

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

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Volume 20 Number 1

January 18 , 2019

## Beauty Bubbles, Subtle Meetings, and Frames for Play: Aesthetic Processes in Danish Kindergartens

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Citation: Blomgren, H. (2019). Beauty bubbles, subtle meetings, and frames for play: Aesthetic processes in Danish kindergartens. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 20(1). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.18113/P8ijea20n1>

### Abstract

This article contributes to the knowledge about artist-teacher collaboration by focusing on aesthetic processes in a partnership between pedagogues and artists in two Danish kindergartens over a period of 18 months. The research is within the framework of action research and links to the development project, *European Children of Culture*, which involved several European/Baltic/Nordic countries in 2015-2017. The article rests on empirical material (interviews, photos, video recordings and field notes from actions and reflections) and investigates how the involved adults understand, facilitate and frame aesthetic processes and how this leads the researcher to expand perspectives on aesthetics in early childhood services. The aim of the article is to rethink aesthetic processes – to explore the many layers of aesthetics, not to reduce them. Hence, aesthetic processes in kindergartens become profound aesthetic-sensitive experiences involving hands-on processes with intensified meaning, subtle meetings and intermediate worlds, and ultimately termed “beauty bubbles”.

## Introduction and Focus

Teacher-artist collaboration is considered to be valuable in educational settings and is in *International Journal of Education & the Arts* mainly connected to school settings. The articles here highlight the teacher-artist collaboration and its impact on school employees (Ansio, Seppälä, & Houni, 2017), pupils' learning outcomes and the benefits of the arts in young peoples' lives (Upitis, 2005) and the organisation of collaboration and reflection on results (Nevanen, Juvonen, & Ruismäki, 2012). In Denmark, the focus on collaboration and partnership between teachers and artists has developed significantly since the school reform of 2014 and the vision of "the open school" making schools responsible for organizing partnerships with the local community. The open school vision and its partnerships with the arts draws on the research by Anne Bamford about quality in arts education and how teaching in the arts improves learning skills in, for example, mathematics and reading (Bamford, 2006; Bamford & Qvortrup, 2006).

This article, however, does not address the school area, pupils or teachers, but turns to artist collaboration in early childhood services. The collaboration between artists and pedagogues is, as it is in schools, a growing field, and expressed in a new law as a part of "The open day care service"<sup>1</sup>. This article focuses on kindergartens, pedagogues (pædagog, in Danish) and artists, and examines a less explored topic in the collaboration – the attention to and concrete unpacking of aesthetic processes. The aim of the article is to broaden understandings of aesthetics in early childhood services as more than art and symbolic mediated forms, but as intermediate worlds, subtle meetings, apprehension and delight in the material world that leads to something more. Kindergartens in Denmark (as in other Scandinavian countries) are not part of the schools, and the very large majority of them are government-sponsored. The article examines how pedagogues and artists understand and facilitate aesthetic processes and how, through collaboration, they expand their understandings of aesthetics and each other. The theoretical approach in the article is philosophical perspectives on aesthetics and aesthetics as the sensitive cognition and -experience. The article investigates the following questions: How do artists and pedagogues understand and facilitate aesthetic processes in a collaborative partnership – and how can this lead to new perspectives on aesthetic processes and experiences in early childhood services?

Names of kindergartens, pedagogues, artists, and children have been fictionalized.

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<sup>1</sup> The law became effective in July 2018. See *Aftale I folketinget om Stærke Dagtilbud – alle børn skal med i fællesskabet* (Agreement in the Danish Parliament about *Strong Daycare Services – Every Child is a Member of a Group and of the Community*). Publication from Child- and Social Ministry (2017, p. 9).

### ***About Pedagogues and Artists***

In Denmark, pedagogues – not pre-school teachers – attend to the pedagogical work in early childhood services. Pedagogue is a distinct and widespread profession requiring a three-and-a-half-year BA degree, leading to work in a range of settings (Jensen, 2011, p. 142). Students choose between three specialisations: early childhood services (infants), school and ‘free-time’ services (schoolchildren), and social work and special services (adults and people with special needs). Early childhood services in kindergartens accommodate children from three to six years old. The pedagogue’s approach to children is holistic and relational in a personal and professional way – a way that does not include a traditional teaching approach (Moss, 2002, p. 143). Instead, pedagogues incorporate the curriculum through a play-learning perspective by facilitating different kinds of activities and through daily routines (Ahrenkiel et al., 2013). The pedagogue is oriented towards everyday life, wellbeing and social relations (Thingstrup, Schmidt, & Andersen, 2017, p. 1) and supporting the child in becoming a democratic and independent being (Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010, p. 15). However, the current restructuring of public services, including early childhood services, as a part of the educational framework, challenges the role of the pedagogue in implementing learning environments (Krejsler, 2012). In this action research examined, the pedagogues collaborated with artists and supporting the curriculum theme *Cultural Expressions and Values* (Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010, p. 15). This theme is recently, within a new law concerning day care services, transformed into *Culture, Aesthetics and Relations* and thus promotes a stronger focus on aesthetics alongside the vision of “The open day care service” including partnerships with artists or art institutions. This article describes a partnership based on collaborative work between artists and pedagogues. The collaborative type of settings where children meet artists in early childhood institutions refers to partnerships based on mutual respect and a rather close collaboration which ideally takes place over an extended period of time (Borgen, 2011, p. 374). What makes this research significant, in the least in a Danish context, is the long-term collaboration, with the children meeting a new artist every six months over an 18-month period. The artists were educated at accredited Danish and foreign institutions of artistic higher education as musicians, visual artists, dramaturges, textile designers and architects. Each artist engaged with the children and pedagogues in action on three to seven occasions. After each action there followed reflections with the pedagogues, pedagogical leaders and the researcher.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Drawing on insights from both philosophical (Baumgarten 1750/1992; Gross, 2002; Jørgensen, 2015; 2018) and child cultural perspectives on aesthetics (Juncker, 2017; Mouritsen, 2002; von Bonsdorff, 2009), this article is written in opposition to psychological

and learning approaches concerning aesthetics that express and mediate impressions, inner-feelings, and 'the unsaid' into symbolic forms (Austring & Sørensen, 2012, p. 93).

The German Enlightenment philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) distinguished between a lower and a higher part of the cognitive faculty (Jørgensen, 2015, p. 12). Yet, he broke with the established notion of the lower cognitive faculty as a provider of concept to the higher cognitive faculty and established lower faculty cognition as an independent and sovereign source of a certain kind of cognition (Gross, 2002, p. 408). He referred to this certain kind of cognition as aesthetic cognition which he defined as sensitive, and not sensual, and as emphasizing imagination, thinking, and intuitive approaches (awareness, attunement, presentiments and sensations) (Jørgensen, 2015, p. 26; 2018, p. 25). According to Baumgarten and the Danish professor of Philosophy and History of Ideas, Dorthe Jørgensen (2015), the goal of sensitive cognition, that is aesthetics, is perfection of the sensitive:

... it is the perfection of the sensitive cognition that is the goal of aesthetics, and perfection is identical to beauty. ... Sensitive cognitions ... are specific and characterized by both unity and diversity. ... in sensitive cognitions the many individual marks of the specific are not lost in abstraction, and not only complexity is experienced, but meaning as well. In sensitive cognitions we do not only sense a multitude of marks. We also perceive a whole that is characterized both by liveliness thanks to this wealth, and by meaningfulness thanks to inner consistency. (p. 13-14)

Aesthetic experience is an experience of beauty. Beauty does not relate to whether something is nice or pretty, but stresses the holistic creation of meaning and new worlds through the sensitive pathways to knowledge. One does this by creating connections to the world around one's self (objects, persons and atmospheres) and creating, perceiving and playing with complexity, diversity and many possible options. This is described by Jørgensen (2015; 2018) as beautiful (expanded) thinking and intermediate worlds (p. 25, pp. 35-37). The intermediate world occurs in a creative act where subject and object erase and is "*the sphere of our experiences of transcendence; experience of a 'surplus' of meaning is the content of this sphere*" (Jørgensen, 2018 p. 38). Philosophical aesthetics, with its sensitive cognition, marks aesthetic processes as creative processes alternating between the subject and the world and such processes changing the people and surroundings involved (Jørgensen, 2015). Those processes are made possible through hands-on processes with a physical material but also simply through being present, attuned, and thoughtful as one creative act.

In his work *Aesthetica*, Baumgarten presented the expression *felix aestheticus*, i.e., the successful aesthician, as a description of the person whose sensitive cognitions are of the perfected kind. Such people are equipped with "*innate natural aesthetics*" – which means that

they are naturally disposed in their souls to beautiful thinking and, furthermore, have an “innate graceful and tasteful spirit” (Baumgarten, 1750/1992, §.28). This disposition makes them able to advance their sensitive approach and lower cognitive faculty. Philosophical aesthetics related to artists, pedagogues, and children draws attention to who is or can become a *felix aestheticus*. According to Baumgarten it is a natural disposal of humans (Gross, 2002, p. 404) and he actually mentions children and their play (Baumgarten, 1750/1992, §.54-55). Professor of Visual Arts Education, Pauline von Bonsdorff, continues this point of view by mentioning children as aesthetic agents who communicate and create meaning through their bodies and play (von Bonsdorff, 2009, p. 61). The theoretical perspectives mentioned create a framework for analysing the aesthetic processes and experiences, and this article interprets both adults and children as aesthetic agents.

### **Methodology: Approach Inspired by Action Research**

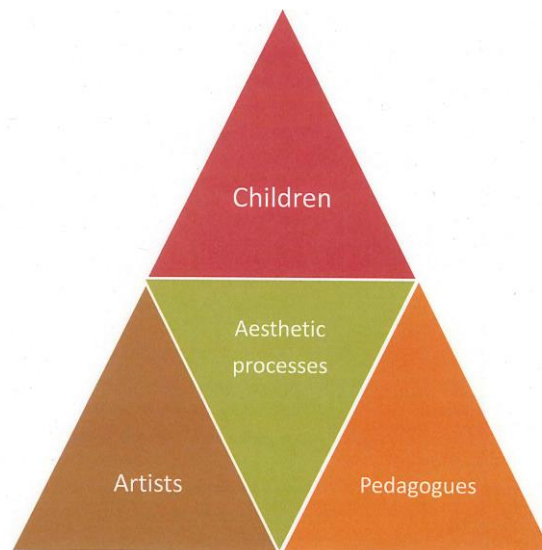
The article is a part of a PhD dissertation that is linked to the *Cultural Children of Europe* development project, which took place in several European, Baltic, and Nordic countries between 2015 and 2017. The development project was targeted towards children from zero to eight years old and with a vision to rethink their culture and get children in early childhood services and the early school years to participate in experimental aesthetic processes involving art and culture. The dissertation focuses on the daycare field and children between four to six years and how artists and pedagogues through a close collaboration challenged their different professional resources and skills. The processes took place in the children’s own institutions. Important key words in the *Cultural Children of Europe* project were ‘ownership’ and ‘collaboration’, hence the project was framed as both top-down and bottom-up. The top-down structure was visible through a charter (formulated by a board) which provided frames and criteria for entering the project. The institutions cooperated with artists and researcher in using action-learning methods (Pedler & Burgoyne, 2015). The bottom-up angle enabled the institutions, through the action learning process, to shape the processes to what was relevant in the local context.<sup>2</sup>

The design of the dissertation is inspired by action research, which took place mainly in two Danish kindergartens, The Hill Hut and The Troll House, situated in two different municipalities. Furthermore, the research implied reflective (or research) circles (Persson, 2009) with The Hill Hut and three additional kindergartens. The reflective circles developed as an extra meeting space for the four institutions from the same area. Here the tasks were to reflect on and from practice, to create knowledge about different perspectives and approaches,

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<sup>2</sup> Further information about the development project is located at: <http://www.culturalchildrenofeurope.com>

and to identify and develop frames and topics for use in actions and research. The action research took place from January 2016 to July 2017, and the focus for and in the action research were children, artists, pedagogues, and aesthetic processes as shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Focus of the action research



Action research turns to actions, reflections and many ways of knowing (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4). It is also a broad concept with many approaches and types (Rönnerman & Salo, 2012, p. 1). Within the action research umbrella, I turn primarily to the Nordic educational tradition, a development of educational, democratic and collaborative processes that states, "... a reciprocal challenging of professional knowledge and experiences, rooted in everyday practices within schools in collaborative arenas populated by researchers and practitioners, and in the interchange of knowledge of different kinds" (Rönnerman, Furu, & Salo, 2008, p. 277). This applies equally well to kindergartens.

As researcher, I worked closely with practitioners (pedagogues, artists, project leaders and pedagogical leaders) and I considered them as co-researchers whom I researched *with* and not *on* (Bradbury, 2015, p. 1). In most of the actions and reflections in the two kindergartens, I was not only a participant observer but also a sensing member (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000, p. 677). I created field notes, photos and video recordings along with interviews with artists, pedagogues and children. During the course of these methods and the long-term engagement, I built up relationships with children and adults (Albon & Rosen, 2014, p. 85) and understandings of frames, possibilities and local needs as we exchanged and developed knowledge. However, the article does not show how the researcher qualifies the action

research but focuses on presenting key themes connected to how artists and pedagogues understand and facilitate aesthetic processes. Getting an insight into practitioners' understandings and highlighting key themes are indeed tasks for action research (Meyer, 2006, p. 127; Rowley, 2014, p. 241, Torbert, 2001, p. 250).

### ***Action and Analysis***

This article focuses on the joint actions involving pedagogues, artists and children, but everyday practices flourished between the actions with the artists. The everyday practices were supported through consultations between artists and pedagogues and through inspiration from their joint actions. The processes developed differently in the two kindergartens. In Hill Hut, the pedagogues who participated were more or less the same throughout the period, but in Troll House, the two pedagogues from the first period (spring 2016) swapped with one 'new' pedagogue and a very experienced pedagogical assistant. They continued for the rest of the periods. The pedagogues from the first period, which also had participated in a pilot study before the 'real' action research period, continued working with aesthetic processes as everyday practices.

<b>Kindergarten The Hill Hut, period and materials</b>	<b>Actions and participants: Experiments with materials</b>	
Spring 2016  <b>Plastic</b>	Three pedagogues, two pedagogical assistants and one visual artist 4 actions with artist plus everyday practices Children's age: 5½ - 6 years	
Autumn 2016  <b>Metal</b>	The same three pedagogues and one 'new' pedagogue, occasionally one assistant and one architect/designer 3 actions with artist plus everyday practices Children's age: 4½ - 5½ years	


<p>Spring 2017</p> <p><b>Paper</b></p>	<p>Now only the three pedagogues (one of them had a new job), occasionally one assistant and one textile designer</p> <p>5 actions with artist plus everyday practices</p> <p>Children's age: 5½ - 6 years</p>	
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Figure 2. Experiments with different materials, 2016-2017

<p><b>Kindergarten</b></p> <p><b>The Troll House, period and themes</b></p>	<p><b>Actions and participants:</b></p> <p><b>Butterflies, music and storytelling</b></p>	
<p>Spring 2016</p> <p><b>Butterflies</b></p> <p>A period, which ended up with some project days at the local school</p>	<p>Two pedagogues and two artists, one musician/accordionist and one visual artist</p> <p>7 actions plus everyday practices</p> <p>Children's age: 5½-6 years</p>	
<p>Autumn 2016</p> <p><b>Music in everyday life</b> (butterflies)</p>	<p>One 'new' pedagogue, one pedagogical assistant and one musician/accordionist</p> <p>7 actions plus everyday practices</p> <p>Children's age: 4½-5 years</p>	
<p>Spring 2017</p> <p><b>Storytelling and drama</b></p> <p>A period, which ended up with some project days at the local school</p>	<p>The same pedagogue and assistant and one dramaturge</p> <p>5 actions plus everyday practices</p> <p>Children's age: 5½-6 years</p>	

Figure 3. Butterflies, music and storytelling, 2016-2017



The analysis and coding of interviews, photos, field notes and video recordings was, along with my action research fieldwork, an interwoven reflective, hermeneutic and abductive reasoning process (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014; Østern, 2013). Consequently, I triangulated and compared the adults' words (interviews, reflections) with their actions (field notes, photos and video recordings from actions). I approached the empirical material, the understandings, meanings and actions, facing my own pre-understandings and presumptions (Gadamer, 2004). Several themes emerged, but I chose to continue this article with the following: Aesthetic processes as hands-on experiences with intensified meaning, as subtle meetings with intermediate worlds, and as beauty bubbles. This will be linked to relevant themes, theory and discussions.

### **Hands-on Experience with Intensified Meaning**

“What do we work with? Our hands – not our mouths!” The artist repeats this sentence several times while addressing children and pedagogues. The pedagogues stop talking and suggesting the children what to do and instead turn their attentions towards what the children do by themselves. A boy is not especially interested in the creation of plastic houses, but the artist discovers his fascination with cling-wrap. She sits beside him. The cling-wrap runs out, and she hands him a new roll to encourage his fascination and creations. The boy keeps on wrapping for a very long time. As the form changes, he suddenly makes it into a gun – and he plays with it at the table. Afterwards, the pedagogues were surprised, that the artist allowed him to continue with the wrapping for so long. He used a lot of cling-wrap! The scene was an eye-opener for the pedagogues. It made them reflect about their approach to aesthetic processes. They expressed it as a challenge to avoid interfering verbally because they want to help and suggest and they regard it as a way of stimulating the children's language. Now they have to re-think their approaches to the children in aesthetic processes. From that day, the reflections very often concern the adult's role and frames for aesthetic processes.

(Vignette composed from field notes and video recordings, The Hill Hut, spring 2016)

The vignette, which I will examine in the following, illustrates key issues in hands-on processes in a collaboration between artists and pedagogues and highlights the themes of framing and verbalization versus being present. The visual artist says in an interview that one of her missions was to educate the pedagogues in presence and to encourage the children's intentions, and she states “the verbalising approach disturbs and distracts the children from exploring their own creativity from within and following their own initiatives.” The artist acts as she calls on the pedagogues to do: she is not very talkative (to get the process started, she

explains and demonstrates materials and framing). She observes the children's initiatives and moves quietly around the table, handing them materials when needed. At no point does she correct, suggest, or judge the children's process, she only supports them when something does not work. In this case, she explains and presents alternatives, but it is up to the children to decide whether they want to follow her suggestions. In the vignette, the task, initiated by the adults, was to create a fantasy-house out of string, cling-wrap, tape and small pieces of plastic. The boy in the vignette was not that interested in the creation of a house, but more fascinated of the cling-wrap and the experience of wrapping it around his object. The artist recognizes his fascination but is also attentive towards his lack of concentration, then she decides to sit quietly beside him, following his process and helping him gently or handing him another roll of cling-wrap when needed. When he starts playing with what turns out to be a gun, she does not interfere or stop him. As the vignette shows, the pedagogues were surprised by the artist's statement about not using their mouths – which meant that they were to play down the verbalizing approach. They were also surprised that she let the boy continue the wrapping for such a long time. At first, they felt she was a bit provocative, but then they discovered their habitual approach to the children – an approach that promoted the verbalising modus. In the collaboration with the artists, they became aware of the importance of letting go, not interfering too much and not having a certain product in mind. From an action research perspective, and which I shall not expose any further in this article, the insights influenced the approach of the pedagogues in the subsequent actions and preparation of everyday practices. The vignette illustrates a child centered approach, which was an existing approach in The Hill Hut in the three periods (cf. figure 2). By contrast, my findings from the research shows that the approach in aesthetic processes with music and drama in The Troll House (cf. figure 3) was adult centered. The visual artists in both of the kindergartens were oriented towards the child centered approach and concerned about the adults' dominating attitude. To prevent that, they created, in collaboration with and in agreement with the pedagogues, an open framing, which encouraged the children's play and attunement. In here, the artists did not require attention or acted as if they were the focal point of the processes. The adult centered approach in music and drama in the Troll House was visible through adult guided activities and the adult as an important driving force and focus. The music activities consisted of singing, movement, and playing instruments and especially the singing and playing instruments had a character of reproducing and not investigating. These findings lean towards those of Holmberg (2012; 2014), who investigated music events in Swedish kindergartens. Holmberg highlighted singing as reproducing but playing instruments as investigating. In my research, also playing instruments had a reproducing character more than investigating. Regardless of the adult as a driving force and the reproducing character, the children in The Troll House enjoyed the music activities. They continued and developed the singing and playing at the playground or at the toilet and it became culture *by* children (Mouritsen, 2002, p. 16). The term Culture *by* children (or children's culture) characterizes the type of culture that children

produce in their own networks – also called their play culture (Mouritsen, 2002, p. 16). As the children actually integrated and developed the music in their free play afterwards is a sign of aesthetic experience – it shows how the music created intensified meaning.

From the general research findings concerning frames and approaches, I turn to The Hill Hut and an interview with the visual artists, Juliane and Nille, who highlighted children’s aesthetic agency and “natural sense of aesthetics”:

Juliane: “... to see the natural sense of aesthetics we have, I mean the children, those set-ups they make ... I just think when they create it – it works! You don’t think that it looks wrong. It gets its own natural look. My selection of the materials (paper) and of types, forms, and scale helps them to use that natural sense of aesthetics.”

Nille: “When you create something there are immediately natural aesthetics ... they (the children) can use the abilities they have. We don’t do a lot.”

(Interview, June 2017)

The visual artists’ reflections about how the children create a form with a natural look adds to understandings of aesthetics as a “*graceful and tasteful spirit*”, as mentioned earlier with reference to Baumgarten (1750/1992, §.28). He refers to humans as aestheticians, which resonates with von Bonsdorff’s argument about children as aesthetic agents who explore, communicate and create meaning through body and play and by composing the materials in a sensitive way. Nonetheless, the aesthetic processes apparently flow because of the role of the artist. Despite the artist’s statement “we don’t do a lot”, it is observable that their approach and skills are vital for the processes. Their way of selecting materials and having an eye for possibilities, the open framing with no predictable outcome (but appealing to children’s imagination and initiatives), their ability to improvise and their skills and experiences with the materials make them influential and important in order to create a space for children’s aesthetic experiences. The approach of the artists, combined with the open framing, apparently inspire the pedagogues’ aesthetic reflective approach and role, as emphasised in the vignette.

### ***The Urge to Create and Play***

The pedagogues and the artists had different approaches and attention to aesthetic processes due to different professionalism and interests. Visual artists in both of the kindergartens mention several times in the interviews the “urge to create” or “to discover your needs”, and one artist reflects, “It is about getting in contact with the urge of creating something. That’s what we deal with ourselves every day in the atelier.” The artists recognise the same urge, ability, and power in the children’s play and sensitive awareness. In the aesthetic processes

the visual artists acknowledge children's play as important, first and foremost as a desire and an urge and then as a way of being in the world (Mouritsen, 2002; von Bonsdorff, 2009). It is important to keep in mind, however, that the aesthetic processes mentioned are not 'free play' but are restricted by selected materials, tools and approaches. The pedagogues, on the other hand, unlike the artists, do not rely on a personal desire or urge to express themselves through materials and play. The pedagogues are educated in creating relations, activities and learning environments and not as skilled arts practitioners. They are pedagogues, who use arts-based approaches in their pedagogical activities and maybe just occasionally. In the kindergarten, the pedagogues have a busy agenda involving parents, meetings, serving lunch and working with the curriculum in general. This agenda attaches to the institutional culture and to routines and time structures that create frames for the pedagogical work (Gulløv, 2017). Working with arts-based activities are often only one part of the jigsaw. For the arts practitioners – the artists – the agenda is to be creative alone and with others (as highlighted above). They enter the institutions as outsiders, who are not loaded with the institutional routines and agendas, but with knowledge about materials, craft and ideas. The action research challenged the pedagogues in being more familiar with arts-based approaches but also to play and not concerning about the product. One of the pedagogues from The Hill Hut said, "We usually reach towards an exhibition as a goal – but now we focus on play and how to play with the children!" The statement illustrates the attention to challenging the pedagogues' established practices and goals concerning aesthetics, and it furthermore emphasizes play and the sensitive cognition as valuable in human life (Huizinga, 1938/2016; Juncker, 2017).

### **Aesthetic Process as Subtle Meetings**

Artists and pedagogues in the kindergartens understood and facilitated aesthetic processes as meetings. These were subtle meetings between adults, children and materials (songs, playing instruments, drama, painting, plastic, paper and metal). The meetings transformed the participants and made them aware of each other in new ways. The artists phrase it like this: "Aesthetics is to me a fine meeting – the result of the process is this fine meeting" and, "It is a meeting that transforms the children." A pedagogue characterises aesthetic processes as meetings where the children experience themselves as a part of a larger group of children where they are having an "Aha!" moment or an experience of cohesiveness." According to philosophical aesthetics, aesthetic experiences contain more than just empirical experiences. They contain creations of new insight and intensified meaning, which Jørgensen (2015) refers to as transcendence and higher experience:

man does not only have empirical experiences, but also witnesses a kind of metaphysical experience, i.e. higher experience. Empirical experiences are about the spatio-temporal world, whereas higher experience is about what transcends the world. ... experiences of transcendence may simply be referred to as experiences of a surplus of meaning, i.e.

intensified meaning. (p. 22-23)

Intensified meaning occurs both in hands-on processes dealing with a physical material, but also when aesthetic processes become a meeting between adults, children and materials and with modes of presence and attunement. The experiences of a surplus of meaning, i.e., intensified meaning, occur not only in the subject or in the object, but in the *intermediate world* (Jørgensen, 2018, p. 37). The intermediate world is created through "... a light emanating from the things, and a light that we ourselves make the things shine with" (Jørgensen, 2015, p. 15). Through beautiful (expanded) thinking, as mentioned earlier, it is possible to reach out to the world and participate in the creation of intermediate worlds. Aesthetic meetings are subtle meetings, which we can refer to as intermediate worlds. They are meetings where subjects and objects are erased and where light shines from the things we make and the way we make them:

Children and adults are creating a hut out of plastic (two long conduits put across each other, and tightened together with transparent tape and then wrapped with cling wrap to close the sides). Theo is having trouble with the tape and the artist helps him. Then he returns to the plastic hut and the pedagogue addresses him, "Then you're ready again, Theo?" Theo replies, "Yes" (looks at the tape). The pedagogue says, "It's so good, yes!" Theo looks at her, smiles, fastens the tape on the hut and walks along the sides, round and round. Two other children are also exploring their tape while walking around the plastic hut. The children look at each other, follow each other's moves and are aware of the distance between them. The pedagogue addresses the girl, "Well, now you're being caught up by Aswar!" The girl smiles. Then the pedagogue turns to a boy, "Zarus, please come over here on the other side of me." Zarus changes to another position. He is now beside Theo.

Theo (gliding his flat hand over the cling-wrapped surface of the hut) says, "Wow, try to feel it! Try to feel this" (his head turns towards the pedagogue who sits further away). "Try to feel it," he says to Zarus beside him. Zarus looks at him. Theo glides his hand over the cling-wrap again. Zarus, still looking at him, is surprised, and glides his hand over it. He smiles and says, "O la la!"

(Video, The Hill Hut, May 2016, minutes 23:25-23:50)

The example illustrates an aesthetic process as a subtle meeting of togetherness and creation of intermediate worlds. It is a subtle meeting between Theo and the cling-wrapped surface, but also a subtle meeting between the children. When the children run around the hut, they are sensitively in tune with each other (from the vignette: *The children look at each other, follow each other's moves and are aware of the distance between them*). An intermediate world is

created due to the way Theo sensitively notices the cling-wrapped surface. He is attuned towards the cling-wrap and makes it shine. He tries to share his (higher) experience with the others (first with the pedagogue, but she is occupied, then with Zarus). He succeeds in sharing the moment with Zarus, who gets a surprise and bursts out: “*O la la!*”

The extracted video clip furthermore illustrates a subtle meeting between the pedagogue and the children. Through her awareness of the children, she is sensitive towards their light, but at the same time, she lets the children shine. Instead of taking an instructive role, she is interpreting the scenario and the children’s positioning and participation. The act and interpretative awareness cause her to guide and comment on their possibilities for meetings and participation with each other, “Then you’re ready again, Theo? (...) Now you are being caught up by Aswar! (...) Zarus, please come over here at the other side of me.” Through her sensitive awareness, she is attentive to the children’s relationships and intentions. She does not focus on a certain product, and she does not comment on their hands-on actions related to the product, but continues to move to positions where she can support the children’s intentions and actions. In this way, she becomes a sort of a midwife who supports the child-initiated perspective. Through her sensitive approach, it is reasonable to argue that she creates intermediate worlds between the children and herself. She thereby creates an interpretative atmosphere, which is connected to beautiful thinking, because she involves the children’s different approaches and ways of participation and responds sensitively to them.

Another example of a subtle meeting between a child and an artefact is the boy, Suni, and his attention to a kind of flower made out of metal (cf. Figure 2):

Suni swipes his face with a metal-branch-flower-like-artefact. Nanna, a girl of the same age, observes him carefully. Suni continues his gestures and is deeply involved in his activity. His hand movements swipe over his cheeks, then his chin, and back up to his forehead. His eyes are half closed and he doesn’t seem to notice what is going on around him. For a little while, he stands there and enjoys his handling of the artefact, which seems like an extension of his hand. Later he tells me that his pedagogue made the flower. Full of enthusiasm, he says, “It is made out of gold!” At lunchtime, I notice that the flower lies beside his plate.

(From field notes, The Hill Hut, October 2016)

His attention to the metal flower is a process of surplus of meaning – a higher experience of something more. Through his sensitive cognition, he creates a connection to the flower, both by catching the light from it and by making it shine. This creative act makes it a higher experience. It creates a surplus of meaning because it is about more than the flower itself; it is about how the meeting creates intensified meaning for him. He is fascinated by the gold and

he has an intensified moment with its own meaning when he swipes his hand across his face. He extends this moment by carrying the flower close to him for the rest of the day. It is possible to call Suni's meeting with the flower a 'magic moment' or a 'beauty bubble'.

### **Beauty Bubbles – Profound Aesthetic Experience**

'Beauty bubble' is a metaphor, which I have made up and composed by using two contradictory words: 'beauty', a heavily loaded term in the philosophical history of aesthetics, but also in art theory and history. However, the second word, 'bubble', indicates something light that can easily burst, like a bubble of chewing gum or a bubble of soap. 'Bubble' indicates beauty as something that occurs in moments, that is unexpected and not the result of learning or tightly organised activities. 'Beauty bubble' is created with inspiration from Baumgarten and Jørgensen, who underlined beauty as the essence of aesthetic experience and, as such, beauty bubble is an aesthetic-sensitive phenomenon that transforms into a special kind of insight. A beauty bubble is a metaphor for a profound aesthetic-sensitive experience. Furthermore, it is a possibility, which occurs through sensitive awareness, where you are open to and interpret the surroundings. With this in mind, it is possible to argue for Suni's meeting with the flower as a beauty bubble. The following field note also illustrates a beauty bubble not attached to hands-on work, but as a way of connecting with surroundings:

Sue, the visual artist, walks to the end of the room, and the children are sitting on the floor. She asks, "What does an artist do?" The children answer spontaneously, "They paint! They make sculptures!" Then Sue asks, "What is art then?" Nina replies, "Paintings!" Sara mumbles, "Wings?" Suddenly Nick points at the transition between ceiling and wall. He raises his hand and says, with enthusiasm in his voice and his eyes wide open, "Something is lighting up – up there!" The pedagogue makes gestures to Sue to continue talking, but Sue reaches out to Nick's discovery, follows his pointed finger, and looks at the light phenomenon. Murmuring, she then invents a sound, and the children's attentions turn both to her and to the light phenomenon. She says, "Do you hear its sound?" The children look at the waving, blurry spot of light almost on the ceiling. Nobody, including me, seems to be able to identify it. What is it? Nick looks thoughtful, while his eyes explore the room, and suddenly he finds an answer: He points towards the window and explains that the phenomenon comes from a bowl of water in the window frame. The water reflects the sunlight and transforms in the room. My eyes suddenly meet Sue's, we both smile and the unique atmosphere is in the room for a while longer. Finally, Sue says, facing the children, "You see, this is art!"

(Field notes, The Troll House, May, 2016)

The boy creates an intermediate world through his sensitive awareness of the surroundings and he lets the light phenomenon shine. He contributes actively to what emerges and effaces the subject-object dualism. He wants to explore it; his imagination is at full speed – he is already in a beauty bubble. Due to the artist's ability and her own sensitive and beautiful thinking, she is able to go along with the boy's curiosity, imagination and philosophies. She recognises his contribution as valuable and interesting and, furthermore, she extends it to involve the whole group of children and adults as well by inventing a sound belonging to the mysterious phenomenon. By saying, "Do you hear its sound?" she embraces all the participants in interpreting and creating their own intermediate worlds. A beauty bubble involves reflection and imagination and something more, which is already happening in the boy, but is also possible through the artist's attunement and framing of the moment. For a second, it seems as if the beauty bubble will burst (from the vignette: *The pedagogue makes gestures to Sue to continue talking*) but the artist preserves and prolongs the beauty bubble by playing along with the boy's sensitive approach to the world and the children's imaginative perspectives through open questioning and invention of sounds. The artist moves through the same non-rational channels as the children. By going above the empirical world and expanding it through shared imagination and reflections, the participants experience and share knowledge about each other's life-worlds.

Several of the pedagogues reflected about aesthetics as magic and about being aware of children having a 'magic moment' of intensified atmosphere and meaning. In this article, their understanding is interpreted and termed beauty bubble. Magic moments or beauty bubbles do not actually exist, per se, but are possibilities created through sensitive awareness and an open mind regarding surroundings and materials. In the collaboration, pedagogues and artists must be aware of this unique possibility and create the frames and awareness for beauty bubbles to occur.

### **Conclusion and Perspectives**

This article has posed questions about how artists and pedagogues understand and facilitate aesthetic processes and how a collaborative partnership can lead to new perspectives on aesthetic processes in early childhood services. Using and analysing qualitative material from a process inspired by action research in Danish kindergartens, this article has shown aesthetics in early childhood services as aesthetic-sensitive cognition involving beautiful thinking, intuition, play, subtle meetings, apprehension and delight in the beauty of the material world, intermediate worlds and, finally, beauty bubbles. Hence, aesthetic experiences become more than psychological feelings or sensorial hands-on work and expressions through different media. Drawing on insights from philosophical aesthetics connected to child-cultural perspectives, this article expands and highlights the many layers, outcomes and possibilities in aesthetics and, more importantly, contributes to a nuanced vocabulary about aesthetics in early childhood services. A vocabulary that extends, rather than reduces, aesthetics is



necessary in an argument for the aesthetic dimension in early childhood service settings. To acknowledge the sensitive cognition as just as important as the rational cognition is crucial in the recurrent discourse about learning and objectively measured competencies. With the analytical framework presented, the article underlines aesthetics connected to human life and as a goal in itself and not as a way to improve competencies. This article furthermore emphasises aesthetics as processes and moments with intensified meaning and atmosphere, which involve and change children and adults.

The article upholds children and adults as aesthetic agents and shows how the collaboration between artists and pedagogues creates reflections and insights in the roles, approaches and framing of aesthetic processes. In the article, I present how the framing of and approach in respectively The Hill Hut and in The Troll House turn out differently – as child centered and experimental in The Hill Hut and as adult centered in music and drama in The Troll House. Furthermore, I show how even adult centered approaches and framing can lead to culture *by* children, to children's play culture in the kindergarten every day and how this is a sign of children's aesthetic experiences. The role of the adult is especially vital for the children's opportunities for aesthetic experiences. With an adult in the role of midwife, less instructive and talkative, the possibilities for beauty bubbles seems to expand. This insight does not suggest that adults must be invisible or passive. On the contrary, it underlines the adult as co-player and aesthetic agent – as one who is attentive to and capable of being curious about children's initiatives and play and creating access (intermediate worlds) to culture *by* children. A collaboration between artists and pedagogues in early childhood services is not about an artist being a pedagogue or vice versa, nor it is about differences or the adults as the focal point of the aesthetic processes. It is about inspiring each other and creating frames for play and possibilities for adults and children to be aesthetic agents exploring materials, atmospheres, meaning and each other. The collaboration between artists and pedagogues in the future could start by asking: How do we create frames for beauty bubbles?

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# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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ISSN: 1529-8094

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