

Sensory Experiences and Material Encounters:  
Cultivating an Aesthetic Education Beyond Early Childhood.

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### Abstract

This paper explores how intentionally cultivating sensory awareness and exploring the expressive materiality of art mediums should have a larger place in curriculum design for students beyond the primary years. A sustained and consistent observation of the world and the fostering of material encounters (Kind, 2014) is promoted across grade levels and upheld as essential to enabling artistic inquiry.

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*“Direct sensuous reality, in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically-generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can we learn how to orient and navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us”*

(Abram,1996, p.x)

I recently witnessed a group of preschoolers walking through the park. They were organized in something resembling a line behind their teacher. Each of their little bodies seemed to vibrate with the sensory delight of moving through the grass on a summer day. One boy swung his arms erratically as he moved through space, taking obvious pleasure in the sensation. Another stopped to examine the lacy patterns of a weathered leaf. A little girl made not-so-stealthy steps towards a bold crow and marveled at its flight for safety. It was clear they were making an aesthetic experience out of an everyday event that the adults around them were immune to.

Experiences that provoke understanding the world through our senses are often omitted in adolescent art programs as students are expected to generate visual responses of increasing conceptual complexity and skill with representational imagery. This paper suggests that cultivating sensory perception and exploring the expressive potential of art materials should have a larger place in curriculum design for students beyond the primary years.

### **Sensing as a Cognitive Event**

Cultural ecologist and philosopher David Abram (1996) writes: “The sensing body is not a programmed machine but an active and open form, continually improvising its relation to things and the world” (p. 49 ). Educators who work with pre-school children know this to be true. Young children are constantly experimenting with their bodies in space and their powers of perception through all of their senses in order to know themselves in relation to the world. These sensory experiences are in fact, significant “cognitive events” (Heid, 2005) that prompt us to make sense through feeling and responding. Attending to our experiences physically and emotionally, elevates our cognition (Heid, 2005). Elliot Eisner points out: “The senses are our first avenues to consciousness. Without an intact sensory system we would be unaware of the qualities in the environment to which we now respond” (2002, p. 2). As adults, our experience of perceiving these qualities is often numbed and distracted. Eisner reminds us that: “the arts invite us to attend to the qualities of sound, sight, taste, and touch so that we experience them; what we are after in the arts is the ability to perceive things, not merely to recognize them” (2002, p.5). Attending to our senses in an aesthetic way not only presents us with moments that reveal the extraordinary in the everyday, it has powerful implications for learning and the arts across age levels.

### **Intentional Looking**

Adolescents have much to gain from the “serious work of noticing” (Tsing, 2013) in their endeavor to understand themselves and the world through art. An aesthetic awareness is cultivated through an increased sensitivity to, and the capturing of, our perceptions and congruent emotions over time. When we recognize and attend to an aesthetic moment--the interplay of light, vibration among colors, the negative space in a shadow-- we not only engage

in deep noticing that embraces our senses, we distil a vast amount of sensory input into something essential--a sophisticated cognitive act. By encouraging students to actively seek out and intentionally capture their aesthetic moments, we enable them to perceive and respond to the world in an authentic way through their own visual language.

### **Material Encounters**

Aesthetic awareness is not only developed through acts of deep noticing, but through what Sylvia Kind considers “material encounters” (2014). In her work with pre-school children, Kind creates invitations to interact with materials in carefully curated spaces that prompt encounters for meaning making, but do not direct it. Kind considers materials as animate participants that “evoke memories, narrate stories, invite actions and communicate meanings” (2014, p.1); she considers herself an “atelierist” who organizes spaces for children to “think *with* materials” (2014, p.1) and respond to their instincts about how to engage with them. Kind’s photographic exhibition, *Acts of Noticing* (2014) captures the spirit of her work, showing children rapturously absorbed and zealously covered in charcoal, clay and paper. The accompanying text poetically points out the latent complexity of these moments; words like “grind, crush, excavate, heal, barter, draw together, undo, redo” (Kind, 2014, p. 19) speak to the multi-dimensionality of a basic material in the children’s hands. We witness how a material exploration of charcoal is generating rich interactions because children are attending to “the serious work of noticing” (Tsing, 2013).

### **Material Encounters and Adolescents**

These early encounters with materiality make developmental sense in the scope of art education; children explore the nature of the material so that they can learn how to use it to

represent ideas and object (Heid, 2015). As children mature, sensory experiences become more indirect. Materials and aesthetics become separate as students become focused on controlling media to achieve a preconceived outcome over responding to the possibilities the medium presents. A secondary art class might lead to very different discoveries about painting, if it were predicated on material encounters that provoked questions about the nature of paint itself: What is paint made from? How does it interact with other materials and substrates? What instincts about it prompt action? How can paint be relational or interactive? To appreciate the interplay between form and meaning, students need to experience tactile, sensory qualities of their art materials before they can exploit those qualities to enhance meaning in complex ways. A sensitivity to form is fundamental to expressive marks that are felt, and “a searching attempt to realize in visual language what an object *feels like to look at* (Southern, 2014, p.138).”

Cultivating sensory awareness and understanding the full range of expressive potential in our materials are essential elements of art making, yet for older students, these are often incidental discoveries that are not explicitly nurtured.

### **A Case for Intuition**

Intuition is another phenomenon in art making that is often overlooked in traditional art educational settings despite being central to the ways artists work. Hunches, feelings, and gut reactions are intimately connected to our perceptive powers and these creative impulses are what drive us to create. These instincts about creative decision making and our sense of design are prompted by a sensitivity to our own perceptions. The more robust that awareness is, the more access we have to these impressions. Many students are not given opportunities to engage in

thinking about the ways they perceive, because it is not embedded in and valued in our learning structures from provocation through assessment.

### **Limiting Beliefs**

Many students stop seeing themselves as artists when they feel they can't control an art material to create representational imagery in comparison to the skill of others. A self-consciousness around being able to draw representationally can be a significant road block to many students even entering the art room. Some see their inexperience or perceived lack of success in reproducing a pre-existing image as an indictment of their worth and sense of belonging in an art class. In fact, time in art classes is not simply about mastering techniques, but as Gude, (2017, p.61) rightly suggests, "it's about experimenting to figure out what ways of making will further each student's unique artistic investigation." To facilitate this, our understanding of materials should be in terms of expressive potential in relation to the invitation to create. Rather than wondering how to control a pencil to make an image that looks realistic, a student might wonder: "How is this medium shaping my idea? Is that appropriate to my instincts about this provocation to create? Can I use this medium in an unexpected way to respond to my creative impulse? Kind's preschoolers need little intervention to perceive their art materials this way. If adolescent students understood art materials in the multi-dimensional ways that preschool children do, they would have access to a multiplicity of representational modes. If our goal is to expand student's aesthetic capacities for engaging and making, intentional explorations of art materials are needed for those understandings to emerge. Curriculum that is overly focused on mastering pre-existing techniques can really only be successful in teaching some students with certain dispositions to successfully render with a medium in a specific way (Gude, 2017). Without a balance of skill building and experimentation, "we fragment learning at the

expense of the richness and flexibility that should be inherent in a living body of knowledge” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.119).

### **Possibilities for Artistic Inquiry**

Olivia Gude reminds us that, “It’s not our job to assess student artwork; it’s our job to assess students’ learning, students’ developing capacities for creative experimentation, and students’ capacities for making meaningful connections to their lives through art experiences (2006, p. 63). Exploring the nature of materials and attending to aesthetic experiences facilitates the translation of emotion and the unique mark-making potential of our idiosyncratic bodies. Engagement in this process creates opportunities for inquiry through purposeful play and these material encounters invite emergence--an understanding the artwork as it comes to be revealed (Shields, 2016). Adolescent students will be better poised to understand themselves as creatives with an array of choices to express a concept or feeling, rather than someone who “can’t draw” and thus artistic expression is not available to them.

### **Contemporary Practices**

The work of artist, Olafur Eliasson is a telling example of how acts of noticing and material explorations have value beyond preschool. For many contemporary artists, cultivating sensory awareness and practices of deep and intentional perceiving informs the complex and technically astonishing works they create. Eliasson creates large scale public interventions and architectural projects that result from a profound interest in our sensory experience, mined from patient noticing of our human perceptions. “Eliasson uses simple natural elements—light, color, water, and movement—to alter viewers’ sensory perceptions” (Art 21, 2019). “Everybody has a relationship with natural phenomena,” he asserts. “You don’t have to be a professional to have an opinion about a rainbow”(Art 21, 2019). Because of the universality of our sensory



experiences and our connection to nature, Eliasson's work doesn't try to translate his own narrative experiences of nature; it invites viewers to partake in sensing the simple and elemental dimensions of our world while imprinting their own emotional context with in it. These stunning "interventions" are influenced by growing up in Denmark and Iceland, where Eliasson became interested in the ways we perceive light and space. As a child, Eliasson would accompany his artist father on mountain retreats and identifies the aesthetic experiences of playing alone in the Icelandic landscape as catalysts for his formal interests. His lifelong cultivation of sensory perceptions allow him to use natural elements to evoke an awareness of the world around us and pays attention to the ways in which we interact with it. Eliasson states that "art does not end where the real world begins," underscoring how transformative moments are present in our everyday experience if we are attuned to perceiving them (Art 21, 2019).

Abram reminds us that "only in regular contact with the tangible ground and sky can we learn how to orient and navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us (1990, p.6)". The arts are uniquely poised to disrupt the *anaesthetic* (Heid, 2015) influences gripping our youth, and foster engagement with the sublime in the world around us. The pre-school children walking in the park transformed an ordinary event into a sensory experience because of their predisposition to attend to the present moment and allow it to be revealed to them. Experiencing the environment though, is a process that continues throughout life. Through reacquainting adolescent students with their powers of perception and extending understandings about the relational materiality of art making practices we can not only help to recover their senses through artistic inquiry, but engender a robust sensitivity to the world.

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