

# AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT OF EXPERIENCE

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## Abstract

Something weird sneaks into my work right from the beginning and makes any attempt to follow my original idea of a new art work impossible. I have become accustomed to this order of things, as if I had been driven into a strange play, where I did not know my playmate in advance. How am I to describe such an experience, a brutal intervention of the appearance of something unidentifiable in my work? How should I think of the different, the strange, odd and mysterious, which confronts me, takes me by the hand and touches me in a wicked way in my own work? How can I grasp this experience of transformation, displacement and disfigurement? What is the role of the entire human body and the total physical sensorium within such an aesthetic experience? This paper suggests an interpretation of experiencing as something differentiating, which amounts to creativity and stems from sensibility, although sometimes at the cost of destruction and incompleteness. What is important here is to recognize the interdependence between body as an animated material form and time as amounting to a lived experience. The aim of this paper is to argue for the use of practice-based research in studying experience.

Keywords: experience, sensibility, body, subject, singular, practice-based research

When an art product once attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience. (Dewey, 2005/1934, p.1)

## Introduction

How does an experience manifest itself inside art making: how does it appear, what is at stake and what does it mean? And why address this question? The goal of this paper is to present a treatment of this theme from an artist-researcher's point of view. My attitude to experience is practice-based, meaning that no

supernatural, transcendental entities are needed in studying it. Instead, my position toward studying experience is that it is as a phenomenon transcendent, empirical and natural.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, here the practice-based means research in which new knowledge is gained by means of my own art practice and by the artifacts that result from this practice.<sup>2</sup>

The real-life attitude means that the locus of my research is the fact that my life happens to me through experiencing, through my animated body, which emotes, thinks and acts, and I am at the center of these events. In this respect and to begin with, I turn to John Dewey (2005/1934, p. 12) as he asserts: “The nature of experience is determined by the essential conditions of life”. In the same way, every one has her own experience: hence, an experience can never be met objectively. Nevertheless, as we share the outside world and its many environments, we are able to communicate our experiences to some extent to each other.

We gain knowledge through experience as experience experiments with us. Experience is experimental in its character: it fuels action, elaboration and even gives rise to an understanding about conditions and consequences. Being an artist, experience unfolds before me holistically, both physically and mentally.

Experience is an integral part of my practice-based research journey. Dewey indicates and distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge. First there is knowledge that is based on rational thought and that has a rational, necessary and unchanging form, which is fixed in itself, and which stands for unity, utility, calculability, repetition and abstraction. This kind of knowledge he calls science, as it provides the standards of measures of reality.<sup>3</sup> According to him, the other kind of knowledge is concerned with change and is empirical and particular in nature; it concerns both materiality and practicality as multiple, fluid and irreducible. It is not something ultimate but rather proximate, and it can operate fruitfully and efficaciously in connection with practical problems and questions. (Dewey 2005/1929, pp. 20-21)<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, Dewey (2005/1929, pp. 83-84) distinguishes between two kinds of experience: one is concerned with ungovernable change and the other with governed and controlled change. For this paper, I want to carry Dewey’s remarks further and try to tease out both Gilles Deleuze’s and Alphonso Lingis’ notions on both experience and sensibility. In brief, what I try to discern here is not the kind of fixed division by Dewey mentioned above; instead, I want to explore and elaborate experience within art practice, not as an appearing of something but as an appearing of itself. Therefore, I address experience not only as something relational, differing and fluctuating but also as something which organizes my entire body into

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I have taken the stance that the concept of the transcendent refers to the natural world because it shows itself, it appears, whereas transcendental refers to knowledge, which is independent of practical experience.

<sup>2</sup> Ways of researching artistic practice have been discussed, for example, by Jyrki Siukonen (2002), Juha Varto (2009) and Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén (2014).

<sup>3</sup> One may argue that science is in the main based on experiential knowledge, which is prone to change.

<sup>4</sup> Juha Varto discusses the notion of knowledge and its relation to artistic activity in his book *Otherwise than Knowing* (2013). Varto (2013, pp. 13 and 177) argues that knowledge is always something conceptual, it must follow previous understanding, and its findings should be replicable. He believes knowledge to be the most amplifying agent of reality.’

another pattern as it arises from my sensibility and is given to consciousness.

To make art or to get involved in it in any other way is a participatory act. The reason I became a researcher of my own work was that my encounter with my own artwork hit me in some way as being strange and alien. This strangeness disturbed me and it became the main objective of my research. I thought that my work showed something I was not expressing as my own. In other words, I found a difference, inconsistency, imbalance, a sort of void and incompleteness between me and my work, as if the work had its own logic of which I was not the master. I needed to learn more about what seemed at first a controversial fit of the intelligible and the sensible in me. At this point, my life as a researcher-practitioner became as important as the making of the artwork. The aim of the present paper is not to explore the vast variety of different kinds of experiences but to flesh out how experience manifests itself through sensibility and relates to itself as the other. In addition, I want to emphasize that the observations which follow are not argumentations but rather touches and approaches.

### **A Subject and Her Experience**

How to get hold of an experience? In the first place, I felt at a loss for words, means and translation. After pondering, I realized that every medium, whether a painting, a literary text, a piece of music, an idea or a vision has its own origin and logic and thus is not translatable into another medium. Every interpretation by another medium or a representational structure that claims to understand the other's language is not likely to be plausible. From the beginning, I had to take this fact into account and I had to start by catching sight of experience purely in itself, just as it shows itself, but to also keep in mind the challenges of translation. By the same token, I became interested in, instead of the "why" question, the importance of extracting the "how" question.

I found that the major difficulty with studying experience is its complexity, as it is, on the one hand, fleeting and singular, undisciplined and open, never linear and thus abstract; on the other hand, however, it is something which is felt bodily, and thus is concrete and material. In addition, one cannot measure one's experience in a definite way, although it tends to guide one's actions, which, paradoxically, might well be measured with various methods and standards. Thus, actions which seem at first certain and finite might be based on an experience which is not fixed, steady or permanent but fleeting and undetermined.

Experience opens up a horizon and demands that I take a stance and act: to stay passive, or to react accordingly or differently. What is of importance is that the division between mind and body is not valid anymore: experience concerns me as a whole bodily being. I become a subject every time an experience occurs and takes place in me. My sensibility reveals the power experience has in me through its affective character.

Sensibility, the ability to experience, to react, to emote, to reflect, to think, relates to bodily sensations

that concern my body as a whole in a given environment. Hence, works of art, as well as the whole process of making, are manifested through our sensible and sensuous bodies, as the immediate realizations of something that appears. In fact, this is something we all share: the potential to experience something as it becomes something and as one senses oneself experiencing it. The time for the aesthetics of experience is approaching. This means that experiencing cannot be entirely subjective and that in order to experience something the existence of another<sup>5</sup> is necessary, so that the unfolding of a sensuous interaction as an experience may take place.

Experience appears as a breaking down of the dichotomies between subject and object, between body and mind. Hence, making what might seem a static object of a painting is actually so much more than a mere illustrative image. Actually, the painting becomes the sensuous tail of my experiences and, at the same time, I become the sensuous tail of my work. As I see it, what matters in my making is that experience has become the most forceful element of my work. It manifests itself in a relation between me and the work: it becomes an experience of itself and, if I am lucky, it becomes the completion of the work. Experiencing in itself creates a dimension or a layer of existence which can be studied as the aesthetics of an experience.

I might ask, especially when I think that the work has put me down and made me feel frustrated: why do I paint? My answer is that it is an innate necessity, but then, a necessity for what? Certainly to feel the pleasure of getting the work right but, most of all, it is about a quest to reveal something new, original and fresh, something I have not witnessed before, something which will astonish me. Juha Varto (2013, p. 14) emphasizes that things manifest themselves as bound to action, as if they were the immediate fulfillment of those actions. How then can the paintings that I have managed to finish still seem so strange to me? Why don't I consider them as something novel in their uttermost strangeness and just be pleased? Because finishing a work is a different thing: one day the work may look great and make me want to finish it. The next day I see the same piece and it looks terrible. Then I have to destroy it or to continue with it. Therefore, I find that, as a practitioner, to finish a work is like affirming a distance, affirming how much I am willing to give in and how much difference and insatiability I can tolerate.<sup>6</sup> In a manner, to work is actually to explore distance and that distance becomes the evidence of that which it distances. Thus the work does not enclose anything but instead indicates something outside of it.

Does this then mean, first, that the work opens itself up to something that exists without limits or that there is in any case more to the work, and second, that the locus of the work is constantly moving and displaced? At least one can believe that there is always more to the work because each one of us experiences it differently, which is to say that the artwork is elsewhere but it needs the work as a place.

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<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this paper, experience is something which continues to be given to the consciousness; there are no zones hidden from consciousness, no unconscious, as there is in psychoanalysis.

<sup>6</sup> At this point, I will not plunge into elaborations that originate from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant on the agreeable and on the sublime.

I have a sense of ideas and thoughts on how to proceed with my work but somehow, even paradoxically, cannot grasp these when working. I start to negotiate the space between my mind, my body and the work in progress. I take action, my body bends forward and something happens. I love to compose though it causes a lot of agony, but I have learned to tune myself into the unknown and unpredictable, and take the disappointments as they come. When the painting flows easily, I reckon I have learned from the past trouble.

One aspect which has intrigued me is: can even what are commonly regarded as negative experiences be seen as assets and be used to promote creativity? In my view, moments of collapse, failure, chaos, confusion and pleasure, and unforeseen happiness for that matter, serve as stepping stones to move toward something unpredictable and original. The pivotal point is instead the role of difference and repetition, stability and instability in creation. Does experiencing within art making require something which is ultimately fixed and stable in order to amount to a finished artwork, or does the work grow out of chaos and instability?

However, a question that demanded my closer attention was: is then such an experience I witness while painting inauthentic, mere illustration or imitation, and does it have a tendency to depend solely on imaginative elements? Then, where else does reality lurk if not in bodily liveliness, in experience? As a true gift of difference, strangeness and inexplicability, experience attaches me to the natural strangeness of what the outside stands for.

## Clues and Methods

Experience can be met only by the person herself: I have no access to another person's experience. Therefore, I had to start my research from myself, to become the subject of my own research, to chase down the existing difference, the gap between me and my work. I needed to consciously and rigorously go through my experiences and the process of making, to turn all the material, the evidence and clues into a well-understood research.

First, I started to reflect on my making by keeping a diary to gather my thoughts and emotions before and after working in order to get access as closely as possible to the experiential knowledge I have. Secondly, besides introspection, I collected visual materials of various forms: photographs, drawings and videos that include thinking aloud. I find, as a practitioner-researcher, that this kind of multi-method arrangement of artistic research, including auto-ethnographic, phenomenological and hermeneutic research, secures an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon I study.<sup>7</sup>

In the beginning, I stumbled on my own to be able to sort out and to settle my urge to find a solution

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<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I will neither focus on the analysis of the findings nor on the conclusions.

to the riddle that the work posed. Soon I understood that there was no definite answer; instead I tried to gain access to this problem of the work and to articulate it. Gilles Deleuze discusses the notion of the problematic by stating that events are essentially problematic and problematising in their essence; therefore, we should deal with the problematic neither as some subjective category of knowledge nor as some random empirical instant.<sup>8</sup> Instead, he claims that the problematic is “both an objective category of knowledge and a perfectly objective kind of being”. (Deleuze 2004, pp. 64-65) In this respect, he considers the problematic to be innate in all phenomena and not something opposite to the unproblematic. Deleuze’s line of thought leads to the notion that when I am faced with the sense of strangeness before my own work, I am actually being called to this situation and it must in some sense be expected.

Situatedness constitutive of experience advocates its immanence, singularity and irreducibility. Therefore, the role of experience in constituting ourselves as subjects is not within one’s cognitive control and cannot be solely explicated and interpreted with concepts. Experience touches and passes through me while I live my life. It opens up my awareness and consciousness as an act of directness to encounter something different. In my view, experience manifests itself by taking the most important role in my apprehension of reality: it keeps me on its leash. By way of experiencing, I am in relation both to the environment and to myself.

Experience is given to consciousness. What kind of consciousness is this then? To my mind, here there is only one mode of consciousness, the one that is experienced. It has something to do with boundlessness, endlessness and incompleteness, since it configures itself with the appearing of becoming of something unforeseeable and different.

I might try to repeat myself in my work, but the repetition keeps changing, as if change were something innate and never repeated itself. My work is the illuminator of difference, and I am the one who is being illuminated as I become blinded while the repetition works on me: however, the painting’s ambivalence about the importance of my identity keeps perplexing me. The work rips me away from myself. I suffer from this uncomfortable situation of not being in or out of the scene but somewhere in between. Slipping in and out, as if I were out of my own reach, within an imaginative space where time and space mix, somewhere in an imaginative convergence zone of body and mind, as if this zone was a ghostly form or figure of no substance, although a very material one. Yet, I believe that I can make sense of my work. This much I know: my works contribute to the encounter with myself, and as such amount to a mysterious re-figuring of my self-portrait, *mise en abyme*.

The moment of experience is the formation of my subjectivity, and thus experience can be considered to be a will to radicality. There is no fixed point where it can be positioned, as if it were something very

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<sup>8</sup> According to Gilles Deleuze (2004), Immanuel Kant was the first to accept the problematic not as a fleeting uncertainty but as the very object of the idea and, thereby, as an indispensable horizon of all that occurs or appears (pp. 64-65).

concrete and abstract at the same time. Alphonso Lingis (1986, pp. 24-25) notes that one cannot make subjectivity something complete; it is in motion all the time. There is no point where subjectivity could be. It never reaches itself.

### **Experiences are Spilled out like a Deluge as a result of Sensibility**

My body is the locus of experience: of thoughts, of emotions, of knowledge and of information, even intuition. Thus “(d)iscussions of the sensuous body require sensuous scholarship in which writers tack between the analytical and the sensible, in which embodied form as well as disembodied logic constitute scholarly argument”, as Paul Stoller (1997, p. XV) puts it. As a consequence, I am never able to understand the other’s experience. However, there is commonality in our experiences, and we can discuss them, the thoughts and feelings of pain, hurt, love, anguish and so on. We share a horizon of possible meanings. In other words, body is an experience and a meaning in and of itself. The sensuous body is the only way in which we can know anything of the world.

Everything appears in relation to my bodily being. Nevertheless, experience is a singular and personal quality of a subject: it is open to everyone. Experience organizes the entire body into another pattern. Moreover, experience turns into a gesture of extraordinary generosity: it communicates to both me and to the world. Thus, being a body feels quite concrete, and at the same time quite experimental and innovative.

Making something produces a bodily demand: it is a call to act and asks of my body’s flexible collaboration. I yearn to exercise my body’s skills, its potentialities, to challenge myself, to renew myself, to experiment with what my body is capable of. In other words, my body wants to explore its sensibility, its intelligence, and its imagination in making, to see what kind of sensuous figures, forms, colors and compositions it can create, and how it can amaze itself.

This demand to act breaks through and beyond my bodily self as some kind of life force, a deluge spilled through my organs. An anxiety to accomplish something sweeps me out of myself and my everydayness. Perhaps this is a part of primal human nature: to always aim at something. Hence, the sensation to react bursts from the act of making as positive energy, as a sense of power, even though the outcome might disappoint me, or leave me paralyzed, perplexed or distressed. In this sense, making is always a violent encounter.

How then can I think, emote and act about and within a body without reducing it to an object of knowledge and meaning, instead approaching it as a meaning itself as it opens itself up to an experience? A body can never represent what it finds, as its experimental findings are always already gone and lost. As Deleuze (2004, pp. 180-181) points out, each move originates from chaos, is qualitatively distinct and produces a distribution of singularities, which diversify into multiplicities. However, this is not all, because by the same token every present “distances every aspect of the other moment”, and gives rise to chances one

cannot imagine; it is “the game of problems and of the question, no longer the game of the categorical and the hypothetical”, as Deleuze summarizes (2004, pp. 70-71). As a consequence, the work I have composed is never the one intended, hoped for or recalled; it is the creation of sensibility communicating singularities, which are for the most part undetermined, and their mutual relation is unpredictable. The multiplicities are restored to the artwork without closure. Sensibility operates as a passage between subject and object, and experience is the outcome of this transfer.

Everything is built on sensibility; it works on multiple environments. One should take the multiplicity it creates seriously. What does that mean? Within my art-making, I find sensibility to be something that concerns a whole even though it goes beyond my understanding and originates in distances. It organizes my entire body into another pattern, creates crises and gives rise to experimenting. It seems to function as a sort of translator and transmitter. It turns experience into flesh. It occupies my mind and body, so there is no time to interpret it; the only interpretation or translation is the work that starts to appear.

Sensibility invites me to be alert to myself and to the world, as if reality oscillated between my experience and the world, as if the world, including me, were primarily a system of sensation, sensuality and sensibility, as if these formed the core of existence. Lingis (1996, p. 6) shows, firstly, that sensibility is the power one seems to feel quivering in all one’s organs and, secondly, that the world happens on this sensible level. This corporeality manifested by sensibility constitutes experience.

Lingis (1996, p. 83) states: “In our sensibility we are exposed to the outside, to the world’s being, in such a way that we are bound to answer for it. A world is not just a spectacle spread before us but a burden we are entrusted with. What opens one to the exterior, what makes one exist, is exteriority, which approaches of itself, and touches us, affects us, afflicts us.” The subject, as flesh, is oriented, affected, attuned and disposed by the world and by her own sensibility, as if she were a substance and material to be unmasked and discovered over and over again. Sensibility gives the evidence of experience as being real. According to Lingis (1996, p. 53): “We communicate with things by embracing them bodily. Our postures, which are oriented upon them, converge in our sensory surfaces on them. Then sensuality in us makes contact with the materiality of things, which induce transubstantiations in us in our material states.”

Sensibility operates as a casting oneself toward entities exterior to oneself, upon luminosity and vibrancy, upon difference, a plane where any existing presentation is ruptured. This kind of experience configures itself as an event, which cannot be repeated and which overflows any concept. These events multiply in my work and as a consequence I multiply in it. And so both the work and I are present for vulnerability because every event waits to be erased, replaced by another event.

I share with others the material world and the opportunities that it gives me. These opportunities are played with and contacted by my sensibility. Sensibility joins me with the world. As a living organism, I experience the material world not organized by categories but composed by intensities, the folds of

interiority and exteriority tinged by colors, sounds, aromas, flavors, textures, emotions, nuances and so on. Sensibility is not solely about differing, othering, alienating and separating, but also about making connections, relations and commitments and, as a consequence, it gives rise to ethics.

## Conclusion

My making breaks through any pre-thought, pre-imagined and pre-configured idea and evolves into experience as a result of sensibility. I follow Deleuze's (2004, p. 171) line of thought: as I am engaged in my work and making something out of something it "is a theme constituted by the components of the event, that is, by the communicating singularities effectively liberated from the limits of individuals and persons."

While making I experience myself in a place of in-between, at a site which is constantly changing and differentiating. Most of the time I work in a state that cannot be turned into any determined attitude, opinion, knowledge or skill that can be articulated afterward but becomes a sort of interrelated thought, emotion and action that finds itself undergoing a kaleidoscopic transformation that throws different facets at possibilities like a prism of light. The accomplished artwork is a fragmented remainder of this transformation, of becoming something.

Experience is not exclusively an experience of something; it is an experience of itself as it is always relational in itself. It is a sensuous appearing of itself. What we have here is the aesthetics of an experience. Here I should mention that Deleuze (2004, pp. 297-298) claims that aesthetics suffers from a dichotomy. According to him, it can, firstly, be identified as the theory of sensibility as the form of possible experience and, secondly, as the building up the theory of art as the reflection of real experience. In this paper, I have deployed Deleuze's thinking to some extent; however, I have tried to reject the separation into real and idea that he illustrates and as he suggests employ and flesh out art as experimenting, as the manifestation of and an inquiry into the singular. What I have tried to discern is that experience is a layout of differences and possibilities oriented by the sensibility of an animated human body in relation to its environment. The key to apprehending artistic making lies in mediating between myself and the work, as the other, and each is to the other both subject and object. Each is unattainable to the other as the unattainable is always present. This mediating, which, as I have discussed here, results in difference, is necessarily creative, as Varto (2013, p. 65) points out: "...precisely, because nothing exists, except confusion and something new taking form."

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