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Context and Interference: Influences in the Perception, Aesthetic Experience, and Interpretation of Exhibitions

Abstract: In this paper, I investigate questions related to the aesthetic interferences, as well as their implications, in the process of perception and appreciation of artworks and exhibitions. By ‘aesthetic interference’ however I mean something more than just actual visual interference, such as when other elements, pieces of art, or fellow visitors are ‘entering’ in the field of vision and thus obstructing the view while one is trying to focus on an individual piece. Instead of purely this, I also mean something that modifies the effect of the exhibited work of art on a further, aesthetic level too, hence not only as something that physically (optically) impedes sight, but something that interferes with the ‘working’ of the artwork. I survey the question on the level of the singular work, of an entire exhibition, and even the exhibition within the larger ‘frame’ and context of a city. What is important to see is that such interference is not always and not necessarily negative. The perception of and influence from other works, the modes of installation, the particularities of the venue, and the discovering of the broader environment can all bring out new aspects and considerations that point towards new potentials in the pieces, and that perhaps even the artist or the curator had not thought of before.

Keywords: aesthetic effect; aesthetic evaluation; perception; interference; context of artworks; exhibitions.

The Sense of Sight – Introductory Considerations

The 1617 painting *The Sense of Sight* is truly a curious and impressive one, even if, at the same time, we can almost call it a paradox work of art (see p. 79, Fig. 1). The piece is part of a set of five paintings depicting the five senses, all of which are now kept in the Museo del Prado in Madrid. It is a collaboration between Jan (‘Velvet’) Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens, in which Brueghel painted the marvelous setting while Rubens the allegorical figures. The imaginary space is entirely filled with wonderful images, with further references to (the sense of) sight. In the painting we can enjoy – through the form of image within the image – many other pieces of art, among other paintings also sculptures, graphic works, goldsmith’s art, jewelry, and tapestry. But we can also find objects with which to see, and to see further: telescopes and astronomical instruments. What’s more, we also have references to sight, both physical and spiritual – allusions and art and cultural historical references to concepts

of introspection, insight and vision. For example, with the help of a small painting in the foreground that Cupid is showing to Venus, we can see the depiction of Jesus healing the blind man.¹

So far these are the basic objects in the painting. But what do we find paradoxical on it, as anticipated above? We may consider it paradoxical because, despite the fact that it depicts the sense of sight, not lastly through the many beautiful works of art that one would want to see, it is hard to *really* see them. It is difficult not because there is nothing to see, but to the contrary, because there is *too much* to see. One has the impression that here the real seeing is hindered due to the particularities of the installation. Or we can also say that if we imagine ourselves being in the middle of such a rich display of artworks and other objects, we could easily find ourselves so overwhelmed by the aesthetic input and visual experience of the multiple objects on display that it would seem very difficult to focus on the actual aesthetic effect and quality of a singular piece. It is however not simply because of the sheer quantity of objects, but exactly because this very quantity is what interferes with our perception and thus appreciation, given the extreme density of the displayed objects.

It will be precisely this that brings us closer to the actual topic of my paper. I am interested in investigating whether we can ever see only the work of art. Is it ever possible to see just the work, without other, external elements interfering? What's more: is it even imaginable – a complete and absolute separation from any aesthetic interference of and from the artwork's environment, setting, and display, including other artworks in its vicinity? And actually, would we really want this?

By 'aesthetic interference' I mean something more than just actual visual interference – like when other elements, pieces of art or common objects, or even fellow humans (in a crowded exhibition) are 'entering' in the field of vision and thus obstructing one's view while one is trying to focus on an individual piece. Apart from only this, I also mean something that modifies the aesthetic effect of the exhibited work of art on a further, aesthetic level too, hence not as something that physically (optically) impedes sight, but something that interferes in the 'working' of the artwork. This is why I am interested in the question of whether we can ever see the work and only *one* work? Is it possible to entirely exclude any possible 'external' visual and other interferences from the perception and aesthetic evaluation, and do we want to strive for it at all? While naturally there can be other sensory experiences – as well as their interferences – when perceiving and enjoying works of art (hearing, smelling, touching or, in certain cases, even taste), here I will nevertheless particularly focus on the questions and on the interference regarding visual perception, this being the sense most directly and obviously connected to works of visual arts.

Despite the obvious connections of these considerations with psychology of perception, here I am more interested in the aesthetic interference and its consequences in the appreciation of the work. When observing works of art, we instinctively see

¹ See more details on this physical and spiritual sight described in the work on the Museo del Prado's website: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-sense-of-sight/494fd4d5-16d2-4857-811b-e0b2a0eb7fc7>, acc. July 17, 2023.

certain styles, manners, forms of expressions, manifestations of artistic approaches, etc., and these will be what influence our initial perception and thus evaluation of the piece. However, this can get ‘manipulated’ quite easily. Just imagine: a 19th-century academic-style, figurative work – with the dark tones typical of the era – having another work of similar period and style alongside it. Or imagine pairing the same classical work with a bright-colored abstract geometric piece from the 21st century. The reason for the possible differences in our perception and aesthetic evaluation of the work in question will not (only) be because of, for example, the diverse color palette or the dissimilar shapes of the abstract work that visually interferes our perception, but (also) because even if we do not ‘analyze’ it in detail and explicitly for ourselves, still, through its basic artistic and aesthetic features (i.e. through its obvious ‘otherness’ in style), one work will influence our perception *and* evaluation of the other.

Such a pairing is naturally already a (curatorial) statement that may be sympathetic for some or disturbing for others. Nevertheless, it is a feature that needs to be taken into consideration. This is why I am curious to investigate the changes of the visual and aesthetic effect when representing and perceiving a work in different contexts and modes of installation. Through this paper, I examine these questions on various levels of the ‘meaning’ of the context, starting from the immediate surrounding of a singular work to then transport the question on the level of the entire exhibition, and finally, the broader environment.

Negative and Positive Interference

What makes the investigation of this question particularly inspiring is that although it may seem at first that interference is a negative phenomenon, it can potentially be positive too. Hence, it has a double effect: It can be a disturbing element impeding the work to ‘function’ to its full aesthetic effect, but it can also be an additional feature that highlights and increases certain potentials in the exhibited piece(s), perhaps even something that neither the artist nor the curator thought of before.

The negative form of interference is when it becomes an obstacle in the more complete function(ing) of the work, or it can impede the full aesthetic possibilities of a work to open up. Among this, as previously mentioned, is the case of obvious interference, i.e., when there is an actual, physical-visual obstacle, when there is another work in front of or alongside the piece of art, standing between the viewer and the ‘target’ work. This clearly has a negative effect on the original work’s functioning as a piece of art. At the same time, it can be a separate and visually not so plainly interfering feature that nevertheless negatively effects the aesthetics of the work, like when certain conditions ‘around’ the work overshadow (both literally and metaphorically) the original piece – e.g., less careful lighting in the space, harsh colors of the walls upon which the picture hangs, or the density of artworks in general. We can, of course, add to these obvious examples also other forms of negative interference that influence the perception, coming from other senses: for example, loud noises (e.g., traffic

noise from the street) disturbing the observer of an exhibition, or heavy rain and/or extreme temperatures making uncomfortable the visitor of an open-air exhibition or sculpture park. Or, on a larger scale, we could also mention certain meteorological and atmospheric aspects that can influence, both positively and negatively, our aesthetic experience and evaluation of the perceived pieces, especially given the fact that certain atmospheric features can even be (re)produced, as it was also stated by Zhuofei Wang: “With the help of a wide range of media, such as light, color, sound, culture-related symbols, and objects with a symbolic meaning, atmospheres are produced that influence or even modify our awareness of the surrounding world.”² These influences and interferences affecting also other senses are, as mentioned above, very important, though could not be analyzed within the scope of this paper.

However, visual and aesthetic forms of interference in and from the context can also add to the work, and not detract from it. Certain settings, modes of installing, curatorial solutions or unusual arrangements can emphasize various aspects in the work that otherwise may have remained hidden, that any exhibition-goer can prove, for example, when they see a well-known piece on loan, and arranged in another show in a different setting, or even when visiting the same hall of a museum on different days with different light conditions. Just like in the case of the negative effects of aesthetic interference, here again we can think of rather obvious details like the aforementioned lighting and ‘ideal’ installation of the piece. But not only: there are also more complex details of the question of how to really present a work, and what to let to interfere with it, what to keep – or keep out of sight. An obvious example: we can assume that most visitors do not really mind that the marvelous natural setting provides the background for Giacometti’s sculpture in one of the popular halls of the Louisiana Museum in Denmark.³ Similarly, and connected to the above, the temporal perspective is also essential – i.e., the time when one walks towards the next piece in such a setting. This provides space and time for reflection and preparation. (This topic will be explored further below.)

The Level of the Singular Works

When investigating the aesthetic interference caused by the particularities and the nature of the context, let’s start with the level of the individual work, and let’s imagine ourselves in two different forms of observing works of art.

As it is well known, and also well documented through a large number of images – in the painting by Brueghel and Rubens cited above and others – from the early Baroque period until as late as the 19th century, pictures were usually installed in a

² Zhuofei Wang, “Atmospheric Design and Experience with an Exemplary Study of Olafur Eliasson’s ‘The Weather Project,’” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 16 (2018), https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contemporaryaesthetics/vol16/iss1/15/.

³ See more on the museum and its collection on its website: <https://louisiana.dk/en/>, acc. on July 17, 2023.

very dense manner.⁴ The tradition – apparent in both the ‘Kunst’ section of the Kunst- und Wunderkammer in Baroque aristocratic art collections, as well as the first large-scale encyclopedic museums of the young nation-states – paintings were arrayed in such proximity that their frames nearly touched one another, and with sculptures often displayed in front of them.⁵

Judging from the artworks that represent these art-filled interiors, one can imagine that it must have been quite difficult to focus on one particular piece of art. As they were physically so close to each other (even if naturally divided by their frames), one work obviously interfered aesthetically with the other. On the one hand this provided the visitor with an overwhelming ‘sense of art’, but – at least, according to modern sensibilities – made it difficult to ‘properly’ perceive the artistic and aesthetic features of a singular piece.

Compared to these intense displays, where it is hard to observe the work independently from its neighboring pieces, a modern ‘white cube’ gallery space seems to be on the other end of the scale.⁶ In many exhibitions both from the middle of the 20th century onwards and often in contemporary art there is a significant physical distance between the shown pieces. The works are displayed in an undecorated, empty space, with plain white walls providing as much ‘neutrality’ in the exhibition and as little additional elements as possible, in order to offer the visitor the opportunity to focus on individual artworks, to allow individual works to stand in and for themselves. This had naturally led to developing other approaches when enjoying the works. When an individual piece stands separately, the viewer will feel less pressured to compare it with other pieces in the same exhibition; thus, more focus is given to its own characteristics. Possible associations are more open-ended, compared to when there is a work (or works) in the immediate proximity that automatically stimulates comparison between these two (or more) pieces of art.

This is why the two ways of presenting artworks will lead to two different modes of appreciation, in which different components and aspects can be in our focus. It can be demonstrated with the help of the differentiation between artistic and aesthetic value, as proposed by Tomas Kulka.⁷ According to Kulka’s differentiation, developed in a 1981 paper, artistic value refers to the artwork’s importance and significance with regards to the history of art – e.g., how novel the piece is, or how much it can be valued as a noteworthy new direction in the course of art history. Compared to this, aesthetic

⁴ Other classical examples include David Teniers the Younger’s works or Giovanni Paolo Panini’s ‘galleries’, even if the latter depict imaginary spaces.

⁵ On the Kunst und Wunderkammer, see Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunst und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1908); see the digitalized version of the original edition on the website of the Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg: <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/schlosser1908>. On a detailed history of one of the best-known encyclopedic museum, the British Museum, see Kim Sloan and Andre Burnett (eds.), *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century* (London: The British Museum Press, 2004).

⁶ On the critical history of the concept, see Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986 – orig. 1976).

⁷ Tomas Kulka, “The Artistic and Aesthetic Value of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21, 4 (1981): 336–350.

value is what describes the special qualities of that particular work of art on its own. The curious aspect however is that the two are not necessarily parallel. Certain artworks may be highly important in the history of art, being interpreted – either already in the time when they were created or retrospectively – as proper turning points, and at the same time they may be less successful aesthetically. In other words, the piece becomes important historically despite the fact that for some reasons it may lack some aesthetic qualities. And naturally the other situation can also easily happen: when there is an artwork with high aesthetic qualities, a piece that is well-planned, nicely executed, but despite all this it gets forgotten over time, and its artistic value remains low. Of course, Kulka also reminds us that each of the two – sometimes seemingly almost opposing values – should be present in a piece to consider it a piece of art: “It seems to me that a certain minimal presence of each of the two-component values is necessary for an object to qualify as a work of art.”⁸

Connecting Kulka’s insightful differentiation of these two values with the diverse modes of displaying artworks over the centuries, we can see that the densely-filled Baroque installations provide the opportunity – or, at least, provide it more easily – for the work’s artistic value to be in focus. It is so among other factors due to the necessary – we could almost say, automatic – comparison between the actual work and its immediate neighbors that are visually and thus aesthetically interfering with it. The viewer instinctively and inevitably looks at the ensemble of images. On the one hand, it makes it more difficult for the individual piece of art to stand out in its singularity. On the other, this installation creates connections between the exhibited pieces, based on various aspects. We shall however also remember from the history of art that precisely these Baroque arrangements had often contributed to the hierarchization of the genres of art. Traditionally the middle, central section of the wall was dedicated to large historic paintings and works with ‘noble’ subjects like mythology and religion, while landscapes – for long considered less valuable in the hierarchy of painting – were placed in the lower sections. As Werner Busch described the case, focusing on the status of landscape painting: “This arrangement also emphasized the more decorative purpose of landscapes; the combination of different genres perhaps implied a cosmological concept underlying the picture gallery – in which landscape represented the greatness of nature as God’s creation.”⁹

Compared to this classical arrangement and its implications regarding the perception and evaluation of artworks, the modern approach of the piece standing more on its own definitely helps the aesthetic value to emerge more clearly, since there are no works directly ‘at hand’, neither to interfere with the shown piece nor to serve as a pair for comparison. In this way, the proper aesthetic features and qualities of the work, including its compositional structure, coloring, forms, etc., may easily become the dominant focus of attention.

⁸ Kulka, “The Artistic and Aesthetic Value of Art,” 343.

⁹ Werner Busch, “Landscape: The Road to Independence,” in *Landscapes from Brueghel to Kandinsky*, ed. Jutta Frings (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2001), 18.

Of course, even in the latter case the situation is not as straightforward as it may seem at first. We shall again underline that even if the exhibition space is less densely filled, it does not mean that the work does not have a context, an immediate and a larger surrounding that can potentially interfere with it. Therefore, when claiming that in a modern exhibition installation we can see ‘only the work’, i.e., in its pure essence and singularity – the affirmation is only partially true: it is shown in its singularity, but not without external influences in our aesthetic perception. It is perhaps the work in itself that we *observe*, but not (only) the work in itself that we *see*. It is not entirely independent of its immediate and larger surrounding. Even if the work stands on its own, we obviously cannot nullify the aesthetic influence of its context – it is still there, inevitably and inseparably. Thus, we can claim that we can never create such an installation or mode of presentation when the work is really standing alone. In this sense then, the white-cube-type installation is the opposite to the Baroque-style presentation of not letting artworks interfere visually and thus aesthetically to each other. Nevertheless, even in the ‘emptiest’ exhibition spaces there is the space and its character, visual features, material, proportions, light conditions, etc., that all influence the aesthetic perception and thus appreciation of an exhibited piece. The reason and effect of this influence is quite easy to see. Just imagine a slight modification of the tone of the color of the wall, or a different texture of the wall or – for example in the case of an exhibition or museum space with large roof windows – even a bright sunny summer day will make the exhibited piece – that is otherwise not influenced or ‘disturbed’ by anything else – look different than on a gloomy autumn afternoon.

The Level of the Entire Show – the Space of the Exhibition

From the above considerations we understood that we can never fully neglect the physical and ‘metaphorical’ context of works of art, whenever and wherever they are exhibited. But the analyses focused so far mainly on the ‘level of the singular piece’, on the particularities of the work’s visual and aesthetic perception and on the interferences in this perception coming from its immediate surrounding, i.e., whether other artworks are in its close vicinity, or it is the ‘pure wall’ serving as its mere – and seemingly neutral – context.

Now we can turn our attention to the investigation of the question regarding the larger context of the work, zooming out from the observation of the actual work with regards to its ‘neighbors’ and to see what interferences its artistic and aesthetic effect can have that comes from the whole exhibition space. Therefore, in this section I am interested in the influence of the entire space, how its ‘type’ and characteristics can influence the perception and evaluation of the shown works.

As already stated above, we cannot fully neglect the surrounding of the artwork, the features of the space, or the conditions of the exhibition. The good news however is that we do not necessarily even want to. The actual space, including all its characteristics remains a given – what’s more: unavoidable – circumstance that can

bear both challenges and opportunities, hence exactly like what we have just observed on the level of the works. The careless consideration of these features and the neglecting of the ‘history’ of the space (e.g., if it is historically loaded place) can significantly decrease or even destroy the aesthetic effect of the shown pieces. On other occasions however, focusing on some of these aspects and on the nature of the space, these can definitely highlight further potentials of the exhibited works. This is why we can – or, even stronger: we *must* – consciously take all these into consideration. Through this also the space allows itself to be experimented with, and thus becomes a tool, a raw material for artists and/or curators to create additional aesthetic effect and frameworks for more complex interpretations.

This is why we can claim that even if in a modern, minimalist environment we excluded the interference coming from the close (physical) vicinity of other works that may be disturbing – though not necessarily – some elements of the context nevertheless do remain there. There is not any entirely ‘transparent’ hosting environment. And this again is not a question of merely physical, visual characteristics. The choice of the location for an exhibition is naturally a conscious decision – just like the ‘style’ of the installation (densely arranged or with more distance between the pieces) – and it can be particularly important for such a show where the hosting environment is a non-typical venue. Actually, these sorts of exhibitions are gaining popularity,¹⁰ including organizing carefully curated presentations in abandoned warehouses,¹¹ classical ruins,¹² shopping malls,¹³ airport lounges,¹⁴ mediaeval monasteries,¹⁵ deconsecrated churches,¹⁶ or war bunkers,¹⁷ etc.

The popularity of exhibitions in untraditional venues can have various explanations, including a general interest in novelty. Besides this however, for many visitors the allure of classical museums is fading, as they are often considered by both the wider public and even the specialists as ossified institutions little changed since their 18 - 19th century establishments, that are unable to offer neither relevant answers for the questions of today’s visitors nor satisfying aesthetic experience. It is not the point of this paper to argue for or against these opinions or to analyze the role

¹⁰ See more on this and the aesthetic implications in my earlier article: Zoltán Somhegyi, “On Some Novel Encounters with Fine Arts. Where to Search for Aesthetics and Where Aesthetics May Have Something to (Re) search,” *ESPES. The Slovak Journal of Aesthetics* 9 (2020/2): 23–31.

¹¹ For example, the 2013 edition of the Moving Image Art Fair, organized in an abandoned warehouse by the Thames in London.

¹² E.g., the 2016 exhibition titled “The Silent Echo”, curated by Karina El Helou, in Baalbek, Lebanon.

¹³ E.g., in the Polygone Riviera Mall in France.

¹⁴ E.g., the Incheon Airport Museum, <https://www.airport.kr/ap/en/svc/attractionDetail.do?SN=2355>, acc. July 17, 2023.

¹⁵ E.g., the Muzeum Susch, <https://www.muzeumsusch.ch/en/1024/Muzeum-Susch>, acc. July 17, 2023.

¹⁶ E.g., in the Kiscelli Múzeum in Budapest.

¹⁷ E.g., Boros Collection, Berlin, <https://www.sammlung-boros.de/>, acc. July 17, 2023.

and opportunities of museums in the contemporary infrastructure of arts.¹⁸ However, knowing these polarities of opinion can help us shed some further light on the reasons of interest of exhibitions in novel locations that will then also help us understand more the influence and interference of these very locations on the aesthetic perception and appreciation of the exhibited works.

Let's then follow the above method of imagining an artwork and its aesthetic effect in two different situations in order to understand the influence of the larger spatial context. We need to imagine observing the work in a traditional exhibition venue or in a place of which original function has little or nothing to do with art shows. When a piece of art is displayed in such a place, its context, i.e., the function, the history of the building, its physical features and the activities pursued in the location (both previously and currently) will inevitably modify the interpretation of the work.

For example, in the glittery interior design of a shopping mall everything is subordinated to the service of the subtle techniques of incentivizing consumption. It is designed as to leave little or no space for self-control in consuming and for critical reflections. Hence it is definitely a challenging place to exhibit works that would require more time for tranquil observation, introspection, rumination, critical insights, etc. At the same time however it is exactly this condition why it can be nevertheless extremely interesting. What's more: it is needed to at least try to exhibit quality pieces. In such a context artwork can provide the casual visitors with some alternative experiences, offering to provide them with another mindset, at least for a short time. Thus, it is not correct that in a mall only low-quality kitsch works or cheap reproductions of classical art works should be found. The mall de-sacralizes the traditional museum context of the work but can add the space (literally) for another form of perception, and, more importantly, another layer of interpretation, in which the (social) critical power of art can thrive.

Another example is when an art show (for example a pop-up exhibition) is organized in a run-down space, e.g., amidst classical ruins or in a modern building approaching ruination, such as an abandoned, decaying industrial complex. In the former case, with classical ruins, the temporal perspectives that are manifested through the aesthetic power of the noble decay provide the interpretation of the exhibited works with novel layers. It is especially so if the shown pieces are recent and contemporary works, hence the mentioned temporal difference is the broadest. In the latter case, when the show is in a derelict industrial complex, the uncomfortable, incongruous, and sinister place creates a different space for reflection. Precisely due to the 'recentness' of the ruination and due to the lack of such temporal distance that we normally do experience with noble Antique ruins, the so-called 'contemporary ruins' can be more uncomfortable for many to visit, hence it can also seem a 'worrisome' environment to exhibit pieces of art. This can thus be very exciting to play with, when

¹⁸ I have investigated some aspects of these questions elsewhere: Zoltán Somhegyi, "The Humanities, Museums and Art: Reflections on Institutional Challenges and Interdisciplinary Opportunities in the 21st Century," in *Proceedings of the European Humanities Conference – ARKEOS – Perspetivas em Diálogo*, Vol. 56, eds. Luiz Oosterbeek, Rosi Braidotti, Henrique Leitão, Rosário Costa (Mação, Portugal: UNESCO, CIPSH, FCT, ITM, série ARKEOS, 2023), 271–281.

organizing art shows in such locations.¹⁹ Besides these considerations, here we can again repeat the importance of possible influences coming from other senses, as briefly referred to above, and how they can interfere with perception. Though we cannot analyze all the details here, let me just refer to, as just one example, the special olfactory experiences that may occur in, for instance, derelict industrial spaces that can affect the perception of exhibited artworks, if a show is organized in such a venue, and/or we observe graffiti, that often appear in such contexts. This aspect was also highlighted by Tim Edensor: “Not deliberately sought, involuntary memories come upon us, rekindling the past through unexpected confrontations with sound, ‘atmospheres’, and particularly smells – largely nonvisual sensual experiences.”²⁰

The Level of the Exhibition(s) within the Larger Environment

Towards the end of my present investigation, we arrive to a third level of possible influence and interference. This is connected to a relatively more recent curatorial practice that is nevertheless steadily growing in both examples and – more importantly – in significance, therefore we absolutely must at least briefly, analyze the tendency here. I am referring to those larger exhibitions, typically biennials, that are organized in different venues scattered across a city, or even beyond its borders. It is easy to see that when one visits such an art event, the perception of both the exhibition in general and of the individual pieces in particular will be influenced by the encountering with the larger environment – for example, when walking between the locations. This experience, through the embedded temporality will then again, as already mentioned above, have implications for the modes of perception of the pieces of art. Based on all this we can claim that in these cases the relation between the individual piece and the entire show is comparable to the connection between the exhibition itself and the total urban or regional context. In other words, we can say that what is the exhibition to the work is a bit like the urban or natural environment for the whole show itself.

Naturally all this can have an unplanned and a planned influence. As an obvious example of the former we can quote the Venice Biennial as a classical example, where the city automatically provides a dense and both historically and aesthetically rich and highly stratified context for the presentation and enjoying of contemporary art and architectural works. We can say that even if someone is from the city of Venice or knows it very well, and would like to focus ‘only’ on the exhibitions, while walking from one pavilion to the other in the Giardini, or between the Giardini and the Arsenale, as the traditional main locations of the biennial, she will have diverse perception of the works compared to when the exhibited pieces are in the same room next to each other. The time of reaching the new venue, like the next pavilion in the Giardini,

¹⁹ See more on this in Chapter 9 of my book: Zoltán Somhegyi, *Reviewing the Past. The Presence of Ruins* (London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020).

²⁰ Tim Edensor, “The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, (2005): 837.

will provide some transitional phase of preparation, a novel visual and aesthetic input coming from the natural and/or urban elements of the place, and this will thus definitely modify the manner of perceiving the works, compared to when they are in the same venue, in the adjacent rooms of the same museum. Needless to say, this effect is even more strongly enlarged when the visitor aims to find the many additional pavilions scattered all over Venice: old palazzos are serving as temporary hosting spaces for countries without permanent pavilions in the Giardini. When meandering in the city in order to find the next venue, one necessarily has some extra time and space for reflection, elaboration of the experience and preparation for the next presentation, compared to when all is under the same roof. Thus this ‘extra time’ that is not necessarily available when works are in the same location can become truly essential, leading to novel experiences.

All this can, however, be also more planned, as we could see for example in the recent editions of the Istanbul Biennial, the Helsinki Biennial, or the Sharjah Biennial. In Istanbul the mesmerizing historical stratification of the city (in this regard similar to Venice), and the city’s great architectural heritage both please and soothe the eyes. The recently established Helsinki Biennial (first edition in 2021) is hosted mainly in the captivating Vallisaari Island, approximately 20 minutes from the Finnish capital, though some of the works were – and also in the 2023 edition are – presented in the downtown (see p. 79, Fig. 2). Walking between the installations, finding the exhibited works within the island, is an activity in which and through which the environment could easily exercise a strong impact on the visitor and hence on her experiencing the exhibited pieces, and this influence continued when, after returning from the island the visitor completed the tour with the pieces in the city center. As announced in a press release before the opening, the 2023 edition has a broader selection of involved locations and institutions: “This year, the biennial’s central location of Vallisaari Island in the Helsinki archipelago will have a particular emphasis on outdoor artworks which subtly operate in dialogue with the surrounding environment and its unique ecosystem. In addition, a 20-minute ferry ride away, artworks and the wider biennial programme sprawl across mainland venues including HAM Helsinki Art Museum, Helsinki Central Library Oodi, Stoa and Caisa Cultural Centers, other public spaces in the city, and online.”²¹

There is a similar approach also in the Sharjah Biennial, in which curators have experimented with bringing the various locations of the shows out of not only the traditional exhibition venues, but also out of the city. Already in the 2015 and 2017 editions one could see the deliberate decision that the larger theoretical framework of the biennial attempted to investigate the spatial-geographical connections between different regions of the emirate of Sharjah. For this the actual passage, with its physical and temporal implications, was also evaluated when planning the exhibitions. As a consequence, the visitors were not merely observing the displayed works, but were provided with an opportunity to both discover the city and the wider region, hence,

²¹ Press release via email, March 29, 2023.

to map the urban pattern, during their perambulation, and to get the special and spatial characteristics of the locations influence their perception and appreciation of the shown pieces of art. This continued in the 2023 edition too, when 19 venues in five cities were activated for the Biennial, for example in the town of Al Dhaid, where different edifices hosted exhibited pieces, e.g., an old clinic, one of the first medical facilities in Sharjah that has been repurposed, among also other buildings that originally used to have other functions (see p. 80, Fig. 3 and 4).

By Way of Conclusion

As we could see from the above considerations and examples, we can probably never see ‘just’ the work of art, or we can also claim that it is never ‘only’ the work of art that we see. We continuously experience interference and influence on various levels. Other artworks can interfere both visually and thus aesthetically. The exhibition space and the nature of the location can influence our perception of the pieces. Besides these, even the larger environment, e.g., the city and beyond, can play a significant role in the reception.

All this interference however is not (necessarily) a bad thing. With creativity and conscious, bold curatorial approaches this can be converted into phenomena that are beneficial for the reception and interpretation of both the singular works and the entire show. The perception of and influence from other works, the modes of installation, the particularities of the venue and the discovering of the broader environment can all bring out new aspects and considerations that point towards new potentials in the pieces, and that perhaps even the artist or the curator had not thought of before. And this is definitely an important added value that deserves to be considered.

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Figure 1. Peter Paul Rubens and Jan 'Velvet' Brueghel the Elder: *The Sense of Sight*, 1617, oil on panel, 64.7 x 109.5 cm, (Inv. No. P001394). Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado. Copyright ©Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado



Figure 2. Keiken, Ángel Yökai Atã, 2023. © HAM/Helsinki Biennial/Kirsi Halkola



Figure 3. Michael Rakowitz, *RETURN*, 2004–ongoing. Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 15, Sheikh Khalid Bin Mohammed Palace and Farm, Al Dhaid, 2023. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Danko Stjepanovic



Figure 4. Sharjah Biennial 15 opening week at Old Al Dhaid Clinic, 2023. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation. Photo: Motaz Mawid

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