

CHAPTER 17

Aesthetic Acts. From Distance to Engagement

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Abstract: This paper will focus on articulating the notion of aesthetic act by tracing its development over these past few years. My main claim is that putting weight on acting in the aesthetic context is important for understanding practices that were originally denied an aesthetic status in systematic philosophical discourse. In the first part of the paper, I argue the concept of aesthetic act becomes highly significant in the context of the ongoing development of everyday aesthetics and environmental aesthetics. In order to address the problem of what is particular to acting in the aesthetic realm, in part two I examine several conceptions of acts that permeate recent work in analytic aesthetics. In part three and four I provide a contrastive account of aesthetic acts in terms of distance and engagement. Paying attention to contrasts between the models of distance and engagement will allow me to situate the concept of aesthetic act within an already established tradition of research and point to the changes that it brings about in the current understanding of aesthetic appreciation.

Keywords: Aesthetic Act, Psychical Distance, Aesthetic Engagement, Everyday Aesthetics

1 Aesthetics Beyond Art: Everyday Aesthetics and Environmental Aesthetics

The starting point of my consideration of aesthetic acts is noting that aesthetic inquiry is nowadays an ever-growing field, which has no clear boundaries. One of the consequences that flows from the extension of the realm of aesthetics beyond the confines of the artworld and the artistic discourse that supports it is the need to rework the received categories deemed adequate to encompass and describe the wide range of our aesthetic encounters. Giving more weight to aesthetic acts might

be a way to respond to this need. In what follows I will try and unpack this notion by drawing on pragmatic and analytic aesthetics. Understood broadly, along a Deweyan line and in contrast to mechanical, systematic philosophical discourse which takes as its object unsubstantial experience defined in a priori terms (Dewey 1930/1998, pp. 195, 197-198, 199-200, p. 204; Berleant 2010, pp. 92-93, 96; Lopes 2018b), aesthetic acts are regarded as an integral part of our everyday life, being directed at the way we qualitatively apprehend the immediate, lived world. On this experiential view, active engagement becomes constitutive of aesthetic appreciation, which can be resumed neither to a matter of receptive response, nor to inferential judgment and logical evaluation (i.e., formally valid, or invalid).

As early as 1930, John Dewey (Dewey 1934/2005, pp. 9-11) already proposed that one should take ordinary life as a point of departure if we are to seek to understand the roots of aesthetic appreciation. Here is a significant quote: “a primary task is imposed [...] to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (Dewey 1934/2005, pp. 2-3). Dewey sought therefore to restore the continuity between aesthetic experience and ordinary processes of existence. Apart from everyday affective experiences, such processes of existence may include, at a lower level, organic responses like visuo-motor activities, or sensory and motor actions that need to be brought to an optimal state (Dewey 1934/2005, pp. 22, 48-49; 1926/2008, 108; Steen 2006, pp. 62-63). To better understand where continuity could fail, we can think here of forms of disruption such as the various forms of sensory deprivation we all experienced during Covid-19, for instance the impossibility of enjoying a distant view under lockdown or the fear of taking a deep, clear breath in a crowded space. Other examples that stress the (dis)continuity between aesthetic experience and organic responses are singing one’s way back to language after a stroke or dancing one’s way back to locomotion, as beautifully documented in Valeria Bruni Tedeschi’s documentary *Une Jeune Fille de 90 Ans* (2016). Furthermore, continuities are to be equally restored between organisms and their environment in what Berleant (2010, pp. 131-132) calls an “aesthetic ecology” – i.e. an interaction with the environment based on multisensory experience as well as on human interrelations and interdependence –; and finally, continuities need to be restored between art and marginal phenomena, which more often than not hold a non-contingent, non-random, bidirectional relationship –

i.e. mutually informative (Dewey 1934/2005, pp. 11-12; Lopes 2018a, p. 7) –, wherein art acts retroactively on the world.

According to recent philosophies of the everyday, by rooting art and aesthetic practices in the human world, the possibility is open for them to have a real effect on experience and broader consequences for the human condition at large, such as transforming or enhancing human life. Dewey (1926/1984, pp. 106-107) had already acknowledged this point first in talking about art and then by extending his argument to broader aesthetic practices: “Art also explicitly recognizes what it has taken so long to discover in science; the control exercised by emotion in re-shaping natural conditions, and the place of the imagination, under the influence of desire, in re-creating the world into a more orderly place.” More recently, Bence Nanay (2018, pp. 79-80) has also developed this idea of affective and perceptual learning through art in a paper in which he focuses on the “experiential shifts in our perception of everyday scenes that result from engagement with artworks”, such as enhanced sensitivity to occlusions or space alignment. Along the same lines, Yuriko Saito (2017, pp. 4, 199) has emphasized that “the power everyday aesthetics wields on humanity’s ongoing project of world-making.” Finally, Berleant (2010, p. 223) holds that “in the aesthetic we discover the human world, and in re-constituting the aesthetic we lay the groundwork for reconstructing a more humane world.” The picture that emerges from the above-mentioned passages is that aesthetics is not disconnected from matters of life but is part of a broader, humanistic project, more specifically a project of “humanistic functionalism” (Berleant 1976, pp. 346-347), sensitive to human needs, including practical human needs.

Eventually, Dewey’s (1930/1998, pp. 197-200) original willingness to make aesthetics take into account situations or larger, integrated environmental units which hypostatize a dominating affective quality, rather than objects or items taken in isolation, materialized in the second half of the 20th century with two developing subdisciplines of aesthetics, namely environmental aesthetics and everyday aesthetics, which focus on the pervasiveness of aesthetics as appreciation of the world at large (Carlson 2001, p. 423; Kvokačka 2020, pp. 271-273). These subdisciplines take as their object entities and situations as diverse as the experiential dimension of a given environment, utilitarian objects and human actions, cultural practices outside the Western tradition, aesthetics of daily lives and habitual interactions etc. (Berleant 2010, pp. 131-132; Saito 2017, p. 1). One defining trait, which stands in contrast to Dewey’s

(1934/2005, p. 209) original argument, is dropping off the idea of an intense, unified, complete, and orderly character of experience, while foregrounding the sensory or multisensory engagement with the world, with a reinvestment and reinforcement of so-called lower physiological functions or proximal senses dealing with sounds, textures, or temperatures etc. (Dewey 1926/1984, p. 106; Saito 2017, pp. 3, 59).

2 Aesthetic Acts

In line with the continuist approach outlined above, aesthetic acts concern worldly interactions with a wide range of items such as functional artifacts requiring an understanding of their instrumental value (Parsons and Carlson 2009), natural environments, the scenic quality of a place, a dynamic urban environment (Galindo and Hidalgo 2005, p. 26; Seip 2010; Chenoweth and Gobster 1990; Berleant 1976, p. 347), a particular range of events, sequential or coexistent things and actions (e.g. a sequence of experience, such as experiencing the visual and spatial design of a urban landscape on one's way to work, Berleant 2010, p. 138), performances within various fields etc. (Schaeffer 2004; Berleant 2010, p. 13; 2017, p. 11).

Freed from constraints in terms of ontological categories, aesthetic acts are defined instead in terms of mental activation that is particular to a given situation, exemplifying a cognitive and affective relation to the world (Dewey 1930/1998; Schaeffer 2003, pp. 140-142; Berleant 2010). The stress is on the experience of acting and finding pleasure in this very experiencing (Saito 2017, pp. 2-3, 24).

A challenge that needs to be taken up is to clarify what kind of mental resources are demanded in such acts. What is particular to acting in the aesthetic realm? In the remainder of this paper, I will try and articulate several conceptions of acts that permeate aesthetic discourse such as distance, involvement, and engagement (Bullough 1912/1984; Lopes 2018b; Berleant 2010). Most are analytically informed act-centred approaches, which bring into focus aspects concerning the agency of the subjects who engage in aesthetic endeavours, such as motivational, volitional, or participatory aspects. The aim of this overview is to find elements of response to the question of determining to what extent the notion of act pushes forward the philosophical project regarding the continuity between aesthetic practices and life. Given that it is a notion involved in discussions about agency, a first question that arises is to know whose acts we are talking about and what forms of activity are

into play. Whether, for instance, acts refer to the organism's causal action outside of one's control and will (what Yuriko Saito calls mechanical acts or acting on autopilot; Saito 2017, pp. 2-3, 24), or whether what matters are the acts of the conscious mind, of a cognitively informed agent, led by curiosity and prone to exploratory behaviour.

In contemporary debates enriching this discussion, there is a narrow sense in which the actions called for aim at the attribution of aesthetic value (which can be manifested, for instance, by belief-like judgments, making certain aesthetic choices, deciding on the order of display of certain items etc.). On this view, aesthetic acts appear as high-level act types, whose outcomes are aesthetic values (Lopes 2018b, pp. 29-30). Dominic Lopes, for instance, distinguishes between an appreciation model of aesthetic acts, coming with a hedonic flavour, according to which "all aesthetic acts are acts of aesthetic appreciation. The model says, first, that to appreciate is to act. [...] the idea is to give acts of appreciation a monopoly on aesthetic agency" (Lopes 2018b, p. 33) and an evaluation model which requires that aesthetic values are mentally represented in the conscious mind of the appreciator. Lopes (2021, p. 210) has a normative understanding of acts, favouring this second model: aesthetic acts are motivated by aesthetic evaluation, i.e., by mentally representing an item or a situation as having aesthetic value; we act a certain way for reasons of aesthetic value, in complying with norms and conventions embedded in social practices, that may require learning and tiresome work. The worry is that there might be too much built into the notion of acting (and more specifically acting well) in compliance with norms within aesthetic communities; on this view, one must have already interiorized a number of norms before acting as an aesthetic agent.

Moreover, with respect to the conception of act as mental performance or mode of consciousness there is also a discussion about the need for exercising rational agency and responding to a distinct kind of reasons, more specifically to what Keren Gorodeisky (2018) calls "aesthetic rationality", or pleasure of mere reflection. According to Gorodeisky (2018, pp. 169-170, 171-172), aesthetic rationality is an active state in that one acts for a reason; furthermore, the active nature of aesthetics goes with self-reflexiveness, being an affective mode of self-consciousness.

While these last two models, the complexity of which I could not do justice here, might seem too demanding since they support a conception of acts which entails revealing aesthetic value by means of epistemic

higher-order processes, there is yet another sense of acting which gives more place to openness, playfulness, and aesthetic freedom (possibly in giving rise to aesthetic value rather than in revealing it). More specifically, on Thi Nguyen's (2019, pp. 1127-1128, p. 1137) view, although aesthetic acting is a cognitive practice aimed at correctness and subject to mistakes, a striving activity to get things right through the exercise of one's own faculties, the stress is on the very process of exercising or engaging in such an endeavour, not on the outcome of the endeavour (i.e., its failure or success). This is what Nguyen (2019, pp. 11-12), calls "the engagement account of aesthetic value" which states that we have an aesthetic experience of the actions we perform (e.g., perception, attention etc.) when engaging in an appreciative behaviour. While the model entails self-reflexiveness, it does so in a less restrictive sense in that there is no commitment as to revealing the reasons for acting a certain way.

Now, what comes into focus with environmental and everyday aesthetics is a broader, yet more encompassing sense of acting, considered this time "in the wild", which is oriented on doing things and acting upon the real world rather than aiming at mere judgment of contents difficult to access which might or might not have consequences in practical empirical life (Saito 2017, p. 58). Within this framework, as in the act-centred approaches briefly sketched above, the experiencing agent is more than a mere spectator who responds passively to an aesthetic object; instead, he actively creates his own experience. Here is a telling quote from Saito (2017, pp. 52-53): "Dewey's and Berleant's discussions are useful in reminding us that, even as a 'spectator' or 'receiver', we are never a sitting duck, so to speak, but rather an active agent of creative engagement with what we are perceiving. In short, we are never passive and inactive when it comes to aesthetic experience." While many philosophers would (and did indeed) side with the sitting duck rather than with the aesthetic agent, the problem of creative aesthetic engagement is certainly worth further investigation. The next two sections will be devoted to an assessment of engagement against what I take to be one of its main competitors, namely (psychical) distance.

3 From Distance...

In order to have a better grasp on aesthetic acts, it might be useful to think of them along a continuum, from an account in terms of distance

to an account in terms of engagement, which are seemingly mutually exclusive.

First of all, distance is construed as a cognitive notion describing a psychological phenomenon or event, something akin to mental detachment (Dickie 1961, p. 234; Dickie 1962, pp. 297-298), grounded in a specific type of consciousness. Edward Bullough (1912/1984), who will be my main reference here, presents distance, and more specifically, psychical distance, as a voluntary action of a special kind which helps recover aesthetic qualities, to be distinguished from a teleological mental act qualified by a distinctive motivation and prior intention to achieve a goal. Bullough (1912/1984, p. 461) claims that distance is obtained by “putting the object out of gear with practical needs”; in other words, psychical distance refers to a subjective orientation performed by a rational agent who is not goal oriented. Furthermore, distance would entail, but not be exhausted by, contemplation and disinterested attention (Dickie 1964, pp. 56-57; Dickie 1961, p. 234).

In Bullough’s view, contemplation marks a distance from one’s own self, who could not be, when immersed in an aesthetic act, an epistemically engaged self, concerned with the reality of the work, or holding an awareness of the world; a self-engaged in an aesthetic act is instead, according to Bullough (1912/1984, pp. 460, 461-462), a subject in “strange solitude and remoteness from the world”, freed from every ordinary concern, from any mundane preoccupations. Though putting us “out of gear with our actual self” distance does not exclude all personal factor, leading to an impersonal relation between the self and the object, but preserves a filtered personal character in that it is emotionally coloured; more precisely, feelings are filtered or cleared of narrowly practical concerns. Distance would thus allow a split between our own self and its affections, felt mostly through an imaginative engagement (Dickie 1961, p. 234).

Now, if distance comes with a phenomenological tone, a felt affective quality, something like a feeling of being distanced, then it allows access to the qualitative processes of which world? In Bullough’s (1912/1984, pp. 461-462) model of distance, the affective character accompanying practical activities are dismissed; the world considered is a virtual world (e.g., the world as a stage), whose primary nature is not ordinary, practical, functional etc., but fictional, based on the unreality of action: our aesthetic encounters experienced through distancing would be akin to witnessing a drama in an Elizabethan theatre.

As we can infer from the brief overview presented above, aesthetic acts connected to distancing would be those acts for which the history of fine art and eighteenth-century systematic aesthetics are highly relevant. It is a view that excludes experience outside these contexts, and more specifically, it excludes an intimate interaction with everyday objects and disregards the experience that such interaction might bring about. The functionality of the everyday, something that we relate to in our daily lives, would make it ineligible for giving rise to aesthetic experience. For this reason, a view on aesthetic acts from distance falls to the ground.

4 ...to Engagement

We can now pursue the line of argument in the opposite direction and present a view from engagement. Engagement, as opposed to distance, is not confined to a psychological attitude but includes somatic and social dimensions of experience (Berleant 2010, p. 90). Being appreciatively engaged entails a multisensory involvement of an embodied actual self with his or her practical environment, an engagement with the ordinary, the mundane or the “humdrum” (Saito 2017, pp. 24-25). Furthermore, the model of engagement fosters no longer an inhibition of action but participatory response of aesthetic agents who count as behavioural entities, acting and responding in a human environment that is not “out of gear” with his or her actual self (Berleant 2017, p. 12). Berleant’s (1970; 2017, p. 10) aesthetic of engagement thus pushes forward Dewey’s idea of continuity between art and life, providing an alternative approach to understanding aesthetic value; it is not a cognitive approach, neither a sociological one, but an experiential approach, as we can read in the passage below: “aesthetic engagement is based on a phenomenological analysis of the direct experience of aesthetic appreciation, an experience commonly had of full participatory involvement in a situation that may include a work of art, a performance, an architectural or environmental location, or a social situation.”

Moreover, aesthetic engagement is meant to contribute to a broader project of human self-understanding, aiming at reinforcing agency (Lopes 2018, p. 7), both individual human agency and social human agency. It thus seeks to provide both a personal and collective sense of identity. A new dimension added by this model is the aesthetic appreciation of human relations and the idea of aesthetic community. The implied objectives, even if not always stated as such, are to overcome formalism and disinterestedness, which rely on exclusive, close attention to distinctive perceptual features of an object.

Let me end with two contrasting quotes that reinforce this idea and serve to better grasp the continuum from distance to engagement along which aesthetic acts could be understood:

Imagine a fog at sea [...] the experience may acquire, in its uncanny mingling of repose and terror, a flavour of such concentrated poignancy and delight as to contrast sharply with the blind and distempered anxiety of its other aspects. This contrast, often emerging with startling suddenness, is like [...] the passing ray of a brighter light, illuminating the outlook upon perhaps the most ordinary and familiar objects - an impression which we experience [...] when our practical interest snaps like a wire from sheer over-tension, and we watch the consummation of some impending catastrophe with the marvelling unconcern of a mere spectator [my emphasis] (Bullough 1984, pp. 459-460).

Consider this: there is beauty in the tracks of missiles flying against a dark sky, and sublimity in the collapse of a glacier. While beauty is the only direct mark of value, it is also involved in an undeniable ambiguity in our contemporary civilization. I am convinced that the most real and important task of aesthetics is to speculate on this ambiguity on the horizon of our global civilization (Berleant 2010, p. 223).

5 Conclusion

This paper aimed at taking a broader look at contemporary accounts of aesthetic acts by situating them in an already established tradition from which we inherit and that can no longer be appropriate for describing the diversity of aesthetic practices. Some of the changes in the understanding of aesthetic appreciation that the notion of aesthetic act brings about are the following: aesthetic acts allow us to move away from an object-centered aesthetics to a situation-centred aesthetics; they favour an axiological approach wherein aesthetic values comprise more than pure perceptual values or beauty, serving as a trade-off (Lehtinen 2021) between affective and social values; they entail a view according to which remoteness from the world is no longer acceptable, proposing instead a humanistic functionalism that reinforces the continuity between aesthetic practices and everyday life.

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