



SCULPTED AMBIANCES IN AFRICANA LANDSCAPE

George Joshua Orwel



Sculpted Ambiances in Africana Landscape

Sculpted Ambiances in Africana Landscape centers on ambiance as it affects the expanded sculptural field, particularly filling a gap in aesthetics left by a lack of focus on sculptures and installations in the Africana world and elsewhere.

This book differentiates ambiance from other affective states and emotions and explores its production. It provides an introduction to the history of ambiance and vividly demonstrates, through immersive and experiential writing, how ambiance manifests in different artistic situations and social settings. The book considers the neglected and unique importance of sculptural ambiance to the history of Africana visual culture, and what these works mean in terms of their social, historical, cultural, political, and ecological imagination of space. The book is written in an episodic style and begins with a description of an image before presenting an analysis of the artist's style and staging for ambient experience.

This book will benefit college and university students; scholars of art, architecture, aesthetics, philosophy, geography, anthropology, and sociology; and curators and galleries.

George Joshua Orwel, a philosopher and writer, is on the adjunct faculty of Hunter College and City Tech, City University of New York. He is writing a book on David Driskell as a Sylvia and Eddie Brown research fellow at the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of Visual Arts & Culture of African Americans & the African Diaspora, University of Maryland, College Park, MD.



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George Joshua Orwel

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Dedicated to Sheryl and in memory of Margaret.



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Acknowledgments

The idea of researching and writing on the topic of ambiance came to me in a dream. I got up from bed one night and wrote it down. I have been interested in ambiance ever since, and it has led me down many paths. A dream is nothing but a series of images, ideas, and emotions, which align perfectly with the affective state that is ambiance.

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Introduction

Concentricity

It was a hot, sunny, muggy afternoon, and I was crossing Whitestone Bridge, which connects the boroughs of the Bronx and Queens in New York City, on my way to John F. Kennedy Airport to catch a flight. Whitestone is a long, massive bridge that spans the entire East River, suspended midair by hundreds of strong cable lines, so that when you're driving on it, you feel like you're in a flying car, looking out over the city and beyond. When it opened to traffic on April 29, 1939, two years after the start of construction, it was intended as a gateway to the World's Fair being held in Flushing Meadow Park in Queens that spring. Today, the bridge looks as modern and elegant as it did on that day.

As I drove, I looked toward the horizon, and it seemed like I was looking at a huge dome with a painted line circling it that appeared to demarcate the boundary of the earth and the sky. Above that line was a grayish-red area signaling a heat wave. On the other side of the bridge, the interstate highway 678 takes you around Citi Field, with its roof hovering above the nearby buildings. Next to the stadium is a spherical steel sculpture orbited by three rings called The Unisphere. The globe, measuring 140 feet high and 120 feet wide, was designed by the artist Gilmore D. Clarke as part of his plan for the 1964 World's Fair, and it became an instant draw for tourists. Representing the earth, it was meant to remind viewers of the importance of global relationships. What is common in all these things—my perception of the natural world around me, the stadium, and the sculpture—is the appearance of concentric circles.

A circle is a near-perfect geometric shape that does not betray the start and end of a line, merging both extremities of circularity and offering a repetitive, even monotonic sense of life. But it should always be remembered that its concentricity dwells in the spirit of space, as a geometric body does in a human figure. A memory can bring to life the circular nature of existence and allows us to travel back through history to revisit moments and events that have left an indelible imprint on the human psyche. Literature, plastic arts, and architecture often enliven the cultural imagination by imbuing bygone eras with the freshness of the present moment. When we say that these acts of imagination—the arts—give life to events and make us relive eras, what exactly do we mean?

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One answer would be epistemic. If we align knowledge with experience, as in the case of living through an era or being immersed in a situation, we can understand, viscerally, what would otherwise be an abstract idea. We can talk of that immersion as a phenomenon; aesthetically it is a condition that defines our experience, so that we can talk of an air of, or sense of, or a vibe, or an environment, or an atmosphere, or an ambiance, or an aura, and many other linguistic terms that denote affective states. Inquiry into these affective states, like ambiance, is meant as an exploration not only of the first order of human experience but also of the wonder of the natural world. In that sense, the phenomenology of space—which is tied to visual culture and, especially in Africa, to the expanded field of sculpture—centers spiritual immanence and the overall sacredness of nature and the universe in our feelings about physical space.

Concentricity, here, refers to a common center around which everything pulses and into which everything is drawn, much like a stage in a theater, or a park in the center of a city or the central nervous system, where there is a convergence of energy, vitality, and intensity, where there is life-giving sacredness and abundance, in other words, a setting, or *mis en scene*. From the medieval period onward, concentric circles, spherical shapes, and globes have been used in portraits of rulers and saints to represent Heaven and our *contemplation* of it. In the Renaissance, the globe came to represent worldliness and universality. The Italian poet and natural philosopher Tommaso Campanella, in his utopian book *The City of the Sun*, written in 1602, describes a temple altar as containing nothing “but a gigantic globe, on which all heavenly bodies are painted, and another that shows every part of the Earth” (Wade 60). The sublime quality of concentric circles, spheres, and globes is comparable to the proportionality of the human body in ancient Egypt, which was used to express ideality of form.

I talk about concentricity because it can help to explain how our responses to cultural and social events like art exhibitions, sporting events, political rallies, and climate change are inseparable from the environments in which they take place; they are, in fact, concentrated in the atmosphere, ambiance, aura, *Stimmung*, or mood of those places and are projected¹ into our experience of them to the point where we are immersed in and enveloped by them. “Humans are not only sensitive to the weather in groups, however,” argues German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, adding that “in all that they do, in the shared field, they themselves act as microspherically climate-active creatures through the division of their immediate surroundings” (*Globes: Spheres II* 139).

Aura

Contemporary scholarship on the phenomenology of atmosphere, which is one source of aesthetic emotions, tends to equate it with ambiance, mood, and aura. My aim is to challenge that equivalence and to seek alternatives by building on the work of Gernot Böhme and Tonino Griffero on aura, atmosphere, and ambiance as synonymous affective states. This project differentiates ambiance and explores its production. As part of that process, I provide a general history of ambiance and