



Is There Art Without Senses?

Satu Järvinen & Jarmo Skön (Tampereen taidekasvatus ry)

Jarmo: Good morning, Satu! How wonderful to be able to take a moment to discuss art, senses and accessibility with you.

Satu: Likewise, Jarmo! It's truly an interesting subject and intimately connected to everything we both do in our work, isn't that right?

Jarmo: Yes, those three words are overarching themes for each day at work. It's a great opportunity to get to reflect on those themes together.

Satu: Let's start with a little exercise: Jarmo, close your eyes and tell me what you're sensing right now.

Jarmo: What I'm sensing is: I smell fresh coffee... my feet are slightly cold... I hear the distant noise of traffic and the screeching of a train in the background. What are you sensing, Satu?

Satu: I taste the delicate aroma of tea in my mouth and hear the humming of appliances around me. I'm sitting in a somewhat uncomfortable position in my chair, better fix it!

Jarmo: Thank you, those are interesting observations, to which I could relate thanks to your description. Satu, you're a professional dance pedagogue and an education researcher, and you've danced yourself for a long time and are specialised in the method of dance-animateuring.

Satu: Yes. I've also participated in developing environmental animateuring, which is a method to address environmental issues and personal environment relationship, based on art and sensory feedback. You, Jarmo, are an instructor of theatrical expression, and you have specialised in applying art with diverse groups, such as disabled people, immigrants, and the elderly. You too have specialised in dance-animateuring and have studied social circus and drama education. Your work is heavily based on the pedagogy of recognition developed by Raisa Foster, PhD.

Jarmo: Yes, that's a major part of who I am as an art educator. Today we've decided to focus on discussing the significance of senses in

art through our own experiences. We will also be talking about the role of the instructor and the pedagogy of recognition as a starting point in our work. As experts in performing arts, we focus on reflecting issues particularly from the viewpoints of dance and theatre.

Experiences and Senses in the Performing Arts

Jarmo: To start things off, we should probably talk a little bit about the significance of senses in performing arts. Theatre is an art form heavily based on personal experiences. Art is being created as the actor explores and analyses their own personal experience of their character and the story of the play. Through this inner exploration the actor can interpret the role in a unique way that they then share with the audience. Although I'm talking about experience, I might as well be talking about senses through which that experience is created. Senses and individual sensory experiences guide the actor strongly on stage. They have all or some of their senses at their disposal: sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, balance, proprioception, kinaesthesia, and even intuition. This means that senses affect us as artists. They are universal, they connect all kinds of people, while at the same time they are a resource that stems from the individuality of each person. In my work as a theatre director and instructor, I do not wish to divide people based on their individuality. Some might need more support than others to participate and work. It is my duty as an instructor to find how every person's potential is maximised. Everyone has the right to both experience and actively make art.

As we approach art from the perspective of accessibility, we must think about the point of view of the artist who needs special support in more detail. Not everyone can, for example, read, they may have trouble with spatial perception, or they may communicate in some other way than speaking. In these cases, exercises involving other senses form the core of making art instead of speech. The sensory experienc-

es that arise from the exercises help the actors draw their own map of actions: where do I stand or sit, what do I do, what do I see and what do I hear. What kinds of impulses does the space give to what I do? What about the other actors? This map of actions drawn by sensory data helps the actor repeat their actions when rehearsing, which is essential for the theatrical experience. So, in a way, sensory data leads to learning.

Satu: In dance-animateuring and dance, too, senses are a natural starting point. That's where we often begin when we dance. Focusing on our senses and openly observing them forces us to embrace the moment and the space with the people and the things in it. So, in a way, our thoughts return to our bodies and our own surroundings, when often they can be preoccupied by, for example, unfinished tasks or today's shopping list.

Perhaps the difference with theatre is that in the method of dance-animateuring, the goal often is to find one's sense of self instead of acting out different roles. This sense of self is crystallised when doing dance exercises together, or perhaps when dancing on a stage. Senses can produce raw, unfiltered data that reinforces staying in the present.

When we're dancing in groups, we process all our senses at once, or alternatively one after the other so that we consciously focus on specific senses and sensory experiences. Sight is often easily approachable, so occasionally I guide the participants to start with looking at things. We can observe things that are far away, things that are near, and memorise them. This can also be a starting point for movement. Most often I start with my groups eyes closed, so that one's gaze and the awareness of being looked at doesn't define what we're doing.

In the future, I'd like to try to explore the sense of smell in more detail with my groups. I'm particularly interested in how smell is tied to memory: what memories can, for example, the smell of cinnamon bring back, and how this memory could be translated into movement.

Jarmo: That's a great idea, and smell and taste could be utilised when making theatre, too. Perhaps I could use them when exploring the themes of a play with the group. It could provide fresh insights into the actors' work. I must say that it's delightful to notice that you used the word 'explore' when describing your work. This is an important point of view for me as well, since as explorers, all the participants are experts and working together becomes more equal.

I'm still thinking about how to use the senses of smell and taste in theatre and drama. As an example, I did a project with a special needs class where we studied the stories of Kalevala through process drama. Among other things, we tasted lingonberries, and smelled spruce branches and tar. These sensory experiences of taste and smell helped make the unreal world of Kalevala more vivid to the participants as we were exploring it together. Do you think it's correct to say that the information one absorbs through senses is more tangible because it feels real?

Satu: Information received through senses becomes real to the receiver always in the situation and moment when the person is present. Being open and receptive makes it possible for art to be born.

Jarmo: Yes, creating art - whether it's dance or theatre - pulls us away from our everyday roles and errands. Using our senses, we can focus on something that is within ourselves, in our interaction, or in our surroundings.

In a way, art is all about sensing things. But is sensing things art? As we established earlier, senses define the individual way of making art for each of us. Perhaps it's about drawing lines: can we, as individual artists, or collaborative groups, decide what to include in our art.

Satu: Is there art without senses? Either you look at it, feel it, listen to it, smell it, or taste it, but if one is without senses, can they experience art? So, is there art without senses?



Limitation – or a New Point of View

Jarmo: Good question, I don't think there is! However, regarding accessibility, we must remember that there are people who have reduced function or a total lack of one of their senses. On the other hand, there are people on the autistic spectrum who may have one sense that dominates all others, and this affects their whole way of being. What happens then and how should one act as an instructor?

What's been great to see in my work in a concrete way is how when a person lacks one sense, the other senses are heightened, and whole new ways of doing things are discovered. We should strive for seeing beyond traditional modes of thinking and place more emphasis on interaction. For example, I've had the chance to witness a blind young person doing aerial acrobatics on a swinging trapeze with their mother, communicating through verbal messages, and relying on their sense of balance, proprioception, and kinaesthesia. Or when I've danced in the lobby of Tampere-talo with an autistic boy who usually abhors touching, in close physical

proximity, relying on the shared tactile experience and intuition.

Speaking as an instructor, I can then say that everything is possible, since it's all about keeping an open mind, and having an atmosphere of trust and the willingness to experiment. And if art is about sensing things, then limitations become possibilities to discover new perspectives into art.

Satu: The differences in how you see things are significant. If you see art as virtuosic, dance becomes something that not everyone can participate in due to, say, flexibility. But could we see it in such a way that everyone can dance and can create art, and the way to approach it is through, for example, senses and different creative exercises.

The Pedagogy of Recognition in Dance-animateuring

Jarmo: As I already mentioned earlier, we all have a unique way of being, which means that everyone can create art in a unique way. Perhaps now would be a good time to explain in more de-

tail the method of dance-animateuring and its relationship with senses and accessibility – after all, it is a subject close to both our hearts. This method developed by Raisa Foster is based on an artistic-pedagogical model of hers, the pedagogy of recognition, which we both use as a framework in our daily work. It aims at the recognition of the self and the other. In this model, our individuality is, by default, a basic constant. When it is combined with making art, it provides one’s artistry with limitless possibilities.

Satu: Yes, the pedagogy of recognition introduced by Foster (2012) in her dissertation recaps the themes that have come up in our discussion. Its three phases are recognition as identification, self-recognition, and mutual recognition. What is meant by identification is acknowledging that there is no single, absolute truth. It is about jumping in with an open mind to examine different phenomena and letting oneself be carried away by the process. In other words, the shift is from knowing to recognizing. Dance-animateuring, based on the pedagogy of recognition, does not involve a ready-made dance choreography, a particular technique, or the grand vision of an instructor that the group must execute. Instead, it is a dialogical process in which, through different sensory and improvisatory exercises, one can discover something new about oneself, others, and the world. Since there is no established ideal to achieve, and the practice is based on everyone’s own way of moving, dance-animateuring is suitable for everyone.

Jarmo: For me, one of the most significant revelations regarding senses in Foster’s framework was how the pedagogy of recognition and dance-animateuring are not focused on one’s self-esteem, but instead they rely on self-awareness and its exploration. When making art and paying attention to ourselves, we learn to identify aspects of ourselves that we may have never noticed before. All the layers within us are thus equal, there is no good or bad in them.

Satu: By self-recognition, we mean that instead of developing a good self-esteem we fo-

cus on developing self-awareness instead. At its best, art can help us discover the narrative and mutable quality of our identity. It helps us to accept both ourselves and others as they are.

Structures and the Accessibility of Art

Satu: Recognition as identification is a very important starting point for questions such as the accessibility of art. We must first consider the different structures and norms of society, and whether we’re unintentionally creating art only for a certain group of people. And whether we, for example, use words that define the art as marginal: is the art ‘special art’, i.e., made by someone who deviates from the norm.

Jarmo: Considering accessibility in art, we in the business must be aware that we’re tearing down traditional views on art. In my opinion, the arts are limiting themselves at the moment with their norms and routines. It has been said that art should be multifaceted and relevant, but we cannot raise future generations to experience and create art in new ways if our society doesn’t allow this diversity to shine. The cliché, ‘art belongs to all’, is then nothing but lip service. The diversity of human nature is still largely invisible.

The challenge is that all art – including art made as a hobby – is strongly based on the laws of supply and demand. The entertainment value of art often takes a more prominent role. That narrows down the supply, as it’s the more ‘selling’ forms of art that get the spotlight. At the same time, instances of art accessibility, such as so-called special art or inclusive art, are left marginalised and invisible. It’s still extremely rare if a person not accepted by society’s norms is lauded as an artist. In fact, I wouldn’t even use the words special art, I’d rather talk about new art.

Perhaps senses could be a good way to open a dialogue in this case as well, whether we could see ourselves through them as equal artists, members of the audience, as people. Years ago, I read about the concept of third space by Homi Bhabha, where the central idea is that culture

is never permanent or original, but it is formed through interaction between individuals or other cultures. In this interaction, together with senses, a 'third space' is born, through which something new can be discovered together. The same takes place in performances when interacting with a crowd who share the 'third space' with the performers through everyone's senses. At the same time, the performers sense the audience, sharing their art with them.

Challenges for Instructors

Satu: As we're discussing art and accessibility, it's also important to discuss the possible risks involved. What are your thoughts?

Jarmo: Yes, the skill of staying in contact with one's art on one hand, and one's resilience regarding the group on the other, are at the centre of what it means to be an instructor. When rehearsing performance art with different special groups, or any group for that matter, it's important to remember that the actor and their role must be distinguished. There are many therapeutic layers to making art, especially with a sensory approach, and it can get side-tracked. It's the director's responsibility in the theatre to make sure the point is to create art and share an activity, not therapy. This requires being clear and drawing boundaries. But the director should be prepared to accept that experiences and emotions may surface while creating art. They must have the skills to guide the group back into the fiction and the narrative, away from oneself.

In drama education, we use the term aesthetic doubling to refer to two layers of reality, the realistic and the fictitious being present simultaneously. I think this is also a good way to visualise the work of the actor to, for example, a disabled actor. It makes the different layers of what an actor does in a theatre at least a little more concrete. It's extremely important that these two layers are not mixed while working.

Satu: These kinds of situations crop up from time to time with my groups as well. As we work on dance projects, we often aim for a 'self' – not

a role, but a search for one's own feelings and sensations. You have to be careful particularly with adults, so that each participant is responsible for how much they share of themselves. When dealing with a special group, the instructor must be even more sensitive about how to approach these things. Roleplay might be a good way to start exploring these issues.

Jarmo: The things surfacing from us through creative work might be surprising for all of us, since our senses can set free something that we are not prepared for rationally. It might bring back things, experiences, and memories that we may have hidden in our bodies and are lying dormant. This is why clearly defined boundaries are important. Everyone must know what the goal is. At the same time, it takes some weight off the instructor's shoulders when things are agreed upon beforehand.

In drama education, we also use the term 'agreement of drama' to describe a detailed framework for the activity to which everyone commits. I always try have one in one form or another before beginning. It takes courage from the instructor as well to set up limits, to know when you've gone too far and what is meaningful use of time and what isn't. With people with special needs, the need for clarity becomes more important – to make everyone understand although verbalising one's own experiences can be difficult.

Satu: I've also appropriated the agreement of drama for dance, so that with each new group an agreement of dance is made, and it's such a great and concrete tool with which to start and to limit the themes that the group will deal with.

Jarmo: Many times, it seems that when talking about making art using senses, people mean freeing themselves of limitations and getting to look at things in a new way. It can also mean that some participants can't set up their protective barriers and, immersing themselves, can't control where they end up. Guidance and other verbal and non-verbal communication from the instructor can also be misinterpreted, or the role of the instructor can become unclear to the par-

ticipants. This is when the instructor must intervene and put into words what is the purpose. We should always keep in mind that the art educator is not a therapist, and art therapy is not the same as art that has a 'therapeutic' layer.

So, I wish that every art educator would reflect on their own sensitivity and their resilience. As my teacher of applied theatre always used to say, the instructor should always keep their feelers up. Sensitive guidance begins at planning. It's also good to remember to proceed calmly and that the instructor always remains in control of the situation. The instructor is responsible for the 'space' they open for the artistic activity, and what is allowed and possible there. We, as artists and art educators, are not there to solve anyone's problems – we have invited people with us to make art.

Senses as a Way to a more Equal Co-Existence

Jarmo: One more thing since there is also an activist trying to save the world in me. If senses are at the core of art and humanity, isn't it so that senses work in us as catalysts for empathy? Creating art together gives us shared sensory experiences. Even though all experiences are individual and even contradictory when compared

side by side, all sensory feedback is received in the same environment through art.

This shared space in which senses hold a key role, creates a bond between the participants where it's possible to regard other people from a new point of view. This could act as a way to a more equal co-existence, as everyone is equally present through their senses. So, through sensory art experiences we can raise our capacity for empathy.

Satu: Definitely! It's impossible to define borders or impose values on people based on senses. There is no hard coded hierarchy in the knowledge, information, and experiences gained through senses. If we confront people with 'rationality', different features might be highlighted. A disabled person can be confronted through, for example, their diagnosis or some other definition, which of course is not productive from the perspective of artistic experiences.

Jarmo: So, let's put faith in the possibilities of senses, as by utilising them in the right way we can create a more accessible and equal world for all!

Satu: Hear, hear. Thank you for this conversation!

Jarmo: Thanks to you too. ●

Sources

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Exercises

Exercise 1

Relax, stay still, and take a few breaths. What are you sensing right now? How do your surroundings affect what you do? How do you feel in this space? What does the space encourage you to do?

Exercise 2

Reflect on your sense of taste and sensations of touch. Bring something for your group to eat and drink that has different textures. Pair these into tasting and emotional pairs. Taste them. What kinds of emotions do the flavours make you feel? Share your experiences with the group. Taste the flavours together, if possible. What kinds of emotions do they make others feel?

Exercise 3

Consider whether you could utilise different taste experiences in your group or activity. How could they affect how the participants experience the activity?