

The Power and Politics of the Aesthetic in American Culture

Ulla Haselstein and Klaus Benesch

In discourses on postmodernity, the ubiquity of the aesthetic in contemporary society has been a central topic. As critics have repeatedly observed, aesthetic forms and effects are no longer related exclusively to art and the entertainment industry, but extend into social practices such as advertising, urban planning or tourism. There is the emphasis on aesthetic form, typical for new hedonistic lifestyles; the absorption of aesthetic concepts such as the beautiful and the rare by consumer culture; or the spectacularization of the political sphere. The increasing cultural diversity of contemporary society in the age of globalization is yet another area where the power and politics of the aesthetic to shape public identity come into view. All these phenomena are inextricably inscribed in the history of (post)modernity. Since many of these developments are linked to global processes, but are often also seen as forms of Americanization, the essays collected here both assess and question the specific American dimension of the return of the aesthetic. As we learn from the following discussions of aesthetic practices both inside and outside the US, to conflate the staggering aestheticization of everyday life with glib notions of the American way of life as a consumerist ideology predicated on packaging and surfaces must fall short of accounting for the complex and tangled history of the aesthetic in modern Western cultures. While this is not the place for a thoroughgoing analysis of the many ways in which the aesthetic has been inscribed into modern discourses on art and art production, a brief overview of the major stages of its career as a cornerstone of both the construction and representation of the modern subject seems in order.

I.

The introduction of the term “aesthetic” in 18th century German philosophical thought was predicated on the effort to define a free and unfettered response of human consciousness to reality. Art figured as *the* cultural space where this response could be observed and theorized, since art had attained autonomy from

church and court and become a commodity of pleasure and entertainment. This relative autonomy of art is the social precondition for Kant's differentiation between ordinary and aesthetic experience. While the former is motivated by interest, and hence by the effort to relate sensual perception to the cognitive sphere of concepts in order to determine the identity of a perceived object, aesthetic experience, according to Kant, is not concerned with practical ends. With the determination of the identity of the object liberated from the constraints of instrumental thought, the mind engages in a self-reflexive activity of observing the formal interplay of sensation and concept. This definition made aesthetic experience a privileged topic of moral philosophy, for aesthetic experience, understood in these terms, could provide a more complete view of the subject as a free and self-governing agent than the mere observation of the subject's practical activities which are always limited by natural facts and the will of other subjects.

For Kant, however, aesthetic experience is not based on the experience of art alone; the interplay of sensation and intellect can be aesthetically experienced by the subject with regard to any object – a landscape, a wall-paper, etc. – provided that the subject's judgment of the quality of the perceived object is untainted by the influence of instrumental reason. Yet Kant does not explain when and why objects of everyday life instigate such a disinterested experience, or, for that matter, when and why a subject suspends its interested judgments of these objects and opts for an aesthetic experience instead.

A different trajectory of aesthetic theory can be traced back to Baumgarten, with whom the modern history of the aesthetic begins. He conceived of the aesthetic in epistemological terms: as evidence of the corporeality of any experience of reality. The German term *Wahrnehmung* indicates the truth effect produced by the interplay of sensation and concept. Nietzsche in turn argued that this interplay is regulated by affect and malleable by discourse. In his wake, art, and more specifically, literature came to be regarded as the preeminent site of a specific self-reflexive experience: for the work of art makes the reader aware of its tropological structure, even if it mimetically seeks to repeat the truth-effect of perception. Thus literary representation engenders an experience that exposes the cognitive interplay between sensation and concept as rhetorically framed and modulated. This process is not necessarily focused on the form of literary representation alone; rather, in a *mise-en-abyme*, it may foreground the constructedness of perceptions of reality the text refers to: when, as in Melville's "Benito Cereno," different cultural and social accounts of reality clash, or when in sentimental novels the experience of love is shown to be based on gendered perceptions and expectations. As a result, reality becomes legible as a layered materialization of cultural meaning.

While Nietzsche's aestheticization of the world is grounded in a contempt of contemporary society, Emerson, who defined the tropological structure of language as a reflection of the spirituality of nature, proffered a more optimistic view of art

and aesthetic experience. For him, the experience of art exposed the latent creative dimension of human perception and thus paved the way for the conceptualization of the aesthetic as cultural work that breaks away from tradition and realizes itself in all sectors of social activity. Emerson's argument thus foreshadows the efforts of the avantgarde to insert the aesthetic into the routines of everyday life and thus lay bare the habits of thought that organize the coherence of perception and cognition at the cost of the new and unprecedented. Modernist artistic practices centered on the new media of photography, radio and film which offered new insights into the cultural production of reality and allowed an even more radical exploration of the structures of perception. Fashion, architecture, and industrial design, the three cornerstones of modern visual culture, became important venues for a new sensibility that sought to produce environments expressive of a new self-empowerment of the subject as creative agent of its own history.

The utopian expectations of the avantgarde movements came into crisis, however, when it became evident that the vision of an aesthetic revolution of habits of thought could neither resist its cooptation and reification by totalitarian propaganda nor its interpretation as a marker of social distinction and self-fashioning by consumer culture. Adorno's aesthetic theory testifies to his disappointment in the critical powers of the aesthetic; this is why he conceptualizes the *as-if* of art as a mere appearance of subjective freedom that ultimately serves social domination, and discards the avantgarde impulse of re-(de)fining everyday life as compliant with commodification. Rewriting Kant's notion of the sublime, Adorno ascribed the sole redemptive power of the aesthetic to the ability of art to refuse meaning and thus resist or at least postpone its absorption into the discursive networks of instrumental reason. Terry Eagleton echoes many of Adorno's arguments when he interprets idealist philosophy as treating aesthetic experience as a process of self-discovery and self-discipline. Since for Kant aesthetic experience proves the ready availability of things for the human intellect, Eagleton maintains that the resulting notion of a "world [that] is uniquely ours" unwittingly reflects the ideology of consumption (92). Contemporary culture does not only destroy the difference between "high" and "low" art by treating both as commodities fashioned to different tastes, but reduces the aesthetic to a mediation between commodity and consumer that allows for self-indulgent – often ironical – performances of a subjectivity marketed as life-style.

In contrast to such critiques, American deconstruction recovered Nietzsche's notion of an interdependence of sensation and concept as based on a set of naturalized tropes, and combined it with a psychoanalytical account of the subject as the "belated and fictive origin" of performative utterances that re-iterate social norms in constructing the referential priority of given perceptual facts. In both queer and post-colonial or race theory, the avantgarde concept of the aesthetic as inducing reflexivity and habit-change is recoded by theories of agency: subjects who are ex-

cluded from the normative convention of universality (such as gays and lesbians, or the numerous racial “others”), yet speak out and claim inclusion into universality, are exposing the failures of the norm and its regime of performativity. This exposure is effected by aesthetic practices that use the normative vocabulary, but also allow the recipient to observe to what ends it is used, and how certain signifiers are endowed with the power of social discrimination. As Judith Butler claims, the openly displayed ‘citationality’ of art highlights the fact of the structural incommensurability of any speech act and its supposedly fixed meaning, thereby evoking possibilities of social change and resistance to normalization.

African-American artists and writers are well known to employ complex technologies of subverting aesthetic expectations often directly related to white supremacist ideology. Two striking examples come to mind here: first, Frederick Douglass’ re-tooling of the white logic of writing style as an expression of personal autonomy and selfhood. As critics of early African-American literature repeatedly noted, for a black slave to write elegantly, that is, in an aesthetically appealing fashion (which is precisely what Douglass – though discouraged by his abolitionist supporters – did well), involved a serious paradox: if mastering the white literary standards testified to the slave’s very humanity and, thereby, the flimsiness of racial stereotyping, it also weakened his position as narrator of a ‘true’ story about the horrors of bondage: given the logic of the system of chattel slavery he is either a ‘thing,’ which is to say incapable of aesthetic, disinterested discourse, or else he is a ‘man,’ which then, by implication, contradicts the very story he is about to tell. This double-bind has marked black aesthetic discourse ever since the authenticity hearings of Phyllis Wheatley. As a recent exhibition of African-American abstract art at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2006) reminds us, pressures to remain within particular formal and discursive frameworks bore heavily on black artists; another striking instance of the cultural and racial ‘situatedness’ of notions of the aesthetic, the show gathered together ‘abstract’ paintings produced by black artists during the most radical periods in 20th-century American politics, the black power era. If this period is well-known for its afro-centric emphasis on what Addison Gayle called the “black aesthetic,” it also raised authenticity issues about black art that used the form of abstraction. The latter was widely seen as ‘white art.’ As a reviewer in the *New York Times* remarked, “Whites viewed black practitioners as copycats; blacks dismissed them as sellouts” (NYT April 7, 2006, E29). While only a few artists gained visibility, the bulk of black abstractionists faded from view: the 1996 Guggenheim Museum’s survey “Abstraction in the 20th-Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline” included no artists of color.

II.

Within the field of American Studies, recent contributions to aesthetic theory often respond to a cultural debate in which the notion of art has come under attack as an elitist concept of cultural production that feeds ideological consensus. Thus in *The Scandal of Pleasure* (1995), Wendy Steiner takes the recent American “Culture Wars” as a starting-point, and defends art by upholding its social value as a potential agent of cultural transformation. Steiner’s book is a passionate plea for public recognition of what the author describes as the “aesthetic paradox,” that is, the double reference of art both to reality and to itself as artifact. Bypassing deconstructive theories of difference, Steiner advocates the phenomenological approach of reception theory, which posits that art produces a cultural space of virtuality that allows the reader or spectator to “understand without assenting, to go over to the other side and still stay home, to be violated and yet in control” (212). Her argument is grounded in a characterization of art as iconic: the art-work establishes a relation of similarity (to reality) and at the same time signifies itself and creates a “magic circle” around itself. Aesthetic experience, for Steiner, is an intense moment of confrontation with oneself and one’s relation to others, as art “dramatizes to us what we like and care about, and how we relate to others who are moved the same way or not” (211). In empiricist fashion (and in contrast to reception theory), Steiner emphasizes affective reactions of pleasure and pain as moments of lived intensity; after the affective epiphany has taken place, the reader or spectator will resort to self-reflection in order to regain cognitive control. This dynamics is said to allow for a critical evaluation of cultural habits of perception and cognitive judgment; Steiner’s argument nevertheless reflects a trend in contemporary aesthetics and artistic production to privilege the sensory impact at the cost of reflection.

From another angle, *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (2002), a recent volume edited by Emory Elliott, probes the consequences for the concept of the aesthetic brought about by cultural diversity. Dewey’s pragmatist statement that aesthetic judgment does not play itself out in art since it is grounded in human experience as such, is invoked by more than one author to argue for a comparative and multicultural theory of the aesthetic, since the definition of art and its social functions varies in different cultures of the U.S. Nevertheless, art is central to the book’s concerns. The syncretist combination of elements taken from different cultural backgrounds has often been described as a distinct feature of American art (high and low); it reflects the history of the United States as a democratic nation of immigrants and has become even more prominent with globalization. Multicultural in form and content even if not necessarily marked (and marketed) as such, American art serves as a venue for encountering and reflecting the consequences of cultural contacts and conflicts: it allows for a tentative identification with cultural otherness, which in turn questions the givens of one’s own cultural identity. If this argument

highlights the cultural and discursive networks in which the individual work of art is located, the epistemological dimension of aesthetic experience (its outlining of referentiality as cultural artifact) tends to go unnoticed.

While the possibilities of art to use the power of the aesthetic for social and cultural critique remains the rationale of much contemporary critical thought, Philip Fisher suggests a different approach. In *Still the New World* (1999), he characterizes the United States as a culture that builds its identity as a new nation on the capitalist energies of creative destruction. Its economic and technological dynamics use the imagination as a resource for innovation, and these dynamics are borne out in the aesthetic field as well, which is organized as a market that assigns supreme value to the new. In Fisher's view, Emerson's philosophy articulates the fundamental philosophy of enterprise capitalism by defining the world as a result of earlier imaginations which is constantly created anew by the introduction of new ideas and technologies, turning each generation into "immigrants" that need to adapt to new conditions and ways of life. The lack of traditions and entrenched social habits in a democratic culture constantly on the move to an as yet unknown future finds its equivalent in an aesthetics of realism and abstraction. Fisher aptly characterizes the so-called "Culture Wars" of the Nineties as the most recent battle in a "civil war within representation" (51) that seeks to repair the failures of democratic culture brought about by social divisions.

III.

Addressing literature, painting, photography, fashion, and the multifarious refractions of aesthetic discourse in contemporary U.S. society, the essays collected in this volume offer the reader a chance to observe how the concept of the aesthetic is currently being probed for new insights into the challenges of the present and the forces of tradition.

Emory Elliott's opening essay conceives of the general context of the new debate on the function of the aesthetic as a (global) war of representations over influence on the public sphere. Art, in his view, is one of several social fields utilized by democratic culture in order to shape the consciousness of its members, and its aesthetic forms are part and parcel of competing rhetorical strategies that offer meaning in the complex world of today where different political actors and social agendas compete for support. In a situation where even "simple" entertainment serves as a means to enlist the reader or spectator in ideological battles, novels – a popular genre that traditionally seeks to portray the contemporary social world – have gained renewed importance as media of cultural self-reflection. Elliott takes *Cosmopolis* by Don DeLillo and *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth as examples and shows how these texts use an aesthetics of astonishment to prompt their

readers to examine and challenge the clichés of American self-images. Acting as “21st century incarnations of failed American visionaries” (14), the protagonists of both satirical novels ultimately serve as props to inquire into the general political climate of the contemporary United States. In conclusion, Elliott – the current President of the American Studies Association – harshly comments on the neglect of the humanities in contemporary university planning. Contrary to public prejudice, training experts on the aesthetic does not mean to produce inhabitants of ivory-towers; rather, the ability to read between the lines, and to analyze the rhetorical structure of representation has to be understood as a vital democratic resource desperately needed in a time of global unrest.

Centered on the concept of a democratic aesthetic, Winfried Fluck’s essay explores a key term of American Studies. The term is usually invoked with reference to both a theory of art and to a theory of aesthetic experience. Against a pervasive European critique of American culture as fundamentally utilitarian or commercially oriented and hence inimical to the idea of the aesthetic grounded in free play, early proponents of American Studies introduced the concept of a democratic aesthetic as an anti-elitist American concept of art grounded in popular practices of self-expression and/or popular forms of entertainment. This argument builds upon but also rewrites earlier American attempts to define the aesthetic such as transcendentalism, which retooled the Kantian argument by relating the aesthetic to moral and cognitive practices of self-culture and self-growth. As a result, art was regarded as a venue of self-authorization, and, in the name of democratic participation, even becomes an expressly political intervention. Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics is a good case in point: in yet another re-writing of Kant, Dewey conceives of the aesthetic as a specific mode of reflection on sensory experience as a prerequisite of cognition; art founded on this premise may be called democratic as it foregrounds aesthetic materiality and downplays institutionalized artistic forms. Fluck himself sees American practices of the aesthetic – which others have linked to the commodifications of consumer culture – as grounded in the egalitarianism of American culture at large: the need of the individual to find ever new sources to distinguish him/herself and gain public recognition leads to a strong element of performance. Tocqueville was the first observer of American culture to note the theatricality of behavior, the constant re-invention of self, and the emphasis on the body and the sensual in art and entertainment; for Fluck, these elements testify to a pervasive trend in American culture to transform art into an aesthetic repertory for individual self-expression and a claim for social recognition. The attacks on elitist notions of art by proponents of minority cultures must then be seen as efforts of self-authorization that follow the general pattern of American culture, and, ironically, thus draw upon the cultural ‘capital’ of art.

Exploring further the complex relations between fashion, art, and modernity Barbara Vinken juxtaposes two historical moments where their mutual interde-

pendence surfaces prominently. Baudelaire's famous poem "A une passante" and Heine's remarks on a poor city girl of southern Trent in his *Reise von München nach Genua* articulate an interplay, each in its own specific ways, between fashion and antique art that serves to elucidate the specific temporality of the modern. Both authors treat fashion not just as the ephemeral opposite of the eternal beauty of the marble statue, but use it as a trope to infect and decompose the ideal of timeless art – a strategy reflected in the broken lines of Baudelaire's sonnet, and in Heine's romantic irony. In Baudelaire's and Heine's texts, art is infected and disrupted by fashion, thereby throwing the oppositions that organize both fields (life and death, antiquity and modernity, eternity and the fleeting moment) in stark relief. Discussing recent developments in fashion design which Vincken describes as "fashion after fashion," she observes a travestied return of the statue in the form of the puppet or manikin. Designers such as Rei Kawakubo or Martin Margiela create dresses that do not fit the body, show the traces of the production process, and destroy the fetishized image of female beauty by reducing the body to a corpse wearing stylized, yet tattered rags. Margiela even takes this ironic appropriation of modernist aesthetics one step further by putting a dressmaker's dummy into a museum yard where it was exposed to wind, rain and fungi, thus evoking the image of an antique statue as an emblem of fashion as deconstructed art.

As art historian Juliane Rebentisch shows, however, to deconstruct the modernist notion of the 'white cube,' the alleged de-contextualization and ultimate independence of the art work *vis-à-vis* its spatial surroundings (or museums), does not necessarily involve the abrogation of aesthetic values altogether. Rather it brings to the fore what Rebentisch calls the "dual context" of all art work and thus the fact that neither context alone (as in postmodern notions of art) nor the total denial of context (as in the 'white cube' ideology) suffice to explain aesthetic phenomena. Even in such context-oriented and context-dependent works as Richard Serra's we are still asked to think of the installation as *art*; as Rebentisch argues, these site-specific art works are by no means directed against the notion of the aesthetic but their aesthetic quality arises precisely from the ongoing negotiation of curatorial conventions; more importantly, because of art's twofold status as at once a representation of ideologically loaded notions of art and an aesthetic practice (that is, the *doing* of art), aesthetic experience may be defined as the result of an intricate interplay of artist, art work and viewer, as an 'event' between subject and object that is neither entirely predicated on the notion of cognition nor on that of action but rather on the fluid concept of performativity. As Rebentisch concludes, the performativity of aesthetic experience claims a liminal space between theoretical and practical reason.

Charting new and exciting territory, both Judith Halberstam and Fred Moten take us well beyond purely philosophical, abstract debates on how to define aesthetic experience. Rather, they probe alternative projects such as the confronta-

tional aesthetics of queer art, a radical realism “that brings the viewer face to face with the harsh realities of life” (Halberstam) and a “gestural critique of judgment” that animates, according to Moten, “black art, black politics and their relation to the law as well as to what Kant calls the ‘lawless freedom’ of the imagination.” To dissociate the fatal skein of iconicity, positivity, and identity politics that has long marked queer aesthetic discourse, Halberstam delineates an aesthetics of failure that adds to and, at the same time, transcends the tradition of a purely negative or *anti*-aesthetic approach to art. By redefining queer bodies and their relation to space(s), Halberstam, following the queer critic Dianne Chisholm, claims “a peripatetics of seeing,” which joins aesthetic structures to location and the identity of communities to particular spaces. Discussing, among others, the strikingly ‘aesthetic’ photographs of vacant pools by Californian artists Cabello/Carceller, Halberstam reads the decayed ‘emptiness’ of these abandoned sites of luxury, leisure, and recreation as an invitation for the viewer to jump into air and space and thereby contemplate the threshold that separates the sparkling surface from the depth of a world usually submerged and glossed over with chlorine-enhanced blue water.

Moten’s reading of the ‘gestural’ into Kant’s critique of judgment bodies forth, on the other hand, a “disorderly intentionality” in black semiotic discourse that often leaves white commentators and observers at an epistemological loss. Taking the raised fist of one black juror after the O.J. Simpson trial as his point of departure, Moten positions African-American corporeal aesthetics between “the materiality of acting out and motionless seeing.” Contrary to Linda Williams’ criticism of such black gestures in *Playing the Race Card*, where she indicts the ideology and politics behind them as a basically melodramatic, misguided form of anti-aesthetics, Moten argues that black bodily expression is often informed by an “experimental exercise of freedom” and that it thus must be seen as a profoundly anti-instrumentalist critique of the instrumentalist flaw of liberalism and its rationality. When Kant distinguished between *Phantasie* und *Einbildungskraft* he already left the door wide open, according to Moten’s striking conclusion, for an interpretation of the aesthetic that is not yet clipped into the regulated forms of a philosophical faculty. Gestures, black gestures, such as the juror’s controversial raised fist, spell out a refusal of systems of beauty and judgment that are deeply entrenched in the white supremacist logic and its anxiety about everything that disorders the faculties of mind. Retooling a term coined by jazz musician Charles Mingus, black aesthetics, for Moten, becomes the “terribly beautiful” whose inter-subjective validity both deconstructs and extends (politically) normative assessments of beauty.

If all contributors to the present volume take on the issue of what critic Edward Said has called the “worldliness” of aesthetic productions that is, their unavoidable embeddedness in cultural and physical environments that impact the form, structure, and range of meanings they convey, Miles Orvell’s discussion of photographs

of September 11 adds a new perspective and new hope for the future of art and the aesthetic in an age of catastrophe. Examining the most complete gathering of 9/11 photographs, a storefront exhibit and, later, online compilation of approximately 5000 images called *Here Is New York*, Orvell describes the curatorial politics that informed both projects, as “revolutionary.” Offering a new way to think about history and make sense of images that haunt us, the exhibition, originally an *ad hoc* event, clearly evokes Whitman’s notion of a ‘democratic’ aesthetic. Since the coordinators invited anyone to submit images, the show also instantiates – its thematic focus notwithstanding – an implicit critique of established procedures of aesthetic evaluation, because it becomes almost impossible to tell the difference between the work of the professional photographer and that of the amateur. That photography, and particularly the latest developments in digital photography, have been considered to make ‘art’ too easy and thus to question certain assumptions about the aesthetic quality of an image is well known. Yet with the online platform of *Here Is New York*, as Orvell shows, we are entering a new stage in both the way photographic images are presented and also in how we, the public, respond to these images. While it is not clear that the exhibit can figure as a model and rationale for the future (precisely because both its theme and form of presentation have been as yet unprecedented), *Here Is New York* delineates a space for documentary photography outside the traditional mass media. What is more, its internet presentation compels us to experience visual media in a new, more democratic fashion. With the representation of photography on internet sites like *Here Is New York*, as Orvell concludes, the democratization of art and media, that photography all along has promised, has taken a quantum leap; eventually, it may also change the ways in which we think about the power and politics of the aesthetic in America (and elsewhere).

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W.** *Ästhetische Theorie*. Gesammelte Schriften 7. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1997.
- Baumgarten, Alexander.** *Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*. Ed. Hans Rudolf Schweizer. Hamurg: Meiner, 1983.
- Butler, Judith.** *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Douglass, Frederick.** *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. An American Slave. Written By Himself*. Ed. David W. Blight. Boston/New York: Bedford Press, 1993.
- Eagleton, Terry.** *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

- Elliott, Emory.** *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo.** "Nature." *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. I. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971. 3-45.
- Fisher, Philip.** *Still the New World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Haverkamp, Anselm.** "Wie die Morgenröthe in zwischen Nacht und Tag. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten und die Begründung der Kulturwissenschaften in Frankfurt an der Oder," *DVjs* 76.1 (2002): 1-26.
- Kant, Immanuel.** *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Werkausgabe X. Ed. Wilhelm Weischedel. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1974.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich.** "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn". *Werke in sechs Bänden*. Vol. V. Ed. Karl Schlechta. Munich: Hanser, 1980. 311-322.
- Said, Edward.** *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Steiner, Wendy.** *The Scandal of Pleasure*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Williams, Linda.** *Playing the Race Card. Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

