

DANCING WITH PIPILOTTI

Young Children's Encounters with Contemporary Art

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Pipilotti Rist, *Kleines Vorstadthirn (Small Suburb Brain)*, 2001; *The Innocent Collection*, 1985–approx. 2032; *Meditation for Suburbbrain*, 2011, installation view, Pipilotti Rist: *Sip my Ocean*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Luhring Augustine © the artist, Photograph: Anna Kucera

I follow the pathway as it zigzags through tight corners of thick, black fabric. Noise and light are completely muted, muffled, absorbed in this between space, until the final corner turned reveals the opening of a huge room filled with beds, music, darkness punctuated with vivid colour. Projections flow slowly on the ceiling, across the walls, downwards onto some of the beds. Georgia, who has recently turned one, and even more recently started to walk with confidence, stands arms outstretched, her face turned upwards to the largest amorphous projection on the ceiling. She begins to dance - her body moves with the music and also with the light and colour. Her dance starts in the centre of the room, swaying, turning, wiggling, clapping, spinning, then she dances, arms still reaching out and up, through the open space, between the beds, across to the walls, along the perimeter of the room. Her skin lights up with the colours of the projections that she dances across and through. Sometimes she notices her shadow dancing with her on the wall. Weaving past the legs of other gallery visitors. Pausing to smile at her sister Alexandra, who is stretched out on a bed, gazing up at the ceiling. 'We're under water!', Alexandra says. Reaching out to touch the hair of her friend Sam, aged 24 months, who is with his older brother William and friend Jacob on one of the beds. Sam and William and Jacob's bed has a projection beaming straight down to it, moving slowly across it, and they move with/in the projection - arms and legs and faces turned orange and red and yellow from the projected circle of light. The projection moves slowly across and down the side of the bed, and Sam, William and Jacob move with it - their bodies 'melting' over the edge of the bed and onto the floor, following the colour as it shifts and flows.

I am at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia (MCA), with a group of 11 children aged between 13 months and 4 years, who - with their families and early childhood teachers - are taking part in the pilot study for the *Art and Wonder: Young Children and Contemporary Art Research Project*. We have just encountered the artwork *Fourth Floor to Mildness*, a large scale, immersive, audio-visual installation by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist.

From the beginning, this has been collaborative research, collaborative pedagogy. The project emerged from a series of rich, open, generative conversations (always over outrageously delicious food) between Amanda Palmer, Gill Nicol, and Cara MacLeod (from the MCA), Wendy Shepherd and Janet Robertson (from Mia Mia), and Dr Belinda Davis and I (from the Department of Educational Studies, Macquarie University). Those early conversations circled around children's rights to beauty, wonder, and complex aesthetic experiences. We realised that there were strong points of overlap between the MCA, Mia Mia and Macquarie University within which we could situate our research: we had a shared interest in understanding more about young children's rights as cultural citizens - their rights to visibility, to participation, to belonging within public cultural institutions such as galleries and museums; we sought to challenge perceptions about what is possible for very young children within the context of contemporary art in a gallery space; and we wanted to highlight the ways in which rich, meaningful creative arts pedagogy might be enacted in this context, particularly for the youngest of children aged under 3 years.

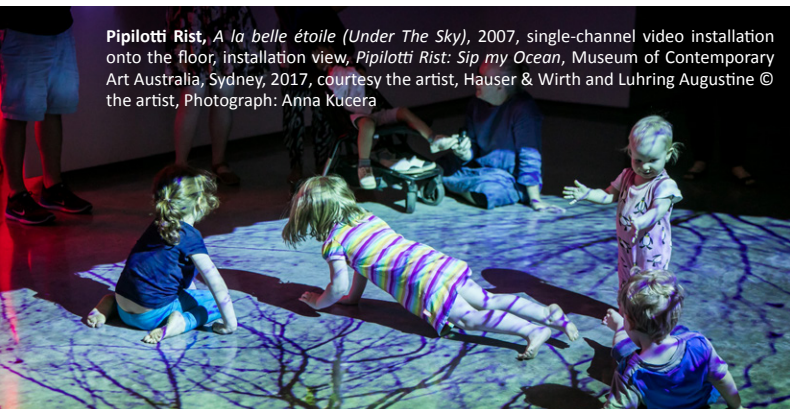
The questions guiding our research project took shape:

- How do very young children bring meaning to and make meaning from contemporary art within a museum context?
- What potential might there be for creative reciprocity between artists and young children?
- Can we create space for intellectually rich, thoughtful, deep and complex early childhood visual arts pedagogy for the very youngest children in ECEC settings and non-traditional places of learning?
- In what ways can a sense of belonging be created for infants and toddlers (and their families) in cultural institutions?
- What might be some of the benefits of actively and regularly welcoming very young children, their families and teachers into the context of the public, cultural, creative space of an art gallery: from the perspective of children, their families, their teachers, the artist educators and the museum?

The benefits of art galleries and museums as places of learning for children have been well articulated by colleagues such as David Bell (2010; 2017), Lisa Terreni (2015; 2017), Kathy Danko-McGhee (2016) and Barbara Piscatelli (2012). We have found David Bell's work particularly useful in the way he explores learning within galleries and museums, identifying the rich sensory experiences, cultural connections, expertise, authentic learning and aesthetic engagement that are specific to these contexts. From the recent research into brain development (see Bergen & Coscia, 2001), we have been given new insight into the extraordinary learning of very young children, and as this work in neuroscience develops, findings continue to foreground the powerful significance of rich, diverse, and high quality learning experiences in the first three years of life. Very little research exists, however, into museum-based pedagogy for children in the early childhood years, particularly those aged under 5 years (Danko-McGhee, 2016; Piscatelli & Smith, 2009).

The pilot project started in late 2017, with four visits to the MCA planned over six months (September, November, February and March). Eleven children aged between 1 and 4 years, along with their families and early childhood teachers from Mia Mia, agreed to participate in the research project. Each visit, the children would be working with the same Artist Educators (Cara Macleod, Nicole Barakat and Brook Morgan), spending time in the MCA's National Centre for Creative Learning (NCCL), the Jackson Bella Room (Kate Beynon's *Room of Lucky Charms*), the main collection in the gallery, and special exhibitions (Pipilotti Rist's *Sip My Ocean* and the 21st Sydney Biennale).

Pipilotti Rist, *A la belle étoile (Under The Sky)*, 2007, single-channel video installation onto the floor, installation view, *Pipilotti Rist: Sip my Ocean*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Luhring Augustine © the artist, Photograph: Anna Kucera



Pipilotti Rist, *Lap Lamp*, 2006, single-channel video installation for a chair and a lap: projector, player, standing lamp, installation view, *Pipilotti Rist: Sip my Ocean*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2017, courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Luhring Augustine © the artist, Photograph: Anna Kucera



Sam (24 months) and Zali (22 months) responding to Pipilotti Rist's works through explorations of light, colour, shadow, movement: provocations facilitated by Artist Educators at the NCCL.

There would be a focus on revisiting and returning over time – building connections and establishing relationships with spaces, materials, artists, artworks and exhibitions. The reflexive rethinking and reshaping of pedagogical approaches in order to actively include infant and toddler age groups in the MCA's education programs would also play a key role.

We are moving within the gallery space – polished concrete floors, stairs and stairs and stairs and stairs, glass and chrome barriers and railings and windows. A glass lift that looks out over the dazzling sparkles of the water and the windows of the cruise ship moored at Warang. We have spent time with one artwork, Warang by Brook Andrew, and now are walking up, within, across, through the space and the people of the gallery to find the next artwork on our program – Fiona Hall's Manuhiri (Travellers). I am looking ahead, watching for where Nicole Barakat, Artist Educator, will lead us to in her beautiful pink tights. But around me, the children are starting to slow. They stop. 'It's a tunnel!' 'It's a cave!' 'Can we go in?' All attention is drawn into the sculptural installation by Callum Morton, Monument #28: Vortex. Frankie (22 months) stands legs apart, a strong stance, pointing into the centre of the artwork. Her gaze is first directed into the artwork as well, but then quickly to the group – this is a moment to be shared. And with all the focus, the attention, the pull towards this artwork, her feet are firmly and strongly planted on that shiny concrete floor. They remain directly on top of the 'white line' – that silent but powerful regulator within galleries and museums that show visitors how close they may stand to a work while still keeping it safe. This is the first of the four visits the children and their families will have to the MCA in the pilot project. Frankie is already taking part in the sophisticated cultural protocol of the gallery audience member.

Returning to the NCCL after our immersion in Pipilotti Rist's artworks, we find the usually large, bright room transformed. Overhead projectors, LED lights, water in clear bags and bottles and containers, a sheet of shimmering fabric draped from the ceiling. Wooden boxes containing the leaves and seeds that the families brought in from home are placed in the centre of the space. Torches and small kaleidoscopes and pieces of foil and sheets of coloured gels. The blinds are pulled down and the lights are off, accentuating the reflections and refractions that the children create as they move across the walls and ceiling. The Artist Educators have chosen these materials and created this space as a provocation for the children to respond to elements of Pipilotti Rist's works – light, colour, shadow, movement, pattern, interaction, chromosaturaton. Sam (24 months) is wrapping water bottles in colour, carrying them over to an overhead projector, watching the movement of water and light projected onto the ceiling, shining the torch into the bottles, swishing the foil. With each bottle he brings to the projector, he carefully shifts the others, so eventually he has almost covered the surface with bottles. His movements are unhurried and deliberate, and his face is serious, until Zali (22 months) joins him at the projector with a large bottle of water and they lean together and grin, faces close and beaming.

The thoughtful and intellectually rich pedagogical approach taken by the Artist Educators at the MCA has deliberately left an openness and space within which very young children's embodied responding to complex aesthetic experiences can take flight in unexpected and wonderful ways. (In a twist that is perhaps unusual in the educational world, this work with/in infant toddler pedagogy has already had an impact on the ways in which other educational programs with older school groups and adults at the gallery are now designed and facilitated).



Callum Morton *Monument #28: Vortex* 2011
polystyrene, epoxy resin, sand, wood, synthetic polymer paint, enamel paint, glass, steel, vinyl. Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased with funds provided by the MCA Foundation, 2016. Photograph: Yaya Stempler

We are also aware of the importance of methodological approaches in our research that create room for understanding and making visible the depth of young children's sensorial lived experience, as well as allowing for the unexpected, the complex, the contradictory. As our research/pedagogy project continues to progress, and we move from the pilot phase into the larger five year longitudinal study across a broader range of ECEC contexts, we share Veia Vecchi's (2010, p.14, original emphasis) enthusiasm for 'bringing aesthetic experience back to an experience of life and relations, removing it from perhaps too solemn an area and returning it to the everyday processes which help us to sense *how things dance with one another*.' And so this article ends where it began, sweeping us back into the mo(ve)ment of a one year old's spontaneous and joyful response to contemporary art: Dancing with Pipilotti.

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