

# Abstraction through the Kaleidoscope

Playful Concept Creation with Irma Salo  
Jæger

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the philosophical concept of abstraction and its educational potential based on a day spent with the Finnish-Norwegian artist Irma Salo Jæger at her studio. The creation of the concept is informed by Deleuze and Guattari's (1994/2009) philosophy of the concept and new materialist theory-practice (Coole and Frost 2010; Hickey-Moody and Page 2015; Kontturi 2018; Page 2018). Throughout the day, the concept of abstraction grows through stories related to Salo Jæger's art and artistry and references to art and art history, and the abstract paintings and other artistic materials at her studio guide the creation of the concept. I further analyse the situations and conversations in light of abstraction's educational potential and the aforementioned theories. I argue that abstraction contains both representational and more-than-representational qualities, which are remoulded and combined anew in the making of and encounters with abstract art. Representation functions as a threshold rather than an impasse. The breaking of representational logic brought about by agential materials and the multiplicity of understandings has educational potential, rejecting tunnel vision and binary thinking. The entanglements between humans and painting matter are pedagogical, eliciting new perspectives and embodied understandings. Playing (Harker 2005) enables the educational potential to unfold. It makes experimenting with and building a complex, kaleidoscopic understanding of the concept of abstraction possible. The article contributes to the discourse about Salo Jæger's art and artistry and the concept of abstraction. The creation of the concept challenges conventional philosophical understandings of abstraction, where the concept is regarded as a universal dimension of ideal forms and ideas.

Keywords: Abstraction, abstract art, Irma Salo Jæger, new materialisms, representation, concept, playing

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## Introduction

Throughout the conversation today, the concept of abstraction has been gleaming in my mind. This concept has rich content. But is it passive or active? Does abstraction have agency? Can it act? Or does it stay abstract?

(Irma Salo Jæger)

I meet the Finnish-Norwegian artist Irma Salo Jæger on a July afternoon in 2020 at Atelier Lilleborg, the renovated linseed oil factory in the Sagene neighbourhood of Oslo. She has painted under the grand roof windows for over 14 years. I am in the process of curating a pedagogically motivated exhibition about abstract art for the Children's Art Museum, a section dedicated to children inside Sørlandets Art Museum in Kristiansand, Norway. The exhibition will include two paintings from Salo Jæger.<sup>2</sup> As part of the process, I am investigating the philosophical concept of

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<sup>2</sup> Abstraction! at Sørlandets Art Museum, September 4, 2020–January 24, 2021. The exhibition was funded by AKO Foundation. The exhibition at Sørlandets Art Museum's website: <https://www.skmu.no/utstillinger/abstraksjon/>

abstraction and its educational potential (see also Kukkonen 2022a), and I wish to hear how an artist who has worked with abstract art over the past six decades understands the concept. Throughout the day, I explore the concept with Salo Jæger at her studio, which provokes memories and stories related to her art and artistry.<sup>3</sup>

Salu Jæger was born in Soini, in the Southern Ostrobothnia region in Finland, in 1928. She studied art history and aesthetics at the University of Helsinki and spent semesters abroad in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. Salu Jæger took up residence in Norway with her late husband, Tycho Jæger, in 1954. The painter held her first solo exhibition with abstract and figurative paintings at the Artist's Association in Oslo in 1962. Salu Jæger was recognised by Norwegian institutions from the beginning, but she has continued to be less represented in Norwegian art history when compared with Jakob Weidemann, Gunnar S. Gundersen, and Inger Sitter, all of whom contributed to establishing abstract painting in Norway (Hansen and Ugelstad 2016; Sjøstad 2016).<sup>4</sup> When abstract art was finally accepted in the Norwegian art world in the 1960s, most painters went either for the expressionist and intuitive approach, like Weidemann, or for the more analytical and rational, like Gundersen. Salu Jæger, however, combined the intuitive and analytical, the abstract and the concrete, in her art (Sjøstad 2016).

The word *abstract* has traditionally been used to describe a painting that is abstracted, taking its starting point in something representational (Varnedoe 2006; Ar-

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3 The 'core texts' about Salu Jæger and her art: Dæhlin (2002); Rajka (2006); Rød (1998); Rød (2014); Sjøstad (2016); Valjakka (2016); Ugelstad (2016).

4 Hansen and Ugelstad (2016) note that Salu Jæger is not mentioned in Brun's article (1983) 'Maleriet 1940–1980' [Painting 1940–1980] in *Norges Kunsthistorie* or Brun's article (1989) 'Etterkrigstid' [The Post-War Period] in *Norges Malerkunst. Vårt eget århundre* [*Norwegian Painting. Our Century*]. In the literature (Sjøstad 2016; Valjakka 2016), Salu Jæger's art is discussed more in relation to internationally recognised modernist artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Josef Albers, and Serge Poliakoff.

vidsson 2018). The painting is inspired by something the artist has seen: movement is reduced to a line or a forest to geometrical patterns.<sup>5</sup> Nonfigurative and concrete, among other terms, are used to describe art that does not refer to anything but itself, that is, to its concrete and material reality, rejecting representation altogether (Arvidsson 2018). These definitions become difficult to follow when the focus moves from the artist's intentions to the experiential realm of the artwork. As I have observed in museum educational situations (Kukkonen 2024), a concrete painting can provoke associations in the spectator as much as an abstract work. In recent literature (Arvidsson 2018; Dickermann 2013; Fer 2000; Karmel 2020; Lind 2013; Linsley 2017; Varnedoe 2006), the concept is not regarded only as a word for abstract art but rather as a wider phenomenon in artistic, social, political, and economic contexts. The authors mentioned above study abstraction from different perspectives, offering historical accounts of how the concept has been understood by different authors, artists, and movements. Instead of looking for universalist or absolutist explanations of abstraction, artists and theorists today focus on abstraction emerging in immediate situations rather than in ideal dimensions (Arvidsson 2018). The experiential and situational realm is also acknowledged in my explorations of abstraction with Salo Jæger.

In the present paper, abstraction is regarded as a philosophical concept according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1994/2009) philosophy: concepts are not static discoveries found in reality, but are always created. During the day spent with Salo Jæger at her studio, we are creating the concept of abstraction by experimenting with different understandings. The creation of the concept is nonlinear and kaleidoscopic, provoking new questions, perspectives, and observations throughout the day. My approach is informed by new materialist theory-practice (Coole and Frost 2010; Hickey-

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5 “Abstraction” after all, comes from the Latin *abstractus*, a word meaning to pull or draw away from. It tends to suggest that abstraction is somehow a derivative or second-order kind of art, drawing away from something the artist has actually seen’ (Varnedoe 2006, p. 47).

Moody and Page 2015; Kontturi 2018; Page 2018), which acknowledges the agency of nonhuman matter. In addition to Salo Jæger and me, other agents such as paintings and artistic materials interrupt and guide the concept creation. Throughout the text, I consider the educational potential that concept creation with abstraction might have, and I argue that playing (Harker 2005) becomes a key element for the potential to unfold.

In the first sections, I present the philosophy of the concept according to Deleuze and Guattari (1994/2009) and new materialist theory-practice (Coole and Frost 2010; Hickey-Moody and Page 2015; Kontturi 2018; Page 2018) that inform this study. The first part of the discussion focuses on the emergence of abstraction, both in Salo Jæger's artistry and in a wider context of art history. In the following sections, I contemplate qualities in the concept that might both break and create representational logic. In addition, concept creation leads to reflections as to whether concepts are merely discursive or also connected to senses and action. In the last part of the discussion, I explore how playing (Harker 2005) might enable kaleidoscopic understandings when creating concepts. When I contemplate the educational potential of abstraction, I support my analysis with my previous studies (Kukkonen 2022a; 2024), which focus on the educational potential of abstraction. Throughout the text, I analyse the situations and quotes from the day spent with Salo Jæger with new materialist theory-practice and Deleuze (1968/2021) and Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/2020; 1994/2009) philosophy.

## Creating Concepts in a Flat One-World Ontology

A theoretical starting point for this study comes from Deleuze and Guattari's ontology, which can be described as a 'flat one-world ontology' (Østern et al. 2021, 8). It escapes from fixed positions; contrary to being, the world happens in a constant becoming. The state of the world is like a 'rhizome' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2020,

ii), whose roots are constantly creating new connections and breakages in all directions. Given that there is no linearity in the rhizome, the world is always in a process: ‘A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, *intermezzo*’ (26). The world is immanent; there is no dualist outside dimension of *a priori* pure forms that transcend into the material and embodied world (hence, a *one-world ontology*). Everything in the world is connected and relational without a hierarchy between the abstract and concrete (hence, a *flat one-world ontology*). The logic in the flat one-world ontology functions instead as an endlessly generating multiplicity of ‘and ... and ... and’ (p. 26) rather than a dualist either/or.

Concepts are always created in the flat one-world ontology, given that there is no dualist abstract dimension in which they can exist separate from the concrete world. In *What Is Philosophy?* (1994/2009), Deleuze and Guattari write, ‘Concepts are not waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies. There is no heaven for concepts. They must be invented, fabricated or rather created and would be nothing without their creator’s signature’ (5). In this study, the concept of abstraction is used as a proposition that works like a springboard to test and generate different understandings. At the start of my meeting with Salo Jæger, I bring up the concept of abstraction. We wonder about the concept throughout the day, which takes us towards different ideas, stories, associations, and materials in her studio (and the other way around: the materials lead us to new ideas about the concept).

## New Materialisms: A Theory and Methodology

New materialist theory-practice (Kontturi 2018; Page 2018), which underpins this study, recognises human and nonhuman matter (and, therefore, artworks as well) as agentive, constantly forming, changing, and becoming (Coole and Frost 2010; Page 2018). Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/2020) process philosophy has had an important influence on new materialisms (Kontturi 2018). Given that the world is in constant

movement, new materialisms focus on the processual and material emergence of artworks. The approach acknowledges agential matter, moving away from the hegemony of language and human-centredness. The research approach asks not only how humans make and understand art but also how art makes us (Hackett et al. 2018). Throughout the day spent with Salo Jæger at her studio, the agential material, such as abstract paintings around us, interrupt and guide the creation of the concept.

New materialisms encourage experimentation, given that they might offer ‘[...] something new instead of what is already known’ (Kontturi 2018, 10). Instead of following a predetermined plan, the approach acknowledges cuts and disruptions in the process, escaping from fixed viewpoints (Kontturi 2018). In this study, following Deleuze (1968/2021) and Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/2020; 1994/2009) philosophy and the new materialist theory-practice has led to abductive research logic (Alvesson and Kärreman 2005), in which theory and practice are in a continuous interplay with each other, and the process constantly generates new research questions. Abductive research logic makes it possible to create knowledge where both patterns and interruptions, as well as order and disorder, are acknowledged (Alvesson and Kärreman 2005). Prior to my meeting with Salo Jæger, I made some plans and prepared questions, but early on, I decided to let go of the controlled plan, to follow the various strands of ideas on the way and let the situations unfold by themselves.

I spoke mostly Finnish with Salo Jæger during the day, but sometimes, we switched to Norwegian and English when we were looking for the ‘right’ words. I recorded the conversations with a Dictaphone. When we were sitting at the restaurant, I took notes by hand on paper to avoid recording nonconsenting persons’ voices. In addition, I took photos of the artist, her studio, and the artworks. We have since continued our conversations with phone calls and emails. The artist received and signed a letter of consent, and the project plan was approved by the Norwegian Council of Research Data before implementation.



## Abstraction Emerging beyond Representational Logic

Come in the afternoon, when the light is the most optimistic.

(Email from Irma Salo Jæger)

Irma Salo Jæger's studio is filled with the optimistic light of a July afternoon, which she mentions in her email prior to our meeting. We are sitting at a large table covered with piles of books, notes, and papers. Her paintings are hanging and leaning on the white partitions installed here and there around us. I tell her about my studies in the concept of abstraction, and I ask her: Why did she start to paint abstract art? She is quiet for a long time, taking her time to think about the question.<sup>6</sup> Then, she fills the silence by asking where our artistic ideas come from in the first place:

That is a very difficult question. Are we just copying each other? [...] All the traditional exercises with drawing and painting, such as figure drawing from live models, are still important today. These exercises create a foundation for all artistic forms of expression. We learn to look at pictures and compose them; we learn to know what is significant. Then, these pictures compose *us*, and in the experience, we might judge the pictures. Are they good, are they bad, or what?

Salo Jæger's answer points towards many different agents in the emergence of abstraction. First, her traditional and classical artistic education has influenced her artistic decisions. Second, by combining anew the patterns and traditions, the artist creates something new. The third agent in the process is the material abstraction itself, 'composing us', as Salo Jæger says. Abstraction is not born in a bubble but emerges from

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6 Salo Jæger tells me later that she was thinking about her experience of seeing an abstract painting by Wassily Kandinsky in the Klar Form exhibition at Kunsthalle Helsinki in 1952. She describes this as a 'soul-stirring' encounter (she uses the Norwegian word *sjælsettende*).

many different agents, such as patterns learned through education, the artist's interests, and the concrete process with the material artwork.

Although Salo Jæger refers to her own practice in her answer – as in how she turned towards abstract art in her artistry – I argue that the same logic can also be encountered in the emergence of abstraction in a wider context. In the history of abstract art, many artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Hilma av Klint, have been credited for being the first to create abstract art (Fer 2000; Arvidsson 2018; Lind 2013). These genesis stories and 'firstness', however, have been questioned by many (Arvidsson 2018; Fer 2000; Lind 2013). As Swedish art historian Arvidsson (2018) writes, 'Abstract images had been created previously in other contexts, such as folk art and handicraft, but were not then described as art' (53). The new materialist writers Tiainen, Kontturi, and Hongisto (2015) write that something 'new' [...] points to the sustained processuality – the never fully foreseeable emergence and unfolding – of any materialisations under scrutiny' (5). Something *new* is not absolute but processual; it comes into being when traditions, ideas, and patterns move and merge in new ways.

Salo Jæger wonders further, 'Why have we turned towards abstraction? [...] Kandinsky is naturally with us in the conversation today. Abstraction is spiritual, and all about senses and synesthesia'.

Salo Jæger mentions the Russian artist and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky many times during the day. As other authors (Valjakka 2016; Sjästad 2016) also write, Kandinsky has been an important inspiration for Salo Jæger. In his widely influential *On the Spiritual of Art* (1946), first published in 1911, Kandinsky writes that art is born from the 'inner necessity' (55) of the artist. The inner necessity is derived from three elements: the artist's own personality, the spirit of the age, and from 'art as such' (55). When the artist creates a work of art born from this inner necessity, the abstractions of colours and forms create a vibration in the soul of the spectator. The abstraction

starts to act by itself, or, as Kandinsky puts it, '[the work of art] possesses creative active forces. It lives, has power, and actively forms the above-mentioned spiritual atmosphere' (91).

I can hear Kandinsky's influence when Salo Jæger begins to show me the abstract paintings around us. She talks about her art in synesthetic terms, where the senses mix into each other, and the paintings are their own active beings. She has taken many unfinished paintings up from her storage to daylight as a result of another project. She tells me that some of them have been there for more than a decade, but the works do not 'speak' to her. I point at pieces of geometrically cut paper on the floor, and Salo Jæger leads me to an unfinished painting to show me how they work. She carefully attaches a piece of paper to the canvas to see if the form can work in the composition. I ask if it is her or the canvas that leads the painting process. She answers:

Sometimes I want to paint, and the painting is calling me too. However, to finish a painting, the artwork needs to speak and come towards me. [...] The artworks have their own agency and will. Materials play a significant part in the process. When I use different kinds of primers on the canvas, the painting starts to act by itself without my knowing. When the painting dries, it might look different from what I expected. I take this agency as a positive gift.

Salo Jæger's artmaking seems like a highly intuitive and sensitive process. Sometimes, the collaboration between her and the materials happens in perfect synergy, while at other times, it involves a number of surprises. As her answer above indicates, she acknowledges the agency of the materials and welcomes the surprises they create as a 'positive gift'. Salo Jæger also describes other nonhuman agents when we discuss the process of making abstract art. As we walk around her studio, she tells me that she is in a hurry to finish the paintings around us because of the disappearing light:

It is already July, and soon, the sunlight will change. [...] We need to live at the mercy of the light that makes our life possible on the only planet that we have. The light begins to disintegrate in July. Very soon, the sunlight will lose its character, and it will lose its face, becoming expressionless and blank. The autumn months are filled with hurry and urgency, with the disappearing light. In the last three months of the year, it is not wise to make final decisions or do finishing touches on a painting. In the middle of January, daylight starts to return, especially if there is snow. The light is at its best around Pentecost.

As the quote above shows, light is an important agent in Salo Jæger's artmaking. She might call the light 'optimistic' and talk about its 'character' and 'expressions', almost as if it were another colleague at her studio. Light is something out of her control, provoking hurry and urgency, but through the knowledge she has gathered throughout her career, she knows how to work *with* it.

In these moments described in Salo Jæger's quotes, the painting matter and light might become a teacher for the artist. The new materialist authors Anna Hickey-Moody and Tara Page (2015) write about matter that '[...] can often teach us through showing us otherwise. [...] Matter resists manipulation, it inspires and demands attention, and through engagement with matter, new modes of practice transpire' (16, original italics). Something new, as also discussed earlier, can come into being when the agential matter acts differently in relation to the artist's expectations. This process might break representational patterns and logic, as in challenging what is already known.

The pattern-breaking qualities of abstraction can be seen not only in the making of abstract art but also in experiences with abstract art. As a museum educator and researcher of museum educational situations with abstract art (Kukkonen 2022a; 2022b; 2024), I have observed this representation-breaking quality in action many times when museum visitors experience abstract modernist art. When a group of 10–

12-year-old children look at an abstract painting, each student sees it differently, and the image transforms from nonfigurative to figurative (and back again) multiple times in the situation (Kukkonen 2024).<sup>7</sup> This paradox – that an image seems to represent nothing but, at the same time, many things – is a common question in the contemporary literature about abstract art (e.g., Fer 2000; Linsley 2017; Varnedoe 2006). The art historian and former chief curator of painting and sculpture of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Kirk Varnedoe, argues that ‘Abstract art, while seeming insistently to reject and destroy representation, in fact steadily expands its possibilities’ (40). One abstraction provokes countless imaginative associations and responses. This could be understood as ‘a multiplicity’, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2020, 7). According to the philosophers, everything is a multiplicity in which lines between subjects and objects become blurred, emerging from numerous sources like a kaleidoscopic collage. In the previously mentioned study with schoolchildren (Kukkonen 2024), I argue that encounters with abstract art can have educational potential given that the multiplicity of understandings might help to reject tunnel vision and binary thinking. The abstraction is seen from multiple perspectives, as if through a kaleidoscope, becoming a multiplicity of abstractions.

## Concrete Abstraction: Numbers, Patterns, and the Unambiguous

Salo Jæger gets an idea about the concept of abstraction, and she begins to scroll through a thick book that lies on the table. She says, ‘Here it is, the number of Fibonacci. Arabic mathematics must be taken into consideration’.

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7 In the study (Kukkonen 2024), I observed eight groups of sixth and seventh graders (10–12-year-olds) visiting Sørlandets Art Museum. The groups participated in a guided tour at the Gunnar S. Gundersen – The Groundbreaking Modernist exhibition (4.9.2020–24.1.2021).

I get up from my chair and take a look at the book. I read from the pages that Leonardo da Pisa, called Fibonacci (1170–1250), was an Italian mathematician who learned Indian and Arabian mathematics when travelling with his merchant father in North Africa. In the Fibonacci sequence, each number is the sum of its two preceding numbers. The sequence that bears his name has been used to compose aesthetically pleasing images, and it is connected to the rule of the golden ratio.<sup>8</sup> Salo Jæger shows me a table chart from the French manufacturing company Sennelier, which produces art materials and pigments. For the past 60 years, Salo Jæger has used canvases that follow the table chart, with its three categories of canvases: figure, landscape, and marine. The length of the painting always has the same ratio as the width of the canvas.

It seems like Salo Jæger's mind is constantly occupied by numbers, which she frequently brings up in our conversations.<sup>9</sup> She wonders whether beauty can be calculated by mathematics, and she tells me how her mother, educated as a tailor, taught her to think about proportions. Then she pushes the movable partitions around and shows me a large greyish-white collage where she has sewn painted particles together.

Mathematics becomes an important component in abstraction when the concept is understood through Salo Jæger's artistry and the situations described above. She relates the concept to the Fibonacci sequence and the golden ratio, and the formats by Sennelier play an important role in the abstractions she creates. When thought through rhizomatic logic, abstraction is not only 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2020, 10–11), ruptures and disconnections that escape the representational

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8 The book that she is scrolling through is a compendium that she assembled with her research assistant when working as a professor at the Norwegian National Academy of Fine Arts from 1986 to 1992. Salo Jæger writes more about the Fibonacci sequence later in an email: 'Numerical relationships that occur this way in geometry appear as symmetrical and harmonious, aesthetical proportions'.

9 For more about Salo Jæger's interest in mathematics and its importance in her work, see Røed (2014).

order, but also ‘lines of articulation or segmentary, strata and territories’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/2020, 2), which might create structure and form. Although the ontological state of the world is in constant movement in the process philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2020), we can still detect organism-like formations, even if they eventually transform into something else when interacting with other things in the world. These ‘already known’ things, such as mathematical patterns in abstraction, can then also be considered representational logic.

The artist suddenly remembers a moment from her teaching days at the Norwegian National Academy of Fine Arts. When a student asked her how she would define the abstract picture, she answered, ‘Abstract painting is colours and forms within the law of frame. The frame is the first step, given that it defines the proportions that will appear on the picture plane’.

This definition reminds me of the concrete art movement, where the painting is stripped of all reference to everyday reality and is constructed from its essentials, colour and form. It is characterised by geometrical, clear, and closed forms and colour planes. Concrete art came to Norway after World War II from Sweden and France, and the international movement was influenced by Bauhaus, suprematism, and neoplasticism in Europe (Gjessing 1998).

I ask Salo Jæger what she thinks about the word ‘concrete’. She gets an idea and starts to push the partitions around, looking for a certain painting. She says, ‘Some of my paintings are concrete, and I would describe them as ... unambiguous, while some others have a certain element of wonderment’.

We are standing in front of a large painting with a cold red background. Warm yellow and light blue vertical forms are leaning against each other, and my eyes turn towards a hook-like black shape in the middle of the painting. Salo Jæger continues, ‘The concrete paintings *happen fast*. Some others you can watch for decades, and they always give you something new to think about’.

Then, she reminds us that, sometimes, the seemingly unambiguous can also become very complicated; perhaps the painting we are looking at is not concrete after all. We begin to wonder where the centre of the painting might be and how all the colours affect each other. Salo Jæger wonders further, ‘There are actually all kinds of events in the painting.’

The word ‘concrete’ has multiple meanings. In addition to movement in abstract art (Gjessing 1998), concrete can mean physical and material things and events in the world.<sup>10</sup> It can also refer to something that can be easily understood and grasped, something ‘unambiguous’, as Salo Jæger says. Inspired by the latter, the concrete can be understood as the representational level of abstraction: patterns, structure, and order in abstract art. Salo Jæger’s interest in numbers, geometry, and mathematics can then be considered concrete: coherent, measurable, and definable.<sup>11</sup>

British artist Gillick (2013) suggests that abstraction is fundamentally impossible because abstract art is always concretised in the making of art. I do not agree with Gillick that abstraction would be impossible, given that I do not think the concept is absolute. I make the case that abstraction contains both the concrete (emergence of representational patterns) and the abstract (moving outside or beyond representational patterns). With the concrete painting at Salo Jæger’s studio, a work that first appeared as ‘unambiguous’ continued to move and happen, giving us more to wonder about when we stood before it. In a situation in which an abstract painting and a spectator meet, something seemingly unambiguous might open up into a multiplicity of events. Similar moments occurred in the study I previously mentioned in this paper (Kukkonen 2024). When I observed 10–12-year-old children on a guided tour with

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10 Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Concrete,” accessed June 18, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concrete>

11 Elsewhere, Salo Jæger has explained that the canvas is concrete and that colours need to find forms that collaborate with the canvas (Røed 2014). When she paints, the mathematical relations of the Sennelier format she has chosen influence the work.



abstract art, some of the students discovered new ‘events’ in the abstract paintings when intuitively moving their bodies in front of them.

The artist-teacher-researcher Tara Page (2018) argues in her pedagogical theory, underpinned by new materialisms, that learning can happen when we engage with matter with our bodies in a sociomaterial world. ‘Bodies and things are not as separate as we were once taught, and their intra-relationship is vital to how we come to know ourselves as humans and interact with our environments’ (Page 2018, 2). The entanglements – or ‘intra-actions’, according to Karen Barad (2007, 141) – between bodies and matter are pedagogical. As in the encounter with a ‘concrete’ painting at Salo Jæger’s studio, or when the schoolchildren experienced abstract art in the museum space, the painting matter interrupted and guided the experience. In these moments, learning happens in intuitive and embodied ways.

## Abstraction as an Incomprehensible Concept

Without noticing it ourselves, we have been standing on our feet for hours in her studio, and we need to rest our legs. We sit down in the neighbouring restaurant. The place is crowded and echoing, but Salo Jæger does not seem to mind the hustle and bustle. We are moved to another table and the waiter brings us desserts as an apology. When Salo Jæger’s purse drops to the floor, she picks it up before I have time to react. She seems curious about the changing and rather crowded and noisy atmosphere of the restaurant. She tells me that they sometimes have great colloquiums with the staff at Atelier Lilleborg. When they hold courses about mural techniques, conversations during lunch breaks are important. She says:

When you are with others, your thoughts are becoming and transforming. The purpose of us humans is to work with the whole of our bodies, and you need to think in many ways. [...] Abstraction seems to be a difficult concept. It is a concept that asks and demands. Demands are very important in life. I have al-

ways been eager to make, to create and to act. But I need to watch out. My life is like a sewing machine ticking forward. Not because time is moving so fast but because I am working so much. But it is important to have things that urge you in action; those things keep you alive.

As the Finnish art historian Timo Valjakka (2016) also points out, Salo Jæger has a curious, unhierarchical, and open attitude towards life and art. As the quote above shows, she values thinking with others and challenging her thoughts. For Deleuze (1968/2021), thinking happens through difference: ‘Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter’ (183, original italics). Whereas recognising means identifying two or more things as identical, repeating what is already known, encounters happen through differentiation, which breaks representational logic. I argue that the concept of abstraction during the day spent with Salo Jæger forced us to think, or as Salo Jæger puts it, ‘[Abstraction] is a concept that asks and demands.’ The quote above also indicates that Salo Jæger regards ‘thinking’ as something that happens through action with other bodies and materialities in the world. Deleuze (1968/2021) writes that thoughts are not only cognitive but occur through the senses, generating understandings that cannot always be articulated or rationalised.

Saló Jæger wonders further, ‘Abstract art depends on our skills to be alive. Abstraction is how everything feels and how it is to sense things, to use senses’. She tries to explain what sensing means, but gets nowhere and says, ‘You cannot explain senses with words because you only feel them.’

We start to wonder in what language the concept of abstraction might be easiest to understand. In our conversation, we have mostly spoken in Finnish, but we are constantly struggling to find the right words. Sometimes, we end up at dead ends, and here and there, we change the language. Saló Jæger switches into Norwegian and

says that, perhaps, the concept is impossible to grasp or understand: ‘An incomprehensible concept! [*Ubegripelig begrep!*.]’

This idea reminds me of Jacques Derrida’s *aporias* (1993) in his linguistic model, a concept I studied for my master’s thesis (Kukkonen 2017) and in relation to abstraction (Kukkonen 2022a). Some concepts have a paradoxical structure that cannot be resolved. These concepts are undefinable and undecidable. Does the concept of abstraction exist at all if you cannot explain it with words?

Salo Jæger seems very enthusiastic about the idea of the impossible abstraction, but she does not accept it as an answer:

Reality is not only made of words. Senses are also reality. My responsibility as a human is to paint, and paintings’ task is to nurture the senses. Without senses, we do not feel well, and nothing matters or means anything.

I argue that in these thoughts, a ‘concept’ is not only a theoretical tool in an abstract or textual dimension, but something that emerges from and further generates ‘concrete’ things, senses, and action (in the sense that ‘concrete’ signifies material and embodied aspects in the world). In light of Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy (1994/2009), concepts are also ‘sensibilia’ (5), similarly, as thinking is not solely cognitive. These understandings challenge human-centredness and the hegemony of language. Education researchers Karin Hultman and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010) write that the understanding that reality is constructed by words ‘[...] reduces our world to a social world, consisting only of humans and neglecting all other nonhuman forces that are at play’ (526).

Connecting the philosophical concept of abstraction to senses and action also differs from the conventional idea of abstraction as the universal and weightless dimension of ideal and perfect forms, as in Plato’s (1997) dualist ontology, where the material, sensory, and concrete are only secondary representations of the perfect forms. In

the concept creation with Salo Jæger, as discussed previously, the painting matter guides and challenges our dialogue and the concept creation. The concrete and abstract are constantly becoming without a clear hierarchy between the two. This is also the case in Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/2020) flat one-world ontology: the world is understood as immanent without a dualist dimension transcending the material world.

## Playing with Uncertainty

In one of the quotes above, Salo Jæger calls the concept of abstraction 'difficult'. However, she does not shy away from this difficulty but openly explores the different understandings that emerge during the day. Concept creation takes us to many different ideas, encounters, stories, and references. Similar logic can be detected in encounters with abstract art: one image becomes a multiplicity of abstractions without a single definite answer. This ambiguity and pattern-breaking quality can be found in many kinds of art, if not all, in varying degrees and not only in modernist painting. As mentioned earlier, Arvidsson (2018) writes that abstract, non-figurative art has been created in many contexts and cultures. For example, a recent archaeological study (Bello et al. 2020) showcased ten fragments of engraved stone plaquettes with abstract designs from the Magdalenian site of Les Varines, Jersey, Channel Islands. These geometrical abstractions are believed to have been made in Magdalenian cultures in Western Europe approximately 15,000 years ago.

I propose that abstraction is the uncertain quality in many, if not all, kinds of art. Abstraction is born when representational logic – traditions, patterns, and what is already known – is composed in new ways. The patterns are broken and remoulded, and the breaking of patterns paradoxically becomes a pattern. Abstraction is that which diverges from the road, opens rather than closes, touches senses, and might es-

cape words and conventional logic. The constant emergence and breaking of patterns makes it slip from our fingers when we are about to catch it.

In my previous studies, I have observed how abstract art and its rejection of fixed answers can provoke frustrated and even angry responses (Kukkonen 2022a; 2024). When the image cannot be controlled by its viewer or given a rational explanation, the human subject loses control of the situation, which creates uncertainty. The painting matter also provokes sensory experiences, which cannot always be explained with conventional logic, and which might challenge the spectator's expectations. This might happen when visitors encounter abstract art in a museum space, but also with an artist who has worked with abstract art for over six decades and has immense knowledge of materials, traditions, and techniques.

As I have argued elsewhere (Kukkonen 2022a; 2024), the uncertainty in abstraction can have educational potential, both when encountered in paintings and when the concept is used as an educational approach by purposely creating situations in which representational logic is challenged. Abstract art is a safe opportunity to encounter uncertainty, which can build our tolerance towards uncertainty in everyday life (Kukkonen 2022a). Encounters with abstract art can help reject tunnel vision and binary thinking (Kukkonen 2024). As argued in this paper, abstraction can help build kaleidoscopic understandings that do not shy away from difficulty. Regarding the concept of abstraction as 'sensibilia' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994/2009, 5) can turn one's focus towards senses and the agency of nonhuman matter.

I further argue, inspired by the day spent with Salo Jæger at her studio, that a key aspect for the educational potential of abstraction to unfold is the element of play. Salo Jæger has an experimental, curious, playful, and unhierarchical attitude towards art and life, skills that can be very beneficial when one encounters uncertainty in art and life. Salo Jæger's playfulness and openness have also been noted by other authors

(Dæhlin 2002; Ugelstad 2016; Valjakka 2016).<sup>12</sup> To create kaleidoscopic understandings, one needs to let go of a linear knowledge-building process that seeks to find one final ‘truth’. The concept creation with Salo Jæger and the analysis in this study is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic logic, which emphasises non-linear and relational epistemology, where disruptions and breakages are welcomed. The philosophers write, ‘Always follow the rhizome by rupture; lengthen, prolong, and relay the line of flight; make it vary, until you have produced the most abstract and tortuous of lines of n dimensions and broken directions’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2020, 10–11).

Harker (2005) writes about playing as something that happens between being and becoming, as inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/2020; 1994/2009) philosophy. Harker argues that playing is not only something that children do, but also an activity that concerns all ages. According to Harker, playing contains embodiment and affects (Connolly 2002; Massumi 2002), intensities between matter and bodies that cannot always be articulated in words. Although playing can be emancipatory, it can also contain controlling patterns that create familiarity and stasis. Playing can also be serious: ‘[...] playing isn’t always fun and games’ (Harker 2005, 48). I argue that the concept creation with Salo Jæger at her studio was playful in Harker’s sense of the word: the concept was in a state of becoming throughout the day, creating an open-ended exploration where we experimented with multiple definitions and ideas. The concept became entangled with artworks, notes, and other materials, and we could not always explain the understandings with words. Playing made it possible to create a kaleidoscopic understanding of the concept.

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12 Salo Jæger has been inspired by the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (2013) and his ideas about the ‘homo ludens’, ‘the playful human’ (Ugelstad 2016, 33).

## Conclusion

I have studied the philosophical concept of abstraction in this text, based on the day spent with Irma Salo Jæger, and by further analysing the situations in light of new materialist theory-practice (Coole and Frost 2010, Kontturi 2018, Page 2018) and Deleuze (1968/2021) and Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/2020; 1994/2009) philosophy. The present paper contributes to the discourse on Salo Jæger's art and artistry (Dæhlin 2002; Rajka 2006; Rød 1998; Røed 2014; Sjøstad 2016; Ugelstad 2016; Valjakka 2016), knowledge that has been called out previously (Hansen and Ugelstad 2016; Sjøstad 2016). This concept creation also contributes to the literature on the concept of abstraction in the context of abstract art (e.g., Arvidsson 2018; Dickermann 2013; Karmel 2020; Lind 2013; Linsley 2017; Varnedoe 2006). To the best of my knowledge, the philosophical concept of abstraction has not been studied before with a new materialist theory-practice in the context of Salo Jæger's work. In addition, I have discussed abstraction's educational potential and the importance of play (Harker 2005) as part of its unfolding.

Concept creation challenged conventional understandings of abstraction, where the abstract and concrete are considered separate dimensions or where abstraction is regarded as a universal realm of ideal forms. The concept was continuously explored in relation to the concrete and material world. I have used multiple meanings in the text for the word concrete. In our concept creation, it has referred to material and physical matter in the world, a movement in nonfigurative art in art history, and to 'unambiguous' things in the world, such as artwork that 'happens fast', as Salo Jæger described it. I have further analysed concrete as representational logic in abstraction. Based on the concept creation with Salo Jæger, her classical artistic education and her interest in mathematics can be understood as representational patterns in abstraction. In the process of making abstract art, and in encounters with abstraction, the patterns are remoulded and combined anew. The breaking of representational logic hap-

pens not only by human subjects but also by agential materials. The ‘teaching matter’ of abstraction might provoke sensory experiences and surprising associations, which cannot always be explained by words or conventional logic.

The breaking of representational logic might create uncertainty and frustrated responses, as I have also observed in museum educational situations, where 10–12-year-olds encounter abstract art on a guided tour (Kukkonen 2024). However, these encounters might have educational potential. Abstract art is a safe opportunity to encounter uncertainty, which can build our tolerance towards uncertainty in everyday life (Kukkonen 2022a). Such encounters can help reject tunnel vision and binary thinking (Kukkonen 2024). In the present paper, based on the concept creation with Salo Jæger, I have argued that playing (Harker 2005) enables the educational potential to unfold, making it possible to create kaleidoscopic understandings of the concept. With a playful approach, a lack of fixed answers can become ‘a multiplicity’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2020, 7) of understandings.

The artist has a playful and unhierarchical attitude towards art and life, an approach I am inspired by as a researcher, art educator and art historian. Salo Jæger’s playfulness does not mean that she does not take art or life seriously. It means curiously looking at things from multiple perspectives, even if it is difficult, time-consuming, and challenging. Her optimism is not naivety or ignorance, but the patience and wisdom of seeing potential in the multiplicity of things, building a kaleidoscopic view. The playful, open, and unhierarchical attitude makes it possible to listen not only to one’s own wishes, but also to the materials. Lines between the artist and artistic matter might sometimes blend into each other. As Salo Jæger said at her studio:

When you work with traditional methods, it takes a lot of time. It won’t become anything if you try to do things too fast. The working process is very complicated. All the different pieces need to be put together. [...] Then, I ask



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myself if I am satisfied with the result. Me and the painting, we are the same. I need to accept that I am like that'.

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