

Aesthetic consciousness of site-specific art¹

Regina-Nino Kurg

Tallinn University, Uus-Sadama 5, Tallinn 10120, Estonia
reginanino@yahoo.com

The aim of this article is to examine Edmund Husserl's theory of aesthetic consciousness and the possibility to apply it to site-specific art. The central focus will be on the idea of the *limited synthetic unity* of the aesthetic object that is introduced by Husserl in order to differentiate positional and aesthetic attitude towards the object. I claim that *strongly site-specific art*, which is a work of art about a place and in the place, challenges the view that the synthetic unity of the aesthetic object is limited. Moreover, following Husserl's theory, it becomes questionable whether strongly site-specific art is *art* at all. I try to answer these objections by explaining how the artist prescribes the appearances and boundaries of a strongly site-specific object of art, thereby satisfying the demand for the limitedness of the synthetic unity of the aesthetic object.

Aesthetic consciousness and strongly site-specific art

Husserl did not develop a coherent and well-structured theory of aesthetics. However, he emphasised the importance of aesthetic consciousness and even drew parallels between the phenomenological and aesthetic attitude (Husserl 1994: p. 134). His ideas about aesthetic consciousness can be summarised as follows: (1) aesthetic consciousness has interest in the *manner of appearing* of the object (Hua 23: 462 [389]);² it is (2) *turning toward* the manner of appearing, and has *thematic primacy* (Hua 23: 464 [392]). Aesthetic interest is not theoretical nor practical interest but (3) purely 'sensuous' interest (Hua 23: 168 [145]) and has (4) *no interest in the existence or nonexistence* of the presented object (Hua 23: 459 [387]). The aesthetic object has (5) *restricted synthetic unity* compared to the synthetic unity of a perceptual object (Hua 23: 705 [588]).³ In this article, the central focus will be on the limited synthetic unity of the aesthetic object and on the possibility to experience it in the case of *strongly site-specific art*.

Kevin Melchionne suggests that we can understand *site-specificity* in three categories. A work of art is: (1) *about* but *not for* place (*not* site-specific, for example, landscape painting); (2) *for* but *not about* place (weakly site-specific art); and (3) *for* and *about* place (strongly site-specific art) (Melchionne 1998: p. 43). For Melchionne, the work of art is site-specific only when it is *in* and *for* the place (Melchionne 1998: p. 43). A landscape painting that is only *about* a specific place is not site-specific work of art because the (physical) painting can be moved from one (exhibition) place to another and not being linked to its location. Weakly site-specific works are, for instance, pedestal sculptures that have gained, mostly by tradition, a symbiotic relationship to the place they stand – a public sculpture can become a local landmark, a symbol of the city, or just a familiar face for people who live in the neighbourhood (Melchionne 1998: pp. 42–43). Strongly site-specific works of art, on the other hand, are *created* into a certain place to be a response to 'the political, historical or *aesthetic quality* of a place through which the site itself becomes the content of the work' (my italics) (Melchionne 1998: p. 43).

1 An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 'Phenomenology and its Futures' conference at the University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, 29–31 March 2013.

2 In my article, I refer to two volumes of *Husserliana: Collected Works: Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory* (Hua 23) and *Cartesian Meditations* (Hua 1). The first page number refers to the translations in English and the second, in square brackets, to the texts in German.

3 It has been claimed that the idea of indifference to existence or nonexistence and the restriction to the mode of appearance of an object is Husserlian in origin (whereas the claim of disinterestness to the object goes back at least to Kant) (Mohanty 2008: pp. 313–314).

One of the examples of strongly site-specific art is the installation ‘HA’ by the Icelandic artist, Sara Björnsdóttir, at the Reykjavik Art Museum (2012). In the interview with the exhibition’s curator, she defines site-specific works of art as those that are ‘made in and about certain place’ (Björnsdóttir 2012). Her installation comprises video screenings on the wall of the exhibition hall that shows images of the same room, so that the visitor is looking at the space where she is standing in. There are no other ‘objects’ in the hall except for the moving images on the wall. The artist says that she wants to move people’s certainties about where they are and what they see, and to make them think about how the world appears to us (Björnsdóttir 2012). This example of strongly site-specific art seems to fit well with Husserl’s understanding of aesthetic valuation, which is ‘essentially connected with the distinction between the consciousness of an object as such and the object’s *manner of appearing* [*Erscheinungsweise*]’ (Hua 23: 461 [388]). However, it will be more difficult to understand how we can have limited synthetic unity of an aesthetic object of site-specific art.

Limited synthetic unity

In a text written in 1921–1924, Husserl argues that the aesthetic object has limited synthetic unity [*beschränkte synthetische Einheit*], which means that its horizon is different from the horizon of the thing *pure and simple* (the perceptual object) (Hua 23: 699 [581]). The notion of ‘horizon’ has a specific meaning in Husserl’s phenomenology. In *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl defines horizons as ‘predelineated’ potentialities [*vorgezeichnete Potentialitäten*]⁴ (Hua 1: 45 [82]). In the process of perceiving a die, for example, we have the genuinely perceived [*eigentlich wahrgenommene*] sides of the object and the sides ‘also meant’ [*die mitgemeinten*]. The latter sides are not yet perceived, they are anticipated and in that sense potentialities: if we walk around the object, we can see it from another side or if we come closer to it, we see some aspects that we did not see from a distance; we focus on the colour of the die at one moment and its shape at another moment, and, in addition to the manifold visual perspectives, a die can be touched or even heard (when we throw a die on the table). We expect an object to appear in certain ways in the future but we also expect it to have a ‘horizon of the past’, that is, a potentiality of awakenable recollections (Hua 1: 44 [82]).

In Husserl’s terms, these multiform and changeable *manners of appearing* of a die are combined into a unity in our consciousness – it is called a *synthesis*. The one identical die appears in various appearances, and it is only because of the synthesis that we experience it as one and the same die although experiencing it differently in the course of time (Hua 1: 39–40 [77–78]). Therefore the synthesis is also called the *synthesis of identification* (Hua 1: 101 [131]).

Husserl says that in a positional attitude we consider how a thing would appear ‘in the continuing course of possible experience’ in the real life (Hua 23: 703 [585]). In aesthetic attitude, the situation is different. We do not include other possible experiences or other possible appearances of an object into the synthetic unity of the object than those prescribed by the artist. In the same vein, we are not interested in how the *artistic fiction* fits with the *real* world; it is separated from it: ‘the extent to which what I see there [in an artistic fiction] accommodates itself harmoniously and synthetically to the universal synthesis of possible experience does not interest me’ (Hua 23: 704–705 [587]). Moreover, Husserl says that what serves us aesthetically would have the function of awakening only certain moments and horizons, and everything else, without exception, would be wholly excluded from the horizon of the theme (Hua 23: 704 [586]). A beautiful landscape, for example, presents itself from a certain perspective; it has certain optical appearances that make up the synthesis of the aesthetic object. All other possible appearances of the landscape are *cut off*:

But my aesthetic belief, the belief pertaining to the aesthetic object, restricts me to the series of optical appearances that I obtain from this position, from the entrance to the valley, and to the unity optically constituted in the series as something identifiable and cognizable by itself. The infinite horizon beyond this, with all of its attendant syntheses accessible to me immediately and mediately

4 As Smith and McIntyre understand Husserl’s notion of horizon, there are two sorts of horizon – ‘object-horizon’ and ‘act-horizon’ (Smith & McIntyre 1982: pp. 236–246). I present here the latter.

(producible my me), is cut off [*ist abgeschnitten*], inasmuch as it is not the horizon of thematic acceptance that I am now carrying out. This restricted synthetic unity, in just the way in which it is intuited there, is my aesthetic object. (Hua 23: 705 [587–588])

Robert Irwin's site-specific installation 'Scrim Veil – Black Rectangle – Natural Light' presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1977), is an example of a strongly site-specific work of art that shows clearly how the artist influences the way the space appears to the beholder.⁵ Many visitors complained that it was just an empty room because they could not detect any object inside it. But the artist claimed otherwise. The aim of the artist was to draw people's attention to 'looking at and seeing all of those things that have been going on all along but which previously have been too incidental or too meaningless to really seriously enter into our visual structure, our picture of the world' (Weschler 2008: p. 187). To accomplish that aim, he took great notice of how the room would appear to the visitor. He explained it as follows:

I did a very simple thing, which was just to paint the end wall the same colour that the side walls had become, throwing the room out of order. It's not the kind of thing that a visitor would cogitate on, but you knew something was amiss in that room. [...] So when you walked into this room at the Whitney, it threw you – you had to stop for a moment because something was amiss. I then suspended with scrim a black line from the ceiling the length of the room [120 feet] at eye level. And then I placed a corresponding eye-level black line around the walls of the room. People would literally walk right into it, bump into it, because you couldn't place this black line in space. So in effect you were forced to become a firsthand perceiver. (Davies & Irwin 2008: pp. 52–53)

Husserl finds that, in the case of works of art, it is the role of the artist to choose what will appear and how it appears (Hua 23: 706 [588]). In my view, the emphasis on the selective process of choosing one of the object's appearances in the creation of art leads us to the understanding that it is possible to have many aesthetic appearances of one object (although Husserl does not explain it this way). The object as such does not change in that course. For instance, we do not experience different *sites* when we see a painting of the site or we see a site-specific work of art about it or we simply perceive it; however, we can have different *aesthetic objects* about the same place. When Husserl asks us to find out 'from which side does the object work best aesthetically?' (Hua 23: 41 [37]), it does not follow that there can be only *one* side that works aesthetically.

What appears to us in a picture of a specific landscape is restricted compared to the perceptual experience of the same landscape. I believe that, in the same way, we can compare the limitedness of the synthetic unities of various aesthetic objects of the same perceptual object. While standing in the exhibition room of Sara Björnsdóttir's installation 'HA', we see more than just the pictorial presentation of the room, and therefore the room has for us more appearances than those presented by the video image. If Sara Björnsdóttir's video screenings were presented somewhere else, in another museum, then, firstly, it would not be a site-specific work of art anymore and, secondly, the synthetic unity of the aesthetic object would be *more* limited than in the Reykjavik Art Museum. One could say that we are not even experiencing the same aesthetic object since the degree of limitedness is different.

Now, even if one agrees that the synthetic unity of a work of art *about* a place is limited compared to the synthetic unity of a work of art that is *about* and *in* the place, one does not have to agree, therefore, that the synthetic unity is limited in the latter case. Husserl believes that in the aesthetic attitude, the beholder should not go 'beyond the "image"' [*nicht über das 'Bild' hinaus*] that is defined by the artist (Hua 23: 705 [587]). It means that if it is a depiction, then 'what is

⁵ One could object that Irwin's installation is a strongly site-specific art since, according to him, the installation was not *about* the space. He says: 'The subject of art is aesthetic perception' (Davies & Irwin 2008: p. 162); and he prefers the term 'site-generated art' instead of 'site-specific' (Weschler 2008: p. 198). However, I think that we can experience the installation as strongly site-specific art: we are in the room experiencing how the room appears to us.

depicted in the How of its being depicted determines the boundary of what appears insofar as it appears' (Hua 23: 706 [588]). If it is a narrative or a novel, the reader should not go beyond the narrative and have further fictional invention about the persons or the landscape, because then he would not be living in the fictional work of the artist anymore (Hua 23: 706 [588]).⁶ As Husserl explains it:

Just as in a narrative, a novel, and the like. I can go beyond the narrative to the extent that I become more deeply engrossed, elucidating what is narrated as such, the landscape, the persons, and so on: But my phantasy is not free in this further development (obviously it is not free with respect to the style of agreement with the prefigurings). On the contrary, I am bound — the unity of the appearances as presented appearances must always be what is narrated as such and nothing else. (Hua 23: 706 [588])

However, it seems that, in the installation 'HA', the beholder is asked to go 'beyond the "image"' and see also the place where the pictorial presentation of the place is exhibited. The visitor can walk around and see the place from different perspectives, and come to the conclusion that the experience of the space is free from the boundaries and restrictions given by the artist. The same happens in visiting Robert Irwin's installation in which case we are asked to look at the room itself without any mediating pictorial presentations. In this way, it becomes questionable whether strongly site-specific art is art at all.

In my view, to answer these objections we have to reconsider how to define the 'frame' or the 'boundaries' of a work of art. As Robert Irwin puts it, the 'marriage of figure and ground', that is, the marriage of object and space/place, is a heritage from modern art that has led to the understanding of 'nonobject art' in contemporary art (Davies & Irwin 2008: p. 161). Following this idea we may say that the installation 'HA' encompasses the pictorial representations of the space and the space itself. The exhibition room is not the background for the video screenings but it has to be taken as part of the work of art. Therefore, when the beholder moves around in the exhibition space, he or she is still *inside* the boundaries of the work of art.

However, I do not believe that the 'marriage of figure and ground' should lead us to the understanding that there are no limits for the works of art or that it expands endlessly in space. Strongly site-specific works of art have frames and these are prescribed by the artist. Robert Irwin's and Sara Björnsdóttir's installations, for example, are about a specific exhibition room and not about some other room in the same museum. And even if we say that the boundaries of the video screenings of Björnsdóttir's installation *extend* to the exhibition room, it does not mean that they extend any further. The visitor may take into account the space around the museum or compare the appearances of this room with the appearances of some other room, but in that case he or she goes 'beyond the image' and is not experiencing the work of art presented by the artist.

As mentioned earlier, in the positional attitude we consider all the possible appearances that we could have of an object. But this infinity of possible experiences is not part of aesthetic attitude: 'Only what "appears as it appears", which comes to harmonious unity in this presentation, interests me.' (Hua 23: 705 [587]) As Husserl says, when we are seeing a beautiful landscape our aesthetic interest aims at the landscape *just as it presents itself*. Moreover, it aims at the landscape 'from here, from this entrance to the valley' (Hua 23: 704 [586]). This restricted view is present in site-specific art as well. Our aesthetic experience pertains to a very specific place and is turned toward the appearing of the space visible to us under the conditions set by the artist. The artist prescribes the size of the work of art and also optical appearances: he or she sets the lighting conditions, the colours of the space, decides from which side the visitor enters the space and can also put some filters in order to create optical illusions, and so on. All these conditions created by the artist prescribe the manner of appearing of the space to the beholder.

⁶ According to my understanding of Husserl's texts, every artistic fiction (every object of art) is contemplated aesthetically. One can experience aesthetically art and non-art, but if it is a work of art then one also (necessarily) has aesthetic consciousness. Therefore, wherever he describes the boundaries of artistic fiction without, explicitly, saying it in the context of aesthetic experience, I take it as a description of aesthetic object.

Conclusion

In this article, I examined the notion of *limited synthetic unity* of an aesthetic object in Husserl's theory of aesthetic consciousness. I have suggested that strongly site-specific art challenges the requirement for limitedness since the synthetic unity of an aesthetic object seems not to be restricted to the appearances prescribed by the artist. I claimed that the degree of limitedness of the synthetic unity of a *not* site-specific work of art is greater than that of a strongly site-specific work of art. I also claimed that if we compare the positional and the aesthetic attitude, we see that the synthetic unity of an aesthetic object is restricted compared to the infinite or universal synthetic unity of perceptual objects, and that it is also true in the case of strongly site-specific art – the boundaries and the optical appearances of the specific space are prescribed by the artist. Accordingly, if the beholder wants to contemplate aesthetically the object of art created by the artist, he or she has to take these restrictions into account. Therefore, the artist has an important role to play in defining the limits of the appearances of a strongly site-specific work of art, and it is still possible to experience a *strongly site-specific* work as a work of art.

References

- Björnsdóttir, S. 2012. 'Installation "HA"', Reykjavík Art Museum – Hafnarhús Exhibition.
- Davies, H.M., Irwin, R. 2008. *Robert Irwin: Primaries and Secondaries*. San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.
- Husserl, E. 1960. *Cartesian Meditations: an Introduction to Phenomenology* (Hua 1). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Husserl, E. 1994. 'Husserl an von Hofmannsthal, 12.1.1907', in: *Briefwechsel. Band 3.7. Wissenschaftlerkorrespondenz*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Husserl, E. 2005. *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)* (Hua 23). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Melchionne, K. 1998. 'Re-thinking site-specificity in public art: some critical and philosophical problems', *Art Criticism* 12(2): 36–49.
- Mohanty, J. 2008. *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl: a Historical Development*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Smith, D.W., McIntyre, R. 1982. *Husserl and Intentionality: a Study of Mind, Meaning, and Language*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Weschler, L. 2008. *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: Over Thirty Years of Conversations with Robert Irwin*. Berkeley: University of California Press.