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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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***“A Real Fact is a Fact of Aesthetic Experience.” On the Actuality of  
Whitehead's Aesthetics.***

Eva Schürmann<sup>104</sup>

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ABSTRACT. Although the British-American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead did not formulate an explicit aesthetics, his basic conceptualization opens up many points of contact with contemporary debates on aesthetic questions. His process ontology has rightly been called cosmopsychology because it recognizes feelings and perceptions as a central dimension of reality. This emphasis on the cosmological significance of the aesthetic in general and of the qualitative experience of value in particular makes him an aesthetician of substance, because he understands all that is real as bound to value and sense perception. My paper will address the relevance of Whitehead's thought with respect to contemporary art. I will demonstrate the relevance of his key concepts to some lines of development in the history of modern art, which I argue is increasingly concerned with the realization of the qualitative experience of presence.

## **1. Introduction**

Although Alfred North Whitehead did not formulate an explicit aesthetic theory throughout his life, the basic conceptuality of his thought with its focus on actual experiences is profoundly aesthetic. Consider, for example, statements such as, “an actual fact is a fact of aesthetic experience.” (RM, 101 f) or: “all order is ... aesthetic order” (RM, 91 f). Focusing on activities of prehension and feeling, his process ontology has also been called a “cosmopsychology”<sup>105</sup> because it recognizes in sensations and perceptions the central determination of everything real.

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<sup>105</sup> Wiehl, 2005, pp. 124-157.

In this respect, his theory is aesthetic primarily in the etymological sense of aesthetic: sensations and experiences are the essential capacities of actual entities that can become conscious perceptual reality in varying degrees.

Crucial to the aesthetic dimension, however, is that these qualities of sensation and apprehension are realizations of worth: “‘Value’ is the word I use for the intrinsic reality of an event” (SMW, 89). Perceptual activities are such, by virtue of which reality is indeed actualized. Thus, the aesthetic-aesthetic gets its central status within Whiteheadian thinking. The cosmological significance of sensory experience in general and of the qualitative apprehension of a value in particular make his theory an aesthetic one, because everything real is bound to sensory perception and value.

In the first part of my paper, I will show that Whitehead’s unwritten aesthetics is an aesthetic theory of the qualitative experience of concrete and sensuously realized contrasts. For this purpose, I deliberately pick out some core ideas from various works that can be found in different phases of his work, whereby I am not concerned with their context in detail, but rather with the leitmotif continuity of central basic provisions of his thought. These include the terms “concrete”, “contrast”, and the concept of exemplification.

In the second step, the reconstruction of these basic concepts enables me to establish connections to modern art, in particular to the history of modern painting up to Concrete Art. It will become apparent that Whitehead’s concepts of creative contrasts and exemplifying actualization correspond to a central line of development in modernist painting, which is increasingly concerned with the realization of presence rather than with symbolic representation.

Finally, in the third part, we will see how Whitehead’s thought construct is also connectable to contemporary performance art. Methodically exemplifying this, I will deal with an artistic work by Marina Abramović, which thematizes the sensual and social experience of looking and being looked at. According to my thesis, this is a further development of the above-mentioned tendency towards the present realization of aesthetic experiences. Increasingly, art urges to actualization, (i.e., intersubjective realization) and insists on offering actual experiences of real events rather than symbolic stand-ins that pretend to be something they are not. This emphasis on real presence can be conceptualized with Whitehead’s understanding of reality, which conceives of a sense of reality as a ‘gift of aesthetic signification’: “the sense of

being one actuality in a world of actualities” (MT, 120). Reality according to Whitehead is actualized self-realization.

## 2. Why Whitehead’s thinking is aesthetic

Let us recall that “‘Feeling’ is used as a synonym for ‘actuality’” (RM, 91), and such actuality is originally value: “Value is inherent in actuality itself” (RM, 87); both thoughts are intertwined. Feeling is neither identical with ‘sensation’, nor with ‘emotion’, it is rather the realization of a sensing that refers to causal efficacy of an actual occasion and is of value for an actual entity. In Whitehead’s thinking, activities such as sensing, perceiving, and experiencing are understood from the outset neither as purely sensory grasping nor as cognitive conceptualizing, but as gradations in between or as transitional forms of psychophysical bipolarity. Reality does not simply exist in the form of substances identical with itself, but only as a constantly changing process of unfolding and interweaving of possible forms (eternal objects) and realized events (actual entities and societies of them).

The activities of feeling or prehending are not thought of as conceptless sensing, but as actualization of real presence. When I feel the velvety of the cloth, I am doing something other than remembering or expecting its qualities, although past experiences or the orientation towards the future may have something to contribute. But, the point of feeling is the realization of the present moment in its particular quality, independent of ideas or concepts. There is thus an existential meaning of the aesthetic that is not something that is added ornamentally or optionally, but something that realises values and actuality.

Although his process ontology takes into account the scientific biological and physicochemical insights by never fading out that in the 'simultaneous universe' every reality consists of innumerable simultaneously running and interacting events on atomic and molecular, biochemical and electromagnetic level, he is under no circumstances willing to disregard the first-personal and qualitative experiential reality. Not only do experiential facts belong to reality as well as facts of any other kind, we know about all facts only by means of experiences, from which we consequently should never make abstractions.<sup>106</sup> It is such

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<sup>106</sup> Whitehead goes so far as to say “that apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing” (PR, 252). This

abstractions that Whitehead criticizes above all others, both in the natural sciences and in the history of philosophy.

Consequently, reality does not only consist of objectively measurable facts, which would have secondary qualities besides, as for example in Locke. Rather, the whole distinction between primary and secondary qualities is misguided by the fallacy of spatiotemporal localization and fixation of qualities. It is a fallacy that prioritizes qualities such as mass or weight of a body, for example, over other qualities such as color or smell, so that the latter become suspiciously doubted and supposedly merely subjective perceptual impressions. Such conception of being, however, abstracts from any concrete experience and individual realization of what is ontologically the case.

Only this creates an explanatory gap between our widespread scientific-naturalistic worldview on the one hand and our human self-understanding as rational, historical and socio-cultural living beings on the other hand, which Whitehead criticizes as bifurcation of nature.

This theory which I am arguing against is to bifurcate nature into two divisions, namely into the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of this awareness. The nature which is apprehended in the fact hold within it the greenness of trees, the song of the birds, the warmth of the sun, the hardness of the chairs, and the feel of the velvet. The nature which is the cause of awareness is the conjectured system of molecules and electrons which so affects the mind as to produce the awareness of apparent nature. The meeting point of these two natures is the mind, the causal nature being influent and the apparent nature being effluent (CM, 30 f).

The philosophy of the organic<sup>107</sup>, on the other hand, opens up a completely different theoretical framework. In this, there exist real individuals and events, which possess psycho-physical poles and which stand with each other in internally-determined and externally-creative relations. They can prehend each other and experience, feel and perceive each other in different gradations. “I [...] use the word ‘prehension’ for uncognitive apprehension: by this I mean apprehension which may or may not be cognitive” (SMW, 86). Prehension with consciousness, meanwhile, is perception: “Perception is simply the cognition of prehensive unification, or

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obviously sounds a lot like Berkeley, but I do not want to discuss this relation here, because in the present context it is sufficient to focus on the central importance of the experiential dimension as addressed in preheating, perceiving, and feeling.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Koutroufinis, 2019.



more shortly, perception is cognition of prehension” (SMW, 69 f).

The actual world is a manifold of prehensions; and a ‘prehension’ is a ‘prehensive occasion’; and a prehensive occasion is the most concrete finite entity, conceived as what it is in itself and for itself, and not as from its aspect in the essence of another such occasion (SMW, 105).

The essential capacity of actual entities consists in being able to make or have experiences that can become cognitively conscious to varying degrees, but which are already realizing qualities of feeling and sensing at the elementary level.

At each moment, a sensory perception encounters a different ‘region’ of reality that can be prehended according to the presuppositions of their respective organisms.

Instead of opening an inexplicable gap between the subjective and the objective, it has to be asked and clarified how and why an organism and its environment can be attuned to each other in such a way that its perception corresponds to reality: “the animal body and the external regions are [...] attuned together, so that under normal circumstances, the appearances conform to natures within the regions” (AI, 251).

Sensory perceptions are able to realize specifically differential realities. They are determined to a large extent by what an organism can grasp of what takes place in the simultaneous present reality region. For example, bats, according to their organic abilities to navigate by means of ultrasound, can perceive completely different aspects of a given environment than, for instance, dogs, whose sense of smell makes all possible information accessible to them. Consequently, what is ‘objectively given’ in an environment depends on the realization abilities of prehended living beings.

With such emphasis on the ineluctably realizing constituent power of apprehension and perception for all that exists, Whitehead's thought is thus, as I hope I have made plausible, profoundly aesthetic. All reality exists only in the mode of the possibility of an act of apprehension. Therefore, one cannot abstract from its relation to the prehended without arriving at a false, namely inconcrete, concept of reality.

Let us now turn to these dimensions of the possible and the concrete in more detail.

An important basic feature of Whitehead's ontology consists in the existential status it assigns to the possible. Reality is not par excellence everything that ‘exists’, but the respective, temporary actualization of possibilities. Beside the real individual beings there exist timeless

objects (eternal objects), eternal forms or indeterminate possibilities of what is actualized in a respectively determined and individuated way. Eternal objects are not, like Plato’s ideas, hierarchically superior, but a dimension of possibility of which it is open in which way it is actualized. “The realm of forms is the realm of potentiality” (MT, 69). Eternal objects are manifold potentialities of realization, comparable therein to variables in mathematics, which stand in for general, but also quite definite possibilities.

Indeterminate possibilities become concrete realities only when and because they are perceptively realized by certain individualities. Possibilities belong ontologically to existence as much as physical things do; they exist, but they become real only by concretization. They exist insofar as they can be realized by actual entities. Eternal objects or general forms are like transcendental possibilities that become real only through concretion. Concretion, in this respect, is a process by which things first actually become what they are because of the way they are realized in an actual act of experience. Reality consists in the actualization of universal forms through concrete particulars. This concept of the concrete is etymologically derived from the Latin ‘concrecere’, which means ‘to grow together’, but also to condense, to emerge, to form. Concretus, the past participle of concrecere, literally means that which has been condensed, that which has grown together.

Hence the central meaning of the term “contrast”<sup>108</sup>. What grows together in concrete contrasts is the sensual experience of a sensually perceptible phenomenon. Actual perceptual and sensory experience is real only by virtue of its realization in concrete patterns of eternal objects – that is, universal forms as well as possibilities – and actual occasions here and now. Contrasts combine universal and particular qualities in embedded situations. In each case, only the actualized patterns into which contrast experiences coalesce from the stream of potentialities are concrete.

Concretization thus means a process of taking shape or actively shaping, through which inexhaustible possibilities of variation become certain realities of experience. Such experiencing is not value-neutral: “Our enjoyment of actuality is a realization of worth, good or bad. It is a value experience. Its basic expression is - Have a care, here is something that

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<sup>108</sup> Wiehl distinguishes in detail: “contrasts between processes,” “contrasts as processes”, and “processes as contrasts,” cf. Wiehl, 2005. pp. 124-157, here 146.

matters!” (MT, 116).<sup>109</sup> A specific quality of value experience is conveyed by beauty.<sup>110</sup> Among other things, it has a synthesizing, unifying power. “Aesthetic experience is feeling arising out of the realization of contrast under identity” (RM, 111).

All degrees of prehensions take place in the mode of contrast formation. By contrast, Whitehead does not mean color contrasts or figure-ground relations, but syntheses and pattern formation: “modes of synthesis of entities in one prehension, or patterned entities” (PR, 22). Contrasts are a category of existence because everything that exists – and this includes possibilities – can combine with everything else in a pattern-forming way. Complementary poles intertwine in contrasts and combine to form something new.<sup>111</sup> One of the most important contrasts is between ‘affirmation’ and ‘negation’. In cosmic interrelations, all individual beings arrange themselves in this way with others in a concise manner, so that new, specifically individuated patterns always arise and pass away. In certain contrasts manifold possibilities concretize to actual realities, differentiated parts combine to a new pattern in the sense of contrasting unity formation.

Two characteristics of contrasts understood in this way are what must concern us more closely: first, the actualizations of possibilities, and second, the concretization of a general. Both are constitutively related without being congruent. The general is a conceptual quality, the possible a modal. The eternal objects are at the same time possibilities and forms. They relate to actual entities like general to particular and like indeterminate possibilities to determinate realities. In finite individuals, infinite possibilities of variation realize themselves by coalescing into definite contrasts.

Whitehead also refers to these processes by the term ‘exemplification’. Exemplification is the process of realization of timeless forms by actual entities, i.e., the concretization of a general form. It takes place when a general principle is actualized as a concrete reality.

Unlike Nelson Goodman after him, he understands exemplification primarily as the realization of an indeterminate possibility through a specific particular case. In the concrete, possibilities also become real. Exemplification is concretion and concretion is realization.

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<sup>109</sup> Cf. also (SMW): “Realization is in itself the attainment of value” (SMW, 116).

<sup>110</sup> Whitehead distinguishes beauty as a cosmic quality of harmony from beautiful as a quality of a concreta.

<sup>111</sup> This is not coincidentally reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty, who speaks of ‘entrelacement’ in such cases.

Goodman was concerned with his famous fabric sample to explain his concept of denotation. The swatch possesses properties to which it simultaneously refers<sup>112</sup>, that is, it not only refers conventionally to something quite different from itself as conventional signs do, but it itself possesses the properties to which it refers. It only exhibits other properties, such as jagged edges, but does not denote them. A work of art is gray in a different way than it is sad; its expressive power is no longer on a denotative level; its expressive power does not consist at all in a designation, but precisely in an exemplification, i.e., in making visible something that would not be perceptible at all without it.

Whiteheadian exemplification, meanwhile, is more concerned with the modal and ontological differences between the possible and the real, or the general and the particular, which coalesce in exemplifying contrasts. Exemplification is the individualized realization of a universal form. In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead writes that the terms 'universals' and 'particulars' correspond to eternal objects and actual entities (cf. PR, 48). Universal here has the sense of generalisable, individual that of a particular individual case, both are thought in connection with the modal distinction between possible and real.

For example, the universal form of the color red can be individualized differently by Rubens than by Josef Albers, or differently by a tomato than by a strawberry. The concrete experience of red is thus the realization of something that is a mere possibility outside of that experience. Indeterminate possibilities become determinate individualities only when they are realized in concrete patterns of aesthetic experience. The generality of the color red is, in form, only possibility; it becomes real only when and because this possibility is actualized by someone and something, and this actualization always grows out of converging contrasts, such as this particular strawberry in the morning light for the one who sees it. In increasing degrees of determinateness, infinite possibilities become a finite present, or in other words, the actual is infinite but only in form and potential, the realization finite: “the infinitude of actuality, hidden in its finitude of realization” (MT, 113).

The individual realization of general forms through actual experiences means the concretization of a contrast. Forms are the possibilities of a particular realization. Exemplification is the chiasmic interweaving of the general in the particular through which a

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<sup>112</sup> Exemplification is possession plus “reference.” Goodman, 1968, p. 53.

concept becomes vivid.

Whitehead’s unwritten aesthetics, with its core concepts of contrast, concretion, and exemplification, is, as I have wanted to show, an aesthetic theory of prehension and perceptual experience. It recognizes in perceptual and sentient experience a key dimension of all that is real. With this cosmological meaning of the aesthetic in general and of the qualitative experience of value in particular, Whitehead is an aesthete in substance.

### 3. Self-presence of the aesthetic means and concrete experience

In an admittedly drastic and brief recourse to some milestones in the history of European painting, I will now trace a line of development that consists in an increasing distance from the mimetic reproduction of objects, but aims all the more at the development of that which can be currently visualized by genuine artistic means. We will see, that gradually the paradigm of vicarious representation of the representational world recedes behind that of the presentation of aesthetic realities. The present paradigm consequently extends to the sounding out of aesthetic experience, for it is in this that the reality of the work is actually actualized. This has a great deal to do with Whitehead, who conceives of reality in the manner described above as everything that concretizes itself in actual experience. What one might call the paradigm of self-presence leads, as I will now show, into our present.

This already begins to become recognizable in the 19th century in some of J.M.W. Turner's paintings, in which the painter devotes himself to the subject of the sea storm. Let's compare Figure 1, entitled *Shipwreck*<sup>113</sup> of 1805, with Figure 2, *Snow Storm*<sup>114</sup> of 1842. The anecdote has it that Turner painted this picture after he had himself tied to the mast of the ship in order to see what it really looked like in such a sea storm, so that he could later reproduce what he experienced. This may be true or just well invented, what is decisive is that the picture no longer represents how one imagines a sea storm with identifiable objects and events as the earlier one did, but evokes dizzying effects with the genuinely pictorial means of color. The dramatic chiaroscuro swirls of the painting make it one of the early non-objective works in the

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<sup>113</sup> For image see: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-shipwreck-n00476>

<sup>114</sup> For image see: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-snow-storm-steam-boat-off-a-harbours-mouth-n00530>

history of painting, long before the abstractions of classical modernism.<sup>115</sup> In any case, one no longer recognizes objects and people in it as in the 1805 painting; instead, the light and color contrasts evoke the sensual impression of foaming spray and roaring sea. The viewer stands in front of the painting like Turner in front of reality; instead of represented objects, the focus is on present experience. The recipient's aesthetic experience is analogous to the producer's experience of reality. The representation aims at mimesis of the real experience Turner had of the natural whirlwind, which is transferred into the suction-like effect of the color vortex. In this sense, the painting is a concrete realization of presence.

An even more programmatic departure from the imitation ideal of the arts takes place in the early 20th century in non-representational painting, when the avant-garde of the Cubists and Fauvists no longer place colour and form in the picture merely as properties of recognisable objects, but give them an autonomous presence. The point of the autonomy of the representational means consists precisely in the creation of a genuinely painterly presence. When protagonists such as Malevich or Kandinsky turn to non-objective painting, abstraction is admittedly not what Whitehead criticizes. This art is called abstract because of its non-objectivity; it abstracts from the recognizable world of tables and chairs, trees and people, and instead shows black squares or yellow triangles, blue circles and contrasting shapes. In this, however, it is actually concrete art, for it shows what it is, and is what it shows - namely color and form on paper and canvas. The term Concrete Art was introduced by Theo van Doesburg in 1924 and programmatically defined in a manifesto in 1930 at the founding of the group Art Concret for an art movement ideally based on mathematical-geometric foundations, because it recognized in them the best presentation formats for color perceptions.

Josef Albers follows on almost seamlessly from this with his 'homages to the square' (Figure 3)<sup>116</sup>. In continuously new variations his pictures sound out the 'interaction of colors'. The fact that a color only becomes a real fact of perception in contrast to its surroundings is shown by pictures on the back of which the tubes of color used by Albers are noted. Thus, for example, a lime green appears different in a dark green neighborhood than in a red one, and so on. It is therefore not correct, according to the painter, to say that he paints squares, because he

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<sup>115</sup> Even earlier, to be sure, but also only almost non-representational, are, for instance, C.D. Friedrich's 'Monk by the Sea' (1810) or F. d. Goya's 'Perro semihundido' (1820/23). Dog and monk are equally the no longer further reducible remnants of recognizable representationalism, without which both works would be pure abstract art.

<sup>116</sup> For image see: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/481031>

rather paints color relationships. The square is, as it were, the form of presentation, the color relation the presented. The aesthetic experience consists in an actual perception of color, embedded in a concrete context of a moment present here and now, the light situation, etc.

One could also recall Magritte's problematization of the representation paradigm (Figure 4)<sup>117</sup> to reconstruct the development to be sketched here. Magritte's famous pipe painting is titled ‘Trahison des images’ (1929), because the representational role of images can be thematized as a betrayal of the represented reality: what images do when they show what they show is just an as-if, just oil on canvas, just the representative sign of a pipe, just as representative as the word pipe, just a deceptive image with which one can do nothing in reality. The discomfort with this leads in consequence (admittedly no longer within Magritte's oeuvre) to a revaluation of aesthetic experience as the mode of realization of a work of art.

Figure 5<sup>118</sup> with the title ‘La clef des champs’ from 1936 thematizes the two authoritative topoi in which we think of pictures, namely as a transparent window or as a reflecting mirror. Ever since Narcissus fell in love with his reflection, we have confused pictures with images. And since the *finestra aperta* paradigm in the Renaissance has been pictures with framed sections that reveal the world behind them, we overestimate their transparency, for the view is not quite so transparent that the frame of the pictorial possible has marked out. Magritte takes both to absurdity by asking what representation does to reality when it transfers its heaviness into the weightlessness of aesthetic appearance. Magritte's entire *Œuvre* points to such differences and limitations.

Against this background, Barnett Newman's ‘Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV’ (figure 6 from 1969/70)<sup>119</sup>, for example, is to be understood as a realization of aesthetic experience. The painting, which belongs to American color field painting and works in various versions with large-scale monochrome color fields, aims at a self-presence of color that is supposed to overwhelm the recipients in the sublime tradition. The exceedingly large-format painting fills the field of vision of the viewer, who is supposed to approach the picture field very closely, in such a way that her entire visual field is color perception. Here again we see that the so-called abstract expressionism is in fact concrete, because color is no longer a

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<sup>117</sup> For image see: <https://collections.lacma.org/node/239578>

<sup>118</sup> For image see: <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/magritte-rene/key-fields-clef-des-champs>

<sup>119</sup> For image see: <https://freunde-der-nationalgalerie.de/erwerbung/barnett-newman/>

property of represented objects, but is monumentally present as them. Representation and represented fall into one.

From here it is not far to Jackson Pollock’s action paintings (Figure 7, 1950)<sup>120</sup>, in which the image becomes the trace of the real act of painting. The physical movement above the canvas - again, usually monumentally large - creates a painting in which neither color nor contour appear as properties of an object pretending to be a still life or a landscape or a body. Rather, it is the color itself, the line itself, the act of painting itself. One can see in this a further step toward real presence, for the painting as the trace of a real action over the surface of a canvas no longer has anything in common with the painting as window or the painting as mirror that Magritte problematized.

I break off here, because, as I admitted, I was not concerned with any of these positions in detail, but with motifs of a development on the whole. My brief reconstruction was intended to make the consistent motifs recognizable, which consist in the tendency toward the self-presence of artistic means for the purpose of genuinely aesthetic experience. Apart from Magritte, whose place in the development I see rather in the counteracting of the ideal of representation, the works mentioned have in common that they increasingly aim at the presentation of the artistic means that are no longer representational as well as at realized and actualizing aesthetic experiences.

A further development of these goals can then - as art history has shown - only consist in problematizing or even abandoning the material work character of art, in order to shift the boundary between art and reality ever further. This is the case, for example, when Josef Beuys plants 7000 oak trees in the city of Kassel as a contribution to the Documenta, so that the work of art no longer exists as an individual work, but rather consists in changing the physical and social reality in the city in a way that is as incisive as it is lasting.

According to my thesis, this has a great deal to do with Whitehead in that this presence-emphasis and concretization tendency corresponds precisely to what is aesthetic about his edifice of thought. What Whitehead denounces as a confusion of the abstract with the concrete – “an error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete” (SMW, 69) – is an error of thinking that consists in taking something abstracted, namely the result of an abstraction, for concrete. But

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<sup>120</sup> For image see: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jackson-Pollock>



concrete, as all thinking teaches, is something only in the way we experience it. If we refrain from this and detach things from their contexts, we erroneously make the abstract a concrete datum. Instead, we must take seriously the concrete existence of an actual entity so as not to miss the real moment.

So much for my reconstruction of a line of development in modernity, with which I wanted to show the connectivity of an aesthetic theory that relies as much on the actualization of present sensory experience and individual oppositions as Whitehead's.

#### 4. Aesthetic Presence Experience as Exemplification

If, as we have seen, art as a whole insists on social and physical realization in such a way that color perception itself can be declared a work of art, there is a certain consistency in making the experience of looking as such the object of an artistic work as well. In a final step, I would now like to turn the attention to a single work by a contemporary artist, which in a way fits exemplificatory to the preceding considerations.

Marina Abramović (born 1946) is a Serbian performance artist with an international reputation, who stands in the tradition of Beuys. While Beuys' project of 'social sculpture' was about pushing the real presence of the artwork to the point of indistinguishability of artistic and extra-artistic reality, Abramović's performances explore both production-aesthetic and reception-aesthetic experiences to the limit of the bearable. However, I will not discuss her earlier works, but rather focus on one of her most recent works.

In 2010, with the performance 'The artist is present' (Figure 8)<sup>121</sup>, she realized a work at the MoMA based on the artist's physical presence in the museum. For three months, six days a week, eight hours a day, the artist sat in a chair in the museum space while exhibition visitors came and went, taking seats across from her at a table (which was removed after a few weeks for greater immediacy) and gazing steadfastly into each other's eyes. At first it was quite open whether the work would be able to succeed. Since it was part of a larger retrospective show of works, the exhibition was well attended from the beginning, but as time went on, there was a veritable run on the work, long queues, and streams of visitors camped outside the MoMA. For

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<sup>121</sup> For images see: [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010/) [Accessed 9/5/2022].

it became apparent that engaging in a direct, not to say indiscreet, gaze relationship was of some explosive power for the recipients.

One could remain seated for as long as one wanted, security forces were of course present, but rarely had to intervene. Usually, people simply took the opportunity to experience presence aesthetically and to get involved in how it feels quite concretely in the here and now to expose oneself to a gaze relationship. The title, a semi-ironic quote often found on the invitation cards to an opening when an artist is present, here literally becomes the artwork itself.

Visitors described sitting with Marina Abramović as an intensely emotional experience, many were very affected, some downright emphatic, they experienced the aesthetic experience as a ‘threshold experience’<sup>122</sup>: “a transforming experience – it’s luminous, it’s uplifting, it has many layers, but it always comes back to being present, breathing, maintaining eye contact. It’s an amazing journey to be able to experience and participate in the piece.”<sup>123</sup>

The work consists of the qualitative moments of an eye contact, realized differently by each and everyone. The theatrical staging is of course part of the performance, but it is also an important framing to experience the reciprocity of seeing and being seen differently than in everyday life. It is precisely the artificiality of the situation, the attentively concentrated attention to one another as an end in itself, which enables an altered perception. Outside of the specially designed museum space, it would be a break with social norms to look at someone else so directly, not to say confrontationally. It would not only be irritating, it would no longer be integrable into the usual forms of sociality. But the museum’s experimental space makes possible a suspension of the socially familiar. The physical presence of the artist makes the experience of being looked at a powerful moment. In the here and now of real presence, the gaze becomes a powerful experience.

Since everything that happens is real, concretely felt and really experienced, it is methodologically and systematically suitable to exemplify my reflections. In what I have traced here as a paradigm shift of present experience, we found at the same time core ideas and basic motifs of Whitehead.

What Abramović’s work does can certainly be described with Whiteheadian

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. Fischer-Lichte, 2003.

<sup>123</sup> [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010/) [Accessed 9/5/2022].

vocabulary, perhaps even better opened up, if one understands the respective relations of gaze as individual contrastations that concretize indeterminate possibility to certain events. It is an exemplification insofar as the possible and the real, as well as the universal, grow together. The universal here is the gaze that Abramović directs at all recipients equally, but which is experienced differently in each case. The philosophical understanding of reality, which, according to Whitehead, exists in every eventful self-realization every moment anew and differently, can be experienced aesthetically in the work of art: “an actuality is self-realizing, and whatever is self-realizing is an actuality” (PR, 222).

To understand this work as an exemplification in the Whiteheadian sense is to recognize in it the concretion of a general. Both, philosophy and art, mutually open up in it. We 'see' more of Whitehead with Abramović, and more in Abramović with Whitehead.

Elsewhere<sup>124</sup> I have described this as philosophizing with art. When a work of art is an exemplification, more is gained and accomplished than exemplification or illustration. An exemplification realizes something that without it would remain at least unexpressed, if not inexpressible. What is realized is a particular case through which a general principle becomes visible.

Exemplification is a procedure of saying and, simultaneously, showing, a synthetic achievement of making visible that makes possible both conceptual and intuitive insight, that is as generally exemplary as it is individually applicable.

To understand a work of art as exemplification is to read it as an individuated actualization of a general form that creates new patterns. A particular becomes recognizable as exemplary of something general. That is why each individual work can be both an incomparable singularity and of general expressiveness. That is why we are always interested anew (namely in ever new productions or film adaptations) in the problems of a theatre or novel character from the 16th or 19th century. It is because, unlike illustrative examples, they are a peculiar interweaving of general expressiveness and singular incomparability.

Undoubtedly, works of art grow historically with us and are infinitely open, so that they can always be received anew and questioned in each new contrast. But at the same time, the individual work stands paradigmatically for something generally characteristic. Therefore, the

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<sup>124</sup> Cf. Schürmann, 2017.

concretizing achievements of literature or painting do not consist in arbitrary illustrations of what could just as well be said and shown differently, but rather in their ability to visualize something in an exemplary, revealing individual case and in a specific-individual way. But how it is represented depends on the style of an artist as well as of an epoch. For the question of what a piece of art is paradigmatic or characteristic of is a task that confronts reflexive aesthetic experience. The synthesis of concept and view, which a work represents according to its potential, must first be accomplished and unfolded. This happens when the reception takes a work as exemplary by questioning it in very specific respects. In this way, a second-order exemplification is carried out, so to speak, and realized as a procedure of comprehended contemplation.

Works of art are inexhaustible because they realize something unseen (AI, 207; 349), which every time can discover anew. Although Whitehead also wrote a little-noticed book on the symbolic articulation of meaning<sup>125</sup>, he is an aesthetician not because he understands art in the conceptual framework of a symbolic system, but rather because he does not want aesthetic experience of value to be limited to art in any way. Aesthetic experience is just as well realized in everyday life, in metaphysical and spiritual questions or in view of individual experience of the beauty of nature.

Art, however, is an ontologically distinct sphere, it is a creative creation through which something is realized that exists precisely not on the basis of expectable causal chains, but is the result of a creative effort.

My account aimed, first, to show that Whitehead's unwritten aesthetics is a philosophy of the qualitative experience of sensuously realized opposites. And second, I wanted to show the relevance of this concept to the history of modern art, which, I hope to have made plausible, is increasingly concerned with the realization of the qualitative experience of presence. In this history, images are less and less representations of an extra-image reality, and rather more presentations of something that cannot otherwise be seen. This concreteness will be better understood if we reread Whitehead.

Increasingly, art pushes for realization, that is, social, physical reality, insisting on offering actual experiences of actual events rather than pretending to be something other than

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<sup>125</sup> But symbols are also realized in concrete sensations, cf. Whitehead, 1928 (S).

itself. Artistic forms that articulate a feeling, whether in the fundamental sense of a colour sensation, or in the emotional sense of an interpersonal encounter, each actualize new infinitely-finite pattern.

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