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## Visual Dwelling in the Artistic Exhibition Space: between Anticipation and Emergence

**Abstract:** This contribution examines the exhibition space as a co-creator of the artistic experience, as well as the possibility of a phenomenological dwelling of the viewer. Starting from the viewer's a priori intentionalities and the normativity of the curated space, the paper proposes a mode of dwelling that allows the emergence of the artwork as an event of encounter. In this perspective, "visual dwelling" is understood as an active negotiation of pre-existing tensions within the phenomenal field itself, which implies both practices of visual dwelling and an awareness of the tension between anticipation and emergence. The analysis of the structure of space uses the Hestia-Hermes polarity as a hermeneutic scheme to capture the relationship between the imposed center and the dynamics of the transitions that space opens up to the gaze. The work argues that dwelling underpins the co-creation of meaning and the transformation of the viewer, thus enabling an authentic artistic experience.

**Keywords:** cultural visual dwelling, exhibition space, phenomenology, anticipation, emergence, Hestia–Hermes, artistic experience, rhythm.

### 1. Theoretical framework

We begin by examining how the viewer dwells in the exhibition space, from a phenomenological perspective on visual existence. Such an approach requires a shift beyond the interpretive tradition that treats the artwork as an object of perception and the exhibition space as a neutral backdrop that merely reveals it. Instead, the exhibition space must be understood as actively structuring the conditions under which the artwork can appear architecture, curatorial practices (lighting, color, placement, etc.), or guidance. Even within seemingly neutral environments such as the so-called "white cube" (O'Doherty 1986), the viewer is not situated in an empty space but within a highly controlled perceptual regime, where neutrality itself functions as a technique of orientation. In this sense, the context does not simply frame the artwork; it becomes constitutive of its intelligibility. This understanding can be further developed through Rancière's notion of the "distribution of the sensible", which designates the system that

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determines what becomes perceptible, while structuring their division and relations within a shared field of experience. (Ranciere 2004, 12)

Given the intentional nature of the artistic space—whether classical or modern—we observe its profoundly teleological character. Artworks are arranged in a specific manner, according to thematic, narrative, or museographic criteria, to affirm their affiliation with a theme or space. In other words, regardless of the mode of display, the positioning of the works is the result of deliberate decisions made under the curator's authority. Consequently, the same work, placed in different contexts, can emphasize or, conversely, attenuate certain meanings. These adjustments foster the creation of a regime of visibility, with the works being intensified, concealed, or perceptually oriented. However, this form of gaze orientation is not accidental but represents an explicit strategy for influencing artistic experience. Many contemporary sources acknowledge that all the constituent elements of an exhibition (the organization of space, materials, light, created subspaces, projections, or even smells) are intentional, designed to create specific experiences for visitors (Lanz and Leveratto 2023, 67-86; Radaelli and Pasqui 2023, 9-31).

In his 1969 lecture titled *Art and Space*, Heidegger revisits the issue of space, which takes on an eventful character here. While in *Being and Time*, space was related to *Dasein* and the way in which it actively opens itself to the world, thereby establishing space, and in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, it was places that produced space (Guzzoni 2002, 65-66), in *Art and Space* the perspective undergoes a slight shift. Unlike in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, here it is no longer a matter of the opening of a world through the work, but of the inherent dynamics of space as its possible opening.

Bringing up Galileo's or Newton's scientific notions of space, Heidegger asks rhetorically whether this is indeed the only real space and whether we can, nevertheless, conceive of alternative ways of experiencing space (Heidegger 2007, 9). The philosopher notes that space has not been given the attention it deserves and turns to language to distinguish the clearing of space (*Räumen*) as the originary gesture of space (*Raum*). The transition of space toward a specific way of making room (*Einräumen*) is further highlighted, characterized by a dual movement: allowing to happen (*Zulassen*) and arranging/preparing (*Einrichten*) (Heidegger 2012, 8). This ambivalence is crucial: space simultaneously opens the possibility for the artwork to emerge and configures the way in which this emergence is perceived.

The opening of the artwork is possible precisely because space “allows” it, freeing up the region where the artwork can create a place for truth. Thus, the work of art does not manifest itself outside of space, but only to the extent that space makes room for its emergence. Given these aspects, space itself has a tensioned dimension: it is not exclusively a structure regulated by curatorial techniques, just as it is not pure openness in the

Heideggerian sense. In this way, artistic experience is co-dependent on the viewer, on space, and, naturally, on the work of art.

The world of the work opens up in its own way, but the viewer enters this opening only to the extent that space allows it to reveal itself. Therefore, the artistic experience is modulated: how much of the work's openness actually reaches the viewer, and whether the work's appearance is diverted by the normativity of the space or not. It is yet to be seen to what extent visual dwelling can negotiate these tensions, thereby transforming the exhibition space into a co-creative instance of the artistic experience.

If we consider the viewer's perspective, their attitude is likewise far from neutral. Rather, we can speak of an internal "visual engine" that guides us toward the artistic experience and that is built over time through memory, affinities, or habits. Thus, physical perception precedes rationalization, shaped by memory and anticipation. The viewer cannot simply "shed" their horizon of meaning upon entering the space. They are implicitly situated; precisely for this reason, the possibility of artistic experience involves the tension between what is known and what is felt, between antepredicative perception and the openness of the work of art.

The fact that we become subjects within an artistic context implies the pre-existence of such a space of openness, an awareness of it, and its recognition as relevant. In order to analyze the dwelling in the art space, it is essential to establish the context in which this might take place, namely, what underpins the possible dwelling—that "whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning... features, the layout of a landscape or a word, in spontaneous accord with the intentions of the moment, as with earlier experience" (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 25).

Likewise, the journey toward the space involves the journey itself, namely the understanding that it does not belong to us, but requires a movement toward a well-established landmark, about which we anticipate in advance what it might entail. Sometimes we are drawn by a poster, a recommendation, or a name. Other times it is an intuition that a certain space "might be hiding something." In any case, our gaze is already "loaded" with a kind of pre-understanding, reinforced by a backdrop of expectations. Yet, the recognition of the space and the potential artworks within it legitimizes the inherent power of the viewer's consciousness to intentionally direct itself toward a specific object. The viewer thus becomes, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, a "network of intentions" (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 140).

## **2. Visual Dwelling**

Given the phenomenological orientation of this work, the encounter between the viewer and the artwork is treated as a phenomenon—namely, as the tensioned field in which the openness of the artwork's world meets

the openness of the viewer's horizon. However, once we take into account both the viewer's intentionality and the intentional structuring of the exhibition space, the very possibility of such an encounter becomes problematic. The viewer's openness no longer operates freely, but is already inscribed within a preconfigured network of meanings, shaped by anticipation, spatial orientation and prior knowledge.

The question, therefore, is not simply whether an encounter takes place, but whether it remains open as an event of appearance, or becomes absorbed into a regime of recognition and pre-established sense. Under these conditions, the viewer's engagement risks remaining at the level of oriented navigation within the art space, rather than reaching the level of dwelling. How, then, can this navigation be transformed into a form of dwelling? The answer proposed here consists in understanding the encounter as an event that must be sustained rather than merely reached. This involves the negotiation of the tensions between anticipation and emergence, not through their elimination, but through a specific mode of engagement.

In this regard, Heidegger's considerations in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* are particularly relevant. Although space makes the appearance of the work possible, the viewer may still remain within a navigational mode of engagement, shaped by anticipation and pre-predicative orientation. In this sense, dwelling becomes decisive: not as simple presence in space, but as the mode through which the opening of space is sustained as lived experience.

Heidegger describes dwelling as "staying with things" (*bei den Dingen*) (Heidegger 2001, 149), which allows us to rethink the viewer's position. The viewer dwells in the art space by situating themselves within a field of relations that unfolds around it, entering into a relational configuration in which the artwork can appear. We observe, however, that merely inhabiting does not guarantee that the opening of space is actually experienced. A spectator who positions themselves in front of the artwork rather than within its field of appearance, transforms the space into a mere backdrop.

In contrast, visual dwelling occurs when the viewer creates a network of relationships with the surrounding elements. In this sense, visual dwelling does not presuppose the prior existence of the artistic space; on the contrary, it participates in the constitution of space as lived. Space becomes experiential not simply by being given, but by being dwelt. Furthermore, dwelling as "staying with things" implies, beyond the mere existence within a network of relationships, the idea of a state of being "lingering". This does not designate a static condition, but rather a form of sustained duration in which the relation with the artwork is preserved rather than passed over.

A key aspect of this position is articulated by Heidegger: "The fundamental character of dwelling is this *sparing* and *preserving*. It pervades dwelling in its whole range." (Heidegger 2001, 147) In this sense, visual dwelling can be understood as allowing the work to be, without closing off

its meaning prematurely. Dwelling, in this context, entails an awareness of otherness and a certain suspension of our background of anticipations and intentions. We thus point toward a type of encounter that does not exhaust the work, but rather maintains its openness, allowing it to appear as such.

Negotiating the tensions between anticipation and emergence would translate, in an exhibition context, into a sustained engagement with the work's opening in the phenomenal field of appearance, while simultaneously modulating its anticipatory background. Negotiation practices are not given in advance. They emerge as adjustments to the viewer's mode of being, through which the viewer comes to dwell within the space.

In this sense, their attitude is neither spectacular nor saturated—that is, steeped in prior beliefs. It is one that modulates in such a way as to favor visual dwelling. In practical terms, we introduce the acceptance of deviation and the keeping of meaning open, the viewer thus finding themselves in close connection with the perceptual horizon in which they are situated. More concretely, the viewer no longer occupies a stable or central position and external elements—specifically, works of art—are capable of “altering” the way they exist. That is precisely why an authentic encounter with art involves, to some extent, temporarily setting aside our own interpretations shaped by what we already know. In this way, one can allow their gaze to linger on peripheral details. They may move spontaneously, temporarily setting aside the constraints of any existing form of guidance.

On the other hand, despite internal or external pressures to move forward through the exhibition space, the viewer can afford to linger. Instead of immediately following the general flow of the visit, they allow themselves a few moments to let their gaze settle. Sometimes this means standing in front of the work without immediately trying to interpret it; other times, returning to it after having walked through the room or changing the position from which they view it.

A relation with the artwork emerges in the present encounter, making possible a form of openness to the work. Understanding and sustaining this connection is a singular mode of experience, subject to continuous renegotiation in real time. In this dynamic, the artwork acquires an active role within the relation. This relation can also be approached through Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility, where perception is not a one-directional act, but a reciprocal relation (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 142). Once inside the exhibition space, the viewer is placed in the position of looking at the exhibited works, yet is unaware of the possibility of being exposed in return. In a similar vein, Dufrenne understands aesthetic contemplation as involving a form of reciprocity, an “act which includes at least an allusion to the other as my equal, because I feel supported by him, approved by him, and in a sense answerable to him.” (Dufrenne 1973, 68)

The work reaches a point where it allows for a series of coherent considerations, offering a clearer insight into the negotiation between anticipation and emergence. If the viewer entering the exhibition space enters into a relationship with the artwork, they adopt the attitude characteristic of a relationship, namely the acceptance of the possibility of being subject to retrospective or anticipatory reevaluations. In this sense, visual dwelling can be understood as the suspension of the closure of experience. But this suspension is not a static state. It involves a certain modulation of the gaze: moments of stabilization and moments of traversal, of gathering and of deviation, of concentration and of resuming the path—modalities through which the gaze engages, at each micro-moment of experience, with the opening of the work. In these moments, the viewer remains within the tension of the phenomenon, allowing the work to unfold without too quickly closing off its meaning. An additional question therefore arises: how do we describe the rhythm of this movement?

### 3. Hestia-Hermes Scheme

To illustrate this idea, we draw on the Hestia-Hermes polarity analyzed by Vernant, transforming it into a hermeneutical framework for the artistic space. In *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, Vernant examines the relationship between the two gods, as embodied in Phidias' sculpture of Zeus at Olympia. There, the 12 deities are arranged in pairs, and Hestia and Hermes, unlike all the others, do not appear to have a direct connection in terms of their genealogies or legends. (Vernant 2006, 157) Instead, he notes the affinity of their functions, namely their complementary activities. If Hestia represents the circular hearth that connects the house to the earth, thus becoming a symbol of fixity, immutability, and permanence (Vernant 2006, 158), Hermes represents the complete opposite, being the one who continually traverses space, symbolizing transition, movement, and contact with foreign elements. (Vernant 2006, 159)

Building on Vernant's assertion, we can articulate a framework for analyzing visual dwelling within the artistic exhibition space, based on patterns of movement. He notes:

by virtue of their polarity, the Hermes-Hestia couple represents the marked tension in the archaic conception of space: space requires a center, a nodal point, with a special value, from which all directions, all qualitatively different, may be channeled and defined; yet, at the same time, space is the medium of movement, implying the possibility of transition and passage from any point to another. (Vernant 2006, 161)

Within the art space, we can identify the center represented by Hestia as the focal point, the one that draws interest and attention to itself; similarly, Hermes, as the principle of mobility, represents movement through space,

oscillation, or drift within it. If contact with the art space involves entering the phenomenal field of appearance of art objects and the possibility of entering into a relationship with them, the visit now acquires a rhythm specific to each individual visitor. The practices I have mentioned are, thus, adjustments to the way of being in space corresponding to the two opposing yet complementary principles.

Fixity in the presence of art imposes a limited mode of perception, one that is better understood as part of a protocol of directed orientation. The guided tours in the world's major museums are such examples in which movement is merely the interval necessary for directing one toward successive focal points. On the contrary, movement should be understood as a flow in which moments of stasis—that is, of the suspension of movement—are interwoven, precisely when the relationship of reciprocity takes shape. This mode of guided perception is replaced by a certain permeability of the encounter, in which the artistic experience is constituted in the moment. There may be as many deviations and flashes, returns and refixations of meanings, all taking shape not within the artwork as an object, but within its opening in the field of appearance.

Lefebvre offers a compelling formulation of the oscillation between fixity and movement through his reflections on rhythm. For him, the experience of space is not primarily visual, but a temporal one, structured through rhythms that unfold in lived experience. He emphasizes the layered structure of temporal experience, where multiple rhythms coexist and interact through patterns of variation and repetition. Within this framework, the harmony between Hestia and Hermes, which structures artistic experience and fosters visual dwelling, can be thought of as a form of eurhythmia, that Lefebvre describes as a “metastable equilibrium”. (Lefebvre 2004, 20) In this way, the tension between stabilization and movement can be rearticulated in rhythmic terms, as a dynamic balance rather than a fixed opposition. Any disruption of this balance leads to arrhythmia, that is, as a pathological condition (Lefebvre 2004, 68): whether as a superficial flow or as rigidity within the artistic space.

Coming back to the Hestia-Hermes polarity, it is directly linked to practices of visual dwelling, providing a rhythmic structure through which the closure of meaning is suspended. The modulations of the gaze represent precisely the rhythmic gestural variations through which space is not navigated, but dwelled in: either by gathering around the “hearth” of a specific art object that temporarily immobilizes its surroundings and thus allows the anticipatory background to be actualized, or by letting the gaze circulate, according to its own rhythm, through detours, distractions, or returns. What is certain is that the two principles of space are indispensable and complementary, productive insofar as they are alternated and attuned to the way art appears in the phenomenal field. As for the suspension of the viewer's intentions, this must be correlated with contingent experience, but

without the total elimination of previous experiences and knowledge. In this sense, a mode of negotiating the tensions between anticipation and emergence takes shape by harmonizing them through practices of visual dwelling, as a rhythm between stability and dynamism. This dynamic can be further examined within a specific museological context, namely the Vatican Museums.

#### **4. Case Study: The Vatican Museums**

The Vatican Museums offer a particularly relevant example in this regard, structured around highly iconic works that shape the anticipatory horizon of the visit. These works are not encountered naturally, but are prefigured through guidebooks, maps, and the broader cultural imagination, generating expectations even before entering the space. Within such environments, visual dwelling becomes increasingly challenging, due both to the scale of the exhibition and to the density of its symbolic and perceptual cues.

In order to achieve a more complete understanding of the space, a guided tour may initially appear as the most appropriate way to navigate and experience it. Yet, in most cases, such an approach tends to restrict the possibility of engaging with the artwork. The image must be identified and apprehended at a rapid pace, leaving little room for sustained attention. Almost immediately, the gaze is redirected toward the next point of interest in each room, the one that demands recognition within the established perceptual hierarchy. Directing one's gaze thus becomes an active effort of anticipation, as it must constantly adjust to the incoming flow of visitors who are about to occupy the same focal position.

Such conditions generate forms of arrhythmia. Highly valorized works function as focal points that attract and concentrate attention, while movement between them becomes merely a means of transition. A paradigmatic example is the Sistine Chapel, where Michelangelo's frescoes exert a strong perceptual pull, particularly toward the end of the visit. While earlier stages may still allow for exploratory engagement, the final approach is characterized by increasing pressure both spatial and temporal, culminating in a dense convergence of attention that leaves little room for dwelling.

By adopting such an attitude, the viewer risks losing focus, leaving even less room for genuine engagement. As a result, potential moments of connection with the artwork tend to dissolve. Moreover, merely "ticking off" works for external reasons diminishes the difference between an embodied artistic experience and one mediated from the comfort of home, through images encountered online or in books. This becomes particularly evident in those moments when the gaze passes over the less canonized works. Toward the end of the exhibition, when the Sistine Chapel becomes

the central point of attraction, the antechambers dedicated to modern artists such as Dalí, de Chirico, or Morandi are often reduced to transitional spaces. Although in other contexts these works might constitute focal points in themselves, within the Vatican they are largely bypassed, as attention is directed toward what follows.

In this context, the question arises: what distinguishes a real artistic experience from a virtual one? How can such spaces be visually dwelled in, defying, to some extent, their own normativity? The answer lies in the possibility of harmonizing the relationship between Hestia and Hermes. Stabilization around the so-called hearth is essential for the experience to take root through contact with the artwork; yet movement remains indispensable, as it creates the conditions for deviation and delay.

In contexts such as the Vatican Museums, these practices may take the form of subtle adjustments: changing the angle from which one looks, allowing unexpected details to emerge, or establishing relations not only with a single work, but with the surrounding constellation of works. Similarly, a form of indirect harmonization may consist in suspending the noise and cultivating moments of relative silence, thereby allowing the gaze to see within the field of relations that unfolds. Thresholds, too, should not be treated merely as points of passage. These hermetic forms of spatial structuring are not simple demarcations between one point and another, but intervals within which the relation is reconfigured.

Such an approach implies a mode of movement that is almost ethical in character, one that preserves the relation and maintains an openness toward otherness. Finally, the possibility of returning—of retracing one's path, or of re-engaging previously encountered works—introduces a form of circularity within a space otherwise structured by linear progression. In a context such as the Vatican Museums, where long corridors, descending staircases, and directional signs emphasize forward movement, these acts of return and hesitation open the possibility for a different kind of experience, one grounded in rhythmic alternation rather than prescribed progression.

## **5. Conclusions**

The present analysis has allowed us to examine the possibility of visual dwelling within the artistic exhibition space in a way that sustains the constitution of an authentic artistic experience. Our contribution has been articulated around the negotiation of the tension between anticipation and emergence. Considering both the viewer's inclination to project their own memories, experiences and expectations onto the artwork and the normatively structured nature of the exhibition space, we have proposed a mode of engagement that enables the formation of relations within the field of appearance of the artwork, while at the same time preserving its alterity. In this sense, visual dwelling has been understood as the suspension of the

closure of meaning, allowing the artwork to remain open as an event of appearance.

This has led us to consider practices through which the viewer may mediate the rhythmic structures characteristic of the temporal experience of the space, rather than its purely visual dimension. The Hestia-Hermes scheme has thus been mobilised as a model for understanding the structuring of space, one that accommodates both focal points corresponding to the principle of fixity and modes of movement within the field of appearance. The balancing of these principles gives rise to a form of visual dwelling specific to each viewer, in which the encounter with the artwork is continuously recontextualized according to the way in which it appears within the perceptual field. In this sense, the artistic experience does not arise as a given, but as a fragile and dynamic process sustained through a rhythmic interplay between stability and movement.

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