

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics

Special Issue – Architecture beyond the building



Taking Up Space: Architecture, Performance Art and the Ethos of Encounter

Author

ROSSEN VENTZISLAVOV

Affiliation

WOODBURY UNIVERSITY

Abstract: One of the many innovations performance art can be credited with is its revolutionary approach to space-making and inhabitation. Its reanimation of objects, events and bodies takes up space as a material presence but also takes space up as a conceptual problem. Philosophical aesthetics has had a lot to say about our relationship with the built form, but this work has not been brought to bear on performance art and the ways it complicates this relationship. My paper addresses this void by exploring two dimensions of what architect Daniel Libeskind has called ‘the space of encounter’ – the physical and the ethical.

INTRODUCTION

One of the many innovations performance art can be credited with is its revolutionary approach to space-making and inhabitation. Its reanimation of objects, events and bodies takes up space as a material presence but also takes space up as a conceptual problem. Philosophical aesthetics has had a lot to say about our relationship with the built form, but this work has not been brought to bear on performance art and the ways it complicates this relationship. My paper addresses this void by exploring two dimensions of what architect Daniel Libeskind has called ‘the space of encounter’ – the physical and the ethical. Sharing a space is as much a matter of phenomenological contact as it is of social relationality. And while philosophers are prone to attend to issues of physical presence and ethical positioning separately, performance art urges an understanding of the two as fully integrated aspects

of a dynamic whole. This integration is one that philosophy can learn from – it carries the promise that through studying and inhabiting the space of encounter philosophers can become more inclusive both in their interest and in their method.

My paper starts with a brief overview of philosophical thinking on space. I then turn to some shortcomings in philosopher Noël Carroll's understanding of architecture and the possibility of resolving them through what architecture theorist Jane Rendell calls 'critical spatial practice'. The final part of my study addresses the ways in which performance art consolidates spatial and ethical engagement and the value of drawing philosophical conclusions from this consolidation.

SPACE OR PLACE?

In his 'How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time', Edward S. Casey summarises the early modern idea of space as a formal and mathematical abstraction. For rationalist philosophers like Descartes, Galileo and Gassendi, space was 'homogenous, isotropic, isometric, and infinitely (or, at least, indefinitely) extended'.¹ Outdated as these references are, the spirit of their cosmological assumptions survives in many precincts of philosophy until the present day. This is what necessitates Casey's intervention.

Contemporary philosophy has largely retained the abstractions of early modern cosmology because of the persistence of something Husserl has called the 'natural attitude', i.e. our preoccupation with 'scientism and its many offshoots in materialism, naturalism, psychologism and so forth'.² While not inherently wrongheaded, this tendency promotes a reductive picture of complex notions like time and space. The most problematic aspect of this philosophical reduction is the assumption that space is somehow given and antecedent to all things and phenomena it presumably contains.

Casey contests this assumption by advancing a phenomenology of *place* – going so far as to propose the primacy of place over space.³ This reversal is not as novel as it might sound. As Casey points out, even Aristotle saw place as more fundamental than and prior to space. The real reversal was the universalisation of space in early modern cosmology and its culmination in Kant's dictum that 'general knowledge must always precede local knowledge'.⁴ And even though influential post-Kantian Georg Simmel protested that 'space does not represent a simple Kantian *a priori*', the universalist model seems to have found new resonance in the scientific leaps of the past two centuries.⁵ Ontologically speaking, the universalist model suggests that 'to begin with there is some empty and innocent spatial spread, waiting, as it were, for cultural configurations to render it placeful'.⁶ Epistemologically, in turn, this model regards places as 'mere apportionings of space', secondary to 'space' writ large and quantifiable in their compartmentalisation.⁷ The pull of the universalist model, according to Casey, explains why most philosophers to

this day are under the spell of an outdated early modern worldview – a scientism which favours the mathematically general over the phenomenologically particular quantitative analysis over qualitative experience.

Casey is an exception among philosophers not only because he questions the scientist paradigm, but also because he notices it at all. To accept space as a given, and as fully intelligible on the terms of science, is to leave a great deal out. All of Casey’s ‘non-scientific’ concerns – emplacement, habitation, ethical positioning etc. – are aspects of space that do not easily lend themselves to empirical analysis and quantification. There is thus a twofold reason why the question of space has been off the regular philosophical menu: philosophers readily sub-contract the study of the physical and ontological aspects of space to the work of ‘hard’ science and, as a result, they remain largely oblivious to the qualitative, phenomenological, and social aspects of space.

Philosophers so often hazard opinions about art, architecture and other spatially-predicated fields of human endeavour without much recognition of how these fields handle space or much command of the tools they employ. A closer look shows that ‘space’ is a deceptively simple designation for a complicated, and discursively disjointed, thing. On the evidence of recent art-historical and art-critical literature the term’s application goes far beyond its technical physico-philosophical meaning. In fact, the contemporary conception of space in the art context is largely unintelligible on the terms of current scientific and philosophical inquiry. Simmel’s talk of ‘social geometry’, for example, finds its match in art historian and theorist Jennifer Doyle’s notions of ‘geometry of affect’ and ‘geometry of gender’.⁸ It is tempting to imagine that Simmel’s subversion of Kant has found its own subversion in contemporary art-theoretical discourse. But the more important takeaway here is that each of these steps registers a concept of space – socialised, aestheticised, gendered and affective – that very few philosophers can accommodate.

CRITICAL SPATIAL PRACTICE

In his essay ‘Architecture and Ethics: Autonomy, Architecture, Art’, Noël Carroll argues that the work of architects is ethically implicated.⁹ Carroll’s proof starts with the statement that, since architecture does a lot of things that are not in its exclusive proprietary domain (Ex. serving instrumental purposes), it is only the relationship between architecture *qua* architecture and ethics that is of philosophical interest. Carroll then states that what makes a building architecture (or architecture *qua* architecture) is its art status. His conclusion is that, since architecture *qua* architecture is marked out by its art status, then its relationship with ethics must be analogous to that of art proper.

Carroll’s argument omits space altogether. One glance at the history of architecture and architectural thinking suffices to show that considerations

of space are central to architecture not only physically but also aesthetically, ethically and conceptually. In fact, since at least the end of the nineteenth century, architecture has been thought of as spatial before anything else. In a speech in 1893, art historian August Schmarsow designated architecture ‘the creatress of space’.¹⁰ This statement is echoed in architect Rudolf Schindler’s manifesto of 1912 where he hails space as the medium of architectural art. An even stronger version of these statements is found in a subsequent essay by Erich Mendelsohn: ‘Architecture is space itself’.¹¹

It is tempting to imagine that Carroll and other philosophers regard architecture’s relationship with space as a matter of literal and measurable extension rather than a dynamic interplay of quantitative and qualitative values. This would explain why his sanitised definition of architecture qua architecture excludes space altogether. The irony for Carroll is that the omission of considerations of space from his writing about architecture makes him vulnerable to the same line of criticism that he levels against modern architecture – that its ‘apotheosis of so-called rationality contributes to the tyranny of instrumental reason and neoliberalism’.¹²

Considering how much stock he puts in architecture’s ‘art status’, it is regrettable that Carroll misses the opportunity to engage the architectural enterprise in its full richness and to capitalise on the ways in which space brings architecture and art together. The work of Jane Rendell, an architectural historian and theorist, presents a powerful alternative to Carroll’s view of architecture and of architecture’s relationship with art. Rendell calls her approach ‘critical spatial practice’, which she defines as ‘work that transgresses the limits of art and architecture and engages with both the social and the aesthetic, the public and the private’.¹³ This definition rests on three convictions – that both art and architecture are distinguished by their critical potential, that our experience of space is both social and private, and that thinking and writing are spatially bound performances that affect and are in turn affected by the built environment.

Both Carroll and Rendell take the crude realities of space (dimensions, volumetric presence etc.) for granted. But, while for Carroll these crude realities are not worth mentioning because they represent all there ever is to think and know about space, for Rendell they are not worth mentioning because they represent the least interesting aspect of an otherwise fascinating set of spatially predicated phenomena. All five references to space in Carroll’s essay occur in the context of coordinates and physical dimensions. This reiterates the early modern idea of space as an uncharted abstraction from which particular and measurable ‘spaces’ can be carved every which way.

But is space ‘a passive receptacle’ or, as Rendell would have it, a complex ecology of social, critical, and aesthetic situatedness?¹⁴ One reason to side with Rendell is the descriptive nature of her approach. Instead of syllogistic tricks, her understanding of architecture employs dwelling, both in the contemplative and the habitation sense.¹⁵ Another reason to prefer Rendell’s

view is that she can account for a range of spatial modalities that Carroll does not even acknowledge. This is especially evident in Rendell's careful treatment of the differences between three fundamental concepts – 'space in connection to social relations, place with reference to the creation of cultural meanings and site with a focus on aesthetic production'.¹⁶ This attention to the modalities of space, place and site is consistent with Simmel's thinking on 'social geometry' and Doyle's work on the geometries of gender and affect. It also confirms Karsten Harries' understanding of architecture as the articulation of an ethos.¹⁷ That all of these intricacies evade Carroll is a small pity. But it is jarring that he uses Harries – an underappreciated fellow philosopher and aesthete – as reference without honouring the complexity of Harries' views about space or noticing their direct bearing on the ethical dimension of architecture.

PERFORMANCE AND THE 'SPACE OF ENCOUNTER'

To claim that performance art is a spatial affair is to be stating the obvious. Even the more conceptual outer reaches of the medium – like Fluxus scores, the scripts for Allan Kaprow's 'happenings' or the street directions Stanley Broun solicited from strangers and recorded graphically – display spatial investment in what could otherwise be regarded as non-physical artworks. The intensity of this investment is one of the reasons why, in the early days of performance art, artists were keen on distinguishing their practice from theater on the one hand and object-based art on the other.¹⁸ In theatre, actors are usually allowed to respond to the space of a stage while the audience is provided visual and auditory access from highly regulated vantage points. With the display of object-based art, in contrast, space and spectatorship are centred around a sculpture, installation etc., which grants the audience a greater degree of freedom. But in both cases there is a sense of prescriptive space-making which relies on various forms of directionality. Performance art disposes of this by radically deregulating the space of presenting and experiencing art. Instead of the traditional unidirectional approach – audience members watching actors respond to staged space or spectators circulating around an object – performance art explores what Doyle has called 'the contiguity of art with the social spaces that surround it'.¹⁹ This is not merely a matter of scrambling the spatial code of art viewing, but a way of troubling the boundary between art and the broader ethical and political frameworks that inspire it and are informed by it.

In political philosophy, the importance of spatial situatedness for the formation and articulation of political agency was initially theorised by Hannah Arendt, in both *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*.¹⁹ A quick summary would not do justice to the intricacy of the respective arguments she makes in these books, but the main takeaway from her work on the subject is that spatial contiguity is a measure of both political freedom

and political responsibility. Performance art, as art historian Michael Archer has claimed, is a prime site for the exploration of the political responsibility shared by artists and their audiences.²⁰ Doyle confirms the importance of mutual responsibility in the affective networks that performance artists and their audiences participate in. Her approach echoes Rendell's in denying the 'passive receptacle' view of space.²¹ The space a performance artist shares with their audience is not just the physical location where the art happens to occur but also the symbolic place where ethical and political expedients like choice, privacy, duty, and trust are collectively quizzed and negotiated.

Performance art is transformed by its spaces, sites and places but it also transforms them in return. Of all art forms, performance art comes the closest to the core concern of architecture – to interrogate the nature of space both conceptually and physically. Artist and curator Johanna Tuukkanen proposes a 'social theory of space' whereby 'everything that happens produces space'.²² This broad claim is refined by performance artist Rajni Shah, who speaks of his practice of 'declaring a space' – not just in the sense of anointing an enclosure for performance to happen in, but also of modifying existing physical and social conditions through performative action.²³ If this is redolent of Rendell's notion of critical spatial practice, it is because the two approaches to space rest on shared assumptions of ethical and aesthetic reflexivity.²⁴ The simplest term for this reflexivity is 'encounter'. The term is consistent with architect Rem Koolhaas's notion of architecture as a 'social condenser', with performance art's demand for ethical mutuality, and with Rendell's own insistence that writing, design and space-making intersect in the performance of criticism.²⁵

CONCLUSION

The current historical moment is ripe for the realisation that for marginalised groups space has been continuously contracting – squeezed as these groups have traditionally been between the denial of public life (through lack of visibility, representation and participation) and the denial of a private one (through scrutiny, judgment and state control). Performance art and architecture are a natural match for the critical conversation surrounding these issues of making and sharing space, because they both approach space as the occasion and result of encounter – physical, critical and performative.

While these subtleties are not lost on some feminist scholars and critical theorists, many card-carrying philosophers like Carroll still operate at a significant remove from them. If architecture is essentially spatial and space is essentially ethical, then mounting an argument – as Carroll does – about the ethical aspect of architecture, without any consideration of space, amounts to a philosophical failure. This might be a matter of framing rather than logical untenability. Carroll's argument works partly because his adopted framework preliminarily excludes the senses of space whose absence renders his project

incomplete. Adopted, of course, is not the same as chosen. Had Carroll been fully aware of his study's internal limitations, he would have also most likely realised that his inadvertent gesture of framing is itself both performative and spatial in the senses discussed above.

rossen.ventzislavov@woodbury.edu

NOTES

- ¹Casey 1997, 20.
- ²Casey 1997, 13.
- ³Casey 1997, 16-17.
- ⁴Casey 1997, 16.
- ⁵Ascoli 2018. For more on the evolution of Simmel's view, and the dearth of philosophical engagement with space in the postmodern era, see Löw 2016.
- ⁶Casey 1997, 14.
- ⁷Casey 1997, 14.
- ⁸Doyle 2013, 24-25.
- ⁹Carroll 2015, 139-156.
- ¹⁰Schmarsow 1994, 287.
- ¹¹Mattens 2011, 105.
- ¹²Carroll 2015, 144.
- ¹³Rendell 2007, 6.
- ¹⁴Rendell uses the term in a citation from Michael Keith and Steve Pile's book *Place and the Politics of Identity*. See Rendell 2007, 35.
- ¹⁵The emphasis on dwelling places Rendell in the tradition of Heidegger, whose 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' is a foundational text in architectural theory and the philosophy of architecture. This text is also one of the first philosophical critiques of scientism and its universalisation of space. See 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking', in Heidegger 1971, 141-161.
- ¹⁶Rendell 2007, 39.
- ¹⁷Harries 1984, 159-165.
- ¹⁸On early performance art as a reaction to the commodification of object-based art, see: Goldberg 1984, 71-94. On the programmatic differences between theatre and performance art, see: Kaprow 2003, 163-80.
- ¹⁹See Arendt 1962, 466; Arendt 1998, 22-54.
- ²⁰Archer 1997, 108.
- ²¹This view is also echoed in a statement by John E. McGrath, the artistic director of the Manchester International Festival: '...no space is neutral and...the power dynamics running through any space will always be part of the meaning of an event that happens in that space...' See Schmidt 2019, 120.
- ²²Schmidt 2019, 96.
- ²³Schmidt 2019, 214.
- ²⁴Two recent articles on the productive synergy between performance art and architecture confirm the existence, and value, of this shared ground. See Zeiger 2018; Howarth 2017.
- ²⁵Koolhaas 2004, 73.

REFERENCES

- Archer, Michael. 1997. *Art since 1960*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1962. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Meridian Books.
- . 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ascoli, Angela. 2018. *Public Space: Henry Lefebvre and Beyond*. Milan: Mimesis International.
- Carroll, Noël. 2015. “Architecture and Ethics: Autonomy, Architecture, Art.” *Architecture Philosophy* 1 (2): 139–156.
- Casey, Edward S. 1997. “How to Get from Space to Place in a Relatively Short Time.” In *Senses of Place*, edited by S. Feld and K. Basso, 13–52. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Doyle, Angela. 2013. *Hold It Against Me*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Goldberg, RoseLee. 1984. “Performance Art: The Golden Years.” In *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas, 44–55. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Harries, Karsten. 1984. “Space, Place, and Ethos: Reflection on the Ethical Function of Architecture.” *Artibus et Historiae* 5 (9): 159–165.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1971. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper Colophon Books.
- Howarth, Dan. 2017. “Chicago Biennial Promotes Performance Art as ‘A Medium of Growing Concern’ for Architects”. Dezeen (see URLs).
- Kaprow, Alan. 2003. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Edited by Jeff Kelley. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Koolhaas, Rem. 2004. *Content*. Cologne: Taschen.
- Löw, Martina. 2016. *The Sociology of Space: Materiality, Social Structures, and Action*. Translated by Donald Goodwin. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mattens, Filip. 2011. “The Aesthetics of Space: Modern Architecture and Photography.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69 (1): 105–114.
- Rendell, Jane. 2007. *Art and Architecture: The Space Between*. London: L.B. Tauris and Co Ltd.
- Schmarsow, August. 1994. “The Essence of Architectural Creation.” In *Empathy, Form, and Space*, edited by Eleftherios Ikonomou and Harry Francis Mallgrave, 281–297. Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities.

Schmidt, Theron. 2019. *Agency: A Partial History of Live Art*. London: Intellect.

Zeiger, Mimi. 2018. "Architecture Embraces Performance Art (Again)". Architect Magazine (see URLs).

URLS

Dan Howarth:

<https://www.dezeen.com/>

Mimi Zeiger:

<https://www.architectmagazine.com/>

COPYRIGHT:

© 2023 Rossen Ventzislavov

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Aesthetic Investigations is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Dutch Association of Aesthetics.