



The Nature of Still Life

by Ines Bertolini and Veronica Ceruti

Istituto Comprensivo 11 of Bologna
in cooperation with the *Dipartimento Didattico*
of the *Galleria d'Arte Moderna* of Bologna.

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Introduction

For the exhibition "The Nature of still Life" a special project was carried out by the *Dipartimento Didattico* of the *Galleria d'Arte Moderna* and the *Istituto Comprensivo 11* of Bologna, which comprises two kindergartens, two primary schools and one intermediate school.

Istituto Comprensivo 11 is located in the outer Bologna suburb Pilastro which was founded in the 1960s for workers coming from South Italy. Pilastro is still today a "difficult" district, since it is the home of many non EU-citizens, gypsies and war refugees.

The project was carried out in the school year 2001-2002.

Each class involved participated in an interactive visit and workshop at the Galleria, where children could experience an artistic path prepared especially for them. Various workshops then took place in the school, tapered according to the children's ages.

Goals of the Project

Goals of the project were:

- To help children and teenagers socialise and interact with each other;
- To bring them closer to various forms of contemporary art;
- To strengthen their creative potential and aesthetic taste;
- To encourage them to experiment with different artistic techniques and media (painting, sculpture, photography and video making);
- To develop personal and self-awareness research skills related to the metaphor of food.

The Exhibition: "The Nature of Still Life"

Galleria d'Arte Moderna of Bologna,
1st December 2001 - 24th February 2002.

In this exhibition, the *Galleria d'Arte Moderna* of Bologna presented an extensive survey on still life, a classic theme of western artistic tradition. It aimed to analyse the artistic and iconographic developments of still life from Manet to the present, using some 140 significant paintings and sculptures from important museums, foundations, and private and state-owned collections from all over Europe and the United States. Presented chronologically, the displays revealed how conventional items such as flowers, fruit, crockery and musical instruments offered artists endless ideas to experiment with: from Manet's optical researches to Cézanne's perspective twists, from the spatial contortions of the *Futuristi* to the perceptual disarticulation of the Cubists, from Morandi's classical textures to Fautrier's relief painting. The exhibition illustrated the most significant artistic movements of the 20th century and showed how the theme of still life, recognisable from its typical models and forms, is still present in the contemporary art scene.

Kindergarten Workshops

Miniature Tables

Sculpturing was the main activity in this project.

Three-dimensionality of natural forms and everyday objects can be copied through keen observation, modelling from a real subject, and the use of plastic techniques and materials. Everyday objects puzzle the observer when their real dimensions are twisted: when we miniaturise the dimensions of an object which we normally use, we become disoriented and are astonished.

Children in this task made small tables and covered them with detailed objects and food (fig. 1), using clay and coloured plasticine (fig. 2).



fig. 1 Miniature Table



fig. 2 One Stage of the Process

Re-casting Nature

The aim of sculpture, particularly in classical art, is to imitate nature precisely; the three-dimensional object made by an artist must appear as real in its shape, proportions and colours as the original. Casting is the process that most closely corresponds to this idea of reproducing reality, and allows an artistic object to be created through a reverse impression (figg. 3, 4).

Children were proud to have re-cast nature and took delight in asking their friends, "Which is the original, which is the copy?" They were often puzzled!



fig. 3 Spoon, Glass, Onion, Pod, Walnut



fig. 4 Bottle Casts

“Don't Talk While Eating!”

How many times have we been reproached at the table: “Keep your elbows down, don't put the knife in your mouth, chew properly, don't talk with your mouth full...” But although we respect the rules of Galateo, it is inevitable that while sitting at the table we will move our muscles, make noises and reveal who we really are. “Tell me how you eat, and I'll tell you who you are”. A video camera recorded participants' table manners. The result was a curious film about food and our attitude to it: how we chew it, taste it, sniff it, swallow it, enjoy it... The making of this video involved all the participating classes.

Primary and Intermediate Schools Workshops

Trap tables

The artist Daniel Spoerri would invite friends to his own restaurant, serve them a good meal, and upon their departure would invite them to his next exhibition. The extraordinary thing then occurred on the opening day, when instead of paintings or photographs on the walls of the gallery, his friends found the very tables they had eaten at a short time before: the same plates, glasses, cutlery, the ashtray full of cigarettes, a red wine stain on the tablecloth, leftovers, crumbs and all the rest! These are the famous *Tableaux-Pièges*, the trap tables, that made Daniel Spoerri famous throughout the world.

Inspired by the work of this artist, we investigated children's and teenagers' personalities by examining their habits and tastes regarding the consumption of food. Even the tiniest secret was revealed by trap tables made by the children to represent themselves (figg. 5, 6).

fig. 5
The Angry
One's Table



fig. 6
Travelling Table



Still Life and Me

Still Life with Vases of Flowers, Goblets and Shells; Still Life with Jug and Fruit Basket; Still Life with Violin; Still Life with Fish...

When you read the titles of some famous still life works, you get a strong feeling of monotony, repetition, immobility.

In these splendid compositions the only great subject absent seems to be the human being.

In this workshop, boys and girls experienced the fantastic world of still life hands-on, using their imagination and creativity. Each participant chose an object to be photographed with for an original still-life work. The next question was how to compose the picture: In which pose did they want to be depicted? What sort of relationship should there be between their body and the chosen object? The results were original and varied, and the titles also changed... (fig. 7, 8, 9)

fig. 8
Girl Lying



fig. 7
Volcano
of Ideas

fig. 9
Changing
Point of
View

Conclusion

At the end of the project we set up an educational exhibition. The garden, corridors and classrooms of the *Istituto Comprensivo 11* were transformed into a museum, displaying all the children's and teenagers' creations. Not only the classes involved, along with their teachers, visited this closing day, but the entire *Istituto*. Relatives and friends in great numbers also came to the retrospective and were pleasantly surprised and enthusiastic about what their children had accomplished. (figg. 10, 11, 12).



fig. 10



fig. 11

The Authors

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fig. 12