



Educational potentials of embodied art reflection

Agnes Bube¹ 

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Abstract

With reference to a standard work on embodied cognition – *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (1991) by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson und Eleanor Rosch – in this article I theorize art reception that connects reflexive processes with concrete perceptual experiences as *embodied art reflection*. Analogously to Varela et al’s citation of meditation practice as a transformation of immediate experience into an open, embodied reflection, one can also understand focussed awareness of experience in reflected, perceptually-oriented reception of art as an open, embodied mode of access. The particular educational potential of art as a medium and object of knowledge and cognition lies moreover above all in its physical power of making-present, which exercises its particular effect in the concrete experience of the artwork. Against the background of a phenomenological perspective on learning, it is especially disruptive moments which are able to form perception and thought anew. For a pedagogical context above all, the schooling of perception and attention practised in art has particular relevance in relation to lived experience, opening new horizons. To show the potential of embodied art reflection through an example from the field of object art, my theoretical discussion opens out into a specific consideration of an artwork.

Keywords Embodied cognition · Aesthetic experience · Perception-oriented reception of art · Awareness · Education through art · Ambiguity

1 Embodied cognition: Bridging the gap with art

Embodied cognition represents an attitude to science grounded in a turn to lived, human experience and its environment (Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1993). Situational, historical and other relative contexts of experience are accordingly fundamental for

✉ Agnes Bube
agnes.bube@igk.uni-hannover.de

¹ Institute of Design Practice and Art History, Leibniz University Hannover, Faculty of Humanities, Königsworther Str. 14, 30167 Hannover, Germany

knowledge. Humberto Maturana already specified that cognition is not located in the nervous system, but rather takes shape only in a life-process: “The mind is not the head, the mind is the behaviour” (Maturana 1985: 311). Behaviour, actions and movement in everyday situations are corresponding loci of self-constructing knowledge.

A conclusion of embodied cognition research that is central to this essay is the indivisible coupling of reflexive processes and concrete perceptual experiences (cf. esp. Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1993). The particular role of this type of embodied experience was also noted by Barbara Becker, who represented as a media scientist a decidedly phenomenologically-oriented conception of cognition. She thus identified the body or processes of embodiment as a defining and ineluctable precondition of human cognition (Becker 2011: 44). With reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Bernhard Waldenfels she likewise pointed out the double structure of an ‘outer’ physical and ‘inner’ experiencing body¹ and confirmed a body-mind relationship oriented toward reciprocity (Becker 2011: 168). In the further development of embodied cognitive science, the reciprocal relationship between body and mind as well as the concept of cognition as a dynamic process in interaction with the life-world continue to be a central focus, especially in the approach of Radical Embodiment (see Thompson/Varela 2001; Gallagher/Varela 2003; Gallagher 2005 & 2012; Chemero 2009).

The momentous consequences of our embodied state and our location in a lived world for human consciousness, thought and action is also recognized, following Varela, by the philosopher and cognitive scientist Alva Noë. Against the focus of neuroscience on the brain, Noë considers cognition more broadly as an explicit physical ‘becoming aware’ in a dynamic-interactive relationship with the environment (Noë 2009). Barbara Becker concludes similarly that meaning is not simply discovered in the world, but arises anew and repeatedly in interaction with the world (Becker 2011: 53). Since our relation to the world conditions our cognitive processes, our daily environment is thus in the end decisive – the environment into which we ‘settle’. Varela, Thompson and Rosch in their concept of enaction theorize an understanding of cognition in which the input-output relation, where meaning is imposed from outside, is replaced by interactions in which meanings only emerge in a process conditioned by the context-giving background. Circularity is a central concept here: “If we are forced to admit that cognition cannot be properly understood without common sense, and that common sense is none other than our bodily and social history, then the inevitable conclusion is that knower and known, mind and world, stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or dependent coorigination” (Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1993: 150). Thus they emphasize the interdependency and fertilization between mind and world, between organism and environment.

Referring to the insights of Maturana and Varela, Fritjof Capra also understands cognition in an inseparable connection with the process of life: “cognition is the very process of life” (Capra 2004: 34). He describes a systemic understanding of life based on complexity theory, which he extends to the social domain. According to him, we need a new way of thinking about life that takes into account four interdependent perspectives: “form, matter, process, and meaning.” (ibid. 74). Not least in the orientation towards these perspectives there are unmistakable links to art.

¹ Understanding the body as object and lived body.

Likewise, the connection between reflection and lived experience can be accomplished in a characteristic way in art. When art is mentioned in this paper, it refers in particular to visual art, whose effects on cognition I explore. In visual art, the process of reception is focused on concretely realized works (paintings, sculptures, objects etc.). Processes of reflection and meanings emerge from the perception of something directly present. Especially in the attentive, phenomenologically oriented reception of works of visual art, all sensory modalities are involved (cf. Bube 2020). In this concept of embodied art reflection,² concrete experience, bodily sensation and mental reflection merge in a specific way into a knowledge-producing event. Open, embodied reflection and the resulting potentialities of experience and knowledge thereby find a concrete application. World-as-form is manifested in the visible work and is reflected in a phenomenologically oriented, situational-physical reception of art. This creates a circularity between reflective thinking and living environment.

The art-historical theory of aesthetic experience (see e.g. Dewey 1934; Jauß 1982; Iser 1994; Kemp 1991; Imdahl 2006; Boehm 1980 & 1990; Stöhr 1996) forms the basis for a correspondingly perception- and experience-oriented treatment of works of art (cf. Imdahl 1982 & 1996; Bube 2017). The phenomenon-bound approach to works of art is based on the concrete, sensual experience of the work, tied to its structure and specific appearance. As a theory of intuitive communication of meaning and praxis realizing seeing-as-recognition, the theory of aesthetic experience presupposes the connection of perception and thinking (Stöhr 1996: 8). It is equally important to understand that viewers are co-constitutors of the work. In coming to terms with the phenomenon, they do not look for underlying pre-formulated ideas, rather the content of a work develops from the mutual interaction between the work and the recipient that is currently taking place – conditioned by situational, social, historical and individual context.

Based on this, further references to the cognitive-scientific concept of enaction (Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1993) can be demonstrated. Here too the circularity between mental processes and direct experience is described. However, reflection should not take place as a dry discourse *on* experience, rather a direct, practical and pragmatic approach to experience is sought, which is nevertheless reflexively radical in scope. In the Buddhist tradition of meditative practice a specific area of application is discovered in that the two processes are profoundly connected, and reaches the point at which reflection is not only mental but also a form of experience and that experience is not only physical, but a process in which both body and mind are present. From this relationship, Varela, Thompson and Rosch develop a changed understanding of reflection: “What we are suggesting is a change in the nature of reflection from an abstract, disembodied activity to an embodied (mindful), open-ended reflection. By embodied, we mean reflection in which body and mind have been brought together. What this formulation intends to convey is that reflection is not just on experience, but reflection is a form of experience itself” (Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1993: 27). Such a mindful and reflective form of experience can open up our thinking. In this understanding the process of reflection is not predefined but “open to possibilities other than those contained in one’s current representations of the life space” (ibid.). The mindful focus

² There are also further approaches to embodied cognition in the arts with different focuses, for example in the domain of musical experience (see Schiavio, van der Schyff, Cespedes-Guevaras & Reybrouck 2017).

on the direct experience disrupts the normal mode of unaware involvement in the world (cf. *ibid.* 32) and thus provides the basis for “the *enactment* or *bringing forth*” (*ibid.* 149) of new context-dependent meaning. This constitutes a fundamental dimension of the concept of open-ended reflection (cf. *ibid.* 32/33). In the reflection process, thoughts are thrown back again and again onto their concrete basis – experience. What matters is to translate the unreflected experience into conscious reflection without closing off the original variety of experience, not to get stuck in abstract, theoretical thinking, but to maintain the circular relationship with practical experience. In this context, art proves especially relevant.

2 Embodied art reflection as a ‘middle way’ of knowledge

As previously pointed out, cognition should be understood with Varela, Thompson and Rosch not as a predetermined, fixed event, but rather as an open process that enacts itself from mutually dependent experiential and mental structures. Following their “middle path” (*ibid.* 172), knowledge arises at the interface between mind and world. Accordingly, they establish the relevance of incorporating everyday experience in intellectual processes – a transformation of the immediate, contextually embedded experience into an “open-ended, embodied reflection” (*ibid.* 117). Analogously to the depth and complexity of scientific analysis, they find in the practice of mindfulness/awareness meditation a pragmatic method of examination for concrete experience. They highlight it as a physical-mental process in which concrete experience, bodily sensation and mental-reflexive negotiation coalesce. As a non-scientific knowledge process Varela, Thompson and Rosch introduce meditation into the context of science and establish thereby their epistemology of connection between reflection and lived experience.

Denis Francesconi also confirms that this approach is by no means outdated: “In the last two decades there has been increased interest from various disciplines in issue of embodiment and bodily experience as well as the role played by the body in the constitution of consciousness and identity” (Francesconi 2009: 19). Together with Massimiliano Tarozzi he examines the current meaning of meditation practice as a mindful experience of the body in the educational context. Against the background of *Embodied Education*, the two authors establish the potential of an *Education of the Body* (Francesconi/Tarozzi 2019).

Analogously to meditation practice, the reflected reception of visual art also offers a specific coupling of experience to reflexive processes and in this way also assumes the status of an open, embodied reflection. Here the work occurs as a concrete event between people and everyday experience and conveys a reality that is detached from the everyday perspective of experience and is nevertheless in a concrete, direct connection to it. While Varela, Thompson and Rosch present ways of mental exercise as an open, embodied reflection,³ the perception- and experience-oriented reception of art enables an experience of the work that is translated into conscious reflection without

³ Whereby the focus is on the presence of mind in embodied everyday experience. Mediation thus serves Varela, Thompson and Rosch as the sought-for process of integrating everyday experience into mental-spiritual processes and is thereby understood as an epistemological process.

closing off the original variety of experience. Another point of intersection lies in the moments of mindfulness and awareness. “What mindfulness disrupts is mindlessness - that is, being mindlessly involved without realizing that that is what one is doing. It is only in this sense that the observation changes what is being observed, and that is part of what we mean by open-ended reflection“ (Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1993: 32/33).

By vividly breaking through the usual patterns of perception and thought, our habitual inattention is brought to consciousness. The deliberate approach to concrete current experiences in the artwork awakens previous life experiences, and starting from difference, will help change one’s attitude towards and dealings with the everyday world. In addition, the moment of circularity between reflective thinking and reference to the living environment is reprised with particular emphasis. This circularity finds its counterpart in visual art reception as the interaction of body and mind, and in addition, also in the interaction between work and recipient. For example, recipients will interpret the work in the context of their individual life history and experiences, and the work opens up for them new experiential opportunities and reflective impulses.

If what we perceive and experience through the senses is fundamental to cognition, it means that essential aesthetic dimensions are fundamental to cognition. If we follow this idea, it can be seen that the approach of Varela, Thompson and Rosch implies aesthetics in several respects. The moments that according to them form the structure of knowledge are also fundamental moments of the theory of aesthetic experience. As a general theory of sensory perception, aesthetics is rooted in the Aristotelian theory of the senses and perception. The sensual is understood via recourse to the original understanding of *aisthesis* (αἴσθησις) here as something fundamentally possessing *sense*. In his *Aesthetica* (1750), Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten already established the existence of a sensual form of knowledge alongside rational or conceptual modes (cf. Baumgarten 2007). In the more recent discourse on aesthetics, or *aisthetics*, there are various approaches with differing focuses (see e.g. Seel 1997; Mersch 2001 & 2015; Kleimann 2002; Schürmann 2017). The term *aisthetics* is interpreted by the philosopher Wolfgang Iser, for example, as the thematization of *all* kinds of perceptions, sensual as well as spiritual, everyday as well as sublime, life-worldly and artistic (Iser 1998: 9/10). This is the basis for an expanded understanding of perception as taking-to-be-true, as realization, awareness and sensual understanding. That corresponds to Varela, Thompson and Rosch’s understanding of a perception- and experience-based as opposed to a purely conceptual type of knowledge. Also, the idea of a middle path between, “disembodied observer” and “dis-worlded mind” (Varela/Thompson/Rosch 1993: 4) finds a match in Iser’s theory of aesthetics. The parallels are striking in his understanding of aesthetic thinking, for which he excludes both a strict, anti-reflection intuitionism and a supposedly perception-independent logicism (ibid., 55). Iser emphasizes the aesthetic connection between perception and thinking, the specific character of a thought that activates the senses in thinking and ‘makes sense’ with them – translating experience into knowledge. The analogy of embodied reflection and aesthetic thinking is unmistakable here.

The essential characteristics that distinguish Varela, Thompson and Rosch’s concept of cognition are also the basis of the art-historical theory of aesthetic experience. Here too, perception is understood as a mode of knowledge production and the mutually conditioning relationship between artwork and recipient is indicated. Just as, according to Varela, Thompson and Rosch, knowledge emerges in process and is constantly

reshaped and newly created through our experiences and actions, so too does knowledge through art take place in a process-related and contextual manner. Meaning only arises from the process of perception, developed from the current interaction between the work and the recipient. Just as with Varela and his colleagues, knowledge is not understood as a predetermined, fixed event, but as an open process to be negotiated repeatedly. Works of art are open and ambiguous. They arise in social and art-historical contexts, have arisen from lived backgrounds of experience and are interpreted against them. Since these are constantly changing and constantly evolving, the interpretation processes are also subject to constant change. In the visualization and reflection process the individual dimensions of a work of art are unfolded through reference to context. The confrontation with art occurs in a circle of experience and reflection, in which reflexive processes are linked to perceptual experiences. A circularity between mental processes and concrete experience is therefore an essential element here.

In the context of the theory of aesthetic experience in visual art, active art reception can accordingly also be understood as a form of embodied reflection, in the sense of a physical-mental connection of perception, experience and thinking (see Bube 2017). In addition, the concept of embodiment is also deeply rooted in art, in that it embodies concretely. It creates tangible objects and lets the embodied reflection start from them. In this way, embodiment reaches particularly far and yet remains concrete. While the meditative approach relates to the mental 'becoming visible', the special thing about art is to enable a concrete, physically comprehensible 'becoming visible'. When dealing with art, reflection is related to the visible. There is a concrete 'visualization' that attracts one's attention. While Varela, Thompson and Rosch describe a method to practice attention, artworks provoke attention to their physical presence. World and knowledge are 'staged'. Just as artistic creation is a creative act of production, perception and experience-related art reception can also be understood as a creative event (Bockemühl 2016). This again shows an analogy to Varela's constructivist concept of a process-oriented and contextual enactment of knowledge. Conversely, just as the cognitive potential of art can be justified from the perspective of cognitive science, it can also be seen that embodied cognition harbours and makes use of aesthetic potential.

3 The role of embodied art reflection in the educational context

The cognitive-scientific potential of embodied art reflection discussed so far marks a central domain of (aesthetic) education. Since knowledge, from the perspective of cognitive science, is guided by perception and experience and takes place in a physical-mental nexus of perception, experience and thinking, this corresponding form of art reception also contributes, in its open perception and the conscious orientation of attention to experience, to education.

Education and learning processes take place in very different forms. Crudely formulated, wherever knowledge or meaning is provoked or an attitude or mindset is produced. In addition to imparting knowledge, non-standardized approaches and individual teaching and learning situations should also be given genuine attention. It takes sharpening of perception and attention training in order to step out of routine actions and involve oneself with the new. In this respect art offers us exemplary model

situations. In dealing with art, aesthetic points of access to the world are opened. Art finds meaning, demands and reflects perception, promotes the development of a capacity for difference, judgment and criticism. It is also about taking on the character of things and situations, acting flexibly, dealing with strangeness and ambiguities and taking on new perspectives. Self-awareness and self-efficacy are facilitated as much as communication processes and the ability to relate and position oneself. In the reception of works of art, we are confronted not only with what we encounter, but also with the reality of life, with ourselves and with others (see e.g. Kämpf-Jansen 2001; Billmayer 2008; Peez 2012; Laner 2018).

Based on the understanding of the work of art as a special form of dealing with reality, one can deduce the relevance of dealing with art in an educational context. By not using works of art as evidence of art-historical concepts, but perceiving them as phenomena in which experience and meaning can only be gained, there is also a specific educational potential. The study of art experience with regard to its epistemological and everyday relevance (Bube 2017) shows educational processes at different levels. Education takes place on the one hand as a mode of knowledge creation, the creation of meaning, and on the other hand as education through art, in which art experience becomes a model for us, through experiences of otherness and difference, to perceive the world and understand it anew.

Through embodied art reflection, we learn to question our understanding of ourselves and the world and to break habits of thinking and perceiving. In accordance with the phenomenological perspective on learning, it is in this way that drastic processes of self-expansion and changing horizons of experience emerge. Käte Meyer-Drawe summarizes learning as involvement with the world in which we must always run the risk of restructuring ourselves, the thing, as well as our relationship with the other (Meyer-Drawe 2008: 214). In keeping with this understanding of learning, the ability to perceive takes on great importance. If learning, according to Meyer-Drawe, is not reduced to learning *something*, but understood as experience, then perception has a special position (ibid. 193). According to Meyer-Drawe, learning is triggered by experiences in which familiar orders start to falter (Meyer-Drawe 2010: 6). Accordingly, learning begins with moments of irritation, wonder and surprise – especially when we expose ourselves to otherness and strange things (Meyer-Drawe 2010; Rumpf 2008; Waldenfels 2011). In the same way, Hans-Christoph Koller sees education primarily as a process of transforming fundamental figures of one's relations to oneself and the world, one triggered by confrontation with new problem situations and crisis experiences (Koller 2018). The potential for implementing experiences in teaching and learning processes lies above all in the encounter of new experiences with previous experiences, the deviation from the familiar and the negation of preconceived expectations (Oelkers 2004; Meyer-Drawe 2008; Rumpf 2008).

Aesthetic experiences are able to change our structure of attitudes and expectations in a special way, not least because they generate new perspectives beyond the usual patterns of perception (Kleimann 2002; Kreysing 2016; Bube 2017). The role of the artistic and stressing the relevance of sensory perception and aesthetic experiences for educational processes is not new, but thus by no means outdated, and an especial point of consensus in art education in addition to the acquisition of visual skills (Peez 2012). Ursula Brandstätter advocates explicitly creating framework conditions for aesthetic experience, particularly in our current life-worlds. For in aesthetic experiences, says

Brandstätter, we experience ourselves and the world at the same time. Their open interplay – between sensuality and reflection, between emotionality and reason, between conscious and unconscious, between materiality and signification, between what can be said and what is unspeakable, between what is certain and what is undefined – is a model for human experience, experience and recognition in general (Brandstätter 2012: 180).

Gerd E. Schäfer, educationalist and professor of early childhood education, also emphasizes the importance of aesthetic perception and experience in the educational process (Schäfer 2004). Realizing that sensual experiences are the first experiences that children have, he explains that education starts from an early age based on experience patterns. What contributes to the formation of experience also contributes accordingly to education. Like Varela, he takes the view that individuals are formed through the experiences that the social and cultural environment offers them. According to Schäfer, aesthetic dimensions play a central role in this. Accordingly, he shows the appreciation of aesthetic experiences and aesthetic thinking in the postmodern discussion. In particular, those who continually develop and differentiate their perceptual and creative faculties gain new perceptions (ibid.). In this sense, the body-sensory experiences in dealing with works of art contribute to a sensitization of perception which is fundamental for the gaining of new perspectives and knowledge.

The experience of evidence and the gaining of knowledge in the concrete act of perception and intuition is based on the material presence as well as the meaningful sign function of works of art. Ursula Brandstätter, for example, notes that it is one of the special features of works of art that they can be understood on the one hand as signs that refer to realities outside of themselves but on the other also represent realities on their own (Brandstätter 2012: 177). Accordingly, the artwork functions as a sign pointing to reality, yet does not disappear behind the designation, but instead draws attention to itself and its materiality again and again (Brandstätter 2013: 80). In this way, works of art open up insights and reintegrate them into the experience of the specific work. This results not least in the central meaning of embodied perception as the basis of aesthetic experience and aesthetic knowledge. Brandstätter refers to McLuhan⁴ on the media dependence of our perception, thinking and communication and describes how visual elements also function as building blocks of thinking and cognition. She sees art as significantly involved in this expansion of a classic logic that is purely language-bound. Since thinking is understood as a process bound to signs, in addition to saying, the pointing function of art has its own specific meaning.⁵ A special feature is that works of art show aspects of reality by *embodying* them themselves. Accordingly, according to Brandstätter, their meaning lies in the fact that they explicitly show what they refer to (Brandstätter 2013: 72).

From a different perspective, the art historian Gottfried Boehm concludes that pictures have their own logic that only belongs to them. By logic he means the consistent generation of meaning from genuinely artistic means (Boehm 2007: 34). In the course of the *iconic turn* and the increasing importance of images in our society,

⁴ Cf. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage* (1967).

⁵ Q.v. the theories of signification and media offered by Nelson Goodman and Dieter Mersch among others.

Boehm examines images in their own meaning and impact as well as their function of showing.⁶ Images open up access to the world and have a decisive influence on our perception. Following this, Boehm states that the one who is able to look at reality differently is certainly as close to it as the one who changes his concepts (ibid. 14). Eva Koethen also attributes comparable importance to visual perception as a non-conceptual way of knowing (Koethen 2015: 51). “Aesthetically reflected (sensory) perception is a fundamental, knowledge-guiding process that is anchored in the subjective conditions of corporeality ... “ (ibid. 62). Just as the process of perception is anchored in the body, in art reception it is also related to a concrete work, a factual object of its own physicality. As a result, Eva Koethen states with reference to Boehm: “Works of visual art are always both: materialities and simultaneously sensemaking / sensory openings; they present distant things to our eyes and form a body of their own that is graspable. They have effects by creating existence for absent ‘references’” (ibid. 70).

The physically present object presents itself to the physically perceiving viewer as a concrete world experience. The cultural and literary scholar Hartmut Böhme emphasizes the importance of this type of ‘real presence’ (Böhme 1996). With regard to the detection of real things that are identifiable in the sense world, according to him the sense of touch is decisive. So Böhme speaks of the contact perception of things (ibid. 206), of a full sense presence and tactile verification (ibid. 186). He states that what is palpable exists for us above all. Reality is only evident if it can be felt by the ‘lower’ senses and especially the sense of touch (ibid. 187). The Bible already classifies the senses into lower and higher ones and questions the cultural-historical primacy of writing, hearing and, in particular, seeing over touch, smell and taste. Especially the proximate sense of touch (ibid. 193) is one he counts as one of the elementary contacts (ibid. 189) – and sees it with reference to the findings of George Berkeley even as the fundamental sense (ibid. 202). At the same time, he also emphasizes the connection between the sense of touch and knowledge, which is still present in the verb ‘grasp’ (*begreifen*) (ibid. 189). With reference to Voltaire’s “les mains de l’expérience”, the palpable hands of experience as a metaphor for sensual knowledge (ibid. 189/190), Böhme also understands the palpable as a source of reliable knowledge and explores the cultural-historical meaning of the tactile.

The life-world relevance and cognitive scientific potential of tactile verification is also recognized by Barbara Becker, who refers explicitly to the connection of cognitive skills and tactility. Understanding requires ‘feeling one’s way’ in the world. It is important to get in touch with things, to touch them and to feel their resistance, to understand their qualitative properties and to recognize them as special objects. From this point of view, touching has proven to be elementary for our access to the world (Becker 2011: 135–137).

The importance of our physically-situated being in the everyday world and the dynamic interaction with objects for cognitive contexts is underlined by Alva Noë. He explains that meaningful thoughts only arise where the holistic being interacts dynamically with its environment (Noë 2009). Sensual-physical experience thereby becomes the medium for opening up the world. Meaning is not found in the world, but is formed

⁶ See the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research “Iconic Criticism – The Power and Meaning of Images”, Basel 2005-.

when dealing with it – and thus also when dealing with works. The fact that works of art not only show already known views of the real, but also implement new perspectives, enable them to gain their own insights. Boehm also emphasizes the presence and effectiveness of works of art. Since paintings have released themselves from the norm of imitation or reproduction, Boehm highlights them as productions and constructions that produce realities and add evidence to the world (Boehm 2010).

The physical potential art possesses to make things present, and the evidential experience of concrete confrontation with an artwork are the basis of the educational potential of art as the subject of knowledge and the medium of articulation of meaning. This shows that concrete perception experiences are relevant for educational contexts, as well as the possibility of model-based learning in art – as a knowledge based on sensory perceptions and constituting itself as such. Taking the power of works of art to ‘make present’ seriously alongside the visual experience, reflections and insights caused by art is also followed by a decisive mediating task for art.

Our everyday life is largely characterized by automatisms. Bringing this to our minds in order to break through them and at the same time show new possibilities of perception, thinking and acting must be grasped as an important educational potential art possesses. Our society is characterized by pluralism and individualization. Through different lifestyles and spaces of creative freedom in their way of life, people are required to adopt their own attitudes and make decisions independently. Just as we need orientation, reliable structures and applicable knowledge, so dealing with the open, oppositional and unexpected has great value for the formation of the self and opens up new horizons of experience and knowledge. Education under today’s social conditions equally requires strengthening the subject and individual abilities as well as learning how to deal with ambiguity and openness. In embodied art reflection – bound to the concrete experience of the phenomenon – different structures of meaning can be opened up and different points of view can be found in the awareness of several possible perspectives. Analogous to the way we shape ourselves and our lives, in this way our thinking and acting is practiced in the construction of contexts and the negotiation of alternatives and is diverted along new paths. Particularly given the increase in diversity and divergence in our living environments, the acquisition of an active ability to shape these, the ability to create references and to form new connections, is especially important.

4 The specific educational potential of everyday object art in a circle of lived experience and reflection

The specificity of visual art is the compression of the real in the form of an embodied object in real space. The art object is given directly to the viewer; reflection and meaning processes arise from the direct presence. This also has special value for educational processes. E. Schäfer emphasizes that one is mainly formed *by* something. The objects of education bear the stamp of history and thus a social and cultural pattern. No education is possible outside of this socio-cultural becoming. You only become yourself to the extent that you find yourself in a counterpart (Schäfer 1995: 20). The exchange between individuals and the things of the world is not only characterized by adaptation and agreement, but also by deviation and difference.

Questioning the familiar, rethinking familiar structures, as well as the ability to question things and gain new perspectives, are basic skills to be acquired in the educational context in general, but these can be gained in a special way by dealing with everyday object art. 'Everyday object art' is a term coined to refer to works of art that specifically include, display or transform usable objects of the everyday world.⁷ Thus the everyday is immediately present in the work, directly and object(ive)ly present. Whether poetically transformed, provocatively exposed, unusually combined, irritatingly deformed or shockingly destroyed – the familiar and the known will be brought together in entirely novel ways.

Precisely because everyday object art recognizes what is known, but shows and questions it in an unusual way, this specific art form irritates and opens up new perspectives for perception and thinking. In the embodied reflection of everyday object art, the potential of the experience of deviating from the familiar can be visualized in the familiar itself. The reason for reflection is the experience of difference to the habitual that can be gained in the concrete, the impressive experience of the open in what is thought to be unchangeable. The everyday object artwork attracts attention by its unusual presence, challenges the perception of the viewer and shifts the horizons of meaning of familiar conceptions. This is directly related to what Schäfer generally states about educational processes. According to him, meaning arises not only from what one experiences or does, but also how one classifies what one experiences or does into what one has experienced and done so far. In this respect, individual previous experiences are combined in the educational process with the new experiential aspects of the current situation (Schäfer 1995: 19).

In the everyday object artwork, new aspects of experience combine with individual previous experience in a specific way. Every person can fall back on a variety of different experiences with everyday objects. In an irritating departure from what has been experienced so far, multi-layered dimensions of meaning open up in the reflected view of the works. However, in the aesthetic experience of everyday object art, not only are experiences of difference made, but, as Ursula Brandstätter emphasizes as relevant for aesthetic experiences in general, also experiences of the correspondence between the aesthetic object and one's own living environment (Brandstätter 2012: 178). In everyday object artworks, the Other and the Own, familiar and unfamiliar always relate to each other and are visibly interwoven in embodied presence. This also makes everyday object art a very specific object of education. Precisely because they allow familiar things to be recognized but questioned and questioned in an unusual way, everyday object artworks irritate, and open up new perspectives for perception and thinking.

In the following, an example is used to clearly illustrate the multi-perspective of embodied art reflection as an educational practice. The guiding principle here is to make concrete perception the continuous point of reference for the discussion. In the circle of concrete intuition and reflection, linked to everyday, life-related backgrounds and contexts of action, an everyday object of art is 'unfolded' in its possible meanings and dimensions of knowledge. This procedure implies active involvement with a claim to new experiences and insights, open to the unknown, the uncertain and the strange that manifests itself.

⁷ See Bube 2017.

5 Example: Ursula Burghardt: “Schnürbecher”, 1968⁸

Following a phenomenological approach to the work, an 8×8 cm silver-colored mug made of sheet aluminium is shown here. Opposite its riveted handle, it is cut open, perforated and run through like a boot with a simple, black bootlace tied neatly in parallel, and which ends with a bow. We are presented with a “shoelace mug” (see Fig. 1a and b).

Through the singular alienating intervention of the lacing, limits of habitual experience are broken and new points of view are created, which captivate and unleash the gaze at the same time. Here the surrealist principle of maximum explosive power works by linking less heterogeneous objects. The combination of a simple tin mug with an equally simple bootlace has created a new kind of thing that irritates and triggers diverse associations and reflections. Starting directly from the visible, the work can be related to different contexts and different levels of meaning with multiple potentials for application. The principle of possible differentness becomes apparent in an open, unsynthesizable juxtaposition of different aspects and possible interpretations.

At first glance, the perceiver notices the holes, because it is these that rob the cup of its original purpose. The “shoelace mug” is contradictory in itself – as a paradox. It is a mug and not a mug at the same time: it has the shape of a mug, is round, has a wall, bottom and handle, only the generally recognized function of holding liquid is eliminated. The holes immediately direct the viewer’s thoughts to this usual use function, it becomes literally *transparent*. In this context, the shoelace also proves to be important. In its function of binding, it refers to the original determination of how the liquid in the mug is held together, but at the same time it is also to be understood as a symbol for the constricting state of ‘straight-lacedness’. Seen in this way, it questions the one-dimensional ‘bondage’ of the mug to its use function. For here a mug, detached from its usual use, has become real. That which is determined in a rational-utilitarian fashion has turned into something absurd and indefinite, so that the newly created thing eludes the simple principle of appropriation and domination. There is a powerful experience of difference from the familiar, even though, taken individually, we see nothing unusual for us. We know both metal cups, shoelaces and parallel perforations. It is only in this confusing combination of quotidian objects that something is realized that exceeds and questions the everyday. Attentive to what has not been seen before, we also reach contexts of what has not yet been thought of.

Our common terms suddenly seem to be full of holes. The mug is not usable but still a mug. Or is a bucket with a hole no longer a bucket? This shows the viewer that an object, if it loses its function, still exists as such. Use is only one dimension. This knowledge is enacted from a present, obvious presence of the multidimensional, on a concrete physical counterpart. The question that inevitably arises here is what meanings the cup has in addition to the use function. If we reflect on the mug from the context of everyday life experiences and consider the everyday handling of the mug, we become aware that here too the mug is not only useful, but is often charged with other meanings. In this way, the interchangeable product can also become something individual, a ‘favorite mug’, a one with cracks and battered areas, maybe also an inherited souvenir, a special gift or the first mug we bought – a mug with which we associate

⁸ Cf. details on this work in Bube 2017, pp. 221–228 und Bube 2016, pp. 45–48.



Fig. 1 a and b Ursula Burghardt: “Schnürbecher”, 1968. Aluminium mug, shoelace, 8 × 8 cm © Ursula Burghardt estate. Photos: © private ownership Pamela Kagel

much more than a mere function. Furthermore, it can also be part of a collection, for example, whose component items have not been used for a long time. Perhaps special relationships with the mug also result from the use, from the physical contact that we experience when we bring it to our mouth while drinking or when we warm our hands when it contains hot liquid. All these meanings and any more can be held together – laced up together – in a mug.

The meanings that a mug can have are therefore individually different and the perception is different. If such differences can already be identified within a culture, it is absolutely imperative to find them transculturally. In a cultural comparison, it quickly turns out that the mug is not to be found everywhere and by no means the only form that can hold liquid; for example the bowl in China takes over the function of the mug. Accordingly, its status varies culturally and it is subject to various purposes and meanings. This shows that there is no universal, definitive definition of the mug. Nevertheless, in addition to individual and culturally different meanings, there are also general social reference functions. For example, the cheap tin mug differs significantly

from an antique silver or gold cup or from a modern designer cup. Based on its material and appearance, the “shoelace mug” also refers to the cup’s production history, to the differentiation of different shapes and materials for different people and needs. For example, the practical, unbreakable tin mug of the ‘camping essentials’ type differs from the status symbol of the exquisite porcelain mug or from the modern design piece as a prestige object that supports the image of a modern lifestyle.

The unusual appearance of the “shoelace mug” also subtly questions product design, marketing and economic value. In addition to a wide variety of mugs in the area of ‘unusual gift items’ or ‘joke items’, a witty lace-up mug would certainly also be sold, all that would be necessary would be to convert the perforated ‘lace-up mug’ to the ‘lace-up fake mug’. The resulting irony is exacerbated by the fact that the “shoelace mug” is not unique, but part of an unlimited edition. For here it is not a commodity or a witty ‘bestseller’ that is mass-produced, but a thing that is useless and unusable from the market perspective which is reproduced. However, the unlimited edition is ‘uneconomical’ not only from the perspective of the commodity market, but also from that of the art market. The latter benefits from the limited production of works of art. In this way, the “shoelace mug” can neither be inserted into the goods or art market, but undercuts both systems in a critical and ironic manner.

With a view to social norms, a similarly revealing effect can be seen in relation to the “shoelace mug”. If you look at the way in which the cup is laced - pulled through the holes in parallel, not crossed, but particularly accurately and neatly - the irony of the work with regard to the compliance with standards increases. Here, something is carefully put together in exemplary fashion, but this is in no way sensible in the usual sense. One norm is broken by executing another. To do justice to an order means to exclude others. The ordered structure of the cup is broken by the order of the lacing. This illustrates that some norms cannot be reconciled with other norms and that different orders cannot be synthesized comprehensively. In the work, detached from the everyday functional context, order boundaries are exceeded without being completely cancelled out. Both the cup and the shoelaces remain recognizable as themselves and their different organizational structures leave a conscious impression.

Further contradictions can be found on other reference levels of the work. If we look at the material and processing of the original cup, we first see a cheap, mass-produced article, simple aluminium sheet with an unfussy riveted handle. But if we consider how energy-intensive aluminium is to produce, the cheap mass-produced item suddenly appears disproportionately expensive with an oversized waste of resources. This ecological dimension also relates to the cycle of objects from use to disposal, since normally a mug with a hole ends up on the rubbish. As a work of art, the “shoelace mug” is withdrawn from this cycle and literally caricatures it, because here a cup has been perforated whose advantage is precisely its unbreakability and whose material is characterized by the fact that it defies decay by not rusting. Looking at the “shoelace mug” also leads to an opposing network of relationships between industry and craft, nostalgia and progress. Cups and laces come from industrial production and are common, cheap, mass-produced items. But in this work they are connected to a new kind of thing with a handicraft character, because the tying of bootlaces has always been done manually. The “shoelace mug” reflects a relationship to the object that is shaped by both the craft and the industrial. While the handicraft relationship is characterized primarily by appreciation and a ‘subject-object proximity’ created by

intensive, holistic processing, anonymous, mechanical manufacturing processes reveal a superficial relationship to the object in industrial activity, which is achieved by 'object-subject distance' is marked. While industrial production refers to modernity and progress, nostalgia and romanticization come to the fore in the handicraft character. While the object emerges as neutral through its industrial aspect, the pre-industrial also shows through the craft: the object as an individualized, long-standing, respectful companion of man. Both dimensions can be found in the "shoelace mug", but none can be clearly assigned.

Another contradiction arises between the actual incompatibility of mug and lacing and the harmonious appearance. Although the lacing destroys the object's normal use, it looks extremely harmonious. Although they were created from heterogeneous individual parts, they contradict each other in a harmonious way that is pleasing to the eye. The shoelace runs in uniform, parallel ties through the cup in line with the shape of the edge and bottom of the cup. The black color of the shoelace harmonizes with the dark contrasting handle, which is also exactly opposite the lacing. Overall, the color scheme is very reduced and reserved, which further supports the object's calm and harmonious appearance. So the "shoelace mug" is different, a novel irritation, but it is not completely foreign. It is laced too accurately not to be 'out of this world', its appearance is too 'geometrically harmonized'. We see what we know on the one hand *differently*, alienated, in a new combination and at the same time we see this other *exactly as we know*, in the usual harmonized patterns of perception. This is how the "shoelace mug" stands between the familiar and the stranger and initiates an incessant exchange between the two (See Fig. 2).

As the previous description has shown, many different aspects of meaning can be derived from the "shoelace mug", which illuminate what has been said above from another side, form diverse connections and in turn produce new aspects. The reflections are potentiated and can be continued in an interpretation process that can never be entirely completed. From the reflective process in visual perception, knowledge is enacted in the respective relation to life and the present. A meaning that cannot be determined is to be recorded as the content of the intuition. The mug as a one-dimensional, closed 'figure of order' has broken down into multiple splinters of meaning that have contradictions. The different dimensions can no longer be defined in a uniform whole, but stand in an equivalent juxtaposition. In the "shoelace mug", the everyday object shows itself as an open, multi-dimensional thing, which is in productive conflict with its individual dimensions. An overview of the complex and heterogeneous reveals an ambiguity and diversity that opens the view. Although we can in fact *see through* the perforated "shoelace mug", it cannot be *seen through* so easily on an interpretive level. Interpretations evolve from a productive mutual interaction of work and viewer, and begin and end in an act of looking *at* rather than looking *through* or comprehending. Definitive attempts at appropriation of the "shoelace mug" are inconceivable, figuratively speaking, they 'slide' through its holes. Its specifically realized appearance thus acts as a model of open understanding of reality: The world is not to be assembled definitively, and no matter how neatly one ties and reties it – there are still gaps. In conscious seeing, not in mastery, in the open encounter between the work and the viewer, new, open perspectives open up from what has actually been realized.

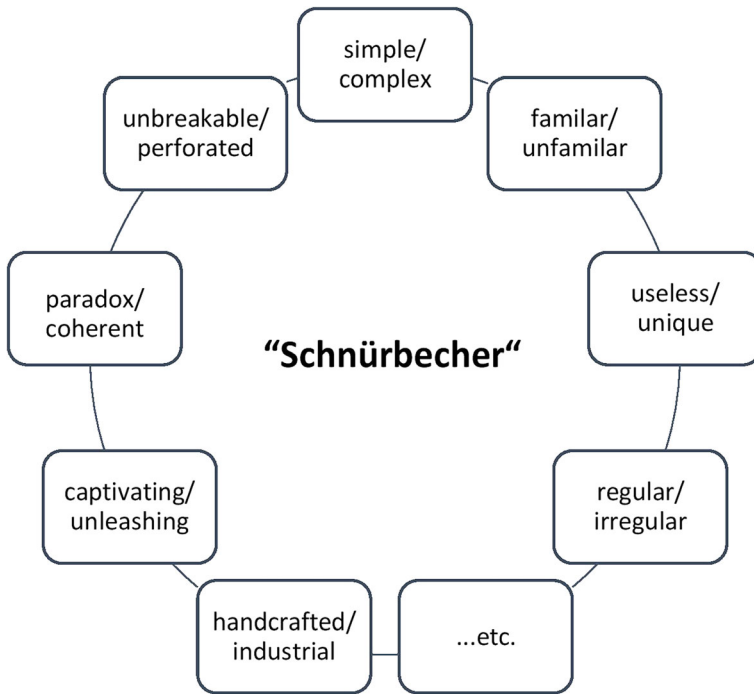


Fig. 2 Paradoxical and multidimensional character of the artwork “Schnürbecher”, 1968

This exemplary ‘practice’ of plurality in the experience of art also corresponds to today’s cultural and social requirements. Especially in view of the increasing cultural diversity in our society, an attitude of openness is required that brings different perspectives to, with and alongside one another in an impartial exchange. As an experience of openness and ambiguity coupled with reflexive processes, the encounter with art gains relevance in everyday life. Here we have the opportunity to experience and test an open attitude to reality. In focusing perception and attentively experiencing experiences and reflecting on them, embodied art reflection is able to produce insights that relate to our experiences of reality and open up new perspectives on them.

The relevance of art and especially everyday object art lies in its ability to materialize unusual perspectives of the real in a tangible form. With the simultaneous embodiment of the everyday as well as the unusual and the experience of ambiguity in confrontation with the one-dimensionally defined functional view of the everyday object, it causes specific moments of irritation which, according to Oelkers, can be understood as moments of educational initiation or induction (Oelkers 2004). Art explicitly becomes the principle of education if it is understood as an inevitable irritation of the familiar, which forces one to reform perception and thinking (ibid. 105). The “point of no return” (ibid. 109ff.) that arises in this process prevents one falling behind experience. As everyday object art in particular draws our attention back to everyday life and at the same time transforms our everyday perception, it is able to participate in a special way in the formation of new connections between our ego and the world – in the sense of Wilhelm von Humboldt’s idea of education or *Bildung* (Weinstock 1957: 57). For this to succeed, an open encounter between the work and the

viewer must be initiated in the form of a physical-mental connection of perception, experience and thinking. Embodied art reflection thus represents its own educational practice, which also holds potential for interdisciplinary pedagogical practice. For as Varela already stated: “The knowledge does not preexist in anyone place or form but is enacted in particular situations” (Varela 1993: 179). In embodied art reflection in particular, we can experience how our perceptions change when we turn to our world with an open eye and open mind.

In this article I have sought to show through examples how art reception that connects reflexive processes with concrete perceptual experiences can make its own contribution to the constitution of consciousness and cognition. Embodied art reception is capable of sensitizing perception and enables a specific practice of mindfulness in relation to the life-world. The perception- and experience-oriented reception of visual art results in an experience of the work that is translated into conscious reflection without closing off the original variety of experience. In phenomenological interaction with artworks new insights can be gained based on concrete experiences in an open-ended reflection process. Works of art are diverse and ambiguous and can be understood and ‘answered’ differently. By thinking in new contexts, by dealing with openness and the irritations caused by works, the reception of art becomes a specific sense-forming process, especially in the phenomenological understanding of education. Through the experience of the indeterminate, the ambiguous and the possible, the encounter with art turns into a model for us to perceive and understand the world anew. This is finally the reason for the specificity of art as a medium and object of knowledge, which continues to ensure that embodied art reception remains an interesting theme to be studied for its effects on education.

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