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Corporal Linkages between Ethics and Aesthetics
Anja Kraus

Research topic:
The interdependence of materiality and sensation carried out by corporal means create the modes of a corporal self-perception. In the frame of the phenomenological approach they can be named as modes of a self and world constituting corporality. Some of these modes will here be theoretically unfolded by focusing the corporal linkages between ethics and aesthetics. The essential question discussed here is whether it is generally possible to pursue important ethical aims through works of art. In case this question could be positively answered, there would be a way opened how to develop literacy in a broad sense through works of art. Besides the theoretical argumentation a means of instruction will be presented by which the ethical and aesthetical aspects of a self and world constituting corporality play a major role for the learning processes in the frame of a multimodal communication of the pupils.

The theoretical framework:
Our corporality is constitutive for our reference to the world. We perceive not only the objects given to us in our perceptions, we also relate ourselves to our environment by means of our body. It is been empirically demonstrated that children in their first year of life use their corporal faculties of expression in a communicative way to reach a certain aim. (cf. Dornes 1993 and others) Up to late childhood, and more or less in the years after, too, human beings appropriate objects primarily in a corporal way. One and the same sensation is interpreted differently, depending on the actual corporal state of the individual. Each of these interpretations is an expression of an individual way of cultivation; we could also say an individual’s mode of learning. The manifold activities of our bodies and our corporality as a primary medium of learning can be considered only by understanding corporality not as a mere device but also as an agile and living body. Unlike the currently widespread differentiation between “having a body” and “being a body”, introduced by Helmuth Plessner (1982), the conception of corporality introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) provides shelter for the corporality as a substance on one hand and as a sensitive and vivid organism on the other hand. According to Merleau-Ponty we become aware of this distinction rather primarily prereflexively and only secondarily rationally.

What does this mean for the relationship between ethics and aesthetics?
In the search for an answer to this question I will first give my attention to the relationship between ethics and aesthetics and by this I will refer to the conference topic.
Is it possible to develop literacy (to pursue important ethical aims) through works of art?

My first association - and maybe also yours - to this is: Works of art thematize existential possibilities of man sometimes in an inhuman way. Not only deviant behaviour and thinking is imaged. The difference between images and ethical thinking is also sometimes shown as a sharp contrast. Obviously, there is a certain ambiguity of art, which implies for example that ethical impacts of a work of art might be misunderstood.

Anyway, the reception of art is, as well as ethical thinking, ruled by the task to achieve orientation.

My hypothesis is that not primarily the rational thinking but the body is the medium of this task.

I’ll use the following definition of „ethics“ and „aesthetic perception“.

Ethical world understanding is defined as a practical knowledge that can be legitimated by language.

However, for the aesthetical perception subjective links of realistic impressions with imaginative ones, at first place with iconic imaginations, play a central role.

The relationship of imagination and language has not been a clear one in the field of arts since the period of romantics. Finally, it is up to the contemplator of art to clarify this according to the certain situation by themselves, i.e. subjectively. Not rarely, the potential cohesion of icon and language is put at stake on purpose by the artists. It is the refusal of sense that takes over innovative and avantgardistic functions within the art-specific icons and language games. Therefore, artistic strategies can principally be understood as forms of neglect, concealment, disruption. Especially in the effects of such de-limitations, the stimulative nature of an artistic work shows itself. This means, that the particular semantic gap addresses us to some extent. As subjectively as such a statement might be, each artistic work is socially dimensioned per se.

An artwork differs from promotion also due to its ambiguity: Even a politically understood artwork, by which one is to respond to contemporary events and which is to impact on it, is connoted very individually against the background of different political contexts and in cohesion with the individual frameworks of its contemplators.

Yet, one will find out that a determination of art merely by de-limitations cannot be accepted like this. First, we will only suppose so.

Especially in this case, a link between art, ethics and education results from this: All these human general behavioral patterns can be characterized by the task of finding measures for existential orientation, see f.e. the especially wide-spread discussion on the topic of self-effectiveness as a requirement for educational processes in the English speaking realm.

The range of possibilities to generate measures for an existential orientation in reference to artistic undertakings is broad. This becomes clear especially when an artistic work is
understood as an argument in the sense of the “linguistic turn”. The modus under which an existential orientation can be given here, is nonetheless not random and not simple in terms of the various possible facets of sense abstinence and sense denial, which play a prominent role in arts.
I am joining the dimension of “worldmaking” and the share of art, ethics and education.
It is out of doubt that, as mentioned above, first and foremost our body opens up in its own immediateness and authenticity to the fields of the social, of history, of art, of culture, in short all to phenomena of the world we live in. However, it is not about mere sensory perceptions as one might suggest. Our prime access to the world and to ourselves has rather always been woven with assessments, concepts and ideas, so that a separation of authentic immediateness and discursive-conceptual mediating is not possible in general. We judge reality on the basis of our prior experiences. These prior experiences are culturally over-formed and we are mostly only pre-consciously and pre-predicatively aware of them without being completely aware of them. According to this, the execution of aesthetical perceptions is somewhat embedded in our bodies. Corporally transmitted pre-experiences are interpreted by Martin SEEL (1991) as a distinct orientation knowledge in the form of sensitive self-presence: “In aesthetic perception we are aware of ourselves as percipients- not merely as self-conscious beings but as beings, which let their corporal sensorium be explicitly active.” The beginning of categorizing acts is therefore already made by subjective impressions and by the demarcations and contrastings that are inherent to these. With Christina THÜRMER-ROHR (1994) the laws of seeing as the modes of organizing things into a hierarchy, to order them, to allocate to one another, to regulate them, to subordinate them, constitute the predominant realization model in “Western culture”. She concludes: “The priority of seeing as a metaphor for the sensible and right realization has far-reaching consequences for the interpersonal realizations. The realization efforts are taken out of the dialogical and perishable context and become ascertaining, categorizing, judging acts.” THÜRMER-ROHR (1994) thus confronts our seeing, completely contrary to the thesis above of a complete de-limination by art, in reference to Dorothee SÖLLE (1987) and Max FRISCH (1974) with the ethical directive 'not to make oneself an image of the other'. She writes: “The seeing asserts because it aims at pictures. To make oneself an image, to create images means making locking ups, making limitations, becoming distant. The picture forges to the place of the still open reality... He who visualizes the other,... denies the foreign, unexpected, still undecided in the other’. Hence, each illustration takes out what is familiar to us, this is how her argumentation can be continued with Wilfried LIPPITZ (1999).
The orientation knowledge that is here described is transmitted through our body. Although our body reflects cultural, social, societal and individual embossments and figurations, it remains beyond all theory.
This is not least the reason why an aesthetical decree cannot always be easily articulated.

It becomes evident here that the effect of visual moments in art is in this respect an ethical and eventually also moral one, as it creates an image of a (supposedly) different other and/or allows to associate one like that. Such an image always implies ethical measures, too, which also determine the pre-conscious and pre-predicative aesthetical perception.

By means of artworks, it can therefore be revealed in a pedagogical situation how specific picture matters are aesthetically organized into a hierarchy, ordered, and how they are related and subordinated differently to one another by the perceptive subject. It can also be extracted, whether and in which respect such arrangements are somewhat socially decreed, or at least seem to be. Moments of sense refusal, sense frankness or also of ambiguity are necessary in order to interpret the perceived at all or even newly. As only forms of forbearance, concealment, disruption allow (in art studies) that a perceived reality can be linked to other associations than the familiar ones or can also be justified differently than before. But this can only take place under the condition that the reception of art is ruled by the task of getting orientation. In this regard they resemble ethical decisions and educational processes.

**Methodology/research design:**

In order to explore different modes of a self and world constituting corporality I developed the sound installation „Sensitive Threshold“, as an “open artwork” (ECO 1989). The „Sensitive Threshold“ serves as a means of instruction and as a means of research at the same time.

Intended are two main aspects that have to be empirically proved: First, the thesis needs to be validated, that by working with the „Sensitive Threshold“, different learning processes can be brought about. Second, one suggests that it provides an opportunity for the pupils to stage a very broad variety of themes (in all school subjects).

The concept of the „Sensitive Threshold“ is especially led by the following consideration: Social community is basically ruled by responsivity. Before a child learns to speak it is sonically addressed by others and it responds to this, at the beginning without words. In this process the integration into a community of other people takes place. – In our daily world we find two correspondences to this thought:

Firstly, an audio-guide used in a museum to make topics such as history, politics, culture etc. audible by means of spoken texts and by sounds.

Secondly, we can move in virtual realities, causing effects by walking or putting our hands up, etc.

Both aspects, audio-guides and virtuality, merge into the concept of the sound installation “Sensitive Threshold” that is now installed in the foyer of a secondary school.
in Berlin: A camera assesses six areas near the entrance of a school. When a person steps into one of these areas a sound file is activated, by stepping into another area another sound file is activated. By the combination of different sounds activated by different persons a kind of audio-guide is generated.

At first learners produce their own audio-guides by choosing a subject, finding a way to make it audible and collecting the sounds by using the Internet or an MP3-Player. The pupils are instructed how to record and how to collect sounds and how to charge them digitally, how to combine them etc. Through audible recordings such as ambient noise carpets, music, verbal explanations etc. a broad knowledge about a culturally significant situation or concern can be mediated. The transformation of learning contents into sounds brings about diverse learning processes. Moving their bodies and touching sounds in the foyer, other kids can pick up on the presented topic in emotional, imaginative, or cognitive ways. Their imaginations serve as a basis for further learning processes. The topics developed by the pupils by means of the interactive possibilities of the “Sensitive Threshold” are: “Sounds of Everyday Life”, “Dying and Death”, “Atmospheres of a Metropolis”, “Love”, “the Temperate Zones of Africa”, “the Sounds of Footsteps”, “Amber”, “the Middle Ages” etc.

In order to evaluate the impact of the “Sensitive Threshold” scientifically, first the lessons and then the events and movements taking place afterwards in the foyer are filmed.

**Here some impressions which precede the systematic research:**

A group of girls of Arabic, Turkish, German and Bosnian origin, had chosen the topic *love*. The goal was to reconstruct the student’s life plans, which are made definite by cultural backgrounds, in an appreciative and, when needed, dissent way. Therefore, it was their first task to arrange freeze images for different culturally specific wedding parties. An Arab-Muslim, a Turkish-Muslim, a Bosnian-Muslim and a German-Christian task group was composed. While the pupils newly synchronised the single scenes intuitively again and again, they fathomed the topic’s complexity in an experience-related, value-neutral and simultaneously dialogical manner. A consensus on the joint topic “love” was soon reached: “The reason for a marriage should be love”. Controversies came about in the aspect of the “arrangement of the festivities”, “marital age”, “basic conditions of love”, “quality of love” etc. A didactical reduction took place through the finding of subheadings, such as “Being in love”, “daily sounds of love” etc. With each subheading, concrete situations were associated. The atmospheres of these respective situations should be (made) audible for the assembly of the sound installation. With the parameter “daily sounds of love” the “sounds of television” and the “noise of domestic appliances” were mentioned for example. Soon, a fascinating discussion was developed. Michelle for example remarked that in her future marriage, boredom and indifference should never arise, she would prevent this by any means. In response, Sosda told her that this was
every doting couple’s wish, but that hardly anyone would succeed. Then, Nese interjected that quarrels were a part of a relationship: “Because only those who argue can get along again. And that refreshes love!” In a group work, eight sounds were assigned to each of the discussed topics. The topic argument was thus set to music through “slamming doors”, through “yelling at someone”, through “begging” etc. The dancing steps which were allocated to Arabic weddings for example, had to be stepped and the silent sounding of the steps had to be recorded. Quickly, the best female dancers from the other class of the same year were asked to come. The music was played through the girls’ mobile phones. It became clear that some descriptions on our list were too vague as “yelling at each other” for example. The question arose how exactly an quarrel takes place and which stereotypical statements drop. This offered a learning cause for a lesson unit for the topic “culture of criticism”.

The following lesson was attended by two sound artists. They had brought some of the sounds with them which the pupils had associated with the topic love. First of all, these sounds were listened to and named. This was a good practice for the acquisition of “German as a Second Language”. Engaging in a different culture, in this case the German one, demands a rearrangement, which takes place mainly on a corporal level. With the aid of the “Sensitive Threshold”, the pupils can stage sounds also of their original culture and relate them to proceedings that are typical in their eyes. A virtual eye height of different cultures is created, as sounds of different cultural origin are positioned next to one another.

Among the pupils cutting experts were educated by the sound artists, who charged the sounds into the installation, according to the instructions of the task group. Thereby, the cutting experts tested various sound constellations, walked through the foyer, discussed and demanded that certain topics should be reversed in the fields. They didn’t like for example that the field “quarrel” was there where the installation was frequented the most. The wedding sounds should be audible most frequently.

The girls proudly led some fellow students in the following school breaks through the foyer and hinted on peculiarities like the own voice as a tune file for example. While passing the installation, the teachers also constantly made new discoveries and notified the project leader or the pupils: “Why does love sound like a vacuum cleaner?”, “Isn’t this Sosda’s voice, who says that she doesn’t want to get married?”, “Is it about sadness in this field?”.

The different modes of responsivity, the diverse media of self-expression, the principles cutting and bridging as a mode of sense-making, aspects of the iconography of performativity are yet to be scientifically unfolded.