

EXTENDED AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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1. The narrowed interpretation of aesthetics

Some confusion arises regarding the philosophical discipline of aesthetics beginning from the original use of the term: according to our knowledge, the term 'aisthesis' meant 'sensational perception' and it referred to sight, hearing, touch and all the other senses as well. In spite of this, in 1750 Baumgarten's *Aesthetics*¹ mentions it as the "the science of sense cognition," establishes that it is rather concerned with the beauty, and defines beauty as "the perfection of sensible knowledge" (Baumgarten 1750-8, 14§). Since beauty is present most saliently in art, the "felix aestheta" (the 'lucky aesthete') is in the position to refine sensual cognition. He claims that the lucky aesthete would be one of the following: „the orator, the poet, the musician etc." (Baumgarten 1750-8, 69§). Evidently, Baumgarten's aesthetics primarily concerns the artist „whose task it is to achieve perfect sense cognition" (Gregor 1983, 377).

This shift became even more prominent after Hegel: aesthetics devoted less and less attention to the sensorial experience (including the experience of beauty), and much more to art. Hegel represented the milestone from which aesthetics was widely regarded as the discipline of the philosophy of art. It is no wonder that James Kirwan sees the discipline of aesthetics nowadays as lacking the aesthetic (*per se*) and questions this concept of "aesthetics without the aesthetic" (Kirwan 2012).

Interpreting aesthetics as philosophy of art entailed reducing the "aesthetical experience" to those senses

which are involved in appreciating art: seeing and hearing. The reasons for excluding the other senses from the discourse on aesthetics are the following:

a.) The categorization of senses into lower and higher

Aristotle speaks of five external senses in *De anima* and in *Parva Naturalia*. Even though these senses primarily serve preservation, he highlights as far as rational beings are considered, the importance of the senses is much higher: "in animals which have also intelligence they serve for the attainment of a higher perfection" (Aristotle 1908–52b, 436b, 437a). In one of his later paragraphs, Aristotle claims that among the external senses, seeing and hearing have a distinguished role in cognition. Sight is our primary source of perception, it is "the superior sense," but "for developing intelligence, and in its indirect consequences hearing takes the precedence," since hearing channels verbal communication (Aristotle 1908–52b, 437a). Philosophers followed this route, discriminating between superior, intellectual senses (visual and auditory), and inferior senses (touch, taste and smell). The latter were regarded as means for preservation, but have a lesser contribution to knowledge than the "intellectual senses." Aesthetics, as an independent field of research, was concerned exclusively with the higher senses.

b.) The exclusion of the agreeable

Kant strictly differentiates between the beautiful and the agreeable, which he defines in the following way: "The agreeable is that which pleases the senses in sensation" (Kant 2000, 91). Smell and taste, in turn, cannot be detached from the feeling of pleasantness: we cannot taste or smell without noticing whether it is pleasant or unpleasant (Aristotle 1908-52c, 421a) – whereas this instinctive, immediate judgment is not necessarily present in visual or auditory experience. If we have to detach pleasantness from the beautiful, then smell and taste cannot be considered objects of the aesthetic judgment.

¹I used the Hungarian translation by Gabor Bolonyai of Baumgarten's work, as it appears in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Esztétika*. Budapest: Atlantisz, 1999.

c.) The spatial (visual) and the temporal (dynamic) arts

As we have seen, aesthetics has turned towards artistic beauty – almost – from the moment it was born, and art is perceived through the two senses of contemplation: vision and hearing. This approach grounds the often-drawn parallel between poetry and painting, a question that is present in Lessing's *Laokoon* as the question of the particularity of artworks which were especially made to be seen and heard (Lessing 1874).

Though its name would suggest that aesthetics is the theory of the whole sensational perception, as we can see, the field has been reduced gradually to its fraction:

- It does not entertain all the sensorial experiences, only the visual and auditory experiences
- Even in these cases it only deals with the experience of beauty
- It does not treat all the occurrences of beauty, but mainly artistic beauty
- Nowadays it is not so much concerned with artistic beauty, but rather with specific issues in philosophy of art (i.e. what is art, what is the ontological status of the artwork, the possibility of critical discourse etc.), which can be answered without involving the issues of aesthetic experience.

As Kirwan puts it, the aesthetic has been leached out of aesthetics, that is, in contemporary aesthetics the aesthetic is "kept on ice" (Kirwan 2012, 181). This type of impoverishment is something that many desire to change by planting the aesthetic back into our daily life, even with the cost of obliterating the demarcation between life and art (Shusterman 2007). Shusterman's work is the beacon in this prospect: he approaches rap music with the rigor and standards of the classical genres (Shusterman 1991), furthermore, he proposes a new discipline, coined somaesthetics: "it can be most briefly defined by its focus on the body as a locus of sensory-

aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning" (Shusterman 2007, 136).

This paper goes the other way around, and investigates those signs present in today's art world which can be interpreted as attempts to re-capture the global perceptive experience of art. In the following passages I will present cases, which allow for the inclusion of touch, taste and smell into the persisting framework, without changing the narrowed-down definition of aesthetics. I will speak of artworks which require the audience not only to see and hear them, but to employ the other senses as well. I will not speak of interactive works which require some sort of active-transformational action from the audience. The challenge that these artists have taken upon them is to expand the contemplative horizon for the senses deemed inferior until now.

2. The expanded aesthetic experience

a.) The sense of touch

It seems that it is hard to harmonize touch with the contemplative attitude which is proper to the aesthetic reception. The act of touching implies some sort of practical, "work-like" transformative (poietic) situation, while the passive tactile situation can be interpreted as intrusion into the private sphere of the individual. Neither of these situations would qualify as typical for reception of art which traditionally does not include touch.

A queer tactile experience is present in Jacob Dahlgren's work, "Wonderful World of Abstraction" (2009). The „object" is a large cube, constituted by 32000 coloured and densely suspended silk ribbons. The playful-looking artifact is actually a trap. When venturing to go into it, the visitor will suddenly feel lost and trapped: the never ending ribbons would surround one from every angle, become suffocating, capture the sounds from the outside and in the same time create a "jungle" in which somebody or something could appear in front of one

anytime. The smooth and pleasant touch of silk can become frightening in this particular case.

Several other installations are also built on the concept of touch. The visitor does not only navigate in a built-in environment, they are also subjected to some sort of tactile impulses. This effect was very vibrant in Transylvanian artist Zsolt Berszán's site-specific installation, exhibited in MODEM in Debrecen in 2010. The theme of the exhibition was the worm – as the persistent element of a world lacking the humane and the transcendent as well. Next to the exhibited objects the artist constructed a small cave-like environment from black silicone and polyurethane foams, giving the impression that the visitor was inside the worm: he covered the floor with the same soft, elastic and flesh-like material, which gave the terrifying, disgusting and nauseating impression of being captured inside the creature.

Ilona Németh, who exhibited *The Paradigm of Women* in 1996, worked in a similar way: she covered the floor of the gallery with starchy pillows, forcing the visitor to step on them in order to get to the other pieces. The soft but discouraging feeling evoke both pleasure and guilt – since the road of classical art appreciation is paved with the suffering of universal womanhood, symbolized by the pillow, and can only be reached if the visitor stomps on it.

b.) The sense of smell

The olfactory sense is tightly interrelated with our biological survival, it can be pleasant at times, but unfortunately, also very unpleasant on other occasions, thus it cannot be included into the classical art concept. It can be quite difficult to differentiate between smells, and especially to formulate these differences, thus they are hard to be included into our disinterested experience which appeals to our intelligence.

Nevertheless, today smell-art or odor-art does have some representatives.

Berlin-based Norwegian artist, Sissel Tolaas' complex pieces attempt to re-establish smell as a crucial means of communication and of perception. Tolaas calls the Western civilization "smell-blind". She has been dealing with odors for 20 years now, planning the "odor-map" of numerous cities, with the purpose of making people more conscious of their experience of smells. Her odor-archive has approximately 8,000 samples. The German Museum of Military History in Dresden has asked Tolaas to plan the smell of a battlefield. The recreated smell was so authentic, hence disturbing that the museum refused to impregnate its halls with it. The artist has claimed many times that there are no pleasant or unpleasant odors for her, this discrimination is due to a prejudice, and she, as the liberator of smells fights against it. Unfortunately, it seems to be quite hard to fight off our natural liking or disgust of certain smells, and thus it becomes hard to relate to them in a disinterested way.

Hungarian artist Hilda Kozári also works with smells. Through her work she studies the effect of smells on emotions and memories. In *AIR – Urban Factory Installation* she reconstructed the specific smells of Helsinki, Budapest and Paris, which she captured in separate large bubbles, inviting the visitor to step into them. She used the term "nose-vision" for her works. In her *Kitchen and Café* set she used spices in the preparation of her painting.

One of the most interesting projects of the last years has been Sonia Falcone's *Campo de Color*. The Bolivian artist's installation is composed of more than one hundred clay-plates, with heaps of different kinds of pigments or national spices (curry, chili, cayenne, paprika, cocoa, different condiments, etc.). The installation is partly visual: the vivid, joyful composition is placed in a geometric order, replicating the perfect

shape of the circle in a grid-like form. The visual experience can also be transmitted by a computer image. However, something that can only be experienced on the spot is the penetrative harmony of smells, the exciting fragrances that flow into all the pieces of the installation, capture the receiver and create simultaneous allusions of home-cooking and of far-away exotic cuisine. Smelling the odors plays a crucial part in the aesthetic experience of the artwork – the fragrances evoke memories and feelings, nostalgia for the past and allusion of the far-away, more than any visible or audible feature.

c.) The sense of taste

Probably the most problematic task would be the elevation of taste into the artistic contemplation. If we desire to maintain the relevant delimitations between the artistic and the non-artistic, taste will not be integrated easily. It is quite hard to imagine sense of taste in a context that does not require the receiver to eat the object of taste – while one of the main criterions of artistic contemplation is exactly the impossibility of depletion of the artifact. If actual ingestion occurs, it is not quite clear why we speak of fine art and not culinary art.

Rirkrit Tiravanija relies on the sense of taste in his works – usually not objects exposed with the purpose of admiration. He implements situations brought about by the social aspects of food consumption. This is why Rirkrit Tiravanija is one of the salient representatives of the relational aesthetics (Nicolas Bourriaud). In his first 1990 work, he cooked a special Thai dish for the conversing visitors in the vacated Paula Allen Gallery in New York. After the visitors finished their meal, the leftovers were left as documentation of the event. The artist often created similar events. His gestures have a critical aspect: by sharing the food he protests against today's greedy consumerist lifestyle.

Cyprien Gaillard has managed to include taste (through the consumption of alcohol) in quite a curious way into his 2011 work exhibited at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. The *à propos* of his installation named *The Recovery of Discovery* are the embossments and architectural reliefs removed from the Pergamon Altar at the beginning of the 20th century, and brought to Berlin, where they can be seen even today. He ordered 72,000 bottles of Efes beer from Efes, placed the cases of beer in the shape of a pyramid – referring to the dominant architectural shape of ancient times. On the opening day he asked the visitors to feel free to open a bottle of beer and consume its content. The visitors met a quite particular mode of consuming art: the rigorously structured geometric form slowly became an incoherent, repulsive mess, decorated with stinking broken bottles of beer.

In the presented cases the application of non-intellectual senses was crucial to the artistic reception: they can be omitted neither from the perception, nor from the interpretation. The significance of these attempts lies in their ability to show a way in which the established aesthetic contemplative framework could be expanded towards the “inferior” senses by incorporating touch, smell and taste.

3. Troubling issues

If the expansion of aesthetic artistic experience is possible, we need to face the following challenges:

a.) The definition of aesthetic experience

The definition of aesthetic experience is problematic on its own – as Shusterman claims „the aesthetic is obviously a vague, polysemic, contested and shifting signifier” (Shusterman 2006, 243). If we wish to maintain the proper aspects of the aesthetic experience, we need to distinguish it from the wider concept of sensorial experience. The *differentia specifica* of the aesthetic

experience is traditionally seen in its application to the “intellectual senses”, furthermore, in providing a “disinteresting pleasure”. The enterprises mentioned above try to provoke this *differentia specifica*: apparently, we are forced to allow the less intellectual senses into the realms of aesthetics as well. The second possible *differentia specifica*, namely, the “disinterest” is challenged by pragmatism, which tries to bring art to the ground, and searches for those aesthetic experiences that can be projected to real-life. In turn, if we abandon the criterion of disinterest, as Shusterman suggests (Shusterman 2006), it is worrisome that the aesthetic experience will become the same with the whole of sensational experience, rendering the term superfluous. This would lead to the annihilation of the whole aesthetic discipline, caused by our attempt to enrich it.

b.) The tendency of the concept of art to merge with other fields (gastronomy, art of living)

The inclusion of the inferior senses into art is risky because the distinction between the fine arts and other forms of activities which are figuratively entitled “art” (for example ‘culinary art’) might disappear. If we want to keep them separate, we probably need to reach back to Kant and his demand for disinterest, and state that ‘culinary art’ has less to do with contemplation, and more to do with consumption, contrary to fine art, which does not aim at being consumed, even when appealing to taste or smell. The metaphorical term “art” is only present in “culinary art” because it refers to more than just the physical satisfaction of the hungry food-craving consumer. The joy of the sensational experience – similar to art – is given by the momentum of “how.” Still, we cannot say that any magnificently constructed culinary masterpiece has ‘meaning.’

Due to Kant, even in these problematic cases we can decide whether we are dealing with aesthetic pleasure, or that of the agreeable. If the consumption of a dish is for the sake of taste, we are probably dealing with “culinary art.” However, if the consumption of the dish is meant to oppose the spirit of the art market, art collections, auctions or marketability, and at the same time opens a locus for communication, as in Rirkrit Tiravanija’s works, it can easily be interpreted as an artistic enterprise. In this case the pleasing aspects of the food – which would be of primary importance in the case of a culinary art – have a secondary role. Though the consumption of the Efes beer was relevant in Cyprien Gaillard’s work, the taste itself was not; what counted was the place of origin of the bottles conveyed by the brand. The aesthetic pleasure and sensual joy can be distinguished even in these cases.

The expanded aesthetic experience in contemporary art does not mean the total annihilation of the borders between life and art. It is much more reasonable to interpret these experiments as art’s own attempt to outgrow itself. Art is only “useful in life”, if it simulates situations, dares to ask uncomfortable questions, while succeeding to stay art. However, challenging these borders is a more than legitimate enterprise.

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