being viewed, we exchange roles with the work and become its subject. We go on stage and the image takes the role of an audience looking at us. We are expected to take delight in semblance and play. Our roles alter just as the image of a child alters the way we see the world. Somehow with childhood we become actors. We are returned to childhood as if we ourselves become children once more.

De Chirico: Childhood, openness and interpretation

De Chirico’s Il cervello del bambino takes the discussion of childhood onto another stretch of the horizon. Here I would like to refer to the discussion, earlier in this chapter, where I make reference to a definition of knowledge by way of a relationship between self and knowing, and between our being in the world and the world as being every thing. By being in the world we know, we play and take delight in semblance. All these acts are pretty much summed up in De Chirico’s work, where every thing would suggest a horizon of interpretations by which we make sense of the world. In its various levels of interpretation this work also tells
the story of childhood. One can read childhood in De Chirico’s work by tracing three instances on its hermeneutic horizon. The first pertains to art as a doing that precludes the closure of meaning by an immediate and certain world. The second instance presents the grammars of childhood and art as methods of interpretation. By relating both instances the painting provides us with a further instance: an openness that De Chirico’s metaphysical art offers in terms of an ability to recognise and live with the enigmatic contexts of meaning.

In terms of De Chirico’s work (and to some extents, Carrà’s), the horizon of art extends across doing, interpretation and openness and continues to do so as long as we engage with it as an audience. However, we may well ask whether these three moments could really extend to the notion of childhood, especially when De Chirico’s work latches onto childhood not merely as a theme (as a title or a story), but by way of his metaphysical reading of the psyche.

*Il cervello del bambino* has been interpreted as the embodiment of the journey between, in this case, the boy and his growing into a man. Psychoanalytical readings attribute various symbolic meanings to the objects that emerge within De Chirico’s paintings. The brain (*cervello*) of the child may or may not entirely equate with the mind (*mente*) of the child. This could be trivial at one level, but quite important at another, especially if (as De Chirico insisted) Metaphysical Art must be distinguished from Surrealism. The artist’s reference to the brain seems to imply a memory that is different from that of the mind’s subconscious. There is a sense of physicality that seems to mediate the presence of the body and not just the mind. In this respect memory becomes corporeal and not just mental. In De Chirico’s work the narrative of memory appears more obvious and accessible than the narrative of the subconscious as depicted by Surrealists like Dalí and Magritte. In De Chirico’s work, the subconscious is direct. His visual representation of a memory that still tells stories that remain in control of the storyteller is more effective as an iconic approach. Here, memory is equivalent to the construction of one’s own daily reality.

By this token, the openness that the Metaphysical work of art proposes to us—as those who do art either by making or by being at sight of it, as its audience—becomes more tangible and familiar. By dint of the familiar we are also led into art as we live the everyday, almost as surrogate artists. In De Chirico’s work, the sense of the quotidian comes from his images even if the arrangement of familiar objects is often odd and appears quite surreal. But here the surreal stops short of being estranged from us, as we are always prompted with a notion of belonging whenever we engage with his work. This is especially tangible in his depiction and representation of physical space. De Chirico’s space is a possible one. We could well see ourselves inhabit his deserted squares, strolling by the many arcades that are so reminiscent of a city found around the Mediterranean, where archways are meant to protect one from the sun and where squares bring people together in cool summer evenings. On the other hand, Dalí’s landscape, which is equally Mediterranean in origin, tends to reconfigure space in a way that we could only inhabit in the mysteries of the unconscious—even when the formations that appear
in Dalí’s work are directly taken from the physicality of landscapes such as Cape Creus and Port Illigat in Catalonia. (Dali 1986, 1993)

To inhabit De Chirico’s space is to inhabit one’s own space. This becomes clearer when we talk of childhood. The childhood of the man and what inhabits the brain as memory is a space that has been inhabited by us as human beings, and more importantly as individuals with a story to tell. Childhood is not a dream but a memory. And because childhood is memorial it allows for segments of interpretations by way of inhabiting it as a familiar space. Childhood and its “hidden” depiction in De Chirico also pertains to the enigma of life. This opens the enigma of truth in a formative way. By saying that truth is being opened to the enigma, one does not mean a deferral of truth to noumenal eternity. Rather De Chirico depicts truth as a plurality that remains familiar and which is well within everyone’s grasp. The enigma is another form of reasoning and remains within the ordinary even when its rearrangement appears surreal or extraordinary. Thus the ethical imagination by which we conduct ourselves and live out the enigmas of life, remains within common reach.

We reach out for the enigma and make it ours. We know that this is possible when we look at De Chirico’s work, and even when we are not sure whether our interpretation is “right”. Interpretation is open and whether it is right or wrong, it would in any case pertain to the rules we make for the appropriation of the enigma. Thus the enigma is part of a formative terrain. Going back to the notion of agôn as that meeting place over which we acquire a facilitation of knowledge, one could say that in De Chirico and Carrà’s spaces one finds a similar state of affairs. The space that is depicted at both the iconographic as well as the metaphorical levels of these paintings is given through the relationship between doing, interpreting and the enigmatic rearrangement of the ordinary. In this respect we could speak of a gift because the work provides the possibility of facilitation by sheer situation. This means that by us being there the space of art provides us with the event of knowledge. The gift is therefore two-fold: it operates as a facilitation of Being, which in turn becomes formative. Art’s space (its agôn) is signified by a latent childhood that in its familiar memory gives us the possibility and the means of appropriating the unfamiliar.

But the gift must not be read as an object that is received passively. In both works, art as a gift becomes an act. The delight in play and semblance are enhanced by an act of giving. This giving emerges from childhood as the given of reality. As a given of reality, childhood emulates the metaphysical moment that dispenses with description and instead places knowledge akin to what Bergson calls the “placing [of] oneself within it instead of adopting points of view towards it” (1992, p. 162). To be placed requires an ability to be there. What is there is not merely found. Neither is it simply, or naturally, learnt.

This is where we start to operate on enigmatic rules. De Chirico and Carrà’s narratives do not allow us to rely on assumed theories of knowledge or learning. They request and prompt interpretation through the aporetic grounds of the enigma. Nothing is accepted or assumed as knowledge by being simply there. Perhaps unlike philosophical notions of metaphysics, metaphysical art claims the
right to take on the enigma as the givenness of truth, and by its familiar whereabouts we find our way into it by exiting what is normally expected of it. To think otherwise would defy what Schiller favours as aesthetic semblance (rather than logical semblance). With play as aesthetic semblance, we are urged to “love [it] just because it is semblance, and not because we take it to be something better.” (1967, Letter xxvi, §5, p. 193) This kind of licence is not gratuitous, but I would argue that it is fundamental to the survival of play in both art and learning. If we yield to logical semblance and assume that semblance is there to tell us something and teach us something to which we have to subscribe at all costs, then we are back into the spiral of instrumental reason where knowledge is only formative because it yields a specific end.

We owe our thinking to the gifts of play and childhood. Without such gifts we could never make a case for education, let alone art. But to do so, one must also exit the assumption that what is given is there to be found or taken. This is why the Modern cannot be assumed as the actuality that we find. Nor does it extend from a familiar sense of newness or youth. Both De Chirico and Carrà seem to suggest that the modern emerges from what is strange by dint of childhood’s familiarity. To do art is to reposition the enigma at the centre of interpretation, just like a child feigning to shoot a toy gun, dressing a doll or playing with a marionette. But here we are also confronted by the question of our own position in history: whether (nor not) we see ourselves as the Children of Modernity. If indeed we are the Children of Modernity, we are faced with the task to define, or at least approximate, what this could mean.