



Paul Uhlmann: *becoming imperceptible* (thinking the world anew)!

ZSUZSANNA SOBOSLAY

1. To commune (k-myn) intr.v: To .be in a state of intimate, heightened sensitivity and receptivity.

2. 'community' Fr. OF communauté Fr. L. *communitas* (cum, 'with/together' + munus, 'gift'), a broad term for fellowship or organised society. 3) a group organised around common values and attributes with a social cohesion within a shared location.¹

Cells commune. It is how they grow. From a given cluster of DNA, cells diverge in their function, switched on by chemical gradients and other interactions with their environment. This is so whether we talk of the zygote becoming an embryo, or dormant bacteria triggered awake in a changed environment.²

The philosopher Charles Birch (to whom the artist Paul Uhlmann often refers) makes a case that all of life – each part and parcel of it – is geared towards extending into relationship (which he likes to call *zest*). For Birch, there is no difference in the nature and hence *intrinsic value* of things.³ Thus Birch identifies *process*, and the sentience which embodies this, as our common ground.

Painting as a verb

The studio as a site of constant change/activity/movement/flow.

How can I find parallels within my creative efforts to the world that unfolds around me?⁴

Uhlmann's 'becoming imperceptible' refers to a condition he approaches in the studio. This type of experience only seems to occur when I am in the right state of mind – when I am "Attentive". At these moments we forget ourselves, boundaries and borders seem to collapse and we become part of the greater world.⁵

As with Birch, Uhlmann's *becoming imperceptible* does not index an act of dissolution; rather, it points to moving towards a greater distinctive *presence* to, and richness of felt experience in, the world. It is an experience I share in viewing his work.

In his earlier Fremantle show (2009), Uhlmann presented a series of birds and skies. Different-sized canvasses (some very small; others very large) were placed at irregular intervals and heights along or against the gallery walls. The space becomes something like an admixture of gallery and forest clearing; one navigates its shifts in a series of adjustments and inversions, such as one might make in a bushwalk through a novel landscape. There is a tree branch leant against one wall; the clarity of its shadow intrigues, and heightens our awareness of where we place *value* in the face of works of 'art'.

Uhlmann had earlier shown me one of these works whilst in-progress. A bird in flight is painted in delicate detail, a white halo holding its moment in the frame. The surrounding space is painted in with a mix of spectrum red with a little bright cadmium yellow. This is the underpainting, due to be overpainted with blues.⁶

Seeing the finished work, I am held as if suspended in time and space. With its almost quilted patching (who else has patched a topography of sky like this?), it is as if I can travel in air, as the bird does, through different volumes and densities. Although barely visible, the underpainting surges and transforms the surface of the canvas, pushing and pulling my experience.⁷

One is acutely aware of the artefact holding something beyond the material frame – just as becoming bird, listening to air, also *relies* on remaining connected to the material means of sensing these distinct things. Remaining and becoming, I hover in a kind of synaesthetic communion between eye-body (including memory, recognition, emotion), paint and space.

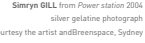


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It is this zeugma – the perceived opposition of similitudes and the concrete world – that constitutes an incredibly dynamic and intensely creative force. It is a different navigation of experience than in Uhlmann's earlier works, which perhaps unwittingly represent resistance to this experience.

In his *Das Meer* (1986), part of a suite of etchings, a man's cheek lies against, or upon, the surface of a turbulent ocean. The swirling water line and phallus of rock against, or towards which, the face inclines, depict forces of antagonism. The mouth is an ambiguous opening. Just as the face does not *rest* in water, the orifice itself does not seem to *like* air. Does this entity even doubt that it can breathe? This is like a turbulent version of Brancusi's delicate *Sleeping Muse* (1910). Brancusi, of course, also proceeded to fashion *Bird in flight* (1924), transcending the weighty bronze from which this sculpture is made.

To my mind, Uhlmann's work has passed through a transformative process since the '80s: from needing to represent the boundaries and angst of difference, to a place which engages in an interplay of self and other, microscope and panorama, seer and seen. In 2009 he expressed this by constructing a plywood 'chapel' in the garden of the Fremantle Arts Centre. The chapel roof has a circular opening which acts as a lens onto an upper world of dappled light through trees. Painted outlandish pink, this chapel is like the dome of a small basilica, a sacred space for transforming vision. Uhlmann made several paintings and photographs from his observations herein, some derived from the negative space – *what is not there* – between leaves. Like the visions afforded via the 18th century *camera obscura*, these works capture a complex and layered awareness of objects, space and time.

Invisible breath

Yogic and Buddhist practices consistently hold the contradiction of emptiness and substance, oneness and division as contiguous within our bodily experience. In Tibetan Buddhism, for example, 'nothingness' is not a contradiction of physical experience; rather it is an understanding that any concrete 'thing' is subject to constant change.

Breath itself is an enigma: the invisible meeting the visible, transforming the inner world and the very functioning of matter within.⁸ In most oral traditions, language itself enacts this dichotomy: in producing the consonants between vowels, lips and tongue give anchor to the very medium from which it is believed the world was made.⁹ Speech gives presence to the *becoming* – the endlessly re-creative and re-combinative power of air.¹⁰ David Abram argues that the way we consciously relate (or don't relate) to air is a sure index of how we relate to or dissociate from nature, and of how responsive or destructive we are to its multitude of less- or in-visible elements.

The *validity* of the imperceptible is given wry credence in Uhlmann's bird boxes: small, internally-decorated 'galleries' hung high in trees. No human gets to see into them; they are his gifts and his communion (*cum-munus*) to the birds and trees.

Uhlmann's 2010 exhibition at the Goethe Institut was hung in the stairwell and conference room, flanked or almost obscured by projector screens and behind coffee tables laden with sandwiches and sticky cakes.¹¹ The works were in an odd space which struck up an interesting dialogue. In Western culture, we have a multitude of *things* with which we have no dialogue – as if they are objects or entities not subject to the same laws of experience as everything else. Even to a Panexperientialist such as Birch, attributing consciousness or sentience to rocks, computers, or table legs is going too far.¹² But we should note that several indigenous peoples do *not* consider such things as less worthy of aesthetic, cultural, or enspirited dialogue – as for Aboriginal Australians, for whom landforms *are* the ancestors. In such a context, one of Uhlmann's central questions, *where does my body begin and where does it end?*, is particularly apt.

Where does my perception, and sense of affect, begin and end? Where too my *listening*? If I mark my border *here*, or *here*, what relationships am I perhaps missing?

In *becoming imperceptible*, the interplay between self and not-self, the boundaries of meaning and conferring of *value*, is given special place. Uhlmann is not the first artist to question this, but the timing of his questions and thinking is important. Clearly, he is an artist who has allowed himself to transform and move beyond self-referential concerns ... in order to give space to the birds. ■

1. Definition 1: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/commune>;
Definition 2: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community>

2. Charles Birch, *Biology and the Riddle of Life*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1999, esp. pp. 91-108.

3. Although there are indeed differences in patterns of ordering, complexity, and degrees of *choice* regarding our actions. For further on this, see footnote 11 below.

4. These and other statements by Uhlmann come from an artist's talk, titled *where does my body begin and where does it end?*, first presented at Edith Cowan University in 2009.

5. Conversation with the artist, April 2010.

6. 'I find that when I mix colours such as this that it enlivens the room.' Ibid.

7. 'When colours are layered over this underpainting it is as if this colour is always striving to emerge.' Ibid.

8. The Navajo believe in various categories of wind, some intrinsic, others extrinsic: for example, that which wraps itself around the world; that which is present at an individual's birth; those which stir within a landscape – each of which communicate with or even give directives to an individual or

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tribe (see J. K. McNeley, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1997).

9. See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Vintage Books, New York, 1997, for careful comparisons between how different traditions (eg., the Navajo, Pintubi, and ancient Hebrew) explain the emergence of matter from the word/breath/wind.

10. Abram (1997) points out that the earliest Hebrew texts lacked vowels, thus leaving texts subject to continual re-creation, and to a wide variation of pronunciation and meaning.

11. The conference, hosted by the Institut's DAAD exchange program, and for which Uhlmann's work was specifically installed, was titled *Tackling the Future: Environmental Challenges and their Impact on Academic Cooperation, Economy and Culture*.

12. He attributes to these things a kind of third-order sentence. See Birch, *Why I am a Panexperientialist*: <http://panendeism.web.officelive.com/Panexperientialism.aspx>

Paul Uhlmann's *becoming imperceptible* was exhibited at the Goethe Institut, Sydney, March 2010. His exhibition *to hear the language of birds* was exhibited at Fremantle Arts Centre, 26 September to 22 November 2009. <http://pauluhlmann.wordpress.com/>

Zsuzsi Soboslay is a writer, performer, and illustrator who currently lives in Canberra. She has a special interest in shamanic traditions.



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