

Imaginative Variations: A Phenomenological Analysis of Imaginary Worlds in Experiences of Visual Art



ESTETIKA
THE EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS

Anders Essom-Stenz 
University of Copenhagen, DK

Tone Roald 
University of Copenhagen, DK

RESEARCH ARTICLE

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

ABSTRACT

In experiences of visual art, we enter imaginary worlds that consist of phenomenologically distinguishable variations of imagination. In this article, we empirically describe some of these variations and the imaginary worlds of which they are part. Based on phenomenological interviews about intense experiences with visual art, we distinguish between sensory imaginings, imaginings of bodily presence, and situational imaginings, each signifying different imaginary content but all related in a dynamic interplay that shape the coherent imaginary experience. We show how imagination is fundamental to experiences of visual art, and how our imaginary worlds relate to the work of art in different ways.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Anders Essom-Stenz

University of Copenhagen, DK

essom.stenz@gmail.com

KEYWORDS:

aesthetics; Edward
Casey; Edmund
Husserl; imagination;
Maurice Merleau-Ponty;
phenomenology;
psychology

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Essom-Stenz, Anders,
and Tone Roald.
'Imaginative Variations: A
Phenomenological Analysis
of Imaginary Worlds in
Experiences of Visual Art.'
*Estetika: The European
Journal of Aesthetics*
LXII/XVIII, no. 1 (2025):
pp. 36–52. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.33134/eeja.565](https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.565)

With an indirect reference to Leonardo Da Vinci, Marcel Proust writes that art is *cosa mentale*: art reveals its expressive qualities within us.¹ The internal unfolding of the aesthetic can be immensely meaningful and intense, but what happens in these experiences? How does the work of art unfold? In this article, we address these questions by studying how imagination, as experience without a perceptually present object, is part of shaping our profound experiences with visual art, and how imaginings present themselves to consciousness. We do so within the framework of phenomenological psychology, and we describe structures of imagination and the ways they deepen our encounter with works of art as a way of illuminating a decisive aspect of the aesthetic experience.

Such topics have been addressed in a variety of phenomenological discussions, both philosophical and psychological.² In his book *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Mikel Dufrenne writes that imaginings are ‘more repressed than aroused by aesthetic perception’ and that ‘the spectacle provided by the aesthetic object is self-sufficient and needs no reinforcement’. Here Dufrenne expresses an idealized form of aesthetics where the subject grasps the expression of the work in a perceptual act. Works of art have ‘no need for elaboration by the imagination’, he writes; works of art are both the means and ends of the aesthetic experience.³ Even though Dufrenne relies on Edmund Husserl, we find in the latter a stronger emphasis on the importance of imagination when he writes that ‘without an image, there is no fine art [...] we are supposed to be taken out of empirical reality and lifted into the equally intuitive world of imagery’.⁴ According to Husserl, aesthetic experience emerges through the dual occurrence of perception – the empirical reality of the work of art and the world of imagery. This type of experience is called image consciousness.⁵

Throughout this article, we analyse phenomenological interviews as well as draw from the work of Dufrenne, Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Edward Casey.⁶ We describe a general principle of imagination based on an analysis of visual art experiences, thereby demonstrating how imagination is central to these experiences and the way they gain their subjective meaning. The work of art draws out a frame of expression that we inhabit in our imagination. We use the term imaginative variation to express the structural differences and the different ways of manifestation for consciousness. Thus, the variations signify different ways for imagination to solidify in experience, and

1 Marcel Proust, *Essais et articles* (Paris: Pléiade, 1971), 640.

2 We discuss a few of these approaches in this paper, just as we have discussed other approaches elsewhere. See Anders Essom-Stenz and Tone Roald, ‘Imagination in Experiences of Visual Art: An Investigation in Phenomenological Psychology’, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 55 (2024): 62–88; ‘Imagination in Perception and Art: Phenomenological Variations’, *Theory and Psychology* 33 (2023): 99–117.

3 Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 359.

4 Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, trans. John B. Brough (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 44.

5 Husserl distinguishes between image consciousness and phantasy, the latter being a form of imagining that does not occur simultaneously with perception, see *ibid.*, 53.

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Eye and Mind’, trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 121–49; *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2012); *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Edward Casey, *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

together the variations make up the structure of our imaginary worlds. We experience such worlds with our bodies as the epistemological point of departure, thus creating an experience of inhabiting an imaginary world that evolves from the work of art. The embodiment of imagination has been treated in contemporary writings, in which arguments have been made that imaginings always 'draws upon the resources of embodied life'.⁷ In developing a detailed empirical account of how this takes place and how our imagination is structured, our analysis is both an empirical and a theoretical contribution to the phenomenology of imagination, art experiences, and the ways in which our bodies are part of structuring these experiences.

II. METHODOLOGY

The empirical foundation of this study consists of descriptions of experiences with visual art from seven interviewees. In the analysis, we draw out descriptions from these interviews, showing the empirical foundation for our conceptualizations. The interviewees are anonymized, and their formal knowledge of art varies, as does the extent to which they attend exhibitions and engage with art. Martin from Denmark is in his early thirties, studying art and working as a visual and performance artist; Julie from Denmark is in her late twenties studying economics and psychology; Hannah from Austria is in her late fifties, working as a social worker; Petra from Greece is in her late twenties, studying psychology; Agnes from Denmark is in her early fifties, working as a nurse; Louis from Denmark is in his early thirties, working as a visual and performance artist; and Maria from Denmark is in her early thirties, working as a visual artist.

The interviews were chosen from a larger pool of interviews, all revolving around experiences of visual art. The reason for drawing from these seven interviews specifically was the elaborative nature of the descriptions, allowing us to analyse the imaginary structures with a high level of detail. Furthermore, the seven interviewees described experiences with works that held different characteristics in terms of art historical periods and artistic medium, allowing us to describe the general imaginary structures involved in the experience of works with very different object characteristics. The goal was not to reach a statistically relevant sample size, as qualitative work relies on quality rather than quantity,⁸ but rather to develop in-depth descriptions of imagination with the experience of different visual works of art.

The interviews were conducted using broad, open-ended questions. The first question was always 'Can you please describe an experience with visual art that has been important to you?' and we let the interview develop from this. Before conducting the interviews, we ensured the interviewees were informed about the aims of the study – namely, to obtain descriptions of an experience with a visual work of art that held

7 Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Life of Imagination: Revealing and Making the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 159. Other contemporary accounts of the embodiment of imagination include Saulius Geniusas, *Phenomenology of Productive Imagination: Embodiment, Language, and Subjectivity* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2022) and Zuzanna Rucinska and Shaun Gallagher, 'Making Imagination Even More Embodied: Imagination, Constraint and Epistemic Relevance', *Synthese* 199 (2021): 8143–70.

8 For a discussion of number and quality of interviews, see Amedeo Giorgi, *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology: A Modified Husserlian Approach* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009); Greg Guest et al., 'How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability', *Field Methods* 18 (2006): 59–82.

particular personal importance and which they remembered as especially significant. The obtaining of empirical descriptions and the subsequent analysis underwent ethical approval from the Department of Psychology at the University of Copenhagen.

The search for a high level of descriptive detail is a way of reducing implicit interpretation and preconceptions about our experiences. Such preconceptions are part of what is typically referred to as our natural attitude within the phenomenological literature. The natural attitude is our way of relating to everyday experiences with implicit knowledge permeating our understanding of those experiences, containing a certain naïveté.⁹ Phenomenological analysis is used to abstract from the naïveté of our natural attitude to describe in more precise terms how an experience manifests. As this abstraction belongs to the process of analysis, we do not rely on the interviewees to suspend their natural attitude. Rather, detailed descriptions are the material from which this abstraction takes place, which means that the researcher is obliged to ask questions that assist the interviewee best to describe their experience in its immediate givenness. The subsequent analysis is a process of phenomenological reduction, in which the essential features of a phenomenon are described as clearly as possible.¹⁰ In performing the phenomenological reduction, we engage the *epoché*.

As Husserl describes it, in applying the *epoché*, we consider a certain thesis or common understanding of the world and we engage in the act of questioning this thesis: 'We set it as it were "out of action", we "disconnect it", "bracket it".'¹¹ It is a methodical act meant to enhance one's awareness of how phenomena present themselves to our consciousness. The principle of the *epoché* is engaged during both the interviews and the subsequent analysis. In the case of art experiences, the *epoché* entails an awareness of how the work of art fundamentally present itself to a subject, as free as possible from the subject's preconceptions, art historical awareness, or expectations towards the work.

We have analysed the empirical material following the methodical steps developed by Amedeo Giorgi.¹² His method derives from Husserl's phenomenology and consists in dividing the given descriptions into smaller experiential units, exhibiting specific subjective meanings. These units are then reduced to basic components in a process in which the central aspects of what is described are preserved and highlighted. Finally, the findings are structured as a coherent narrative in which the characteristics of experiences are elucidated.¹³ The process thus signifies the narrowing-down of a phenomenon and its characteristics, and the way to arrive at a detailed descriptive understanding of the meaning units that make up the totality of the experience in question. The reduced meaning units are structured in coherent narratives meant to present the general structure of a specific phenomenon under investigation.

9 Sebastian Luft, *Subjectivity and Lifeworld in Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 37–51.

10 See Giorgi, *Descriptive Phenomenological Method*.

11 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book; General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Fred Kersten (London: Routledge, 2012), § 31, 57.

12 Described in detail in Giorgi, *Descriptive Phenomenological Method*.

13 For a concrete example of the method, see James Morley, 'The Private Theatre: A Phenomenological Investigation of Daydreaming', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 29 (1998): 116–34. For examples of coherent narratives and a general structure, see Essom-Stenz and Roald, 'Imagination in Experiences of Visual Art'.

In this case, the general structure is a descriptive text meant to exhibit the invariant characteristics of imagination as it figures in experiences of visual art.

In the following, we draw descriptive examples from the interviews and show how imagination in experiences of visual art manifests in three phenomenologically distinct variations: sensory imaginings, imaginings of bodily presence, and imagined situations. Thus, we discuss the empirical results in a dialogue with theoretical insights. The imaginative variations are essential structural characteristics of imagination. Furthermore, they are the constituents of the imaginary worlds that we can enter and engage with as part of experiences of visual art.

III. SENSORY IMAGININGS

Sensory imaginings have the forms of sense modalities, such as visual images, auditory imaginings, and imagined tactility: we see, hear, and touch in our imagination. In Martin's experience of Asger Jorn's painting *In the Beginning Was the Image* (1965), he visually imagines the artist: 'I can see Asger Jorn standing there in the 1960s just smearing it [the paint] in.' Despite its brevity, we are given several descriptive details in this account. The imagining is a visual image of Asger Jorn behaving in a certain way; he expresses energetic creativity, which Martin grasps in the visual image. The fact that Martin imagines an actual person, and that the image is partly shaped by his knowledge of this person, such as the fact that Asger Jorn was working during the 1960s, means that the image has a representative function. With a concept developed by Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, we can call this an act of *recreative imagination*:¹⁴ shifting perspective and imaginarily putting oneself in another person's place.

Whether to speak of images as presentations or representations is not easily resolved. Leaning on Husserl,¹⁵ we describe the image as a presentation by which the image is experienced as an individuality: it presents itself as a coherent object, given as an original presentation, rather than solely having a mediating function between an imaginative realm and the perceptual world. Yet, in Martin's case, the imagined representation of the real artist is an important part of the significance that the experience of the painting has. Martin describes the immense inspiration the experience awakens, and this is partly due to the painting's creative origin: 'I get incredibly inspired and envious that a person can be so talented and create this [...] you get inspired to do exactly as you want to yourself.' Even though Martin's imaginings of the actual artist are important denominators of the personal meaning the experience engenders, the appearance of the image – the artist working feverishly – carries meaning in itself. It is an image with its own expression, and to adequately describe the phenomenology of such images we must regard them as presentations to consciousness rather than images whose meaning resides solely in their representative function, even though they also represent something perceptual.

Husserl is continuously concerned with this distinction between presentation and representation. In 1905 he wrote that 'the image [is] not actual, but re-presents the

14 Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 9.

15 Husserl, *Phantasy*, 359–60.

subject: the non-present subject'.¹⁶ This emphasis on the image subject, which is the real object that the image represents, is replaced in 1910 with an emphasis on the image world itself: 'We live exclusively in the image world and not at all in the actual world [...] it is a *presenting* consciousness, not a *re-presenting* consciousness.'¹⁷ In other words, imaginative experiences take place in imaginative worlds, which are phenomenologically distinct from the perceivable world. Seeing imaginings as representations of perceptions can lead to a conceptualization of images as objects residing in the mind like pictures in a drawer.¹⁸ The difference between these two conceptions is whether we regard imaginings as having phenomenological individuality or as serving an intermediary function between imagination and the world of perception.

Importantly, Husserl uses the term *Vergegenwärtigung*, which can be translated into representation, even when he writes about pure phantasy. However, these are not reproductions of perceptions but original presentations of non-existent objects. When Husserl still uses the notion of representation, we can see it as an example of his underlying assumption about the relation between imagination and perception. As Rudolf Bernet notes, in Husserl's view, imaginings are secondary representations of originary presence.¹⁹ Imaginings always relate to the perceptual world, according to Husserl, even if they do not have a strict perceptual correlate.

When analysing imagination as it takes part in experiences of visual art, the relationship between imagination and perception becomes even more intricate, as the imaginative elements are part of an experience, which also encompasses a perceptual object – namely, the work of art. The phenomenological individuality that characterizes Martin's imaginings of Asger Jorn does not mean that they are completely deprived of any relation to the perceptual world. Asger Jorn is a real person, and the visual imagining is thus an original presentation for Martin's consciousness, while at the same time representing the actual creative force behind the painting.

The ways that images carry meanings are perhaps more evident in cases where they do not represent actual persons or objects. This is the case for Julie. She describes an experience with a painting that hangs in the home of a relative, which depicts three women, one of them holding a dead boy. 'I see an explosion,' Julie says, 'something happening by the clay huts [...] suddenly, everything is dusty, people are shouting, and the child is found under these collapsed clay huts; with no wounds.' These visual, tactile, and auditory imaginings are not depicted in the actual painting but develop from her perception of it. They do not represent actual events but bring a certain sense to the experience of the painting in the way they present themselves as images of what has preceded the depiction. Julie's experience also illustrates how our imaginings can take the form of several sense modalities, all being part of the same imagined course of action or totality. The same is the case for Hannah, who describes an experience with Auguste Rodin's sculpture *The Kiss* (1882): 'I have a boyfriend in my heart [...] I talked to him while I saw the sculpture [...] in my thoughts.' She engages in an imagined conversation while visually imagining the person she speaks to: 'I see him, I see moments of our physical contact, I see a kiss.' Similarly, for Petra,

¹⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹⁷ Ibid., 359–60.

¹⁸ Ibid., 23.

¹⁹ Rudolf Bernet, 'Derrida-Husserl-Freud: The Trace of Transference', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 32 (1993): 148.

who describes an experience with the painting *The Lemon Grove in Bordighera* (1884) by Claude Monet, various sensory imaginings make up a distinct imagined world: 'I smelled citrus,' she says, 'I could feel the grass under my feet [...] I could hear the wind blowing through the leaves.' These olfactory, tactile, and auditory imaginings shape the way that Petra is bodily placed in the distinct world of the work of art. She describes it as 'surrounding me [...] exactly like you are in a forest.' Agnes describes the same way of bodily inhabiting an imagined world in her experience of the ceiling painting *Gefion Plowing Out Zeeland from Sweden* (1882) by Lorenz Frølich, depicting the goddess Gefion plowing with a span of oxen: 'If I feel anything, it is the dust and the smell of the animals and the thundering sensation in the floor.'

Our imaginings can thus present themselves in the form of several sensory modalities, each exhibiting experiential content that is part of meaningful imagined settings. These imaginings manifest as both image consciousness and pure imagination. The distinction between image consciousness and pure imagination reflects a difference in the intentional structure of the imaginary experience: pure imaginings are imaginary through and through, whereas image consciousness develops in and through the perception of the work of art. Our reason for using the term pure imagination instead of pure phantasy, as Husserl did, is grounded on these two structures of consciousness sharing the characteristic of being experiences of inactual content. As has been noted,²⁰ Husserl used the concept of phantasy to distance it from notions of imagination as a psychological ability or Kantian faculty, but we hold that this should not cloud the phenomenological similarities.

Agnes's and Petra's imaginings are structured as image consciousness, whereas Martin, Julie, and Hannah experience pure imagination. Husserl argues that image consciousness is an impressional act,²¹ which means that it depends on perceptual surroundings from which an image can appear. It signifies the way that we can see something in something else, such as when Agnes sees the goddess Gefion or when Petra sees a forest; in both cases, the images are contemplated in and through the paintings. Their imaginings develop in and through their perceptions of the paintings. In Husserlian terms, the images that Agnes and Petra contemplate are image objects. They arise based on the physical images – the paintings – and refer to the image subjects;²² in these cases, Gefion in Frølich's painting and the forest in Monet's painting. The image object 'lacks the characteristics of reality' and it stands out as imagined against the reality 'that is firmly established',²³ meaning the painting.

A Husserlian interpretation conceptualizes Agnes's and Petra's imaginings as impressional. However, there are different ways of understanding the experiential process of an impression. The question is epistemological: is the impression of image consciousness an act of grasping or reading a similarity in a painting, or is it characterized by an 'intimacy of objects to the subject', as Merleau-Ponty puts it,²⁴

20 Julia Jansen, 'Phantasy's Systematic Place in Husserl's Work: On the Condition of Possibility for a Phenomenology of Experience', in *Edmund Husserl: Critical Assessment of Leading Philosophers*, vol. 3, *The Nexus of Phenomena: Intentionality, Perception, and Temporality*, ed. Rudolf Bernet, Donn Welton, and Gina Zavota (London: Routledge, 2005), 221–44.

21 Husserl, *Phantasy*, 272.

22 *Ibid.*, 21.

23 *Ibid.*, 584.

24 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior*, trans. Alden L. Fisher (London: Methuen, 1965), 199.

with direct reference to the notion of impression? The former denotes an intellectualist account where the impression is grasped in a reflective judgement of a semblance between the painting's depiction and an actual object. Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects such an account, just as he rejects the use of the term impression. When we distinguish the details of a shape, as he points out, we do not rely on an 'impression of legibility'²⁵ but simply describe the shape presented to us. Rather than impressions as reflective cognitions, Merleau-Ponty speaks of a continuous relation between the bodily subject and their surroundings in which the subject and the surroundings enter a bodily relationship by which experience emerge. The way that both Agnes and Petra take the physical paintings as exhibiting certain image objects – the forest and the oxen – involves their entire bodily being at the same time as they are aware of the as-if character of the experience. They enter into proximity with the forest and the oxen, and the experiences are characterized by this bodily intimacy with the image objects. Paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, we might say that Agnes and Petra conceive of the work's expression through the bodily 'echo' it awakens.²⁶ The apprehension process is an embodied grasping of the painting's expression. Even if Husserl uses the concept of impression, he would agree with this emphasis on the union between object and meaning. As he writes in his lectures on phenomenological psychology, separating matter and sense, such as a painting and its meaning, 'is an abstractive distinguishing of layers [...]. In the concrete contemplation of a work of art [...] we experience not duality but unity.'²⁷

Where Petra's and Agnes's sensory imaginings have the form of image consciousness, Martin, Julie, and Hannah experience pure imagination. This means that their imaginings are not apprehensions of the perceived as fictive, meaning that it does not rest on a continuous perception of the work taken to represent something imaginary. Pure imaginings are imaginary through and through, without simultaneous aid from perception. Despite this, they do have a relation to the perceived work of art. When Martin visually imagines the artist, when Julie imagines the explosions, or when Hannah engages in an imaginary dialogue, they experience imaginings that develop along the lines of the work of art and deepen what is given in perception. There is a continuous relation between pure imaginings and works of art, but when we consider the specific phenomenology of pure imaginings they are not simultaneous with the perception of the work, as is the case with image consciousness.

Despite the structural differences between image consciousness and pure imagination, both convey experiential content ultimately characterized by inactuality. In the case of sensory imaginings, the essential characteristic is the presentation of inactual content in the form of particular senses. Sensory imaginings are part of placing the subject in an imaginary world, both when they are structured as image consciousness and when they are pure imagination. 'It felt as if this painting had invited me,' Petra says; 'it felt like the painting was coming outside [...] trying to embrace me [...] I could imagine myself inside the scenery.' Our sensory imaginings are part of this experience, but our ways of inhabiting aesthetic worlds depend on other imaginative variations as well, one being the imagining of bodily presence.

25 Ibid., 183.

26 Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', 125.

27 Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenological Psychology: Lectures, Summer Semester 1925*, trans. John Scanlon (Dordrecht: Springer, 1977), 85.

Imaginings of bodily presence are imaginings of being bodily situated in an imagined situation. They are not imaginings of specific sensory forms, but rather those of an encompassing embodiment: a general sense of being spatially and temporally present. This imaginary variation encompasses both bodily activity and passivity – specific movements as well as spectatorship – just as it can be both imaginings of one's own bodily presence and another imagined subject's bodily presence. When Martin describes how he imagines Asger Jorn, he says: 'He forgets that he is holding a brush, he doesn't think about painting with a brush, he just throws things. It doesn't matter. It becomes pure embodiment. And I feel it bodily myself.'

Martin imagines Asger Jorn's bodily, creative act. He imaginatively embodies Asger Jorn's movements. Imaginings of movements manifest palpably; imaginings of bodily acts, even other people's bodily acts, manifest in and through the imagining subject's own body. Where Martin imagines acting as an embodied other, Julie's imaginings of embodied presence have herself at the centre. She imagines being a participant in the painting's scene with the three women and the dead boy: 'I can see how it would be if it was me [...] it could be my face instead of the boy, or my mother or my father or cousins, whoever have been close to me.' Julie is an embodied spectator. She views the scene rather than acting in it as Martin does.

Despite embodiment being central to both imaginings of bodily presence and sensory imaginings, there are differences between these two types of imagining. Our analysis demonstrates how imaginings of bodily presence denote a form of embodiment often expressed through the term *Leib* – the lived body.²⁸ The lived body is the interrelation of the corporeal and the mental, which underlies our every experience. It is the ever-present datum from which we experience our surroundings as well as ourselves. Imaginings of bodily presence are imaginings of a general bodily self-awareness. By describing them as such, we do not mean to indicate a plurality of bodily self-awareness, such as a perceptual one distinct from an imaginary one, but rather an experience of being an embodied participant in an imaginary realm. We enter imaginary worlds and experience ourselves as bodily situated in our imaginary surroundings. In this way, imaginings of bodily presence are very fundamental ways of being bodily situated in imagined situations.

The engagement of Merleau-Ponty's work with the lived body also points towards an affective lining of our imaginary experiences of bodily presence. Throughout his works, Merleau-Ponty writes extensively on affectivity, sometimes using the word *enceinte* to express the interweaving of body and affectivity.²⁹ Meaning pregnancy or enclosure, objects as *enceinte* express how our embodied being always carries something behind its seeming external limits. Our bodily perspective hides aspects of our surroundings from view, and our surroundings thus imply possibilities of change, regarding both appearance and use. This way of engaging with our surroundings implies affective responses.³⁰ This is seen in Agnes's imaginings of the approaching oxen: 'There is

28 See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book; Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Springer, 1989), § 18.

29 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 263.

30 Merleau-Ponty discusses this way of bodily acquiring the world with all its possibilities of change and the affective states such acquisition brings with it in a number of places and in different ways, such as in *Phenomenology of Perception*, 132, 156–57.

this “flee, jump aside” when you stand under it [...] the fear lies in being crushed by these animals who want me no harm, but they are being pressured from behind by someone who wants them to do a very hard job.’ The possibility of being run over, the inclination to jump aside, and the fear that Agnes feels are mutually dependent. As William James notes, the numerous bodily changes occurring in every experience, making the body resemble a ‘sounding-board’, always co-exist with our various emotions,³¹ which means that bodily reactions and emotions cannot be separated phenomenologically. Julie’s experience of the sadness and sorrow expressed in the painting’s motif of the dead boy, and her imaginings of her own family taking the roles of the depicted women cannot meaningfully be distinguished from her imaginings of bodily presence. Martin’s sense of ‘childish energy’ emanating from the painting and the free-spirited work of Asger Jorn is also closely tied to how he imagines Asger Jorn’s embodied acts. This is not a question of causality between affectivity and imaginings but rather a general characteristic of our imaginings – namely, that they always have an affective lining. This characterizes both imaginings of bodily presence and sensory imaginings. Taking Agnes’s descriptions as an example, the visual, auditory, and tactile imaginings of the approaching oxen affect the fear and the lived bodily response. Even though we can distinguish phenomenologically between the imaginary variations of sensory imaginings and bodily presence, as they denote distinct forms and content of imagination, we see how both types of imagining are affectively laden.

As was the case with sensory imaginings, imaginings of bodily presence can manifest in both image consciousness and pure imagination. Agnes’s experience shows how our imaginings of bodily presence fluctuate between these two structures with ease:

You can see suffering [...] you can see that they are working hard and that they are being used for something that they’re good at, but at the same time, it is not enjoyable. So, I feel pity for them, and at the same time it is awe-inspiring [...] they are letting themselves be tamed by her [Gefion] because in principle they could turn around and rebel, kill her if that was what they wanted.

The first part of Agnes’s description relates both to the sensory imaginings that we considered earlier on and the variation of bodily presence that we have dealt with in this section: Agnes visually imagines the oxen as well as how it must feel to work as they do. These imagined properties develop in image consciousness as the painting depicts precisely this: the oxen plowing under the control of Gefion. From this, Agnes’s imagination structurally changes in the last part of the description, where she imagines how the oxen could easily kill the figure of Gefion if they wished to. These are imagined events that are not given in the depiction of the painting but develop as purely imaginative.

Imaginings of bodily presence concern bodily felt experiences. They figure closely together with sensory imaginings, not least because of their shared affectivity. The last imaginative variation that we will describe is affective as well, but it distinguishes itself from the two other variations by not being bodily in any clear way. Rather, it is an imagined sense of context.

31 William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1950), 450.

We define situational imagining as the sense of context belonging to an imaginary field. The term situational imaginings is chosen over other conceptualizations, such as imagined knowledge, owing to the embodiment of imagination. *Knowledge* can connote an intellectualist understanding of imaginings. This notion is found in Jean-Paul Sartre's account of the imaginary, criticized by Merleau-Ponty for not drawing the consequences of the primacy of the body in experience.³² Calling it situational imaginings, we wish to express the subject's awareness of imaginary context while maintaining the embodied situatedness that characterizes imagination in general. In Julie's experience, a multitude of images of what has preceded the scene with the women and the dead boy present themselves. Each contains information about the imagined situation: 'No one has killed [the boy],' she says. Rather, the context is one of 'war, but not as though someone has shot him. He has not been a target.' In other words, Julie imagines a series of events leading up to the scene of the painting, but not all of these events present themselves in the concrete manner of her sensory imaginings of explosions and collapsed huts, nor as her embodied sense of being situated in the boy's place, surrounded by her family members. Rather, Julie imagines the context of war in a general sense, but still as a sense of context that speaks to her embodied self as it takes part in the imaginary world. By this, we mean that the imagined situation seems to epitomize a particular meaning of the imaginary world in its totality, creating a background for meaningful embodied participation. This meaning depends on all the imaginary variations that make up the totality of the imaginary world. Julie's contextual awareness of war, serving as the context of the imaginary world she enters, gains more concrete form through her images of explosions, her sense of participation, and the fear and sorrow that are interweaved with these imaginings. The context presents itself to consciousness as an awareness of how specific images or specific acts that we imagine are meaningful, considering the situation in which they take place. In other words, when we imagine something visually or imagine being an embodied participant, we know something about the situation in which this image appears and in which we are participating.

As is always the case with the figure-ground constellation, the background and the figure depend on each other; in other words, the imagined situation relies on the two other imaginary variations in a dynamic relationship of mutual influence. They affect each other and change accordingly, which, in the case of situational imaginings, means that the idealized knowledge of the imagined context is expressed in and through the sensory imaginings and imaginings of bodily presence. We see an example of such mutual dependency between the variations in Petra's description of her initial encounter with Monet's painting: 'I was really focused on the first tree on the left because it is the only tree that actually looks a bit like a tree, and it entices you in a way. It goes, "Look, I am going to show you a forest. You have to look at me first, though, in order to see the forest."' Part of Petra's experience is the sense of entering a forest. The imagining of a forest develops from her perception of the painting, and apart from the various sensory images and sense of bodily presence, a particular context permeates the entirety of the imaginary world that she enters. Her feeling of 'calmness', occurring because 'that is the sensation I have in real life when

32 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary: A Phenomenal Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber (New York: Routledge, 2010); Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 245.

I'm in the woods', gradually turns into the feeling of 'anxiety', as she describes it: 'It's getting dark, we need to get out of here, we're going to get lost.' This is a description of what goes on in the situation: the awareness of potential dangers, such as getting lost, is present in the experience as an awareness of a specific situation. It exists in the background as knowledge of the particular context, just as we have a pre-reflective awareness of the context of our everyday lives, regardless of the activities we engage in. Such contextual awareness is part of our imaginary worlds in their entirety, and it develops dynamically in a mutual dependency between all three variations of imagination.

Based on how the interviewees describe their experiences, it appears that the knowledge of situational imaginings manifests not by a process of deduction but rather as an immediate givenness that we grasp as we enter our imaginary worlds. It can be a surprising and overwhelming feeling, as Louis describes concerning the exhibition *What's the Point of It?* (2014) by Martin Creed: 'It is as if I have entered another person's territory [...]. [W]hen I am in there, I have surrendered. I understand that it is not me who dictates this situation [...]. I feel that I have surrendered my control to Martin Creed; he is the one who decides what goes on in here, and I am almost there on his mercy.' The actual intentions of the artist are unknown to Louis, just as the setting of the exhibition is not a foreign territory controlled by the artist but an art gallery in London. Nonetheless, in Louis's experience, it is as if an imagined person intends something for him specifically, shaping his experience utilizing objects in the exhibition halls. Similar to Louis, Maria describes how an imagined situation emerges the moment she enters William Kentridge's installation *The Refusal of Time* (2012): 'I felt like entering a cinema world, and it was magical and very much like a different dimension in a way.' This made Maria 'feel like being in the cinema when I was a child'. The situation presents itself as an awareness of context and of ways of inhabiting the imaginary world. As is the case for Louis, Petra, and Julie, Maria's situational imagining is an imagined frame of reference containing dispositions for what kinds of concrete events could meaningfully occur in the situation.

We have seen how imagination presents itself in different variations and how these variations affect our experiences of works of visual art. The work of art invites imaginary participation, and this participation can be structured in these three variations. We enter imaginary worlds as embodied beings, and it is the embodiment of imagination that is especially decisive when we wish to understand how aesthetic experiences gain psychological significance.

VI. HORIZONS OF IMAGINATION

The embodied character of imagination means that imaginings contain horizons. We lean on the definition of horizons that Husserl offers in *Ideas I*: 'an empty mist of dim indeterminacy [...] that can never be completely outlined'.³³ As Husserl indicates here, the horizon of a phenomenon cannot be determined once and for all, simply because it varies. 'The horizon is a versatile and unsurpassable limit, which is always relative to subjectivity and which delimits each and every phenomenon,' as Saulius Genusas points out.³⁴ This means that the experience contains an *overtone*, a *halo*, or a *fringe*

33 Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology: First Book*, § 27, 52.

34 Saulius Genusas, *The Origins of the Horizons in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 2.

of hidden aspects – all words used by James³⁵ to describe what Husserl's notion of horizon later came to signify. Besides being a structural characteristic of imagination, the horizons are central to the meaning that our imaginings carry.

In his book *Imagining*, Edward Casey discusses the question of horizons as part of his in-depth descriptions of imagination. He argues that imagined objects present themselves without horizons.³⁶ Casey writes that the world-frame of our imagination is not a *field* in the same way as our perceptual field, which consists of multiple elements that function as a background for the perceived object and give it a specific spatial location. The imagined field is instead a transitory frame, he argues, in which imagined content is presented before being replaced altogether as we imagine something else. This means that our imaginings have no external horizons. There is no halo or indeterminacy in the imagined because it has no surroundings to indicate such indeterminacies. What we imagine is rather 'momentarily "localized"',³⁷ meaning inherently fluid and with no specific relation to other objects, such as a perceived house related to the neighbouring house or the garden belonging to it. Furthermore, our imaginings have no internal horizons: by being subject to complete alteration or dismissal at the expense of a new imagined object, no alternate mode of being is indicated in the imagined object itself. For Casey, imaginings present themselves with a distinct flatness and vagueness, and their edges are only 'a loose-fitting, but wholly non-descript, garment'.³⁸

The embodiment of imagination that we have shown challenges Casey's claim that imaginings lack horizons. Since the body is present as an epistemological outset for our imaginative experiences, one's own body becomes the reference through which imaginative objects appear in consciousness. In short, when encountering an object, the limits with which it appears are relative insofar as we can imaginatively move in different ways, thus changing its appearance. Imagined bodily movements are ever-present possibilities, as our empirical examples have demonstrated. Sensory imaginings can change their appearance if we imaginatively move or act in different ways, imaginings of bodily presence depend entirely on our bodily acts in imagination, and situational imaginings too express an imaginary context for our embodied being, making it subject to change if our imaginary situatedness changes. We agree that imaginary fields are different from perceptual fields, as Casey points out, for instance in the stability with which they present themselves, but we show that their horizons make them contain a certain depth. Such depth characterizes both the appearance of our imaginary surroundings and the meaningful habituality with which they appear. It has the phenomenological consequence that our imaginary surroundings do not necessarily present themselves as subjects of our will, even if we can forcefully change their appearance. We enter our imaginary worlds and relate to their imaginary surroundings in ways in which we are not the only agents but in the presence of imaginary entities with distinct individual characteristics. This also means that the imaginary field as a transitory frame is a modality of a horizon: the change of field or the move from one image to the next happens in and through the potential for change that the body carries with it.

35 James, *Principles of Psychology*, 281.

36 Casey, *Imagining*, 160, 164.

37 Ibid., 156.

38 Ibid., 53.

Imaginings manifest in consciousness with an ever-present variability indicated, and this inherent variability means that it is not only the appearance of an imagined object that can potentially change but necessarily its meaning as well. We have seen how meaning is always present, partly by the way that our experiences are always affectively laden. By this inherent meaningfulness, our imaginary surroundings present themselves with a particular habituality in the sense that changes in our imaginings will affect our imaginary worlds and the way we inhabit them. In other words, imaginary worlds are more than hollow appearances. They denote a distinct otherness and present themselves with coherency and self-reliance.

VII. THE OTHERNESS OF OUR IMAGININGS

In imagination, objects present themselves with individual qualities that affect our experience of them. We do not experience them as entirely under our forceful influence. Imaginative experiences are experiences of otherness, whether this otherness presents itself as persons or objects. This is the case even though our imaginings are inherently subjective and private. The interdependence between the imaginative variations point to the inherent processual character of our imaginings: they evolve and consist of different experiential elements, which gain a particular subjective meaning in and through the relations between them. This interdependence does not have a uniform structure that is always the same, such as a structure of specific patterns of association. It is a dynamic emergence of imaginary worlds, consisting of distinct imaginative variations.

One question arising is whether the variations can be experienced in isolation, meaning whether one variation can exist in the experience without the other variations. Casey touches upon this question,³⁹ arguing that phenomenologically distinct imaginary entities cannot co-exist; one variation will always present itself alone. Based on our analysis, we claim that even if the rapid fluctuations of our imaginings mean that imaginary objects manifest one at a time, we have to describe and conceptualize the coherency of our imaginary worlds if we are to understand the psychological significance and meaning that can arise from these experiences. In other words, whether or not two or three imaginary entities can manifest simultaneously in experience, it is only by describing their relations that we can grasp our ways of being present in imagination. The meaning with which each variation of our imagination presents itself can only be grasped adequately if the relations between variations are part of the phenomenological description and conceptualization.

The otherness of our imaginary worlds is of a different kind than the otherness we encounter in our perceptual surroundings. The radical changes in appearance, which is an ever-present possibility of our imaginings, mean that the otherness of our imaginary worlds is much less stable than the actual, perceivable world. Despite embodiment being a general characteristic of experience, such as when Agnes grasps the heavily moving oxen through her own embodied being, the way it unfolds in imagination is different than in perception. We see an example of this when Julie imaginatively observes herself in the scene of the painting. This does not mean, however, that we must understand embodiment in completely different

39 Ibid., 47.

terms when we speak of imaginings in contrast to perceptions, but rather that our imaginings denote a type of experience in which we see the virtuality of the lived body unfold.

By engaging in imaginary worlds, we dwell in the work of art. Whether it is the childish energy of a painting by Asger Jorn, the solemn and rather anxious atmosphere of Monet's lemon grove, the innocence of cinema in William Kentridge's installation, the sensation of intimacy in Rodin's sculpture, the overwhelming loss of control in Martin Creed's exhibition, or the grief of loss in a painted processing of war, imagination is decisive in deepening the expressive qualities of the work.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In experiences of visual art, imaginary variations can be at least threefold: sensory imaginings, imaginings of bodily presence, and situational imaginings. Sensory imaginings have the form of distinct sensory modalities, such as vision, tactility, and audibility, whereas imaginings of bodily presence signify imaginings of lived embodiment and of being bodily situated in a situation. Situational imaginings are idealized knowledge, forming imagined contexts. These variations stand in a relation of mutual dependency, forming unified imaginary worlds, and all share the structural characteristic of embodiment. This means that we inhabit our imaginary worlds as embodied beings, which gives rise to experiential horizons: inherent limits to the appearance of objects, which implies possibilities of variation of the imaginary world itself. The inherent possibilities of variation mean that our imaginary surroundings present themselves with a distinct presence and habituality – an expressive individuality. We experience being in the presence of distinct others, even if those others are imagined. As our empirical analysis has pointed to, these imaginary worlds are integral to experiences of visual works of art. The internal unfolding of the aesthetic that Proust points to by describing art as *cosa mentale* is largely an unfolding of imaginary worlds. As Husserl notes, art relies on us being taken out of empirical reality and lifted into the world of imagery. As we have shown, this is not only a matter of image consciousness – the act of imagining in and through a perceived object. It also manifests as an embodied engagement in a purely imaginary world, having distinct structures and developing as an imaginary exploration of an aesthetic expression.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our article benefitted from valuable comments from two anonymous referees as well as from *Estetika's* editorial team.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The work has generously been funded by the Carlsberg Foundation.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

- Bernet, Rudolf. 'Derrida-Husserl-Freud: The Trace of Transference.' *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 32 (1993): 141–58. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.1994.tb01738.x>
- Casey, Edward. *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Currie, Gregory, and Ian Ravenscroft. *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198238089.001.0001>
- Dufrenne, Mikel. *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. Translated by Edward S. Casey. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Essom-Stenz, Anders, and Tone Roald. 'Imagination in Experiences of Visual Art: An Investigation in Phenomenological Psychology.' *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 55 (2024): 62–88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691624-20241315>
- , 'Imagination in Perception and Art: Phenomenological Variations.' *Theory and Psychology* 33 (2023): 99–117. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543221135149>
- Geniusas, Saulius. *The Origins of the Horizons in Husserl's Phenomenology*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2012. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4644-2>
- , *Phenomenology of Productive Imagination: Embodiment, Language, and Subjectivity*. Stuttgart: ibidem, 2022.
- Giorgi, Amedeo. *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology: A Modified Husserlian Approach*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009.
- Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer. *The Life of Imagination: Revealing and Making the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Guest, Greg, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson. 'How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability.' *Field Methods* 18 (2006): 59–82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book; General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Translated by Fred Kersten. London: Routledge, 2012.
- , *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book; Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*. Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer. Dordrecht: Springer, 1989.
- , *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*. Translated by John B. Brough. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005.
- , *Phenomenological Psychology: Lectures, Summer Semester 1925*. Translated by John Scanlon. Dordrecht: Springer, 1977.
- James, William. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover, 1950.
- Jansen, Julia. 'Phantasy's Systematic Place in Husserl's Work: On the Condition of Possibility for a Phenomenology of Experience.' In *Edmund Husserl: Critical Assessment of Leading Philosophers*, vol. 3, *The Nexus of Phenomena: Intentionality, Perception, and Temporality*, edited by Rudolf Bernet, Donn Welton, and Gina Zavota, 221–44. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Luft, Sebastian. *Subjectivity and Lifeworld in Transcendental Phenomenology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv47wch6>
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 'Eye and Mind.' Translated by Carleton Gallery. In *The Primacy of Perception*, 121–49. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964.
- , *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge, 2012.

- . *The Structure of Behavior*. Translated by Alden L. Fisher. London: Methuen, 1965.
- . *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- Morley, James. 'The Private Theatre: A Phenomenological Investigation of Daydreaming.' *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 29 (1998): 116–34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916298X00049>
- Proust, Marcel. *Essais et articles*. Paris: Pléiade, 1971.
- Rucinska, Zuzanna, and Shaun Gallagher. 'Making Imagination Even More Embodied: Imagination, Constraint and Epistemic Relevance.' *Synthese* 199 (2021): 8143–70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-021-03156-x>
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Imaginary: A Phenomenal Psychology of the Imagination*. Translated by Jonathan Webber. New York: Routledge, 2010. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203857069>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Essom-Stenz, Anders,
and Tone Roald.
'Imaginative Variations: A
Phenomenological Analysis
of Imaginary Worlds in
Experiences of Visual Art.'
*Estetika: The European
Journal of Aesthetics*
LXII/XVIII, no. 1 (2025):
pp. 36–52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.565>

Submitted: 20 August 2024
Accepted: 27 January 2025
Published: 18 March 2025

COPYRIGHT:
© 2025 The Author(s).
This is an open-access
article distributed under
the terms of the Creative
Commons Attribution
4.0 International License
(CC-BY 4.0), which
permits unrestricted
use, distribution, and
reproduction in any
medium, provided the
original author and source
are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

*Estetika: The European
Journal of Aesthetics* is
a peer-reviewed open
access journal published by
Helsinki University Press in
cooperation with the Faculty
of Arts, Charles University in
Prague.