

Experimental Aesthetics

For over a decade now, the debate on art has been dominated by the rhetoric of research. However, does the concept of artistic research still express its originally radical and experimental power today? The concept seems to have become hackneyed and obscured by method fever and academic jargon.

Perhaps the time has come to invigorate its conceptual framework – for example through terminology referring to its companion in art, namely philosophy’s branch of aesthetics. Could experimental and speculative processes of thought again be leading in aesthetic debates and contemporary art? These are the issues that come to the fore in this publication through a series of projects, views, and perspectives connected to the project Aesthetic Jam – part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Tapei Biennial.



with Andre Alves, Boris Groys,  
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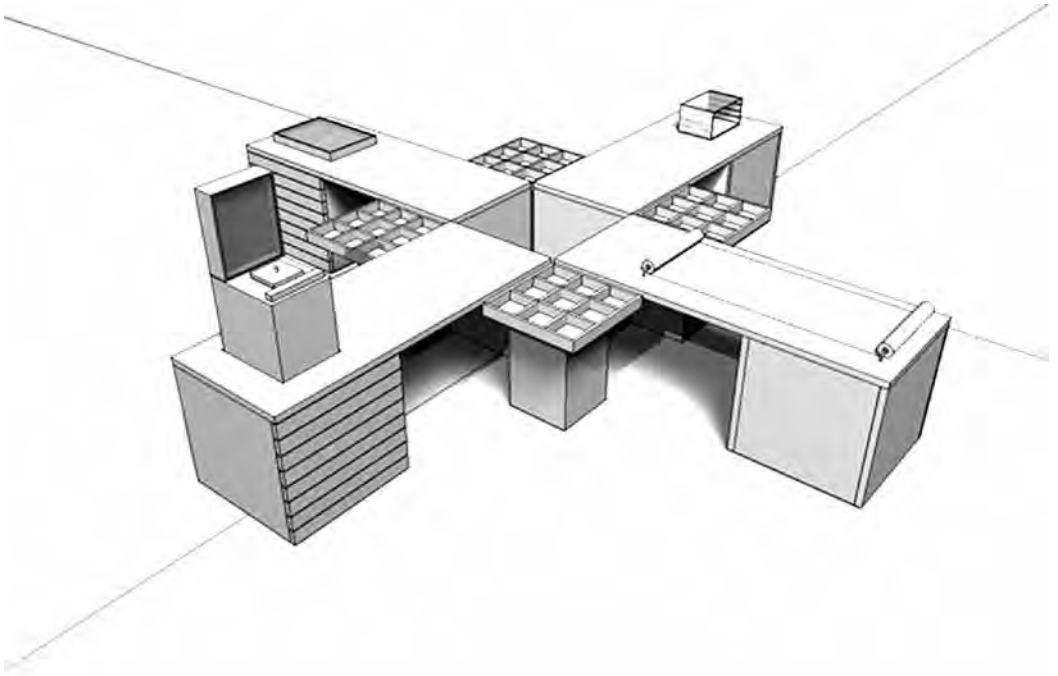
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\* Irene Kopelman, *Workstation*, Aesthetic Jam,  
Taipei Biennial, 2014

# Experimental Aesthetics

## Editorial

Today, both the practice and understanding of artistic research are encompassed by increasingly rigidifying forms of academization. This asks for a thorough conceptual reassessment of that originally artistic field. Indeed, many questions have been lurking in the wings for some time now. Does the present conceptual impact of artistic research still cover its original and radical drive? Is artistic research still related to processes of experimental thinking and creating? Or does a pervasive institutionalization urge to reset the ever-narrowing framework of artistic research?

The present publication intends to explore topical potentialities of an alternative and more strategic manner of dealing with artistic practices. Therefore, the texts deliberately refer again to the concept of aesthetics. Since contemporary thinkers such as Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière have initiated to redefine the aesthetic domain, aesthetics seems once again to point to extra-territorial frameworks able to avoid the production of instrumentalizing concepts. Indeed, a topical understanding of aesthetics appears to be astoundingly compatible with what was once advocated by artistic research, i.e. the self-reflexive and self-critical capacities of artists engaging in configurations of understanding and signification.

In light of a topical reconsideration of the aesthetic regime, a first exploration took place during the project *The Judgment is the Mirror* (Living Art Museum, Reykjavik, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. In particular, attention was drawn to how the current artistic discourse and its

profound focus on method and knowledge production is at risk of losing sight of the role of critical judgment – after all a core concept in Kantian aesthetics. Specifically, the unique character of the aesthetic judgment – offering a critical mirror reflecting both the judgment and how it comes into being – makes clear that the aesthetic as such represents a dimension preceding a transparent methodology and an epistemological result. Therefore, the aesthetic process requires a manner of judgment that is capable of prolonging the gap between aesthetic apprehension and methodological deduction so that any claim to knowledge could be delayed as a “not yet.”

The very issues of aesthetics and productive delay of knowledge were at the core of the project *Joyful Wisdom* (Parallel Event Istanbul Biennale 2013).<sup>2</sup> In line with Nietzsche’s *Gaya Scienza*, essayistic presentations of eight artistic situation-based thinking processes continued the quest for an aesthetics that hovers on the border of judgment and affect in an attempt to be liberated from the freezing order of academic knowledge. The potential of a radical choice loomed up, foreboding the course of being adrift to the point of a black out of the senses, an epistemic guerilla, and making an untimely plea for speculative and symbolic forms of understanding.

*Aesthetic Jam*, the concluding project in this series<sup>3</sup>, is part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Taipei Biennial (2014) and connects to Nicolas Bourriaud’s curatorial concept of *The Great Acceleration*. The concept of great acceleration points here to the urge of a global refoundation of the notion of aesthetics deploying various topical perspectives such as antropocene, object-oriented ontology, and new materialism. Yet, *Aesthetic Jam* also stresses the bond

1 *The Judgment is the Mirror* took place in the Living Art Museum Reykjavik (as an exhibition) and the Iceland Academy of the Art (as a seminar) from January 19 until March 24, 2013. Participants: Tiong Ang, Clodagh Emoe, Jan Kaila, Jaapo Knuutila, Roger Palmer, Henk Slager (curator), and Mick Wilson.

2 *Joyful Wisdom* took place as parallel event of the 13<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennale in Rezan Has Museum (as an exhibition) and Kadir Has University (as a seminar) from September 13 until October 20, 2013. Participants: Tiong Ang, Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan, Burak Delier, Jan Kaila, Aglaia Konrad, Marion von Osten, Henk Slager (curator), Jalal Toufic, and Mick Wilson.

between aesthetics and experimental processes of making art. A zero-degree exhibition plan developed by co-curators Hongjohn Lin and Henk Slager<sup>4</sup> hosted a relay-type series of three production periods and additional presentation moments. Participating artists not only produced new work, but also continuously engaged in adaptation of the display system and public discussions of the material conditions and relevant conceptual frameworks of both the exhibition and their art making for *Aesthetic Jam*.

As an elaboration on aforementioned research projects, a publication has been developed in collaboration with Metropolis M Books. Deriving from a multitude of perspectives and lines of thought, this publication intends to question anew the concept of aesthetics and its relevant positions and situations. Could a novel concept of aesthetics reveal different forms of interest in and processes of artistic thinking? Could experimental aesthetics as an undisciplinary methodology distinctive from a theoretical and academic philosophy be in the forefront of artistic practices? Could the concept of aesthetics have the power to reframe the concept of artistic research?

A number of *Aesthetic Jam* participants such as Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan, Irene Kopelman, Hongjohn Lin, Mick Wilson, Andre Alves, and Clodagh Emoe delve into their art making and the questions stated above. In addition, the publication contains contextualizing texts by authors known for their critical reflections on the topical impact of aesthetics such as Boris Groys, Chus Martínez, John Rajchman, Henk Slager, Timotheus Vermeulen.

Henk Slager, Editor

3 *Aesthetic Jam* (co-curators Hongjohn Lin and Henk Slager, Editor) took place as a satellite project of the 9<sup>th</sup> Taipei Biennial (curator Nicolas Bourriaud), Taipei Fine Arts Museum/Taipei National University of the Arts, September 12, 2014 through January 4, 2015. Participants: Andre Alves, Tiong Ang, Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan, Chang Nai-Wen, Clodagh Emoe, Fang Yen-Hsiang, James T. Hong, Huang Chien-Hung, Kai Huang Chen, Irene Kopelman, Alejandro Ramirez, Su Meng-hung, Gwen Wang, Wang Sheng-Hung, Mick Wilson, and Wu Shu-ann.

4 The zero-degree composition is made up of two installative presentations: Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan's *Episode of the Sea* and Kai Huang Chen's *Sea Route*. Both works articulate the current situation of aesthetics metaphorically: the obsolescence of a chosen course, the romanticism of isolation, the unbearableness of island consciousness, and the pressing necessity of a complete reformulation based on novel perspectives and experimentations.

# Aesthetic of the Impasse

Andre Alves

It is not a vision – it can be found in any newspaper: the contemporary everyday is held by a sensation of non-resolution and lacks prospects for other worlds. In the worst case, this is not some sort of daydream but the manifestation of having become paranoid without realizing the splits between different realities. In the best case, it is the advertisement of an articulation of reality sustained by ambiguity and impotence in the name of economic austerity, the common good, and political discipline – and with the capacity to get rid of any sense of radicalism, personal and social potency, and mental balance.

The contemporary everyday results from a set of temporary exchanges articulating contingent practices, while maintaining the social and the political essentially unstable. However, today the contemporary seems to be trapped in a play of ambiguity not performing the potential openness of the unstable, but rather leading to setting-up the instable; one that will simply not wear off. This is basically the outcome of a repetitious political lexicon as a sort of linguistic pathology following a dialectic of negativity: influence, trump, legislate, dominate, surround, crisis, austerity, discipline, future, lack, solution...

Such an instability is a manifestation of the crisis in political imagination, in our creative impotency. The sensation of uncertainty gives rise to what Marina Garcés calls the “prisons of the possible”:<sup>1</sup> an arrest of the imagination of other others in the world, or even other worlds – at least ones that are not the world of the excluded. According to Garcés, the very

idea of reality relies on the potential for change – a contingency that allows for the actualization of that potential, the novel. But in the current contemporary she identifies a tension between that which seems to be possible and the role of uncertainty as openness: “the prisons of the possible... invade and monopolize our relation with the world every time we feel that ‘everything is possible... but we cannot do anything else (besides choosing)’ and that ‘everything can be said... but one has nothing relevant to add.’”<sup>1</sup>

The crisis of imagination is not brought about so much by the lack of potential to produce alternatives (because everything seems to be possible, at least in the eyes of capital exchange) as by the evidence that one’s alternatives have no capacity to shift the sensed contemporary. There seems to be a hegemonic voracity regarding the present, a manifestation of the desire to normalize subjectivity by controlling the mechanisms inherent to political mobilization (from territory planning to currency control) and subjective perceptions (from interfering with personal aspirations, localization of the individual in the possibility of the present and his own future, and so on). Such a teleology without purpose struggles with the possibility of artistic endeavors, since the artistic attitude is necessarily a founding one. It dismisses that there is a decision to follow; decisions are the most fundamental aspect of the aesthetic. For the subjective experience of the individual, it is not much different.

If one lives under a sensation of inoperability, of “no alternatives left,” then, in the world of unlimited reproduction – as Nicolas Bourriaud puts it – subjects are left to live under the sign of permanent exile.<sup>2</sup> The exile starts with the model of contemporary participation dominated by a shared currency of capital and technology. *Colectivo Situaciones*<sup>3</sup> saw in this

<sup>1</sup> Marina Garcés, *En las Prisiones de lo Posible*, Barcelona, 2002, p.15 (my translation).

<sup>2</sup> According to Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Relational Aesthetic*, New York, 2009, p. 42.

the dilemma of our present: on the one hand the profound subjective disquiet of choice, on the other, something perceived as a terrifying and constant attempt of normalization of the counter-system that excludes us (in *Situaciones'* original idea, from a political governance angle). This contemporary attitude can be interpreted as an aesthetic of the impasse: a present lacking potential actuality. That is, the capacity and incapacity to use the disquiet, to profit from contingency, to imagine possibilities without being immediately subdued by the belief that they will not effect any transformation.

The word *impasse* has become particularly popular in contemporary politics to describe a state of apparent non-resolution, where nothing can be altered. The surprise is that the *impasse* is treated by media and politics as a sort of external entity; as a logic unfolding from the exterior of society, as a haunting shadow that excuses responsibility, henceforth allowing all sorts of decisions – violence, disrespect, and negation of the other.

Yet, something is in motion in the contemporary and the transformation of how the word *impasse* is employed signals it. The term *impasse* was born from Voltaire's literary beautification of the term *cul-de-sac*: dead-end street. It results from the contraction of *im* + *passer*, or not to pass. The use of the term *impasse* in present politics pursues that original dead-end street metaphor. In our days, this (originally architectonic) terminology is more commonly known for expressing situations and subjective psychological states – accomplishing Simmel's prognosis on the expansion of the lexicon of the metropolis as a definer for the nature of spirit.<sup>4</sup> A shift happened under Fritz Perls, who has listed the *impasse* as a psychological state of neurosis. From then on, the impossibility of acting and judging

connected to an impasse no longer denotes a dead-end (street). It rather designates an inward-turned energy imploding the layers of personality, where the obvious ceases to be clear through a timely process that should be perceived as a transition, as the internal event taking place in people's minds as they go through change. The *impasse* is a haunting force generated by the individual to indicate an area of discomfort. It signals a lack of resolution and understating of direction.

However, despite being a jam in direction, the *impasse* is also carried by a sense of motion, one that the individual must go through in order to produce change. This is somewhat uncanny, since it is generated by individuals and feels to them as an external force. The understanding being enacted in political discourse is similar to this sense of external force that commands our directions. But although the term is employed in such discourses in ways meant to imprint this idea, it is worth noting too that the similarity ends there. For Perls (and Gestalt Therapy), the understanding of what one is shying away from is a necessary step for transformation – to embody, to exaggerate it, until it forces one to realize its intention. This process is also different from change, which can fall on you by force or fate or even random choice; it implicates one as accountable for the realization of a decision.

Then, here, one finds a discursive gaffe or a missed encounter, since art, psychology, media-speech and politics all express and perceive the *impasse* in different ways. This mismatch of ideas plays an important role in the nebulous effect of our perceptions: we use the same words but engage in different conversations. It is not only a situation of ambiguity and deep hesitation; it is one of unashamed dyslexia. Words know things; they carry a history of proven effectiveness, and the delivered use of a

# On Aestheticization

Boris Groys

word mobilizes metaphors that open up specific constructions of reality. Reclaiming this discursive manipulation, and accepting that there are advantages in the existential disquiet (rather than being subdued by it) inverses the manipulation of language but also evokes a release from a dialectics of paranoia and consolation.

It might sound like a cliché, but artists do know how to put the disquiet into play and turn it into something potential. It is not about being haunted by dread and find catharsis and consolation in making art – that would be the same consoling criteria the political discourse acts upon; it is about making and giving shape to meanings, again and again, and again. Art practices permanently offer the puzzlement of the new by detecting, in the making of art, how individuals relate to the materiality of their time, that is, how they exist in it. This puts aesthetic judgment at work and creates continuity in the development of artistic discourses. In the aesthetic disquiet, everything must be reorganized; thinking, then, undergoes a digressive experience, which is not necessarily a disintegrative one. What is being sold in political discourse as infectious has always been taken in art as a cure.

Because the aesthetic force is meant for the imaginary other, it is from the start an aperture in the intentions of “the prisons of the possible.” The role of art in the era of the impasse might start by reclaiming the impassive-unrest that floods the contemporary (as once one recognized the need to reclaim the means of labor), to disintegrate the configurations that force the contemporary into a cliché – including its own. The potential is there; if aesthetics has something to teach our contemporary politics it is how to regain its creative imagination – and that will depend on art’s pedagogical capacity.

In the contemporary art context the words “aesthetics”, “aestheticism” and “aestheticization” have mostly negative connotations and are used as critique and accusation. Many contemporary artists understand the goal of art not as production of “aesthetic experience” in the soul of an aesthetically educated spectator but, rather, as a means to change the world they are living in. The shift from artistic production towards art activism seems to lead to a total rejection of the aesthetic attitude. At the moment artists enter the sphere of politics they tend to leave aesthetics behind them. The famous dictum by Walter Benjamin weighs heavily on their minds: aestheticization of politics leads to Fascism and should be opposed by politicization of aesthetics. But does the turn towards art activism necessarily mean the subordination of aesthetics under the hegemony of politics?

Now I would argue that today the word aestheticization is mostly used in a confused and confusing way. One speaks about aestheticization implying different and often even opposing theoretical and political operations. The reason for this state of confusion is the division of contemporary art practice itself into two different domains: art in the proper sense of the word and design. In these two domains aestheticization means, indeed, two different and even opposing things. Let us analyze the difference.

In the domain of design aestheticization of certain technical tools, commodities or events means an attempt to make them more attractive, seductive, appealing to the user. In this sense we

should see the whole art of the pre-modern past as, actually, not art but design. If one looks at the art of ancient China one finds well designed tools for religious ceremonies or everyday objects used by court functionaries and intellectuals. The same can be said about the art of Ancient Egypt or of the Inca empire: it is not art in the modern sense of the word but design. And the same can be said about the art of European old regimes before the French revolution – here we also find only religious design or design of power and wealth.

Our contemporary notion of art and artistic aestheticization has its roots in the French revolution – in the decisions that were taken by the French revolutionary government concerning the objects that this government inherited from the Old Regime. The change of regime – especially a radical change such as it was introduced by the French revolution – is usually accompanied by a wave of iconoclasm. One could follow these waves in the cases of Protestantism, Conquista or, recently, after the fall of the Socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. The French revolutionaries took a different course: instead of destroying sacral and profane objects belonging to the Old Regime they de-functionalized, or, in other words, aestheticized them. The French revolution turned the design of the Old Regime into what we call today art, i.e. in an object not of use but of pure contemplation. This violent, revolutionary act of aestheticization of the old regime created art as we know it today. Before the French revolution there was no art – only design. After the French revolution art emerged – as death of design.

The revolutionary origins of aesthetics were conceptualized by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Almost at the beginning of this text Kant makes clear its political context. He writes: “If

someone asks me whether I find the palace that I see before me beautiful, I may well say that I do not like that sort of thing, in true Rousseauesque manner I might even vilify the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people on such superfluous thing. (...) All of this might be conceded to me and approved; but that is not what is at issue here. One must not be in the least biased in favor of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in the matter of taste.”<sup>1</sup> Kant does not like the palace as a representation of wealth and power. However, he is ready to accept the palace as aestheticized, that actually means negated, made non-existent for all practical purposes – reduced to a pure form.

So since the French revolution art began to be understood as the de-functionalized and publicly exhibited corpse of past reality. Such an understanding of art determines the art strategies until now. In the art context to aestheticize the things of the present means to discover their dysfunctional, absurd and unworkable character. In other words, artistic aestheticization is the opposite of the aestheticization by means of design. The goal of design is to aesthetically improve the status quo – to make it more attractive. Art also accepts the status quo – but it accepts it as a corpse, after its transformation into a mere representation. In this sense art sees contemporaneity not merely from a revolutionary, but, rather, post-revolutionary perspective. One can say: modern and contemporary art see modernity and contemporaneity as the French revolutionaries saw the design of the Old Regime – as already obsolete, reducible to a pure form, already a corpse.

Actually, it is especially true for artists of the avant-garde who are often mistakenly interpreted as heralds of the new technological world – as marching in the avant-

garde of technological progress. Nothing is further from the historical truth. Of course, artists of the historical avant-garde were interested in a technological, industrialized modernity. However, they were interested in technological modernity only with the goal to aestheticize modernity, to de-functionalize it, to demonstrate the ideology of progress as phantasmal and absurd. When one speaks about the avant-garde in its relationship to technology one has mostly one historical figure in mind: Tommaso Marinetti and his *Futurist Manifesto* that was published on the first page of the newspaper *Figaro* in 1909.<sup>2</sup> The text condemned the “passeistic” cultural taste of the bourgeoisie and celebrated the beauty of the new industrial civilization (“a roaring motorcar, which seems to race on like machine-gun fire is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace”), glorified war as “hygiene of the world,” and wished “to destroy museums, libraries and academies of any sort.” The identification with the ideology of progress seems here to be complete. However, Marinetti did not publish the text of the Futurist Manifesto in isolation, but included it inside a story that begins with a description of how he interrupted a long, nightly conversation with his friends about poetry with a call to stand up and drive far away in a fast car. And so they did. Marinetti writes: “And we, like young lions chased after Death... Nothing at all worth dying for, other than the desire to divest ourselves finally of the courage that weighed us down.” And the divestment took place. Marinetti describes the nocturnal ride further: “How ridiculous! What a nuisance!... I braked hard and to my disgust the wheels left the ground and I flew into the ditch... O mother of a ditch, brimful with muddy water. How I relished your strength-giving sludge that reminded me so much of the saintly black breasts of my Sudanese nurse.”

I will not dwell too long on this figure of the return to the mother womb and to the nurse’s breasts after a frenetic ride in a car towards death – it is all sufficiently obvious. Here it is enough to say that Marinetti and his friends were fished out of the ditch by a group of fishermen and, as he writes, “some gouty old naturalists” – that means by the same passeists against which the Manifesto is directed. Thus, the Manifesto is introduced by the description of a failure of its own program. And so one does not wonder that the text fragment that concludes the Manifest repeats the figure of defeat. Following the logic of progress Marinetti envisions the coming of a new generation for which he and his friends will appear, in their turn, as the hated passeists that should be destroyed. But he writes that when the agents of this coming generation will try to destroy him and his friends they will find them “on a winter’s night in a humble shed, far away in the country with an incessant rain drumming upon us – and warming our hands around the flickering flames of our present-day books.”

These passages show that for Marinetti to aestheticize a technologically driven modernity does not mean to glorify it or trying to improve it, to make it more efficient by means of a better design. Quite the contrary, from the beginning of his artistic career Marinetti looks at modernity in retrospective, as if it has already collapsed, as if it already has become a thing of the past – imagining himself in the ditch of History or, at best, sitting in the countryside under the post-apocalyptic, incessant rain. Marinetti envisions the failure of his own project – but this failure is understood by him as a failure of progress itself that leaves behind only debris, ruins and personal catastrophes.

Now, I quoted Marinetti at some length because it is precisely Marinetti

2 F. T. Marinetti, ‘The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism’, in: *Critical Writings*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 2006, p.11–17.

3 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in: *Illuminations*, London, 1992.

4 Walter Benjamin, ‘Ueber den Begriff der Geschichte’, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:2, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1974.

whom Benjamin calls the crucial witness when in the Afterword to his famous essay about the artwork in the age of its mechanical reproducibility Benjamin formulates his critique of the aestheticization of politics as the Fascist undertaking par excellence.<sup>3</sup> To make his point Benjamin cites a later text by Marinetti on the Ethiopian war, in which Marinetti draws parallels between the modern war operations and poetic and artistic operations that were used by the Futurist artists and famously speaks “about the metallization of the human body” – metallization that has only one meaning: death of this body turning it into a corpse understood as an art object. Benjamin interprets this text as a proclamation of war by art against life and summarizes the Fascist political program by the words: *fiat art – pereas mundi*. And Benjamin writes further that Fascism is the fulfillment of the *l’art pour l’art* movement.

Of course, Benjamin’s analysis of Marinetti’s rhetoric is correct. There is only one but crucial question here: how reliable is Marinetti as a witness? Marinetti’s Fascism is an already aestheticized Fascism – Fascism understood as a heroic acceptance of defeat and death. Real Fascism wanted, of course, not defeat but victory. Actually, in the late 1920s and 1930s, Marinetti became less and less influential inside the Italian Fascist movement that practiced precisely not the aestheticization of politics but the politicization of aesthetics by using Novecento and Neo-Classicism and, yes, also Futurism for its political goals – or, we can say, for its political design. In fact, the figure of Angelus Novus as it was described by Benjamin reminds one of Marinetti – even if Benjamin himself refers here to an image by Klee.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin describes, namely, Angelus Novus as driven by the wind of progress towards the



# Aesthetic Consciousness

Chus Martínez

future, but turning his back to the future and looking into the past unfolding under his gaze – progress presents itself to this backward directed gaze as a work of destruction and devastation.

Thus, the aestheticization of the present condition is not the celebration of it but rather a manifestation of the deepest possible distrust in its sustainability, in its potential of historical survival – to a degree that the artist does not even try to improve this condition. By aesthetical de-functionalization of the status quo, art prefigures its coming revolutionary overturn. Or a new global war. Or a new global catastrophe. In any case an event that will make the whole contemporary culture, including all its aspirations, projections and alternatives obsolete – as the French revolution made obsolete all the aspirations, intellectual projections and Utopias of the Old Regime.

By practicing the politicization of art, contemporary art activism cannot escape a much more radical, revolutionary tradition of aestheticization of politics – the acceptance of one's own failure understood as a premonition and prefiguration of the coming failure of the status quo in its totality that will leave no room for its possible improvement or correction. In fact, in our contemporary world only art indicates the possibility of a revolution as a radical change beyond the horizon of all our present desires and expectations.

## 1

I would like to start by reproducing the definition of “aesthetic” given by the Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy: “Introduced into the philosophical lexicon during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the term *aesthetic* has come to be used to designate, among other things, a kind of object, a kind of judgment, a kind of attitude, a kind of experience, and a kind of value. For the most part, aesthetic theories have divided over questions particular to one or another of these designations: whether artworks are necessarily aesthetic objects; how to square the allegedly perceptual basis of aesthetic judgments with the fact that we give reasons in support of them; how best to capture the elusive contrast between an aesthetic attitude and a practical one; whether to define aesthetic experience according to its phenomenological or representational content; how best to understand the relation between aesthetic value and aesthetic experience. But questions of more general nature have lately arisen, and these have tended to have a skeptical cast: whether any use of *aesthetic* may be explicated without appeal to some other; whether agreement respecting any use is sufficient to ground meaningful theoretical agreement or disagreement; whether the term ultimately answers to any legitimate philosophical purpose that justifies its inclusion in the lexicon. The skepticism expressed by such general questions did not begin to take hold until the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this fact prompts the question whether (a) the concept of the aesthetic is inherently problematic and it is only recently that we have managed to see that it is, or

(b) the concept is fine and it is only recently that we have become muddled enough to imagine otherwise. Adjudicating between these possibilities requires a vantage from which to take in both early and late theorizing on aesthetic matters.”<sup>1</sup>

2

How to regain a notion of aesthetic as a useful one in the current debate around artistic research? True, the term aesthetic does refer to a relationship with experience and to the possibility of gaining a consensus on how certain types of objects – and later non-objects – are at the origin of that particular experience. However, I cannot think of this term without its very precise historical life in art and art theory contexts – even if expanding its meaning may be interesting; even if pointing to other terms and therefore problems concerning experience, knowledge, and thinking in relation to art may be equally important.

Is it still productive to consider the aesthetic a valid concept pointing to the “processes of understanding signification”? And if so, how? The term, even taken in a more experimental, expanded or redefined way, refers to the experience we do find in what we call the “I”. The “I” being a human or a bat, I am not going to make any distinction here, since it is possible to imagine that all animate matter could possess a sense of the I, even without a language to tell us about it. However, my first reservation pertains to the confidence the term aesthetic implies: a very compelling trust in the cause-effect relationship between the mind and the outside-the-mind situation. It is difficult to think about the term aesthetic without implying a dualistic model of mind and nature and the “lucky” psychophysical laws enabling the happy connection between certain types of objects/circumstances and the experience we have of

them. Traditionally art theory depends very much on those dualistic explanatory models. Art and some “parts” of nature are understood as having rare physical properties that play a causal role in the mind perception. Those properties trigger the lucky correspondence between what is outside and what we sense as “inside.” My argument rests on the claim that these properties cannot be known, neither through perception nor through introspection. However, that does not rule out the possibility that they might be known.

3

In searching for a concept, what we do is look for a better, more complex way to define a problem. Artistic research means many things at once. It would take too long to discuss two terms separately. It is worthwhile, though, to devote some time to describing the nature of the ambition that married the two terms. Artistic used as an adjective is already a strange and tricky notion. In the coupling of terms, it is unclear whether research happens in a playful, non-structured way or that it is at the core of doing of art. Too many times artistic research entails an ideological statement. That is, even if common sense says art happens first and foremost in the realm of the unconscious, it is still considered research, thus, a conscious pursuit towards an “engagement with processes of understanding signification.” Artistic research comes to be, then, a statement about a very particular type of thinking, isolating the two cases “thinking in art” and “thinking through art.” Furthermore, in being made a first cousin to the aesthetic, the term artistic research implies that such a particular case study in “thinking” also produces a particular experience with an “I”. In my opinion, that emphasis in artistic research just stresses once more the historical problem

<sup>1</sup> <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-concept/>

of coming to terms with the mind-object issue. The mind cannot consciously create the object that produces an experience escaping any straightforward decision-making process able to be replicated with the same effect by anyone. Only artists are capable of producing art. Therefore, the type of consciousness that produces art cannot be followed or easily be explained as an intention to produce an effect. Self-reflectivity and signification is reached unintentionally. Whether art addresses politics or issues of form or material, the aesthetic – more than political or cultural theory – defines the kind of processes that happen in the minds of viewers and in their experience of works of art. If consciousness is what we call thinking, we need to explain how thinking happens in art, assuming that art is not a conscious decision everyone can make.

The term artistic research could be confusing in its similitude to academic research. However, such a misunderstanding could also produce an interesting awareness of what is proposed by the expression of artistic research. As a conceptual diptych, it does not create a compromise between its specific terms. More than anything, it “entertains” a paradox: the possibility of a non-deliberate system or discipline at the core of a deliberate one. “Research” here does not indicate the embodiment of any particular form of academic training, but the gesture of placing a “maybe” at the heart of the real. This causes something very simple to occur: knowledge vacillates. A permanent oscillation between positioning us here – isolating some features of the real, performing representation, giving form to matter – and, at the same time, taking us faraway from the present time. That is how I understand “artistic research.” For me the term “artistic research” is a composition that designates a temporary solution – and so does the

notion of aesthetic. Aesthetic is the name philosophy gave to a problem that corresponds to the philosophy of mind, to the question of how experience generates thinking and how art – its making and its understanding – like no other realm embodies the incredibly deep complexity of the relationship between thinking/sensing/feeling. Artistic research as a term is a bricolage not used to point to art as thinking, but to indicate our impossibility of grasping how art is thinking. Both terms express the need for more, for a language capable of new ways of addressing art’s contribution to knowledge of a mind active in the non-human realm; for a logic that will bring us to understand social and political philosophies – not in rehearsing inherited terms and theoretical apparatuses but by venturing new ones as Michael Serres or Alain Badiou do.

#### 4

The issue of knowledge and thought both in our mind and in matter is so complex that it leads to a sort of creative pan psyche. It even assumes a level of consciousness in matter. I have stated once that to inquire into knowledge implies the effort to formulate – through logic and languages that surpass disciplines – how inextricable relations are possible among things, language, matter, form, and sense. It means to account for terms, possibilities, and circumstances where principles occur that associate animate with inanimate, objects with memory, animals with other animals, seeds with art, theory with the logic of politics, poetry with knowledge. Then it cannot come as a surprise that imagination is a central principle in inventing knowledge that takes place in art – a task that does not mimic an activity of academia, but one that, in an excessive and subversive way, produces time and space for it while constituting a new “culture.” The main trait of fiction

and imagination is their potential failure. They do not serve as solid ground for a speech act; they are an interference in the logic of an intentional assertion of meaning. Art has retained the inversion of the relationship between meaning and saying as a way to overcome the traps of consciousness as the transcendental principle that rules the modern conception of the individual defining the political as an unambiguous text marked by intention of meaning and able to produce and reproduce a very definite sense of empathy.

The exercise of accepting the riddle of ambiguity, the constant alteration of the relations between matter and words, time and meaning, requires a research manner that calls for a radical reconsideration of the role of language, of straightforward conceptions of how things interact, as well as an inventory of monologues produced by serious forms of meaning.

5

The notion “consciousness” is used in many different ways. It is sometimes used for the capacity to discriminate between stimuli, to report information, to monitor internal states, or to control behavior. We can think of these phenomena as posing the “easy problems” of consciousness. In principle, there seems to be no profound problem in assuming that a physical system could be “conscious” in the senses and there is no obvious obstacle to an eventual explanation of these phenomena in neurobiological or computational sense. But how and why do physical processes give rise to experience? Why do physical processes not take place “in the dark,” without any accompanying awareness of experience? That is the central mystery of consciousness.

However, not all we know about consciousness is deducible from physical phenomena. Therefore, we will always be

unable to fully understand consciousness when departing from physical states. Traditional notions of aesthetic experience all have an epistemic basis – and I would say that aesthetic experience as used today in art contexts very much depends on that. They all assume a gap between the real and the mind, between physical and phenomenological “truths.” In other words, they all seem to derive from a Cartesian way of presenting the divide between anima and non-anima realms. The aesthetic paradigm is still a reductionist one.

Consciousness is connected to the human mind, a mind affected by the real, a real that does not possess any form of consciousness. The aesthetic depends on a materialistic way of reading the relationship between human and nature. It is hard to believe how materialism can still be held as a true way of presenting human versus nature or explaining a particular case in experience – but materialism must be true since alternatives are unacceptable. Thus, we should dedicate our research efforts to produce alternatives for preminent worldviews – not only affecting how we read art and its effects, but also able to transform traditional ways of understanding experience, art, and politics.

As argued above, we have good reason to believe that consciousness has a fundamental place in nature. In light of all relevant philosophical and scientific developments, we need to explore how this may trigger a new science for thinking about art and art’s thinking together with a new set of terms and logic – only then can we proceed, from a point of view of an “art-I” rather than merely a “human-I”, to discover a truly new way of being part of art.

# Performing Philosophy in a Non-Philosophical Way

Clodagh Emoe

Generally, aesthetics is understood as philosophy's discourse of art. Since the role of philosophy is that of interpretation, such a reading of aesthetics designates philosophy as external to art. That also privileges philosophy as the bearer of meaning and accordingly the site for thought. As a post-conceptual artist, my artistic practice complicates such a general, conventional understanding of aesthetics because my practice presents an alternative engagement with art and philosophy. In my work, philosophy does not fulfil a role of interpretation, but is performed throughout the entire process of art making. To further complicate matters, as artworks emerge out of my sustained engagement with philosophical enquiry it is impossible to completely separate the two domains. Since philosophy is internal rather than external to my artistic practice, one could argue that my artworks demonstrate a "philosophical character." Instead of considering philosophy a resource for art, it is precisely the relationship between art and philosophy that activates me to think. The process of engaging with philosophical ideas through an art practice modifies the general reading of aesthetics further while demonstrating that thought is not confined to the domain of philosophy but also takes place in and through the domain of art.

Philosopher Peter Osborne argues that contemporary art has a "philosophical character." Although contemporary art

has problematized aesthetics, Osborne perceives an "ineliminable" bind between the two domains.<sup>1</sup> The interrogative practices of the late 1960s that informed and extended the horizon of contemporary art consider this bind contentious, but nevertheless present. All in all, Osborne observes a "resurgence of interest in explicitly philosophical discourses about art over the last decade" played out in the discursive space of contemporary art.<sup>2</sup> That interest is underscored by philosopher Alain Badiou in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*.<sup>3</sup> Badiou argues that a crisis of the homogenization of cultural forms of representation and a loss of political agency and its investigative approach posit once more the issue of aesthetics for contemporary art. Although he positions the concept of inaesthetics as a departure from aesthetics, I approach inaesthetics as providing a new form of aesthetic enquiry in contemporary art because it asserts art's primacy over thought. For me, inaesthetics re-engages with the discourse of aesthetics while at the same time taking part in the thinking that takes place *within* contemporary art practice. My understanding that inaesthetics expands the aesthetic discourse is also advanced by philosopher Jacques Rancière, who claims, "Even as it tries to ward off aesthetics, perhaps inaesthetics thereby enters into a new dialogue with it." Inaesthetics is unavoidably situated within the discursive field of aesthetics because it puts, as Rancière observes, aesthetics "back into play, if not into question, the operations through which it sought to challenge the logic of the aesthetic regime of the arts."<sup>4</sup> In line with Rancière, I assume that inaesthetics is not a complete departure from aesthetics as a genre of philosophy, but offers a new aesthetic framework that

1 Peter Osborne, *Art Beyond Aesthetics, Philosophical Criticism*, in: *Art History and Contemporary Art*, Special Issue: *Art-History-Visual Culture*, March 2004, p. 27.

2 Peter Osborne, *Art Beyond Aesthetics*, p. 8.

3 Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, ed. Werner Hamacher, trans. Alberto Toscano. Stanford University Press, 2005.

4 Jacques Rancière, 'Aesthetics, Inaesthetics, Anti-Aesthetics,' in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward, London/New York, 2004, p. 231.

overcomes the impasse of the contentious bind between aesthetics and contemporary art.

Consequently, inaesthetics presents a more relevant form of aesthetic enquiry for my practice and for contemporary art in general. Moreover, it has the critical resources that previous forms of aesthetics lack in dealing with the condition of thought in art. Badiou outlines how he conceives thought in art by repositioning the locus of truth from the privileged realm of philosophy to art. In composing a new schema between art and philosophy, inaesthetics presents a non-hierarchical symbiotic relation between the two disciplines. This is because inaesthetics “makes no claim to turn art into an object for philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> Instead, philosophy can reveal the specific form of thought that is immanent to art, Badiou claims.

For me as an artist, inaesthetics provides the critical tools to consider how philosophical meaning is implicated in my works by allowing me to explore how art offers a way to think about philosophical ideas in a non-philosophical way. Thus, inaesthetics provides a framework to reflect on the thinking that is potentially raised by, or better put, *invited* by the event-based work *Mystical Anarchism*. *Mystical Anarchism* emerged out of my interest for philosophical enquiry. The work that I developed in collaboration with philosopher Simon Critchley was enacted for the first time in Glendalough in August, 2009. *Mystical Anarchism* not only encompasses the original event in Glendalough; it also includes the production of a film in 2011, and a series of events centered on the screening of the film in 2012. In this text, I will focus on the first event centered on an intimate lecture. Although a lecture might seem a conventional way of relaying philosophical ideas, the enactment of the work played a crucial role in how the ideas within this

lecture were mediated. Critchley’s lecture “Mystical Anarchism” recalls the Movement of the Free Spirit, a group of thirteenth century mystics, focusing on mystic Marguerite Porete and her peculiar handbook *The Mirror of Simple and Annihilated Souls (and Who Remain Only in Wanting and Desire of Love)*. This handbook led to Porete’s charge of heresy in 1310 and her refusal to disavow the message of her handbook led to her execution at the stake. In his lecture, Critchley recounts the seven stages that Porete maintained necessary to annihilate the soul and bring about a transcendental encounter with the divine. He describes this process as both mystical and anarchistic because the internalization of religious authority these mystics practiced effectively undermines the hierarchies of the Church and, by extrapolation, the State. In addition, he observes the political implications of the process of self-deification, outlining how this process captures the ethos of the Movement of the Free Spirit by presenting the self as a “dividual.” When the spirit is free “all conceptions of mine and thine vanish.”<sup>6</sup> Critchley assumes that the transformation of the individual to a dividual subject would enable more socially bound forms of collectivity articulating the tenets of the Movement of the Free Spirit as offering a new way of being in the world that adheres to notions of freedom and equality.

Where the lecture “Mystical Anarchism” explores the potential of the collective to forge new states of being in the world and consequently new ways of thinking about the world, the enactment of the lecture sought to furnish a space where a group could come together and potentially engage with the ideas articulated in Critchley’s lecture more directly, on an experiential level. The project *Mystical Anarchism* sought to engender an interplay between the content of Critchley’s

lecture with the context of the event, extending philosophical enquiry to others in a nuanced way by creating an *other* space where thinking might be “felt” or perceived. Through a process that I define as *staging*, the performance of philosophy that is explicit in Critchley’s lecture becomes implicated through its enactment.

In the enactment of “Mystical Anarchism,” the method of assembly is initiated from the onset by the hand-delivered invitation to participate. The journey to an unknown location, the gathering in a clearing of a forest on a large hand-mat of 17 x 7 metres in near darkness further embeds the content of Critchley’s lecture. The method enhances the experiential aspect and informs the symbolic reading of the work. By enacting in a space where a group could be gathering together for a discrete period of time, Critchley’s philosophical ideas on the possibility of utopian forms of community can be “felt” and engaged with in an immediate and meaningful capacity. The method also informs the conceptual framework of the work where my decision not to seek permission from the National Parks Authority implicitly refers to the anarchistic attitude that Critchley presents in his lecture.<sup>7</sup>

Enacting *Mystical Anarchism* in a significant place, the banks of the Upper Lake in Glendalough, at midnight, intensified the experiential dimension of the event. The name Glendalough is derived from the Irish *Glenn dha Lough* (the valley of the two lakes). The site is geographically significant since it has been formed by a fault line in the earth’s crust. Glendalough is also an ancient monastic settlement built around the followers of St. Kevin, a

hermit monk who resided on the banks of the upper lake. St. Kevin’s mendicant lifestyle reflects that of mystic Marguerite Porete’s and The Movement of the Free Spirit. At midnight, the site of Glendalough turns into a mysterious, impenetrable site that would attract mystics. Enacting the event at midnight was a gesture towards the element of secrecy surrounding the esoteric text that led to Porete’s execution. Midnight is a significant time, often understood as a time of potential, a time when we might think differently.<sup>8</sup>

Although as an artist I engage with philosophical questions, I observe that the way of thinking that unfolds through my artistic practice and also unfolds out of works such as *Mystical Anarchism* is not analogous to the form of thought instituted by conventional methods of philosophy. My practice activates me to think, but in ways that differ from an abstracted reflection, argumentation, and theory building that one would associate with the discipline of philosophical enquiry. In my work, the act of thinking is bound with experience and, therefore, affective in nature. In this way, the processes used in the enactment of event-based works such as *Mystical Anarchism* invite people to think about philosophical ideas in a non-philosophical way. Since in aesthetics acknowledges that thought is immanent to art and inseparable from the sensible, it provides the aesthetic framework to reflect on the form of thought that *Mystical Anarchism* invites.

7 The decision to not ask permission from the state authorities was also a practical decision. I anticipated they would refuse my bringing one hundred people to the banks of the Upper Lake in Glendalough at midnight. This observation demonstrates how art practice often necessitates the artist to operate in an anarchistic manner.

8 Badiou’s peer Jacques Rancière also observes the potential of nighttime in *The Nights of Labour*. In this essay Rancière reflects on the auto-didactic activities of the proletariat instrumentalising a time out of time, carving out a space where they could institute their own subjective agency. This process can also be registered in Irish history through the phenomenon of the hedge school, a secret educational system that literally took place in the hedges during the late sixteenth and seventeenth century in Ireland.



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# Stop Making the Sensible

Hongjohn Lin

One generally assumes that aesthetics is built around the discourse of the senses. Paradoxically, since Plato, the philosophical endeavor has been to translate a visceral, individual and subjective experience into a discursive practice. Aesthetics, a term coined by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, focuses profoundly on the aesthetic experience, which divides the good, the bad, and the ugly from art's formal properties based on perceptions and receptions. In an etymological sense, aesthetics emphatically does not relate to the business of artists – practices, makings, and how-to-do's.

Taking the notion of taste into a broader concept, Baumgarten was not shying away from giving the corporeal pleasure a prestigious place in judging the quality of art. As subjective and personal it might be, emotional responses, from affection to aversion, or from pleasure to pain, reconnect the body with the mind encompassing the conundrum of art, which was previously solely commented on from the perspective of thought and intellect. Baumgarten's aesthetics could be disdained, yet it was an attempt to free philosophy from its logocentric aspects. Aesthetics stands on the muddling foreground where words can easily run out into the fusion (and confusion) of the rational and the sensible.

The ground of fusion where the judgment of taste stands not only distills meaning from the external objects for the sensible, but also gives existential meaning to humanity. Kant and many subsequent aestheticians have prescribed art as one of the indispensable solutions for human existence and its potential transcendence.

However, knowledge of the beautiful cannot be expanded without a political price to pay. From Plato's republic and its expelled artisans, to Adorno's conception of a standardized, industrialized culture, and Rancière's recount of the ruling of demos, the aesthetic paradigm, once the science of the sensible, cannot be transformed without the political and the social. Strikingly, the time of Baumgarten's neologism corresponds to the nascent period of the privatization of art as a commodity needing to be evaluated and valued for distribution in the pre-capitalist system – the emergence of aesthetics was already coded with politico-economic messages. Perhaps the most assertive voice speaking of the importance of the sensible can be found in Karl Marx's statement: "The formation of the five *senses* is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present."<sup>1</sup> If a historical, dialectical pinnacle can be boiled down to a sensible issue as Marx claims, then it comes as no surprise that contemporary aestheticians such as Badiou, Rancière, and many others, allay the sensible with the political while shifting the boundaries of the fixed territory of conventional aesthetics, which has always been a cognitive issue. The expanding and changing aesthetic domain is deemed to be a meta-political one; henceforth, the aesthetic revelation can become revolutionary, as most contemporary philosophical quests postulate. First and foremost, such a political domain assumes the presence of readers, audiences, spectators, onlookers, and beholders.

Aesthetics stems from the reaction of the sensible, while at the other end of the line lies the action it produces. Nonetheless, one could surmise that radical aesthetic politics taken to an extreme would abolish the hierarchy among known artists and anonymous audiences, which might well be the case in some practices of art. To put it bluntly, the issue

of the sensible is mostly considered the emancipation of the universal, speculative receiver, not of a particular doer.

Contemporary aesthetics never took the how-to-do as the subject-supposed-to-know. In Greek times, particularly poetics or *poiesis* meaning “to make” and “to become,” as a branch of philosophy was supposed to be able to transform and to reveal the world. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the equivalent of *Rhetoric* on how to write, dealt with how to create drama. Aristotle’s twist of Plato’s *mimesis* is to give the power of imitation back to the hands of the doers rather than to the philosophical interpretation of the receiver’s mind. In his view, to imitate and to improvise is intrinsic to human nature, as most children show in playing; for poets these two gifts are important artistic techniques. *Poetics*’ claim is that both tragedy and comedy originate in “improvisation,” literally meaning “not foreseen” and able to construct a veri-

similar narrative. Thus, Aristotle makes sense of making art, not of making sense of the sensible. In Aristotle’s time, improvisation is important to theater, and no less important than dance, music, and the wide range of art.

Indeed, improvisation is an interplay of associations and affiliations to create something in contingency. Moreover, one needs to perceive and conceive at the same time, comparable to music where players are also listeners. The formal structure of improvisation is always loosely bound, off-center, and without being enclosed in deploying something anew: the informal quality of improvisation defies a fixed systematic constraint. Improvisation creates the situation of co-authoring – a single authorship cannot easily be contained. Improvisation is always a dynamic flux, a process of making, which is the indispensable meaning of poetic experience.



# Workstation

Irene Kopelman

At the Taipei Biennial 2014, the project *Aesthetic Jam*, curated by Henk Slager and Hongjohn Lin, creates an improvisation with fourteen artists and critics rendering a contemporary version of a surrealist *cadavre exquis*. The project title says it all: turning aesthetic experience into a poetic one in three consecutive rounds within a three-month span, involving group and public discussions amidst a changing exhibition scenario. Firstly, two works *Sea Route* by Chen Kai-Huang and the *Episode of the Sea* by Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan are installed, showing two radical situations of islands. The former, Taiwan, isolated by the artist's performance connotes the island's separate cultural-political identity; the latter, Urk, demonstrates how everything changed since the island's connection to the mainland. Starting from there, *Aesthetic Jam* continues to be a platform where ideas and thoughts can be exchanged implying reactions, presentations, and interactions, making the exhibition grow and expand.

What affects the exhibition, does not necessarily come from each participant's own discipline and aesthetic doctrine, but rather from their encounter in relation to the previous stage and to each other. *Aesthetic Jam* is about making sense of the sensible and going back to the sense of making, which cannot be accomplished by single, specialized knowledge. In the collective interest of a new art object and a semantic space, and in a fluid and diversified manner, the exhibition denotes poetic experience. The signification of aesthetics – making sense of the sensible – can break down in the shock waves of an unforeseen art. Such a transformation can be seen in the passage from Plato to Aristotle and needs to be anticipated again in our time, where aesthetics attempts to delve into a novel, broad spectrum of making art.

If you are a person who likes to think, you most probably want to produce an original thought every now and then, even though we all know that most things have been said and done (and thought of) already.

We abandoned the idea of the genius centuries ago. Still, when you sit down, think, and work, you do so with the expectation, or at least desire, of producing an original idea. The question is, how? How can you reach for what you didn't know already?

Most of us know our strengths and weaknesses; the situations that make us feel safe and those that challenge us.

One of the strategies I put into play is that of placing myself in (literally) unknown terrain – and then I try to draw. A place so far out of my comfort zone that I cannot have pre-conceptualized it, a landscape I have not seen or experienced before, that I am observing first-hand for the first time – and then trying to draw. A situation I know nothing about but the fact that I want to draw it and turn my observations into a representation.

What to draw and how to draw it are the questions that follow; the context triggers a system of representation I could not have imagined in any other situation.

Some forms demand flat lines, others depth and shadow. The riddle has to be solved, the brain has to pull out stratagems, and it gets conflicted and confused but eventually the puzzle gets solved, by the eye, the mind, and the drawing hand.

Eventually the system becomes unobstructed and the series of drawings can begin to exist.



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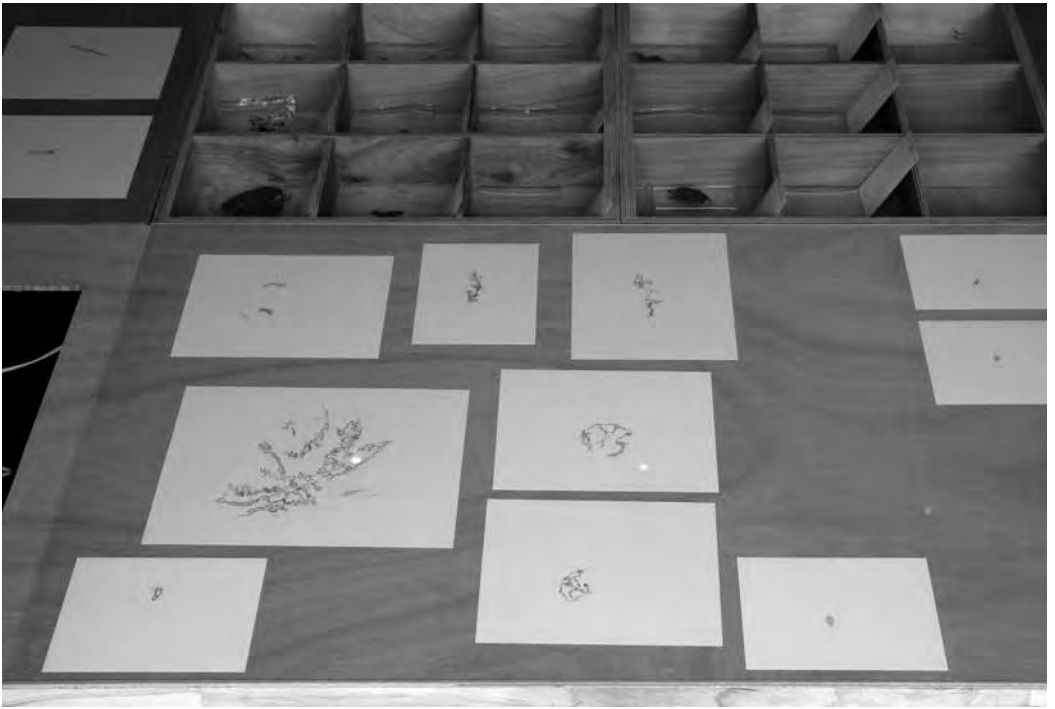
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# Experimental Aesthetics

## A Short Story of Thinking in Art

John Rajchman

What does “artistic research” have to do with “aesthetics” – or vice versa – and what does “experimental” mean in the context of the intersections between the two? The question emerges within a larger situation – that, at any rate, is the premise of the following short story of thinking in art.

How, in what context then did the problem arise? We might think of it as lying at the intersection of two recent movements. Both emerged in Europe relatively independently from one another after 1989 for a new “millennial” generation growing up in the “cognitive environment” of the Internet and working in the new “global” conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The two movements – let’s call them the “aesthetic research” movement and the “re-inventing aesthetics” movement – matured in tandem with a “global contemporary art” (or a *contemporaneity* in art) which no longer seemed to fit within any given narrative, established expertise, or accepted style of criticism. One was thus confronted with a new problem: how to think in contemporary times without an established critical framework or narrative, when older models no longer seem to work while newer ones are yet to be invented. In the absence of any established discursive or critical frame, a space of discussion within the institutions – specifically biennials, art fairs, and private museums – came into being which, along with auction houses, were driving the novel “globalization” of the art world. Thus, exhibitions, large-scale as well as small or independent, started hosting discussions and talks. Moreover, the

expanded field of the curator as “a catalyst” for these talks tended to take over the more bookish, established world of critics, and methods introducing more experimental approaches or formats – networks, laboratories, brain-storming in public – often relayed via e-flux or, more generally, through the Internet.

In this context, “experimental” (in contrast to avant-garde or neo-avant-garde) came to qualify an ongoing free, extra-disciplinary search and research. If the resulting question of “experimental aesthetics” is to be re-opened today, perhaps the great, global discursive game has itself become in turn institutionalized and commercialized, threatening the free roving, experimental spirit that once animated it. Have we entered a time not only of biennial and art fair fatigue, but also of the limitation of experimental forms they once made possible? It is at this point that my philosophical short story begins. It zeroes in on a particular question – what then is to *think* in art, with art, about art today, how, where, through what forms, and with what forms of research, what kinds of “aesthetic”? In particular, how did the question of “thinking in art” take shape in the debates of the last years on the “re-invention of aesthetics” or “artistic research,” that might suggest new points of connection between them today?

We know that “aesthetics” is the name of a critical or transcendental discipline invented by Kant, against Baumgarten’s idea of a science of sensibility, which would then accompany thinking for the next two centuries, and assuming many new forms in the process. But how could it be reinvented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century or for “contemporary art”? In this light, we might think of Jacques Rancière’s attempts in the 1990s to go back to the Kantian “aesthetic revolution.” What mattered in this revolution, he argued, was that the notion that art, its criticism, functions, and

judgment came to revolve around questions of “sensibility” (or *aisthesis*) rather than, as earlier, around ideas of representation or imitation. In itself this approach was not new – indeed Heidegger said as much in the 1930s in an appendix to his essay on “the origin of the work of art” about the end of art (*aisthesis* is the element in which art dies, agonizing over two centuries). But Rancière embarked on a very different angle that turned on a particular view of activity of thinking outside given forms of knowledge or constituted communities. Rejecting the notion of “the end of art,” he imagined instead moments of “dis-identification” for which one model was the condition of “ignorance” in reading and thinking together at night carried on in the 19<sup>th</sup> century French working class. Armed with dis-identification and dismissing the misguided notion of postmodernism, Rancière thus took on the debate about contemporary art from the fresh angle of “indisciplined” forms of thinking in and through art.

In many ways, his project drew on the work of Gilles Deleuze, pushing it into a new direction. As no one before, Deleuze called attention to the issue of “the visible” in the work of Michel Foucault. It is hard to imagine Rancière’s new program without it. In effect, his approach was a development of Foucault’s attempt to “historicize the a priori” as a changing regime of the visible, the sayable, and therefore the do-able, leading to the new questions of how to cross the line. For Rancière, the key question thus became one of “*le sensible*” and the crucial problem of how the sensible is “distributed/shared” (*partage*) prior to any given condition of intelligibility or any given form of expertise. What does it, then, mean to cross the line of a given “regime” of sensibility and discourse and to think and think together in places “outside” of it? It is here that Rancière introduced his picture of the unforeseeable arrival of

moments of dis-identification and emancipation, in which we move out of the conditions of sensibility we “share” into another place, another space, outside any instituted *habitus*. At the same time, such moments of dis-identification and dissensus seem to suggest a new democratic way of posing the question of “the political” and the role of art (and thinking in art). For it follows that it is vain to try to institutionalize emancipation once and for all. On the contrary, emancipation lies precisely in crossing instituted frames of sensibility, in “an-archical” moments (without founding principles) and outside the scope of any administrative or party politics. Thinking and thinking together in such moments and spaces thus becomes “extra-disciplinary,” outside constituted expertise; in times of dis-identificatory emancipation, we are all “amateurs” no matter where we come from. Indeed this peculiar “equality” is just what makes such moments “democratic” in a radical way, prior to any given political regime or form of government, appealing to “peoples” not yet given in politics as in art. In short, with his looking back at the “aesthetic revolution,” Rancière tried to extend the “difficult legacy” of Foucault in his own attempt to free the exercise and function of critical thinking from constituted knowledge and power, associating instead with “processes of subjectivization” of a kind found in the arts.

When we look back today at Rancière’s new picture of “the aesthetic revolution” from this angle, we of course find further divisions, further bifurcations. Within the larger French context, in particular Alain Badiou started talking of an *in-aesthetics* of the Event; and his student Quentin Meillassoux would try to extend this rejection of “the sensible” to a “speculative realism,” in which, freed from “correlationism” or corresponding notions of “finitude” and armed with aesthetic

preoccupations with numbers, one could simply “speculate” about the real inviting artists to join in.<sup>1</sup>

In pursuing another strongly “anti-Badiou” tack on his picture of a non-philosophical understanding of philosophy in the arts given through “sensibility,” Francois Laruelle found in Deleuze what it means to “think” or “have ideas” in the arts with an a-subjective percept and affect.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, Rancière’s “aesthetic revolution” remained connected to a historical, material matter; not a “speculative” one – and closer to Foucault. Ever allergic to the role of Artaud, Rancière questioned more generally the role of the body in thinking in art than Deleuze had pursued in his own work on cinema or painting – what is to “have an idea” in cinema, what is the nature of the “violent form of thinking” called painting in Francis Bacon’s “logic of sensation.” In those writings, Deleuze pushed the question of “sensation” or *aisthesis* into another ultimately more “speculative” or less simply historical direction, surrounding the question of what it means to think (especially in the arts) with one’s body as well as one’s brain – with one’s feet, eyes, ears, voices, sexual parts, stomachs or guts. With such bodily or cerebral thinking, art would find its “vital” function: “give me another brain, give me another body.” In this way, Deleuze tried to elaborate the role of “sensation” Merleau-Ponty had seen in Cezanne’s “thinking in painting” outside the confines of the phenomenological view where it was still contained, and, going back to Husserl, associating it instead with a prior chaotic mad zone of “the unthought” into which one must plunge to find vital new ideas.

Rancière was not impressed; for him everything remained ordered “historical regimes,” recast, updated as *partages*,

opening up in the times and places of “dis-identificatory emancipation.” We thus find another fork within the larger field of debate about the role of “sensation” in how we think in the arts – and therefore about “aesthetics.” One that takes us away from Rancière’s starting point in Kant and re-opening earlier “speculative” philosophies that “critical philosophy” had tended to reduce (notably Spinoza), but also extending the role of “sensibility” in experimental ways, beyond Hume – who had famously awoken Kant from his dogmatic slumbers – and outside the transcendental subjectivity or intersubjectivity in which Kant had enclosed it in turn. Indeed, for his part Deleuze had hoped to develop a “philosophy of Nature at the moment in which difference between nature and artifice becomes muted”<sup>3</sup> – as earlier with Spinoza’s idea of the “plane of immanence” prior to Cartesian views on animals and machines linked to the composition of our singular modes of existence. The “vital” function of thinking in art would no doubt have found its place in this philosophy – as occurred with the new question of the brain Deleuze raised in his aesthetic writings. If art can “give us another brain,” he argued, it is because there is something about our brains that can never be “objectified.” Irreducible to both “artificial intelligence” and anchorage in a phenomenological “life-world,” our brains derive instead from something like a “cerebral unthought,” a source of “vital ideas.” In other words, “vital ideas” call for a style of thought that might now be called “speculative,” which asks what Nature must be like for such “ideas” to be possible.

What role then does art have as a mode of thinking with respect to larger “ecologies” in which we figure together with animals and machines? Why does the vital

2 Francois Laruelle, *Against Badiou*, [www.amazon.com/Anti-Badiou-Introduction-Maoism-into-Philosophy/dp/1441195742](http://www.amazon.com/Anti-Badiou-Introduction-Maoism-into-Philosophy/dp/1441195742). In favor of “non-philosophy.” [www.onphi.net/texte-a-new-presentation-of-non-philosophy-32.html](http://www.onphi.net/texte-a-new-presentation-of-non-philosophy-32.html)

3 Gilles Deleuze, ‘On Philosophy’ in *Negotiations*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, pp.135–155.

4 Ranciere on Mallarme: <http://inclementweather.wikispaces.com/file/view/RanciereBroodthaers.pdf> Messailloux on Mallarme: <http://www.amazon.com/The-Number-Siren-Decipherment-Mallarmes/dp/0983216924>. For an account of the problem of “finitude” quite close to the attempt to draw the line for contemporary philosophies in the turn from formal or language philosophies to questions of genes and brains, see Deleuze’s Appendix to his study of Foucault.

function of thinking in the arts emerge only when neuroscience restricts itself to asking which brain must be for such “neuro-aesthetic experimentation” to take place?

From this perspective, Rancière’s attempt to update Kant’s “aesthetic revolution” for the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to fall back in some ways on 19<sup>th</sup> century formations. Indeed his own “research” focuses on the French working class of that period to which he also seems to return as well in his aesthetic writings (on the ideas of “image” or “realism,” for example). But is everything happening today just as an extension of this earlier French or European moment? Perhaps today we might instead draw the line of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in another way – as the passage from the great pre-occupation in the philosophy of the last century with language, form, system, information, methods of inference (or “logic”) to new questions of brains, genes, and so the larger material “eco-logies” developing in tandem with the new role of global “information technologies” in which thinking now takes place. Today it would seem quite quaint to reduce the role of “thinking in art” to questions of art and language once so important to “conceptual art” – thinking in the arts has long worked in ways not exhausted by Wittgenstein’s great distinction between public and private language. Indeed Rancière, who had little use for “conceptual art” of this type, might then be seen in this light – we “think in art” in ways that come *before* the order of language, the “forms of life,” or the habits that underlie it and to which we gain access only *after* those moments of “dissensus” and “experimentation” that free us from given public languages and related forms of life opening up new possibilities. But this way of drawing the line for philosophies – therefore *aesthetics* – in the 21<sup>st</sup> century affects the question

of “speculative philosophies” as well. For in the end the attempt to substitute mathematico-logical for a linguistic formalism doesn’t really change much. Thus, going back to find “numbers and sirens” in Mallarmé, far from being new or contemporary, in fact seems to draw us back to earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century kinds of formal philosophy. In many ways, one is better off with Rancière’s own attempt to think instead of the legacy of Mallarmé in terms of materiality of print and the role of “the public” in it as it is taken up in the work of Marcel Broodthaers for example.<sup>4</sup> But how then might the question of “the sensible” be extended beyond this historical situation to larger questions of new ways of thinking, in particular, beyond the reliance on print in the Mallarmean lineage? More generally, what is “experimental aesthetics” today? What kind of “research,” what forms of research, go with it?

It is at this point that my story re-connects with the question of “research” in the “aesthetic research movement” – as well, albeit in another way, with the revival of the idea and role of research by Rem Koolhaas in architecture. In an earlier essay, I looked at this question in relation to Deleuze’s principle in his study of the “search” or “research” for lost time in Proust, where “ideas always come after,” without prior method, therefore requiring “experimental” ways.<sup>5</sup> But we need to extend this idea outside the stratified world of Paris at the turn of the century into the new 21<sup>st</sup> century’s “global arena,” in which the question is being posed today. Perhaps this publication will suggest new ideas – my short story is an attempt to offer one philosophical way into them.





# Drifting Studio Practice

From molding sugar to the unknown depths of the sea

Lonnie van Brummelen &  
Siebren de Haan

## 1 *The return of the material*

The cinematic essay *Monument of Sugar – How to Use Artistic Means to Elude Trade Barriers* (2007) opens with a title: “The return of the material.” This adage resonates with recent developments in theory that seem indicative of a renewed interest in the physical world. In *Ecology without Nature*, for example, Timothy Morton bases himself on literature to demonstrate that the concept of nature behaves as a transcendental category of thought that has little to do with the entangled reality. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett proposes an opposite critique, in this case with regards to matter. Matter, she puts forward, is not inert and passive, as modernity conceives it, but pulsating and forceful.

Why did we choose to make the return of the material our epigram? To explain this, we must revert to neoliberal post-industrial society as it existed before the recent economic crisis. The production and assembly of goods had been transferred to the periphery and was considered anachronistic – something we had left behind. The reality of things, how they were manufactured, and which landscapes they connected no longer seemed relevant. As artists who derive pleasure from the encounter with materials and the search for unexpected entanglements, we felt slightly ill at ease in the so-called knowledge economy – which had disconnected itself from the physical world and was

no longer interested in the folds that connect times and places that seem distant at first sight. We felt more affinity with Michel Serres’ crumpled handkerchief. According to the French philosopher, a linear understanding of time entails that the last event on the timeline is perceived to be the most contemporary and relevant, but it cannot explain why certain events or inventions from the past are still material today. He therefore proposes the model of the bunched up handkerchief: two points that are far apart when the cloth is flattened out can be very close once it is crumpled up.<sup>1</sup>

These ontological considerations were the starting point for a practical experiment aimed at making banished matter return. That sugar became the protagonist of this experiment was the result of an off-the-cuff remark made by a Polish farmer whom we met near the Polish-Ukrainian border on May 1, 2004 – the day it transformed from a national into a European border. While offering us homemade sausages and coffee, he told us that Polish *cukier* had become “twice as sweet” since the country’s entry into the European Union. It had even become cheaper to buy Polish sugar in the Ukraine than in Poland itself. What is the secret of this miracle of prices? Europe’s sugar beet manufacturers are protected from global price level fluctuations by a fixed minimum price many times higher than the prevailing world market price; simultaneously, substantial trade tariffs ward off foreign competitors and export subsidies help to make expensive European sugar competitive worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 *Minimal intervention*

The operation *Monument of Sugar* consisted of inverting the subsidized flow of sugar by molding it into a monument. As a monument, sugar could be imported

0 An extended reflection on this topic has appeared in the book *World of Matter*, edited by Inke Arns, published by Sternberg Press, Berlin/New York, 2014.

1 Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, translated by Roxanne Lapidoux, University of Michigan press/Ann Arbor publishing, 1998, p. 45.

2 This price regime has now been partially abandoned after receiving criticism from the World Trade Organisation.

under heading 9703 of the European Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System, which ensures duty-free import for “original sculptures and statuary, in any material.”<sup>3</sup> United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics showed that the bulk of Europe’s subsidized sugar was exported to Nigeria. Armed with this information, we departed for Lagos. But finding European sugar in the hectic and fragile infrastructure of the African city of millions turned out to be no mean feat; nor was turning loose sugar crystals into a solid mass in tropic, humid conditions. From our Nigerian colleagues we learned to adjust our plans and to take into account in our artistic actions that things can be unpredictable, withdraw themselves from us and display a will of their own. Thanks to their advice, we did finally manage to create a monument.<sup>4</sup>

Our plan was to turn the sugar into solid minimal blocks, but this operation turned out to be a painstaking operation. Artists like to speak of a “resistance in the material,” but Nigeria’s sweet crystals were outright rebelling against our will to form. The fine grains could barely be compressed into a stable substance. Due to the tropical humidity, the brittle blocks failed to dry out. The casts, which emerged sharp and white from their moulds, gradually morphed into grimy, sagging lumps with little trace of right angles. Only through endless post-processing did we eventually obtain more or less firm and uniform shapes. Alas, during the overseas travel by cargo ship, the process of decay began anew. When the sugar blocks arrived in Europe after their long journey, they were softer than butter and almost impossible to extricate from their packaging.

Had we succeeded in making matter return? Or had we still approached sugar too much as a neutral, passive substance that could be turned into a monument to invert a trade flow? Perhaps the experiment had succeeded because we failed, because the sugar effectively revolted and resisted our desire to mold it. Based on these experiments, we developed a *drifting studio practice*: an artistic attitude which may be summarized as a moving along with things, so as to be able to attend to their recalcitrance.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 *Drifting Studio Practice*

When a regional art museum invited us to engage in an artistic inquiry among the fishing community of Urk, we seized upon the opportunity to elaborate further on the notion of drifting.<sup>6</sup> After all, who could be more accustomed to instability and things that retreat than fishermen who, generation upon generation, confidently cast their nets down from the sea’s restless surface into unknown depths? We visited Urk for the first time in spring 2011. The Dutch government had just announced a stiff package of budget cuts for cultural spending, and cultural producers were being cast as scroungers for relying on subsidies. When we introduced ourselves to a group of fishermen as artists, we therefore discreetly added that the reputation of our sector had recently suffered some damage. The fishermen nodded that for them too, the days when they were “heroes of the sea” were long gone: nowadays, they were seen as pirates who were fishing the world’s oceans dry. Together we sighed that we shared an image problem – this is how our collaboration started.

We knew the fishing village from media accounts as a conservative, deeply religious

3 For the full narrative of the film, see also the publication *Monument en Sucre – comment utiliser des moyens artistiques pour échapper aux barrières douanières / Monument of Sugar – how to use artistic means to elude trade barriers*, published in collaboration with Palais de Tokyo Paris and Argos Brussels, Van Brummelen & De Haan, Paris, 2007.

5 Film essay *Monument of Sugar – how to use artistic means to elude trade barriers*, final chapter.

6 Museum de Paviljoens, Almere, invited us for the residency in Urk. Shortly after the commission, the museum’s funding was discontinued and it closed in 2013.

4 The suggestion to opt for a material approach, using matter at hand, was offered to us by the sculptors Mr. Fidelis Odogwu and Mr. Richardson Ovbiebo.

reservation, where the order of things of the 1950s had been conserved. Yet during our fieldwork we encountered a more ambivalent Urk. Certainly, on Sundays the churches were filled and the ring of Old Testament language suggested that indeed we were in a town where time had stood still. But the Urkers were also an entrepreneurial lot, worldly and inventive. In order to obtain more fishing rights, many of the fishermen had purchased Danish, Belgian, German or English fishing boats, because buying a foreign ship included the fishing quota allotted to it. Local family firms had thus become multinational businesses. Also their catch was exported to the farthest reaches of the world. On top of that, Urkers were ahead of the curve in finding novel fishing techniques that did less damage to the sea soils; adaptations

that reduced fuel usage and toxic exhaust fumes; and techniques of killing fish that reduced pointless suffering, through anesthetizing the fish before they were gutted.

By doing our rounds through town and visiting the outer docks and fishing industries, we gradually managed to win the Urkers' trust. We transcribed each conversation we had with them and compressed the hundreds of pages into a script. We then proposed this to the inhabitants, and asked if they would recite the sentences on camera. The script was carefully read through and appropriated in the islander dialect. On Saturdays, we filmed these recitations, performed on the ships, on the quays and on the former sea soil; during the week we visited the fish factories, the auction house, the wharfs and



\*

the docks, both when work was being carried out and when they were deserted. Our *ciné-eye* filled itself up with working bodies, surfaces eroded by the salt-water, nets spreading, and lifeless fish being measured, weighed, and filleted to be delivered straight to the shops or to be frozen into stiff boards.

Occasionally, our instruments and ourselves were invited to go out to sea with the fishermen. Then we adopted their rhythm of two hours of work, followed by a short nap. We learned that the whipping of ropes and creaking of cables announced that full nets would be hauled on board, and that when the pin was removed from the railing, we had to stand back because the heavy nets would soon drag violently across the deck, only to careen back into the sea moments later.

The most disruptive experience, however, was the endless flow of struggling fish gasping for water, gutted one by one with the flick of a knife. When we asked the fishermen about this cruel aspect of their practice, they explained that this was what they had been taught by their fathers, who had in turn been taught by their fathers: “Nowadays people aren’t used to that; nowadays you are expected to have feelings with everything you do.”<sup>7</sup>

#### 4 *The other community*

In *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, Alphonso Lingis describes how in mercantile port cities of Greece, strangers arrive who ask the Greeks, “Why do you do as you do?” To which the Greek answer, like all groups who express their distinctness: “Because our fathers have taught us to do so, because our gods have decreed that it be so.”<sup>8</sup> Lingis describes how a new community emerges when the Greeks begin to give a reason that the strangers, who do not share their ancestors or gods, can accept. Because reason speaks in a language which is the

same for every lucid mind. But behind this anonymous community, which we know and which is the work of reason, there still lies this other community that has no reason – the community of those who have nothing in common.

Had we, in our focus on material practice, perhaps forgotten Serres’ crumpled handkerchief, which allowed the forefathers to infiltrate today’s world? But would the ancestors agree with the local catch of flatfish being transported over the world’s oceans to be offered on the global market as generic white fish?

Much as we struggled to understand why they work like they do, the fishermen had difficulty grasping why we were so attached to our obsolete 35mm camera, which had to be reloaded every four minutes. And just like them, we invoked our forefathers to explain ourselves and told them about Robert Flaherty’s *Man of Aran*, Luchino Visconti’s *La terra trema*, Jean Rouch’s *Bataille sur le grand fleuve*, and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub’s *Klassenverhältnisse*.

#### 5 *Co-authorship*

To allow the fishermen to tell their own story we had entered into a co-authorship with them, but other authors had also silently slipped in. The work program of the fishermen – and thereby that of the film we produced together – was largely determined by the migration of the fish, the direction and force of the wind, the customs passed on by ancestors, and their faith. In addition to those forces, other dominant players had entered into the field, such as the massive imports of fish farmed in Asia, the hike in oil prices and the filling up of warehouses. These caused a decline in income, and made for a situation in which embarking on new fishing excursions was unviable. All these actors guide the film *Episode of the Sea*. With an imagery referring to neo-realist

cinema and early documentary film, we have attempted to put into images this paradoxical world that attains its rhythm from ancestors, religion and the cycles of nature, but is overwhelmed by a market pragmatics. Simultaneously, parallels emerge between the practices of fishing and filming.

We had conceived that we could learn from the fishermen how to deal with instability and things that retreat. But as it turned out, they were dragged along by globalizing forces in a mind-set of calculation and division, in which everything is expressed as a matter of control, and unpredictability is the first thing one tries to eliminate. Still we caught a glimpse of that *other community*, headed by ancestors, which sees the world of things as a field of forces with rules of its own; a world in which all is connected. And it is this other community by which we have become captivated and which we want to continue to explore.

## An Anachronistic Aesthesis

The inedible following upon the unspeakable

Mick Wilson

### 1 *The aesthetic re-arrangement*

In the early 1990s, having completed a research project on the disavowal (“refusal”) of the aesthetic within Russian constructivist and productivist discourse, I attempted to initiate a doctoral research project on the question of philosophical aesthetics as an early enlightenment discursive address to embodiment and sensory knowing.<sup>1</sup> My proposition was that (*one* version of) philosophical aesthetics had emerged initially as an attempt to frame a discourse on the specificity of bodily cognition, sensory apprehension and experience, but had subsequently been transposed, by way of the Kantian and post-Kantian recuperation of Baumgarten’s neologism, into a discourse on the fine arts and on refined pleasures.<sup>2</sup> The drive animating this research proposal was a speculation on what might have emerged if, within the general project of the enlightenment, the questions of the corporeal and the aesthetic had been consolidated within a formal philosophical discourse.

What if the enquiry into aesthesis had taken as its privileged object of study, *not* the work of art nor the encounter with art works or the (art-like) “natural world,” but rather instead, the appetites, pleasures, pains, corporeal pulsions and material flux of the eating-breathing-

1 For the original proposal see [www.smallfatman.com/?page\\_id=1691](http://www.smallfatman.com/?page_id=1691)

2 Baumgarten’s role in inaugurating a new discourse on aesthetics is partly obscured by later developments and is also disputed. Even in Baumgarten’s own period his ideas seem to have circulated initially in the form of secondary texts. His bulky and unfinished *Aesthetica* (1750–1758) appears to have been the culmination of his work in this area. Much of it appears to have been anticipated in earlier works, especially in the *Metaphysica* of 1739 in which he already argued the case for a “science of sense knowledge,” and in which the term *aesthetica* first appeared.

sleeping-farting-laughing-sweating-birthing-coughing-running-sitting-fucking-yearning-craving-walking-daydreaming-falling-leaking bodied (“human”) being? This was proposed as a question of both the proximal visceral lived “subject” body, and of the distantiated scopic “object” body, that sees and is seen in the field of visual relations. This was also a matter of the body that subsists in febrile mutability across many other registers beyond the visual. My interest was not in a twin thematization of the body as both *Leib* and *Körper*, nor in a tired prejudicial trial of Cartesian mind-body dualist heresy, but in an attempt to think the body as an integral manifold of dancing fleshly-logos, of weeping-meaty-growth, and of raging-carnal-reverie. The goal was to think-and-do the aesthetic *not* as a matter of a “natural” or “authentic” body, but to think-and-do the aesthetic in an address to bodily being as a mode far more extensive than, and conceptually prior to, the elaboration of the system of the fine arts. This was self-consciously an attempt to evade aesthetics as a discourse perennially negotiating – and seeking to “overcome” – a subject-object field of relations through the privileged relays of exquisitely sensitized subjectivity and the “privileged” objects and experiences of art.

This proposed research was topical in many ways, and reflected my immersion in a contemporary art discourse oriented to all things corporeal. In the 1990s the discussions of the art world, and the world of criticism more generally, were littered with “bodies.” The liberal democratic political imaginary was also dissecting the rights and wrongs of the “body” politic (abortion, reproduction, insemination,

contagion, privacy, maternity/paternity, sodomy, mortality, biosecurity, and so forth) at this time. In such a context, my proposed historical reconstruction was somewhat (self-consciously) anachronistic in as much as I was in part imposing the critical priorities of the late twentieth century onto the pre-critical moment of an early enlightenment discursive formation.

This context also meant that the proposal, to re-address the historical constitution of philosophical aesthetics and the body, was most often met with a certain *ho-hum*, off-hand or blasé expression from my colleagues whenever the attempt was made to articulate it. In terms of criticism, and the question of “theory,” my colleagues would ask, are we not working in the tradition of Ricoeur’s masters of suspicion, and “surely they were all about the body: the laboring body; the agonistic and the despised body; the bodily unconscious?” Then there was this intense intellectual excitement and dizzying affect flowing from the early 1990s work on gendered bodies troubling gender; on material bodies that mattered; on weird cyborg bodies that were wired-otherwise and so forth. So my colleagues would say, in a somewhat deflationary way: “isn’t everything always already about the body?”

In terms of a specifically “aesthetic” discourse, they would point to the traditions of literature and suggest that the body is the substantive preoccupation of literary art in general: from Swift’s scatological obsessions to Joyce’s flushed orgasms; from *écriture féminine* to *I Sing the Body Electric*; from the Rabelaisian grotesque body to the Sadean libertine “nature” body; from Proustian gustatory reminiscence to Shakespearian corporeal

Baumgarten lectured for many years on the subject before the first part of the *Aesthetica* was published. Eva Schaper has described the circulation of Baumgarten’s ideas as follows: “So fast was the transmission and assimilation of learning – and the publication of books – in the eighteenth century that G.F. Meier, one of Baumgarten’s pupils, was able to popularise (and inevitably to distort thereby) Baumgarten’s thought in his own *Anfangsgrunde aller schonen Kunste und Wissenschaften* of 1748. [...] To some extent, then, Meier’s more accessible work took the wind out of the *Aesthetica*’s sail.” *British Journal of Aesthetics* (1985) 25 (3): pp. 278–279.

bloodlusts. Citing these different literary monuments colleagues would ask: “what is literature if not a song of bodily being?” Others would exclaim: “Feminism!” and announce that “given the body in sexual politics is the very ground upon which contesting projects of enslavement and emancipation are performed, what is Feminism if not a demand to recognize the body as a political site of colonization and resistance, and as such, is it not inevitably an urgent challenge to reformulate all questions of bodily knowing?”

Under the influence of the intense debates within queer culture and feminist critique, the problematic of sexual pleasure was a key impetus to re-think the emergence of philosophical aesthetics as potentially a discourse on the pleasures of the body, and *not* one primarily attending to the experiences of art, or at least *not* a discourse that proposes the experience of art as paradigmatic for the aesthetic in general. How was it that philosophical modernity had produced such a lively and highly intricate literature on the values, experiences and specificities of high art and such an anaemic and unenthusiastic literature on fucking and sexual intensities? How could we have something as generative and as profound as the philosophical literature on art, on the one hand, and something as anodyne as sexology and “the joy of sex,” on the other hand? These were my questions, but, of course my colleagues would again restrain my libidinal over-investment by gently reminding me that there was a rather profound tradition of psycho-analytic enquiry that had indeed wrestled with bodily pleasures, embodied subjectivity and sexuality: “a tradition, which while highly contested, could hardly be called bloodless!” Another colleague pointed to Schelling’s denouncement of philosophy for its seeking after the essence of things in forms and concepts through

a disavowal of *Fleisch und Blut*, suggesting that the claims of corporeality were an oft-repeated refrain within the philosophical tradition across the last two centuries: “Modern European philosophy as a whole, from its beginning (in Descartes) has this common flaw: for it nature does not exist, it lacks a living ground. ... If a philosophy lacks this living fundament ... it loses itself in the kind of system whose attenuated concepts of aseity, modifications, etc., stand in sharpest contrast to the vital force and fullness of reality.”<sup>3</sup>

For various reasons my project was never finished, and I later completed a doctorate on a very different topic, in very different circumstances, and now today I work with researchers engaged by very different concerns. The fashion for talk of the body has predictably waned over the intervening two decades, and while the intensification of interest in Foucauldian biopolitics signals one line of intellectual development building upon the body talk of the 1990s, it also suggests a re-inscription of Foucault’s project to study the historically specific bodily techniques of biopolitics into the a-historical and abstractly-corporeal terms of political philosophy in the grand manner (*pace* Agamben). As such the recent vogue for biopolitical themes in art discourses, in as much as it attends to Agamben more than to Foucault, suggests rather a retreat from the political dynamics of fugitive lived bodies into the politesse of rigorous mortifying logos.

So now, twenty years later, and engaged with different networks of colleagues, and inevitably responding to new intellectual fashions, I find myself in the midst of a different set of rhetorics of the aesthetic and responding within a radically expanded contemporary art system. I am writing now at a time marked by a longstanding resurgence of the aesthetic as an acceptable topic for practicing

3 From Schelling’s *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and Matters Connected Therewith*. (1809) This translation is taken from David Farrell Krell’s (2005) *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God*, Indiana University Press. p. 76.

artists (no longer the analogue of ornithology for the birds).<sup>4</sup> This is also a moment in contemporary art debates marked by the widespread currency of “artistic research” as a problem bridging between parts of the mainstream art world and parts of the art school system. Artistic research appears to be seeking to re-map the intrinsic relations of praxis (theory and practice), attempting to generate temporary autonomous zones exceeding the logics of markets and of bureaucracies, while co-opting resources from both, and proposing the possibility of a space of experimental aesthetics unencumbered by the reductive demands of explanations, value-measures, and instrumentality.

In responding to this conjunction, I find myself revisiting this project to re-imagine aesthetic enquiry as an address to the generalized context of bodily being, and not as a reflection on the objects and experiences of art per se. Perhaps as an index of my own bodily aging, I find the priorities among my interests – in thinking the aesthetic as a matter of bodied being and trying to disentangle this enquiry from the privileged objects and terms of art – moving somewhat away from the question of sexuality, and more towards such matters as food and death. Perhaps these are the appropriately expanded appetites and anxieties of an expanded and privileged middle-aged body. In any case, these are some of the concerns that have framed my own practice in recent years, and in the next section of the paper I would like to suggest, somewhat schematically and impressionistically, a trajectory for this renewed enquiry with reference to the question of the body, the aesthetic and various food *things*.

## 2 *The distribution of the edible*

Claire Bishop in her highly entertaining, if somewhat inflammatory, *Artificial Hells*, has referred to “a slew of community-

based practices that revolve around the predictable formula of children’s workshops, discussions, meals, film screenings and walks.”<sup>5</sup> While Bishop merely itemizes “meals” as one more cliché on her list, she could rightfully claim that the presence of food, as material, medium, subject matter and context of contemporary artworks, has been an increasingly prominent tendency since at least the 1960s and has become, by now, pretty much a norm of the art world (and of various counter-cultural tendencies and independent scenes that interact in different ways with the global art system.) However, it would seem that the range and variety of food practices in the contemporary art field exceed anything that could be properly called a “predictable formula.”

Consider a relatively arbitrary range of projects such as: *Future Farmers Victory Gardens* (2006–ongoing); *The Domestic Godless* (2002–ongoing); *Dirtstar’s Night Soil* (2010); *Edible Estates* (2005–ongoing); *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* (2012); *The Gatherers: Greening Our Urban Spheres* (2008–2009); *Homebaked: A Perfect Recipe* (2014); *Dining in Refugee Camps: The Art of Sahrawi Cooking* (2010); and *The How Not To Cook Something: Lessons learned the hard way* (2009). Then place these also in relationship with practices from previous decades such as: Alison Knowles *Identical Lunch* (1960s); Tina Girouard’s, Carol Gooden’s and Gordon Matta Clarke’s “*FOOD*” (1971); Joseph Beuys *art of eating* (1970s); and Suzanne Lacy’s *International Dinner Party* (1979). One begins to recognise that the intersection of contemporary art and food practices is a multiply enacted and diversely produced encounter.

There are, indeed, certain formulas and tactics that are re-used: the eatery; the cookbook; commensualism; olfactory and gustatory shock or titillation; the

4 Barnett Newman is famously accredited with the line “aesthetics is for artists as ornithology is for the birds.”

5 Claire Bishop (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, p. 21.

dynamics of the gift; the tracing of ripeness and decay; the agency of do-it-yourself; the commons, the local and the everyday. However, contra Bishop's reductive gesture, this typology of forms and concerns does not exhaustively specify the experimental work that has happened in the mobilisation of foodways within the art field. (Inevitably, there is a need for extreme caution here in constructing a simplistic "art and food" conjunction in this way, which can so easily degenerate into the triteness of the notorious – and hopefully apocryphal – undergraduate essay task on "the cat in art.")

The salient point here, though, is that many food practices have been effectively operationalized and thematized within contemporary art. Taken in the context of my proposal to re-imagine aesthetics, does this not make it clear then that the question of the aesthetic, as an enquiry into bodily being, with reference to our embodied entanglement in foodways and wider food systems for example, is something that can easily proceed, even where philosophical aesthetics still tends to take as its privileged objects the work of art or the experience of art? Isn't the initial response of my colleagues from two decades ago still the appropriate one: Isn't everything already about the body, and isn't there a wide variety of discursive frames and practices already actively addressing the aesthesis of the body in general, and, with reference to the current example, the food consuming body in particular?

The answer, at this point, I believe is "no": No, it is not the case that these developments put meaty flesh upon the bare dry bones of philosophical aesthetics. The reason for this is that the question

of bodily being in general, and the question of the aesthesis of the eating body in particular, are not thereby rehearsed within a wider philosophical perspective. We have a mobilisation of food ways within art practices, and we have a particular elaboration of the consuming body within these works, as well as an attempted articulation of these with broader politics of conviviality, sustainability, ecological and climate crisis, and so forth. However, in the register of philosophical aesthetics and the response to these developments, we have a reversion to questions of the proprieties of properly *artistic* art and to the specificity of the aesthetic understood precisely as that which is *not* located within the gustatory play, the urgencies nor the sustenance of lived bodies, but rather only in the *je ne sais quoi* of distantiated, reflective and refined aesthetic judgement, only in the never-to-be-swallowed-whole – *as if* – food-for-thought of art.<sup>6</sup>

The aesthetic is, again, not a matter of the unrelenting flux of ravenous-living-testing-tasting-sucking-swelling-masticating-defecating-grasping-gorging-licking-starving-and-satiating-then-vomiting bodies. It is not at work in the production and negotiation of these bodies through the distributions of scarcity and plenty; of the edible and the inedible; of the tasty and the disgusting; of the bland and the spicy; of the bitter and the sweet; of the noxious and the more-ish; of the savoured and the swallowed swiftly; of the subtle and the strong: but rather, the aesthetic operates as a (re-) distribution of the sensible. Aesthetics elaborates itself not in an animalistic nor a vegetative nor a fungal nor even a rhizomatic mode but more in a crystalline self-re-calibrating manner. Aesthetics – as a re-distribution

6 Thus the debate between Claire Bishop and Grant Kester initiated on the pages of *Artforum* in the mid-2000s re-instates the question of what is properly *artistic* in social art practices, and it is on this point that the philosopher Jacques Rancière is brought into play. Elsewhere Rancière himself intervenes on just such a basis, so that in spite of appearances his analytic of the "aesthetic regime" re-instates the primacy of the artistic. To put it roughly, but succinctly, aesthetics is deemed a regime of art rather than art being deemed a specific subdivision of the field of aesthesis (and a highly niche-specific one at that).

of the sensible, of the seeable and the sayable – is a matter of structuring the economy of the almost-sensual; the almost-but-never-quite-a-drop-of-saliva-leaked-from-the-mouth-sensual. The aesthetic remains a term not properly spoken from a drooling mouth.

To go further, and from the dry parched mouth, from the hungry mouth, or from the speaking-with-mouthful mouth, it may be worth saying something about the inexorable entanglement of aesthetics and politics in the current fragility of the global food system. Is it not then an exercise in experimental aesthetics to consider the food thing that is put into some mouths and reserved from others? Or is that too much to swallow perhaps when one may wish to savour the tasty morsels of autonomy? Can aesthesis transition the scales of one body to many bodies, from my mouth to speak into your mouth, without reducing all these beautiful open mouths and their noisy teeth into grim instruments of shy chattering and lonely gaping?



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# Aesthetics and the “as if”

Timotheus Vermeulen

After years of turning a blind eye, or even a stink eye, scholars and critics have recently refocused their attention on aesthetics. The output ranges from anthologies about Rancière’s *aesthetic regime* and Badiou’s *inaesthetics* to journal articles about Lyotard and Iser’s aesthetic theories to blog posts about the canon of Adorno and Kant, and discusses topics as diverse as beauty and the sublime, fictionality, and *object-oriented ontology*. There has been so much interest in aesthetics, indeed, that some have started to speak of a “revival of aesthetics” (Avanessian and Skrebowski, 2011) or even an “aesthetic turn” (Halsall, Janssen and O’Connor 2004; 2009). This aesthetic turn should be understood, however, less as a “rediscovery”, as has been suggested, than as a re-exploration. If you rediscover something, you locate something you had lost from sight or forgotten. To re-explore is to re-examine a thing you knew all along was there. To be sure: no one ever lost sight of aesthetics. People just assumed there was nothing left to find there. Frustrated, presumably, by the impasse at which postmodern and poststructuralist theory found themselves and encouraged by the pioneering travels of Deleuze, Rancière and Badiou, scholars in the 2000s have returned to aesthetics to see if there is anything else to source. As it turns out, there is. Quite a lot, in fact: perhaps the most pronounced characteristic of the current spate of aesthetic research is how much each of the studies and its approach to aesthetics differs from the others. Depending on whom you read, aesthetics stands for, amongst others, a socio-historical regime, an ideology, a theoretical

discourse, a critical method, an evaluative tool, an experiential register, affect, morality, art, not-art, and beauty. Rather than to simply see this diversity as a sign of the field’s slipperiness, I think it should be perceived as a sign of uncharted potential: as the territory is re-explored, many new pathways are encountered, some of which may lead to dead-ends but others of which could just lead to novel insights. What I mean to say, I guess, is that in a sense all current aesthetic research is experimental, adopting a course unsure of its outcome. In what follows, I wish to make a very brief, and certainly quite modest contribution to this developing discourse of re-exploration by proposing an understanding of aesthetics as an “as if” modality. In pursuing this argument, I draw on the writings of the British philosopher Eva Schaper (1924–1992) and the German thinker Hans Vaihinger (1852–1933), though not always explicitly in the detail they deserve or necessarily in the manner they intended.

When I speak about aesthetics here I speak about a *dimension* of experience. It is a dimension that engages with the world around us on the level of what may be called, in lack of a more appropriate term, form: visual form, acoustic form, form of taste, the qualities of scent, of touch, or otherwise. It is distinct from other dimensions of experience like use, ethics or mathematics though not necessarily separate from them – indeed, more often than not they overlap. As I see it, the aesthetic dimension can be animated by external factors (a sunset, a Rothko painting, or as in a *Seinfeld* episode, even the song “Desperado”), but it can just as well be activated at will, as a mode, approach or attitude towards the world (I’m thinking here of a practice like dandyism, of course, but also of artistic research, in which a focus on form is taken to social, economic or biological questions).

This dimension, finally, is individual yet as Rancière has shown us also tied to particular regimes of distribution of the sensible.

Importantly, the aesthetic experience is an affective experience – not a disaffected calculation (which is not to say, to be sure, that the former could not follow from the latter; there are plenty of historical examples that prove this). It is a sensation of resonance, of connection, with someone or something else because of their formal qualities – as opposed to their practical use or ethical value. Of course, the phrase Kant used to define this experience was “purposiveness without purpose”: in the aesthetic judgment we appreciate something as purposeful even though its purpose cannot be empirically or logically established. Vaihinger and Schaper later interestingly and insightfully describe this modality in terms of an “as if”. When you use the phrase “as if” you make a comparison or analogy (the conjunction *as*) with a conditional clause (the modification *if*), that is to say, with a possibility rather than a fact (Vaihinger 2009 [1911]: 91–93). If my neighbor says to me “it looks as if it is going to rain”, after all, what he is telling me is that judging from the clouds or the behavior of the mosquitoes or the feeling in his right index finger it may well rain, though this is by no means certain. Or when Cher in *Clueless* shouts in indignation “as if!”, she is articulating grave doubt. For Vaihinger and Schaper, what the aesthetic experience as described by Kant implies, what it is conditioned on, is the appreciation of one thing – say, nature – *as if* it was another that it most likely is not – art. As Schaper put it more eloquently herself: “we approach objects aesthetically when we recognize with delight, wonder, and arrested attention the structural patterns of things; when, despite being unable to say *that* they exhibit purpose, we approach them *as if* they did.” (1964–65: 227)

As I write this, there is a debate going on in the Netherlands, where I teach, about the state of politically engaged art. It is a debate that I am certain readers from other countries will be intimately familiar with as well. On one side of the debate stands the critic and curator Hans den Hartog Jager, who argues that politically engaged artists and curators have lost touch both with reality and their publics. Curators like Charles Esche and Maria Hlavajova and artists such as Hito Steyerl and Jonas Staal, he maintains, are speaking to an audience that no longer pays attention nor has been for quite a while. Den Hartog Jager’s argument here, however, is not necessarily that artistic discourse has become incomprehensible, as is so often – and at times rightly – suggested, but rather that it has become all too comprehensible, too predictable: it still sticks to the line it took in the 1920s, without reflecting on either their own changing position or the developments in contemporary society. On the other side of the debate stand the accused, I guess, alongside their defenders. Their counter arguments are manifold, though it must be said that they tend to be of the defensive kind more than the affirmative sort. They range from the somewhat pitiable questioning of Den Hartog Jager’s political affinities to justified interrogations pertaining to the lack of in-depth analysis to equally legitimate problematizations of some of his assumptions.

I do not agree with Den Hartog Jager’s argument, though I don’t think his assessment is as wide off the mark as some of his opponents make it out to be. There certainly is a discourse in art that is at once incomprehensible and predictable, that requires from its public not only years and years of study of art historical and philosophical or quasi-philosophical debates (the Groys’, the Badiou’s, the speculative realists, the accelerationists,

etc), but also a distinct political inclination. The problem is not conceptually challenging art, a public space for experimentation, it is jargonistic exclusive art, a club for members only. Similarly, politically engaged art is not an issue. The issue is rather art in which form is exhausted by a specific politics (which is not necessarily the same, by the way, as art produced in order to propagate such politics, as Eisenstein and Riefenstahl, whose films are far more multiplicitous than the single message they need to convey, have demonstrated). Remember many of Godard's later films?

Here Den Hartog Jager's examples unfortunately do not help his case. Take Jonas Staal. There is undoubtedly much you can say about Staal's work, but not, it seems to me, that it is repetitive. Staal's performances, from *The Geert Wilders Works* (2005–8), in which he turns an actual court case into an theatre play cum public debate, to the *New World Summit* series (2012–present), in which he constitutes temporary parliaments peopled by representatives of banned, stateless and terrorist political organizations, are less intended to set forth one particular politics than to stretch the limits of what politics can mean for us today by imagining occasionally insane scenario's that could not take place within the context of those politics – these scenario's, also, may vary considerably. It is true that Staal himself has an ideological bias, one with which many people may well take issue. It might further be argued that this partiality informs (the premise of) his performances. But it does, as of yet at least, not circumscribe or limit these performances. Indeed, Staal's performances are not simply political pamphlets so much as the critical tools of inquiry for an artistic research project undertaken towards a PhD.

Den Hartog Jager criticizes Staal's performances solely on the level of use or ethics whereas the dimension the artist seems to cultivate – and therefore should be judged on – is that of aesthetics. Just as Kant, when describing the aesthetic judgment, considers nature *as if* it were art, or Schaper, who contemplates purpose where there isn't any, Staal approaches political regimes *as if* they were formal compositions, lines of reasoning *as if* they were poetic tropes. The idea here seems less to reduce one to the other than to expand the political discourse by treating it *as if* it were another modality, one that importantly we understand it isn't and perhaps cannot be. In engaging in politics formally, Staal takes into account and pursues alternative criteria. Many if not all of these pursuits will, when translated back to politics, be failures, imagining dangerous and even disastrous virtual realities. Yet whatever their outcomes, they reintroduce the intimation of the alternative, the sensation that, perhaps, just perhaps, History has not ended, Art is not over, the horizon not wiped out – sentiments that seem to me to be very important at a moment in time where the economic, political and social realities of the day necessitate a critical yet imaginative look around us. Ironically, if we read Staal's performances along these lines, they have surprisingly much in common with the works of Yael Bartana and Renzo Martens, two of the artists I am pleased to read Den Hartog Jager cites approvingly.

None of the above discussion of aesthetics is experimental in the sense that it is original or radical. Indeed, many of the ideas expressed here have surely been articulated far more intelligently and eloquently by others, if not by Schaper, Vaihinger, Schiller, or Kant than by others who, knowingly or unwittingly, took on some of their ideas. But it is experimental,

I feel, in the sense that it continues, or reinstates, a long abandoned course of action of which the outcomes are unsure. The power of an aesthetic discourse as I understand it, whether willful (as by Staal or Bartana or Martens) or as unexpected experience, lies in its appreciation of the imagination of the impossible possibility of an unseizable purpose – to recognize its sense of radical openness, to value its pulsating spirit of potential. To me the task of art – and I include artistic research and writing about art here – is to articulate this imagination, not by explicating which path to pave or which utopia to fight for, but by returning to the public sphere the spirit of the alternative.

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