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Personal Space and the Everyday Aesthetic Experience – Chasing after Boundaries and Definitions

Topic

Body Aesthetics; soma and senses

Abstract

The very basic human need for space is generally acknowledged and an especially burning issue in the current state of the world with growing population densities. Everyday experiences, aesthetically inclined among others, are susceptible to the influence of changes in surrounding space. Personal space is associated with the boundaries of sensory experience so changes in that sphere affect the experience as a whole. However, in the discussions on aesthetic experience the concept of personal space has not been considered central. From recurrent remarks one can detect that a certain notion of space defined as personal is still presumed. In an attempt to define aesthetic experience in a comprehensive manner these implications of space and the distances within it are of key importance. For example in the field of everyday aesthetics the wellbeing of an individual is linked to the multi-sensory aesthetic experience of the surrounding space (Yuriko Saito). In this paper I outline the notion of personal space by tracing its origins in other fields outside the discipline of aesthetics. The concept's origins stem mainly from anthropology (E. T. Hall) and human geography (Yi-Fu Tuan). Incorporating concepts from other disciplines into philosophical inquiry may initially seem to pose problems but here this interdisciplinary approach is justified. Personal space and how it is somatically and cognitively perceived bring into light issues concerning somatic experience, since the senses function mainly in this sphere of proximity to the body. The use of senses and thus perceiving the “immediate space to be experienced” (Roland Barthes) is the starting point for any multi-sensory experience. Through some examples I show possible ways of understanding the meaning of personal space in the context of everyday aesthetics. Discerning the experience of space from the aesthetic experience might seem difficult or irrelevant, but I claim here that instead it is essential in fully recognizing the components of different kinds of aesthetic experiences. The individual experience described in this paper also opens up a possibility of encounter as encountering someone primarily means letting them into proximity. Ultimately this continuous variation between distance and closeness enables sharing and communicating experiences, of which the aesthetic ones are under inspection here.

The very basic human need for personal space is often brought up in informal discussions on space arrangement and well-being. The aesthetic nature of this spatial experience has however not been considered sufficiently. Interdisciplinary approach seems to be lacking as well even though it is especially fitting to this subject. My mission here is to introduce the concept of personal space into the field of aesthetics and to incorporate it into the discussion on aesthetic experience. This concept is an essential tool in analysing the spatial conditions of different kinds of aesthetic experiences. Instead of leaving the discussion and research on personal space solely to different branches of psychology or sociology, my aim is to show that the phenomena this concept describes are central within the realm of aesthetics. By introducing the notion of personal space into aesthetics it is possible to understand how, on one hand, the traditionally individualistic aesthetic experience and, on the other hand, the shared conditions of social situations intriguingly complement each other. These themes echo the aspirations of contemporary aesthetics in examining the aesthetic in actions, human relations and social situations.

The best-known definition of ‘personal space’ comes from Edward T. Hall’s notion of proxemics from his anthropological examinations on humans’ use of space. Hall’s descriptions of “personal reaction bubbles” mark different categories of territorial spaces between individuals: *intimate, personal, public and social*.¹ These categories describe the division of interaction distances between individuals. Interaction distances vary depending on many factors and measuring the actual distance of personal space can be challenging. Interaction distance spheres seem to change according to situation and many cultural and individual variables. Individuals are also able to adjust surprisingly flexibly to the surrounding spaces and situations. However, some approximations have been made. Hall calculated for example that the so-called intimate distance is from 0 to 0,5 metres and is reserved for close relations such as those with relatives or friends. The sphere of the actual personal distance spans from 0,5 metres to 1 metre. Social distance measures from 1 to 3 metres from the body and the public distance up from 3 metres. One has to keep in mind that these measures result from Hall’s original research from the 1960’s, and even though they are taken for granted in many subsequent studies, they are

¹ Madanipour 2003, 23.

still **too**/quite rough measurements to be generalized. Yi-Fu Tuan bases his human geography on a similar starting point, where the upright body of man sets the articulation of space “in accordance with his corporeal schema”.² The reaction spheres together with this corporeal schema form the basic structure for understanding the sort of internalized navigation that is needed in piecing together the surrounding space.

According to Hall, two phases can be identified belonging directly to the personal distance: the so-called *close phase* (approx. 45 to 75 centimetres) and *far phase* (approx. 75 to 120 centimetres). This set of distances constitutes personal space, which can be understood to be an extension of the body. Its size changes according to different situations or, for example, cultural differences.³ Physical domination of space, behaviour towards others or even strong mental presence or charisma in the sphere of this space does not solely explain its limits or how or whether it is perceived and experienced. Spatial regulation of relationships between individuals happens mainly in this sphere that is “emotionally charged”⁴. In environmental psychology personal space describes the field of space around the individual that he feels comfortable in. This comfortable space offers within itself possibilities of variations between closeness and distance. The term ‘comfort zone’ is widely used in common speech and can be understood to be a kind of metaphorical version of an actual spatial territory. In environmental psychology the two main functions of personal space are *protection* and *communication*. Environmental psychology charts and describes different kinds of preferences.⁵ These descriptions are of course very useful in understanding the behaviour of people in group situations or, for example, when reviewing successful building plans. However, the viewpoint of environmental psychology does not seem to take into account the individual’s proper experience of these situations. Its point of view seems one-sided in the sense that it does not give importance to the multiplicity of individual’s overlapping experiences, such as aesthetic experience. Feeling safe, participating or being part of a group are some reasons to stay in close proximity to others. Vice versa there can be multiple reasons to leave

² Tuan 2003, 35–36.

³ E.g. Tuan 2003, 119.

⁴ Madanipour 2003, 22–23.

⁵ Madanipour 2003, 26.

more distance between people. Abrupt intrusions into this space can lead to different kind of stress reactions, since privacy is a high factor in the sphere of personal space. More complex social processes can transform someone's personal zone into an element in a process of crowding or social isolation. However, personal space should not **/to** be totally identified with privacy which also has other factors contributing to it.

Hall as an anthropologist categorizes man's sensory perception of space *pre-cultural*. The distance senses of vision and hearing convey a certain image of our surroundings. However, it is the sense of touch that initially teaches us about the dimensions, distances and spatial forms. Thus the tactile outlining of environment then partly happens on an imaginary level and is connected to the memories of previous tactile experiences. This goes well together with phenomenological environmental aesthetics, which positions the perceiver as an active constituent of the environment. Participating bodily and multi-sensorally into the exploration of the surroundings challenges memories, preconceptions and expectations at the same time into a polyphonic discourse. Human senses work in such a way that perception of the environment is always changing. The working together of the senses forms the basis for the whole experience. However, surrounding space is sometimes conceived without being able to concretely use the haptic mode of perception. A vehicle is a good example of an extension of personal space where the actual haptic relation to the environment is hindered.⁶ The confined space of a vehicle sets clear limits to the space. Yet being partly made of see-through glass it gives the illusion of transparency when at the same time it enables movement at high speed. The movement of the vehicle adds an extraordinary dimension to this instance of personal space with the possibility of speed, acceleration and seeming fluidity of movement. Being inside a vehicle involves a very complex relation to the environment.

How do these notions of different types of distances and variations of personal space affect different types of aesthetic experiences? The problem is manifold and seems to entail engaging the perspectives of several different disciplines into the discussion. When moving from Hall's anthropological social distance theory towards aesthetics one must

⁶ E.g. Hall 1990, 177.

adopt a wider stance towards the question of which space can be attributed to be personal. Even though Hall's use of the concepts of personal distance and personal space are well known and widely accepted, one does not fully have to satisfy with these quantitatively measured slices of space. It might be more useful in the context of aesthetics to widen the concept of personal space to loosely include several of Hall's reaction distances. In the context of any experience the variations might be big and the meaningfulness of the aesthetic research comes partly from acknowledging those differences and their effects. The range of personal space extends from the sphere of the body to the sphere of social encounter. Extensions of the body in space can be understood to define the lines within which interaction can take on a physical level. Thus personal space in the aesthetic sense can in varying degrees include elements from Hall's intimate or social or even public spheres of distance.

An interestingly different version of proxemics is to be found in Roland Barthes's late seminar entitled *Comment vivre ensemble* ("How to live together"). He introduces proxemics into the sphere of semiology as "subjective spaces as they are 'lived' affectively by subjects" and proxemics here is generated by intimately valued objects. Conforming to the original meaning of personal space Barthes describes proxemics as concerning the use of space, specifically the closest space to be experienced. It is "restricted space that immediately surrounds the subject", "the sphere of the immediate gesture" which forms the "dialectics of distance".⁷ As an example Barthes describes how the sphere of light encloses one who is sitting in an armchair and reading a book under the lamp. The reach of the light defines the boundaries of this small intimate or personal space and also marks off the area of the immediate surroundings that is left to the dark. This happens partly because of what goes on in the sphere of the senses, as vision cannot extend much beyond the rays that the light casts. Darkness does not offer many sensory impulses and thus the situation makes possible the total concentration and engagement to the activity, in this case the reading of the book. Thus proxemics, which has mainly been used to examine interhuman relations, is used here to describe relations between individual and objects. This in an interesting turn since it widens the scope of distance vs.

⁷ Barthes 2002, 155–156.

proximity to concern the relationship to objects and more broadly whole environments. In the case of the lamp certain aspects seem to point towards the shaping of an atmosphere or other type of aesthetic evaluation of environment that is based on objects.

Barthes' slightly altered use of the notion of proxemics anticipates new possible uses of the concept and points towards a new kind of proxemic relationship with the environment, especially with objects and organization of space. Space and place are common themes in the field of environmental aesthetics but often dealt with a certain conceptual distance. Space understood as personal makes possible many kinds of intimately pleasurable aesthetic experiences. Movements of the body, moving in a given space and the limits and overlapping fields of the senses affect boundaries of personal space. Many of our movements are almost unconscious, yet "movements such as the simple ability to kick one's legs and stretch one's arms are basic to the awareness of space." This experience of having room is central to the estimation of space.⁸ The definition-escaping nature of spatial experience is partly due to the multiple variables involved. Personal space is based on the experience of the body. Body with its movements and its ability to navigate in space is the beginning point for spatial exploration of the surroundings. Personal space is also the sphere where many everyday aesthetic practices such as personal grooming, attire or even part of the culinary pleasures have their effect.

According to Yuriko Saito, the everyday experiences contain intrinsically the same elements as our aesthetic experiences of art or nature⁹. Physical danger that can become an obstacle for experience in nature can be seen similar to the stress caused by other humans in social situations. Aesthetically potent environments and situations can lead into very non-aesthetic experiences if pressure, uncomfot or even danger is in the air, so to speak. A multitude of psychological factors are involved in sensing space and making it ripe for meaning. Besides the psychological, also social factors govern the aesthetic situations of the everyday where sensing the space around oneself is essential. Here the

⁸ Tuan 2003, 12.

⁹ Saito 2007, 2.

aesthetic is seen as comprised of intellectual, psychological, and the sensuous factors of the human experience. Aesthetic experience of the everyday is to be understood here in a way that Saito describes it, as deeply rooted into everyday actions and even decision-making. The way in which surrounding space modulates the aesthetic experience is directly linked to these actions.

The question of personal space is central in understanding how aesthetic experiences take place and affect us. Having space around us may seem a luxury in today's world but instead it is something that should be valued and likened to human rights in order to make life worth experiencing. The concept of aesthetic well-being can be directly linked to that of personal space. Personal space here denotes the part of the environment that is on one's direct reach and to which one can have at least some direct, even tactile effect on. It is the part of environment that one cannot escape, so to speak. Its effect on well-being is unmediated and even unconscious. What happens right next to us always marks us, it does not happen without leaving a trace in us since it is in the sphere of physical participation, concrete action, and bodily presence. Access to the body by being physically close is willingly granted only to the people and objects that are accepted and thus tolerated in the close range. Being able to select these people and objects in today's world is becoming more and more of a luxury. This notion of space relates to individual's control over what happens to them and the way they engage with their immediate surroundings. Being able to control one's surroundings (in the sense of avoiding clutter or over-crowded places for example) is considered to lead to a greater overall well-being.

Within the invisible boundaries of personal space there is a strong factor of individual's power of control in action, without which the tendency or preparedness for aesthetic experience will not be attained. This needs to be acknowledged from philosophical and not only from psychological point of view. Variations in distance are interesting from psychological and sociological point of view, but they also contribute to the individual aesthetic experience. Vice versa, aesthetic experiences can challenge and enrich our conceptions of the physical space of our surroundings. Proxemics as a study of interpersonal distances offers some useful tools for understanding how the distance in

relation to others is both necessary and valuable in the process of a spatial experience. Question of the interpersonal distance also concerns the well-being of a person since one's need for space and privacy is of central importance to a human being. However, this space around us is very flexible and the amount needed adapts well to different kinds of situations. When in a state of excitement, flow or a deeply ravishing experience – also an aesthetic one – one's need for this private zone seems to diminish.

No true encounter is possible without changes in the personal spaces and distances between two individuals. The grades of distance affect these experiences. Personal space is commonly understood to be a sign of control over one's environment and it functions as a barrier protecting individual from the outside world. Adaptation to a situation where personal space is “threatened” by others may lead to unusual and thus interesting spatial arrangements. The distance needed for interpersonal relations and communication is comparable to the distance the aesthetic experience associated with art often seems to require. Personal space is an essential factor in encouraging action and reciprocity between humans. As Arnold Berleant points out, social environment consists of “situated human relationships”. Environment endorses this “situatedness” of relationships, which means that relationships are bound to environments that are constructed and apprehended in certain ways.¹⁰ It seems thus evident that acknowledging and respecting one another's personal space becomes a central issue when human relations are given more emphasis in the sphere of aesthetics.

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¹⁰ Berleant 1999, 15.

“Personal Space and the Everyday Aesthetic Experience” Boundaries and Definitions, in *Performing Cultures*, ed. Jakub Petri, Krakow: Libron, pp. 147–154. November 2015. The authors are pleased to present another issue of *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, representing the very best of their field for the readers' reading pleasure. The content of this issue is wide in scope, involving art processing and preference, creative processes, and aesthetic measurement. Importantly, the articles on offer this month also present some tools for future [Show full abstract] studies in aesthetic reasoning and judgment, as well the use of multiple methods, theories, and cultures to investigate similar topics. Read more. Article. 1 19th International Congress of Aesthetics “Aesthetics in Action Krakow, Poland July 21–27, 2013 Ms. Sanna Lehtinen MA, Doctoral Student International Institute of Applied Aesthetics (IIAA) University of Helsinki, Finland Personal Space and the Everyday Aesthetic Experience “Chasing after Boundaries and Definitions Topic Body Aesthetics; soma and senses Abstract The very basic human need for space is generally acknowledged and an especially burning issue in the current state of the world with growing population densities. In an attempt to define aesthetic experience in a comprehensive manner these implications of space and the distances within it are of key importance. Free Essay: Personal Space My project is about personal space. It is about finding out why people tend to have their own personal space. Personal space is... I chose to investigate into this area because this topic is quite of a challenge. The main|show more content| Culture shock- on the part of the ethnographer Expense- on the part of the ethnographer Interpretation- some things can be interpreted very differently from culture to culture. Each individual has their own personal space boundary which others may not enter. If an individual steps into this boundary the other individual will feel highly uncomfortable and move away to increase the distance between them. When two people are having an argument, often the first.