

Immersive Environments: Fragmented and Discontinuous Spaces for Action and Art

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Abstract

The spectator of contemporary art is located in a special operating space during an exhibition, where he/she can participate, take action, modify, intervene, expand: nevertheless, is the possibility of action really the main feature of a work of art, if action is considered as a performance with a clear and specific goal? What will become of the spectator's role, if we shift our conception of the artwork and consider it as something we can't use in a self-evident way? This essay will try to loosen the bond between an active spectator and an artwork recognized as such, and to bring out a disinterested and value-centered approach; in so doing, the aim is to overshadow the need for functionality and action when we deal with art. Immersion appears to respond to the need to be in the image, through a new type of interaction that takes place in real time, offering freedom and the chance to intervene, to participate, to modify the conditions under which experience unfolds: but if the need is to shorten the distance and achieve proximity with the image, to expand it, modify it, to *be in it* as if it was reality, wouldn't it be less costly to experience reality directly, without doubling it? A promising and successful experience in this sense is the ongoing series of *sensitive environments* by Studio Azzurro, an Italian collective of artists: immersive environments where the spectator's actions are not predetermined, he/she is encouraged to interact with the artwork through creative gestures, and the transition from spectator to participant/agent of an immersive artwork is connected with evaluative and operational processes at the same time.

Introduction

In *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, James J. Gibson says something quite interesting about his definition of *affordance*: “I have coined this word as a substitute for values, a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning. I mean simply what things furnish, for good or ill. What they afford the observer, after all, depends on their properties.”¹ The goal is to understand if, when we talk about artistic objects, the so-called “old burden of philosophical meaning” attached to the term “value” is really that old and anachronistic. Shortly afterwards, Gibson adds: “In short, the human observer learns to detect what have been called the values or meanings of things, perceiving their distinctive features, putting them into categories and subcategories, noticing their similarities and differences and even studying them for their own sakes, apart from learning what to do about them”:² two different approaches coexist in this quote, one strictly classificatory (inapplicable to the artistic discourse: it is not essential to “rank” works of art, outside of the art market); the other properly evaluative, which seems the most suitable in dealing with artworks. To evaluate an artwork is not the same as doing an economic ranking of some sort; works of art cannot be evaluated through hierarchies (comparisons between different artworks are always unbalanced, unfair and, in the end, meaningless). The evaluation process is also not equivalent to the research of something which has “aesthetically superior” properties, or of what is “more beautiful”; whatever “beauty” means, it is not related to objective and visible characteristics of the object in question. When we say that something is “beautiful”, “graceful” (or, simply, we think that it is “fine as it is”, we “wouldn’t change a thing”), we do not rely on those words and concepts, often we don’t even use them; we simply wear the dress that fits better according to us, and (in the case of artworks) we read the book that we consider fascinating, or we go back and watch the painting we find compelling. These are “occasions or activities,”³ as Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in his *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics*, not words of classifications. Evaluating is questioning why, and how, a specific object has a particular function in our life; this process is a direct consequence of our appreciation of the object, an experience that does not satisfy a need or an interest. We appreciate and enjoy the experience in itself, without any ulterior motive.

A key notion is the concept of “strange tool”, coined by Alva Noë in his homonymous book: functionality, instrumentality, and usefulness are pushed into the background when we talk about art; through the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, inevitably linked to an evaluative dimension of aesthetic and

artistic experience, it is possible to loosen the apparently unbreakable bond between art and a spectator that acts. "The theory of affordances" Gibson writes "implies that to see things is to see how to get about among them and what to do or not to do with them":⁴ the issue is, art does nothing, and with art, we don't do anything. For contemporary art, increasingly directed towards interactive, immersive and participatory practices, an action-centered approach would seem far more appropriate: however, is it really true that in an interactive environment the spectator can only act? The concept of action is definitely nuanced: "action" cannot be defined as "goal-oriented", "task-related", as an efficient performance with a clear goal, especially when we deal with art. Perhaps an interactive environment can *afford* a number of different possibilities, as the analysis of the "sensitive environments" by Studio Azzurro will prove.

Tools and the Meta-Operational Approach

According to Gibson, tools are "detached objects of a very special sort";⁵ they can be grasped, carried, manipulated. They can be combined to make new tools, which can be used in every possible way (within certain limits). The notion of "tool" is the *leitmotif* chosen for this essay; although, another concept is necessary, even if it will remain in the background of the analysis: the one of meta-operation. We, as human beings, are capable of *operating on our operations*. According to the Italian philosopher Emilio Garroni, every human operation is included in the framework of meta-operations: in short, one of the distinctive features of human beings is the capability of seeing an object not only for its *a priori*, pre-determined purposes, but also (and most importantly) for its potential, non-immediate, purposes. When we recognize an object (a simple, mundane object, but also a much more complex one), we interpret it through a "perceptive investment," which is of course non-transformative (the object is still and always the same), but can "set up" the object itself depending on the situation we ("we" as in: me + the object I am looking at) are in. The same object is up for potentially *infinite* considerations and points of view: it can operate, and be used, in *infinite* different ways.

This is crucial for the purpose of this essay: it proves that tools (and artistic tools in particular) don't have to be always and immediately available for usage to be considered tools. A stone can be seen as something trivial, not worthy of our attention, during a walk in the woods, but also as something to throw against someone during a heated fight. The object *affords* many different possibilities; but what about works of art? What does all this have to do with them? According to Garroni, artistic activities are *examples* (in a Kantian sense) of this typically human meta-operational capability; what we call "work of art" differs from other objects, because a work of art is not (or should not be) *aimed at something*, following strictly cognitive or communicational goals. Sure, a work of art can aim at anything, and more often than not it does; but it must not be its primary feature, which is instead precisely its meta-operational component.

Framed Environment: Art, Action and Disinterestedness

A work of art is a strange tool; it is an implement or instrument that has been denuded of its function. Art is the enemy of function, it is the perversion of technology. (...) Which is not to deny that there are works of art that may as a matter of fact serve this or that function. Just as something can be a hammer and a paperweight, so something can be, literally, a urinal and a work of art, or a doorknob and an item of sculptural interest.⁶

Alva Noë's interpretation of the gibsonian's approach (often not even explicitly mentioned by the author) is clear: Noë shares a vision according to which dynamic transactions often unfold between us and the objects in our surroundings. In general, seeing and perceiving are activities included in the framework of the entire environment, so not limited to our brain. Seeing is not something that happens within us; we perceive through our acting in the world. Substituting the term *value* with *affordance* strongly suggest a connection with functionality, action, and usability; on the other hand, value is subjective, according to Gibson, no more than a mental phenomenon. The gibsonian approach seems to be clearly action-centered; but how can we relate to an object with which we cannot do anything? Although art looks like technology (and technology organizes our lives and the experiences we have in the world), Noë writes, that is just an illusory resemblance: technology is not technology without a predeterminate goal; and if technology becomes useless, then it is no longer technology, but art. We generally know how to behave around objects: they are placed in a context that

affords instructions on how to use them; everything we encounter on our path is, most of the time, user-friendly. Works of art, on the other hand, are often placed in artificial environments (galleries, museums, exhibitions) that do not provide or explain the terms of use (except for well-known recommendations, such as “do not touch” and “do not stand too close to the artworks”; often even these instructions are absent, or useless, due to the fact that art developed into practices of interaction, touch, modification). Art doesn’t seem to follow the rules we already know when we play along in experiencing the world:

Doorknobs don’t puzzle us. They do not puzzle us just to the degree that we are able to take everything that they presuppose – the whole background practice – for granted. If that cultural practice were strange to us, if we didn’t understand the human body or the fact that human beings live in buildings, if we were aliens from another planet, doorknobs would seem very strange and very puzzling indeed. (...) Design stops and art begins when we lose the possibility of taking the background of our familiar technologies for granted, when we can no longer take for granted what is, in fact, a precondition of the very natural-seeming intelligibility of such things as doorknobs and pictures. Art starts when things get strange. Design organizes and enables; art subverts. It does this by abrogating the background that needs to be in place for things to have their functions.⁷

So, we don’t have to act. Art, according to Noë, requires us to stop everything we think we can do with it; we must “stop demanding application, and even pertinence.”⁸ The transactions we have with this kind of objects are not action-centered: it is a different kind of performance (Richard Schechner called it “the release of undoing”). Certain works of art sure could *afford* some kind of action: I see a burglar ready to attack me, I frantically look around in search of a defense weapon and I spot a Giacometti sculpture; I see it exclusively as something which I can use to defend myself, to hurt the burglar; but for sure I am not seeing the object as it is meant to be seen, that is, as a work of art. In this sense, artistic experience is not only devoid of the necessity of acting, but also of any practical interest: when I engage with a work of art, everything I do is unlikely to be relevant in the world of the artwork, and I, as a spectator, am cut off from that world; my performance is not, by any means, influenced by the properties of the art object.⁹ This is an experience that could be defined as “disinterested”. Works of art can puzzle us; but they can also bore us to death, as it often is when the object doesn’t afford a goal, an action, a job to carry out. When the object isn’t *aimed* at something, you don’t immediately understand it and it becomes boring; but boredom might be, sometimes, a goal in itself.

The choreography on the stage? The painting on the wall? These are cut off from dancing, or showing, or learning. They stop you dead in your tracks. That is, if you let them. If you suspend. If you interrupt. If you enter that special space and that altered state that art provides or allows. [...] Works of art are cut off and they demand that you cut yourself off from your engaged living.¹⁰

Noë highlights how it is unusual to be bored during our adult life: we have goals to achieve, jobs to complete, assignments to accomplish. Artworks, on the other hand, don't support our constant need for action and practicality: this, if we experience them as we *are supposed to*. That is why the relationship between art and functionality has always been so troubled: a house must be suitable for living (otherwise who would want to live there?), a courthouse needs to appear threatening (otherwise no one would be scared of being on trial and everyone would commit crimes light-heartedly), a bank should suggest an *atmosphere* of honesty and trust (or else who would want to rely on them for their money?);¹¹ but these are not artistic objects, or at least we generally don't relate to them as if they were. "A true art of architecture" Noë writes "would make inhabitable spaces."¹²

According to Gibson, it is through action that the subject can really get to know and experience the world. Affordances teach us what we can (and cannot) do with objects and tools. But what if the object in question is a *strange tool*, so it doesn't *afford* any actions on our part, at least not in the classical sense we are used to think about action? If we don't act, if we don't accomplish something, as gallery-goers we are at risk of being passive viewers, inactive participants. This was precisely one of the challenges met by interactive, immersive and participatory art: how can the spectator do more than contemplate the artwork? In other words: how can the spectator become an agent?

Interactivity: New Media and Sensitive Environments

The relation between the animal and its environment is not one of interaction in any sense of the word that I understand... it's one of, well, reciprocity's not too bad. A term like 'affordance' that bridges the gap points both ways... Affordances are both objective and persisting and, at the same time, subjective, because they relate to the species of individuals for whom something is afforded.¹³

Interaction seems inadequate to describe the relation between animal and environment, according to Gibson; it seems even less adequate to account for a spectator looking for an artistic performance capable of engage him/her. If we pin-point the most popular art exhibitions over the years, an artistic performance is "engaging" when it activates all the senses of the spectator, entertaining him/her for its entire duration. Immersive, interactive, participatory art (deliberately vague and expandable definitions) sometimes seems to offer interaction as pure sensationalism, mere entertainment, stimulation of the senses for recreational purposes only. Interactive art with an eye for reciprocity, on the other hand, does not seem to be doomed to failure: experiencing interactive art is a complex phenomenon, and it cannot be reduced exclusively to a stimulus to (re)act, to do something, to perform operations through what a computer, a helmet or *datagloves* allow the spectator to do. These actions inevitably lead to a scattered, fragmented experience, during which the only possible goal is to accomplish as many things as possible; there is no freedom, but the duty of keeping up with the requests of virtual interfaces, which afford us so many possibilities that end up with a) inhibiting the spectator, or b) the need to speed up the experience to seize all of them.

If interactive installations were addressed exclusively to our senses, experiencing them would be like being constantly challenged and solicited, forced to participate in an amusement park where we are "kept busy", entertained, and we just have to react to a precise stimulus: nevertheless, "A work of art (...) is more than a stimulus", as Noë states: "it is a response, a transaction, a move".¹⁴ When Gibson describes tools he highlights that "the boundary between the animal and the environment is not fixed at the surface of the skin but can shift"; in general, according to the theory of affordances, we can go beyond the "philosophical dichotomy" of the objective/subjective.¹⁵ Experiencing interactive art is not just a subjective experience if, and only if, our senses are not the only thing that is alerted: that is the main goal of the Italian artistic collective "Studio Azzurro." They work on new media to build a peculiar concept of interactivity, through what they call "sensitive environments": the participation of the spectators is total, imbued with sociality; they do not simply look at the artwork, they "attend" to it. In the works by Studio Azzurro action and contemplation coexist peacefully: Paolo Rosa, one of the collective's founders, argued that "action" and "contemplation" are complementary, and equally necessary, concepts. Passively wearing a virtual reality headset has nothing to do with an artistic experience: thanks to what they define "natural user interface technology", the spectator does not interact with technological prosthesis (a computer mouse, a keyboard...) but via "traditional

communicative methods” like touching, breathing and blowing, talking and making gestures. In this way, a “switch on/off logic” in which the technological device is only a mean to an end (if I press a button, something must activate, move, respond somehow) is avoided. Works like *Tavoli perché queste mani mi toccano* (*Tables. Why are these hands touching me*), *Coro* (*Chorus*) and *Il soffio sull'angelo — primo naufragio del pensiero* (*Breath on the angel—first shipwreck of thought*) as figures 1, 2 and 3 show, including figures projected on the surfaces of tables, a square made of felt, parachutes, figures that responds to our touch, our steps and breath. These are what Studio Azzurro call *sensitive environments* (in the beginning they were simply called “video-environment”); they are “sensitive” because they are actually modified, influenced, moulded by the spectator’s gestures, his/her intervention or simple presence. Studio Azzurro highlights the importance of a “behavioral attitude” of the spectator, not limited to the activation of devices; a creative reciprocity is at stake.



Figure 1. Still from Studio Azzurro, *Tavoli. Perché queste mani mi toccano* [Tables. Why are these hands touching me], 1995.¹⁶



Figure 2. Studio Azzurro, *Coro* [Chorus], 1995.
Photo of the author (during the retrospective "Studio Azzurro. Immagini sensibili"
held in Milan, Palazzo Reale, from April 9 to September 4, 2016).



Figure 3. Still from Studio Azzurro, *Il soffio sull'angelo (primo naufragio del pensiero)*
["Breath on the angel (first shipwreck of thought)], 1997.¹⁷

Of course, pushing the concept of interactivity to its limits, an objection might be that an art installation that aspires to be truly interactive should give the spectator the chance to step in and incorporate whatever he/she feels is missing. This is the ultimate form of reciprocity, and the dichotomy subject/object can be overcome: the subject is not just interpreting the artwork but cooperating with it, and the art object is more than a simple object. In their path to create authentically collective and public spaces for art, Studio Azzurro started an ongoing series called *Portatori di storie* (*Story Bearers*): this project involves creating relationships with virtual people walking back and forth, who can be stopped by the spectator with a spontaneous wave of the hand to listen to their stories. Apparently, the only action possible for the spectator is a gesture, so there is no concrete intervention in the artwork: one of the last projects of the series, *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan*), doesn't even allow the spectator to choose the person to talk to; he/her stands in front of a "sensitive mirror", and a person appears to tell a story. Actually, this project goes to show that action as we are used to know it has little or no place in the artistic discourse, in which the spectator can finally find a space free from hectic procedures, uninterrupted actions and requests, efficiency, obsessive and self-referential participation. That is why the dynamic of spectatorship (especially in dealing with contemporary art) is unusual: as spectators we often interact with the artwork through repetitive and self-centered operations like taking pictures, videos, selfies; then, once the task is over (and so our space for action and performance), we no more want to be active participant. We want to be passive spectators once again, to look at the images we produced, to save them and create memories and archives with them. Our space for action is always, when we deal with art, fragmented and discontinuous.

Conclusion

Back to the start, then. Why cannot a theory of affordances completely take over a value-centered approach? What has all this got to do with how we, as spectators, behave in the presence of an artwork? Boris Arvatov in 1925 significantly wrote:

Other criteria of value now took pride of place: convenience, portability, comfort, flexibility, expedience, hygiene, and so on – in a word, everything that they call adaptability of the thing, its suitability in terms of positioning and assembling for the needs of social practice. (...) The ability to pick-up a cigarette-case, to smoke a cigarette, to put on an overcoat, to wear a cap, to open a door, all these “trivialities” acquire their qualification, their not unimportant “culture.”¹⁸ (Arvatov 1997)

These are criteria of value that do not apply to art objects. Opening a door, smoking a cigarette, are actions that I carry out without giving them a second thought; they belong to my knowledge of the world, to my everyday experience of it. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in *On Certainty*, writes that when it's time for me to get out of the chair, I don't question if my two feet are still where they are supposed to be, and working as they always have and always will; it is an action that I do without doubting my ability to accomplish it. Of course, getting out of a chair is part of a much more complex background, but I shouldn't question every second of my every action (if I do, Wittgenstein warns, I am at risk of never being able to finally act). If we “stop doing” instead, as Noë recommends when we deal with art, we are at least partly detached from what we see; if we feel a disinterested pleasure for what stands in front of us (or all around us, in the case of an immersive performance), we as viewers do not limit ourselves to the desire to own that object; we don't care about its use-value, what it can, or cannot, do for us (or what we can do with it). We do not *fetishize* the object in front of us. Then, art is just a pointless game, a hobby, a contemplative distraction? What is the point of the artistic experience? Is there even a point? “Technology serves ends” Noë writes: “Art questions those very ends. Art affords revelation, transformation, reorganization; art puts into question those values, rules, conventions, and assumptions that make the use of technology possible in the first place”;¹⁹ art not only cannot be experienced with the same kind of basic confidence we have when we open a door or get out of a chair; it also calls into question all these actions, reorganizing them, highlighting what we thought it was the granted role they have in our lives. A *strange tool* always presents itself, according to Noë, with a precise

demand: "See me, if you can"; you, as a spectator, have to make sense of it, you have to think about it, question it, bring it into focus.²⁰ That is why "art's effects are not immediate"; they are never granted, unproblematic, or plain. How we relate to art is always up for "criticism, questioning, context, reflection"; the relation is "magnificently and necessarily cultural."²¹ When Gibson writes that "*values and meanings of things in the environment can be directly perceived*,"²² this doesn't seem to apply to the art discourse; that is why the affordance theory is at risk of being a reductionist approach when the focus is on art objects of any sort. At the same time, values and meanings are not strictly "subjective, phenomenal and mental": we cannot discard an evaluative approach to works of art, otherwise it would be impossible to understand them, or even to simply be able to talk about them. Suggesting a disinterested approach to art means opening up to the chance to appreciate artworks socially and globally (in what Kant would have called a "subjective universality"); appreciating artworks is not an idiosyncratic, subjective process, a response to a stimulus, an effect which inevitably follows a cause.

It is not contradictory or fundamentally wrong to approach art for the emotional or intellectual impact that often has on us as spectators, agents, participants; art can have many different goals, and be many different things: the point is, we cannot appreciate art just for its effects, otherwise its specificity, its role in our lives would be unexplainable. As Wittgenstein stated, if effects and reactions they provoke are the most interesting traits of artworks, we could replace them pretty easily: with a phantomatic drug that makes you feel the same way, or with another artwork, as if they were interchangeable. Understanding artworks is never a granted or automatic operation; evaluating them means paying a specific kind of attention, focusing on *this* artwork, which we have chosen to attend to. To shorten the time for contemplation and appreciation often means to react to a constant request of participation and action; the alternative approach, here merely hinted at, is to get rid of a "stimulus-response" logic, of an instrumental use of artworks.

Author Biography

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Notes

1. James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (University of Michigan: Houghton Mifflin, 1966): 285.
2. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, 285.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology & Religious Belief* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966): 3.
4. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, Taylor & Francis Group, 1986): 223.
5. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 40-41.
6. Alva Noë, *Strange Tools. Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015): 97.
7. Noë, *Strange Tools*, 98.
8. Noë, *Strange Tools*, 111.
9. This exact example was made by Bence Nanay in *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 29-30.
10. Noë, *Strange Tools*, 112.
11. These examples are taken from Adolf Loos, *Spoken Into the Void*.
12. Noë, *Strange Tools*, 112.
13. James J. Gibson, Discussion, in *Cognition and the symbolic processes*, ed. W.B. Weimer & D.S. Palermo (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1982): 234-237.
14. Noë, *Strange Tools*, 96.
15. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 41.
16. Official Youtube channel of the artists, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sB_CXsimp4
17. Official Youtube channel of the artists, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYwwpJfE1yA&t=33s>

18. Boris Arvatov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing", *October*, vol. 81 (Summer 1997): 126.
19. Noë, *Strange Tools*, 66.
20. Noë, *Strange Tools*, 101.
21. Noë, *Strange Tools*, 61.
22. Noë, *Strange Tools*, 128.

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