Alex

Phyllis Webb

at five o'clock today Alex four years old said
I will draw a picture of you!
at first he gave me no ears and I said
you should give me ears
I would like big ears one on each side
and he added them and three buttons down the front
now I'll make your skirt wide he said and he did
and he put pins in all up and down my ribs and I waited
and he said now I'll put a knife in you
it was in my side and I said does it hurt
and No! he said and we laughed and he said
now I'll put a fire on you and he put male
fire on me in the right place then scribbled me
all into flames shouting FIRE FIRE FIRE
FIRE FIRE FIRE and I said
shall we call the fire engines and he said Yes!
this is where they are and the ladders are bending
and we made siren noises as he drew the engines on
over the page then he said the Hose! and he put
the fire out and that's better I said
and he rolled over laughing like crazy
because it was all on paper

Nine-Year Olds, Meet Monet

Ellen Goodman

SHE was on what the school called a "field trip," as if the fourth graders were anthropologists and the Museum of Fine Arts were a foreign land.

It was, in some ways, a meeting of different cultures. The nine-year-old chatter splintered in huge marble hallways built to echo nineteenth-century discussions of Art. The blue jeans and T-shirts jarred with the gilt frames holding priceless paintings.

The class had gone to meet one of the woman's favorite people—Claude Monet—and so, she had gone along. Not to introduce them, you understand, but to accompany them.

There she was struck, not by the contrasting cultures, but by the contrasting values of one culture. The children had been taken en masse to meet an individualist. They had come, clutching worksheets in one hand and best friends in the other—the channel markers of the social system—to see the work of a man who rebelled against his own artistic system.

Watching them giggling together and sharing answers she thought again: They are becoming socialized, for better and for worse.

The worksheets and friends were, in one way or another, the constraints of society on the ego. How they performed on paper and with each other would inevitably be marked down on the up-to-date report card under the headings "Learning Skills" and "Social Skills." Yet the paintings on the wall were the work of the disciplined but essentially "unsocialized" ego

of the artist who believed in the primary value of self-expression.

If, like Monet, they skipped school to go to the sea, or drew cartoons of their teacher, they would be labeled "social problems." If they had the nerve to believe that their own rebellious notions were better than the collected wisdom of the École des Beaux-Arts, they too would be considered antisocial egotists.

The nine-year-olds, scattered around the rooms full of luscious landscapes, were, on the whole, good kids. You didn't have to remind them to keep their hands off. They had been almost civilized out of the real Me-Decade, the first years of life. Totally selfish at one, outrageously self-centered at two, by now the cutting edges of their egos had rubbed off against each other and the adults. They raised their hands and waited their turns and followed directions. They had learned the acts of survival—cooperation, and orderliness, laced with hypocrisy and covered with suppression.

They were becoming socialized. For better and for worse.

She thought of all the conflicting feelings and messages that went into this process. Be yourself but get along with others. Be popular but don't follow the crowd. Write an imaginative story, within these margins and in this time. Paint . . . by numbers.

They say that societies get the children they want. The imaginative three-year-old becomes the reasonable ten-year-old. The nursery-school child who asks, "How do they get the people inside the television set?" becomes the middle-school child who reads the ingredients on the cereal box. The two-year-old exhibitionist becomes the twelve-year-old conformist who won't wear the wrong kind of blue jeans.

As kids grow up, they are less exhausting and less imaginative, less selfish and less creative. They are easier to live with. Their egos come under control. They become socialized, for better and for worse.

We train selfishness out of them. Yet, ironically, some who resist, like the artists, may end up giving the most to others. The product of the most egotistical self-expression may become a generous gift available on the museum wall or the library shelf.

The fourth graders finished their hour with Monet. They were impressed with Impressionism and would, for a while, remember the man they'd met. They left, with their worksheets in one hand and their best friends in the other, still chattering. They passed, in reasonable order, through the doorway and down the massive staircase.

Very few of them had read or understood the words printed on the wall of the exhibit. They were copied from a letter Monet had written to a friend: "Don't you agree that on one's own with nature, one does better? Me, I'm sure of it. . . . What I'm going to do here will at least have the merit of not resembling anyone else, or so I think, because it will be simply the expression of what I myself have felt."