

Christian Hartard

From Representation to Presence:

Concrete Aesthetics

Artistic Research on Performative Spaces

Concrete Aesthetics

Abstract

In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.

Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, 1964

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Performative spaces are temporalised, emergent constellations of *space, objects* and *actors*, based on *sculptural situations* which are subject to change over time. My role as the artist, basically, is to produce an initial infrastructure which I then hand over to a *participatory process*. I provide for configurations of modular elements which do not form an invariant order, but can be used, moved, rearranged, reshaped, expanded, destroyed or replaced when worn out. They might be replicated in a different location, spread or modified without restriction. They are not bound to a physical space, especially not to an institutional framing. They are prototypes rather than originals, forms of common property rather than economic products (in a broader sense, objects are all material outcomes of joint action which might also include cooking, gardening and similar practices). Their semantic openness allows the integration in action and communication sequences which build up their own order in a non-determined, infinite proceeding. This calculated loss of artistic control aims at an empowerment of the viewers who become receptive and, at the same time, productive parts within the artistic operations. They may employ their individual aesthetic potentials and experience themselves as authors of meaning. I am aware that the central challenge—and my responsibility as the artist—lies in the activation and sensitisation of the participants which requires the investment of time, on both sides. This will also reshape the conventional character of the artwork's presentation: It will have to shift from the form of an exhibition or a staging towards that of a workshop or a seminar in which I act as a moderator of the collaborative discourse.

Methodological notes

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My project establishes *performative spaces* both as a theoretical concept of aesthetic reflection and as a practical programme for artistic production. It looks at art as an immanently reflexive process which, through self-observation, permanently conditions its own operations: It generates the problems it then solves, if only to discover new problems within the supposed solution. I will apply this mechanism as a strategy to radicalise my work by refining it in contact with its own theoretical re-description. The objective is to create a series of performative spaces as experimental arrangements that might involve other artists, professional performers, members of specific social groups or random visitors. The empirical knowledge gained from these experiences will be used to develop a consistent epistemological frame that serves for describing and analysing my work and consequently being refeeded into my artistic practice. It is important to note, however, that every art is an exploratory access to the world; consequently, artistic research does not necessarily require a verbalising transformation of art into theory, and a scholarly observation of artistic practice is only one of several possible means of reflection (among immanent ones like sketches, drafts, bozzetti, rehearsals, variations, improvisations).

For analytical purposes, the elements of performative spaces—situations, processes and objects, their meanings and logical structures—are dynamically described as *open, liquid, provisional* and *migrant*. I propose a concept that temporises and liquifies the work, but which is nevertheless decidedly sculptural in that it refuses to fully dissolve the material dimension of art in communication and action. It employs objects as means of reflection, as anchor points that store aesthetic operations and open them up to debate and critique by making them visible and undeniable. As physical condensates of collective negotiations, they incorporate social conflicts—disparities, hierarchies, problems of inclusion and exclusion—and make them processable within the artistic production. In this respect, performative spaces are immanently critical and emancipatory: Not necessarily in their contents, but as *political forms*.

An aesthetics of the concrete is a post-image approach. It takes into account the *paradigm shift from representation to presence* in many contemporary fields of artistic production like concept, performance or activist art that do not draw their significance from being visual or referential. I will reconstruct this historical evolution, building upon the extensive research on the history and theory of sculptural space I conducted as a Fritz

Thyssen Fellow 2010—2012. For a general description of performative spaces, I will operationalise progressive pedagogical ideas from the 1920s. Workable parameters that derive from there are the notions of *prepared environment*, *material*, *play* as a purposeless, yet meaningful activity, and *self-organised learning* as a coupling of bodily and intellectual practice. Models of *system theory* will serve as an instrument for analysing the autopoietic emergence and the internal logic of communication structures, while I will refer to *field-theoretical designs* to discuss their inherent mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. My studies on the aesthetics of Niklas Luhmann and Pierre Bourdieu provide an excellent basis therefor. Other relevant approaches I will apply are those of *productive reception* (Michel de Certeau), *presence* (Ulrich Gumbrecht), the *open work* (Umberto Eco), *quasi-objects* (Michel Serres), concepts of non-human agency developed by theorists of the material turn and the actor-network-theory and thoughts on performativity and space delivered by authors like Juliane Rebentisch, Martina Löw or Erika Fischer-Lichte.

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World Machine

The natural surface of things is beautiful, but the imitation of it is without life. Things give us everything, but the representation of things gives us nothing.

Piet Mondrian, Notebook, 1914

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Although trained as a sculptor, I am not particularly interested in images; that is if the term ‘image’ is meant to describe a window to the world. Or, even worse, a window through which the artist sticks his or her head to tell us how the world ought to be arranged. Contrary to a proclaimed ‘iconic’ or ‘pictorial turn’, contemporary fields of artistic production like concept, performance or activist art do not draw their significance from being visual or referential. Sculpture that goes beyond the image produces new dimensions of meaning: The objects themselves come into focus, along with space, body, materiality, atmosphere (Böhme 2013, Löw 2008, Rebentisch 2003). A post-image aesthetics would have to recognise this as a paradigm shift from the symbolic to the concrete, from representation to presence (Bertram 2014, Boehm 2001, Dewey 1934, Gumbrecht 2004 and 2012, Nancy 2006, Sontag 1966).

In sculpture, this transition can be traced as an exemplary consequence of the autonomisation of social systems (for my preliminary studies see: Christian Hartard, *World Machine. History and theory of sculptural space*, 2018, download via: www.icaros.org/docs). Sculptural art from the Middle Ages emancipated itself from architecture by purposefully staging itself as a significant image (instead of as a decorative ornament). In modern times, this supporting context is increasingly replaced by that of space, for example in the ‘figura serpentinata’ from the Renaissance or the multi-perspective action sculptures by Bernini, which, in the dynamisation of the work and the viewer, already carry performative traits. On the threshold of the 19th to the 20th century, Rodin manages to undertake the transformation from symbolic to concrete: When he fragments older sculptures and reassembles them to create new forms then these montages are no longer images referring to the world, but—as Rilke already remarked—just “things”. This aesthetic development runs parallel to a process of social

differentiation, which sustains and accelerates it. Art pays its price for freedom in relation to politics, religion or economy with a semantic overdetermination of the visible world. The allegedly compact, natural things dissolve beneath the surface into contingent significances and the visual coherence of objects merely shrouds the plurality of meanings. This multiplication of social reality becomes a serious problem for art. Because the attribution of its references to the referenced object has been destabilised, it is confronted with the question of the possibility of depicting the 'real'. In painting, the answer is: Retreat into abstraction. Art still manages to show the demontage of an external system of ordering—and the successful construction of an own, aesthetic ordering from within. Art becomes a world machine (I borrowed this term from the title of an installation by Austrian autodidact Franz Gsellmann, 1910—1981; see Gerhard Roth, Franz Killmeyer, Gsellmanns Weltmaschine, 1996).

In the case of sculpture, the question needs to be looked at more closely. On the one hand, the division of the human being into a multitude of social roles plunges man into a crisis. And along with the belief in the wholeness of the 'individual', the confidence in the depiction thereof disappears. On the other hand, sculptural art as a producer of concrete objects cannot simply escape into abstraction. The relationship of its objects to the world has to be fundamentally (re-)determined. When Duchamp merges artwork with everyday objects and thus drives the mimesis of realism ad absurdum, he strikes this nerve. His readymades reference nothing but themselves—they are no symbol that can point out a fictive space from the perspective of a real one; they are what they are. They shed off imagery and replace it with the pure presence of the object.

Sculpture cannot move back behind that point. Whichever external references it displays: It cannot conceal the self-reference to its physical form. Every observation of the work recursively discovers its objecthood and the space it shares with the viewer. This awareness is the basis for the widening of sculptural concepts in the 1960s, and evidently also performative practices that interconnect objects, bodies and observers within the actual space (Fischer-Lichte 2004) can start from here.

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”
Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There, 1871

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My artistic practice responds to these conditions by employing sculptural gestures and fragile states of aggregation: Vibrating window glass, heated concrete, the freezing of condensed water, melting wax, flowing iodine, a silver-coated curtain charged with electricity. I include a temporal dimension by incorporating performativity into the objects themselves. These record small events—moments, which are elusive or unstable, phenomena that otherwise take place at the periphery of our perception, briefly flashing up and immediately disappearing again. I am concerned with creating situations in which the artworks—through their presence, media or process—can be experienced as counterparts, thus addressing the corporeality of the observer.

Based on these ideas, I am increasingly interested in artistic strategies that redeploy performativity from the object to the recipient. I am hereby thinking of sculptural situations which are subject to change over time: Settings made of objects which do not form an invariant structure, but can be used, moved, rearranged, reshaped, expanded or destroyed and which thereby create transitory spaces. The objects are serial, modular and variable. Their construction is laid bare. They can be copied, rebuilt in a different location and subsequently be replaced when worn out. They do not hold market value. Their incorporation into a spatial frame, into a net of relationships to other objects and to actions of the participants releases them from the imposition of being completed artworks in themselves. Their semantic openness allows the attribution of sense and the integration in action and communication sequences which build up their own order in a non-determined, infinite collective process. Consequently, the activation of the initial situation for which I provide the basic elements is not arbitrary; but it is autonomous, in the sense of a self-regulating emergence of structure. It is, like every artistic practice, a learning system that, through self-reflection, conditions its own operations. Such a feedback effect might be described as a form of aesthetic reflexivity

which continuously, implicitly and non-verbalised runs alongside the work process (Bertram / Feige / Ruda 2012, Bippus 2012, Lash 1992, Paetzold 1990).

The concept of performative spaces radicalises this model by granting (or daring) the viewer to not just be a receptive, but to become a productive part in the reflective process (de Certeau 1980). It aims at an emancipation of the 'viewers' and takes into consequence the calculated loss of artistic control over the work. An artistic practice that has purposefully gotten out of hand makes the observers accomplices, who—by employing their individual aesthetic potentials—experience themselves as authors of meaning.

These reflections differentiate my approach from sculptural positions that restrict the interpretative freedom of the recipients in that their objects allow only a few or only predefined actions or, because of conservational reasons, are strongly constrained in their use. Equally, I exclude theatrical stagings where the interaction with objects is reserved to the artist and serves less the empowerment of the viewer, but more so the auratic charging of the performance relics. In both an affirmative and a negative sense, artists such as Franz-Erhard Walther, Joseph Beuys, Charlotte Posenenske, Carl Andre, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Robert Morris, Marina Abramović, Lygia Clark, Thomas Hirschhorn, Anne Imhof, Monica Bonvicini or Erwin Wurm mark positions of orientation for me.

Our heads are round so our thoughts can change direction.
Francis Picabia, La pomme de pins, 1922

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That which is plastic is malleable, moveable, changeable. Plastic thinking means: Thinking in relations, thinking in processes. This term (borrowed from Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision*, 1951, p. 196) describes the theoretical convergence to the concept of performative spaces. It is centred around four analytical categories which are also conceptualised as dynamic, each accentuating different nuances of plasticity (Rübel 2012). Thus, situations, spaces and objects, their meaning and structures can be described as open, liquid, provisional or migrant.

The elements of the performative space are *open* on two sides: They can integrate the new—meaning, objects, actions, viewers—and they are therefore never completed, neither physically nor semantically. In terms of system theory, open objects (Eco 1962, *Open Objects* 2011) could be defined following the concept of double contingency with which the production of any artwork begins: Usually, double contingency is utterly consumed during the artistic process; within an infinite performative space a residual contingency remains and is constantly regenerated by new input (Luhmann 1987, cf. Christian Hartard, *Kunstautonomien: Luhmann und Bourdieu*, 2010).

The term *liquidity* especially refers to the conventional boundaries within art, in particular to the differentiation between artist and recipient. In the collectively produced (Mader 2012) performative space, these roles become interchangeable and the resulting meaning is neither attributable to one side nor the other. Also the borders of the object become liquid. They can no longer be thought of as solely substantial. As condensations of aesthetic operations, the objects serve the linkage and deposit of communication, and there is, in this respect, basically no difference between the loose and ephemeral communicative acts of social praxis and those physically fixed in the form of objects (Latour 2005, Serres 1981).

One can speak of *provisional* objects (a reference to a series of works by Edith Dekyndt), in order to underline their relative stability. They mark areas of condensed complexity which serve as aids for orientation and as ordering aspects of aesthetic operations. As visible and permanent reservoirs of aesthetic communication, they give access to its logical structure, also across discontinuities of observation. They allow the structure-changing integration of external elements which give a new direction to the artistic production. The artist is left with nothing but compensating his or her failing control with trust—or with disinterest.

Performative spaces become *migrant* when considered as prototypes rather than as originals, as forms of common property rather than as market economy products. Borrowing from economic models that have been developed in the open source and sharing economy movement, their elements can be reproduced, spread and modified without restriction. They are not bound to a physical space, especially not to an institutional framing.

No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.

Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, 1891

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My decidedly sculptural approach temporises and liquifies the work, but refuses to fully dissolve it in communication and action. The contemporary relevance, maybe even the whole validity of sculpture lies precisely in its apparent anachronism with which it refuses a digital or medial approach to the world. The insistence on the immediate corporeality of aesthetic experience is an alternative to aesthetics which define the image as their leading medium. I believe that, in the face of blurring boundaries between real and virtual, between true and untrue, we are more than ever in need of an art of the concrete. Not as the better, 'truer' reality, but as a constant reassurance (and irritation) about what we perceive as being real. Paradoxically, digitalised objects and bodies are by no means liberated from governmental or non-governmental impositions. Quite the contrary, they establish new and far-reaching mechanisms of control and access which in turn, due to their immaterial nature, are themselves uncontrollable and unaccessible. Biometric methods, for instance, transform real bodies into body data that can virtually be stored and processed while the individual citizen is not able to control nor even to read them. Getting back to concrete objects and concrete bodies might be a first step to evade such an asymmetry of power and to regain sovereignty over one's own body.

Form instead of informality, however, is also a means against discursive unsharpness and manipulations. Objects create at once an undeniable factuality and the possibility of distance. They offer relatively stable anchor points which allow observers a repeated access to an otherwise ephemeral aesthetic communication. Accumulated sequences of action are being frozen and thus opened up to debate, reflection or critique. Open, liquid, provisional, migrant spaces and objects are therefore immanently political; but not because they deal with societal problems on a contextual level to take a critical position. This is of course possible, and the nature of the concept implies bringing in controversial topics to the sculptural space. It is, nevertheless, not enough to be on the 'right' side. Art that organises itself autonomously must, in contrast, be adamant about the differentiation between art and politics. Critique means: the faculty of judgment. Instead of feathering one's own nest, art should unsettle the viewer's certainties—and

then hand over the decision tools to the viewers to make up their own minds. This is meant when we speak of the artist losing control.

Thus, the contents of aesthetic communication are not necessarily political. The form itself is political (and maybe also: emancipatory) (Christ / Dressler 2015, Mouffe 2013), because via collectively produced objects and situations, everyday conflict-lines are incorporated into the work and can be processed there. When anyone can inscribe themselves into the art, also the participants' hierarchies, prejudices, gender differences, power relations, their intellectual or economic capabilities and incapacities otherwise invisibly outsourced into reception are inscribed into the process.

Thereby, the collaborative aesthetic praxis itself poses questions of inclusion and exclusion; of gender-stereotypical, racist and economically discriminating attributions in interaction and of the unequal capacities of gaining knowledge and aesthetic experience due to educational level, gender, social or ethnic background.

Performative spaces must themselves demonstrate their ability to master such challenge—or how they fail at them. But even failure is a connectable world observation which does not stop the aesthetic operations, but instead more insistently asks of how we should continue instead.

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