

THE META-COGNITIONAL WORK OF AESTHETICS IN TIMES OF EPISTEMIC CRISIS —A TENTATIVE SKETCH

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Do we still have to prove that our reason is doing violence to the world? Does our reason no longer feel the vital need for beauty?¹

Don't we tend to forget that Descartes'—a preferred, partly deserved, target of criticism of early modern rationality and subjectivity—attempt to provide a certain foundation for knowledge that relied on the activity of doubting? It is the capacity to doubt about the truth of the world and everything in it that founds the certainty of the existence of the I. The dictum “*cogito, ergo sum*,” which Descartes originally formulated in French as “*je pense, donc je suis*,” usually translated into English as “I think, therefore I am,” is based on doubt. The *cogito*, the thinking, refers to the cognitive activity of doubting—because, according to Descartes' rational argument, it is impossible to doubt one's own existence while one is doubting. Therefore, the full formula becomes, “*dubito, ergo sum, vel, quod idem est: cogito, ergo sum*” (“I doubt, therefore I am—or, what is the same—I think, therefore I am”).² There must be a doubting/thinking entity for there to be doubt/thought.

Cognition, the mental activity or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding—unlike what many have seen as the lesson to be learned from Descartes' meditations on the *cogito*—does not only happen through rational thought. Cognition also happens through experience and the senses. We not only get to know (*cognoscere*) through thinking, but also through sensing and experiencing. About a century after Descartes, Baumgarten wrote his treatise on aesthetics, which he defined as the science of sense-cognition or sensate cognition (*cognitio sensitiva*).³ Interestingly, according to Christoph Menke, the development of the discipline of aesthetics coincides with the development of the modern use of the term “subject,” as both appear for the first time in Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*:

Baumgarten's aesthetics revalues sensual recognition, against the rationalist declaration of its inferiority, by understanding it in a structurally new way: as constituted by the activity of the

subject. Or, in revaluing sensual recognition, Baumgarten's aesthetics establishes a new discourse about the subject, as not passively representing objects but, rather, actively constituting its object-relations.⁴

Historically, aesthetics has been tied to the modern sensing human subject, but in recent decades we have become increasingly aware that it is necessary to decentre the human being as a privileged, self-sufficient agent in the world, that we are inescapably entangled with our environment and the earth, and need to develop what Achille Mbembe has called a planetary consciousness.⁵ Such planetary consciousness involves, among other things, the questioning of stable subject-object relations, a coming to terms with the situatedness of any knowledge, and a decolonization of the knowledge forms and norms we have inherited from Western modernity. As Kader Attia, Anselm Franke and Ana Teixeira Pinto remark, with reference to Mbembe, the history of modernity is more about the history of reason's unreason than about the progress of reason.⁶

I claim that aesthetics, which itself originally emerged as part of Western modernity, has the potential to help carry out a cognitive decolonisation, and what Walter Mignolo terms "epistemic disobedience."⁷ The superiority and universality of modern Western reason may no longer be taken for granted, and now has to be argued for.⁸ Although still surprisingly pervasive, the concealment of its own geo-historical and geo-biographical conditions that allowed Eurocentric epistemology to establish the idea of universal knowledge, and the illusion of the universality of the knowing subject, has been revealed as what it is: a concealment, wilful or not. Epistemic disobedience consists of breaking with the illusory idea of an epistemic view from nowhere, a zero-point epistemology:

Geo-politics of knowledge goes hand in hand with geo-politics of knowing. Who and when, why and where is knowledge generated [...]? Asking these questions means to shift the attention from the enunciated to the enunciation. And by so doing, turning Descartes's dictum inside out: rather than assuming that thinking comes before being, one assumes instead that it is a racially marked body in a geo-historical marked space that feels the urge or get the call to speak, to articulate, in whatever semiotic system, the urge that makes of living organisms "human" beings.⁹

Aesthetics concerns sensuous cognition, of living bodies in specific temporal and spatial conditions. Sensuous cognition is characterised by a certain reflexivity with regard to the sense we make of phenomena given to our senses and perception (in Kant's work, as readers of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* would know, the reflective judgment of taste is the capacity to find a concept that corresponds to a given phenomenon for which we do not have an immediate concept, in contrast to determinative judgment, where the phenomenon is immediately subsumed under an already-given concept). Thus, fundamentally, aesthetics concerns situated sensing and reflective processes of sense-making, but these activities or practices are not necessarily confined to individual human subjects confronted with discrete, delimited objects (as is the case in Baumgartian and Kantian aesthetics, roughly stated). Often, they operate collectively, and in constellations or entanglements that comprise human as well as more-than-human actants. Aesthetics pertains to the ability to perceive and to be concerned,¹⁰ and what qualifies a practice as aesthetic is an exploration of the modes and the means by which reality is sensed and perceived and presented publicly, as part of, or at odds with, society's *common sense*.¹¹ Thus, aesthetic practice is not only a particular way of engaging with the sensuous world, but also involves the production of aesthetic reflective perception. The production of aesthetic perception is addressed to a public. An aesthetic practice proper invites an audience, a public, to take part in the process of sensing and sense-making. It exhibits—holds out—the world and initiates a negotiation of how that which passes as reality should be perceived, and what sense to make of it. In line with this, Nora Sternfeld recently remarked that in today's neoliberal society, we lose any feeling of estrangement, *verfremdung*.¹² Aesthetics may help us create distance to what is, to the distribution of the sensible, to become able to critically negotiate it.

Kant famously stresses that for enlightenment, “nothing is required but [...] the least harmful [...] freedom: namely, freedom to make *public use* of one's reason in all matters.”¹³ Reminiscent of Kant's view of the collective and public aspects of enlightenment – decolonising cognition and practising epistemological disobedience, let us be careful to not throw out all the babies with the imperialist, universalist bathwater—Eyal Weizman argues in favour of the truth practice of “open verification,” to challenge not only the dark epistemology of current reactionary forces that seek to render it impossible to establish facts, and when they are trustworthy, but also traditional ideas of truth production that purportedly bear no traces

of the knower.¹⁴ According to Weizman, verification does not relate to truth as an essence, but as a contingent, collective and polypectival practice:

The term verification could itself be associated with scientific authority. [...] But it could also be opened up to engage with new kinds of material – open-source and activist-produced – and employ different methodological processes that open and socialize the production of evidence, integrate scientific with aesthetic sensibilities, and work across and bring together different types of seemingly incompatible institutions and forms of knowledge.¹⁵

The practice of Weizman and Forensic Architecture, understood as an “expanded epistemic community” and an investigative aesthetics, is highly compelling and urgently needed.¹⁶ However, its orientation toward truth production and the investigation and presentation of evidence is not what makes it aesthetic. What makes it aesthetic is the openness of the processes of sense-making and signification, that is, what takes place before truth is arrived at. As Juliane Rebentisch states, in relation to artistic practice,

Art does not produce knowledge in any strict sense [...] – it interrupts the accumulation of knowledge as well as social relations. Art unfolds its cognitive dimension within the mode of what Kant called thinking (as opposed to knowledge), in a process that establishes a reflexive distance toward social knowledge production.¹⁷

I think that aesthetics – in what the editors of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* call “the age of unreason,” which is also the age of the decolonisation of modern Western provincial universalism, rationality and knowledge forms—could be about exploring doubt and modes of doubting, what it means to maintain oneself—who- or whatever that is—in doubt, in wonderful uncertainty, before transitioning to rational thought, judgment, conceptualisation, truth. Regarding the question of reason and unreason, we could see the subject-matter of aesthetics as situated, sense-based, meta-cognitive reflections on conceptions of, and assumptions about the world, our sociopolitical and eco-systemic realities, and how they are experienced.

- 1 Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011 [1992]), 25.
- 2 René Descartes, “La Recherche de la Vérité par La Lumière Naturelle,” in *Oeuvres de Descartes, vol. X*, eds. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1908), 523.
- 3 A.G. Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, in *Theoretische Ästhetik*, trans. and ed. Hans Rudolf Schweizer (Hamburg: Meiner, 1988), §1.
- 4 Christoph Menke, “Modernity, Subjectivity and Aesthetic Reflection,” in *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses*, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2000), 41.
- 5 Achille Mbembe, “How to Develop a Planetary Consciousness,” Interview with Nils Gilman and Jonathan Blake, *NOEMA* (January 11, 2022), accessed 25 April 2024, <https://www.noemamag.com/how-to-develop-a-planetary-consciousness/>. Cf. also Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021 [2010]), 7–41.
- 6 Kader Attia, Anselm Franke and Ana Teixeira Pinto, eds., *The White West: Fascism, Unreason, and the Paradox of Modernity* (London: Sternberg, 2023), 11.
- 7 Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009): 159–181. However, see David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019) for a critical analysis of how the foundational texts of the discipline of aesthetics ground the racial order of the modern world.
- 8 Sanjay Seth, “Knowledge, Progress and the Knowledge of Progress,” *The Sociological Review* 70, no. 2 (2022): 1–16.
- 9 Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience,” 160.
- 10 Cf. Bruno Latour’s concept of “from matter of fact to matter of concern,” in “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public,” in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ZKM exhibition catalogue edited by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, 4–31 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
- 11 Cf. Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 94–95.
- 12 Sternfeld made this remark on 2 April 2024, during an assessment meeting regarding the PhD thesis, *Where the Present Begins to Appear as Past: Mediating Contemporaneity in a Museum of the Future* by Anders Thruu Djurslev at Aarhus University.
- 13 Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” [1784] in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8:36.
- 14 Eyal Weizman, “Open Verification,” *e-flux Architecture* 06 (2019): 1–14, accessed 24 April 2024, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/becoming-digital/248062/open-verification/>.
- 15 Weizman, “Open Verification,” 4.
- 16 Cf. Weizman, “Open Verification,” 11; Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London: Verso, 2021).
- 17 Juliane Rebentisch, in conversation with Tristan Garcia and Vincent Normand, “Theatricality, Autonomy, Negativity,” in *Theater, Garden, Bestiary: A Materialist History of Exhibitions*, eds. Tristan Garcia and Vincent Normand (Berlin: Sternberg, 2019), 65.