THE IMPROVISATIONS OF EDVARD MUNCH

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Rolf Stenersen’s biography of Edvard Munch draws the reader’s attention to the fact that the artist’s pictures are full of peculiarities. Strange markings and peculiar lines that seem to have little to do with the configuration of the paintings are visible, especially towards the outer edges. Asked a direct question about why he allowed these accidental brush strokes to assume an independent status, Munch answered: “I felt I had to put something in there.”¹ This points to an intuitive or automatic working method, and the accidental spots and lines may be interpreted as unconscious or unconsidered elements in Munch’s work. In addition, it is a well-documented fact that Munch was preoccupied with the idea of his work appearing authentic. The viewer is made aware of the physical aspects of the painting process. Each painting consists of a plane, covered with a loose network of brush strokes, and these unfettered notations are result of the movement of his body before the easel whilst he worked. The brush strokes are applied with varying degrees of pressure, and are partly disengaged from their purely descriptive function. The plane and the spatial depth fluctuate according to the viewer’s perception of the painting. The pictures reflect the artist’s body language as well as his state of mind.

Several of Munch’s paintings also bear visible traces of the way in which he allowed paint to run or drip, and how he deliberately allowed the brushstrokes to assume their own expressive value. In some cases he did not cover the entire canvas with colour. Some of his paintings are clearly a result of accidental and unforeseen processes, and consequently these paintings – or parts of them – are defined as aleatory (or chance-directed). On the whole, researchers tend to agree about the general idea that Munch painted intuitively. On the other hand, it would be foolish to disregard the notion that this accidental aspect of his work was a deliberate and preconceived strategy.

Munch tended to abandon his paintings before they had acquired the attributes conventionally associated with finished work. One of the central art-historical themes regarding the understanding of Munch’s work is a phenomenon that I, along with several others, call «the incomplete».² Traditionally the Italian term non finito is used to describe an artwork that for one reason or another has been left before it is finished, or fully developed. At the beginning of the 1880s Munch’s, younger brother, Andreas, wrote in his diary that «It is difficult to get a finished painting out of him [Edvard]».³ Munch’s brother was first in a long line of commentators who commented upon, or objected to Munch’s inability or unwillingness to distinguish between the artistic process and the finished work. It is exactly this – the criteria we use to judge whether or not a painting has attained the status of an autonomous artwork – that the following text will explore.

Abstract
Many of Edvard Munch’s pictures were regarded by his contemporaries as being unfinished. However, even today it is not possible to overlook his formal weaknesses or contextual ambiguities. In this essay Erik Mørstad presents five explanations relating to the lack of correspondence between form and content in Munch’s paintings. The author argues in favour of the fact that Munch experimented with coincidences in much the same way as August Strindberg did. The article leads to the following question: which criteria need to be fulfilled in order for a painting to achieve the status of an autonomous work of art?

Keywords
anomie
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Bourdieu
«seeing-as»
«seeing-in»
Simmel
Strindberg
Wollheim
Empiricism: primary reception

Several art historians have discussed the dichotomy between formula and improvisation in connection with Munch’s paintings. Carl Nordenfalk’s article «A propos Munch-utställningen» (A propos the Munch Exhibition), from 1947, identified the way in which Munch situated the figures that appear in his pictorial spaces in established positions which he repeated: frontally and in profile or combinations of standing and reclining figures. Recurring motifs such as moonlight, shadows, a rising floor level, the seashore, the gestures of his figures and their hair, were all formulated in a metaphorical visual language. The depth of field that these motifs describe and the actual plane of the painting both acknowledge and deny one another simultaneously.

Nordenfalk argues that Munch has the ability to unite these formulas through his improvisational work process. The artist combines physical presence and intuition, accidental processes and rational choice. Nevertheless, Munch’s primary audience doubted the fundamental principle behind his working method.

Amongst the many writers that commented upon Munch’s paintings in the initial phase of his career, Andreas Aubert took a leading position. As early as 1885 he wrote about Munch’s artistic achievement and level of aesthetic competency, for the newspaper Nyt Tidsskrift. Since he was one of the first to articulate any kind of public interpretation or understanding of the young painter and his artistic performance, his views and arguments were noted and repeated by other writers on subsequent occasions. In his voluminous newspaper article «Kunstnernes fjerde høstudstilling» (The Artists Fourth Autumn Exhibition), he presented an overview of Munch’s merits and weaknesses as an artist. For the Autumn Exhibition in 1885, Munch exhibited – amongst other works – a portrait of the painter Karl Jensen-Hjell, painted that same year. The full-figure portrait of his colleague was much admired by Aubert. He recognized unusual talent; in fact, Aubert enthusiastically declared that the portrait bore traces of «genius». Nevertheless, he did not forget to evaluate the work in negative, as well as positive terms, and he did not hesitate to describe Munch’s behaviour as pretentious and self-important. The writer continued in this vein, declaring that (Munch’s) conceit was accompanied by hasty workmanship and improvisation. He described the portrait of Jensen-Hjell as being abandoned at a sketch-like stage, after only a couple of working sessions. Because of this (according to Aubert), the painting offered the viewer the expectation of a finished work that far outweighed the quality of the exhibited sketch. It is interesting to note Aubert’s use of characteristics such as «improvisation», «hasty workmanship» and «sketch-like». These characteristics were recurring topics in the debate that ensued every time Munch exhibited his work. Aubert also distinguished between a sketch and a «finished work»7, and this distinction formed the basis of his (and other’s) analysis of Munch’s paintings.

Just one year later Aubert reiterated his enthusiasm for Munch’s talent as a painter, and his thoughts were published in a review of the annual Autumn Exhibition. In an article entitled «The Artists 5th Autumn Exhibition» which appeared in the newspaper Morgenbladet on 9th November, 1886, he explored the term «finished work» more thoroughly.8 This time, he applied his definition to the painting The Sick Child (1885–86), which was exhibited under the title Study. Aubert commented upon The Sick Child as follows: «As this «study» (!) stands, it is simply a discarded, partly scratched out sketch. He [Munch] must have become tired whilst he worked. It is an abortive effort, like one of the paintings Zola describes so wonderfully in L’oeuvre.»9 This last reference was to Émile Zola’s novel The Masterpiece (L’oeuvre) which – amongst other things – is about an artist who never manages to progress past imaginary paintings and sketches for paintings that may become masterpieces at some future date. Aubert’s ironic point was that Munch became bored with the time-consuming process of painting long before the painting had undergone the transformation from sketch to finished work. It is perhaps worth noting that Aubert was well informed about the contemporary international art of the day, and in an article entitled «Tilbageblik paa Høstudstillingen» (A Retrospective View of the Autumn Exhibition), printed in the newspaper Dagbladet on 19th November, 1888, he drew up some guidelines to distinguish between a study and a finished painting. He wrote the piece on account of the growing interest for outdoor painting at the time, and Aubert underlined the fact that a painter’s sketches or studies were often superior to the finished paintings of the same subject matter. The paintings often lacked the immediacy and freshness of the original sketches. The reason for this, he believed, was that the sketch or preliminary study was more closely related to the experience of nature at first-hand.10 It’s clear that Aubert saw a difference between the borderline separating the preliminary study from the fully
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Among the matters that were interpreted as unfinished in Munch's paintings were also errors in draughtsmanship, which featured in the portrayed characterization of some of his subjects. In an article written in 1889, Krohg pointed out that in Munch's portrait of Hans Jæger (1889), the painter had located the subject's thigh bone «nowhere near his hip socket».14 (Munch probably made changes to the pain-

In an article entitled «Tredje generasjon» (Third Generation) that was published in the newspaper Verdens Gang on 27th April, 1889, he stated quite plainly that Munch's paintings were unfinished, though he added that this might be the artist's intention. Krohg wrote that «Munch sees only the essential, and of course that is what he paints».11 Krohg's interpretation of the term «finished painting» points towards something that several critics called «Munch's method».

The criticism of what were interpreted as unfinished elements in Munch's paintings also included the alleged drawing errors and anatomical weaknesses that occurred in the portrayal of some of his subjects. In an article written in 1889, Krohg pointed out that in Munch's portrait of Hans Jæger (1889), the painter had located the subject's thigh bone «nowhere near his hip socket».14 (Munch probably made changes to the painting on account of this comment.) The painter Erik Werenskiold also remarked that Munch's Self-Portrait with Cigarette (1895) «is greatly spoiled by the overly elongated arm».15 The errors in draughtsmanship were also legio, according to several newspaper critics. In 1889, Krohg wrote that Munch «has abandoned the art of good drawing», but that this was due to his particular artistic method and aesthetic sense.16 During the same year Aubert remarked that although Munch's work is brilliant, the artist seems indifferent to «form and drawing».17 In November 1890, in a review of the Autumn Exhibition for Dagbladet, Aubert wrote that Munch's work lacks «serious and thoroughly executed drawing or modelling skills».16

The technical and formal criticism of Munch's work was only surpassed by what the public experienced as the provocative imagery or motifs. The disagreement concerning the literary content matter of his work easily overshadowed the hegemony of the debates about Munch's work. In the 1896 article entitled «Das Litterarische in der Malerlei» (The Literary in Painting), Franz Servaes complained about what he called the technical incompleteness of Munch's paintings.19 However, for those interested in the purely literary aspects of painting (continued Servaes), this lack of technical skill plays a less important role. Munch's paintings split the public into antagonistic groups. Some viewed the literary themes he employed in his painting in positive terms, caring little about the technical weaknesses, whilst others were unable to see past what they considered to be formal faults and repulsive motifs.

In a review of the paintings Munch exhibited at the Autumn Exhibition in 1887, Aubert wrote that the colours the artist employed in the painting Jurisprudence seemed patchy and phosphorescent.20 In addition, he remarked that several of the colours and tones clashed with fundamental keynotes. In other articles Aubert praised Munch and hailed him as a gifted colourist of the highest order.21 Taken as a whole, the criticism regarding Munch's use of colour was far less accentuated than the criticism directed at his weak sense of form and shaky understanding of the relationship between plane and depth of field.

In several articles that he wrote up until 1890, Aubert took an almost fatherly attitude towards Munch's state of health. He made light of Munch's indifference to mistakes of draughtsmanship, putting it down to the artist's weak physical health and sensitivity: «Munch is one of our artists whose temperament is conditioned by his nervous.»22 As a result of his unstable health, Munch did not have the opportunity of studying at an academic educational institute. Another critic, Holger Sinding, wondered whether the reason Munch was never able to progress beyond the brilliant sketch was due to a lack of interest or a deficiency of talent. The question arose in the wake of an analysis of Munch's portrait of August Strindberg (1892). Sinding claimed that Munch had developed an artistic method that never progressed past the first sketch. He claimed that Munch ignored common sense, which presupposes that a painted detail should bear some resemblance to the object it is supposed to represent.23 The relationship between reality and the painted representation of it – the resemblance factor – was one of the recurring themes that featured in much of the anonymous criticism in the newspapers. Most of
this criticism reflected popular taste, and was clearly in Munch’s disfavour.

Of the critics who took an active interest in Munch’s work right from the beginning of his career, it seems that even the most competent differentiated between the features of his paintings that might be put down to downright carelessness or lack of motivation and the features that are a result of aiming purposefully for a visual language based upon impressionism, or a simplified style. Amongst the critics who differentiated between varying kinds of motivation and intention, we find several of the best known artists and art critics of the time. Both Werenskiold and Aubert agreed that some of Munch’s work was weakened by technical faults and flaws, but both acknowledged that he was in the process of developing an individual artistic method. However, there was no consensus about what this method might be.

Werenskiold offered up this point of view in a letter he wrote to Aubert in December 1891: «Much of Munch’s work is half finished – hardly even that – and he even mixes oils and pastels. He allows large areas of canvas to be left uncovered, no matter what mood he is trying to create in the painting; the bare canvas is supposed to do justice to daylight, sunshine, an evening mood, moonlight or whatever.»24 Werenskiold established that the motifs in Munch’s paintings seldom reach a finished state. The sketchiness of his work is striking. Munch also mixes oil paint with the medium of pastel – this was unheard of according to the general technical instructions of the time. He also allows the bare canvas to shine through without paint, no matter what the motif might be. In other words, Werenskiold says that the motifs in Munch’s paintings are not concordant with the way they are executed.

In an interview with Munch before he travelled to Berlin in the autumn of 1892, Krogh referred to the artist’s working method.25 There is no point in working with a painting over an extended period, says Munch. A painting has to be executed in a particular mood, or state of mind. Since subjective moods never last very long, a painting should be completed as soon as one mood seems to be changing into another. The picture, or painting, says Munch, is about a subjective expression of the mind and not about reproducing a photographic section of nature. In a somewhat longer analysis which Krogh published in 1902, he explored this reasoning in more depth.26 He used Realism and Impressionism as the basis for the comparison he drew up. In contrast to the painters whose work was categorized under these two «isms» (who, according to Krogh, took a tabula rasa approach to their motifs), Munch’s approach was characterized by his subjective emotional state. Munch did not try to emulate nature, Krogh claimed – he painted according to his own inner state of mind: «He paints his motifs according to the emotional state he happens to be in at the time.»27

One of Munch’s friends, the poet Sigbjørn Obstfelder, had a very similar opinion to Krogh. He wrote an essay entitled «Edvard Munch. Et forsøg» (Edvard Munch. An Attempt) in 1896. In it he explained that Munch tended to choose motifs that were imbued with intense emotion.28 He also prefers to paint in an emotional mental state, without allowing time for reflection – which he believes will orientate the mind towards reality and thereby interfere with the creative impulse. As a result of this method, many paintings are abandoned in an unfinished state, and so in some respects may be viewed as sketches or studies. Obstfelder concluded.

As an artist, Munch is an individualist, continued Obstfelder. Through the medium of painting he presents his experience of existence in his own particular way, and it «is this style that causes so much fuss».29 During an interview with Munch early as 1892, Krogh established the fact that the artist was taking a step away from the meticulous representation of observable details in his work30, and in the painting Melancholy (1892) Werenskiold identified a stylistic move towards a more summary treatment of the motif and the fact that a characteristic «flattening» effect was becoming more evident. This was a tendency he had encountered himself in his own painting31. In other words, Werenskiold was preoccupied with the paradigm shift that occurred around the 1890s. The fact that Munch’s work did not conform to the normal variants – the realistic and impressionistic paradigm – was in many ways unproblematic. The disagreement of the time was more to do with how Munch’s paintings related to reality and the degree of incompleteness they displayed. Some critics – for example Henrik Grosch – claimed in an article in the newspaper Aftenposten on 4th October 1895, that Munch’s motifs distanced themselves from our normal understanding of nature and reality and ended up as caricature.32 The Danish critic Emil Hannover established a more neutral line of argument in the Danish newspaper Politiken: «Munch is to be commended for the fact that his work is less complete than most paintings that are exhibited publicly.»33 Hannover’s text was quoted in the catalogue that accompanied Munch’s exhibition in Stockholm in 1894.
The main core of all the criticism about Munch’s work was the issue of visual language. In a review of an exhibition Munch held in 1895, Kristian Gløersen wrote that the public should be given the opportunity of making themselves familiar with the method used to paint these pictures. Only then would one be in a position to judge the artwork. Munch’s method of painting (which in stylistic terms is neither attributable to Realism nor Impressionism), left the viewer with the impression that the artist lacked technical knowledge and the will to formulate a homogeneous visual language. Gløersen remarked that Munch’s art required great patience, goodwill, and a practiced eye. But when an artwork is not self-explanatory, Gløersen continued, the fault lay equally with the viewer and the artist. Although some Norwegian artists and art historians had an educated understanding of such art, the general public and the allied press lay a fair way behind. Many held the view that Munch was in fact making fun of them. This was one of the themes taken up in the reviews of Munch’s work, and disagreement about it split the public into adherents and opponents. In autumn 1895, Werenskiold noted that Munch’s most recent paintings «may almost be described as large sketches», and that the public should be given the opportunity of making themselves familiar with the method used to paint these pictures. Only then would one be in a position to judge the artwork. Munch’s method of painting (which in stylistic terms is neither attributable to Realism nor Impressionism), left the viewer with the impression that the artist lacked technical knowledge and the will to formulate a homogeneous visual language. Gløersen remarked that Munch’s art required great patience, goodwill, and a practiced eye. But when an artwork is not self-explanatory, Gløersen continued, the fault lay equally with the viewer and the artist. Although some Norwegian artists and art historians had an educated understanding of such art, the general public and the allied press lay a fair way behind. Many held the view that Munch was in fact making fun of them. This was one of the themes taken up in the reviews of Munch’s work, and disagreement about it split the public into adherents and opponents. In autumn 1895, Werenskiold noted that Munch’s most recent paintings «may almost be described as large sketches», and that the public were either fanatic about them or simply laughed at them.

Despite all this negative evaluation, mediated by some sections of the press, Munch nevertheless found himself in a very fortunate situation. In an article published in Dagbladet in autumn 1887, just before Munch’s 24th birthday, Aubert mentioned that «the number of those who appreciate Munch’s extraordinary talent, has been greatly extended this year.» The idea that Munch was a victim of unreasonable and unfounded criticism is a construction that he himself (and later, his supporters) tried hard to maintain, right up to our own times. In reality, Munch was in fact a protégé, supported by the new, powerful élite of the Norwegian art world. In some respects, Munch lacked institutional competence – formal education from one of the major Fine Art Academies, but this played a minor role, since his cultural and social capital (his experience with art and the social network surrounding it) was far stronger and more developed than might be expected for an average artist of his age. As Nils Messel documented in an article entitled «Edvard Munch and his Critics in the 1880s», Munch was praised and encouraged by central figures in the public arena. Munch’s active supporters included artists and critics such as Krohg, Werenskiold, Aubert, Frits Thaulow and Eilif Peterssen. Other artists, such as Hans Heyerdahl, Theodor Kittelsen, Christian Skredsvig, Amaldus Nielsen and Julius Middelthun recommended Munch for various awards and stipends. In this role of «Wonderboy», Munch could allow himself to exhibit paintings that even his protectors regarded as unfinished or slap dash.

**The Incomplete: five perspectives**

An examination of the empirical material – the actual criticism with which Munch’s paintings were met, points towards a collective conclusion. There was a general consensus that Munch’s paintings seemed unfinished, but the basis for this conclusion split the public into two groups. One group had a negative attitude to Munch’s visual language and motifs, and found them both incomprehensible. The other group tended to overlook the formal mistakes and flaws, and focused instead upon the possibilities that such a talented artist would have if only he had the benefit of a proper formal education and the economic support that would allow him to travel abroad to study and work. However, even these supporters underestimated Munch. He dexterously avoided being channelled into an academic educational institute, and continued to develop his own special style, which meant that his work seldom achieved a «finished» status. This central question – the lack of completeness in Munch’s paintings, and the reasons for this – will be discussed from five different angles in the following text.

**The Institutionalization of Anomie**

Pierre Bourdieu constructed a sociological model for historical and social change, and Munch’s career may be regarded as an example of this. In his text «Manet and the Institutionalization of Anomie» he calls this change «a successful symbolic revolution». For the Parisian art world of the 1870s and 1880s, modern painting was something to be reckoned with, wrote Bourdieu, and the sudden change can only be understood if one examines the academic institutions of the day and the conventional style and range of motifs that they promoted. The social structure, studio and exhibition system, and the mentality that was incorporated into this, was under pressure from the growing numbers of marginalised artists who stood outside the system. This subversive activity, represented by such artists as Édouard Manet...
and the Impressionists, was transmitted to new generations. Munch can be identified as one of the artists to follow in Manet’s wake.

The pivotal point of Bourdieu’s reasoning balances upon the fact that the categories of perception and understanding that were employed to interpret the paintings of the 20th century, originated from the social and perceptual reorganization that took place during the symbolic revolution mentioned previously. The establishment of an autonomous production field for art coincided «with the construction of a properly aesthetic mode of perception, which places the source of artistic «creation» in the representation and not in the thing represented». Painting stops referring to anything else than itself, and more importance is placed upon form.

Bourdieu examined this theoretical model in more depth, and drew up an historical analysis. Academic art was established inside an educational system that operated with such tools as criteria for entry, class levels, hierarchies regarding age and competency, competitions and a system of advancement. The academic artist was taught through imitation of his/her teachers, and the aesthetic and economic value of an artwork was regulated by an authorised sales channel – The Salon. Academic painting, says Bourdieu, «a scholastic art which undoubtedly represents the historical quintessence of the typical productions of «homo academicus»». The system was based upon respect for the «masters» of the past and the teachers at the institution. An artist who acquired an education through this academic system was more interested in the literary content of his/her work than any formal developments within the field. Academic painting was a work-intensive process that sought less to say something new than to show what had been said was perfectly adequate.

Academic painting consisted of aesthetic content matter. The picture had to be read, and the reading of it required an insightful interpretation that was based upon literary cultivation. The technique was supposed to be less noticeable, and academic painting favoured «the aesthetic of the finished».

The preferred taste for «the finished» is particularly evident if one compares paintings by Eugène Delacroix, Gustave Courbet and Manet, with those painted by academic artists. Bourdieu reminds us that elements such as finish and cleanly drawn lines were loaded with ethical implications. Criteria such as these were perceived as work-intensive and demanding. That which was difficult to achieve was contrasted with the lightweight, or easily attainable, Bourdieu remarked, «notably the topos/scheme of facility, which leads to the perception of certain pictorial manners as being inspired by the search for rapid success at the least cost, thus tending to project the sexual connotations of the aesthetic condemnation of the «facile» on to the painted object itself». According to Bourdieu, the «cheap» in the sexual meaning of the word (in other words the easy, but also that which is simple to produce without cost and strife), was something that stuck in people’s minds when confronted with the actual materials and tools of painting (faktur and signs of alla prima), and this was the reason why the traces of physical work were so carefully hidden in academic painting. In academic painting there was a sharp dividing line between the sketch and the finished work – between the preliminary study and the real invention. Whilst academic painting was valued for its narrative and often elevated subject matter, modern painting was preferred for the visibility of the brush strokes, alla prima technique and the textured materiality of the colours.

In the paragraph entitled «The Model: from Nomos to the Institutionalization of Anomie», Bourdieu draws a number of conclusions about modern painting and the situation it was in during the last decade of the 19th century. Academic art was the result of a particular social structure that was built on the idea of nomos – laws or regulated intercourse between individuals and society. Academic art was steered by common rules that regulated both perception and reception. The academic art institution was a monopoly in terms of art education. It legitimized the authority of its practitioners and decided what was to be considered art. The foundation of the system was reciprocal support: the painters trust in the decisions made by the jury, the State’s confidence in the jury, and the general public’s acceptance of academic art practice. But the academic system that promoted the principle of competition, gradually began to produce a surfeit of artists who chose to work outside the parameters it had drawn up. These marginalised artists began to create their own liberal artistic milieu which, over the course of time became subversive.

The academic system of monopoly was gradually replaced by an autonomous field of production, within which each artist, or group of artists competed for artistic legitimacy. The sociological terms nomos and anomie, are used to describe the relationship between the individual and society. If society is anomic – lawless and lacking structure – the people within it become...
In Bourdieu’s analysis of the «symbolic revolution», the academic system represents a regime with rules that can be defined as *nomos*. From 1870s onwards, this regulatory system was replaced by *anomie*, or put in a different way: each artist could invoke his/her right to be a spokesman for *nomos*, thereby creating an *anomic* situation: «The constitution of a field is, in the true sense of the word, an *institutionalization of anomie*.»

In a newspaper article entitled «Third Generation», written in 1889, Krohg deplored the fact that «Munch has not had the opportunity – like all the French painters – to pursue a thorough education at an Academy of Arts». He added that as an artist, Munch was so independent that such an education would do him no harm, and that nobody «has been harmed by learning when they can simply discard what they have learned and pick it up again to be used at the right time and place». It’s clear that Krohg spoke against his own better judgement here, for in an essay he wrote for the Danish newspaper **København**, six months later (on 12th November 1889) entitled «The Impressionists», he reminded himself how difficult it was to look at a motif from nature without reverting to academic knowledge and conventions. The expectations of the public steered the artistic process to some extent. Even the ploy of sectioning the world was changing. The new ideas about perception, to the «innocent eye». But this was a utopian solution according to Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. Habitus involves precise ways of encountering reality – acquired dispositions that lay down the conditions for the way one acts in practice. During the socialisation process these dispositions are incorporated according to the changing life conditions of the individual. A *habitus* that is learned within the confines of the primary family lays down the foundations for the way in which one experiences and relates to knowledge mediated via formal education. In turn, the new *habitus* which occurs as a result of formal education, influences later experiences. Once established, these dispositions effect the individual’s actions and function unconsciously or automatically because they have been incorporated.

Aubert was tenaciously preoccupied with the idea that Munch should be awarded a stipend that would give him the opportunity of studying abroad.47 Munch’s supporters rallied round their protégé, and the young painter was indeed awarded a travelling grant. From October 1889 until the new year of 1890, Munch was registered as a pupil at Léon Bonnat’s private atelier – Atelier de la rue Ampère – in Paris. Munch was unmotivated.48 It seems as if he preferred to learn by studying art at exhibitions, carrying on work on his own paintings, and socializing with other artists instead of pursuing a formal education abroad. The idea of an academic education seemed to hinder Munch’s career plans. He defined his own «laws» and became an active participant in the new *anomic* situation.

**Idealism – Modernism**

In his book *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu describes how the artistic arena was moving towards a greater autonomy from Manet onwards.49 Autonomy led to increased differences among the various forms of expression. The establishment of an autonomous field for painting went hand in hand with the development of new principles of perception. The gaze artists used to view the world was changing. The new ideas about perception placed the creative principle in the representation of the object and not in the object that was being represented. An artwork was viewed in terms of form itself, on its own terms. This opened for a new way of painting. The object being painted was subordinate to the way it was represented. Contemporary motifs that had previously been regarded as vulgar, were now incorporated into a growing repository of possible subject matter. An aesthetic re-development of the «low», the «easy» and the «cheap» began, and simultaneously, paintings became more ambivalent. It was no longer so easy to comment upon them or interpret them. Painting was to adhere to its own, specific painterly laws, independent of the kind of object it was representing. The painted work was under no circumstance to be translated into some kind of text or reduced to any other form of discourse. By employing this strategy, artists signalled command over their own artistic production. They gave precedence to form, the method of painting and style – all that the artist him/herself controlled. The motif, or the theme of the painting, that alluded to something outside
the painting itself was subordinate to these formal aspects. The consequence of this was that art no longer copied nature, but copied, or commented upon itself and its own history. The painter was not judged on his/her ability to represent objective realism, but to what degree the painting expressed a special personality or characteristics. The evaluation of art could no longer be based on the aesthetic and ethical norms of the past.

In his book Kunstretninger. Sex forelæsninger (Art Movements. Six Lectures), from 1883, Marcus Jacob Monrad, a professor at the University of Oslo, examined the contemporary taste and understanding of the art of the day. In the fifth chapter he charts the connection between intellectual movements and artistic tendencies at the beginning of the 1880s, and he takes up the relationship between Idealism and Realism – an aesthetic viewpoint and an art movement that existed as two parallel and partly divergent tendencies that coloured the contemporary cultural life of the time.50 Monrad remarked that the painting of an object with a precise and characteristic form and contour was a form of idealism. The reason for this, he continues, was that the artist made the assumption that there was something unchangeable behind his/her temporary perception of it. The most recent development in painting at the time was Impressionism, which, according to Monrad, is able only to depict a momentary impression of an object, a transient perception, not an image of the object itself. In paintings such as these, the contour lines were obscure. Monrad believed that because of this, Realism and Impressionism were actually opposites. He himself favoured what he called indirect idealism, which implied that art was able to offer a glimpse of the divine, the good and the beautiful.51

Another variant of Monrad’s term «indirect idealism» is to be found in a newspaper article entitled «Nye Arbeider af Edv. Munch. Udstilling hos Blomqvist» (New Work by Edvard Munch. An Exhibition at the Blomqvist Gallery). It was published in Aftenposten on 4th October 1895. In the article Grosch draws attention to two negative characteristics that he found in Munch’s paintings. Firstly, he thought that the method of painting distanced the motifs from any identifiable reality, and secondly, he found many of the motifs repulsive.52 Grosch believed that an aesthetic experience gained through looking at art, would also have an ethically improving effect. In this, he shared Monrad’s view, for Monrad viewed both life and art with an «ideologically reconciled gaze».53 Viewed in this light, beauty was a symbol for moralism. Despite movements such as Realism and Impressionism, idealism continued to play a significant role with regard to aesthetics and the understanding of art throughout the 1880s. Aesthetic idealism was a central factor in all critical production. This was an aesthetic standpoint that expected art to elevate the viewer – to point the viewer in the direction of the ideal, towards the realm of morality – by depicting beautiful forms or exalted themes. The beautiful and the good were two aspects that united to form a monolithic entity – an entity that in many cases included the divine. When Grosch wrote that he found Munch’s paintings repulsive in aesthetic terms, this also meant that he intended a moral accusation. The charge against Munch was repeated by other critics. For example, in his book published in 1902, Max Linde wrote that Munch overstepped traditional art by portraying the hideous.54 Everything points to the notion that Munch deliberately chose to produce repulsive or hideous paintings, thereby breaking with the demands of idealism, which dictated the ethical and aesthetic standards that were applied to art at the time.

One of idealism’s demands was that artists were expected to idealise women and sexuality. If this was not possible, then women and sexual instincts were to be demonised. About this particular subject, Munch’s paintings were ambiguous. The sketch-like method of painting he employed broke with both idealism and Realism, and it defined Munch as a modern artist. On the other hand, Munch’s belief in the sovereignty of the divine or characteristics, Munch did not quite manage to form a monolithic entity – an entity that in many cases included the divine. When Grosch wrote that he found Munch’s paintings repulsive in aesthetic terms, this also meant that he intended a moral accusation. The charge against Munch was repeated by other critics. For example, in his book published in 1902, Max Linde wrote that Munch overstepped traditional art by portraying the hideous.54 Everything points to the notion that Munch deliberately chose to produce repulsive or hideous paintings, thereby breaking with the demands of idealism, which dictated the ethical and aesthetic standards that were applied to art at the time.

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nality that has fascinated art critics, from Aubert to Clement Greenberg.56

Realism – Expressionism

In the lecture «The Conflict in Modern Culture», that was later published as a book in 1918, Georg Simmel wrote about the way in which modern society differentiated between the segregated spheres of living and producing. In contrast to previous historical epochs, Simmel found there was no hegemonic «central idea»57. Despite this, he believed he could identify the beginnings of a new overriding idea that he called «the concept of life», «in which perceptions of reality were united with metaphysical, psychological, moral and aesthetic values».58

In all cultures life expresses itself in particular forms, for example in material works of art. But the form of the artwork is not identical with life itself. An artwork has its own identity and logic and it follows its own rules. Because of this rigidity, artwork is placed at a distance from the creativity it originated from. The contrast between life itself and a more rigid or frozen version of it (objectified artwork) defines the dialectic of culture. But lying behind all outer forms and strict frameworks of rules, Simmel believed there was a dynamic and indefinable life force – a life process. Simmel showed how life manifested itself in new forms of expression that were capable of breaking down all that had become rigid and alien. During his own time – the years leading up to the First World War, Simmel believed he had identified cultural forms of expression – primarily in avant-garde art – that tended to harmonise life and form without the stiffness that was usually associated with objective culture (objectified forms such as painting etc.). In the past, transitional periods had been times of striving together for new, collective ideals. Contemporary art, on the other hand, had a general aversion to any kind of fixed rule. A battle seemed to be taking place – against all closed systems. There was also a rebellion against the classical – classical, in terms of art that had a clear, uniform, outer shape and contour. Amongst the many styles of contemporary painting at the time, Simmel was most interested in Expressionism – he believed it to be an extension of Vincent van Gogh’s painterly style. For Simmel, expressionist painting represented an art form where a painter’s emotions were manifested in their art exactly as he/she experienced them.59

Human emotions cannot be manifested in any given artistic convention, nor can they be made to fit to a particular form dictated from outside. This is one of the reasons why Expressionism has nothing in common with Impressionism. According to Simmel, Impressionism was characterized by a representational, aesthetic
formula that had a negative impact upon the creative process. Such pictures were dependent upon external reality. They were expressions of both the artist’s life and the characteristics of the motif, and were still tied to past conventions of representation. Expressionists, on the other hand, transferred emotionality directly to the paintbrush, which in turn transmitted the artist’s state of mind on to the canvas. A painting was a direct expression of the artist’s inner emotional state. Simmel noted that expressionist paintings very often bore titles that referred to observable phenomena, yet the paintings themselves had no need to conform to, or correspond to these titles. Expressionist paintings might originate from a stimulation of the senses that had been triggered by observable objects, but they might just as well spring from the artist’s own inner state of mind. Simmel reminded the reader that up until the end of the 1880s the general opinion was «that a successful artistic response must be morphologically similar to the stimulus that evoked it; indeed the whole impressionist school was based on this conception».60

The expressionists deviated from this causal connection – this is one of their particular contributions. As an alternative, they offered the idea «that there is no need for the identity between the form of the cause and that of its effects».61 The perception of a violin or a face may awaken an emotional response in an artist, and this might be transformed into a painting that has a completely different form to the one that first awakened the response. Simmel puts it like this: «One might say that the expressionistic artist replaces his model with the response.»62 Expressionist painting did of course have a form, but expressionist art was indifferent to the traditional standards that conventionally dictated what was perceived as repulsive or beautiful.

The expressionists and their forerunners – van Gogh and Munch – rejected the classical rules regarding composition and representation, and did not allow a painting to be ruled by the reality of the given object.

In the text «The Conflict of Modern Culture», Simmel operated with a contradiction between life and form. In the book «Å forstå det moderne» (Understanding the modern), Willy Guneriussen says that Simmel stood out as a vital thinker in the years 1917–18.63 Simmel claimed that behind all outer form and rigid laws there was a dynamic life force, which he called «the concept of life».64 From the beginning of the last decade of the 1800s onwards, «the concept of life» came to play a major role, becoming one of the central notions of the time. In art, this life force was manifested in a general aversion to any fixed or rigid form or closed system, rather than striving towards a new collective ideal, or adequate replacement. Simmel’s characterisation of van Gogh’s paintings might also be applied to the work of other painters who followed a similar path – for example, Munch: «It is primarily this burning life, which can be felt in its immediacy – and which sometimes enters into a destructive contrast with its obvious form – that makes van Gogh so fascinating.»65

Caricature – deformation

Munch’s egocentric and paranoid delusions were the cause of a series of interpersonal conflicts, and these disagreements were stored in his visual memory, later to be transformed into visual parodies of real and imagined enemies. Many of these caricatures found their way into Munch’s satirical play The City of Free Love and the lithographic fable Alpha and Omega.66 The grotesque exaggeration of these caricatures is symptomatic of Munch’s attempt to master complex situations, and researchers often interpret these pictures as self-therapeutic. One strategy to strengthen the function of the ego and reduce the threat of inner chaos was to paint one’s enemies.67 The process of painting could trigger an emotional discharge of accumulated energy – a catharsis.

In a review written in 1895, Grosch remarked that Munch’s paintings that dealt with death appeared to be caricatures.68 The portrait of Ludvig Meyer (ill. 2.) was also a wicked caricature, according to Grosch – an interpretation that Henrik Ibsen agreed with.69 A caricature is a form of art in which a person’s appearance is presented in a distorted manner. Caricatures are based on the idea that noteworthy aspects of an individual’s appearance can be exaggerated and possibly deformed with a view to highlighting divergent personal characteristics, or particular ways of behaving. A caricature often exposes inadequate behaviour and offers an un-nuanced profile of the subject’s personality. The caricature simplifies reality in the social sphere – its aim is to provoke a comic reaction. The public laugh when they discover the imbalance between a person’s pretensions and the results. The comical aspect lies in the discrepancy between content matter and form.70 The caricature is tendentious, but revealing. Several of
Munch’s best known paintings contain caricature-like depictions of subjects – for example *Three male Heads and Seated Female Nude* (1898–99?), *The Dance of Life* (1899–1900) and *Golgotha* (1900).

In a study made by Ernst Kris and E.H. Gombrich, the authors claimed that the working mechanism behind the art of caricature was aggression. This hallmark is consistent with the earliest definitions recorded of caricature as a specific genre, as well as with psycho-analytical empiricism and practice. The aim of a caricature is to reveal, and revealing is a recognized technique for degrading. In parody, the caricature-like aspect of the work contributes to the devaluation of the content matter, whilst travesty deploys degradation as a visual language and form. In practice, the borderlines between parody, travesty, satire and caricature are somewhat fluid. By the 1860s caricature and journalistic illustration were established forms of mediation in the urban sphere. Caricature was an established genre, practiced by several painters, amongst others Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas. The sketchiness of the imagery expressed tempo, and superficiality was a typical hallmark of the genres of both caricature and impressionist painting.

Caricaturists had a tendency to simplify, exaggerate and to emphasize pictorial planes, and these devices were used to new effect. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s caricature-like style and form of expression exemplified this. The «ugly» or «hideous» aspect of the new, urbane iconography could be expressed through caricature, and the recycling of the same formal elements and development of new formulas that could be repeated in picture after picture, was exploited by painters. As mentioned previously, Munch made use of recurring compositional formulas, and this is one of the characteristics of his work.

Many art historians have commented upon Munch’s ability to observe and capture the personal characteristics of his subjects. This ability was useful in his portrait paintings. Some of these portraits come close to being distorted and ironic – his own tendency to employ irony was what attracted Munch to the world of satire and caricature.

He produced many pictures – often drawings and prints – that portrayed friends and enemies as pompous officials or with facial characteristics that resembled animals such as toads, pigs oroodles. In his paintings however, he tended to employ a subtler approach. In the painting *At the Roulette Wheel* (ill. 3.), from 1892, he painted himself into the composition – a figure busy noting the numbers that came up. A tightly packed group of women and men stand and sit around the gaming table in Monte Carlo. The details of their faces are abstract, consisting of system of marks. The colours the artist has used are metaphorical – white, red and green tones. The slapdash method of painting is striking, and a painted hand in the foreground indicates the presence of a person who is hardly visible, or is outside the painted field of vision. This painting was hardly likely to conform to the expectations of the time with regard to «finish». But if we look at it in the light of work by other paintings by Manet, Degas or Toulouse-Lautrec, several similarities regarding form and iconography are identifiable. The similarities have something to do with the fact that Munch and the French painters shared a common reference point: caricature. The language of caricature was developed within the field of painting as a symptom of the differentiation inside modern society and the appurtenant isolation of the individual.

**Chance (Hazard) – perception**

In 1894 August Strindberg wrote an article regarding the theory of art in French. It was published in a Parisian journal entitled *Reves des Reves* on November 15th the same year. The article was entitled «Des art nouveaux! ou Le hazard dans la production artistique» (The New Arts! Or Hazard in Artistic Production).

In the text, Strindberg used the essay form to discuss the aesthetics of chance or hazard. Although the article referred to subjective experience and was written from a novelistic standpoint, two main themes were identifiable. Strindberg discussed the artist’s creative processes and the viewer’s aesthetic response. Let us look at the creative aspect first. Strindberg pointed out examples of how pure chance might lead to the production of an aesthetic product. According to Strindberg, this process implied that the imagination came into play without a pre-defined aim. Strindberg lived in the artist’s colony at Grez sur Loing in 1883 and 1885, and in the article he recalled the oil sketches made by the artists who lived in the neighbouring village of Marlotte – these sketches were created from the remains of colours left on their palettes. At the end of the day the artists turned from their paintings and began these formal improvisations, which recalled, rather than focused upon, nature as an image. Without attempting to create a true likeness to nature in all its detail, the overall effect was a mixture of
Erik Mørstad: *The improvisations of Edvard Munch*

consciousness and unconsciousness. Strindberg’s idea was that artists should imitate nature in a more haphazard way – they should not primarily attempt to imitate the phenomena of nature, but try to follow nature’s own way of creating. Strindberg was himself a painter of course, and in the article he explained how the painting *Wonderland* (ill. 4.) was produced during his stay in Dornach in Spring 1894. Strindberg was careful to explain that the canvas or board he painted on had to be of moderate size. Inspiration only lasts for two to three hours, he claimed, and the painting had to be completed within this time framework. Following Gustave Courbet’s example, Strindberg chose palette knives rather than paintbrushes. According to Strindberg, the choice was due to his interest in the *alla prima* technique. He applied the colours to the surface he had chosen to paint on, and mixed them together as required. The motif was developed according to what the artist had observed, but continually evolved, partly in tune with his visual imagination and partly as a result of the technical and formal process itself. In the article, he mentioned his theory about «automatic art». This was based upon an aleatoric concept that functioned on a visual and technical level – the end result was the consequence of chance and unforeseen processes.

The principle of chance – or hazard – also came into play with regard to what the viewer saw. Strindberg recounted how he was walking in a wood one day. In the distance he glimpsed an object in a field. First he supposed it to be a cow, then later, two farmers and a tree trunk. When he arrived at this puzzling object, he discovered it was a plough, upon which a farmer had hung his coat and knapsack. Strindberg’s point was not just an optical one – of course phenomena do appear to change according to the amount of visual information available. For Strindberg it was a question of how one’s state of mind affected the way one processed visual information. A painting always appears to be new – it changes according to the light and the viewer’s emotional response.

In the book *Art and Illusion*, E.H. Gombrich reminds us of «the beholder’s share in the reading of the artist’s image». The viewer’s response is just as important vis-à-vis nature as it is to painting. Take clouds, for example. Let us look at the protagonist Peer, in Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt*. In one of the scenes Peer lies on the ground interpreting the shape of the clouds – one is a man with a horse, another is his own mother on a broomstick. This way of reading nature is a symptom of the ability to see or recognize something in the clouds that already lies stored in the mind. In projective tests such as *The Rorschach Test* or *The Thematic Apperception Test*, the subject’s response is diagnosed. By showing the subject a series of ambiguously-shaped ink-spots or figures that might be interpreted in a number of different ways, a projective response is triggered. This may reveal a potential behavioural pattern or personality feature.

Strindberg had been interested in painting since he was a child, and although some of his work has been lost, he left a substantial collection – some of which is in the National Museum in Stockholm. He began painting in 1872, but he was most active as a painter when – for one reason or another – he was less active as a journalist or a writer, for example from 1892–93 and in 1894. During part of this time he lived in Berlin, where he knew Munch socially. Strindberg exhibited some of his paintings in Stockholm in July 1892, and was interested in exhibiting again. He mentioned this to Leopold Littmansson in a letter dated 31st June 1894. In the letter, Strindberg told Littmansson about an article he had published the same year – its subject was a method he had developed for what he called fortuitous creativity: «L’art fortuite». He presented the method as subjective, and his paintings as consisting of two levels. He explained that the paintings had an esoteric side that everyone could see and understand, but that they also had an esoteric side that was visible only to himself and a few chosen others. Two years later Munch and Strindberg met again, this time in Paris. Strindberg wrote an article about Munch that was published in the journal *Revue Blanche* on 1st June 1896. In the opening sequence of this essay he presented Munch as an esoteric painter who had come to Paris in order to be understood by the initiated. In other words, Strindberg included Munch in his theory of art (L’art fortuite), and he distinguished between the esoteric and exoteric levels when interpreting Munch’s paintings.

One tentative conclusion might be that Strindberg believed Munch to be on the same footing as himself with regard to artistic method and interpretation. Whilst living in Paris, Munch held a solo exhibition at the gallery «L’Art Nouveau», and there is a strong possibility that Strindberg’s article about Munch referred to this very exhibition. At the time, Strindberg’s life was problematic – it is often referred to as «the inferno crisis». A year later, in 1897, he portrayed his own unstable psychological state of mind in the novel *Inferno*. In this text he refers to Munch’s portrait of Stanislaw Przybyszewski
that had been exhibited in Paris the year before. Strindberg claimed there was a cloud below Przybyszewski’s head, but today there is no trace of any such cloud – there is however, a rather grubby, amorphous watermark. The «cloud» that Strindberg referred to in Inferno, is nothing more than a watermark, probably caused by the aleatory treatment that Munch called his «horse-cure» treatment. In the biography Edvard Munch. Nærbilde av et geni (Edvard Munch. Close-up of a Genius), Stenersen wrote that Munch often exposed his paintings to great variables of light and temperature. Because of this harsh treatment, Munch «accidentally discovered» new colour effects that encouraged him to carry on working, Stenersen commented. Munch regarded accidental stains, dirt and tears in the canvas as an integral part of the artistic process. According to Jan Thurmann-Moe, one of the first paintings to be exposed to this «horse-cure» treatment was the portrait of Przybyszewski, dated 1893. Strindberg responded to the accidental watermark according to his own concept of subjective perception.

In the catalogue text written for the exhibition Edvard Munchs «hestekur». Experimenter med teknikk og materialer (Edvard Munch’s «horse-cure» treatment. Experiments with techniques and materials), Thurmann-Moe documents and discusses Munch’s unorthodox painting methods. As well as the «horse-cure» treatment that Munch began using in 1893, he had also begun to scrape into the layers of oil paint as early as 1886, in his Self-Portrait. The outer layer of paint was scraped with a sharp tool, and this resulted in a more matte effect as the oil paint lost some of its shine. Munch also scraped the surface of The Sick Child, probably in order to tone down the contrast or correct the forms. He sprayed some of his paintings by running his hand across a brush loaded with paint. This was another technique that he began to employ from 1893 onwards. Several areas of the portrait of Przybyszewski, from 1893 were spray-painted. Munch’s work is full of
Erik Mørstad: *The improvisations of Edvard Munch*

spots, blotches and unmotivated lines that belong more to the painterly world than the figurative. In my view, that there is little doubt that Munch shared Strindberg’s ideas about the principle of chance – «L’Art fortuite». As previously mentioned, Strindberg differentiated between an artwork’s manifest meaning – that which is visible to all, and a latent level of understanding that only the initiated are able to comprehend. Munch’s paintings display a number of examples of double meanings. In the painting *Red Virginia Creeper* (page 138), there is a square-like, coloured area to the left, between the main house and the outbuilding. This connects the two buildings visually, rather than representing any observable phenomena. The double-edged aspect of the painting does not simply lie in what one sees and notices, but in the way one connects together visual information, and in what way the connection is interpreted as part of the formal construction of the painting or part of its innate meaning. In the painting *Ashes* (1894), there is a white object to the right of the burnt-out tree trunk – although there is some doubt about it, the object may be interpreted as a cranium. It might also be nothing more than an imprecise painted shape, amongst many other undefined forms. Because of the context, these might be interpreted as large and small stones on a beach, but taken one by one they cannot be understood as anything more than coloured spots on a painted surface. A large white form in the foreground of *Mystery of the Beach* (1892), appears to be a stone marked with eyes, nose and a mouth – the caricature of a face. This anthropomorphic treatment of stones or tree trunks is reminiscent of caricature or children’s drawings. In some of Munch’s other paintings it is tempting to interpret parts of trees and stones as male or female genitalia. To the far left of *Moonlight* (1893), Munch has painted a brownish-red form with a wavy contour – whether or not this is a man’s torso is unclear. The painting contains too little information for us to draw a final conclusion. The shape of a shadow in another painting – *Self-Portrait in Hell* (ill. 6) is another conundrum. The right-hand contour of the shadow that touches the back of Munch’s head, looks like a female face in profile. In the portrait of Munch’s sister, Laura – *Melancholia* (1900–1901), the surface of the table may be read as a section of the protagonist’s (sick) brain. A final example is *The Island of Ulvøya seen from Nordstrand* (also called *Summer Night by the Oslo-Fjord*, ill. 7). From the foreground on shore, the viewer looks out across the water towards a horizontal island reflected on the surface of the sea. Viewed as a whole, the island and its reflection could quite easily be read as a woman’s mouth, or vaginal opening, floating just above the surface of the water.

In his PhD thesis, Frank Høifødt discusses Munch’s «private iconography». His text concerns motifs that are seemingly disengaged from conventional symbols and emblems. Munch’s private iconography consists of subjective metaphors and codes, often referring to self-biographical diary notes that probably include fictitious elements. In order to interpret this private iconography, one need to know something about the artist’s biography and attitude to life, says Høifødt. The premise for an adequate description and interpretation of the motifs Munch produced, is that one accepts, or makes do with Munch’s private symbolism. A description and identification of the motifs in Munch’s paintings is therefore difficult. It is easy enough to point to the fact that various art historians have given divergent descriptions of
Erik Mørstad: The improvisations of Edvard Munch

the same motif. These descriptions mutually contradi-
cut one another with regard to both details and referen-
ces. References to other paintings by Munch create a
network that shifts the focus away from the individual
work to the chronological or thematic aspects of
Munch’s art. As mentioned previously, this leads to
quite divergent interpretations and iconographic identi-
fication. In my view, this relativism has primarily two
reasons. Firstly, research has paid very little attention to
the paradigm shift that took place during the 1800s. In
the book *Stil und Ikonographie* (Style and Iconography),
Jan Bialostocki analyses the transition from collective
iconography which was based on allegory, to a more
individual iconography that sprang from a greater
emphasis upon the atmosphere of the content matter—
the metaphorical aspect. The larger, more general the-
mes, which Bialostocki calls «Rahmenthemen»
(Framework themes), continued in the work of artists
such as Munch, although they became more personali-
sed and no longer displayed the most generalised attri-
butes. It is therefore necessary to connect Munch’s
«private iconography» to a collective European theme
in order to avoid interpreting his work within such a
narrow framework that it becomes a purely biographical
project. Secondly, in my view, art historians have failed
to place sufficient emphasis upon Munch’s style of
improvisation and the formal ambiguity of his work. His
motifs may be seen as the result of an aesthetic method
of chance, in several instances imprecise, and in the fol-
lowing passage I shall introduce some arguments that
corroborate this standpoint.

Ill. 7. Edvard Munch, *The Island of Ulvøya seen from
Nordstrand*, 1901. Kunsthalle Mannheim. Photo: Munch
Museum. © Munch Museum / Munch-Ellingsen Group / BONO
2007
Erik Mørstad: The improvisations of Edvard Munch

«Seeing-as», «Seeing-in»

The experience of viewing a painting has two aspects. One can look at a painting’s form (composition, the formal aspects), but one may also attach importance to what it represents (content, motif). Art Theory has traditionally distinguished between these two aspects. By art philosophers, an attempt to fuse the two is known as «parallelism». Parallelism promotes the idea that it is quite possible to experience the form of a painting (brushstrokes on a flat, supporting surface) and its content (the motif), but that one can never experience both aspects simultaneously. This perception may be compared to seeing a hare or a duck in the well-known psychological test drawing (originally a comic drawing) that Joseph Jastrow included as an illustration in the book Fact and Fable in Psychology (ill. 8).97 The viewer is able to see both animals, but never simultaneously. The point of the drawing is that one interpretation follows the other – they are consecutive. In Philosophical Investigations, Ludwig Wittgenstein calls the transition between these two aspects – the duck and the hare – «seeing-as».98 The experience of one aspect disallows the other. According to the concept of parallelism, the same perceptual mechanism comes into play when the viewer looks at a painting. A painting may therefore be characterized by its double-aspect phenomenology. Gombrich discusses this kind of visual phenomena in some depth in his book Art and Illusion. He claims that the form of the psychological test drawing referred to by Jastrow, does not really resemble either of the animals. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the drawings do indeed shift between duck and hare and vice versa – in other words, the reading of the drawings shifts between two interpretations of it. One sees the drawing either as a duck, or a hare. Gombrich argues that it is not possible «to see the shape apart from its interpretation».99 Several of the paintings I have listed in this article, for example Ashes, include details that appear to shift between two «readings»: stone or cranium, table or section of a brain, shadow or the contour of a woman’s face, island or mouth.

In the book Painting as an Art, Richard Wollheim introduces an alternative explanation. His theory is based on the idea that form and content are two simultaneous aspects of the same experience. Wollheim calls this «seeing-in».100 He reminds us of the advice Leonardo da Vinci gave to an assistant, about looking at a wall with random marks and blotches.101 Spots on a wall, clouds in the sky, or watermarks – as in Strindberg’s case – can appear to us to be figures or motifs, and when this happens, the experience of the cloud or the shape of the blotch melts together with what it temporarily represents. In one of his diary entries from the time he spent at St. Cloud in 1890, Munch wrote that the moonlight created suggestive images on the wall – just like shadow theatre.102 Two elements are mixed together to create a double experience. The difference between Gombrich’s and Wollheim’s explanations is that Gombrich insists that the image of the duck and the hare never occur simultaneously. Wollheim argues that one has a simultaneous experience of the duck and the drawn composition, or a simultaneous experience of the hare and the composition. Applied to the relationship between the two aspects of painting – motif/content and form/composition, Wollheim’s term «seeing-in» implies that one either sees the duck and the composition, or the hare and the composition.

Wollheim emphasises the fact that this double aspect of «seeing-in» does not rule out the idea that one experience may be more dominating than the other and vice versa. If one looks at a wall covered with random spots – as suggested by Leonardo da Vinci – one can choose to concentrate upon the surface of the wall, the spots themselves, or on one or several of the figures that one may perceive as a result of the way in which the wall...
surface and the spots relate to one another. But Wollheim makes yet another distinction. He says that the ability to create representations is based upon a special visual capability with which humans are equipped, and which is probably hereditary. Wollheim calls this ability «seeing-in». The unique aspect of this ability «is the kind of visual experience in which it manifests itself».103 When one looks at a painting, the experience has two aspects which are quite distinct, but which cannot be separated: «On the one hand, I recognize a face: on the other hand, I am visually aware of the surface of the picture. I call this all-important characteristic of the experience 'twofoldness'.»104 A representation of something – in practice, a picture – presupposes this ability to «see-in». This ability precedes the representation, both logically and historically: «Logically, in that I can see objects in things that neither are nor are believed by me to be representations – such as clouds, or damp stains on walls, or the silhouettes of cast shadow; and historically, in that I am sure our remotest ancestors could do this before they thought of adorning their caves with the images of the animals they hunted.»105

A representation, for example a painting, occurs when (for example) an artist puts colour to canvas with the intention of creating an image that the viewer can recognize – for example a face. The difference between a representation and the natural ability to «see-in», is that the representation incorporates a standard for what is a correct or incorrect representation: «For, if the artist succeeds in his intentions so that a face can be seen in the surface, then the spectator sees the surface correctly if he sees a face in it; otherwise he sees it incorrectly.»106

In an article from 1894 about the accidental aspect of the artistic, creative process, Strindberg distanced himself from an essentialist definition of art. Art does not last forever either – the art of the future will disappear just like everything else, were the final words of this piece. Art is temporary and process-oriented. Pictures occur accidentally, although the result is also steered by the process. The viewer is free to respond subjectively, just as Strindberg did when he looked at Munch’s portrait of Przybyszewski. In the same article (1894), Strindberg wrote that he had aired his theory about the «automatic» aspect of art in the ateliers of his artist friends. This stems from an episode in autumn 1891, when he was modelling a classical figure which was transformed into a crying boy due to an accidental movement of his hand. It is therefore probable – as Arne Eggum suggests in his monograph of the artist – that Munch became acquainted with Strindberg’s concept of «hazard» as an artistic principle whilst living in Berlin in 1892–93, and in Paris a couple of years later. Analysts of Munch’s paintings also imply that he was already toying with similar ideas long before he met Strindberg.

In my view, the core of the matter – the aesthetics of the accidental – is a question of at what point in the process the picture becomes a representation, and whether it is possible to stop the process before it includes the criteria that define a representation. Wollheim puts it like this: «Representation arrives, then, when there is imposed upon the natural capacity of seeing-in something that so far it had been without: a standard of correctness and incorrectness.»107

Some concluding remarks

Munch’s paintings have been the cause of recurrent objection, ever since Aubert wrote and published his criticisms. The main thrust of these objections pivot upon the three elements of painting – pictorial structure, symbolism and form of expression – and the fact that these are not sufficiently fused in Munch’s work. These elements are often perceived as disjunctive or lacking in integration. I believe it is productive to place on record that many of Munch’s paintings are in iconographic and formal terms, disconnected or incoherent. In this article, I have chosen to introduce some explanatory perspectives that shed light upon the lack of congruence between the formal aspects and the literary content matter of Munch’s pictures. The explanatory factors refer to the historic transitional period the Bourdieu calls «symbolic revolution», including the gradual move from Idealism to Modernism, the subjective representation of reality in Expressionism, the visual language of caricature as an effect of modern society, and not least, the aesthetics of chance or hazard with which both Strindberg and Munch experimented.

English translation: Palmyre Pierroux
The improvisations of Edvard Munch

NOTES
1 Rolf Stenersen, Edvard Munch. Nærbilde av en geni, Oslo 1946, p. 68.
3 Quoted in Marit Lande, På sporet av Edvard Munch – mannens mål, Oslo 1996, p. 56.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Andreas Aubert, «Kunstnerenes fjerde høstudstilling», Morgenbladet, 9 November 1886.
9 Ibid.
10 Andreas Aubert, «Tilhægeblik paa Høstudstillingen», Dagbladet, 19 November 1888.
11 Andreas Aubert, «Høstudstillingen VII», Dagbladet, 6 November 1887.
12 Andreas Aubert, «I anledning af Edvard Munchs Udstilling», Dagbladet, 19 May 1895.
14 Ibid.
15 Erik Werenskiold, Autumn 1895, quoted in Henning Gran, «Munch gjenom Werenskiolds brillers», Kunsten i dag, 1951, p. 8.
16 Krohg, 1889, op.cit.
17 Aubert, 1889, op.cit.
18 Andreas Aubert, «Høstudstillingen», Dagbladet, 5 November 1890.
20 Aubert 1887, op.cit.
21 Aubert 1889, op.cit.
22 Aubert 1890, op.cit.
23 Holger Sinding, «Edvard Munch's udstilling», Tidssignaler, 12 October 1895.
24 Erik Werenskiold to Andreas Aubert, December 1891, letter no. 32, NBO.
27 Ibid.
29 Obstfelder, op.cit., p. 18.
30 See Koefoed and Thue (edit.), op.cit., p. 49.
31 Erik Werenskiold (1891), quoted in Gran, op.cit., p. 8.
33 Quoted in «Utdrag ur kritiker», reproduced in Frieckeningen ofver Edvard Manuchs utställningen, Stockholm 1894.
34 Kristian Glemmert, «Munch», Verdens Gang, 10 October 1895.
35 Quoted in Gran, op.cit., p. 8.
36 Andreas Aubert, «Hæstdudstilling VII», Dagbladet, 6 November 1887.
39 Ibid.
41 Bourdieu 2004, op.cit., p. 246.
45 Ibid.
47 Andreas Aubert, «I anledning af Edvard Munchs Udstilling», Dagbladet, 18 May 1889.
48 T2770 (« E.M »), December 1889.
51 Monrad 1883, op.cit., p. 72.
53 Monrad 1883, op.cit., p. 72.
54 Quoted in Næss, op.cit., pp. 256–257.
55 Grosch 1895, op.cit.
59 Simmel, op.cit., p. 16.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
64 Simmel, op.cit., p. 14.
65 Simmel, op.cit., p. 16.
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68 Grosch 1985, op.cit.
79 Engellau-Gullander, op.cit., p. 18.
80 Engellau-Gullander, op.cit., p. 48.
81 Engellau-Gullander, op.cit., p. 17–18.
89 Stenersen, op.cit., p. 66.
90 Thurmann-Moe, op.cit., p. 25.
91 Thurmann-Moe, op.cit., p. 5–62.
99 Gombrich, op.cit., p. 5.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Wollheim, op.cit., p. 48.