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Alfonsina Scarinzi

Editor

Aesthetics and the Embodied Mind: Beyond Art Theory and the Cartesian Mind-Body Dichotomy

 Springer

Chapter 12

A Qualitative Study of Aesthetic Reflection as Embodied Interpretation

Tracie E. Costantino

Abstract In his book, *The Meaning of the Body: The Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, Mark Johnson (The meaning of the body: aesthetics of human understanding. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007) built his case for the importance of aesthetics in a conception of cognition as inherently embodied upon the writings in psychology and philosophy of William James and John Dewey. He devoted significant portions of the early sections of the book to each of these authors, who, with phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, he has considered critical to the developments in neuroscience that have debunked the Cartesian mind/body dualism. Writing elsewhere, Johnson (*Daedalus* 135(3):46–54, 2006) asserted, “I regard American pragmatist philosophy, which came to prominence early in the twentieth century, as the most scientifically and philosophically sophisticated naturalistic, non-dualistic approach to mind available to us even today” (p. 48). In this chapter I will focus on Dewey’s influence on Johnson’s theory of embodied mind as a theoretical framework for a qualitative research study on aesthetic reflection as embodied interpretation.

Keywords Dewey • Qualitative research study • Neuroscience • Aesthetic education • Emotional interaction

Introduction

In his book, *The Meaning of the Body: The Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, Mark Johnson [12] built his case for the importance of aesthetics in a conception of cognition as inherently embodied upon the writings in psychology and philosophy of William James and John Dewey. He devoted significant portions of the early sections of the book to each of these authors who, with phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, he considers critical to the developments in neuroscience that have debunked the Cartesian mind/body dualism. Writing elsewhere, Johnson [11]

T.E. Costantino (✉)
Academic Affairs, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI, USA
e-mail: tcostant@risd.edu

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asserted, "I regard American pragmatist philosophy, which came to prominence early in the twentieth century, as the most scientifically and philosophically sophisticated naturalistic, nondualistic approach to mind available to us even today" (p. 48). In this chapter I will focus on Dewey's influence on Johnson's theory of embodied mind as a theoretical framework for a research study on aesthetic reflection as embodied interpretation.

In the beginning chapters of *The Meaning of the Body*, Johnson [12] explicated the significance of Dewey's conceptualization of qualitative thought as an early example of theorizing about embodied cognition. In his later chapter on "Art as an Exemplar of Meaning Making" Johnson drew on Dewey's pragmatist aesthetic theory of art as experience (1934), which applies Dewey's earlier writings in psychology on qualitative thought to art making and perceiving. Dewey [7] described qualitative thought in art as thinking in terms of the relation of form and matter within a qualitative whole. He wrote, "the ultimate cause of the union of form and matter in experience is the intimate relation of undergoing and doing in interaction of a live creature with the world of nature and man [*sic*]" (p. 132).

Working in aesthetic education, I have been influenced by Dewey and Johnson in my conceptualization of aesthetic reflection. I define aesthetic reflection¹ as the shaping of media into form with the explicit intention to convey reflective meaning. In the realm I work, the reflective meaning is an interpretive response to aesthetic encounters that are often situated within an educative context, whether it is in a museum, gallery, viewing works *in situ*, or in an art classroom. Johnson's emphasis on the relevance of aesthetic experience for cognition—the holistic embodiment of sensorimotor, psychological, emotional interaction with the physical and social environment—undergirds my conceptualization of aesthetic reflection. In aesthetic reflection, a person's body-mind is engaged in putting into aesthetic form his or her interpretive meanings of aesthetic encounters. Within an educational context, the viewer is being asked to aesthetically reflect on his or her meaning making explicitly, to pay attention to the interpretive process and represent his or her eventual understandings of an aesthetic encounter.

In this chapter I will present findings from a small qualitative study of college students' aesthetic reflections on their aesthetic encounters while studying abroad in Italy. These students were attending a class on interpretation and aesthetic understanding, thereby requiring them to think metacognitively about their interpretive experiences with works of art. The three participants in this qualitative study kept visual/verbal journals containing aesthetic reflections that I analyze using a hermeneutic lens. Their aesthetic reflections provide insight into the interpretive process and how it is essentially embodied.

¹My use of the term differs from that of Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, in that I am concerned with the reflection that occurs in the process of interpretive visual response, while Kant was referring solely to the contemplation of aesthetic objects.

Aesthetic Reflection as Embodied Interpretation

Figure 12.1 diagrams the theoretical influences from which I have developed the construct of aesthetic reflection. While in this chapter I am focusing on Dewey and Johnson, Merleau-Ponty's embodiment phenomenology, and especially his writings on aesthetic expression as a coming into meaning (The original was published in 1945; the English translation in 1962 [13]), and Damasio's research on the role of emotion in cognition (e.g., 1994), have contributed to Johnson's emphasis on the critical role emotion plays in the aesthetics of human understanding. Damasio's research on emotion underlies Johnson's defense of aesthetics as foundational for human meaning making, as it is an exemplar of the research in the cognitive sciences conducted since the cognitive revolution that finally debunked the Cartesian mind/body dualism (in his 2007 book Johnson cited all of Damasio's books published up to that point). Damasio's conceptualization of emotional thought (articulated with Immordino-Yang [10]), as a term for "the large overlap between cognition and emotion...in processes of learning, memory, and decision making" (p. 8) also aligns with Dewey's conceptualization of qualitative thought. That is, "it may be said that common-sense thinking, that concerned with action and its consequences, whether undergone in enjoyment or suffering, is qualitative" ([8], p. 243).

Qualitative thought is an underlying pervasive logic that integrates and unifies the distinctions and characteristics of experience. Dewey emphasized the importance of acknowledging the situatedness of qualitative thought, as embedded in experience:

The special point made is that the selective determination and relation of objects in thought is controlled by reference to a situation—to that which is constituted by a pervasive and internally integrating quality, so that failure to acknowledge the situation leaves, in the end, the logical force of objects and their relations inexplicable. (1930/1984, p. 246)

This quote suggests the importance of reflection in acknowledging the significance of a situation. Dewey explained that qualitative thought is an associative process in which significant relationships are intuitively grasped in an experience "...the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality, is the

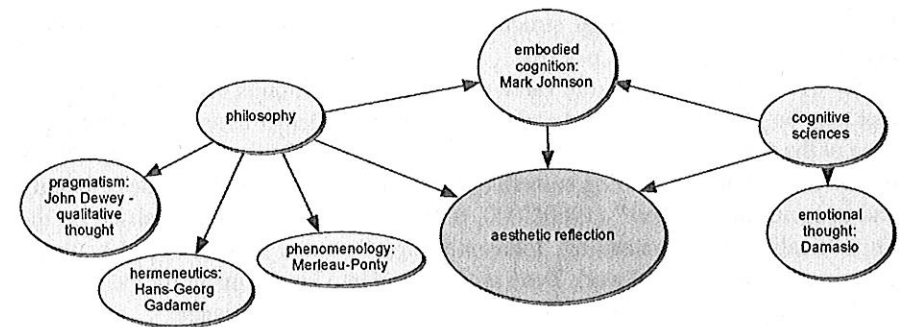


Fig. 12.1 Conceptual framework for aesthetic reflection

background, the point of departure, and the regulative principle of all thinking" (p. 261). Upon reflection, this qualitative thinking forms connections that may be analogic, metaphoric, or propositional. Dewey described artistic thinking as an exemplar of qualitative thought. "The logic of artistic construction and esthetic appreciation is peculiarly significant because they exemplify in accentuated and purified form the control of selection of detail and of mode of relation, or integration, by a qualitative whole" (p. 251).

This relates to Johnson's naturalist theory of meaning, explained in the first section on bodily meaning and felt sense in his 2007 book, "Sometimes our meanings are conceptually and propositionally coded, but that is merely the more conscious, selective dimension of a vast, continuous process of immanent meanings that involve structures, patterns, qualities, feelings, and emotions" (p. 10). Importantly for Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, and Johnson, these meanings are generated through action, the sensorimotor and perceptual interaction of an organism with its environment. It is what Dewey called a transactional realism, "The interaction—or as he later would call it *transaction*—of organism and environment is an active, adaptive, and adjustive process in which the organism seeks to maintain a dynamic balance with its ever-changing environment" ([3], p. 10). Johnson builds on Dewey (and Merleau-Ponty) in his explanation:

An embodied view of meaning looks for the origins and structures of meaning in the organic activities of embodied creatures to interact with their changing environments. It sees meaning and all our higher functioning as growing out of and shaped by our abilities to perceive things, manipulate objects, move our bodies in space, and evaluate our situation. (2007, p. 11)

Dewey's idea of transactional realism and Johnson's explanation of embodied meaning are especially relevant to the adaptive requirements of a study abroad experience, as students' body-minds are adjusting to the different sights, sounds, smells, tastes, terrain, and knowledge (cultural, especially) they are bombarded with on a daily basis. The *transaction* of the aesthetic reflection process—the impulsion to artistically reflect on a qualitative intuition of a significant situation—may be considered a vehicle for making meaning of the experience. Johnson emphasized, "Since much of art makes meaning without words or linguistic symbols, art reminds us that meaning is not the exclusive purview of language. Indeed, linguistic meaning is parasitic on the primordial structures and processes of embodied interaction, quality, and feeling" (2007, p. 218).

As with any work of art, the value of aesthetic reflection is the potential insight that may be gained by the artist and the viewer. As Gadamer asserted, "Our experience of the aesthetic too is a mode of self-understanding. Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other" (1960/2000, p. 97). Although Gadamer insisted on the linguisticity of understanding, Johnson brings Gadamer's treatment of aesthetic experience in the seminal work *Truth and Method* into his argument for the inherent aesthetic nature of meaning-making and its grounding in experience:

The aesthetic experience is not just one kind of experience among others, but represents the essence of experience itself...In the experience of art there is present a fullness of meaning which belongs not only to this particular content or object but rather stands for the meaningful whole of life...The work of art is understood as perfecting of the symbolic representation of life, towards which every experience tends. (Gadamer 1960/75 as cited in Johnson [12], p. 213)

Therefore, the process of aesthetic reflection in the context of a study abroad experience focused on visual arts education may be considered an effective vehicle for students' meaning making and self-understanding in what is typically a transformative educational experience.

Research Context

The context for this research study was a study abroad program located in Cortona, Italy, sponsored by an American university. This program is unique amongst the many study abroad programs in Italy as its focus is on postsecondary visual arts education. One Italian art history course is a requirement during the program, but the majority of course credits come from the studio arts. The program has a residential campus in Cortona, Italy with extensive studio facilities supporting study in diverse two-dimensional and three-dimensional art media, including painting, drawing, printmaking, book and paper arts, photography, sculpture, ceramics, and jewelry and metals. In the spring semester, art education is offered with teaching practicums in the local elementary and middle schools of Cortona. In addition to the 2-month stay in Cortona, during the spring semester program, students spend several days each in Rome, Florence, and Venice, and take weekly field trips on Saturdays to sites in Tuscany and Umbria. With the focus on studio arts in this program, and direct encounters with works of art *in situ* and in regional museums, aesthetic reflection is an effective mediating tool for authentic engagement in the art education course in which data collection occurred.

The course, *Art Criticism and Aesthetic Understanding*, is designed to provide students with the rationale and methodology for teaching art criticism and fostering aesthetic understanding in K-12 educational settings, museums, and other community settings. Aesthetic understanding is the ability to interpret and construct meaning from works of art of diverse genres and cultures, both familiar and unknown. The course combines viewing works of art with discussions of art history, criticism and aesthetics. When taught on the study abroad program in Cortona, content focuses upon modern and contemporary art in dialogue with the history of art as experienced in Italy. Experiences are scheduled to allow students to apply class discussions to school, museum, and other community settings, including a teaching practicum at the middle school in Cortona. By the end of the semester, each student should have developed a sound philosophy regarding teaching art criticism and fostering aesthetic understanding in students, developed additional teaching skills and sequential instructional approaches appropriate for teaching art criticism, gained

additional proficiency in personal knowledge of art history, art criticism and aesthetics as those disciplines pertain to the teaching of art, and developed greater skills in responding to art both orally and in written and visual forms.

Keeping a visual journal is a course requirement, albeit open ended. Students are given specific prompts to respond to, as well as asked to visually and verbally reflect on their aesthetic encounters throughout the program. These aesthetic encounters do not have to be exclusively related to works of art, or students' studio practice, but may also be in response to the natural and social environment. An example of a specific prompt is when visiting the frescoes by Signorelli in the cathedral of Orvieto, students were asked to make notes and sketches in their visual journal imagining they were Michelangelo, who visited these frescoes and was likely influenced by them before painting the Sistine Chapel. In addition, we frequently discussed students' aesthetic reflections (which were typically created in their visual journal) in class in a dialogic manner using Barrett's approach of reflecting, wondering, and responding [1]. My analysis of the students' aesthetic reflections is necessarily influenced by these discussions.

Research Design

This chapter discusses findings from a subsection of a larger qualitative research study that entails both theory development and empirical investigation of the construct of aesthetic reflection as a form of embodied cognition as manifested in visual artifacts produced within the praxis of art education. Based on findings from an earlier study on the potential insight that may be gained through visual responses to works of art [5], for several years I have incorporated methods of visual response into my teaching, asking students to represent their understanding of content and reflect on their teaching practice through visual representation in a variety of forms, including developing visual metaphors of a concept, creating postcards communicating significant learning incidents, pre and post-course drawing prompts, and keeping a visual journal. I have often used these strategies as a form of authentic informal performance assessment, as the reflective quality of the strategies facilitates students' further understanding of a concept or experience.

In this study I am working within a practitioner research methodology related to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL), which is defined as "higher education faculty across disciplines who were engaged in sustained inquiry into their teaching practices and their students' learning" ([4], p. 40). This study reflects practitioner inquiry as I am both practitioner—course instructor—and researcher, the professional context is also the research site, the boundaries between inquiry and practice are blurred, and I am systematically collecting and analyzing data as in an empirical inquiry [4]. With the above discussion of the theoretical framework for this study reflecting a naturalist view of meaning, and aesthetic reflection as an example of this kind of transactional meaning making, the methodology for this study necessarily reflects a pragmatic paradigm [3], with methodology referring to

the epistemology through which one conceptualizes the nature of inquiry in a particular research context.

The main research question for the larger study is to understand how aesthetic reflection is valuable as an educational process that supports the reflective and meta-cognitive aspects of learning through embodied cognition. In this subset of the larger study, within the context of a course on art criticism and aesthetic understanding, I am especially seeking to understand how the process of aesthetic reflection in a visual journal may facilitate the interpretive process.

Participants

Participants for the study consisted of the three students enrolled in the course during the semester in which the study was conducted. Class sizes are typically small during the spring semester of this study abroad program, which allows for a more intensive seminar experience and flexibility as to where class can occur, with the class often meeting at different architectural and museum sites in Cortona in order to take advantage of the opportunity for direct aesthetic encounters as opposed to always being in the classroom viewing projected images. Two of the students (Joseph and Caroline²) were art education graduate students earning master's degrees, while the third student, Eva, was an undergraduate student studying sociology and art history. While this course was the first time I had met Eva, both Joseph and Caroline had been students in several of my courses prior to this semester. Both of the graduate students were also practicing artists, working comfortably in two-dimensional media as well as ceramics, while Eva's arts practice fell mostly within photography. Joseph and Caroline were already in the daily habit of keeping a sketchbook, journal, or visual journal, while this was the first time Eva had consistently reflected in a sketchbook or visual journal, accordingly she had some anxiety about producing reflections in visual form.

Data Collection and Analysis

Visual journal entries from all three participants were the primary form of data as the focus of this study was to explore the potential of the visual journal as a form of aesthetic reflection on the interpretive process. Specifically, there were a total of 111 pages of entries (Joseph $n=31$; Caroline $n=46$; Eva $n=34$). Each student's visual journal was analyzed individually, with emergent themes identified, and then compared across cases for insights regarding the value of aesthetic reflection as a form of embodied interpretation.

²Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality.

My analysis of artifacts of aesthetic reflection relies on the visual analysis and study of iconography typical in art historical inquiry [2], as well as approaches to art criticism that incorporate personal response [1]. Since my data analysis task may also be considered an interpretation of students' interpretive experiences during aesthetic encounters, as represented in visual-verbal texts, it is also essentially hermeneutic, as my analytic process moves in a whole-parts-whole cycle. I assessed the credibility of my interpretations through member checking with the participants.

While Dewey and Johnson provide the main theoretical contribution to build a case for the non-verbal nature of understanding that challenges the hermeneutic insistence on the linguisticity of understanding [9]—consider the title of Johnson's introduction to his book (2007) "Meaning is more than Words and Deeper than Concepts"—why bring in hermeneutics at all? In addition to Johnson's incorporation of Gadamer's theory of aesthetic experience as inherently meaningful, as a practitioner researcher, my project is essentially interpretive as I seek to understand my students' visual/verbal interpretations. My position as practitioner researcher also significantly informs my analysis from a hermeneutic perspective as my interpretations are situated within the horizons of my experience as an instructor on this program with these students. It follows that however I may interpret my students' meaning making via qualitative thought, I then need to translate this into language as a researcher sharing my findings. Therefore, both visual understanding and verbal articulation is needed, but working in collaboration, as is often seen in the visual journal aesthetic reflection entries. Indeed, this is the case Biesta and Burbules [3] make for the relevance of Dewey's pragmatism as a methodology for educational research: it is the interaction and reciprocal relationship of different modes of experience that constitute the inquiry process.

Interpreting Aesthetic Reflection as Embodied Interpretation

As Johnson did in his chapter on "Art as an Exemplar of Meaning-making", providing "exemplary cases that show how the structures, processes, and qualities that make art possible and valuable are exactly the same ones that constitute *all* meaning, thought, and understanding" (2007, p. 213), I will provide exemplary cases of aesthetic reflection from each participant for discussion. Guiding this discussion is the idea that the felt material of experience provides the qualitative substance for the form of expression in aesthetic reflection. According to Dewey, it is esthetic emotion that unifies *an* experience as an aesthetic experience: "Emotion is the moving and cementing force. It selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its color, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar" (1934, p. 42). That is, the formal elements of participants' reflections—their use of color, line, shape, etc.—in a unified composition convey the meaning of their experience.

Eva – Embodying Wonder

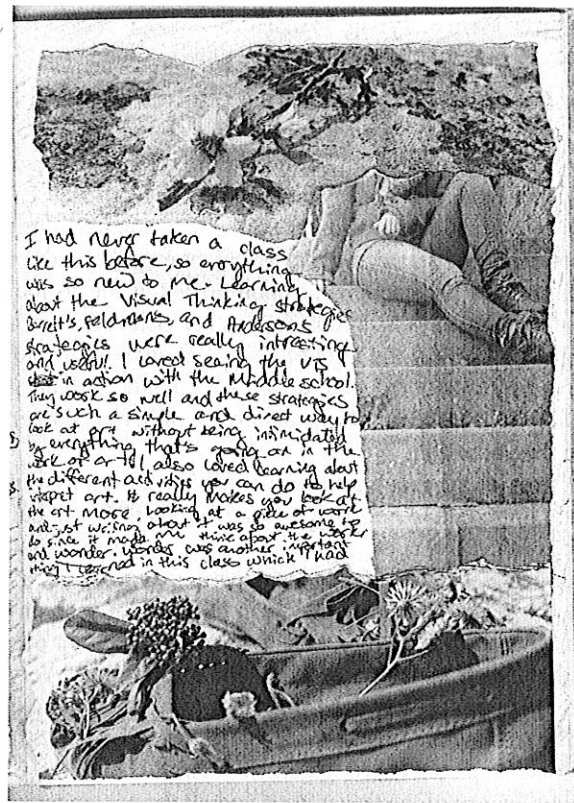
In her closing reflection on the course represented by a two-page spread in her visual journal, Eva wrote about how she realized the importance of wonder when looking at a work of art. During the course we discussed the role of wonder prompted by two readings [1, 6], which may have facilitated Eva's articulation of wonder as an important emotion in her aesthetic encounters during the program. Even though not explicitly stated, wonder is salient even in Eva's earliest aesthetic reflections as she recalls her excitement upon arrival at the Rome airport, but especially in an entry of two days later reflecting on her visit to the Galleria Borghese and surrounding gardens. Amidst the unfamiliarity and anxiety of finding one's way around Rome, Eva wrote about the awe she felt walking through the gardens as she approached the Galleria Borghese, and especially upon her encounters with the Bernini sculptures in the collection.

But let me first begin with a general description of Eva's visual journal entries. It is important to note that the first entries in Eva's journal were created several days into the program, once the visual journal had been assigned, and hence were created retroactively to document her experiences in Rome. Eva's entries begin with the text dominating, whether in the form of prose, or as main elements of the composition, playing with the color, size and shape of letters often spelling out the names of cities, such as Rome or Pisa. For example, the very first entry gives the airport abbreviation of her departing city, using the colors and symbols of the American flag (red, white, stars) to decorate the large letters, and those of the arrival city, Rome, depicted in red, green, and white. Use of these cultural signifiers implies the significance of the travel itself and all the accompanying anticipation, especially on a study abroad program where a student is leaving the familiarity of home to live for several months in a different country.

In the early entries, Eva used a stick figure to represent herself with the only distinguishing attribute being curving lines to represent her long hair. Visual elements are added to subsequent pages in scrapbook fashion, including ticket stubs, subway passes, or other items of special significance, such as Kinderegg wrappers (an entire entry is devoted to these chocolate treats). However, as the semester progressed and Eva became immersed in her photography classes and daily interactions with fellow art students, including her classmates in this course with more experience using a visual journal, Eva's aesthetic reflections became much more visual, artistic, and experimental, employing mixed media (drawing, photography, collage elements) with reflective text incorporated into the composition. The compositions become layered and more ambiguous, and her self-portrait moved away from the stick figure to a more fully drawn figure.

In the exemplar of aesthetic reflection for Eva (Fig. 12.2), we see her experimentation in how she rips and then juxtaposes strips of black and white photographs (a combination of her own and those of another student) to make what might be considered a symbolic portrait collage, with the reflective writing occupying almost half of the composition space. It is symbolic in that the various visual objects

Fig. 12.2 Final aesthetic reflection entry by Eva



represent meaningful experiences for Eva during her stay in Cortona. The composition is vertical, with the viewer's eye descending down the stairs upon which the figure is seated. It is meaningful that Eva chose to put a figure seated on stairs as the central image. The central piazza in Cortona houses the city hall that is reached by a central staircase, a favorite gathering spot for students and community members. Students often meet on the stairs for lunch or a snack, eating panini from the local grocer or gelato in the late afternoon. At both the top and base of the composition are ripped strips of photographs incorporating recently bloomed spring flowers that are interrelated with the figure—at the top they take the place of the head, and at the bottom of the composition they are interwoven into shoes. This study occurred in the spring semester of the program, with students residing from mid-February to late-April in Cortona. During these months students experienced the change of seasons from a cold, wet winter to welcome spring with the blossoming of almond trees, the blooming of wisteria, and warmer weather that might encourage a casting off of shoes. Indeed the blossoms in the top strip are from the early blooming almond trees plucked and laid on the stonewall of a Franciscan monastery that was a favorite peaceful spot students would often visit during long walks outside of the

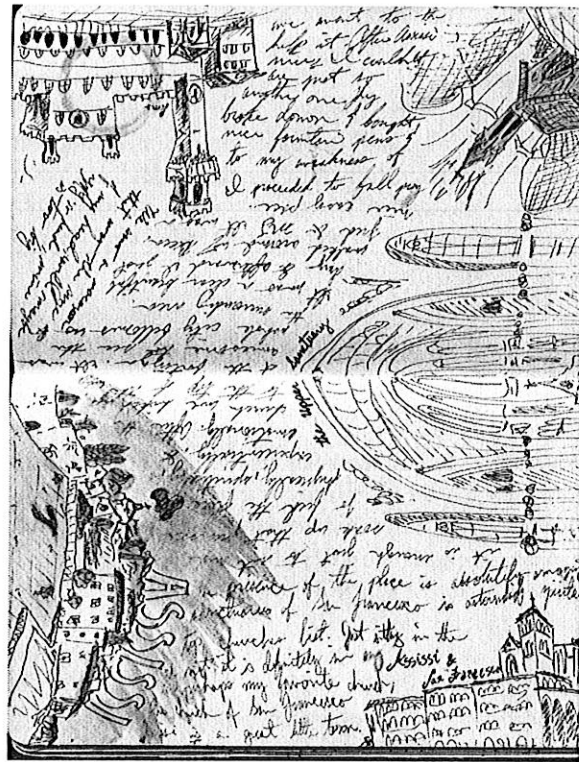
city walls. The flowers in the shoes at the base of the composition may represent a memory from a Saturday field trip, or lounging in the shady yard surrounding the building in which studio classes occurred. In a sense this aesthetic reflection represents the merging of aesthetic experience with art and nature that is so characteristic of travel in Italy. In this closing reflection, Eva has created a representation of her embodied encounters with the environment, both cultural and natural, through her preferred medium of visual expression—photography—choosing to highlight the emotional meaning of wonderment in her experience.

Joseph – Visual Journaling as Aesthetic Experience

During this study, Joseph was a graduate student earning his master's degree in art education. He was focusing his master's degree final project on studying the visual journal as an act of *currere*, or curriculum as autobiographical inquiry. He came to this topic after his experience using the visual journal in art education courses, and especially during the study abroad program. He considers visual journaling an artistic practice and form of living inquiry, akin to arts-based research. With his engagement in journaling as a daily practice, he has developed a style that is evident in the majority of his reflective entries. The focus of the reflection is represented visually as one or more drawn images—typically in ink—placed sometimes roughly in the center of the page, other times asymmetrically or along the periphery. Winding around the image(s) are Joseph's written reflective thoughts, which travel around the page leaving no spaces uncovered as his thoughts unfold (see Fig. 12.3). In this way language is integrated qualitatively into the composition, intuitively and rhythmically laid down so that the reader must physically interact with the page, either turning one's head or the journal around to follow the stream of Joseph's reflection on his experience. The writing becomes a form itself, often creating a bridge of interaction amongst the images. It is as if the creating of the aesthetic reflection, or act of visual journaling, is an aesthetic experience for Joseph, as Dewey [7] described art practice with the rhythmic doing and undergoing of perceptions of relationships of qualities: "the esthetic experience—in its limited sense—is thus seen to be inherently connected with the experience of making" (p. 49).

Joseph's aesthetic reflections on course content, often in response to a specific prompt, are more dominantly visual, often utilizing visual metaphors, with text serving as a signifier to a specific concept. For example, for the midterm for the course, students were required to write a paper comparing a work of Italian pre-modern art with a contemporary artist. Two years prior Joseph had visited the Accademia in Florence, where Michelangelo's sculpture of David is on view. During the time of his visit there was also a retrospective exhibition of the photographs of twentieth century American artist Robert Mapplethorpe, including an installation of Mapplethorpe's photographs of male nude figures surrounding the statue of David. At the time, Joseph was dismayed that his first visit to see the David was interrupted by this photography installation. In the course during the study

Fig. 12.3 Reflective journal entry by Joseph



abroad program two years later, with a focus on aesthetic awareness and interpretation, Joseph revisited his experience with this exhibition for his midterm paper. During his midterm presentation of the paper, Joseph asked the class to do a quick visual response to the installation as a form of interpretation. He then shared the aesthetic reflection of the David he had constructed for the presentation to demonstrate the influence of his reflection on his prior experience of viewing the David surrounded by photographs by Mapplethorpe (Fig. 12.4).

Titling his paper "The Stone or the Shutter," Joseph sought to compare not only the media these two artists worked in, but also to query about the juxtaposition and interrelationship of these artists in the installation. During his presentation and in his paper, Joseph discussed his interpretation of Michelangelo's and Mapplethorpe's use of light to objectify the male form and how Mapplethorpe's photographs give the figures a sculptural quality. He used the term exploitation often, which is qualitatively conveyed in his drawing with the spotlighting of the figures against a dark background that is aggressively blocked out with wide strokes of black (there was no such background in the actual installation). The torso of David is given prominence with exaggerated breadth, which is further enhanced in comparison with the miniature size of the head. The figure of David also looms over the crouching figures in Mapplethorpe's photographs installed alongside the statue's base. In this way,

Fig. 12.4 Aesthetic reflection by Joseph on exhibition installation viewed two years prior



through his aesthetic reflection on the installation Joseph conveys his emphasis on exploitation in his interpretation of these artists' treatment of the male form. This visual representation of his interpretation powerfully conveys the significance of this aesthetic encounter for Joseph.

Caroline – Drawing on Qualitative Thinking

Like Joseph, during the program Caroline was a graduate student with a daily habit of journaling, especially utilizing the visual-textual integration of a visual journal. She was also accustomed to keeping a visual journal as a course requirement. In her journal Caroline's reflective writing and drawings are integrated within a composition or page spread in an organized and easy to follow manner. Often Caroline covers a page with fully rendered drawings, and then writes her reflections on a separate page, or she overlaps drawn images onto printed text that still remains legible. In other instances she might clearly position descriptive text in reference to an image. Caroline is accomplished in drawing, and it is evident that this is a productive mode of expression for her, as hers is the most consistently predominantly visual of the aesthetic reflection entries of all three participants. She often chose to depict her

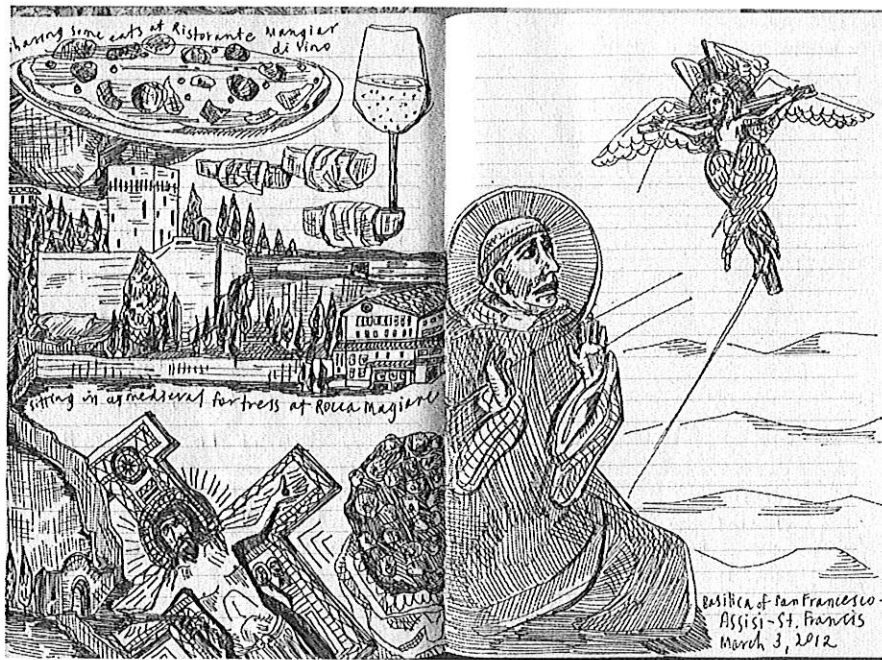


Fig. 12.5 Example of aesthetic reflection by Caroline

various experiences of a place through a visual compilation of drawn images (and sometimes photographs and collaged printed images), including, for example, encounters with works of art, an especially delicious meal, and a beautiful landscape view (Fig. 12.5). Indeed these are all sources of aesthetic experiences for which Italy is beloved. Caroline also typically created aesthetic reflections during class while engaged in discussion; there are numerous entries with key ideas written out alongside drawings of images we were viewing in class. Her comments during class discussion when we were interpreting an image were often focused on the formal elements of an artwork, indicating her predisposition for an aesthetic mode of thinking [7].

This is especially evident in a visual journal entry Caroline composed in response to a prompt I gave for students to visually reflect on a principle of interpretation laid out by Barrett in his book *Interpreting Art* (2002), which we used as a text for the course. The principle Caroline chose is “feelings are guides for interpretation”. In Fig. 12.6 Caroline created a composition composed of lines seeming to move from the left to the right side of the page. The lines branch out, as if feeling their way as they are drawn across the page. This is a good example of Dewey’s [7] description of material expressed into form to convey meaning, as the dynamic quality of the line seems to travel across the landscape of the page. This interpretation is enforced when compared with an earlier aesthetic reflection Caroline made upon the beauty of the valley surrounding the city of Cortona (Fig. 12.7). In this image Caroline’s

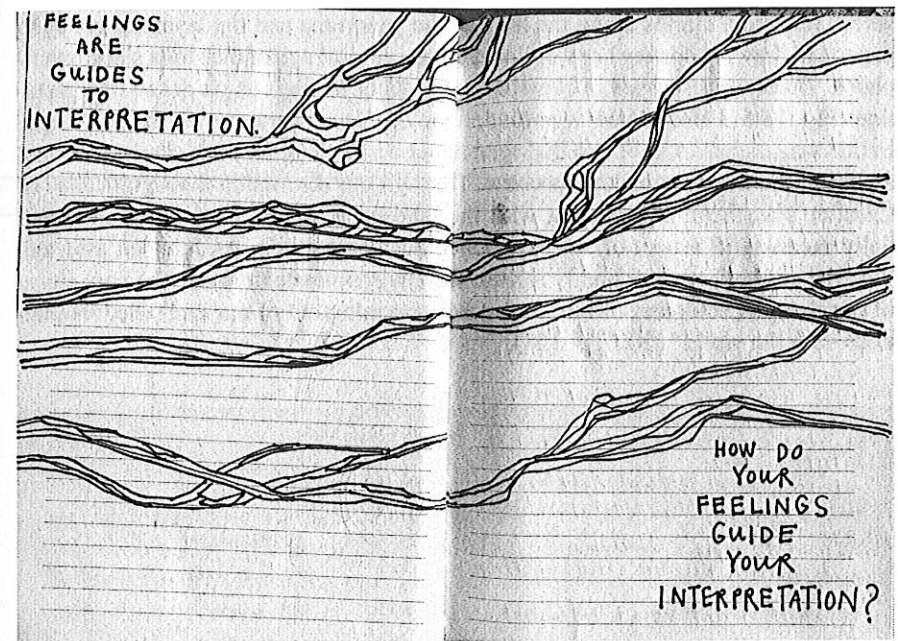


Fig. 12.6 Aesthetic reflection by Caroline on feelings as guides to interpretation

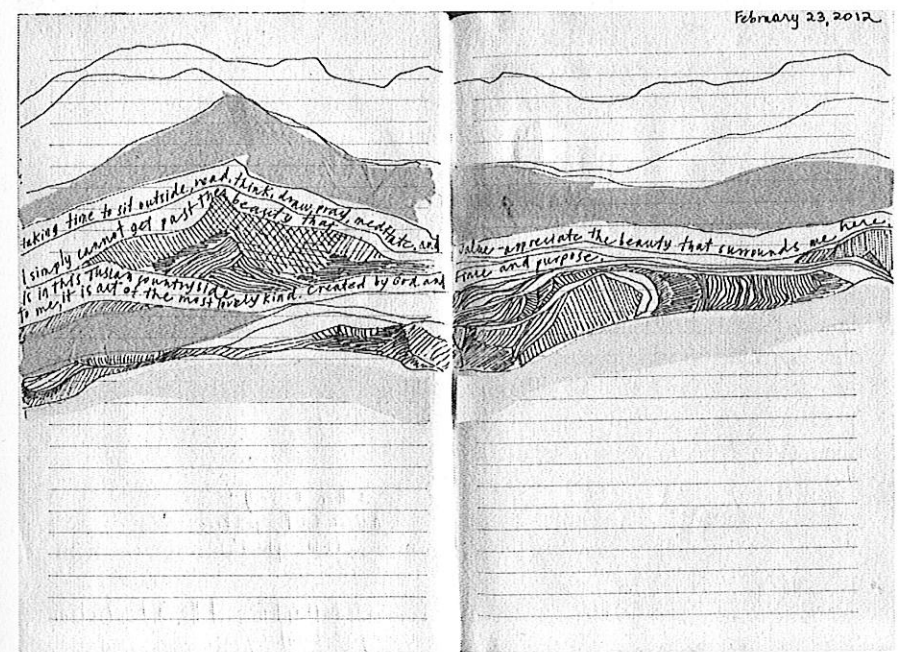


Fig. 12.7 Aesthetic reflection on landscape by Caroline

verbal reflection climbs along the hills of the panorama and the layers of collaged paper and drawing convey her wonder at the geological age of the strata she contemplates. When we discussed in class her entry about feelings as guides to interpretation (Fig. 12.6) I shared how it reminded me of this earlier entry on the landscape. In this way, the sharing of and dialogue about aesthetic reflections can be a critical aspect of the meaning making process. Through our discussion the significance of Caroline's aesthetic engagement with the landscape around Cortona as an essentially meaningful aspect of her experience became explicit. As Johnson asserted, "Via the aesthetics of our bodily senses, the environment enters into the very shape of our thought, sculpting our most abstract reasoning out of our embodied interactions with the world" (2007, p. 154).

Conclusion

As revealed in the above discussion, aesthetic reflection presents itself as a vehicle for the expression of meaning generated in aesthetic experience as well as a manifestation of the actual interpretive process. We see this especially in Joseph's reflections as the rhythmic interactions of written reflection with images symbolic of aesthetic encounters carry him to understandings as he moves his hand across and around the page. For Eva, the requirement of keeping a visual journal encouraged her to recognize and tap into a form of visual expression—the medium of photography—that she already utilized, but now as a lens through which she aesthetically reflected and composed meaningful views of her experience. For Caroline, the opportunity to use drawing as a means of pouring out a cascade of images symbolic of meaningful experiences while studying abroad, and the reflective dialogue around those images, aided in her interpretation of the significance of those experiences.

The theorization of embodied cognition put forth by Dewey and Johnson has guided my understanding of how the *act* of aesthetic reflection in education—the *transactive* practice of reflecting upon an immanently qualitative meaning then manifested through aesthetic articulation—is an interpretive practice that is meaningful for the viewer as well as the creator. While I checked my interpretations with the participants, there are multiple meanings that may be constructed, each inherently situated in the perspective of the interpreter, and also in relational dialogue, so that interpretations are dynamic and potentially meaningfully different with subsequent engagement. While this may seem relativistic, it is instead reflective of the interactive and constructive nature of our understanding of our experiences that is generated through body-mind engagement with our environment. It also reflects the ongoing rewards of revisiting our experiences through aesthetic reflection.

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