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EDITED BY
JAMES ELKINS

Art History Versus Aesthetics

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University College Cork
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

The Art Seminar

VOLUME 1
ART HISTORY VERSUS AESTHETICS

VOLUME 2
PHOTOGRAPHY THEORY

VOLUME 3
IS ART HISTORY GLOBAL?

VOLUME 4
THE STATE OF ART CRITICISM

VOLUME 5
THE RENAISSANCE

VOLUME 6
LANDSCAPE THEORY

VOLUME 7
TRANSCENDENCE

Sponsored by the University College Cork, Ireland; the Burren College of Art, Ballyvaughan, Ireland; and the School of the Art Institute, Chicago.

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SERIES PREFACE

James Elkins

It has been said and said that there is too much theorizing in the visual arts. Contemporary writing seems like a trackless thicket, tangled with unanswered questions. Yet it is not a wilderness; in fact it is well posted with signs and directions. Want to find Lacan? Read him through Macey, Silverman, Borch-Jakobsen, Žižek, Nancy, Leclaire, Derrida, Laplanche, Lecercle, or even Klossowski, but not—so it might be said—through Abraham, Miller, Pontalis, Rosaloto, Safouan, Roudinesco, Schneiderman, or Mounin, and of course never through Dalí.

People who would rather avoid problems of interpretation, at least in their more difficult forms, have sometimes hoped that “theory” would prove to be a passing fad. A simple test shows that is not the case. Figure 1 shows the number of art historical essays that have terms like “psychoanalysis” as keywords, according to the *Bibliography of the History of Art*. The increase is steep after 1980, and in three cases—the gaze, psychoanalysis, and feminism—the rise is exponential.

Figure 2 shows that citations of some of the more influential art historians of the mid-twentieth century, writers who came

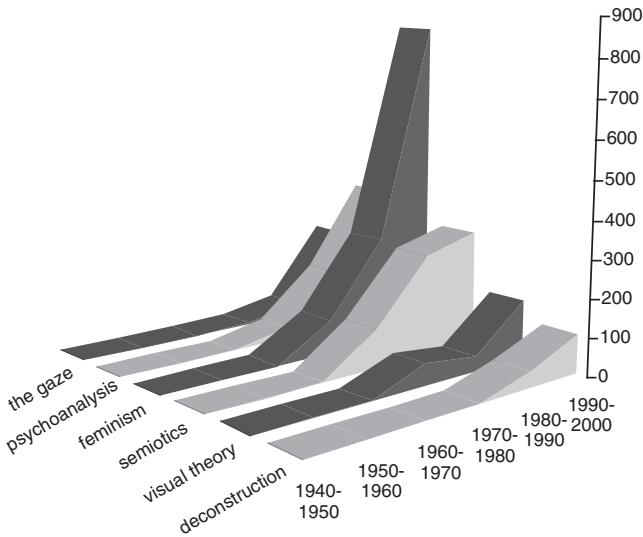


Figure 1 Theory in art history, 1940–2000.

before the current proliferation of theories, are waning. In this second graph there is a slight rise in the number of references to Warburg and Riegl, reflecting the interest they have had for the current generation of art historians: but the graph's surprise is the precipitous decline in citations of Panofsky and Gombrich.

Most of art history is not driven by named theories or individual historians, and these graphs are also limited by the terms that can be meaningfully searched in the *Bibliography of the History of Art*. Even so, the graphs suggest that the landscape of interpretive strategies is changing rapidly. Many subjects crucial to the interpretation of art are too new, ill-theorized, or unfocused to be addressed in monographs or textbooks. The purpose of *The Art Seminar* is to address some of the most challenging subjects in current writing on art: those that are not unencompassably large (such as the state of painting), or not yet adequately posed (such as the space between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic), or so well known that they can be written up in critical dictionaries (the the-

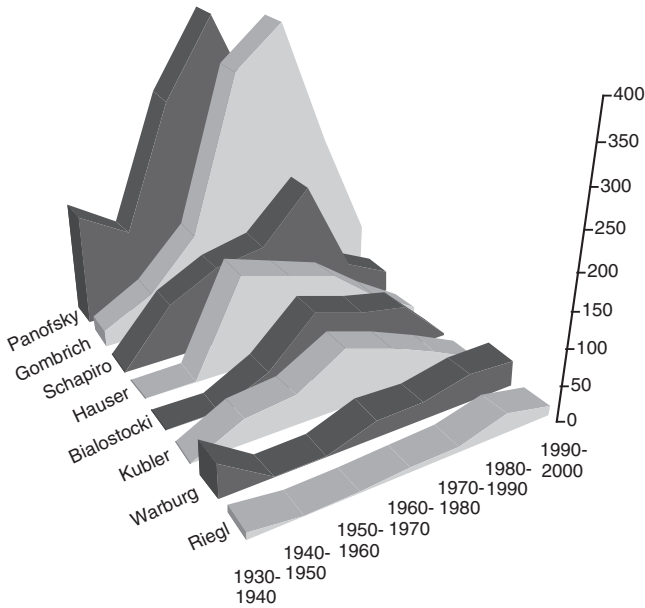


Figure 2 Rise and fall of an older art history, 1930–2000: Citations of selected writers.

ory of deconstruction). The subjects chosen for *The Art Seminar* are poised, ready to be articulated and argued.

Each volume in the series began as a roundtable conversation, held in front of an audience at one of the three sponsoring institutions—the University College Cork, the Burren College of Art (both in Ireland), and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The conversations were then transcribed, and edited by the participants. The idea was to edit in such a way as to minimize the correctable faults of grammar, repetitions, and lapses that mark any conversation, while preserving the momentary disagreements, confusions, and dead-ends that could be attributed to the articulation of the subject itself.

In each volume of *The Art Seminar*, the conversation itself is preceded by a general introduction to the subject and one or more “Starting Points,” previously published essays that were distributed to participants before the roundtable. Together the “Introductions” and “Starting Points” are meant to provide the essential background for the conversation. A number of scholars who did not attend the events were then asked to write “Assessments”; their brief was to consider the conversation from a distance, noting its strengths and its blind spots. The “Assessments” vary widely in style and length: some are highly structured, and others are impressionistic; some are under a page, and others the length of a commissioned essay. Contributors were just asked to let their form fit their content, with no limitations. Each volume then concludes with one or more “Afterwords,” longer critical essays written by scholars who had access to all the material including the “Assessments.”

The Art Seminar attempts to cast as wide, as fine, and as strong a net as possible, to capture the limit of theorizing on each subject. Perhaps in the future the ideas discussed here will be colonized, and become part of the standard pedagogy of art: but by that time they may be on the downward slide, away from the centers of conversation and into the history of disciplines. At the moment they are unresolved, and their irresolution has much to tell us.

1

INTRODUCTION

THE BORDER OF THE AESTHETIC

Robert Gero

The border of the aesthetic is a contested space—a multiply defended zone of discourses occupied by theorists working within the disciplines of philosophy and art history. Theoretical maneuvers and countermoves occur within the domain of each discipline. In both disciplines, theorists battle over the definition of the aesthetic. On one side, theorists claim that aesthetic encounters with artworks involve immediate, noninferential sensory responses that are refined by sustained contemplation alone and not by appeal to such extraphenomenal factors as facts about art theory, art practice, or art history. This is a subjectivist position that is usually framed as the view that aesthetic judgments are autonomous. On the other side, the claim is that theory and practice are logically implicated in aesthetic judgment because they are logically implicated in the artwork itself. This position makes possible a coherent basis for talk of “true” and “false” in aesthetic judgment and art

criticism—or at least talk of “better” and “worse.” In general, theorists are divided by whether they count aesthetic encounters with artworks to be logically independent of their theoretical properties or necessarily constrained by them.

Since the eighteenth century, writers within philosophy have worked to reconcile these extremes. Alexander Baumgarten, who first introduced the term “aesthetics” in 1735, defined it as sensitive cognition.¹ In discussing poetry, he distinguished the category of sensitive discourse, with its suggestive flood of densely packed imagery and ideas, from the category of intellectual discourse, with its network of clear and distinct abstract ideas. David Hume, in 1757, argued that aesthetic responses were spontaneous, subjective states that could be informed by reason as well as sense. Hume supported this by appeal to the intrinsically reflective structure of the aesthetic response. The possibility of informed reflection was the ground on which Hume delineated true critics from pretend critics even though he continued to maintain that aesthetic judgments were subjective reports of feeling and lacked truth value. According to Hume, true critics of “the finer arts” must subject their aesthetic responses to training: they must be translocal, engaging with artworks of “different nations and ages” in order to make informed comparisons; they must be transpersonal, calibrating their responses to the point of view of the intended audience; and they must be analytical, using reason to judge how well the work realized its calculated ends or was “confined by rules of art, discovered to the author either by genius or by observation.”²

Since the beginning of the modernist period, the field of combat has been Kantian: in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant introduced or developed most of the critical terms in play in modernist art analysis—beauty and the sublime, reflective judgment, the presence of an intellectual pleasure in aesthetic appreciation, the presence of a “free play” of cognitive and imaginative elements in aesthetic appreciation, the absence of determinate concepts in

aesthetic judgment, the role of artworks as productive exemplars in art making, and the crucial, regulating function of the *sensus communis* in training artists, critics, and other art viewers. For this reason, all contemporary art theorists can be viewed as negotiating a position in relation to Kant. Consequently, a review of Kantian aesthetics will be a helpful aid in reading Section 3, "The Art Seminar."

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant analyzed the formal structures of both aesthetic judgment and art making in terms of the "free play" of imagination and understanding. This is the "free play" of the beautiful where the imagination can endlessly play at forming and the understanding can endlessly play at describing. For Kant, artworks are an imaginative array of representations, "a multiplicity of partial representations," what he calls "aesthetic ideas" that "strain" to approximate an objective presentation of a rational idea.³ Rational ideas are not determinate concepts but are ways of trying to think about, or somehow represent, what lies beyond human experience or what is mysterious and ineluctable within it. Aesthetic ideas are not determinate concepts either, nonetheless, as disciplined imaginative insights, they have cognitive content. Aesthetic appreciation is the entertaining of indeterminate and partial concepts that never coalesce into one privileged, conceptual "closure." In Kant's aesthetic, this rush of thought stimulates intellectual pleasure when it somehow satisfies the spectator in spite of resisting crystallization into a fixed or definite thought. In fact, Kant claims that the reason artworks can stimulate such enjoyable floods of thought is *because* that thought is not narrowly constrained within the boundary of a particular determinate concept. Aesthetic pleasure is the harmonic play of the understanding and the imagination as they work together to organize meanings.

For Kant, such a free play is possible only if the artwork is a dynamic mechanism operating according to a kind of complex internal logic that both invites and eludes interpretation. Kant

claimed that artists can isolate and extract this mechanism from another artist's artwork and either directly appropriate it or rework it in their own artworks. For Kant, no worked structure is an artwork unless it creates and maintains the free play necessary for a purely intellectual or cognitive enjoyment. Consequently, art production necessarily involves the invention of works that have sufficient complexity and sufficient openness to stimulate a rich train of thought, a set of plausible readings that must always remain indefinite.

Kant's work has been appropriated to advance differing accounts of the aesthetic. Some define the aesthetic as the experiencing of a sensible object of any sort—natural or artifactual—when it is framed as *an irreducibly singular event*, disconnected from any determinate purpose, function, or art-historical situation. On this account, the aesthetic is tied to the perceptual: every perceptual object could be viewed aesthetically, for example, an aerial night bombing or a makeshift memorial shrine, but not every artwork. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), for example, would be included in the scope of the aesthetic; but not Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964) or Paul McCarthy's *Bossy Burger* (1991).

This narrowed bracketing of the aesthetic is the application to art of the disciplinary project of the Enlightenment—what Jürgen Habermas calls “the project of modernity ... to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic.”⁴

The autonomy of art has been variously viewed. It has been mourned as “aesthetic alienation”: “the experience of art as *aesthetical* is the experience of art as having lost or been deprived of its power to speak the truth ... modernity is the site of beauty bereaved.”⁵ A cultural position or set of concerns, later organized under the term “anti-aesthetic,” emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s and attacked the aesthetic as the mark of art. They at-

tempted to “change the object itself,” “the very nature of art,” and “the object of criticism”:

“Anti-aesthetic” also signals that the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas, is in question here: the idea that aesthetic experience exists apart, without “purpose,” all but beyond history, or that art can now effect a world at once (inter)subjective, concrete and universal—a symbolic totality. ... More locally, “anti-aesthetic” also signals a practice, cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic ... or rooted in a vernacular—that is, to forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm.⁶

J. M. Bernstein notes that theories of art that view artworks as historical constructions, “attempt[ing] to interrogate art historically,”⁷ necessarily understand artworks “in non-aesthetic terms.”⁸ On the other hand, the aesthetic has been valued as a subversive zone of experiencing because it is not compromised by the instrumentality of political and economic negotiations. Theodor Adorno sees art or the “aesthetic mode of conduct” as “a reservoir of critique ... because it alone can block the repressive authority—instrumental rationality (perfected under capitalism)”:⁹

Aesthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object, in that instant in which artworks themselves become animate under its gaze. ... Through contemplative immersion the immanent processual quality of the work is set free. ... This immanent dynamic is, in a sense, a higher-order element of what artworks are. If anywhere, then it is here that aesthetic experience resembles sexual experience, indeed its culmination.¹⁰

Many writers practicing or avoiding philosophical aesthetics share this sense-based interpretation of the aesthetic. Arthur Danto has claimed that Warhol’s *Brillo Box* is an anomalous artwork that exposes the basic theoretical dimension of art and forces the abandonment of the aesthetic theory of art. According

to Danto, *Brillo Box* refutes the theoretical claim that the only significant properties of an artwork are aesthetic properties that supervene on the sense-based properties of the work. He claims “aesthetic considerations have no essential application to ... art produced from the late 1960s on”:¹¹

For me, the interesting feature of the *Brillo Box* was that it appropriated the philosophical question of the relationship between art and reality and incorporated it into the *Brillo Box* and in effect asks why, if it is art, the boxes of Brillo in the supermarket, which differ from it in no interesting perceptual way, are not. At the very least the *Brillo Box* made plain that one cannot any longer think of distinguishing art from reality on perceptual grounds, for these grounds have been cut away. ... What makes the one art may be something quite invisible, perhaps how it arrived in the world and what someone intended it to be.¹²

For Danto, when an artwork can have significant nonperceptual properties, art is revealed as nonaesthetic. For this reason, he concludes that the project of interpreting and appreciating art cannot be confined by the terms of the aesthetic.

In contrast, the aesthetic has been defined as referring exclusively to the experiencing of an object *when framed as an artwork*. On this account, every artwork, even one possessing insignificant or no perceptual qualities is aesthetic, while most perceptually discriminated objects are not. Thierry de Duve shares this reading of the aesthetic:

The sentence “here is some art” produces a case of art, but it is not a case of theory; it is a case of feeling. The experience is not repeatable, which is to say, experimental; it is singular, which is to say aesthetic.¹³

Other theorists in this group have redrawn the boundary of the aesthetic far beyond the liminal border of the perceptual. Stephen Davies counts as aesthetic *all* the complex semantic prop-

erties of an artwork necessary for its appreciation as an artwork.¹⁴ He claims that Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) possesses the property of "referring to the history and technique of sculpture" because it has gained aesthetic properties "as a result of attaining art status."¹⁵ Noël Carroll has challenged this use of "aesthetic" to cover a diverse set of properties ranging from the sensuous to the semantic. However, he agrees that the formal properties of an artwork are aesthetic, defining them as "the ensemble of choices that realize the point or purpose of the work."¹⁶ Consequently, Carroll concludes that conceptual artworks such as John Cage's *4'33"* have nonperceptual aesthetic properties:

With respect to *4'33"*, the form of the work crucially involves the choice of notational silence—the pianist enters, opens the score, and does nothing—thereby virtually compelling the audience to attend to whatever ambient sounds occur in the ensuing interval of four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The point of the work—Cage's great project, one might say—is to deconstruct the privileged position of music in the music/noise couplet and to alert the listener to the aural richness that surrounds her at any given moment.¹⁷

Carroll points out that this move also entails another attack on a modernist aesthetics: he claims that one can grasp the artistic form of John Cage's *4'33"* without ever attending a performance of the work.¹⁸ Here Carroll extends Malcolm Budd's attack on "the acquaintance principle" by concluding that some aesthetic properties themselves, and not just knowledge of them, can be grasped on the basis of their reliable description, without requiring any experiencing of them directly.¹⁹

Recently, James Shelley has advanced a new aesthetic theory of art using Frank Sibley's notion of aesthetic perception understood as noninferential perception. According to Sibley, aesthetic perception is necessary for aesthetic judgment and is impossible without a direct encounter with the artwork:

People have to *see* the grace and unity of a work, *hear* the plain-tiveness or frenzy in the music, *notice* the gaudiness of a color scheme, *feel* the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. They may be struck by these qualities at once, or they may come to perceive them only after repeated viewings, hearings, or readings, and with the help of critics. But unless they do perceive them for themselves, aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgment are beyond them. Merely to learn from others, on good authority, that the music is serene, the play moving, or the picture unbalanced, is of little aesthetic value; the crucial thing is to see, or hear, or feel. To suppose that one can make aesthetic judgments without aesthetic perception, say, by following rules of some kind, is to misunderstand aesthetic judgment.²⁰

Shelley argues that noticing the cognitive contents of artworks is sufficient to support aesthetic experience.²¹ He claims that ideas or thoughts can be affective, that is, “thoughts [can] move us perhaps as much as sensuous forms do. They strike us with daring and wit, and with power and beauty”:

There is a notion of the aesthetic on the table—Sibley’s—according to which daring, impudence, and wit are no less aesthetic than grace, elegance and beauty ... [consequently] there is a notion of the aesthetic ... according to which *Fountain*, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, and *Erased DeKooning Drawing* are no less aesthetic than are the Trevi Fountain, the *Mona Lisa*, and the DeKooning drawing that Rauschenberg erased.²²

On this account, aesthetic properties can depend on semantic properties of artworks just as they depend on perceptual properties. Consequently, all artworks are aesthetic, even nonperceptual works with significant cognitive content and irrelevant perceptual properties. Interestingly, Shelley claims that this move is properly termed an “aesthetic” theory of art since it is in line with Francis Hutcheson’s treatment of the aesthetic in his *Inquiry Concerning*

Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design (1725), a work Shelley describes as “a founding text of modern aesthetics.” In it, Hutcheson analyzes the idea of beauty as “an ‘internal’ or ‘mentalsensation,’ received by means of an ‘internal’ or ‘mental’ sense.”²³ Hutcheson also defends, at length, the claim that “powerful yet economical” theorems can strike us with their beauty.²⁴

The preceding is offered as a summary to help frame the terms of conversation that follow in Section 3, “The Art Seminar.” Within art history, there are differing accounts of whether art history constrains aesthetic judgment or is constrained by it. Some theorists have claimed that art historians identify vital stylistic elements in artworks by detecting the aesthetic significance of those elements. Others have argued for a stronger claim: no stylistic element or subcomponent of an artwork can be articulated unless that element’s aesthetic significance within the work has first been determined:

No doubt the painter Ingres drew his exquisite lines and did not use a ruler, but whereas the use of unruled lines is a vital stylistic element in Barnett Newman, it is not one we would mention in connection with Ingres. Why is this? It is because Newman has introduced those unruled lines with a special formal effect in mind, and this formal effect forms a large part of the aesthetic significance of a Newman canvas. Ingres presumably did not ever consider the use of a ruler: no aesthetically significant choice was involved in his use of unruled lines.²⁵

In contrast, other scholars have argued that aesthetic evaluation is impossible without first determining the history of the artwork, its particular positioning within art history. Erwin Panofsky is perhaps the preeminent example:

But that we grasp [aesthetic] qualities in the fraction of a second and almost automatically must not induce us to believe that we could ever give a correct pre-iconographical description of

a work of art without having divined, as it were, its historical “locus.” While we believe that we are identifying the motifs on the basis of our practical experience pure and simple, we really are reading “what we see” according to the manner in which objects and events are expressed by forms under varying historical conditions ... we subject our practical experience to a corrective principle which may be called the history of style.²⁶

Kendall Walton reinforces this claim; for him, historical facts about the origination of an artwork are essential to determining the aesthetic properties of an artwork. Aesthetic evaluation is possible only if such facts as the artist’s intention or the existence of particular “well-established and well-recognized” categories of art production within the art world of the artist (such as impressionist painting and twelve-tone music) have been determined in advance:

We could not possibly tell by staring at [the work], no matter how intently and intelligently, whether it is coherent, or serene, or dynamic, for by staring we cannot tell whether it is to be seen as a sculpture, a *Guernica*, or some other exotic or mundane kind of work of art. (We could attribute aesthetic properties to it in the way we do to natural objects, which of course does not involve consideration of historical facts about artists or their societies. But to do this would not be to treat the object as a *work* of art.) ... And of two works which differ *only* in respect of their origins—that is, which are perceptually indistinguishable—one might be coherent or serene, and the other not.²⁷

Others have taken art-critical practice in general to constrain the aesthetic judgment of particular artworks. Denis Dutton indexes the artist’s creatively realized intention to complicate “enabling” or “regulating” background conditions that include, for poetic works, “the background of the vocabulary, grammar, syntax, conventions, associations and history of language.”²⁸ This move

has been attacked on the grounds that it fails to discriminate between fixed background conditions that *explicitly* enter into the artwork's design and those that do not.²⁹

If background conditions surrounding the production of a particular artwork are read in the broadest sense, the artwork becomes a condensed representation of a particular sociohistorical context and discourse. Its dominant function is to be an interpreted moment of a cultural time-space. Here the specificities of art history and aesthetics are lost in the generalities of institutional display. Jacques Rancière has observed that artworks have been historicized by art museums in the very act of framing *qua* aesthetic display:

Our museums of fine arts don't display pure specimens of fine art. They display historicized art: Fra Angelico between Giotto and Masaccio, framing an idea of Florentine princely splendor and religious fervour; Rembrandt between Hals and Vermeer, featuring Dutch domestic and civic life, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and so on. They exhibit a time-space of art as so many moments of the incarnation of thought.³⁰

According to Rancière, art making is no longer "subject to a set of intrinsic norms: a hierarchy of genres, adequation of expression to subject matter, correspondence between the arts, etc."³¹: now it is possible for "everything to play the part of the heterogenous, unavailable sensible."³² Rancière claims that this romantic construction of the heteronomy of the art object as a form of life, what he calls "the plot of the spirit of forms," is, in fact, the construction of a mode of experience that projects the properties of the aesthetic experience onto the art object yet paradoxically recognizes the object as art only on the condition that it is nonart.³³ Rancière claims that the current aesthetic regime operates via a Romantic poetics that regards art and life to be permeable. As a result, both formalism in art and normativity in art have been overthrown.

In Section 3, “The Art Seminar” and Section 4, “Assessments,” a very wide range of opinions regarding the aesthetic becomes evident: some writers reject the role of the aesthetic in art criticism in favor of historically-bounded criteria; others attempt to redesign or return the aesthetic to a concept compatible with the historical. Others begin with assumptions that reject any confluence between art history and aesthetics; this places them outside of arguments that can contain both aesthetics and history, including the literature I have reviewed here. These positions, in sum, comprise a large portion of the spectrum of conceptual possibilities as I see it. Most of the terms of art history, considered as a discipline, are at least influenced, if not determined by, fundamental issues such as the ones I have outlined. I will bring this introduction to a close by sketching my own position in relation to these issues.

I believe that Kantian aesthetic theory remains applicable to the category of contemporary artwork classified as “nonaesthetic.” A reading of Kant’s formalism demonstrates an essential connection to postmodernist art practice and appreciation. *Contra* Clement Greenberg, Kant’s account of aesthetic appreciation is not formalist in a narrow sense. To conclude otherwise is to neglect Kant’s account of art making as a species of intellectual play: “production through freedom, i.e., through an act of will that places reason at the basis of its action.”³⁴

To view a work as art is to enjoy shifting levels of interplay: seeing how the artist has merged imagery, sounds, cultural icons, found objects, sometimes even another artist’s work, into new representations that express meaningful ideas; seeing how the artist’s selection of, and treatment of, a medium fits into the art-historical record of media treatment; seeing how the artist’s work is positioned with earlier works of that artist and other artists in history; seeing how the artist’s work plays in relation to other disciplines and the social dimension of life. Rosalind Krauss notes that art

practice regarded as “eclectic” from a modernist point of view can be seen as “rigorously logical” from a postmodern perspective:

Within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself—might be used.³⁵

Instead of conclusions—which would, given the complexity of the subject and the brevity of this exposition, be premature—I would like to advance another theory of the aesthetic. My model incorporates and extends theoretical moves advanced by several of the theorists under discussion in this essay:

1. The Sibley/Shelley move: No property of an artwork counts as aesthetic unless it can generate a noninferential judgment in a trained, sentient spectator. I would extend this: any property of an artwork counts as aesthetic if its virtual “viewing” is sufficient to generate noninferential judgments.
2. Davies’s move: Aesthetic properties are not just sensuous properties; they include such art-historically indexed properties as “referring to the history and techniques of sculpture.” I would both narrow and broaden this claim. First, only art-historical descriptions of works that generate perceptual/sensory experiences count as aesthetic properties of artworks. Second, art-historical descriptions can sometimes generate new properties and even new works.
3. Carroll’s move: Artistic form is the set of choices that realize certain purposes or points. I would extend this: some artworks are strategic structures. Because certain artworks utilize theory strategically, they can be “seen” only by trained spectators who are aware of other artworks and the

ways theoretical commitments and moves within the art world can generate aesthetic properties.

This, in outline, seems a promising way to define the aesthetic since it is informed by the spectrum of theory and by the encounter with a class of contemporary artwork that has generally frustrated and confounded aesthetic analysis. Here I follow Adorno:

[T]he concrete historical situation of art registers concrete demands. Aesthetics begins with reflection on them: only through them does a perspective open up on what art is. . . . The principle of method here is that light should be cast on all art from the vantage point of the most recent artworks, rather than the reverse, following the custom of historicism and philology, which, bourgeois at heart, prefers that nothing ever change. If Valéry's thesis is true that the best in the new corresponds to an old need, then the most authentic works are critiques of past works. Aesthetics becomes normative by articulating such criticism. This, however, has retroactive force, and from it alone is it possible to expect what general aesthetics offered only as a hope and a sham.³⁶

Notes

1. Alexander Baumgarten, *Theoretische Ästhetik*, trans. H. R. Schweitzer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1988). Originally published in 1750 /1758 as *Aesthetica*.
2. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis, IN: The Liberty Fund, 1987), 235. Originally published in 1757.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), Part I, Book II, 49:316. Originally published in 1790 as *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*.
4. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity: An Incomplete Project," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 9. Originally delivered in 1980 as a talk.
5. J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 4.
6. Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, x, xv.

7. The Fate of Art, 4.
8. The Fate of Art, 3.
9. Josef Früchtl, "Adorno and Mimesis," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1:25.
10. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 175–6. Originally published in 1970 as *Ästhetische Theorie*. Adorno's position is complex: his notion of the autonomy of art is derived from psychoanalysis and historical materialism, not the disciplinary project of modernity. For Adorno, artworks are "immanently dynamic" in relation to the spectator and to other artworks (176). He claims "history is inherent to aesthetic theory. Its categories are radically historical" (359).
11. Arthur Danto, *After the End: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 25. Danto regards his work in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) and *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) as demonstrating this philosophically.
12. Arthur Danto, "Pop Art: Aesthetics of Andy Warhol," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 1:42, 44.
13. Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 50–51.
14. Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 108.
15. *Ibid.*, 67.
16. Noël Carroll, "Non-Perceptual Aesthetic Properties: Comments for James Shelley," *British Society of Aesthetics* 44 no. 4 (October 2004): 416–17.
17. *Ibid.*, 415.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, 416–17; Malcolm Budd, "The Acquaintance Principle," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 no. 4 (October 2003): 386–92.
20. Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1957): 137.
21. James Shelley, "The Problem of Non-Perceptual Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 4 (October 2003): 373–78.
22. *Ibid.*, 378, 373.
23. *Ibid.*, 376; Francis Hutcheson, *Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, ed. Peter Kivy (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), §I, art. X, § III, arts. I, II, V.
24. Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, § III.
25. Jenefer M. Robinson, "Style and Significance in Art History and Art Criticism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 40 (1981): 11.
26. Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 34–35.
27. Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review*, 79 (1970): 334–67.

28. Denis Dutton, "Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1994): 235.
29. Robert Wicks, "Dependent Beauty as the Appreciation of Teleological Style," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 396–97.
30. Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes," *New Left Review* 14 (March–April 2002): 141.
31. *Ibid.*, 135.
32. *Ibid.*, 135, 144–45.
33. *Ibid.*, 141, 135–36.
34. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Part I, Book II, 43:163.
35. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodernism* (New York: New Press, 2002), 41. Originally published in October 8 (Spring 1979).
36. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 359.

2

STARTING POINTS

EXORCISING THE DREARINESS OF AESTHETICS¹

Joseph Margolis

I

A little more than 50 years has passed since J. A. Passmore's much-admired paper, "The Dreariness of Aesthetics," made its appearance in *Mind*.² There is, of course, no point in hurrying now to defend aesthetics against the charges Passmore leveled then. The truth is, Passmore believed that aesthetics need not be dull. A good part of his paper was occupied with showing why opinions to the contrary (John Wisdom's, for instance) were not compelling. Passmore made it clear, by tactful induction, that he was generally opposed to "woolliness" in thought. (Who is not?) Unfortunately, though, he happened to find woolliness disconcertingly widespread and thriving. In one prescient passage he ventured to say that

books on artistic "goodness"... often try to provide a substitute for individual judgment; they are dull for the same reason that

books on scientific method are often dull; they set out to destroy spontaneity and speculation, and to substitute for them the application of a mechanical method.

Passmore could not have known, when he wrote this, that the “unity of science program” would be placed in mortal peril by the time we, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the American Society for Aesthetics, would be reviewing our own field in order to assess just what it has accomplished in its first half-century. The fact remains that Passmore’s advice about aesthetics has been followed, more or less, both in recent aesthetics and the philosophy of science. Premature generalizations about “beauty,” “aesthetic goodness,” and the “value” of art pretty well match the vacuity of talk about “scientific reason,” “scientific method,” “scientific values,” and “science” *tout court*.

In Anglo-American philosophy, for instance, it was undoubtedly the appearance of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that, in a largely unintended way, started a radical turn toward the historical contingencies of scientific practice. By now, it has put the idea of a changeless, uniform, comprehensive, and adequate method of science pretty well on the defensive (perhaps even at a point beyond defense).³ The analogous development in aesthetics is considerably more halting. Passmore’s sensible advice about overcoming the “dullness” of aesthetics recommends only abandoning global generalizations and favoring “an intensive special study of the separate arts, carried out with no undue respect for anyone’s ‘aesthetic experiences,’ but much respect for real differences between the works of art themselves.” The point is well taken. I must add only that Passmore nowhere explains why, once we have attempted these scrupulous studies, we should not also risk returning to the “metaphysics” of art and “meta-” generalizations about beauty, goodness, criticism, and the like, if we find them promising. Also, I personally find (I must admit) no benefit at all in the technical use of the term “aesthetic” in any of its

combinations: it is nothing but a catch-all for discourse about the arts (which, of course, was not what Kant had in mind or what that genial army of contemporary Kantians may still have in mind perseverating about the “aesthetic”). (I recommend its complete dismissal.) Passmore himself betrays (if that is the right word) his keenness about the arts and something of his own grasp of literature. It would be entirely fair to say that aesthetics need not be dull, in the sense that most regular contributors to the field may now be counted on to be quite well informed about particular runs of art. (That, of course, hardly touches on drearinesses of the human sort.)

In fact, in aesthetics (as in the philosophy of science), genuinely fruitful speculations do not require an expert’s grasp of the pertinent materials. What is needed, rather, is an appreciation of some reasonably salient practices of the sciences, the arts, criticism, and history, pointed enough to recommend a change in our way of conceiving strategic questions. The many specialists who identify themselves as philosophers of science for instance are, for the most part, only distantly familiar with, say, the close work of quantum physicists—and that has hardly damaged the usefulness of their reflections. A literate grasp of the state of the field is ordinarily enough to make their contributions worth considering. There is no reason why the same should not be true in aesthetics. It is also worth remarking that, at the present time, both of these specialties are enormously more interesting and useful than, say, epistemology or moral philosophy, disciplines with which they are usually rather closely paired and (unfavorably) compared. Neither of these has taken Passmore’s advice to heart: that is, that we should have a reasonably detailed familiarity with part of what is *actual* in the domain being explored—possibly even *actuel*, in the French sense.

No, the dreariness of aesthetics is the dreariness of normalized professional practice that endorses the unexamined im-