

# Creative-expressive artwork as a phenomenological exploration of experience

## Abstract

**Background:** The study of experience is both the object of study for phenomenology and a crucial part of the psychotherapeutic technique. In both cases, is critical to access the pre-reflective embodied aspects of experience and avoid remaining in its representational contents.

**Aims:** This article describes how art-making as a plastic creative-expressive experience (PCE) can operate as a phenomenological exploration of experience and to delineate the consequences of such exploration for clinical practice and research.

**Methods:** Conceptual argumentation based on the notions of experience and language were applied in order to an embodied approach to the study of experience; a comparative argumentation between art-based research and micro-phenomenology; Dewey's proposal of art as an experience (Dewey, 2005) ;and a review of literature on art therapy and phenomenology.

**Results:** The usefulness and value of creative-expressive artwork in the phenomenological exploration of experience are supported. As a key phenomenological method, phenomenological reduction and the reflective stance of *observation* are both analyzed within the PCE process. Likewise, the situated, embodied, and pre-reflective characteristics of PCE experience as *an experience* are highlighted along with its non-verbal expressive value for formerly lived experiences.

**Discussion:** Future use of creative-expressive artwork for phenomenological exploration of experience is recommended, and its scope of application is discussed both for clinical and research contexts.

**Keywords:** phenomenology, phenomenological reduction, contemplative practice, creative-expressive artwork, art therapy, arts-based research

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## Introduction

Within the scientific field, the study of experience brings together different disciplines such as phenomenology, cognitive sciences, micro-phenomenology, and neuropsychology. Despite its explosive growth during the last decades, there are still different definitions of what is meant by experience as an object of study, and therefore suited forms of access to it or its methods of study. The interdisciplinary network of the research project "An Embodied Approach in the Study of Experience (EASE)" was devoted to answering these epistemological and methodological questions to advance a framework where the phenomenon under study is consistent with the methodology, and its theoretical basis.

Psychotherapies can be considered as applied disciplines in the study of patients' experiential world. Despite their wide spectrum of theoretical backgrounds and techniques what is occurring in any psychotherapeutic setting is an inter-subjective exploration of experience. In this regard, Fuchs, Messas [1] propose phenomenology as a foundational science for psychopathology and also for psychotherapy while it captures human existence in all its dimen-

sions (self-awareness, embodied, spatiality, temporality, narrativity, and intersubjectivity). Further, the phenomenological approach to psychotherapy highlights the bodily resonance, the inter-corporality, and the body memory expressed in the present moment through the psychotherapeutic relationship [2], [3]. On the contrary, the psychotherapeutic approaches that work with patients' inner states or psychic content (being conscious, unconscious, or somehow hidden in the past) emphasize narrative or mental content over the bodily, inter-corporeal register of the patient's lived experience [1], [4]. Thus, cognitive approaches to psychotherapy work under the premise that thought schemes are the source of psychological suffering with the body out of its psychotherapeutic work. Further, psychoanalysis's notion of unconscious refers to unknown introjected objects hidden within the depth of the psychic apparatus that works as an inner container of images of the external reality, with meanings and effects out of the subject's knowledge that can be decoded through speech. Altogether, corresponds to what is referred to here as verbal supremacy in psychotherapy.

Therefore, both within the field of psychotherapies and research we are subject to what Eisner [5] (1997) high-

lighted: we search for what we know how to find (p. 7). This applies especially to the use of verbal language as the preferred search tool. One common difficulty when searching for patterns of experiencing in psychotherapy is the trend of patients to stick with the 'what' rather than the 'how' of experiences which implies a predominance of the explicit/reflective level of experience over the implicit/pre-reflective one (both levels corresponding to the notion of the double structure of experience posited by Fuchs [6]). This verbal supremacy places the content of experience in the focus of attention for which explanations, judgments, and concepts emerge. On the contrary, the pre-reflective experiential flow is deeply rooted in the body, outside the conscious attentional focus, and just lived through. This is what Fuchs [3] called the unconscious in the horizontal dimension in which body memory takes a crucial role as opposed to the verticality of the Freudian notion of the unconscious, which lies at the bottom of the psychic structure.

This article attempts to critically analyze the role of language in the study of experience and show the methodological potential of plastic-creative expressive techniques presenting the artwork as a privileged tool for an *embodied approach to the study of experience* (both its applications in art-based research and art therapy will be discussed).

Most of the formulations posited by the author here come from her experience as an art therapist working with persons suffering from eating disorder symptoms, trauma, and the broad spectrum of psychosomatic disorders.

In the following, this article refers to artwork or artistic experience mainly as a plastic-creative expression (PCE), however, it can be easily extended to all the creative arts therapies [7], [8], [9], [10] since their main features, processes, and therapeutic factors are largely overlapping [11], [12]. Other forms of artistic experience as the aesthetic encounter with other's artwork will not take part in this argumentation. Therefore, PCE is proposed as a form of art-based phenomenological exploration of the lived experience and is understood here as any form of creative process using plastic materials for expressive purposes that results in a unique artwork object (i.e.: painting, sculpture, collage, modeling, drawing, etc.). Further, it will be examined how the phenomenological reduction and the possibility of coming back to the pre-reflective bodily experience by postponing its verbal narrative are offered by artistic creation both as an experience itself [13], and expression of a formerly given experience.

## The notion of experience

It is relevant to begin this examination by clarifying the notion of experience and answering the corresponding questions referring to *what we are observing and how we are observing it when we study the experience*.

From a phenomenological approach *what we are observing* is the *lived experience* or first-person experience with an emphasis on immediate and embodied action [14], [15],

[16]. Therefore, it is assumed here that such experience is at the same time precise, concrete, and individual with its own spatiotemporal parameters [13], [15], [17]. However, experience is always new and different from moment to moment and contains at the same time the lived experience sedimented within the body [18]. This sedimented experience is what has been referred to as 'body memory' which mediates the sense of familiarity and continuity in the succession of events, and conveys a sense of identity and unity as the personal way of being in the world [3], [19]. Therefore, one of the methodological challenges at the time of studying experience is its impermanence, or what Varela has called "momentariness" [15]. This characteristic supports the use of methodologies that explore the experience situated in the present moment as micro-phenomenology does [20], [21].

Exploring the human experience faces the complex challenge of its multidimensionality which determines *how to observe it*. In agreement with the *double structure of experience* posited by Fuchs [6] the direct flow of any given experience that unfolds in a continuous present tense as the implicit bodily experience is what has been called *pre-reflective experience*, unlike *reflective experience* that is referred to as the reflective action about a given experience which could have different and recursive levels of abstraction [14], [15], [22], [23], [24]. Reflection is always out of time with direct experience which is called the '*elusive nature of experience*' [15], [25], [26]. The immediacy of our unreflective experience refuses to be grasped by the reflection that it is always late as a further discourse about the experience that is always in the present tense [15], [16], [25], [26]. In this way, the reflection will always be out of phase with direct experience and therefore inevitably at a certain distance from it.

From the viewpoint of phenomenology, pre-reflective experience is embodied and non-verbal; therefore, it is not possible to find judgments, representations, or beliefs at that level that is pre-wording. It is through an act of reflection *about* such pre-reflective or direct experience that explanations, judgments, or beliefs could emerge. It is important to note that both levels of experience, pre-reflective and reflective, are full of meaning. At the pre-reflective level every act, movement, or gesture is meaningful as far as it assures the organism's survival and adaptation to the environment. We as living organisms are acting and being affected through our sensorimotor system in a meaningful manner, thus making sense of our experience is a relevant life-saving action that could lead or not to verbalization, however, any verbalization has, at some level, its origins within the body [27]. Otherwise, at the reflective level meanings emerge through a reflective act of a conscious subject about his or her lived experience. Therefore, pre-reflective experience expresses itself through what could be called *embodied meanings* and reflective experience expresses itself mainly through *narrative meanings* with a distance from direct experience determined by the very reflective act [15], [16], [22], [28], [29].

Thus, both within the sciences of experience and in daily life we can stay trapped in what we call here *verbal supremacy* or the enforcement of narratives to the experience. This is probably because explanations, judgments, and descriptions about the 'what' of experience are easier to access rather than the embodied meanings of the implicit and procedural 'how' of experience that usually is not verbally accessible. This is relevant to thinking about how to access experience when observing it and what we are observing by that means.

Let us take for example if asking a pianist to explain how to play a piece of music without indicating with their hands, only verbally, will have to make an effort to bring what is on a procedural level to a verbal one. Therefore, it could not be the same to access a representational level of experience through the narrative that the subject makes *about* his or her own experience; as to access the here and now of the flow of experience at its immediate, pre-verbal and pre-reflective level.

These ways of accessing experience represent different methodological challenges that go beyond the limits of this article to discuss. However, roughly speaking, can be grouped between *embodied* and *narrative* methods of exploring subjective experience. Among the first can be mentioned micro-phenomenology [17] and contemplative practices (as proposed by Varela, Thompson [15]), and among the *narrative* ones the broad spectrum of traditional qualitative research methods [30], [31]. Most of the latter are focused on the *subjective what or content* of a given experience while micro-phenomenology and contemplative practices are focused on the *subjective 'how'* of an embodied, procedural, and concrete-situated experiences (i.e., focus on bodily cues that participate in a given experience, focus on breathing, a visual focus, etc.) [15], [16], [32]. Thus micro-phenomenology and contemplative practices have in common that they actively avoid general descriptions, reflections, beliefs, or representations that for micro-phenomenology are considered satellite information [33], [34], and for contemplative practices reflective or mental activity that one should let go of [16], [35].

Therefore, it is assumed here that patterns can be identified rather in the *how* of experience than in explanations or descriptions about it [36]. The descriptive-explanatory account of experience represents the *natural attitude* that one aspires to suspend as the main phenomenological methodology for accessing experience; the epoché [36], [37], [38].

Phenomenology explores how things appear in an individual's consciousness, thus the subjective experience of 'a thing' matters, rather than the knowledge or explanations about "the thing." Things appear to us intentionally, which means we are affectively and significantly directed toward things. However, the natural attitude does not inform us about such an intentional approach to things. [39] thus assuming those things that appear to us as existing out there independent of our consciousness. Subject and object comprise an experiential unit

that makes no sense for the study of experience to separate.

Through observing the subject-object dynamic system the invariants or patterns of experience are expected to emerge as structures or essences. To this aim, phenomenological reduction takes a crucial role through bracketing our pre-suppositions and explanations about the object of study and its 'objective existence' to keep us open to the unfolding process of what emerges from the experiential unit [33], [35].

Therefore, some consensus ideas concerning the notion of experience within phenomenology and cognitive sciences are its **dynamic** character, its **double structure** (pre-reflective and reflective structure), and its consideration as a **non-dualistic** phenomenon in which subject and object form part of a dynamic system of meaningful reciprocal actions [6], [14], [35], [40], [41]. It is within that subject-object dynamic system that experience appears to us through our sensorimotor explorations of the world. Hence, it is difficult to separate the world experienced from the person who experiences it. This is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the *lived body* which means that the human experience results from the relation between the embodied subject and what appears to him/her at any moment [14].

There is a continuum of experience that moves from pre-reflective to reflective levels of experience which means that most of the time we are immersed in the flow of experience unless something interrupts that flow forcing us to shift our focus of attention to a reflective or conscious level. For instance, the use of crutches following a leg fracture requires attention and body awareness that is not the usual way in which we move spontaneously without further attention to our walking. This pre-reflective/reflective interplay is part of the dynamic quality of experience that is in continuous change. Likewise, this **dynamic quality** determines that observing experience is inevitably retrospective and entails changing it through the same act of observation. This fact is a limitation for accessing the study of experience for scientific purposes, and a strength for accessing psychotherapeutic change. But is it possible to access the embodied and pre-reflective experience without its spoken account? This opens the question of *how to access embodied, pre-reflective experience*.

Regarding the role of language in the study of experience, an open question is whether using *verbal* language to study experience allows to grasp it or restricts access to experience [6].

Research in the mental health field related to corporeality such as psychosomatics, eating disorders, or other types of symptomatology to be explored from an embodied approach seems particularly called to seek new methodological tools. In this regard, Gallagher claims that most of the research designs on body image, require the subject to reflect on and describe their body image. However, Gallagher questions any study that places the subject in a reflective attitude to access aspects of the pre-reflective experience (which comprises a significant part of the body

image), stressing that pre-reflective experience does not necessarily convey a conscious representation [40].

Thus, both within the sciences of experience and in daily life experiences there is a risk of staying trapped in what we have called here *verbal supremacy* or the enforcement of narratives to the experience (well reflected in advertising or political campaigns but also in the stories that we and our patients develop about our daily life). This is probably because explanations, judgments, and descriptions ‘about’ the experience are easier to access rather than the embodied meanings of the implicit and procedural ‘how’ of experience that usually is not easily accessible through words.

Hence, both the reflective and pre-reflective levels are unavoidably part of the experience, but the connection between them is not necessarily fully available: e.g., if the pianist, who would otherwise just play the instrument, tries to do it in a fully reflective manner, the flow of execution will be lost. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the way of accessing the study of the experience will be related to what we will obtain from such a study.

## The art-based study of experience

The act of expression, as Dewey posits, begins with an ‘impulsion’ [13]: a spontaneous gesture as a micro-movement that unfolds bodily memory and that is what we find in every artwork. It thus corresponds to the unspoken dimension of experience that we aspire to express and to further talk about.

Up to now, phenomenology and micro-phenomenology have been the main embodied approaches for the study of subjective experience that are well-grounded both empirically and theoretically [15], [17], [22], [23]. Art-based research has been added to the available tools for qualitative inquiry within the field of the social sciences with the advantage of accessing non-verbal accounts of experience through artistic expression that otherwise would not be available [8], [42], [43]. The use of non-verbal expressive languages accounting for pre-reflective experiences as the case of any type of *expressive artwork* is relevant here since *figurative art* is closer to a ‘representation’ of experience (as a representation of *external reality*, i.e.: a drawing or painting of a vase and a bowl with fruits), which should be intentionally avoided in approaching the experience from a more connected and embodied stance. Thus, for example, asking someone to make a draw or paint his/her house is not the same as asking him/her to draw or paint *how* it is to live there. Therefore, the artwork that I refer to corresponds to the plastic creative expressive one, PCE.

Both the PCE process and the resulting artwork offer **two sources of information for a phenomenological exploration of experience**:

1. **the process of creation** itself with all its experiential display of rhythms, pulses, movements, immersions, perspective-taking, detentions, flows, etc., deploying

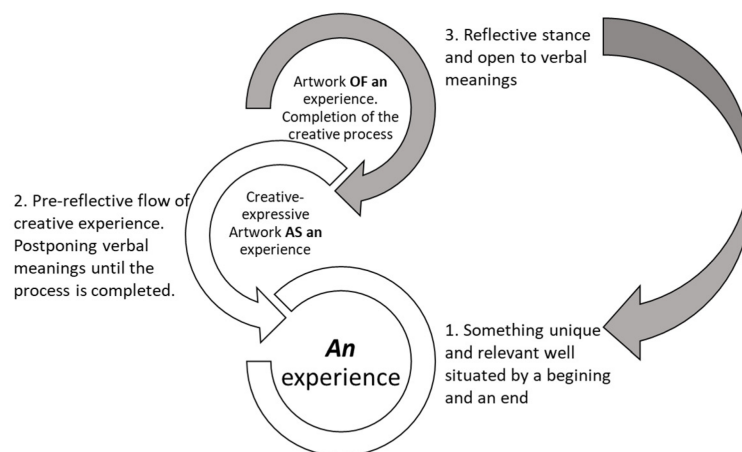
through this the intentionality of consciousness and suspending the natural attitude,

2. **the resulting artwork** as an expression of the embodied and non-verbal meanings of that PCE experience.

Likewise, an art-based exploration of experience offers the possibility of observing “an” experience in the present time, namely the very PCE process, along with its embodied meanings (the affectivity and emotional resonance of the author) expressed through images or objects in the resulting artwork. But at once, offers the possibility of expressing a formerly lived experience taken to present through the very PCE process and its resulting artwork. Except for laboratory settings in which the subject is exposed to an experience that will be the object of study, the PCE process as a methodological tool for the exploration of experience represents an advantage over other qualitative methodologies in which reference is made “about” lived experience that is not occurring in real-time. The process of artistic creation, like any experience, has a *double structure* in which the artist fluctuates between immersion in the creative flow and perspective-taking and then immersion again, which is part of the pre-reflective/reflective dynamism of the experience as a *recursive folding of embodied meaning-making processes* [44] (see Figure 1). For example, while working on artwork, one can observe moments of greater or lesser tracing intensity, use of water/solvent, sudden changes in the chromatics of the work, emotional or dissociated pauses, and extended moments of intense work without pause. Which altogether will be explicit or implicitly expressed in the final artwork. In this way, both the process and the resulting artwork convey embodied meanings.

It seems useful at this point to refer to Dewey’s notion of *art as an experience* as it highlights relevant aspects to consider when studying experience that resemble the methodological approach of micro-phenomenology that seeks to explore situated and well-defined experiences for extracting the procedural and implicit aspects rather than the mental elaborations about a given experience. Dewey [13] distinguishes between experiences that occur continuously as part of the process of living, and having *an experience* as having an experiential episode that runs its course to fulfillment. He proposes that it is only when the experience gets its consummation rather than its simple cessation, that it can be integrated and demarcated within the general stream of experiences with its particularity and self-sufficiency. Therefore, his notion of *an experience* as a self-organized unity of meaning relies on the subject’s distinction of a beginning and an end to any given experience which, in a vital sense, represents something unique and relevant to the subject. It provides thus criteria to delimit and situate a given experience as a subjective “punctuation” over the general experiential flow, anyhow preserving the double structure and the dynamic feature already described for any experience. As observed through my work as an art therapist, in any PCE artwork, this self-organized unity emerges when the subject decides that the artwork is finished and satisfac-





**Figure 1: Artwork AS and OF an experience. Recursive unfolding of meaning-making. Both gray arrows indicate the recursive reflective process: about the creative process as ‘an’ experience (3 to 2) and about the lived ‘experience’ itself (3 to 1).**

torily ready, therefore verbal accounts of it can emerge. Before that moment, the creative process is unfolding through the streaming of experiences full of affective intentionality expressed by spontaneous movements and rhythms. It flows pre-reflectively without further conscious control by the author unless some obstacle forces a change of position by moving to a reflective level as a way of dealing with the problem to re-immersing into the creative pre-reflective experiential flow [44]. This creative process continues until the point at which the artwork has end, determined by the individual, which defines the creative experience as *an experience* on Dewey’s terms. Therefore, the PCE experience proceeds in a pre-reflective mode, just experiencing, except for the moments when the obstacles of the materials call for a shift to a reflective stance to resolve them, or when the creative process requires a perspective-taking for decisions to be taken, including the decision that the process is completed. Each of them is a moment when verbal meanings can emerge (see Figure 1).

Thus, as can be seen in Figure 1, the PCE process comprises both *an experience* (AS *an experience*) and can refer to or be an expression “about” another experience lived outside the creative process itself (OF *an experience*) as a reflective act upon a formerly lived experience.

In this regard, Varela, Thompson & Rosch [35] propose that the role of reflection in the study of experience has to do with the fact that it is a form of experience itself rather than only *about* an experience, highlighting the recursive feature of the experiencing streaming. As it is shown in Figure 1 the creative-expressive process can also involve a reflective stance that is more similar to the contemplative stance of mindfulness techniques and the phenomenological reduction practice [16], [26], [36], named by Varela, Thompson & Rosch as *mindful, open-ended reflection* [15], and for the purposes of this article we will use ‘observational stance’ as a general term for such a reflexive form. For a detailed and fine-grained discussion of different forms of reflection see Zahavi [29] in academic dialogue with Bitbol & Petitmengin [45].

Thus, it is proposed here that the **dynamism** of experience takes part in the PCE experience through its creative flow

that moves from reflective to pre-reflective stance and vice versa opening and expanding the experience by movements through its **double structure**, offering the chance for change and for new meanings to emerge. Through the PCE process embodied and enacted meanings emerge first that would be further verbalized and crystalized by words.

This is of relevance in subjects without mindfulness training (as is the case of many of those who ask for help in mental health) in which exploring one’s own experience through PCE is a good option. In the author’s experience, both clinical and in the application of the micro-phenomenological interview, it was observed people with great difficulty in putting aside mental elaborations such as judgments, reasoning, ideas, etc. Moreover, many are immersed in a permanent state of mental rumination that makes it difficult to access a connected or embodied presence, and some of them overtly reject the practice of meditation. On the other hand, it has also observed subjects that appear to be frozen with great difficulty to talk about anything, even more about their own experience. The use of non-verbal tools for accessing experience as PCE artworks represents an excellent option to overcome the obstacle that verbal language represents in both cases.

Concrete examples of how the PCE process is expressed through embodied meanings that are further captured by words can be found in Figure 2 which shows the artworks of two women within their art therapy processes.

In sum, this dynamic meaning-making system comprises the artwork author’s sensorimotor coordination, his or her affectivity that acts on plastic materials, and the materials themselves. It implies that he or she is the owner of the body which makes possible the creative-expressive process (body ownership). It also implies that the author is responsible for the decision making of the creative process (body agency) such as what type of materials to use, the technique to apply, the selection of colors, mixtures, format, and the limits of the process such as its beginning and end that constitutes it as **an experience**.

Hence, the author is part of the artwork both within the creative process and as the owner of the finished artwork.



Gouache, 53,2x37,5

**CASE 1.** young adult female, professional.

Consultation due to problems of uncontrolled eating and overweight. Art-therapy consignment: "Paint how you feel at this moment of your life."

The work done by this patient expresses according to her own description the many ideas and projects in her head as a very active aspect of herself and, in contrast, the great difficulty and limitation of executing, in the reality, all that is in her head: she feels her feet in a swampy mud that does not allow her to move forward. The body is blue, a color that, although she likes it, appears associated with little energy and vitality. In the center of the chest, a red circle expresses the most intense and deepest affections, demarcated in black as a form of protection: they do not come out easily, preventing her from suffering.



Gouache, 37,5x53,2

**CASE 2.** Middle-aged woman, professional.

Consultation due to Depression and Chronic Pain diagnosed with Fibromyalgia. Art-therapy consignment: "Paint your anger feelings."

She painted a 7 head monster or dragon expelling fire from its mouth but with teardrops in her eyes and with a very little body behind this, as an embryo. When looking at its image she realized the heaviness over her neck and shoulders for sustaining all those 'on fire' heads understanding by this means her chronic pain in her neck, shoulders, and upper back as a form of deeply embodied chronic feelings of anger, sadness and fear and of her embodied defense mechanism against the rejection of others by a rigid bodily configuration.

Figure 2: Artworks of two different womes from heir Art Therapy process [76].

It highlights the **non-dualistic** feature of experience: there is not a rigid boundary between the subject and the object of experience, namely between the author and its artwork [46]. Thus, according to Winnicott [47], beyond the inner world of the author and the outer world of the plastic materials as inherent to the creative process, there is a third party in that equation which is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which the inner and the external world both contribute.

The twofold application of the *art-based study of experience*, namely, for psychotherapeutic aims (art therapy) and scientific ones (art-based research) will be discussed below.

## Art therapy and the study of experience

In the following, the art therapy process is referring to the complete psychotherapeutic process. Art therapy session refers to a single session of around one hour of duration. With a PCE process, I refer to a single creative process resulting in a single artwork. During a session of art therapy session usually, only one PCE process is developed.

The healing potential of the artistic experience, both encountering the artwork and creating it, is well documented [48], [49], [50], [51], [52], [53], [54]. Regarding the PCE

artwork, its healing potential is either by the creative process itself or by some form of symbolization *about* the resulting artwork, so that the insights gained can be kept available to the patient. Clinical experience in art therapy shows how the creative process itself functions as a meaningful and unique experience for the patient, promoting a sense of bodily ownership and agency which in turn restores a sense of being in the world competently and creatively. On the other hand, the resulting artwork opens meanings that were not available to the subject and allows for a reformulation of his or her experience from an embodied comprehension which implies a different feeling and being in the world that later words could come to crystallize (see two clinical cases as examples at Figure 2).

This is of special relevance for psychotherapeutic work with traumatic experiences in which detached forms of verbal expression can be observed: words seem to not have emotional resonance. Labeled as dissociation it calls for other forms of access to experiences such as non-verbal methods of the broad spectrum of creative arts therapies [49], [51], [52], [53], [54], [55], [56], somatic experiencing [57], [58], sensorimotor psychotherapy [59], and the so-called bodily oriented therapies [2], [60], [61]. Considering that there is no experience that is meaningless even if it is not yet articulated in words which is often the case of trauma, the PCE process is also an experience

of embodied meanings not yet verbalized but expressed in the resulting artwork.

Both cases presented in Figure 2 show traumatic registers that were not available to consciousness. In the first case, the devitalized body and the sadness contained in the chest from a childhood of neglect and abuse. In the second case, the psychological violence and persistent rejection over time by her half-siblings and the violent and early death of her father resulted over time in a rigid bodily configuration as a form of defense.

Hence, any psychotherapeutic effort is oriented to give insight into the experience of the subject through opening meanings that were previously not in his or her reflective awareness. As can be noted in Figure 2, the art therapist's indications in both cases do not advance the resulting artwork. Neither the therapist nor the patient could have a predefined idea about it, thus the author's surprise at the meanings that emerge from his own work of art shows the pre-reflective feature of the process that evolves towards a progressive unveiling of such embodied meanings.

Thus, it is through the creative process (with its rhythms, pulses, movements, vitality, energy, stiffness, looseness or fluidity, space use, etc.), that these images emerge, capturing on the blank page this pre-reflective and sensorimotor process resulting in an artwork as a concrete metaphor of embodied meanings. It is expressed in Figure 2 as follows: **In case one** the lack of vitality and energy, the lack of connection with the body and emotions, the lack of agency and sense of ownership over one's own body as an active agent on the environment. **In case two** the bodily configuration of feelings of rage as a defense against the emotional fragility of the patient expressed in overexertion of the neck and shoulders to hold a flaming head that expresses, in turn, the painful points of her fibromyalgia.

Therefore, a complete creative process with a well-defined beginning and end is developed during an art therapy session. Both the process itself and the concrete result of the plastic work are organized as part of an *experience* with its particularity, significance, and relevance expressed by enacted and embodied meanings that are possible to further crystallize through verbal language. Furthermore, in the practice of art therapy, the PCE process is an experience itself, but at the same time, it may express a previous experience (*of an experience*), often one of suffering. Through its deployment, the creative-expressive process is constituted as a *new embodied self-organized system of meanings* that becomes a significant part of the psychological resources and of the change in the subjective experience of suffering for the individual. This way, art therapy replicates the double structure of experience as its "expresses" a given experience, which implies postponing the verbal meaning-making of that suffering experience, all the while unfolding through an embodied meaningful creative experience that leads to a reflective stance as an experience of an experience in a recursive manner (as Figure 1 shows).

The PCE process naturally promotes the unfolding of the "how" of a given experience in an embodied and procedural way favoring self-awareness and change. The predominance of non-verbal, spontaneous, and intuitive stance (named here observational stance) during an art therapy session is a significant difference from the usual mental, verbal, and representative stance of traditional verbal psychotherapeutic approaches.

Therefore, as it is shown in Figure 3, I can distinguish, at least, two different forms of reflection:

1. an embodied, mainly non-verbal reflection or **observational stance** [26] of experience, and
2. a verbal level or **representational stance** of experience.

However, even though creative-expressive language favors the reflective position of *observing over representing* experience (see Figure 3), some people find it difficult to open up to the pre-reflective creative flow remaining thus defensively at a reflective, or representational level.

From the author's clinical experience, this "representative defense" can be observed in a figurative predominance in the plastic work (artwork representing an object from the reality, for instance painting an apple just as it is a real one) or in ruminative commentaries during the creative process, which take the patient out of the experience. In any case, these resistances are part of the therapeutic process itself and, therefore, must be integrated by the therapist for the benefit of the patient. Furthermore, the dynamism between reflective and pre-reflective experience is considered part of a valuable source of information that allows observing different patterns in terms of the level of immersion in the creative process or the difficulty to enter into it by maintaining a dialogue or reflection either self-critical ("I'm bad at this", "I made a mistake", "it's ugly", etc.), or critical of the materials ("I don't like the gouache", "this sheet of paper is too big", "it's not the color I want"), or simply stopping at some critical point of the very creative process as a sort of shocking not knowing how to go on, or the final choice of "it's done" that may show different patterns in terms of the ease or difficulty to detach from the artwork and consider it finished. Altogether, the PCE process informs the therapist about the level of tension between reflection and direct experience that takes part in the suffering experience of the patient [26].

For the practice of art therapy, both concrete well-placed experiences as well as more diffuse or open experiences such as affects, feelings, emotions, or sensations with special resonance for the patient, can be part of the artwork of a session. In both cases, through the PCE process, the patient is prevented from becoming trapped in his or her habitual system of representations favoring a connection with the experience in its implicit and embodied aspects. For example, asking about anger feelings by favoring a narrative about what irritates or bothers the patient (people, situations, events, thoughts, etc.) does not provide the same information as inviting the subject to

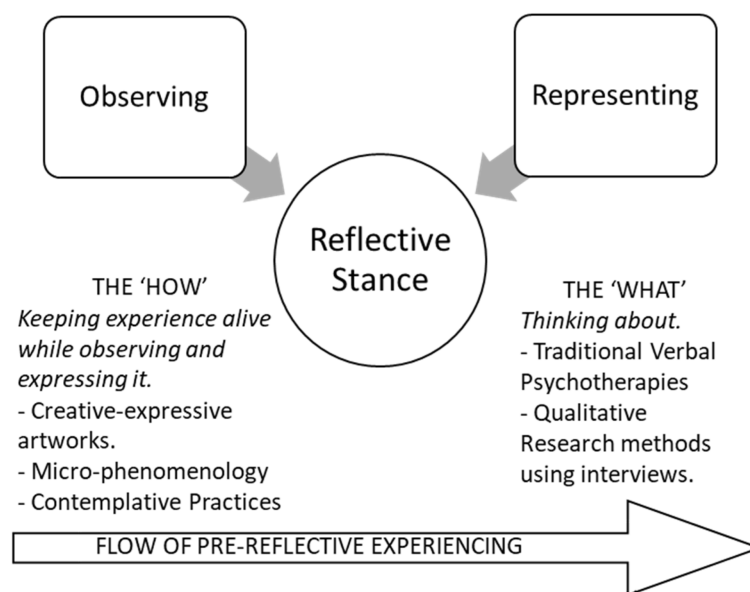


Figure 3: Observing vs. Representing as different reflective stances.

express how his or her anger is in a PCE work (which can be seen in case two of Figure 2).

Therefore, helping the subject to detach from the content of his/her experience and shift the focus to his/her way of experiencing is what will make it possible to manage a meaningful change. In this sense, the use of art therapy is a tool that naturally manages to produce this change of focus in the patient through suspending the explanations or verbal conceptualizations to yield to the PCE process. It is through the creative process that it will be possible to identify patterns or invariants in the structure of the experience of suffering that is susceptible to change through the comparison of different moments of an art therapy process (several PCE processes observing some repeated forms of painting, traces, colors, movements, revealing some patterns of the dynamic flow of the experience, along with different resulting artworks as concrete metaphors of such forms of experiencing).

## Art-based research and the study of experience

The present article intends to give some answers to McNiff's suggestion to apply art therapies as ways of expressing what cannot be conveyed in conventional language to research [8]. McNiff calls for creating new forms of research in resonance with the artistic process. The author highlights the need for an examination of how the processes of creative arts therapy can be applied to research referring to Gadamer's emphasis on the aesthetic experience as the *essence of experience per se* which represents a phenomenological return to aesthetic experience [62].

In exploring experience, amplifying the focus may difficult the connection with direct, embodied experience by

moving up to a more descriptive and representational level of abstraction, unless tools are used that favor suspending the natural attitude such as meditative practice, phenomenological and micro-phenomenological exploration of experience, and artistic expression as proposed in this article. It does not seem possible to gain easy access to embodied, procedural, and pre-reflective cues when attempting to verbally explore broader and less situated experiences for instance the experience of 'vacation' in a general sense. Traditional qualitative methods are better tools for the verbal exploration of such broader and open experiences through their subjective narrative description which leads to a grounded theory that, although it will be based on the subjective account of the individual, its "theoretical" character honestly recognizes its distance from the pre-reflective experience [31]. In this regard, non-verbal approaches are useful tools for exploring such broader and less situated experiences sustaining the subject's connection to its embodied experience as is the case of the art-based research that offers the chance of postponing words and expressing experience through the creative process.

Instead, zooming in on concrete, situated, and well-bounded experience, such as what Dewey considers *an* experience, would facilitate verbal access to the procedural and embodied aspects of direct experience such as exploring the moment when I went horseback riding during my vacation. That is the reason micro-phenomenology and neurophenomenology are used to be applied to 'experimental settings' in which subjects are exposed to a given and well-delimited experience that is further examined.

Hence, art-based research can be used in both cases (less situated experiences and well-situated ones) without sacrificing bodily connection and the possibility of access to pre-reflective experience. Further, the very PCE process offers itself as a unique, concrete, and well-situated ex-



perience that makes it possible to apply what Petitmengin [20] proposes as a methodological imperative.

This emphasis on the 'how' of situated experiences is an important difference between micro-phenomenology and traditional qualitative methodologies [30], [63], which implies the difference between a descriptive account of our experience that inevitably focuses on facts, actions, and events, which obscures the awareness that all these experiential contents pass through the particular way or form of experiencing that is properly subjective and part of our particular way of experiencing. Therefore, if the focus of the study is the lived experience rather than its content, the methodologies to be used should consider it. Art-based research is proposed here as naturally engaged with the study of the lived experience and one of the methodologies of choice.

On the one hand, it is precisely the situated and delimited character of the PCE process as **an** experience that enables the access to the 'how' of experience in which identifying the invariants also opens the chance of changing them. On the other hand, the artistic language seems a better form of expressing pre-reflectively a broader, non-situated, or open experience (PCE process **about** an experience).

If one considers the Indian metaphor of the blind men and the elephant, the study of experience as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon seems not to be possible to embrace by a single method. The study of Valenzuela-Moguillansky et al. [64] shows a promising integration of traditional qualitative methods, micro-phenomenology, and art-based research that makes clear both the differences between them and offers the possibility of being altogether a well approaching o the whole phenomenon that lived experience entails. As such, their study explores the experience of the recovery process of women with fibromyalgia from a multi-level approach:

1. a narrative level for accessing the broad bodily experience of recovery as non-situated experience with an interview designed following qualitative research methods guides resulting on thematic analysis [65],
2. a procedural-embodied level through a micro-phenomenological interview for accessing to detailed verbal descriptions of single life situations, and
3. a non-verbal level through art-based research (Body Mapping technique) that was aimed at deepening the single moment that was approached by the micro-phenomenological interview with a focus on sensorial, postural and on the bodily resonance of the approached moment.

This technique as it was applied by them shows how those already mentioned "embodied meanings" appear such as the qualities of size, color, texture, shape, disposition, and the felt senses as a form of bodily resonance or aesthetic resonance of the final artwork, and a way to graphically visualize the relationship between two moments previously evoked during the micro-phenomenological interview as two different but related forms of bodily configurations.

All the above makes it possible to highlight another characteristic of the art-based study of experience and it refers to its great advantage in the communication of the results. The possibility of presenting the final artworks allows the reader to participate in the lived experience of the subjects through the aesthetic resonance with their artwork.

## The role of language in the access to experience through artwork

Studying experience through interview techniques relies on the use of verbal descriptions as traditional psychotherapies also do. Psychotherapies study human experience through interview techniques and ground their transformative potential in the intersubjective exploration of experience through therapeutic conversation [66]. Even though there are no conclusive answers as to the role of language as a tool for the exploration of experience, it can be thought that by turning pre-reflective material into concepts something is crystallized which represents to a large extent the value of verbal psychotherapies, but also their limitation. Further, language takes part in the dynamic interplay between pre-reflective and reflective experience, where distinctions and explicit meanings emerge. In this regard, it is possible to say that plastic expression, being a deeply bodily, sensorimotor, and affective experience, implies an experience that conveys meanings. These meanings, which are implicit in the creative gesture, are possible to deploy further in a reflective stance through words.

But agreeing that language emerges from the body [2], [27] through its sensory-motor explorations and its emotional and affective resonance [41], the question remains as to what happens that at some point reflecting on experience might get detached from its embodied meaning. Consider the alexithymia features present in several mental health problems as the case of eating and somatoform disorders, dissociative features of traumatic experiences, or the rumination symptoms proper of depression [67], [68], [69] that, as was already mentioned, can make the task of exploring their experiences through verbal language very difficult.

One possible answer to the question about the point of detachment of reflection from direct experience may lie in the distinction between different types of reflection [29]. Among which are of interest here: the reflective position of *observing* experience, (named *contemplative stance* or phenomenological reflection [15], [25], [26]) and the reflective position of *thinking about or representing* the experience which corresponds to what Zahavi [29] has referred as one that leads to a 'self-distantiation', and what within the Buddhist tradition is considered one of the marks of existence and the origin of suffering since reflection is always out of time with direct experience being not possible for reflection to grasp it [25], [26]. According to the so-called 'elusive nature' of the sense of self and its failed efforts for grasping experience

through reflection [15], [26], I propose that reflection implies a distance from the pre-reflective experience that it fails to shorten.

Thus, what we consider here as a reflective posture of *thinking about or representing* experience refers to the natural or naïve attitude that assumes the external reality of our experience, and as a fact possible to describe verbally and to refer to it by concepts, representations, and judgments. The reflective posture of *observation* of experience refers to staying in the experience, sustaining it, and thus, keeping it alive. Thus, what we call *observing experience* implies staying in its sensory embodied attributes, postponing the assignment of verbal meanings as is the case of contemplative practices and phenomenological reduction [16], [26], [36], [70]. In the same way, as one tastes a meal, observing the experience relates to the holding of the taste texture as sensory qualities without imposing mental representations. It corresponds to the state of mindfulness or 'body-fullness' in Caldwell's terms [71], in which thoughts are set aside to observe one's own embodied experience.

For its part, the creative-expressive process corresponds also to a way of sustaining or 'savoring' the experience and postponing the verbal attribution of meanings, which opens the possibility of relief from suffering through change and creativity. It means that it works as *observing experience* rather than *thinking about* it. Furthermore, the artwork as a method of access to experience (for art therapy or research proposes) avoids representations and access to embodied experience which is called by Leavy [72] 'groundless theory' as part of the art-based research paradigm.

Therefore, the role of language in the exploration of experience through PCE work comprises a recursive unfolding of meaning generation. In the first moment, the creative process is a system of embodied non-verbal meanings emerging directly from the body through an observational-reflective turn (colors, textures, movement, rhythms forming images). Further, after successive reflective turns and, especially, when the work is finished by its author, verbal meanings can emerge (see Figure 1).

It is proposed here that both contemplative practices, art-therapies, arts-based research, and micro-phenomenology are bodily and pre-reflectively oriented taking an *observational stance for exploring experience*, with verbalization playing different roles and weights through the very process of exploring experience (i.e., setting thoughts aside for staying in presence, mindfulness, or body-fullness stance in contemplative practices, some further elaboration of the images of the resulting concrete artwork in PCE process, and a means of accessing to a procedural description of a specific lived experience).

In the case of the artwork, the verbal meanings that emerge from the creative process may have a smaller distance from the direct embodied experience than the verbal meanings obtained through an interview [30], [33], [34]. Furthermore, it will probably have very different content. In the study of Valenzuela et al. [64], this can be observed quite clearly since the same sub-phases of the

moment that was explored in the micro-phenomenological interview, were further expressed with the body mapping technique. Thus, what is expressed in the plastic work is closely related to what was explored verbally during the interview but with new embodied meanings emerging from it (i.e.: *sub-phase of tension and rigidity*: visual features: dark colors, sharp edges, the smaller size of the body and a shrunken position among others that were not present in the verbal description of the interview). Thus, art-based exploration of experience shares with the micro-phenomenological interview the focus on procedural and sensorial cues which allow the unfolding of embodied meanings. In the case of the artwork the affective and operative intentionality [23], [73] are displayed through the non-verbal creative process, and in the latter, through the verbal technique of evocation; both work as useful tools for sustaining the pre-reflective stance.

Anyhow, I propose here that when subjects, because of their ruminative and hyper-reflective thinking, have difficulties sustaining or being in touch with their inner embodied experience (to easily access their pre-reflective experience through interviews), the art-based exploration of experience can be a very useful tool that prevents the subject from becoming trapped or immersed in thoughts or words to open up to creative unfolding by shifting the focus of attention to a bodily connected posture. So, in such cases, the use of the PCE artwork would be like telling the subject: "fewer words and more actions or hands to work."

## Discussion

*"When I was at a loss for words and feelings, I sought experiences in the non-verbal, sub-symbolic realm to help me find words for what I could not speak about and to access feelings that I could link with the words in my verbal narrative. In the world of moving and breathing -the sensory, motoric, and visceral domain- I made contact with what Winnicott (1960) referred to as the true self, the source of the spontaneous gesture" (p. 22) [60].*

According to the argumentation in this article, artistic-expressive tools are an option for the phenomenological exploration of experience with both therapeutic and scientific objectives. The PCE process as well as its resulting artwork could entail a phenomenological reduction, which is by far the most frequently occurring technique pointed out as crucial for the phenomenological exploration of experience [33], [35], [37].

In any case, achieving phenomenological reduction through creative work is not something given but will require an adequate atmosphere, and guidance from the art therapist or researcher. Like the micro-phenomenological interview in which specific tools are used such as inducing a particular state of evocation in the interviewee, PCE as a form of phenomenological reduction also requires certain specific conditions. In the author's experi-

ence as an art therapist, the instructions given to the subject are of crucial importance, among them can mention: making explicit that it is not about creating something 'pretty' but rather something genuine, inviting the subject to play and paint from the inside out, letting him/herself be carried away by the movements and forms that emerge in the creative process itself, or by the connection with a given experience to be expressed. The chosen plastic technique can also be used in favoring the phenomenological reduction, some are more likely to induce reflection and lead to more figurative-representational works such as pencil drawing compared to painting, and the use of paintbrushes compared to brushes. In general, those techniques that prevent the rational control of the creative process are better if it is sought that the subject leaves aside the mental, rational control to immerse himself in the creative-expressive experience.

However, all these recommendations arising from clinical experience should be subject to empirical exploration to develop a sufficiently rigorous art-based methodology for the study of experience possible for replication in different studies. In this regard, there is a wide spectrum of areas for the study of experience in which the art-based research method can be applied.

First, as it was exposed here psychotherapy considered as a discipline aimed at the intersubjective exploration of experience is a field in which art therapy represent a powerful tool for approaching the unspoken dimension of suffering experience. If any mental health suffering has its own unspoken dimension, there are some in which the choice of relief it is mainly at that pre-reflective level of experience. It can be due to an impossibility of found, nor the suffering source neither the solution, at the narrative or reflective level. Thus, symptoms that emerge from a traumatic experience can be approached through a verbal traditional psychotherapeutic process, but it will probably be an unnecessarily long process or may achieve rapid symptom relief, but the chances of relapse are very high if the dissociated and deeply embodied traumatic registers are not relieved.

Secondly, within the field of the study of experience for scientific goals, art-based research can also contribute to a wide range of research lines, for example, in experimental protocols of neurophenomenology. The expressive potential of artistic creation is known to have brain correlates that show how the brain re-experiences what the subject is expressing artistically. This allows the PCE artwork to be a way of re-experiencing a lived experience in a process that is observable in real time and, at the same time, to add to the report of results a concrete image, which, through the aesthetic body resonance, allows the experience under study to be transmitted in a non-verbal way. Further, art-based research can be added to experimental protocols within the field of the study of emotions, consciousness, and any exploration of the first-person experience that benefits from the chance to observe the unfolding of the experience in real time [49], [74], [75].

Otherwise, within the field of traumatic experiences art-based research can also be a useful tool since it allows re-experiencing events, expressing emotions without the need of a direct exposure to the traumatic event and favors the deployment of the body register that was not available to the subject (which offers the opportunity to psychotherapeutic relief for the suffering in an art therapy setting). Further, art-based research can be also a useful tool in exploring embodied experiences of different mental health problems, contributing thus to a deeper comprehension of psychopathology from an embodied approach.

Despite both phenomenology and psychotherapy coincide in the study of experience as one of their main goals, and the requirement of phenomenological reduction for the study of experience implies an emphasis on the implicit experience rather than on the mental representation through verbalization, both coincide in crystallizing experience into verbal representations that can be communicated and shared. This makes it necessary to consider the role of language in the approach to experience. According to what has been developed here, we can conclude that language is an inherent aspect of human experience, but it has a double edge: on the one hand, it emerges as a process of generating meaning from sensorimotor experiences, and on the other hand, it can distance us from these bodily experiences through thoughts, judgments, or representations where verbal language is imposed on the embodied experience, which we have defined as 'verbal supremacy' here.

In this regard, the artwork appears to its author's consciousness, while it emerges from the sensorimotor explorations of the plastic materials. Thus, except for figurative art, the PCE process (the one exposed here) requires its author to stay mostly at a pre-reflective and embodied stance named here as the *observational stance*. This way, it favors the phenomenological reduction, postpones the verbal meaning-making, and sets aside the habitual flow of thoughts, explanations, or 'what' of the experience, and the bodily gestures unfold. These embodied meanings are expressed and materialized in the final artwork from which words can further emerge. Through the sensorimotor explorations of the creative process, intentionality unfolds as an expression of how consciousness is 'directed towards', thus expressing the patterns of experiencing. Therefore, the 'how' of the experience can unfold in the creative process through strokes, shapes, colors, movements, and rhythms that can then be translated into words. Both during the creative process and its resulting contents, patterns or structural features of experience can emerge.

The emerging invariants or patterns of experience can be identified just because of the phenomenological reduction. It is part thus of a challenging future line of research to establish the guidelines for an art-based research exploration of experience that explicitly uses it. Even though it does not seem possible to be immersed in the expressive creative flow and at the same time hold an explanatory-reflective stance, obtaining a rigorous methodology

for favoring and sustaining that creative-expressive immersion requires systematization.

The field of study of experience aspires to access embodied experience and a PCE process is an appropriate tool precisely because it is fully embodied. The body is the owner of the artwork and the agent of the creation process. It explicitly avoids representations and favors the expression of embodied and pre-reflective material. Therefore, artwork corresponds to a concrete subject-object convergence zone: it is something existing there that is not the subject but created by him and owned by the subject [47]. This concrete expression of experience constitutes itself as resulting of a dynamic embodied meaning-making system of the creative process. Both the concrete expressive result and its creative process are valuable research and therapeutic resources.

In the case of art therapy, the therapist, the patient, his/her creative process, and the resulting artwork form a dynamic intersubjective meaning-making system in which pre-reflective material becomes reflective but at once it changes. Changing the experience is unavoidable as well as the very therapeutic objective also. For researching the researcher, the participant, their creative process, and the resulting artwork also form a dynamic intersubjective meaning-making system, in which first and second-order cybernetic systems are implied. This means that the researcher is inevitably involved in the creative process and the outcome he or she aspires to explore which is also a compelling argument for developing guidelines and standards for art-based research.

Regarding the role of language in the study of experience, an open question is whether using *verbal* language to study experience allows to grasp it or restricts access to experience [6]. Can the PCE and its resulting artwork be sufficient for promoting psychotherapeutic change or it is not possible without further verbal elaboration? Can be the final artwork, a good form of reporting research results within the field of the study of experience? I think yes because it has the unique feature of expressing through the aesthetic resonance the lived experience that conveys. The question that opens here is if it is necessary to add words to the artwork for reporting results? If we are consistent with the recursive nature of the PCE process, the changing nature of experience and its expression in artistic creation one can say that the possibilities of reporting something new each time are endless. Thus, is it possible to have a methodologically rigorous way of exploring and communicating results about the lived experience? I think yes, but there is still room for developing and better shaping such rigorous methods that ensures the reliability of the results.

Otherwise, further research conducted into the use of different plastic materials and techniques seems necessary for a better organized 'toolbox' to guide both therapeutic and research decisions. Just as we know from experience that certain plastic techniques favor the expressive art, others the figurative, others can favor a contemplative posture (i.e.: as in the case of Buddhist mandalas in sand) or prevent rational control.

In this sense, postponing words through the 'egoless' *observation stance* favored by the creative process can be assimilated to the *contemplative position* of detaching from our judgments and thoughts to listen to the flow of our embodied experience and, this way, a healing experience itself that may not require further verbalization.

In sum, the *creative* artistic experience is proposed here as promoting a phenomenological reduction and a mindfulness stance that was called the *observational stance* in opposition to the *representational stance*. However, it is relevant to say that it does not mean that any artistic experience conveys such a specific state. That is precisely why what it is discussing here is the role of the PCE processes in the field of art-based research for the study of experience. From our viewpoint art therapy opens the disposition, by the very PCE process, to postpone narratives and to sustain the experience similarly that contemplative and phenomenological reduction practices do.

Finally, the dynamism highlights the changing nature of experience that is both problematic and desirable. Problematic for the study of experience, while it renders it impossible to study it as it is: observing experience always means changing it. Otherwise, desirable for art-therapy goals while it looks for changing the suffering experience. In this regard, the changing nature of experience is something to accept as a limitation for its scientific exploration that is better to consider rather than ignore. And for art therapy, appears as something to manage to result in the therapeutic change that is sought.

## Conclusion

The present article developed and discussed the PCE artworks within the frame of art therapy as a tool for the phenomenological exploration of experience both for therapeutic and research goals.

I argued how the level of contact with the experience at a pre-reflective level is favored using the art therapy technique. In this regard, the phenomenological reduction, the artwork as an experience, and the non-duality of the creative expressive experience posit it as an embodied meaning-making and dynamic system through which not yet symbolized experience can be unfolded. Therefore, the role of language in that meaning-making process is firstly rooted in the sensorimotor explorations of the creative process as enacting expressive process; and further, its role is of a narrative creation that integrates the experience expressed through the artwork and the artwork creative process itself as an experience. This integration necessarily conveys changes in the way of representing the given experience, as well as in the way of experiencing further experiences. It represents both the psychotherapeutic strength of art therapy techniques and the limitation of art-based research. However, if we consider that the observer is part of the observed thus the resulting knowledge is unavoidable a changed experience by the



very observation process. That limitation is not restricted to art-based research but any other research approach. Finally, I believe that there is enough room to develop the art-based research as a methodology with sufficient rigor to contribute to the phenomenological exploration of experience.

## Notes

## Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

## Funding

As covered in the EASE international research network. Acknowledgments for funding to Conicyt-Chile. Project: REDI 170181, An Embodied Approach to the Study of Experience, EASE research network, (2017–2020).

## Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments to ANID-Millennium Science Initiative Program/Millennium Institute for Research on Depression and Personality-MIDAP ICS13\_005 for their support in the preparation of this article.

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**Please cite as**

Gaete MI. Creative-expressive artwork as a phenomenological exploration of experience. GMS J Art Ther. 2022;4:Doc05. DOI: 10.3205/jat000020, URN: urn:nbn:de:0183-jat0000203

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<https://doi.org/10.3205/jat000020>

**Published:** 2022-08-19

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