

Abstraction in Action: Post-Qualitative Inquiry as an Approach to Curating

Heidi Marjaana Kukkonen

Universitetet i Agder

Abstract: In this self-study, I describe the process of curating an exhibition about abstract art for children. The field of museum education lacks studies about experiences with and approaches to abstract art. In order to find new ways to approach abstract art outside of the traditional dialogue-based methods and to imagine how a child might want to experience abstract art, I began to conduct a post-qualitative inquiry with an emphasis on ontology and epistemology. I used the concept of abstraction as a creative force and a method, and the post-qualitative inquiry became a lived inquiry. My experiments were influenced by post-structuralist theory. I moved from the critical tradition towards experiential museum education in my curatorial decisions. The process made the educational potential of abstract art visible: abstraction is a safe opportunity to explore feelings of uncertainty and discomfort, and a strategy to deconstruct stiff patterns in order to get creative.

Keywords: abstract art, abstraction, post-qualitative inquiry, curating, museum education

Introduction

What is abstract art good for? What's the use of paintings that do not seem to show anything except themselves? These questions were asked by Kirk Varnedoe, art historian and former chief curator of painting and sculpture of the Museum of Modern Art, during his lectures *Pictures of Nothing – Abstract Art since Pollock*. He says that the topic is “one of the

most legitimate but poorly addressed questions in modern art” (2003, pp. 23–25). Similar questions intrigue me as a museum educator. In recent decades, only a handful of studies have been made about museum educational practices with abstract art, and these studies focus on traditional dialogue-based methods.¹ The field of museum education lacks actual studies about experiences and approaches with abstract art. In this self-study I will reflect on the educational potential of abstraction.

When I worked as a museum guide in my native country, Finland, I used traditional dialogue-based methods with abstract art.² I tried to decode the meaning of the artworks, and I focused on factual art historical information on my guided tours. Despite my lengthy explanations, I received frustrated comments from the visitors that the art form was difficult to understand. It was challenging for me as well to talk about abstract art. Ignoring senses and going straight into analysis can be linked to a critical tradition in museum education, where an idea instead of the body and its senses is the starting point for the experience. Museum education in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe leans strongly towards the critical tradition (Christensen-Scheel, 2019, p. 29). It is based on critical philosophy and art’s aesthetic autonomy, stemming from the writings of Immanuel Kant (1790/2007) and Theodor Adorno (1970/2013).

I study museum educational practices with abstract art in my PhD project. What happens when we encounter abstract art? Can we find new ways to mediate abstract modernist art? During the first year of my PhD project, I was invited to curate an exhibition about abstract art for

-
- 1 Palmyre Pierroux (2005) writes how high school students master concepts in aesthetics and modern art in art history classes and in art museums, using abstract modern art as an example. Olga Hubard (2011) studies interpretative inquiry when discussing “open” artworks with students. Both Pierroux and Hubard study encounters with abstract art as complex meaning-making processes by using dialogue-based museum education, such as a guided tour or a discussion with students in a gallery space or a classroom. Two studies published in the *Tate Papers* series (Dima, 2016; Scott & Meijer, 2009) focus on visitors’ engagement with learning tools in exhibitions with abstract art, but the studies pay little attention to the art form, and most tools in the studies are based on text.
 - 2 Dialogue-based practices can be understood as a variety of participatory and multisensory practices (Dysthe et al., 2012, p. 6). When I write about my traditional dialogue-based practices as a guide, I mean a traditional guided tour that focuses on art historical and biographical information, takes distance to subjective sensing and emphasizes art’s critical potential (see for example Christensen-Scheel, 2019, p. 30).

Barnas Kunstmuseum [Children's Art Museum], a section dedicated for children inside Sørlandets Kunstmuseum [Southern Norway Museum of Art], a regional museum in Kristiansand, Norway. The exhibition would create an important empirical part in my PhD project. I started to plan and make ideas, but I was still somewhat stuck in the critical tradition of museum education. In order to find new ways to approach the art form, and to reflect how children would like to experience abstract art, I began to conduct a post-qualitative inquiry with abstract art. According to Elizabeth St. Pierre (2019a), post-qualitative inquiry does not use already-there methods and methodologies but encourages to experiment instead in order to see outside of the old patterns. The focus is on the unknown and what is yet to become instead of repetition or representation of what is already known. (p. 1).

In my experiments I noticed how abstraction escapes from words and definitions, touching our senses instead. When a painting catches my attention with bright colors, I might get chills on my arm, but I cannot explain the sensation by words. I may associate it with a feeling or a place, but I cannot exactly say why. The post-qualitative inquiry then led me closer towards experiential museum educational practices, which were used in the exhibition design. Experiential museum education emphasizes the museum visitor's experience when encountering art: the visitors have the opportunity to physically participate in activities and multisensory encounters (Christensen-Scheel, 2019, p. 25). Experiential museum education is based on phenomenological and pragmatic traditions in philosophy (Dewey, 1980; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013).

Abstraction! opened in September 2020. The exhibition displays post-war abstract art from the Tangen Collection.³ Paintings and prints are displayed together with activities and digital solutions in three rooms.⁴ In this self-study, I will describe how my post-qualitative inquiry with abstraction became the groundwork for curating an exhibition about abstract art for children. My inquiry can be located most importantly

3 About the Tangen Collection, see Sørlandets Kunstmuseum [Southern Norway Museum of Art], 2021.

4 The museum applied and received funding for the exhibition from AKO Foundation.

in the field of museum education, but it is influenced and inspired by art history.⁵

I will begin by depicting the conflict between me and abstract art in the first section. In the next sections, I will describe my post-qualitative inquiry, the playful experiments and encounters with abstraction. I started to make abstract art and to pay attention to abstraction in everyday life. In addition, I started to provoke abstraction in relational situations and to contemplate ontological questions. In each of these sections, I will explain how the post-qualitative inquiry has contributed to the curatorial strategy by giving concrete examples from the exhibition design. The whole process made the educational potential of abstract art visible for me, which I will discuss in the final sections. In addition to St. Pierre's article «Post-Qualitative Inquiry in an Ontology of Immanence» (2019a), I will use poststructuralist theoretical texts that have influenced my explorations with abstraction: *Positions* (1972/1981) and *Aporias* (1993) from Jacques Derrida and *A Thousand Plateaus – Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980/2004) from Deleuze and Guattari. In the subchapter “What is abstraction? Ontological contemplations” I will explain how I moved from Derrida's deconstruction towards Deleuze and Guattari's ontology of immanence in my explorations with abstraction. I will do this with the help of two concepts: *aporia* from Derrida (1972/1981) and the *rhizome* from Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2004).

Towards post-qualitative inquiry

The Children's Art Museum is a section dedicated for children inside Southern Norway Museum of Art. The museum space, consisting of three large rooms, has permanent wooden installations, inspired by cabinets of curiosities from the Renaissance. The cabinets and boxes have space to exhibit artworks, and the installations invite children to explore

5 The art historical terminology of abstract art is confusing, as pointed out by Varnedoe (2003, p. 47). Should one talk about abstract, non-figurative, non-representational or non-objective art? I use the concept of abstraction, since it is the most accessible term both for professionals and museum visitors. However, I do use the other concepts as well when it is necessary to help the reader or to emphasize the complexity of the concept.

and roam around the art inside and outside of the cabinets. When the Children's Art Museum opened in 2014, its goal was to create a space where children can experience art in their own premises, through play and using their senses (Liven, 2015). In 2019, I was invited by the museum to curate an exhibition about abstract art for children, which would create an important empirical part of my PhD project.

Around these times, I was still in conflict with abstract art. In fact, I had chosen the topic for my dissertation because of my problematic relationship with the art form. The conflict started when I worked as a museum guide in my native country, Finland. I considered language and dialogue-based methods my most important tools. My main goal was to make the artworks accessible and meaningful for visitors, and my favorite part was the moment of resolution, when the trick of the artwork would become apparent. I believed that the museum visit would be successful for the visitors when I was well-enough prepared; had answers and explanations for all the artworks, and my conversations were flowing with the visitors. I tried to see *behind* the artworks by decoding them, and I highlighted factual information.

However, this kind of easy catharsis was difficult to initiate when I talked about abstract art: non-figurative modernist painting does not have a similar visual narrative like its predecessors before the 20th century. Even if I had done my homework, my much-rehearsed guidance in front of abstract art felt misplaced and uncomfortable. There was a void between me and abstract art, a feeling that my own words were empty or about to be exposed. It was often easier with children, who seemed to be more playful and open towards abstract art. A common trick is to ask the children to point out all the almost-there figures in the painting. The artwork then turns into a fun game of decoding hidden meanings (*that swirl of paint looks like a face!*). This trick works like a charm, but does it not make the abstraction *concrete*, the non-figurative into figurative? What about the abstraction itself?

I had long tried to find perfect definitions from art historical texts of what abstraction as a concept and as an art form might be. However, early on I realized that the meaning of abstract art cannot be explained thoroughly with words, nor can abstraction be defined with simple sentences.

Abstract art seems to work beyond words and language. When a painting catches my attention with bright colors, I can feel it in my gut, but I cannot always explain it by words. I might get chills and goosebumps or intuitively move around the painting. I may associate it with a feeling or a place, but I cannot exactly say why.⁶ I came to realize that text-oriented research methodology would only get me so far when exploring abstraction. It was pointless to try to read abstract art like a textbook, when it has unique qualities that cannot be always explained by words. I had to turn towards bodies, senses and action, things I had neglected when working with traditional dialogue-based methods. In order to kick-start the project and get a real insight of abstraction, I needed to participate myself instead of observing and analyzing abstraction from distance. I began to conduct, so to say, a blind search in my doctorate project. Instead of testing a hypothesis, I started to explore abstraction without any pre-desired results.

These experiments and explorations became my post-qualitative inquiry. Post-qualitative inquiry was introduced by Elizabeth A. St. Pierre in 2011 in order to challenge the traditional qualitative research (St. Pierre, 2011). According to St. Pierre, qualitative research has become too formalized and method-driven, which is ironic, since it was originally invented in the 1980s as an interpretive social science to challenge the methods-driven approach of positivist social science. Unlike traditional qualitative inquiry, post-qualitative inquiry focuses more on ontology and epistemology than methodology (St. Pierre, 2019b). In my experiments, I kept the ontological and epistemological questions in my mind. What is abstraction, and how can we experience it? How can I bring out the educational potential of abstract art in an exhibition for children?

Concrete encounters with abstract art

Post-qualitative inquiry starts with “a concrete encounter with the real” (St. Pierre, 2019a, p. 12). My experiments with abstract art started by going

6 Practicing artist and professor of painting Tarja Pitkänen-Walter also describes experiences concerning language and senses with abstract art in her doctoral dissertation (2006), but from the point of view of the artist.

to the museum and spending time with abstract paintings instead of reading and writing about them at home.⁷ In the following sections, I will first describe my own experiments with abstraction, and then explain how these have influenced the curatorial strategy at the Children's Art Museum.

In the past, I have been a fast museum visitor. I go and see, but I wish to reflect at home in my head. This time I decided to stay and literally spend time with the concrete artworks. I stood in front of them, I sat on the floor and I moved around the room. I made myself linger on even when I wanted to move. However, *being* with abstraction appeared to be difficult to conduct; abstraction seemed to urge action. Sometimes the abstract paintings made me want to step further away or closer, literally moving and guiding me. The associations in my mind and the restlessness in my body would move me as well. The obsession to make sense made me question all the time what I was doing and why. At the same time, I tried to resist making sense as much as I could: I was afraid that converting abstraction into explanations might dissolve it altogether. Here I had realized that abstract art might show our obsession (or desire) to constantly reason, categorize, identify, and make sense. We seem to meet this desire when we look at abstract art, immediately asking what it is or what it means. This idea came when I read Gert Biesta's article "What if? Art Education Beyond Expression and Creativity" (2018). He writes how art has the ability to give form to our desires. When we engage in a dialogue with resistance, our desires can also rearrange and transform (Biesta, 2018, p. 18).

Sometimes I laid down on the floor, watching how the colors of the paintings changed when the lights refracted the layers of paint. During my experiments in the museum space, I could sometimes see other visitors behaving as strange as me, and it was often one particular visitor group. Children might sit and lie on the floor and test the limits of the white cube. This I had experienced at my job as a museum guide, as well. Children might be interested in peculiar details, move spontaneously

7 These experiments with abstract art were made at Southern Norway Museum of Art during the fall and winter 2019/2020. Two exhibitions with abstract, modernist art were especially significant: *11 nordiske. Kunstnere fra Tangen-samlingen* [11 Nordics. Artists from the Tangen Collection] (22.6.-22.11.2019), and *Before the Horizon – AKO Curatorial Award* (7.12.2019–1.3.2020). In addition, other exhibitions were visited in Norway, Finland and the Netherlands.

around the exhibition space, and ask difficult and random questions that do not always seem to make sense.

It was important for me that the exhibition I was curating would allow all that, to let children explore art in their own ways. In order to facilitate concrete encounters with abstract art, I wanted to include real artworks in the exhibition space for children, even if they needed to be secured by acrylic glass. The museum was concerned for the safety of the artworks, but eventually decided to include some of the artworks to the exhibition. I chose different types of post-war abstraction from the Tangen collection: more spontaneous and intuitive expression from painter Irma Salo Jæger (b. 1928), paintings containing optical illusions from Outi Ikkala (1935–2011), and serigraph prints with mathematical rules from Vladimir Kopteff (1932–2007). In addition to my post-qualitative inquiry, two interviews and a literature review were conducted in order to anchor the exhibition to art historical knowledge.

Making unexpected art

In order to approach abstraction in different ways, I started to create abstract art at home (figure 1). Here I am not just thinking of art such as paintings with a non-figurative form of expression, but a process with abstract character. Instead of producing something according to an imagined vision, I focused on a multisensory and spontaneous process instead, using my body and my senses. I played with elements of uncertainty and surprise, something yet unknown. I formed a mass of blue magic dough out of salt, flour, oil, water and acrylic paint. I then intuitively played with it, until I let someone else to decide what it should become. The end product was destruction: When the dough dried, it lost its beautiful color and started to resemble a moldy porridge.

I have previously done my “field work” by planning ahead and by “stepping outside of the bubble” of reading and writing. In post-qualitative inquiry, however, one does not have to be in a particular site to do empirical field work (St. Pierre, 2019a, p. 10). I started to pay attention to surprising situations in everyday life that made me feel abstraction, turning the experiments into a living inquiry (figure 2). The abstract situations



Figure 1. Making abstract art at home. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. License: CC BY-NC-ND.



Figure 2. Broken (discursive?) patterns. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. License: CC BY-NC-ND.

hold the same characteristics as one might use to describe the process of creating an abstract action painting: situations where a loss of control is inevitable, where routines, patterns, plans and rules might not take place, and where the result or meaning is yet unknown and unpredictable. I got lost in a new place or in a conversation (figure 3), I paid attention to confusing details (figure 4), and I found myself in situations that made no sense.

Here I gave up some of the control and power I had been holding tight to my chest when working with more traditional methods as an educator. At the Children's Art Museum, I would trust the children instead, who might know better how to abstract. Adults know the systems of validating knowledge over senses and *making sense* all too well. I had, as well, taken abstract art a bit too seriously as a museum guide. Exploring the world with senses and going off-road here and there might be easier for children than for many adults. In my experiments, I tried to adopt the playful way of encountering abstract art. Some of my experiments, starting from the blue magic dough, can be described as childish. It was my



Figure 3. I got lost on a hike. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. License: CC BY-NC-ND.



Figure 4. I paid attention to surprising and confusing details in my surroundings. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. License: CC BY-NC-ND.

way of reflecting how a child might experience art, even if I could not actually know how it is to be a child today.

I wanted to include the art making with surprises and unexpectedness to the actual exhibition space at the Children's Art Museum. I did not want to create activities that give children a quick satisfaction or an easy solution, where one pushes a button and things click (since abstract art rarely works like that). I also wanted to avoid *making sense* of abstraction by rationalizing it. Together with the museum, we came up with open activities where children (and adults) can fill up the blank spaces with their own imagination, movement and play, and where uncertainty can become curiosity. The activities do not have right or wrong answers but invite to exploration instead. In the first room of the exhibition, the visitors are encouraged to create their own abstract compositions by experimenting with lights, colors and forms in the exhibition space (figure 5). One of the in-built boxes contains a camera, and the spontaneous artwork appears on two screens under the wooden cabinet (figure 5). Here,

the digital element adds movement and unexpectedness to the art making, since the visitor cannot create and see the result at the same time. It also encourages for collaboration: some can perform, and others can watch and guide the art making.



Figure 5. *Abstraction!* at Children's Art Museum. On the wall: *Breakthrough* (1965) and *The Wellspring Appears* (1961) by Irma Salo Jæger. The visitors receive a bag to make their own abstract compositions. One of the boxes on the wooden installation contains a camera, and the action is streamed to two TV screens below the wooden installation. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. License: CC BY-NC-ND.

I assume that my frustration with abstract art on my guided tours resulted from straightening all the bends of abstraction and making it flat and boring by hanging tight on factual and biographical information in order to cope with the uncertainty of abstraction. This time, with the exhibition at the Children's Art Museum, I wanted to emphasize the paradoxes in abstract art. Instead of shying away from the complexity of abstraction, the wall texts encourage the visitors to experiment and play with the paradoxes instead. Children are often very talented in asking difficult and "impossible" philosophical questions in random moments themselves, and I wanted to capture the curious, playful, and exploring attitude to the texts.

In order to encourage the visitors to play with rules and patterns at the Children's Art Museum, a large replica of Vladimir Kopteff's (1932–2007) artwork was installed on the floor of the workshop space (figure 6). The image has circles, triangles and squares in different colors in a geometrical



Figure 6. I dance with Kopteff's patterns on the carpet. On the wall: *L* (1977) and *M* (1977) from Vladimir Kopteff. In the cabinet: a gouache painting (title lost) (1976) from Outi Ikkala and *Serigrafia IV* (1974) from Kopteff. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. License: CC BY-NC-ND.

pattern. The replica works like a game of Twister, inviting children to come up with their own rules and play on the life-size gameboard. The wall text tells how Kopteff was investigating mathematical rules in art, and how colors and forms play together. The original artwork is displayed next to the replica.

Provoking abstraction in relational situations

When I got more familiar with my experiments, I sharpened my post-qualitative inquiry. I started to intentionally put myself in uncomfortable situations, provoking abstraction with curiosity (figure 7). I attended meetings without preparing a speech of my plans and intentions. I aired out my ideas before they were finished or polished, and gave presentations in front of others without a perfected plan. Instead of working alone, I reached out to others in order to add relational elements and action into the situation. This would mean a short coffee break with a colleague or a friend, or a longer workshop where I wanted to talk about a certain



Figure 7. I started to provoke and play with abstraction. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. License: CC BY-NC-ND.

question or a theme. That way I was able to add more action and unexpectedness into my ways of working. The more people attend a conversation, the more abstract the situation might eventually become.

Crowded and noisy places seemed to yell abstraction. I noticed that some of the chaotic and uncertain situations manifested themselves in my body as a raised pulse and sweaty hands. The anxiety itself can be seen as abstraction, like a grey cloud of something that might be difficult to name, hovering around, becoming concrete in bodily sensations.

In the exhibition, relational abstraction is created in a user-generated digital installation (figure 8).⁸ The installation mediates Norwegian modernist painter Gunnar S. Gundersen's (1921–1983) philosophy of movement, rhythm, and vibration in his paintings, and the visualities



Figure 8. The digital installation. I point at the orange circle that depicts my movement in the room. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. License: CC BY-NC-ND.

8 The digital installation is created by Serbian artist Mirko Lazović in collaboration with the museum, following the curatorial plans. The installation relates to the *Gunnar S. Gundersen – Groundbreaking Modernist* exhibition on the third floor of the museum.

are inspired by his art. When a visitor enters the room, a kinetic sensor recognizes the body of the visitor, and a circle appears on the wall. When the visitor moves in the space, the circle draws a trace in the image. The visitors can therefore “paint” by moving their bodies. The image is always created in relation to others, even if the visitor is alone in the room, since the background depicts the previous visitors’ movements. In addition, some elements have randomness and twists programmed into them. They follow, poke and interrupt the visitor’s circle. Many visitors can create traces at the same time, and the abstraction transforms and grows as long as there are visitors in the room.

What is abstraction? Ontological contemplations

Post-qualitative inquiry uses ontology of immanence in poststructuralist theories (St. Pierre, 2019a, p. 4). One of the questions, when starting my exploration, was *what abstraction is*. This led me towards ontological contemplations about the existence of abstraction. When I realized that abstraction was difficult to explain with words, I began to think abstraction as an impossible and unexplainable concept. When defined with words, it stops being abstract. Similarly, as explained by Liam Gillick (2013), abstract art is fundamentally impossible, since the abstraction is always *concretized* in the process of making art. Here I was closely tight with Jacques Derrida’s *aporias*, a concept I had previously used as a part of a concept analysis in my master’s thesis (Kukkonen, 2017).

In *Positions* (1971/1981), Jacques Derrida explains how deconstruction in his writings attempts to deconstruct the binary opposites in classical philosophy. He writes how deconstruction strives to overturn the violent hierarchy of the binaries by systematic intervention (1971/1981, p. 41). These binaries for Derrida are, for example, speech over writing, subject over object, and intelligence over senses. However, this process also produces concepts that cannot fit into the binary oppositions: aporias that resist and disorganize the structure. The undecidable concepts can never be resolved or dissolved into a third term, even though they are simultaneously neither/nor and either/or (Derrida, 1971/1981, p. 43). The concepts have a paradoxical structure: as later described in *Aporias*, the condition

of these concepts' possibility is their impossibility (Derrida, 1993, p. 15). For example, Derrida has analyzed death and hospitality as aporias.

Aporia is a fundamental concept in Derrida's writings. In *Aporias* (1993), he describes how the paradoxical structure of aporia has been in his interest in number of different contexts (Derrida, 1993, pp. 12–13). The concept of aporia is determined from the double concept of the border (Derrida, 1993, p. 18). Binary structures function between borders, such as things, objects, territories, countries, cultures, and languages. The binaries also function on a conceptual level. They are determined by oppositions and what they are not. Aporias, however, are found in between a border, where a plural logic takes place. The border is double, uncrossable or impossible to catch. The two contradictory opposites in aporia are haunting each other (Derrida, 1993, pp. 17–18.)

When it comes to abstraction as an aporia, I imagine it moving and undecidable like a hologram. I see it flashing its two sides, flipping between the opposites of impossible and the absolute, abstract and concrete. The abstraction seems to become concrete in one moment and disappear into thin air in the next, as moving, changing and undecidable concept. In my exploration with abstraction, however, I wanted to go further than being “stuck” between two possibilities: as Derrida says in *Positions*, he still remains and operates within the deconstructed system (1972/1981, p. 42). I wanted to move beyond Derrida's linguistic model and get my whole *body* involved in *action* and *situations*. I wanted to have more chaos and ways to depart. Instead of a hologram, I was looking for a metamorphosis.

During the first year of my fellowship, I read much about Deleuze and Guattari's ontology of immanence, which has then influenced my explorations. The ontology of immanence is introduced in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980/2004), through the rhizome: an organism-like structure that is changing, varying and metamorphosing (figure 9–10). The rhizome has no center or hierarchy, nor does it have a beginning or an end. Everything in the world is connected and entangled to each other, sometimes meeting a dead-end but growing further elsewhere. Deleuze and Guattari write how the world is much more complicated than a steady structure, where opposites and dichotomies are found (1980/2004, pp. 3–28). The world is full of action; changing and moving, instead of passively standing still for me to observe.



Figure 9. Rhizome. What does an actual rhizome; a root of a plant look like? I created a concrete experiment with the concept by scanning a tomato plant. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. License: CC BY-NC-ND.



Figure 10. Rhizome. Photo: Heidi Kukkonen. CC BY NC ND.

The educational potential of abstract art

In my experiments, I started to reinvent the concept of abstraction for myself. Like St. Pierre writes, philosophical concepts do not represent reality, but reorient thought (2019a, p. 14). A philosophical concept is a creative force (St. Pierre, 2019a, p. 7). Abstraction became action and an opening into something yet unknown. I started to pay attention to it and provoke it in relational situations. I realized that abstraction is in constant becoming, always changing into something else, refusing to be defined. In the exhibition design, abstraction is similarly used as an opening: The exhibition itself does not give a straight answer what abstraction is, but it serves as a laboratory space to test and experiment through action.

The relational perspective was much underrated in my previous text-oriented approach. In my experiments, I came to realize that abstraction operates in bodies and senses, not only in my own, but also in the very material body of a painting. With an abstract painting, the swirls, colors, lines, and details guide me, sometimes boring me. The time seems to slow down, and I intuitively turn and walk away. Sometimes the details

catch my attention in so much that the time speeds up and I lost track of it. In a chaotic situation, bodies function in abstract and uncontrollable ways, both creating and reacting to abstraction. My voice is shaking, my hands get sweaty, and I might literally lose my words. The reactions are intuitive, uncontrollable and cannot be reproduced. The interplay is not like a dialogue from A to B between me and a painting, but a rhizomatic *situation* of becoming matter.

My understanding of abstraction and museum education went through an *experiential turn*. The term is suggested by Dorothea von Hantelmann in her widely cited text “The Experiential Turn” (2014). She argues that the experience of the spectator has become an integral part of the artwork’s conception from the 1960s onwards. Artwork is no longer understood as an object bearing meaning, but as a situation experienced by the spectator (von Hantelmann, 2014). Many institutions in Scandinavia have undertaken serious measures to develop their educational practices towards more experimental educational settings in recent decades (Illeris, 2015, p. 228). The public is invited to participate, and the educator no longer fills the empty heads of the visitors with (art historical) knowledge.

I admit that the traditional methods, where I speak as a guide according to a plan and the museum visitors listen, are often much easier to conduct. Every museum guide has been through the awkward silence when participation is encouraged, but there is no natural flow in the situation. Experiential museum education requires openness, actual enthusiasm and patience to bear the messy moments, both from the educator and the visitors.

In order to avoid a situation where the visitors would just move on confused and exit the space, they are helped to get started. Christensen-Scheel (2019) writes how experiential museum education is often combined with the critical tradition in today’s museums (p. 45). This was done at the Children’s Art Museum as well. Even if the activities are designed to function without further instructions, help can be found if needed. The wall texts and the activities are all anchored in art history, while simultaneously encouraging the visitors to test the ideas out. This requires that the adults read the texts aloud for the children who cannot yet read. The

texts give art historical context for the activities and challenge the adults to contemplate the paradoxes of abstract art as well.

Abstraction is not only the object of my study, but it has become a part of my methodology, too. Abstraction became an important curatorial and educational strategy that forced me to see and act outside of the patterns I had learned too well. In creative and experimental ways, I had to put myself in situations which I could not plan beforehand in order to experience abstraction. I learned to give up some of the power of planning ahead and being in control as an educator. This is paradoxical, since I did this voluntarily and willingly. Therefore, I was implicitly the one setting premises for the situations. I consider this paradox to be much linked to the non-methodology of post-qualitative inquiry: my method was to not apply a method, by planning not to plan.⁹ Post-qualitative inquiry itself has an abstract nature: playing with uncertainty and the unknown, without plans and methods.

However, I might not be able to find abstraction same way in the future. On the account of ontology of immanence, post-qualitative inquiry has a disappearing and transforming nature. My sweaty hands dry and my voice stops shaking; abstraction seems to disappear when it becomes familiar or static. After holding presentations without a specific plan multiple times and putting myself intentionally in uncertain situations, I have gotten more used to the spontaneity; I have gotten comfortable with being uncomfortable. Here, the educational potential of abstraction becomes visible. By playing with abstraction, I managed to shake my stiff patterns and I got creative again as a curator, museum educator and researcher. Most importantly, I became more tolerant and even curious towards uncertainty and discomfort.

Conclusions

My post-qualitative inquiry made me pay attention to the transformability of the concept of abstraction. The meaning of abstraction cannot

9 The paradox of method without a method reminds me of Derrida's aporias, a concept I have discussed earlier in this paper.

always be articulated or mediated by words and language. Abstraction operates in bodies and senses like an immediate multisensory experience in front of an abstract painting. It urges in action and movement, and it builds up in relational situations. In my experiments, the philosophical concept of abstraction became a method; an opening to the void between me and abstract art. As a former firm believer in foolproof plans and safe choices, I met uncomfortable and chaotic situations where I had to become an active and spontaneous participator. This self-study with abstraction has then exposed me to uncertainty, conflict and failure in playful ways, improving my tolerance for uncertainty.

As a museum educator, I moved from the critical tradition towards experiential practices. At the Children's Art Museum, participation, multisensory activities and relational situations are set up for the whole family to explore abstract art. Children and adults are encouraged to use their senses and bodies, action, and movement in the space. The philosophical questions and wondering tone in the texts challenge the visitors to play with abstraction instead of shying away from the "difficult" art form. This approach was inspired by children themselves, who might know the abstract method better than adults. After the exhibition opened, I have studied the children's encounters with abstraction in the exhibition by inviting school groups to the Children's Art Museum. This material forms the basis for upcoming articles in my PhD project.

I started this chapter by citing some questions asked by Kirk Varnedoe (2003): *What is abstract art good for? What's the use of paintings that do not seem to show anything expect themselves?* (pp. 23–25.) Based on my post-qualitative inquiry and the process of curating *Abstraction!* at the Children's Art Museum, I can draw two conclusions. Abstraction, both when encountered in paintings and when the concept is used as a creative force, has much potential in educational purposes. Firstly, it is a great and safe opportunity to explore feelings of uncertainty and discomfort. By exposing ourselves to these feelings in playful ways, we might become more curious and tolerant towards uncertainty. Secondly, abstraction is a great tool to shake boring patterns that risk art to become too fixed and stiff. New and creative ideas rarely come from perfection and orderly systems that are stuck in safe methods, routines and traditions.

References

- Adorno, T. (2013). *Aesthetic theory* (R. Hullot-Kentor, Trans.). Bloomsbury.
(Originally published 1970)
- Biesta, G. (2018). What if? Art education beyond expression and creativity.
In C. Naughton, G. Biesta & D. C. Cole (Eds.), *Art, artists and pedagogy*
(pp. 11–19). Routledge.
- Christensen-Scheel, B. (2019). Sanselige møter eller kritisk tenkning? Formidling
i samtidens kunstmuseer [Sensuous encounters or critical thinking? Mediating
art in contemporary art museums]. In C. B. Myrvold & G. E. Mørland (Eds.),
*Kunstformidling. Fra verk til betrakter [Mediating art. From the object to the
spectator]* (pp. 22–46). Pax Forlag.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (2004). *A thousand plateaus – capitalism and
schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). Continuum. (Originally published 1980)
- Derrida, J. (1981). *Positions* (A. Bass, Trans.). The University of Chicago Press.
(Originally published 1972)
- Derrida, J. (1993). *Aporias* (T. Dutoit, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1980). *Art as experience*. Pedigree Books.
- Dima, M. (2016). *Value and audience relationships: Tate's ticketed exhibitions 2014–15*.
<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/25/value-and-audience-relationships>
- Dysthe, O., Bernhardt, N. & Esbjørn, L. (2012). *Dialogbasert undervisning.
Kunstmuseet som læringsrom [Dialogue-based teaching. Art museum as a space to
learn]*. Fagbokforlaget.
- Gillick, L. (2013). Abstract. In M. Lind (Ed.), *Abstraction* (pp. 211–214). Whitechapel
Gallery.
- Hubard, O. (2011). Illustrating interpretative inquiry – a reflection for art museum
education. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 54(2), 165–179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2011.00079.x>
- Illeris, H. (2015). The friendly eye: Encounters with artworks as visual events. In A.
Göthlund, H. Illeris & K. W. Kristine (Eds.), *EDGE: 20 Essays on contemporary
art education* (pp. 153–168). Multivers Academic.
- Kant, I. (2007). *Critique of judgement* (N. Walker, Ed., M. J. Creed, Trans.). Oxford
University Press. (Originally published 1790)
- Kukkonen, H. (2017). *Uncannyt oksymoronit subliimin lähteinä. Stéphane Thidet'n
tuotannon tarkastelua [Uncanny oxymorons as the sources of sublime. Viewing
Stéphane Thidet's art]* [Master's thesis]. University of Turku.
- Liven, T. (2015, August 19). På lekens premisser [On the premises of play]. *Periskop*.
<http://www.periskop.no/pa-lekens-premisser/>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2013). *Phenomenology of perception* (D. Landes, Trans.).
Routledge. (Originally published 1945)

- Pierroux, P. (2005). Dispensing with formalities in art education research. *Nordisk Museologi*, 2, 76–88. <https://doi.org/10.5617/nm.3316>
- Pitkänen-Walter, T. (2006). *Liian haurasta kuvaksi – maalauksen aistisuudesta* [Too fragile to turn into image – on the sensuousness of painting] [Doctoral dissertation, Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki]. LIKE Publishing.
- Scott, M. & Meijer, R. (2009). *Tools to understand: An evaluation of the interpretation material used in Tate Modern's Rothko exhibition*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/11/tools-to-understand-an-evaluation-of-the-interpretation-material-used-in-tate-moderns-rothko-exhibition>
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2011). Post-qualitative research – the critique and the coming after. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 611–625). Sage.
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2019a). Post-qualitative inquiry in an ontology of immanence. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418772634>
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2019b, November 14). Practices for the “new” in the new empiricisms, the new materialisms, and post-qualitative inquiry. A lecture by Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre on November 18th, 2014 at University of Helsinki. [Blog post.] *AGORA Blog*.
- Sørlandets Kunstmuseum. (n.d.). *Tangen-samlingen* [The Tangen Collection]. <https://www.skmu.no/samlingen/tangen-samlingen/>
- Varnedoe, K. (2003). *Pictures of nothing – abstract art since Pollock*. Princeton University Press.
- Von Hantelmann, D. (2014). The experiential turn. In E. Carpenter (Ed.), *Living collections catalogue: Vol. 1. On performativity*. Walker Art Center. <http://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/experiential-turn/>