Art as Practice of Differentiation: From a Performative Exercise to the Epistemic World of Imponderable Evidence

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ABSTRACT. How does art help to differentiate reality for us? My reflections start by describing a small performative exercise in a teaching context. What kind of knowledge arises when we experience a shift in the reality we expect to encounter in teaching contexts? How can we understand such aesthetic shifts in an epistemological and academic context? Wittgenstein creates an intellectual environment in which it is possible to reflect on artistic processes as tools of differentiation. Thus, new, critical perspectives on how we experience the world we exist in are made possible – through art, through participation in artistic settings and not least through reflecting on art. In this article, I only indicate some central Wittgensteinian patterns in aesthetic epistemology.

Keywords: Art and reflection, Performance, the Art of Teaching, Wittgenstein, imponderable evidence

> Perhaps what is inexpressible
> (what I find mysterious and am not able to express)
> is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning.[1]
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A thought-provoking experience: My little performative exercise as an example of differentiation

Some time ago, I was thinking about whether I could use surprises and new settings in order to break with the expectations of my students. When attending my lectures, they enter the room with the usual expectations, and three minutes before I begin they always know what is going to happen. One day, I wanted to startle these normal and everyday expectations. The day before I had told them to give a brief introduction to Adorno`s *Aesthetics*, and then we would begin to discuss his great essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society". We had a course on aesthetic experience and philosophy of art. I decided to enter the room five minutes early and turn on some funky soul music.[2] Then, I wrote "aesthetic experience" on the blackboard and sat down waiting for the students to gather in a circle, which is how we usually sit. About ten students were present that day. I was very excited to see their reactions. They were all quite relaxed and had smiling faces. Some of them asked questions about the music, but no one asked why we were listening to this music in the first

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1. Wittgenstein 1980, p. 16.
2. I used this remix: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZcLBeba6eY (16.11.2020).

place. I felt that the music put them in a good mood and gave them a feeling of liberating happiness. Now, I was presented with a challenge as to how I should proceed. I decided to just sit there on my chair, halting my introduction on Adorno. I asked them instead whether they liked the music, and in fact everyone did. The following questions came to my mind and I couldn't get the following questions out of my mind: Is it possible for me to experiment with the moment right now? What does it mean to play with the moment right now? Does it make sense to experiment with the moment right now? To just break off the whole situation would be embarrassing. I felt that I had to start with a discourse on what we were doing. So I asked them the simple question: What are we doing now? By asking this, I felt better and more comfortable with the situation. The students gave some answers. However, at the same time I was listening to them, I felt a sort of weakness and insecurity: Had it been a sign of weakness to begin with discourse? Would it not have been better to expose myself a bit longer to the situation back when no one knew how it would progress? In the moment, I felt an impulse that I had not been anticipating while I was preparing this little performance. I decided to act on the impulse and, while feeling that what I was about to say would open up for a new uncontrolled experience, I confessed to my students: "You know, I feel very unconfident and I am unsure how long I can let this pass. This feeling disturbs me." They were laughing and began to comfort me by saying things like "we should listen to more music", "I find it cool", "Shall we dance?" and so on. I noticed that the mood in the entire room had changed for the better. I had been honest about my insecurity and by opening up like this, my students opened up for new forms of participating in return. The new mood created an atmosphere in which they could be more open-minded to each other. "Ok, let`s start by describing what is happening now", I said, while pointing to the blackboard on which the words "Aesthetic experience" were written. Is it possible, I wondered, to capture this moment by describing it? "What is happening now?" I asked my students. We entered into an interesting discourse on the descriptions of the aesthetic experiences and while talking we noticed how we were moving away from the music. Perhaps this is symptomatic of the tension between experiencing and reflecting at the same time. What caught my attention and got me thinking, was the fact that the music had inspired the reflections of the discourse. After a while we tuned into the funky music again and stopped the reflection. For me, this was reason enough to ponder on the happening itself. I turned the music off after twenty minutes.

Reflecting upon the little performative exercise

When I am trying to figure out how I would describe the performance in my lecture, I am fascinated by the attentive and thought-provoking movement of stepping in and out of both the musical-aesthetic experience and the reflections on it fascinating. In my view, they were triggering each other. I will use my little exercise in performance as a reference for the following reflections on the performative art of teaching. Does it really make sense, one could ask, to write about my exercise? I can never reach an understanding of the unique situation by describing it with a few words. The reason for writing about it is to open a reflection process on performative teaching. My little performative exercise serves a possible point of departure for reflections on art as a kind of differentiation practice. As shown in my example from the lecture, performances can provide a new openness when done correctly. The whole enterprise can of course fail very easily, but to expose oneself to the possibility of failure is perhaps the most exciting part of the process. Even the smallest things can leave you with a feeling of embarrassment, but the potential outcomes of using the performance as a medium for a new openness are worth the risk. What is this performative openness, then, and in which way is the performance a medium for acquiring the openness? In the following, I will look into three fields of openness.

First field: A performance exercise would miss its point if the teacher would be able to control and calculate the openness before it takes place. The openness turns every participant into an actor. Exposing everyone in the room to this possibility of sudden action is part of the indefinite openness. To break with our own expectations in order to feel the moment in terms of its difference to the situation we had expected changes our attention and reaction. Am I a part of a game? What is my role? Trying to define one's role on the performative scene is an ongoing process happening while willingly or unwillingly taking part in the situation. It includes paying attention to the performative elements of the whole situation (in my example, the funky soul music) and to the other participating actors (the students). This form of openness is a formal

openness. How we experience it depends on how every individual responds to the performative elements. It is difficult to say anything about whether the good feeling in the group was inspired by the music we were listening to. I did in fact calculate that a good mood would arise when choosing this particular music. With other types of music, the performative situation would obviously not be the same. Although no performative situations are identical, the performative use of a particular device, such as my funky soul music, evokes similarity in different contexts. The experience of similarity is one thing that makes reflections on performative teaching interesting.

Second field: An inexplicable feeling emerges and shapes new expectation. Every participant is wondering what is going to happen next. In anticipating the next moments, they lose the presence of the given moment, which is a presence of being in the music. The students may become distracted by wondering whether the teacher carries out some didactic intention by playing the music. If the teacher mentions didactic reasons too quickly, he or she will lose the tension in the situation. In my view, the teacher should never provide the students with evidence-based or clear reasons for doing what he or she does. The performance has to stay in uncomfortable openness. The task of the teacher is to improvise in the situation and to let the students be aware of how unsure he or she feels in the situation despite having the power to control the proceedings. I was shocked to notice that the whole situation depended on the amount of power I could choose to impose on the discourse.

Third field: The openness was an opening of the discourse itself. I said things I never would have said in academic lectures. I felt the freedom to play with thoughts because it was an open question whether my statements were fictional or meant seriously. This uncertain atmosphere creates possibilities for experiencing freedom of speech. It is a dangerous risk to take and it depends on our courage to leap into the situation with thoughts that can be expressed because their ontological status becomes open in the performative situation.

As we have seen in these three fields, the openness of the performative situation relates to the participation in the moment, the uncertain and uncomfortable feeling that allows the teacher to be honest, and the experience of freedom of speech. The performative situation breaks with expectations and allows students to participate as actors on an open scene. The music turns the room into a scene where we follow momentary impulses. The question is what kind of knowledge this small performance provides. I regard it as *aesthetic knowledge*. As the philosopher Dieter Mersch points out, aesthetic knowledge has to do with reflections made through and with aesthetical material. This kind of knowledge has its own epistemological status. He describes aesthetic knowledge as follows:

> Our interest is in the stimulation of effects or leaps rather than directional intentions or calculated efforts that follow a precise plan and aim for closure in a manner imagined at the work`s inception. Instead, these consequences and jumps serve to create moments of unlocking or freeing, and all that can be said about them is that they happen at the site of aesthetic practices and involve art`s use of media and materials. Put another way, this "unlocking" apostrophizes something that creates an opening or openness that does not specify what it is or will become. [3]

Artistic settings are settings of differentiation by letting the peculiarity of the smallest little insignificant thing emerge; it gives meaning to what we do not want to see and it allows us to experience the uniqueness of every sensory experience. Art reflects the hidden, forgotten and repressed micro-perceptions of reality. It reflects reality through and in its own media. Therefore, art is a result of artistic reflection processes. It divides the sensual in new ways and thus allows reality to emerge in a new light. Describing art means to touch on what it shows of differentiations in and through the sensuous in an environment of what Wittgenstein calls "imponderable evidence". I will now look into some perspectives of Wittgenstein`s thinking on this concept, seeking to understand it against a background of his reflections on the relationship of music and language.

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3. Mersch 2015, p. 11f.

The imponderable evidence

We cannot recognize different artistic expressions in the same way that we can recognize x and y as different types of chairs. This means that there is no direct representation between the artistic expression and our conceptual apparatus. But they are comparable. In this context, Wittgenstein comes into consideration. For Wittgenstein, art and language are in an alternating relationship. An expression of one of them serves to illuminate something in the other. A good example is the following short text about the relationship between music and language:

> Understanding a sentence is more akin to understanding a piece of music than one might think. Why must these bars be played just so? Why do I want to produce this pattern of variation in loudness and tempo? I would like to say "Because I know what it`s all about." But what is it all about? I should not be able to say. For explanation I can only translate the musical picture into a picture in another medium and let the one picture throw light on the other.[4]

Here, Wittgenstein says that an understanding of music takes place through images. Therefore, one can use a metaphorical language when trying to describe the art experience. Putting the art experience into words can never give a general, comprehensive description of the content of the art. One can only direct certain questions to the artistic expression, with the appropriate attention to something specific in it. Therefore, any description of an art experience comes in the form of a perspective, aimed at something specific.

The interpretations of art are infinite because there is no fixable uniqueness in artistic expression. There are no restrictions on how a work of art can be interpreted. This helps to justify the freedom of art. Let's look at another quote by Wittgenstein to shed light on the relationship between language and art. Using another musical example, Wittgenstein writes aptly that tender expression in music

> isn't to be characterized in terms of degrees of loudness in tempo. Any more than a tender facial expression can be described in terms of the distribution of matter in space. As a matter of fact it can't even be explained by reference to a paradigm, since there are countless ways in which the same piece may be played with genuine expression.[5]

A key idea of Wittgenstein's is that we are always within imponderable evidence in aesthetic matters. Towards the end of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein explains what imponderable evidence means. Key to understanding this concepts is his remarks on the philosophy of psychology, presented in the second part of *Philosophical Investigations.* One of his goals is to show that there exists a form of understanding that is not empirical-scientific. This type of understanding opens up for art and a way of looking at nature that differs from the methodological canon of science. Wittgenstein sees Goethe's color theory, for example, as another way of looking at nature that is not meaningless to people living in a scientific world. Wittgenstein does not develop a general theory of what science is; his approach is based on an everyday conversation between two people. When person X tries to understand person Y, X will not push Y into general concepts, but rather try to understand the credibility or correspondence between his or her external expressions (like gestures and acts) and verbal utterances. Understanding is not achieved through methods, but through long experience between people. For example, parents can quickly see what a child means because they know their children. But how can one say anything about this form of knowledge? It is in this context, then, that Wittgenstein characterizes the concept of imponderable evidence (The original German text speaks of *unwägbare Evidenz*). The intention of this concept is not to show that this form of evidence is on thin ground, but that it has other parameters than scientific knowledge. With such parameters, one can talk about people who have a completely unique human knowledge. But because we today partly reduce knowledge to scientific knowledge, we have difficulty understanding that we can learn something from art, literature and music. In Wittgenstein's words: "People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc., to give them pleasure. The idea that these have something to teach them – that does not occur to them."[6] In line with the idea that we can learn something from artists, Wittgenstein tries to elucidate how we gain knowledge about what the subject of imponderable evidence is. His reasoning is as

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4. Wittgenstein 1974, p. 41.
5. Wittgenstein 1980, p. 82.
6. Wittgenstein 1980, p. 36.

follows: Wittgenstein wonders if there is an expertise when it comes to emotional expression. We all believe that there is a difference in people's empathetic abilities. Some people understand emotions better than others do. The next question will then be whether one can acquire such knowledge? The only way is through experience. One cannot take a course in emotional knowledge, and then be an expert in emotions. But can anyone be a teacher in emotional knowledge? They can only help by giving good advice, which ideally comes in the form of correct judgements:

> What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculating-rules. What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words…[7]

Evidence that the teacher's assessment is correct is imponderable. We feel confident that he or she is not fooling us. Wittgenstein's thought goes no further than to be left with such imponderable evidence. We can distinguish between an ingenious and a non-ingenious novel, but to say clearly where the difference lies is difficult. Only trust in the teacher's judgment or personal experience can confirm the imponderable evidence.

In summary, if we ask what properties knowledge with imponderable evidence has, we come to the conclusion that it has to do with particular knowledge and that a person's experience is the only way to be able to form an opinion on whether it is true or not. One example: For research in the art of musical interpretation, this means that descriptions of listening examples remain descriptions of a single performance seen from specific perspectives, and that the measure of whether this description is true can only be given through experience. My experience forms the background for my concepts. Only someone with long experience with the same research object can really say anything about it. This is in contrast to empirical-scientific verifiability. Philosophical research is always subjective like any other research in the humanities. Therefore, the results cannot be measured and weighed. Seen in Wittgenstein's perspective, this is not a weakness, but a strength. We are not dealing with so called facts, but with hermeneutic processes. With ideas like imponderable evidence and a philosophical understanding that differs from the empirical sciences, it is important to emphasize that Wittgenstein does not seek to explain, but to describe. Descriptions imply an opinion that cannot be given through a collection or accumulation of information.

Example: Music and language

Wittgenstein compares understanding a musical phrase to understanding a facial expression. I cannot look at myself to know what understanding a musical phrase is. I have to look at another person. As Wittgenstein shows in the *Philosophical Investigations*, we learn to understand through the expressions of others. When one formulates sentences such as „he experiences the theme in an intensive way", one tries to put the expression in relation to an experience. This involves the entire environment (German original: *Umgebung*) of the listener. The description of the impression „He experiences the theme in an intensive way" is then explained with the help of language. Wittgenstein goes on to say that:

> If I say for instance: here it's as though a conclusion were being drawn, here it's as though someone were expressing agreement, or as though this were a reply to what came before, - my understanding of it presupposes my familiarity with conclusions, expressions of agreement, replies.[8]

Comparing music with language means grasping some of the meaning in the music. For example, tempo can be an important factor in understanding music. It is exactly the same thing that happens in language: "Sometimes a sentence can be understood only if it is read at the right tempo. My sentences are all supposed to be read slowly."[9] In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein discusses once again what it means to understand a musical phrase. He does not come up with an unambiguous answer, but rather tries to show that different forms of expression can say something about whether one has understood the music or not. The understanding of music is an expression of life (German original: *Lebensäußerung*). Here, a new element is

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7. Wittgenstein 1984, p. 574.
8. Wittgenstein 1980, p. 51.
9. Ibid., p. 57.

introduced: Understanding music means understanding how people react to it. But to know what musical understanding is cannot be achieved through music alone. Other branches of art can contribute in this regard. A methodological conclusion based on this important text is that the descriptions of aesthetic art experiences may be different. Sometimes, opening a particular show may be appropriate. Other times, making a story out of what you hear can contribute to the understanding. In some cases, incorporating analytical knowledge of music may help to unpack the meaning of the artwork and to inform the interpretation of it. There are no rules here; the ways in which one can choose to describe music are indeed limitless. The only criterion for being able to say something about whether the description is correct is the reference to the imponderable evidence. This opens a discourse, where others with a certain understanding of music can form an opinion about my description. I could ask: Does my description express something that you can hear in the music? Or do you hear something completely different? The discussion about the description will then develop into a dialogue that moves between experience and knowledge.

Understanding musical language, based on tonality, analogous to linguistic forms of expression is a method that can discover meanings in music is a method that can discover meanings in music. The context in which this meaning is produced has to do with the tonal logic of music. The appearance of the tones is understood in relation to each other and gives meaning as a relational unit. Therefore, this method can be called an analysis of the meaning connections of the tonality based musical language. Wittgenstein had no faith in musical modernism. His intuitive cultural ideal extended to Schumann's time.[10] When I talk about meaning contexts in music and understand music in analogy to language, I apply the context of tonality based music in European art music (as Wittgenstein does), in which understanding music means understanding how the tones follow each other based on the effect they have in the listening process.

Family resemblances in artistic expression

Against this background, the following thought from the *Philosophical Investigations* is important: We use words in a context. A shout can have a huge variety of meanings. Wittgenstein's famous example is that of a man shouting "Plank!". With this example, Wittgenstein shows that words do not have meaning in themselves; their meaning is based on a relationship to a situation and a context. The task of philosophy is to describe these contexts; rather than seeking an all-encompassing knowledge of language, philosophy must show how language works. In this context, Wittgenstein talks about the family resemblances of language games. Wittgenstein's understanding of the method of philosophy is simply to understand the meaning of words based on how they are used. This cannot be done in the form of a theory, but with the help of examples. Therefore, Wittgenstein's texts are mostly collections of examples taken from most contexts in life. In his words: „Practice [*Praxis*] gives the words their sense."[11] He does not deliver a language theory, but analyzes how we use language in daily life. Here, he shows that it is our actions that form the basis of our language, claiming that our acting "lies at the bottom of the language game".[12] Language is therefore always situated in a context of life. Wittgenstein talks about life forms in his often cited statement: "And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life."[13]

Describing how a practice works has become a separate scientific branch in all art disciplines. In a musical context, it means asking questions such as the following: How are the different means of expression used,

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10. Wittgenstein 1980, 2: "I often wonder whether my cultural ideal is a new one, i.e. contemporary, or whether it derives from Schumann's time. It does at least strike me as continuing that ideal, though not in the way it was actually continued at the time. That is to say, the second half of the Nineteenth Century has been left out. This, I ought to say, has been a purely instinctive development and not the result of reflection." Scruton 2009, p. 36 (italics, H.H) comments on this: "Many of his remarks suggest that he believed musical modernism (at least in its more austere varieties) to involve a mistake about the nature of listening. When I listen to a piece written in the idiom of twelve-tone serialism I may recognize that all the notes of the series have been exhausted except one – G sharp, say. I then know that G sharp must follow. And someone might be misled into thinking that this is just like the case of someone listening to a piece in the classical style, who hears it settle on a dominant seventh, and therefore is led to expect the tonic. *Musical understanding is in each case a matter of grasping the way in which one musical event compels the next one. And satisfaction comes from perceiving order and discipline in what, from the acoustic perspective, is no more than a sequence of sounds.*"
11. Wittgenstein 1980, p. 85.
12. Wittgenstein 1975, p. 204.
13. Wittgenstein 1953, nr. 19.

and why are they used in this way? In other words, it is not just a matter of describing a practice, but also of working out its meaning. Only then can the practice be understood. „The conductor of an orchestra slows down in tempo 28" is a statement without a particularly deep meaning. But to ask why the conductor slows down in bar 28, based on what was and what is coming, makes more sense. Bar 28 is then part of a whole. By looking at the connections of meaning and the family resemblances, an understanding of the practice is formed. Of course, one can discuss different ways of interpreting the tempo change. People have different views on a practice. Wittgenstein does not strive for a new scientific positivity based on the descriptions. Therefore, according to Wittgenstein's thinking, studies of practices are not based on securing factual knowledge, but on a desire for an ever deeper understanding. Different practices and contexts require different types of descriptions and different types of attempts at justification. In aesthetic descriptions, there are no external criteria other than the discussion of whether it is a good or bad description. But the fact that we are able to form an opinion about the quality of the description shows that we have a relationship with our linguistic means of expression that enables us to be critical.

Foreground and background

The foreground of any musical expression is based on a specific background. This background is not a collection of certain propositions about music, but rather an expression of a worldview. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein tries to understand how it is possible to have certainty about something without possessing empirical evidence (empirical evidence, in Wittgenstein's perspective, is ultimately an impossibility). His thesis is that all our sentences, which we assume to be true without being able to prove it, are based on a particular worldview. We have not acquired this worldview through experience; it is something that is given to us from a very young age. We are given a background that lays the foundation for our propositions. It is this background that gives us the criteria for what will apply as right and wrong. The following example illustrates this:

> It is quite sure that motor cars don't grow out of earth. We feel that if someone could believe the contrary he could believe everything we say is untrue, and could question everything that we hold to be sure. But how does this one belief hang together with all the rest? We would like to say that someone who could believe that does not accept our whole system of verification. The system is something that a human being acquires by means of observation and instruction. I intentionally do not say «learns».[14]

Our whole perception of reality is built up under a belief in certain things as a matter of course. Wittgenstein then turns to skepticism and shows convincingly that a radical skepticism is not possible because in order to doubt that X exists, one must necessarily master the language game that makes us understand what we mean by the concepts of "X" and "doubt". Perhaps it is worth it, then, to think about whether performative exercises open up a field of experiences that allows us to break with our normal and everyday expectations and categorizations of reality. In such reflections, I see a great critical potential in educational contexts.

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14. Wittgenstein 1975, p. 279.

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