

Towards a Theory of the Aesthetic Situation¹

Hans Dieter Huber

Abstract

Normally, the work of art or the observer stands in the foreground of an aesthetic theory. Here, however, it is the concept of the situation. The concept of the viewer is replaced by the concept of the actor to indicate that perception is not only an activity but also an action. It is an aesthetic perceptual action. Institutions are introduced as norms that restrict and guide action and that additionally frame the situation in which objects and actors operate. A situation is understood as an assembly of actors, objects and institutions that can be distinguished spatially, temporally and socially. Situations become aesthetic situations when they are observed, designated and judged under an aesthetic attitude. The text defines what is understood by an object, an actor, an institution or an attitude. Situations contain external conditions such as scarcities, opportunities and institutional norms as well as internal, actor-based conditions such as the definition and the framing of the situation. Both fields decide how a situation is perceived, how it is evaluated and acted upon. Through regular and repeated aesthetic experiences, aesthetic habits and lifestyles are formed that increasingly determine an actor's aesthetic perceptual action. If, however, the encounter with current, contemporary art is classified as new, unfamiliar or alien, this leads to an irritation of the actor's habits. In this case, his aesthetic expectations and routines no longer serve him for an adequate understanding of the new. He must abandon his habitual aesthetic judgements and obtain new information through conscious, reflexive thinking, consider possible alternatives for action and decide on a new, aesthetic perceptual action. At this moment the actors become creative. They act in a creative way that is unpredictable in terms of their habits. It is concluded that the creative action of actors and institutions in the face of irritating or problematic situations is the prerequisite for the evolution of art.

Introduction

In most traditional aesthetics, the work of art and its interpretation are at the foreground of interest. They deal about natural beauty, artistic beauty, aesthetic experience or the question of the sublime. However, attention is rarely paid to the fact that the aesthetic experience of a work of art takes place in a specific environment, field, context or system. The concept of the aesthetic situation is proposed here for this embedding.

Aesthetic Situations

A situation is a spatial, temporary and social assembly of objects, actors and institutions. An aesthetic situation is a situation in which the actors and institutions perceive, describe, judge and act within the situation (or certain aspects of it) with an aesthetic attitude. The definition and framing of an aesthetic situation by actors form the basis for their aesthetic decisions and aesthetic actions. The participants in an aesthetic situation act on the basis of their definition of the situation and then decide how they act in the aesthetic situation.

Objects and actors are always in a situation. As soon as a situation ends, a new one begins, which in turn is replaced by a third situation. Throughout our lives we act in different, successive situations. Due to the spatial-temporal co-presence of objects and actors in a situation, it is inconceivable that we find ourselves in two different situations at the same time.

Aesthetic situations can be distinguished in spatial, temporal and social terms. These are conceptual-analytical distinctions that allow us to concentrate on a particular aspect of a situation.

Among the objects that can appear in an aesthetic situation, there is an infinite number of possibilities. What is distinguished as one object and what is distinguished as two different objects are always the result of observation, differentiation and designation by one actor. This results in the description of the concrete structure of an aesthetic situation.

Aesthetic situations have a beginning and an end. They begin and end in spatial, as well as temporal and social terms. They therefore have a boundary. The boundaries of an aesthetic situation arise by defining the situation. They are not identical for all actors. Take a theatre performance as an example. It begins much earlier for a stage technician than for an actor, the soufflé or the audience. The beginning and end of an aesthetic situation depend on the respective definition of the situation by a certain actor.

Objects

One can understand things as units, which are created by the distinctions of an actor. In their practice, actors produce these units through the operation of distinction and designation. Simultaneously with the creation of an object as a closed and delimited unit, the medium, milieu or situation in which an object exists is also created. What appears as a closed object unit and what is perceived as its aesthetic situation is solely dependent on the chosen distinction of an actor. If the actor is interested in the internal composition of an object, this unity can be described as a complex system of components and relations. If, on the other hand, the actor is interested in the interactions of the unity with other units, he can apprehend them as a closed black box whose internal composition is not interested. Whether it is a simple or a composite unit depends on the interest on which the distinctions of an actor are based.

For some years now, there has been a debate in some humanities disciplines under the heading "agency of things" as to whether objects can play an active role. Depending on the nature of the objects, they can exert a different kind of effect on the actors, the institutions and the situation in which they are assembled. Not only humans, but also animals, objects, concepts or institutions can be active actors in a situation. Things can empower, enable, offer, encourage, allow, suggest, influence, prevent, authorise or exclude.

However, most of the objects we encounter as actors in aesthetic situations are not art, but everyday objects. These include, for example, chairs, benches, lamps, doors, windows, ceilings, lighting, partitions and air conditioning. Usually, aesthetic perception focuses on the works of art and ignores the presence of objects that are not art. Nevertheless, everyday objects in an aesthetic situation influence perception, feeling and aesthetic judgment.

Actors

Actors in an aesthetic situation can be distinguished from each other in many ways. They can be distinguished in terms of age, gender, level of education, occupation, place of residence, social class or social milieu. They can also be distinguished by the social role they play in the system. A gross differentiation of actors in the art system into typical social groups can be made by distinguishing between artists, critics, curators, gallery owners, registrars, conservators, art historians, shippers, photographers, housekeepers, custodians, etc. In these differentiations, it becomes clear that a second-order scientific observer makes distinctions based on his scientific interest in the aesthetic situation he observes. The distinctions made lead to a contingent structuring of the aesthetic situation. The temporary assembly of objects, actors and institutions in an aesthetic situation can be of infinite complexity due to the quantitatively possible relations. It can only be selectively observed and described by an external observer

Institutions

Institutions are long-lasting social structures that fulfil two different functions in society. On the one hand, they limit the arbitrariness and arbitrariness of social action in aesthetic situations. On the other hand, through their normative authority for all members, they secure the reproduction of society and ensure its long-term renewal. Institutions reduce the social complexity of situations and create trust. The normative obligation of institutions can also crystallize in laws, regulations, rules or statutes. Institutionalized norms, which limit the behavior of actors, can be set permanently in the form of organizations that have a statute and act according to their own rules. Such institutionalized organizations of the art system are, for example, museums, art associations, galleries, but also off spaces, professional associations, trade unions or cooperatives.

The Definition of the Situation

The definition of a situation is a subjective interpretation, evaluation or assessment of the situation that depends on the attitudes, expectations, values and knowledge of the respective actor. Situation definitions are always relative to the actors who make the definition. They can differ radically from actor to actor. Think of the assessment of a dangerous situation. An anxious actor may quickly come to a definition that the situation he is approaching is dangerous, while his companion may think that it is completely harmless. One and the same situation can be defined by one actor as restrictive, by the other as liberating, by the one as pleasant, by the other as unpleasant, self-evident or problematic. With their definition of the situation, the actors adjust to the aesthetic situation in which they find themselves. They adopt a certain attitude or position towards it. If the situation is an aesthetic situation, they can also adopt an aesthetic attitude and differ in their attitude from that of their neighbour.

Framing the Situation

In addition to the internal conditions of an aesthetic situation such as attitudes, values or beliefs, there are also external conditions whose resources are not under the control of the actor, such as scarcities, opportunities or institutional rules. The framing of an aesthetic situation is carried out with the help of a mental model, a prototype, a schema or an image, which functions as a basis for the decision for a certain aesthetic action. Framing the situation simplifies its perception by typifying, standardizing and generalizing it. By the process of framing, a certain actor assigns the aesthetic situation in which he finds himself to a more general type of aesthetic situation.

Because of this typification, he knows what can and can not be considered as a typical or appropriate response in such a situation. The framing of a situation thus defines the scope for decision that an actor believes to have in an aesthetic situation. The internal conditions such as attitudes, expectations, beliefs or stereotypes as well as the external conditions in form of scarcities, opportunities or institutional constraints must be balanced when framing a situation. While the definition of the situation leads to a selective perception of the objects, actors and institutions present in it, the framing of the situation leads to a typifying and schematizing simplification. Both operations reduce the complexity of the actual aesthetic situation.

Attitudes

What makes a situation an aesthetic situation? It depends on the specific attitude of an actor or institution in a situation. Situations are defined and framed in everyday life with a non-aesthetic, everyday or practical attitude. But if one takes an aesthetic attitude, then this means that one perceives, differentiates and judges the objects, actors and institutions present in this situation exactly with this aesthetic attitude. You then perceive the whole situation aesthetically. It becomes an aesthetic situation.

Originally, attitudes were conceived as learned cognitions that suggested a constant, enduring way of reacting and behaving. In addition, it was pointed out that attitudes were affects or emotional attitudes towards an intentional object. However, settings also have a behavioral motivating and triggering effect. An attitude is defined as an enduring organization of perceptual, motivational, and emotional assimilation processes that are oriented towards particular objects. Attitudes cause that only certain things are perceived in an aesthetic situation and that these are selectively perceived and interpreted. They are not necessarily conscious, but have become automated and independent as long-term modes of reaction. Attitudes are mechanisms of selection from the manifold stimuli offered by an aesthetic situation, through which those aesthetic experiences are selected and interpreted that are of interest to a particular actor. The actor's aesthetic attitude to a certain aesthetic situation thus influences the aesthetic judgment he makes about the assembly of things, actors or institutions and which determines his further acting in this aesthetic situation. The definition of the situation is made on the basis of a certain attitude, which provides the framework for the interpretation of the situation and the basis for the decision of the planned action.

Aesthetic Attitudes

The word aesthetic specifies the type of attitude and defines the way in which a situation is observed, interpreted and evaluated. The term derives from the Greek *aisthesis*. Since Plato, the term has generally been used in ancient Greek to refer to sensual perception. *Aisthesis* itself is an own form of sensual knowledge. It arises through the perceptual activity of an actor. An aesthetic attitude is therefore an attitude in which an actor perceives, interprets and evaluates the situation, or parts of it, in an aesthetic way. The aesthetic attitude can be distinguished from the everyday attitude in which we encounter the manifold situations of our *Lebenswelt* and derive our usual benefit from them. When I go to the market, for example, I observe whether plums are cheaper at one market stall than at another. But it's not about which plums have the most beautiful blue tones or which taste the sweetest. Such judgments point to an aesthetic attitude in which plums are perceived and judged sensually. The aesthetic attitude is a special kind of selective attention that is focused primarily on the shape, proportions, size, colour, sound, smell, taste, softness or hardness of an object, i.e. the sensual properties of an object, and judges these properties by means of an aesthetic attitude. The aesthetic judgement then leads to a corresponding aesthetic decision and a subsequent aesthetic action by the actor.

Situated Interaction

In what kind of relation to each other are objects, actors and institutions standing in an aesthetic situation? Since aesthetic situations are determined spatially as well as temporally and socially, there is no static concept possible that only captures the spatial relationship, just as there is no concept possible that can only describe the temporal or social relationships. Since in a situation all objects and actors are gathered at the same time in the same place, one can speak of a situated interaction system in which objects, actors and institutions interact with each other. But who interacts with whom, where, when, for how long and in what way, is always the result of selective observation and description by a second-order scientific observer. In contrast to communication, interaction is a system of spatial, temporal and social co-presence.

The concept of situated interaction means that the relationships between objects and actors must be described as an active, reciprocal process. Interaction is always active, mutual and copresent. It always takes place in the present. A situated interaction system is a system that consists of units that are all at the same place at the same time and can potentially interact with each other. The decisive criterion, whether a system is a situated interaction system or not, lies in the common, spatiotemporal co-presence of the assembled units.

Of course, a situated interaction system can also be extended by a communication system by forming information into a medium, which can then be received with a time delay. Media communication systems expand the spatial, temporal and social horizon of the interaction systems fixed to the present by adding a memorable past and an anticipated future.

Aesthetic Expectations

The repetition of similar or identical aesthetic experiences gradually leads to a growing aesthetic experience in dealing with aesthetic situations and in the long run to the formation of aesthetic habits and expectations. Experienced actors usually act in familiar, aesthetic situations in a routine and habitual manner. Routinized, aesthetic action usually leads to a confirmation of the attitudes, values and beliefs of the actor.

Actors operate in aesthetic situations with expectations that they have developed from their past definitions of situations. Aesthetic expectations arise from the recognition of known aesthetic situations. They are based on past experiences in comparable situations. Expectations reduce the complexity of a social situation. Expectations of expectations create trust and reciprocal attitudes towards a shared aesthetic situation. Expectations relieve the complexity of an aesthetic situation by typifying and schematizing the definition of the situation, i.e. selectively simplifying it. Expectations can be confirmed, exceeded or disappointed in the course of an aesthetic situation. If they are confirmed or even exceeded, the experience of confirmation contributes to a further stabilization and consolidation of aesthetic attitudes and routines.

However, an aesthetic situation develops quite differently when expectations are disappointed, the viewer is irritated and comes to the conclusion that the present aesthetic situation is no longer self-evident but problematic. In this case, there are two possibilities.

The disappointment can be externalized or internalized. If one ascribes the cause of aesthetic disappointment to the aesthetic situation, one signals that one still considers one's own aesthetic expectations to be adequate. In this case, the art should change in the direction of one's own aesthetic expectations, which are perceived as correct and appropriate to the aesthetic situation. One could describe this behavior as a kind of perceptual defense against change.

In the other case, when disappointed aesthetic expectations are internalized and the irritation is attributed to oneself and to exaggerated or false aesthetic expectations, there is a chance to learn something. In this case, the aesthetic routines with which an actor usually acts are temporarily suspended, self-critically examined and transformed into new aesthetic perceptual action through reflexive thinking and further search for information.

Creative Action

How do actors behave in the face of aesthetic irritations caused by the art system? The answer is that they become creative. In problematic aesthetic situations, in which aesthetic routines no longer function or eventually lead to false aesthetic judgements, conscious, reflexive thinking begins, in which further information is sought, different alternatives for action are evaluated with regard to their possible benefits and the consequences of new, creative action are anticipated. Through creative action, irritated actors decide in favour of a new perceptual action that ensures them the greatest possible benefit or usefulness of their action. Whether a new, creative and aesthetic action is successful or fails can be seen in the follow-up reactions and actions of the system. In a successful creative action, the new aesthetic perceptual action can lead to a new aesthetic routine, a new aesthetic taste with changed aesthetic preferences and differences.

Conclusion

The Evolution of Art Through Creative Action

Creative aesthetic action becomes gradually institutionalized and thus normative for certain types of aesthetic situations. In the long term, creative aesthetic action functions as a successful confirmation of the adaptation of aesthetic expectations to a problematic aesthetic situation. It thus serves to strengthen an actor's identity and self-perception. In the long run, the permanent creative renewal of aesthetic routines leads to a change and development of art itself. The permanent creativity of aesthetic action functions as a necessary prerequisite for the evolution of the system. By increasing the range of variations of aesthetic action in problematic aesthetic situations and a subsequent positive adoption of the successful variants, the art system restabilizes itself to a new, emergent level. Art, its audience and institutions have developed into the future.

Author Biography

Hans Dieter Huber, born 1953, lives in Stuttgart. 1973-77 studied painting and graphic arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, 1977-1986 studied art history, philosophy and psychology in Heidelberg. 1986 Doctorate with the work ‚System and Effect. Interpretation and meaning of contemporary art‘ (Munich 1989). 1994 habilitation with the work ‚Paolo Veronese. Art as a social system‘. From October 1997 to September 1999 Professor of Art History at the Academy of Visual Arts, Leipzig; since October 1999 Professor of Contemporary Art History, Aesthetics and Art Theory at the State Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart. From May 2006 to October 2011 he was head of the International Master Program "Conservation of New Media and Digital Information" at the State Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart. From March to June 2007 he was Senior Fellow at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies in Vienna. From December 2006 to November 2009 he was Associate Professor at the Research Training Group Image, Body, Medium at the HfG Karlsruhe. Since October 2007 member of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Since March 2009 member of the Scientific Board of the Society for Interdisciplinary Image Science. Since May 2013 member of the Scientific Advisory Board of the International Institute for Subjective Experience and Research (ISER) at the MSH Medical School Hamburg. Since December 2016 Deputy Chairman of the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart. Since June 2017 Member of the Board of Trustees of the Adolf Hölzel Foundation, Stuttgart.

Note 1: This text is a sum of the aesthetic theory which I am currently developing on a larger scale and which will soon be published as a book.