

Gender, Aesthetics, and Sexuality in Play: Uneasy Lessons from Girls' Dolls, Action Figures, and Television Programs

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Abstract

How does children's play with dolls and action figures engender exploration of gendered identities: from aesthetics and appearances, to social standards, and various rituals and performances? This paper examines recent research in art education and gender studies concerning dolls and figural toys marketed to girls. As an artist and teacher educator, I will draw upon my teaching experiences and examine artifacts of pedagogy from popular material culture. I will address issues of consumption while taking into consideration taboos of gender and sexuality within public and private play. While children's toys as symbolic bodies may pose narrowly gendered and heteronormative models of adulthood, this article argues children may also begin to counter paradigms of gender and sexuality within unintended, subversive play at home and school. I will also propose coalitions of art and material culture, through which teachers can facilitate inquiries and projects around thoughtful juxtapositions of play, performance, and art-making.

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Introduction: Material Culture, Gender, and Play

Art educator Wagner-Ott (2002) suggests in her research that teachers have yet to thoroughly consider students' visual culture of dolls and action figures in the context of gender (p. 246). The pervasive "heterosexual imperatives" that regulate bodies and sexualities (Butler, 1993, p. 2) also surround children's dolls as symbolic bodies. Advertisements and television programming centered on dolls and action figures often poses narrowly gendered and heteronormative models of adulthood to young people. However, play enables children to reconfigure meanings and iconography different from those intended by marketers and/or feared by parents, demonstrating that what is intended may not ultimately designate those messages and images ultimately constructed by young people. Art educators can approach Barbie dolls and other figures from material culture as artifacts of pedagogy, for they are objects that are part of personal histories, narratives, and play that links imagination with learning.

Barbie-play with the doll itself and its accessories and kits can also be conceptualized as a form of craft, for "practices - such as sewing, curio display, baking, and diorama and knickknack making - are fostered in community centers, in national girls clubs such as Girl Scouts or 4-H, and through mass media 'how-to' discourses" (Spigel, 2001, p. 319). I have been inspired by this suggestion to explore, for example, how young girls can craft spaces and narratives for Barbies and similar toys in unexpected and potentially liberatory ways. I will also consider

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the potential of dialogue between contemporary art with dolls and action figures in artistic and political questions of beauty that impact the art curriculum. Works of art that inspire and are inspired by toys will be examined as part of the influence of popular culture on students, artists, and educators. Finally, I will argue that despite stereotypical images and heteronormative models from television, students and teachers may also revise and reconfigure gendered and cultural binaries through unintended juxtapositions of play as performance and artistic production.

Princess (Em)Power(ed): My Own Childhood and Gendered Play

Although Barbie reigned supreme among my female childhood peers, I was not at all interested in her as a young girl. I preferred playing with packages of oozing slime, activity kits relating to monsters and astronauts, and other toys that felt stronger, more colorful, and more active. My one gendered concession to “girls’ toys” was She-Ra. In my recollections, She-Ra: The Princess of Power had a magical sword, a flying horse, and some feisty friends. In my eyes, she represented a balance of beauty, brains, and genuine strength. My favorite toy (the only surviving She-Ra artifact I possess) wasn’t actually an action figure or doll, but rather a hand-made book my mother authored and illustrated for me. Within this narrative, I traveled to She-Ra’s realm to aid her in defeating menacing forces with help from a unicorn friend and my older sister. Looking at

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my much-loved She-Ra text now, I realize how intensely I valued this representation of She-Ra not only as my first reading experience, but also as my earliest visual icon of femininity and feminist agency.

As the teenage daughter of a psychologist, I would later become privy to more adult readings of She-Ra and her cohort. I remember my mother and her friends sharing how Bow, a somewhat ambiguously or androgynously dressed male character on the She-Ra television show, seemed to be homosexual or bisexual. Similarly, non-heteronormative narratives could be readily imagined for other characters that were ambiguously gendered and/or implicitly attached to others of the same or opposite sex, unlike many connotations of conventional relationships present in other television programming. I recall my own joy at the fact that She-Ra was neither married nor cohabitating with anyone as she enjoyed various adventures. Her individualism subverted the common narrative with which I was familiar and tired: that of a female princess or protagonist whose adventure-seeking culminates in marriage. For me, She-Ra was a symbol of my imagination, an adventurous and intelligent being in a fascinating world that I expanded by playing. Over the course of the years that followed as an artist and art educator, I have become very interested in how interpretation and revision of gendered influences from popular culture through play has potential to intersect with iconography, narrative, and imagination.



Figure 1. Image from a hand-made children's book given to the author as a birthday present by Alexandria Weida, 1986.

Passing on Play: Teaching Observations From Art Rooms

In recent discussions with students and student teachers, I noticed some unexpected trends surrounding mass-produced objects of play for young girls. While She-Ra is passé, Barbie persists and takes on an increasing range of real and imagined roles echoing promising shifts in the professional world as well as persisting sexism. Material culture studies can include useful explorations of

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histories and cultures surrounding not only popular manufactured objects such as toys, but also a range of artifacts made by hand, and even fine art (Ulbricht, 2007). Additionally, a material culture studies approach invites us to compare and contrast manufactured objects with works of art and craft. As one example, I recently purchased a hand-made She-Ra purse repurposed from a child's She-Ra bed sheet of the 1980s. Such D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself) practice paired with nostalgic collection subverts typical models of consumption by reinventing and recycling products of the past intended for children into new craft commodities aimed at young adults. Although my female colleagues often lament how She-Ra and other warrior-type dolls and action figures marketed to girls are cancelled and/or discontinued more readily than their male counterparts (e.g. G.I. Joe, or more directly: He-Man), these female figures retain a certain status as cult symbols of nostalgia for teenagers and young adults. In this way, play extends developmentally and artistically beyond consumption across the lifespan, through emotional processes of memory, collection, and (re)making.

Deep Play and Artistic Flow: Potential for Passionate States

As I wrote this article, I was struck by a 2009 episode of the popular show *South Park*, in which a character that obviously parodies Disney's Mickey Mouse makes a controversial revelation about girls' sexuality and their consumption of popular culture: "when little girls' 'ginies tickle, I make money! *Haha*. And that's

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because little girls are fucking stupid!" Girls' engagement with gendered toys and their desires for and about these popular, often lucrative objects can be a taboo topic. Even the notion of discussing the development of sexuality and desire among female children is controversial. We may remember that the *Lilli* dolls that preceded and influenced famed Barbie dolls of today were originally sex toys (Gerber, 2009, p. 9). While Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler, apparently knew nothing of the prototype's sordid past as a tawdry comic book strip and gag gift for bachelor parties, the latent sexuality that surrounds the Barbie doll arguably reemerges in play with these objects. Underlying themes of desire and the body raise questions about how children's play and art-making around dolls and action figures relates to the development of gender identities.

Examining the nature of young children and play, numerous studies identify pleasurable experience in developmentally-based definitions of playful activities with dolls and toys. In their study, Kuther and McDonald (2006) describe play as a rewarding opportunity to converse with the world and internalize particular aspects of society (p. 40). Poet and naturalist Ackerman (1999) proposes play as a process of arousal (p. 14). These characterizations underscore the intensity, sensuality, and illicit (or even sexual) potential of some of the play that can take place with dolls and other toys. For the purposes of this paper, I would emphasize Ackerman's sense of deep play, a special mental space beyond the mundane that involves fantasy and risk-taking (p. 14). This could include, for example, incidences I have witnessed of young people creating

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complex narratives and plays surrounding their action figures that both mimic and improvise social relations. These narratives range from deep conversations between romantic partners, to subtle interactions of friends in public, and many other interpersonal exchanges. Children's play activities at home and school also show processes of thinking, experimenting, and creating around toys. In both the "play" performances of children with dolls and their drawings adorned with popular characters, we can observe an engagement with invented narratives and images that relate to literacy, art, and personal growth.

As an artist, I see such deep play in parallel with Csíkszentmihályi's (1986) notions of flow, or the state he observed in adolescents of profound engagement with an activity and experiences of emotional and physical buoyancy (p. 23). Both young people and adults creating art may experience "deep play as flow" during which "the inner, intuitive self, the *luminous body*, takes over from the willful calculating self" (Beittel, 2000, p. 39). I mention the connection of deep play with artistic flow and intuition because this relates play to artistic making in terms of shared gestures, thoughts, and ideas. In the writings of Ackerman, Csíkszentmihályi, and Beittel, we may locate an intense, embodied pleasure that might be viewed as corporeal, even sexual. I do not raise this point to make playful engagement a site of controversy or even shame, but rather to examine how pleasure and play can be located within the body, and how this embodiment extends public and private spheres of learning and knowing. While these experiences are generally not considered appropriate for pedagogical

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discussion with or even about children, they suggest gender coding relating to play, toys, and relationships that children encounter. Topics of marriage and other romantic relationships often emerge in school settings within fairy tales, stories, and other narratives (Allan, et al, 2008, p. 317). The possibility to expand upon gendered labels and personas may be particularly relevant for teachers of language arts and visual arts. Children might be provided with alternative visions and narratives to those they know already through explorations of otherness within gender, culture, and relationships. Creating such safe spaces for identity exploration is valuable for inclusive, democratic education.

Capacity for Corporeal Difference:

Identity Politics of *South Park* and the Bratz

While play can be personal and private, some of the more social experimentations with toys I have observed as a teacher also reconfigure play in ways adults might not expect. For example, the Bratz dolls received critical attention from parents as toys that show child-like figures in skimpy and sexually-provocative clothing. At closer inspection, it is also apparent that these dolls have detachable feet, such that changing a pair of shoes actually entails changing their feet as well. Some children often leave body parts unattached during play with other dolls and children, exploring the possibility of an injured doll or a doll

with a bodily disability. This instance shows play as an exploration of social and corporeal difference.

From my perspective, this playful modification can be a serious re-envisioning of the body, reminiscent of corporeal representations of characters Jimmy and Timmy in toys and figurines from the aforementioned popular show *South Park*. While Jimmy and Timmy are characters who have physical and mental disabilities, they are also shown as children that balance their unique personalities with acceptance in the school community. Notably, television viewers voted Jimmy's character for the distinction of "Greatest Disabled TV Character" in 2005 on OUCH!, a Web site devoted to disability-related content in BBC programming (http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ouch/2008/11/south_park_shortlisted_in_disa.html).

Bratz doll play not only allows for students to create and explore difference in bodily image, but also opens up additional cultural possibilities. While these dolls are provocatively dressed, they more authentically depict non-white ethnicity than their perhaps more appropriately dressed counterparts through varied eyes, noses, and lips. Bratz dolls are ambiguous in their cultural identities, appearing unrecognizably ethnicized, but clearly non-white. In this way, their ethnicity is uncertain, but they have a pervasive, shared youth culture often viewed as promiscuous and sexual. This layered representation of culture is problematic in that it also casts cultural others as sexual objects, and locates this sexuality in dolls that appear to be adolescents or children. It may be noted that

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Bratz were briefly discontinued after a dispute with Barbie's distributor, Mattel, not due to the controversy surrounding their clothing, but because the dolls' creator originally conceived of their design while under contract at Mattel (Reuters, 2008). This event raises interesting artistic issues at the intersection of creativity and consumption that older students might begin to explore critically in the classroom. Additionally, these teenaged (or "tween"aged) dolls might be seen as indoctrinating adolescents into consumption not only of trendy teen clothing, but also of a ghettoized aesthetic of cool that combines minority ethnicity with teenaged sexual promiscuity (Duncum, 2007; p. 289-90). Inviting students to consider these problems and possibilities surrounding objects of youth culture can touch upon issues of race, gender, and sexuality with aesthetic objects that are familiar to them.

Radical Modifications: Race, Gender, and Extreme Doll Play

An examination of both recent and traditional Barbie dolls shows limited concern for realistic visual representations of women, and particularly of non-white ethnic groups. Multicultural/non-white Barbies appear as if they were white dolls merely painted a different color (Wagner-Ott, 2002, p. 255). That is to say that these dolls still have the lips, noses, eyes, hair texture, and figures of impossibly slender white women. How do children approach these idea(l)s of the female form? One response through play is extreme alteration or modification of

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the doll's body. Kuther and McDonald (2006) have observed the widespread tendencies of both male and female adolescents to engage in violent play with Barbies. Violent play included cutting the hair, biting the heads, melting the doll, and placing Barbie in real or simulated peril through play or actual modification of the doll object (p. 42). Many of the students in their study observe (or perhaps mimic the parental concern) that Barbie herself is unrealistic looking. These instances of violence and/or torture play could be seen as a performance responding to resentment and problems of gender and beauty surrounding Barbie's image. This sort of alteration treads the line between art and life, with disturbing and yet compelling implications about visions and treatment of women.

Play can also be a performance connected to the domain of art history and artmaking (Pitri, 2001, p. 48). In the case of Barbie play, I have observed that torture could fit into the continuum of children testing out socially condoned versus socially unacceptable behavior, with Barbie functioning as a complex medium. Torture play directed towards Barbie shows a sort of testing of boundaries, for while cutting the hair and changing the clothes is a part of play modeled by advertisements, more extreme and violent play potentially disrupts the possibility for future engagement with the doll.

Willow Rosenberg Toys: Alternative Adolescent Identity

Beyond childhood Barbie play, toys and action figures for and about adulthood abound and also express otherness, as with some of the *Buffy the*

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Vampire Slayer products. Although Joss Whedon's *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (BTVS) television show originally aired from 1997 to 2003, this enterprise has spawned ongoing comic books and action figures that elaborate its cult status. I have been compelled by this particular phenomenon because of representations of one of the lead characters, Willow Rosenberg. Willow, a high school student who attends both high school and college as the show progresses, is a complex character that often defies labels and yet could be referred to as lesbian, Pagan, and "geek." I have frequently encountered BTVS fans in conferences and classrooms who favor Willow above other characters because they feel that they "know" her. As Willow grew up on this long-running series, so too did many of her fans, exemplifying the kinds of collecting and even play that extends from adolescence to adulthood.

UK researcher Jarvis (2005) describes BTVS as a show demonstrating the potential of academic, experiential, spiritual, and many other different types of learning, knowing, and doing (p. 32). Ultimately, Jarvis argues that the resolution of the show suggests that women can appropriate stereotypical male power by leading and fighting like the protagonist, and can also use "powerful arts coded female, like witchcraft" (p. 43) as Willow does. Willow's use of power and authority is not a simple one, but rather a varied negotiation of ideology and identity in which she balances academic intelligence, personal experience, and discourse with others to guide her actions. Willow's negotiations with sexual, religious, and gender mores are made iconic in various action figures that identify

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her experiences and personas as a witch and a lesbian, through objects that accompany the toy. These include spell bottles, cats, clothing, books, and other miniaturized personal effects that mark and signify Willow's identity.

While some aspects of BTVS characters' personalities defy cultural norms, the bodies of Buffy and Willow are still quite slender and representative of Hollywood beauty. Further, crucial points in the show's plot suggest that Willow must be saved or rescued by male characters. However, beyond manufactured busts and action figures of Willow, more playful and diverse representations can be observed in numerous fanfiction, graphica, and art devoted to her character. In this way, sustained playful engagement exists in dialogue with the narrative of the show, including reconfigurations of relationships and revisions of the plot that transform these characters beyond the confines of network television according to the artistic visions of the readers.

Artists' Alterations: Building on Barbie and Representing the Figure

We might consider BTVS a work of art in that its creator, Joss Whedon, has pursued related graphic novels as well as the television series and commercial toys and products. There are also many artists that borrow or reference trademarked or licensed images from popular culture in more traditional formats of paintings and/or sculptures. We may return to the icon of Barbie as an inspiration for works of art by many contemporary artists who

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explore issues of beauty and body. Educators can also invite students to explore the use of popular culture body images in contemporary art. One promising example is Andras Kallai's 2006 terracotta and plastic sculpture entitled *Fat Barbie*. This sculpture takes the nude body of Barbie and creates *Venus of Willendorf* proportions, through the addition of clay. This embellishment is particularly relevant in terms of sexual imagery and symbolism because though Barbie often serves as a sexual object, her proportions are impossible and would seem counterintuitive to fertility. At the same time, the rotund body of *Venus of Willendorf* is also an exaggeration. Such artistic comparisons are neither entirely celebration nor condemnation, but rather engage in the kind of playful dialogues that may be of interest to art educators. In light of the subtractive torture play mentioned earlier, this kind of alteration presents a constructive and perhaps constructivist framework to address symbols of sexuality and femininity.

Most adults realize that Barbie's proportions, if applied to an actual human, would create a giant unable to stand or walk. Notably, Barbie dolls cannot stand unassisted, and most frequently function as a sort of mannequin (or perhaps like an unfinished work of art) for children to act upon or complete. How do these qualities complicate Barbie as a model of female adulthood? Kallai's *Fat Barbie* becomes a powerful image of alternation in the face of news items pertaining to women like Sarah Burge or Cindy Jackson, both of whom underwent major plastic surgery in attempts to look more like Barbie (Rutherford, 2009). There is an unsettling relationship between altering one's body to mirror a

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Barbie doll, not only stemming from issues of sexual objectification surrounding Barbie's image, but also because the doll itself often functions as a symbol of impossibility and a site of alteration.

French performance artist Orlan altered her own face to appear more like a composite of images of classical beauty from the Renaissance, making the act of her plastic surgery public art (*The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, 1990). These imitations have feminist implications, but highlight different aspects of aesthetics and mimesis. We might well encourage students to explore how the aesthetics of beauty influence and reference both art and popular culture in such examples. We can "play around" with notions of how art and life can disturb us, make commentary on social values, and reflect realities in such critical and unresolved ways. More practically, Wertheimer (2006) explored how "play [within pre-teen websites] offers a space where the body becomes a central locale for expression and experimentation with different selves and subjectivities, through the help of technologies such as clothing, toys, and cameras" (p. 220). Educators might take up the photographic work of Cindy Sherman as a parallel artistic reference, allowing students to explore ways in which play and performance intersect around clothing, body image, setting, and social perceptions.

Further, even the body of the art teacher is not safe from corporate imitation, objectification, and production. Art teacher Barbie (one of the most skimpily-dressed of the Barbie teacher line appearing in 2002) was marketed with students who mirror her race, a coloring book curriculum, and art prints that

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primarily feature artworks from deceased white male artists (Blair, 2006, p. 338). These representations clearly not only stereotype art education, but also undervalue the depth and inclusivity of the work art teachers often pursue. It may be noted that one of primary questions young people ask real art teachers about being artists is whether or not they have seen and depicted people in the nude during art training. I mention this popular question not to make artists and educators uncomfortable (although this question sometimes had that effect upon me), but rather to highlight how the looking and representing associated with art-making might provide a useful space for thoughtfully addressing some issues of gender, sexuality, and corporeality. For example, we gain a better understanding of the body and its many types by drawing it in full. Artists may also employ their gazes in attempts to appreciate and represent difference, inviting viewers not only to view images missing from popular culture, but also to identify beauty in difference within art.

Art Class Activism:

Student-Generated Images and Discussions of Pop Culture

Gender studies researchers like Lamb and Brown (2006) contend that once we are aware of the insidiousness of a curriculum marketing Disney toys and Barbies to girls, there is no going back. This position is both interesting and disturbing. Could art, or rather art education, empower us to pause and speak

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back to these images? In my K-12 and college teaching, I have been surprised by possibilities of student-created and community-based media that re-presents, re-configures, parodies, alters, and even celebrates popular culture images. Collages posted online and in other art spaces outside of galleries often juxtapose popular images in new situations and contexts with changed meanings. A YouTube search of the word “Disney” yields several unexpected juxtapositions of licensed characters in alternative relationships and with altered plots and language that reconfigure the existing narratives. A prime educative example is found in Eric Faden’s review of copyright definitions, *A Fair(y) Use Tale*, which uses selected clips from Disney films that ironically demonstrate and explain ways in which artistic work and ideas can be used and shared by educators and artists without violating copyright law.

While contemporary copyright protects major corporations more fully than individual artists, I maintain that it is important to resist, reclaim, and revise images in art education, playfully. For example, artists like Roger Shimomura and his potentially sinister Disney creatures and comic book action figures (e.g. *Kabuki Play*) are not to be overlooked in consideration of consumer culture. Further, documentary films available to educators like *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* critically examine, among other issues, the problematic romantic relationships of Disney films such as *Beauty and the Beast*, in which the treatment of Belle by the Beast is nearly abusive. So too, the sacrifice of Ariel’s voice and body in *The Little Mermaid* for a romantic relationship is troubling. These kinds of inquiries

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may be increasingly appropriate for adolescent students as they are not only viewing but also planning or experiencing romantic relationships. On a related note, students and teachers may wish to explore popular culture and create activist media and public-service announcements within the framework of *Adbusters Culture Jammers*, a subversive grassroots group with a website and journal that considers contemporary consumer culture and related issues of body, politics, and image through parody and satire.



Figure 2. *Kabuki Play* by Roger Shimomura, 1985.

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Questioning popular culture is not always the same as condemning it, however. My own affinity for She-Ra was perhaps an inspiration for my artistic interest in women as heroines, including characters such as the Greek goddess, Artemis, or the folklore precursor to Disney's *Mulan* noted in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Along this line of thinking, artists and educators might work through issues of consumption and critical literacy with a playful sense of interconnections. Specifically, we can creatively address popular culture as part of art education, as but one of several source materials in the reading and making of all kinds of images and narratives. This valuing of play and creating commentary about mass-produced products also allows for us to address broader continuums of artistic representation, by extending consumer choice and aesthetic canons even while also noting continuities.

One example blurring popular culture and contemporary art is Seattle artist Mike Leavitt's Art Army of action figures that include models of Banksy and R. Crumb (<http://intuitionkitchenproductions.com>). Meanwhile, English teacher Dana St John (2009) has suggested that fellow teachers invite students to create their own action figures based around the lives of artists they are studying. Her "bio-dolls" curriculum inspires students to inquire into the lives and works of artists, symbolically representing or mapping their thoughts and feelings from art historical explorations in the head and heart of the dolls' forms. We might consider Yoshitomo Nara in the classroom as an artist who negotiates the divide of art and popular culture. Inspired by popular culture and manga, his sculptures

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and paintings generate unresolved narratives surrounding frustrated female children. Nara references toys in his aesthetic, and in turn his work has also been transformed and manufactured as toy objects for children, such as plates and figurines. Artists with such diverse artistic references create an ambiguous and interesting backdrop to discuss art and design along with toys and play. Wielding toy-sized weapons of their own, Nara's female figures may also be viewed as exemplifying some of the frustrations of popular culture detailed throughout this paper relating to oppressive body image, restrictive sexuality, and predetermined standards of social behavior.

Conclusions: Playful Possibilities in Pedagogy

In summary, this article has explored some of the ways in which processes of play intersect with gender identity-construction and developing sexualities. This intersection is often problematic and unresolved as a site of pedagogy. In some of my earlier research, I emphasized ambivalence as a useful concept for thinking about art and about identity (Weida, 2009). I believe that ambivalence, as a balancing of opposites and negotiation of tensions, can also be useful to consider in discussions of play and art education where controversial issues of sexuality are involved. Further, as Spigel (2001) observes "the discourse of victimization that surrounds the child might . . . usefully be renamed and reinvestigated as a discourse of power through which adults express their own

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disenfranchisement" (p. 211). It is likely that parents and educators share a great deal of uncertainty about topics of sexuality in K-12 curriculum, yet we may recognize that heteronormative sexuality is already embedded in the popular culture surrounding both children and adolescents. Rather than prescribe particular frameworks for addressing gender and sexuality in the classroom, I have sought to explore ways in which diverse images and interpretations might be made available for learning through play. Specifically, a variety of toys, narratives, and artworks can be presented (or even created) such that students encounter different body types, relationships, and communities pertaining to adulthood. To encounter openness and otherness is often to help de-stigmatize aspects of gender and sexuality that are a part of students' experiences.

Popular culture studies can pose a similar level of controversy as sexuality education in K-12 schools. Some theorists have questioned visual culture approaches to toys and dolls as broadening the scope of art education excessively. Specifically, there is concern that popular culture overshadows art itself. For example, Kamhi (2004) challenged that if a visual culture of toys is considered alongside works of art history, "one can henceforth treat the *Nike of Samothrace* and Michelangelo's *David*, say, on a par with Mattel Toys' Barbie and Ken dolls" (p. 30). While these four examples are perhaps not suited for the same educational exploration, Andras Kallai's *Fat Barbie* might function as a bridge from fine art to visual culture, inviting us to gather works of art and toys

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into related dialogue with focused learning objectives around gender, body image, and aesthetics.

As an educator, I value critical readings of gender with familiar objects of popular culture as well as contemporary and historical works of art. Artworks and examples of popular culture can serve as artifacts of pedagogy that pose complex problems of gender in their juxtaposition of familiar contexts with potent visual symbolism. I propose that children and adults begin to address these problems creatively by conceptualizing ourselves as players and makers, instead of merely viewers, consumers, and censors. We can begin to examine the relationships between toys and art, and between play and education. A playful, yet thoughtful approach to engaging with images of gender and sexuality may provide agency for young people, such that learning communities collaborate to embrace the possibilities of play in art, and of art in play.

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