The paradox of unconventional affordances

Marc Slors

Abstract
Responsiveness to affordances that are salient in our conventional practices is usually automatic and unreflective—for good reasons. Responsiveness to unconventional affordances, by contrast, must be enforced. This is what artistic interventions of studio RAAAF do. I argue that it is precisely the fact that affordances are more or less forced on us that makes it possible for us to relate to them freely.

Keywords
Affordances, conventions, art

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1. Introduction
One of the features of the works of art produced by studio RAAAF and discussed in Erik Rietveld’s inaugural lecture is their ability to “generate meaning by offering new affordances, new possibilities for engaging with the world.” (Rietveld, 2019, p. 13) The ability to offer new affordances is discussed under the heading of one of the three aspects of RAAAF-art distinguished by Rietveld, namely working with layers of meaning. It is, however, also connected with another aspect identified by Rietveld, namely the ability of art to facilitate an openness to the possibility of having radically different socio-material practices. For part of this facilitation consists precisely of exposing an audience to radically new affordances. In this contribution, I want to discuss the way in which works of art open up unconventional affordances, as part of what it takes to let us consider radically new practices. I want to do this against the background of the idea that socio-cultural practices usually sensitize us to conventional affordances by making us unreflectively and automatically responsive to them. This points to an interesting paradox in the way in which works of art, such as those discussed by Rietveld, open up a world of unconventional affordances for us: they necessarily have to force them on their audience, rather than lure it into responsiveness through unreflective practice. But it is precisely such forcing that allows the audience to freely relate to them and reflect on them. Or so I will argue.

2. Two routes to responsiveness to affordances
Our conventional daily cultural practices, Rietveld writes,
typically generate a selective openness to those affordances that allow us to go on in the same way as the other practitioners (...), to act according to the established norms, but the cost of that conventional selective openness is that people also habitually ignore many of the more unorthodox affordances. (Rietveld, 2019, p. 13)

I believe this is exactly right. Our cultural practices make us sensitive to specific affordances offered by our socio-cultural niche, thereby occluding many others.

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Affordances that are part of our conventional routines are salient for us—our enculturation has made them stick out in “the ambient optic array” or perceivable as patterns in the behavior of others. In that sense, we are often very much conscious of them. But that is perceptual or phenomenal consciousness, not reflective consciousness. For we tend to respond to them, precisely as parts of conventional routines: more or less automatically. Elsewhere, I have argued that there is a good reason for this (Slors, 2019): by collectively being sensitive to the same kinds of affordances, we are able to put into place cultural conventions that allow us to offload onto the cultural niche a considerable amount of cognition aimed at the coordination of our daily activities. If all affordances would stick out equally for us, such offloading would be impossible. Thus, culture sensitizes us to certain affordances and at the same time make us insensitive to the very many other affordances that are present in our life world as well.

Against this (admittedly very sketchy) background, it becomes clear that if one wants to open up unconventional affordances to an audience, the access of this audience to these affordances must follow another trajectory than the regular sensitization processes that underlie our responsiveness to the conventions that are salient for us in daily life, the processes of enculturation and socialization. We cannot become acquainted with and responsive to unconventional affordances by becoming part of future socio-material practices in which they figure. Such practices do not (yet) exist. Instead, works of art such as those described by Rietveld are interventions that deliberately stall or contradict current practices. The audience is jolted out of the daily automaticity with which they interact with their environments by being confronted with new ones. Unconventional affordances are thus made available via a reflective route. Instead of slow, automatic enculturation, they are, in a sense, forced on us by the artist.

For example, the slicing open of Bunker 599 is a deliberate deviation from our current practice of preserving cultural heritage. Whereas in our regular practices, the salient affordances that buildings such as these have for us is to leave them intact as much as possible, the esthetic intervention of slicing it open presents the new affordance of the bunker to make us question this regular practice. It is the stalling of our current practice that offers this affordance. But such stalling more or less means that the affordance for reflection is imposed on us. Another example is the End of Sitting in which many unconventional affordances are offered. The point is that we are made responsive to these unconventional affordances by the complete absence of conventional sitting affordances. If sitting affordances would be available as well, we would very likely not even notice the diverse alternatives that are offered everywhere in this work of art. This, again, means that unconventional affordances are imposed on us. So, precisely because our route to conventional affordances is via the gentle non-reflective nudging that enculturation entails and that results in a smooth unreflective responsiveness, unconventional affordances must be offered via another route that disrupts this smooth dealing with our life world.

3. The paradox of unconventional affordances

Such artistic arm-wrestling, which basically involves forcing a set of affordances onto an audience, might seem to be the opposite of letting people get acquainted with unorthodox affordances freely. But that impression is misguided. The artistic route to unconventional affordances is a transparent one. It is precisely the fact that affordances are forced on us, rather than sneaked in via the backdoor of slow and automatic enculturation, that makes it possible for us to reflect on them. Rietveld rightly quotes Alva Noë: “artworks that question our conventional practices and norms can be seen as a way of doing philosophy.” (Rietveld, 2019, p. 32) Reflection is a prerequisite for the ability to relate freely to whatever it is we reflect on. So here is the paradox: it is precisely by forcing affordances on us that we are not coerced into becoming responsive to them, but can relate to them freely.

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