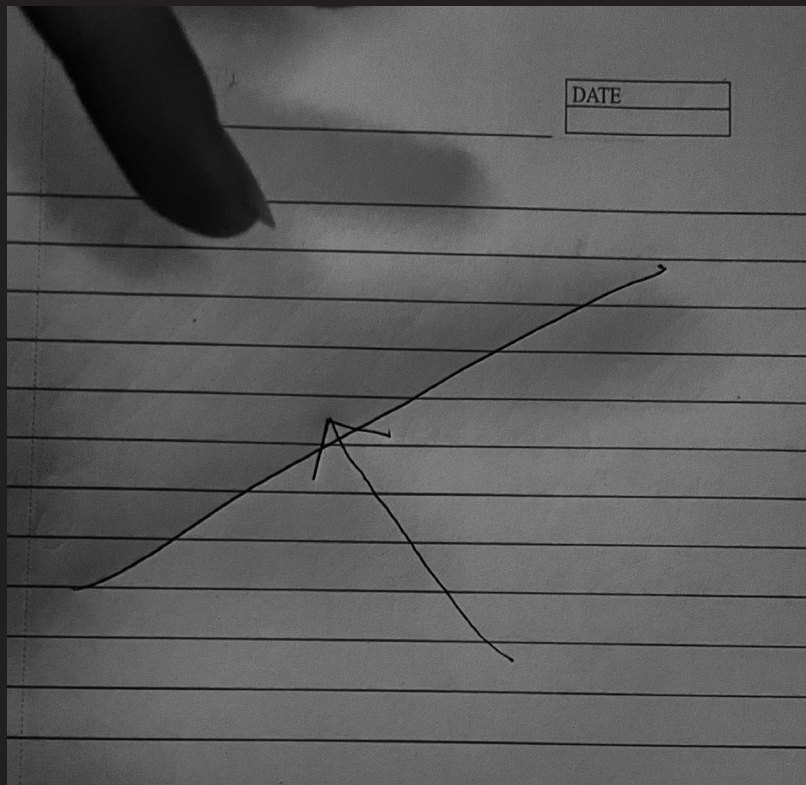


PICTURES FROM THE EDGE:
art and limit experience



"Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire place in the line that it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy; transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable."

--Michel Foucault, A Preface to Transgression, 1963

Karl Jaspers (German psychiatrist turned philosopher 1883-1969) describes a limit experience as one which so upsets my typical way of being in and relating to the world that I become transcendently aware. (Who One Is, Part I Hart, 2009) Michel Foucault saw limit experience as dissolving the self, and looked to art, extreme experiences, and madness to define—and induce—them. (Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel, Foucault 1963). Death, error, and sexuality are common themes among explorers of limit experience. I could read the limit experience idea as the cliché where a person suddenly understands life following some devastation, and maybe that's what it is. That's why I'm interested in it.

My *Limit Experience* project is an exploration of the area around limit experiences following their impact, looking specifically at how art is produced from them. I've asked participating artists to submit work that feels challenging or limit testing, with the idea that we can work backwards from formal analysis to the circumstances under which the work was made. As we move from the art object to the mental experience of the artist, we may discover limit experiences at any point along the way, or we may not. Over the next few months, I'll be examining and presenting work submitted to the project, leading up to the final iteration of *Limit Experience*. As noted in my call for submissions, I am utterly unconcerned with whether a work of art is "good", and in fact welcome works that seem abjectly, bad, unfinished, or ugly. This project sees art as a reflection of human subjective experience and attempts an unfettered, open-minded exploration, ignoring conventions of criticism and aesthetic evaluation. I have privileged error over polish in my selections. In this essay, I'll use thoughts about my own work to introduce some ideas and illustrate my interest in limit experiences.

Foucault, valuing limit experiences as aids for the annihilation of subjectivity, saw art as a potential method for producing them. Under the right circumstances, he thought art could act as a type of self-destroying machinery (he saw the writings of Maurice Blanchot and Georges Bataille as examples of such art because both, in his opinion, disintegrate the subjectivity of the author through the form and act of writing). He also viewed extreme experiences like sadomasochistic sex and drug use as potential aids, and these he refers to as transgression. (Foucault: A Very Short Introduction, Gutting, 2019) Jaspers valued limit experiences for the transcendent change they produce in a person's consciousness, and the events he associated with limit experiences are unwilled experiences such as guilt, anxiety, and calamity. (Hart)

I am interested in both notions of limit experience and see two possibilities for art emerge from their foundations, though I suspect many more possibilities will emerge during this exploration. Foucault's view sees art as the possible instigator of limit experiences, equating the control one has over doing a drug with the control the artist has in enacting intense work. The type of work produced in this vein might be something like transgressive, durational performance work. Jasper's view, I think, precludes art-making at the time of the limit experience but creates space for a reflective art practice that I have recently used and recount here.

Lately, I have thought of past limit experiences like bombs. They've gone off in my life, obliterating all my previously constituted things of importance including ideologies, identity, material possessions and their meaning or value to me. When I make art whose content relates to a limit experience, I stop time and travel backwards in it. Art allows this through a powerful activation of memory, where I am involved physically, emotionally, and psychologically in the process of remembering rather than passively observing my history like a mental-image movie. I go back to the moment of my limit experience. I survey the bombed "land" (the area of my experience), regarding all the blown-up material of my life—my worldview torn apart, my stuff destroyed or mangled to the point of uselessness. Sometimes material things and even ideologies remain intact, but meanings have so fundamentally shifted that everything seems nonsensical and must be re-ordered.

In this case, unwilling experiences are explored as memory, and art-making is a reflective act rather than a visceral or immediate act. The artist is the observer who returns to the site of the explosion after it has taken place. With time to explore, without the fear of being destroyed, the artist can take stock of what has happened, collecting items and reconstituting them to form an image of the scorched site. These images are pictures from the edge. They rely on memory, imagination, self-reflection, and curiosity to document or create from the moment of significance. It is unlikely that art would ever be made during a limit experience of this variety, which aligns to Jaspers' conception rather than Foucault's. Here, art is the slower, thought based, reflective, receptive area of consciousness. The self may have been momentarily obliterated during the originating limit experience, but fully reconstitutes, with a new conception of reality, following the event. It's impossible for art to take place without the artist's conscious knowledge that it is taking place, while this description of limit experience can only occur when an artist is totally unaware that it is coming. It happens beyond the artist's consciousness. Art made around Jaspers' conception of limit experiences, I think, is more likely to be painting, drawing, writing, and other forms that allow a person to be secluded and safe in private thought while they produce.

In the past, I tried to induce limit experiences with my art, or I tried to represent past experiences with the intensity I'd felt during the original event. This impulse I see as related to Foucault's idea of transgression. I wanted this art to produce a fire of thought in me and in the audience, a fire like the one I'd felt when I'd been forever changed by some life event, so intense that I did lose myself for a time. Sometimes the work seemed effective, and sometimes it didn't. Can art produce a similar reality for the audience? Should art do that? These are questions I'd like to explore more during this project. For the time being, I've decided it's better to leave life-altering events to powers greater than myself. I expect my ideas will evolve as I engage with each of the limit experience artists' work, and I look forward to exchanging thoughts with others as the project develops.

I started this project because I believe in the extra-potent insight gained from limit experiences. This insight ignites a desire for change, for love, for the highest realization of life and the art forms that reflect and perhaps kindle those realizations. This insight also mobilizes the best form of the "fuck it" mentality, freeing me from my weak wish to please others, and helping me to prioritize my passion and commitment to transcendence.

I deliberately pursue this sense of freedom and passion as I witness patterned thinking and behavior around art that curtails open-mindedness. This is a problem not with artmaking but with thinking. The thinking problem I see in myself and others could be summed up as "rushing to conclusions" about the meaning and function of art. Rather than exploring, we tend to define, and see the definitions of meaning and function as success. This kind of thinking leads us to:

- rush the thought process as it concerns art and in general
- minimize the importance of passion in art
- ask artists to brand and overdetermine their practice so that items may be easily understood and/or sold
- systematically destroy complexity and ambiguity through discourse that hands pre-determined interpretations and theories of art to artists without requiring them to do their own thinking
- require that artists align ideologically to causes without fully understanding their own thoughts let alone the histories behind such charges
- ignore thoughts and ideas that aren't easy to understand or don't fit with popular narratives
- reduce art to a lesser science, eliminating all the merits of art thought in favor of thought from an entirely different set of disciplines

and more.

So, *Limit Experience* is a thought exercise more than it is a traditional art show or publication. The point is to slow down thinking and examine work with a different sort of interest.

I think examining strange work made from strange experiences can counteract problems with thinking and create the conditions necessary for open-mindedness. Open-mindedness requires the acceptance of the unknown, and a knowledge that beyond a certain point you will experience it. It requires acceptance of the fear that precedes experience of the unknown. It requires willingness to allow others to guide thought, so to let go of directing others' minds, ideas and behaviors. Open mindedness produces unexpected outcomes... information that may not be easily understandable or relatable. I may not know. I may be confused. I may be wrong. I will be wrong. I will be confused. I will not know. This is the artistic territory of the limit experience, of pictures from the edge, the gray soup of ambiguity I love to inhabit because it sets me free.

Over the next few months, I'll be releasing zines teasing the work of artists who will be featured in the final iteration of the *Limit Experience* project. As with this essay/zine, the zines will be free. You can just download the .pdf and print/fold/staple to put together. I'll provide instructions for future zines. This one you just staple.

-Jessamyn Plotts

Bibliography

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DRUGS

ARE

BAD

numbers 999...

It's a sick world and I
love it!

