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EXPANSIVE CREATIVITY IS BEYOND THE VISUAL¹

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EXPANSIVE CREATIVITY IS BEYOND THE VISUAL

Expansive creativity starts with how we navigate language, in its plethora of manifestations and contexts. Increasing hegemonic and unwieldy systems of imposed synchronicities and rationality abound leading to our submergence as opposed to emergence as human beings far less creatives.

Symptomatic of an age of rapid obsolescence and distraction, we neither know nor care what is beyond the surface of things. Day to day relations with materials and things is increasingly one of attachment and estrangement, determined by function, enslaved in conformity. Learning to be innovative is driven by the desire to adapt to new demands, whilst simultaneously being pulled apart in that meeting with unknown challenges that transformation of language and being brings about as a result.

Expansive creativity denotes an event, not simply an object of matter, but a phenomenological field no less of absence and withdrawal, from place, actions - in effect, resulting in a site that is estranged from all forms, for maker and viewer, student, and teacher alike. This is to say, artworks and by that, creativity may be in, but not of the world.

This is the paradox of arts materiality being as it is between the physical, intimate, and sensed and that effervescence of the visual, virtual, and distant. Paradoxical, because in making this thing called 'art' we are concealing something by default. Indeed, that creative drive is not a Heideggerian project, in that our survival is not dependent upon it. Instead, it a means to immerse in that being-for-its-self.

This concealment may be where we can say teaching and dialogue traverse, akin to a gap, of the kind discussed in *art and experience* by John Dewey. An invisibility indicative of that expansive actual and implosive virtual and the distinction between the aesthetic object and the experience of the work. Assemblages of an expressed world, not structures of a predetermined one, symptomatic of that incessant state of a coming into appearance. As such like us, in a condition of midst. Virtual in part by the reflective knowledge that brings about that actuality, whilst also symptomatic of an ongoing state of becoming, distinct from that virtuality. As embodied beings, we are between what Levinas termed the living contradiction. Simultaneously we traverse a past, present future trajectory indicative of intentioned creative aims, as well as a future, present, past orientation corresponding to the will of our consciousness to express ourselves. This is because our consciousness is always ahead of us, in contrast to the causality of the former which works from a past as it becomes aims for our future. The pre-reflective state is already engaged with that raw facticity of the work and world, and the making of that world within us.

Hence whilst it is not non-visible, any attempt to make it visual results in that concealment of its *dasein*-which Heidegger referred to as the clearing.

The clearing is when the art/work unconceals its being. In this, all seeing is elemental first and constituted as things second, after all the intellect only defines the work and its contents as objects or by function.

As such making art is an event of materiality consumed by action, in this the pre reflective brings into appearance that which is the interiority of the interior. M/Ponty stated the visible is pregnant with the invisible. By that, artworks are not simply Heideggerian projects of life or striving, but instead thresholds between the what-is, and the possible akin to a dasein. In doing so, allowing appearance and reality to co-compose, and subsequently emerge from within, in that act of disclosure.

Artworks if we are to teach what they are and critique that level of innovation, we can't assume we are all talking about the same thing, nor assume we're all going to interpret or critique it in the same manner. Husserl said, the voice that will do that interpreting is outside the empirical straight jacket, but speech reduces it to signifying content. However, in that discourse, language also discloses the other, indeed without the other, there would be no exteriority to seek to unconceal. For creativity to engage in this unconcealment, is to unlearn the way we see and seek to embrace that sensorial field that is not Infront of us, but all around us.

Artworks are not invisible, but meaning is. By their aesthetic appearance, artworks make that state of unconcealment- of what is sensed, available to us. In this the sensorial field is the being of the work as the thing- in- itself, all the while that which we encounter with our eyes serves only to register the symbolic and make more distant the being or that worlding of the work. In this the real is not reproducing the world but illuminating the real by unveiling its world in isolation. In not defining the work, its being is inexhaustible.

With so much appearing there is so much being, creative innovation is instead a shared not assumed intersubjectivity to what is possible. Shifting from language as a production of surfaces, to an opening up of that corporeal glue between viewer and maker,

creative production is spread across the visual, the physical and the mental. The visual the thing we see, the physical the experience we sense, and the mental, that meandering under, below or within that thingness estranged as it is from the actuality of time and space, in our will of consciousness. According to Husserl, the world is not what I think but what I live through.

Unless we appreciate these frameworks, we may be stating what creativity is not, as such merely teaching / acknowledging what we know, and not conceding the sensorial field that transcends that seeing. It is both in historical time and space by our perception but also in its own unique time and space by that awareness of its dasein in-itself-for-us. In this there is a freedom through that immersion in the creative event that manifest to each of us as unique.

In representation, we eliminate the body that conceived the work from the centre from which it preceded- but being as we are embodied, means to be at the centre of world- after all senses are not exposed to the world, but the body is and by default the art we make also.

Mikel Dufrenne stated creative work is a "a coalescence of sensuous elements".² Instead of hanging meanings and implied narratives upon artworks, it may help to reclaim that hapticity instead of intensifying that ongoing distancing.

Beyond its material strata "the genuine work of art spares us the expense of (or need of) an exuberant imagination" said Dufrenne.³ In place of understanding and reception of the work, we can engage in feeling our way in that "reciprocity of two depths...the depth of the expressed world and the depth of the beholder".⁴ The very means we employ to comprehend the work, may be the means that eludes it from us. From reality to depth is when the actual (illusion of the work) disperses and the dis-illusion, where one's evidencing becomes the acquisition of another.

Merleau-Ponty said “It would be naïve to seek solidity in the heaven of ideas, or in the fond(ground) of meaning, it is neither above nor below appearances but at their joints”.⁵ This is that interior envelope as he called it, between an interior we sense and an inexhaustible depth of surface that we see. In this situation, we are wrestling with a presumption that when we talk about art and what it means to create, we are all talking about the same thing. In fact, we either abstract it or assume we all see the same way. In doing so, that encounter with the work in-itself-for-us escapes us.

If it is invisible, how do we know it’s truly innovative, far less any good? It may be to what degree it activates inner discordance, its capacity for amplification and rupture. American artist Barry La Va said “if you aren’t making art that challenges you, you aren’t making art that challenges anyone”.⁶ In this it is an emergence, intensification, and resonance of that thing in-itself. We are connecting to that thingness and withdrawing from its appearance simultaneously.

This otherness is beyond appearance, but not outside the work but that encounter with its interior being in that state of becoming. In the presence of an artwork, it is the same object to all who gaze upon it, but its content can never be so. Existing as we do, in unique positions in time and space, the art object we perceive is not the content that overflows it that we experience.

In its emergent real, that indeterminate dialogue between artist and student is where invisibility is visibility. This is to say, between the infinite nature of learning and innovation with regard to ideas, that synergy as new realities form. Beyond those conflicts of perception or hegemonies of interpretation, this realisation of instability can ascend, instead of a broader “ephemerality masquerading as stability”.⁷ When we produce art, we co-create, between a pre-reflective situation of art’s raw facticity, and the application of artistic languages and methodologies which may conceal it.

Being innovative is rhizomic but also paradoxical, beyond knowledge at that interspace between past and future that is present through its dispersal. Indeed, as Levinas suggests this “non representability is the surplus of the lived body over the representation of it”⁸ as the creative potential of other is where one set of assemblage uniforms and another emerges in that reterritorialization and future forming that result from that creative production.

This inchoate state is that opening up to an expansive creativity whereby a concealment (this is to say - a consciousness of the real) occurs alongside a withdrawal from that which was not (i.e. Representation). This we shall say is an actuality akin to an inverted magic trick. The rabbit won’t be pulled out of the magician’s hat, because it was there all along, if only we would stop looking for it.

OF PERFORMANCE, TEACHING AND NOT KNOWING

Teaching students as well as researching and writing about performance art leave the academic and teacher able to know and discuss no more than a small proportion of the original artworks. Most of the germinal performances of the 60s and 70s have left just a handful of images and limited descriptions. Theorists such as Cindy Nemsser and Peggy Phelan have pointed out the ontological problem posed by a documenting of performance that is opposed to the nature of the medium itself, while Amelia Jones and Philip Auslander have suggested that acts of looking at the photographs of performances are “phenomenological experiences in their own right, and are not tied to an objective originary experience”.⁹

Keeping these theoretical elements in mind, the images documenting any performance that are circulated are limited and carefully chosen and edited by the artists. The descriptions of the actions too are sometimes very limited and often do not record in any detail crucial aspects: how the performer behaved, the reaction of the audience and the counter-reaction of the performer to the audience. The accounts by the artists are carefully crafted to convey a specific meaning and to offer us a specific interpretation of the work.

As pointed out by Santone, some media-based art forms are preserved by performative documentation that is meant to be replayed or reread.¹⁰

This paper will discuss on the basis of the author's own teaching (and research) experience and related theory, some of the challenges of presenting performance art to students. In my experience, this implies to some extent filling in the gaps left by the paucity of documentation and creating a narration on the basis of a narration. Teaching performance art history from the author's perspective can be depicted as an exercise that fills the gaps in the unknown by necessarily using a degree of imagination (even if relatively very small), with the aim of evoking a series of moments, to capture their aura. A storytelling that seeks to engage, to enable students to make what is in the end the same leap of the imagination. To fill that gap in knowledge, that gap in experience. A narration that needs to be grounded and to acknowledge (to oneself and openly to the students) this impossibility of knowing. That it is of the teacher and students, of course, at different levels – even at the risk of placing the teachers in the eyes of some of the students in a relative position of fragility.

A very interesting example of the challenges of teaching (and of course researching) performance art is provided by *Action Pants: Genital Panic* by VALIE EXPORT. The action was devised by the artist in a *kino* in Munich in 1968. No documentation was captured and to date no witnesses or audience accounts have been found. The event was not publicised beforehand, therefore no audience attended. What survives are simply several different accounts by the artist herself, following the action. If this kind of performance with its rejection of documentation could be considered the epitome of performance, adhering to those elements of ephemerality that Nemsser and Phelan outlined, to date there is no absolute certainty that the event ever happened. A photo staged the year after (1969) and captured by Peter Hassmann, conveys some elements of the artist's narrations as to how the performance might have unfolded.¹¹

In the image, we can see the artist sitting on a bench, her legs apart to expose her nudity with crotchless pants, and a shotgun. The artist emulates a posture that is usually associated with men. Besides the hint that the action included these elements, nothing really tells us much about how the performance developed. The image is static (despite the title), and no context or audience can be seen.

In some accounts VALIE EXPORT says that she went to a porn cinema where there were some filmmakers projecting their work, and her displaying her body parts lead them to leave. Other accounts involve a shotgun and the offer of sex.¹²

From the author's experience, while discussing the piece with students, the first step is acknowledging its status: the lack of documentation and the element of the unknown.

A focus on the words in the description might allow to evoke the 'aura' of the original event, its uniqueness by virtue of its having existed at a certain moment in space and time. Benjamin wrote: "Words, too, can have an aura of their own This is how Karl Kraus described it: "the closer one looks at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back."¹³

We could doubtless argue that VALIE EXPORT's action is an extreme case, but a similar situation applies to much performance art and the accounts available are in any case limited.

The need to understand embodiment and the "lived experience of the body" when attempting to grasp a key element in performance, as noted by Shusterman¹⁴ and confirmed by countless examples,¹⁵ leaves many who research – and, indeed, many who teach about performance - in the dark. Therefore, from the author's perspective, it is crucial that we incorporate this acknowledgement of the impossibility of knowing to some degree and the lived experience.

In the wake of new research about performance¹⁶ and – we could assume - as a strategy to confront this unknown, there has been a tendency over the past twenty years to adopt re-enactment. We could argue that this strategy could have the aim or the ambition to attain a glimpse of the embodiment and of that

unknown. A re-enactment, though, will always be different from what originally happened, a different experience: sometimes a different performer (and we could argue that although the performer might through the passing of time have changed to a certain degree), a difference audience, and therefore especially for participatory work or works that involve an audience at some level it might give rise to a totally different event. Nonetheless, from the author's perspective, it might provide useful insight into the original event and help to grasp something of that unknown.

It is interesting to notice that *Genital Panic* was one of the performance pieces selected and re-enacted by Marina Abramović in her famous exhibition and performance series *Seven Easy Pieces*.¹⁷ At the time Abramović - who became in this case a "researcher of performance art's history"¹⁸ - complained about the lack of documentation for that specific piece. In any case, instead of re-performing a recollection or narration of the performance, Abramović engaged with the mentioned image of the poster and activated some specific elements and themes it sought to convey.¹⁹

Another issue is raised by performances documented by the camera which provide an illusion of knowing it all, while leaving much unknown, out of shot. And that can apply even to performance to camera.

In a re-enactment of *Doppelgänger* (1979-81, Fig. 1) a performance to camera by Elaine Shemilt curated by Leuzzi, precisely this occurred. The artist was able to remember what was behind the camera through the rehearsals in preparation for the event.²⁰ The initial sequence in the work was made possible by a monitor with feedback that reflected the image of the artist on the mirror where Shemilt was making her own portrait: which provided a precious guideline for the creating of the image. Before that moment, although interviewed several times, in her accounts of the event Shemilt had been missing a major element.

This was a pivotal moment for the author, and one that has informed her practice-based research method. In other words, she came to realise that there was a measure of the unknown even when the event was recorded.



Figure 1. Elaine Shemilt, *Doppelgänger Redux*, Nunnery Gallery, Bow Arts, London, 2016. Courtesy of the artist. Photo Courtesy Orlando Myxx.

Teaching performance in the 70s, an interesting point is comparing the actions of artists such as Marina Abramović & Ulay, Gilbert & George, VALIE EXPORT and Chris Burden to the re-enactments on *Second Life* by Italian artists Eva and Franco Mattes (2007-2010). With their videos the latter seem to show so much more - sometimes - than the few images available from the original pieces. And yet at that point another part of the unknown surfaces: the experience of a performance through an avatar, a virtual body. Made of code that we cannot see and therefore that remains to us unknown. Yet again something that talks about an experience that might be unfamiliar to my audience: the building of a virtual body, an identity and experience of a sociality that differs from that of the real body. In this capacity, although it might seem at first glance to be all there, the work lays bare a quantity of the unknown to most people. The decision to choose Marina or Ulay in the re-enactment of *Imponderabilia* (few anecdotal accounts of the 1977 original are available²¹), Eva or Franco, remains unknown, both in the real and in the virtual world. Or the experience of seeing someone getting shot. The sound of the bullet leaving the barrel of the gun and exploding in the air. The smell of the gunpowder. Or the sound in a virtual space of an element made up of intangible pixels that has no victim but yet is visually compelling as it retains an element of surprise.

No matter how many re-enactments, the original will always remain unknown to some degree. And an agency – the status of which I must acknowledge – of not knowing.

NOTES

- ¹ The first section of this paper was authored by Greig Burgoyne. The second section was authored by Laura Leuzzi.
- ² Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 13.
- ³ Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* 366.
- ⁴ Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* 483.
- ⁵ Maurice-Merleau Ponty, *The visible and the invisible followed by working notes* (Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1968), 168
- ⁶ Ingrid Schaffner, *Accumulated vision and violence, Barry La Va*, (Philadelphia: Institute of contemporary art, University of Pennsylvania, 2005), 83.
- ⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space* (Victoria Australia; Oxford Massachusetts USA: Blackwell publishing, 1991), 309.
- ⁸ James R. Mensch, *Levinas's Existential analytic* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press Evanston, 2015), 43.
- ⁹ Michael J.H. Woolley, "Documenting performance art: documentation in practice," *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 10:1, 48-66, (2014): 50, accessed January, 23, 2024, doi: 10.1080/14794713.2014.912501
- ¹⁰ Jessica Santone, "Marina Abramović's 'Seven Easy Pieces': Critical Documentation Strategies for Preserving Art's History," *Leonardo* 41, no. 2 (2008): 147–52, accessed January, 23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20206555>.
- ¹¹ See for example R. Askey, "VALIE EXPORT," *High Performance* 4:1 (Spring 1981); Elizabeth Manchester, "VALIE EXPORT, Action Pants: Genital Panic, 1969," *Tate*, 2007, accessed January 23, 2014, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/export-action-pants-genital-panic-p79233>
- ¹² Askey, "VALIE EXPORT", 80.
- ¹³ Michelle Ty, *On Self-Forgetting: Receptivity and the Inhuman Encounter in the Modernist Moment*, thesis, UC Berkley University of California, 2016: 48-49, accessed January 23, 2014, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3hs6637j>
- ¹⁴ Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).
- ¹⁵ Bryan S. Turner, "Introduction – Bodily Performance: On Aura and Reproducibility," *Body & Society* 11:4, (2005), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X050>
- ¹⁶ Domenico Quaranta, "RE:akt! Things That Happen Twice", in A. Caronia, J. Janša, D. Quaranta, eds., *RE:akt! Reconstruction, Re-enactment, Re-reporting* (Brescia: FPeditions 2009), 45.
- ¹⁷ Marina Abramović, Attilio Maranzano, Babette Mangolte, *Marina Abramović: 7 easy pieces* (Milano: Charta, 2007).
- ¹⁸ Jessica Santone, "Marina Abramović's 'Seven Easy Pieces', 148.
- ¹⁹ Santone, "Marina Abramović's".
- ²⁰ Laura Leuzzi, "Re-enacting Early Video Art as a Research Tool for Media Art Histories", in Oliver Grau, O., Janina Hoth, Evelin Wandl-Vogt, eds., *Digital Art through the Looking Glass: New strategies for archiving, collecting and preserving in Digital* (Krems: Danube University Press, 2019), 169-172.
- ²¹ Laura Leuzzi, "Interview with Renato Barilli", *Rewind.ac.uk*, 2011, accessed January 23, 2024 <https://rewind.ac.uk/people/renato-barilli/>

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