

# Book Review of Saarinen's *Affect in Artistic Creativity: Painting to Feel*

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IN THIS ESSAY BOOK REVIEW, I examine what the role of painters' affective experiences can generate for curriculum. As a working artist and art educator, I found Saarinen's (2020) remarkable book, *Affect in Artistic Creativity: Painting to Feel*, offers not only theoretical perspectives into painting and feeling but also wisdom about processes of self-fulfillment and co-creative, interpersonal enrichment that can both explain and further advance the practices of teaching and curriculum building. Saarinen brings relational psychoanalytic ideas to bear upon questions of art and creativity. Through this nexus, meaningful human experiences can be explained and comprehended in ways relevant to curriculum theorizing and classroom experience. That is to say, by being a book about artistic creativity, *Affect in Artistic Creativity* also speaks educational truths. There is something "artistic" happening in education and perhaps something "educational" in artistic practice. The targeted readership includes artists, art educators, art researchers, psychoanalysts, and psychoanalytic scholars. I argue that fields of education, particularly curriculum studies, could benefit from Saarinen's book by considering the role of affect in creativity in curriculum design, inquiry, and classroom teaching practices.

The book's greatest strength is the rich interdisciplinary union of theories Saarinen weaves together about "affectivity in painting" (p. 143). These ideas are outlined in Chapter 1. In his study, "affects" are a general class of feelings that occur in painters' experience with their artwork and a meeting point between bodily and subjective experience. Saarinen's theoretical framework merges the contemporary philosophy of emotion and affect as he examines Colombetti and Krueger's (2015) affective scaffolding and relational psychoanalysis, drawing mainly from Winnicott's (1965/2006, 1971, 1977) theories of creativity, unconscious dimensions of artistic creativity, and the mother-infant relationship. The connection of Winnicottian ideas, how the mother-infant relationship significantly impacts the adult artist's relationship to their painting work and creativity later in life as a means of exploring how painters create niches and scaffold feelings through their creative painting process, is of high value. Chapters 2 and 3 detail these ideas and are addressed in the following.

In Chapter 2, Saarinen discusses *affective scaffolding* applied to painting. Affective scaffolding describes how our environmental resources sustain our affective states (e.g., our connections with people, spaces, and objects). Saarinen (2020) forms an open philosophical

position pragmatic to scaffolding—a view that people live in a world, “a multiform niche” (p. 16), that they must participate in to have an impact on their affective states. Saarinen says, “we find ourselves in niches that scaffold the way we feel” (p. 17), meaning that a niche is a particular space in which alterations or transformations can occur to one’s feelings and emotions in the level of intensity. Saarinen further explicates various dimensions of affective niches and scaffolding relating to painting, including temporality, reciprocity, individual/collectivity, trust, individualization, entrenchment, and intent. Saarinen argues that painting is a process of “expressing or giving form to experience, or about communicating certain contents” (p. 28), and creating niches is essential for the artist to enable and explore feeling.

Metaphorically speaking, I believe readers can make connections to visual arts education, general education, and theorizing about creativity in Saarinen’s book, particularly, Saarinen’s account of the artist’s perspective. The experience becomes a scaffolding process, one which has bidirectionality between the artist and painter, or in the case of education, the curriculum and teacher. One can develop an awareness of how paintings, or creative assignments, can be material objects that draw painters, or teachers, in, allowing for the focus to be on a frame the artist, or teacher, has designed—“painterly niches” (p. 19). Saarinen writes that painterly niches can refer to an individual’s place of engagement with a painting—the materiality of painting materials the artist uses to create the painting, canvas size, distinct qualities inherent within the painting and more. Also, one can focus on the way paintings, or creative assignments, can “scaffold specific feelings” (p. 20) in the artist, or teacher, how they bring about affectivity through their materiality and how artists, or teachers, can see their paintings, or curriculum work, as “living others” (p. 20). Saarinen means the concept of living others can refer to the artist’s deepened relationship and connection with their work of art, as not just a material object, but relational where an inner communal and reflective dialogue can occur.

In distance learning, teachers and students are often seen as part-objects on the computer screens during Zoom or Google Meet calls, heads and half bodies—it is hard to make eye contact, arduous to connect, just as expressed in the clinical setting when psychoanalysis and psychotherapy are online (see Isaacs-Russell, 2015). Subjectivity and individuality can become compromised by our technologies, with immediacy taking precedence over the value of human contact, conversation, and relationship building (Pinar, 2015). Teachers and students must connect in the online curriculum by sharing creative work together, co-creating lessons and activities, empowering students’ decision-making, and making the time to talk with each other to feel alive, bringing valuable in-person classroom pieces to online platforms. Chapter 3 is advantageous to this idea. Saarinen (2020) explores creativity as “a way of *being* or *existing*” (p. 34), knowing ones “*environmental provision*” (p. 34), and that the start of creative development happens in the earliest “*infant-mother interaction*” (p. 35), drawing upon Winnicott’s (1971) theory of creativity. Saarinen adopts Winnicott’s (1971) and Wright’s (2009) ideas that artistic creativity is about the artist navigating the self into being—to “*feel real*” (Saarinen, 2020, p. 43); in this case, life is “more real” (Saarinen, 2020, p. 44) when an artist invests in their art object, developing an understanding of themselves through their art object, as opposed to not engaging in a creative act which might withdraw the artist from this heightened state.

Saarinen’s framework illustrates how early object-relations significantly shape the artist’s creativity in adult life. At birth, and in infancy, developmental niches form. The infant learns affective scaffolding from their caregivers. The mother or caregiver responds to the infant’s needs, feelings, and emotions. Ideally, trust builds in these affectively charged two-way experiences. The infant’s developmental journey includes interactions with objects, transitional objects, and their

environmental resources during which they form niches involving affective scaffolding. These affective scaffolds influence their painting work in the search for feeling later in adult life.

I believe Saarinen's connection of how one scaffolds feelings from being cared for in infancy and early childhood has an impact on ways in which they approach their creative work in adult life to be the most compelling in the book. Saarinen clearly draws from Winnicott's (1977) theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship, which theorizes the journey of the infant and mother from the period of absolute dependence, relative dependence, to independence. From Saarinen's perspective here, we can further consider how *holding*, a Winnicottian concept, as an early formed niche, might draw relationships to how the artist holds their artwork in adult life. If we examine this idea from a curriculum perspective, we can think about how this concept might travel to how a teacher or art educator might hold their curriculum. Several suppositions I thought Saarinen could help confirm and elaborate in Chapter three are about Winnicott's holding concept—the importance of the early holding of an infant physically and emotionally and how this experience might apply to artists in their adult life in the ways in which they think about creativity, being with their materials, spaces they create in, surfaces they create on, and affects that are produced. Winnicott (1977) argues maternal care is essential for early infant ego development, including and stabilizing the id; furthermore; in early childhood development, being creative as a human being and having creative play experiences all bear unconsciously on how the adult artist engages with their creative work.

Saarinen's (2020) Chapter 4 looks at the concept of vitality and “vitalistic fantasy” (p. 56), drawing from the work of art historians, art critics, and psychoanalysts, looking at the living “human attributes” (p. 56) of an artist's painting—how the painting works to complete itself (e.g., Isabelle Graw), the “flesh-like” (p. 65) qualities of paint (e.g., Peter Fuller), and metamorphosis (e.g., James Elkins). Saarinen discusses artists' lived-experiences with their paintings, detailing that artists see their paintings as “living ‘others’” (p. 55), forged by the creative experience of making art. Saarinen argues this particular *feeling* of the artist's painting as living has historical origins, that painting as a practice is relational and affectively grounded in rich histories, traditions, and cultural contexts, and also developed in early unconscious infant interactions—the infant's engagement with objects and caregivers (Bollas, 1987, 2018; Winnicott, 1965/2006).

Saarinen (2020) accounts for how the artist profoundly listens to their painting, an object that is alive, creating itself, as the “aliveness of one's paintings also enables *oneself* to feel more alive and connected” (p. 55). Just as these “animistic depictions of art-making are always just metaphorical” (p. 54), I believe, as Saarinen believes about some artists and their painting work, that teachers can see their curriculum-in-progress as a living, breathing being, one that writes itself, open to teachers' lived-experience and the historical moment they find themselves in, no matter how difficult or strange. To this point, teachers can listen and be with their curriculum's “aliveness” (p. 54)—the emergence of their student's interests and voices, what is affecting them, and hard-to-discern histories of the world and society. As such, complex topics of war, racial oppression, environmental calamity, injustice, climate change, mental health, and more are waiting to be worked through, felt, and known, like the artist working on a painting.

Chapter 5 describes oceanic feeling in the creative process, primarily drawing upon Anton Ehrenzweig (1953, 1967) and the history of the oceanic feeling concept from many psychoanalysts, scholars, thinkers, and artists. Saarinen elaborates on three key elements, the first “a feeling of self-boundary dissolution and/or fusion” (p. 87), “fusion” that can be the feeling of oneness between painting as object, connections to the material world, and self-experience. The second idea Ehrenzweig (1967) was enamored by was a circulation between “differentiated and

undifferentiated types of perception” (p. 295), maintaining a balanced ego state in the artistic process, becoming more tolerant of unpredictability and bewilderment. Lastly, oceanic states can have positive and negative affective states. Artists can access and scaffold oceanic feeling with perception or tap into how their creative process can generate many feelings and affects. The main point for education is whether teachers can tap into oceanic feelings when they become immersed into their curriculums—projects, lessons, and teachings with their students and becoming aware of the fusion, perception, and affects—the ability for teachers to listen to their inner and outer worlds and the many feelings at play as they work with their curriculum as parts develop and fuse.

Chapter 6 draws mainly upon the work of Townsend (2019) and Hagman (2005, 2010). Saarinen (2020) develops rich connections on the artists’ “responsive engagement” (p. 103) with their work in connection to self-experience and subjectivity, how artists get their painting work to make sense for them. Saarinen writes, “the grounds for rightness often change and develop as the creative work progresses, and may become established only after lengthy periods of trial and error” (p. 102). As the artist works to find a space and a vision for “rightness” in their painting work, such is true for the educator in a curriculum piece or project. It might take trial and error, review and revision, or working through with colleagues to achieve a feeling of rightness. When does a curriculum project *feel* finished or “right” to an educator in their inner world? What does that feeling do for the educator?

In the final chapter, Saarinen examines how “art-making can have a profound effect on the artist’s overall sense of being” (p. 121). First, he elaborates on Milner (1950/1957, 1987), who taught herself how to paint freely, discovering new ideas about her “being,” thus, arriving at Ratcliffe’s (2008) existential feelings theory for further analysis. Saarinen (2020) says existential feelings have two main components—“*pre-intentional background feelings that structure experience*” (p. 133) and “*bodily feelings*,” (p. 133) which he connects to a painter’s art-making experience. “Existential feelings are *feelings of being*” (p. 136) that structure artistic experience in a profound manner. Art-making can shape this state and lead to “a new *existential orientation*” (p. 137).

Returning to my initial question of what can the role of painters’ affective experiences do for curriculum? Saarinen’s book can inspire scholars in curriculum studies and related education fields. Education must focus on the subjective lived experiences of educators and students involving trust, care, and affective scaffolding in curriculum work. According to Saarinen’s (2020) ideas, this can look like how educators develop relationships with their students and other teachers in their curriculum work and how their relationship evolves and grows also with “inanimate things” (p. 59) and scaffold feelings as a curriculum developer as in writing, projects, and the ways in which teachers set up their classroom atmosphere and discussion spaces for their students. It can also simply be being aware of how early interactions with one’s caregivers and surroundings shape the way teachers might engage their curriculum.

Affect is an essential part of Saarinen’s book and grows in complexity with varying aspects of affect in artistic creativity. One aspect of affectivity that future research could examine would be to what extent “occupant affect” could be teased out. I thought that Saarinen could do more to explain this term as it is used sparingly in his book. The concept makes me wonder how an artist might be cognizant of the affectivity that occupies their creative mental, emotional, and physical spaces relating to painting processes, subject matter, and technique. Further elaboration on Winnicott’s holding and creative play concepts in connection to affective scaffolding in later life for the artist remains for further investigation. Overall, existentially speaking, Saarinen (2020) examines the “potential space” (p. 49) in painting—a type of experience where one can witness

the dynamism occurring between the subjective and objective world, discovering the self through painting and the materials in which the artist uses to paint. Like the artist paints to feel, having a profound relationship with their painting work, teaching and curriculum work can evoke similar truths—Saarinen's book provides us with “feelings” that we can cultivate, especially concerning learning about one's self, through artistic expression or otherwise.

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