

An Experiential Call

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It is surely no coincidence that a search for the illusory immediacy of experience appears to have re-emerged at a time when the commodification of experience has become so prevalent, arguably as a consequence of late capitalism. The hunger for commodities may have taken a turn; the desire to secure identity through having objects has now modified into a desire to have a feeling or a moment of being.

To take some simple examples, before the recession holidays were given as gifts and television programmes listed the things we should do or have the experience of before we die. Post-recession a hierarchy of such experiences has developed: flying in a jet fighter is bad, whereas package holidays that involve extreme environments like the Arctic or exchanging one culture for another (preferably tribal) are good, a sort of back to basics of experience often involving the natural in some form. The enticement of the commodified object has never been restricted to its function but it is as if the promise of the experiential – couched in its extreme form as ‘the experience of a lifetime’ – offers something extraordinary, something beyond materiality. This proffers the intangible as tangible – a touch of the unknown – and marks an encounter as an experience. Now we are being sold our own personalised experience, something far more distinctive than any object. This experiential product is subjectivised as we both consume and configure our own experiences, which gain added value through embodiment.

This saleable experience has moved beyond the retail sector and infiltrated other organisations. We now see reference, for instance, to the ‘student’ or ‘museum’ experience. Virtually every cultural sphere seems to have been permeated by the experiential as institutions advocate and have reformulated themselves as hosts to experience. Recently Tate Modern advertised for a visitor experience manager; here the management of services has been transformed into the management of experiences. To some degree it might be argued this follows the commercialisation of museums and universities, but it also reflects a broader cultural imperative for the experiential, or at least the language of experience. This is not to say that the designation of education or cultural consumption as an ‘experience’ has the same implications or effects across these different realms, but to register the existence of an experiential expectation on the part of the hosting institution and consumer. An emphasis is being placed on affect and on process or being, in various arenas of social and cultural life.

Longstanding and contested debates about the nature of experience have previously focused on the relative value of experiences garnered through the various senses (measured according to the access provided to supposed universal truths, knowledge, or beauty) and on the relations between bodily experience and the embodied being or subject who experiences. Some contemporary commentators have bemoaned the destruction of experience, as if modern subjects can no longer access and communicate their own experiences due to alienating social configurations that arose in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹ Others have argued that such unmediated access has not been lost; it was only ever a fantasy, a fallacy that experience could be the ‘guarantor of an impartial truth that would make your trajectory through life feel more real, elevated, enduring, strong and certain’.²

Imagined or not, the experiential is in the ascendant. So the question is how is this experiential expectation, even drive, is affecting cultural production, and with what consequences for the work of art and its consumption. For example, take Carsten Höller’s installation *Test Site* (2006–7), commissioned for the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. What type of experiential model was offered? In this paper I want to address these questions by using this installation as a case study to examine what type of experience is being hosted. As Dave Beech writes: ‘Today some of the key debates on what art is, can be, or ought to be centre on the way art is encountered. What kinds of experience both individual and collective, ought to be developed for art’.³

Discussed in these terms, works of art – as well as the institutions that house them – act as hosts to experience. The audience is given the position of a guest who at certain events can choose between the role of viewer, participant, or collaborator. That this encounter between the hosting work of art and the guest *cum* viewer/participant is articulated in terms of experience is nothing

new in itself, dating back to Kant.⁴ What is new is the primacy that is being given to experience as agency rather than to the object as intended stimulus and its maker as agent. This experiential call is a phenomenon.

Installation, interactive, and other participatory art forms that feature an experiential aspect are now prominent in the mainstream, at the same time as the broader privileging of experience. Such work is often seen to provide an embodied experience for the viewer, where the viewer's conscious perception becomes the work of art. Höller's *Test Site* was significant as an installation and differed markedly from other works in the Unilever Series because of its explicit hosting of an experiential aesthetic, offering a whole body experience. In the middle of the Turbine Hall a set of five covered slides spiralled like gigantic silver and plastic ribbons frozen in their descent from the second, third, fourth, and fifth levels and came to rest underneath the bridge on the ground floor. As sculptures they had a baroque or futuristic feel, a sinuous attraction, but were constrained in the expanse of the hall. Höller is known to have an abiding concern with human behaviour and with the playful questioning of logic, perception, and altered states of mind. He contended in the *Test Site: Source Book* (the catalogue for the installation), that it was a misconception to think that using the slides was necessary to the work.⁵ Nevertheless, it was not the look of the sculptures that attracted an average of five thousand visitors a day. The pull of the work lay in the anticipation of the physical experience of going down the slide, or at least in watching others have and register the experience of sliding. This was its experiential aesthetic. Of course all art involves active perception by the viewer, but in this case the role of bodily affect is manifest and becomes paramount *as* the work of art.

Emphasis on the experiential was immediately signalled in the presentation of *Test Site* in the exhibition hall. In contrast to previous commissions, the installation had no accompanying text or museum talks, implying that there was no need for interpretive texts. This literal absence created an impression that the work was already readily understandable, rather than mysterious, and that understanding of it was sensory rather than intellectual. As a consequence, most participants engaged with the work in terms of the vertiginous experience of sliding, culminating in a sense of bounded, contained exhilaration. Experience, within the parameters of *Test Site*, was understood and offered as unmediated and visceral. So how is the experience being understood in process, and how is it being employed through the work? Höller proposes the slide as a viable vehicle for transportation, but this information is only made explicit through the pages of the catalogue and is therefore a 'meaning' in another space and time, separated from the event-experience of the work itself.

A significant aspect of Höller's work, particularly the slide series, is the experiential knowledge, imaginary or otherwise, that the visitor brings to the installation. *Test Site's* experiential aesthetic rests on anticipation and expectation. The audience was already familiar with the experience on offer through personal associations with slides in playgrounds and amusement parks. The large number of people drawn to the Turbine Hall wanted to partake (at least to some extent) in the known experience of sliding. This took away the unexpectedness often featured in installation art and set up a framework of familiarity for participants (and the critical *flâneur*) that affected their engagement with the work. This sense of affinity enticed some by offering to fulfil expectations of enjoyment; for others, for whom the familiar was precisely what had to be rejected, it excited disassociation and disparagement.

The setting and management of the Turbine Hall also framed the experience of the slides. In the original architectural plans for the transformation of the Bankside building this area was not envisaged as an exhibition space but rather as a nineteenth-century covered arcade, a space for public interchange and circulation, an inherently social space. This grand entrance hall is oddly inert, eviscerated of its industrial machinery and processes. All the commissions have had to contend against this backdrop as well as competing with each other.⁶ *Test Site* fell through the middle of the Turbine Hall, which functions as both ticket hall and exhibition space, introducing the visitor to the work. The approach to *Test Site* necessarily involved the usual waiting for tickets and the more uncommon management of the queue by invigilators prior to the work. Health and safety notices took the place of interpretive texts, and staff perched at the mouths of the slides provided procedural information and offered protective clothing. The lead-in to this work of art

mirrored the entry to an amusement ride. The intimations of danger and potential thrill evoked a similar experience of mixed anticipation and trepidation. For those who waited in the queue, consideration of other imaginative possibilities – for instance, movement through time and space or the psychological dimensions of why they were participating and what they desired – were inevitably constrained by this context.

The strategy of hosting an experiential aesthetic is explicitly concerned with sensory experience, in this case carried out literally through ‘testing’ the experience of sliding. Having made the choice to take the ride it was as if you left your mind at the top of the drop. Enjoyment in the ride lay in the ride itself, not in the appreciation of the art machine providing the ride. This was about choosing to abandon a civilised, social, and constrained self, and the release of the primordial self of unmediated feeling. Visitors reaching the bottom of the slide had to take a moment to collect themselves both physically and mentally to return to their social selves. Contemplation, examination, or other mental agency was not part of the moment of sliding. The alterity of the experience was recouped both physically and mentally as the guests, the users, returned to controlling themselves and to the experience of being seen. Any residual effect was understood as being caused by the slide. A sense of self was momentarily lost, but once disgorged beneath the bridge users became visibly self-conscious, aware of their dishevelment and of themselves as spectacle. Strangely, as a result, once out of the slide the visitor became oddly uninvolved; the slide happened in a kind of suspension, so that the experience of ‘experiencing the slide’, of being freed of constraint was bounded, in time, space and psychologically – to the internal space of the slide.

In effect, the installation reinforced a traditional conceptualisation of experience as being immediate and bodily rather than one with a cognitive relation to the world. Höller went so far as to describe the experience as unspeakable, beyond language, while also advocating the potential transformative affect of the slide on an individual and social level. Nicholas Serota, director of Tate Modern, commented, after being on the slide, that it ‘takes you over, like all good art’. But for what purpose? Perhaps it might be more accurate to stand Serota’s argument on its head; not ‘it takes you over’ but ‘you take it over’ and to ask if that makes interesting art.⁷

The longstanding paradigm of the work of art as a means or tool for transforming inner being is problematic in itself, but here questions arise about what is being transformed and how, by whom, and for what purpose. Höller’s emphasis on transformation links to the notion of the transcendental work, a body testing of the sublime, and to claims concerning the universality of truth, knowledge, and beauty resounding in philosophy and aesthetics through to Modernism (at least). Through the embodied experience this experiential aesthetic appeared to allow a subjective, individual experience, owned by and unique to each person who takes the trip. Yet *Test Site* prevented the possibility of a particularity of experience. Everyone was forced down the same chutes, on a metaphorical level. A webcam continually recorded people as they were ejected from the tubes and disappeared into the recesses of the Tate. The quality of the transmission did not register their emotive response but its staccato animation implied a more mechanised affect. In the sliding process visitors might have found themselves confirming what was an exciting sensory experience, but there was no room, no cognitive disruption within which to explore their own particular experiences. Many visitors commented that the experience had taken them over, as if their experience was not fully subjective. Each visitor felt that s/he had embodied the experience through the destabilisation of her/his body, but ultimately it was not ‘their’ body but *the* body that had been destabilised. It was as if anybody had had its self-ness momentarily disturbed.

In projecting a loss of control *Test Site* was in fact a controlling work. Dorothea von Hantelmann, in one of the catalogue’s essays, argues that *Test Site* constitutes the body as destabilised which ‘reconfigures the museum [...] in bringing to the fore precisely those aspects that the museum once strove to suppress’.⁸ If, as I am arguing, the destabilisation is on a physical level and remains in the space of the slide, the self-consciousness that the user feels does not necessarily bring into question museum etiquette or the way in which the visitor both expects and is expected to behave. The space into which the visitor disembarks is the contained, transitory space underneath the bridge, which marked the entry back into the museum, symbolised by the handing back of the mat. It is not so much the subject’s experience of the slides but rather an experimental by-product of *Test Site*, the phenomenon of the mass crowd filled with excited anticipation or exuberant adrenaline

surging into the more regulated spaces of the gallery that has provided the ideological challenge to the experience of the institution.

The Unilever commissions are no longer conceived by the curators as projects but as public events, involving experience and therefore potentially memorable as something as visitors we can proclaim we were part of or even that they belong to us individually. The desire is to imply that history might coalesce around these occurrences. What circulated around *Test Site* was a strange reiteration by many critics of a value-based knowingness that predetermined rather than critiqued the experience of the work of art.⁹ The problem with *Test Site* lay not with its economy of enjoyment or bodily disruption but rather with the model of the experiential that both the installation and Tate Modern prescribed for its audience. This was, and perhaps remains, a conservative model where experience is understood as something beyond the cognitive, rather than at its borders; as a sensory, bodily experience that is unmediated in its legibility, universal and timeless.

Test Site's and Tate Modern's economy of enjoyment can be related to the contradictory nature of hospitality. On one level, the work can be interpreted as offering visitors or guests the opportunity to be themselves, to be natural and freed from social constraints. But hospitality also involves dealing with strangers, disarming enemies, manipulating them by making them feel at home. Hospitality is the root of the institution of hospital, which takes in those with disruptive symptoms and subjects them to a regime that, if effective restores them to social health. *Test Site* disallows the dynamic and possibly even subversive potential that should be the realm of the experiential. This may exceed language but could still be available for objective reflection. A purely ethical notion of hospitality is difficult to sustain in relation to both *Test Site* and the museum, as neither is simply benign. As a host *Test Site* rejects the subjectivity of its guests in denying them any imaginative relation to the experience offered, thereby restricting the potential of the experiential aesthetics guaranteeing the work.

It seems that culturally speaking experience is seen to have a positive charge; 'It's good to be experienced,' sang Jimi Hendrix, something our institutions seem to want to extol, albeit without the sexual overtone. The difficulty with the institutional drive for the experiential is not only that it registers a limited conceptualisation of experience but fundamentally that it is instrumental in its limitation and manipulation of that conception.

I wonder if it is possible to register a relation between *Test Site's* prescribed offering, a regulation of the experiential that is stuck in the interiority of the tube and our current social imperative to manage and control experience.¹⁰ This discounts strangeness, closing down rather than opening up possibilities, for good or ill, within the particularity of an experience. In these contexts there is a danger that experience becomes hollowed out, as there is a failure to recognise and really host the experiential. The idea that something can be labelled as an experience if it leaves the subject where they began is not radical and should be examined. *Test Site* registered the existence of an experiential call within contemporary culture, but did not answer it; its test to the site of the museum also remains unanswered, so perhaps it is now time to argue about the politics of experience in their complexity.

NOTES

1. See: Walter Benjamin (1955), 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations*, tr. by Harry Zohn, London: Fontana, 1973. Giorgio Agamben (1978), *Infancy & History: On the Destruction of Experience*, tr. by Liz Heron, London: Verso, 2007, pp. 13-72.
2. Kate Love, 'The Experience of Art as a Living Through of Language' in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. by Gavin Butt, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, p.157.
3. Dave Beech, 'Encountering Art' in *Art Monthly*; no. 336, 2010.
4. Immanuel Kant (1792), *Critique of Judgment*, tr. by J. H. Barnard, New York: Hafner Publishing, 1951. For an interesting discussion on Kant's Third Critique see Michael R. Neville 'Kant's Characterisation of Aesthetic Experience', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 33, no. 2, Winter 1974, p. 197.
5. Carsten Höller, *Test Site: Source Book*, London: Tate Publishing, 2006, p. 7.
6. Anish Kapoor's *Marsyas* (2003) dominated the space with a voluminous sculpture that stretched two levels, spanning the width of the hall. Bruce Nauman instigated a subtler dynamic, treating the space as a place for language by installing a cacophony of voices in his relatively dematerialised sound project *Raw Materials* (2004-5). *Test Site* held none of the sculptural interest of the inaugural 'interactive' installation, Louise Bourgeois' monumental three steel towers *I Do, I Undo and I Redo* (2000) which took on an almost figurative presence; nor did they have the intestinal resonance of Höller's earlier *Slide No 5* (1999-2000) in Prada Offices, Milan, or the riveted industrial quality of his *Valerio III* (2000) in Kiasma, Helsinki.
7. Louise Jury, *A New Twist at the Tate as Gallery Enjoys Fun of the Fair*; *The Independent*, Tuesday, 10 October 2006. Interestingly, Serota's response also echoes comments made by extreme sports enthusiasts, so preoccupied by moments of fulfilled intensity they are often unwilling to make any other observations.
8. Dorothea von Hantelmann, 'T', in *Test Site: Source Book*, 2006, p. 35.
9. Each year the press coverage of the Unilever Series gathers momentum but writers largely fail to undertake analysis of the experiential nature of *Test Site*, beyond characterising it as 'fun'. Placing it in this category functioned (rather like humour) to deflect analysis or render it redundant; once it was just fun, there was nothing more to say. The old high art/low art paradigm re-surfaced in certain articles, along with the hint of contempt for or fear of the crowd, as some critics made the analogy between the work and an amusement ride and expressed concern over the mass appeal of the piece. One such commentator worried that the result of enabling such sensory involvement would be to encourage disrespectful engagement with art more widely, that people might run off into the other galleries touching and defiling as they went. Here the installation and museum were seen to offer the wrong type of experience, one that was not edifying; the original mainstay of the museums rationale. Perhaps the critics were confounded by a work that functioned primarily on an experiential level; if they could not intellectualise it, what then? In a kind of modernist reprise, they focused on watching the people rather than thinking through their engagement with the installation, acting rather like *flâneurs* or ethnographers. Certainly there was little productive critique of the work or its Tate Modern context, especially in terms of the role of experience.
10. Such regulation could only be cynically valued as an institutional critique.