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Embodied and Situated Aesthetics

An enactive approach to a cognitive notion of aesthetics*

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Abstract

This text presents a first attempt to define aesthetics as a variety of cognition. Due to the inaugural character of this essay it merely outlines key ideas in this regard. It maps out a territory which begins to emerge through the landmarks that delineate it and will be precisely realized in the coming years. This essay is structured in three parts. The first summarizes the main traits of a concept of cognition rooted in the theory of autopoiesis and developed in the framework of the enactive approach. This concept differs radically from its common twofold meaning: the explicit or implicit production or acquisition of knowledge about an object or a state of affairs by a subject or a group of subjects through the performance of mental skills or the development of certain skills in order to perform a task. This notion of cognition expands in the enactive context towards its identification with a concept of life, defined as a process of *sense-making*. In the second part, the enactive concept of cognition provides a foundation for my definition of a cognitive notion of aesthetics. Whereas cognition will be outlined as the actualization of a *self-sustaining network of shared agencies*, aesthetics will be fundamentally described as a mode of action – *aesthetic conduct* – ie, as a form of participation in the actualization of this network. After characterizing this variety of active engagement with the

* This essay is a reformulation of the notes for my lecture "Understanding: on the cognitive function of aesthetic practices" at the Questioning Aesthetics Symposium: Art Research & Aesthetics.

world, its function in the general context of cognition will be specified: aesthetic conduct enables the disclosure of new *fields of intelligibility*, to new possibilities of *understanding*. The third section shows how this embodied and situated concept of aesthetics clarifies the position of *aesthetic research* in the context of other forms of inquiry.

Keywords

aesthetics, embodied and situated cognition, enactivism

Estética corporeizada y situada

Un enfoque enactivo a una noción cognitiva de estética

Resumen

Este texto presenta un primer intento de definir la estética como un tipo de cognición. Debido al carácter inaugural de este ensayo, solo esboza ideas claves a este respecto, traza un territorio que comienza a emerger a través de los referentes que lo delimitan y que se materializará de forma precisa en los próximos años. Este ensayo se estructura en tres partes. La primera resume los rasgos característicos de un concepto de cognición anclado en la teoría de la autopoiesis y desarrollado en el marco del enactivismo. Este concepto difiere radicalmente de su doble significado habitual: la producción o adquisición explícitas o implícitas de conocimiento sobre un objeto o una situación, por parte de un sujeto o grupo de sujetos, mediante el uso de habilidades mentales o del desarrollo de ciertas habilidades para realizar una tarea. Esta noción de cognición se expande en el enactivismo para identificarse con un concepto de vida, definido como un proceso de producción de sentido. En la segunda parte, el concepto enactivo de cognición fundamenta mi definición de una noción cognitiva de estética. Mientras que la cognición se define como la actualización de una red autosuficiente de agencias compartidas, la estética se define básicamente como un modo de acción-conducta estética-, es decir, como una forma de participación en la actualización de esta red. Tras caracterizar esta variedad de participación activa con el mundo, se especifica su función en el contexto general de la cognición: la conducta estética posibilita el despliegue de nuevos campos de inteligibilidad, de nuevas posibilidades de comprensión. La tercera parte muestra como este concepto situado y corporeizado de estética clarifica la posición de la investigación estética en el contexto de otras formas de investigación.

Palabras clave

estética, cognición corporeizada y situada, enactivismo

This text presents a first attempt to specify the cognitive function of aesthetics or, to put it in more radical terms, to define aesthetics as a variety of cognition.¹ Due to the inaugural character of this essay which, although rooted in my former work,² delves into new research territory, it merely outlines key ideas. It maps out a territory which begins to emerge through the landmarks that delineate it. Accordingly, this text does not include detailed arguments about the proposed ideas. It simply defines the infrastructure of a conceptual construction that will be enabled and put in place over the coming years.

This endeavor is framed by the so-called *theories of embodied and situated cognition* and more specifically the *enactive approach*.³ According to the first, cognition takes place due to two necessary conditions: the activities of bodies – biologically realized organisms – and their entanglement with their surroundings. Cognition thus cannot occur on the basis of an ideal entity – eg a “pure mind” – in a vacuum or “neutral container”. The enactive approach specifies these basic conditions, defining the body as an *autonomous system* and its involvement with the environment as *structural coupling*. Furthermore, this cognitive approach explains the relationships between living units and their surroundings in terms of *co-emergence*: a dynamic and complex system of mutual determination between enabling conditions and emerging qualities.⁴

This essay is structured in three parts. The first summarizes the main traits of a concept of cognition rooted in the theory of autopoiesis and developed in the framework of the enactive approach. This concept differs radically from its common twofold meaning: the explicit or implicit production or acquisition of knowledge about an object or a state of affairs by a subject or a group of subjects – the only agents in this process – through the performance of mental skills such as attention, categorization, judgement, induction or deduction, or the development of certain skills in order to perform a task. This notion of cognition expands in the enactive context towards its identification with a concept of life, defined as a process of *sense-making*.

In the second part, the enactive concept of cognition provides a foundation for my definition of a cognitive notion of aesthetics. Whereas cognition will be outlined as the actualization of a *self-sustaining network of shared agencies*, aesthetics will be fundamentally described as a mode of action – *aesthetic conduct* – ie as a form of participation in the actualization of this network. After characterizing this variety of active engagement with the world, its function in the general context of cognition will be specified: aesthetic conduct does not produce

stable and objectified conceptual presences of things and states of affairs to which it relates – it does not *produce knowledge*. Instead it *destabilizes* established phenomena, enabling the constitution of radical alternatives. Aesthetic conduct eventually enables the disclosure of new *fields of intelligibility*, to new possibilities of *understanding*.

The third section shows how this embodied and situated concept of aesthetics clarifies the position of artistic research, or better, *aesthetic research*, in the context of other forms of inquiry.

The enactive notion of cognition

One of the fundamental ideas of enactivism – the “big picture” one could say – is that *selves and environments co-emerge*. This means that the arising of a *self* – a clearly contoured, autonomous, self-regulated unit, leading its own actions out of its self-determined inner organization – and of an *environment* – necessarily *its* environment: the domain of significance in and with which the self develops its autonomy – occurs simultaneously and in an intimate relationship of mutual determination: the self arises because the environment emerges, and the environment comes to be because the self arises. The enactive approach not only delivers this conceptual construct but also a fundamental explanation of its inner dynamics grounded in the biological organization of living units – their *autopoiesis* – and the way they relate to their physicochemical surroundings – their *structural coupling*. The core idea is twofold. The first aspect is that the defining trait of a living being is its own form for organization: a unit – a chronotopologically contoured entity, an enclosed system – can be considered to be alive when it generates and regenerates the own inner components that enable processes, which in turn generate and regenerate the components that allow those processes to occur.⁵ This circular causality is denominated *operational closure* and it is the source of the living unit's *autonomy*.⁶ The second aspect is that the living unit needs the exchange with its surroundings to be realized. The living unit is autonomous – this is the constitutive trait of its inner organization – but it is not independent: it depends on its surroundings to exist, to develop its organic dynamics and to realize itself. Both the living unit and its surroundings are *structurally coupled*: they condition mutually the actual expression of their respective organizations, ie their present states, their current presences. Expressed in terms of

1. Aesthetics was originally defined in epistemological terms by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in its *Aesthetica*, inaugurating a long and fruitful line of thought. My attempt to outline aesthetics as a variety of cognition is embedded in this tradition but differs from it fundamentally due to the concept of cognition that I take as basis.

2. See as a main reference my research project *Architecture of Embodiment*: <www.architecture-embodiment.org>.

3. For a future development of this undertaking I will expand its conceptual base. In this initial moment, nevertheless, I consider enactivism a powerful conceptual framework to establish a solid link between aesthetics and life's most fundamental dynamics.

4. For the first definition of this approach, see: Varela *et al.* (1991). For an exhaustive description, see: Thompson (2007).

5. According to the original definition of autopoiesis, two further conditions are necessary for a unit to be autopoietic: the existence of a semi-permeable membrane and that this membrane is generated by the unit's own processes. See: Maturana and Varela (1972).

6. For a clarification of the relationship between autopoiesis and autonomy, see the chapter “Life and Mind: the Philosophy of the Organism” in Thompson, *op. cit.*

co-emergence: the specific way in which the autonomous unit and the components of its surroundings relate to one another configures the set of enabling conditions that allows the emergent qualities – the self and its environment, its world – to arise, constraining in turn the way the autonomous unit and the components of its surroundings behave with and to one another.

Cognition in this conceptual framework is understood as the process of co-emergence that enables selves and environments to be constituted as significant presences out of the spontaneous and entangled development of the forms of organization of living units and their physicochemical surroundings. Cognition is the *expression* and the *realization*, or formulated in a compact way, the *expressive realization* of life's own dynamics. To be more precise: cognition is the network of processes that ensure the *viability* of life's own dynamics through their spontaneous and expressive realization.

Obviously, the enactive concept of cognition implies an extension of the common meaning of this term. Cognition in this context is not reduced to the production, development or achievement of an explanation or a skill – in reference respectively to the concept of “knowing that” and “knowing how”⁷ – about something else: respectively an object or state of affairs or a task. Cognition is not reduced here to a mere question of problem-solving. To solve a concrete problem or to develop the necessary skills to do it configure specific aspects of cognition but define neither exhaustively nor fundamentally this term. The enactive concept of cognition refers to the fundamental activities of being alive, of finding ways to maintain life, to preserve the viability of the living unit's active-being-in-the-world in and with the worlds that emerge out of life's own processes, which simultaneously enable living units to achieve and maintain their own selfness.

On this basis, I would like to extend one particular aspect of the enactive concept of cognition, emphasizing one of its underdeveloped aspects: the *agency of heteropoietic units*,⁸ which I have referred to so far as “components of the living unit's surroundings”. Although, as already pointed out, structural coupling is one of the constitutive aspects of this approach – defined as such in the theory of autopoiesis⁹ – in the context of enactivism it is rather the question of the living system's autonomy that is stressed. For this reason one could think that the primary reason why cognition comes to be is the existence of autonomous units and thus that autonomy is the core and the beginning of cognition. The first part of the last assertion is true: there

would not be cognition without autonomous units. But the second part is wrong as a consequence of a problematic habit of thought: to think that every process inevitably has to have a moment marked as “its beginning” and that the description or explanation of this process must refer necessarily to it and therefore begin there as well, ie begin with and from the beginning. This procedure can be appropriate in some cases but not when referring to the enactive concept of cognition. As already mentioned, circular causality¹⁰ is constitutive for this approach, and there is no beginning in a circle. Accordingly, autonomous units cannot be thought of as being the beginning, nor even the motor of cognitive processes, since they would not exist without being coupled with heteropoietic units: one exists because of the other. Whereas in the enactivist context there is no doubt about the agency of autonomous units, since their agency is a result of their autonomy, there is no reference to the possible *agency* of heteronomous entities, although they are constitutive for life and thus for cognition. There are good reasons, whose enumeration would exceed the frame of this text, to believe that the attribution of agency to those units is plausible according to the criteria established by the theory of autopoiesis as “non-living”, ie to consider heteronomously organized matter as a cognitive agent.¹¹ This attribution goes beyond the concept of *affordances*,¹² critically integrated in the enactive approach, and will reduce – if not eliminate – the asymmetry in the description of the participation of autonomous systems and heteronomous units in the processes of cognition. Accepting the attribution of agency to non-living entities, it is possible to assert that cognition takes place in a field of *shared agencies*. Accordingly, cognition can be defined as a network of processes that actualizes these agencies in a relation of mutual contingency. Cognition is shared action. It is a self-organized, self-supporting and co-emerging network of *conducts*: of actions that are guided (*-duct*, from “ducere”: to guide) in common (*con-*).

Embodied and situated aesthetics

The extension of the concept of cognition caused by its identification with the enactive notion of life implies that every human activity can be specified as a variety of cognitive conduct. Every kind of human action, whether spontaneous or organized,¹³ participates unavoidably in the realization of life, ie in the expression of its dynamics as the

7. In reference to Gilbert Ryle's differentiation between two types of knowledge. See: Ryle (1949).

8. Whereas autopoietic units are self-organized, heteropoietic ones are organized and defined in relation to their chronotopographic structure by external agents.

9. See footnote 6.

10. I consider the so-called *circular causality* to be a logical construction able to express, approximately, simultaneity in the medium of discursive language.

11. This idea is central in the so-called *new materialism*. See as a good example: Benett (2010). Referring to a particular kind of organized matter – pictures – see also: Bredekamp (2010).

12. I refer to the concept of “affordances” as defined by: Gibson (1979).

13. In this conceptual context, the possibility of a categorical distinction between these two terms is weakened by the idea that all varieties of human action are grounded on the inner organization of living system that perform them. Consequently also “organized” actions, *i.e.* actions explicitly structured by their actor, are “spontaneous”: they arise (“sponte”) out of their own constitution (“sua”).

emergence of significances. On this basis, the definition of the unique and distinctive features of a field of human activity, eg aesthetics, fundamentally implies the specification of a variety of conduct, ie of a particular form of participation in the network of shared agencies that sustains life's viability. Accordingly, the following two basic questions can be posed regarding every single case: first, what is the particular variety of conduct that specifies a kind of human activity, eg aesthetics, and therefore differentiates it from others, eg religion, sports or philosophy? And second, what is the specific contribution of this variety of conduct to the general field of cognition? In other words: what is the specific cognitive function of this concrete field of human action? Or also: how does aesthetic conduct contribute to maintaining life's viability? In the following paragraphs I will succinctly address both questions in relation to aesthetics.

In this initial state of my inquiry I identify three fundamental characteristics of *aesthetic conduct*. The first relates to the kind of skills and organic dynamics that primarily support the performance of this variety of action. Although every organic process is involved in every action of the organism,¹⁴ aesthetic conduct is primarily enabled by our *sensorimotor* and *emotional* skills. The link between our sensory capacities and our abilities to move constitutes a basic system in the connective dynamics between us and our surroundings.¹⁵ Our sensory contact with our physicochemical context, enabled and enhanced by our capacity to move, which in turn is conditioned by our sensuous experience,¹⁶ continuously realizes not only one of the most fundamental forms of exchange between the autonomous unit and its surroundings¹⁷ but furthermore actualizes, or in a formulation already used here: expressively realizes, the boundary between both spheres, negotiating the dynamics of differentiation and connection that constitute it operatively. On a higher level of complexity, emotions – in terms of the etymological origin of the word: to move or to be moved from within – mobilize our organism in a holistic and basic way. Emotions are one of the fundamental dynamics that define the direction of our actions and thus co-constitute the *valence* with which our environment emerges. Attraction or repulsion, as basic possibilities, and all the subtly nuanced variations we enact, mark decisively the *sense* with which our environment appears to us. Without excluding other skills, aesthetic conduct is based on the performance of our sensorimotor and emotional skills: the basic connective dynamics between our fundamental self and our physicochemical surroundings.

The second constitutive trait of aesthetic conduct, which is

sustained by the former and reinforces its realization, is a strong *restriction of target-oriented and will-based action*. The skills of defining and fixing a goal and mobilizing our organic resources, and thus our actions, to achieve it, are constitutive of a variety of conduct that could be termed as “functional”. Proceeding in this way, our sensorimotor skills are subordinated to those able to define a task and accomplish it, and our emotions have to be sorted out: those that reinforce the achievement of the previously defined goal can be strengthened, or at least tolerated, and those that hinder its accomplishment should be repressed. By conducting our interaction with our surroundings functionally, ie setting a goal and arranging our actions to achieve it, the environment becomes a mere stage or a collection of means for the actualization of the only agency at stake: ours. Time becomes tense and acquires an instrumental character, as do our surroundings. It becomes a framework or a means with which to fulfill the purpose set by the former, ie non-present instant. On the contrary, by renouncing a strong purposiveness¹⁸ and the exercise of our will, we set free two intimately interwoven sets of agencies: the spontaneous agencies of our sensorimotor and emotional skills and the agencies of our surroundings. The non-tense variety of conduct based on these interdependent agencies, often qualified as “passive”,¹⁹ confers actuality and a substantial and autonomous presence to the environment and allows the appearance of qualities that might be radically different from those strongly predetermined by an intrinsically reductive entity: an *objective* – something *we* throw (*-ject*, from “jectere”: to throw) in front of ourselves (*ob-*).

The third basic characteristic of aesthetic conduct is a consequence of the former two and is therefore already implicit in their description: aesthetic conduct is constitutively *receptive*. As already posited, the reduction of purpose and will opens a space for a reinforced manifestation of the agencies of the environment that can be addressed, on the one hand, in an intensified and increasingly adaptive way and, on the other hand, less “colored” by our own autonomy – by our very specific “response” – through the predominant role of our sensorimotor and emotional skills. Without renouncing our own responsibility – to the specific ability to respond rooted in our fundamental autonomy – but rather extending the concept of responsibility by resituating it in a context of shared agency, aesthetic conduct does not tend to stamp our own (pre-) conceptions on a presumably neutral environment. Instead, it allows for the spontaneous emergence of new “responses”, ie of

14. This idea was extensively formulated by Kurt Goldstein. See: Goldstein (2000).

15. In this regard see: Noë (2004) and di Paolo *et al.* (2017).

16. The relationship between movement and sensation can be also describe in terms of circular causality.

17. Other basic dynamics are those related to respiration and nourishment, ie processes of metabolism. It would make sense to consider them in the attempt to define the notion of aesthetic conduct.

18. For an extensive reflection on purposiveness, its connection with the phenomenological concept of “intentionality” and the Kantian formulation “purposiveness without purpose”, see: Arteaga (2014).

19. See: Husserl (2001) and Bush and Draxler (2013).

new autonomous actions, by virtue of an increased receptivity of the autonomous unit to the actualization of other agencies.

The former formulation anticipates the answer to the second question, the one referring to the specificity of aesthetic conduct and more concretely to its distinctive *cognitive function*. Aesthetic conduct does not contribute to sustaining life's viability through the *production of knowledge*. This form of behavior leads *directly* neither to the generation by an individual of consolidated and stable, explicitly formulated conceptual artifacts that describe, define or explain a subject matter – an object or state of affairs – nor to the development of skills for the accomplishment of a particular task. Instead, it enables the *destabilization* of these kinds of steady, established, secured and habitualized entities. Prevailing and routine cognitive entities might be disrupted if we *let ourselves be moved* by our surroundings by relying on our basic connective dynamics. This disturbance facilitates the whole network of agencies that configure the dynamic system in which we participate spontaneously, ie according to *its* own dynamics. The cognitive function of aesthetics is, therefore, primarily *negative*. Obviously, I am using this term in an operative sense: aesthetic conduct contributes to the maintenance of life's viability by not-producing stability, furthermore by de-stabilizing, dis-rupting. In doing so, aesthetic conduct contributes to the emergence of the most fundamental conditions of possibility for a reestablishment of stabilities on a different substrate – this is the final positive character of the negative strategy. A substrate which, due to its *common* origin – the dynamics of *radical sharing* – might be more adjusted to and adequate for the current situation – the actual state of the whole system individual-environment. Destabilization is, therefore, a negative means for the positive function of aesthetic conduct in the general field of cognition: to facilitate radically alternative presences to arise – intentional presences as perceptions, concepts, categories or values and / or operative²⁰ presences like varieties of inter-action or environments as such²¹ – by allowing a reorganization of the enabling conditions of the system of co-emergence. Aesthetic conduct is not productive but *conductive*: it allows for alternative forms of *common action*, of shared participation in life's own sustaining dynamics.

If I formulate this conductive function not from a third-person-perspective in relation to the whole system but from the point of view of the one who is acting aesthetically – from a first-person-perspective inside the system, although formulated in the following lines in a third-

person form – I would postulate that instead of achieving or producing knowledge, she, the one who is behaving aesthetically, increases her possibilities of *understanding*, ie of *repositioning towards* the object of her attention in such a way that enhances the *viability of her conduct*. Aesthetic conduct helps us to find unexpected *ways* (*via-*: way) through our environment, ie to find alternative means of approaching what we are doing and want or need to do, by virtue of an alteration of the dynamics of our co-emergence – the mutually conditioned constitution of our-selves and our-environment – enabled as well by this variety of action. The increased porosity of the subtle membrane that simultaneously detaches and connects us allows for an altered presence of our world – or at least of the fraction that centered our current attention – and with it of our-selves, as practicable.

Embodied and situated aesthetic research

I understand artistic research, or better *aesthetic research*,²² as a line of inquiry whose methodology is based on – but not necessarily limited to – a mobilization of the cognitive power of aesthetic conduct through the organization of this variety of action in *practices*. Therefore, aesthetic research is a field of practice whose social usefulness – its *raison d'être* – is rooted in and corresponds to the cognitive function of aesthetic conduct. Consequently, taking my characterization of this function in the previous section as a foundation, aesthetic research does not produce knowledge but contributes to it – or to be more precise, to the configuration of *radically new* knowledge – by facilitating the emergence of its more fundamental conditions of possibility through destabilization. In the same way that, according to Merleau-Ponty, perception is the fundamental process of intentional constitution and consequently all other noematic actions refer necessarily to perceptually constituted phenomena – the reason of the “primacy of perception”²³ – aesthetic research, deeply rooted in those organic routines that enable perception, interferes in the most basic processes of the emergence of our-world and of our-selves and thus in the perceptual and conceptual constitution of all their possible particular aspects “of which knowledge always *speaks*”.²⁴ Aesthetic research does not construct but allows the terrain of construction to emerge.

20. I use the term “operative” in relation to Husserl's concept of “operative intentionality” (“fungierende Intentionalität”). See: Husserl (1955).

21. For an interpretation of the concept of “environment” as operative presence, see: Arteaga (2016).

22. The primary reason for this change of terminology is to consider its use of aesthetic conduct and not necessarily of procedures of artistic production as the fundamental definitory trait of this kind of research. On this basis, aesthetic research exceeds the limits of the art system and is not constrained by its normativity.

23. “Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xi). In direct reference: Merleau-Ponty (1964).

24. “To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the country-side in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. ix-x, italics in the original).

These considerations do not imply a subordinated position of this kind of research in comparison to other types of inquiry. In the framework of embodied and situated cognition, to understand the relationships between the different fields of research practices in terms of a scale of relevance or of value would be completely absurd since each of them are defined and practiced in virtue of the system they share and configure. All kinds of research are therefore mutually dependent. They configure a system: a sub-system of our eco-system. They all contribute, by virtue of their own specificities and the specific way they are connected to one another, to the viability of our common life. Following this systemic logic, the relationship between the different types of research should not be defined in terms of “application of their results” – this might be valid in certain cases like in the relationships of certain kinds of scientific research and engineering development – but rather through the configuration of frameworks that facilitate different research practices to *get in touch*, to establish mutual relationships of contingency (from “contingere”: to touch). These frameworks replicate eco-systemic dynamics and allow the specific consequences²⁵ of each practice to influence the (re)conception and performance of the others. In such a systemic organization of the different fields of research practices, which enables their spontaneous interlacements on the basis of their respective autonomy and their coupling – a non-disciplinary context based on connected disciplines – aesthetic research would develop and show adequately its specific efficacy in a shared, constantly emerging and transformative geography of the *common*.

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25. I chose this general term instead of “outcomes” or “products” first in reference to its etymology (“sequi”: to follow; “com”: with), which shows its intimate relationship to “conduct” and, on this basis, secondly because, as explained, I do not consider aesthetic practices to be productive.

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Alex Arteaga's research integrates aesthetic and philosophical practices relating to aesthetics, the emergence of sense, meaning and knowledge and the relationships between aural, architecture and the environment through phenomenological and enactivist approaches.

He studied piano, music theory, composition, electroacoustic music and architecture in Berlin and Barcelona, and received a PhD in philosophy from the Humboldt University. After being a post-doctoral researcher at the Collegium for the Advanced Study of Picture Act and Embodiment at the Humboldt University he developed his own research projects at the Berlin University of the Arts among which Architecture of Embodiment as Einstein Junior Fellow. He is currently visiting professor at the Academy of Fine Arts of the University of the Arts Helsinki, professor for artistic research at the Research Master in Art and Design (EINA / Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), senior researcher at Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Ghent), head of the Auditory Architecture Research Unit and lecturer in the MA Sound Studies and Sonic Arts (Berlin University of the Arts) and member of the editorial board of the Journal for Artistic Research.

