

ATTENTION AND AESTHETIC VALUE

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ABSTRACT

We are capable of engaging in different kinds of relations with objects and situations we meet. Any relation is, in principle singular and thus *einmalig*, unique. Still, certain general types of relationality do exist. Relations may be established with focus (“attention”) on usability, truth, ethics, power, authenticity—and of course, on “beauty,” on aesthetic value. This differentiation is an invention of the Modern world and in itself subject to historical change. In terms of “discursive areas” it has been theorized in varying keys—including quite many universalist ones. We are free to choose our modes of attention. Still, institutionalized discourses in practice pre-configure these modes. Especially when it comes to art and Modernity’s “great divide” between *poiesis* and *aesthesis*, the conditions for attentional approaches appear largely pre-figured. The article discusses this pre-configuration and the institutionalized “freedoms” of art and its audience, respectively—including current calls to abolish such differentiations and to transgress the discursive boundaries of art.

KEYWORDS

Attention, Autonomy, Poiesis versus Aesthesis, Kant

1.

The title of this article should have been rather “Attentions and Aesthetic Value,” i.e., in the plural.

Attention is not just attention. There are different kinds of attention, which we all know about, make use of and meet every single day. We may expect one kind of attention, for instance, admiration for our work, and get another, for instance, one of sexual desire. We experience ourselves the ways we, perhaps even involuntarily, alter the kind of attention we do pay in a specific situation or towards certain objects.

All real occurrences of attention are, of course, singular and situated. Still, different general types and specific kinds of attention do exist.

2.

On the one hand, we do believe that we ourselves decide and produce the kind of attention we wish to pay to whatever. On the other hand, a choice of different kinds of attention seemingly is available, in the shape of conventions, established language games, and discursive rules. So who is actually choosing, and what do the choices depend on?

On the face of it, the objects decide. Some things are worth attention, others not. Some situations call for curiosity, interest, or disgust, others do not. Nevertheless, in reality, not least, our own situation decides. Are we up for paying attention today? Is this or that in our current line of interest? Are we afraid of attracting unwanted attention if we pay attention to this and that?

Still, certain objects invite us to distinctive kinds of attention according to their discursive belongings. Artworks are good examples of this.

3.

In the case of artworks as well, we are free to choose which kind of attention we want to pay if any. Artworks nowadays are, as we know, not necessarily identifiable as artworks based on their objectual qualities exclusively. A readymade in the shape of a snow shovel may be paid attention to as just a snow shovel. Even traditional artworks, such as canvases, may be approached with attention to the themes of what they depict, while novels may be approached with attention to what they can teach us about daily life. We are free not to pay attention to artworks as art, in other words. If we do so anyhow, we are furthermore free to choose whether we wish to establish “aesthetic,” judgment-based relations

to the artworks in question. We may choose rather to prioritize paying attention to cognitive, political, or sociological questions raised by the artworks.

However, although we may choose for ourselves, our choices of modes of attention will, in practice, take place along the lines of already existing, conventional modes.

4.

Free to choose, and still inclined to choose certain conventional modes of attention. Just by the way, as we are free to act and react in general, all the while, we still act very much in concordance with average conduct as prescribed by our cultural encyclopedia.

These conventions are products of our history. Their validity is thus historically concrete as well. What seems natural right now may be entirely un-understandable in another historical context. Immanuel Kant, in the 18th century, could in no possible way have understood a canned artist's shit as a work of art. The entire phenomenon of "objectual de-differentiation" concerning artworks nowadays would be considered senseless, and individuals appreciating that kind of artworks accordingly would be deemed insane back then. Conversely, much of what was considered fine art in Kant's time is still appreciated as art today. Conventions are not, as it seems, solely about the artifacts as such.

5.

Although all this may appear as common knowledge, tendencies to simplify the complex interplay between individual freedom and societal conventions are quite frequent. We may influence, elaborate on, even individually evade conventional discourses, but we cannot deny their existence nor their impact, also where our individual choices are concerned. The historically engendered reality cannot be ruled out by decision. On the other hand, these conventions are not universally, i.e., trans-historically valid.

This fragile and complicated balance is true, not least when it comes to art in our Modern sense. Art in our kind of society is characterized by a distinct non-symmetry between the conditions for producing and those for receiving art. The "great divide" between *poiesis* and *aesthesis* takes place historically when the artist no longer produces his or her work to well-known requestors, but to an anonymous audience, to a market. This, on the one hand, creates the space for art's unlimited freedom, its so-called autonomy, to do or say or act after its own rules exclusively, i.e., to work on behalf of, above all, art itself. On the other hand, the

divide creates a free space for the audience, also individually, to pay attention to artworks “aesthetically” (as it eventually was named in the process), i.e., asking what is in this for me, conceptualized as-if this for-me were related to a more universal for-us. It is important to understand that this falling apart is the mutual precondition to the conventional freedoms of both *poiesis* and *aesthesis* within the Modern. Art is no longer committed directly to its audience, and the audience is no longer obliged to appreciate artworks according to their intentions as art.¹

6.

Poiesis and *aesthesis* separated, set “free,” and detached from each other in terms of discursive spaces, including rules for conduct, criteria for validity and legitimacy and sociological conditions. But, of course, still intimately interconnected above all through their joint “object”: Art, works of art.

Not least conceptually, this detachedness has been hard to accept. Historically, the separation in itself gave birth to a quest for coherence, for reconciliation. This became the agenda of the Jena Romanticism movement, giving birth to a strong tradition in aesthetics that has been alive ever since. The “marriage” between art and aesthetics established a bridge between the two primarily through a general emphasis on art’s cognitive potentials, turning aesthetics in this “speculative” tradition into a kind of more or less normative master of art.²

7.

The speculative tradition, for all its valuable contributions in its own context, however never managed to alter the fact of the original “great divide”—and thus failed to understand the specificity of aesthetic experience, relationality—aesthetic *attention*, as it is.

This specificity had initially been analyzed and described back in the 18th century above all by Immanuel Kant (after Baumgarten’s invention of the discipline). Why there and then, one might ask? Simply because it as a phenomenon had been brought into existence. During the Renaissance and the formation of the Modern, the “great divide” had created an audience including the individual experience or feeling of belonging to an audience.

Kant’s analysis of the mechanisms of aesthetic relationality, of the judgment of taste, is part of an extended reflection on how to deal with the new conditions of *differentiation* in the Modern. His analysis is thus quite evidently historically based. To Kant himself, however, his observations and reflections had universal

validity, i.e., were transhistorically true. This is obviously not the case: Kant must be historicized, i.e., understood according to the historical conditions under and into which he developed his analyses. That, however, does not prevent these analyses from being *grosso modo* still historically adequate where the fundamental condition of differentiation within the Modern is concerned.³

8.

On the other “side” of the great divide, we have art’s “autonomy.” Autonomy has remained art’s basic condition so far within the Modern. Often the concept of autonomy has been conceptually misinterpreted as if it were about art being detached or isolated from society, thus not being capable or allowed to deal with society’s running problems.⁴ This is not the case: Art’s autonomy above all means that art is free to act according to its proper rules (and thus not committed to ordinary rules of, for instance purpose, rationality in society). Art’s autonomy means that whatever art does or says, it does so *as art*.

This distinctive “freedom,” of course, is art’s blessing and its curse at the same time. Therefore, art’s autonomy has been under attack from art itself, almost constantly, during the Modern times, not least under furious attacks from the historical avant-garde movements and later from their heritors, situationists, neo- and transavantgardes.

So far, however, these attacks have never really changed art’s condition of autonomy, of being “intransitive.” Art has not been set free from acting as art with its own rules. Art’s autonomy has apparently not even become weaker, to the contrary.

9.

The concept of art itself, however, has changed dramatically during the latest two hundred years. Art is no longer necessarily identifiable as such in terms of discernible objects. All kinds of situations, ready-mades, actions, even absence or nothingness may be “art.” Everything whatsoever may be “art.” Nevertheless, that does not mean that everything *is* art. Art indeed still has its boundaries, but these boundaries have changed dramatically, and they are under permanent change. Not just in their position but also in their conceptual form—and not least today.

This calls for thorough investigations into these boundaries and their current condition.

10.

Today we, once again, meet insisting calls for criticizing art's institutionalized boundaries, the autonomy of art and the existence of any peculiar "aesthetic" relationality (including its pretensions about equal access and rights). We hear calls for fighting against any division in modus between self-defined tasks of art, and the serious (political) problems of everyday life, be it concerning race, gender, climate, colonialism, or whatever. All art, it is stated, should contribute directly to creating attention(s) to these problems, to solving them. ⁵

Art is thus encouraged to make use of its freedom to tear down the separation that is the very precondition of its freedom and symbolic authority, by which it is able to act in the name of art.

11.

Is this a paradox, a threat to art's institutionalized "autonomy" and thus its freedom? Or to a distinct aesthetic attention?

That depends. Any beholder is, of course, free to prefer his or her kind of art. Nevertheless, more generally, seen from outside art's own boundaries, these calls for denigrating, for cancelling its boundaries is actually something of a paradox. If such endeavors came through, art would become "transitive," and might become the platform of specific political interests. However, the price for that would be the loss of art's symbolic authority to act in the name of just art, thereby addressing exactly me as if I were representing anyone.

On the other hand, from the point of view of art itself, seen from the inside, endeavors like these are by no means paradoxical. Such endeavors are sanctioned exactly by art's freedom, thus granted by the fact that they are realized in the name of art, i.e., as art.

Concordantly, on behalf of art itself, there is no surprise about endeavors like that. Art is entitled to have agendas concerning any societal area, including opinions, strong or weak, controversial or conventional.

However, such endeavors may appear slightly surprising when it comes to professional approaches to the art of today from outside art's boundaries. Of course, the dream of a reconciliation of the good, the true, and the beautiful is still alive, also in our hyper-differentiated modern society. The development of our discipline of aesthetics, however, has in fact pointed in the opposite direction during the last forty years. There is a marked tendency to again emphasize aesthetic value, aesthetic relationality as something distinctive, connected to experience, to

reception—and thus not seamlessly interwoven with, for example, what artworks want us to do or to believe. This development has taken place within most parts of the established theoretical traditions, even in the strong, continental German one, to which Romanticism's reconciliation was the historical background.⁶

12.

In general, there is a growing acknowledgment in aesthetics that actually “Kant got it right” in his original analysis of aesthetic relationality as something distinctive.⁷ Immanuel Kant, of course, was not right in his claims for universal, trans-historical validity of his analysis. His work was historically rooted, and its strengths and weaknesses are clearly connected to its specific historical context. This context was the historical birth of a fundamental societal differentiation into spheres, fields, and discourses, with separate rules and possibilities—in particular, including an ever-developing division of labor concordantly. Moreover, to come back to our agenda: producing different kinds of attention, including “aesthetic” ones. It is hard to see this diversity, these differences, separations, boundaries, as problems that should be solved or overcome. They are parts of Modernity's privileged offer to us. And they are the reason why art matters.

- 1 On the "great divide", see Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scènes du régime esthétique de l'art* (Paris: Galilée, 2011), esp. 29–40.
- 2 On the "marriage," see Morten Kyndrup, "Art, Aesthetics–Divorce?," *Site*, no. 33 (2013); "Ästhetik, Kunst und Kunstverständnis. Die Kunst und das Kunstwerk," *Neue Rundschau* Heft 1 (2012). On the "speculative tradition," see Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'Art de l'âge moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).
- 3 On Kant and historicity, see Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1996), and *Aesthetics at Large: Art, Ethics, Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- 4 A pertinent example is the interpretation of the historical avantgardes' general intentions in Peter Bürger's influential theory. See Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp, 1974).
- 5 Multiple examples of this are referred in Carole Talon-Hugon's critical analysis of this phenomenon, see her *L'art sous contrôle. Nouvel agenda sociétal et censures militantes* (Paris: PUF, 2019). David Lloyd takes such an approach to the limit (or beyond) by claiming aesthetic philosophy as such to actually having grounded the racial order of the modern world. See his *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham UP, 2019).
- 6 On the recent developments in the German tradition, see Juliane Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst – zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2013). Outside this tradition works of for example Jean-Marie Schaeffer (*L'Art de l'âge moderne*) and Gérard Genette, *L'œuvre de l'art**. La relation esthétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1997) might be mentioned. Thierry de Duve's recent book, *Aesthetics at Large* establishes a critical dialogue between and an overview of a number of different theoretical traditions of aesthetics in this context.
- 7 See Thierry de Duve, "Why Kant got it right," in *Æstetisering. Forbindelser og forskelle*, edited by Birgit Eriksson, Jacob Lund, Henrik Kaare Nielsen & Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen (Aarhus: Klim, 2012); Morten Kyndrup, "Aesthetics and Judgment: 'Why Kant Got It Right'?", *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 54 (2018): 75–85.