

Article

On Some Epistemological Advantages of the Notion of “Intervenient Aesthetic Field”

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Abstract: The reality of the aesthetic seems to manifest itself more and more in relational and immersive ways that defy analyses that follow the trail of the modern tradition of philosophy, based on the dual gnoseological relationship between subject and object. Even some areas of the new cognitive sciences seem to converge towards a conception of experience as a complex horizon in which variously related vectors operate. From this point of view, it is worth exploring the notion of “field” as a conceptual tool to describe the aesthetic. In this paper we will consider two possible uses of this notion in reference to the aesthetic: to describe experiential modes (following Arnold Berleant), and to describe social dynamics (following Pierre Bourdieu). Yet, the starting point will be some considerations provided by Peter Abbs. We will thus try to show how the notion of “aesthetic field” can be consonant with scientific settings that advocate models of mind that stress its being extended and situated. A particular test bed will be the psychology of art as a discipline spanning philosophical knowledge and empirical investigation. In this key will also be considered the so-called “experiential revolution” in psychology, which indicates an extra-cognitive horizon variously coinciding with the perspective of an aesthetic research focused on the conception of *aisthesis* as a system of practices of perception, emotion, and expression. According to this conception, the dynamics within the aesthetic field, such as those related to the nexus between perceptual contents and aesthetic properties, or between emotional content and the practices of sensing could prove to be dynamics of “intervenience,” rather than of supervenience.

Keywords: aesthetic field; experience; intervenience



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1. For a Critique of a Standard Model

For the sake of argumentation, I will polemicize here against a standard model that is perhaps itself fictitious in its sheer simplicity, but which I believe can be found underlying much of the literature ascribable to the current psychology of art. As such, I believe it embodies an inherent belief that is effective even beyond the psychology of art. It seems to be almost the underlying matrix of aesthetic theorizing, by serving as the general epistemological framework of aesthetics, including philosophical aesthetics, especially in an era in which philosophy seems willing to face the empirical sciences.

In a nutshell, this model can be formulated as follows, taking the words of a recent survey of current orientations within the field of the psychology of art: aesthetic experience can be defined as a process concerning the cognitive and affective response of an individual faced with an object belonging to a particular class of artifacts called art.

Aesthetic experience can occur while we observe a work of art in a museum, gallery, square, or other context. Most psychological perspectives on aesthetic experience argue that the latter is the result of the coordinated action of several mental processes such as: perception, attention, memory, imagination, thought, and emotion [1] (p. 72)¹.

Such a definition of aesthetic experience appears to be so general that it cannot be easily refuted, and indeed is fully corroborated by any rigorous account of the tasks of

the psychology of art as a whole (see, for example, the nice summary offered by George Mather [2]).

In my view, this conception of aesthetic experience (and note: “aesthetic,” not “artistic”) presents a number of issues that I will simply list below.

- (1) The persistence of the stimulus–response principle is clear. Aesthetic experience is presented as the reaction (“response”) to precise inputs. A state of affairs provokes an attitude according to an analysis that primarily breaks down the overall phenomenon into two well-divided ontological regions between which there is a causal relationship, no matter how complex.
- (2) The model is prone to a dual ontologism concerning both the region of the states of affairs (the “facts” of art) and the region of attitudes (the responses to those facts). It, therefore, seeks to answer the question “what is...” within these two distinct regions.
- (3) Consequently, the model tends to reduce the phenomenon to a fact. And here the problem becomes particularly thorny. On the side of the artistic object, the relevance of the distinction between fact and phenomenon, indeed, appears quite obvious: even the full coincidence of formal factual solutions doesn’t provide a sufficient reason to confer the same meaning upon two different experiential phenomena. Two painters who realize the “same” painting would produce two different works, with different meanings, at least for referring to two different repertoires that would thus intersect (the remarks made by Philip Pettit [3] are interesting in this regard). However, this is also true for the other “region”: even two overlapping series of intracranial states may not be a sufficient basis for talking about the same experience, since the way in which two distinct experiential configurations are established is often more important than their final contents, although they hypothetically coincide. In general, the convergence of factual elements does not guarantee that the corresponding phenomena are identical in their experiential meaning.
- (4) At the basis of the standard model lies a biased conception of both regions into which the phenomenon of aesthetic experience is divided. On the one hand, the relevant states of affairs are pre-defined starting from the uncritical assumption of a conventionally established “art world.” This imposes on the model a strong pseudo-contractualist burden that echoes the justificationist conception that is typical of the so-called “institutional theory of art.” On the other hand, the contemplative attitude that the modern tradition of aesthetics has glorified in its analyses of the Fine Arts since the eighteenth century is taken as the standard. The aesthetic response is thus inferred from an art world defined starting from a very circumscribed historical-cultural reality. The problem is that this becomes the comparative standard for aesthetic experience in general. Thus, in addition to the problems posed by a justificationist approach to an idealized reality, such as the one that flourishes in the institutional theory of art, one also obtains a deep theoretical and methodological limit. The aesthetic is confined to the artistic in the modern sense, preventing the understanding of fully-fledged aesthetic experiences such as the immersive ones that not only mark an increasingly predominant tendency of contemporary artistic language (as if contemplating a painting on canvas in the museum should remain the paradigm for the experience one has with a work by Bill Viola, for example), but also constitute the environment of everyday life that we inhabit today for the most part precisely as densely aesthetic. Contemplativism and art-centrism are serious flaws for any “psychology of art” and, in general, for any conscious aesthetic analysis practiced in this part of the twenty-first century.

There are reasons within the psychological discourse that could lead us to try and dismantle this standard model. I am thinking first of all of the “experiential turn” that increasingly characterizes current psychological research and practice, and which is certainly not incompatible with models of the mind shaped on the so-called “4 E’s” that have prompted us to move away from the Cartesian legacy that is projected onto the entire tradition of modern philosophical aesthetics. Even from an epistemological point of view, it would be worthwhile if such an experiential turning point were to also be acknowledged as

a research program in the field of the psychology of art (in line, for example, with Daniel N. Stern [4], who not by chance focuses on the performing arts). The emphasis on the relational and environmental dimension prevents the mind from being confined to intracranial events. Mind is projected beyond the separation between physical and spiritual. In this way we could really begin to think of an “empirical aesthetics” that does not coincide with an empiricist psychology of the aesthetic.

Now, the idea of placing the notion of “field” here at the heart of the discussion in relation to the aesthetic is due to the aim of overcoming precisely these limitations brought about by the standard model, according to which the description of the experience of the aesthetic would inevitably be faced with a rather sharp crossroads. That is, such a description would have to choose between a subjectivist and an objectivist path, and in each case try to subsume one pole to the other. According to some scholars, it is in subjectivity that are located the mechanisms that qualify the aesthetic experience as such, since the latter would be determined by a particular attitude (epistemic, emotional, or otherwise) assumed by its bearer. According to others, conversely, it would be the particular set of objective properties called into an experience that would make it aesthetic to the point of extorting from the subject that same peculiar attitude that the alternative position would consider instead original and primitive.

The concept of field—which is certainly not unfamiliar to psychology as such [5]—has exactly the function of dismissing this sterile alternative. To understand the reasons for this, we can consider some authors who have explicitly relied on the notion of field in relation to art and the aesthetic.

2. A General Overview of the Concept of Field: Peter Abbs

Without following chronological paths, the first author that can be useful to consider is Peter Abbs, who in some brief contributions highlights crucial aspects of the notion at issue². These aspects can be summarized schematically as follows.

The concept of field is drawn from physical science, although obviously without aiming to establish aesthetics as a quantitative study of nature. In fact, Abbs specifies:

I have taken the word “field” from quantum mechanics to act not as a precise analogue—the arts have no need of any analogue outside of their own activity—but merely as a suggestive metaphor. I want to suggest that art should not refer to a series of discrete artifacts or what some critics call “art objects” but to a highly complex web of energy linking the artist to the audience, and both artist and audience to all inherited culture as now an active, now a latent shaping force [6] (pp. 247–248).

The relevant point that emerges in this passage is the connection to the energetic component of the aesthetic phenomenon. Despite being too closely bound to the identity between aesthetics and philosophy of art, and therefore to an art-centric perspective, Abbs’ conceptual analysis has the advantage of insisting on this element also in relation to a consequence that is by no means negligible. If it is true that the aesthetic phenomenon conceived through the notion of field should be understood as an energetic phenomenon, then it will be necessary to recognize its constitutive dynamism. This latter deprives the aesthetic of any component of substantiality. Therefore, the phenomenon requires at least ideally a system of linguistic references in which, instead of the nouns–attributes system, verbal and adverbial functions are in the foreground.

Ideally, art requires for its understanding a dynamic language of participles and verbs, not of inert nouns referring to discrete objects. Just as in the study of subatomic particles so in the field of art our terms should be those of motion, of interaction, of transformation. Just as the nature of matter cannot be separated from its activity, so the artwork should not be conceptually separated from the complex field in which it operates. Just as in quantum physics the field gives birth to a variety of forms, which it sustains, then takes back, then recreates, so the

aesthetic field may throw up endless combinations which are, in turn, dissolved and recast again, culture after culture, work after work, symbol after symbol; the “simultaneous order” [6] (p. 248).

The emphasis is thus on the cultural-historical component of the aesthetic field, the particular complexity of which is reflected in the crypto-citation of Eliot and his “simultaneous order” thesis (the reference to Eliot is made explicit by Abbs [7]). In an energy field, the outcome being configured is the product of the system of explicit and implicit, thematic and operative, intentional and anonymous forces, that “weave” the surroundings:

“Field”, then, in our context, implies an intricate web of energy where the parts are seen in relationship, in a state of reciprocal flow between tradition and innovation, between form and impulse, between the society and the individual, between the four phases of *making, presenting, responding, and evaluating* which mark the four essential elements of the aesthetic field [6] (p. 248).

This reveals another crucial reference to the notion of the aesthetic field in general, namely Dewey’s *Art as Experience* [8], to which Abbs later explicitly refers [6] (p. 250). In Deweyan pragmatism, in fact, the aesthetic phenomenon is not equated with thegnoseologically determinable art object. As distinct from the artistic fact, the aesthetic phenomenon is the experiential unfolding of the dynamics by which the operating of art is realized in a given circumstance of experience. What is at issue is not so much the artwork as such, but the aesthetic “working.” Therefore, the notion of field implies the tendency to overcome any form of art-centrism. This latter is based on the idea that it is possible to provide in some way an ontological determination of art, able to consequentially circumscribe the perimeter of aesthetic phenomena as such. On the other hand, from the standpoint of the field, even the most sublime artefact is nothing more than the manifestation of energies that run through an experiential surrounding even beyond their concretization in an ontologically determinable object. In other words, the concept of field in aesthetics implies the subordination of ontology to phenomenology, going in the opposite direction to the traditional modern approach, aimed at determination of the “what” and therefore driven by the primacy of judgment over experience, and propositional discreteness over the density of sensuousness.

The Deweyan component of the notion of field in aesthetics is also expressed in a further passage, where Abbs pays attention to the importance of the medium, exactly as it famously happens in Dewey’s *Art as Experience*:

The medium, it is worth observing, is not a neutral space through which the creative act passes; it is rather the tangible material which makes the act possible and, as tangible material, it has its own character, inviting certain movements of the art-maker, resisting or confounding others. The material also carries with it a history, a repertoire of previous uses, of working conventions, of established connections and meanings, both covert and hidden. In engaging with the material, the art maker thus engages both consciously and unconsciously with tradition, with the forms already used and the modes and the techniques those forms have employed and passed on [6] (pp. 249–250).

Actually, in addition to the centrality of the medium, it seems evident here that the notion of field allows us to modify another thesis that has often been detrimental to aesthetics. The material is not, aesthetically, inert material. This means that it is not the receptacle of forms that can be attributed exclusively to subjectivity, whether empirical or transcendental. The material medium articulates within itself horizons of possible curvatures, lines of energy, with which the so-called subject is engaged, or rather—as I would rather say—“colluded.” One must know how to play with the material if one wants to draw expressive efficacy from it as an unfolding of the energy that informs the material itself. This energy endowment is the same historical foundation of a material a priori that is sedimented precisely as an aesthetic field, by setting the margins of concrete possibility

within which the effective moves—and only these ones are allowed, and therefore a criterion for what is right or wrong when carrying out the phenomenal process.

The aesthetic material cannot then be derubricated as a passive component of the phenomenon. Abbs, like all those who rely on the concept of field, insists not by chance on the relational dimension that marks the aesthetic as such, which is intrinsically foreign to dualistic options. Every praxis in which the aesthetic operates in fact oscillates incessantly between a subjectual polarity and an objectual polarity. Inherently bistable, the praxes of the aisthesis cannot be crystallized into states or properties. They display a dynamic, anti-substantialist character that escapes any ontological determination. Therefore, when we refer to the territory of the aesthetic, we resort to terms that are fueled by this bistability, even of a semantic kind. It is shaped on the seeming ambiguity of the term itself that labels it, namely “aisthesis,” due to its root in the bodily dimension. The latter is aesthetically expressive not because of the addition of a mental content, but because it articulates within itself something like the “mental”:

Touch, taste, feel, tact: these are the words, suggesting in their uses the intimate relationship between sensation and feeling, which best bring out the nature of the aesthetic mode. However high art may aspire it is yet always rooted in bodily response and primitive engagement [6] (pp. 246–247).

This allows us to clarify a very important point for our context. If conceived as a field relationship operating between vectors and not as a dual relationship between entities, the aesthetic phenomenon appears at once “physical” and “spiritual.” It, in fact, enacts in sensuousness a meaningfulness, or even—correspondingly—configures as meaningful a sensuous process. Therefore, the energy field of the aisthesis cannot be resolved in the cognitive act of sensuous reception. It shows itself as an exploratory process of perceptualization, in which the fulcrum goes (or returns) from the empirical to the experiential, i.e., from the fact to the phenomenon, from the constative to the expressive. Therefore, it possesses the ability to express what eludes any mere factual ascertainment. In other words, perception becomes aesthetic not because of special contents that it may take on, but because it radicalizes its own performative (as a making perceive, that is—precisely—a perceptualizing) and dynamic (as praxis, not as an act) character of collusion, of material engagement with the world. Perceiving expressively realizes, already in the postures in which it is embodied, what would otherwise remain inert. It is as if it “reawakened” the potentiality of meaning that lies in the texture of sensuousness.

All this finds an adequate formulation in an evocative passage quoted by Abbs from a letter written by Coleridge to William Sotheby on 13 July 1802. Here the aesthetic praxis is captured by Coleridge in its extreme tension towards the expressive possibility of what is not factually ascertainable. It is like that “non-ocular seeing” that is realized through a perceptual praxis, however adequately meaningful on the phenomenal level. It seems easy to compare Coleridge with what others (such as Bateson) have pointed out about the “seeing” of the blind by means of a stick, or even with the metaphor recurring in some authors (from Adorno to Berleant, for example) of the miner’s ability to see in the dark, which would be paradigmatic for the creativity of sensuousness and, therefore, also of art:

... a great Poet must be, implicité if not explicité, a profound Metaphysician. He may not have it in logical coherence, in his Brain & Tongue; but he must have it by Tact / for all sounds, & all forms of human nature he must have the ear of a wild Arab listening in the silent Desart, the eye of a North American Indian tracing the footsteps of an Enemy upon the Leaves that strew the Forest—; the Touch of a Blind Man feeling the face of a darling Child [9] (p. 810).

The full involvement of the body in a sensuous field of which it becomes a vector has, on the level of the epistemological approach, the advantage of eroding the cerebrality in which we have also often tried to enclose perception. As a perceptualization, a sensuous process is a collusive engagement with the material that is expressed relationally and dynamically. Then, a crucial reference for any good field theory cannot but be the dynamic

conception of Gestalt psychology elaborated by Kurt Lewin. By virtue of its intrinsically material connotation, the concept of field implies a quasi-structuralist view of phenomena, since a vector is manifested as such only within the energy curves dictated by the field in which it is taken. On the other hand, however, these energy curves cannot be reduced to *pure* transcendental forms. They are the material innervations of the field, as they sediment historically, based on practiced usages, in the very phenomenon that embodies them. Converging with the dynamic intonation of Gestalt psychology advocated by Lewin, the concept of field, especially in aesthetics, means then to welcome even structuralist instances, but always by breaking every fixed limit of structures, which never become constituted entities. As noted by Enzo Melandri, indeed, in the conception of the field proposed by Lewin “structure is the foundation of function” [10] (p. 19), in the sense that “the behavior of objects is determined by the structure of the field of which they are a constitutive part” [10] (p. 24), but only insofar as this structure is embodied in its vectorial manifestations. The concept of field involves the anti-substantialist reduction of entities (subject and object, paradigmatically) to vectors expressing energy curves:

vectors are (to use a traditional language) attributes of motion, not of the moving body. And this becomes quite evident with the introduction of the concept of field, in which “bodies” no longer have a place; there are only “variables” [10] (p. 28)³.

Consequently, properties that manifest themselves within a field will be properties of the field itself, although the latter may be manifest exclusively in the circumstance in which the vector variables materialize. They are “inter-venient”, and not supervenient with respect to qualities of a lower and more basic degree. It is on this thin border that the possibility of not falling back into a metaphysics of the field, into a substantialization of the relation, after having avoided the shortcomings of the metaphysical substantiality of subjective and objective entities, is played out. This is why we should say that the reference point for any theorization of the concept of field, even in aesthetics, must inevitably be Cassirer’s *Substance and Function*, a text to which the philosophers we are considering here often refer.

Abbs is also helpful in understanding this point. In a very short text, on the one hand he notes how in this theorizing one is “strikingly close to that of the structuralist movement” [7] (p. 5). However, he then specifies, “The aesthetic field, then, refers to that complex interactive system of allusion, reference and structure in which individual expressions of art are necessarily constituted.” And he concludes:

There is nothing inherently fixed or in any way metaphysical about the concept of the aesthetic field. Just as in quantum physics the field creates a variety of forms which it sustains, then takes back, then creates again in new patterns, so in the aesthetic field the complex relationships between the parts are changing all the time, recast in different ways at different times, by the driving power of different ideological movements, critical theories and artistic schools [7] (p. 5).

Then it becomes apparent how leveraging on the concept of field, so to speak, can solve the problem already encountered concerning the uncritical, basically justificationist assumption of the factual reality of the art world as the starting point for an ontologistic conception of the aesthetic—as happens in the institutional theory of art and, parasitically, in a substantial part of the psychology of art. With the concept of field, the forced alternative between mere substantial given and mere contingent becoming is dropped. Moreover, in such domains as art there are processes through which something that arises historically is sedimented in a series of activities, behaviors and attitudes that are then taken as natural, at least until phenomena occur that undermine their smooth functioning. For the correct analysis, necessarily anti-justificationist, these processes are prioritized over individual determined contents. Such a way of looking at the problem recognizes that historically acquired practices are transformed into a kind of new nature, and, complementarily, that in times of crisis it is possible to disrupt and overcome this new nature by restoring the historical sense of the establishment of these practices. Therefore, shifts of the boundary

between nature and history are foreseeable and are dictated by the requests of experiential concreteness, although they are then difficult to describe since they are always progressive and gradual.

The framework that has just been outlined contemplates the possibility of unexpected dislocations of what is experienced from time to time as aesthetic (and even as art), that is, of what aesthetic experience consists of in single cultural circumstances. Consequently, the analysis is directed towards those expressive manifestations that, in certain periods, so to speak, fray the consolidated margins of artisticity, soliciting a genuinely critical attitude oriented mostly to intercept the factors contributing to the shift of boundaries, which are widespread, for example, in the current era of indefinite transition.

Therefore, an escape from the mere opposition between naturalness and historicity favors a more fruitful approach to aesthetic phenomena that, like the current ones, appear particularly difficult to frame until either, *naturalistically*, we simply invoke a “pure” attitude that isolates the aesthetic behavior hypostatizing a particular way of conceiving the structures and / or the object; or, *historically*, one insists with the same degree of unilateralism on the epochal contingency of what aesthetics and art have become, diluting in the relativism of tastes what from time to time counts as meaningful, and leaving vague the reasons for continuity and trans-culturality that prevail in an era characterized by globalization and by recurrent reactivations of past stylistic features.

It is necessary, however, to ask how the concept of field helps to understand how it happens, and what it means, that a historical texture of beliefs and practices, in such cases, *becomes* nature, and—prior to this—what conceptual tools help to understand the processes in question.

3. From “World” to “Field” (and “Habitus”): Pierre Bourdieu

In order to reinterpret the naturalness / historicity plexus, it is necessary to carefully choose the terms to be used. The reality of the artistic dimension can, for example, be referred to using either the concept of “world” or the concept of “field”. Investigations centered on the concept of world reveal, however, the dead ends that lead to the assimilation of aesthetics to the world of art. In this way it seems certainly possible to reach good sociological and heuristic hypotheses on the current functioning of the dimension under discussion, but to the same extent it seems that what is most important from a theoretical point of view, namely an effective analysis of the establishment and development of this dimension, is disregarded. This is because the examination of the establishment and development of a reality must also concern the processes that lead to the transformation and sometimes even to the potential dialectical overcoming of what is in force. Starting from the thesis, or even from the hypostasis, of the art *world* means hiding its constitutive dynamics, and therefore preventing oneself from understanding the modalities of alteration, decay, disintegration, and possible restoration.

Compared to this, as we have seen, the notion of field, in the sense in which physics, for example, describes it, has at least the advantage of expressing an intrinsic dynamism. The field reveals itself in the unfolding of its potentiality, as an interactional dynamic between the vectors that operate in it. We know something about a field to the extent that we analyze the interactive behavior of the phenomena that occur within it. If it is always possible to confuse the world with a portion of it, running the risk of essentialist definition that sclerotizes a phenomenon and makes it paradigmatic or antonomastic for the whole dimension, the field is in principle indefinable on the basis of the hypostasis of any of its single and isolated vectors. While then the concept of world tends to obey the logic of exclusivity, that of field is congenitally inclusive. Interactivity here in principle does not exclude any vector. Moreover, if within a world it seems that it is possible to occupy any given position that one chooses once one has managed to enter it, in the action space of a field one occupies only those positions that are allowed by the lines of force that innervate it with gradually decreasing intensity, so that in the periphery there will always be an unstable osmosis between “inside” and “outside” to the point of configuring situations of

actual undecidability as to whether one belongs to the field. The world is a continuous space that has constraints only at its margins, by virtue of borders that regulate the access to it; the field is a densely constrained space, without substantial boundaries at the entrance.

A case in which the notion of field is usefully employed to adopt a perspective capable of looking at the aesthetic dimension without incurring the justificationist contortions of the various institutional theories of art, is that of Pierre Bourdieu, who *contra* Danto observed how his theory.

overlooks the historical and sociological analysis of the genesis and structure of the institution (the artistic field) which is capable of accomplishing such an act of institution, that is, of imposing the *recognition* of the work of art as such among all those (*and only those*) who (like the philosopher visiting a museum) have been constituted (through the effort of socialization, which also has to be analysed in terms of its social conditions and logic) in such a fashion that (as their entry into a museum attests) they are disposed to recognize as artistic and to apprehend as such the works socially designated as artistic (notably by their exhibition in a museum) [11] (p. 287).

The institutionalists' defense strategy against this kind of accusation is weak. In fact, they make up for the omission that Bourdieu blames on them by invoking either a metaphysical principle (the thematization of reality, i.e., *aboutness*, understood as the specific distinctive element of art) or an axiologically relevant and peremptory attitude (what makes an object worthy and suitable for appreciation by operators in the art world, who are always, however, already selected and always already qualified to perform this function). In other words, the attention of both is immediately catalyzed not by the entire system, but by the work and/or the world in force. But this is merely the simple, and equally dogmatic, counterpart of the attention that is exclusively polarized towards that aesthetic attitude against which they commonly polemicize.

On the contrary, when we speak of the field, the investigation is directed not to the existing institution or to what has already been instituted, but to the *instituting* and *institutionalization* of the operative dimension within which subsist the relationships that are each time current. This is the threshold where naturalness and historicity overlap and redefine each other. This threshold is where work and attitude, i.e., the two sides of artisticity which have an obvious relationship of reciprocity, are its components and not original sources.

To highlight what kind of approach is proposed, we can go back to Bourdieu's passage, and in particular to the various points that appear in brackets there. They in fact point out that for an approach centered on the notion of field:

- (a) the recognition of art is possible only to those who are constituted in a consentaneous way; not, however, according to the romantic acceptation, but in the sense for which understanding a work of art—one would say, with Wittgenstein and Wollheim—means understanding a form of life; it is a field practice;
- (b) the very act of visiting a place dedicated to aesthetic experience (a museum, a concert hall, the location of an event...) or the act of triggering a device for aesthetic fruition (turning on a screen, starting up a piece of equipment...) implies that one is endowed with a particular competence on how to access aesthetic phenomena; it is a field knowledge;
- (c) the subjectivities involved in any capacity in fruition are themselves socially established in an adequate and corresponding way: that is, they are made available and disposed, endowed with conforming dispositions, to carry out such an experience, or more generally to theoretically assume such contents as aesthetic; they are field vectors;
- (d) this establishment, while being social, is not to be traced back to a mechanism of sociologicistic causation: it is a response to a logic, to a grammar that involves adjectives, judgments, postures, gestures, destinies of a certain type; this is why living in the same

social context does not mean sharing a certain taste, and why different grammars can coexist horizontally, be adjacent to each other; it will be the acquired competence, the single trajectory accomplished within a field, the praxis of the aesthetic knowledge involved, which will decide the effective grammar each time.

From these preliminary remarks derives an important conclusion that can be expressed again with Bourdieu's words:

What the analysis of essence forgets are the social conditions of the production (or the invention) and of the reproduction (or the inculcation) of dispositions and classificatory schemas which are activated in artistic perception—the social conditions of that kind of *historical transcendental* which is the condition of the aesthetic experience which naively describes it [11] (p. 288).

The subject of the analysis, then, is not the set of social conditions that govern the production and reproduction of the works, since the aim is not to construct a positive sociology of art. What we should be concerned with, instead, are the conditions of production and reproduction of the dispositional structures, of the attitudinal modes that belong to the game that takes place in the field, and that involve both mind and body, if it is true that they are often revealed more by a physical posture than by a theoretical discourse. In this way, the critical work on the aesthetic field shifts the center of gravity of the analysis from the option between nature and history to the historicized naturalness or, reciprocally, to the naturalized historicity—in short, to what finds expression in the apparently oxymoronic concept of “historical transcendental” which Bourdieu refers to.

What is crucial is neither the given factuality of the object nor the given factuality of the subject. Emphasizing, as to the former, the importance of the function beyond the form, and as to the latter, the secondary nature of the structures of the aesthetic attitude, the operative establishment of the field is placed in the foreground as—on the one hand—a correlative structure that gives rise both to an objectuality and to an aesthetic-artistic subjectuality⁴, and as—on the other hand—the outcome of the reciprocity between organism and environment that tends to become autonomous.

The aesthetic field finds its reflection in a particular system of beliefs and gestures which is quite different from a subjectivity that is juxtaposed to the objectivity of a world. Given this relationship of circular co-foundation, it is necessary to find a category for the subjectual component that is as non-hypostatizing as the category of field is for the objectual component. Bourdieu identifies it with a pragmatistically colored notion, that of *habitus*, which expresses the subjectual counterpart of the naturalized history of the field. An exemplary case is that of the twentieth-century art connoisseur, where the cultivated *habitus* and the fully autonomous artistic field merge into each other, representing two sides of the same historical institution. This relationship of circular causality is typical of every institution, that is, of every habitualization of behaviors that become rituals, since every institution “can only function if it is established simultaneously within the objectivity of a social game and within dispositions ready to enter into the game and participate in it” [11] (p. 288).

4. Aisthesis and Field: Arnold Berleant

In this way, thanks to the notion of aesthetic field, the analysis of the social phenomenon fades into the investigation of the underlying anthropological processes. The plane of adjacency, so to speak, is the consideration of the historicity of the transcendental component of perception. If we perceive according to what we have incorporated into a *habitus*, then—pace neuroaesthetic reductionism—the human body that acts by perceiving is not a mere pre-constituted mechanical apparatus. Experience is not immutable to the same extent that the recruited biological-physiological endowment is invariable. And since, by virtue of the inclusion of perception under the concept of *habitus*, the latter is inherent to the body as much as to the mind, anthropological unity can be read within the framework of a theory of institutionalized and institutionalizing social action (see [12],

p. 138)⁵. In other words, the act of perception cannot collapse into the instant in which a Subject and an Object come into contact. Perception is the manifestation of the interaction between what is filtered and sedimented in bodily postures and mental *schemata*—a habitus, indeed—and a horizon of objectuality that is equally pre-disposed by anthropic practices that, like attentivity, weave together emotional, cognitive, and imaginative components [13] (pp. 138–139, and 184). In this sense, perception implies a historical a priori, as well as a material one.

Urging the emancipation from both formal transcendentalism and classical metaphysics, the notion of field discloses the possibility of a description of the “perceptual integrity of aesthetic experience” [14] (p. 84) in a usefully anthropological and material key. The consequent theoretical turn deriving from these general assumptions deserves further emphasis. The strength in the concept of field—whose extensive analysis is the goal of Berleant—comes to light when the material density it expresses is recognized. In the field, the various subjectual and objectual vectors manifest in their co-implication. It is therefore not only a question of rejecting specific options in the philosophy of art, such as for instance the spectatorial principle of aesthetic contemplativism. Rather, what emerges is a radical discontinuity with respect to the Cartesian matrix of modern thought, as Arnold Berleant expressly declares [14] (p. 178, note 98). And, of course, leveraging the pre-predicative (instead of cognitive) and interactional (instead of oppositional) status of the field aligns completely with turning toward an experiential modality freed from the lapse into knowledge. This is precisely a practice “that solicits an involved, responsive receptivity in the appreciation of art, a genuine participation in an experience of primary, qualitative perception” [14] (p. 160). It is for this reason, and certainly not for slipping unexpectedly into a form of psychologism⁶, that the phenomenon of the aesthetic field is forcefully directed to dealing with the complex figure of the *perceiver*: a sort of relational functor. His or her sensuous practice has the character of immediacy, not because it instantaneously renders accessible for a subject a perceptively given object. Rather, it coincides with the manifestation of an intricate network of mediations materially informing the complexity of the field, and which—situated in sensuousness as the domain of phenomenological categorial intuition—find a reflexive expression in *perceptual* [14] (p. 131) rather than “conceptual or analytic” *categories*.

To find one’s self in the position of the perceiver is not the consequence of the purely subjective adoption of an attitude. It is the unfolding experiential relationship that establishes “the manner in which the perceiver functions in the aesthetic field” [14] p. 56) as he or she corresponds to the related appeals of meaningfulness. That is, this position is defined on the basis of modal constraints constitutive of the correspondence that is carried out in the field as such, based on the specific material qualities configuring the interaction that is taking place. In this way, the aesthetic experience appears different from the effect of psychic activity. If anything, it is the so-called subject that tendentially takes shape for how it is passively constituted, that is to say, it emerges from the particular modalities of environmental relationships in which it is enveloped and engaged. Therefore, the *modal* appraisal of the *perceiver’s subjectuality* must be kept separate from the *substantialist* appraisal of the *percipient’s subjectivity*. Between them runs the same difference dividing “actor” and “agent.” The first is irreducible to the second due to its incompatibility with a Cartesian subject defined by its “intensional” endowment, and it is rather defined by the role it is called upon to play, in how it is asked, is allowed, and is able to participate in the field. Similarly, whilst percipient is only the subject of an act of perception, perceiver is the subjectual condensed nucleus of a perceptual practice whose *ownership pertains to the field itself*.

There is another facet that Berleant exploits to show the modal nuances of the aesthetic field. This facet is the delicate distinction between perceiver and appreciator. The appreciator is aware of the beauty of the aesthetic to a degree that exceeds the perimeter of the mere operative perceptual life, given his or her savoring of the aesthetic as it takes part in his or her experience. More than an aesthetic perceiver, the appreciator is an *aesthetically*

aware perceiver, whose evaluative judgments proceed from his or her valuing efforts, which characterize and passively constitute the subjectual pole of aesthetic experience. We must surrender to the fact that the introduction of the concept of field forces the description to insist on complex relational connotations; themselves difficult to capture in a theoretic lexicon marked by clear boundaries separating subjectivity and objectivity. We must endure a certain linguistic and conceptual discomfort once we accept the invitation to try a new codification of the components involved in the description of perception.

Moreover, even this last aspect has its roots in the general strategy inspiring Berleant's *The Aesthetic Field*. The complex reality of the perceiver flares up once the consideration of perception as practice is assumed over against perception as act. As an act performed by an agent, perception can almost docilely flow back into the channel of cognitive activity, canonically attributable to the perimeter of a replaced subjectivity. As a practice that stages a procedural field, that is as an enactive-performative dynamic that shapes he or she who is its actor, perception exhibits unavoidable externalist characteristics. It is a correspondence, perhaps even an expressive one, which involves on equal terms the subjectual pole and the objectual pole. It is primarily a relationship, actually an embodied one [14] (p. 72), irreducible to the designation of isolated juxtaposed contents according to the dualistic subject-object scheme. It is in this sense that Berleant notes the unsuspected complexity of aesthetic perception, since "the art object and its perceiver, to be sure, do function in the aesthetic field, but in ways not explained or even suggested by the usual common-sense account" [14] (p. 51). In fact, aesthetic perception consists in a "transactional relationship in which perceiver and perceived are functionally inseparable, each becoming what it is on the basis of its intimate dependence on the other" [14] (p. 139). As a praxis, perception is a path unwinding along a ridge from which related slopes extend. It makes little sense to try to establish whether the ridge belongs de jure to this or that side, even in the awareness that the ridge does not represent a further side.

This is why Berleant peremptorily issues a perceptual charter to the aesthetic. Some passages are unequivocal in this regard. For example: "when the experience is direct and immediate, when it is thoroughly qualitative, it remains immersed in the perceptual sphere" [14] (p. 121); or again: "each art, in its own way, derives from the infinitely fertile matrix of perceptual experience and replenishes its source in an endlessly enriching cycle" [14] (p. 157). It is thus reiterated how the aesthetic is not a plane or level added to those that intersect in a usual experiential field. The aesthetic experience is the overall mobilization of the field's vectors based on a qualitative *interrelation* that is carried out as aisthesis. Consequently, as Berleant distinguishes the perceiver from the subject who merely performs a perceptual act, so does he, like Dewey [8], distinguish the art object, an atomic objective content, from the work of art: an objective experiential whole that with the "dynamic character of the aesthetic situation", of which it is a vector, "includes the active involvement as well as the passive receptivity of the person experiencing art" [14] (p. 54).

5. The Operative Nature of the Aesthetic Field

The description of the aesthetic field is therefore more concerned with its operative factors than with isolated thematic vectors – or rather: indeed, with vectors, but only as they are outlined by and within the peculiar operative character of the field, not per se. The goal is the ability to "see the aesthetic qualitatively rather than substantively" [14] (p. 87), with adjectival and adverbial terms rather than substantive or substantialist terms [14] (p. 87, footnote) (and we have to recall the similar observation provided by Abbs). The reader can see what, on the subjectual front, this implies for the various functional nuclei surrounding the perceiver, artist, and critic; and on the objectual front what it implies for the work of art, form, content, media, and materials.

In relation to each of these nuclei we must strive to remove the aesthetic from the danger of its dissolution brought about by the ossification implicit in substantialist thematizations of its pervasive operativity. These latter lead to defining the aesthetic in general on the basis of elements that in some way belong to it yet, once absolutized, inevitably

distort it. In so doing the dynamic tensions that make up the aesthetic in its operativity become fixed juxtapositions between mutually exclusive substantialist principles. And the consequence is not simply that of obscuring factors of complexity in the phenomenon. A far greater fault is to replace the very same phenomenon with content that no longer serves as a processual moment of the whole, precisely because it tends to render the whole a part of it, its domain, its exemplification. Then, from the dense structure of the field, integrated in its aspects, we move toward a discrete succession of incompatible views: nuclei made fixed because detached from the texture of the field once foundational links are presumed. In so doing, the so-called “surrogate theories” emerge, which Berleant polemicizes. It is no coincidence that their various determining principles are deduced, not always consciously, from specific conceptions of experience based on extra-aesthetic principles (metaphysical, gnoseological, religious, social, psychological, etc.), as is the case with the dogmas of disinterest or distance in appreciation.

Opposing these forms of substantialist unilateralism, Berleant insists on aesthetic praxis as an overall *engagement* that the perceiver assumes with the field, a collusive and integral transaction *with* the other nuclei that operate therewithin. A commitment, therefore, which implies a properly environmental and immersive surrounding, instead of juxtaposed canonical schemes that generate distance:

Aesthetic experience transcends psychophysical and epistemological dualisms, for it is the condition of an engagement of perceiver and object in a unified relationship that is forcefully immediate and direct.

[. . .] Instead of a fragmented concatenation of independent elements, the aesthetic field reveals a perceptual order and unity. Thus we can properly describe aesthetic experience as integral. It is experience which achieves its own unity when its boundaries can be defined functionally by the way in which the appreciator and the art object combine with the other factors in the aesthetic field to form a unified perceptual environment, an experiential totality [14] (p. 129).

In the aesthetic engagement with the environment, activity and passivity, as well as subjectuality and objectuality, continually blur with one another. On the perceiver’s side, there is an incessant oscillation between sensuous receptivity to the ways in which phenomena manifest themselves and the performativity that stages it. The effusive commitment to the aesthetic experience is therefore the exercise of skills that enables a non-thematic increase of competence in the praxis of aisthesis. It intensifies awareness before generating new knowledge. Certainly not instrumental to the acquisition of thematic knowledge and therefore to the awareness of “what,” the aesthetic engagement remains intertwined with sensory manifestation in a never suspended contact with the awareness of “how.” Working aesthetically, even as creators, means knowing how to proceed by groping [14] (p. 99); therefore, the aesthetic is in itself *performance*, and can be fully carried out only in new praxes of aisthesis, in a progression of aesthetic knowledge that concerns exclusively the way in which the experience unfolds. The engagement remains a direct contact, *awareness*, without ever transfiguring into categorical or propositional knowledge, at least as long as it retains its own aesthetic nature.

Here, the emphasis falls on a relational and modal trait, resisting any psychological or merely contextualist characterizations, without excluding both psychological and contextual implications or aftereffects. A point in case is Berleant’s abandonment of the notion of pleasure, favoring instead the description of gratification provided by the aesthetic engagement. Through the redemption of the “sensuous character” of the aesthetic [14] (pp. 95 ff.), Berleant replaces the intellectualized “aesthetic pleasure” with a factor of sensuous intensification that does not disdain its own bodily affectivity, confirming the emancipation from modern dualisms. And it is precisely because this engagement reveals a physiognomy characterized by such traits, that its notion contributes to crediting Berleant as an exemplary reference if one is to develop, even today, an aesthetics that proceeds

from *material engagement* [15]: that is, from the paradigm of *experience-with*, according to non-Cartesian models of the mind [16–18].

6. A Conclusive Remark

Bringing the aesthetic back within the horizon of the praxis of aisthesis is, however, far from confining it to just a perceptual content among others. It means recognizing it as a process of experiential intensification marked by its overall qualitative relevance to the sensory register, in which it inscribes any subsequent analytically enucleable property or content. One could say the aesthetic consists of an orthogonally perceptual texture with respect to the conceptualization that the cognitive gives rise to. Consequently, although not due to some specific nuclear properties, it remains in principle distinct from experiences which, despite recruiting perceptual content, move primarily towards other dimensions [14] (pp. 101, and 103).

As well as emphasizing the correlative dimension of aesthetics, the concept of field allows us to respect the link between perceptual (and perceptualizing) texture and expressive capacity towards the environmental surroundings as a bio-cultural niche. Instead of opposing subjective attitude and institutionalized world, the concept of field captures, in its operative realization, the correspondence of vectors in which the energy curves are embodied. In the aesthetic manifestation conceived starting from the notion of field, then, a process of institutionalization emerges that overcomes the oppositional nexus between convention and metaphysical hypostasis, between mere cultural relativism and naive idealizing substantialism, in which instead the standard model to which most of the positive research in the field of aesthetics still conforms epistemologically remains entangled. That's why aesthetic properties are not specific properties isolated from the "normal" sensory properties of an experiential field and perhaps placed on a higher level than the latter. They are precisely these properties as they manifest their ability to intervene, to be truly effective, by operating as sensuous constraints in which the experiential transaction between the organism and the environment is tightened. Therefore, it is as a vectorial value that the aesthetic presents itself as the ability to make performatively inter-venient⁷ the so-called factual properties or the so-called psychic states, attributes, and emotions, which inseparably concur in the establishment of the phenomenon that is carried out.

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Notes

¹ Our translation from Italian.

² The often-overlooked contribution of Peter Francis Abbs (1942–2020) to aesthetic reflection is important here for the direct and explicit thematization of the concept that is at the heart of this essay. Since it offers a clear picture, almost a conceptual synopsis, of the issues involved in the notion of "aesthetic field," I think it appropriate to start from his analysis.

³ All the quotations from Melandri's work have been translated into English by the author of this essay

⁴ In this context, it is at least worth distinguishing accurately between "subjective" and "subjectual" and, in parallel, between "objective" and "objectual". If "subjective" qualifies an experiential content insofar as it depends on the act performed by a subject, and thus implies a previously constituted "subjectivity", by "subjectual" I aim to indicate those experiential moments that tend to cluster around a "subjectual" pole that is in the process of being constituted; these moments define, that is, a "subjectuality" (not "subjectivity") that does not belong to a subject, since it rather identifies the subject's position within the field. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the distinction between "objective" and "objectual". In a pragmatist perspective, as well as in a phenomenological one, this distinction cannot be neglected, while, for example, a psychological position would certainly conflate the subjectual into the subjective. Hence the technicalization of these terms, which makes some passages of the text somewhat laborious to read, and for which I apologize.

⁵ "[S]ocial agents are endowed with habitus, inscribed in their bodies by past experiences. These systems of schemes of perception, appreciation and action enable them to perform acts of practical knowledge, based on the identification and recognition of conditional, conventional stimuli to which they are predisposed to react; and, without any explicit definition of ends or rational calculation of means, to generate appropriate and endlessly renewed strategies, but within the limits of the structural constraints of which they are the product and which define them" [12] (p. 138).

- 6 Berleant's anti-psychologism seems evident, for example, when he writes: "Proposals for aesthetic disinterestedness, isolation, psychological distance and the like have been put forward as ways of characterizing the aesthetic attitude and setting it off from one that is scientific or cognitive, practical, moral, or religious. While there is no question of the historical importance of these concepts in contributing to the identification of an aesthetic mode of experience, it may be useful to re-examine them in the light of the manner in which the perceiver functions in the aesthetic field. For when these ideas are set against the phenomenology of aesthetic experience, the limitations imposed by their excessive concern with the psychology of attention becomes plain" [14] (p. 56).
- 7 The Latin verb "inter-venire" means, in fact, to come in-between, namely, to become involved, or occur as to take an active part in the process. I believe that aesthetic predication expresses this dynamic instead of ascribing attributes of a different order to a sensory content, as on the contrary it is assumed by the more usual thesis of aesthetic "super"-venience. In this sense, at least some predicates that are considered aesthetic "categories" (starting from "beautiful") should, consequently, also be analyzed as ways of expressing the sensuous efficacy of an aesthetic field as a whole, namely the modality in which the latter sensuously works, that is its intervenient character.

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