

# **Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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# ***The (Aesthetic) Extended Mind: Aesthetics from Experience-of to Experience-with***

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ABSTRACT. Through this contribution I would like to outline a particular paradigm of aesthetic experience and carry out a first discussion on it. I will explain the basic reason for this proposal in par. 1, in which a paradox that, in my opinion, thrives in our present conception of the aesthetic is pointed out. In par. 2 I will provide the general coordinates of the paradigm at issue trying to highlight at least in principle the connection with the extended mind model<sup>2</sup>, while in the following two paragraphs I will draw some consequences with regard to the categorial apparatus relating both to aesthetic theory (par. 3) and to the aesthetic field, that is, to the practice of the aesthetic (par. 4).

## **1. Subject / Object: A Problematic Dualistic Premise**

If you ask people observing a painting, listening to a song, reading a novel, or even drinking coffee from a design mug or wearing a branded dress, what

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<sup>2</sup> The content of this paragraph was discussed at the ESA Conference 2018 in Maribor. I present it here in an abridged version; the broader and final one constitutes the second part of Matteucci (forthcoming). I am deeply indebted to the organizers of Maribor's Conference for inviting me to present my research and to all the participants who gave me critical suggestions during a very fruitful debate.

it is that makes their experience aesthetic, their answer will presumably appeal to emotions felt as their own, to specific knowledge or notions, or, alternatively, they will refer to some determined content detected in the object, to certain properties which would characterize the latter, if not even to a sort of, so to speak, “superior order objectivity” that would constitute an alleged aesthetic value.

Those who have tried to put order, conceptually and philosophically, among all these possible responses have usually suggested dual schemes. At least in the analytical field, the philosophers who have dealt with the question of how to investigate aesthetic experience, or the experience of the aesthetic, have generally emphasized dichotomies between opposing approaches: for example, “transformational” and “demarcative” (Shusterman 1997), or “phenomenological” and “epistemic” (Iseminger 2003 and 2008), or even “internalist” and “externalist” (Shelley 2017, par. 2.4). In this way it is as if the above-sampled responses were arranged within a two-column table. In the first column we would find answers that seem to trace back to the subjective dimension, advocating a conception of aesthetic experience based on peculiar characteristics of the acts of the subject and therefore constitutive of his/her attitude, or even of a subjectively understood value. In the second column, on the other hand, the answers that ascribe the specificity of the experience in question to elements proper to or attributable to the objective content. In the same basic approach we can also include Carroll’s analysis, that has experimented with different classifications during the course of its own development (see Carroll’s various essays: 2001, pp. 41-62; 2002; 2006), but which at the end has

settled on a vision that contrasts approaches focused on the subjective dimension, connected to attitude and value, and those approaches that instead leverage the experiential component related to the content, and therefore to the objective dimension.

Now, more than discussing the variously interesting and suggestive options that have animated the debate (well summarized, according to an original interpretation, also by Leddy 2012, pp. 135-149), it is here interesting to stress the underlying motif that unites these dual schemes. In fact, they all seem to be faithful to the principle according to which experience – in this case the aesthetic one – must be described and discussed assuming the dichotomy between subject and object as a starting point (against this conception see also Crowther 2008). In this they agree with the options that are implied by the various responses we introduced at the beginning as samples taken from common sense.

I believe that the reason behind this kind of justifications is a peculiar cultural stratification. Thus, although with a certain degree of approximation and beyond several complications, sophistications and refinements introduced by this or that philosopher, I would rather say that according to our tradition, aesthetic experience is described as a relationship that connects two heterogeneous and *per se* isolated entities, along the lines of a general conception of the cognitive act which implies a primary opposition between mind and world. In other terms, our analysis of the aesthetic has been traditionally developed according to a paradigm derived from the typically modern theory of knowledge.

If this holds true, in the aforementioned justifications one is exposed



to the risk of incurring a functionalist fallacy, by conjecturing a specific (either subjective or objective) *ad hoc* function that is considered able to explain the phenomenon at issue. Sometimes all this is aggravated by the presumption of an underlying substantialist and essentialist order, as when one ascribes this function to a (subjective or objective) substance that would constitute the essence of the aesthetic – a sort of *vis aesthetica* analogous to Molière's *vis dormitiva*.

The suspect of a poorly-developed functionalism also derives from a historical understanding of art, the domain to which one more tenaciously refers when speaking of the aesthetic. In fact, the kernels of this canonical model are increasingly challenged in our current artistic context: the aesthetic object has been replaced by experiential processes which are incompatible with the ontological status of modern objectivity; individual aesthetic subjects have been replaced by multiple subjectivities, or even inter-subjectivity figures and hybrid relationships between creativity and receptivity. Aesthetic experience nowadays takes place more and more as an interactive articulation that involves devices rather than objects and agencies greatly endowed with impersonal components rather than subjects. Suffice to consider how frayed and porous are here the boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity.

Therefore we can speak of a paradox. It seems in fact that the way we think of the aesthetic is dualistic, while the way we practice it is – so to speak – holistically relational. Accordingly, the canonical model is still valid for the way we usually describe or conceive of our aesthetic experience, despite contradicting the way we usually practice our aesthetic experience.

In more sophisticated terms, we could say that the modern gnoseological pair subject-object yielded a sort of “ideological” structure that has sedimented in our common sense. According to this “ideological” structure aesthetic experience is that linear (it does not matter whether mono- or bi-directional) relationship that occurs between a constituted subjective pole and a constituted objective pole. Contrariwise, if you were to describe what happens commonly and effectively when you have an experience that is recognised as being aesthetic it turns out that the system of roles still valid for that “ideological” structure collapses, also with reference to what is considered art today. Preliminary ontological or substantial partitions (or separate levels of quality and quantity) between the organism and the environment do not subsist in the immersive and widespread practices of the aesthetic. What seems to be still valid for the ideological and explicit (thematical) structure of our conception of the aesthetic (i.e., our “common sense *about* the aesthetic”) conflicts with the actual and implicit (pragmatical) structure of our conception of the aesthetic (i.e., our “aesthetic common sense”).

The issue that I would like to address is hence how we can describe aesthetic experience by locating ourselves somehow outside the ideological scheme of the common sense about the aesthetic and by staying as close as possible to a conception of the aesthetic as a set of practices, namely to our aesthetic common sense.

## 2. The Paradigm of Experience-with

An experience that does not take place through linear yet biunivocal channels between constituted and stable entities, implies an irreducible solidarity between *relata* and a distributed *agency*. It pertains to a whole field system. This, or at least something similar, seems to apply already to the works of great art. In the aesthetic practice of reading a novel, we are not interested in the features that the novel preserves in itself as the object of both our perceptual and cognitive experience. By reading what is written, by experiencing words and propositions, we are not primarily interested in enjoying the qualities of linguistic forms and their meaning *per se*. Neither are we willing to taste the quality of our condition *per se*. Through this we want to taste the quality of the novel in the ways it “gets us”, in the ways it *becomes* our own way of feeling something. We want to taste the relational modality in its pregnant and involving contingency.

It is probably for this reason that some philosophers and critics have observed that aesthetic experience transforms both the perceiver as individual and as community, and the artwork, that hence, in its own historical efficacy proves to be irreducible to an absolute and atemporal datum. What kind of experience is exactly aesthetic experience, then? What is at stake in it, if not the subject in him/herself and the object in itself or their features? In other terms, what is the mark of the aesthetic as such? “What” and “what kind of thing” is the aesthetic?

An important element is that the aesthetic can concern any experiential content, any sort of perception, belief, memory, knowledge,

emotion, imagination... On this basis some have suggested to consider it as a potential doubling of experience in general or as a true and proper ontological transfiguration of it. At a closer look, yet, what emerges is the fact that the aesthetic is not really a “what”, but rather a “how”, a modal index. It is the modality in which the interaction between organism and environment takes place that qualifies, if anything, the experience as aesthetic, and not single elements, contents, or acts belonging either to the organism or to the environment.

In order to pinpoint this peculiar relational modality, I think that we could at least heuristically agree that the aesthetic designates a form of an organism-environment interaction so integrated that it generates a sort of full “collusion”. In other words, it is a kind of practices in which the organism and the environment are coupled and mutually supportive in a holistic experiential configuration. In this regard, some cues provided by a number of quite heterogeneous and otherwise incompatible contemporary philosophers seem reassuring: Wittgenstein, when he describes art experience as the act of paying a visit to someone and feeling welcomed, and hence “taken” into its field; Dilthey and “atmospherology”, with the analysis of *moods* and *Stimmungen*; Dewey, when he assigns a foundational role to the emotional quality of aesthetic experience; Cassirer, when he analyzes expressive perception; Adorno, when he seems to compare the aesthetic behaviour to the immersion into a tank full of energy.

Due to the lack of any ontological-substantial partition between Subject and Object, the aesthetic *agency* distributes itself in vectors devoid of predefined and specific ownership, to the extent that it generates a sort of

bi-stability that makes the roles of the various correlated elements exchangeable. The same elements can take on each role at any time, both actively and passively. They are experienced with in their shifting from one role to the other, and never in the simultaneous staticity of a specific and absolute function they would be endowed with. Hence, the aesthetic field has a performative and in itself indeterminable configuration in the most pregnant sense this term has in physics. Consequently, in the aesthetic field the object is not (or rather, no longer, in respect to Modernity) a mere object, but an appeal to us, and the subject is not (or rather, no longer, in respect to Modernity) a mere subject, but an embedded organism that corresponds to the environment by putting to the test its own skills. Both of them are players of a game, of a *ludus*, whose sense appears only when executed. Just as the object alludes, invites to the game, and in its extra-subjective passivity, in its materiality, reveals itself as effective, hence active, so the subject feels him/herself colluded, taken into the game of the sensibly mediated sense, thus also by virtue of elements of passivity – of constraints – to which he/she is supposed to correspond.

For this same reason, the aesthetic content cannot be reduced to the perceptual one. The experiential content that inheres in *aisthesis* goes beyond mere *aistheton*. The latter refers to a content of the senses inscribed in an order which is internal to the linear relationship between subject and object, and it hence gets structured as the articulation of a “noema”, as phenomenology would call it. While the percept we can focus on is a center, a *fulcrum*, that absorbs the “rays”, so to speak, of our attention that in turn shed light on it, the aesthetic in a wider and pregnant sense is a horizon that

expands itself while involving us, it is the light both shaping and shed by what we are facing: it dictates the configuration of an experiential field while avoiding every factual ascertainment. If *aistheton* falls back into a noematic order, the aesthetic *per se* outlines an order. It is – we may say – an “aisthema”, that is articulated not by virtue of acts of perception, but by soliciting practices of “perceptualization” (using a term introduced by Cassirer 1944, p. 193): more than perceiving, it is a matter of making perceivable.

Not being an *aistheton* but an *aisthema*, which generates sense in the simple form of relational efficacy, it is not surprising that the aesthetic may even be factually inexistent. In the aesthetic field the topological constraintness that usually marks a perceptual content can be embodied by an imaginative *analogon* that is performative only by appearing, and that makes us feel it effective and present, as it eminently happens with literature. It is exactly by virtue of this “aisthematic” nature, or in other terms as being a performative structure that makes something perceivable, that both makes someone feel and makes itself felt, that the aesthetic is fatally interwoven with the virtual, due to a common suspension of ontologically determined or noetically determinable entities.

As a relational modality, the aesthetic is hence pervasive (at least potentially) not because it doubles experience. It modifies the latter immanently, materially, by emphasizing those elements that, although inhabit it actively, would otherwise remain tacit. Specifically, the aesthetic alters the structure of the cognitive thematization: that which, from a functional point of view, is merely operative is here brought to the fore to

the extent of becoming apparent. When this switch takes place, the field's energy lines emerge and acquire relevance, while the linear tension towards thematic contents loses its supremacy. These contents now cease being the terminal targets of our attention and become the catalysts of a different manifestation of the field. They switch from being ends to being means, from being goals to being vectors. These cases emphasize the "operative" which implies a different paradigm from that of the "experience-of" something, that is, the paradigm of the "experience-with" something. It is a wide range-paradigm that covers various experiential phenomena, at least from the gestaltic to the imaginative.

In this framework, the distinction between experience-of and experience-with, which has been traditionally neglected, is crucial. Let's just think how different it is to ask on the one hand "what is seen *of* a painting" and, on the other hand, "what is seen *with* a painting". Moreover, such distinction, which is of a phenomenological if not even of a pragmatic (and certainly not ontological) kind, goes way beyond the most canonical aesthetic domain.

We may sum this point up by saying that in the experience-of, "of" marks a distance that may generate distinction and abstraction, while in the experience-with, "with" marks a relationship that is always mutually supportive and material. The first one is inclined to generalization and hence risks being inefficacious in practice, while the second one is ineludibly topologically bound and hence it possesses a whole efficacy which yet is valid only for that specific moment.

By deflating the term, the aesthetic hence appears as something with

which we experience – that is: only when we experience with something, we can be faced with aestheticity as a relational modality. In this case, the object, instead of being the target of a subject, performatively generates an experiential field which can be aesthetically qualified as a whole. Hence, the table that I have experience *of* is a thematically experienced content, while the aesthetic I can experience *with* the table is a field relationship that makes mediation inescapable, that is, it always and *simultaneously* says something about me and about the world in the current circumstance. Insofar as we are engaged in this experience-with we are colluding with the manifestation of an *aisthema*, and therefore our experience is aesthetic.

Since this manifestation pertains to operative, and not substantial elements, the kind of experience at issue here is radically contingent. It hence forces to an exercise of competences: the organism does not merely attend to, but participates in the apparition of the *aisthema*, even when it plays the role of the “author” of an aesthetic structure, by also making use of itself, and not only of those same contents that are mere functional terms for its experience-of, that is, of the matter it interacts with. In the practice of the aesthetic, activity and passivity pertain to both *relata*, according to a performative intertwining between feeling and feeling-oneself that produces reflexivity. By virtue of this involvement the organism, in fact, from its interaction with the environment acquires plastic competences about the “self-in-the-world” (a non-quantifiable formula within itself) that are outside of merely functional relationships and whose ownership is to be ascribed to the field as a whole.

The aesthetic inter-play develops in relation to concrete and



contingent usages of factual matter that becomes the experiential heritage of the organism as its own ways of operating with the material that then emerges. So, if the experiential arc describes the activity of a mind, the latter necessarily includes, in their own mutually supportive reciprocity, both the organism and the environment. The aesthetic requires collusion, participation in a correspondence (that unfolds in an analogical series), between players who are looking for reciprocal agreement, and hence, a common expressivity. That is why the primary feature of the aesthetic is its expressive property.

If aesthetic expressivity is the non-substantial connotation of the operative factors which appear when the experience-of-something is de-functionalized, that is, when one experiences “with” that something, what is aesthetically expressive is precisely the experiential field as a whole, not its components as isolated and thematizable entities. Hence, the peculiar nature of aesthetic properties. The properties that we objectively attribute to perceived objects are non-aesthetic exactly because they pertain to the content of *aisthesis* as *aistheton*, as that which we have experience of: the fragility of a glass refers to the object of which I have an experience, its objective and knowable attributes. Contrariwise, aesthetic properties operatively subsist in the praxis of sensibility, they pertain to the content of *aisthesis* as *aisthema*, as that with which we experience. Properties manifest their own expressive operativity when we experience with them. They then appear as that aesthetic property which overall orients the collusive interaction with the environment, namely working in an analogical way, not in a logical one. We will therefore say that aesthetic properties, instead of

supervening in respect to non-aesthetic properties, *inter-vene* in the contingent and topologically embedded experiential field. The aesthetic property is the non-aesthetic property itself that takes on a different role: we no longer have experience of it, but we experience with it. Without implying continuity solutions (“superior levels” or new entities), it coincides with the inflection point that makes an *aistheton aisthema*.

Summarizing: Aesthetic experience as such is based on a model which is not ascribable to the linear (univocal or reciprocal) relationship between two separate entities, a subject and an object (“experience-of”). It rather consists of an “experience-with” something, that develops within the sphere of sensibility, or, in other words, of *aisthesis*, meant as a field in which one can orientate him or herself only by analogically managing the expressive features of an ambiance-like situation. The lines of force that operate within such field should be understood as structures that are simultaneously endowed with activity and passivity, to the extent that they, in their expressivity, exceed every merely empirical, objective as well as subjective, content. I proposed thus to describe such a field force as “aisthema”, in order to emphasize the difference that exists from every structural relationship (“noema”) that connotes someone’s “experience-of” something.

The aesthetic field implies a distribution of factors through which aesthetic experience runs, just like the energy of a field. Such a distribution breaks the boundary between inside and outside which the classic modern Cartesian paradigm contrariwise relies on, that at a closer look is actually at the origin of the “experience-of” model. In these terms, the analysis of aesthetic experience meets recent philosophical programs who aim at

revising the traditional conception of mind, and specifically it meets the extended mind model, that precisely underlines how mental vectors are distributed in the environment (as scaffoldings) rather than confined inside the organism.

The adoption of the extended mind model seems to entail the necessity to talk of the aesthetic in those functional terms which have been stigmatized at the beginning of this paper, given that the model in question, at least in Andy Clark's version, remains bound to some kind of functionalism (see Clark 2008, p. 88). Nevertheless, two elements dismiss the possibility of ending up with a functionalist determination of aesthetic experience. First of all, the topological contingency of the aesthetic, its materiality, which makes its every single element that occurs each time non-replaceable. Replacing a material component, as functionalism would imply, means distorting an aesthetic structure. Secondly, the aesthetic resists to functionalism also macroscopically, as a whole. This has clearly emerged with the analysis of its "adverbial" and "analogical" nature, that is, its being a relational modality. For this reason, it turns out to be elusive every time one attempts to determine its specific function from a logical-cognitive point of view. Perceptions, beliefs, memories, knowledge, emotions, imagination... can take on an aesthetic qualification, but asking someone to identify an aesthetic content that is not perception, belief, memory, knowledge, emotion, imagination, means – I believe – assigning an impossible task just as much as it is impossible to detect the "mark" of the aesthetic, if we limit our analysis to the contents of an experience-of any object, event or process because, as we can say at this point, the mind is

aesthetic only if it is extended.

### **3. Consequences of the Paradigm of Experience-with: (1) The Categories of Aesthetics as a Theory are not Thematic but Operative**

If the aesthetic turns out to be the connotation of an “extended” modality of interaction as such, there is no reason to constrain it to the sphere of art in the sense of that system of Fine Arts which was consolidated between the mid-18th century and the early 20th century. The latter, if anything, seems rather a very particular case, strongly conditioned at the cultural level. If it has been possible to reduce aesthetics to the philosophy of art, it is precisely because the aesthetic and the artistic in fact have a bond, so strong that it has been culturally privileged in a certain cultural sphere. However, making the combination of the aesthetic and artistic the starting point for the analysis of the former risks forcing aesthetics into a very narrow episode of Western culture, bound to an ideal concept of art that had real value for two centuries or so, during which it was considered obvious that only it should act as a unique principle of definition and determination of a cultural sphere of its own.

Yet this combination, albeit reductive, drove aesthetics to develop a theoretical apparatus that, although it seems to be inadequate or partial today, nevertheless generated elements that are far from negligible. Indeed, even the negative outcome of aesthetics as a philosophy of art has a positive

side. First of all, not arriving at a unique and absolute definition of art meant gaining awareness of increasingly subtle and insidious questions. Above all, however, it meant realizing that the area in question is densely populated with categories (beyond that prototypical one of *art*, even those of *beauty*, *style*, *taste*, etc.) that have a peculiar character: that of acting effectively in the course of experience and analysis of certain phenomena, but, at the same time, to avoid any attempt at precise determination.

This happens when concepts do not have the function of cataloguing or qualifying very well-defined portions of reality, but mainly serve to provide certain experiences in a particular way, through a perceptually grounded “analogy-making” (with partial reference to Mitchell 1993; but see Melandri 2004, parr. 50-52 and 113-117). Therefore concepts are here more regulative than normative, they orient instead of defining, and thus imply the emergence of a “value” in terms of a possible sense of the phenomena that – so to speak – appear only then, *tendentially*, configured under a particular light which never excludes other concurrent illuminations. In other words, here the categories are more *operative* than *thematic*, and therefore strongly bound to practices and intrinsically metamorphic. And this is characteristic of the field of experience-with, which is a matter of carrying out a relationship rather than determining individual atomic contents, as we have seen.

Let us consider a specific case. It is not uncommon to hear people speak today of the “art of cooking”. Now, as long as to the concept of “art” is attributed solely or even predominantly a normative meaning, i.e., a thematic use, it seems very complicated to justify this phrase, which to the

contrary is immediately grasped. In this case, rather, it pivots on the operational use, on the regulative meaning of the concept of art, which orients experience in such a way as to render it permissible to proceed not so much by a mere figurative speech, and much less by conceptual negotiation by agreeing on what traits the work of a painter and that of a chef have in common, but rather through an approximate and suggestive shift, namely through an analogy meant (according to John Stuart Mill) as an “uncomplete induction” from a particular state of affairs to another particular state of affairs. The “purist” would probably oppose these shifts in meaning, although pragmatically (i.e., in the practice of communication) many are willing to accept this manner of speaking. Likewise, the opportunity to celebrate an athlete as an “artist” of his sport is due to the operative nature of the concept of art.

It would be wrong, however, to think that these shifts are related to an unconscious nostalgic reference to the pre-modern situation in which *ars* and *techne* indiscriminately indicated every constructive and productive capacity of the human being. Today when we talk about an artist in the kitchen or with a ball, we are generally, although vaguely, aware of two centuries of philosophy of art, because we are trying precisely to emphasise that there is also a certain refined skill in food preparation or dribbling that have salient features that, from a certain point of view, are no less important than the totally different talents that have been recognized exclusively in the creation of works of painting, poetry, music and so on over the centuries that separate us from the founding fathers of philosophical aesthetics in the 18th century. But it would be impossible to overcome embarrassment if you

were asked to provide an actual definition of a concept of art able to accurately and thematically include both the preparation of food and painting, and both dribbling and the writing of poetic verse. Only in its distillation into precise practices, orienting experience from within as its particular way of organizing itself (resulting in the multiple historical stratifications of its meaning), does the concept of art fully reveal the expansive potential it is endowed with.

That is why we need to be careful when we speak, as some scholars do today, about “artification” to indicate that process of ennobling that leads to the recognition of the rank of artistry to a certain expressive technique. The notion of artification struggles to get rid of a thematic concept of art, at least insofar as attributing to fashion the status of art, for example, would mean finding in fashion the same characteristics that should serve to define art. More productive, in these cases, is to stick to an operative use of the concept, that is, not go searching for well-defined shared traits, but rather contaminations and contiguities that incarnate in practice the overlapping between fields that are from time to time dynamically and mutually qualifiable as convergent or divergent, inclusive or exclusive, depending on historical and cultural circumstances. They are overlaps that emerge on the basis of a principle of mutual indeterminacy: the more elements become distinctive of the various fields, the more their interaction will be blurred, forcing a stiffening of their boundaries. Reversing the terms: the more effective is the content of experience-with, the more indeterminate is the content of experience-of.

If design is defined as art because, for example, its works are thought

to be worthy of “disinterested contemplation” (as it is assumed when exhibiting various “design pieces” in contemporary art museums) there is a risk of creating a serious aesthetic misunderstanding both of art and of design. On the one hand, because the aesthetic work of design does not aim to produce objects to contemplate, as anyone who relies on everyday spaces for which design develops its own works well knows. On the other hand, because today it is quite doubtful that disinterested use is indeed a universal and distinctive aesthetic trait of art: countless objects unquestionably considered to be works of art (religious statues, public buildings, mythological narratives, etc.) were created and are experienced on the basis of heteronomous instances from antiquity, if not from prehistory. In fact, there are many contemporary experiences that are widely held to be artistic, yet they parade their homology with everyday life and their mingling of interests. Such a definition would neither capture the aesthetic sense of design nor the aesthetic sense of art, but rather would sterilely replicate a definitional structure that is antiquated with respect to art and forced for design.

Things are no different for the other categories of aesthetics. Beauty, style, autonomy and so on escape thematic closure as much as they operatively unfold new horizons for experience-with. This is precisely what the history of the arts itself attests to, which has not infrequently proceeded with progressive fractures, always shifting the boundary within which it was thematically supposed to remain, often explicitly subverting established norms. In this regard Duchamp’s ready-made is striking. It shares very little with the previous artistic “facts”: the skilled act of the artist is reduced to a



minimum; the object itself is far from being distant from everyday life; there is no formal experimentation and so on. Yet its relevance to art is undeniable and obvious, even for those who would not want to recognize it as such although they are provoked by it. But what about the contrasting schools that have always marked the history of the arts, where a thesis and its exact antithesis are repeatedly contrasted, thus showing the operative wealth of the notions invoked? In all these cases the thematic reversal of the concept translates into the expansion of its scope of operation.

That is why the categories of aesthetics appear destined to evolve (or better: to reposition and readjust themselves from time to time) practically by leaps. The various meanings they assume in different cultural contexts, in their different practices, are linked by discontinuous traits. There is no common denominator for all definitions of “beauty”, for example, but some concepts have similarities, while others share elements of a different kind, as stressed by the nowadays popular concept of family resemblances. Continuity is only operative and contingent, that is, it is explicated by contextual and pragmatic contiguity in the connection between different concepts practicing experience-with. Philosophically speaking, acquiring this awareness even through the failure of its own program could be no small achievement for aesthetics as a philosophy of art.

However, this does not mean that any definition of these categories is acceptable. A pure relativism that led to believing something like that would be at least unusable. In reality, it is precisely the nature of the operative categories to follow specific polarizations that historically define their margins of effectiveness. “Historically” means, in this case, in relation to

certain practices of experience-with that are interrelated in various manners. In short, the area of significance of an operative category can be compared more to a force field than to a static domain. Within it possible discrete positions appear, discontinuous though correlated (even opposing), which continuously redesign the temporary physiognomy of the category itself, still based on a sort of indeterminacy principle that makes some traits salient in certain circumstances to the detriment of others, which in any case may subsequently acquire renewed importance.

A preliminary mapping of those operating fields expressed in categories of aesthetics should then show of the latter not so much static content as, contrariwise, operating margins that have become dramatically perceptible when the project of aesthetics conceived as a philosophy of art ran into difficulties. It would thus become obvious how unstable the categories examined turned out to be, especially when they crossed the horizons of acute criticality, as often was the case in the course of the 20th century. It is no coincidence that in the last century they have been almost inevitably pushed to flip to their opposite, as certified by some pairs that have become inseparable: beauty-ugliness, autonomy-heteronomy, taste-disgust. Consequently, it would be wrong to expect doctrinal conclusions from such a mapping. On the contrary, we would notice how the outcomes will always be prospective, *in fieri*, suggesting a reconsideration – in fact – of the operative character of aesthetic conceptuality in general, once we renounce to resort unilaterally to subjective or objective entities, and instead we emphasize the holistically relational nature of experience-with, which underlies the aesthetic as a dimension of the extended mind.

#### **4. Consequences of the Paradigm of Experience-with: (2) The Categories of the Aesthetic in Practice are not Static but Dynamic**

The fulcrum of the canonical model of the aesthetic, attributable to the paradigm of experience-of, is constituted by a work of art as something to be determined, if not even precisely defined, in its specificity. In connection with this need very specific institutions have emerged: academies, conservatories, etc. as places where one learns to produce works and thus authorized to convey artistic knowledge; museums, book series, etc. as places designated to preserve obviously not art, but its relative works; theatres, concert halls and so on as places established for the public proclamation of the achieved artistic nature of the works; and so on. It is these institutions, as well as critical and philosophical reflection (with their respective institutions: journals, universities, cultural circles, etc.) that have traditionally been entrusted with the task of certifying the artistic status of the works, issuing, let's say, their IDs. In this institutionalized world there is no art that is not a work of art, and continuous conflicts of legitimacy arise in relation to specific objects and practices. Again, according to the concept of the artwork the canonical model also predefines the actors on the stage: the author as the one who ably produced the work; the beholder as the one who properly enjoys the work; the critic as the one who skillfully extracts the meaning of the work.

But already at least in some institutional places of the art world that have recently been accredited – biennials, workshops, portals on the web – works are no longer encountered by subjects in this canonical sense, at least from an *aesthetic* point of view. What fails here is the fundamental principle according to which *the aesthetic* should be necessarily embodied in a work of art (or in a product similar to it for its alleged purely aesthetic function) that first “sits” in front of its creator and then from time to time of its audience, its critic, its theorist etc. And this lack connotes exactly the situation of our currently usual interaction with something we practice as aesthetic, not only in relation to art. In all these cases what is aesthetic is not the *experience of* something, but the *experience with* something. Using the terms introduced at the beginning of this paper we could say then that our “aesthetic common sense” conforms with the strictly aesthetic model of experience-with, which is very different from the “common sense about the aesthetic” which is instead associated with the essentially cognitive model of experience-of.

If you visit the Louvre and you enter the *Mona Lisa* room, you come across a wall of tourists each of which is intent on taking a selfie that somehow frames the masterpiece by Leonardo, but first of all certifies that they have been exposed to this masterpiece, that there was an interaction (more or less trivial, more or less corny, more or less significant) with it. The images thus created attest to the value of the experience *with*, its aesthetic prominence compared to the experience *of*. Within this dimension also falls every hypothesis of the clear demarcation between the artistic and the quotidian from an aesthetic point of view. Here, in fact, even the

eventual direct contact with an artistic content takes place in continuity with the methods and styles of the virtual relationship: more and more often the work is experienced in flesh and blood through the same devices that structure everyday life. A painted picture enters peoples' aesthetic baggage more in the sense that it has been digitized than viewed without artificial intermediaries. The new experiments with installations in which the works of art "come to life" thanks to 3D technology and the implementation of augmented reality, though they may disgust cultured connoisseurs of Great Art, are ways of procuring even intense aesthetic experiences of common sense (valid, after all, even for refined enthusiasts) on a par with commercial venues designed to immerse consumers in the kaleidoscope of synesthesia.

The categories that are used to describe this complex relationship must then renounce the static nature of the canonical model (see also Matteucci 2016). When the fulcrum of the analyzed phenomena shifts from the artwork or aesthetic object to the interaction that takes on a peculiar value for how it involves the various individuals that come into its field, one must speak of articulated, complex and indefinite processes rather than of a well-defined entity. And a number of different individuals work together in these processes, not a single person assuming in turn the fully defined role of artist, beholder or critic. In other words, the actors of aesthetic processes no longer appear as individual and isolated subjects, as self-sufficient and autarkic as the work of art or the "ideal" aesthetic object should be autonomous according to the canonical conception. It then becomes necessary to radically change even the cluster of concepts that govern the institutions of the art world in so far as the latter should remain an aesthetic

field.

If the category of “author” must lose rigidity, because it is no longer packaged along the lines of the particular case of the individual artist who expresses him/herself in his/her work and must cover more generally a widespread authorship that includes a combination of skills, the idea of experiencing art as a concentrated and absolute descent into one’s own interiority is replaced by that of a collective reception and recreation that can aggregate as much as it renders gregarious. The exercise of criticism supported by refined scholarship, which with its judgements aims to shape and educate other people’s perception, is replaced by the evaluation carried out through a symbol (i.e., a “like”, or “star ratings”), a gesture that distils the aesthetic message into a primary interjection based on an average appreciation that practically exempts from individual discrimination.

Under these conditions the factors of the aesthetic field (with regard to art too) turn out to be dynamic elements, both for their continuous modifications and for the fact that they assume this or that physiognomy depending on the overall experience that is developing. Also for this reason what we once considered as belonging to the category of artwork has gradually dematerialized. The artwork has been sublimated in a device that is designed to generate experiential flows that have the effect of shaping a taste unbound from individual objects, allowing the consequent exercise of preferences on an unpredictable array of content. The determination of well-defined objects is replaced by the scanning of a flowing continuum that must not be interrupted and that therefore requires surface nodes that tend to contract instantaneously. This is almost the sunset of aesthetics as a modern

philosophy of art. Here we face the passage (forwards or backwards?) from the *experience of* the work of art to the *experience with* aesthetic devices working as mere and serial analogy-makers.

This point is very delicate. The theories of aesthetic experience mentioned at the beginning of this paper tend, sometimes explicitly sometimes critically, to focus exclusively or as a priority on art experience precisely because they are patterned after the paradigm of experience-of. This reveals how intrinsically “modern” they are, and therefore how limited is their theoretical validity, which seeks to justify the aesthetic starting from a philosophy of culture or even starting from a cultural ideology. If we switch the paradigm by adopting that of experience-with, the basic question changes. It is no longer about how to export the results of the analysis of art into non-artistic areas (such as everyday life) in which aesthetic experiences are however encountered. The question becomes how art has been able to represent a very particular case in continuity with non-artistic aesthetic practices, being moreover endowed with exclusive distinctive traits as a cultural and symbolic sphere. It is as a material analytic of practices (similar to the analysis of a form of life), and not as a logic or an epistemology of a specific symbolic world (a mere description of a language game), that aesthetics can aim at justifying an art theory.

Furthermore it is exactly because it embodies an exemplary experience-with something that the aesthetic has its remarkable pervasive force. Not being anchored to a particular object, not being primarily an experience of something specific, it is a reserve of experiential intensification even in a reality characterized by the saturation of functional

needs. As marketing experts well know, today's widespread and prevalent aesthetic *practices* relate to events that are planned through an actual "experiential design" that penetrates daily life and must ensure the participation of individuals in a field of energies we have to correspond with, and therefore we have to receive and at the same time to implement, in a continuous alternation between passivity and activity.

## 5. Conclusions

At the end of these analyses there are no real conclusions to be drawn, but only programmatic indications for a further study. In the complex system of transformations implied by the adoption of the paradigm of experience-with, the aesthetic seems to accentuate its evanescent, ephemeral nature and thus its original bond with sensitivity, with *aisthesis*. All in all it insists on the dimension of appearance, no matter how deeply substantial one might consider the content that is expressed through it. But it would be naive to say that by being inscribed in the domain of appearance the aesthetic is therefore a negligible element. On the contrary: taken in its dynamic nature and reassessed in its matrix of experience-with and therefore in its intrinsic openness to otherness and sharing, the aesthetic proves to be an indispensable factor for carrying out holistic relations, both between the Self and the world, the Self and itself and between one's Self and the other Selves. Hence the aesthetic turns out to be a primitive (underivable) manifestation of an extended mind as the analogical competence (the knowing-how) that an individual must possess in order to emerge from



within the interaction with the surrounding environment. For in all these cases, it is a tangled weave that first of all rests on the surface of experiential dynamics, which are consequently usable in turn as interfaces. Even before learning it, what the world means for us we experience primarily through the face that it shows us and that tunes the tenor of our experience. What we realize we are, what we therefore consider our identity, is not only embodied but also determined by the way in which we represent ourselves, which conditions our gestures and words to the point of often raising the suspicion that behind this staging there is very little to look for if not the need to produce a new appearance. Finally, the set of social relations is not reflected, but rather in the normal sense and fluidly established – at least in part – by the manifestation of preferences and tastes and their roles in interactions with others.

Knowing how to manage the complex system of appearance even in the absence of references to deep structures of existence (in the most varied spheres: metaphysical, religious, moral, ideological, and so on) is the skill increasingly required of the contemporary human being, and perhaps decisive in general for human beings from the beginning insofar as they are prompted by their own nature to extend their mind, to live in dialogue with something that cannot remain merely “outside”. An aesthetic knowledge that, in order to be expressed effectively, must remain operative and thus be entrenched in a field of experience that involves dynamic categories, ready to change on impact with circumstances without stiffening into structures that are too elementary because abstractly atomic.

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