

Artworks' Bodies

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Abstract: *In this paper, I shed some light on specific kind of experiences when the appreciator takes the artwork as having a body. I shall propose a framework which allows to conceptualise artworks' bodily dimension and which says something nontrivial about artworks and our relationship to them. I argue that some artworks are able to cast a specific sort of aesthetic atmosphere connected with their physical nature as well as appreciator's somatic consciousness. The existence of such atmospheres might be a reason for shifting our understanding of artworks and human relations to them.*

Keywords: *materialism, aesthetics, contemporary art, exhibitions.*

1. A Stranger in the Room

Imagine yourself visiting an art gallery. As a passionate art lover with a distinguished taste for modern and contemporary art, you have certain habits regarding appreciating works of art. It is early Wednesday morning, and you have intentionally chosen this specific time as you prefer to meet as few other visitors as possible. In your opinion, artworks should be appreciated fully without any distractions. In such a perfect environment, you're dwelling in the gallery enjoying aesthetic and artistic features of the exhibited pieces. Eventually, you come into a room and get caught by a strange feeling. You are looking around nervously and with a surprise realise you're alone in the room. However, the odd impression remains: you *do* feel someone else's presence. A bit confused, you realise that the only candidate for "the other" is the artwork displayed in the room. That is, you *feel* the artwork's physical presence, you feel it as having a *body*.

In this article, I would like to shed some light on the unusual experience described in the above paragraph, that is, when the appreciator experiences the artwork as having a body. In order to do so, I shall propose a framework which allows to conceptualise the artworks' bodily dimension and which says something nontrivial about artworks and our relationship to them. In short, my hypothesis is the following: at least some artworks have bodies. Although it may sound quite controversial, I believe there are reasons supporting this claim if we give the term "body" a specific meaning.

2. Close, but Not Close Enough

In order to explore the hypothesis that (some) artworks could have bodies, I propose to start

from identifying and briefly discussing the existing issues from philosophical aesthetics which take into account (not always explicitly) materiality of artworks and the kind of experience connected with it. I would like to consider just two examples thereof: (1) the nature of portraits and their role in our everyday life, as well as, (2) the case where someone loves a piece of art, respectively. Although, neither of these examples can be translated directly into my hypothesis, analysing them will help us set up a theoretical framework supporting my intuition and will bring our attention to the aspects of works of art that make us think that some art pieces have bodies, and how we should understand such an unintuitive claim.

In my house, there is a rather special photograph given to me by a close friend of mine Kamil. The photograph (taken by our mutual friend Filip) depicts me with Kamil sitting near our favourite tree in the park close to the area where we live. We both look very happy and quite exhausted. The photo was taken at the end of a full day and night of intensive celebration honouring his acceptance at the prestigious Lodz Film School. Every time I take a look at the photograph, good, wild memories vividly come back to me, but also, and most importantly, I think of my friend. The way in which he is depicted makes me think: “That’s the *real* him!”¹ The photograph is a portrait of my friend.

The situation described in the previous paragraph is—certainly—quite familiar to most people. We treasure portraits (mostly photographs, both analog and digital) of our family members, loved ones and friends. Cynthia Freeland has illuminated the very special nature of portraits and the complex experience of them in her celebrated book *Portraits and Persons* (2010). In a nutshell, her philosophical account of the art of portraiture² argues that portraits “provide us with an essential revelation of persons, of their very nature” (ibid., p. 43). That is, when looking at a portrait, we get a certain sense of authenticity: the person depicted is rightly represented in terms of gesture, facial expression or individuality (ibid.). Thanks to this function of portraiture, we might maintain “contact” with persons that we love or like even if they are far away or passed away some time ago.³

More analytically, Freeland formulates three conditions that have to be met for an object to qualify as a portrait. So, the portrait needs to present “(1) a recognizable physical body along with (2) an inner life (i.e., some sort of character and/or psychological or mental states), and (3) the ability to pose or to present oneself to be depicted in representation” (ibid., p. 74).⁴ Thus, if something is a portrait, then it gives the viewers a sense of the depicted person’s “essence”: her distinct features of character, body awareness, the way she is and/or the moral outlook of that person (ibid., p. 78 and p. 116).⁵ For example, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Lady with Ermine* (1489-90) depicts Cecilia Gallerani who was a mistress of Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. Gallerani is presented in a noble pose, as a wealthy and powerful woman. Without going deeply into the complex and interesting interpretation of the painting (see Pizzagalli 2006; Shell & Sironi 1992), we can easily notice that she is a bit lonely. There are no other people around her; the

1 Which is not always the case when I look at other photographs depicting him. Also, I doubt that it is the real me in the photo (or, at least, not to the same extent as my friend). In other words, I would say that the photograph is his portrait, but not mine. This raises the question of when a given photograph is a mere depiction of the person, and when it is able to become something more “serious”, that is, a portrait of that person. For the sake of simplicity, I decide not to address that question.

2 Portraiture, as a category, is a subset of depicting objects. So, it covers various art forms such as paintings, drawings or photography.

3 Ibid., p. 49. Freeland supports her claim with reference to Kendall Walton’s transparency thesis regarding photographs. It says, roughly, that when looking at a photograph, we indirectly *see* the objects depicted in it (“seeing-through-photography”). Cf. Walton (2008). However, it seems that Freeland extends this specific sense of “contact” to other forms of portraiture as well.

4 For another interesting account of portraiture, see also Maes (2015). Note, that the notion of body, as explained later, applies also to objects that are not of representational nature. I am using portraiture as a starting point for my further investigations.

5 *Nb.* Freeland claims that only persons can be portrayed. See p. 80.

background is in a minor colour, and her expression seems to be quite distanced. All of this clashes interestingly with the way she intimately strokes the ermine. Based on the painting, we might say something nontrivial about Gallerani's life.

Let me move to the second example derived from philosophical aesthetics. Undoubtedly, artworks can elicit serious emotional reactions. People like artworks, admire or contemplate them. On the other hand, some artworks evoke frustration, boredom or anxiety in their recipients. It is hard to remain neutral when it comes to art. And, because of that, art is a powerful tool that can be successfully used for social change or moral education (see e.g. Simontini 2018; Berger & Alfano 2016). There are people claiming to love particular works of art. Imagine for a moment that you are visiting the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. You have very carefully chosen a month, day and exact time for your visit to maximally limit the number of other visitors in order to enjoy the beauty of artworks there fully. While walking through the corridor, you overhear a lady saying "I return here every year. I just love Botticelli's *Primavera*! I can't take my eyes off it!" You might interpret the overheard confession as follows: the lady likes *Primavera* very much. That would not be very surprising since we often unproblematically use the phrase "I love *x*" while actually meaning "I really like *x*". We love skiing in Les Trois Vallées, drinking Priorat wine in Barcelona or eating chocolate noir in Turin in that way. However, the *Primavera* case seems to be different. What the lady actually meant was that she really loves Botticelli's masterpiece located at the Uffizi Gallery.

The issue of loving artworks seems to be an underdeveloped topic within the contemporary philosophical debate.⁶ Luckily, Anthony Cross has recently touched upon that issue when investigating the nature of obligations to artworks (2010). Starting from assessing the moral character of obligations to (all) artworks (he is quite critical of such a possibility), he claims that people have genuine obligations to those artworks they actually love (ibid., p. 87). The concept of love that is invoked by Cross is not entirely clear; notwithstanding, he makes an interesting observation when noting that "... we value works of art in much the same way that we value other persons" (ibid., p. 91). (*Nb.* Cross critically evaluates this claim.) I think this says something true about our relationship with works of art, and I propose to treat the mentioned passage as an invitation to broaden the scope of human love to artworks.⁷

Without a doubt, there are a number of various kinds of love: we love our partners, friends, kids or members of the local community, but in each case "love" means something a bit different (Helm 2005/2017). Since the theme of loving artworks is almost absent in philosophical aesthetics, and its framework has not been established yet, I propose to learn something about the issue in question from real-life cases, however rare. Agnieszka Piotrowska's critically acclaimed documentary *Married to the Eiffel Tower* (2008) is—as far as I can tell—the best artistic study on that theme, showing women falling in love with objects. Types of objects vary from person to person, and they have different sizes, textures, and designs. In the film, we see evidence for loving a katana or a bow, but also for loving the Berlin Wall, the Golden Gate or the Eiffel Tower, and at least the last two objects might count as pieces of architectural art. My intention is not to analyse the documentary's content nor to judge the viewpoint stated in the movie, but merely to pick up on interesting points that are shared by all of the heroines depicted there. Firstly, objects are given full-fledged agency similar to persons. That is, objects (including artworks) can feel, have moods, intentions, thoughts and are even able to save human lives (one of the

6 For a notable exception, see Maes (2017).

7 For the sake of simplicity, I'm leaving aside the (causal) relationship between obligations to artworks and loving them.

characters claims that she did not commit suicide *because* of her love for the Twin Towers). It is especially evident when people depicted in the documentary claim that they are very much in love with some objects: the portrayed characters believe that the objects love them back.⁸ Secondly, there is a sense of sexual appeal towards the loved objects. However, it is not always necessary and certainly goes beyond standardly understood fetishism. Lastly, the relationship with the loved object is taken very seriously. It is shown that the characters are deeply and genuinely emotionally engaged with loved objects: they can stand for them or communicate with them and feel “no difference” between them and human agents (Newman, Bartles & Smith 2016). Two of the depicted characters are even “married” to beloved objects—the Eiffel Tower and the Berlin Wall.

Now it is time for general remarks. As I mentioned earlier, the examples derived from philosophical aesthetics would help direct our attention into those aspects of artworks that support my main hypothesis, suggesting that at least some artworks could have bodies. Investigations into the nature of the art of portraiture tell us one important thing: it is not the artwork in itself that has a “body”, but rather the person that is depicted in the portrait. Or, more analytically, if we feel someone’s presence in the gallery room, it is the person depicted in the portrait, rather than the piece of art as it is. The overall—without a doubt—special and intensive experiences elicited by portraits are connected mainly with the portrayed persons. That is, if we feel a certain “mood” or “air” when experiencing an artwork, it is because we can grasp the “mood” or “air” of the portrayed person. A positive lesson learned from focusing on portraits is that we are quite sure that artworks can cause such a feeling, and we get a good explanation of that fact. The position suggested by me provides a more radical and (and surely controversial) view that it is truly possible for someone to love an artwork. It presupposes that we are interested in not *only* what is depicted by the object (for example, a person, a landscape) but also in the work itself. People love artworks in their totalities, not only what is represented/symbolized by them. Even if the story from *Married to the Eiffel Tower* is highly controversial, it says something true about loving artworks (not only as sexual objects): if we love a piece of art, we feel like it has its own body.⁹ Returning to the *Primavera* example, it would be quite strange to love that masterpiece without admitting its autonomy (though we do not need to claim that it has any agency or personality). It is worth noting that when we love a work of art, we are likely to change our manner of thinking about it—including the vocabulary we use. That is, I bet that we are more likely to say that the work is “hurt” or “raped” rather than “damaged” or “misinterpreted”, and that shift takes place quite naturally, without one even fully noticing it.

3. Atmospheres

Places have atmospheres: a narrow, dark street could be frightening, a mountain view sublime, while a clearing feels peaceful and safe. Atmospheres are elusive “entities” yet powerful and irresistible: it is hard to avoid them, and they have an impact on our lives. In this section, I shall introduce the concept of “atmosphere” as an aesthetic concept described and defended by Gernot Böhme in his book *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* which has recently been published in

8 *Nb.* It is subject to change in due course: it is possible to “break up” with an object. In such a case, both persons and objects suffer from emotional coldness.

9 The feeling of bodily presence of the artwork is not necessarily connected with the fact that a human being is depicted by that artwork. It is true that in such cases it would be “natural” to link that feeling with the person depicted (e.g. portraits). However, in this paper an approach suggested by me is more ecumenical. That is, I suggest that some artworks have bodies and that fact is fairly independent from their representational nature (e.g. an abstract painting could have a body although it does not depict any person).

English (2017).¹⁰ In the next section, I will use that concept as well as what has been established so far to support the claim concerning artworks' bodies.

According to Böhme, "Atmosphere is what relates objective factors and constellations of the environment with my bodily feeling in that environment. That is: atmosphere is what is in between, what mediates the two sides." (ibid., 20). Atmospheres are "placed" between the subject and object. Their ontological status is then quite peculiar. On the one hand, they are quasi-objective: they could be shared with other people, or at least they are inter-subjective to some extent (ibid., 70; see also Griffero 2014). For example, imagine that you intrude upon a departmental meeting without being formally invited. As a student, you might feel intimidated, and the atmosphere in the room might be quite tense. Or, when visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, you get the impression that the place you are in is very solemn and serious. At that point, it is not surprising if we note that other students or pilgrims feel the atmospheres quite similarly. Thanks to the fact that atmospheres are essentially rooted in the sharable features of the environment, e.g., a room is spacious, a landscape is vivid, a valley is cloudy, people can discuss and share their impressions with others. I would like to add one qualification: when you agree on the features of a certain atmosphere, its influence is strengthened. For example, if your companion says "That street is so dark. I don't feel safe here!", and you concur, then the street might seem even more hostile to both of you.¹¹ Moreover, atmospheres can be created. It is not something new that some places are intentionally designed to elicit a certain kind of impression. This is especially true when it comes to, for example, tourist practices (i.e. some designated spots to admire the natural surrounding like a picturesque landscape) or architecture (i.e. monuments or squares that highlight royal power) to name just a few.

On the other hand, atmospheres are extremely vague, indeterminate and intangible (Böhme 2017, p. 69).¹² How we perceive a particular place or object depends on who we are, what experiences we embraced throughout our lives and our general approach to the surroundings. That is, atmospheres are entirely subjective since "one must expose oneself to them" (ibid., p. 70).¹³ It is difficult to imagine the atmosphere of the place without actually being there. What is more, we often struggle with explaining the sense of an atmosphere of a place to individuals who have not experienced it. For example, after visiting the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, you say to a friend "Giotto's frescos are truly amazing!"; but it seems unlikely that he could grasp the general aura of Giotto's artworks without seeing them. In atmospheres, we perceive not only objective features of objects, but also objects' "ekstases" that are "the expressive forms of things" (Böhme 2017, p. 95). That is, objects not only have properties (e.g., being blue) but also these properties relate "to the way in which they radiate outwards into space" (ibid.).

Another important characteristic of atmospheres is that they fill spaces. People enter a place that is filled with a certain atmosphere, and usually, its radius is limited to that place. For example, if you are at a local pub during Christmastime, you probably feel an atmosphere of joy and happiness. The atmosphere is "spatially" extended throughout the pub and, maybe, its proximate exterior. So, you cannot feel that atmosphere on the opposite side of the street. However, when you exit the pub, you might be fuelled with its atmosphere. That is, "atmospheres are apprehended as powers which affect the subject; they have the tendency to induce in the

10 Atmospheres are sometimes defined also as "half-entities". See e.g. Grant (2013, p. 21).

11 It does not mean, of course, that the street itself gets any "new" features. However, the atmosphere of danger becomes increasingly tense.

12 However, at the same time, they claimed to be as real as solid entities. See Griffero (2014, p. 10).

13 Juhani Pallasmaa (2014) notes that when someone is in an atmosphere she or he grasps its "essence" immediately. That is, she or he experience first the atmosphere as a totality, and then (if at all) its "elements".

subject a characteristic mood” (ibid., 88). It should be noted that Böhme’s proposal may be easily undermined by claiming that it lacks the critical dimension of the aesthetic.¹⁴ That is, focusing on the very elusive notion of “atmospheres”, we are not able to give any objective criteria for appreciating atmospheres. I think that is quite true. However, it is not a threat to Böhme’s theory itself. He intentionally distances himself from the aesthetics concentrated on formulating aesthetic judgements and focuses instead on aesthetic experiences (Böhme 2017, pp. 43-46). The primary aim of the aesthetics of atmospheres is to describe people’s aesthetic reactions to atmospheres and their role in shaping our perception.

4. Bodies

So, finally, what does it mean that some artworks have bodies? Or, what are artworks’ bodies? The most intuitive answer to these questions is to claim that “body” is nothing more than another way to say “medium”.¹⁵ That is, by “body” we refer—maybe a bit metaphorically—to artworks’ materiality in general. And if so, since all artworks have mediums, then all artworks have bodies. The answer sounds elegant and straightforward as it provides a unifying solution by employing an already well-established conceptual framework for our problem. Intuitive as it is, however, it does not explain the particular situation (and experience) described in the opening section of this essay, namely, that some artworks are experienced as being *present* in a different way than other art-works. The difference is not automatically rooted in the medium itself, as two artworks made from the same sort of medium (say, marble) may be experienced entirely differently—the first one might make one feel like it has a body, whereas the second might not.

Taking into account the above, I shall propose an alternative view for artworks’ bodies. I suggest that when we say “I feel that this artwork has a body”, we really refer to the special aura of that artwork. In other words, we mean that such a piece of art casts a special atmosphere.¹⁶ The key point here is that atmospheres, as aesthetic phenomena, are essentially bodily feelings. According to Böhme, “[t]o perceive aura is to absorb it into one’s bodily state of being. What is perceived is an indeterminate spatially extended quality of feeling” (Böhme 2017, p. 54). He also notes that “atmospheres are evidently what are experienced in bodily presence in relation to persons and things or in spaces” (ibid.). Böhme’s proposal renders to the fact that atmospheres emanate from objects and fill spaces around them. People are bodily aware of atmospheres thanks to objects’ ekstases and change the mood when entering a particular atmosphere. I accept this, but I think that in the case of artworks we can nuance this view a bit more. Atmospheres are bodily feelings and may be noticed by individuals only when they are aware of their bodily presence in the world. The same is true when we feel an atmosphere cast by another person. For example, when we accidentally run into our ex-partner and get an impression of discomfort or when someone is welcoming a beloved friend after a long time apart and feels happiness.¹⁷ Both cases presuppose that we are bodily aware of the presence of the other person and we react (also bodily) to them because they have bodies as well. I hope it is acceptable to draw an analogical line between persons and artworks. Sometimes we react to artworks in such a way that enables us to experience *our* bodily nature, that we are engaged with the world primarily with our flesh

14 *Nb.* Sometimes taking care of that dimension in doing aesthetics is not the most important thing. See e.g. Leddy (2012).

15 I refer here to the *physical* medium and omit the issue of *artistic* medium, as the latter is not relevant for the purposes of this essay. See Davies (2001, p. 181).

16 It seems true that some artworks can cause atmospheres. See Pallasmaa (2014, p. 233); Griffero (2014, p. 83).

17 However, it should be noted that it is still hard to define when, (or, more precisely, under which circumstances), a person causes an atmosphere. This might be defined by the person of whom the atmosphere we feel *and* the recipient of that atmosphere as well.

and encountering other bodies as well. This kind of feeling—which is not automatically aesthetic appreciation—reflects, in its essence, to the same extent both on subject and object. In other words, an artwork's body is, in fact, a (specific) kind of atmosphere that is cast by that artwork. However, it is not only a matter of how the work works. We must remember that atmospheres are “placed” between subjects and objects. And if this is true, then also human reactions to objects (here, artworks) are not neutral for designing a certain kind of atmosphere. I do not want to say that people “project”¹⁸ their bodies onto artworks, but rather I would like to stress that people's body consciousness is questioned in such a way by artworks that we perceive them as having bodies as well.¹⁹ To sum up, artworks' bodies are their atmospheres.²⁰

Obviously, not every artwork has a body. It is rather an unusual situation when experiencing art. So, what are the criteria for obtaining/designing this kind of atmosphere? As it has been stated earlier, the aesthetics of atmospheres is not focused on formulating frameworks for critical discourse. Appreciating this standpoint, however, I hope to provide an account of some general tendencies that facilitate the existence of artworks' bodies.²¹

Firstly, it seems that—using Nelson Goodman's terminology (1976)—autographic works of art are more likely to cast such an atmosphere. Naturally, experiencing the majority of allographic artworks allows us to experience aesthetic atmospheres as well. For example, reading a Gothic novel in my house may create an atmosphere of horror in my shadowed living room. Notwithstanding, having just one and only one instantiation of an artwork (e.g., a painting) gives an impression that the work is located *here* and *now*, in *this* space and at that time. An artwork's uniqueness fosters the existence of its “body” because I, as a person and art appreciator, have only one body and the same (as I feel it) goes for the artwork.

Secondly, the way in which an artwork is physically present in the space also has some importance. Three-dimensional objects, such as sculptures, are more similar to our own bodies (even if they are very different) than paintings (even if they are quite similar to humans—I mean portraits, for example). This is obviously because some objects arrange space around them “better” than other artifacts. Sculptures are (usually) more “enforcing” if you compare them to drawings or landscape paintings. As a result, a place is created which means that the spatial surroundings of the artwork become meaningful (Haapala 2005).

Thirdly, artworks connected with the so-called lower senses (touch, smell and taste) also seem to favour the existence of bodies. If you extend the notion of arthood to a wide range of artifacts, such as fine clothing design, then it would be even more intuitive. Artworks, traditionally speaking, are “distanced” from appreciators due to the fact that we experience them via the so-called higher senses (sight and hearing). And these are the senses of distance which (supposedly) make them more objective and intellectual, as opposed to the lower senses that are (allegedly) proximal and subjective (see Korsmeyer 1999). Experiencing an artwork via the lower senses might reinforce the possibility of gaining the artwork's body (designing the atmosphere). For example, using your favourite piece of design, say, a Hans Wegner chair is inevitably connected with bodily involvement in its function. Naturally, this does not mean

18 Surely, there are a number of artworks questioning human bodily dimensions in a more direct way. For example, body performances. See Heinrich (2012).

19 Please note that neither do I claim here that artworks have the same kind of bodies as humans nor that they enjoy any full-blooded personality and/or consciousness.

20 Again, not every aura is an artwork's body. Aura is a more general and heterogeneous category, whereas bodies refer to specific artistic atmospheres that invite us to experience and understand artworks in their totalities as something autonomous and fully present in the space.

21 The list is obviously not final. It is rather a phenomenological question as to whether a given person feels the bodily presence of the work of art (its special atmosphere).

that the chair feels like having a body. However, the situation might be different if someone *else* is using your chair. It is possible for you to *feel* that your chair does not want to be used by other persons. Quite analogically, someone could have a similar impression when wearing their best friend's cardigan. It may fit very well. However, they might feel as if they “aren't in their own skin” as the cardigan is the visual signature of that friend.

In the end, it is worth considering the possible advantages (both theoretical and practical) of accepting the claim that some artworks have bodies. I think that my hypothesis, although roughly stated and clearly needing further development, is valuable for a number of reasons. First of all, it sheds light on the rather strange experience of artworks—when the appreciator feels someone's presence, but there is no other human being in the room. That experience might be not frequent, but it allows us to conceptualise artworks in terms going beyond the concept of physical medium. Artworks seen in that way are more “autonomous”.²² And people are capable of appreciating that. Secondly, thanks to that, it provides another reason for postulating the genuine rights of artworks. Artistic artifacts are traditionally seen as vehicles for human intentions and emotions, and because of that, we should respect them. Genuine rights of artworks ought to be rooted in artworks, not in artists (creators). Maybe we should be able to value them not only for the aesthetic pleasures they give us but also for the works as they *are*, even if they are not original, sublime or beautiful. Thirdly, as one of the heroines depicted in *Married to the Eiffel Tower* says, “[p]eople love objects for practical purposes. This is why they don't see the soul of the object.” Perhaps the heroine is telling us a profound truth: if we would like to really get an object's (artwork's) soul, its essence, then we should treat it like one of us, and this presupposes perceiving it as if were a body. This is because we are, as humans, conscious bodies (Shusterman 2012).

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In this paper, I have tried to enumerate reasons supporting the hypothesis of artworks' bodily dimension. That is, I suggested that some artworks could be experienced as having *bodies*. In other words, these artworks are able to cast a specific sort of aesthetic atmosphere connected with their physical nature (going beyond “mere” medium) as well as the appreciator's somatic consciousness. The existence of such atmospheres might be a plea for shifting our understanding of art-works (not purely in objectifying terms) and human relations to them (as something intimate).

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22 Here I mean some kind of phenomenological autonomy—that the work is really “there” and felt as independent of the spectator. I do not refer here to, for example, aesthetic autonomy (also involving the autonomy of aesthetic judgement).

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