

ART AS A CONTINUAL ARRIVAL OF LIFE WITHIN ONESELF

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Abstract

Tracing the fleeting moments of lived experiences as moments of disclosure is the core of phenomenological philosophy. In a previous research project, where art was brought into everyday workplaces, the author followed her own lived experiences in art. In this article, she illuminates traces of these experiences through short stories and notions which transgress the borders of the true, untrue and absurd. In doing so, these experiences open up events in art as specific spaces of time which don't obey the rhythm of a traditional single working day. The French philosopher and novelist Michel Henry writes that our experiences leave in us traces of energy which need to be given free rein in the culture we live in (2012, pp. 100-102). He continues this theme by remarking that history as an active remembering is a coming back to life, in a sense, which ties it to something other than conservation: it is history as a productive act, and thus it becomes more (Henry 2012, pp. 7-21, pp116-117). Henry claims that art negates any objectivity and that art can provide, as in this text, an escape from boredom, for art has a special meaning: it is a representation of life. "As a representation of life, it can only actually give it as absent, as this *ens imaginarium* in which it is projected and which applies to it", he concludes (Henry 2012, p. 36).

In this article, the author believes that there is no free rein (or at least hardly any) in a culture where we have experiences in art. This becomes visible when researchers try to explore experiences in art which touch the hidden borders of the true, unreal and untrue. In trying to understand this, the author lives this one life she has, writes about it in her notebook, and analyses it through writing and re-writing. As a result, she questions whether it is possible to rely on her own experiences, considering that they are weird, and whether there is something in art which turns these experiences back into something which we can share with others. In the project where she worked as an observing researcher, she learned that communities of people who work together often have a shared history which is based on the members of the community and their shared individual experiences of their work. Following Henry's writing, she claims that life can be understood as a continual arrival within ourselves, and that art as a representation of life can give a new significance to history, which is often invisible but becomes visible in our memory.

This is especially true in cases where some experiences leave strong traces in us which are revealed as absurd.

Keywords: Art, visibility, life, absurdity, imagination, professionalism, phenomenology, concepts of the human being in human-centeredness.

A list of inadequacies in the subject matter

(Critiques from the board of trustees of readers)¹

In this work the author introduces her topic with three short stories, in which she writes about herself in the third person, as “she”. Our hope as the board of trustees of readers is that she will give readers a better introduction to these short stories and a clear reason why she, in most parts of the stories, presents herself in the third person, instead of using the first person. Could it be that she is presenting herself to us as if she were on a stage in front of us, and we find ourselves as the audience or observers? This is at least how it looks to us. For that reason, we want, at this point, to explore this possibility a bit more. However, with this direct question we do not wish to give the impression that we are trying to form any kind of pre-defined steps for the author (or the other readers), as we know that in phenomenological philosophy it is essential to let go and to trust in what comes.

Still, as the board of trustees of readers, we want to mention that, for instance, Erving Goffman writes in his article “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” that “It will be convenient to begin a consideration of performances by [...] looking at the individual’s own belief in the impressions of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself” (Goffman, 1959, p. 47). Goffman also claims that in certain kinds of performances the performer may not be sincere in his/her own acts.

“When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with his beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term ‘sincere’ for individuals who believe in the impressions fostered by their performance” (Goffman, 1959, p. 47).

Most of us readers understood these short stories as descriptions of performances in the way Goffman describes them. However, some of us could also find close connections to the philosophy of the absurd, and to the writings of Albert Camus. In *Outsider (L’Étranger)*, Camus writes about a French Algerian young man who seems to have no emotional connection to his environment. He does not mourn his mother’s death, and ends up in a prison after killing a stranger. It is not until his last moment of life, just before being executed by guillotine that he connects to his environment. He reveals his existential anguish

¹ Please note: this part of the text includes introductions to and explorations of the content. You continue reading at your own risk.

in enormous anger to a priest. In doing so, he argues about the human condition and the meaninglessness of life. (Camus, 2012/1949)

In this article, the author stresses that the text is focused (or at least intended to be so?) on some significant episodes which she experienced during the course of a single day. The author assures us that everything she writes about has actually happened in her own life (but has she actually seen or heard these things?). Furthermore, she claims that she has documented all of these events in her notebooks. However, she does not specify how this documentation of the events was realized. What exactly did she experience? For example, when she obviously did not *see* anything as in the first story, or when the event which she photographed was from a *play*, as in the photo entitled “*Visiting an art workshop at an anonymous workplace*”, or at least so it seems from reading between the lines.

So, as readers of this text we cannot be sure whether we should, or should not, rely on what the author is claiming to have experienced. Or, to put it another way, we are not sure whether this text should be read as if it were fact or fiction. However, it seems that the author has, at least partly, also noticed this failure. She actually names herself the fool - or was it someone else? This is understandable, even though not everyone has doubts about the text.

At the same time, however, it seems for us readers that the author's principal aim was not to generate doubts through her short stories. It seems that she uses the stories to present a desire to proceed in phenomenological writing and in phenomenological description on questions of time, space, and embodied and pedagogical relations. It could be useful for the author to read more closely what Max van Manen has written about this in his book *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, since we believe the author actually writes “against the existentials of temporality, spatiality, corporeality and sociality” as in van Manen (1990, p. 172).

In addition, there are various *other reasons* which make it hard to believe the author: for example, the title of the section “How could I have known it without first being there?” is not adequate. Should it not be written as: “How could I have *not known* it when I had been there?”. Then, a major mistake follows: throughout the whole text she fails to stay consistent in her leading of the reader. So, instead of using *she* (*the author*) the author refers to herself as *a she* (as at the end of the text), and for that reason it seems that she has obviously mostly forgotten who she is and keeps on writing about herself as an *author*. Furthermore, the author seems to be unclear about *what the meaning of reality is*. She continuously mixes up reality in ways where, for instance, *what has been written about does not seem to be true*. At least for the reader it is hard to believe it would be so, and he needs to argue that reality cannot be as the author here claims. At least it does not seem to be credible that the *same person* would be on the Camino (pilgrimage road of St. Jacob in Spain?) and at a university workplace (Aalto University, Helsinki?) *during the same day*. For all these reasons, one can say that although the author writes that she does not want to disturb

(or hurt?) her colleagues (somebody special, or everybody?), she without doubt manages to do so. And so, as the board of trustees of readers we have to conclude that the author is misleading readers into believing that the text could be true. And finally, one more remark from another reader, who is an ex-member of our board of trustees of readers: “that what appears to be there [...] is not there, it is only *as if art were a matter of belief or a religion or something, like poetry* [sic]. For this reason the credibility of the whole text fails. I think it makes no sense in the manner it is written. My friend told me exactly the same story, or at least most parts of it were the same. He too was working as a researcher of arts, although he then ended up doing something else. So, the author is lying. At the very least, it is not a particular story of a singular person. This could happen to anybody!”



Figure 1. Back from the Camino. August 2010 Navarra, Spain.
Photo: Cecilia von Brandenburg.



Figure 2. Visiting an art workshop at an anonymous workplace. May 2012, Southern Finland.
Photo: Cecilia von Brandenburg

How could I have known it without first being there?

Story I (Field notes by CvB August/2010)

The Camino, as this footpath is called, would be labelled with clear yellow arrows. It would be ridiculously easy to follow. It would just be necessary to read a couple of guide books beforehand. “Being there would be safe”, they said. “No more herds of wild dogs, no more thieves”, they continued.

“Use the days well, start when it is still fresh, and don’t, for God’s sake, continue your walk when it is too late. For, in mist or dark conditions, you can face potential dangers. Make the most of the daylight. If it gets dark, you could miss the signs”. This is what they shouted. But it was still all quiet around me.

Only a fool would do otherwise. Only a fool jumps on the Camino with no idea of what will come, without any preparation at all. Instead of asking for advice, this fool just believes in herself, in her dreams. She does not wake up with the sun, but sleeps until midday. She would not awake with a love for the freshness of the morning but with a taste of a dream on her lips. She would not be joining the others when they started their day.

No, she would dream her own dreams until everything turned quiet around her. Not earlier, but then, exactly then, she would wake up, open the door, and take her first steps in the burning heat of the afternoon sun. Alone,

with her dreams gone, she would be there. There she would be with nothing, with nothing other than a burning heat around her. She would be there, in the shadow-less heat. There she would be with no path, and with no signs. There would she be with no sound, nothing. There would be only heat, sweat, all over. She would be alone with the sun drilling through her body.

Believe it or not, I was that fool. I was there. That all happened to me during one single afternoon.

Story II (Field notes by CvB August/2012)

While writing, she was able to sit for hours without lifting her body out of the chair. While writing, she could hear the nice chattering sound of her computer's keyboard. This sound of her writing would spread around the shared open workspace. Although her fingers might not be in their best shape any more, they would still be strong and fast enough to follow her thinking.

And today, her thinking would prove to be particularly quick. She would know it from the effective rhythm of her work: the quicker she typed, the nicer the sound turned out to be. And so, in this way her writing would go on, and on, the whole morning. It would continue without break for hours in a quick and steady rhythm. It would be the sound of her work, for her work would have this sound.

Finally, she would pause, reach one more button, and let the printer spew out a strikingly high pile of paper. She would then sigh with relief and collect the papers in a pile. "Brilliant", she would say to herself, nod her head and sink deeper into the office chair. "It is almost lunchtime".

The other researchers appeared to still be continuing their work. She would then reach for a dust cloth and wipe her keypad with careful, smooth movements, almost as if she wanted to thank it for a good work performance. That specific keyboard was indeed very dear to her. It had been in her personal possession for at least six years. "The years have passed by so quickly. But the keypad is still working well", she would say to herself. "And one doesn't seem to notice the time-worn look", she would add. It would appear to be full of small scratches and fingerprints, traces of her touch. And still, she would sigh again, and admire how practical it had been to use. She would put her glasses on for a closer look, to see that each of the buttons were still in their own niches. They would be round and exactly the right size for her fingers. She would try to type the niche marked K with her front finger. It would follow her command as willingly as before. It would go down as if it were making a nice quick curtsy. Mr. K would start a nice dance with his finger. "Is it Mr. K or Mrs. K whom I have the pleasure of meeting?" she would ask herself. With a light sniffing voice she would laugh silently at her little joke, and let her hand descend to her thigh under the table. She would then give a quick glance at the clock on the wall. It was finally lunch time.

At the lunch table, she would ask her workmates if they had had a good morning in their research work. She would know without asking that they would all make their research in their own, unique ways. She would then casually mention to her workmates that the text she was working on today seemed to have the potential to become something, or that she, at least, hoped it would. The others did not seem to be interested in hearing about this.

As earlier, they had their heads bent down. She would notice that all of them were busy writing text messages on their mobile phones. She too would grab her phone, and give it a quick check. Unfortunately, she did not find anything that would interest her. While still sitting there alone with the others, she would then notice that it had become a bit uncomfortable, but also that she was unsure of what actually had happened at that moment and earlier. "How come no one seems to be interested in talking to me?", she would ask herself. Even worse, no one seemed to want to bother to even answer the question she had just formulated. The quietness would seem to go on and seem to raise a mountain of questions within her. Was it because it was she who had asked the question that the others had not wanted to talk? Didn't they need to talk? Were they annoyed with her? Or, were they just fed up with sharing the same work space with her? She would then notice a small drop almost falling from her nose. After all, she was a nice workmate, wasn't she?

After a long period of thinking it over, she would finally decide to pose a direct question. "Did my keypad disturb you", she would ask in a low voice. "I mean, it is loud, isn't it", she would continue. "I just happened to have a good morning in my research writing, which doesn't happen often... but, of course, I can change the keyboard now, after lunch, if you would like", she would continue talking in a whisper. The others would finally lift their heads from their phones and look at her. Would she be able to see the empty amazement in their eyes?

Believe it or not, the person who used the keyboard was me. I was there. That all happened to me during one morning.

Story III (Field notes by CvB August/2012)

Her actual workday started when she would wake up in the morning and open her eyes. Then she would remember her work. Her workday would continue all the time she travelled from home to the open-office-style research space. That is where she would perform her writing tasks. She would then work while eating lunch and talking to her workmates. She would also work on the way from the research space to an unfamiliar workplace, where she would work as an investigator for a research project. On the way to that other workplace during that particular day she would not know beforehand that it would be a significant day for her. She would just be on the way to that workplace to do her work as an investigator in the project. She would be going after lunch, and she knew only the name of that workplace but not much else, and it would not help her to think that it would somehow be better if she knew more than just a name.

For her, doing art had always meant being burdened in herself, reaching an intimate self through an inner gesture, which stayed invisible to others. The birth of colour on her canvas had occurred as a visible brother of an invisible inner gesture and the energy it carried. Perhaps it was for this reason she was so very confused when she visited that specific workplace during that afternoon of the same day.

Upon arriving at that workplace, she was still deep in her thoughts. What had happened during the lunch with her colleagues had totally occupied her mind. She opened the door and entered the room. The next moment she was surprised to find herself in the middle of a performance, led by two artists with at least ten women participating. These women were all talking (or shouting?) at the same time. The language they used seemed to be some slang form of Swedish, which she could hardly understand. Part of what they were talking about apparently had something to do with a play she remembered having seen somewhere before. While continuing their talk without a pause, the group of women was at the same time putting on strange clothing in an exceedingly excited manner. Before she had a chance to ask anything, they all disappeared somewhere into the cellar. So, she plunged in after them towards the noise. After following many empty corridors, she ended up in the middle of a play she didn't understand at all.

Believe it or not, the person who got scared of art was me. I was there. That all happened to me during one single day.

With these thoughts still in mind

“Afterthoughts are what I call the notes you feel impelled to write in your fieldwork diary a few hours after a diary entry. Naturally, I am talking of handwriting, an ancient technology that allows the pen to slip to side away from forming letters and words to form pictures and back again to words” (Taussig 2011, p. 141).

As the author of the article, I would like to thank the board of trustees of readers for their effort to get my text ready for print. The board wished that I would open up some unclear perspectives in this later part of my text. Some doubt has been cast upon the use of the third person in my short stories. I could mention here that it was indeed meaningful for me to create distance from myself in the language I used. However, this was not intentional when I first started to write my notes in the fieldwork. Later, I tried to change to first person, but noticed that it was more interesting for me to write and moreover to read my own writings as a she. Michael Taussig writes:

“For finding a prose form that is value neutral with respects and belief of the Other! How on earth can we create a language that can do justice to the passions and nuances of the Other,

while at the same time refraining from revealing something absolutely crucial about one's own life-world, prejudices, fears, values and enthusiasms?" (Taussig 1999, p. 75).

My notebooks are all handwritten. A laptop would definitely not have been more practical for my notebook-writing actions. No, the noise of a keyboard would have disturbed me, and with a keyboard I wouldn't be able to make my quick drawings, which transgress the borders of pages. My notebooks have ridden with me on shaky buses and local trains when I have travelled to various workplaces, where I have followed artists working with employees. For me, writing in notebooks was like I was watching myself in a performance. There, in the performance, I would be myself doing something, somewhere, in a certain place or a certain space of time. I was doing a job that needed to be done, and in addition there would be someone else watching me performing it. I would be performing this job for someone who, in fact, only needed me as a tool for a dialogue. What makes the job so absurd is that my very best efforts do not bring any end to this dialogue. This resembles Samuel Becket's absurd play "Endgame" (1957). As in "Endgame", my research work is performed in the stories as unreal; it is a kind of chess game which does not have a winner. What remains is an escaped servant without his biscuit (food), a master who cannot see or move, and two other characters (the parents of the master) who have been thrown away as garbage.

Mikel Dufrenne describes aesthetics as arising from the direct experience of the sensuous. The concept of man can help us to understand the uniqueness of an aesthetic experience, and connects it to ethics. Aesthetic perception is individual, and connects us to nature. Man cannot be understood without a connection to nature and sensuous experience. We can only talk of a person in a way in which he/she is described as a unique self, and as an irreplaceable individual in a unique relationship with the world. Dufrenne invites us to picture for ourselves how the birth of visual perception tears off invisibility. A painter wants to surprise us with the moment in which objects becomes creatures and the world is the world. Dufrenne argues that the painter is not interested in what part of this follows the influence of language or culture. In this way, the aesthetic experience represents innocence and harmony with the world. (1987, pp. 21-72)

I would like to thank the board of trustees of readers for their notion that I should further study the four existentials: lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived relationships with others (van Manen 1990, p. 172). For me, it was important to read it afterwards, for otherwise it would not have left me free to write how I saw everything. Now, afterwards, it seems that the stories indeed open various existential spaces. But that happened accidentally or intuitively, not on purpose. Van Manen writes that phenomenology studies the immediate experience before first conceptualizing it. It asks: "What is this or that kind of experience like?", and in this manner phenomenology is keen to understand what is significant for the human being. However, he reminds us that "phenomenological reflection on experiences is not introspective but retrospective". For it is not possible to create any distance and to reflect on lived experience as you are at that very moment experiencing it, living through it. Max van

Manen claims that phenomenology is not unique in its ability to provide the opportunity to study experiences, and in fact many other research disciplines struggle with the same theme. Thus, phenomenology alone cannot be used to prove that art is good for one's health, or good at improving skills or competences at work. It is not able to prove states or quantities. What is unique for phenomenology is its way of making it possible to ask the meaning of an experience. (van Manen 1990, pp. 21-23)

For that reason, I find it important to write and to re-write about my own experiences in my fieldwork. I use experimental writing in analysing the stories of my fieldwork in the project. In this method, the writing proceeds through writing and rewriting. Writing is here understood as a way of discovery (Richardson 1998, pp. 91-95).

Michel Henry claims that life can be understood as a continual arrival within ourselves, and that art as a representation of life can give a new significance to history, which is often invisible, but becomes visible in our memory. This happens especially in cases where some experiences leave strong traces in us. History as an active remembering is a coming back to life, in a sense. An active remembering ties life to something other than *conservation*. For this reason, it is a type of *productive act*, and thus a *becoming more*. (Henry 2012, pp. 34, 116) I believe that this is significant, for in remembering what has happened it is possible to step back into life and make history visible through art.

At this very final point of the text, I would like to once more thank the board of trustees of readers for their valuable comments on my text. They have indeed helped me to find my position in this polyphonic research field of art and professional life. But many things are still hidden from me. Therefore, I cannot do much more than remain here, contemplate my singular self, and embrace and enjoy life.

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