

Approaching Aisthetics

Or: Installation Art and Environmental Aesthetics as Investigative Activity

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Abstract: The article discusses installation art and its potential contribution to a transdisciplinary research practice, in which not only artistic, but also aesthetic theoretical approaches could play a central role. However, as the article shows, this firstly requires a change in perspective concerning the way we approach art. Secondly, it entails changes to a common understanding of aesthetic theory and, thereby, philosophy. A term of central significance in this context is the notion of *aisthesis*. The article will illustrate these thoughts through the examples of Bruce Nauman, Ilya Kabakov, and Arnold Berleant.

Keywords: aisthesis/aisthetics, installation art, built environments, environmental aesthetics, philosophy.

The arts have changed over the course of the twentieth century. This is particularly true for the second half of the century, in which a broad range of new formats and artistic media started to develop, such as performance, action art, happenings, environments, conceptual art, and new media art. The process of transformation is unbroken, and different forms of artistic articulation are often hard to distinguish from each other. Therefore, it is probably advisable to speak rather of “fields of action” than of clearly identifiable “genres” or “art forms.”

One such field of action is only now, in the present day, starting to reveal itself as such, though important contributions were already made in the late 1960’s and 70’s, and distant antecedents may be found even earlier:¹ this is the field of installation art, and more specifically of architecture- and place-related installation. What the expression refers to is artistic works that are strongly reminiscent of everyday places or architecture, visually, but most importantly due to the fact that they are three-dimensional, spatially vast, and, in many cases, physically accessible.

Such installations are an oddity. After all, the difference between the means of representation and the object represented is minimal in this case. Unlike painting, for example, where a three-dimensional subject – a person, an animal, a landscape – is transformed and captured on a two-dimensional canvas, architecture- and place-related installations use the same means that are also utilized by the real object: and so a door can serve to depict a door, a window can show a window, and an entire living room nothing other than: an entire living room.

This convergence is perplexing, and it conjures up the question: what distinguishes art from reality, replica from original? And, secondly, what, other than copies, superficial imitations of the familiar, are such artworks, really?

¹ Some authors refer to the spatial setups of Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, while others look even further back to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* or the rituals of the Catholic church. See, for example, Archer, De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry (1994), De Oliveira, Oxley & Petry (2003), Bishop (2005).

Now, one could continue, as already suggested above, and apply a traditional perspective – the one of art history or of a philosophical reception aesthetics – and indeed, depending on motivation and point of view, this might prove an interesting and certainly not easy undertaking. However, there is another option which, unfortunately, in traditional approaches, is too-often left unconsidered, not to say intentionally rejected, though it may – possibly not concerning all, but certainly concerning some questions – offer the most interesting insights. This is the possibility of switching perspectives, and instead of inquiring into the artistic product, its historical development and effect on recipients, asking what artists who create architecture- and place-related installations do in their daily work; or in other words: it is the question not of the work of art but of the artistic working.

I. Installations as Means of Artistic Working and Investigating

Some of the first architecture- and place-related installations were created in the late 1960's by the American sculptor, performance-, installation-, photo-, and video-artist Bruce Nauman. As the range of media indicates, Nauman is a very versatile artist and certainly can also be considered one of the most influential representatives of his generation. Characteristic, especially for the early Nauman, is his open manner of approach: rather than working in a particular medium and searching for “new modes of expression” or “subjects,” he starts out with an initial interest – a concrete question, or a not-yet-specified, nonetheless specific curiosity – and explores various means and media to determine the most appropriate to pursue this interest.

Such a manner of approach also becomes apparent in the genesis of his “corridor” pieces, which were created in the late 1960's and 1970's. Nauman's starting points, in this case, were simple physical actions and the experiences they enable (such as: changing the position of his body relative to wall and floor by leaning, bracing, squatting, or sitting; or standing in a corner and letting his back bounce against the wall). Nauman's interest here, as he explains in interviews, relates to a physical “awareness” which “*comes from a certain amount of activity and you can't get it from just thinking about yourself. You do exercises, you have certain kinds of awareness that you don't have if you read books*” (Kraynak 2005, p. 142). But how to convey this physical awareness to others? Nauman initially experiments with “instructions for action”: short texts presented in an exhibition space so that visitors can read them and perform the described activities themselves. However, this does not ensure that recipients will actually experience what the artist wants them to experience (they could misunderstand an instruction, interpret it differently, or simply ignore it). Nauman sees another possibility in filming himself performing an action and then presenting the result to others. But this too does not guarantee that an experience is conveyed. (For example, the activity of lying on the floor and imagining that one is slowly sinking in may be a strong – also physically strong – experience. But when captured on video, all the viewer sees is: a person, motionless, lying on the floor for an hour.) Even carefully instructing others and then presenting the result as a live performance yields only limited success.

This situation changes with the construction of the first corridor, which is more or less a chance discovery made along the way: In fact, Nauman is in the process of filming one of his actions. To this end, he erects a backdrop in his studio consisting of two simple wooden walls for the performer to move through. Soon, however, Nauman recognizes the true potential of the setup: Namely, that the walls not only optically limit the activity for the camera, they also – very literally – limit the physical range of motion and thereby the range of potential actions. Not just Nauman himself but any person who enters the setup can do nothing other than walk into the corridor and then – since the far end is blocked by a wall – move out again. The experience of a linear movement between two physically perceptible, narrowly-spaced walls –

this is all there is to be experienced. This limitation is, however, precisely the advantage of the setup, as Nauman explains retrospectively: *“I wanted to make kind of play experiences unavailable, just by the preciseness of the area”* (Kraynak 2005, p. 167).

The first corridor, which made Nauman recognize that, by using a material construction, it is possible to create a “preciseness of the experience” through a “preciseness of the area,” provides the initial spark. Soon he starts experimenting with narrowing corridors whose walls converge towards a shared point, so that an increasing physical oppression when going in and a spatial widening when going out can be experienced; or he uses special materials that manipulate the acoustics inside the corridor – to name just a few examples.

Nauman’s early experiments still have the character of rather simple artistic test setups. The potential complexity of such installations is in contrast made clear by another significant figure from this field of action: the Soviet-born painter and installation artist Ilya Kabakov. With him, the medium transforms from plain spaces to detailed interiors, which at first glance appear almost real, while in fact, they consist of specially-built walls, ceilings, floors, and of a myriad of “banal things,” as Kabakov puts it, meaning *“tables, chairs, couches, shelves, beds, [...] cups, plates, lamps, books [...] – the infinite sea of all types of things, mechanisms, home appliances, clothing, furniture, [the] millions of objects surrounding a person [...]”* (Kabakov 1995, pp. 244, 292).

Kabakov explains the necessity of this flood of details by analogy to the theater. After all, his work, too, is concerned with telling a story, the difference being that Kabakov’s installations are “places of halted action.” The narrative that the artist wishes to convey does not develop successively, with one scene following another; rather, it is simultaneous, compressed into a single stage set that can be walked into (while the temporal dimension is displaced onto the recipients, the place of halted action becoming slowly comprehensible to them as they walk attentively through it). There are also no actors to convey the action. In entering one of Kabakov’s installations, we walk onto a “stage without actors.” Or more precisely: The stage itself and all the details gathered there are the actors. And so one can imagine “all the objects in the installation as actors, playing the types of roles common to all theater: soloist, chorus, supernumeraries.” A superfluous object then would be like an extra who suddenly pops up in a scene where he doesn’t belong; likewise, a missing object would be like an actor who fails to appear on cue, though the plot doesn’t make sense without his presence. So, in order to develop his silent narrative stringently, and to make the characterizations of the people that his installations are concerned with as precise as possible, the space of the installation must be, as Kabakov puts it in a nutshell: “an entirely reworked space” (Kabakov 1995, p. 243).

But what exactly is being “reworked” here? Unlike many other artists, Kabakov gives detailed information on this question in the form of texts and books; the publication of his lecture series *On the “Total” Installation* is one such example. As Kabakov explains here, installations are about something quite different than just a “silent stage” – and in this sense, the comparison to the theater is as helpful as it is misleading. For beyond such illustrative descriptions, Kabakov’s installations are actually complex perceptual networks in which each detail, no matter how minor, is arranged according to how it relates to another detail and according to what effect these together have on the recipient as she moves through the installation – respective to how they are perceptually experienced by her. No aspect is unimportant or negligible. And so Kabakov applies the same degree of attention to the walls as to the floor, the ceiling, or such details as windows, lamps, and doors. Ultimately, *“[...] each place has its own clearly defined face [...] the proportion of the walls and windows, the quality of the materials and their condition, the peculiar paint on the walls, ceiling,*

and floor, the neglect and appearance of small details, almost unnoticeable – all of this creates the special atmosphere of [a] place.” Also, intangible components, separately or in their synthetic interactions with each other – questions of light, color, sound, and potentially of smells – are considered. And even that which is lacking or entirely nonexistent must be taken into consideration and included in the installation’s total effect on the recipient: *“the gaps between objects, the intervals, empty spaces, corners, curves, spacings, in short – the very air around the objects”* (Kabakov 1995, p. 243).

To come back to the question posed at the beginning: what distinguishes art from reality? And secondly, what are installations other than copies, superficial imitations of real built environments? After this brief excursion to two prominent representatives of the field, the answer should be evident, for neither Nauman nor Kabakov is after superficial mimicry. Rather, both artists use artistic-empirical means to investigate the way built spaces affect human perception.

As each of the examples shows in its own way, neither artist is aiming for a “simple sensory effect”; rather, they explore the sensory and the cognitive in connection: from Nauman’s corridors, where we do not just sense “something” at a particular distance to ourselves, but rather a “restriction through walls” (or, in other words: the sensory aspect is interlinked with a comprehending element, whereby a seemingly banal situation turns into an existential one), to Kabakov’s complex installational arrangements, which address us on a sensory-cognitive level to convey entire narratives and offer insights into characters (more on this below, under the term “aisthesis”).

II. Arnold Berleant’s Approach to Built Environments

At this point, I will turn to Arnold Berleant. The fundamental role that the American philosopher, aesthetic theorist, and practitioner (musician and composer) has played in the development of the fields of environmental- and everyday aesthetics need not be specially noted here. Also, it will be impossible to delve deeper into Berleant's work, which is concerned with a vast breadth of topics, from his critique of traditional approaches and his proposals for a contemporary philosophy of the arts, to his more recent work taking everyday- and environmental aesthetics into the domains of ethics and social philosophy.

Instead, I wish to address a specific question that is as simple as it is fundamental, and in view of which Berleant’s approach, as shown below, can be seen as exemplary. This question is: How do aesthetic theoretical approaches relate to built environments? The danger that they, like installations, may be taken for real should be rather small. After all, philosophical investigations do not take shape in material form. How else, though, can they operate?

In Berleant’s case, the answer seems clear: it involves “experience” and “engagement,” and thereby leads right into the complex network of terms that Berleant develops – not as a static theoretical edifice, but rather as a carefully woven fabric – which is more concerned with “continuities” than with “breaks,” more with “differences” than with “divisions,” more with “distinctions” than with “separations” (Berleant 2010, p. 7). Trying to extract a fixed definition from such a structure – which is in constant movement and in which terms are continually being redetermined in relation to others – would be an illegitimate intervention.²

² In addition, this would run counter to Berleant’s basic epistemological beliefs, which are generally ontology-critical and, at least to me, also show anti-essentialist traits (see: Berleant 2007 and 2010, p. 56).

Nonetheless, I believe that what Berleant is aiming at with the term “experience” can be illustrated well with reference to his book *Aesthetics and Environment*. Here, he distinguishes between three different models of experience: 1. a contemplative model, epitomized by the concept of distanced, disinterested pleasure; 2. an active model, taking into account the involved role of the perceiver; 3. a participatory model – Berleant’s own approach. The first model, most prominently represented by Kant, has, according to Berleant, become a convention today whose lasting popularity in aesthetic theoretical circles is disproportional to its utility, for it does not offer a satisfying explanation for aesthetic experience: neither in daily life and environments nor in the arts. In contrast, the second model, significantly developed in the 20th century, is characterized by the fundamental insight that the supposedly objective world of the natural sciences does not accord with the experienceable world of everyday life:

What is common to the various forms of the active model is the recognition that the objective world of classical science is not the experiential world of the human perceiver. Thus, there is a sharp difference between space as it is presumably held to be objectively and the perception of that space. A theory of aesthetic experience must thrive from the latter, rather than the former, from the manner we participate in spatial experience rather than from the way we conceptualize and objectify such experience (Berleant 2005, p. 6).

The thought that human experience cannot be conceived according to the model of a seemingly objective world can be found in the pragmatism of John Dewey, as well as in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. To Berleant, both approaches are crucial, yet not to be followed unconditionally. In particular, Berleant sees the phenomenological tradition as characterized by a tendency to absolutize the body as a priori of experience. In comparison, Berleant’s own participatory model of experience emphasizes the constellational relationship between person and environment:

Environment is not wholly dependent on the perceiving subject. It also imposes itself in significant ways on the human person, engaging one in a relationship of mutual influence. Not only is it misleading to objectify the environment; it cannot be taken as a mere reflection of the perceiver, either (Berleant 2005, p. 8).

For the twofold manner in which a person, via perception, is open towards an environment which conversely imposes itself on that person, Berleant uses a second term central to his work: “engagement.” This expression rather describes a state of continuity and connection in which perceiving subject and environment take place (as one could say with reference to Heidegger’s “Ereignis”) as the conjunction of two dualistic, self-contained entities. In this sense, engagement is something that plays a role in a wide range of human experiences, such as in the arts, sports, and social activities. Nevertheless, it is also and particularly significant for an understanding of environmental perception.³

Now I would like to turn to the question raised above: What can Arnold Berleant’s work tell us concerning the way aesthetic theoretical approaches relate to built environments? To start with, it is remarkable that Berleant does not deny the discrepancy – or let’s say, at least the distance – there is to be bridged between a discipline like philosophy, which operates reflectively by means of language, and an

³ In more general terms, Berleant explains the role and meaning of the term as follows: “*‘engagement,’ later specified as ‘aesthetic engagement’ [...] became the central concept of an aesthetic that emerged as an alternative to the aesthetic disinterestedness that was central to traditional aesthetic theory. Aesthetic engagement rejects the dualism inherent in traditional accounts of aesthetic appreciation and epitomized in Kantian aesthetics, which treats aesthetic experience as the subjective appreciation of a beautiful object. Instead, aesthetic engagement emphasizes the holistic, contextual character of aesthetic appreciation*” (Berleant 2013). “*It claims continuity rather than separation, contextual relevance rather than objectivity, historical pluralism rather than certainty, ontological parity rather than priority*” (Berleant 1991, xiii).

empirical subject like human environments. Instead, he deals with the problem productively. After all, any investigation of natural and built environments must admit the empirical dimension of its subject – unless it aims to be pure transcendental philosophy, which seeks for the most fundamental modi and conditions of human knowledge but has rather little to say when it comes to our everyday life. And for this, even a discipline like philosophy must pass through the needle’s eye of perception.

Berleant accepts this problem and, through the terms “experience” and “engagement,” even makes it the central subject of his theoretical inquiries. But he does more than that. For as Berleant himself repeatedly makes clear, experience is something that cannot only be theorized; rather, in order to be theorized, it must be practiced in the first place. Accordingly, his theory of engagement is also ultimately a “descriptive theory,” which deals with nothing other than that which, in concrete contexts, is experienced as “engaged experience” (Berleant 1992, p. 25 and 2004, p. 19).

Fechner’s⁴ apt remark that the great philosophical systems of Kant and Hegel were outstanding giants “with feet of clay” (that is, impressive constructs of terms and thoughts lacking an empirical basis) thus certainly cannot be applied to Berleant (Fechner 2013, 1). He too is concerned with exploring the “conditions of possibility.” Unlike Kant, however, he does not proceed on the purely mental path of transcendental philosophy, but rather on the practical, phenomenological one of examining physical conditions: And so Berleant exposes himself – on foot, skis, by car or canoe – to various possibilities of experiencing environments that, in this particular manner, can only be explored – and not imagined from the desk (Berleant 1992, pp. 25-56).⁵

III. Artistic and Philosophical Approaches – and Their Common Field of Action

To summarize, at this point I’d like to return to installation art: a shift in perspective from a reception aesthetics to the question “What do artists actually do in their daily work?” can, as has been shown, yield interesting insights. Art then does not present itself as the creation of objects to be received and interpreted, nor of products to be commercialized; it is not even, when it comes to artists’ writings, art theory. Instead, art-making can be described, in Bruce Nauman’s words, as investigative activity: “*Art is a means of acquiring an investigative activity. [...] my attitude comes from being an artist and not a scientist, which is another way of investigating.*” (Kraynak 2005, p. 188)

Certainly, not all artists would subscribe to this statement (also, different art forms may imply different forms and subjects of investigation). Nevertheless, the examples of Nauman and Kabakov show what is decisive at this point: the fact that it is at all possible to conduct a specific kind of investigation by installational means – one that is related to, yet to be distinguished from other forms of research.

For when artists like Nauman and Kabakov investigate human environments, they use their own perceptive body – and that within a perceptual context which they can precisely shape and reshape, like an experimental setup. The fact that the experiences they have this way – and the insights that lie embedded in these experiences – are not merely “subjective” is proven by the fact that installations are experienced by exhibition visitors the very same way they are by the artists (there may be variances, yet no fundamental

⁴ Gustav Theodor Fechner is generally considered the founder of an empirical-experimental aesthetics whose scientific orientation distinguishes it from the aesthetic approach discussed here.

⁵ Certainly, it is not only a phenomenological impetus that can be observed here, but also a pragmatist one. After all, it was already John Dewey who argued against a Platonic-Aristotelian tradition and its incisive distinction between *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis*. Berleant’s above-described undertakings are in this sense by no means trivial, but consequent applications of a theory-critical theorizing.

deviations⁶). Nonetheless, such an investigative approach, which works with a first-person perspective and its collective significance, differs from other systems of validation, in particular from the methodology of natural sciences.

No fundamental difference exists between this and a philosophical aesthetic-theoretical approach, which for its part investigates the relationship between perceiver and environment. For ultimately, the latter approach too has no other means than to explore natural or human environments from a first-person perspective and to base its reflections on individually-made experiences that aspire to collective validity.⁷

As far as the degree of empirical validation is concerned, philosophical approaches come in second to installational ones, for the latter carry out intensive investigative and experimental examinations which can – as the example of Kabakov shows – be seamlessly extended into language-based textual reflections.⁸ Philosophical approaches, for their part, have the advantage of having a differentiated terminological and conceptual set of tools at their disposal, gathered over two and a half millennia, which allows them to analyze, systematize, and critically reflect on empirical experiences.

However – and this is the crucial point – both artistic and philosophical approaches ultimately do not operate in different spheres, but rather on one connected scale. To use an image: Think of a piano keyboard. Installational approaches may usually move in the lower range of the black keys: the “depths of empiricism,” philosophical aesthetics in the range of the upper white ones: the “heights of mental reflection.” Nonetheless, it remains a single continuous and interlinked scale. And in this respect, aesthetic theoretical and installational approaches that aim at investigating built environments could in the future perfectly complement each other.

Concluding Remarks

In my book *Aesthetics of (Built) Human Environments: Foundations of an Artistic-Philosophical Research Practice*, I examine the questions raised above in detail, referring to a range of artistic and philosophical approaches. In conclusion, I put forward the claim that methodological commonalities (as well as conceptual ones which could not be explicitly addressed here⁹) suggest the possibility of something that does not yet exist as such: namely, a collaborative research practice in which installational approaches that utilize language to report on their reflective side, yet have particular strengths in the realm of empirical investigation, work together with philosophical approaches in which the competencies are distributed in the opposite manner. What we commonly call “art” and “philosophy” would neither risk losing any of their other specific qualities, nor would they merge into one – but: they would meet in view of a certain aspect that they, contrary to the way they are stereotypically portrayed, already today possess – and in a manner appropriate for partners: namely standing hand in hand, facing a common field of interest (instead of one turning the other into an object of inquiry, as in a traditional philosophy of art). Conversely, looking at things from the standpoint of this common field of interest – which consequently should be called a potential field of common action – the question of provenance, may it be artistic or philosophical, no longer arises. The only question that does matter is the one of validity.

⁶ Note: The talk is not of an interpretive level here, but of the level of perceptual experience.

⁷ Certainly, as done in scientific surveys, it is also possible to interview third parties. But this does not solve the problem; it just multiplies it.

⁸ On the question of how artists not only work with installative set-ups in the studio, but also investigate real existing built environments through physical explorations and in-situ interventions (see: Hinkes 2017, pp. 274-342, 377-414).

⁹ Such as the recognition not of a supposedly predominantly visual and passive, but rather active, physical, multisensory, synthetic perception. For details, see Hinkes (2017, pp. 307-375).

Conceptually promising in this context is a term familiar to the discipline of aesthetics since its very beginning: aisthesis. One may translate the term with “perception by the senses” and understand it as core of aesthetic experience, as Arnold Berleant does – thus turning it into a key concept of aesthetics. One may also, as theorists like Wolfgang Iser and Gernot Böhme have done, interpret it in a broader sense, whereby it becomes the foundation of its own (sub-)discipline: aesthetics.¹⁰ Or one can subscribe to the second interpretation, as I do, but nevertheless – distinct from Böhme and in critical continuity with Berleant – emphasize the inextricable connection between sensory and cognitive aspects of perception. In this sense, “aisthesis” would better be translated – as probably all authors would agree – not as “sensual perception,” but as “sensual understanding” – “sinnliche Erkenntnis,” or as Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, the founder of the philosophical discipline of aesthetics, already put it, “cognitio sensitiva.”¹¹ (A view, by the way, that the artistic approaches discussed above are also likely to subscribe to. After all, they do not conceive of their installations as mere sensory stimuli but rather as subtle and precise means of sensory-cognitive address.)

Regardless which interpretation exactly one chooses: the epistemic quality that lies intrinsically embedded in perception, and which the term aisthesis draws our attention to, is something that cannot be simulated by the purely mental act of “reflecting on.” It must be explored in practice, through physical experience and – at least when taking things seriously – also through experimental investigations (experimental, of course, not in the sense of the natural sciences but in the previously explained sense of a critically reflected first-person-perspective).

To conclude, let’s return to the beginning: it is not only the arts that have changed over the course of the 20th century. Philosophy too left behind formerly paradigmatic – even transcendental – points of reference or, according to one’s perspective, renewed and intensified its critique of reason through movements such as phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, pragmatism, analytic philosophy, critical theory, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, post-colonial-, and gender theory. A transdisciplinary, artistic-philosophical approach that proceeds not just reflectively, but investigates aisthesis empirically, and, also in respect to its reflective components, remains close to what can be experienced in perception, would certainly mean a logical continuation and even further radicalization of a critique of reason, with consequences not only for aesthetics, but equally for fields as epistemology, ethics, social-, and political theory – as well as for our understanding of philosophy.¹²

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¹⁰ Iser (1990, 1996a) and Böhme (e.g. 1989, 1995, 1998) were key contributors to the so-called “aisthesis debate” in German-language discourse. Iser deepened his argument later in his comprehensive investigation of “transversal reason” (1996b), as did Böhme in his theory of perception (2001) and its application to built environments (2006). Adler (2002) offers an incisive overview of the aisthesis debate in English. In addition to those by Berleant (particularly 2010), aisthesis-oriented contributions have been made by Diaconu (2005) and Mandoki (2007). On the potential relation between aesthetics and aisthetics, see Iser (1996) and Hinkes (2017).

¹¹ This should not be confused with a “cognitive approach.” On the contrary, aisthetics aims to gain insights into “sensory-cognitive” – or as they are also termed, “pathic-gnostic” processes; in so far as the pathic (i.e. the physically experiencing) making of a perception is always accompanied by the gnostic (recognizing, understanding) grasping of an object of perception. In this sense, language too should not be understood as a closed system alien to experience but rather – as in late Wittgenstein – should be investigated in its interconnectedness with perceptual experiences. Quote: Baumgarten (2007, 10).

¹² Translated from German by Anne P. Smith

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