

Smooth Project Conference Keynote

Becoming fecund audiences to childhood publics

Sevasti-Melissa Nolas
Goldsmiths, University of London

What sort of audience members and interlocutors might we need to become to achieve 'equality, sharing, participation, togetherness, caring and freedom' in educational commons, and other intergenerational collectivities? In this keynote, I focus on childhood publics and sketch out my response to this question, starting with children's private lives. "Private life is doing nothing, lying down in the sun and feeling the sun on my face and having time to myself," my young (age 7) London interlocutor reflected. "Doing homework, a way to secure your own space and time," and "Private life is being 'free from others' interference", our young interlocutors in Athens and Hyderabad added. A private life is a prerequisite for a childhood publics. These children, together with 42 others, took part in an international study on the relationship between childhood and public life between 2014-2019. Over a three-year period, we (researchers) worked together with the children and their parents, drawing and mapping, taking photographs, exchanging stories, writing newsletters and blogposts, writing emails and sending post cards, coming together in workshops, making photo-stories, and co-curating and mounting exhibitions, to create and make visible a childhood publics. Publics emerge at the margins of institutional life, in the cracks of the everyday, they rely on their members having a private life, a freedom to dream, to reflect, and to associate. As such, we spent many hours dwelling in children's private lives, entering their imaginations and private thoughts with them. We focused on the peripheries of schooling and of family life, on the settings and times of leisure and play both in person and online, and/or in the in-between-institutional times and spaces, such as bedrooms, playgrounds, walking to and from school or a friends' place, when children themselves may be left largely to their own devices, with little to no adult supervision and input; those increasingly squeezed and vanishing private moments of the day when a child might catch the sun on their face, have their head in a book of school work, or in a game on a device, with the bedroom door shut 'free from others' interference. Childhood publics are the, often invisible, ways in which children are connected through issues of common care and concern, and our project was an experiment in making these connections visible and documenting them in multimodal ways. In so doing, it required of us to become something other than the highly skilled adult researchers that we were, to develop a different sort of acoustics and haptics than the one we had been trained in. Drawing on a rich multimodal ethnographic record that inscribed children's speech acts, gazes and gestures, and their multifarious ways of garnering our attention, the keynote shares examples of children's cares and concerns, in children's own idiom. My aim is to think through the devices we, as audience members and interlocutors, might need to turn into so that we may pay adequate attention and become fecund audiences.