

To be certain
of our own
existence,
we need
the objects,
the gestures,
and the
words.

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Performative Objects

Project website:

www.icaros.org/en

Cover: Herta Müller, Nobel Lecture in Literature, 2009



Abstract

Hypotheses and objectives

The authoritarian figure of the artist is the undead of art. Even in participative practices, the audience and their contributions – ideas, actions, bodies – mostly do not become the sources of a connectable communication, but just another material within the creative process controlled by the artist. My project aims to fill this gap. I am convinced that art can increase its innovative options and its complexity if it makes itself interdependent from reception and opens up to actual co-production. For such approaches, the project uses the term 'political forms'. *It demonstrates empirically and analyses theoretically how and with which artistic, social, and epistemological consequences a decentralised creation of aesthetic 'sense' can succeed.*

Methods

For this purpose, the study develops an infrastructure of sculptural elements which participants can flexibly use and reshape, move, combine, alter, and rearrange without any directives. Their performative potential will be tested and documented in living labs with interdisciplinary partners who are invited to interact individually with the material. Participatory observation and in-depth interviews will reflect on the question: *How do 'performative objects' instigate sculptural acts and situations, and which parameters guide the aesthetic decisions in this process?*

Theoretical framework

The project operates from a praxeological perspective. Important impulses are given by theoretical proposals which discuss aesthetic meaning as the result of practical processes and emphasise the embodiment of aesthetic experience,^a as well as by concepts that situate objects as social agents in an interdependent network of actions, like the actor-network theory,^b the idea of quasi-objects,^c boundary objects,^d or the affordance of things.^e

Level of innovation

In combining theoretical framing, artistic practice, and empirical control, the project pursues four complementary goals:

- (1) It proposes an innovative, object-based methodology of artistic research by introducing a unique research inventory into empirical aesthetics, centred on sculptural modules that serve both as catalysts and analytical instruments of creative action.
- (2) It provides fundamental insights into the process of collaborative 'sense'-making.
- (3) By posing programmatic questions on an alternative presentation, distribution, and economy of art, it investigates the emancipative potential, but also the exclusive mechanisms of artistic practices that – depending on education, socialisation, time of their potential audiences – create new opportunities for participation as well as new access barriers.
- (4) As a sustainable project, it preserves the object corpus for follow-up research or for public use both as an analogue collection and a digital repository.

Primary researchers

The study is designed as an individual research, in collaboration with advisors from museological, technical, and psychological fields of expertise.

NOTES

- a cf. Julia Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, 2012 (orig. 2003); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, 2008 (orig. 2004); Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 2017 (orig. 2013); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Präsenz*, 2012; Georg Bertram, *Art as Human Practice. An Aesthetics*, 2019 (orig. 2014)
- b Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency*, 1998; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social – An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 2005
- c Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, 1982 (orig. 1980)
- d Susan Leigh Star, James R. Griesemer, *Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39*, in: *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 19 no. 3 (Aug. 1989), pp. 387–420
- e James J. Gibson: *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 1979; Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (orig. *The Psychology of Everyday Things*), 1988



Contents

Those who dance	1
I Assumptions, hypotheses, objectives, questions	2
1 Authorian, authoritarian, and political form	2
2 Central hypotheses	4
3 Objectives, research questions, and programme	5
Studio: Development of performative objects – Lab: Collaborative workshops – Sensors: Theoretical reflection – Platform: Educational programme – Archive: Sustainable research	
II Methodology	6
1 Studio: Performative Objects	6
Gestures – Form – Complexity – Object status – Context	
2 Lab: Elicitation through Performative Objects (EPOS)	8
Empirical aesthetics – Object-based research – Living lab: Experiment, observation, description, documentation, interview – Research horizons: Sense, reflexivity, contingency, complexity – Quality management	
3 Sensors: Theoretical reflection	12
Presentation – Economy – Inclusion and exclusion – Aesthetic competence	
III State of research and theoretical context	13
1 Process: Dissolution of the work	14
2 Post-iconics: Dissolution of the image	15
3 Participation: Dissolution of the artist	16
IV Level of innovation	17
References	

Those who dance are thought mad by those who hear not the music

[1] When this concept took shape last year (2022), the 59th Venice Art Biennale and especially the controversial Documenta 15 dominated discussions in the art world. In Venice, curator Cecilia Alemani proclaimed the end of a human-focused epoch, dedicating her exhibition to artists who “cultivate a sense of kinship between [...] the organic and inorganic”, crossing “the boundaries between bodies and objects.”¹ In another way, *ruangrupa*, the curators of Documenta, tried to shift the balance between centre and periphery, between the individual and the whole (and involuntarily showed how distributed control may lead to collective irresponsibility). *ruangrupa* chose not to invite any individual artists, but collectives and initiatives were invited that were based on a “community-oriented model of sustainability [...] in which resources, ideas or knowledge are shared, as well as social participation.”² What is common to both approaches is the conviction that contemporary art must understand itself as a social, political, and ecological system that directs its attention to a broader, more diverse range of actors and addressees. Artists do not become superfluous; but their role changes. These are considerations that interest me very much as an art historian – and which affect me directly as an artist. Even though I have always tried to produce works that are unstable and variable, the question remains whether it is not possible to somehow transfer their inherent performative restlessness to the recipients and to involve them into the artistic process – but rather as autonomous co-creators than as mere spectators or choreographed participants. I would be happy to see people dance in my exhibitions, just not necessarily to my tune.

This is where the idea of ‘performative objects’ comes in. My project realises and investigates a collaborative form of artistic practice in which participants can flexibly use and reshape a given sculptural infrastructure. The calculated loss of artistic control aims at an emancipation of the ‘viewers’ who may employ their individual aesthetic potentials and experience themselves as authors of meaning. Performative objects liquify the artistic work but are nevertheless decidedly sculptural in that they refuse to fully dissolve the material dimension of art in communication and action. They employ objects as means of reflection that store aesthetic operations and open them up to debate and critique – thus not only creating focal points for critical interventions, but representing political forms in themselves.

This concept stands out from comparable approaches in two ways: While it sees itself as a contribution to an empirical aesthetics,³ it does not, however, as neuroaesthetics does,

1 statement by Cecilia Alemani, accessed 31 May 2022, <www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/statement-cecilia-alemani>

2 statement by ruangrupa, accessed 31 May 2022, <www.documenta-fifteen.de/en/about/>

3 Eugen Wassiliwizky, Winfried Menninghaus, Why and How Should Cognitive Science Care about Aesthetics?, in: Trends in Cognitive Sciences, June 2021, vol. 25, no. 6

examine aesthetic experience as a biologically explainable and thus universal phenomenon,⁴ but as a mode of perception along socially mediated and learned cultural codes. Secondly, it undermines the false distinction between reception and production aesthetics by practically and analytically interweaving both levels: as *productive reception* that reacts to existing artistic sense in the form of *visible* aesthetic action – and thus in turn generates another connectable aesthetic communication.

The study suggests both an artistic and a theoretical yield. It aims (1) to design and practically apply what I call ‘political forms’, (2) to develop and test a novel methodology for their assessment and evaluation, and (3) to discuss conclusions for participative art.

I Assumptions, hypotheses, objectives, questions

1 Authorian, authoritarian, and political form

[2] “The things I make are variable, as simple as possible, reproducible. They are components of a space; (...) they can always be rearranged into new combinations or positions. Thus, they alter the space. I leave this alteration to the consumer who thereby again and anew participates in the creation.”⁵ When artist Charlotte Posenenske published these reflections in the magazine *Art International* in 1968, she had been experimenting for well over a year with her series of *Vierkantrohre* (square tubes), a set of six stereometric hollow bars made of thin sheet steel that could be assembled into a wide variety of formations not specified by the artist. The completion of the installation was thus left to the respective exhibition curators, gallery owners, or buyers – not arbitrarily, but freely within the possibilities given by the elements. Posenenske’s commentary, which at the same time marked her farewell to art, referred primarily to this series of works.⁶ Disillusioned by the limited social impact of her work (which she considered to be political, i. e. targeting social conditions), she wrote: “It is painful for me to face the fact that art cannot contribute to the solution of urgent social problems.”⁷ A few years earlier, in 1962, Umberto Eco’s study *Opera aperta* (The Open Work) had presented an aesthetic blueprint that Posenenske’s works seem to be a radical realisation of.⁸ In fact, when Eco speaks of “works of art in motion”,⁹ he does not have in mind an actual movement of the work or the viewer, but rather a dynamics of possible interrelations of signs

4 Christian Tewes, Die Konstitution ästhetischer Erfahrung aus der Perspektive der Neuroästhetik, in: Ludger Schwarte (ed.), VIII. congress of the German Society for Aesthetics 2011, vol. 2: Experimentelle Ästhetik

5 Charlotte Posenenske, Statement in: *Art International*, XII/5, May 1968 (cited in: Burkhard Brunn (ed.), Charlotte Posenenske: manifesto, 2012, p. 7)

6 Other series, such as the *Reliefs* (reliefs, 1966/67) and the *Drehflügel* (revolving doors, 1967/68), have a very limited participatory approach.

7 Posenenske 1968 (Brunn 2012, p. 7)

8 Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta*, 1962 (German translation published in 1977, English translation in 1989)

9 Eco 1977 (orig. 1962), p. 42

and symbols within the work; but for him, too, it is the viewers who complete the work through their reception. Eco conceives the contemporary work of art as an ambiguous “system of relations”¹⁰ that initiates communication with the observer: The structures of the work provide a certain tendency of meaning, but are in turn read contextually, namely depending on the culture, socialisation, and experience of the recipient. Thus, for Eco, openness does not mean: arbitrariness of interpretation, but: reciprocal binding of meaning and interpretation.

[3] It is remarkable that Eco’s aesthetics, although emphasising the participation of the recipient, leaves the authoritarian figure of the artist fundamentally untouched. It is tacitly presupposed that an artist creates the work autonomously, as a materially unchangeable object, and that the recipient remains excluded from this process. Artistic control over the meaning of the work is only limited by the fact that the work and the viewer remain ultimately inaccessible to each other – the viewer has no command over the substance of the work, the work has no command over the viewer’s preconditions for observation – and that meaningful, ‘sense’-making communication nevertheless comes about. ‘Sense’ (*Sinn*) here means that the recipients can ‘do something’ (*etwas anfangen*) with what is presented, can make it the starting point for their own continuation of meaning. In terms of systems theory, one could formulate: The artwork’s communicative offer is connectable (*anschlussfähig*); and this also means: open for deviating connections. Interestingly, however, Luhmann’s system theory shows that the immanent ambiguity of the work does not necessarily have to aim at an emancipation of the audience. Like Eco, Luhmann conceives the work as a structure of relations between communicative elements. As the number of elements increases, the totality of their possible relations can no longer be handled by the artist. The complexity of the work (but not the disposition of the observer) creates a surplus of possibilities¹¹ – the work contains more possible meaning than the artist has put into it.¹²

What I find objectionable, in Eco as in Luhmann: the freedom of the observers is merely the freedom to draw their own conclusions. But the fact that thoughts are free is not due to the work, but to the nature of things. In this sense, freedom of thought – but not freedom of action – exists even in the most repressive systems, simply because you can’t see into people’s heads. In art, such freedom of interpretation is not the freedom of one’s own aesthetic expression, of an alternative use, of an evident change, expansion or continuation of the work. This is true not least of many participatory and collaborative formats that have repeatedly aimed at this gap since the 1960s and attempted to redistribute artistic involvement. Even with an eminent artist like Franz Erhard Walther, who introduced action as a work component into

10 Eco 1977 (orig. 1962), p. 14

11 Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 1995 (orig. 1984), p. 40

12 Luhmann 1995 (orig. 1984), p. 21 et seq., p. 25

sculpture, or more recently with Thomas Hirschhorn, Erwin Wurm, or Maria Eichhorn, the recipients ultimately function as performers of a more or less narrowly defined artistic script, with objects that allow only limited actions or, for reasons of conservation, come with specific usage restrictions. The bodies and the gestures of the audience do not actually become the creators, but elements of the work. Here too, only the artist's production is visible; reception is invisible. Only production is connectable communication; reception is a monologue. This eliminates the possibility for the artist to receive responses to his or her aesthetic contributions, and in this, too, artists resemble a regime that operates without criticism, without a corrective, immunised against contradiction.

Such an asymmetrical form of work, which is determined materially or in its performative execution solely by the artist, not conditionable by reception, might be called 'authorian' or even 'authoritarian form'. I contrast it with what I call 'political form': an artistic infrastructure that does not centre the control of practice on the artist, but allows for a decentralised – individual or collective – production of order and meaning. 'Political form' is always provisional (instead of fixed), reflexive (instead of one-sided), social (instead of isolating).

2 Central hypotheses

[4] The research project is guided by the conviction that art must (and can) allow experiments that break the mode of 'author(itar)ian' form and offer 'political' forms that shift the participation of the recipients towards a co-production visible in the work itself. In this sense, my project searches for ways to replace control with cooperation, product with process, unilateral with reciprocal conditioning. I do not conceive of aesthetic experience as a mode of – at best critical – consumption, but as creative involvement in an open-ended, provisional order for which I as the (initial) artist merely set the framework.

These are not moral demands. A project that, with regard to the accessibility of art, advocates the expansion of possibilities cannot scientifically aim for scarcity (for example, through the monopolisation of 'truth'). It is not about replacing a 'conventional' art with a supposedly better one; it is about difference. This does not mean progress, but the attempt to find an answer to the question of how to continue, in other words: how art can increase its capacity for innovation. In my view, there are two main relations of increase (*Steigerungsverhältnisse* in systems theory terminology):

Firstly, the audience's creative contributions serve as communicative feedback. They raise the reflexive level of the entire aesthetic communication and allow it to enrich itself with complexity. Secondly, the growing degrees of receptive freedom can lead to a greater probability that the artistic communication will be accepted (at least as long as this freedom is perceived as a gain in experience and not as overstress). Paradoxically, the emancipation of

the ‘viewer’ corresponds to an expansion of options on the part of the artists as well, who obtain new possibilities to differentiate forms and gradations of their own loss of control and to offer exactly this as their specific artistic achievement.

3 Objectives, research questions, and programme → table 2 (appendix)

[5] The project promises genuine research through art: As a contribution to a material-based research, it introduces ‘performative objects’ as a toolkit for cooperative creation, empirical exploration, and theoretical reflection. As an artistic research, it simultaneously uses the forms it invents as heuristic instruments, thus analysing itself by its own means. –

The project unfolds in five interrelated modules:

[6] A) *Studio: Development of performative objects* (→ nos. 11–16). In a first working phase, I conceive and realise a comprehensive corpus of ‘performative objects’, starting from an index of gestures that these objects are supposed to enable. They can be touched, moved, worn on and by the body, arranged in space, and combined with each other. According to the idea of *open source*, they might also be adapted for and from other contexts, copied or altered. Where possible, the decentralised reproducibility of the objects is to be facilitated through the use of additive manufacturing techniques (3D printing).

[7] B) *Lab: Collaborative workshops* (→ nos. 17–21). In a second, collaborative phase, this performative potential will be practically tested in explorative workshops (*research cells*) with partners from different disciplines and selected audiences, taking the form of a living lab that combines close observation, description, and documentation along with qualitative in-depth interviews. The focus of this project stage is on the questions of how ‘performative objects’ instigate sculptural acts, which specific constellations and activities the elements allow for, which parameters guide the aesthetic decisions in each individual case and how the contingency of an artistic proposal is transformed into participatory complexity so that aesthetic order emerges (→ no. 20).

[8] C) *Platform: Educational programme*. Wherever possible, the creative process and its results will be made public in the form of a presentation, performance or lecture, accompanied by a series of public conversations with the participants and supported by information material.

[9] D) *Sensors: Theoretical reflection* (→ nos. 22–25). The findings from the second project phase serve as the basis for a theoretical embedding of my approach and for drawing conclusions on its aesthetic, epistemological, and social impact. Issues that arise are the emancipative potential, but also the exclusive mechanisms of an art that requires resources of reception (such as time or cultural capital) which are unequally distributed in society (→ nos. 24 and 25). Also the effects of ‘openness’ – the incompleteness and the unlimited circulation of

‘works’ – on their economic value (→ no. 23) and the formats of their presentation (→ no. 22) need to be discussed. This reflection can be used in a twofold way: as the foundation for a model of aesthetic experience in participatory practices – and to formulate demands for the organisation of a contemporary art system.

[10] E) *Archive: Sustainable research*. The objects developed within the project will remain permanently available for follow-up studies and public use. They will be indexed in detail – in text, images, and plans or, if additive manufacturing techniques are involved, as digital print files – , allowing the object fundus to be reproduced, but also supplemented, adapted, and refined by others. In accordance with the idea of open access, the website www.icaros.org has been set up as an online repository for all material produced within the project: objects, texts, the interviews, and representative insights into the workshop process. For a broader dissemination, the project results will also be posted on the SAR Research Catalogue (RC), a non-commercial publishing platform provided by the Society for Artistic Research that allows the weaving together of text, image, audio and video files.

II Methodology

1 Studio: Performative Objects

[11] ‘Performative objects’ are sculptural elements that can become means of aesthetic actions without these actions being predetermined or the artefacts necessarily suggesting them. What they all have in common is their communicative and community-building potential, in that they allow (but do not force) social action through collective reference to things.

[12] *Gestures*: Action is inherent in objects as a cause, a possibility, and a proposition at the same time and connects them on two sides with those who act: the human actors (who in conventional terminology are called ‘artists’ or ‘recipients’). Performativity thus serves as a bracket to describe productive and receptive activity in an identical way. The starting point of my research is an index of potential gestures which the objects allow, e. g. self-referential and external-referential gestures (folding – coupling) or hierarchising and levelling gestures (stacking – lining up). Depending on their specific form, objects can be hung, placed, laid, leaned, pushed, nested, joined, rolled, bent, wrapped and unwrapped, inserted, pulled out, pushed in, hooked, unhooked, condensed, dispersed, opened, closed.

[13] *Form*: ‘Performative objects’ are modular and serial. Their materials are industrial and everyday – aluminium, rubber, textile, pressboard, perspex, cardboard, linoleum, styrofoam, PVC. They are comparatively easy to produce and might – through additive manufacturing, for example – be reproduced independently of the ‘initial’ producer. Their dimensions allow them to be handled manually. Some objects are related to the body, individually wearable or suitable

for connecting two or more people physically or in action (coordination – confrontation). They enable more or less intimate relationships of showing – hiding, holding – letting go. Other objects can be connected to each other or used to structure space; constellations emerge through action and can be experienced through physical presence, creating relationships of closeness – distance, turning towards – turning away, above – below, inside – outside.

[14] *Complexity*: The objects are abstract, based on elementary geometric forms of limited complexity. The concept of complexity describes the density of decisions already made on the object (such as material, form, size) in relation to the decisions still possible (actions, couplings, changes). One could also say: it describes the relationship between a ‘sense’ (*Sinn*) already set and a still open horizon of ‘sense’, or: the degree of contingency. One of the essential challenges will be to balance precisely this relationship between definiteness and indeterminacy, between too much and too little of order. The white sheet of paper, the empty space, the promise of ‘everything is possible’ can stimulate creative solutions, but can also be experienced as unacceptable pressure to make decisions.

[15] *Object status*: Performative objects are thus open objects that are not formulated to a possible end. They retain sufficient contingency, both materially and semantically, in order to remain connectable to new elements and to integrate approaching actions, actors, neighbouring objects, and attributions of meaning. They are what in German is called *Halbzeug* (‘semi-products’) – in a very literal sense, but also in a Heideggerian sense as a hybrid between the artistic work and the *Zeug* (‘equipment’) that makes itself subservient: performative objects are functional, but not in terms of a practical everyday use, but as a means of a specifically aesthetic activity. Their integration into a spatial framework, into a network of relationships with other objects and into the participants’ actions relieves them of the imposition of being artworks in their own right. Rather, they serve as mediators and catalysts for what I call ‘sculptural acts’: the process of an individual or collective production of a provisional artistic order that places the objects in a temporary relationship with each other, with one’s own body or with the bodies of others.

[16] *Context*: In order to define the concept of ‘performative objects’ more precisely from an art historical perspective, there are various reference concepts that already have their own history of theory formation. Performative objects have certain overlaps with the *readymade*,¹³ an everyday object that, only through artistic action (but with no or only minimal change to its material form) becomes an anchor of aesthetic observation. From an ontological and economic point of view, there are similarities to the *multiple*¹⁴ which abolishes the dichotomy of original

13 Lars Blunck, Duchamps Readymade, 2017

14 Peter Weibel (ed.), Kunst ohne Original. Multiple und Sampling als Medium. Techno-Transformationen der Kunst, 1999

and copy and which allows – at least in principle – an unlimited edition. The spatial arrangement of objects is a strategy of decontextualisation and recontextualisation known from *collage* (montage, assemblage, sampling)¹⁵ and Appropriation Art.¹⁶ Important models for the *modularity* and *seriality* of performative objects can be found in Minimal Art (Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt). I have already mentioned Charlotte Posenenske and Franz Erhard Walther as pioneers for the aspect of *action* directed at things; in a similar way, objects are used in performance, sometimes as mere props (comparable to those of theatre),¹⁷ sometimes with the claim to possess, as auratically charged relics of the artistic event, the character of works of art (as in Joseph Beuys). Finally, from the non-artistic sphere, the reform pedagogical *material* concepts of Friedrich Fröbel (1782 – 1852) and Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) are of interest;¹⁸ both the ‘Fröbel gifts’ and the ‘Montessori materials’ pursue the idea of coupling bodily and intellectual activity in a purpose-free play that supplies itself with meaning.¹⁹

2 Lab: Elicitation through Performative Objects (EPOS)

[17] *Empirical aesthetics*: The project uses methods of qualitative social research to gain insights into motives, procedures, and decision-making criteria of creative action. While the first phase of the project focuses on the development of sculptural modules, the second phase uses experimental workshops to investigate the formation of aesthetic meaning and order made possible by performative objects. I cooperate with visual artists, architects, choreographers, dancers, performers, but also with pedagogues, psychologists, art theorists or social workers who are invited – individually or as a team – to engage with the performative material I provide for and to (inter-)act with it in their own approach, selection, form, and speed.

[18] *Object-based research*: Qualitative research methods that use objects as narrative and action-motivating means in interviews or observations are summarised in the social sciences under the term ‘object elicitation’ (also *object-based* or *object-aided research*).²⁰ The work along supporting materials is intended to focus the contributions of the probands, strengthen their emotional involvement and at the same time reduce distortions that lie in the presence of the interviewer or the observer (insofar as the proband does not interact with them but with the objects). A common method is the photo interview,²¹ but this focuses primarily on the

15 Katherine Hoffman (ed.), *Collage. Critical Views*, 1989; Brendan Taylor, *Collage. The Making of Modern Art*, 2004

16 Stefan Römer, *Künstlerische Strategien des Fake. Kritik von Original und Fälschung*, 2001

17 Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, 2003

18 Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten*, 1997

19 cf. on the motif of play also Ruth Sonderegger, *Für eine Ästhetik des Spiels. Hermeneutik, Dekonstruktion und der Eigensinn der Kunst*, 2000

20 Carla Willig, Reflections on the use of object elicitation, in: *Qualitative Psychology*, 4(3), 2017, pp. 211 – 222

21 Ulf Wuggenig, *Die Fotobefragung als projektives Verfahren*, in: *Angewandte Sozialforschung*, 16 (1/2), 1990, pp. 109 – 129

depictive, symbolic or informative content of the material. A research practice based on haptic objects in the narrower sense is rarer, whereby the boundary between actual research *through* objects and research *on* objects (for example in art history and archaeology) cannot always be sharply drawn. Their possible field of application is diverse and ranges from medical studies, migration research or research with children and adolescents²² to historical studies,²³ museology,²⁴ and design research.²⁵ The method presented here for analysing aesthetic practice and experience is intended to fit into this environment in the field of empirical aesthetics. I provisionally use the term *Elicitation through Performative Objects* (EPOS).

[19] *Living lab*: The research design takes inspiration from the practice-oriented concept of the *living lab* (or real-world experiments)²⁶ and Kurt Lewin's *action research*.²⁷ It is characterised by a sequence of self-contained research cells that examine the aesthetic practice of the probands in a multi-method approach through experiment, observation, description, documentation, and interview:

Experiment: Each workshop will be conducted with a single participant, usually in the spatial setting of the Mozarteum University or another art or cultural institution, where there is a depot and a 'demonstration room'²⁸ for the storage and activation of the objects. Each participant receives a detailed overview of the available objects well in advance of the workshop and has the opportunity to examine them during a visit to the depot. A time frame of one week is planned for each workshop itself. How the given space and time are used is up to the participants. They can select objects, arrange them, change them or use them performatively. They might take over and continue sculptural constellations of their predecessors or start with an empty space. They can let objects be used by selected guests, groups of people or even visitors to the institution. They can leave the demonstration room with the objects and use them in a private setting or place them in urban and natural spaces. They are also free to decide which phases of action are visible to the public and whether the

22 source references in Reitstätter / Fineder, 2021, section 3.1.3

23 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich et al., *Tangible Things. Making History Through Objects*, 2015; Piera Rossetto, *The materialities of belonging. Objects in / of exile across the Mediterranean*, in: *Mobile CultureStudies. The Journal*, 2021; Corinne Alexandre-Garner, Alexandra Galitzine-Lompet, *L'objet de la migration, le sujet en exil*, 2020

24 Kathleen H. Corriveau et al., *Living Laboratory. A Mutual Professional Development Model for Museum-based Research Partnerships*, 2015

25 Sonjia Iltanen, Päivi Topo, *Object elicitation in interviews about clothing design, ageing and dementia*, in: *Journal of Design Research*, 13(2), 2015, pp. 167–184

26 Matthias Groß, Holger Hoffmann-Riem, Wolfgang Krohn, *Realexperimente. Ökologische Gestaltungsprozesse in der Wissensgesellschaft*, 2015

27 Kurt Lewin, *Group Decision and Social Change*, in: T. M. Newcomb, E. E. Hartley (eds.), *Readings in social psychology*, 1952, pp. 459–473

28 The term is borrowed from El Lissitzky (1890–1941), who designed his 'Abstract Cabinet' in Hanover in 1926/27 as a 'demonstration room'. The exhibition room, only 23 square metres in size, served to present abstract works, some of which could be shifted by visitors on movable tableaux or covered by panels. As an early example of audience activation, Lissitzky's cabinet is of great interest for my investigation.

entire process, only certain intermediate steps, a final result (as an installation, a performance or in any other form), only a documentation or even nothing at all is presented publicly. A total of sixteen workshops are planned, split between two or three venues in different cities (Salzburg, Vienna, Munich).

Observation: I accompany the activities of the test persons in the form of open, if desired also participant observation. For me, too, the probands determine the extent and time of my presence, i. e. it is their decision whether the sculptural activity is observable for me as a process or only in snapshots. Gaps in observation must be addressed in conversation with the participants and, if possible, filled.

Description: I record the observations in notes, which are produced as ‘thick descriptions’ in the sense of Clifford Geertz.²⁹ Together with the performative objects themselves and the documentation, they serve as the basis for the interview.

Documentation: Processes, intermediate steps, and final results are recorded photographically or, if necessary, on film. Also sketches, inventories or action diagrams might be used as additional documentation techniques.³⁰

Interview: In the course or at the end of each workshop, I reflect on the experiences of the creative process together with the participants in narrative, explorative interviews. If possible, they are carried out as in situ ‘forays’ in order to create an object-guided link between conversation, reenactment, and multisensory perception.³¹ My own notes and documentations, but also reflection material of the actors (such as photographs, drawings, texts, video or audio recordings made during the workshop) enrich the interview basis in a multidimensional way.

[20] *Research horizons:* The densely focused, multi-method approach of an Elicitation through Performative Objects (EPOS) will provide authentic, first-hand insights into basic categories of the creative process under the conditions of a shared authorship. This will allow to develop an empirically based model of aesthetic experience, which on the one hand will guide the observation and interviews of the following workshops, and on the other hand will be tested, confirmed or modified with each new research cell. I understand aesthetic experience, in a provisional definition, as intensified, subjectively meaningful, self-purposeful perception. For the operationalisation of the term, categories based on the structural features of aesthetic

29 Clifford Geertz, Thick description. Toward an interpretive theory of culture, in: Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Culture. Selected Essays, 1973

30 cf. the suggestions for such notations – such as inventories, narrative drawings, subjective maps – in Günter Mey, Zugänge zur kindlichen Perspektive. Methoden der Kindheitsforschung. Forschungsbericht aus der Abteilung Psychologie im Institut für Sozialwissenschaften der Technischen Universität Berlin (Research report from the Department of Psychology at the Institute of Social Sciences at the Technical University of Berlin), no. 1, 2003

31 cf. as a methodological example Luise Reitsstätter, Martina Fineder, Der Ausstellungsinterviewrundgang (AIR) als Methode. Experimentelles Forschen mit Objekten am Beispiel der Wahrnehmung von Commons-Logiken (The Exhibition Interview Walk (EIW) as a Method: Experimental Research With Objects to Discover How Commons Logics Are Perceived), in: FQS (Forum: Qualitative Sozialforschung) 1, January 2021

experience proposed by Georg Peetz can be used (eg. surprise, fit / non-fit, enjoyment, tension / dissolution, immersion).³² The focus will be on the following issues:

Sense – or: How does aesthetic order emerge? The main question here is why and along which aspects the participants select or reject objects, realise placements, constellations, and actions and determine end points of the action. Which specific logic of selection is decisive? Is this structuring aspect set beforehand, or does it develop and stabilise in an emergent process? Why do different participants react differently to the same material? Why do some plastic gestures ‘make sense’ to the probands, others do not? Can ‘meaningful’ decisions be guided by the objects themselves (*affordance*), or do they result from external (social, biographical) dispositions? What role does one’s own corporeality play in the experience of aesthetic ‘sense’? And how communicable is what one experiences as meaningful?

Reflexivity – or: How does practice observe itself? To what extent are the participants aware of the conditions of practice in the creative process? Are alternatives noticed and tried out? How important are immanent forms of reflexivity (improvisation, intuition) versus explicit ones (planning, sketches)?

Contingency and complexity – or: How does openness become determination? How do the participants deal with the existing – or also: missing – determinations of the material? What density of given order do they perceive as a stimulating nucleus for their own connecting communication? At which point does helpful structuredness turn into patronising restriction? On the other hand, can an excess of openness make every possible decision seem arbitrary?

[21] *Quality management:* In order to ensure compliance with the scientific quality criteria, the empirical phase will be prepared through expert interviews and through exchange with other researchers; in particular, I am planning to consult the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Frankfurt a. M. (and here especially the Visual Neuroaesthetics Lab led by Dominik Welke and Edward A. Vessel). The observation, description, and conversation categories as well as the interview guide and the question catalogue are developed in cooperation with an advisor from the field of psychology (→ no. 40). Each workshop ends with an evaluation by the participants. Since the project is a qualitative study of potential, but not a statistical analysis, and therefore a strictly standardised survey situation is not necessary, it is possible to adapt the questionnaire and the observation guidelines in the course of the empirical phase. The findings of each research cell can therefore be fed into the subsequent cells, thus creating a learning, self-conditioning system in the sense of a PDCA (plan, do, check, adapt) cycle.

3 Sensors: Theoretical reflection

Besides these aesthetic questions, there are significant social and economic consequences of an art that is not centred on the artist and the artwork. My project will reflect on them theoretically as well as in conversation with the participants of each research cell. The following sections outline central dimensions of investigation to which the study will provide clarifying contributions.

[22] *Presentation – or: How does art show itself?* It is obvious that if art does not aim at producing exhibitable works it cannot do much with the classical museum (and vice versa, the museum cannot do much with this kind of art). Conservation concerns, regulated opening hours, limited financial and human resources often stand in the way of participatory formats. It becomes even more difficult when certain artistic genres do not require institutional framing or even demand a place outside the *white cube* – after all, exhibition institutions have to justify their existence exactly by filling their houses with art (and audiences). A (re-)representative art creates (re-)representative museums, and museums create museum-like art. Instead, the museum would have to develop into a facility that works project-oriented, with the constant participation of the public and not necessarily in a closed space, an institution that offers mediation as art rather than mediation of art.

[23] *Economy – or: Who owns art?* My approach is based on the economic model of *public domain*; concepts such as *copyleft* or *open source* pursue similar goals. Performative objects are freely copyable prototypes. On the one hand, they undermine the ban of cultural appropriation which has to be replaced by a fluid, inclusive concept of culture that explicitly values the '(mis-)appropriation' of cultural elements. On the other hand, performative objects also resist the market logic of scarcity – not out of an anti-capitalist impulse, but out of the expectation that a processual, provisional, participatory work which removes traditional criteria such as originality, aura,³³ or authorship simply cannot be economically exploitable. The question is what alternative financing models there are for such artistic positions and whether the new dependencies to which one gets involved instead – for example, political ones – actually allow more freedom than dependence on the market.

[24] *Inclusion and exclusion – or: Who is in?* The aesthetic form includes and excludes. Art that sees itself as participatory or emancipative must reflect this. Working with performative objects promises an experience of freedom that author(itar)ian art forms prevent through too many directives, too much ready-made 'sense'. On the other hand, it demands a willingness to participate that is unusual in art and thus presupposes resources that are unequally distributed in society (such as time or cultural capital). In the worst case, performative objects only

33 On the concept of aura, cf. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1935; and Dieter Mersch, *Ereignis und Aura. Untersuchungen zu einer ‚performativen Ästhetik‘*, 2002

demonstrate to the observers their own creative failure and refer them back to the rescuing necessity of a ‘professional’ artist. The more art makes aesthetic experience dependent on the commitment of its participants, the more sharply it must ask what new thresholds of participation it sets up, which specific participatory possibilities it allows (or prevents) depending on socio-demographic factors like sex, gender, age or origin, whose actions become relevant and how it communicates accessibility.

[25] *Aesthetic competence—or: Who benefits?* It is obvious that the individual interest, readiness, and ability to participate as well as the personal benefit of participation is highly dependent on the level of education. Competence is indispensable. But if the complexity of the artistic form is not to be replaced by didacticism, art itself cannot provide this resource. Nevertheless, competence can be acquired, and consideration must be given to the question of how the means to do so can be multiplied and made widely available, regardless of socially unequal opportunities of access. Before that, it has to be clarified which competences are necessary in detail. As a point of departure, I can use the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Competency, which was presented in 2016 by an international working group of art educators from, among others, the Mozarteum University Salzburg, the Academy of Fine Arts Munich, Goldsmiths London, and Sorbonne Paris.³⁴

III State of research and theoretical context

[26] In line with the idea of artistic research, my project establishes performative objects both as a theoretical concept of aesthetic reflection and as a practical programme for creative production. Terminologically and in some theory figures,³⁵ my concept is informed, but not uniformed, by *systems theory*. My own research on the sociologies of art of Niklas Luhmann and Pierre Bourdieu³⁶ provides a good basis for integrating a *praxeological* perspective as well. As performative research, the project thus fits into the broader context of the ‘performative turn’ in the social sciences.³⁷ It is interested in social (and more precisely: aesthetic) acts not only as objects of study, but also uses them as an epistemological instrument.

With regard to the art system, the project rests on the assumption that three central aesthetic concepts – work, image, artist – have become porous in the present. Alternative guiding categories come into view, which can be described as (1) *processual*,

34 Ernst Wagner, Diederik Schönau (eds.), *Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy – Prototype*, 2016

35 such as: elements and relations, structure, connectivity, sense, complexity, contingency, observation, form

36 Christian Hartard, *Kunstautonomien*. Luhmann und Bourdieu, 2010

37 cf. Andreas Reckwitz, *Grundelemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken. Eine sozialtheoretische Perspektive*, in: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, yr. 32, vol. 4, August 2003, pp. 282 – 301

(2) *post-iconic*, and (3) *participatory*. They accentuate (1) the unstable situation of aesthetic involvement, (2) the concreteness of things, spaces, bodies, materials, and (3) the cooperative authorship of all participants. I am committed to practices and aesthetics that embrace and reflect this paradigm shift. They offer orientation in the development of the research design, but at the same time are to be thought further and radicalised.

1 Process: Dissolution of the work

[27] Since (at least) the 1960s, one can witness how the visual arts have realised what Gyorgy Kepes³⁸ has called a ‘plastic thinking’: an operative thinking in relations and processes instead of an ontological thinking in substances. Not only performative art forms in the narrower sense, but also installation, environment, land art or conceptual art liquefy the compact, static work, since they conceive aesthetic experience as a process, as an experience of action, body, and interaction, and this premise has an effect on the form of the works themselves. Action-oriented approaches to art³⁹ can understand this by thinking of art not substantively, but processually: art does not exist in the form of works, but occurs in the moment of action and in the acting body. This idea of a somatically and performatively anchored experience of art is the guiding principle for my research and is reflected in the strictly praxeological design of the project. The research design thus follows current findings of cognitive science on the practice- and body-bound nature of human perception and knowledge production (*enactivism, embodiment*),⁴⁰ which Horst Bredekamp’s ‘Theory of the Image Act’⁴¹ or Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetics⁴² have made fruitful for art theory. At the same time, one must not lose sight of the question of who actually acts when actions are observed in the material world: the human being? the body? or perhaps the objects themselves? Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory discusses this issue by situating objects as social agents in an interdependent network of actions;⁴³ this approach can be used with profit for my project, as can related concepts, such as the assumption that all things have more or

38 Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision*, 1951, p. 196

39 cf. Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art. The Meaning of Art’s Performativity*, 2010 (orig. 2007); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, 2008 (orig. 2004); Georg Bertram, *Art as Human Practice. An Aesthetics*, 2019 (orig. 2014); Karin Gludovatz, Michael Lüthy, Bernhard Schieder, Dorothea von Hantelmann (eds.), *Kunsthandeln*, 2010; Daniel Martin Feige, Judith Siegmund (eds.), *Kunst und Handlung. Ästhetische und handlungstheoretische Perspektiven*, 2015

40 Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind. Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, 1991; Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 2005; as an overview: Markus Wild, Rebekka Hufendiek, Joerg Fingerhut (eds.), *Philosophie der Verkörperung. Grundlagentexte zu einer aktuellen Debatte*, 2013

41 Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts*, 2010

42 Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness. A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, 2008; Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body. Essays in Somaesthetics*, 2012

43 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social – An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 2005; with regard to art: Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency*, 1998

less suggestive qualities (*affordance*),⁴⁴ the idea of quasi-objects (Michel Serres) which – like the ball in a football match – bind and support social action,⁴⁵ or *boundary objects*, which coordinate social action without the need to establish a consensus among the participants about the meaning of the object.⁴⁶

[28] *Basis 1:* The concept I propose temporalises the artwork, but refrains from completely dissolving it into performativity, thus reflecting the dialectic that (1) aesthetic experience is based on action and (2) action is oriented towards the concrete world. Performative objects are not works of art in themselves but elements of aesthetic practice. The actual artistic value lies within the performative constellation of objects, actions, and agents.

2 Post-iconics: Dissolution of the image

[29] A post-iconic aesthetics must address the fact that many contemporary artistic fields – installation, performance, activist art, for example – no longer derive their meaning primarily from the pictoriality of their works. They do not create images, but realities. The objects themselves come into focus, their immediate physical presence, along with space, atmosphere, the body, social action. Such a shift from representation to presence sheds the fixation on the visual and upgrades dimensions of artistic experience that have previously been in the shadows: feeling versus seeing, matter versus spirit. Accordingly, my project draws its inspiration particularly from art historical theories that aim at semantic qualities beyond the image: the ‘eroticism of art’⁴⁷ (Susan Sontag), the ‘atmosphere’⁴⁸ of space (Gernot Böhme), the ‘presence’⁴⁹ (Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht) or the ‘appearing’⁵⁰ (Martin Seel) of the work. Such a post-iconic aesthetics includes – in addition to the already mentioned contributions on the agency of things and on aesthetic performativity (→ nos. 27 and 28) – Gottfried Boehm’s idea of ‘plastic space’⁵¹ and approaches of ‘material culture’ which rediscover the epistemological value of material and its plasticity.⁵²

44 James J. Gibson: *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 1979; Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (orig. *The Psychology of Everyday Things*), 1988

45 Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, 1982 (orig. 1980)

46 Susan Leigh Star, James R. Griesemer, *Institutional Ecology, ‘Translations’ and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907–39*, in: *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 19 no. 3 (Aug. 1989), pp. 387–420

47 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 1966

48 Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, 2017 (orig. 2013)

49 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, 2003; idem, *Präsenz*, 2012

50 Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, 2004 (orig. 2000)

51 Gottfried Boehm, *Plastik und plastischer Raum*, in: *Skulptur. Ausstellung in Münster*, vol. 1, 1977

52 Dieter Mersch, *Was sich zeigt. Materialität, Präsenz, Ereignis*, 2002; Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst. Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne*, 2001; Christiane Heibach, Carsten Rohde (eds.), *Ästhetik der Materialität*, 2015; Kerstin Stakemeier, Susanne Witzgall (eds.), *Power of Material – Politics of Materiality*, 2014; Dietmar Rübél, *Plastizität. Eine Kunstgeschichte des Veränderlichen*, 2012

[30] *Basis 2*: The assertion that the image is in crisis may be at odds with a prominently claimed ‘iconic turn’ in art.⁵³ However, the tendency in contemporary art since the 1960s to replace image and meaning with an emphasis on material, space, body, or action cannot be ignored. My ‘concrete aesthetics’ takes into account these developments which have parallels in the social sciences under the labels of ‘material’, ‘spatial’, ‘somatic’, and ‘performative turn’.

3 Participation: Dissolution of the artist

[31] The detachment of artistic meaning from the referential function of the work has consequences for the role of the artist. The artist’s central position is not only questioned in practice, but also criticised theoretically: In terms of *production aesthetics*, resistance is formed against all remnants of the idea of genius by pointing to the socially made nature of the artist (Bourdieu) or their dependence on the internal logic of the emerging work (Luhmann). In terms of *work aesthetics*, the author’s intention is relativised in approaches that conceive of the work as immanently ambiguous (Eco) or that ascribe to it its own semantic power to act (*agency*). For *reception aesthetics*, finally, the actual source of artistic ‘sense’ lies in the aesthetic experience of the viewers⁵⁴ who emancipate themselves in two ways: through their reflexivity, i. e. their potential for interpretation and contradiction, or through their subjectivity, which marks each individual approach to the work as authentic, uncriticisable and thus ‘true’.

[32] I have already noted that this critical view of the artist hardly diminishes their factual control over the form of the work. For this reason, clarification is necessary on two terms that are important to me, but which need to be sharpened. This applies first to the buzzword *participation*.⁵⁵ Mostly it refers to the activation of the audience within a ‘project’ or arrangement programmed by the artist, but not necessarily to the creative involvement in its actual production or conception. In such formats, the human body is just another novel artistic material which an expanded concept of art has introduced since the 1960s, like other previously unfamiliar substances as fat corners, mouldy chocolate or artist’s shit. Sometimes ‘participatory art’ also stands for an experience intensified by bodily presence (for example in Bruce Nauman’s corridors), thus remaining essentially a reception-aesthetic phenomenon. The second label is *multiple authorship*.⁵⁶ It usually means artistic work in a team and thus relativises the idea of sole artistic responsibility, but not fundamentally the separation into professional producers and receptive audiences.

53 Christa Maar, Hubert Burda (eds.), *Iconic Turn. Die neue Macht der Bilder*, 2005

54 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1934

55 Silke Feldhoff, *Partizipative Kunst. Genese, Typologie und Kritik einer Kunstform zwischen Spiel und Politik*, 2013; *Get involved! Partizipation als künstlerische Strategie*, *Kunstforum international* 240, 2016

56 Rachel Mader (Hg.), *Kollektive Autorschaft in der Kunst. Alternatives Handeln und Denkmodell*, 2012; Mark Terkessidis, *Kollaboration*, 2015

[33] *Basis 3:* My project re-adjusts this terminology on three levels: *production-aesthetically* as the artist's loss of control over the specific artistic form; *work-aesthetically* in the sense of a work that is not merely semantically but physically open; *reception-aesthetically* in the idea of a productive observation that changes what it observes.

IV Level of innovation

[34] In several central dimensions of contemporary art, paradigm shifts can be identified which I have described as a turn towards processual, post-iconic, and participatory artistic forms: from the closed work of art to open aesthetic action, from the representativeness of the image to the presence of the concrete, from individual to collective production. It remains a desideratum to trace and theoretically substantiate the emergence of aesthetic 'sense' under these changed parameters. My proposal meets this challenge by *artistically* radicalising the dissolution of work, image, and artist and at the same time using the means thus gained as instruments of *scientific* (self-)observation. In combining theoretical framing, artistic practice, and empirical control, my project achieves four complementary objectives:

[35] It develops and tests an innovative, multiperspective, object-based methodology for instigating and analysing the collaborative creation of aesthetic 'sense' (Elicitation through Performative Objects, EPOS). In the intertwining of art reception and art production this approach goes beyond research designs that investigate aesthetic experience exclusively on the part of either the artist or the audience. With the corpus of performative objects, my concept introduces a unique research inventory into empirical aesthetics. As hybrids of sculptural proposals, catalysts of social action and analysis material, performative objects serve to produce aesthetic situations that I as the initial 'artist' cannot control, but as a scientist can observe from an art-theoretical, sociological, and cognitive-psychological perspective. In this respect, the project is basic research in art.

[36] The empirical phase (research cells) will gain fundamental insights into the process and conditions of artistic 'sense'-making, in order to establish a model of aesthetic experience under the sign of multiple authorship. In intensive observations, documentations, and interviews, the study will work out how and under the influence of which formative factors 'senseful' order can be generated, changed, and collectively continued.

[37] The project is oriented towards the concept of 'political form', which is newly introduced into the art-scientific discussion as a term for decentralised, provisional, reflexive and social art practices. On this basis, the study delivers programmatic conclusions for necessary changes in the organisation of the art system. It outlines ways to new artistic models of presentation and distribution and to an alternative economy of art. In investigating the emancipative

potential, but also the possibly exclusive mechanisms of participatory practice, it readjusts the sometimes naive and idealised view on the sociality of art.

[38] As the set of performative objects can freely be re-used and reproduced, it will stimulate further empirical evaluation, enhancement, and variation of the concept. In particular, the object corpus can be applied for studies that open up its use to a general public or for cooperative work with specific social groups (such as children or students). The project can also serve as pioneering work for in-depth research with larger and socially more differentiated panels that allow a statistical analysis along socio-demographic characteristics and help to gain new insights into the social conditionality of aesthetic experience. Prospectively, there is the potential for applications in art and museum pedagogy, in the assessment of aesthetic competence as well as in art therapy and integration work.



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Project modules

A Studio: Development of performative objects

- corpus of modular elements that might freely be used and reproduced (open access)

B Lab: Collaborative workshops

- research cells with partners from different disciplines such as fine arts, design, dance, architecture, or social sciences
- participatory observation and qualitative in-depth interviews

C Platform: Educational programme

- presentations, performances, lectures, public conversations

D Sensors: Theoretical reflection

- theoretical embedding
- development of a model of aesthetic experience in participatory practices
- aspects of presentation, distribution, inclusion / exclusion

E Archive: Sustainable research

- website www.icaros.org as multi-media repository for objects, texts, interviews
- publication via the SAR Research Catalogue