

## QUESTIONNAIRE ON AESTHETICS IN THE AGE OF UNREASON

We live in an age characterized by an expansion and deepening of the instrumental reason of capital, an increasing prevalence of reactionary and even fascist irrationalism and “post-truth” myth-making, and a fundamental proliferation of digital technologies of artificial intelligence and other vast information infrastructures mediating our social relations and climate.

Rather than the liberal *Zeitdiagnose* of a “post-truth era,” it seems more fitting to designate this conjunction an age of unreason, in line with the tradition of the Frankfurt School, as recently revisited by the late Bernard Stiegler and Achille Mbembe. Whereas Mbembe has argued that the colonial history of modernity, with its constitutive division of reason and unreason, the (white) liberal subject and the subjugated Black subject, outlines a “history of reason’s unreason” that to this day constitutes contemporary societies and their public spheres, Stiegler theorized the emergence of a de-formed reason and stupidity as a key tendency in today’s globalized, digital technoculture.

For both theorists, the dialectical tension between reason and unreason—the historical task of *Aufklärung* with its exclusion, racialization, and proletarianization—takes intensified and ever-more contradictory forms in the 21st century. Following Paul B. Preciado and many others, it seems fair to assert that we are living through an enormous “epistemological crisis” re-addressing the fundamental question of access to knowledge and our ability to know. It’s this overall crisis that marks the current “age of unreason.”

In this questionnaire, we invite reflections on how the notion and discipline of aesthetics should respond to this altered contemporary landscape of epistemological crisis. The background for this is an ambitious—and to some, perhaps, hyperbolic—hypothesis that we wish to *test* in this special issue: at stake today, we suggest, is not just an inverted or heretic relation to facts or truth, but rather a crisis of our epistemic and sensible relation to the world, a crisis of “our” very *aísthēsis*, and thus also a crisis of the discipline that carries this name.

Identifying such a crisis as an “age of unreason” marks a deliberately ambiguous field of inquiry. Since its emergence in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the discourse of aesthetics has served as a crucial antipode to so-called reason and rational knowledge. Intrinsicly bound to the notion of modernity, aesthetics was in many instances seen as what Terry Eagleton has called a “cognitive underlabourer.” It promised a knowledge “in its uniqueness all that to which the higher reason is necessarily blind.” Rather than simply a negation of reason and rational knowledge, “aesthetics” delineated a privileged experiential access to “the sensible” and thus a realm of bodily, communal, and material life not covered by the disciplines of logic or ethics. At the risk of confusion or conflation, we might dub this autonomous domain within but apart from (instrumental) life a domain of *un-reason* in the sense of a reason without (rational) reason: an epistemic regime that renders the criteria of “pure reason” inoperable, or rather, a different way of knowing through sensing.

With this questionnaire, we invite reflections upon the tasks and obligations of this intricate epistemic field of aesthetics in “our” age of unreason. How does one know *otherwise* in a social world characterized by the very crisis of knowing? Acknowledging both the bourgeois, gendered, and racial origin of aesthetics, we are asking which inherent problems it conserves and reproduces? Displacing (or perhaps even dethroning) aesthetics from its domain of propriety, what are its promises today? To what extent has aesthetic critique “run out of steam”? How do we, for example, differentiate between the “counter-knowledge” of aesthetics with its “free play of the faculties” and the prevailing counter-knowledges of conspiracy theories, alternative facts, and AI fabulation? But also, crucially, what resources endure, what categories and concepts remain operative today?

We thus wish to facilitate a discussion of how approaches to and notions and traditions of aesthetics might help us understand current manifestations of the epistemic crisis and contestations of established regimes of knowledge, and, conversely, how and to what extent concepts and “regimes” of aesthetics are themselves implicated in this process.

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