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Book Review by Robin Tipple

Affect in Artistic Creativity – Painting to Feel

Jussi A. Saarinen

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Introduction

Most Art Therapists and Art Psychotherapists have a belief in the healing qualities of the media. It is a shared article of faith that creative material processes, of themselves, can promote the development of health and stability. Nevertheless, we also know that the relation to the material element is not without hazard. This is a problem for us, I think, because we can never be certain about the relationship between a service user, or client, and the physical material she manipulates. In terms of the relation that the other has to substance and process, we are always on the outside.

This book by Jussi A. Saarinen, who is a psychologist and a post-doctoral researcher in philosophy, explores the painter's relationship to painting, the '*experience itself*' (2021: 1. italics the author). Saarinen stresses that he is not concerned with expression but with what painters feel 'because they paint' (2021:1). His book is essentially a carefully constructed argument, which engages with philosophical literatures, psychoanalysis, recent cognitive theory and interviews with artists, in support of the proposition that: "Painters paint *to feel."* (2021: 1. Italics the author).

I was keen to read this book for two reasons, firstly, to question my understanding of feeling, affect, and emotion in relation to painting, and secondly, to explore frames, philosophical and psychological, that might help in thinking about the problematic outlined in paragraph 1 above.

A Theory of Mind

Saarinen references recent literature which explores environmental resources that impact on, and facilitate, feeling and thinking; for example, the theory of 'scaffolding' is intended to show how people, things, physical spaces etc. 'are used to elicit, regulate, and augment our affects, cognitions, and actions' (2021:3). The argument of the philosophers here is that we create 'niches' in the cultural, social and material environment, to 'scaffold' our minds.

I think that we should note that these ideas are not entirely new. The intellectualist view of mind, a view which stresses the internal movement of representations and the production of propositional material prior to action in the world, although widespread, has been previously criticised, not least by phenomenologists. Ryle (1949) sees the

‘intellectual view’ as leading to continuous circular reasoning. This position has been supported by other philosophers. Noe (2009) for instance, critiques the assumptions of the intellectualist view which suggests that all human agency requires planning and control. Not every motor action is pre-planned according to some goal, but rather is generated and supported in the environment in which mind is embedded.

The idea of the mind as embedded and/or extended has been developed by cognitive psychologists who have been interested in the hand (see Zdravko, 2013). Raymond Tallis writes: ‘The hand knows and the hand communicates….. it is an organ of exploration and cognition in its own right’ (Tallis, 2003: 28 & 31). In anthropology also, arguments in favour of locating mind in the cultural and social environment, exist. For instance, Geertz (1993) argues that ‘thinking is primarily an overt act conducted in terms of the objective materials of the common culture’ and mental processes are situated, they have their place ‘at the scholars desk or the football field, in the studio or lorry-driver’s seat…’ (Geertz, 1993:83). We should notice the word ‘studio’ here.

Saarinen writes ‘Mental processes are fundamentally co determined by the circumstances and environmental context in which they occur’ (2021:14) and he argues that the environment becomes ‘ontologically constitutive’ (2021:18) of affective states. This seems to me somewhat stronger than ‘scaffolding’ and the creation of a ‘niche’, would suggest.

Painting as resource

In relation to thinking and the constitution of mind, what properties and resource does painting offer? There are the obvious material resources, substances and tools, that provide what Saarinen calls ‘concrete scaffolding’ (2021:19), and there is also the temporal aspect. There is past painting, a tradition that the artist absorbs and which prepares her to paint. There is the more immediate engagement in making marks and responding to marks. Here there is a reciprocity and the painting can be ‘experienced as an interlocutor’ (2021:23). Trust, the ‘reliability of a given environment is important Saarinen stresses, and paintings and painting, are arguably, ‘sufficiently dependable resources for affective states’ (2021:25). The painting environment is customized by painters and there is an ‘integration’ and “entrenchment” of tools and instruments into the ‘affective landscape’ of the individual. Here we might think of the studio as a material

situation and as an affective world, in which mind is activated and shaped, and there is a strong argument for this in the art therapy literature, (Fenner, 2019) for example.

Saarinen quotes the painter Maisa Kela:

'Instead of talking with a therapist, you converse with a picture. The painting process… gives you new insight about yourself' (Huttula, 2017:163) – Saarinen's translation 2021:27)

Conscious intent is not necessary in relation to accessing painting as affective scaffolding. What makes painting special, Saarinen argues, is that the scaffoldings supplied by painting 'are in the *process of being created by the agent whose affects they scaffold*' (2021:28 – italics the author).

Psychoanalysis – Object Relations

In chapter three, Saarinen turns to psychoanalysis. He wishes to show that the 'scaffolding' for thinking that painting offers 'are organised by earlier object relations' (2021:30). He proposes that existential core concerns present in early infancy can be linked to the painting process, for example, the distinction between 'me and not-me' (Winnicott 1971) between subjective and objective realities, the differences between separation and connection, and the feeling that comes with being fully alive.

Saarinen recognises that reciprocity in relation to the caregiver is important where emphasis is given to 'what the mother provides and what the child might conceive of (Winnicott 1971:12). Winnicott's thinking, especially in relation to environmental provision and context, Saarinen proposes, is entirely explicable within the 'niche construction/scaffolding framework' and he endeavours to demonstrate that as 'playing and creative relating' becomes 'sophisticated', 'Slowly but surely, niche construction expands, diversifies and becomes experientially more enriching' (2021:41).

In enlarging his thinking about the artist's relation to painting, Saarinen explores mirroring via Wright (2009), and attunement via Stern (1985). Referencing Wright, Saarinen suggests that the care-giver's face provides 'a *responsive medium*' for the infant, from

which the infant can retrieve '*significant forms* of his own experience' Wright (2009) : 142-145 italics the author).

Stern's interest is in the manner in which the 'infant's subjective state' is 'recast' by the caregiver (Saarinen 2021:46). The caregiver transforms the infant's experience, providing variety, fresh pattern and rhythm. Wright argues that when painting, the artist's emotional life is given form in an '*objective medium'* and just as infant experiences in relation to the caregiver 'bring the self into being', the artist attempts to 'bring his own self into being through creative work' (Wright:153-154 italics the author). Much of this theory is also familiar to art psychotherapists, especially those working with infants and caregivers (Meyerowistz-Katz and Reddick 2017).

Saarinen raises questions about Wright's approach, suggesting for instance, that artist's do not always concern themselves with the '*affective* elements of experience' (2021:47 italics the author). He suggests that whilst it may be that a painting can function 'in a similar way' to the 'Mother's expressive face' (Wright 2009:13) this does not necessarily confirm that painting experiences, in the adult world, are derivative of infant caregiver relations. In painting, Saarinen stresses, 'novel and desirable affects' are generated, feelings emerge that did not have a previous existence in 'inner affective states' (2021:51-52).

The Pygmalion Myth

Paintings, can be experienced as 'alive', they exhibit a vitality, Saarinen suggests, (2021:53) and he quotes three painters:

'My paintings become creature-like…. Each painting grows to be an individual…… a breathing body ….. I see my paintings as collaborators.' (Olli Piippo – Saarinen 2021:53, and 2019)

'there is nothing but a helpless mark on the canvas. It's like a child trying to utter its first word…' (Juhana Blomstedt - Jaameri, 2007 Saarinen's translation)

‘Even if a space seems empty, it always has a sense of presence. I paint in order to discover that distinct presence …’ (Susann Gottberg -The third factor exhibition text Kunsthalle Helsinki, 1 June to 4 August 2019).

Two elements are stressed in this idea. Paintings can be experienced as *‘organic’* living entities that develop and change, and paintings can have agency, they become ‘autonomous contributers’ to a process (2021: P54 italics the author).

Three factors contribute to this ‘aliveness of paintings’ argues Saarinen. Firstly, there are ‘*cultural* and *discursive*’ factors which support ‘animistic and anthropomorphic’ accounts of painting. Secondly there is the individual artist’s ‘vitalistic fantasies’, and ‘unconscious factors’, ‘rooted in early dyadic relations’ (2021: 54 italics the author). Thirdly there are particular ‘*material* and *metamorphic*’ factors that give painting life, or vitality (2021:55 - italics the author).

Since we first relate to another person the suggestion is, and here Saarinen quotes Marion Milner, ‘the adult painter could be basically, even though unconsciously, concerned with an animistically conceived world’ (Milner 1957:116). The ‘vitalistic phantasy is a *potentiality’* which requires particular conditions ‘if it is to be triggered’ (Saarinen 2021:59 author’s italics). With this phantasy expectations arise, there is an expectation of a receptive response from the material engagement. On the ‘darker side’ lies an anxiety that the blank unresponsive canvas may not come to life, images may turn out dead. Just as with any relationship there is an element of unpredictability.

Saarinen explores the material nature of painting and refers to Elikins. Elkins emphasises the ‘realm of the viscous, the gluey’, where paint is seen as a substance that mimics ‘life by shining, gleaming, catching the eye’ (Elkins, 2000:166,167,143). Ingredients can then be regarded as half-alive, there is a potential in the ‘*tangible material qualities* of the paints themselves’ (Saarinen 2021:64 authors italics).

Saarinen briefly explores the history of the Pygmalion myth and he observes that some painters attempt to escape the subjective through the application of mechanistic and random production processes, for example Gerhard Richter, and in doing so demonstrate the paintings ‘self-agency’. Such methodologies impact on the experiences of other

artists. It is experience that explains the persistence of the Pygmalion trope, according to Saarinen, a ‘collectively accumulated experience’ which painters can relate to because of their own ‘painterly practice’. (2021:57).

I think it should be noted that painters did, and still can, use very conventional rule- based approaches to the production of imagery. This could be regarded as a way of disciplining the media and over-determining the changes that take place. But painters often allow their paints to ‘behave more freely’. Expressionists and other modern and contemporary painters, by deliberately loosening control, experience the growth of their work as ‘organic’. We could say that the Pygmalion myth is sustained by modernist discourses and practices and the statements of artists, and of critics, disclose this cultural context.

Elkins suggests that painters have to ‘toy with death, to bring the paint close to the point of no return’ (Elkins 2000:143). This would indicate that aggression has a role in painting and in making, and such a view accords with Kleinian approaches to art. For example, Klein writes: ‘conflict, and the need to overcome it is a fundamental element in creativeness’ (Klein, 1988 (1957):186).

Saarinen does not explore Kleinian ideas, instead, he next turns to Bollas’ notion of the ‘transformational object’:

to seek the transformational object is really to recollect an early object experience, to remember not cognitively, but existentially through intense affective experience, a relationship that was identified with cumulative transformational experiences of the self. (Bollas, 2018:91).

Bollas’s view is reminiscent of Wright’s ideas concerning mirroring. In response to Bollas, Saarinen suggests that there is a need for painters to ‘enliven and advance the creative process’….. ‘so that they *themselves* can feel alive’, and painting provides the scaffolding that may not be attainable elsewhere (Saarinen 2021:71 italics the author).

The Oceanic Feeling

So far, the painting has been considered as an object apart from the painter who is enlivened by the dialogue with this as-if alive object. However, when we take up paint

with the brush, or other implement, and apply it to a surface, our consciousness is focussed on the paint and its movement over a surface, of resistance and of a flowing, or of a clotting and sticky, substance. The sensitive transmission of sensation via brush, fingers and hand brings us in contact with the paint, and the surface to which it is applied, in such a way as to channel consciousness and encourage a union, a lack of separation. Consciousness of self falls away in our absorption in the phenomenology of painting. Saarinen suggests this bodily absorption can be experienced as a submersion. Here he quotes the painter Stephen Newton who describes 'a peculiar sensation of envelopment … a total engulfment' (Newton, 2008:47). Krausz,. a philosopher and a painter, suggests that, in in this particular affective state, 'sharp distinctions between binary terms …….. self and other, subject and object are undone.' (Krausz, 2009:194)

Saarinen chooses to explore this experience of ,dissolution and fusion' under the term 'oceanic feeling' (2021: 75). He reminds us that Freud, in responding to the novelist and social critic Romain Rolland, offered an interpretative account of the 'oceanic feeling' in adult life as a preservation of 'primary narcissism', a later version of an original 'all-embracing feeling' experienced in infant-mother unity (Saarinen 2021:76). The 'oceanic feeling', which was initially seen as defensive, was the subject of debate in psychoanalytic and developmental literatures. Was there a union of a symbiotic kind in neo-natal life, or was the infant capable of distinguishing the not-me from the me at the beginning?

Saarinen draws on some developmental debate, and in support of his Winnicottian sympathies, he suggests that both extremes of separation and union can be experienced in early infancy and 'self-other boundaries' may be experienced as 'fluid' . The adult experience of the oceanic, Saarinen proposes, arises from a more sensorial or receptive 'mode of mentation' as opposed to a more 'active and differentiated' mental mode (2021: 81 and 84) .

But what is the value of the 'oceanic feeling'? Saarinen's brief review of the literature which explores this question, would indicate that it might have both positive and negative value, dependent on context. Are states of union representative of some moment of 'pure creativity' or does the state inhibit critical attention to activity (Krausz 2009)? Saarinen suggests that there is a special interactive state, between painter and painting, where

conscious and deliberate action is lost to awareness, but where activity is still present and effective. This might be contrasted with a later critically evaluative reflection.

Saarinen refers to Ehrenzweig (1967), who argues that 'depth level'perception is essential to art making since it subverts the tendency to 'see things in terms of separation and opposites', and it disrupts 'the fixity and rigidity of habitual surface perception' (Saarinen 2021:92,93). By giving way to the 'pull of the deep' as, Ehrenzweig (1967:196) proposes, limits are transcended and discoveries are made, in terms of form and vitality.

But Ehrenzweig (1967) does also suggest that art-making requires an 'oscillation' between the 'differentiated surface level' attention, and the 'dedifferentiated depth-level' form. Milner (1987), following Ehrenzweig, refers to the mind's 'porpoise-like movement' (1987:242). Saarinen argues that this should be understood as the co-existence of two 'moods' where each form of perception compliments the other and contributes to the creative work. However, it is also suggested that the oceanic feeling that arises with 'depth-level' perception can engender a range of feeling, including 'considerable anxiety' (2021:97). In 'manic-oceanic' states, grandiosity and omnipotence in relation to art making may make an appearance (2021:98,99).

For some painters, Saarinen concludes, the oceanic experience, may result in a 'broadening' of 'perceptual and aesthetic sensibilities' to the benefit of their painting.

I was surprised that Saarinen did not discuss consciousness, or reference phenomenology, in this part of his book. We are not always fully conscious of ourselves when engaged in activities, and we surely lose such consciousness when there is intense focus, whether narrow or dispersed. Sartre (1956) has argued for the recognition of an unreflective consciousness and maybe these intense states are not so unusual when we are fully absorbed and committed to the material and equipment of our projects (see for example, Csikszentruihalyi, 1990).

The Feeling of Rightness

Painters often report on the feeling that they have got *'it*' right. Agnes Martin for instance; 'when you finally paint what you're supposed to paint, then something tells you "OK, this is *it".'* (Gruen,1991:83, 84 – italics in original) Richard Diebenkorn asserts; 'the idea is to

get everything right ….everything all at once'(Gruen,1991:63). The important thing to note, suggests Saarinen, is that this rightness, or awareness of rightness, is a feeling.

What is it in the painting that feels right? It must be variable since painters paint in 'different cultural-historical circumstances' using a wide range of methodologies. Feeling in respect of 'rightness' must be 'overdetermined' Saarinen argues, and the grounds that might determine 'rightness' may shift and develop as work progresses. If then, there is a large diversity of practices what would be the underlining point of reference, to which the feeling relates? Saarinen proposes that the basis for this feeling is 'the artist's *own experience'* (2021:103 authors italics).

David Hockney asserts; 'even if you are dealing with something else, it has to be filtered through your own experience and feelings. In that sense it is always autobiographical.' (Cork, 2015:94). Hockney's view is supported by Michael Craig-Martin; 'Works of art are the products of our attempts to give expressive form to our personal experience of the world.' (Cork, 2015:179).

Both of the above quotations do not help with the identification of the moment when the feeling emerges or describe a commonality in the origins of the feeling – beyond suggesting that it remains individual. We could well imagine that "rightness" for Hockney would be quite a different thing for Craig-Martin. The individual aspect is important to Saarinen who proposes that the painting 'becomes, in Winnicottian parlance, a *subjective object',* or in Kohut's terminology a *'self-object' (*Kohut, 2011 in Saarinen 2021:105 authors italics). Here the idea of reflection emerges again (see earlier comments on mirroring) and painting is then seen as an interaction with a material object that reorganises experience.

Saarinen at this point reports that he is limiting his enquiry to painting that encapsulates a 'bi-directional interaction between the painter and the developing work' (2021:105). A process that requires continuous re-adjustment of intentionality as the painting progresses. Francis Bacon, for instance, reports; 'I have an idea of what I'd like to do, but…accidents in the paint suggest the possibilities of developing the image in a way which seems very much better than anything I had thought of.' (Cork, 2015:33).

It does appear from the quotations that Saarinen explores, that personal 'pre-sensing' or 'planning' does not have particular significance for his approach to painting. Saarinen returns to psychoanalysis, this time drawing on the writings of George Hagman (2005 and 2010). Essentially Hagman proposes that the painting, when it excites and enlivens the artist as 'self-object', reflects the 'shared idealization' … 'the thrill of touching and vocalizing' previously present in infant-caregiver interactions. For Hagman, when 'subjectivity' is expressed, the artist then experiences '*aesthetic resonance',* especially when the painting 'reflects its maker's subjectivity in both ideal and sufficiently truthful form' (Hagman, 2010:5, 74,79 in Saarinen 2021:115). The process is presented as addictive since the artist is in search of an 'elusive yet powerful affective event' (Hagman, 2005:72). Saarinen views this event as a moment of 'self-discovery' which enhances the feeling of being alive.

The feeling of having got it right, or the desire for getting it right (in the painting) is for Saarinen related to a 'perpetual existential' concern, to be 'meaningfully' connected to a world. It is a search for affirmation, 'what we need and desire most' (2021:120).

Existential Feeling

In his explorations in philosophy and psychoanalysis, and in his reading of artists' statements, Saarinen has been in pursuit of the existential. In chapter seven, the last chapter in the book, he presents us with his understandings in relation to 'existential feeling'. He achieves this by presenting Marian Milner as a case study.

Saarinen directs the reader towards three themes that emerge from Milner's engagement with painting.

Firstly, the realization that the ,object world'does not accord with our unconscious desires, wishes or phantasies, and this disjunction might generate hate. Disillusionment then becomes a developmental necessity enabling the subject to experience objects as autonomous, as being real. However, the split that arises between the subjective and objective can be restored by painting, according to Milner, through the creation of a 'particular kind of new unity' (Milner 1957:131).

Secondly, painting offers an opportunity for the painter to give what fits a perceived ‘gap’. Milner argues that artists create their own gaps, determining the size of the gap but also deciding what should fill it (Milner 1957:133).

Thirdly, art production is transformative. It enables individuals to discover a fresh self in relation to others. Milner suggests, ‘it is perhaps ourselves that the artist in us is trying to create; and if ourselves then also the world’ (Milner 1957:136.)

These identified themes in Milner are then considered by Saarinen under the concept of ‘existential feeling’ as outlined by Ratcliffe (2013). Ratcliffe develops Heidegger to argue that we find ourselves in a world that is given to us. It is given to us through our moods. Just as we find ourselves in a world, we find ourselves in moods, moods are not had in the same way as emotions or desires. We are immersed in moods which disclose the world to us and determine possibilities. They are bodily phenomena through which the experiences of objects reach us. These bodily feelings, understood as moods, provide the context in which more conscious intentionality develops.

Saarinen is suggesting that Milner, through her experiments with painting, was able to register a change in existential mood/feeling to reach beyond her disillusionment and become more receptive to outer realities. The therapeutic value of painting then reaches beyond the ‘aesthetic’ and opens towards a more extended mind. Milner’s ‘new unity’ is a new ground or mood, which creates ‘new gaps’, which then leads towards the creation of a new world and self.

Saarinen concludes that painting is able to ‘support the modification and sustenance of one’s overall affectively constituted existential orientation’ (2021:139). Existential feeling then becomes for Saarinen ‘one of the main *objects* of artistic creativity’ (2021:139 italics the author).

Summary

Saarinen is concerned with painters who have a commitment to a regular engagement with painting. These professional painters who he quotes do differ considerably in their practices, consider for example, the contrast between Agnes Martin, David Hockney and Francis Bacon. But all have clearly developed their views in a cultural climate which

encourages practices where experiment and the expression and exploration of feeling are valued, rather than the use of pre-planning and formalized procedures.

There are shared feelings arising from the experience of painting that the painters report and Saarinen suggests that these feelings can be understood through the use of psychoanalytical thinking, in particular object relations theory. Feelings that are described in relation to the experience of painting are then related to early experiences with the caregiver. But Saarinen is clear that such feeling is not simply derivative of the early experiences. He acknowledges the importance of phantasy and the unconscious, but he wants to show that there is something more fundamental which emerges in the practice of painting and which generates feeling and emotion in an *existential* form. This bodily existential feeling is part of the earlier emotional experiences with caregivers and it has some determinate effect on how the world is encountered. There is something phenomenological in respect of painting as a practice that enables this existential mood to reach consciousness and Milner's experiments serve as an exemplar.

An interrogation of how we construct and/or imagine infant experience might be useful here, and I would have liked to have seen a more suspicious, and systematic approach to the artist's statements in this book. I think a more discursive study of the artists' language and speech is needed to locate it, more emphatically, in its cultural context.

Much of the literature that Saarinen explores from psychoanalysis and object relations, could be thought of as foundational for many practicing art therapists and the move from psychoanalysis to existentialism in Saarinen's thinking should be of interest to art therapists. Everything in his book is carefully argued and that makes it valuable. But, in a way, art therapists have a different problem where understanding *how contexts* influence material engagements, is critical. An exploration of painting as an activity where affect is communicated and exchanged with others, is needed, if we are to grasp an individual's relation to their practice, and the importance of the processes with materials.

About the Author

Robin Tipple is an editor for ATOL and recently retired from lecturing at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is interested in exploring how subjects are produced in Art Psychotherapeutic practices.

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