



## Introduction

*I feel sure that we must account for the origin of art by  
some reference to play.*

—JAMES SULLY, PSYCHOLOGIST, 1895, 327

*Can I draw on the ground with this chalk?  
I'm a really good artist.*

— RAFAEL, AGE 10

From 2010 to 2012 I worked with students from The University of the Arts to donate jump ropes, balls, hoops, and chalk—all traditional urban play materials—to nine public schools in Philadelphia. The idea was to make it possible for resource-poor schools to enrich children's time and to support children's expressive culture. We followed our donation with an art activity in four of the schools, where teachers asked the children to paint what they do at recess and how it makes them feel. Art about play became *The Art of Play*.

Consider the following two paintings (Figures I.1 and I.2). The first, from an earlier study, was painted by an eight-year-old boy enamored with the Harry Potter series (Beresin 2010). When I asked him what he does at recess, he painted "Quidditch," with its snitch, quaffle, and

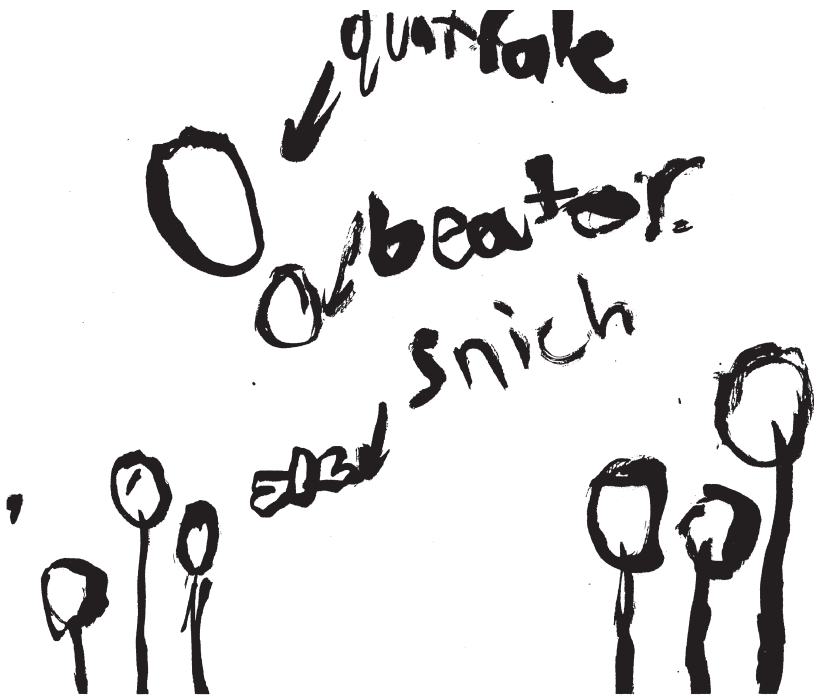


Figure 1.1 (Grade 5)

beater balls. His painting is not an exact copy of a Quidditch pitch: the set on the left copies the proportions of the hoops in the books and movies, but the one on the right has the hoops in their own order, like a diagram of a family or a constellation of friends. It is both an image of Quidditch and not an image of Quidditch. And when I asked him to paint or tell me more, he painted the people he plays with: “Albus Dumbledore, Eva, Tyson, and me.”

The second was more recently painted by a ten-year-old girl in a school in West Philadelphia. Because there were no working basketball hoops, the children invented “hoop ball,” with hula hoops used as makeshift baskets for shooting basketballs. Earlier that day I had witnessed this exact image on their playground. A group of children gathered around the girl who painted it, nodding their approval of its portrayal and puffing out their chests.

These two paintings and the children who painted them suggest that beyond the social and aerobic benefits of recess, there is a hidden realm of invention being practiced and that observational studies like my own

previous work were missing pieces of the puzzle. Some paintings were literal copies of inventions visible on the playground. Some inventions were imaginary and seen only in the children's heads. What can the art of play teach us about the art of play?

The paintings in this book were made by more than one hundred seven-, eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds. The stories reflect the realities and imaginations of more than two thousand urban lives: Latino children, Asian American children, European American white children, and in the vast majority, African American children. Each chosen school comes from a different part of Philadelphia: North, South, West, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, East Central, Center City, and Kensington. With one exception, these schools are in working-class neighborhoods, and all the working-class schools have concrete school yards with no built playground equipment of any kind.

The nonprofit Great Schools rates overall school performance on a scale of 1 to 10; these working-class schools earned an average score of 2 out of 10. Several scored 1 out of 10 in terms of poor resources and low test scores.<sup>1</sup> Although some of the schools seemed to belong in a Dickens



Figure 1.2 (Grade 5)

novel, many were bright, caring places where a super-heroic staff made do with nonexistent resources. All the schools, administrators, teachers, and children have been given pseudonyms, and all the original art has been returned to the children.

Here are images of leaping, tossing, friendships, and hearts, as well as images of invisible handcuffs. *Broken Song*, a book about the persecution of Russian Jews, waves like a banner to the portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Wished-for breakfast foods join traditional footballs, jump ropes, and basketballs in the flowing ink. The only editing of the paintings was the removal of names, and the collection is shown in its entirety. The paintings are grouped by grade as a developmental cohort, suggesting developmental differences and similarities in children's culture and its portrayal through reflective artistic practice.

### Paintlore

Children's cultural historian Brian Sutton-Smith writes of the spontaneous tales that children tell as the "folkstories of children" and their peer

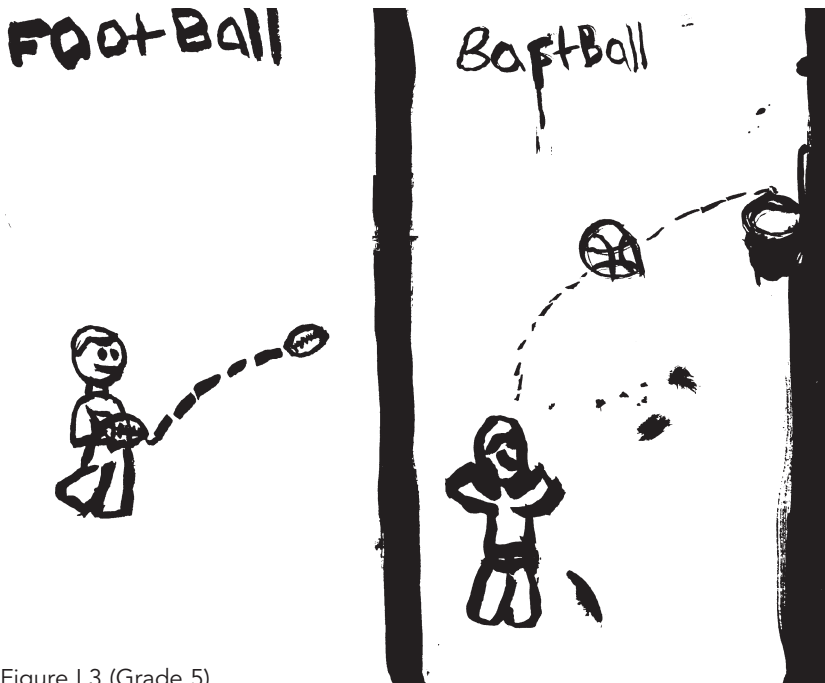


Figure 1.3 (Grade 5)

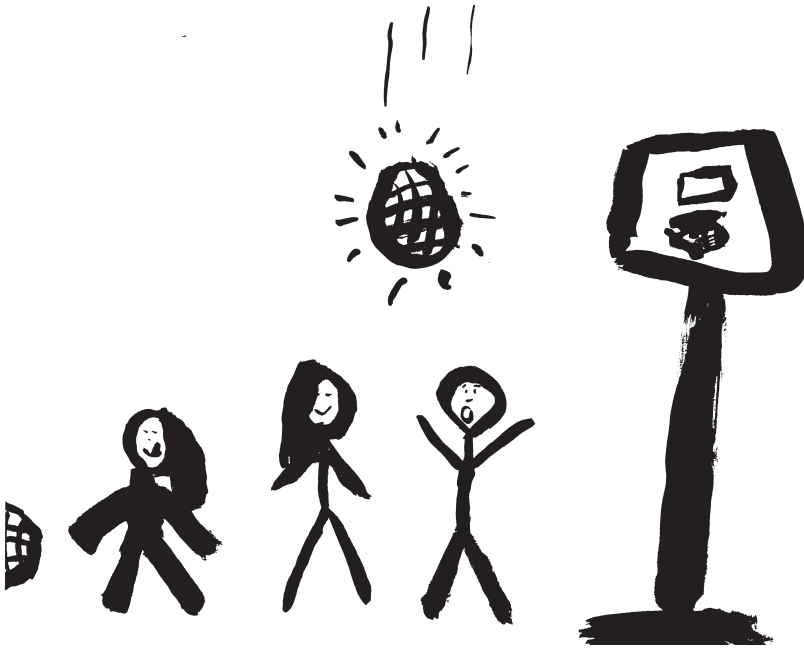


Figure 1.4 (Grade 5)

culture outside and in as the “folkgames of children.”<sup>2</sup> Folklorist Simon Bronner refers to toys made by children as a form of craft.<sup>3</sup> But chalk and painting present uniquely, becoming what we might term “folk drawings” and “folk paintings.” In these images there are themes and styles, frames of reference and frames of perspective. They are created communally in each other’s presence.

That first painting of Quidditch led me to view art as a source of documentation of hidden children’s culture, and their paintlore as a way to present a host of localized game variations and traditional styles. “Paintlore” is what I call the painted depiction of a culture’s folklore done by the people in that particular place. An expressive, communicative art, its main purpose is storytelling.

Folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett used a collection of paintings to document her father’s complex history in prewar Europe, writing: “Like the itinerant patuas of Bengal, who unroll their painted scrolls and perform the stories visualized on them . . . the paintings are not illustrations and the stories are not captions. They are not versions of one another. Rather, different parts of the story are told in different ways in different



Figure 1.5 (Grade 5)

media to form a whole that is greater than could be achieved in words or images alone.”<sup>4</sup>

Because this book is a folklore study, I focus on the art and the community of creators who make meaning through their art forms. It is not a psychological study of individuals or an institutional study of specific schools. At the center are the emergent play images and play genres, their value as explained by the people in the community and by like-minded thinkers.

In this book we meet Mrs. Dee, the henna-haired gym teacher who dances with the children every day; quiet Ms. Mary, one of the most creative elementary art teachers I have ever met; and school staff who have permanently canceled recess and who believe that “nobody has recess anymore.” We hear directly from the children who jumped on these playgrounds along with the recorded observations of games they actually played in front of us. They sang as they played, and sang as they painted, often blurring the activities of art room and playground.

The theme of the practice of invention recurs in the children’s own commentary and in the countervoices of practicing adult artists in dance, theater, music, film, design, and fine arts as they think aloud about the play element in their own work. All the children and administrators were participants in Recess Access, a grant-funded initiative of ParLAB, the Philadelphia Applied Research Laboratory at The University of the Arts, where I teach; all the artists quoted are professors of some form of art



Figure 1.6 (Grade 5)



Figure 1.7 (Grade 5)



Figure 1.8 (Grade 5)



there. The book is a pairing of narratives—the telling of the tales of the Recess Access schools from 2010 to 2012 and the examination of the intersection of art and play.

## Multiple Meanings

There are many meanings associated with the title *The Art of Play*:

- the art (skill) of being a fine player
- the theoretical connections between art and play itself
- the art images of people at play

Because play is both frame and frame breaker,<sup>5</sup> this book addresses all three meanings and their opposites:

- the art (skill) of being a fine player *and* the creation of skill
- the roots of the arts in play *and* the roots of play in the arts
- the art images of people at play, which will in turn be played with

These abstractions are made concrete, pardon the pun, through the telling of stories emerging from these nine paved urban school yards. The schools were the first in a string of recess advocacy partnerships created with university monies and buoyed by college student labor. Almost all the schools had no playthings of any kind. All donations had no strings attached; school staff members were free to do whatever they wished with the recess and art materials, and each school was eager for more. At the same time, the university students were introduced to neighborhoods in Philadelphia that they had never seen before, most returning for more than one volunteer opportunity. The Recess Access motto: “Give children time. Give children props. Give children a daily recess.”

“Props” are “things to play with,” like props on a stage that enable storytelling. “Props” are also “support structures” that keep things from falling down. In urban slang, “props” means “proper respect.” When given to children, props can validate their practices, uphold their budding friendships, and invite artistic thinking.

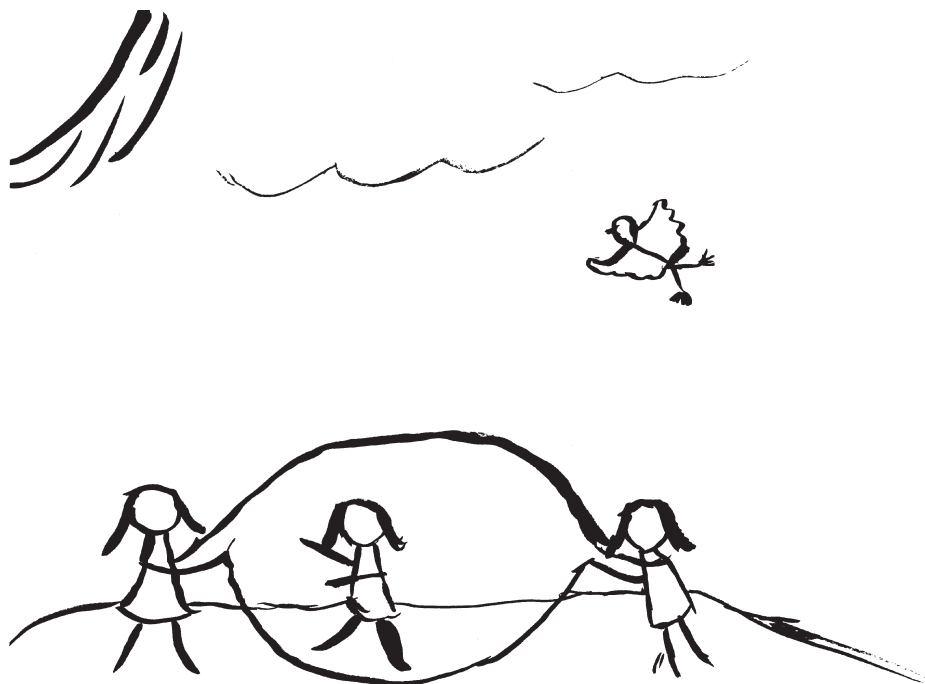


Figure I.9 (Grade 5)



Figure I.10 (Grade 5)

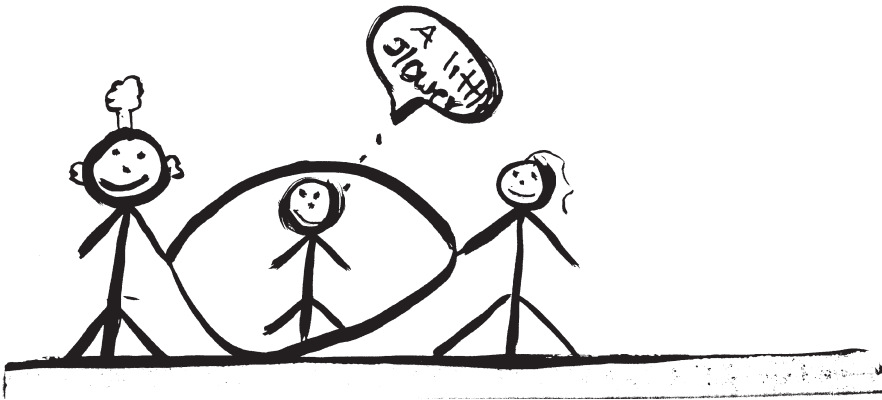


Figure I.11 (Grade 5)



Figure I.12 (Grade 5)

## The Intersection of Art and Play

Art and play have both been utilized therapeutically with children, and there is an enormous literature to support their use but little on their intersection. A growing literature about skill at play, or “master players,” describes resiliency in children,<sup>6</sup> as well as the play connection to creativity in master artists.<sup>7</sup> Typically, these are studies of very young children or of expert artists looking back on their careers.

In his masterwork, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith writes of the romantic linking of play and art at the turn of the twentieth century:

When we consider that children’s art and modern art were constantly paralleled at the turn of this century, the strength of the linkage between the child’s imagination and the child as artist becomes apparent. . . . Leading modern artists, such as Picasso, [Henri] Matisse, [Juan] Gris, [Wassily] Kandinsky, and [Paul] Klee, avowed that they would like to be able to draw like children, because children draw what they imagine and not what they see. . . .

In psychology, since [Karl] Groos at the turn of the century, occasional attempts have been made to separate play and art. . . . For Groos, play is biology and art is culture. For [Daniel] Berlyne . . . play is frivolous and art is revered. . . . [Howard] Gardner sees play in terms of the mastery of anxiety, self, and the world, but art in terms of the mastery of symbolic forms.<sup>8</sup>

Yet Howard Gardner notes:

Despite the many intervening years, the analogies between the art of the child and the art of the master seem worth cherishing. For it is in the activity of the young child—his preconscious sense of form, his willingness to explore and to solve problems that arise, his capacity to take risks, his affective needs which must be worked out in a symbolic realm—that we find the crucial seeds of the greatest artistic achievement.<sup>9</sup>

Play becomes art in song, drama, dance, sculpture, and drawing. Hear it in the playground’s jump-rope rhymes, in the pretend play, the sporting

# touch DOWN



Figure I.13 (Grade 5)



Figure I.14 (Grade 5)

elegance, and the children's attempts to modify their own play environments. Unlike psychologist Howard Gardner and art historian Jonathan Fineberg and the vast majority of writers who address art and childhood,<sup>10</sup> this book focuses on the art of childhood proper, not early childhood or children's artistic genius.

Writers in the field of play studies and in the field of art history have cautioned against the conflation of art and play.<sup>11</sup> Play is not the same as art, as art implies an exacting mastery, yet there are masterful moments in play, and playful moments in the process of creation. What do play and art have in common?

Children's artistry, like all art that comes from a different culture, is often misunderstood, undervalued, and even oppressed. Art history professor Nancy Heller tells me: "What's always bothered me in art history—things that are funny get no respect. Play and humor—at least in the world of art history, there's this belief that anything that was humorous was not worthwhile. . . . It took a while for artists such as [Alexander] Calder to be taken seriously. It's because he is funny, child-like. It took a long time for art historians to accept him as an artist with a capital 'A.' To

me, play has the implication of pleasure; by definition it is something you don't have to do; it's therefore suspect."<sup>12</sup>

In 1895 James Sully suggested:

They build their sand castles, they pretend to keep shop, to entertain visitors, and so forth, for the sake of the enjoyment that they find in these actions. This clearly involves one point of kinship with the artist, for the poet sings and the painter paints because they love to do so.

It is evident, moreover, from what was said about the imaginative side of play that it has this further circumstance in common with art-production, that it is the bodying forth of a mental image into the semblance of outer life.<sup>13</sup>

This "bodying forth of a mental image" that emerges in play can be found in the children's paintings and in the photos—in the extended chest, the elastic arms, the exaggerated muscles, the leaping forms. If, as philosopher Mark Johnson suggests,<sup>14</sup> the origin of imaginative thinking is in the movements of the body, then the body's movement, with all its cultural stylizations, must be at the root of both play and artistic thinking. Sigmund Freud, too, was intrigued by the connections between art and play: "Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?"<sup>15</sup>

But unlike the neo-Freudians, who saw play as a form of emotional mastery, I am suggesting that there are a host of practices that are being reinvented during play: the practice of fine and large motor skills; the practice of balance; the practice of friendship; the practice of culture, and with it the practice of words, of singing, drawing, dancing, acting; the practice of design, of expansion and contraction; the practice of juxtaposition; the practice of practice.

Gardner clarifies: "Both young children and adult artists are willing, even eager, to explore their medium, to try out various alternatives, to permit unconscious processes of play to gain sway. . . . Moreover, both are willing to suspend (for somewhat different reasons) their knowledge of what others do, to go their own way, to transcend the practices and boundaries that overwhelm and inhibit 'literal-age' children (and, quite possibly, lesser artists)."<sup>16</sup>



Figure I.15 (Grade 5)

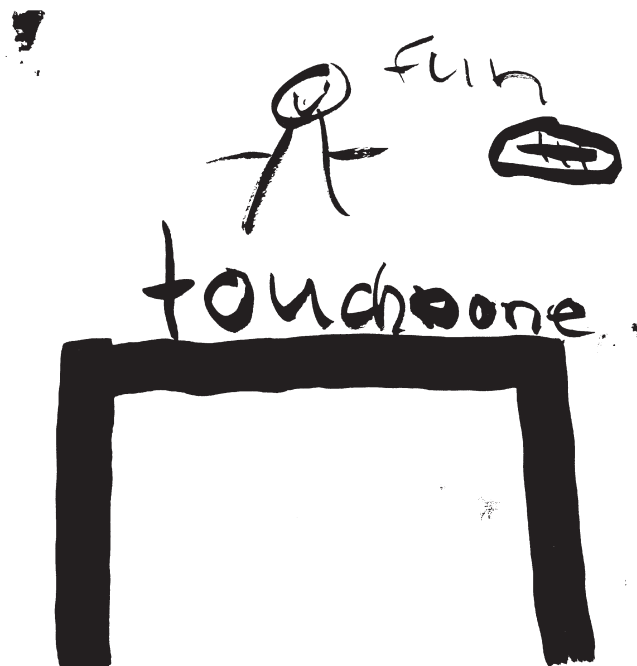


Figure I.16 (Grade 5)



FAG  
Tees

Figure I.17 (Grade 5)



Figure I.18 (Grade 5)

Yet art does not disappear in middle childhood; we just have been looking for children's art in the wrong places. Although it abounds in early childhood, and for some lucky few lasts through adulthood, it has been there all this time—on the playground.

Collecting children's playground art on a large scale has always been the goal of the folklorists of childhood. Collections typically focus on songs, jokes, and rules of games, with collectors recording variations with pen and paper and, later on, with audio and video. Like Sutton-Smith in New Zealand, Iona and Peter Opie surveyed the whole of Great Britain's evolving children's traditions, adding an emphasis on material culture—the toys and things that were designed by and for children. Before them there was Lady Alice B. Gomme (1894), whose methods were limited to what could be collected through letter writing, while in the United States, William Wells Newell gathered games and songs of American children through observation in the 1880s. All these early survey collections were utilized as demonstrations of nationalism and the attempt to discern cultural boundary making through play.

Other scholars of play have been interested in movement across boundaries. Onwuchekwa Jemie collected African American children's

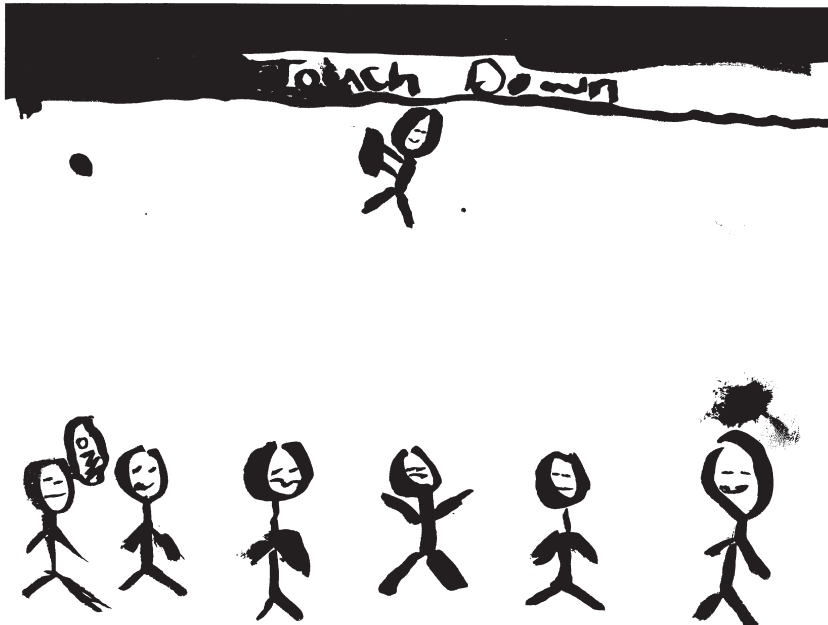


Figure 1.19 (Grade 5)



Figure I.20 (Grade 5)

lore in the 1960s and 1970s and found the roots of American verbal play in African verbal arts by comparing recorded words and phrases across the ocean.<sup>17</sup> All collections of children's folklore, from June Factor's "kid-speak" to Kathryn Marsh's collections of singing games in Australia, have in common a sense of the *changing yet consistent* vital play of childhood, seeking the rhymes of the times.<sup>18</sup> Folklorists tend to see children's play as a unique subculture, even as it parodies the adults around them. Yet in order to understand the psychology of creativity within children's culture, we need to examine the larger frames of power.

### The Play of the Book

Part I, "Erasing Children's Expressivity," describes the removal of children's opportunities for play and art and the attempts to initiate their return. The focus is on the children's fleeting accessibility to play materials and the children's commentaries as they look at their own paintings. These interactions were recorded before the widespread cuts to Philadelphia art programs in 2013, and if current predictions are validated, children will

continue to face not only decreased exposure to any art opportunity in school but also widespread further elimination of recess. Part II, “Master Players,” is framed by basic props—chalk, ball, and rope—while introducing the more joyous Recess Access stories. The voices of master artists currently at play in visual art, theater, music, and dance serve as interludes. The artists speak of play in their own practice of improvisation and composition, and of their early memories of playing with art. The contrast suggests that similar processes are at play in the studio and in the playground, that seemingly trivial moves are a part of creative practice.

Part III, “Balancing Acts,” shifts from qualitative to quantitative study, analyzing movement with pedometers and paintings by theme. The most academic section of the book, Part III offers wisdom from well-known artists and scholars, from choreographer Rudolf Laban to philosopher John Dewey, from folklorist Henry Glassie to psychologist Robert Coles. The book then appeals for the protection of something I call “children’s cultural vitality” and returns to the intersection of art and play.

As we watched the exuberant use of our donations in both the playground and the art room, photography major Megan LaMon asked the school staff if it would be possible to take photographs and then solicit permission for each one. After a year of attempting to secure parental permission for the photographs, we ultimately were unable to publish the images unretouched. Securing widespread parental permission in busy working-class lives is difficult, particularly in American schools. So we solved our dilemma by literally masking the children’s identities with faces from the paintings made by the children themselves and then getting staff approval. In this way the raw emotion and expressive physicality is shared without identities being compromised.

As seems fitting in a book called *The Art of Play*, the children’s faces are *the children’s faces*, masked and real, a surreal documentation of children’s culture. In a truly collaborative effort, Recess Access volunteers prepared hundreds of materials, hauled them to schools, scrubbed inky brushes, cleaned desks, and surveyed neighborhood school yards. The children painted what they wished, and then Megan LaMon attached their handpainted faces to their photographed bodies. Not all images are pleasant, just as not all play is sweet, but difficult stories can be enacted in honorable ways. These seven-, eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds have outlined their play for us in black and white.