The Iraqi Children's Art Exchange is a project that uses art and photography to connect children, on both sides of the exchange, an opportunity to express themselves and tell a personal story about their particular moment in history. It is an active and ever-expanding collection of art made especially for this project, and documenting photographs by project founder and coordinator, Claudia Lefko.

Alladin and Iron Man
by Mohammed Showeka, with the help of Dr. Salma Al-Haddad, 2001. "I want to get out of this hospital."
**ART GIVES CHILDREN A VOICE.**

As someone who works with images—children’s art and photographic documenting an art exchange project between children in Iraq and children in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts where I live—I was immediately struck by the exchange described in Article 11 of the CRC, and decided to write this letter to comment on the context of the question before us: how to include children as active participants in society. I come up with another, broader definition.

A child begins forming a view the moment she or he enters the world, and, as the British art and cultural critic Colin Berger points out: “Seeing comes before words. The child exists and recognizes before it can speak. And there is a time during which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our relation to the things we name. It is by being in the world, we understand and name, but words can never make the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the expectation, never quite fits the sight.”

The point is clear: I think all children, even very young children have a point of view—feeling, even opinion about their life and the world around them. What they need is an audience of adults, willing and able to listen and respond to them with “dove weight.” Children are expressing themselves in relation to their environment all the time. They have their own unique visual perspective, with materials and toys, found objects, pets and other “stuff” of childhood. The question for us, as adults, is how to be constructive listeners, how to create a visual framework that enables us to bring children and their views into our discussions. How to include them as active and important actors in their lives, as participants in the decision-making process of family, school and community. How can we give children “dove weight.” “It is an education,” the focus of my work with children is an art exchange project.

Every day, all around the world—in the global south and in the north—in the east and in the west—parents, teachers, therapists, social workers and others are working with children, with no particular instructions. We encourage children to paint and draw, cut, paste and sculpt for the pleasure of it. But beyond that, we expect a certain level of creativity, a certain level of visual and expressive language of childhood that gives children another way of expressing and understanding the ever-changing, buffeting world around them. Some would say that children can express themselves and their ideas more truly, and with more meaningfulness, if we could make art easier to see, paint and paper than they can in a conversation. If you want a window on a child’s life, offer them art materials.

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**Art is an important language of childhood.**

Seeing comes before words. We see children in the aftermath of natural disasters, eyes staring—disoriented and sober— as cameras absorb the scene around them. Imagine the long, wide-eyed hours of children working through a traumatic event, whether it is a conflict, terrorist attack or a brutal act. A brutal act and a brutal act art. I invite them to offer a public comment on their particular moment in history, and themselves in that moment, what they are seeing, what they are thinking with photographs. This was the beginning of the Iraq Children’s Art Exchange Project. The exhibits created from this ongoing project bring faces and voices of children from conflict and war, from imprisonment and confinement. They enable children to participate in a wide-ranging and extremely important conversation about human kindness, understanding, empathy, love and peace.

The art of the “brutal act” is to be a witness to the time in history. Imagine the long, wide-eyed hours of a child working through a traumatic event, whether it is a conflict, terrorist attack or a brutal act. A brutal act and a brutal act art. I invite them to offer a public comment on their particular moment in history, and themselves in that moment, what they are seeing, what they are thinking with photographs. This was the beginning of the Iraq Children’s Art Exchange Project. The exhibits created from this ongoing project bring faces and voices of children from conflict and war, from imprisonment and confinement. They enable children to participate in a wide-ranging and extremely important conversation about human kindness, understanding, empathy, love and peace.

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