

FULLY ON CYRUS

LAB 3



DOING STS

PERCEPTUAL FERMENT

"Vinegar mother is both catalyst and remains. Leaving a cloudiness in her wake, she is a reminder of the dephasing from sugar water to vinegar, and of the fact that what is produced is always less a substance in itself than a relational milieu."

Doing STS hosts a lecture and Q+A with Erin Manning, followed by a hands-on DIY vinegar fermentation workshop. Tools and materials provided.

Free public event
1-4pm, June 18th, 2023
Unit 17, 2414 Main Street
Text (604) 942-4412
For entry

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OTHERWISE
TASTES



Perceptual Ferment

ERIN MANNING

In the chemical breakdown of sugars by microorganisms, the ferment produces a transduction from sugar water to alcohol to vinegar. Effervescence is the perceptible effect of this process, heat and bubbling marking the initial dephasing from mango seed, sugar, water and yeast to fermented proto-alcoholic mixture, this irreducible interval—neither quite alcohol nor yet vinegar, carrying the echo of the sugar-water it once was as it is simultaneously transformed into the acidic milieu it will eventually become. As the new milieu phases into existence, a voyager tends to emerge: the mother, a symbiotic colony of yeast that ferments the sugar and acetobacter that will convert the mixture to vinegar. The mother—cellulose and acetic acid bacteria (*mycoderma aceti*)—feeds on the sugar in the mixture, thereby hastening the process of acetic transformation. This film, spongy yet firm to the touch, is one trace of a complex process of relation with oxygen as a key participant. Cut off the oxygen and the process stills, coming closer to the final form it will seem to have taken.

Mother is both catalyst and remains. Leaving a cloudiness in her wake, she is a reminder of the dephasing from sugar water to vinegar, and of the fact that what is produced is always less a substance in itself than a relational milieu. In an ethos

of a poetics of relation, the mother is the irreducible share of a process still underway. She is the trace the process produces and leaves behind. She can be excised from it, but the ensuing milieu will always carry the effects of her having been constituted by it. And when she is fed into new sugar solutions—new vinegars will be seeded by her metabolizing presence—she will continue to produce more of herself, which is to say, more potential for transduction, the activity of transformation whereby mixtures individuate, subsequently producing dephasings that activate new processes. And though products will emerge—vinegars with singular tastes, textures and perfumes—these (like all products) will never be able to be returned to the sum of their parts, will never be reducible to the sugar water they once were. They will always carry the effervescence that fostered their transduction.

Perceptual ferment is the expression of the exuberance of a process dephasing. To connect to the milieu of its individuation, abduction is necessary. Abduction, a concept proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, necessitates what he calls “perceptual judgment”. Brian Massumi calls “perceptual judgment” “perceptual feeling.” A perceptual feeling, Massumi proposes, is a feeling “without the actual perception” (2011: 106). “They are judgments without the actual judgment: direct perceptions of the world’s acquired complexity, incoming, flush with the bare-active firstness of experience feeling its way into a next event” (Massumi 2011: 11).

Abduction is not inference—“a conclusion reached on the basis of evidence and reasoning” (OED). Active in the environment of what William James calls “pure experience,” perceptual judgment does its work in the immanent field of an activity’s coming to expression (James 1906). This “bare active firstness

of experience” into which abduction does its work is the welter in which all that is coming to expression has not yet parsed itself into category (Massumi 2011: 11).

Alfred North Whitehead has a vocabulary for the expressive force of the milieu in the parsing of the singularity of an actual occasion from the welter. He calls this causal efficacy. Brian Massumi and I have called it “entrainment” in an effort to amplify the relational force of its in-gathering gesture (2014). Across the entrainment, alongside and within it—inseparable, irreducible—is the activity of the field of sensation, or what Whitehead calls “presentational immediacy” (1927). Massumi and I have thought of this as “entertainment,” which is to say, “how the field entertains itself” (2014).

The terms causal efficacy and presentational immediacy are at the basis of Whitehead’s theory of perception, a theory that seeks to distance itself from any account of perception that depends on a traditional subject-object distinction and reifies what he calls the “misplaced concreteness” of “simple location” (1967). Perception is always abductive in Whitehead, composed in the lively interstices of a speculative pragmatism that is committed to the how of an activity in the pragmatism of its expression as occasion of experience *as well as* to the speculative quality of excess or more-than it carries.

What distinguishes Whitehead’s account of perception from most is that he doesn’t begin with a subject sensing. That is to say, he refuses an account of perception that would produce the perceptual vista through the reduction of experience to sense data, perception mediated. In this refusal, he is clear that an account that situates perception as a “mediation of our bodily sense-organs, such as eyes, palates, noses, ears, and the diffused bodily organization furnishing touches,

aches, and other bodily sensations by bodily sense-organs” reinforces the mistaken presupposition that “all percepts are bare sensa, in patterned connections, given in the immediate present [and] that our experience of a social world is an interpretative reaction wholly derivative from this perception” (1967: 177-178).

Instead of beginning with the sensory (as sense-presentation), Whitehead begins in the associated milieu of relation. Worlds are activated not through the channels of sense data mediated by impressions received by a subject, but through a directly relational agencement of a field tending toward an angle of activity. This is causal efficacy: the coming into itself, for itself, of a relational field. This relational field, in its very coming to be, is imbued with qualities that tend both toward its past inheritances in the minute intervals of the present-passing, and toward potential futurities. Imbricated in this spread of intensities coming into the relational feel of this singular entrainment is the thisness of its colour, its tone, its texture. This is presentational immediacy, or entertainment. By itself, if it could be separated out, presentational immediacy has no purchase on existence—it is “vivid, precise and barren” (1927: 23). It only entertains the occasion when it is entrained by it. The feel of the world does not precede the making of its relational milieu—they are made by each other, in the double articulation Whitehead calls symbolic reference.

Perception’s ferment is the agitation at the cusp where entrainment and entertainment come together. As the feel of what has not yet fully phased into form, it is the carrier of the differential that foments in the irreducibility of existence to itself. Here, where perception has not locked itself into inference, where presupposition is allayed, even if for the briefest

interval, the lively more-than of worlds coming into themselves can be felt. The “stimmigkeit of attended presences,” to borrow the vocabulary of Nikolaus Gansterer and Alex Arteaga, is at work here.

DeafBlind poet and essayist John Lee Clark has defined distantism as the operation through which the distant senses—vision and hearing—propel and police a “standing apart” that becomes inseparable from the normopathic and ableist value systems that hold up existence.¹

Distantism is built into inference: all inference presupposes not only a standing apart (between subject and object, or symbol and meaning) but also a “common” ground of reference that is considered to be a given for all experience. In the context of DeafBlind life, this means that there will always be a presupposition that the modes of conduct and perception used by hearing-seeing people are the ideal baseline for all: walk in the middle of the sidewalk even if that means you have no bearings (don’t crawl!); presuppose that what visually expresses itself in the surrounds is necessary to connect to them (feign interest in all that centers vision!); reduce or refuse touch that in any way challenges the normative standard of tact (stop reaching-toward!); learn to communicate in a language that by necessity excludes you (make sense of signs that chiefly operate in visual space!), and know the world only through the mediation of an intervention (hire an intervenor!). If this were “just” a practice, that would be bad enough. But this is the model of perception that is taken as the baseline of existence.

1. https://wordgathering.syr.edu/past_issues/issue43/essays/clark.html.

Whitehead's symbolic reference refuses this common ground and the presuppositions it normalizes, concerned instead with the emergent quality of a perception activated in the associated milieu of feeling where feeling is never reducible to a preexisting subject but is, rather, the lure that motors expressibility. Imbricated in the double articulation of an overlap unparseable, symbolic reference does not refer *to something*. It abducts a something-doing that perceives (or prehends) the world into act.

In its abductive logic, this prehensive force is never reducible to its-self. The qualities that populate it and the conduit that motivates it are inseparable and unparseable. Against distancism, perception is motored into activity by a double articulation that is born of the event's own agencement. There is no intervenor here.

At the cusp of entrainment and entertainment, in the interval of how a world fields and is fielded, in the activity of perceptual judgment, an impasse presents itself. How to consider notation even when understood as the conduit (and not the enforcer) of a certain account of what agitates experience without adding to it the intervention of a mediator? How to remain in the abductive potential of what transversally agitates at the interstices of the thinking-feeling of what happens of perceptual judgment? How to not reduce the lively atmosphere of experience as yet unformed to a form-taking that fosters a normopathic standing-apart?

Notation, Gansterer and Arteaga propose, "cannot be performed as an operation of 'apprehension,' 'grasping,' or 'capturing' because these operations can only be realized with phenomena that are clearly objectified presences." In its becoming-verb, notation notates "a contact with a non-objec-

tified presence” [implying] “the establishment of the necessary variety of contact that allows for producing organized signs in sensed coherence with the notation’s correlate.” The force of the lure for feeling is apparent here in the curiosity of what extends and escapes: notation becomes the contact zone for what is not quite capturable even as it refers back in “some organized form” to what it left behind. The aim: to “provide access,” to “allow for contact” in a “gesture of mediation, not representation.”²

In “Against Access,” Clark recognizes the role access plays in disability politics and the ways in which the fight for accessibility facilitates many of his everyday activities from crossing the street to typing an essay. And yet he warns: “the way those things are lobbied for, funded, designed, implemented, and used revolves around the assumption that there’s only one world and ignores realms of possibility nestled within those same modes.” In the presumption of the normopathic reduction of existence to the able body, which is always also to say, whiteness, the nestled differential is quickly written over by all that is deemed of value, and it is there that access tends to be situated. “The question I am asked most frequently by hearing and sighted people is ‘How can I make my [website, gallery exhibit, film, performance, concert, whatever] accessible to you.’” “The arrogance is astounding. Why is it always about them?”³

Access is a second-order operation that requires the sedimentation of the perceptual field into a normative framework for its translation into another realm. While generative in some circumstances, this is not a process of dephasing. There is no

2. <https://contingentagencies.net/conceptual-framework/>.

3. https://audio.mcsweeneys.net/transcripts/against_access.html.

transduction here. Nothing is shifted from the primary site of legibility in its translation for access in the context of disability politics. The aim is one to one without remains: this is that.

This strategy of displacing the perceptual field from one register to another presupposes an external agent mediating. In the DeafBlind community, there has been ample time to recognize the danger of this mediating presence which has as its endpoint to make DeafBlind life (deficiently) seeing and hearing by proxy.

The question is: what else can access be in the fielding of the world's immanent expressibility? Inference will happen. But it need not be valued as the model through which the world comes to expression. Or, put differently, an attunement to the normopathy of inference can amplify the affective contours of all that was missed, inferentially.

Perceptual feeling scintillates with intuition. Intuition here refers to the activity of fielding through which the thinking-feeling tunes toward a tendency.

Intuition does not have an object. It has a fielding. It comes with a field potential that is movingly thoughtfelt before its elements are consciously registered as the objects of a fully formed perception, and is immanent to what occurs as a function of that field. The immanence of this thinking-feeling can be parsed out, retrospectively, into different aspects or elements. But each of them can only figure because the others are there for it to figure with. They are mutually included in the energizing of the event, as cooperating factors in its playing-out" (Massumi 2015: 45).

Intuition moves into the world's immanent expressibility without mediation. It does so amodally, abductively. Beyond any conscious reasoning, before inference, in the milieu where

sensation is emergently relational, intuition fields the resonant forces of the event's tendings. There is no distantism here, no standing apart looking in from outside: intuition is not motivated by a subject, moving instead always from the milieu out, *immediating*. In the perceptual feel of abductive reasoning, "the parts coming together have already made themselves felt without requiring reflective mediation; the *intensity* of the event is immediately and equally thought and felt—not through a practice of deliberation, understanding, reason, or analysis, but through a 'conceptually rigorous intuition'" (Massumi 2016, 125).

Intuition—which can extend to the activities that prolong it—is not what we bring to a process, it is how a process brings us with it. It is the activity of co-composition that propels us into our difference in the modality of the event's own expressibility.

Mediation requires the between-two of a perceiver and a perceived, their interactivity mobilized by a principle of access that binds the two together. This produces what Alfred North Whitehead calls a "knower-known" relation—activity on one side, receptivity on the other.

Perceptual ferment takes another approach, refusing mediation as the anchor of its logical differentiation. That is to say, perceptual ferment begins and remains in the associated milieu of the dephasing, producing a "symbolic reference" based not on a mediating externality but on the immediating quality of the transductive force as carried by what comes to be felt (Whitehead 1927).

Intuition's amodality, its untetheredness to a preexisting body schema, culls from the event its lived abstraction, its perceptual feeling. Agitated into act intuitively, perceptual feeling is that echo of the cusp itself that leaks into all it might come to refer to.

Symbolic reference carries the errant tendency of perception. In the cusping of the speculative and the pragmatic, where the pragmatic is tuned to the little absolute of what has come to pass and the speculative carries the force of the more-than, the pragmatic itself cannot err. What can err is the excess the event carries in the transduction. Symbolic reference includes this excess, reverberates with it. Born of excess in the more-than of all that still agitates in the coming to form, symbolic reference is immediating to the degree that it manifests a time-signature that spreads across registers of time unmoored. Symbolic reference is never a point on a line. And as such, there can no mediation of the field it produces. There is no mediating force that can single out one tendency from another in perceptual judgment. In the "thinking-feeling of what happens" meaning is not stable, or static. Perception is never reducible to the limited form inference registers (Massumi 2011).

The spread that immediates through the perceptual field in perceptual feeling is alive with nonsensuous perception. Nonsensuous perception, the direct perception of relation in the event, allays the tendency to make perception an activity reducible to human sensation that requires reflective consciousness. For Whitehead—as for Peirce—perceptual feeling is not conscious. It is a worlding that composes us at interstices alive with inheritances and potentialities, imbued with the affective tonality of all that is already moving through it and all that speculatively exceeds it, in advance of any capac-

ity for reflection on it. In the secondary process of returning to the event consciously to situate it in the realm of lived experience, there will always be a temptation to excise that speculative share that, though not actualized in the event, makes a difference in the cast it leaves behind. Whitehead calls this its “concern” for the event at hand.

The concern for all that is welling carries with it a certain attunement to its antecedents. Yellowness has a certain carrying-over, perhaps, of a spring afternoon, or, under other conditions, of a lemon-ginger vinegar. The spring afternoon and the vinegar have no relationship to one-another. But yellowness carries them both, in the concern for a certain quality of excess that inhabits it. In the relation, yellowness is imbued, in the future-presenting, with the amodality of an immediating relation. The fusing of sense-perception with nonsensuous perception pulls the relational field into symbolic reference with a concern for yellowness and its acidic aftertaste. There is no distantism here—perception cannot be transferred, only transduced into vinegary spring feelings. Entrainment is entertained with the thickness of all that relationally moved through it in the activity of being fielded in the event’s concern for its unfolding. This is the ethos of process philosophy: what is made, what comes to experience, what is transduced into new processes, carries with it the concern for a relation, a relation irreducible, unparseable. This, its poetics of relation, is its unwavering commitment to a modality of difference that cannot be summed up by the forms things take.

Symbolic reference—the vinegary feel of spring or the spring-like yellowing of perception’s ferment—cannot be reduced to inference. Inference has no relational complex, no unmoored (time)line, no spread, no concern for the differential that swerves experience into its “consent not to be a single being”

(Glissant). It is too bare a response to the complexity that has made itself felt in the activity of co-composition. Always more-than, symbolic reference's fallibility is its motor: symbolic reference is not a fact, it is a propositional field. In the errancy of its worldings, there is no preexisting primacy of meaning or symbol: "The nature of [the relationship between symbol and meaning] does not in itself determine which is symbol and meaning. There are no components of experience which are only symbols or only meanings" (1927: 10). Symbolic reference is made in the relational web of a milieu's own emergent expressibility.

What is perceived is never simply "a thing." What is perceived is the field of relation imbued with a tendency, an orientation, and angling. Perceptual judgment catches the tendency through an intuitive attunement to its affective tonality. A feel stands out, but not apart. This feel is not "ours." We are made in the feel, we are not masters of it. In the feel, it is the quality of perception's expressibility that is amplified. In force taking form, form carries the feel of its excess.

The feel is alive with perceptual ferment. Condiment, preservative, beverage, both culinary and medicinal, the slow-ferment of the age-old practice of making vinegar takes at least 75 days to metabolize the sugar and produce a high enough acid content to be considered acetic. But it is not a hard science. Mostly you go by taste. And in the tasting, there will necessarily be variation, imbued as the process of transduction is with the question of how to ascertain an absence. How to taste sugar's disappearance? How to feel what has dephased into its difference from itself? How to recognize the turn the mixture has taken as complete?

Transduction cannot be measured. There is no absolute point where one thing is itself and another thing becomes another. There is only ever the dephasing. And the mother. As expression of the dephasing it could be said that vinegar is the notational remains of the process of tending to water, mango seed, yeast and then to mother over a period of three months. And that the mother is the form the excess takes, the document of its dephasing. But the vinegar isn't reducible to its parts—it is an expression all its own, a “*stimmigkeit* with the attended presences” certainly, but only if the *Stimmung* has concern for the differential inflection activated in the transduction. The acidic mood of the event simply cannot be captured, let alone traced back. And the mother really is her own event, tending as she does toward new inflections on a vinegary spring day.

The question of notation returns here. Is the act of vinegaring, of verbing the atmosphere of transduction, still notation? Or has the vinegaring, in all its symbolic reference, propelled notation into another milieu? And if it has done so, if what is being recorded is not the aftermath of an encounter but the encounter itself with the force of resonance through which tonalities of experience reverberate—atmospheres differentially co-composing—what vocabulary do we have for catching in the act a perception without perception that fields us into a worlding?

Anarchiving is the term SenseLab has used to discuss the immediating force of what moves a process into its difference-from-itself such that it can seed new processes (Manning 2020). Transductive to the core, anarchiving is the curiosity for how what has been left behind, as a trace, is potentially taken up elsewhere (2016). Verb-like, always on its way, in the midst, anarchiving generates an adjacency in the

relational field that motivates a redirection by other means of the more-than that propelled the event into activity. It does so in the recognition that process takes form, and that this form matters even as the process cannot be reduced to it, or be determinately defined by it.

Symbolic reference does not emerge out of a vacuum. How things come to shape each other matters. Modes of valuation are everywhere present in the emergent couplings of perceptual judgments. But these are not valuations that enter into the process from the outside-in. They are immanent evaluations, sorting through the differential complexity to attune to tendencies in germ. “The components of experience are not a structureless collection indiscriminately brought together. Each component by its very nature stands in a certain potential scheme of relationships to the other components. It is the transformation of this potentiality into real unity which constitutes that actual concrete fact which is an act of experience” (Whitehead 1927: 86). In the transduction of symbolic reference, the anarchic share of that potential remains as inhibition, intensification, affect (Whitehead 1927: 86). To draw, to sound, to move into the wake of an atmosphere is to compose with these potentials not toward a standing apart, an access-to, but toward an adjacency, an approximation of proximity that propels the event into the cusp of its anarchival potential. In the overlap of a milieu without distances, we draw, we sound, we dance ourselves into act in the metatactility of a foment that never directs us back to where we came from because it is here that we are made, in the perceptual ferment.

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