

# ON THE PERFORMATIVITY OF DISINTERESTED ATTENTION FOR THE EXPERIENCE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to point out that attentional practices don't simply overlap with control and action/reaction dynamics; they are also strictly connected to non-productivity, non-instrumentality, disinterestedness, contemplation as performative inactivity. Disinterested attention (a definition formulated by Bence Nanay) and free-floating attention help to better understand the apparently seamless and unproblematic transition from passive spectator to active participant/agent of contemporary art. If considering attention in relation to executive functions (planning and organizing our experience in the world we live in) could be persuasive, a self-evident definition of attention strictly considered as "selection for action" is less convincing, and the weakness of this connection becomes clear when goal-oriented attitude is pushed into the background. Attention is often researched into to improve our performances and to overcome the inevitable "blind spots": experiencing art is about a different way of paying attention, that is fluctuating, "suspended," fragmented.

## KEYWORDS

Disinterestedness, Free-floating Attention, Contemplation,  
Contemporary Art

## CONTEMPLATION, ACTION, EFFICIENCY

The concept of contemplation is traditionally opposed to action and participation. Immanuel Kant defined contemplation as the disregard towards the object's existence, and we are used to think about contemplation as a passive pleasure: actually, in a genuine Kantian sense, it is not completely detached from practice and everything related to it, in so far as the meaning of "practice" is misunderstood if reduced merely to an action (or a series of actions) undertaken in order to accomplish a specific goal. It is a circular, self-reinforcing gaze which does not produce profit or reward, except for the perception of the activity in itself. Emilio Garroni, an Italian philosopher, highlights how aesthetically contemplating an object or a representation does not amount to experiencing it in an "original void, through a pure sentiment of astonishment."<sup>1</sup> This analysis is part of a wider consideration, according to which the ability to make sense of our experience of the world never results in an impeccable synthesis: the necessary incompleteness of the data we filter from our surroundings is actually productive, as well as an "undeniable adaptive benefit;"<sup>2</sup> in terms of attentional practices, there is a perpetual overlap of determinacy and vagueness. Pure contemplation is an unprofitable and unobtainable condition because we—unlike non-human animals—cannot trust unambiguous signals from our senses: to that extent, it is possible to talk about disinterested experience (or mediated, second-degree, not tied to immediate survival needs, interest).<sup>3</sup> In *The Burnout Society*, Byung-Chul Han ascribes to wild animals the ability, out of necessity, to multitask at all times; this is why an animal would be "incapable of contemplative immersion (...) because it must also process background events." Han claims that ours is a "community of activity [*Aktive-meinschaft*]," and "the gift of listening is based on the ability to grant deep, contemplative attention—which remains inaccessible to the hyperactive ego."<sup>4</sup> Attention is often defined by its capability of shaping the subject's agency: following the model of the so-called "Many-Many Problem,"<sup>5</sup> the subject can act only if she selects one of the many external inputs associated with a coherent behavioral output. This can only be done through the exercise of attention; otherwise, action would be inhibited. Interestingly, action is intended exclusively as an efficient performance with a clear and specific goal: is it true that every action requires a reduction of the many-many set of options to a one-one relation?

A condition of totally focused concentration is not always forthcoming; even when it is achievable, can it unfailingly lead to the ability to unify the totality of experience in a path full of meaning with no vagueness or residues? Attention is often depicted as capable of “custom-tailoring” our reality:<sup>6</sup> our structural attentional blindness appears to be “a tremendous opportunity”<sup>7</sup> that should be exploited in order to improve our performance, to discover what we are missing, and include it in a pattern we can keep track of. But how does attention work outside the dynamics of productivity and efficiency? My take here is that there is a space between pure reflex and the resolution of a hypothetical Many-Many Problem, in which takes place what Jonathan Crary defined as the “adaptive performance of the body to a milieu, involving connectedness and decision, and not simply reaction;”<sup>8</sup> it is precisely in this space that artistic experience is located. As Alva Noë claims, “artworks are not response triggers, and aesthetic experiences are nothing like events switched on the brain.”<sup>9</sup>

#### DISINTERESTED ATTENTION, FREE-FLOATING ATTENTION

Aesthetic experience is so frowned upon because it is assumed to be essentially disinterested: it is not completely explainable on the basis of utility and idiosyncratic interests. The dialectic between attention and disinterestedness is self-contradictory at first glance, the first being traditionally connected with interest and the act of selection: this is the main reason why the majority of definitions of the concept of attention are conceived outside aesthetic experience. An exception is Bence Nanay’s theory: the author proposes a re-interpretation of the Kantian notion of disinterestedness in the sense of “disinterested attention.” The author elaborates on four different ways we can exercise our attention, which can be “distributed with regards to objects and focused with regards to properties” (for example, when we have to classify and organize a certain group of objects) or “focused with regards to objects and focused with regards to properties;” for the sake of this essay, it is important to investigate the other two ways: “distributed with regards to objects and distributed with regards to properties” and “focused with regards to objects and distributed with regards to properties.”<sup>10</sup> According to the latter, which is the “disinterested attention” in question, we are not interested in the object from a practical point of view: we distribute our attention between different properties (while remaining perceptually aware of the object itself), without focusing on just one of them, which could lead us to the exploitation of the (art) object. When our attention

is distributed with regards both to the object and its properties instead, we are exercising our attention, according to the author, during meaningless and often alienating experiences (for example, when we are in a waiting room and we have forgotten to bring something to read). On the contrary, free-floating attention can be a very rich notion to explore: according to the original Freudian definition, “critical” attention is identified with selective attention, intentional and classificatory, a process of radical control and censorship; free-floating attention, on the other hand, is “evenly-suspended,”<sup>11</sup> to resist any kind of selection. Freud advised both the psychoanalyst and the patient to adopt a method of acritical self-observation and to proceed without any resolutions or aims in mind, to give everything the same amount of attention. Of course, it is not always possible to build experience in this way; this is not an attentional pattern “characterized by no interest at all.”<sup>12</sup> Disinterested pleasure, in a Kantian sense, can be defined only through a negative proceeding: it is what is left after analyzing every other kind of interested pleasure, which is not eliminated from the actual judgement. The focus of attention is on what interests us: attention creates a reaction, it is telling us what we are seeing, and if we want to avoid it, how we want to act in response.<sup>13</sup> Different interests generate different relevance and ranges of focalization; keeping in mind the residual dimension, the bond between attention and interest can be loosened. Yves Citton talks about “paying attention to what is left,” to the residue excluded from the filter: from the collapse of a so-called *extractivist* model of attention. Based strictly on organization, efficiency and exclusion, free-floating attention emerges in its capacity to accept differences without flattening or generalizing them; as part of an economic framework in which the total amount of attention available is limited. In this way is possible to emancipate attentional trajectories, allowing the discovery of original patterns.<sup>14</sup> The collapse (or better, the change of perspective) of the extractivist model of attention invites us to pay attention to the background and not only to the figures we extract from it.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the concept of disinterested attention could be expanded to include free-floating attention.

#### SEE ME IF YOU CAN! THE ATTENTIONAL DYNAMICS OF ARTISTIC EXPERIENCE

The transactions we have with art are not action-centered: they represent a different kind of performance (Richard Schechner defined it as “the release of undoing”).<sup>16</sup> In this sense, the artistic

experience is not only devoid of the necessity of acting but also of any practical interest; if we don't act or accomplish something, as gallery-goers, we are at risk of being passive and inactive viewers. This was precisely one of the challenges met by most of contemporary art: how can the spectator become an agent? Attentional patterns modify in unison with the transition from the condition of spectator to participant, which reflects the perpetual oscillation between contemplation and action, mostly because art is increasingly interactive, immersive and participatory, and also as a consequence of the well-established impossibility of engaging in one experience as a continuous flow (hence the "parceling" of our attention, which is always scarce, as taught by the economy of attention). The notion of disinterested attention is a theoretical tool useful to understand the transition from a passive spectator to an active participant; the dichotomies questioned, with good reason, by Jacques Rancière (seeing/doing, looking/knowing, activity/passivity),<sup>17</sup> are way too rigid to give a reasoned account of the experience of contemporary art. Artistic experience seems to develop between these two poles: according to Crary, "attention and distraction cannot be thought outside a continuum in which the two ceaselessly flow into one another."<sup>18</sup> Following this claim, Claire Bishop observes that uninterrupted, focused attention and complete perceptive unity are myths: the spectator's condition is made up through a continuous overlapping of focused, internal attention and communication through clearly externalized attentional practices.<sup>19</sup> Bishop uses the concepts of "slippage" and "mediation" between different modes of spectatorship; Paolo Rosa, a member of the Italian collective of artists Studio Azzurro, analyzed specifically the dialectic between interactivity (as based on the concepts of "acting" and "being there") and contemplation. According to Rosa, the two notions are perfectly complementary: interactivity can be reformulated as a gaze from afar, suspended, one of the two-fold ways of perceiving and experiencing things. It is interesting to point out (as Bishop also does) that the spectator often expects to "play the agent," and then go back to her original condition as a viewer, giving herself the chance to retrace, archive, and show others all the operations performed in this participative interlude. Working precisely on this peculiar dynamic, Studio Azzurro started an ongoing series called *Portatori di storie* ("Story Bearers"). The focus of the project is to create relationships with virtual people walking back and forth and listening to their stories by stopping them with a simple gesture. Action, as we are used to understand it, has little or no place in this space free from

requests, efficiency, obsessive, and self-referential participation; when dealing with art, our margin for action is always fragmented and discontinuous. *These Associations* by Tino Sehgal, a famous performance quoted by Bishop in her essay, seems to be almost a “live version” of the *Portatori di storie*, in which the spectator encounters real, living people and attention (a precious resource, given its scarcity) is explicitly the material with which Sehgal works: to be given attention and to give attention to others in a “free flow,” to move forward and to step back during light, casual conversations and long, emotional exchanges.

Relational, participative, interactive, immersive art requires an intermittent succession of attention and distraction, to constantly calibrate socialization, participation, and interest;<sup>20</sup> to pull back and then move forward. Schechner proposed a model of *selective inattention*, which requires us to drop in and out of a performance, making us feel “involved and separate, celebratory and critical simultaneously.”<sup>21</sup> Artistic experience and the attentional patterns which characterize it show that our knowledge and access to the world are never infallible and never to be taken for granted: as Noë claims, “every work of art (whether dance, song, poetry, film, whatever) challenges you to *see* it, or to *get* it. The work of art (...) says, *Bring me into focus, if you can!* Crucially, you usually can’t, at least not right away.”<sup>22</sup>

- 1 “Nulla è più lontano da Kant, fatte salve oscillazioni e coloriture, dell’idea della contemplazione estetica di una rappresentazione o di un oggetto (...) come qualcosa di colto in una sorta di vuoto originario mediante un puro sentimento di stupefazione”. Emilio Garroni, *Estetica ed Epistemologia: riflessioni sulla Critica del Giudizio* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1967), 97.
- 2 Emilio Garroni, *Immagine Linguaggio Figura*, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005), 22.
- 3 Garroni, *Immagine Linguaggio Figura*, 23.
- 4 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, translated by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 32.
- 5 Wayne Wu, “Attention as Selection for Action,” in *Attention: Philosophical and Psychological Essays*, edited by Christopher Mole, Declan Smithies & Wayne Wu (Oxford University Press, 2011), 97–116.
- 6 Winifred Gallagher, *Rapt. Attention and the Focused Life* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), 14.
- 7 Cathy N Davidson, *Now You See It. How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work and Learn* (New York: Viking, 2011), 12. It is interesting to note that Davidson appears to lean towards a collaborative concept of attentional practices (crucial for artistic experiences), and a revision of the concept of multitasking according to which different tasks of attention are distributed throughout the attentional community, so not only depending on the single individual.
- 8 Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 348–349, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6569.001.0001>.
- 9 Alva Noë, *Strange Tools. Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), 124.
- 10 Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199658442.001.0001>.
- 11 Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 367.
- 12 Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*, 25.
- 13 Citton defines this attentional regime as governed by alertness, in which we as subjects research data and traces; it is a *milieu* focused on survival and speed, Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 85. In this regime, the main character seems to be the one which André Lepecki has called “the spectator,” in opposition to “the witness:” the spectator is always looking for “informations” and “forensics”, André Lepecki, *Singularities. Dance in the Age of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 179.
- 14 Free-floating attention is not the same as distraction. Citton defines it as, “listening in a somewhat distracted fashion to what the patient says, trying not to understand the apparently obvious meaning of his rambling:” however, it is very difficult to decide consciously to not understand. I think there is a strong and radical component of conscience and deliberation, Yves Citton: “Attention Agency is Environmental Agency”, *Communication in the Age of Attention Scarcity*. Edited by Waddick Doyle & Claudia Roda. Chalm (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 21–32, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20918-6\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20918-6_3).
- 15 According to Citton, from an ecological point of view we would avoid problems which derives from the reduction of the environment in figures (often quantitative) we extract from it, Citton, “Attention Agency is Environmental Agency,” 21–32; Garroni spoke about an “ecological disaster” caused by an interpretant perception, more efficacious than the *segnalitic sensation*, but at the same time magnified in its excessive production of technology and culture.
- 16 Richard Schechner, “Selective Inattention: A Traditional Way of Spectating Now Part of the Avant-Garde,” *Performing Arts Journal* 1, no. 1 (1976): 8–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3245182>.
- 17 Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2008).
- 18 Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 47, <https://doi.org/10.3917/lafab.ranci.2008.01>.
- 19 Claire Bishop, “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention,” *The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 22–42, [https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM\\_a\\_00746](https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00746).
- 20 The conversations weaved during *These Associations* are free and not in any way controlled or scrutinized; volunteers cannot force the participant to speak. Nonetheless, Laura Cumming for *The Guardian* in her review of the performance by Sehgal wrote, “how could one not be interested? It is almost a test of human solidarity.”
- 21 Schechner, “Selective Inattention,” 17.
- 22 Noë, *Strange Tools*, 100.