

KATARZYNA TRZECIAK
(JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY)

BETWEEN HAPTICS AND KINAESTHETICS:
BODY EXPERIENCE IN SOME CONTEMPORARY
THEORIES OF SCULPTURE¹

ABSTRACT

The text deals with the question about the perception of sculpture which is this kind of plastic art in which all human body is engaged in the process of perception.

In Katarzyna Kobro's and Władysław Strzemiński's *Composition of Space* (1931) we can read that sculpture is a way of space organisation. The experience of sculpture is not (as in painting) based on looking or understanding, but on the feeling of spatiotemporal motion.

Oscar Hansen also emphasised the role of psychophysical activity in contact with sculpture and went a step further than Kobro i Strzemiński experiencing the impact on the human body different sculpting materials.

In William Morris's *Notes on Sculpture* (1966–1969) sculpture exists only in subjective, corporal way of experience, away from consciousness and discursive association. All those theories and their artistic concretizations redefines the role of the viewer of artifact and extend the Classic concept of sculpture as an art close to the body. In a number of contemporary sculpture this is not the model's body that is the most important. Rather they deals with viewer's body which is increasingly drawn into artistic representation.

KEY WORDS

sculpture, body, kinaesthetics

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 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katarzyna Trzeciak
 Faculty of Polish Studies
 Jagiellonian University in Kraków
 e-mail: k_trzeciak@o2.pl

Sculpture does not work through the language nor the eye. It works through the body in time and space. As a three-dimensional art the sculpted human figure is more like a real human figure than a painted one because it uses space in the same way. According to XVIIIth century aesthetic doctrine of Herder, we appreciate sculpture by employing imaginative touch in which eye becomes hand. In his *Critical Forests: Fourth Grove, On Riedel's Theory of the Beaux Arts*, Herder notes:

Painting is directed towards a single point of view, for sculpture, however, there are as many points of view as there are radii in the circle that I can draw around the statue and from each of which I can behold it. From no single point do I survey the work in its entirety; I must walk around it in order to have seen it; each point shows me only a tiny surface, and when I have described the whole circumference, I have perceived nothing more than a polygon composed of many small sides and angles. All these small sides must first be assembled by the imagination before we can conceive of the totality as a body. And this bodily whole, is it then a product of my eye? Or of my soul? Is the effect, which it shall achieve only as a whole, a visual sensation? Or a sensation of my soul? In this art, therefore, the effect of the whole is completely lost on the unmediated eye. So there is definitely no sculpture for the eye! Not physically, not aesthetically. Not physically because the eye cannot see a body as a body; not aesthetically, because when the bodily whole vanishes from sculpture, the very essence of its art and its characteristic effect disappears with it².

The role of spectator in the experience of sculpture is here associated with his physical movement in space around the statue. In Herder's view, the aesthetic experience of sculpture is preeminently an experi-

² See: R. Zuckert, *Sculpture and Touch: Herder's Aesthetics of Sculpture*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 2009, Vol. 67, No. 3, p. 287–288.

ence of, by, and for humans as embodied creatures. As Rachel Zuckert notes:

The paradigm sculpture is the expressive representation of human form. Aesthetic appreciation of sculpture calls upon the appreciator's abilities precisely as an embodied being: she must not only employ concepts that arise from her own embodiment (her use of the sense of touch), but must also move around the sculpture in order to gain a full understanding of the work and its presence in space; she must proprioceive in order to understand the sculpture's "life" and expressiveness³.

Zuckert follows Herderian logic and claims that our embodiment contributes crucially to aesthetic appreciation of sculpture. Herderian 'imaginative touch' is activated in the space surrounding the sculpture and to perceive it properly means to include to our experience kinaesthetic sensations of movement in this space.

As an 'imaginative', sense of touch seems less easy to define in sculptural perception. F. David Martin suggests that whereas sight-space dominates in the perception of painting, touch-space with its more direct associations of mass and volume often dominates in the perception of sculpture⁴. In sculpture tactual and kinesthetic feeling come into play in a more direct way than in painting. However, the direct tactual level of experience is usually excluded when sculptures are presented in galleries or museums where the material body of most sculpture is beyond our reach. For this reason, Martin claims that an essential part of the perceptible structure of the sculpture is located in the space around although it is not a part of its material body. The perceptual forces impact on our body and lure our bodies around. In Merleau-Ponty *The Phenomenology of Perception* we read that all perception of an external thing involves a resound within our bodies of that thing physically forcing itself on our bodies⁵. Our movement in the space around sculpture intensifies the sense of sculptural power penetrating and saturating the surrounding space and pressing our bodies. Our bodies situated in the space between are in state of tension.

³ Ibidem, p. 294.

⁴ F. D. Martin, *Sculpture, Painting and Damage*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 1978, Vol. 37, No. 1, p. 47.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 48.

Following Herderian divagations about sculpture and viewer body I accept that aesthetic experience is always embodied and in my analyze I would examine how certain modernist sculptor (constructivists Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, Oskar Hansen and minimalist Robert Morris⁶) deals with this specific sculptural perception organize in the space between the viewer and the artifact. Another aim of my article is to present different modes of conceptualizing the embodied aesthetic experience. My understanding of body experience of sculpture follows Merleau-Ponty findings about the role of movement in our perception as a key element in our contact with the world as long as both we and the objects of our perception stay “lived-through movement”⁷.

Katarzyna Kobro spatio-temporal rhythms

The book of Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński *Spatial Composition. Calculation of Space-Time Rhythm* (1931) was mostly an outline of the principles of Unism, but it went beyond painting, expanding into sculpture and architecture. Sculpture, unlike painting, is a spatial art in which not solids and masses but rhythms organize the sculptural space. The spatio-temporal rhythm is the result of the impact of the depth of a work of art. The depth is hidden from any location, from which we see the work. By moving around, we see new shapes and depth becomes the width, revealing new, previously unseen aspects of the art work, and other shapes that previously were the width, become the depth.

The rhythm was one of the key problems of modernism, on the one hand expressing the desire to organize the world in a defined structure, on the other hand the rhythm was treated biologically and mechanically as an idea of evolution. The rhythm was primarily create universalist hope to build a homogeneous picture of the world of nature, production, and human. It was supposed to be the world structured by the

⁶ Modernist aspects of Morris’s work was defined by Micheal Fried who in *Art and Objecthood* commented Minimalist’s ambition for aesthetic purity that modernism demanded – See: M. Fried, *Art and Object-hood*, [in:] *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. G. Battcock, Berkeley 1968, p. 127.

⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, London and New York 2002, p. 237.

power of rational and harmonious rules. Rhythm was also understood as a way of concretization of the space. The Avant-garde by deriving the rhythm from the body mechanics and physiology, introduce it in the space.

The history of Kobro's and Strzemiński's spatiotemporal composition is a kind of searching the possibilities of integration the body with the space. It was based on the dynamic model of interaction between the human and the world in a homogeneous space defined rhythmically by the body. Introduction to the works of art of the third dimension entails spatiotemporality, it means the variability of this work when viewing it from different angles, and therefore the sculpture is interpreted as a spatial rhythm, which takes place in time. We are exploring the space by acting within it – Kobro says. And further: "The indicative directions of human activities in space are: human static and vertical position, the level of environment we face from both sides of ourselves and the direction ahead, kind of move forward"⁸.

From Kobro's and Strzemiński's *Space composition* emerges the subject which hides a desire of the construction which experiences, learns and organizes the abolition of corporal depth and its shell that hides the individuality and the unconscious, and thus impeding the achievement of the ultimate unity. The body, with its sexuality, awareness and physicality caused most difficulties in the new perspective of spatiotemporal composition and inherently connected with them embodied human viewer.

The conception of rhythms in Kobro's sculpture has the paradoxical structure in the approach to the body. It is the theory in which the work of art is incomplete without the spectator's body (especially its movement in space) but at the same time this body caused the troubles by its idiomatic properties which should be subject to biomechanical socialization defined by the numerical parameters.

Kobro opposed surrealist paintings with their trembling pulse of rhythm which she treated as a bourgeois illusion, kind of narcosis to modern world sickness. "Intricate, whimsical line in surrealist art, reflects all the vibrations constituting an artist, but their justification is only in him – in his biology and physiology"⁹ – she writes in her functional art manifesto. To avoid this type of closure, Kobro has sought to

⁸ K. Kobro, W. Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Oblicza rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*, Łódź 1993, p. 38 (trans. K. Trzeciak).

⁹ Ibidem, p. 40.

embed the viewer's body in space not as a figure distinguishable from the background, autonomous and having individualized psyche but rather as a transparent subject covered by the universal rhythm of movement. Kobra sought in the material of the body the uniform numerical expression, whose rhythm can submit a harmonious human functional movements, even with its biological structure.

But this kind of perception theory has a paradoxical structure. If the status of sculpture depends on the viewer (and Kobra claimed that the fourth dimension of the sculpture, time, is added by the viewer), then his subjectivity brings to the reception of an artworks a number of unique factors. Such factors as emotional balance or spatial dimensions of the body remain outside the mathematical expression make difficult to achieve the spatiotemporal unity of sculpture and the viewer. The ideal spectator should therefore be transparent so that it can be seamlessly integrated with the space of sculpture. His body then organized by the logic of mechanical rhythms could interact with the space just as deprived of their uniqueness – sexuality and instincts.

Oskar Hansen and the open sculpture

Kobra's theory of sculpture emphasized the special status of the sculpture, which does not work at a distance (through narration or reproduction), but only through direct, multi-dimensional contact. Oskar Hansen, architect, designer, theoretician, pedagogue, painter and sculptor, born in 1922 referred to Kobra conception in his famous theory of Open Form. In 1959 in Open Form Manifesto he notes that contemporary sculpture is alien to each of us because above all those works are personal monuments to their authors and as such are not ready to absorb the changes and events taking place during the lifetime of the form.

Those monuments are the corollary of composing by way of closed form, in which the formal and often also the contextual components are fixed. They are passive towards changes in time. The moment they are born they become antiques [...] Closed form. The decision taken in my name. I am standing next to the process. There is no way to find your identity here – your own self. All these are somebody else's souvenirs, feelings, somebody else's houses and housing settlements¹⁰.

¹⁰ O. Hansen, *Forma otwarta*, „Przegląd Kulturalny” 1959, Vol. 5, No. 5, p. 5 (trans. K. Murawska-Muthesius), [online] <http://open-form.blogspot.com/2009/01/original-1959-open-form-manifesto.html>.

Hansen's manifesto is directed against the art of closed form and at the same time proposes a new quality of creation based on organic forms which, as Hansen notes:

[...] will awake the desire of existence for every one of us, it will help us to define ourselves and find ourselves in the space and time in which we live. (This new art) will become the space which suits our complex and yet not unexplored psyche, and it will become so because we will constitute the organic elements of this art¹¹.

The art of open form is a composition we work through, not only around. Diverse individuality, in all its randomness and bustling, will become the wealth of this space, its participant. The idea of Open Form is to harmoniously integrate Earth's biological life forms with the space of human activity. Respecting the recipient's individuality, Open Space art creates a spatial atmosphere conducive to reflection, thus opposing the art of a dominant object in space – the cult of dogmatic dictates. According to Hansen's theory, for the subjective experience of the sculpture, besides feeling of solid and weight of our own body we can include also a motion path and its rate of climb as well as psychomotor efficiency (e.g. sense of balance). The artist also claims that any object can be a sculptural form provided that compels the psychophysical activity. The famous example of such form is the memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau – *The Road* created in 1957. The radically innovative concept lay in negating the traditional notion of the monument, and instead treating the entire site of the former death camp as a monument in itself. Its central element was a black paved road about one kilometer long and 70 meters wide, cutting diagonally across the camp and petrifying everything in its path. All other remaining relics on both sides of the road – the barracks, the chimneys, the barbed wire fences, the railway ramp and the crematoriums – would be left to be consumed by the effects of time and entropy.

Minimal sculpture of Robert Morris

In his *Notes on Sculpture* (1966–1969) Robert Morris deals with the specific experience of sculpture as a work of art which makes a transition from optical to haptic and kinesthetic. Minimal sculpture creates

¹¹ Ibidem.

objects in the spectator's space and both his eye and body have to deal with this art work. The new art resigns from the overall perception of the work resigns from the overall perception of the work on the major search keys, so that the sculpture is felt rather than seen. One of the famous example of such experience, *Steam* (1967), which is a special type of fountain that gurgles underground and swells to an amorphous column of mist, which then dissipates, is a kind of anti-monument, as Morris notes: „*Steam* is just a lot of hot air which when we enter it, surrounds a white, absorbent blindness, wet shudder of steam claustrophobia and the caress of a warm stone in the foot”¹². This art exists only as an interaction with the spectator; his bodily experience which lets the sculpture be something more than just a hot air.

The most interesting connection between the concept of body and the sculptural experience Morris locates in the phenomenological mode of perception:

The object is but one of the terms in the newer esthetic. It is in some way more reflexive, because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and space¹³.

As Virginia Spivay claims, Morris thus posited that the viewer understands real space physically, constructing internal knowledge based on the phenomenological apprehension of other objects sharing the same space architectural surroundings, and conditions¹⁴.

Morris *Column* (1961) debuted, not in an art gallery, but at the Living Theater in New York in 1962. *Column* is a kind of performance – placed vertically on an empty stage, remained on end for three and-a-half minutes before being pulled over by a string held off stage. It then lay horizontally for another three and a half minutes before the lights went out and the performance ended. Wanting the object to appear to move of its own volition, Morris had intended to stand inside the hollow structure and fall over, causing it to topple. But during the rehearsal

¹² R. Morris, *Notes on Sculpture, part 1*, [online] <http://xarts.usfca.edu/~rbegehoefer/Fundamentals11/lecture/Morris.pdf>, p. 228.

¹³ V. Spivey, *Sites of Subjectivity: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and Dance*, “Dance Research Journal” 2003–2004, Vol. 35, No. 2, Vol. 36, No. 1, p. 122–123.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

he falls, suffered head injury and decided to replace himself with pull-string in the actual performance. Like a dancing body, the object “performed” a sequence of choreographed movements over a set period of time, reacting to conditions of material weight, gravity, and space. This kind of performance refers to his interests in movement choreography of dance. Linking up the role of object’s movement in his performance with sculptural objects he claimed:

Finding ways to get the body moving and having this movement be generated by the manipulation of objects so that the resultant movement became the dance was the challenge... *pace* the comparable *a priori* methods involved in construction to generate my sculptural objects of the early 1960s. This new structural armature opened up the making for me on both fronts – i.e., a kind of automation that foreclosed the ‘expression’ involved in pointing the toe (dance), or adding a little more on the left (sculpture) offered a new freedom¹⁵.

In his dances, like in sculpture, Morris challenged the authority of the spectator’s gaze by problematizing the relation between bodies and objects on stage. In *Site*, performed in 1964, visual artist Carolee Schneemann casts with sheets of four-by-eight foot plywood. The artist posed like Manet’s *Olympia* (nude and covered in white paint, she sat motionless throughout the performance) whilst Morris manipulated the wooden boards. Schneemann was subsumed by her status as an object – both as a passive female body displayed for the viewer’s gaze and as a recreation of a famous painting, an object of art. On the other hand, Morris’s panels acted anthropomorphically as performers. Ironically, they implied a human presence that the character of Schneemann as *Olympia* lacked completely. Morris pushed this ambiguity further by concealing his facial expressions with a mask that replicated his own features. *Site* thus forced its viewers to reconcile the anthropomorphism of the plywood panels with the neutral presence of the living performers.

Notes of Sculpture written simultaneously with Morris’s performances and sculpture of 1960s, the author described the phenomenological encounter the object with the observer’s body. In particular emphasized the role of object’s size explaining that “In the perception of relative size the human body enters into total the continuum of sizes

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

and establishes itself as a constant on this scale¹⁶. Morris distinguished two types of reception of sculpture dependent on the size of the object: Intimacy which is attached to an object in a fairly direct proportion as its size diminishes in relation to oneself and publicness associated with the increase in size relative to the human. Things on the monumental scale include more terms necessary for their apprehension than object smaller than the body, namely the literal space in which they exist and the kinesthetic demands placed upon the body.

Morris applied those thesis about object scale in most of his works in accordance to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty in which 'to perceive is to render one's self present to something through the body'. Let's take *The Plywood Show* from New York's Green Gallery 1964, which is an installation devoted entirely to the spare geometric constructions he had begun building in 1961. The visitors entered into the gallery and firstly passed beneath *Untitled (Corner Beam)* which was made of plywood and nails, hand-painted Merkin Pilgrim gray, and lacked any notable surface texture or detail. The visitor in the gallery thus engaged in a reflexive process of self-awareness based on the physical presence of the object that, like another person, shared his or her environment.

Yvonne Rainer, American dancer, choreographer and filmmaker who established in her dances an alternative relationship that resists subject/object dualism in favor of an intersubjective model (she exposed the artifice of her performance by treating the dancing body as a material object) described the effect Morris's works had on her challenging her own sense of space:

We take up space together [...] The exquisite containment of my body. I can't say it's euphoria or ecstasy [...] But yet still I have this strange sense of limits – physical limits – and it seems such an exquisite knowledge. Perfect containment. Something to do with a finely-tuned awareness of just how, what, something to do with my own particular mass and volume. It (or my body) occupies exactly as much space as it needs¹⁷.

Morris sculptures is no longer objectified by the viewer's gaze. The viewer is forced to recognize the artwork ability to define his own feeling of space. He or she is also entangled in an altered dynamics

¹⁶ R. Morris, *Notes on Sculpture, part 2*, [online] <http://xarts.usfca.edu/~rbegenhofer/Fundamentals11/lecture/Morris.pdf>, p. 230.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 125.

within sculptural encounter. This dynamics is based on the feeling, which Rainer called “seduction to drawn-out contemplation” based on interactive nature of the viewer's experience with Morris's sculpture.

Morris's 1960s practice allowed the category of sculpture to include performance, the body as material, process as well as product. All those elements and features made the important difference in the perception of sculpture not only by inclusion physical acts of experience but most of all by problematization the relations between the viewer's and the artworks body.

Conclusion: sculpture in between

All presented theories do not pretend to be a complete history of XXth century sculptural perception. They are only some points on the whole map of this phenomenon. But points which are showing the crucial problem of sculpture as an art work which sets between its own objectivity and viewer's subjectivity. Kopro, Hansen and Morris by using various theoretical concepts: rhythms, open structure or phenomenology defined the sculpture as an art dependent most of all on the viewer's body's movement.

Kopro's rhythm emphasize the paradoxes of including spectator's body in the experience of sculpture artwork. Ideal body experience should be based on transparent transmission in the space between viewer and sculpture in order not to violate the cohesiveness of an artwork. Therefore in this artistic vision the body should be stripped of its physicality to make mechanical rhythms possible and adequate. Hansen's open form is more inclusive as a project that respects the recipient's individuality. In his compositions human body's uniqueness determines sculptural senses to such an extent that redefines the concept of sculpture itself and make any object been sculptural form provided that compels body movement. Robert Morris sculptural performances expand the concept of sculpture even more; demonstrating to the viewer that they ‘establish selfhood by reconciling subjective agency with their own body's objectness’¹⁸ which includes idiomatic characters of each embodied subjectivity standing in between.

¹⁸ V. Spivey, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

Thanks to this physical activity the body redefined not only its own position in space but also constituted sculpture as an artwork that acquires its meanings only in between.

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Katarzyna Trzeciak – e-mail: k_trzeciak@o2.pl