

INTRODUCTION

AESTHETIC RELATIONS

Concepts of aesthetic relations are currently undergoing massive critique and potential reconfiguration. In some way or other, they all relate to the power structures vested in the aesthetic and its theoretical inheritance. In this contestation of the western canon, recent scholars have questioned basic aesthetic concepts like talent, disinterestedness, transparency, and universalist notions of the human by highlighting how such discourses are built upon and reinforce divisions of a racial and colonial nature.¹ Aesthetic relations, it seems, can no longer be confined to the classical relationship between an object and a subject. Neither can we solve the issue by a simple return to the broad understanding of aesthetics as *aisthesis*, as a general formula for sense perception, since such a conception still favors the singular experience of an autonomous self.

The topic of this special volume of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* originated from a conference held at the University of Copenhagen in January 2021 hosted by the Art as Forum research center. The aim of the conference was not only to catch a glimpse of the status quo within artistic practices and aesthetic theory, but also to invite proposals for how new conceptualizations of relationality could be formulated in aesthetic, social, political, and historical contexts. Pivotal for the forms of these discussions was the setting they took place in: a world-wide lockdown due to an ongoing Covid-pandemic.

While the health crisis exposed several structures of inequality in Denmark and many other places, it also coexisted with—or even revitalized—other significant movements across the globe. In 2020, the assassination of George Floyd led to a new surge of Black Lives Matters uprisings all over the world as well as global revolts against symbols of colonial heritage that assembled humans from near and far, high and low, and gave rise to wide-ranging debates over the role of aesthetics within social and political infrastructures and hierarchies. The simultaneity of revolts across the globe—from South Africa to Kalaallit Nunaat—made explicit how the lockdown had intensified our already growing dependency on digital infrastructures of communication. While the viral dissemination of slogans of anti-racism

and forms of anti-colonial intervention demonstrated the scope of social media's affective economies, other events reminded us that the platforms hosting them are hardly just neutral tools. Also, the Trump supporters and white supremacists that stormed the West's most established symbol of liberal democracy, the Capitol building in Washington DC, on January 6th, 2021, were largely organized on social media. And strikingly, they were neutralized as an immediate threat to the democratic post-election processes *only* when global media platforms, a few days after the storm, decided to shut down their access. Although most of us are well aware that global tech giants are corporations of advanced capitalism rather than philanthropic hubs of innovation in the service of humanity, this chain of events—where global tech initially made the riots possible and eventually shut them down with a great deal more efficiency than the US National Guard had been able to—appeared as a wake-up call to show how the power to regulate and control aesthetic relations is becoming distributed in new ways.

In Denmark, the “ghetto act”—a governmental initiative that since 2018 aims to recompose the demography of social housing complexes with a high percentage of migrants and descendants of migrants by means of tearing down buildings, selling apartments, and forcing people to move out—has released debates and analyses that pinpoint how, ultimately, the social divisions within our societies are all connected to and molded in aesthetic practices, relations, and appearances. Thus, the problems brought to light by the contesting views on how aesthetic relations shape actual lives have also disclosed the need for a renegotiation of history and its structural and symbolic place in the present. A work that is commenced by several contributions to this volume. In a direct manner, both the historically attentive and personally political essay by Christa Holm Vogelius, and Birgit Eriksson and Anne Mette W. Nielsen's thorough, ethnographically informed study of community art projects motivate such renegotiations in the violent effects of recent battles over immigration and social housing in a Danish context—and both stress how these struggles cannot be conceived of as isolated contemporary and local issues but must be understood in broader historical as well as global contexts.

When we speak of aesthetic relations, then, we speak not merely about the way art and cultural practices shape our interaction with the world within the “gated communities” provided by cultural

institutions—but also about the wider political and social implications of sense relations as they establish connections and divisions both inside and outside of the arts. This entails applying transversal and infrastructural perspectives that can elucidate the entwinements of production and reception, of the aesthetic and the social, and of the epistemological and the ontological. The request for materialist contextualization suggests that we revise our analytical, evaluative, and methodological view upon aesthetics and aesthetic theory.

The global Covid crisis has reminded us that what we call our own is always interlaced with the lives of others. With little difficulty the virus crosses national borders and public/private distinctions, eliciting our dependency on each other and the ethical bond that implores me to take care of you, and you to take care of me. The subject cannot stand alone in its isolated singularity—it has too many openings. Thus, it is not just the relation between object and subject but the respectively supporting and border-drawing relations that exist in and around these subjectivities and objectivities that call for attention. Instead of discussing either of the two entities in their particularity, the entangled structures ought to be examined. To talk about aesthetic relations is also to talk about the social geographies taking shape around the meeting with artworks, ordinary objects, and other individuals.

As a continuation of the encounters and discussions with colleagues at the conference *Aesthetic Relations* and the daily study in the Art as Forum research center, we seek to analyze, historicize, and question socio-aesthetic concepts and their infrastructural embeddedness in conditions of production, articulation, and reception within and around the arts. As organizers of the conference and editors of this volume, informed by the rich contributions included here, we want to push forward the focus on historical embeddedness and the violence, power, and transformability of aesthetic relations.

Édouard Glissant has provided us with helpful analyses and concepts in the theoretical corpus on aesthetic relations. His *Poetics of Relations* from 1990 is a recurrent frame of reference in the articles gathered here². In this book, he suggests relationality as a general condition of subjectivity by which he understands social interdependency to be at the heart of our selves. While such interdependencies open our relations to each other and make us

realize how we are connected, they do so without exhausting the meaning of she who appears: rather than the revelation of a transparent humanity, Glissant opts for our right to remain opaque. Crucial for this volume's contributors is the trope of circularity, which, in the *Poetics of Relations*, is articulated as a counternarrative to the linear time scape of European modernity. Circularity allows for other types of relationships that span across time and space to emerge: What are the unexpected connections between the bricks of the building hosting Denmark's Royal Art Academy and the historical, transcontinental trade routes of enslavement? Which intertwinements of aesthetics and racialization exist between social policies in New York toward the end of the 19th century, current imbalances on the Copenhagen housing market, and the so-called "ghetto law" implemented by the two latest Danish governments? How can we track configurations of agency and dependency—and their relation to aesthetic form and pleasure—from 18th century accounts of London to melodramatic novels from the 1960s? And how would these understandings of agency problematize who gets to be a subject, who gets to be represented, and in which ways?

A methodology informed by Glissant—based on a relational and poetic approach to the study of culture—creates a time-space compression and gives voice to those who have been silenced or removed from the archive. Through an experimental or an artistic research agenda, several of the articles in this special issue bring alternative stories to the fore. Moreover, they correct or supplement the strategies through which we usually engage with questions of aesthetics. Whether it is a practice of suspension, repair, or a reading of elements like sea, landscape, fire, or clouds, they all seek alternative ways to investigate the structures that underlie modernity.

The first contribution is the score of a performance held during the conference by Kiran Kumār and Lucie Tuma. In a reflection on the temporal structures of our daily lives and that of modernity in general, they experiment with the act of suspension. Suspension is a direct effect of the reality of Covid-lockdown—the suspension of social life, of research projects, etc.—but it is also an opportunity to rethink our relations to each other and our histories. If the routine and rhythm of our activities, our judgments, our thinking, and our living are disrupted, which alternative temporal figures might then appear?

Suspension is the very condition of writing in the second article, a co-creation of four colleagues and friends with a shared interest in ecological, decolonial, and anti-capitalist approaches. “Elements matter” is a multifocal analysis by Leon Gabriel, Julia Schade, Stefan Hölscher, and Ruth Schmidt in which they turn to our environmental surroundings in formulating new relationalities or scenes of thought. In a joint engagement with theories and artworks dealing with landscapes, the sea, burning oilfields, and cloudy thinking respectively, they confront the progressive time of colonial modernity as well as the production of self-enclosed subjectivities in the term “racial Capitalocene”, coined by Françoise Vergès. In these scenes, the distanced perspective of a god-like human spectator is replaced by a feeling of vertigo, of an overwhelming juxtaposition of images and narratives which confront inhabited epistemological foundations. This horizontal ecology of relations exposes the false reassurance of a transcendental verticality, just as it questions the presumed neutrality of the formation of a general, digital world picture—as a gridded globe—where cybernetic measurements and technologies of forecast prediction allow a complete view of the earth.

In Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld’s contribution, “Entangled Archives. Reparative critical practices in situations ‘beyond repair’”, she traces the connecting lines between the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and Denmark’s colonial project. In her original approach to the intertwinements—historical as well as contemporary—of art and racism, she puts forward a theory of rematerialization. This concerns a practice of remodulating and rearticulating the objects and the networks they form part of, be they artworks or materials like bricks and textiles, as both direct and indirect testimonies of colonial circulation and exploitation. Her text further comments on the reactions by Danish media in the wake of an activist artistic performance by Anonymous Artists, where a copy of a bust of King Frederik V (founder of the art academy) was submerged in the Copenhagen harbor. Rather than being a comment on or a representation of the ongoing political debate on Denmark’s colonial legacies and their continuation into the present, the “rematerialization” of the bust became a direct, time- and site-specific, aesthetic intervention into it, in which the continuities of colonialism were resurfaced.

In “Changing Gellerup Park: Political interventions and aesthetic engagement in an exposed social housing area in Denmark” Birgit

Eriksson and Anne Mette W. Nielsen engage with both the site-specific and the time-specific, as they turn to art projects situated in and emanating from Gellerup, one of the areas most persistently connected with the discriminatory “ghetto act” in Danish legislation. Through an art historical approach informed by ethnographic methods, the authors uncover how, to the residents of Gellerup, the greatest challenge is not crime rates, poverty, or negative social control as claimed by political discourse, but rather how the “territorial stigmatization” produced by such discourse creates a “triple exposure” of the residents in these neighborhood as they become subjected to both inequality, stigmatization, and discriminatory interventions as a result of the distorted image of the neighborhood. And since this problem fundamentally emanates from aesthetic relations, sustained aesthetic interventions in the form of long-term art projects make immediate sense: the continuous artistic practices in Gellerup transgress the superficial and instrumental nature of the so-called “betterment agenda” of many publicly funded, but typically both top-down and temporary, community art projects. Accordingly, the analyzed art platforms, *Sigrid’s Living Room* and *Andromeda 8220*, mobilize the actual resources of the community in producing alternative narratives and future figurations that are explicitly concerned with exposing and intervening in the aesthetic core of the challenges facing the neighborhood.

The “new relationalities” at play in our present s—theorized by Glissant and depicted in “Elements Matter”—are historicized by Ragnild Lome in her contribution “The Melodrama of Possessive Agency”. Lome turns to the 1960s as the period where what Erich Hörl recently called “the general ecologization of thought” initially exploded with the first wave of computer technology and the introduction of cybernetics and systems theory. In Lome’s approach, the question of individual vs. distributed agency becomes key to conceptualizing the new relationalities at play in the 1960s, thus decentralizing the classical relationship between the subject and the object to begin with. While this approach lifts agency out of the subject and considers it a process emerging between human and non-human agents of both nature and technology, Lome uses the contested genre of the melodrama to demonstrate how these new figures of thought gave rise to harsh ideological conflicts between defenders of a sovereign enlightenment subject, and its materialist critics. Her analysis of a Norwegian melodramatic novel, Finn Alnæs’ *Koloss* (1963), and

its differing reception, suggest how these conflicts were negotiated through aesthetic forms. Lome proposes that aesthetic media and the specific genres belonging to them are not neutral containers but aesthetic devices that can both contest and co-produce the historical configurations of agency.

The historization of the relationship between aesthetics and political subjectivation goes further back to the beginning of the 18th century in Tue Andersen Nexø's "Watching the City with Pleasure. Polite Disengagement, Aesthetic Pleasure and Life in the City in *The Spectator*". Nexø finds a formative moment in the constitution of the ideal modern subject under the influence of the canonized, literary depiction of life in the 18th century city. The political implications of the concept of aesthetic pleasure cannot be overseen: The fictitious and popular Mr. Spectator suggests—on widely distributed, half-page leaflets—to lean into a disengaged mode of visual jouissance, politeness, and a passive taking pleasure in observing the commercial and capitalist society of the 18th century London. Opposed to later ideas of aesthetic experience as engaging the imagination of future (political) alternatives, Mr. Spectator offers a moral education of retirement and discrete consumption beyond the revolutionary. According to Nexø, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, the supposed authors of the vignettes by Mr. Spectator, offer—through the promotion of pleasure, disengagement, and politeness—a rather passive subjectivity that refrains from political discussions. Thereby, Nexø also stresses how the aesthetic theorist Addison, and the literary writer Steele are not merely descriptors and analysts, but rather co-producers—educators—of a non-political sentiment: not only do they describe and depict social and emerging financial, capitalist life, but they also perform and promote disengagement in politics in their moral writings. Thus, they create disengaged subjects, an advantage of the ruling political power of "Court Whigs" in their historical present. Hence, Nexø questions—through Mr. Spectator's non-political, asocial, and pleased observations of urban and financial activities—the *per se* communizing "good" sociality of Kantian aesthetic experience, and points instead towards the disciplining and political implications of sensibility.

Bridging the gap between history and present day, Christa Holm Vogelius in the issue's final contribution, "Housing Reform and the Ghetto Law in the Time of Covid", writes from within the

temporal and spatial suspensions of Covid-lockdowns. In her both personal, politically indignant, and historically complex essay, she traces the connections between the current debates in Denmark about the so-called “ghetto law” and the housing reforms in New York in late 19th century. Taking the lens of documentary photographer and housing reformer Jacob Riis as her example, her analysis questions how the general benevolence associated with the reception of his work has neglected how Riis’ work also rested on ideas of exclusion based on racial categories, and how the voices of Riis’ photographic subjects—many of them evicted from their homes because of the reforms—are consistently silenced in the archive. Against the backdrop of Vogelius’ own background as a child of Danish migrants in New Jersey and her recent relocation to Denmark, she questions the notion of “ghetto” central to the Danish debate and she especially raises a critique of the ways in which the racial categories that underlie this debate are based on thinly covered stereotypes. Being a racialized white woman strung out between different and conflictual senses of belonging, she reminds us that much of the debate on “parallel societies” rests on appearances and thus on basic questions of how relations are always aesthetically co-determined. Finally, she warns us not to repeat histories of racism in attempts at integrating socially marginalized groups as parts of large-scale government initiatives where the exclusion from decision-making can very easily turn such initiatives into large-scale social experiments with devastating outcomes for large groups of individuals.

As editors, we hope that this varied collection of texts will contribute with historical qualifications and creative complications of the ongoing, and frequently heated, debates about aesthetic relations, their implicit violent separations, and exclusions, and their ongoing as well as potential future reconfigurations. We want to voice a heartfelt thank you to all the brilliant scholars and artists that have contributed, to our generous and attentive peer reviewers, and not least to everyone who has joined our conversations on aesthetic relations in *Art as Forum* and beyond.

- 1 See Fred Moten, *In the Break. The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press 2003; Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. University of Minnesota Press 2007; Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X – The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, Fordham University Press, 2013; David Lloyd, *Under Representation. The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, Fordham University Press, 2019.
- 2 French: *Poétique de la relation (Poétique III)*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990. English translation: Édouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. University of Michigan Press [1997] 2010.