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# Aesthetic experience on the move: own environment as art

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## Introduction

While experiencing art devices on the move, spectators have sometimes to use a phone or a headphone, or even to accost unknown persons. They have to be ready to walk a lot, sometimes to run, sometimes to personally get involved. The experience often takes place out of places devoted to exhibition, out of defined times devoted to exhibition: spectators may believe that they were experiencing the work of art in the morning, whereas they find themselves still connected to it in the evening.

The experience those art devices propose seems very different from the experiences that other forms of art provide. These specificities justify the development of a new adapted theoretical framework. Indeed, the artistic strategies enforced to produce these new works require particular skills (for example the use of digital devices). Of course, this observation is true for many different types of works: the world of art, and certainly the world of contemporary art in particular, are composed of many forms of art. The first question that the theorist has then to face is to understand in what way the emerging forms of art correspond to what is commonly referred to as “art”, meaning fine-arts, of more precisely visual arts. When it comes to comparing forms of art, it is easy to put forward differences, but similarities should not be considered as secondary. The research of invariants can indeed be the starting of any theoretical thinking.

The global aim of this article is to show in what way the mobile art devices develop as part of the field of visual arts. Provided that the objects produced by the artists can take plenty of different forms (like a simple rule of a game, a software, a downloadable phone application, a

virtual reality headset, etc.), our attention will particularly focus on the spectator(s) who experience(s) these works of art. More precisely, this article is about the aesthetic experience felt by the spectators while they are appreciating these works.

Let us note that the notion of aesthetics does not here refer to the formal aspects or the appearance of things, but it is here used in its philosophical sense,<sup>1</sup> referring to sensations and perceptions of the spectator while he or she is experiencing the work. The reader can also be surprised to see the term “spectator” used in a context where experience and action are so important, but the notion of spectator is not at all intrinsically linked to the notion of passivity. On the contrary, the spectator is never completely passive.<sup>2</sup> Thus, this article aims at conceptually marking out the different cognitive processes involved in the experience of mobile art devices, and at understanding to what extent the involvement of these cognitive processes is different from their involvement in other forms of art.<sup>3</sup> In the same

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1. For the first use of this term, see: BAUMGARTEN A.G., *Reflections on Poetry* (1735), Berkeley, University of California Press, 1954.

2. Despite the relevance of the Situationist criticism of the spectacle, I use the term spectator. I prefer this term rather than the terms audience and viewer as well: I work on the experiencing subject and not on a community and visual art does not only imply the eyes of the subject. Let us note that the daily publication dealing with beauty and philosophy of art founded by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in 1711 was called “The Spectator”. For the Situationist criticism, see DEBORD G., *The Society of the Spectacle*, New-York, Zone Books, 1967.

3. The fact that we want to study cognitive processes does not imply that we agree with the modularity of the mind: Quite the contrary, we think that a cognitive process can be involved in several situations. Above all, we think that the aesthetic experience may be based on the use of the mere

manner that Goodman has drawn the different symptoms to define when art is,<sup>4</sup> we want to draw the recurrent symptoms to define when the aesthetic experience produced by mobile devices happens. However, unlike Goodman, we do not adopt an analytic approach. We will propose an epistemic framework enabling to give full account of both the specificities and the anchoring of these art practices in the field of art.

### I. Symptoms of mobile art devices

Art experience is generally delimited by precise boundaries. The significance of these boundaries has even given rise to some attempts of institutional definitions of art: there is art when the object is implemented in an institutional artistic context.<sup>5</sup> This hypothesis has been invalidated by street art, which takes place out of a usual setting of exhibition. This characteristic is shared by many mobile devices (even if some works involving mobility take place in an institutional framework, like *You Get Me* by Blast Theory in 2008, which had to be experienced from the Royal Opera House of London). However, street art has another peculiarity: even though some street art tours start to develop,<sup>6</sup> street art mostly remains an art practice that shows up to the passer-by while he or she is not expecting to become a spectator of a work of art. With *trompe l'œil*, it is one of the rare artistic cases in front of which the individuals can become spectators without knowing that they were going to face an artistic situation. One of the stakes of these art practices is exactly that they do not require a setting to operate: they are invasive, in the sense that they emerge in the day-to-day life. In this regard, mobile art devices are different

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routine cognitive processes in a non-routine context. Therefore, our approach is different from Fodor's description of cognition or Zeki's works in neuroaesthetics.

4. See GOODMAN N., *Of Mind and Other Matters*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1984, p. 135-138.

5. See for example DICKIE G., "Defining art", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 6, n°3, 1969, p. 253-256 and GOODMAN N., "Implementation of the Arts", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40, no. 3 (Spring 1982), p. 281-283.

6. For example, the Bristol street art tours invite people to discover Banksy; there are also street art tours in NYC, London, Buenos Aires, etc.

from street art: they impose an art framework that clearly separates the artistic experience from the day-to-day life. Or at least these devices let the participant think that such a framework exists, even if of course some works exactly exploit, disrupt and blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional. Thus, the participants in *A Machine To See With* by Blast Theory in 2010 had first to agree on the terms of a clause that sounds at first really banal: while the experience takes place in the city, the organizers declined all responsibility for what could happen. But after some first actions that already were ethically questionable, participants were asked to complicit in a bank robbery. How can the participant know where the boundaries are? Where does the game stop and where does real life begins? Were the employees of the bank in or out of the game?

This work is surely radical, but it is still symptomatic of those works of art: they carry in themselves the idea of the existence of two distinct worlds, the "real world" and the own environment of the work. They provide the illusion of fiction within reality. As a consequence, we can come up with the following hypothesis: the aesthetic experience specificity of mobile art devices is characterized by the subjective construction of a border between the real world and the world of the art experience, even though there is no framework materializing this partition. Let us note that the term of "world" is here crucial to the extent that these art devices do not provide a scene that the spectator cannot reach: these experiences are not simply contemplative, the spectator does act.

On a more concrete level, beside the action of the spectator, these experiences translate into different shifts in the habits of the individual. The nature of these shifts is one of the symptoms of mobile art devices. Two major ideas stand out, one symptom and one aftereffect:

I. These artistic practices modify the manner that the spectator perceives his environment and the persons in it.<sup>7</sup>

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7. This article does not deal with the modifications in the way other people are considered. This research field involving empathy and alterity is becoming an important issue of aesthetic experience in front of art. See for example

2. These shifts are not delimited to a precise time window; the experience is resurgent.

The major subjective ability connected to these ideas is the ability that an individual has to be in immersion in a universe which seems different from his routine environment. Whereas we have already worked in previous articles on immersion using conceptual tools from phenomenology,<sup>8</sup> the concepts proposed by Gibson can reveal particularly relevant in order to describe mobile devices;<sup>9</sup> i) because the experience is in situation of mobility and ii) because the experience is not only perceptive, but is also actually active.

## 2. The coupling between perception and action: an ecologic approach enables a good description of immersion

Perception and action are two fundamental skills. These two notions are crucial in philosophy. However, the distinction between perception and action is not as obvious as it seems: Bergson already noted that the common mistake between Descartes and the empiricists was to think that perception was above all designed to know the world. According to Bergson, perception has instead developed in order to act.<sup>10</sup> A few years later, the psychologist Gibson developed a theory of perception geared to action, notably using the notion of affordance:<sup>11</sup> perceiving the world is equal to perceiving the actions that we can afford. Furthermore, we perceive possible actions, but acting modifies the perception of our

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DI DIO C., GALLESE V., “Neuroaesthetics: a review”, *Current opinion in neurobiology*, 19, 2009, p. 682–687 and FREEDBERG D, GALLESE V., “Motion, emotion and empathy in esthetic experience”, *Trends Cognit Sci*, 11:197203, 2007.

8. See for example: TRENTINI B., « Immersions réelles et virtuelles : des expériences esthétiques modifiant perception et corps propre », *Figures de l'art n° 26, arts immersifs – dispositifs & expériences*, dirigé par ANDRIEU B., PUPPA, 2014, p. 153-164.

9. GIBSON J.J., *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979), Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1986.

10. BERGSON H., *Matter and Memory* (1896), New York, Cosimo, 2007, p. 17.

11. GIBSON J.J., “The theory of affordance”, *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, 1977, p. 67-82.

environment, and so on so forth: this feedback loop is the basis of the coupling between perception and action.<sup>12</sup>

The perception of our environment depends on what we can do in it. However, affordances are not objective and established once for all, they are built over time. As a consequence, the perception that we have of our environment can change over time. The individual then faces a new own environment.<sup>13</sup> For example, in a context of snow in the mountains, the own environment of a person with bad shoes will be very different from the own environment of another person which would be equipped with good mountain boots. In a similar context rooted in phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty takes the example of a man holding a stick: once he is used to the pressure that the stick exerts on the palm of his hand, he does not feel the stick anymore, he directly feels the objects that the stick touches.<sup>14</sup> In other words, mountain boots and sticks function as perceptive prostheses,<sup>15</sup> and thus as agentive

12. The perception-action cycle comes from James' psychology. See JAMES W. (1890). *Principles of psychology*. Chapter 18: Imagination. After that, this idea has been developed by several theorists: Bergson, Gibson, etc. For example, Varela and his co-workers have suggested a very relevant theory. They wanted to draw a distinction between their theory and Gibson's approach. However, we think that one of their comments is not pertinent: “whereas Gibson claims that the environment is independent, we claim that it is enacted”. Maybe the distinction between “environment” and “own environment” would be helpful: the own environment is also not independent. See VARELA F.J., THOMPSON E., ROSCH E., *The Embodied Mind*, MIT Press, 1993, p. 204.

13. We use the notion of “own environment” following Gibson's works dealing with environment. By this term we want to argue that the environment is not objective; it depends on the subject. In that way, “own environment” is related to the notion of “life-world” introduced by Husserl. Let's note that Von Uexküll has proposed the notion of Umwelt (the literal translation) that is also based on what the individual can afford in the world: according to Von Uexküll, individuals only perceive the objects on which they can act.

14. MERLEAU-PONTY M., *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), London and New-York, Routledge Classics, 2002, p. 175-176.

15. We use the notion of perceptive prosthesis following the notion of visual prosthesis suggested by Dominic Lopes in order to describe pictures. See LOPES D., *Understanding Pictures*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996. Let's note that

prostheses. But physical prostheses are not necessary to modify the affordances of the environment. A simple rule of a game is enough: two jackets lying on the floor can be decided to serve as goals when you want to play at soccer in a park; tree becomes a good hiding place when playing hide-and-seek. In other words, affordances can vary depending on the situation; some can become more relevant than others. These remarks however assume a routine situation: the so-called real world, real life.

Immersion can be described as a modification of this routine situation which gives rise to a new own environment. This new environment is regarded by the individual as a parenthesis within the real world. Usually, the mere possibility of immersion is an environmental affordance: the presence of a movie screen, of a stage of basketball, of a paintball arena or of an open book provides the possibility of immersive experiences.

Such a description of immersion is clearly different from conditions of absorption, rapture and bewilderment: being immersed does not involve contemplation. Being immersed does not imply the inhibition of action, but involves a shift in what one can do or not do. The balance of potential action between “routine own environment” and “art own environment” is the cornerstone of the aesthetic experience in front of mobile art devices.

### **3. Perception-action coupling and aesthetic experience: acting is a characteristic of the environment**

For a long time, for apparently obvious reasons, notably etymologic reasons, aesthetics has been mainly focused on perception. The field of aesthetic experience was apparently devoid of any reference to action. Following these preconceptions, some have also tempted to describe the aesthetic experience as the behaviour during which perception was not coupled to action anymore. Even if the spectator is never

completely passive, even if perceiving implies *per se* many acts, acts that are geared to action are rare during the aesthetic experience. Thus, this hypothesis based on a decoupling between perception and action at first seems appealing. Mobile art devices however refute this thesis: they make the spectator get involved. Contemplation from an eye connected to a pure spirit seems then irrelevant. These devices are nevertheless not UFOs in the world of art. The difference between an aesthetic experience devoid of any other act than the ones enabling perception and an aesthetic experience full of acts geared to action should not be neglected, but the ecologic description of the individual renders obsolete a total decoupling between perception and action. That is to say that there is no radical rupture between an agentive and a contemplative perception. This continuum is the source where we can search for invariants between an art practice making the spectator actively get involved and other more traditional practices. We would thus like to show that aesthetic experience always mobilizes the perception-action coupling.

The reader might have been surprised to previously find the cinema screen among the examples of immersive devices that imply a shift of affordances of the individual: in fact the experience of a film is an immersive experience in which no action of the spectator is expected. Yet, it is not because the spectator does not act that affordances are not relevant. Thus, being in immersion in a film means for example being enough involved in the storyline and with the characters to feel agentive impulses which are inhibited ahead of time: understanding the distress of a character is equal to having the impetus of helping him. The fact that action is not actually effective does not imply that it is not relevant to take it into account. A more obvious way to realize that action has to be considered in these immersive experiences is that the diegetic consistency of a film comes from the fact that the behaviours of the characters on the screen are plausible, that is to say that if we would have been them, in the idea that we can have of what their own environment is, we could have acted like them. The example of the immersion in a film is

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Merleau-Ponty has described the blind man's stick as “an instrument *with* which he perceives”, “a bodily auxiliary, an extension of the bodily synthesis”; MERLEAU-PONTY M, *op. cit.*, p. 176.



not an isolated case, most of the works impulse actions that will not be carried out, but which are still considered. One of the most relevant case is the sculpture *Dandelion Clocks* made by Léa Barbazanges in 2013. This sculpture made of real dandelions is absolutely not interactive; the artist would certainly not appreciate that someone comes and blows on her flowers. Yet, the want is present, and the simple fact of wanting to blow on this sculpture modifies the reception that we have of it. We thus see very well that action has not to be effective: the perception-action coupling could be operating without any effective action.

The fact that the spectator has to act with some works but not the others constitutes of course a difference, but it is actually a secondary difference that results from a primary difference. Action is a possibility offered by an environment. Thus, if action is possible in the case of mobile art devices, it is because the artistic situation that is presented is not an object, with a particular location in the environment, but it is an environment in its own right.

We are then facing a problem:

We here want to test the hypothesis that aesthetic experience induced by mobile devices requires the illusion of a parallel environment. The mere possibility of experiencing a new environment offering new affordances is evidence of the adaptation of the individual. However, once persons have managed to adapt themselves to a new configuration, once they have got used to the extent that they have not to interpret the situation anymore as Merleau-Ponty would say,<sup>16</sup> nothing can temporally delimit the aesthetic experience. In this case, not only the artistic situation would not be located in space by an object, but it would not be situated in time by an event.

#### 4. Mobile art devices and their aftereffects

*Karen* made by Blast theory in 2015 proposes an experience which is not delimited in a given time: *Karen* is a life coach who accompanies the participants; she asks them questions in order to know a little bit about their personality and to coach them in the best way. One of the particularities of this application is that *Karen*

16. MERLEAU-PONTY M., *idem*.

accumulates information that the participants have not tell her about, but that she has simply deduced from the way they use their cell phones. *Karen* is one of these intrusive works which tend to dissolve the boundary between the real world and a fictional world, both spatially and temporally. This work of art makes the spectator remind that the framework separating the work itself and reality is illusory.<sup>17</sup>

Once again, the example of *Karen* is particular: all the mobile devices are not so out of a given temporality. The person who has participated to *A Machine To See With* began this experience at a given time, and stopped it at another one. But this way of thinking describes experiences as if they were objects; experiences would be like stored in defined boxes. However, the border between the environment created by the device and the routine environment is an illusion, and is nothing else than an illusion: since the mobile devices enable experiences within the daily world, they can easily resurface in the real world. It would for example be absurd to think that the emotionally strong events of art experiences are not going to reemerge at some point: it is likely that the participant of *A Machine To See With* will think about this work when entering a bank, maybe the same bank of the game. More generally, he or she will perhaps wonder if people are participating to such a device while talking to them. In other words, the affordances put forward by immersion in such a work of art have not only created a punctual environment, but they have also created a new way of comprehending the world – and a relevant one. This way is thus able to resurface at any time.

We could think that this feature is specific to mobile work of art, but the fact is that almost all art experiences leave aftereffects on the spectator. Aesthetic experience due to a work of art is never delimited to the event of perception of the work of art. As Oscar Wilde and then Bergson said,

17. We understand illusion as Kant has described it, that is to say as a “delusion which persists even though one knows that the supposed object is not real”. KANT I. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 41. Of course, for our part, the illusion is not about an object but about a whole environment.

one cannot see the London fog in the same way after having seen paintings.<sup>18</sup> Maybe the reader will not look at dandelions in the same way after having seen a reproduction of the work by Léa Barbazanges. However, what remains true is that the shift of the routine experience is more constitutive of the work of art in the case of mobile devices than in the case of Turner: if it is true that all the aesthetic experiences leave aesthetic aftereffects, some works particularly draw their artistic interest from this ability.

### Conclusion

Contemporary art has many recent subsets: performance, street art, installations, etc. Sometimes the genre is defined by the medium, sometimes by the use of a specific technology, sometimes by the setting of the work of art. Mobile art devices are one of these subsets. Of course, it is easy to think of mobile applications, of alternate reality devices, of the new technologies and GPS coordinates, but these characteristics are based on art practice. The mobility however does not characterize the art practice, it characterizes the experience of the spectator. It appears that the spectator is invited to take part in works of art that spread out, as if they were a full environment, not only as objects that stand on the environment. That is why the art experiences in mobile devices are immersive. The abilities involved by an individual in order to be immersed are similar to the abilities involved in order to be adapted to the mere reality: these adaptations are gradually being built by dint of experiencing the world.

The three main attributes of mobile art devices (i.e. involvement of perception-action coupling with effective actions, works of art as an environment and possibility of aftereffects) are in fact three faces of the immersive experience. However, we have seen that almost all the works of art could be described in these terms. Yet, we do not want to negatively conclude by pointing out the impossibility of characterizing mobile art

devices. Instead, two major points on contemporary art and aesthetic experience emerge from this analysis. First, in spite of appearances, there is homogeneity to contemporary art. Indeed, the same cognitive processes are involved in the aesthetic experience caused by works of art which are very different. Secondly, this homogeneity should not prevent us from identifying some specificities: As regards the perception-action coupling, some works exploit the affordances of the spectator, i.e. in which way he or she would act, and some works exploit the artist's acts, i.e. in which way the spectator would be able to mentally picture the gestures required to create the work of art in front of him or her.

These few symptoms of aesthetic experience seem to be a good way to study the spectatorship attitude. Besides, contemporary art has a tendency to radicalize these symptoms. This enables a better analysis of their roles in aesthetic experience. In this sense, any specific study of a genre of art can be considered both as a specific approach and as a model able to give account of visual art as a whole.

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18. According to Wilde, the fog had never been seen before painters and poets depicted it. WILDE O., *The Decay of Lying* (1891), Penguin Classics, 2010. See also BERGSON H., *Key Writings*, London, Continuum, 2002, p. 251.