

# How the researcher's experience of visual images can contribute to qualitative research

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## **Abstract**

This article presents a theoretical argument exploring how visual images appeal to sensory knowledge, and how sensory knowledge can contribute to qualitative research where visual images are included as part of the method. The argument is based on a phenomenological approach and a conceptual model of 'the aesthetic object'. The experience of the aesthetic object comprises three different attitudes, each of which approaches specific aspects of the aesthetic object. By reflectively differentiating between these various attitudes, the contribution of sensory-experienced knowledge can become explicit in qualitative research.

**Keywords** art experience, aesthetic object, sensory knowledge, visual images, qualitative research

## **Introduction**

Research on children can include children's art and drawings to study children's feelings, experiences, intentions and engagement in their everyday life (see e.g., Boyatzis & Albertini, 2000; Braswell & Callanen, 2003; Braswell, 2006; Bruselius-Jensen, 2013; Burkitt &

Barrett, 2011; Burkitt, Jolley & Rose, 2010; Clark, 2010; Eng, 1961; Fink-Jensen, 1998; Flensburg, 1994; Goodnow, 1978; Havskov-Jensen, 1986; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1972; Nielsen, 1999, 2012; Pedersen, 1993; 1999). Studies of children that include visual methods often encompass interviews, dialogues and other means of articulation (e.g., Braswell, 2006; Bruselius-Jensen, 2013; Burkitt & Barrett, 2011; Clark, 2010; Fink-Jensen, 1998; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011; Nielsen, 1999). In most of this research, interest is directed towards studying something specific about which the drawings must 'tell' us something. But how can the researcher handle drawings as data with the specific visual qualities differing from speech and text? In verbal interviews children refer to experienced phenomena and situations. To interpret that kind of data the researcher must recognise what the words refer to. The interviewer can respond and ask about articulations indicating feelings and specific meanings in the interview situation. In this dialogue, the interviewer can clarify whether the immediate interpretation of affect, feeling or engagement is meaningful for the interviewee. When it comes to children's drawings, however, I have not seen any examples of similar visual dialogues between researchers and interviewees. Instead, the researchers ask children to define what their drawings 'mean'. As a result, the processing of children's drawings is often reduced to illustrations of the spoken narratives in research on children.

In this article I explore how sensory knowledge in children's drawings can contribute to qualitative research.

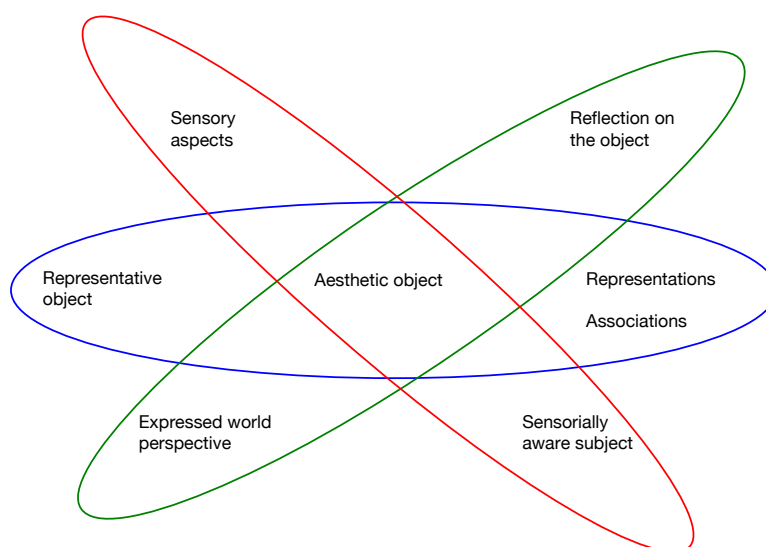
The exploration involves a theoretical argument applying a phenomenological approach. This approach is chosen because it offers conceptualisations that fit with the author's sensory experiences as a former artist and illustrator. More generally it fits with sensory experiences in research including visual methods. Visual perception is integral, and sensory and aesthetic recognition is experienced and expressed in, for instance, affective or emotional reflection, an impulsive emotional response, direct intuitive interpretations or a profound 'certitude' that cannot be 'translated' into simple conceptual explanations (Funch, 1996a, 1996b; Hansen, 2010; Hohn & Pedersen, 1996; Todres, 2007). By a reconceptualisation of 'the aesthetic object,' I will show how the researcher can endeavour to make his/her own experience of children's drawings a reflective part of the

research process. The theoretical argument includes an illustrative example from a research project.

### The aesthetic object

With inspiration from phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne's analysis of aesthetic perception of art as 'aesthetic objects' (Dufrenne, 1973), Fink-Jensen and Nielsen (2009) have focused on three aspects that are relevant to all aesthetic perception: a sensory aspect, a representative aspect and an expressive aspect.

In the researcher's (the subject's) aesthetic experience of a child's drawing (the aesthetic object), both object and subject help to determine which aesthetic experiences are possible. The object provides special *sensory* options which can be experienced by the sensorially aware subject. The object also provides special *representative images* for the subject to experience, depending on his/her own experiences, knowledge and associative options. Finally, in the *expressive* aspect, the aesthetic object expresses a special perspective on the 'world', and the subject can experience this perspective through his/her own special feelings, thoughts, actions and articulations (model 1, Fink-Jensen & Nielsen, 2009).



**Model 1: Experiential potential of the aesthetic object**

- The three aspects of the aesthetic object show how aesthetic experiences and recognitions can be described and analysed by emphasising the *object's* sensory qualities, representative qualities and reflective qualities, and the potential experiences provided by the aesthetic object for the sensorially aware subject – such as the researcher. The model was developed by Fink-Jensen & Nielsen (2009).

From this point of departure, children's drawings can be characterised as sensory objects which stand out in special ways by virtue of their materials and expressive qualities. Drawings can be perceived as sensory objects by researchers and others who actively sense, perceive and relate to any sensations, feelings and conceptions triggered and created in the encounter with the drawing as a sensory object.

The model can guide different researcher attitudes to drawings as part of the method. Each attitude is described further below. Firstly an illustrative example is presented, not as 'evidence' for a specific method, but to illustrate the different approaches.

### **An example illustrating a researcher's experience of a child's drawing in a research context**

In a study of nine children's learning processes that applied various modes of expression over three years at a kindergarten, school and after-school care facility, we included visual conversations as one of the study methods (Nielsen, 1999; Fink-Jensen & Nielsen, 2000). The children took part in visual conversations at the kindergarten in groups of three five-year-old children. The groups were introduced to the assignment and colouring materials as follows: "Please look at this! I have brought some new paper and new crayons with me today. Have you seen this kind of paper or these crayons before?" The children had not, so the researcher demonstrated how to use them as she talked:

"You can use the crayons to draw with, just like ordinary crayons. After you have drawn something, you can drip some water on the crayon colour on the paper and then paint with it. You decide whether you just want to colour with the crayons or whether you also want to paint with them. We would like you to draw and colour and perhaps even paint a picture about something that happened to you today. It could have happened at home this morning. Or it might be something that happened on your way to the kindergarten, or here at the kindergarten. As long as it was something that happened today."

In one of the groups, a boy named Johan drew his house, where he had eaten breakfast with his older brother that morning (Figure 1).



Figure 1.

As a researcher, when I look at this picture, I have a feeling of both lightness and stability, but I also notice great energy and mobility at the same time, as the picture shows something that is both standing and falling. I remember Johan's hesitant drawing process, the attentively observant look in his eye and his meticulous choice of colours and colouring of the curtains in the two windows. Offhand, I see the entire house as his own head and eyes looking at an airy sphere floating down with a wavy line from the upper section of the drawing. He drew with concentration in the group after having observed another child's drawing process. When asked what he had drawn, he was very pleased to explain how his older brother had dropped a bowl of cornflakes on the floor that morning. Their mother saw it happen, and he described how she had a new red hairdo. When he tried to paint the drawings of himself and his brother, the lines became blurred and the dramatic situation became unclear in the drawing. Looking at it now, it still seems brimming with energy. The image arouses a number of aesthetic recognitions in me. Some of these feelings are aroused by the drawing

itself, and some by associations with the situation in which I experienced Johan drawing and painting. Regardless of whether one has witnessed the actual depiction process, children's drawings can move the onlooker – including researchers. This emotive dimension and sensory knowledge can easily disappear as the drawing is moved from situated production to academic categorisation. In the following an attempt is made to show how sensory knowledge can contribute to research using the notion of the aesthetic object.

### **Experiencing a sensory object**

The researcher can relate to the child's drawing as a 'sensory object' by observing the drawing's sensory qualities: material, strokes, surfaces, colours, shapes, textures, light, dark, dimensions, vigour, gravity, lightness, etc. In order to approach the drawing like this, the researcher can assume the attitude of phenomenological reduction and the attempt to perform the epoché by setting aside the natural attitude (Giorgi, 2012). In the natural attitude the subjects perceive their life-world as taken for granted, including the assumption that objects exist and 'are' as they are perceived (Zahavi, 2003). The perceived objects present themselves and appeal and call for the attention and action of the intentionally oriented subject (Fink-Jensen, 2008). The sensory-material phenomena appeal to the subject's embodied intentionality, that is, an energetic rhythm appeals to energetic rhythmic movements, and moving gestures of another living being appeal to similar forms, intensities and timings in the bodily movements and/or mood and attunement of the subject (ibid.). Visually experienced movements in the life-world correspond to emotional intensities, according to Sheets-Johnstone (1999); motion is experienced in modes of embodied e-motion. Similarly, aesthetic articulations such as children's drawings appeal to embodied experienced phenomena like feelings and intentionality. In the natural attitude, these experiences are 'taken for granted'.

By performing the epoché, the phenomenologist attempts to suspend the 'taken for grantedness' of experience and instead to wonder and approach experiences with an open mind. This reflexive attitude is important if we intend to study another subject's experiences. In this attitude the researcher considers what he/she has been given in the moment, and at the same time refrains from defining it as being the way it presents itself to her consciousness. This is



an attempt to describe what can be seen and sensed in the drawing without interpreting what is being described as an expression of something specific. What can be seen and sensed in the drawing? How does it manifest itself as a sensory object? How can these visual and sensory perceptions be described?

### **Experiencing the representative object**

The researcher can also relate to the child's drawing as a 'representative object' by describing what he/she perceives the drawing as referring to: Does it represent objects, figures, living creatures, movements, activities, relationships between objects and figures? How are they represented? How does the researcher experience these images – for example in the form of feelings, thoughts, conceptions, associations, memories, etc.?

This concept of representations does not refer to the cognitive psychological concept of representations as 'some-thing' in the mind mirroring 'some-thing' in an 'outer world'. On the contrary, in this context representations are lived experiences evoked in the encounter with the perceived object. The researcher's evoked lived experiences from other contexts can be re-lived in the encounter with the child's articulation in drawing and narratives about it. The researcher can gain access to life-world phenomena by observing and/or participating with other people in their everyday life contexts, as we did.

In the phenomenological approach every subject is understood as situated in and interdependently contextually interwoven with the life-world. The life-world "is an integrative complexity where we live, act and have experiences, (it) can neither be reduced to a single quality nor transcended. ... It is an integration of life and world, object and subject, inner and outer, mind and body, individual and society, etc." (Berndtsson, Claesson, Friberg, Öhlen, 2007, p. 259). In the natural attitude the subject pre-reflexively intentionally orients towards, perceives and responds to changes in the life-world. The interdependency of life and world means that the life-world is personal and personally experienced, and at the same time subjects can to some extent share life-worlds with people more or less close to them. "...research within a life-world approach implies interrelating with and, to some extent, sharing other people's life-worlds." (op.cit., p. 261).

In the study of the nine children's learning processes in everyday life, we were participating observers in some of their everyday life contexts and thus interrelated with their life-worlds. The knowledge gained is included in the drawing as a 'representative object', but it is not the only relevant form of knowledge involved. When the researcher focuses on the drawing as a 'representative object', this equates to describing the experiences, direct associations, meanings and any preconceptions experienced in the encounter with the drawing. Which sensory sensations, feelings and thoughts are aroused by the encounter with this drawing? What types of personal and technical knowledge are evoked as recognisable and relevant in working on this aesthetic object?

This part of the analysis includes 'free imaginative variation' (Giorgi, 2012) and brings in or makes use of the creative potential of the researcher's pre-reflexive, lived and embodied experiences as well as reflexive knowledge based on other studies, theories etc. In this part of the process I am a researcher subject with lived experiences through a lot of artistic activities such as pencil-drawing, the use of watercolours, etching, oil-painting, and modelling in clay and plaster. My immediate and pre-reflexive sensations when encountering Johan's drawing include shared life-world experiences of what it is like to move a colour intentionally, attempting to define something on the paper with firm movements, and then see that the result differs from my preconceptions and yet provides a new context for the next lines. My hands re-live what it is like to move a brush while attempting to control the stream of water blurring the colour lines and the tension in the body when these materials work on their own and disrupt the lines. The sensation is of something deteriorating, 'losing its grip', with the tentative formation of a theme which is slipping away. I re-live a brief moment of wonder, disorientation and intention to grasp 'what was almost there'.

As I look at the drawing, this kind of experience is intertwined with my memory of Johan's silent and wondering tone of voice as he talked about his brother dropping cornflakes and his mother's new hairdo, and with the memory of the social encounters of three children who were drawing and two researchers asking questions and providing yet unknown drawing materials in the kindergarten. These various associations merge into the experience of the drawing as a representative object.



### The expressed world

Finally, the researcher can relate to the child's drawing as an 'expressed world': Which feelings, perceptions, experiences or knowledge is the child depicting in this drawing? What is the child seeking to articulate and render visible through the specific use of the given materials and skills available to the child? In this aspect, the researcher's aesthetic experience focuses on reflections on the 'world' expressed in the aesthetic object. In an artistic experience, this could be reflections in the form of actions and articulations (such as personal conceptions of aesthetic objects); but it could also be feelings, thoughts and conceptions of the experienced 'expressed world'.

In Johan's drawing the situated expressed world can be characterised as 'a wondering and observing approach to what is going on'. Johan tries to produce the drawing that the researcher has asked for, and he observes the other children in the group: How do they perform the task? He assumes the motif is 'my home', inspired by one of the other children's drawings, and he intends to articulate what he experienced in his home this morning. He uses the drawing tool and moves it to define a 'frame' of home, a transparent house, a large square in which he can arrange figures to articulate his morning experiences. His intentionally directed drawing activity includes an attempt to experiment with changing the coloured lines to paint, like his peers have done, but when he sees the result he immediately stops the painting movements. His lifted eyebrows and surprised expression indicate that he did not expect or want the particular result of the painting process. The expressed world in this particular drawing can reveal a five-year-old boy's wondering attitude to what he becomes aware of in the drawing situation and in his home context – and the study can describe a couple of moments in his experienced life-world and situated experiences that contribute to learning processes in lines of intertwined preceding moments and moments to come.

Focusing on the expressed world in the research process is equivalent to using the drawing to look for what the child intends and seeks to express using the resources available. The child's intentions expressed in the drawing can be relevant to the actual research project, but they can also turn out to deal with other factors. For clarification, it could be relevant to compare the researcher's description of the drawing as a sensory object with descriptions of the

representative images experienced. This makes it possible to consider how the researcher's subjective experience of the depictions, in the form of feelings, for instance, enables him/her to recognise feelings that the child who made the drawing might also have experienced. In the researcher's aesthetic perception, the child who makes the drawing can come to the fore as an existential being with feelings, corresponding to those the researcher perceives in his/her own encounter with the drawing. The researcher's awareness of his/her own sensory and aesthetic perceptions of a drawing's representative aspect can open the way to sensory knowledge by recognising commonly experienced phenomena. It can also make it possible to differentiate between the type of potential knowledge emanating from the researcher's sensory and aesthetic experiences and the potential knowledge relatable to sensory qualities that can be described in the drawing. The child's narratives and any knowledge or concepts relating to the child's drawing styles and processes can add information as well.

The resources available to the child during the drawing process include the child's ability to draw with the tools at hand and in the particular context and social situation. The subject moving and perceiving in drawing processes can be illuminated in the phenomenological approach. Social and material tools, their contribution to mediation and symbolic meaning, opportunities and constraints can be studied applying a culture-psychology approach. Such an approach is also applied in the study of the nine children and their learning processes across contexts, but this part of the study is not included here.

### Summing up

In order to see and describe the world expressed in children's drawings, the researcher must be able to differentiate between his/her natural approach and the immediate experiences, deciphering, associations, etc., on the one hand, and a wondering attitude towards what a child is trying to accomplish and is capable of articulating and expressing in his/her drawings, on the other. Talking to children about their drawings can help to qualify the work, particularly by inquiring about their use of materials and conceptions which are difficult for a researcher to recognise and decipher.

It is possible to render some of the otherwise implicit formations of sensory knowledge and meaning transparent by differentiating between the sensory aspect, the representative aspect and the expressive aspect in drawings as aesthetic data material. It is worth considering how such data can qualify the research, for instance by contributing something unexpected or giving rise to new questions.

Taking this approach, the drawings can create knowledge about the child's perception and perspectives in several different ways. A vital aspect of this approach is the researcher's active sensory awareness, observance and description of sensory perceptions as part of the processing, and the perceived feelings, meanings, references, associations, definitions, etc. as sensory knowledge that can be described. This also includes any theoretical categories or concepts that come to the fore in the researcher's perception. This does not mean that the researcher's perception is identical to that of the child who makes the drawing, or that the meaning of feelings can be directly understood. It means that emotive qualities can be communicated, as in Johan's sudden stop of the brush and surprised embodied expression when water dissolved his coloured lines.

It is worth considering how the articulation of feelings and perceptions is linked to various experiences, cultural meanings and theoretical conceptualisations. I should like to know whether a reflective differentiation between the different attitudes proposed in the reconceptualisation of the aesthetic object is useful for other researchers using drawings as data. Does it provide them with an opportunity to explicitly include how the researcher's sensory feelings and aesthetic experiences can contribute recognition, understanding and perceived knowledge in the processing of drawings in qualitative studies?

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