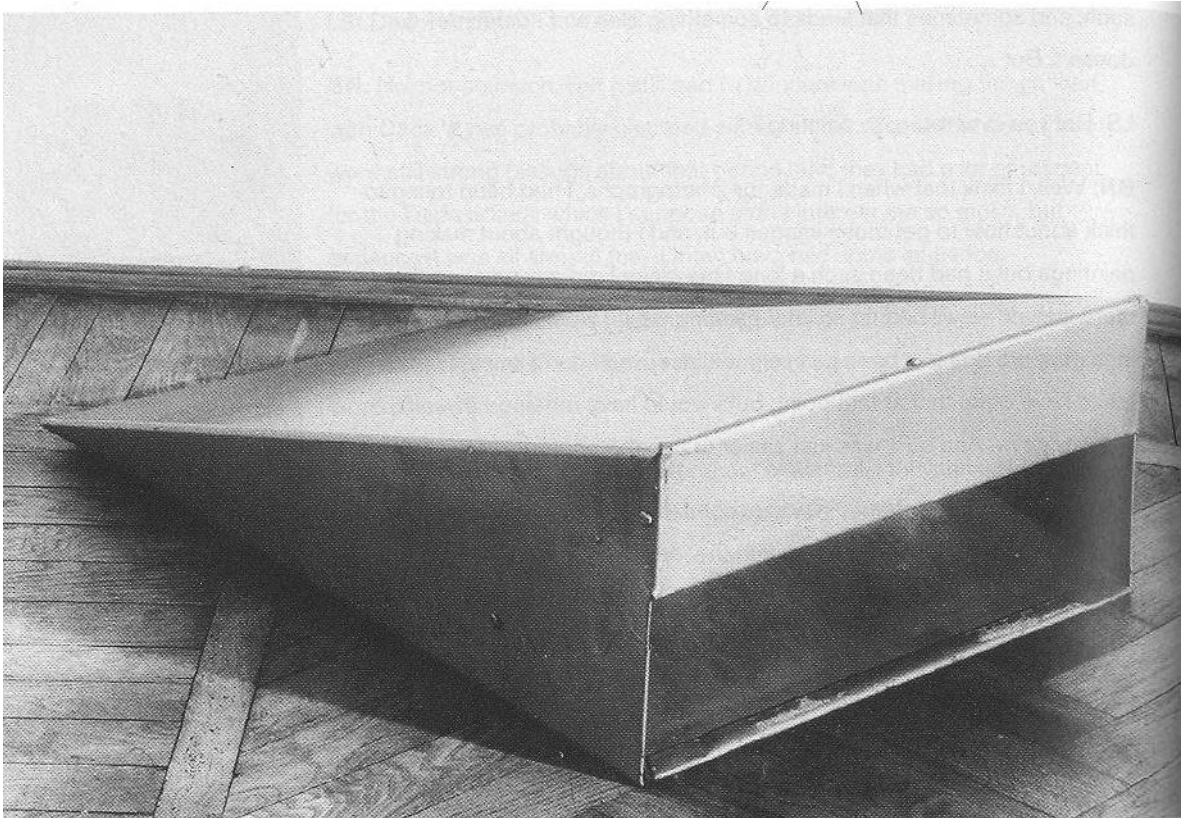


Things you do, and don't understand

by Chris van der Kaap



Bruce Nauman. device to stand in, 1966, steel, blue laquer

Touching on Spinoza

Posters, manifestations, temporary libraries and performances try to regain our attention for Spinoza. About four years ago I first read Spinoza's *Ethics*. What I remember from it then was the difficulty of using rationality to explaining to someone that you love something. Now I try to approach some of his general thoughts using specific experiences of myself and those of others.

Ethics is a book that applies mathematical logic to ones understanding and experience of life. The third of 5 chapters is about human affections in relation to the things he strives for and experiences. Spinoza's often somewhat 'limited' definitions of love, pleasure and especially touching, inspired me to write a short essay on sense (*verstand*) and sensation (*gevoel*).

Things you do, and don't understand

Only people who are curious can understand something. In anything you do that has your attention, there is a desire to obtain knowledge about that subject. To learn to know how your experience of things relate to how comprehend things¹. To be able grab it, means that you can actually hold it. But is knowledge something that you can own?

Why is any object we don't understand always called 'a thing'??

Discovering is touching on something that you didn't yet experience before. Touching is a state in which you allow yourself to be affected by an object or an idea. This potential effect of this experience can not find ways to be revealed. The excitement you feel when touching something for the first time is because of the fact that you discovered a certain value about it. You might want to try to preserve the condition in which it touched you. Like a rose or a piece of sheet material. Not only because the experience becomes something you desire. Also touching it in another place and another time always makes a different experience.

Some things are hard to touch, temporary or unique. Those tend to have a bigger impact on us than things we can easily recognize. The discovery of an object like a new species of flowers can be examined on many different levels and by many different people.³ A scientist may examine it for its shape and it's color while an artist looks at what is happening inside of its stem. Both experience the joy of showing off their skills in observing. Even though they may argue about their findings both their knowledge adds to our understanding of it.⁴

Making something also has to do with owning something. You make something because you think the knowledge it contains has value. Like writing a text makes you find words for an important experience you had. Maybe after writing the text you decide to print it in a small edition. So you can hold an object that actually contains your thoughts. Although this may seem like quite an ordinary thing, the fact that you can do this relies on the basics of economical liberty. It allows you to hold it for a while so you can develop it to its potential. Yet holding on to your idea is mostly not very satisfactory. There is something that makes you proud of something you have achieved.

Telling someone about your experience makes you proud. Because you believe other people might appreciate what you have done. But how do other people understand your personal experience? Imagination helps us to understand things from a distance.

1 The word comprehend originates from the the latin word *prehendere* meaning to grab or to hold.

2 Quote from Leonard McCoy in Star Trek: The Motion Picture, 1979

3 p194, *Ethica*, B. de Spinoza. Translated by Henri Krop, Prometheus, 2002

4 Interview with Richard Feynman, BBC Horizon, The pleasure of finding things out , 1981

Touching an object and holding it adds to the understanding that we have of the object. But one also tries to touch things you cannot touch⁵. Imagining the height of a tower constructed of all the things you own or imagining how something would look inside out⁶ are experiments in which the mind tries to increase ones ability to imagine how things may feel like.⁷ A bit like the desire to stand on something which is not allowed to stand on⁸.



I Touch Things I Can't Touch, video (still)

Touching is being so close to something that you can reach it. Making a model of your favorite building is an example when imagination and touch go back and forth. It is hard to tell someone else about what you love about that building. Often the experience goes beyond our rational explanation of things. 'Sometimes we can do nothing else but to find nice words that try to describe our astonishment about our ignorance⁹ says Spinoza.

Ones personal experience is fed by bending, modeling or planing the wood or paper you use. There is something in the intimacy you have with the object that it tells you about how its can be touched. Other people can understand that when your joy of touching, becomes the desire of someone else.

Thinking of something you want understand makes you aware of yourself.¹⁰ which allows you to take a position towards an object that you are investigating. When you want to get into something it is important to trust the position that you chose for a while.¹¹ You can make a list of things you know for sure and things you doubt about. In any job you do doubt is essential. It allows to act beyond your apprehension or expectation.

5 p179, Ethica, ibid.

6 p129. Please Pay Attention Please. Writing and interviews of Bruce Nauman, Mit press 2005

7 p245, Ethica, ibid.

8 Marcel Broodthaers, streng verboden de werken aan te raken, 1968

9 p231, Ethica, ibid,

10 p269, Ethica, ibid,

11 John Cage, From: Some rules for students and teachers

Doubt is a state in which we are affected in a position we haven't been before.¹² When you are in a room it can happen that there is something in the room that makes you unable to find a good place to stand. You walk through the room trying to find a right spot. But in putting your left foot in front of your right you start doubting. You try to understand why you like some parts of the room and dislike others. Most things that you do or make will probably contain bits of both.

We need to make rules to live by in order to understand our senses¹³. Some rules tell you how to stand or how to talk to someone you have never seen before. While other rules tend to rely more on intuition. Intuitive rules get formed by your way of understanding things around you. But trusting your senses will in almost any case result in confusion¹⁴. When you see an object which you identify as a piece of furniture, but you don't know how to position yourself towards it, you get confused. Rules are like questions you repeatedly ask yourself to deal with such confusion. A lot of rules are very handy because they give you a sort of comfortable chair to look at things. Yet every time you see something you think is unique all the answers you might have found for these questions are questioned again.

Anyone, from a thinker to a maker, knows or feels that there is always a difference between the one who comes up with something and a person that looks, or reads or listens to it.¹⁵

Yet it can also be seen the other way around. A maker is just as much the person that looks, feels and listens as the person he tries to reach.

As to that there remains one big challenge. Being: clearness in communication. To which Spinoza replies that people 'would be happier if they could as easily be silent as they could speak'¹⁶...

How can we touch things we didn't know existed? Why do you care what other people think?¹⁷ The simple yet strict mathematical structure structure of the Ethica allows us to remember its individual statements.¹⁸ Many open questions come naturally from reading Spinoza's abstract thoughts about how we are affected by things around us. Only once he talks about the pleasure of an experience. About eating an extraordinarily delicious piece of pie. Which makes you eat so much that you get sick of it. Being a real thinker Spinoza is rather occupied with the pleasure of finding things out.

-Chris van der Kaap-

Note

12 p251, Ethica, ibid,

13 p479, Ethica, ibid,

14 p227, Ethica, ibid,

15 John Cage, Silence. Lectures and writings., Wesleyan University Press, 1961

16 p233, Ethica, ibid

17 Feynman, Richard, What do you care what other people think?, W W Norton, 1988

18 Hoe heb ik Spinoza ooit kunnen vergeten? Hendrikus Keizer in Trouw 19/09/05

Note : Ethics by Spinoza is available in English translation by Penguin Pockets. ISBN: 0140435719