

***What Art and Science Want:***  
*Disciplines and Cultures in Contention*

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Extract from section:

***How Shall I Know? Where Shall I Be?***

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2.0

***How Shall I Know? Where Shall I Be? - An Artist's Foreword***



**Fig. 1.** Family photograph, c. 1966

## 2.1

**A Garden**

A photograph [fig. 1] shows two boys, about six years and three years old, constructing a piece of furniture from scraps of wood. They are brothers, and the project is led by the older one. His father has told him that what he is trying to do will not work: the footstool he wants to make will not bear the weight of even a small person. The father's father is a woodworker by trade, building cupboards, doors and staircases for houses. Between them these two men are able to make almost anything that can be made out of wood. The older boy's exposure to these skills and practical knowledges has for some time piqued his curiosity, leading to encounters like the one I now remember via this photograph.

The boy is making a bid to become a maker of useful things like chairs, tables, and containers. Until now, the pieces of wood purloined from nearby construction sites were just a collection of rough-and-ready play-bricks. Enticed by what might be done in the world of his adult mentors, and the possibility of gaining their affirmation and approval, he is beginning to exchange the infinite possibilities of play for fixed forms and definite objects, things which are not thrown back into the box, as pieces, but are still standing tomorrow. If all goes well, the little piece of furniture will be a sign of a successful bid to master one of the forms of the made world; if it starts to go wrong – twisting, collapsing – he might revise his stated intention. In this case, the new and unprecedented object that emerges will still be accepted, but as the outcome of play, as a sign of the imaginative use of partially-assimilated skills.

The younger brother has the role of helper. He knows that nails need to be grasped before they are struck, although he hasn't quite understood that when held as shown in the photograph the grasping hand is in the way of the hammer. The older boy knows that the problem of the mis-held nail will have to be addressed immediately, for he is reaching for the hammer. He doesn't really want an assistant, but he hasn't any other means of balancing all the pieces of wood together in the correct configuration, whilst also holding and striking nails. He is beginning to find that nails driven straight down through the top-board into the legs do not form a strong bond, just as his father has warned. He wants to be left alone to get to grips with these new realisations. All seemed clear at the outset, but now the project looks set to mock his inadequacies.

Watching his father and grandfather fashion a world of new objects, the boy has witnessed the power of their instruments and methods (as he has with his mother and grandmother, with their skills of drawing and sewing). What is particularly frustrating – unjust, as far as he can see – is that he is not yet allowed access to the tools needed to extend his own agency as they have theirs. He has a hammer and nails, but with a handsaw he could have made four legs of equal length for the footstool. Just now, this

would help a lot. The frustration crossing his face is a hint of a storm gathering within, a personal anguish fuelled by the holding back of crucial tools, the rationing of materials, an uneven work surface, and an incomplete knowledge of the relevant techniques. These difficulties are heightened by the efforts of a helper whose mind, as everyone should know, is still that of a child who just wants to play. The older boy can sense impending failure, a humiliation that everyone will witness... and now someone is photographing him just at the threshold of this disaster.

I have introduced this photograph as the record of a moment of conflictual becoming. It is a moment in which at least one aspiring cultural agent – myself as a child – is working through a divergence of ways of knowing the physical and social worlds, and his place in them. Although frustrated, he is enjoying his sense of growing out of an imagined and imaginary universe, whose reality has, until recently, immersed him. The footstool is an object with which he hopes to demonstrate new agency, and simultaneously acquire new status. It will, for a while at least, be a sign of his difference from his younger brother, a sign of his drawing closer to the world of his father, and in this respect it looks as if the boy's move is an act of social mimesis; a bid to be like the father, like the men.

There is something else to it. He has noticed that fragments discarded according to one rule, when seen from a fresh perspective, can become elements newly in play. So far, so idiosyncratic. But his putting into play of these particular elements (the offcuts of wood) is neither playful nor open-ended. He will sacrifice the very free-association which enables him to see new possibilities in discarded fragments, in a bid to be recognized as the maker of an object of pre-authenticated form. The moment is one of many incremental shifts, in which the enormous latitude allowed in children's play is given over to rule-directed evaluation: in this example, to a simple test of utility. If this approach becomes the norm for him, it means that he will sacrifice his sense of an unbounded future for one delimited by the rule, as long as he can be master of the rule.

The difficulties that currently preoccupy him are early signs of what will become a familiar predicament: that knowing the story of a knowledge, feeling that one can read its signs, is altogether different from being the bearer of its powers. He is, nevertheless, acquiring a slightly stronger sense of how a world maximally in play is offered up, bit by bit, to the governance of rules. As a child who aspires towards a bigger role in making the world, he is experiencing a conflict of interests. This is accentuated by the involvement of his younger brother, which brings out an underlying tension between his current, earnest pursuit of the rule and the carefree enjoyment of things in play. Of course, these terms can be swapped around: he already has a sense that rules might be enjoyed, but he will realise too that a disenchantment with the rule can be the very reason for earnestly putting things into play.

The rule seduces, only to betray. One rule in particular, eventually borne by everyone, is often hidden whilst aspirants are inculcated into the ways of making the world. As the boy grows up and outlives other people known to him he will begin to know it as the rule of mortality. Faced with his own mortal limits, questions like 'what to do?', and 'how to live?' will press ever more urgently. This apprehension of mortality might be just a particularly dramatic form of accepting the limits of his own agency, but even that more banal realisation raises questions, such as: 'what serves me best?', and 'what can I best serve (given the limits of my agency)?'

It would be unsurprising if the ludic state enjoyed by the child at play were recalled nostalgically by any adult, for it is an approximation of the world before the rule (for which the adult comes to bear responsibility, from which there is no escape); a memory of the infant's cosmos, before any limitation of agency was conceded. Surviving as an affinity for things kept in play, the ludic can even become a purposive element of many socially-legitimate activities. Some may be called art, others science.

My family photograph records a moment in a boy's struggle with knowing the story of a knowledge, whilst not quite enjoying the agency it supposedly affords. He has some tools and techniques, but is still between play, imaginative projection, and cultural production. He is between ruled knowledges borne by others – that others have clearly 'mastered in their practical state'<sup>29</sup> – and his own, ad hoc apprehensions of how things might be done. He is between different ways of knowing and being. Further, although dangerous tools are withheld out of care, it seems to the boy that his aspirations are being resisted just because his father wants to demonstrate his authority. The father does claim authenticatory power over whether or not the boy is fit to carry aspects of a knowledge into practice, and whether or not the outcome serves the purposes conventionally ascribed to the knowledge. However, this power is exercised only half-seriously. For the father, all this is a family game, whilst for the boy it is about entry into a new social sphere, the world of those who are able to make things that people like his father make.

I want to imagine that the incident in the garden has more far-reaching ramifications; that the outcome of the boy's project is evaluated, outside the family setting, according to two different protocols. The first deems that, in order to succeed, the boy's construction must stand up and bear the weight of a person; the second that if the object looks like furniture, but is obviously too fragile to sit on, its purpose might be to make us think about what we expect from objects like it, and thus to challenge received ideas. I invent these extreme evaluations so that I can attribute the first to a physical scientist or engineer, and the second to an evaluating agent close to contemporary art. I can now suggest that my scientist-engineer seeks an outcome that demonstrates the reliability of the knowledges which led up to it, and thus legitimates the getting of further, related knowledge. My artistic agent, on the other hand, seeks an engagingly

unusual, new, or novel outcome which can catalyse a critique of established ideas and forms, yet can also be categorized as art, and thus legitimate the making of more art.

I am emphasizing protocols of authentication, by which outcomes are deemed true or false products of a disciplinary field, as opposed to the mixed affinities and empathies, from the practical to the social, clearly still in play for the two boys in my photograph. As both grow up, they will gravitate towards the disciplinary fields of art, and some of the affinities coming to light in childhood will then be said to have shaped their professional and social lives. Both will be makers of art and music, and be involved with art in academic contexts, teaching and writing. This will all happen in a society that is liberal, democratic and consumerist, where art-making generally ceases after childhood,<sup>30</sup> and yet there is also a want of scientists.<sup>31</sup> Is my attribution of selectivist protocols for authenticating the true products of arts and sciences in this society justified? I think so, but I need to test it.