



# Being Moved by Art: A Phenomenological and Pragmatist Dialogue

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

This article integrates John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, Mikel Dufrenne's *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, and phenomenological interviews with museum visitors to answer what it means to be 'moved by art'. The interviews point to intense affective and existential experiences, in which encounters with art can be genuinely transformative. We focus on Dufrenne's notion of 'adherent reflection' and Dewey's notions of 'doing and undergoing' to understand the intentional structure and dynamics of such experiences, concluding that being moved contains two merged forms of intentionality: one overt aspect of perceptual intentionality directed at the work, and a covert affective intentionality directed back at oneself in one's situated existence. These are operational simultaneously but can work in loops, one leading to an intensification of the other and vice versa. As such, these analyses emphasize the value of phenomenological interviews and advance the integration of phenomenological and pragmatist thinking in the context of aesthetic experience.

KEYWORDS:

adherent reflection;  
affectivity; being moved;  
doing and undergoing;  
John Dewey; Mikel  
Dufrenne; pragmatism;  
phenomenological  
interview; phenomenology

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Høffding, Simon, Carlos  
Vara Sánchez, and Tone  
Roald. 'Being Moved by  
Art: A Phenomenological  
and Pragmatist Dialogue.'  
*Estetika: The European  
Journal of Aesthetics*  
LIX/XV, no. 2 (2022):  
pp. 85–102. DOI: [https://doi.  
org/10.33134/eeja.246](https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.246)

What does it mean to be moved by art? One characterization harkens back to Friedrich Schiller: 'Being moved, rigorously understood, designates the mixed sentiment of suffering and the pleasure taken in its suffering.'<sup>1</sup> More recently, being moved has been described as a particularly strong and ambiguous set of emotions that 'intrudes on whatever one is doing'.<sup>2</sup> In both ideas, there is a latent sense of tension and disruption in being moved, which we will investigate through three main perspectives. The first comes from qualitative, phenomenological interviews with museum visitors. The second is from Mikel Dufrenne, a phenomenological thinker inspired particularly by Immanuel Kant and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* has regrettably gone relatively unnoticed in contemporary debates within aesthetics. The third perspective comes from John Dewey's philosophy of art and experience. We bring Dufrenne and Dewey into a conversation about how to understand the experience of being moved by art. Neither of them conceptualizes aesthetic experience precisely in terms of being moved, which is an integrative lens we use to establish a focused discussion on aesthetic experience. Dewey and Dufrenne are often complementary, but the phenomenological interviews we present revitalize their ideas and show that neither of them is complete.

Our chosen combination of perspectives has another advantage. The growing trend in philosophy and cognitive science – namely, the position known as enactivism or 4E cognition,<sup>3</sup> is starting to spill over into aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> Many enactivists claim an intellectual inheritance from phenomenology and pragmatism. The link between phenomenology and enactivism is well established – for instance, in Evan Thompson's work – but a link to pragmatism is not always easy to find.<sup>5</sup> Rarely have the two perspectives been placed side by side to enlighten a single issue. This paper can then also be seen as a kind of test of whether phenomenology and pragmatism can jointly contribute to an enactive understanding of, in our case, aesthetic experience.

## I. BEING MOVED

This paper rests on the assumption that being moved is one kind of aesthetic experience, though not just any kind: importantly, being moved represents one of the most intense, significant, and prized forms of aesthetic experiences and, for that reason, it is important to understand it.<sup>6</sup> We hold the pragmatic position that interviewing people about their most memorable or meaningful experiences in an

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1 Winfried Menninghaus et al., 'Towards a Psychological Construct of Being Moved', *PLoS One* 10 (2015): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0128451>.

2 Nico H. Frijda, *The Laws of Emotion* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 2007), 38.

3 Shaun Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions: Rethinking the Mind* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017); Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

4 Alfonsina Scarinzi, ed., *Aesthetics and the Embodied Mind: Beyond Art Theory and the Cartesian Mind-Body Dichotomy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015); Carlos Vara Sánchez, 'Enacting the Aesthetic: A Model for Raw Cognitive Dynamics', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 21 (2022): 317–39.

5 See Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions*, chap. 3.

6 In *The Psychology of Art Appreciation* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 1997), Bjarne Funch has described such existential encounters with art from a psychological perspective. Roald has developed the concept of intrapellation to describe how we are moved by visual art: Tone Roald, *The Subject of Aesthetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). Funch's and Roald's works thus complement the analyses of Dufrenne and Dewey.

art museum can appropriately be labelled as aesthetic experience.<sup>7</sup> Much in the spirit of both Dewey and Dufrenne, this article, rather than providing one precise, all-encompassing definition, is one long explication of the term under investigation. We identify a necessary condition – namely, a certain affective, intentional structure. We believe that defining such a relatively stable structure,<sup>8</sup> also constituted by neural, bodily, and worldly intertwined components,<sup>9</sup> helps establish common ground between phenomenological and pragmatist traditions. Our analyses show that the central experiential structure enveloping self and world when moved by art is affectivity as a sense of existential replacement.

Our appeal to an affective and existential dimension should not be confused with the claim that being moved involves a specific class of aesthetic emotions.<sup>10</sup> When we are moved by art, we can undergo a number of different emotions, none of which is inherently essential to the experience: fear, love, or nostalgia can all excite or move us and make us lose touch or, inversely, re-establish touch with our reality and can equally be involved in being moved. We do not use ‘existential’ in the narrow sense of referring to, for instance, Jean-Paul Sartre’s or Martin Heidegger’s ideas but in the broad sense of engaging with personal questions of meaning and existence: being moved into the work of art as well as into and away from oneself, bringing forth a new perspective on the world and oneself. Yet, as we shall learn from Dewey and Dufrenne, when moved, affective processes are not free-floating but attuned as specific responses: facing the work of art, one enters into a particular sort of relationship with overt and covert forms of intentionality.

## II. PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEWS ON AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

### II.1. METHODOLOGY

As part of a research project in phenomenology and psychology on the relationship between aesthetic experience and pre-reflective self-awareness, the authors interviewed museum visitors, asking the general question: what do people experience when they have an intense or significant experience with art? We have argued elsewhere that, when museum visitors give elaborate descriptions in response to such a question, it ought to have implications for our definition of aesthetic experience.<sup>11</sup> We have also elsewhere clarified that the descriptions to follow are not representative of most people’s experience in art museums.<sup>12</sup> The analysis of being moved does not generally describe how most people experience going to an art museum. Rather, it

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7 Overall, we find ourselves much in agreement with Nanay’s distinctions on the nature of aesthetic experience: Bence Nanay, ‘Aesthetic Attention’, *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 22 (2015): 96–118.

8 Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 28.

9 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; New York: Perigee Books, 1980), hereafter: AE; Gallagher, *Enactivist Interventions*.

10 For a distinction between affectivity and emotions, see Giovanna Colombetti, *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 1–3.

11 Roald, *Subject of Aesthetics*.

12 Simon Høffding, Mette Rung, and Tone Roald, ‘Participation and Receptivity in the Art Museum: A Phenomenological Exposition’, *Curator* 63 (2020): 69–81.

seeks to highlight the most important structures of subjectivity present in intense and meaningful encounters with works of art. There is a lot to be said about the methodology of qualitative interviews and about the possibility of integrating such methods with the sciences of the mind. For reasons of length, we offer merely a rudimentary introduction here.

There has been a long debate on the combination of phenomenology and interview methods or qualitative research methods.<sup>13</sup> One contender for a point of convergence consists in rules of thumb or best practices of the interview itself. The interviews are semi-structured conversations in which the interviewer's task is to create a welcoming atmosphere, listen intently, and gently ask questions that open up possibilities of richer and richer descriptions. Rather than asking yes/no questions or asking for people's opinions of a given past experience, the interviewer attempts to elicit as many details as possible by focusing on a particular past experience from many different angles. Further, the interviewer avoids using her own theoretical vocabulary. In our case, we would not ask an interviewee 'What is the role of pre-reflective self-awareness in your aesthetic experience?' but start by establishing rapport and listening attentively to the descriptions emerging from an initial question such as 'I wonder if you have ever had a particularly memorable experience looking at an artwork in a museum.'

The interviews used for this study were informed by best practices in phenomenological psychology<sup>14</sup> and ethnography.<sup>15</sup> From March 2017 to March 2018, Høffding and Roald conducted twenty interviews at the Esbjerg Art Museum, the National Gallery of Denmark, and the Department of Psychology at the University of Copenhagen. A 'good' interview is one that generates many detailed descriptions of a particular experience and usually lasts quite some time. In our case, five of the twenty interviews were sufficiently detailed, and we will now discuss two representative ones. After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed, subjected to several close readings, and analysed first in emic terms (using concepts from the interview to generate experiential categories, into which the utterances are organized) and then in etic terms (relating the emic analysis to wider concepts from outside the interview from psychology and phenomenology).<sup>16</sup> Of the two following examples, the first is translated from Danish to English and both are anonymized.

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13 For a historical overview, see Dan Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2018). For presentations of the main methodologies, see Amedeo Giorgi, *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology: A Modified Husserlian Approach* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009); Jonathan Smith, Paul Flowers, and Martin Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: SAGE, 2009); Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (London, ON: Althouse, 1990); Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Claire Petitmengin, 'Describing One's Subjective Experience in the Second Person: An Interview Method for the Science of Consciousness', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 5 (2006): 229–69. For an overview comparing all these positions, see Simon Høffding, Katrin Heimann, and Kristian Martiny, eds., 'Working with Others' Experiences: Theory, Practice and Application', special issue of *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (forthcoming).

14 Steinar Kvale, *InterViews* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1996).

15 Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2011); Susanne Ravn, 'Phenomenological Analysis in Sport and Exercise', in *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Methods in Sport and Exercise*, ed. Bret Smith and Andrew Sparkes (London: Routledge, 2016), 206–18.

16 See Susanne Ravn and Simon Høffding, 'Improvisation and Thinking in Movement: An Enactivist Analysis of Agency in Artistic Practices', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 21 (2022): 515–37.

The two interviewees are both experienced museum visitors, voicing what some would view as a traditionalist or romantic conception of art. They were, however, selected only on the criterion of offering rich descriptions. It might be objected that they simply regurgitate a romantic and elitist normative expectation about what to look for in a museum. Such expectations may certainly inform their experiences, but a fundamental principle of qualitative research is that you cannot and do not screen for bias, first because unbiased experience is an impossible scientific ideal and, second, because we as phenomenologists are interested in experience as lived with all its preconditions, biases, and idiosyncrasies. There is no mutual exclusion between expressing a certain norm and such a norm genuinely being part of one's experience. As qualitative researchers, our job is to elicit as many experiential details as possible and faithfully report the most salient. As philosophers and psychologists, our job is to analyse these to say something important about the nature and structure of these experiences.<sup>17</sup>

## II.2. KARIN'S EXPERIENCES WITH ART

Karin is a middle-aged woman, with no particular training in fine arts, who goes to art museums on a regular basis. She describes experiences with two particular works of art but says that her experience is similar almost every time she visits any museum. If the exhibit is too pedagogical, however – that is, if she notices some kind of implicit agenda – she is put off and has no noteworthy experience. When the works of art have an impact on her, however, they activate intense feelings:

I know it [the work of art] as soon as I see it, almost before I am aware that I have seen it [...]. It happens with the speed of light. I think the thoughts come afterwards [...]. I think it is a mixture of shock and falling in love the very first time I see it.<sup>18</sup>

Karin also mentions a feeling like having butterflies in the stomach, indicating that the emotions she undergoes also evoke bodily sensations. In order for this dimension of experience to come to the fore, she avoids thinking or reflecting too much, but rather lets herself be drawn in:

Without really thinking too much about it, I just let myself experience the work of art, then it happens quietly by itself [...]. I just try to let my body and my senses just experience it [...]. And then it can happen now and again that a thought appears, and I have an 'a-ha' experience, but it is not something I try to force or make appear [...]. I can of course analyse them, and I know how to do such stuff, but that does not mean much to me [...] but these pictures [...] or works of art which just say something immediately, with them I am not busy with anything else but just experiencing them.

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17 Of course, a single paragraph is not sufficient to counter a sceptical objection to our methodology. For a systematic presentation, please see Simon Høffding, Kristian Martiny, and Andreas Roepstorff, 'Can We Trust the Phenomenological Interview? Metaphysical, Epistemological, and Methodological Objections', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 21 (2022): 33–51; and Roald, *The Subject of Aesthetics*.

18 The quotations from the interviewees are sometimes not grammatically correct. We have sought to retain the original language to give the readers a sense of the interviewees' struggle to put their experiences into words.

From the outset of the interview, Karin is very explicit in expressing why she goes to art museums and why she often seeks out the same artworks, such as the pink room in the installation *Your Atmospheric Color Atlas* (2009) by Olafur Eliasson at ARoS, the Museum of Modern Art in Århus, Denmark. The works that ‘just say something immediately’ allow her to open up to what we could call existential feelings, by which she manages to better cope with her emotional life and overall situation:

I feel as if some bricks are physically moved around in my head or body [...]. And it feels strange to say, but it is as if a cleaning takes place or that some issues are more solidly put in place [...]. Occasionally, there are also different trains of thought running, and then gently, it becomes, not necessarily tied together, but everything nevertheless becomes a greater whole [...] in which I, how to say, where they all suddenly make sense together in a way different from before. I arrive at a bigger picture of something that before was separate directions [...]. It gives me a collected sense of clarity or sense of wholeness [...]. Both works [Eliasson’s *Your Atmospheric Color Atlas* and Edvard Munch’s *Moonlight* (1895)] make a lot of feelings present at once and make me have them [...] make me able to deal with them. It [the work of art] can bring forth a lot of feelings, but just in a way that makes them okay [...]. It is not because they disappear, but they are reduced in strength, perhaps, in comparison to how large a negative influence they could otherwise have.

Much of Karin’s language avoids positing herself as the grammatical subject. She is not the primary actor or initiator of these kinds of experience. The artworks and experiences themselves are put in the active role and she is the one who undergoes:

Something happens to me when I am there, and I feel calm [...]. Munch’s *Moonlight*, which I have been in love with ever since I saw it for the first time, and again I cannot explain what it does, but it has to do with its symbolic, mixed with the colours, and yes, mixed with [...] which just does something to me.

A final dimension to mention is the sense of communication Karin enjoys with the artwork. As it is not primarily presented to her in acts of deliberate reflection, this kind of communication is also not primarily verbal but somehow emotional.

I am mostly focused on, I don’t know if one could say communicate with [the artworks], but it feels as if that is what I do. I know very well that, that is just me. That is actually what is most important to me [...]. It belongs to that side of things that we cannot fully verbalize, but which comprises some kind of insight, a kind of knowledge or feelings.

In the interview with Karin, we can observe an existential longing that becomes actualized in the aesthetic experience. Rather than thinking about or analysing the paintings, she simply looks at them and then they begin to work in her, transforming her emotional life. Even if she is attentively directed at the works of art, her experience is not about them alone. It is about herself, as a subject, changing with the impact of the artworks. She is not in the nominative subject position but in the dative ‘to me’ or ‘for me’, through a necessary mediation of the artworks.

### II.3. SABINA'S EXPERIENCES WITH ART

Asked to mention an intense encounter with art, Sabina, also a middle-aged woman with much museum experience, describes seeing André Derain's *Woman in a Chemise* (1906):

You come in, and that Derain, which comes right out of the picture at you, I thought it was fabulous. I loved that [...]. I wasn't really expecting it to be so powerful [...]. Well, the colors of course are very strong, but also this impression of the woman leaning right out of the picture [...]. And the, the life in the picture which is indicated by the lines and by the colors, uhm, I think that was what struck me [...]. It affects me here in the diaphragm [...]. I don't really get physical sensations except, ha ha, you know I didn't grow up with the Nordic winter, and as November goes into January [in Norway], I feel actually thirsty for colour, so then when I see colour, the feeling of thirst is removed [...]. Yes, completion, that's a very good word.

Sabina feels revived and replenished by Derain's expressive colours, which she, like Karin, takes in, without deliberate reflection:

You just stand there, and it sort of goes into you. The memory is very vivid later and you just take it in, you, in Norwegian you would say '*man tar imot*' [you receive], you just sort of feel receptive to it, I guess [...]. I can't think of any special thoughts I have actually, but I find that I, when I go to galleries, museums, I usually only look at a few of the pictures, I mean I walk past the rest, I think, because otherwise it is too much, it feels, you feel full and you can't take any more.

When Sabina encounters a painting of significance to her, she gets absorbed in it. This heightened sense of receptivity is demanding and easily exceeds her mental capacity:

Yes, but it's not a choice, you can say that the picture attracts me and the more I look, well then you can say the more absorbed I get in the picture. So the picture has an active role, but also, I allow myself to be absorbed, because very often I look at a picture I mean, you know, and then I look at that one for example, I suppose if I looked at it long enough I would probably get absorbed in that too, but I don't, I have to economize it in a way because otherwise as I say you would get too tired, or sort of had enough.

*Like you're over-saturated or so?*

Exactly.

*Okay, so it invites you and you let yourself...*

Yes, I answer the invitation in a way.

As for Karin, Sabina's attention is directed at the painting, but she is also engaged in a kind of self-communication marked by these existential feelings concerning her identity:

It gives me a feeling of being myself [...] it contributes to my sense of identity in fact [...]. It's more existential, this is me, this is who I am, and that might also relate to the fact that because we lived removed, you change friends, you change cultures, and so your sense of identity can be a little fluid, so everything that gives me this feeling of [being myself],

strengthens my sense of identity. But it's not an intellectual thing, it's not because I am a person who appreciates art, that's not the feeling I get, it's more existential.

Sabina puts herself in the dative as the person to whom something happens and puts the artwork in the nominative rather than the accusative, as the agent enabling a certain kind of experience. The painting invites her, and her role, besides perceptually attending to it, is to 'allow' herself to get absorbed. So again, though directed at the work of art, the experience is not about it, but about letting it mediate and enable a kind of self-relation that ultimately re-establishes or 'contributes' to her 'sense of identity'.

These two excerpts portray rather detailed lived experiences of being moved. Note that, besides Karin's 'bricks' that are 'moved', neither of the two women explicitly mentions being moved, which is an etic concept we apply from the top down to interpret their experience. The excerpts depict a heightened affective dimension and the formation of a certain kind of relationship with the works of art, leading to an existential reorientation.

### III. INTERPRETING BEING MOVED WITH DUFRENNE

#### III.1. DUFRENNE ON ADHERENT REFLECTION

Dufrenne's notion of 'adherent reflection' can help us to understand what it means to be moved, even if he does not use that specific term. We are appropriating his concept of adherent reflection to suit our purpose and to emphasize how the subject can be affectively and existentially changed in the aesthetic encounter.

Dufrenne's thinking on reflection in aesthetic experience is in line with those phenomenological conceptions of reflection that emphasize a heightened pre-reflective awareness that in some way or other unifies subject and object.<sup>19</sup> His magnum opus, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, is a systemic work covering most of the classical art forms. He distinguishes between 'the work of art' and 'the aesthetic object';<sup>20</sup> the former is the stable material being of the work (the paint on the canvas, the score of the sonata), while the latter pertains to a special attitude that sometimes emerges in the meaningful relation between subject and the work of art. *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* is an ambitious work in four parts. Here, we exclusively treat the third part, the 'Phenomenology of Aesthetic Perception'. Dufrenne constructs a layered account of aesthetic experience, in which each new layer presupposes the previous one, striving toward a full-fledged experience involving several mental capacities. He begins with the

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19 Philosophers, especially in the phenomenological tradition, have worked extensively on characterizing reflection; see Dan Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), chap. 2. While some, such as Dreyfus, define it as distanced or 'a stepping back' from the world, others, such as Sartre and Marcel, develop new conceptions in which reflection unifies us with the world, with concepts such as 'pure reflection' (Sartre) and 'secondary reflection' (Marcel). See Hubert Dreyfus, 'The Return of the Myth of the Mental', *Inquiry* 50 (2007): 354; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Estella Barnes (London: Routledge, 1991), 155; Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, vol. 1, *Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser (London: Harvill, 1951), 83.

20 Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), lii. Hereafter: *PAE*.



term 'presence', a bodily-based, pre-conscious, and primitive perception that puts me on a par or unifies me with my surroundings. From here, he moves through 'imagination', 'understanding', 'feeling', 'reflection', and a reworked notion of feeling 'as being-in-depth', in order finally to arrive, almost one hundred pages later, at the 'aesthetic attitude'.

Presence is at the root of the relation with the aesthetic object; a kind of mystical or pre-intelligible and pre-linguistic experience of unity, 'forming a subject-object totality' (PAE, p. 339) or a 'communion between the object and myself' (PAE, p. 375). Presence is only the starting point for the subsequent mental powers of imagination, understanding, and so on, which add complexity and increasing differentiation between subject and aesthetic object. Dufrenne is inspired by Merleau-Ponty's notion of pre-reflective bodily intentionality (PAE, p. 337) and Husserl's notion of passive synthesis (PAE, p. 348), both of which precede standard reflection in their accounts of our primary relation with the world. In other words, aesthetic experience contains a heightened pre-reflective dimension of experience.

When looking at a painting, I can intentionally direct my gaze at its shapes and colours as with any other mundane object and reflect upon its formal features. But, when it comes to aesthetic experience, this mundane work of art is transformed into an aesthetic object that, in conveying an existential and affectively laden meaning, has the capacity to transform its spectator, as demonstrated with Karin's and Sabina's excerpts: here is an intentionality that positions both subject and object and constitutes a certain relation between the two. To name this relation, Dufrenne needs a concept that can 'speak of its [the aesthetic object's] reverberation within me' (PAE, p. 376) and therefore distinguishes 'between a reflection which separates us from, and a reflection which makes us adhere to, the object' (PAE, p. 392):

By means of adherent reflection, I submit myself to the work instead of submitting it to my jurisdiction, and I allow the work to deposit its meaning within me. I consider the object no longer as a thing which must be known through its appearance – as in critical reflection, where appearance has no value and signifies nothing on its own – but, rather, as a thing which signifies spontaneously and directly, even if I am unable to encompass its meaning: as a quasi-subject. (PAE, p. 393)

In normal reflection, I am separate from the object and examine it by submitting it to my jurisdiction as a one-way form of communication in which I transfer my beliefs, opinions, and judgements onto it, as if evaluating the truthfulness of a Facebook post. In contrast, in adherent reflection, I let myself be moved and changed, not just by an appearance but by an immediate signification. Although I perceive the same content in the mundane work of art and in the aesthetic object, the effective principle, which accounts for how I am moved by the latter, is an affective stance: I am directed at the painting but what moves me is its meaning. The givenness of this meaning is not identical to that of the work's materiality. The operation of this affective intentionality of openness, receptivity, or sensitivity is not determined by its directedness at a particular object but rather by its ability to be impressed and to contain. The move of reflection from imperious imposition to adherent receptivity has epistemic implications: 'I restrain myself from questioning in the way that the

physicist questions when he searches for the meaning of the distribution of light rays on a spectroscope. In other words, I do not look for a causal agent' (PAE, p. 393).<sup>21</sup>

Dufrenne's idea is that when the physicist asks 'Why is it like this rather than that?' they are looking for explanations extraneous to the appearance of the phenomenon. In contradistinction, in aesthetic experience 'to understand a work is to be assured that it cannot be otherwise than it is' or to grasp it on its own premises. In other words, according to Dufrenne, I do not understand the work through its appearance, which 'signifies nothing on its own' (PAE, p. 396) and which, as a static object, does not communicate a meaning or tell a story. Rather, adherent reflection gives me the meaning or signification of the work addressed directly to me, by an entity not entirely unlike another human being, which Dufrenne calls a 'quasi-subject' (PAE, p. 396).

We find a similar take on the possibility that perception does not grasp mere surface or appearance, but gets into contact with a lived meaning, in Dorothée Legrand and Susanne Ravn's distinction between perception and scrutiny:

Both perception and scrutiny can be attentively focused but only scrutinizing involves a reification of the intentional object, i.e., the consideration of the intentional object as a mere thing. This is the case whenever you fix your 'gaze' and adopt an 'analytical attitude' (Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. 262) in order to scrutinize, e.g., the wrinkles at the corner of your friend's eyes. It is not paradigmatically the case, however, when you perceive (even attentively), e.g., your friend's face as expressing his boredom. The important point here is that subjectivity would be alienated by the reification involved in scrutiny.<sup>22</sup>

Think of the scrutiny of a doctor. She looks at the appearance, at various symptoms that do not signify anything in themselves but point to an extraneous cause, say, a flu or a cancer. She is interested in what she sees only insofar as it reveals or points to something else – namely, the cause of the symptoms. This 'scrutiny' or 'reification' strips the subject of her interiority and disregards her innate expressive being. While this may be acceptable or even desirable in certain medical relations, a reifying imperious reflection will disable aesthetic experience. The inverse of reification could be a form of empathizing, an ability to resonate with the aesthetic object: 'We cannot open up a world and open ourselves to that world except in one and the same movement [...]. And intentionality is no longer an aim or mere intention toward but a participation with' (PAE, p. 405–6).

Opening up oneself has a metaphorical ring. We understand it as a specific shift in intentionality from critical or scrutinizing to adherent or empathic. Again, we are not judging or imposing our opinions, nor are we passive in a completely inert sense. We resonate with, or participate in, the work of art. We are not intentionally directed at our own reflective judgements of causality (PAE, p. 389, 393), or at our random

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21 Robinson, likewise inspired by Merleau-Ponty, makes a perfect parallel in the context of physical movement and architecture: 'there is a difference between the "lived space" of architecture that we experience in and through our bodies and bodily movements, and space as studied by physicists': Jenefer Robinson, 'On Being Moved by Architecture', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70 (2021): 340.

22 Dorothée Legrand and Susanne Ravn, 'Perceiving Subjectivity in Bodily Movement: The Case of Dancers', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 8 (2009): 393. Note that their reference to the *Phenomenology of Perception* is to the original French edition: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

associations or mind wanderings into memories and expectations (PAE, p. 361), which remove us from the presence of the aesthetic object.<sup>23</sup> Rather, we attune to, and participate in, its expression, receptive to its meaning, all of which exists as much in us as in the aesthetic object. Though at times vague and mystical, Dufrenne's philosophy extends beyond romanticizing aesthetics as granting access to a pre-conscious primordial truth or purity devoid of mental activity:

Feeling runs the constant risk of losing itself in the object and returning to the immediacy of presence, or of converting its communion into a blind ecstasy and confusing its reading of what the object expresses with the spontaneous responses of lived experience. Feeling can have a noetic function and value only as a reflective act, in part a victory over former reflection and in part open to a new reflection. Otherwise, feeling would revert to the pure and simple nonreflective level of presence, that is, to what is not knowledge [*connaissance*] and barely even consciousness. (PAE, p. 416)

Dufrenne's notion of aesthetic experience comprises a unity of bodily presence, different kinds of reflection (critical and adherent), imagination, and feeling that constrain each other to establish the necessary adherent relation to the work of art. If the reflective layers are completely bypassed, the aesthetic experience degrades to a blind ecstasy, which is barely even conscious and therefore not aesthetic.<sup>24</sup> Further, we also see that Dufrenne problematically blocks the spontaneous responses of lived experience from the sphere of the aesthetic.

### III.2. APPLYING DUFRENNE TO KARIN'S AND SABINA'S EXPERIENCES

Our two excerpts demonstrate the relevance of Dufrenne's conceptual distinctions in several ways. Both Karin and Sabina mentioned that they are not adept in analysing paintings, that they from time to time reflect (on the standard conception of reflection) on the meaning or message of the works of art, but that this is not what experiencing paintings in an aesthetic fashion is essentially about. In order to have a significant experience, the level of reflection is bracketed and replaced by a simple and sustained perception of the work. Think of Sabina's description of *Woman in a Chemise*, who 'comes out of the painting'. The relation between Sabina and the woman is spontaneously signifying, a relation of adherent resonance that

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23 In a recent article, Fabry and Kukkonen convincingly argue that mind wandering is an essential component in absorption into literary works of art. For instance, while reading, our minds wander to build imaginary landscapes: Regina Fabry and Karin Kukkonen, 'Reconsidering the Mind-Wandering Reader: Predictive Processing, Probability Designs, and Enculturation', *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, no. 2648 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02648>. Something similar might very well happen in the case of paintings or sculptures. Our point is merely that, if such mind wandering becomes too dominant, it loses its intentional connection with the work of art and thus distracts one's act of intense perceptual attention toward that work.

24 Dufrenne considers ecstasy too emotional and removed from the work of art to instantiate an aesthetic experience. We believe, however, that, unless the ecstasy is indeed completely 'blind', it is possible to be lost herein for a moment as an important aspect of being moved. Reflection can set in afterwards and connect one back to an even more intense appreciation of the work of art. See also Roald, *Subject of Aesthetics*. Reflection on what happened in that moment is important to the aesthetic experience, which does not in principle need to be delimited to only the momentary encounter with the work of art, as Nanay rightly mentions with his 'lingering effect': 'Aesthetic Attention', 101–2.

transforms the woman into a quasi-subject. The subjective moments of reflectively adhering and opening oneself up are conjoined. When Karin senses the atmosphere in the pink room, she is not wondering about how the colour of the light is produced; she is not scrutinizing or looking for extraneous causalities. Adhering to or absorbing herself into the room, she opens herself up, which leads to a reorganization of her existential brickwork. Adherent reflection loops in two directions: Karin feels as if she communicates with the artworks. She experiences the work being open to her and herself to the work. Perceiving it affectively or in adherent reflection is what gives access to her existential brickwork and impetus to let it be reorganized.

Here, however, we also reach some of the limits of Dufrenne's thinking. When Karin and Sabina respond to the particular artworks in question, it is, most likely, because these works call to their previous lived experience. For instance, for Sabina, *Woman in a Chemise* resonates with her need for colour and her experience of being moved resolves this need. The work completes her insofar as it responds to her lived experience. That is also the case for Karin. As she says, she brings a lot of feelings with her to the work, and after the first initial meeting with the work of art these feelings are somewhat reconfigured for the better.<sup>25</sup> Dufrenne's insistence on avoiding the spontaneous responses of lived experience in the aesthetic experience are constraining and overly idealized. Even if we find something like an 'aesthetic attitude' (PAE, p. 426) in Sabina and Karin's descriptions, this attitude is not disconnected from their everyday lives. On the contrary, they are continuous. Dewey is apt to theorize this continuity.

## IV. INTERPRETING BEING MOVED WITH DEWEY

### IV.1. DEWEY ON AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

According to Dewey, in order to understand what an aesthetic experience is,<sup>26</sup> we have to start from where it emerges: general experience. For Dewey, artworks and their experience are nothing but refined and intensified forms of general experience (AE, p. 2). Despite Dewey's reluctance to offer a clear definition of aesthetic experience,<sup>27</sup> the following five features seem to be particularly relevant: (i) fulfilment, (ii) intensity, (iii) cumulation, (iv) unity, and (v) impulsion. These are aspects of the 'how' of an aesthetic engagement with the environment. Although we will not provide a detailed analysis, it is important to understand these features and their inner connections.

- (i) Fulfilment is the differential conclusion of an aesthetic experience. General experiences can just be abandoned; we do not care much about them. Our attention quickly finds another interest and never looks back. Aesthetic experience, instead, demands fulfilment, for reaching fulfilment is what

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25 Funch argues from the point of view of phenomenological psychology that in aesthetic experience, diffuse feelings are given a new form. He also argues for the continuity of aesthetic experience with everyday life. See Bjarne Funch, 'An Extended Look at Art', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 53 (2019): 106–19.

26 Dewey distinguishes between experiences with an aesthetic quality and completely aesthetic experiences, for 'esthetic cannot be sharply marked off from intellectual experience since the latter must bear an aesthetic stamp to be itself complete' (AE, p. 40). In this paper, we will focus on the latter.

27 For more detailed studies on Dewey's aesthetics, see Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987); Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

brings forth meaning and significance. However, recovering unison with the surroundings – that is, fulfilling an experience – ‘is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed’ (AE, p. 13).

- (ii) An aesthetic experience is a ‘clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normal complex experience’ (AE, p. 48). Its intensity comes from its form of rhythmic struggle, a contrast and opposition of doing and undergoing.<sup>28</sup> An aesthetic experience requires ‘energies resisting each other. Each gains intensity for a certain period, but thereby compresses some opposed energy until the latter overcome the other’ (AE, p. 161). The accumulation of energies is a consequence of this reciprocal adaptation between doing and undergoing.
- (iii) Accumulation refers to the ever-growing dynamic of these experiences. There has to be resistance in the experience for it to gain intensity. That is, it is only ‘[w]hen complete release is postponed and is arrived at finally through a succession of ordered periods of accumulation and conservation, marked off into intervals by the recurrent pauses of balance, [that] the manifestation of emotion becomes true expression, acquiring aesthetic quality’ (AE, p. 162). What holds together this intense accumulation is unity.
- (iv) Unity is achieved through an overarching pervasive emotional quality. In Dewey’s words, ‘[e]motion is the moving and cementing force. It selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its colour, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials externally disparate and dissimilar. It thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of an experience’ (AE, p. 44).
- (v) Impulsion is the starting point of every aesthetic experience. It results from a temporary lack of equilibrium with the environment. For Dewey, impulsions ‘are the beginnings of complete experience because they proceed from need; from a hunger and demand that belongs to the organism as a whole and that can be supplied only by instituting definite relations (active relations, interactions) with the environment’ (AE, p. 61).

To summarize, an impulsion will lead to an aesthetic experience only if it finds conflict, and this leads to a rhythmic tension that grants emotional unity to the experience, which will cumulate through the alternation of both doing and undergoing until the eventual fulfilment restores equilibrium.

## IV.2. DEWEY’S NOTION OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AS DYNAMIC

Remember that Dufrenne distinguishes between the work of art and the aesthetic object (PAE, p. lii). Dewey makes the same distinction, with the difference that what he calls ‘artwork’ has the function Dufrenne ascribed to the aesthetic object; for Dewey, the artwork is what happens in experience, while the ‘art product’ is just the physical object (AE, p. 168). Dewey does not distinguish between spatial and temporal arts, ‘since all objects of art are matters of perception and perception is not instantaneous’ (AE, p. 191). The artwork, thus, is always a dynamic experience that takes time to

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28 Dewey’s notion of rhythm is of particular importance, as it is considered the main formal aspect of aesthetic experience. See Carlos Vara Sánchez, ‘Rhythm ’n’ Dewey: An Adverbialist Ontology of Art’, *Rivista di Estetica* 73 (2020): 79–95.

develop (AE, p. 57). It is dynamic because '[t]hat which distinguishes an experience as aesthetic is conversion of resistance and tensions, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversion, into a movement for a fulfilling close. Experiencing like breathing is a rhythm of intakings and outgivings' (AE, p. 58).

According to Dewey – and, again, similarly to Dufrenne's spelling out of 'presence' – in the dynamic of an aesthetic experience a 'direct and unreasoned impression comes first'. This is what he calls the 'seizure'. This seizure strikes us and affects us (something akin to the 'speed of light' shock that precedes thinking, in Karin's words); it 'precedes all definite recognition of what it is about' (AE, p. 151). Thomas Alexander writes: 'The phase of seizure is marked by the impeding sense of the as yet unarticulated richness of an experience of the sense of there being more to the experience that is immediately taken in' (AE, p. 253). The seizure is 'so consciously present as to focus and direct activity toward the realization of the possibility'.<sup>29</sup> Yet, in order for the experience to grow, the aesthetic seizure demands a counteracting force, which Dewey defines as 'discrimination'. Again, we recognize a similar dynamic in Dufrenne where aesthetic experience only comes about when there is a dynamic development of gradual differentiation from the aesthetic object through mental processes such as imagination and adherent reflection. For Dewey, '[i]f the perception continues, discrimination inevitably sets in. Attention must move, and, as it moves, parts, members, emerge from the background. And if attention moves in a unified direction instead of wandering, it is controlled by the pervading qualitative unity' (AE, p. 199).

However, we must be careful to avoid considering this transition between seizure and discrimination as an exclusively passive process. Dewey warns us: '[R]eceptivity is not passivity. It, too, is a process consisting of series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment' (AE, p. 54). This idea is arguably consistent with the Husserlian notion of 'generative passivity' playing a role in aesthetic experience<sup>30</sup> or the loosening of the sense of agency as a necessary, but not sufficient, feature of an artistic experience.<sup>31</sup> The discrimination phase features a pattern of reciprocal doing and undergoing (AE, p. 45). During an aesthetic experience we do experience an engagement with the artwork, in which sense and meaning articulate at the edge of a tension between doing and undergoing. While the former is the more performative pole of experience and the latter is the more appreciative, there is no clear distinction between the two aspects. The doing does not merely consist of the actions of walking around a gallery and looking at a painting, and undergoing the affective impact of what we experience. Both aspects of the experience reciprocally constrain each other. An experience is never exclusively of the doing or of the undergoing. Paying too much attention to just one side will make an experience collapse. It seems that, in Dewey's terms, what actually moves us in this relation is the rhythmic flow between doing and undergoing in which our experience of an artwork temporally evolves and takes shape.

Although Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience is more temporally evolving than Dufrenne's, they arguably share an interest in characterizing aesthetic experience as a transient unity that dissolves boundaries, within which being moved emerges as a

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29 Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art*, 251.

30 Simon Høffding and Tone Roald, 'Passivity in Aesthetic Experience: Husserlian and Enactive Perspectives', *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 6 (2019): 1–20.

31 Vara Sánchez, 'Rhythm 'n' Dewey'.

relevant component. This idea resonates with Sabina's words when she claims that the picture has an active role but, nonetheless, she has to allow herself to be absorbed, or with Karin's description of how she has to let herself experience the work of art and only then sense that 'some bricks are physically moved around in my head or body'. What she undergoes is inevitably related to what she does during the experience.

All things considered, being moved can be regarded as part of Dewey's pragmatist understanding of aesthetic experience as long as it is not understood as a passive dynamic detached from the whole experience. Being moved is not synonymous with letting yourself be carried away by the object causing the experience. For an experience to be aesthetic, it is necessary to enact a relation with the object in the discrimination phase, connecting doings and undergoing. In other words, we do move and we do *undergo* being moved as complementary parts of the same process.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have brought together three distinct sources of insight: interviews, Dufrenne, and Dewey. Dufrenne's primary contribution is to carefully locate aesthetic experience between the affective and the reflective, or rather to conceptually establish an experiential overlap between the two, such that one's critical or more cognitive faculties are not excluded from the affective impact of intense aesthetic experience. A strength of his derives from a conception of experience as a 'spatial layering', in which one mental layer grounds the next. Here, Dewey is more focused on the dynamic temporality of experience and begins his analysis with tensions between organisms and environments, in which aesthetic experience is a particularly refined kind. This analysis can be used to moderate Dufrenne – whose 'aesthetic attitude', though well described, is nevertheless isolated from daily life and experience – by making the everyday and the aesthetic continuous, though identifying the latter as intensified or heightened.

We wanted to examine whether pragmatism and phenomenology could supplement each other, which, if answered in the positive, would advance enactivist agendas. Despite significant differences between the two traditions, Dufrenne's and Dewey's philosophical approaches to aesthetic experience can communicate and complement each other. It is, however, the interview material that brings the phenomenological and pragmatist ideas down to earth, as we can easily identify with Karin's and Sabina's experiences. The inclusion of actual experiences into theory, we believe, brings more pertinence to the latter and arguably conforms to Husserl's vision of a 'phenomenological psychology'.<sup>32</sup> Finally, we see that the three sources – the interviews, Dewey, and Dufrenne – provide a focused, yet comprehensive analysis of what it means to be moved in the context of works of art. Specifically, we consider being moved an emergent quality of an experience constituted by the interaction of two forms of intentionality: an overt and sustained perceptual intentionality directed at the work of art itself, and a covert affective intentionality directed back at oneself. These are operational simultaneously, but are experienced as working in an evolving loop, one leading to an intensification of the other and vice versa. Our analyses of Dewey and Dufrenne bring out a double intentional structure: we see both doing and

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32 Edmund Husserl, 'Phenomenological Psychology and Transcendental Phenomenology' (1927), trans. Richard E. Palmer, in *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 322–36.

undergoing when Sabina adheres reflectively to the strong colours in Derain, feel that they contribute to her sense of identity, and saturate a thirst for life caused by the dark Norwegian winter. And we see it when Karin, immersed in the pink of Eliasson's *Your Atmospheric Color Atlas*, has her existential brickwork reorganized and feels at ease in going through difficult emotions. To be moved by art is a complex experience that reveals the affective and aesthetic meaning(s) of a work of art, as well as important aspects of our own existential situation related to it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for suggesting improvements to the paper. Høffding's contribution was supported by the Independent Research Fund, Denmark (DFF-6107-00273), and the Research Council of Norway, Centres of Excellence (262762). Roald's contribution was supported by the Independent Research Fund, Denmark (DFF-6107-00273). Vara Sánchez's contribution was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement no. 794484.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:  
Høffding, Simon, Carlos  
Vara Sánchez, and Tone  
Roald. 'Being Moved by  
Art: A Phenomenological  
and Pragmatist Dialogue.'  
*Estetika: The European  
Journal of Aesthetics*  
LIX/XV, no. 2 (2022):  
pp. 85–102. DOI: [https://  
doi.org/10.33134/eeja.246](https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.246)

Submitted: 14 January 2021  
Accepted: 06 September 2021  
Published: 15 September 2022

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cooperation with the Faculty  
of Arts, Charles University in  
Prague.