

Johannes Itten, “Analyses of Old Masters” (1921)

... To experience a work of art means to re-experience it; means to awaken the essential in it, to bring the living quality which is inherent in its form to independent life. The work of art is reborn within me.

We say: to experience a work of art is to re-create it. Because, intellectually speaking, there is no great difference between a person who experiences a work of art and a person who outwardly represents an experienced form in a work. Every human being can be taught to draw a circle, but not every human being has within him the power to experience a circle. I am able to set free this power within him, but am not able to give it to him. Since experiencing is dependent on forces of the mind and soul and since we will never comprehend what these really are, we shall say it is a gift of God that is inborn in His image, through which path He breathes His spirit into man's soul.

A living representation is always something experienced, and something experienced is always represented with life. Nothing dead will ever come to life, and nothing living will ever die.

The ability for outward representation is dependent on the substance, and the physical constitution of a human body, the fingers, the hands, the arms, the feet, the legs, the trunk; on internal organs like the heart, the lungs, the stomach, on sensory organs and the brain. In short, such ability is dependent on the constitution of all physical substances and organs.

Experiencing is a faculty of the mind and spirit. If it concerns phenomena of a coarse material kind, then it is the physical faculties which produce the experience; on the other hand, if it relates to sensitive spiritual phenomena, then it is the spiritual faculties that produce the experience.

To perceive means to be moved, and to be moved means to form. Even the slightest sensation is a form that radiates movement. Everything that is alive reveals itself to man by means of movement. Everything moves and nothing is dead, for otherwise it would not exist. Everything that exists is differentiated according to quantity and quality of movement, is differentiated according to time and space. All forms are differentiated, just as movements are differentiated....

Without movement—no perception, without perception—no form, without form stance. Substance—form. Form = movement in time and space; thus, substance = movement in time and space.

Above, we have contended that all substances are means of representation. But now substances are forms. Thus, form is a means of representation. If this is so, and if the existence of form is based on its spiritual and mental origin, which can never be grasped then the conclusion results quite easily:

The means of representation are as little teachable as form itself. To teach and to learn means to have comprehended and to comprehend. The claim that form can be taught can therefore only seem true to a person of little understanding.

Question: Are teaching and comprehending possible at all? We shall never get to the tom of a thing. Neither substance nor form nor movement can be taught, can be comprehended. Perception alone is perceivable.

Modesty and great humility before Him, the Incomprehensible, help us bear the gravity of this insight.

I am able to perceive the perception. I am able to perceive the consciousness of being moved, not movement itself, but being moved. So, all teaching or learning is perception of how the person who is teaching or the person who is learning is being moved. Being moved begets being moved....

Movement gives birth to form, form gives birth to movement. Every point, every line, every body, every shadow, every light, every color, are forms born of movement, which again give birth to movement. Sadness and happiness, hate and love, antipathy and sympathy, are forms of the psyche, caused by movement.

If I want to experience a line, I must either move my hand in accordance with the line must follow the line with my senses; hence. I have to be psychically moved. Finally, if I am able to visualize a line, then I am mentally moved.

These now are the three differentiated degrees of the act of being moved: If I draw the line with my hand, then I am physically moved; this is the first, the physical degree of "being moved." If I move my senses along a line, then I am in the second, the psychic degree "being moved." If I mentally visualize a line, then I am in the third, the mental degree "being moved." The physical degree is an act of being moved outwardly; the mental degree is an act of being moved internally; the psychic degree is a combined act of being moved, internally and outwardly. Seen from above, lightness and clarity correspond to internal, the mental act of being moved; and darkness and gloom to the external, the physical act of being moved. Just as the sun illuminates the moon, so the third degree illuminates the first and rescues it from the darkness....