

Sensing Collectives – Aesthetic and Political Practices Intertwined

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14-16 November 2018

Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI)

Hybrid Lab TU-Berlin

Entanglements between aesthetic and political practices are visible all around. Collective life is shaped in ways of sensing, perceiving, and desiring (aesthetics) as well as in collective subjectivities, will, and interests (politics). To see both dimensions of collective ordering at work we may look into struggles over cultural policy and curatory strategies, into governmental public relations, party campaigns, corporate branding and marketing, grassroots activism, protest, resistance or amateur and do-it-yourself movements. They all comprise both an aesthetic and a political dimension. But how exactly do aesthetics and politics relate with each other?

With the workshop “Sensing Collectives – Aesthetic and Political Practices Intertwined” our investigations into these relations focused on practices: concrete activities by which sensorial perceptions and collective subjectivities are evoked and by which they are shaped in particular situations. For aesthetic practices: How is it that patterns of sensorial attention and appreciation become attuned, that certain styles of sensing are effectively performed as intense and valuable, so that certain aesthetics become authoritative? And for political practices: How is it that collective action is mobilized and norms and decisions are legitimized, that certain group identities are performed effectively, so that certain representations of collective will and interests become authoritative? The aim of taking this practice-oriented approach is to arrive at an analytical description of specific patterns in which aesthetics and politics intertwine in the making and in the disruption of collective orders – in ongoing processes of governance and innovation.

Being aware of the limits for translating sensorial experiences into words, we invited not only academic papers but also artistic performances and activist demonstrations as starting points for reflecting and discussing these questions.

The event started with a public opening session on **collective sensing and its politics** at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI). It comprised keynote presentations by Sophia Prinz (Universität der Künste Berlin/ Europa-Universität Viadrina, Frankfurt Oder) and Antoine Hennion (Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation, Paris) who were invited as two of the most inspiring and conceptually versed contributors to current debates on the topic, each following a slightly different analytical take on the issue, either focusing on professional artists' engagements with dominant sensual orders, or focusing on self-transformative experiments of amateurs collectively cultivating their own ways of sensing.

Sophia Prinz, in her talk “**Challenging the Sensual Order. Artistic Practice and Forms of Perception,**” discussed the case of artist Lina Bo Bardi curating the 1963 inaugural exhibition at the Museu de Arte Popular (MAP) in Salvador da Bahia. She displayed folk art rather than the canonic forms of modern art with a view to expand forms of perception rooted in the everyday life of people rather than in the life of cosmopolitan elites. Sophia presented a sophisticated analytical argument on the interdependent relationship between collectively shared schemes of perception and material culture (building on Michel Foucault and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) to illuminate how Bo Bardi's exhibition revealed the historical conditions and boundaries of modernist modes of perception and thus worked as an “accusation” of the colonial social order it entails.

Antoine Hennion, in his talk “**Taste as a collective involvement to expand the worlds that we inhabit**,” stressed the transformative potential of amateurs’ practices (building on William James and Bruno Latour). Cultivating the love for things they embed in an attentive, exploratory mode of engagement which allows for sensing subjects and objects of taste to form each other, so that finely sculpted worlds can emerge gradually as relational assemblages of devices and bodies, collectives and subjectivities. Engaging with the world in an aesthetic orientation requires continuous actualization of relations: a permanent re-sensing that introduces differences and allows existences to remain *in becoming*. Tasting is thus a highly performative activity. It is a tentative and responsive, non-determined and non-determining mode of presence to the world, an experimental orientation towards “*se laisser faire* – letting things (make themselves) happen.” Antoine Hennion demonstrated this orientation by performing his keynote as an improvised exploratory engagement with the topic, the audience, the setting, and with himself. He emphasized that relational and processual social theories (like pragmatism and actor-network theory) provided an ontological foundation for this style of engagement and thus entailed an ethical and political stance in themselves, allowing us to better experience the worlds that we inhabit and to attune our senses towards the expansion of their unexplored potential.

This keynote duo nicely brought into view the contrasting orientations and tensions in current studies of collective sensing and its politics. They may either be concerned with dominant orders of sensing (e.g. Bourdieu, Foucault) or with opportunities to experimentally open up and innovate ways of sensing (e.g. Dewey, Rancière). And they may focus either on institutionalized aesthetic practices (e.g. in professional art, museums) or on vernacular and amateur aesthetic practice (e.g. in everyday life, do-it-yourself or grassroots movements).

Papers and demonstrations during the following two days were grouped around the topic of “aesthetic mobilization,” where the focus was on processes that promote a re-sensing and disruption of dominant identities and realities, and “aesthetic governance,” where the focus was on processes in which orders of sensual perception are built and stabilized.

The morning session of the second day focused on **aesthetic modes of political mobilization**. Sebastian Sommer (Freie Universität Berlin, theatre studies) started the day with a presentation on how the bodily and spatial performance of the PEGIDA movement’s protest rallies produces “real life echo chambers” in which participants sensually experience collective identity as hegemonic “German-ness” around feelings of dispossession, anger, and nostalgia.

After that, Vanesa Farfán (free artist, Berlin/Mexico), had us experience how it feels to be grouped in the crowded city of Beijing (China) by asking us to stand together, each within one square meter, the average surface area available for each of Beijing’s inhabitants. She then screened a video showing herself kneeling in the streets of Beijing to do paper embossing with the relief of sewer cover. A crowd of spectators quickly gathered around this foreigner doing strange things. The crowd in turn was immediately dissolved by the police, as groupings of more than ten people on public streets was forbidden by law. Relating this experience with the permanent grouping of people in the crowded city, she proposed that it would actually be the focused sensorial attention, the perceptive concentration of a group, the formation of a “sensing collective” that is forbidden.

For our lunch break, Markus Binner (free artist, Berlin) performed “Bitter Mass Cooking” as a participatory experiment. Workshop participants were randomly assigned to groups with a specific task and a role to play in preparing a multi-course menu. Four groups were responsible for cooking and serving (appetizers, main course, desert, and setup), one group was in charge of governing and managing (“conductors”) and another one for disrupting and exploring (“guerrillas”). The setting prompted a dynamic process of collective making and unmaking. Power relationships were rendered visible, articulation of dissidence and

rebellion against assigned roles were provoked, orders were disrupted, but the threat of chaos was met with efforts to counter-mobilize and stabilize the collective project. The collective cooking and eating let us sensorially experience the delicious and bitter tastes of collective making.

After the lunch experiment, the first afternoon session was devoted to the question of how aesthetical and political practices intertwined in the **making of alternative urban spaces**. Xenia Kopf (University of Salzburg, cultural studies) discussed sensory practices as means by which “a different city” was performed in the “Arena,” an autonomous cultural center in Vienna founded in 1976. Drawing attention to how gender relations were problematized, she highlighted the persistence of hegemonic orders even in the context of resistant and emancipatory practices.

Tau Lenskjold (University of Southern Denmark, design and communication studies; co-author: Sissel Olander, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, architecture and design studies) reflected on architectural planning and co-design as different approaches to the regeneration of neighborhoods. Discussing the development of a new library and cultural center in Denmark, he elaborated how both approaches involve different forms of aesthetic involvement and participation for the local population, providing different opportunities for collective subjectivities to articulate and shape the material orders they inhabit.

For the last part of the first day, we moved on to explore various approaches of **artistic activism**. Friederike Landau (Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, art and design studies) started the session with a presentation on the German activist group “Zentrum für Politische Schönheit.” Analyzing one of their programmatic texts she explored how, by invoking concepts of beauty, affect, hope, and desire, the text activates and politicizes emotions. Mobilizing for an “aggressive humanism” is to re-introduce difference, disrupt hegemonic orders of political discourse and counter a perceived a state of post-politics by nurturing contingency and conflict not only discursively, but also affectively.

Tatiana Bazzichelli (Disruption Network Lab, Berlin, information and media studies) proposed to understand and perform whistleblowing in analogy to hacking as an artistic practice. It should combine informational, aesthetic, and organizational modes of activism to make it possible to experience information emotionally and thus effectively expose misconduct and disrupt hegemonic orders that rest on selective information services and strategic public relations work.

Lastly, Rose Beerman (performance artist, Berlin) screened video sequences from a controversial Danish TV show and her own re-enactment of it for theatre entitled “Strip naked, talk naked” (2014). She discussed the latter as a choreographic commentary on the stereotypes of femininity and gender relations performed in the TV show by seeking to demonstrate creative, playful, and agential female subjectivity in contrast with an objectified female body passively exposed to the male gaze.

On the third day, we shifted over to **aesthetic governance**. A repeating topic were specific aesthetics associated with or deliberately inscribed into industrial products and technological infrastructure. The discussion centered on how interactions with such artefacts cultivate certain sensory pre-dispositions and how this can be escaped.

Jonathan Austin and Anna Leander (The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, International Relations) took us into the product design labs of the Silicon Valley to draw attention to great efforts at producing sensorial perceptions, creating “resonance” and affectively binding customers to products, thus enrolling them into corporate strategies. They discussed this in terms of sensual governance and mentioned counter-strategies such as ad-busting and the makers movement.

Nona Schulte-Römer (Helmholtz-Zentrum für Umweltforschung GmbH – UFZ, sociology) showed how the sensual experience of public infrastructures like drinking water and street lighting is actively shaped by designers and operators of those systems. She also drew

attention to contestations of this sensory governance by “pure water” and “light pollution” activists and she emphasized that sensory dimensions of collective ordering would deserve more reflection in reflexive governance studies.

Valentin Meilinger (Utrecht University, geography) presented a study of newly emerging aesthetics of gardening in the city of Los Angeles arising from water-conservation discourse and policy. Contrasting arid garden design with greywater crop growing, he introduced the aesthetics of infrastructure as an additional dimension for assessing alternative ways of coping with ecological constraints and as a neglected dimension of the politics of sustainability transitions.

Susan Steward (Sydney University of Technology, design studies) gave a presentation on packaging and how it materially affects people, creates a sensation and binds them to certain products and styles of consumption, thus effectively shaping sensing collectives around a certain product. The effect is curiously illustrated by a special genre of YouTube videos celebrating the pleasures of “unboxing.”

The lunch break on the third day started with a brief introduction of the “Schmeck!” project by Jan-Peter Voß; Daniel Kofahl then led through an eating experiment (both Berlin University of Technology, Sociology) which was co-designed with Michael Guggenheim (Goldsmith College, Sociology). The project sets out to explore complexities of tasting with a group of twenty amateur researchers who conduct ethnographic observations and carry out experiments to explore how eating and tasting practices can change. This is against the background of a diagnosis of “aesthetic path dependencies” linked with industrialized patterns of food production. In order to open up sustainable ways of eating, these path dependencies need to be escaped by exploring new ways of tasting. For a pre-test of such an experimental exploration we were led through a process in which we exchanged and re-assembled foodstuffs, collaboratively re-constructed their meaning and our expectations of taste experiences, found new ways of preparing, combining and eating them, and, finally, sensing and tasting them. During the process we questioned established ways tasting and the collective bonds and separations that they entail, and we collectively engaged in re-creating sensorial perceptions of food.

In the final session, Miguel Paredes (The University of Edinburgh, architecture and design studies) took issue with the ways in which urban life becomes digitally represented in the context of “smart” urban governance. Counteracting the reduction, objectification, artificial standardization and homogenization of urban life forms, he presented results from various projects that were aimed at producing counter-maps of life in the city, using different methods and foregrounding the diversity and complexity of patterns in urban life.

Lastly, Hanna Husberg (Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna, artist) and Agata Marzecova (Tallinn University, environmental sciences) gave a lecture-performance with a complementary paper presentation on the sensory experiences of smog (in Beijing). Their contribution highlighted how sensory experiences are shaped through sensing technologies, methods of measurement and indices. By articulating a multi-sensorial artistic intervention also re-introducing the voices of people articulating their subjective affection by smog, they called for exploring new forms of collectively engaging with urban air beyond the current mode of algorithmic governance.

The workshop was concluded by a feedback round and discussion of follow-up activities.

The plan is to produce a publication with revised contributions that (a) precisely elaborate aesthetic and political practices in each case, (b) thoroughly map their intertwining, and (c) reconstruct how specifically they contribute to the stabilization and/or innovation of collective orders.