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Artistic diaries as a tool for reflection in socially engaged arts practices

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Introduction

Keeping a diary for making notes goes way back in human history: hypomnema in Ancient Greek, the Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon, a Japanese poet and a court lady in the tenth century, commonplace books in fifteenth-century England, Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks in the Italian Renaissance, scholarly notes in the Renaissance and early modern period, and scrapbooks for memorabilia in the nineteenth century. Diaries and scrapbooks act "as a place for users to create and post … personal media assemblages: individualized collections of media fragments both original and appropriated, including notes, messages, photographs, symbolic tokens, and snippets of meaningful items" (Good, 2012, p. 559). In doing so, they often served both functional and aesthetic purposes (Vosmeier, 2006).

Making notes and keeping a diary is also essential to artistic practice. For an artist, a notebook can be understood "as a closet, an attic, a basement or a file folder, where unedited thoughts are stored in a jumble" (Olivia Petrides quoted by Hill, 2018, para. 1). It provides a means to document, manage, and process one's observations, ideas, insights, and random scribblings and to reflect upon them. This article investigates the relevance of reflection for aesthetic diaries, a creative tool for artists in the socially engaged arts field.

Socially engaged arts

As part of the social turn in the arts (Helguera, 2012), artists' professionalism has expanded (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2021), and socially engaged arts constitute an increasingly important area of artistic practice due to its potential for community participation, social inclusion, personal development, empowerment in many contexts, including youth work (Laitinen, 2017). Socially engaged art is an umbrella concept for a broad set of context-specific,

participatory artistic practices entailing transformational aspirations. These practices can include any art form and utilise interdisciplinarity to address social or other issues relevant to their participants (Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, forthcoming). Depending on context-specific needs, these practices tend to draw from a range of theoretical perspectives, such as social justice, Marxist philosophy, Freirean pedagogy, various forms of feminism, and organisation theory. Thus, socially engaged art practice can be understood as "theoretically informed committed action" (Green, 2009, p. 11) that approaches its topics by integrating practical knowledge, ethics, and wisdom (Flyvberg, 2001) through creative exploration, often grappling with complexities and challenges (Macklin, 2009, p. 95).

Social engagement, the central characteristic of socially engaged art, is embedded in creating, performing, exhibiting, or interpreting art. It requires artists in this field to possess a wide range of competences[1] that supplement their artistic skills. These competences can be organised into eight interconnected competence areas: artistic, social, pedagogical, ethical, research, development, entrepreneurship, and contextual (see more, Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, forthcoming). It is beyond the scope of this article to look at each of these competence areas in detail. Instead, this article will focus on a single competence relevant to all eight competence areas: reflection.

Reflection in socially engaged art

Reflection can be understood as a sense-making process—the act of pausing to think about recent experiences or prospects, making them clear to oneself. According to Van Manen (2015, p. 50), reflection is "retrospective" when it addresses past experiences and "anticipatory" when it focuses on our experiences of imagined futures. Reflection is fundamental to experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) as it serves to acquire new knowledge or insights (Moon, 2004) "by making sense of perplexity" (Pässilä, 2012, p. 61). Such sense-making includes actively and carefully considering beliefs and knowledge, their supporting grounds, and potential implications (Dewey, 1933). Thus, reflection is central to "intentional

[1] Competence refers to a complex idea of what a person can do, encompassing behavioural, cognitive, and personal aspects, connecting to the intricacy of social practice, and referring to the capacity to apply knowledge, skills, and abilities independently and autonomously at a certain level (Lester, 2014; Mulder, 2021). See (Lehikoinen & Siljamäki, forthcoming; Lehikoinen, 2013; Vondracek, 2013) on competences in socially engaged art practice.

learning, problem solving, and validity testing" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 99). It deepens our understanding of the reflected phenomenon and informs our future actions.

In socially engaged art, which strives to instigate social transformation, learning from reflection has relevance to both the artist and the participants. It enhances their reflexivity, helping them critically scrutinise their and others' experiences, actions, assumptions, mindsets, values, narratives, and principles of practice. Further, it helps identify, for example, possible power relations, social control, discursive practices, and ideological influences in which they are embedded (see Foucault, 1980; Gramsci, 1971).

There are many ways to reflect, think critically, and dismantle assumptions. For example, Peters (1994) encourages us to consider a concrete case and then step back and examine our presumptions. Brookfield (1995) proposes a multi-perspective approach with four points of entry: our own, our colleague's perspective, student view, and theoretical texts, while Bolton suggests “as many angles as possible: people, place, relationships, timing, chronology, causality, connections, the social and political context, and so on” (2014, p. 7). These approaches to the reflective practice tend to highlight reflection as a “critical” (Hillier, 2005, p. 7) process and validity testing taking “the form of consensus reached through rational discourse” (Mezirow, 1991, p.76).

However, reflective processes require creative thinking next to critical thinking to boost “the ability to generate new ideas and to see things with fresh eyes” (Ghaye, 2011, p. 127). Bolton, who draws from Winnicott’s ideas of ‘transitional space’ (1965) and ‘play space’ (1971), sees the entire reflective mindset as “the realm of the artist” (Bolton, 2014, p. 11). She elaborates upon this as follows:

> Art has always questioned boundaries of existence. Artists, ethnographers and philosophers put themselves in situations in which conventional orderliness of everyday systems of thinking is suspended. Artists cross dangerous mental and social boundaries/barriers to create images that jolt or shock audiences into reassessment. Bertold [sic] Brecht, for example, set viewers questioning taken-for-granted structures.
>
> (Bolton, 2014, p. 130).

Despite references to artistic practice, Bolton and many others regard the reflective practice as a verbal activity belonging to the “discipline of writing” (Bolton, 2014, p. 119), with the

artistic mindset and creativity informing the reflective writing. However, reflection can also belong to the discipline of art and be practised with artistic means such as an aesthetic diary.

Aesthetic diary: a creative tool for reflection

Aesthetic diaries, influenced by aesthetic theories, artistic research, and action research, serve as a creative instrument for artists practising socially engaged art, allowing them to reflect on their collaborations with non-artists, fostering a process of learning through self-observation and reflection (Artwork, 2023). Although these diaries take different forms and use different media, all they have in common is the blank space needing to be filled.

Following Michel de Certeau's idea of writing in his analyses of everyday life practices, it can be suggested that aesthetic diaries provide "a space of its own [that] delimits a place of production for the subject" (1984, p. 134). It is a space of severance and distantiation "where the ambiguities of the world have been exorcised" (Ibid.). Such a position, de Certeau argues, puts the artist in "the position of having to manage a space that is his [sic] own and distinct from all others and in which he [sic] can exercise his own will" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 134). Thus, aesthetic diaries constitute a site for freedom of expression, where selected textual fragments and images are composed in relation to each other to produce a structure. They are the outcome of "a series of articulated operations (gestural or mental)" (ibid.) that gives form to how different elements relate to each other on a page or how different pages relate to each other, constituting the diary as a system. In other words, in the blank space of the diary, "an itinerant, progressive, and regulated practice–a "walk"–composes the artefact of another "world" that is not received but rather made" (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 134-5).

In aesthetic diaries, aesthetic experience is central. The emphasis is on the individual's subjective encounter with the sensory stimuli, which allows for multiple interpretations and varied meaning-making processes. The significance of aesthetic experience in aesthetic diaries lies in the personal and subjective responses the notes recorded in the diary evoke rather than a predetermined or fixed meaning of those notes.

The rationale underpinning this article claims that engaging with an aesthetic diary immerses us in a sea of textuality. In this realm, every element, such as a scribble, a note, a drawing, a newspaper clipping, or a photograph, serves as a signifier, holding an abundance of potential

and legitimate connections and meanings. In other words, aesthetic diaries go beyond merely reporting or portraying social reality phenomena. In doing so, they are performative: they frame, shape, and manipulate depictions of reality, challenging and disrupting them by opening a space for intertextuality (Kristeva, 1986) where new interpretations and understandings can emerge.

In post-structuralism, any experienced phenomenon, including scribbles and drawings on a diary page, can be approached as text that is "not a self-contained structure but as differential and historical" (Frow, 1990. p. 45), embodying "traces and tracings of otherness" (Ibid). Constructing an aesthetic diary and reflecting on it by reading[2] constitute "a process of moving between texts" (Allen, 2000, p. 1), which begins to resemble swimming in a textual seaweed. Meaning is no longer fixed on the pages of the diary. Instead, it becomes fluid, existing "between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates" (Ibid.), diving out from independent scribbles and drawings on a diary page "into a network of textual relations" (Ibid).

Judith Still and Michael Worton suggest two reasons for that. First, other texts enter an aesthetic diary through the author, who is "a reader of texts (in the broadest sense) before s/he is a creator of texts" (Still & Worton, 1990, p. 1). Therefore, any aesthetic diary is "inevitably shot through with references, quotations and influences of every kind" (Ibid). Second, in reading an aesthetic diary, we engage in interpretative meaning-making where "what is produced ... is due to the cross-fertilisation of the packaged textual material ... by all the texts which the reader brings to it" (Still & Worton, 1990, p. 2). Thus, we discover multiple meanings as we dive into an aesthetic diary, reflecting on our notes and the textual relations flowing in and out of those notes. We can also annotate those reflections, making an aesthetic diary an iterative process.

Despite its many beneficial qualities, such as multimodality and intertextuality, applying an aesthetic diary to reflect one's work analytically is not straightforward. Instead, it needs effort, as all reflection does. For example, reflection requires self-awareness and examination of one's thoughts, beliefs, biases, and assumptions. Also, it necessitates critical competence, including analytical thinking skills, to examine situations, experiences, and information

[2] In a post-structuralist sense, reading refers to all meaning-making related to experiencing phenomena.

nuanced and comprehensively. Further, multiperspectivity is necessary for critical reflection, calling for an open and receptive mindset, asking the practitioner to "uncover, and then investigate, the paradigmatic, perspective, and causal assumptions that inform how we practice" (Bolton, 2009, pp. 125-6) and consider alternative possibilities. For example, reflecting on one's diary by recognising relationships between some elements (e.g., individual scribbles or images) and ascribing meanings to them often requires highly refined interpretative skills and using selected perspectives that these relationships call for. Following Uberto Eco, the reader has agency in reading diary notes but not infinitely, for "you cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it" (Eco, 1979, p. 9).

Engaging with all of the above requires vulnerability because critical reflection often involves confronting uncomfortable perspectives and acknowledging personal limitations or mistakes. It requires courage to challenge ingrained beliefs and be vulnerable in the face of self-examination. For example, an artist engaging in critical reflection might confront questions concerning their professional identity or interpersonal challenges (Lehikoinen et al., 2021). Critical reflection also requires time and commitment, which involves setting aside moments for introspection, the creative interplay of ideas, and thoughtful contemplation

Finally, critical reflection is not just about self-reflection. In general, it is expected to "judge the worthiness ... of ideas and fresh ways of seeing" (Ghaye, 2011, p. 127), empower and lead to transformative action, using insights from the reflective practice to inform future actions and "find a bridge between the present and future in those forces within the present which are potentially able to transform it" (Eagleton, 2000, p. 22). An action-oriented attitude is essential to initiate transformation— whether on a personal or global scale. That entails a proactive, goal-oriented, and ethical approach, embracing responsibility, openness to feedback, resilience, adaptability, and a commitment to social engagement and collaboration to drive impactful change and achieve positive outcomes (Bolton, 2014; Ghaye, 2011; Hillier, 2005). While some artists may have these qualities interwoven in their personalities, others learn to reflect critically and adopt an active-oriented attitude by practising—usually encouraged by high-quality teaching.

Coda

In this article, I have investigated the role of reflection in socially engaged arts practice, specifically in the use of aesthetic diaries as a tool for artists' reflective practice. I have argued that aesthetic diaries, as spaces for creative note-making in the spirit of freedom of expression, constitute a space to severance, distantiate, and arrange selected materials for closer reflection. Further, the valuable qualities of intertextuality and multimodality in aesthetic diaries do not limit the reflective practice to written words. Instead, they invite a rich and creative interpretative interplay of meanings and the use of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2000), supporting individual learning styles (Leite et al., 2009; Honey & Mumford, 1992; Kolb, 1984). This interplay of past and anticipated experiences, senses, emotions, images, sounds, bodies, physical movement, and other texts enriches our understanding, for example, by considering emotions, moods, and atmospheres. Thus, aesthetic diaries can offer artists and participants more complex and multifaceted opportunities to engage with and contemplate various aspects of their work than more conventional reflective writing in socially engaged arts practice.

However, as noted above, applying an aesthetic diary for critical reflection is a complex process. It requires effort, self-awareness, critical competence, and multiperspectivity. Critical reflection demands courage and vulnerability to confront uncomfortable perspectives and acknowledge personal limitations. It necessitates time, commitment, and an action-oriented attitude.

Using aesthetic diaries for critical reflection can empower artists and help them engage in transformative action by embracing proactive, goal-oriented, and ethical approaches, being open to feedback, and being resilient, adaptable, and socially active. While some artists may naturally possess many qualities needed for critical reflection with an aesthetic diary, others can develop them through practice and high-quality teaching. Therefore, it is recommendable to introduce critical reflection and the use of reflective means, such as the aesthetic diary approach, in higher arts education, especially in courses related to socially engaged arts practice.

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