

Vea Vecchi,
atelierista of Diana School



chapter 7

The Role of the *Atelierista* An Interview with Lella Gandini*

Vea Vecchi

Gandini: *What are the reasons that made you abandon the work you were doing in the middle school and come to work in the atelier of the preprimary schools in Reggio Emilia?*

Vecchi: It is very easy to say negative things about the way art education is treated in middle schools in Italy. It is truly marginal there. What attracted me to the preprimary schools in Reggio was, first, the use of visual languages as a construction of thoughts and feelings within a holistic education, and second, the fact that the *atelier* becomes a cultural vehicle for teacher development. This was declared to me by Loris Malaguzzi over 30 years ago, at the very first meeting we had.

Gandini: *The role of atelierista was new and original in Reggio Emilia; it does not exist in other systems in Italy. Has it measured up to your expectations?*

Vecchi: Twenty five years of work are a clear answer. They have shaped my identity as a person and a woman. The visual language, as interpreted—and constantly reinterpreted—within the wide philosophical perspective of the Reggio approach, provides the possibility to be involved in an ongoing process of communication and confrontation with people of different professional and social

* Translated by Lella Gandini.



FIGURE 7.1. Children working in the *atelier*.

backgrounds. This has naturally affected my own personal and professional identity and offered me a way to examine and validate my daily work in an authentic way.

Gandini: *Do you think that your training in art school was too narrow—for example, with not enough broad background in the liberal arts, too much focus on technical skills—for such a specific job as being an atelierista with young children?*

Vecchi: The art school certainly had old-fashioned methods. But so had the school that formed the other teachers in the classrooms. The artistic training at least gave me an approach to teaching that wasn't overly structured—perhaps freer and with more potential for irony, humor, or pleasure. All in all, I think my artistic training produced a certain freedom of thought that has adapted itself very well to the different styles and attitudes of mind an *atelierista* must take on.

Gandini: *How could you define the place of the atelier in such a complex organization as the preprimary school?*

Vecchi: The *atelier* serves two functions. First, it provides a place for children to become masters of all kinds of techniques, such as painting, drawing, and working in clay—all the symbolic languages. Second, it assists the adults in understanding processes of how children learn. It helps teachers understand how children invent autonomous vehicles of expressive freedom, cognitive freedom, symbolic freedom, and paths to communication. The *atelier* has an important, provocative, and disturbing effect on old-fashioned teaching ideas. Loris Malaguzzi (Chapter 3) has talked about this and expressed our views.

I'm not sure that we have always lived up to the expectations held for us, but I am at least convinced that having the *atelier* in every preprimary school has made a deep impact on the emerging educational identity of our system. Certainly, the *atelier* itself has changed with the passing of time, although the basic philosophy has remained the same. And, of course, the personality and style of each *atelierista* makes each *atelier* a different place.

I will try to tell you about the place and significance of the *atelier* in the school where I have worked. In the beginning I read a great deal of literature on children's drawings, about which I then knew almost nothing. At the same time, I talked constantly with teachers, parents, and *pedagogisti*, trying to give them deeper appreciation of what they saw as purely aesthetic activities. At the same time I know that I had prejudgments about art, and I was still virtually blind and deaf when it came to understanding children's drawings and three dimensional work. What I didn't realize was that gaining this understanding would be my ongoing quest from then on.

Working together, guiding the children in their projects, teachers and I have repeatedly found ourselves face to face—as if looking in a mirror—learning from one another, and together learning from the children. This way we were trying to create paths to a new educational approach, one certainly not tried before, where the visual language was interpreted and connected to other languages, all thereby gaining in meaning.

The other important function of the *atelier* was to provide a workshop for documentation. Documentation was seen then as a democratic possibility to inform the public of the contents of the schools. Already within 6 months after I began to work at the Diana School, we opened the school to the citizens with an exhibit of children's work. This work aroused much surprise and even some scandalized reaction, because among the themes displayed were a few usually censored for children, such as love and the nativity of Jesus.

I believe that few schools compare to the ones in Reggio Emilia in the amount of documentation prepared in the form of panels, slides, and now also small books and video tapes—materials to use with the children and families, as well as with teachers for in-service training. For example in recently reorganizing our Diana archives, we have realized that we have accumulated over 200 different sets of large panels (70 x 100 centimeters) presenting projects or experiences with children. Indeed, over time, our work in Reggio Emilia has tended to involve more and more research, visual education, and documentation. The educational work with children and the documentation have become more and more interconnected and mutually supportive.

Recently our interests have also shifted more and more toward analysis of the processes of learning and the interconnections among children's different ideas, activities, and representations. All of this documentation—the written descriptions, transcriptions of children's words, photographs, and now the

videotapes—becomes an indispensable source of materials that we use everyday to be able to “read” and reflect critically, both individually and collectively, on the experience we are living, the project we are exploring. This allows us to construct theories and hypotheses that are not arbitrary and artificially imposed on the children.

Yet this method of work takes much time and is never easy. And we know that we still have much to learn. The camera, tape recorder, slide projector, typewriter, videocamera, computer, and photocopying machine are instruments absolutely indispensable for recording, understanding, debating among ourselves, and finally preparing appropriate documents of our experience.

The roles of the teacher and *atelierista* that emerge from these considerations are certainly different from how they were conceived years ago when I first came here. They require many competencies, including the capacity to reflect critically, different from what was emphasized before. Yet I am absolutely certain that the presence of the *atelierista* made possible many of the best projects

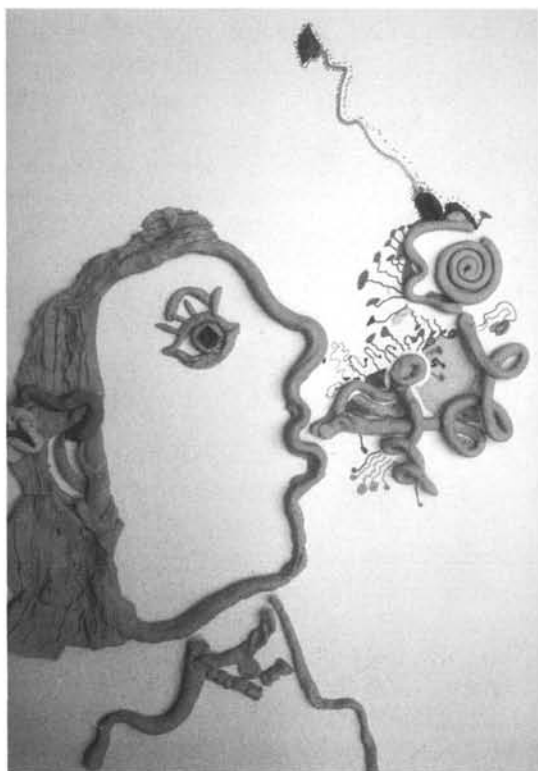


FIGURE 72. “Little girl telling a story.” Clay drawing.



FIGURE 73. Vea Vecchi discusses documentation with Loris Malaguzzi.

in all of our schools. The environment of the *atelier* becomes a center of culture, where through the years the processes and tools have been modified. The relationship between the *atelierista* and teachers has grown and deepened, affecting in turn the professional relationship between teachers and children.

What has remained constant through time in my work is the way in which I work simultaneously with teachers and children, as well as the way in which I work directly with teachers. I am convinced that it is essential to construct with teachers a broad base of cultural knowledge, reflected in all of the details of our schools. This work requires immense time and effort.

Gandini: *I wonder whether through your long experience you have modified your views and theories or your relationship with the children and teachers. Have you discovered new visual and symbolic languages of children?*

Vecchi: Besides what I have said before, I can highlight a few things. I can say, first, that I have discovered how creativity is part of the makeup of every individual, and how the “reading” of reality is a subjective and cooperative production, and this is a creative act. Second, I have found it essential to have a high esteem for boys and girls, for men and women, in order to relate to them with genuine interest and curiosity. In the daily exchanges that I have with the children and adults, what has grown palpably is what I gain from them. I wish, although I am not sure, this will also increase what I give back to them. Third,

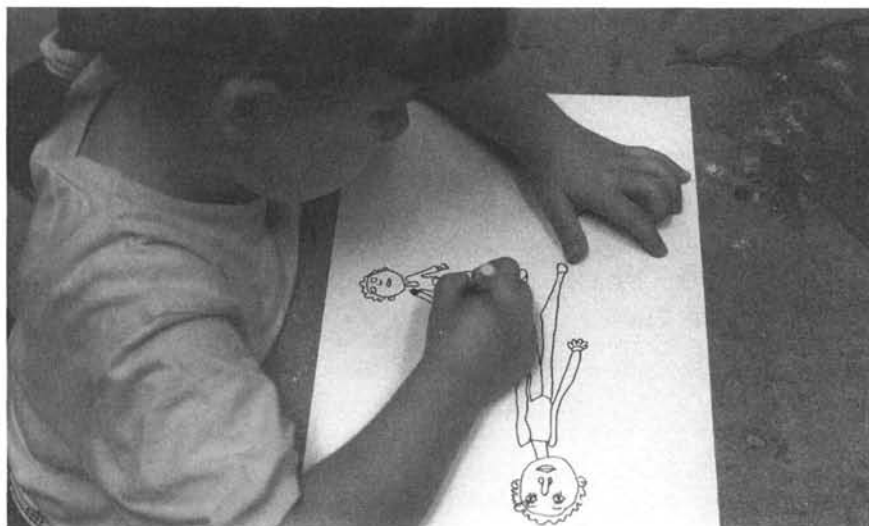


FIGURE 7.4. Making hypotheses about the placement of her own shadow.



FIGURE 7.5. Exploring the shadows.

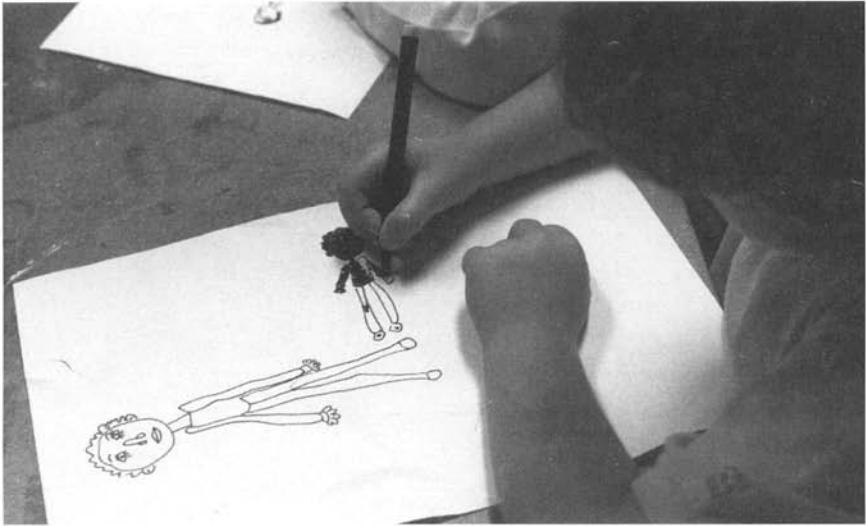


FIGURE 7.6. Revising her drawing based on new findings.

I realize that we have widened a great deal our field of interpretations, both of the processes and the results of our work. Fourth, the field of visual languages used by the children has also widened. As a consequence, in our work we are following new paths, different from the usual and the traditional. For example, we are trying to understand the feminine and masculine ways of representing reality. Fifth, I realize more and more the importance of the work done among the peer groups of children. We spend a great deal of energy in thinking about, and providing, instruments and strategies to support this way of working as a vital act of learning and a path toward social competence and maturity. We do continuously combine educational theories and our empirical research, filtered through our own, never fully adequate, professional lenses. In the school in which I work we are all women. We are curious about the world that little by little we are discovering, the world of children constructing their theories. At times we think that the relationship with the children reawakens in us a sense of our own childhood, creating feelings of tenderness, curiosity, play, and true pleasure.

Gandini: *Much of what the children do in your schools is so beautiful. Is this art? Is there an art of children?*

Vecchi: The way one should examine what children do is very different from evaluating adult artwork. It happens very often that some of the children's products are so original that one wants to compare them with the work of

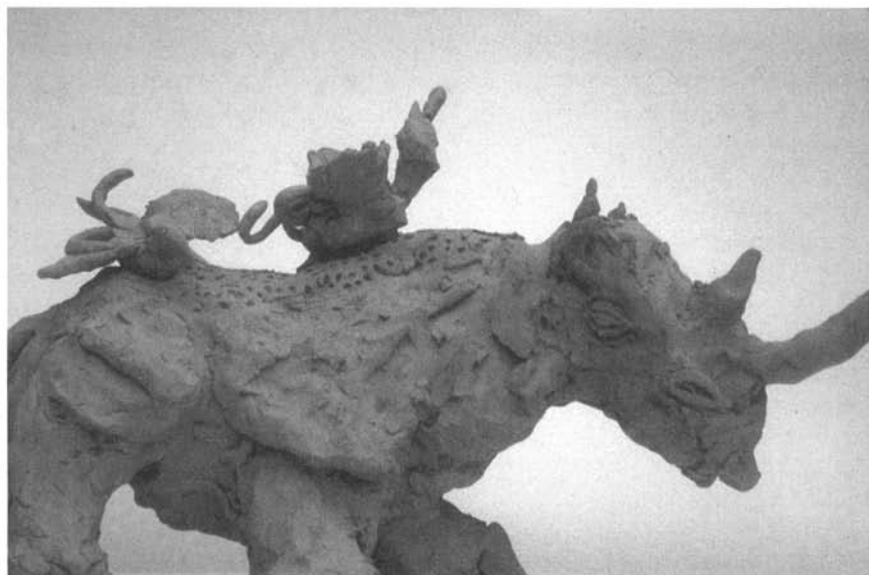


FIGURE 7.7. Rhinoceros (clay sculpture).

famous artists. But that kind of comparison becomes dangerous and fraught with ambiguity, especially if one tries to make comparisons consistently. It leads to false conclusions, such as that the behavior of children unfolds innately, or that the product is more important than the process. To make comparisons that go beyond a simple and playful resemblance shows how little one understands either children or artists.

On the other hand, I think that artistic discoveries—conceptual breakthroughs made by artists—should circulate among the adults in our schools, because we can learn from them. For example, the way that artists have solved problems of representing light, combining colors, and creating a sense of volume are all very interesting and help us explore new paths with children.

Gandini: *What advice could you give, after so many years of work, to teachers who work with young children?*

Vecchi: I hesitate to give advice. Our research is really an adventure, often exciting and diverting, and how can I give advice about going on an adventure? This pleasure and amusement is taken up by the children in their self-directed process of learning; I wish this would happen more because it works so well. And it should be shared by the teachers.

Gandini: *Tell me more about how you work on a daily basis with teachers.*

Vecchi: We meet several times a day. Every morning I do a tour of each

classroom. I am particularly interested in what is happening at the beginning of the day, both with regard to the larger ongoing projects and to the smaller, independent activities. Teachers and I briefly talk about how to introduce certain things to the children and what to anticipate, and then what to do about them. Sometimes I also suggest the use of particular materials. Often, in the middle of the morning, I do another circuit, being sure to go where something of particular interest might be happening. Or sometimes, a teacher comes to ask advice or to get me to come and visit. Then, at the end of every morning I find at least 15 minutes to consult with each teacher. And often, we gather as a group for discussion. An important part of my role is to ensure the circulation of ideas among teachers. I am really their constant consultant. Because my training is different from theirs, I can help them see the visual possibilities of themes and projects that are not apparent to them. I may even intervene directly with the children to create possibilities that have not occurred to others. For example, once I noticed that the sun, shining behind one of the trees outside the window, cast a shadow of the leaves onto the glass. I taped a sheet of translucent white paper onto the glass. As children came in that morning, they exclaimed with surprise and pleasure at the sight of the shadow of leaves on the paper. Many things followed. The children even came to use the shadow as a clock. One said, "It's time to go to lunch. Look at the design on the paper!"

Certainly, I closely follow all of our major and longer term projects. I always find most interesting and wonderful the project on which we are currently working, because it seems to me that with each project we advance and learn a little more, and thereby we work better with the children. For example, we have found that shadows offer extraordinary educational possibilities. This theme, described in our book, *Tutto Ha Un' Ombra Meno Le Formiche (Everything Has a Shadow Except Ants)*,¹ involves an integration of acts of visual representation with scientific hypothesis testing. It goes far beyond the emphasis on aesthetic expression and perceptual exploration with which I began my work over 25 years ago.

¹ Published by the Comune di Reggio Emilia, 1990.