

EXPERIENCE PREFERRED

by Kate Love



“MY FATHER DIED IN HIS 45TH YEAR OF HEART FAILURE when I was just seven years old, giving us only one weeks warning that his health was failing. I have never ever been able to remember anything about that time, nothing from either before or, for a long time, after his death.

There *are* though, maybe one or two exceptions, sharp memories, such as the first day back at school after the summer holidays and starting a new year the teacher asked each class member to state their father’s occupation (this was still the *early* 60’s afterall) – and I replied quite prosaically – ‘deceased’.

I could not say ‘dead’, or ‘has died’, partly because I thought it felt vaguely bad mannered, but also because the sound and the meaning of the word *dead* was both far too final and real, *and* simultaneously, elsewhere – something I absolutely could not associate with myself or my grief.

Apart from this and one or two other quite specific recollections, there is nothing else that I can really recall from this period or before, and for as long as I can remember I have always considered this space or gap in my memory to be a constituent of my subjectivity: the fact that I am unable to remember the early years of my life is ‘just part of my history’.

It has been, to say the least, a long and circuitous journey to this point – a point where I no longer feel so happy to have such a gap or such a hole in my past.

The work, which I have been engaged with for some time on the concept of experience, has brought me, quite unintentionally, towards an obligation to face this space of un-knowing.

And in a sense, I now realise that I am making this work in order *to describe an experience*: an experience of this gap-space (knowing and yet not knowing) which, strangely, and quite startlingly, I now also recognise might not be unlike a new and a possibly more adequate interpretation of experience itself.”

'The dialectic has its proper fulfilment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.' Hans-Georg Gadamer ¹

1

It is with some trepidation that I begin this text with such a personal account of my *own* experience because paradoxically my work on the concept of experience began as a *critique* of the ubiquity of such strategies in contemporary art practice. For example, when I started this work in 1995 it had become incredibly commonplace to read accounts of particular art works which stressed quite unproblematically, and I felt untenably, that they were about the artist's *own personal experience* rather than that experience as it might be understood discursively – inter-subjectively – or as very deliberately, an experience 'of' a social or critical or contemporaneous issue.

The cultural and political shifts which had produced this privileged, and to some extent overdetermined, sense of the personal as '*confessional*', were sanctioned most particularly in the context of art and literature. Arts anyway residual tendency to focus on the relationship between 'the work' and 'the self' had been compounded by a generation or so of visibility politics and the move towards social equality through encouraging the representation of *difference* rather than *sameness* or *universality*. Concurrently, a concomitant of this turn 'inwards' was also being underwritten on an activist level by the increased acceptance of Michel Foucault's seminal injunction, proclaiming 'the indignity of speaking *for* others'. Slowly but surely, this instruction permeated accepted behaviour, to the extent that it became less and less comfortable to take being spoken 'on behalf of' for granted. Gradually, more and more people began to respond to the space and the anticipation that they might now learn to speak '*for* *themselves*'.

In the context of art, these various technologies of writerly inscription and diversification served to edge forwards the already existing and perhaps politically inevitable transition from a 1970's/80's art practice based on the 'big' themes of 'Identity' and 'Representability' – towards quite a different body of work – one which was associated in the 90's with the figuring of a smaller kind of experience, a localised, and quotidian politics of '*the Everyday*'. People just started to make work about the obviousness and ordinariness of so-called 'mundane' experience – events that they might bump up against in their day-to-day lives, rather than the *great* themes typically associated with art. Paradoxically, when this work first appeared, it seemed so 'out of the ordinary' that it didn't always signify. ²

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Hitherto this period, art works which were figured in any way as ‘personal’ or about ‘experience’, had unfortunately remained relatively delimited – the province of certain subjects only. And as a consequence, this work mostly had an audience ‘in the know’, who knew what they were looking for and how to read the signs. Furthermore, because this kind of work was often concerned with the ‘personal’ or the autobiographical, it was most usually associated with *all things female* or *other* and therefore marginalised as such, and dangerously off-limits for the continuation of a *serious* practice. However – in the late 80’s/early 90’s – largely as a result of these technologies of *difference* and *interpellation* – what became startling and surprising, precisely, *for those others* – was that this terrific shift in consciousness produced a mass vindication, whereby *anyone* who wanted to could just get down to what they had wanted all along – that is – ‘to *find their own voice*’ and start to ‘*represent their own experience*’.



To bring this writing up to date, the point at which I came into this work was when I first realised that – whilst welcoming such a move – the force of such a recognition³ only served to obscure the substantive linguistic, psychoanalytic and philosophical complexities which surround the probability of finding something you might call your ‘*own*’ voice or your ‘*own*’ experience. For example, it seemed that the political interpellation to go *inwards* and *downwards* had been unravelled in ways which began to overshadow the hard-won victories of earlier poststructuralist discourse. These deconstructive interpretations had previously liberated individuals from the confines of artificially induced ‘normality’ and ‘naturalness’, by insisting on the *constructedness* of the ‘self’, and were therefore seen initially as a real move towards the cultural and social mobilisation of subjectivity. But in the context of this ever-growing propensity for the depiction and valorisation of personal experience, some artists very deliberately turned their backs on such theory – angry that these ideas had decentered subjectivity and rendered artistic agency and intentionality quite impossible.⁴

Unfortunately, this sort of *round about* thinking engendered a morbid re-visiting of a previously much discredited belief – that is, that the representation of experience would guarantee transparent access to an authentic knowledge of subjectivity. As a consequence, the insidious acceptance of this idea, in many diverse contexts, similarly led back to the older, and relatively pernicious, understanding of the subject as a singular, autonomous and expressive *individual*. Typically, these

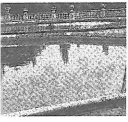
beliefs served to legitimate reference to experience, in art, as entirely ‘ones own’ – that is, as if knowledges gained through experience were able to deliver meanings which were immediately present to consciousness. Within art school discourse, for example, it was, and to some extent still is, so much more usual to hear a student say that they are ‘making work about my *experience*’ – rather than – ‘making work about my *understanding* of the world.’ And in many ways I have found that this statement usually means the student has internalised the idea that, only by working on experience, will they be able to release the truth content of their subjectivity, because only experience, as *opposed* to understanding, can offer the right kind of indexical contiguity with the world – as unmediated meaning.

Given the enduring prevalence of such an assertion, it would be relatively easy to just give in to such declarations, if it were not for a set of unresolved contradictions that, I feel, still haunt this lingering belief in the ‘immediacy’ of experience. That is, that whilst I can obviously accept that there is a qualitative difference between what it *feels* like to *experience* the world, as distinct from what it feels like to *understand* the world – I still have problems with the idea that experience should therefore, on the strength of this difference, be summarily collapsed to *authentic* self-presence. That is, whilst it may well be the case that to have had an experience is – *as if to possess it* – a feeling of immediate contiguity between sensation and affect – I remain unconvinced by how this *immediacy* might turn itself instantaneously into recognition and meaning. For example, if experience does transcend discourse, then it’s hard to see how we might make sense of our experiences, if they are always on the *out-side* of language. On the other hand, if we compensate for this linguistic predicament by resorting to the proposition that experience is *necessarily* ‘always already’ in signification for it to be understood *as* experience, then it really becomes quite difficult to posit experience as structurally different to understanding, in that both are subject to discursive interpretation through the movement of *différance*. And so on – if experience *is* necessarily subject to the condition of temporal and spatial deferral which comprises *différance* – then this would mean that experience could never be *self-present* to consciousness, and as a consequence it becomes difficult to maintain the supposed ‘immediacy’ of *actual* experience.

Whatever the outcomes of these contortions, however, one only has to witness on TV and in popular journalism, the enduring tendency to privilege the account of someone who has *had* an actual experience over someone who *has not*,

to begin to estimate the strength of this common-sense view of personal experience as a guarantee of authenticity and truth.

So for me, despite all the attenuated complexities surrounding the contradiction of experience, the challenge remains – as this publication attests – the challenge, that is, in the question **what is experience?** For example, what does it mean to say you've had an *experience*, what is its status, and value, and how is that written and seen?



To begin to answer such a series of questions demands that we scrutinise the conditions of possibility that have given rise to such inquiries in the first place. For example, what does it *mean* to even think of querying the status of *actual* experience and how do we begin to understand how the representation of such an experience might be thought of as authentic? Inevitably, to pose either of these questions relies on the assumption that it's still possible to think of the individual as the origin or source of experience, transparently representing the truth of their subjectivity. But is it still feasible to think in this way? For example, if the 90's 'art of the everyday' *hadn't* turned its back so resolutely on the gains of 80's poststructuralism, would we even be thinking in terms such as these? And if such a 'return to quotidian experience' hadn't disavowed the idea of a *constituted subjectivity* would we still be thinking along the lines of the *immediacy* of experience and it's possession in art? It's quite possible that it is exactly this feeling of possession that has fed the desire for – and the interpretation of – so much recent confessional based art practice. But as I queried earlier – is it still prudent to maintain a belief in experience *as* implying unmediated transmission of sensation to effect?

To date, therefore, I am trying to work through the idea of an interpretation of the concept of experience as *yes*, being intrinsically different to the feeling of understanding but *no*, not by default being posited as self-present and therefore inevitably *other* to language and discursive construction.

And a clue here – in the search for the kind of interpretation of experience which would comply with these conditions – is precisely in the examination of the similarities and differences between *experience* and *understanding* and their relationship to *language*. So by way of a conclusion I would like to consider these relations, if only to attempt to think through what might really be happening when we say that we have *had an actual experience*.

The traditional, ubiquitous reading suggests that *experience* is sensate rather than cognitive – ‘a buzzing, confusion of things’ that just ‘happens’ to a subject – whilst the concept of *understanding* implies a certain command over knowledge, a process, which is very definitely *in* language, and one which *positions* the subject *by* such an interpretation and such a control. Its quite possible that it is this openness which makes experience feel more immediate, but also leads wrongly, I would argue, to the assumption of self-presence. And similarly, it is almost certainly the supposed fluidity of experience which distances it *untenably* from the fixity of language and discursive understanding.

Given the exacting precision of these conditions, however, it does seem important that any viable interpretation of experience doesn’t ignore these differences in quality but rather attempts to retain the intuitive sense of the *openness* of experience, whilst at the same time making space for the inevitability of its discursive interpretation. In other words, a more workable and/or conceptually tenable understanding of experience could be figured as one in which the subject is concurrently both *in* language and yet posited at the limits *of* that language. A process which could be likened to the subject *undergoing* and *interpreting* simultaneously, and one which would give credence to *something* called *actual experience* – in that it could register an openness rather than a fixity towards language without conflating that fluidity with the fallaciousness of self-presence.⁵

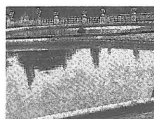
It is interesting to note here that when people talk about making art – particularly the key moment of ‘imaginative variation’ – when the seeming incoherence of an object or an image *suddenly* gets to ‘count as something’, they very often speak about this moment as equivalent to a feeling of being both *in meaning* and also at the *limits of that meaning* – being *pushed into meaning* – if you like – as it turns over and is made. To me – this sounds very similar to the above elucidation of experience, as *undergoing and interpreting* (not as self-presence or as collapsed entirely to language, but both – at the same time) and for this reason I am now working with the idea that the process of making and looking at art could be used as an exemplar, or model, for understanding the concept of experience *itself*. That is, in order to undermine the art theory/art practice binary redolent of so much contemporary debate – instead of using *theory* to analyse *art* – I am attempting to use the experience of art, *itself*, as a tool of conceptual analysis. My argument would be that if these moments with art can act as a metaphor for experience, as we might



conceptualise it but rarely truly experience it, then in terms of the pursuit of a more adequate definition of experience, it seems imperative that we try to analyse such moments of art against the concept of experience that they might tend to produce.

To end, by returning to the beginning of this text, the images included throughout this writing are my photographic attempt to do just this. Taken in Hyde Park, London, they are a remembrance of the place, as it was, when I visited it a few weeks after the death of my Father when I was seven years old. When I took them, last year, it felt as if I was at the very limit of the *sense* of such a memory. But it was as if – through the experience of setting up these photographs – I encountered what I would now call ‘the limit of understanding’, or experience, *as* the limit of understanding – when experience is seen as a process of consciousness in relation to itself *as a process of consciousness*. The interesting thing, so far, is that this practice does seem to do the analytical work I really hoped it might – that is, produce an interpretation of such an experience which doesn’t feel anything like possession or fixity (no room to mobilise such memories) but rather strikingly and startlingly produces an openness⁶ to that experience which I have probably always intuitively known is only *made possible by experience itself*.

With this in mind, my hope is that maybe someday soon I’ll be able to ‘do’ something with such ‘memories’.



Footnotes for EXPERIENCE PREFERRED by Kate Love. p. 33.