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From Art-Viewing to Art-Experiencing: Perspectives of an Artist

One of the greatest ironies of art-making may be that art should involve so many senses for the maker during its creation process while so often relying on the *viewer's* sole sight to be experienced. Be it the smell of paint, the temperature of the marble, the weight of the camera or even the click of a keyboard or the taste of coffee, the process by which we make art is for every artist wholesome and multi-sensorial. In general, it is during this process that artists feel the most alive, the most complete and the most harmonious not only with themselves but with the rest of the world. With this in mind, it is not hard to understand a certain despair when the product of our labor is shared incompletely or isolatedly, for example behind glass in a museum or only encountered as small flattened pixels on a cold screen.

The very fact that we have yet to standardize a better word than *viewer* to describe those experiencing art points to the depth of the issue. Even the words *audience* or *public*, presumably more open and involved, imply a very passive reception of art. Centuries of art history and intellectual progress have proven time and time again that art is not an object but rather a phenomenon happening inside the maker first, followed by the *art-experiencers* (to avoid saying *viewers*) later. The art objects (be them painting, sculpture, video, text, performance, action...) are vehicles for the meaning, but not the meaning itself. The meaning itself can only happen inside the conscious mind(s) who add(s) context to the object. Art is therefore an action, a verb, an engaged process.

Many artists and curators have addressed this issue by widening their practice into multi-sensory works and "exhibitions" including workshops, crowd-sourced research, audience-participation, community-based projects and so on. The ideal of the *gesamtkunstwerk* – integrating all art forms into a complete and total work of art – still looms over the studio. In my own practice and for lack of ever finding the one form that could encompass all forms, I find it essential to allow projects to take multiple formats to permeate multiple senses over time. For example, *Approximately 199* started as a series of handmade sketchbooks with one page per country in the world and expanded into a performance wearing one shirt per country



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

(for sight and touch) (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) as well as long term projects collecting one recipe per country (for taste and smell), one song (for hearing), and even reading one autobiography per century in the world.¹

¹ Visit www.capucinegros.com for more details and follow @thestudiothatnever sleeps for updates.

As a final proposition for further thinking, I would suggest that there might exist one focus point, one medium, where all senses collide. One language that is most universal and which anchors all other perception processes. This is the beautiful language of time. The one material which cannot be purchased, cannot be cheated, cannot be recreated and which everyone on the planet can relate to, not without cultural and social nuances, of course, but certainly with less taboos than senses such as touch and smell. Touch and smell, along with sight, taste and hearing, are all relatively easy to trick, especially in isolation: reprinted photos, reproduced paintings, recorded sounds, artificial smells... It is indeed amusing that our artworld, so obsessed with countering reproducibility with limited editions and authenticity certificates, still privileges sight as the main vector of truth. Combine two or three senses, and things become much harder to replicate. Factor in time, and they become near-impossible. You cannot fake the age of paint nor can you really recreate a performance from the 60s.

Time is therefore indissociable from authenticity. It is already ingrained in all works of art, both in a practical sense (how long paint takes to dry, how long a performance or a video lasts, how long it takes to master a skill etc.) as well as a conceptual one (as seen in our obsession of dating works to comprehend their context and meaning). Yet beyond this, there are also works that utilize time itself as their medium and their form. My grand heroes of time are Tehching Hsieh with his one year performances, On Kawara with his date paintings and life-long projects, and Roman Opalka with his infinity series. They have laid the ground for the most all-encompassing of projects, which in essence use all senses because they involve the artists' entire bodies over days, years, decades, lifetimes. Tehching Hsieh spent one year in a cage without distractions nor interactions. Everything he (didn't) touch, hear, smell, eat or read gave his work all its depth and meaning. On Kawara marked days through the physical limitations of his body: if he had time to finish the painting, it would exist. If not, it was destroyed. Roman Opalka painted numbers, seemingly repetitive, yet infinitely varied by means of his own body (witnessed through portraits) and senses (via the touch of his brush) aging over the years. I would argue that when one works with time, the work becomes, by default, multi-sensory.

Definitely, we ought to improve our methodologies to display, discuss and experience art with our entire bodies rather than just our eyes, if we hope to honor anything close to what artists ever hoped to share or investigate. Yet it might also help to step away from the categories of senses altogether and consider focusing on a more fulfilling common denominator, such as time. If we put time at the center of our processes and make time the main vector of truth, then we will inevitably engage all senses, reach art-experiencers more universally, and perhaps earn more authenticity in the process.