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Fine-tuning our senses with (sound) art for aesthetic experience
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Summary:
- The aesthetic and the artistic should not be confused
  (even though, they sometimes overlap)
- A universal realm for aesthetic experience
- On the distinction between trivial and aesthetic experience
- Contemporary sound art practices
- Sound Art: Ontology of sound, site-specificity and exercising the senses
- Taking a sound walk as an example
After a long and widespread overlapping, in traditional accounts of aesthetic experience, between the realms of the artistic and the aesthetic, it’s becoming increasingly consensual that not only artworks, but also non-artistic objects - natural phenomena, natural landscapes and human environments, perhaps even everyday activities - can be the focus of valuable, arousing, cognitively and emotionally engaging sensory experiences.
Superseding the artistic object with the artistic experience

Contemporary artistic practices have been shifting their focus from object-making to more performative and participatory forms of expression and creativity, emphasizing the experiential aspect of artwork installations/performances.

But it would be an error to take the artistic and the aesthetic as the same.
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A universal realm for aesthetic experience

It shouldn't be defined by the objects of experience, since (virtually) everything has the potential to become an object of aesthetic experience.

An aesthetic attitude or an aesthetic state of mind: any object could be the focus of aesthetic experience, as long as the subject of experience is adopting an attitude, which usually implies some sort of detachment or a feature of disinterestedness.

But, an aesthetic experience, like just any experience simpliciter, necessarily implies a focus, a something that is experienced, its intentional content.

Aesthetic experience is thus not something purely passive or purely active, it is something that both happens to the subject and that she tries to apprehend.
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But if everything can be the focus of aesthetic experience, how can we distinguish aesthetic experience from trivial experience?

**Phenomenological accounts of aesthetic experience** (Beardsley) mentions **focus, intensity, unity or completeness** – allowing it to stand out vis-à-vis ordinary humdrum experience.

However, such characterizations, seem to still convey some moral or metaphysical preconceptions concerning beauty and the intrinsic value of aesthetic experience. **Aesthetic experience as honorific.**

But maybe not all aesthetic experiences have to be absolutely overwhelming, **maybe it doesn’t have to be “an” experience!** (Dewey)

There are incomplete, fragmented, ambiguous, soft or feeble experiences that can still be counted within the realm of the aesthetic.

**Maybe, instead of talking of aesthetic experiences, as individuated psychological events, one should simply talk of experiencing aesthetically.**
On the distinction between trivial and aesthetic experience

In aesthetic experience, particular modes of perception and attention allow singular kinds of cognitive processes (mainly sensorial with symbolic and conceptual elements) and emotional (affective, hedonic) responses or forms of engagement that also have particular nuances.

Yet, there are no real differences concerning the cognitive or affective structure in both kinds of experiences, only contextual and modal differences. Jean-Marie Schaeffer mentions, for instance, different modes and styles of attention: parallel and distributed attention, in the aesthetic mindset, instead of serial and targeted, in the 'standard' mode.
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I would say that, in order to experience aesthetically, one will have to be sensorially attentive, cognitively aware and emotionally engaged with the environment and the life within.

Not only beholders, spectators, bystanders or passive audiences may have aesthetic experiences or experience aesthetically, but also participants, artists, performers, persons engaged in creative activities and particular modes of perception and attention that foster the possibility of aesthetic experience.
Contemporary sound art practices

**sound art**: a very heterogeneous range of practices, from sound sculpture and installations to performances, compositions, field recordings or even collective practices such as sound walks, that either use sound as a medium or talk about sound, auditory experience and aurality.

Unlike ‘music’ which deals with abstract elements (pitch, harmony, melody, rhythm), it is mostly concerned with concrete sounds (whether acoustical, electronic, found or environmental sounds), their materiality, sensuous character and specific connection with space and time, therefore appealing to sensory, relational, contextual and contingent features of actual experience.
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Ontology of sound, site-specificity and exercising the senses

Sound is a particular event, a localized disturbance of a surrounding medium that produces pressure waves, which can be propagated, reflected or refracted in a concrete space, and is exposed to auditory perception through a bundle of some specific and transient audible qualities that change according to several conditions (distance, orientation, atmosphere, etc.) while still conveying a lot of information concerning sound sources and also about when and where the sounding events occurred (Cf. O’Callaghan 2007).

In sound art practices, the listener/user/participant of such pieces is not only invited to sharpen her (auditory and indeed multimodal) perception of the event and/or environment – since the experience of sound art pieces are usually very immersive - but also to enhance her awareness concerning the way she’s being affected by the experience.
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Taking a soundwalk as an example

“A soundwalk is any excursion whose main purpose is listening to the environment. It is exposing our ears to every sound around us no matter where we are. We may be at home, we may be walking across a downtown street, through a park, along the beach (...) wherever we go we will give our ears priority.

It can be done alone or with a friend (...). It can also be done in small groups, in which case it is always interesting to explore the interplay between group listening and individual listening (...). A soundwalk can furthermore cover a wide area or it can just centre around one particular place. No matter what form a soundwalk takes, its focus is to rediscover and reactivate our sense of hearing.”

Hildegard Westerkamp, Soundwalking, 1974
In 1966, Max Neuhaus decided to ask a small group of invited friends to meet him on a specific corner of Manhattan (NY); (he) rubber-stamped the word LISTEN on each person's hand and began walking with them down the streets, near the East River. They crossed several noisy places of New York City saying nothing and simply listening to the environment and everyday sounds.

(Max Neuhaus, *LISTEN*, 1966)
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In group soundwalks or oriented listening walks, the guide can suggest diverse aural *foci* when listening to the urban environment:

- **Paying attention to the musical aspects of the soundscape** (pitches, rhythms, textures, harmonies) or otherwise listening while thinking about relationships between bodily sounds and their surroundings (subjective listening); or between the sounds they are hearing and have heard in the past, in case they were already familiar with that street or location (historical);
- The listener can instead be made aware of other sensorial associations that are evoked by the listening walk; and finally attention can be drawn to the political relationship between sounds, those which are predominant, those which are masked by others and barely heard and eventually question why and who controls these sounds.

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[here being guided by a blindman in Montréal]
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The sensitized subjects of this sort of experiments /experiences may become more prone to perceive and let themselves be aesthetically affected by natural and human aural environments, everyday practices, social relations and daily events, in short, they will be more likely to experience aesthetically.

And this potential sensitization derives from the intensified focus of perception required in such practices as well as the singular, emotional and dynamic character of the auditory experience, which, in some sense is also a multisensory experience.

Thank You.

Akio Suzuki, Oto-Date (1996- ongoing)
[here, at a listening point at Torino in 2006]
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References (selection):


