

From “**The Astounding Nature of Experience; Conversations with Peter Brown**”,

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Preface to the sabbatical edition, for those interested in how I tied the Notes into art practice and studies.

Our lives are made up of experiences. We normally think of our lives as being made up of *compartmentalized* experiences that we *have*, with maybe some downtime in between. Some experiences we desire and dream about and chase, and others we try to avoid. Avoiding and chasing are also experiences. So is downtime.

It could then be said that our lives are *nothing but* experience. We might think of memories or things we look forward to as being outside of current experience, but really they are what current experience consists of (partially). Bob Samples cites Navajo usage of tense which illustrates this distinction: whereas we would say, “He was running”, the Navajo would say in effect, “In my mind, he is running” (*Metaphoric Mind: A Celebration of Creative Consciousness*, 1993). Nothing is exempt. Or as Peter (who will be introduced later) is fond of saying, “It’s always Miller time!”

We can more precisely see and feel that instead of separate experiences following one after another, our lives are actually one nonstop *stream* of experiencing that is continually and instantaneously morphing, like a movie on a screen, or a kaleidoscope. It is continually replenishing itself. This is the continuum of daily life, waking though sleeping. This more experienced-based way of seeing is what this sabbatical project is about.

We tend not to notice things that we always experience, like gravity or air, or the ringing in our ears, or space, or the feeling of being – or things we don’t hold as important at the time, like our socks, or gum on the trash can. All these ubiquitous elements that make up the backdrop of our lives we might call context or background. Things that concern us and get us out of bed in the morning (or make us want to stay in bed) are foreground, the content of our lives. Foreground and background; sounds like an art concern to me!

All of this ties into art. It’s my contention that art is about nothing but experience - illuminating, reflecting, and inquiring into experience. Its “purpose” is to *expose* aspects of experience normally unquestioned, normally unchallenged, normally unnoticed or taken for granted. To me, successful art exposes other ways of *looking, using, relating to, or thinking about* something. It exposes (makes conscious, makes us appreciate) new connections, or beauty, or ignorance, or the flow of time, or qualities of light, or ugliness, or intelligence, or [your adjective here], perhaps where and in ways you never thought of finding it. In the words of artist Paul Klee, “Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible” (from his 1961 *Notebooks*).

Sometimes artists attempt to expose something by bypassing the mind, going straight for the senses. For example, abstract painters and the Light & Space artists often fall into this category of art making. Sometimes artists attempt to do this by reframing, causing people to think about

issues, to reflect and discuss. Chris Burden's visceral *L.A.P.D. Blue*, uniforms made for 8 foot-tall policemen (produced after the L.A. riots) is a good illustration of this - a feeling of sickening ominous control is palpable coming upon this work. This artistic process of exposing can be focused on psychological or social/cultural/linguistic experience and conditioning, or on pure sensorial experience (light, space, color, form). But nevertheless, it is all dealing with experience.

My work as an artist has followed this strategy of exposing - from a body of work inspired by the unseen world of migration grids of the Monarch butterflies (discovered in 2006), to the vulnerability and beautiful gesture of cement floor cracks and their visual connections to lightening streaks, lacerations, arteries, tree limb growth and aerial views of rivers and fault lines. Later incarnations of this work transposed cracks from studio to gallery, as well as became a poignant exercise in futility with a floor crack cleaned and filled with gold leaf the night before the demolition of a building. Much of my site specific work has been an attempt to expose or reframe the context in which the work is shown - an example would be my Homeless Pavilions - crawl-in boxes with transcendental interiors at a pop-space in a depressed area of L.A. My main medium is decomposed earth (clay), which I often turn back into rock and landscape, and at times use this terrestrial material associated with permanence to reference sky and ephemerality. My vessel work exposes the "earthiness" of the material, as well as often reveals a connection of vessel with architecture.

The fact that art (or any of the sciences or humanities) can and continues to expose things, continues to make us discover something new, implies that there is an endless depth of experience available to us.

We are desensitized to much of the depth of our experience through the conditioning of language (especially SAE - Standard American European languages, cited in linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf's *Language, Thought and Reality*, 1956), culture, and upbringing. A static and limited experience of objects, time, space, self and relations, as well as a hierarchy of what is worth our attention, is unconsciously habituated through conditioning.

Our human bodies themselves condition or filter experience, seeming to operate within a certain bandwidth of perceptions. However, these limitations and narrow bandwidths of experience are challenged if we look at the perceptions of certain indigenous cultures - for instance the Hopi Indians (as reflected in the structure of their language, written about extensively in Whorf's work, cited above) and certain tribes of the upper Amazon - or cultures steeped in traditions of meditation and contemplation such as India or Tibet, or descriptions of psychotic breaks, near death experiences and spiritual emergencies (also called kundalini syndrome - one of which is described on the first page of the Notes). These limitations are also challenged when we take a closer look at anything in our experience.

Following this line of logic, art training would be superficial if it were just about skill acquisition and expression. What is it you want to express, and what is worth expressing? And terrific skill is great as far as it goes, but what is it about? Being good at drawing does not an artist make. What is being exposed?

Deeper art training, “finding your own voice”, is also about discovering how seeing, thinking and communication are *conditioned*, and the *forces involved* in that conditioning (for instance bonding or economic disparity or patriarchal society in the larger sphere, or bullies or high school in the personal sphere, etc.). What other ways of seeing are available that conditioning might be blocking? Are language and definitions really serving us? Or are they in fact really bad Cliff Notes, caricatures, gross generalizations and over- simplifications that actively dull our experience? The training then becomes about *finding ways to deconstruct* what seems concrete and conditioned.

Lastly, the training is about *developing sensitivity* (a form of deconstruction itself) - learning to look closer and more subtly, beyond definitions, within deeper and more nuanced bandwidths. Just trying to draw a still life in beginning drawing, spending hours beyond the initial, “oh, it’s just some fruit and a bottle”, begins this process of sensitization in profound ways. There is endless visual “information”, endless qualities, much of which there are no words for.

Anywhere along this line of inquiry – exposing conditioning, to deconstruction, to sensitivity – is where significant or deeper art practices (and deeper, or more direct experiences) are couched. Though a topic for another time, this is not a process that could ever be standardized – every artist, every person, has to find their own way into this process, into their own voice.

As such, art practice-as-inquiry is in step with philosophical or psychological or spiritual or shamanistic inquiry. I am not speaking religions, schools of thought, belief systems or worldviews, though these aren’t necessarily excluded. I am speaking of inquiry into direct experience, or perception, of which the notes I have compiled and edited deal with *explicitly*.

Broaching the topic of experience in an academic setting has always been a somewhat dicey affair. Most of the social sciences, being sciences, tend to approach topics in third person, through studies, experiments, and data. Philosophy, though being an introspective study, still has schools of thought that inquiry fits into – were this sabbatical project to be labeled within that discipline, it would fall into a sort of messy kind of phenomenology. However, when inquiry shines light on first person identity/sensorial experience, a kind of solipsism, it quickly leaves the realm of categorization. For example, try to label or explain the subtle, layered, nonlinear impressions and connections that shift like quicksilver you experience in the hypnagogic state. Definitions (in this example the name of the state, and the parts of the brain active at that time from fMRI’s) seem to “tame” experience, make it “known”, but that taming doesn’t really describe anything. How do you describe a quality? It is not that cross- disciplinary biology/physics/ psychology/philosophy might not someday be able to better map this terrain, but to my knowledge it hasn’t done so yet, or at least in a way that does justice to qualities of first person experience. The map is never the terrain.¹

¹ From *The Theory of Everything*, by McKenna: Margritte, “The Treachery of Images”: It is a pipe, but it’s not a pipe, it’s a painting of a pipe, a depiction of a thing and not the thing itself. Similarly, a movie of a mountain is not a mountain, it’s just a shifting pattern of light on a screen. I am on the stage, but I’m also out in the audience, and from that perspective, everything on the stage is the same, just as everything on a movie screen is light. Everything on the stage – you and me and table and chairs and time and space and all the rest – is just a shifting pattern of light on a screen. This is not a mystical revelation, it’s just perception undistorted by layers of false belief. Simulacra and Simulation, a 1981 essay by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, describes what he calls the precession of simulacra. He describes the way we have moved away from the direct and authentic experience of reality, to a symbol-based simulation of reality in which the symbols have evolved through several generations until they no longer represent anything real, only prior abstractions. He’s talking about developments in the last hundred years, but it’s

interesting to note that what he's saying in the micro is what we're saying in the macro; that the map has become the territory and has no underlying basis in reality.

This topic is not just myopically relevant to art and perception. I would put forward that the quality of one's life is determined by the quality of one's experience. As experiencing starts to open through closer looking, qualities already present come to the fore that I would posit *are* the richness of life. It has nothing to do with kinds or amounts of experience (i.e., travel, entertainment, etc.), but qualities. Think of the difference in people's health, relations, and impact on the environment if the need to hoard, or be incessantly clobbered over the head with lots of entertaining and sensual things in order to feel secure, or to at least feel *something*, is diminished - even just a little!

All the above is leading to perhaps an obvious and I hope accepted conclusion and confession. These notes, these conversations, are *extremely* personal, though valid to others involved in similar inquiry. They are a rather detailed excursion into subtle interior life and perceptions (not to mention numerous personal foibles and the occasional sailor's mouth), discussing the myriad ways experience is obstructed as well as already liberated from definitions. Perhaps unfortunately, it is often couched in the language of eastern thought and practice, as it is a more nuanced language in the realm of experience - but if leaving definitions and looking closer is considered "spiritual" (sounds just as much scientific to me), so be it.

How these conversations actually translate into art practice and teaching is an ongoing evolution, an ongoing fleshing-out process - though truly not that idiosyncratic an approach to art. Witness all of Robert Irwin's writings and work, Jan Butterfield's "The Art of Light & Space", art theory (see the succinct summary of Baudrillard's philosophy in the footnote above, much of which contemporary art theory is based upon) or Betty Edwards' classic, "Drawing in the Right Side of the Brain" as examples. The way I teach students to look closer and how to write-as-discovery about what they perceive, is something I learned and modified while being a teaching assistant for beginning sculpture at USC, and of which I wrote about and published in the international periodical, *Ceramics Monthly*. So this is not really that odd of an approach. Art is the study of experience.

Which brings me to the notes of Skype sessions I had with Peter Brown.

I consider Peter a home-grown Dzogchen master, without him ever officially having gone through that particular lineage. He's probably pigeon-holed as a Neo-Advaitist if that helps, but what he presents is so outside and even counter to that particular approach, it's kind of a funny misrepresentation to categorize him as such. In regards to what initially triggered his awakening, he's technically in the lineage of the shamans of the Amazon, as will be explained.

Peter initially comes across as the most normal person in the room, though more articulate and observant than most - but when you catch wind of what he talks about, and then realize he's talking from that place, all I can say is that it's time to fasten your seat belt! He's also a musician, retired recording engineer/producer, and life-long student of many of the world's spiritual, mystery, and occult traditions, not to mention a master of Tarot.

An active rock musician on the east coast in his teens and early twenties (a virtuosic guitarist and drummer), Peter met and hung out with Italian archeologist, inventor, explorer, psychic, and author, Pino Turolla (1922-1984). As a young man still in his teens, Pino was a member of the Italian special forces, fighting in many fierce operations throughout World War II. After the war, Pino's interests turned to the pre-Inca civilizations of South America, as well as on the uses of plant medicines in the Amazon. He collected and brought back plant samples to the U.S. for medical research. Pino met shamans, some who were his guides into the flora and fauna of the region as well as to hidden archeological sites. During his time in South America, Pino sustained life-threatening injuries which were healed by these indigenous people and their plant remedies. These experiences strengthened his interest in and sensitivity to psychic phenomena, and was later selected to be a test subject in experiments regarding psychic phenomena conducted by Stanford Research Institute in the 1950's and 60's.

Pino was reportedly a fantastic storyteller and had quite an amazing presence – a real-life Indiana Jones. This, coupled with whatever had opened in him through his adventures and healings, all became the catalyst for an overwhelming and transformative experience of reality for Peter. This was a major shock to his psyche, turning inside out just about every way he had held things to be. Peter's experiences are covered more completely in his book, "Dirty Enlightenment: The Inherent Perfection of Imperfection" (2013, but has been available as a .pdf since 2006).

It took Peter another 25 years and a bout with cancer to integrate this perceptual shift into a way that was clear and stable enough for him to communicate it to others. During that 25 years he ran one of the top recording studios in the Bay area, raised twin daughters, and obsessively studied and practiced many contemplative traditions, both east and west.

Around 2006, Peter began informal discussions with friends and acquaintances interested in the nature of experience - often a moveable feast held at different restaurants or people's homes, which continues to this day.

With no dogma, nothing to join and no fee to pay (other than defraying travel costs), Peter has pretty much been an open book to peruse whenever I or anyone else has had the curiosity to look at personal experience in different and deeper ways.

I think it is valuable to present these notes as Peter's teachings are well documented with groups, but not one on one. Many notes are included from public/invitational/retreat settings to give a more complete picture. Though the notes are through the filter of what I was able to hear and hold important at the time, the personal facet (and progression) of his work is something I think could be of interest to others, as well as has been extremely valuable for me to review and organize. It is also intended as a small gesture of payback for Peter's time and generosity.

Just recently Peter mentioned how understanding is actually a lot more weird than a causal, "I speak, you understand", one-to-one correlation. It is more like a coincidence if understanding occurs. Words and thoughts are strange in themselves, and really refer only to themselves – as in, you can eat a picture of strawberry, but it is incomparable to eating a strawberry. As well, words only gain meaning in a string – their meanings are marginal one at a time, out of context of a sentence that references meanings back and forth.

It is ALWAYS a surprise when understanding happens. I can hear something a thousand times (as you will discover!), but it's always "why didn't you say that before?" when I get it.

Which begs the question if the words and notes herein are of any value. I find the notes powerful; they were "designed for" and best suited to me after all. However, you can't predict what will jog someone else's experience. What one person dismisses might make another drool in wonder.

May we all drool in wonder.