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PREFACE

This booklet aims to provide an introduction to phenomenological thinking and to the ways such thinking can be used to allow for a more personal way of relating to art.

Phenomenology is a way of understanding the world that focuses not on how things are objectively, but on how we experience them.

As a discipline, it is the study of lived experience. It asks: What is it like to perceive, think, and exist in this world? It invites us to look inward - to pay attention to the ways in which perception, memory, and emotion shape our experience.

We engage in phenomenological thinking daily without realizing it. When we pause to notice how the moon's light disperses through a cloud and how it feels to see it, or when we reflect on the pleasure or the discomfort of a moment, we're thinking phenomenologically. When we observe the way a song resonates emotionally, or how the texture of a familiar object triggers a memory, we're not just observing the world — we're examining our experience of it.

The art of Kenan Abbas is art that intentionally avoids definition. The works, with their purposful ambiguity, seeking to play around with and disrupt our habituated modes of perceiving are therefore art that seeks to put us into a position of thinking phenomenologically. A place in which we ask not what the artist meant to express, but what a given work means to us and what it is like for us to experience it.

By giving examples of phenomenological thinking and how such thinking has previously been used to think about art, the text seeks to provide a mental toolkit, which would allow the reader to expand and to deepen their relationship with the ambiguity of the works.

By shifting the attention away from looking for an objective meaning behind the art, the viewer is invited to engage with the paintings in a phenomenological manner - to examine up close the way in which the elusive imagery on the canvas interacts with their own internal world of things felt, sensed and imagined.



world

time: just now

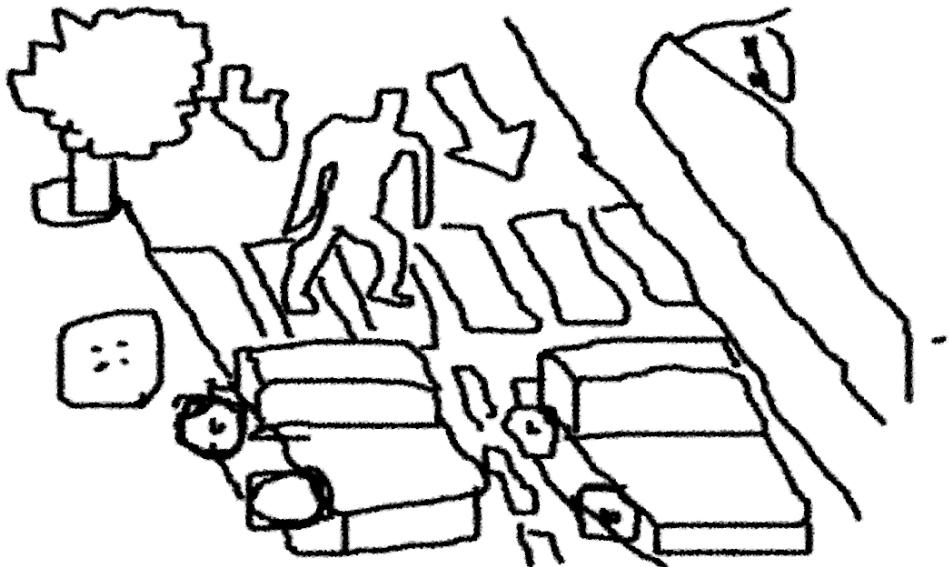
blank_sl

blank_slate appeared in the world literally just now, in this exact moment and without any prior knowledge about anything. They do not know what a world is, they do not know they appeared in it, and they have no idea what a moment is, let alone that they're in one.



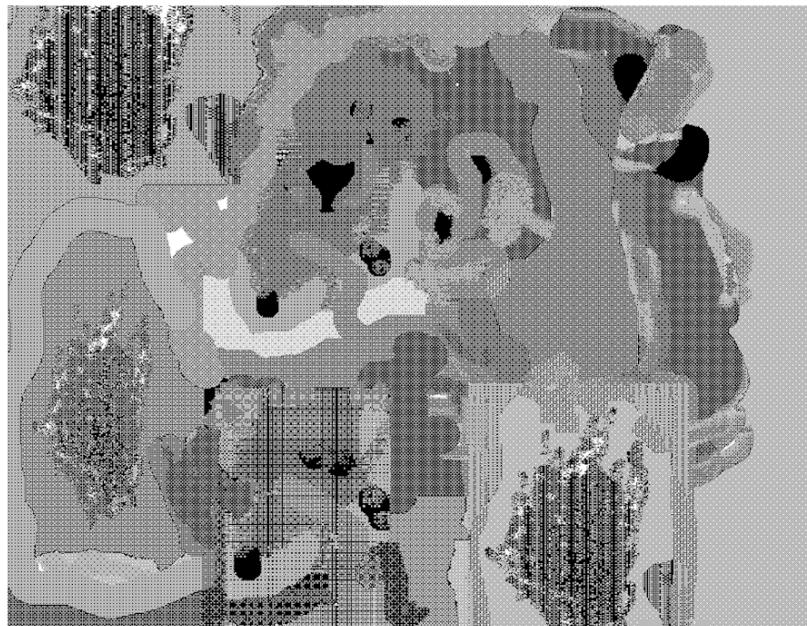
wall with graffiti on it

if they saw a wall with graffiti on it, it would not appear to them as a wall, that has graffiti on it. Without prior knowledge about walls or graffiti (or objects), they would not be able to perceive the graffiti as separate from the wall. They would have no concept of walls, or graffiti and the thing would most likely appear to them as an undifferentiated sensory impression - an uninterrupted rush of sensations.



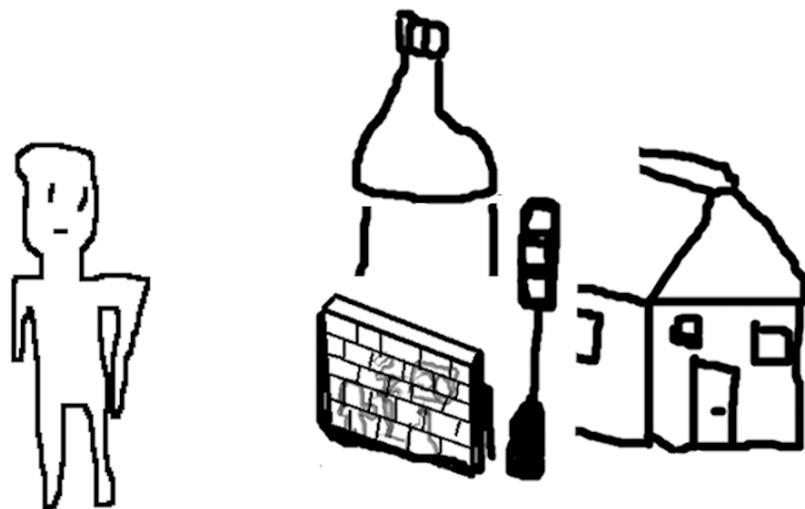
without any prior knowledge about objects, if blank_slate was in front of a street, their experience of the street would not look like this to them, even if that's what the street looks like to us.

POV: you are blank-slate

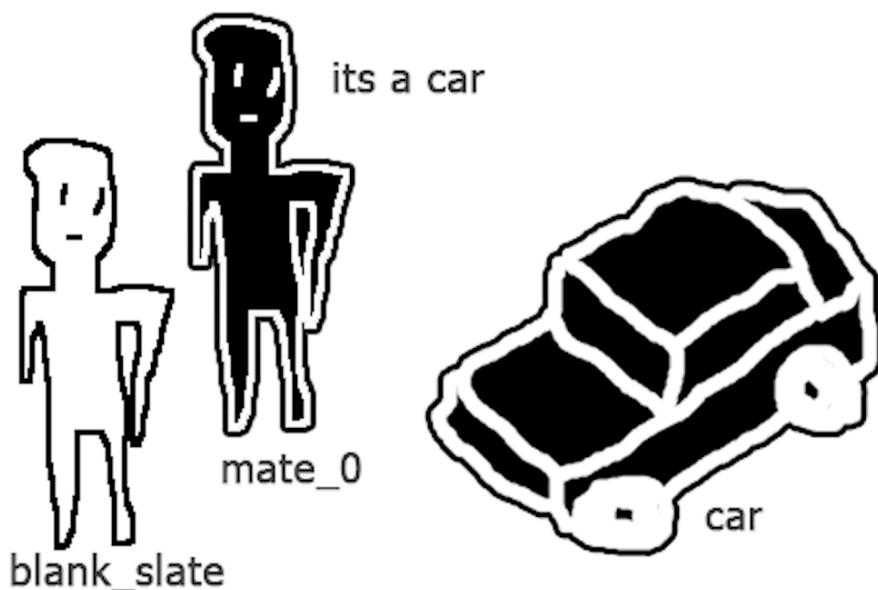


Everything would appear to them as a unified totality of sensations. They wouldn't know what objects are, so they would not be able to look at this sensory mess and recognize objects.

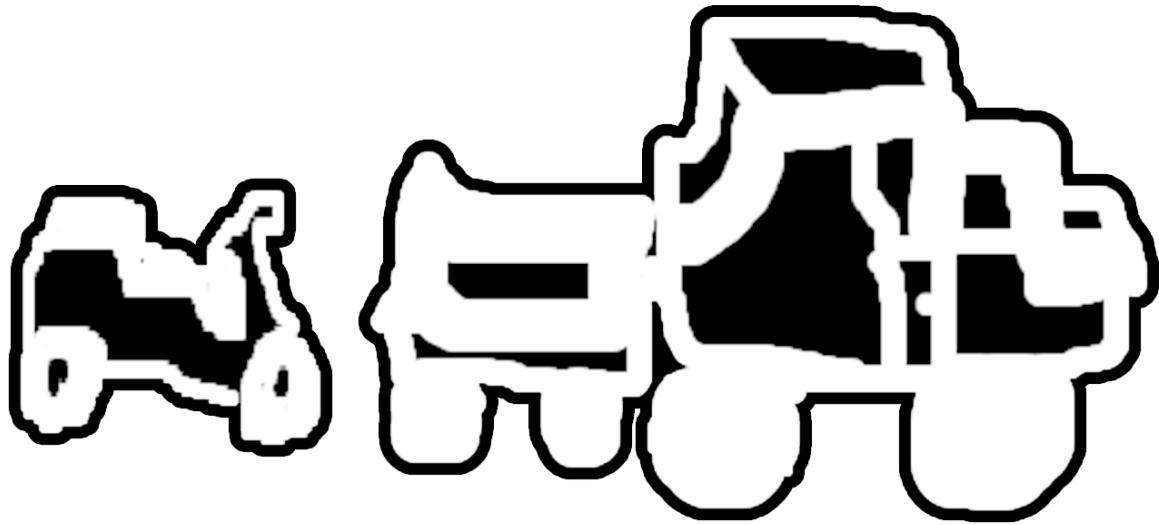
Furthermore, they would not know that some of the sensations they feel are them "seeing" and that other sensations are "feelings", as they would have no concepts through which to differentiate the two.



blank_slate spent one year running around, learning about everything. A year later, they have been told about the difference between seeing and feeling. They are able to see many objects. They know what walls are and they know people paint graffiti on them. They have a house and they know about cars and bottles.



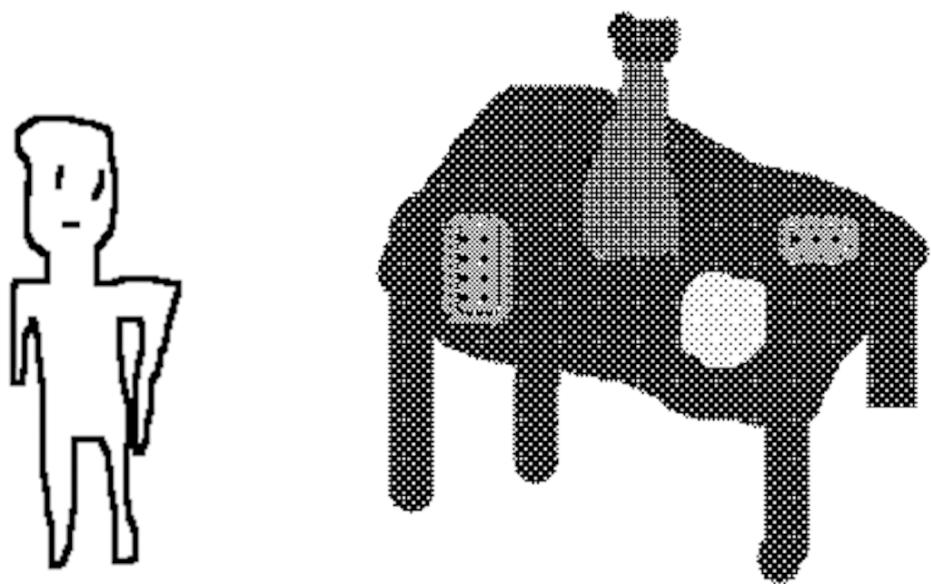
Every time when blank_slate was able to recognize a new objects it was because someone told them what's going on. When blank_slate saw a car for the first time, their friend mate_0 told them that it's a car. Since the first car that blank_slate ever saw was black thing with wheels, they first thought that all black things with wheels are cars.



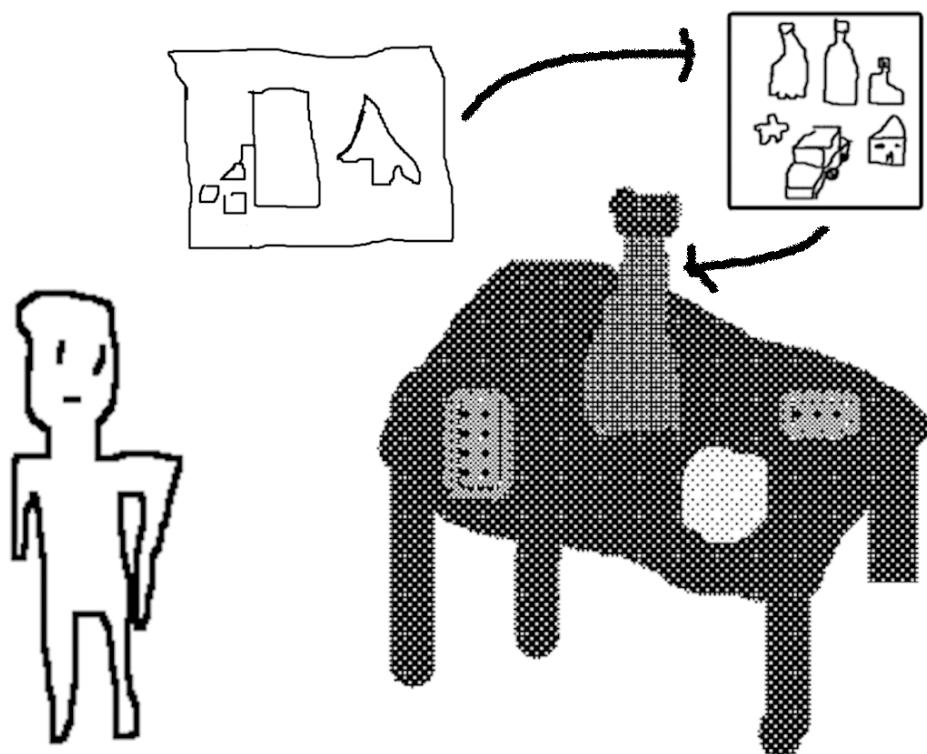
When `blank_slate` saw more cars, they learned that sometimes white things with wheels are also cars. `blank_slate` also learned that sometimes black things with wheels aren't cars. Sometimes they're motorcycles, and some other times they are tractors.



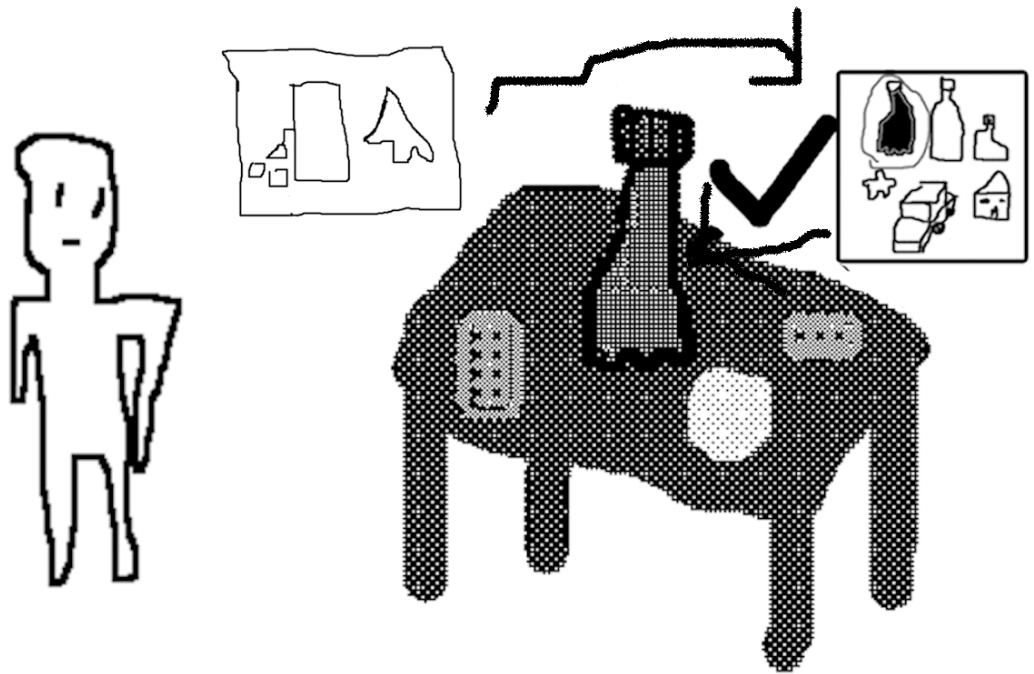
Every time `blank_slate` sees a new object and learns what it is, the information is stored in `blank_slate`'s mind, in a thing that we will call "the matrix of experience". The matrix of experience contains the information about what cars, bottles and walls look like. It allows `blank_slate` to look into the undifferentiated mess of their senses and outline single objects



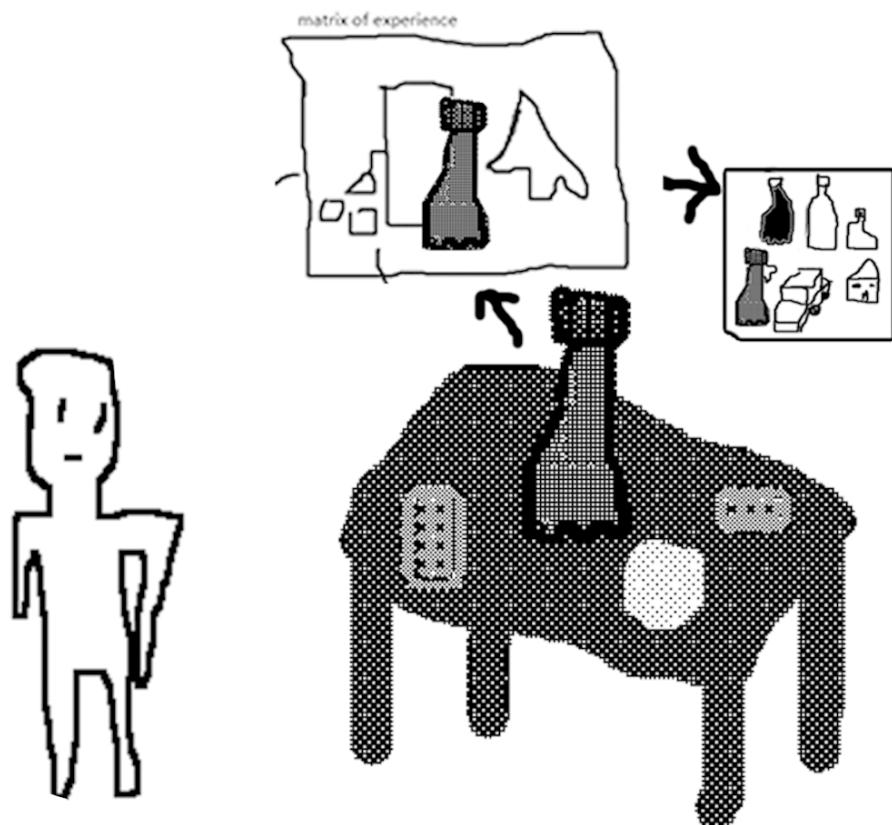
Whenever `blank_slate` has a new experience, experiencing is a four-step process. In this example, they are looking at a table with a bottle on it. At first, the entire thing would appear to them as an undifferentiated rush of sensations and colours. They would not be able to make out any objects in the thing that they're seeing.



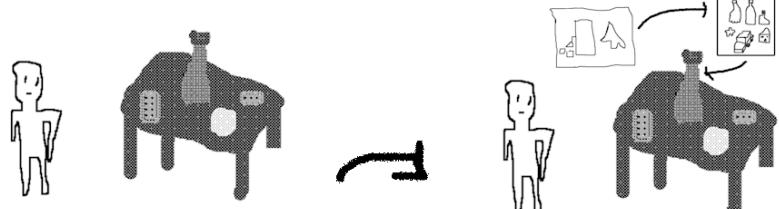
The information coming from the senses gets checked against the database of objects, stored in `blank_slate`'s matrix of experience to see if any shapes in the new experience match any of the shapes that `blank_slate` has previously experienced, and that are stored in `blank_slate`'s matrix of experience.



After it recognizes shapes from other bottles that Blank saw, Blank's matrix of experience outlines a bottle out of the undifferentiated sensations, so Blank has the experience of seeing a bottle.

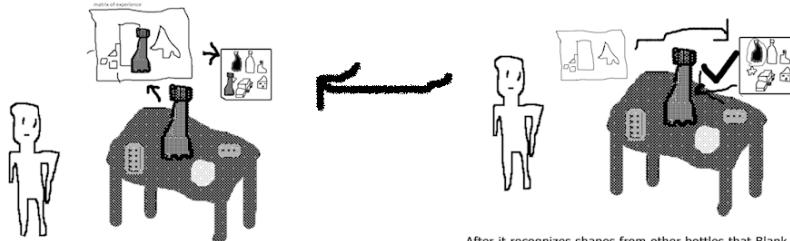


Once blank_slate has seen the bottle, the bottle gets added to their matrix of experience, where it is stored with other bottles that blank_slate has seen and used to define the outlines of any future bottles that blank slate may see.



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Once blank_slate has seen the bottle, the bottle gets added to their matrix of experience, where it is stored with other bottles that blank_slate has seen and used to define the outlines of any future bottles that blank slate may see.

After it recognizes shapes from other bottles that Blank saw, Blank's matrix of experience outlines a bottle out of the undifferentiated sensations, so Blank has the experience of seeing a bottle.

This cycle perpetually repeats during every single perceiving moment of blank_slate's life, making up every single experience that blank_slate ever has. Whenever blank_slate sees a bottle it is only in reference to previous bottles that they have seen. blank_slate's eyes do not differentiate individual objects - they only see the full world in front of them. It is blank_slate's matrix of experience that takes the information from the eyes and turns it into objects.



Throughout the entire process, blank_slates brain and nervous system (the CNS) makes sure that blank_slate stays unaware of the entire process. For blank_slate's convenience the process is removed out of their perception, to make it feel like their experiencing it all as an uninterrupted moment.

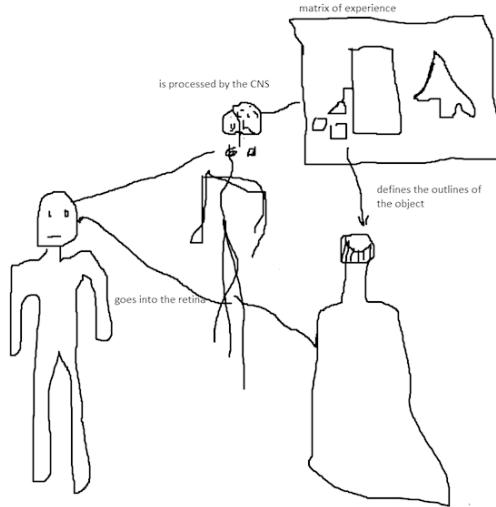


fig 1. (The Diagram)

The story of blank_slate was used to provide an easy to grasp introduction into one of phenomenology's key concepts - the idea that observing and experiencing the world is a process in which we play an active part. We are not passive observers of the world - we are actively creating our experiences, by outlining structures that make sense to us out of the chaos of the senses.

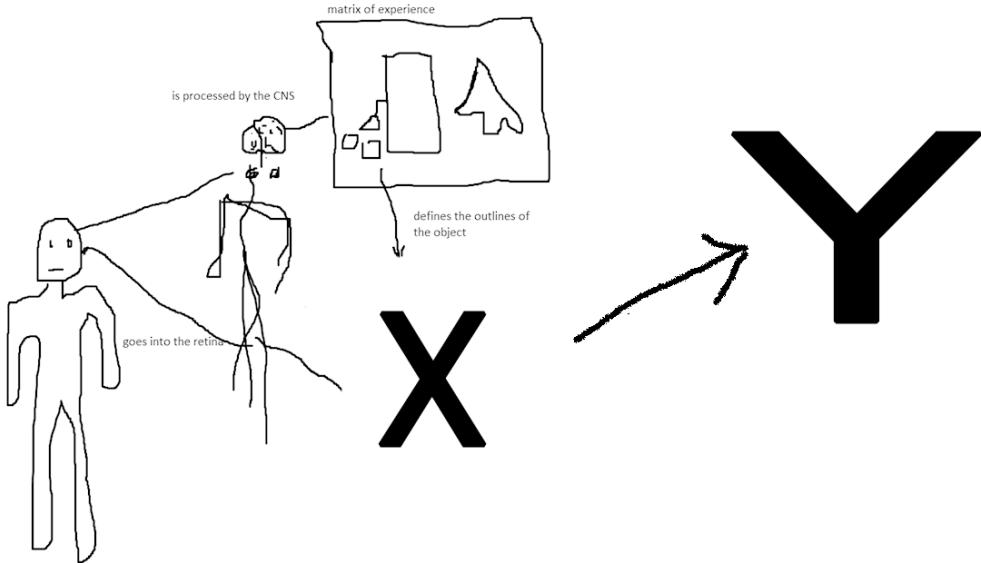
The idea of the active part that the observer plays in creating what they experience as "reality" is so fundamental to the field, that it could be said that much of the field mostly occupies itself with studying the implications of this.

Since this idea is so fundamental, in order to efficiently talk phenomenology, we have compressed this idea into a symbol, (see fig.1, which will going forward be referred to as "The Diagram) to be used going forward to signify any experiencing person.

The Diagram shows the circular process through which all of our lived experience is produced.

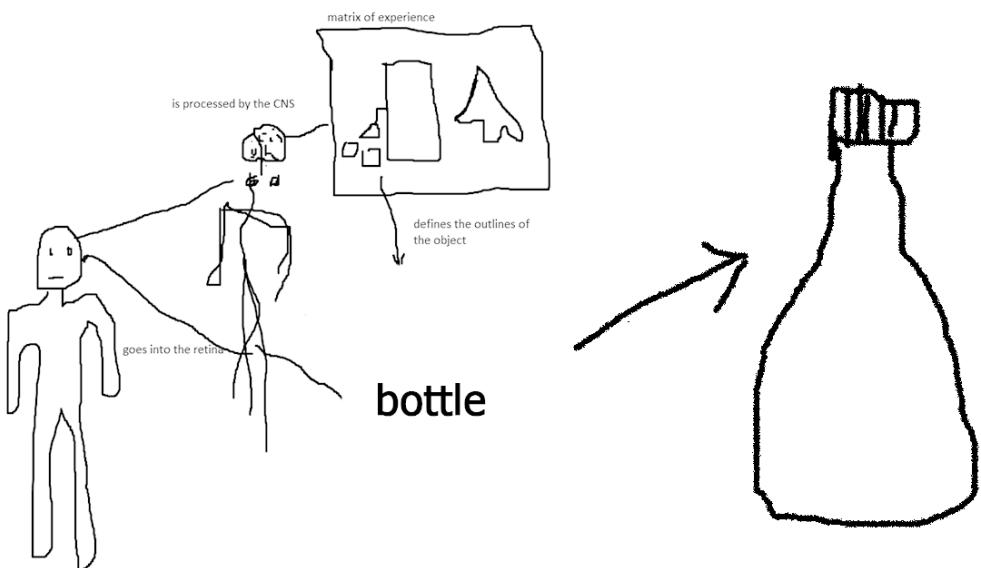
In The Diagram we can see:

- The object (a bottle), the image of which enters into the retina
- a person, who is used to signify the sensory apparatus (sight, smell, touch, etc.)
- the matrix of experience, which outlines the object in the first place.
- The Central Nervous System (CNS), which oversees the whole process, and turns it into a single uninterrupted experience, keeping us unaware of the individual elements that make up the process



Using the diagram allows us to make use of a type of arithmetics of perception, in which:

X stands for what is being paid attention to, while
Y stands for the experience that the thing being paid attention to produces together with all elements of the observer including the matrix of experience and the deletions of the CNS.



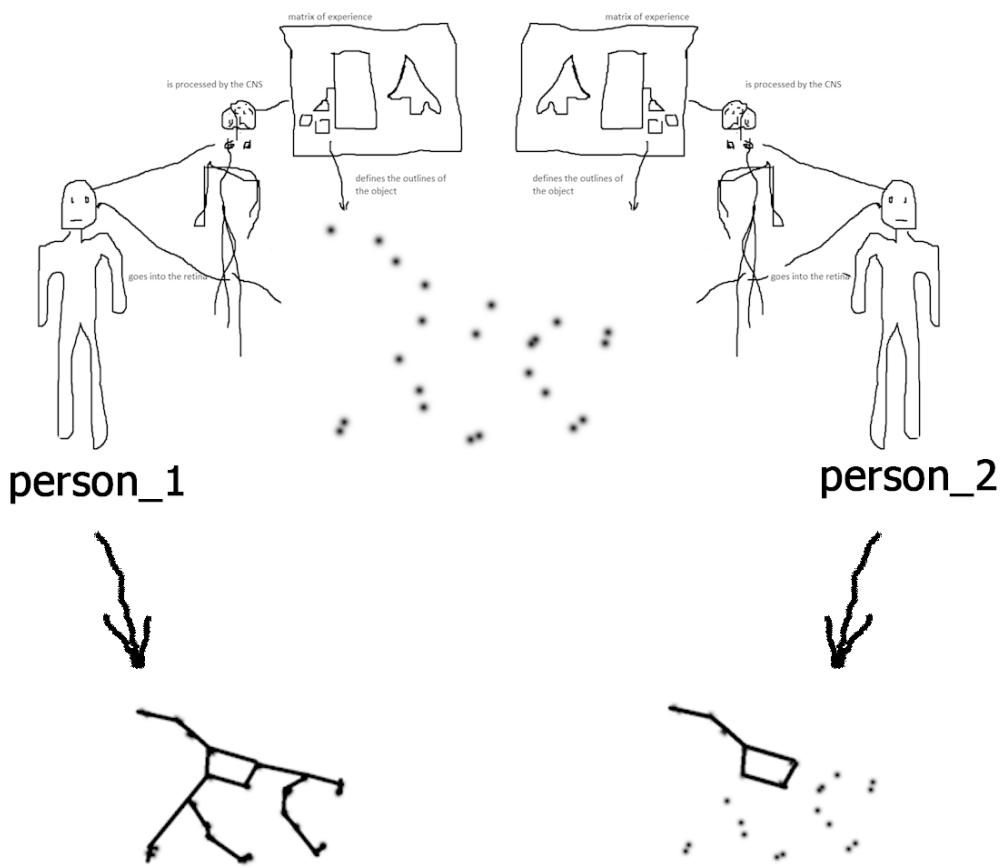
In this relatively simple example, the thing being outlined by the matrix of experience as a bottle, produces the lived experience of seeing a bottle.

In order to better learn to use the arithmetics of perception, the following page provides a simple exercise to help to solidify the diagram and its use in phenomenological arithmetics

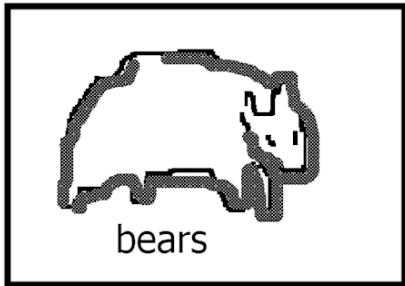


EXERCISE:

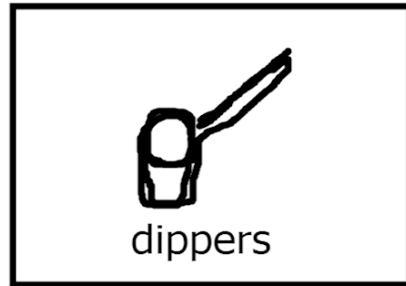
This grouping of stars was initially known throughout Europe as Ursa Major or the Great Bear. Yet with time, first in the USA, and then in a lot of the English-speaking world, it started being referred to as the big dipper. By using what we have learned about the matrix of experience and about how it outlines the objects of our perception, come up with a reason why this may be so. An answer is provided on the next page.



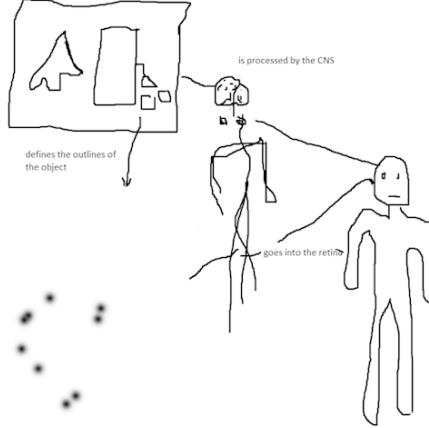
matrix of experience contents:



matrix of experience contents:



person_1



person_2



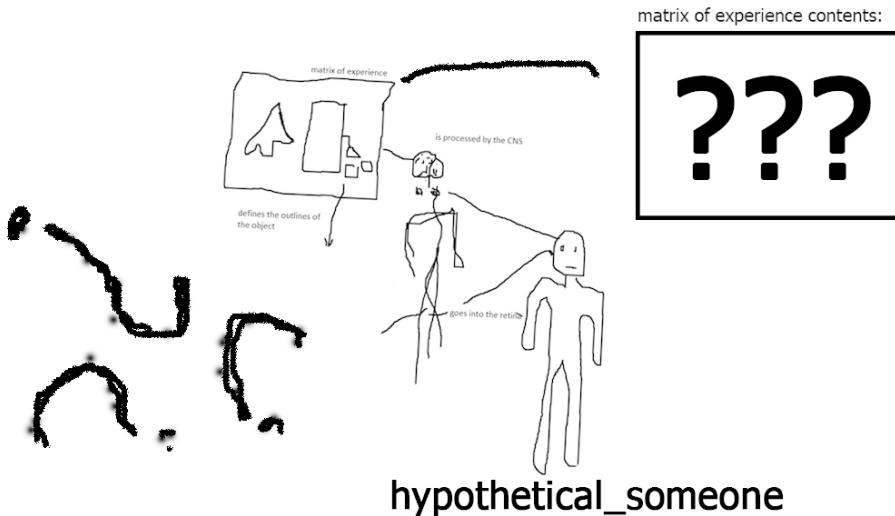
ANSWER:

person_1 looks up at the same stars as person_2

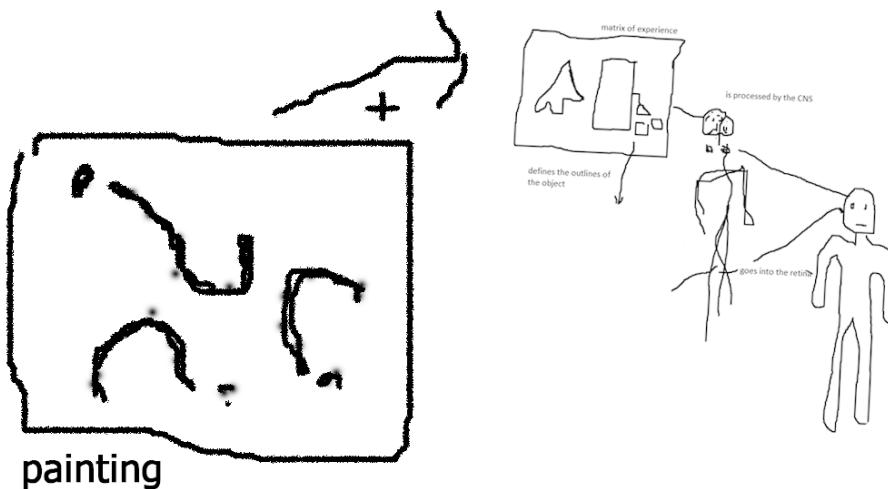
but person_1 has seen more bears, while person_2 has seen more dippers. Therefore person_1's MOE contains more bears and in looking at the stars, their MOE recognizes a bear.

person_2's MOE has seen more dippers, which means that when they look at the stars, their MOE outlines a dipper.

the artwork as a site of truth

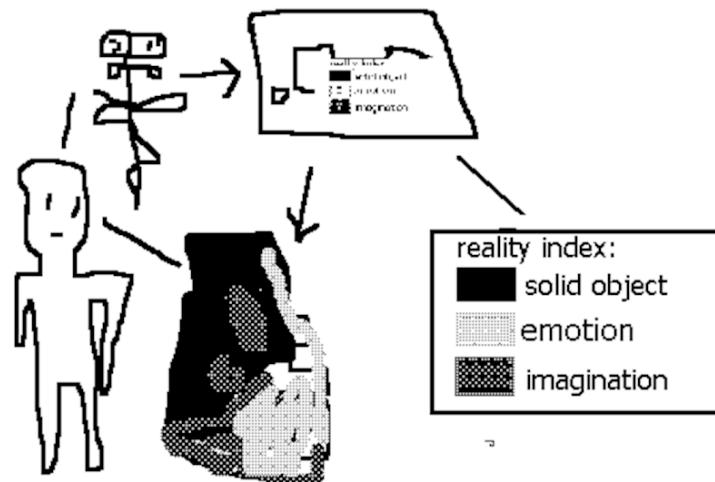


A hypothetical someone, who lives in the current age of political, social, ontological and existential uncertainty could possibly look at the same constellation and, given that their mind is full of so many questions, they could possibly see the constellation as three big question marks.



That same hypothetical someone could then make a painting of the same stars, linking them together to make three question marks. The people seeing the painting would then have the three question marks enter into their matrix of experience and the next time they see the same group of stars, they would be able to see them as three question marks.

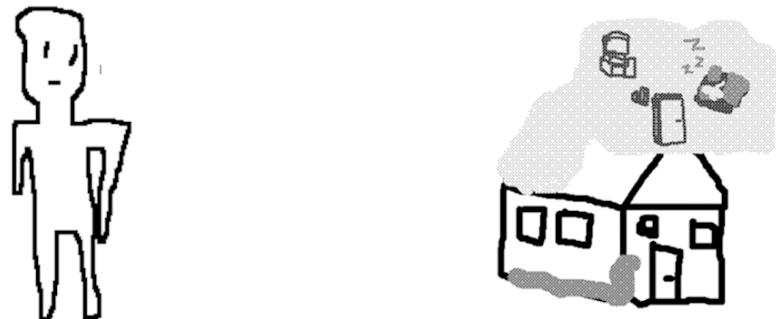
Heidegger saw art as being a "site of truth", something which shows us a new way to perceive reality, in effect allowing us to perceive a different reality, since the reality that we live in is defined by what our MOE outlines.



metaphysics:

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things. Metaphysics asks questions such as: "what is reality?", "what is an object?", "what is time?". Every aspect of our lives, is affected by how we answer such questions.

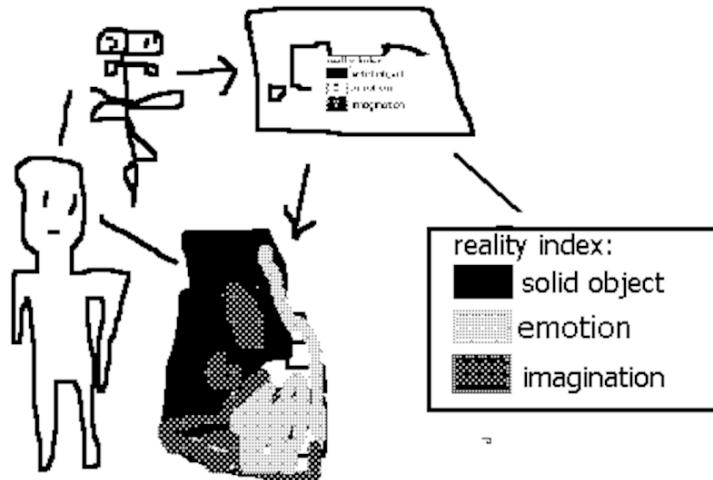
This is because, our answers to such questions are contained in our MOE - they are the most fundamental categories through which our MOE outlines the world into experience.



When we experience a house, the visual image of the house is not the only thing that we experience. We also experience a set of emotions. Perhaps, looking at our house makes us feel comfort, because we know there is food in the fridge, or a comfortable couch and a bed to sleep in. We may imagine our bed or the food in the fridge.

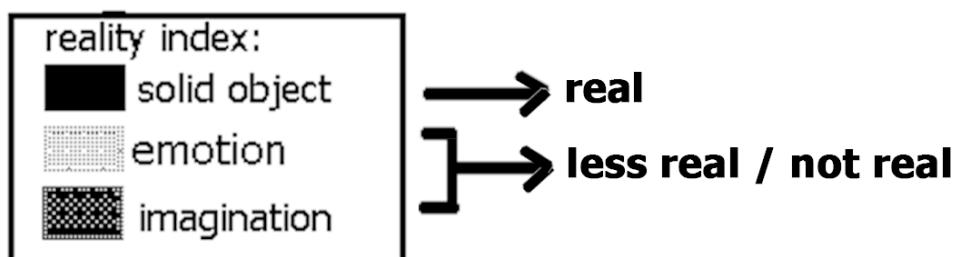
In the way it appears to us, there is nothing that practically separates the visual image of the house from the way we feel about it. We learn that the house is separate from the way we feel about it. The house is **an object**, the feeling is **an emotion**.

the reality index:



Different cultures and different periods of history often have different answers to the questions of metaphysics. In the modern-day, across most of the western world, most people's MOE contains a "reality index" - a set of assumptions about what is real and what isn't.

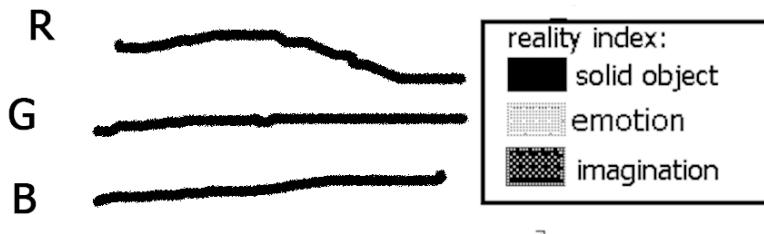
The very word "reality" is the result of a metaphysical assumption, the assumption that the world can be split into two categories: things that are real and things that are not.



"real" is often defined as "having an existence separate from the mind" or "existing, as opposed to imaginary". Such definitions point to a set of metaphysical assumptions - a hierarchy, in which what we can touch, see, objectively measure and quantify is more valuable than the things that we can't.

At its worst this metaphysical model, can make us practically blind to everything that does not fall within the category of "solid object". The implications of such blindness are best illustrated by imagining an inversion of this hierarchy. How much of our day would be spent running head-first into walls if we exclusively paid attention to our emotions and our imagination to a point of making us unable to see any solid objects?

Thinking about art through phenomenology

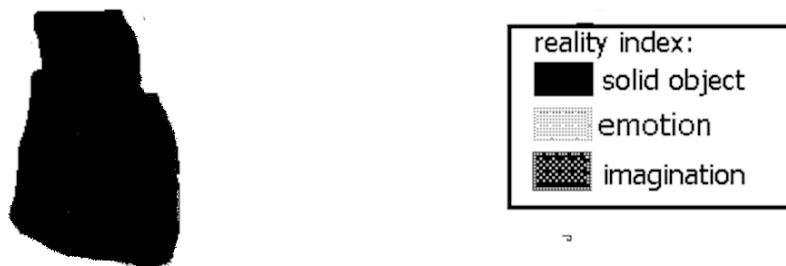


By using the visual language established so far (and if we attempt to remove the hierarchy implicit in the modern-day reality index), we could say that the “solid object”, the “emotion” and the “imagination” are three channels that work together to produce an “output” - our lived experience.

Using such a framework, allows us to make use of the tools of the field to find new ways to think about art.

To do this, we can begin by looking into the way such a framework was first used by French philosopher and phenomenologist Maurice Marleau-Ponty.

Building on Heidegger’s idea of the artwork as a “site of truth”, Marleau-Ponty argued that the art and methodology of Paul Cezanne could be studied to reveal truths about how we perceive the world.



prior artists' art

He believed that artists prior to Cezanne had mostly sought to depict the world “as it is” - their art was an effort to paint only the “solid object” part of reality.

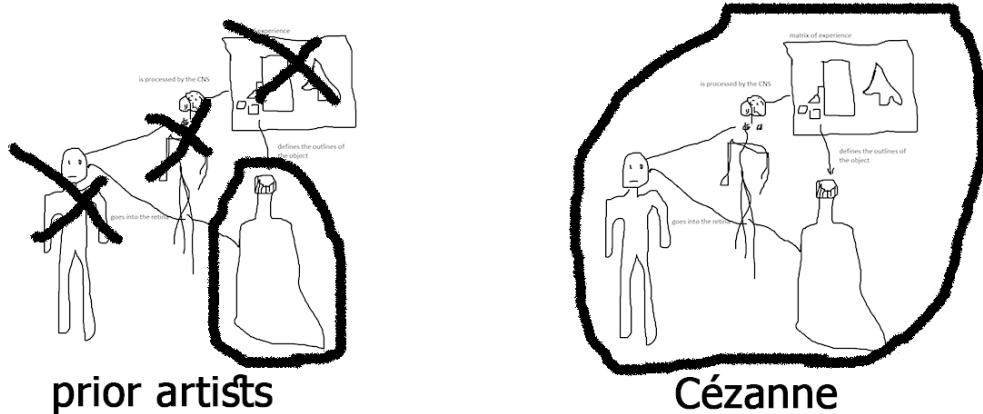


reality index:
solid object
emotion
imagination

Cezanne's art

Where Cezanne's art differed, Marleau-Ponty argues is in that it looked to include not only the solid object, but also the rest of the channels that make up our perception - the "emotion" and the "imagination".

Cezanne sought to depict the world not as it is, without the mind's "distortions", but rather to paint the "distortions" that the mind perceives the world through and to include those distortions into his depictions of the "solid objects".



Marleau-Ponty believed that Cezanne's art was therefore not simply an art-piece, but also a form of philosophy. Cézanne's art uses light, color, form and a nonlinear approach to perspective, to depict the world as a holistic, immersive environment in which landscapes flow into one another without distinct boundaries.

Marleau-Ponty argues that in doing so, Cézanne's works points to the inseparability of subject and object, or to use the language established in this text: it points our attention to the existence of the other elements that make up our perception, such as the matrix of experience, the CNS and the senses.

Using the framework to analyze the art of Kenan Abbas



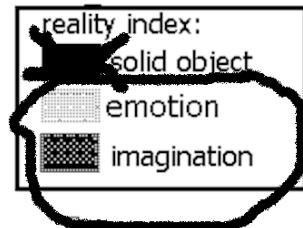
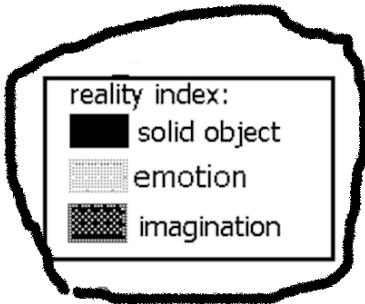
decontextualisation

When it comes to depicting the mechanisms of perception, the art of Kenan Abbas could be seen as a philosophical, albeit not intentional, extension of Cezanne's method.

When looking at any one of Abbas' works, we are hard-pressed to find any distinct semblance of a familiar object - instead of attempting to represent the external world, the subdued colours, drift in and out of attempts to solidify into anything we could attribute materiality to.

Whenever the sensory sprawl does begin to resemble something we could recognize, it is only to further subvert the mind's attempts to make sense of what it sees - carefully crafted textures turn three-dimensional only to form into impossible objects, made further convoluted by the juxtaposition of their organic forms with textures that are more likely to be seen in a metropolitan city, than on any living thing we can find in nature.

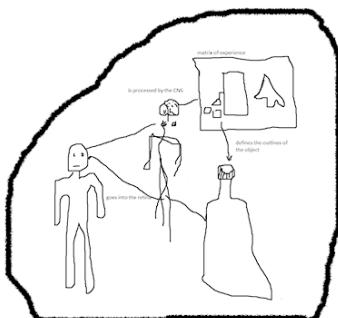
The technique through which this is achieved is that of decontextualising. The artist uses the external world as a palette to pick from, taking the elements of objects from his surrounding, breaking them down into fragments to then scatter them through the canvas, using his precise knowledge of lighting, perspective and composition to hide the original object from being perceived. Thus even when it is being depicted, the object reminds us more of the loose shapes that our mind uses as the building blocks of perception.



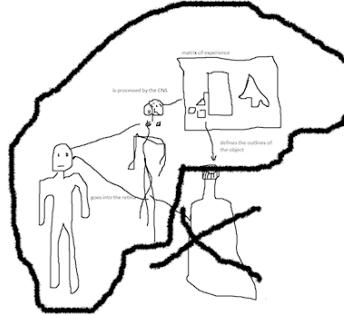
Cezanne's art

Abbas' art

In seeking to remove the object out of perception via a series of techniques, designed to obfuscate it, it could be said that the work of Abbas takes a further step inwards in the direction set by Cezanne. In using the visual language of this text, we could say that while Cezanne sought to point our attention to the reality of all of the channels that make up our lived experience, Abbas' paintings ask what would happen if we were to shut down the "solid object" channel - what would be left in our perception if we take the external world out of the question?



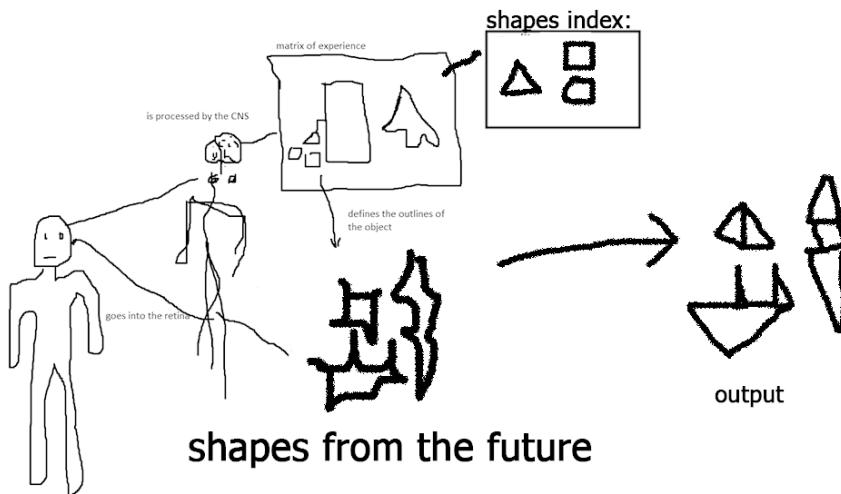
Paul Cezanne



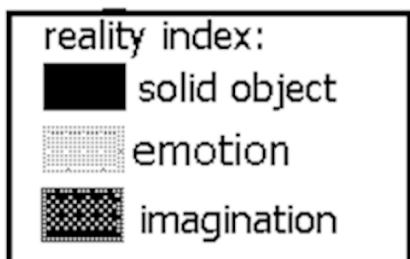
Kenan Abbas

Having established a phenomenological framework for understanding Abbas' works, we can extend the analysis performed by Marleau-Ponty to ask what are the philosophical implications of the methodology used in Abbas' paintings?

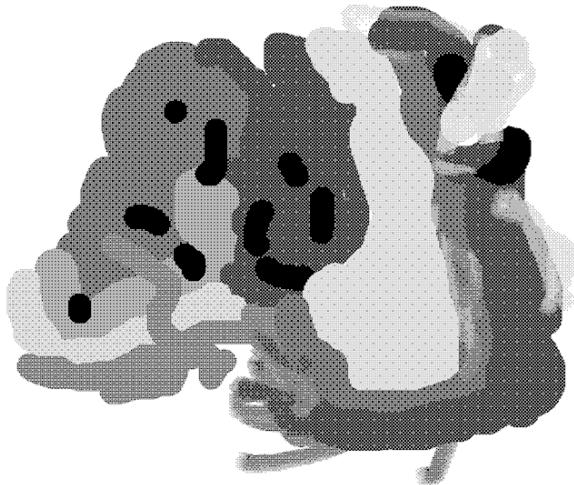
If Cezanne's art seeks to point our attention to our active role in perceiving the world, Abbas' method of taking the external world out of the equation can be read as a radical reminder of the tactile reality of a world, that has been made inaccessible through the metaphysical assumptions of our culture. The object has been removed from perception, yet instead of resulting in a blank canvas, this removal has left us with a world full of life, although it is not any life that we can easily recognize from the vantage point of our habituated modes of perceiving.



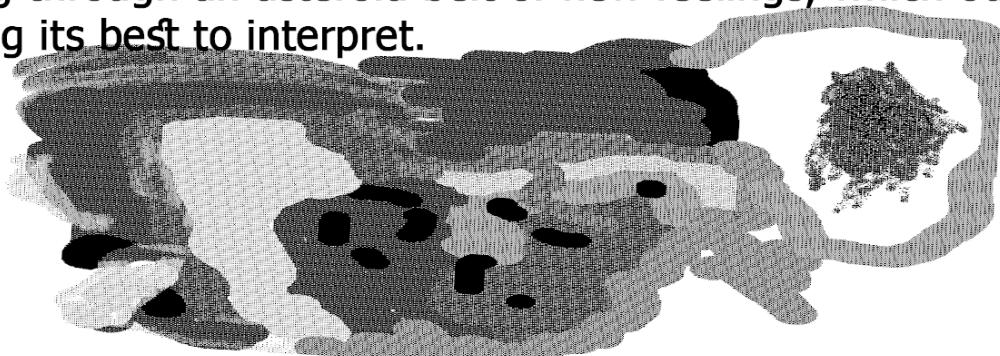
If we were able to somehow tune the human mind like a radio to receive signals from some point in the future where humanity has moved into a new metaphysical paradigm, the signals that we would receive would most likely come out distorted. Our matrix of experience would have never experienced something from the future and we would have no frame of reference to interpret the signals through. If the signals were new geometric shapes in the future, we would only be able to experience them through the present shapes we already know



If such a travel through time was possible for the mind to achieve, it would require at least one metaphysical adjustment - an acknowledgement of the real tactile existence of the "emotion" and the "imagination" channels that make up our lived experience. The reason for this, is that under present metaphysics, time is only experienced linearly in reference to the "solid object" channel - time can only be measured through the movement of solid objects. Therefore travelling through time in a way that disrupts its linear flow, would need to happen via the channels, where time can not be measured objectively



Tuning into channels “emotion” and “imagination”, and using the amplification of Earth’s temporary second moon, asteroid 2024 PT5, we begin tuning our mind and surfing through future experiences. Given that we can only travel via the “emotion” and “imagination” channels, we are only able to perceive these two channels of the future. We aren’t able to see any objects, but we are immersed into a mix of strange and familiar feelings, sensing the traces of the present that still remain in this distant place, but also feeling unusual combinations of emotions - that’s probably new emotions, that are absent from our MOE, so we are experiencing them as a mood swings, as if we are drifting through an asteroid belt of new feelings, which our MOE is doing its best to interpret.



In the middle of this, we feel a rush of familiar feelings. We’ve stopped surfing through the unknown mutated emotions of the future and our attention stops on something that seems familiar. The slight anxiety is mixed up with a fluttering in the stomach, we’re feeling butterflies. By using our best efforts to make sense of it we try to put it into words. The words come out awkward and weird and it doesn’t make a lot of sense. It’s someone declaring their love, but what are they saying? What does love look like in that distant future? Is it the same? Different? We make out the words “I can waste five years of your time in one year”. That’s a strange way to declare your love for someone. What in the world could this strange signal possibly mean?

**written by: Yanik Lechev
inspired by: the art of Kenan Abbas**