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Three Key Words: **Curiosity, Light, Experience**

I will be discussing three keywords in the context of my practice of Design and Crafts to construct an essay question for future analysis. The three words I have chosen are curiosity, light and experience. These words will be defined by applying philosophy, psychology, and the artistic perspective. The works of Bonnie Mustoe-Whitehill, Stephen Knapp and Dale Chihuly will be discussed to understand and back up these ideas. I will investigate the relationships these words make to synthesise and attain a research question for the future.

‘Curiosity’ is a natural human drive to seek out information or experiences, and has always been a curiosity to humans, with many philosophers and psychoanalysis exploring what it means and how it affects individuals. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, curiosity is “a strong desire to know or learn something” (Stevenson, 2010). William James, a psychologist, was the first to describe curiosity as “the impulse towards better cognition” (1983, p. 37). He believed that it was a gap in our knowledge which leads us to be curious, it is the desire to know which we do not. This led to many others studying curiosity and its effects. Humans always unconsciously strive for knowledge, an intuitive instinct which helps develop evolution.

Curiosity is noticeably linked to motivation and learning. Being curious about a subject or experience can improve motivation for knowledge and memory. It is an important trait that can lead to various positive outcomes, including better learning, creativity, problem-solving, and well-being. Studies have explored the relationship between curiosity and learning. Gruber et al. (2014) found that people who are more curious tend to have better motivation and memory. Kidd and Hayden further expanded on this study stating,

Curiosity drove activity in both the midbrain (implying the dopaminergic regions) and nucleus accumbens. Memory was correlated with midbrain and hippocampal activity. These results suggest that, although curiosity reflects intrinsic motivation, it is mediated by the same mechanisms as extrinsically motivated reward. (2015, p.454)

Gruber et al. (2014) discovered that participants brain activity increased when more curious. There was a link between curiosity and both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Memory retention is also enhanced when in this state, even improving memory on subjects that were not interesting to participants. Positive emotions arise when being curious. Seeking out knowledge gives feelings of reward driving people to seek more and more; people can become persistent in pursuing this knowledge developing problem-solving skills and hyper-focus memory. Curiosity is a powerful force that can improve learning, motivation, and memory, as well as creativity and problem-solving skills. These are all highly important in the creation and perception of art.

Being a successful artist requires a fundamental curiosity, a deep interest, and a desire to learn and explore the surrounding world. Bonnie Mustoe-Whitehill a mixed media artist, massively focuses her work on curiosity. She investigates what makes her curious and invites her audiences to do the same. Her piece *Please Touch* (see Fig 1), visibly pushes her audience to engage and discover new experiences, it was crafted from her own curiosities about tactility and play. Mustoe-Whitehill enjoys experimenting with touch and sight to create positive effects. On her website she highlights the importance of exploring the world around



Figure 1

us, stating “I hope that this work encourages people to use their sense of touch more intuitively, in making work as well as exploring it and the world around them” (2022), engaging with surroundings is vital for new ideas, perceptions, and for artists techniques. Csikszentmihalyi mentions in his book *Creativity*: “the first step toward a more creative life is the cultivation of curiosity and interest” (1996, p.346), he proposes that curiosity is crucial in achieving a good flow of creative activity. He

believed in embracing the exploration and experience of things, to gain more meaningful and creative ideas. Mustoe-Whitehill experimented with casting techniques, to find new innovative ways to play and form material deception. She has been able to elevate her practice by engaging with her surroundings, experimenting, and igniting wonder in others. Overall curiosity is a fascinating concept which influences many aspects of life, mainly producing positive effects, especially in learning. It is an essential drive which enables humans to evolve in becoming more knowledgeable and unconsciously, individual to each other.

According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, 'Light' is "the natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible" (Stevenson, 2010). From a scientific perspective, light is a type of electromagnetic radiation composed of packets of energy known as photons, which allows the eye and brain to see the world. While light contains a wide range of radiation, the human eye is only capable of detecting a small portion of it, known as visible light or white light (Bloomer, 1990, p.26). After centuries of fascination with light and optics, Sir Isaac Newton conducted experiments with transparent materials like glass, ultimately discovering refraction and the colour spectrum. By passing a beam of light through a glass prism, Newton was able to separate it into seven different colours, discovering what is now known as the "spectrum." He also demonstrated that white light consists of different wavelengths of radiation, with violet rays having the shortest wavelengths and red having the longest (see Fig 2) (Grandis & Gilbert, 1986, p.11-12). Glass is an important factor in harnessing the power of light, playing a key role in many discoveries and technological developments, from the law of refraction and lenses to light bulbs.

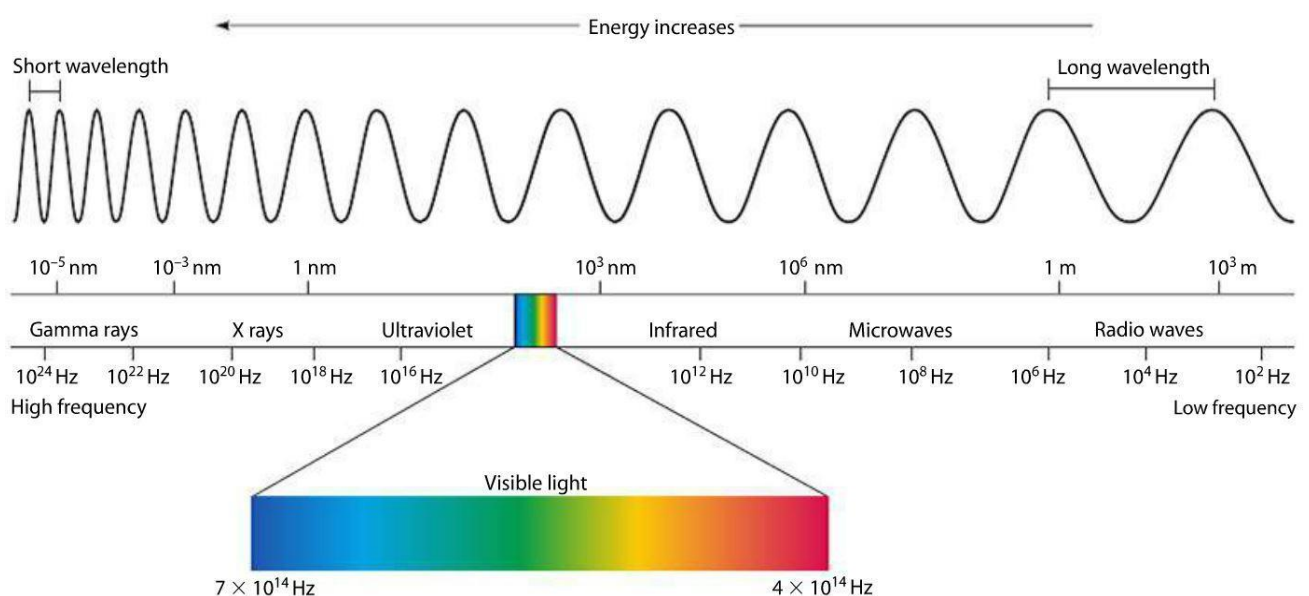


Figure 2

Light is a remarkable and powerful form of energy that touches nearly every aspect of life, allowing people to perceive and experience the world around them. Light's energy does not just affect sight but emotion. In the art world, light and colour hold huge significance, as Blühm and Lippincott state in their book *Light!*, "Light is integral to the making and enjoyment of any work of art" (2001, p.6). Light and colour can have the ability to evoke a range of moods and atmospheres, transforming our experience with the artwork. As Henry Plummer notes in *The Architecture of Natural Light*, "light also makes it possible to express and convey things that are not apparent to the physical eye" (2009, p.15). As one of the most important metaphors in art, light can represent deeper meanings and ideas. Brighter light can symbolise spirituality or hope, and the absence of light is known to produce emotions such as fear or despair. The use of light in art is essential for creating visual perception, emotional impact, and unique artistic experiences. One artist Stephen Knapp uses the power of light in his art. His work is a mesmerizing example of how light can transform the way that we experience and perceive art.

Stephen Knapp is a contemporary artist who primarily works with light to create unique and vibrant artworks, which he calls 'lightpaintings'. His innovative use of light is central to his



Figure 3

artistic practice. One of the key aspects of Knapp's work is his ability to convey a sense of depth and space. His work challenges our perception of form and space in a new way. Knapp's 'lightpaintings' are created by shining a bright light onto shaped dichroic glass, that reflects and refracts light in a range of colours and patterns (see Fig 3). Light and most importantly glass, has a special way of creating this magical presence which is there one moment, and gone the next (Plummer, 2009, p.83). Knapp also comments on his work in this way on his website, "Each piece has a presence that far exceeds its physical dimensions. At once both

physical objects and illusions, they remind us that dreams, hopes and aspirations are the center of art's ability to touch the human spirit." (N.D). His work is so intriguing as he uses no traditional painting materials, his work needs to be constructed in a particular way to be recreated. These beautiful dances of light and colour create an atmosphere able to transcend the mind into other world-like states, filling the body with joy. Light and glass are such unique materials with a multitude of visual effects possible, and Knapp can create almost all of them. The light's energy can be felt in his pieces, creating an exciting and immersive experience for his audience, and demonstrating how powerful light can really be.

'Experience' involves various dimensions which can be defined in different ways depending on the context. The Oxford Dictionary of English offers two definitions, "an event or occurrence which leaves an impression on someone" and "the knowledge or skill acquired by a period of practical experience of something, especially that gained in a particular profession" (Stevenson, 2010). Experience is a complex concept which involves encountering, observing, and participating in an event or activity that leaves a lasting impression, leading to knowledge, understanding and personal growth. Philosopher John Dewey investigated the significance of experience, Alma expands on his findings stating, "An experience is characterized by an intense, vital feeling of being alive." (2020, p.34), they are an essential component in supporting life. Experiences are rooted in the present, enabling individuals to embrace the current moment and expand their sensory perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and physical actions. As with everything, they are subjective to the individual, context, and time, shaping the person uniquely. Experiences play a fundamental role in human life, constantly influencing beliefs and values.

The world of art serves as a significant platform for experiences, connecting individuals, artists, and the artwork. It is a meaningful way to engage with the present physical world, "art can be a great source of enriching personal experience." (Rydzeski,1967, p.5). Dewey proposed a new way of looking at experience, viewing it as a transactional phenomenon. The experiences people encounter, extend beyond their conscious perceptions; these external elements hold equal importance in shaping the experience. (Jackson, 2008, p.3). Dewey's preference for the term 'transaction' over 'interaction' highlights the relationship between the two entities. It is important to recognise that experiences are not limited to the individual alone but the objects and elements within the experience. Knowledge is gained with every

experience whether positive or negative, it helps the individual become aware, resulting in learning. Art is a greatly influential medium that allows individuals to establish a deep connection with their surroundings, emotions and the present world.

Artist Dale Chihuly is most known for his glass installations and immersive artworks. He enjoys pushing the boundaries of glass and creates astonishing unique glass installations which also transfer an experience onto his viewers. His designs showcase the power of experience, creating enchanting immersive artworks. When asked how he feels about being able to display his work after the pandemic he said, "I think art experiences work best when we can relate directly and intimately with the work." (Augustin, 2021). Chihuly recognizes that art and being able to experience it needs to be direct to the viewer. As seen in Figures 4 and 5, Chihuly's pieces are impressive and grand. He intertwines his practice with the world, designing and producing a new innovative worlds for his audience to experience.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Chihuly is a very skilled designer and maker and conveys well how experience can greatly contribute to the artwork and story. Personal experience is very important in design and crafts, being able to work and explore with materials, learning and developing one's personal practice, as March mentions in *The Ambiguities of Experience* "Experience is a significant source of intelligence" (March, 2010, p.101). (See Fig 4) Glass is a commanding material to work with, needing full mental and physical power to achieve the desired outcomes. Allowing



Figure 6

the material to connect with the body and mind gains many important sensory experiences, first-hand experience is vital in the design craft field. Chihuly has explored nearly all forms of media, ranging from charcoal drawings, and textiles to neon glass, his experience is multifaceted. Experience impacts the creative journey

immensely, constantly evolving artistic growth. Being well-experienced in any artistic medium strengthens skill and effectively conveys ideas, into tangible works of art. Gaining experience increases confidence, creativity and intelligence. Experience is important in growing a personal brand and recognition. At last, experiences help challenge and transform a person's mind and body, enhancing the understanding of reality and shaping perspectives.

Exploring the three words Curiosity, Light and Experience, connections between them have started becoming more apparent. Each of these words possesses an inherent nature that influences us both physically and mentally, yielding positive effects such as cognitive learning and artistic development. While they maintain their distinct identities, they also share profound and meaningful bonds that shape one another. Curiosity is a natural drive, while light is a physical phenomenon and experience is a subjective encounter, they each have their place in life and roles in an artist. Curiosity was a key component in the discoveries and technologies of light, on the other hand as well light and the ability to see and perceive the world enabled us to be curious in the first place. I am curious myself about the workings of light and how much it can affect us. Being able to understand light and use it will be valuable in my practice. Curiosity is the driving force for seeking new experiences. It stimulates artistic exploration and experimentation. By being curious artists can discover new ideas, expand their techniques, and create meaningful and engaging artworks. Light is evidently essential in the experiencing of the physical world, stimulating sight and allowing individuals to perceive their surroundings. Light is crucial in art, transforming the way people experience art, creating

visual perception, and setting the mood. Experiences are key to being alive and are the reason for knowledge and skill.

When considered together, these keywords reveal a rich interchange between artistic research and practice. They are interconnected in a symbolic relationship. I aspire to deepen my research on the psychological foundations that underpin motivation, memory, and creativity. I will broaden my understanding of metaphysics and explore the concepts of existence. I will continue to explore Newton's discoveries and identify how important light and colour are in art. In time obtaining a better understanding of the perception of light and how it impacts the mind. And lastly investigating of the different types of experiences and phenomenology of the world. How impactful experiences are for artists and important for their audiences, expanding on why art is important in the wellbeing of others. After evaluating the whole, I have multiple avenues for future research, my question, however, is, "What intangible factors play the greatest part in developing artistic practice and audience engagement?"

Figures

Figure 1: Mustoe-Whitehill, B. (2022) *Please Touch*. Available at: <https://www.bonniemustoewhitehill.com/please-touch> (Accessed: 9 May 2023)

Figure 2: Mini Physics (2016) *Electromagnetic spectrum*. Available at: https://www.miniphysics.com/electromagnetic-spectrum_25.html (Accessed: 5 May 2023)

Figure 3: Knapp, S. (N.D) *Into the Narrows*. Available at: <http://www.lightpaintings.com/rh9k7yua13kt4xwovfh7rv3h8mkfan> (Accessed: 5 May 2023)

Figure 4: Chihuly, D. (2022) *Neodymium Reeds on Logs*. Available at: <https://www.chihuly.com/exhibitions/missouri-botanical-garden/chihuly-garden-2023> (Accessed: 17 May 2023)

Figure 5: Chihuly, D. (2003, 2019, 2019) *Nijima Floats, Sunset Chandelier, Anemones*. Available at: <https://www.chihuly.com/exhibitions/franklin-park-conservatory-and-botanical-gardens/chihuly-collection> (Accessed: 17 May 2023)

Figure 6: Chihuly, D. (1986) *Chihuly, Paul DeSomma, and Richard Royal, Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, Washington, c.* Available at: <https://www.chihuly.com/life> (Accessed: 17 May 2023)

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