

*This is the Introduction to the book *Beyond the Aesthetic and the Anti-Aesthetic*, vol. 4 of the *Stone Art Theory Seminars*.*

*It was originally posted on [www.jameselkins.com](http://www.jameselkins.com). The book as a whole is available on Amazon. For questions, comments, etc., please contact James Elkins via the website.*

## INTRODUCTION

*James Elkins*

The subject of this book is both concise and enormous.

As a small subject, the anti-aesthetic is associated with Manhattan in the early 1980s, where it was crystallized by Hal Foster's edited volume *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Practices later identified as anti-aesthetic had emerged in the 1970s, and were developed in the 1980s in various centers of the art world, including New York, Los Angeles, London, Amsterdam, Brussels, Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Berlin. By the late 1990s, it could be argued that theories of the anti-aesthetic had given way to other conceptual formations, such as resistance and criticality, both of which are discussed in this book. *The Anti-Aesthetic* is still read in universities in North America and parts of Europe, where it is often proposed as a historical document, a moment in the history of reactions against Modernism. In those contexts it has become background reading in the way Heinrich Wölfflin or E. H. Gombrich has become in art-historical pedagogy. It is significant that in some parts of the world *The Anti-Aesthetic* is scarcely known, and the term "anti-aesthetic" has not passed through the sequence from a label for art practice, to a specific series of theoretical positions, to an element in the historiography of postmodernism.

But the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic is also an enormous subject. Historically, the aesthetic has been used, problematically, as a near-synonym for Modernism itself, a way of signaling Modernism's commitment to value. The anti-aesthetic has been expanded backward in time, to characterize the reaction of Modernism against academic art and against the political situation leading to the First World War: a context in which, as Arthur Danto has noted, beauty became anathema. From that perspective, anti-aesthetic practice has been a *sine qua non* of Modernism in its many forms up to the present.

Currently the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic lurk largely unseen in the pedagogic structures of art schools, art departments, and art academies throughout the world. "Anti-aesthetic" has been a useful label for the activities of students and young artists engaging capitalism in its different forms, thinking about neoliberalism, working out how identities are constructed and represented, addressing the institutions that make art possible and give it value, trying to provide a voice that can be heard above the roar of multinational corporations and the military-industrial complex, addressing the assimilation of cultural differences, pondering the gradual degradation of the planet, and thinking about how art might contribute in disaster areas, in underprivileged neighborhoods, or in the everyday lives of

people who do not ordinarily use art. Politics, society, institutions, power, privilege, and identity are among the concerns of such practices, which do not always even call themselves “art.” On the other hand, “aesthetic” is still a useful term for practices involving work in the studio, using traditional media such as painting, printmaking, ceramics, and sculpture. Such work may not be aimed at changing or even addressing society and wider culture. Its purpose, at least initially, might just be to achieve value as art. The students and young artists who make such work care, among other things, about the object they produce, and its capacity to amaze, enthrall, absorb, give pleasure. They may not choose to say or think so, but their practices result in aesthetic objects, which hopefully possess one of the many qualities associated with art, from beauty to the sublime.

Those two positions are hard to describe, both because they overlap so much and so often and because a formidable array of theoretical arguments rushes in to demonstrate that every aesthetic object is also a political object, and every political object has its aesthetics. Many authors discussed in this book, from Gilles Deleuze to Jacques Rancière, from Jean-Luc Nancy to Arthur Danto, have arguments along those lines. Most any contemporary artistic practice can be shown to be a mixture of aesthetic and nonaesthetic interests, and most any young artist trained in an art school or art department knows how to talk about her work as a mixed engagement of politics and aesthetics.

Still, the division holds, and it divides art instruction around the world. Every department of art, every academy, every art school of sufficient size, from Chongqing to Bogotá, from Vancouver to Ljubljana, has some classes, studios, and departments that are mainly dedicated to political and identity issues, and others where students attend to techniques and media. The division runs deep, and permeates the world of art instruction.

This is not a well-studied subject. The pedagogic division between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic activities is discussed, if it is at all, at the level of bureaucracy, administration, and institutional organization and planning. In the absence of any concerted debate, the distinction is reinforced by a wide variety of teaching habits, institutional configurations, and lingering expectations regarding media. In other words, it persists without being analyzed.

The central question of this book is whether or not we are free of this choice, in practice, in pedagogy, and in theory. The question is complicated by the gesture, now common, in which artists, critics, and historians decline to identify their practices as anti-aesthetic or aesthetic, partly on the grounds that the two are inevitably mixed, and partly because the terms, singly and as a pair, are said to be outdated, ill-formed, or otherwise inapplicable. Many contemporary artists, theorists, and historians who use the words “aesthetic” and “anti-aesthetic” do not have developed accounts of what the concepts might mean to them—indeed, their practices sometimes depend on not having such accounts.

Let me illustrate this with an overly familiar example, which I intend to misuse in a particular way: Barnett Newman’s remark, at the Woodstock Art

Conference in 1952, that aesthetics is for artists what ornithology is for the birds. In context, Newman used his now-famous comparative analogy to make several points, not all of them compatible. His principal complaint was that aestheticians did not advocate for the value of American art, leaving the field open for museum directors and curators. Despite the remark about ornithology, he thought aesthetics could speak to art, and he used aesthetic concepts to describe what he thought it should be doing (engaging in “the moral struggle between notions of beauty . . . and sublimity”).<sup>1</sup> I don’t want to explore any of those somewhat tangled motivations here. I want instead to draw out two inferences one could make from the assertion that ornithology “is for the birds”—that birds don’t give a damn about ornithology.

First, it could mean birds don’t understand ornithology. In that case, in a perfect world, if they could learn ornithology, they might come to understand themselves better. In the comparative analogy, that means artists could benefit from aesthetics even if they think it has nothing to do with them. It would describe the situation in which contemporary artists, critics, and historians might find that the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic actually do structure some of their practice.

Second, it could mean birds aren’t well described by ornithology, that it is an insufficient explanation of birds, a deficient science. In the comparative analogy, that would imply that contemporary artistic practice and theory are essentially, perhaps deeply, independent of the terms of the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. Even that minority of contemporary artists who feel they need to become clear about the historical precedents and conceptual foundations of their practice would not need to study the ideas discussed in this book.

This, in brief, is the principal question of this book. I could put it most concisely this way: is any part of *The Anti-Aesthetic* still important for contemporary practice and theory?

Here I will do two things: I will list, very briefly, some of the principal terms that articulate discussions of the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic. The idea here is just to signal how difficult the vocabulary is: the concepts involved are, as Wittgenstein said, both hard and slippery. Then I will list some of the principal critical positions around the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic, in order to provide some guides to what happens in this book.

#### TERMS

1. *Aesthetics* itself has been shrunk to individual passages in Kant and to an identification with beauty; and it has been expanded into a synonym for anything nonverbal, or anything of the body. It can occur in art writing as a placeholder for whatever practices the author wishes to stigmatize or valorize.

1. I thank Harper Montgomery for a close reading and suggestions for this essay. Some of these points are made in Paul Mattick,

“Aesthetics and Anti-Aesthetics in the Visual Arts,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, no. 2 (1991): 253–59.

2. *Kant* is an object of ambivalence throughout this book. For much of the conversation he is sunk somewhere in the deep background, indispensable but unquoted. At other times he is crucial, but then it's often a question of *which* Kant, or even which individual passages or words. For some critics what matters is Kant's idea of the free play of faculties, imagination, and knowledge (*freies Spiel der Erkenntniskräfte*); for others it's the claim of understanding beyond the conceptual (*jenseits des begrifflichen Denkens*), or the concept of disinterested interest (*uninteressiertes Interesse*) in judgments of quality, or just the tripartite schema of *beauty*, *ugliness*, and the *ordinary*. Diarmuid Costello, who co-organized the Chicago event with me, argues that a promising way out of the aesthetic/anti-aesthetic trap is a fuller reading of Kant, stressing the many things that are overlooked in the Modernist reading.<sup>2</sup> A useful first step in some discussions would be to carefully specify which passages in Kant are taken to matter, and why.
3. The *opposites of aesthetics* have grown into an entire exotic fauna. There are anti-aesthetic, nonaesthetic, anaesthetic, technoaesthetic, postaesthetic, and inaesthetic positions, some of which have been posed as distinct from others. The anti-aesthetic itself has a sporadic existence before and after *The Anti-Aesthetic*; it was used, for example, by the historian Robert Thompson in 1968 in a context unrelated to its later development;<sup>3</sup> and it was used, as Luis Camnitzer notes in his Assessment, in 1965 by Luis Felipe Noé to describe a mode of "bad painting" that had developed in Latin America.<sup>4</sup>
4. *Art* itself is difficult to pin down in relation to the difference between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. Discourse that supports politically engaged, apparently non-aesthetic practices can involve problematic uses of the word "art," as in the artists' group called Critical Art Ensemble. In that title, the word "art" marks the institutional home of the artists and some, but not most, of their projects. What it signifies beyond institutional frames is difficult to say.
5. *The sublime* has also been put to work, supporting a wide range of artists, from Xu Bing to Olafur Eliasson, from Paul Chan to Bill Viola. The postmodern sublime has been subject of many texts, from Thomas Weiskel's excellent monograph to Neil Hertz, Jean-François Lyotard, Peter De Bolla, Paul Crowther, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Griselda Pollock.<sup>5</sup>

2. See Costello, "Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 2 (2007): 217–28.

3. Robert Farris Thompson coined the term "anti-aesthetic" to describe deliberately ugly Yoruba masks: an early example of the term, and also a typical instance of the reduction of aesthetics to the study of beauty. Thompson, "Aesthetics in Traditional Africa" (1968), in *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by C. F. Jopling

(New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), 374–81. For the "anaesthetic" and "technoaesthetic" see Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Autumn 1992): 3–41.

4. Luis Felipe Noé, *Antiéstética* (Buenos Aires: Van Riel, 1965).

5. All these are discussed in my "Against the Sublime," in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, edited by Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 20–42, translated as *Das Erhabene*

## POSITIONS

There are also a certain number of nameable positions around the question of the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. I list them here in no particular order, because most have overlapping chronologies and continue, in some form, to be pertinent.

1. *Revivals of beauty* have been much discussed in the art world, from the 1980s to the present. This subject is one of the quickest litmus tests of the difference between universities and art schools and academies. In the art school context, in North America, the putative revival of beauty is associated with Dave Hickey, Peter Schjeldahl, Peter Plagens, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, and Bill Beckley.<sup>6</sup> Their work is seldom discussed in universities, where it is more common, either in North America or in Europe, to encounter the work of Elaine Scarry, Wendy Steiner, Alexander Nehamas, and Arthur Danto.<sup>7</sup> There is virtually no serious scholarly discussion of the positions taken by Hickey and other popular critics and journalists.<sup>8</sup> Danto is often misdescribed as a participant in the revival, but *The Abuse of Beauty* and his essay “Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art” are pleas to extend aesthetics into the “dainty and dumpy” (as in John Austin), the “innocent, modest, and tender” (terms used by Kant), into the everyday (the *Lebenswelt*, Duchamp’s “anaesthetic,” Fluxus practices), the “silly” (Kant’s astonishing precritical proposal for the opposite of the sublime), and especially into the disgusting (which Kant says is immune to the beautiful).<sup>9</sup> Danto observes that most artistic traditions have not been interested in beauty, and that the nineteenth century “narrowly identified” aesthetic with beauty and caused a rejection of aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> Hence Danto’s position is neither a revival of beauty nor a rejection of aesthetic values. Twentieth-century art was “anti-aesthetic” only in the sense that it was often against beauty (and by association and reduction, aesthetics).
2. There are also *revivals of beauty* in the realm of Christian scholarship, although they have gone entirely unnoticed by the art world. The

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*in Wissenschaft und Kunst: Über Vernunft und Einbildungskraft* (Berlin: Surhkamp: 2010).

6. See, for example, Bill Beckley, “Introduction: Generosity and the Black Swan,” in *Uncontrollable Beauty: Toward a New Aesthetics*, edited by Bill Beckley with David Shapiro (New York: Allworth, 1998), ix–xix; Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues, 1993).

7. Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Nehamas, “Beauty Links Art History and Aesthetics,” in *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, The Art Seminar 1 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 141–54.

8. Hickey and Schjeldahl are slammed in the *October* round table on art criticism; that discussion is discussed in *The State of Art Criticism*, coedited with Michael Newman, The Art Seminar 4 (New York: Routledge, 2007). Alexander Alberro, “Beauty Knows No Pain,” *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (2004): 37, mentions several of these authors as a single group, with a few minor caveats, and he identifies Hickey’s aesthetic as “a diluted version” of Bataille’s—a strange judgment, but at least a serious one (39n8).

9. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003); also “Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art,” *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (2004): 24–35.

10. Danto, *Abuse of Beauty*, 45, 59.

Protestant theologian Karl Barth, for example, argued that beauty is the means by which people are persuaded or awakened to faith—a position that intrigued John Updike.<sup>11</sup> Contemporary scholars also draw on Jacques Maritain and his interest in ways that beauty reveals the eternal, invisible dimension of objects.<sup>12</sup> In philosophic terms, a principal question in these revivals of beauty is the medieval scholar's question: What is the prime analogue, the principal model, of beauty? Is it divine or mundane, or (equivalently) theological or philosophic, Platonic or Aristotelian? In these discussions, Kant is barely mentioned, and Aristotle tends to stand for a definition of beauty as harmony of parts, interpreted through church doctrine in a long tradition including Anselm, Aquinas, Augustine.<sup>13</sup> As far as I can tell, this enormous literature is unread in the arts, even—or especially—when Kant's exclusion of theology is itself taken as a determining factor in the development of aesthetics.<sup>14</sup>

3. *Relational aesthetics* is one of the principal guides and inspirations for new art practices in the Americas and Europe. It presents an especially difficult problem for this book because of the disparity between its popularity among young artists and its often severe critique in academic circles. As of this writing, in spring 2012, the newest version of relational aesthetics is integrated into “altermodernity,” a term coined by Nicolas Bourriaud for the Tate Triennial in 2009. Altermodernity is not argued so much as evoked in Bourriaud's essay.<sup>15</sup> Aesthetics is barely mentioned in Bourriaud's essay, perhaps on account of the criticism he had received for earlier texts. Altermodern work, he says, deals “in the aesthetics of heterochrony”: it has no sense of contemporaneity, but is concerned with “intemporality.”<sup>16</sup> It has been easy to argue that Bourriaud's politics are understood as aesthetics: because all “nomadic” and “heterochronic” links take place within existing geopolitical structures, they remain ineffectual, ambiguous, or undefined as gestures of resistance, and so the

11. For Barth and Updike see Bernard Schopen, “Faith, Morality, and the Novels of John Updike,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 24, no. 4 (1978): 523–35; Paul Casner, “Blessed Assurance? Reason and Certainty of Knowledge of God in Karl Barth and Hans Kueng,” PhD dissertation, Marquette University, available on Proquest Digital, paper AA19811380.

12. Desmond FitzGerald, “Maritain and Gilsen on Painting,” in *Beauty, Art, and the Polis*, edited by Alice Ramos (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 190–99.

13. I draw these examples from a conference at Lipscomb University, Nashville, Tennessee, in June 2010, “Beauty in the Academy: Faith, Scholarship, and the Arts.”

14. An interesting counterexample is the work of Marie-José Mondzain; see her contribution to *What Is an Image?*, Stone Art Theory Institutes 2 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

15. It is described initially as a “synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism.” Postmodernism, he writes, is “a petrified kind of time advancing in loops”; altermodernity proposes instead a “positive experience of disorientation” based on the acceptance of “heterochronies.” Bourriaud rejects “post-colonial postmodernism” as “second-stage postmodernism,” leading to a “neurotic preoccupation with origins typical of the era of globalization.” Bourriaud, “Altermodern,” in *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, exh. cat. (London: Tate, 2009), 12, 13.

16. Bourriaud, “Altermodern,” 20. Altermodernity's principal tropes are nomadism “in space, in time, and among the ‘signs’” and a perspective “simultaneously geographical . . . and historical.” What matters is the “network” or “archipelago” of new relations, the “relational aesthetics” produced by the work. Bourriaud, “Altermodern,” 22, 23.

criteria of interest in new relations are aesthetic. A more difficult question is how to read relational aesthetics texts in such a way as to do justice to their continuing influence. It is clear that Bourriaud's text aims to resist the kind of linear reading that could elucidate its relation to aesthetics or anti-aesthetics; it is less clear how the text is used by artists and curators who find it enabling, or what the relation might be between such a use and what might be called a careful or close reading.

4. *Jacques Rancière* has also been read as being "beyond" the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. An initial problem in assessing Rancière's theories is to see how he positions himself in relation to accounts he means to critique, including anti-aesthetic theories. He provides two different genealogies of the anti-aesthetic in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*; the first is in the preface, and the second follows immediately in the introduction. Both have two parts, and operate by dividing aesthetic positions into two opposing camps. In the preface, he first argues that "aesthetics has been charged with being the captious discourse by which philosophy . . . hijacks the meaning of artworks." He names Pierre Bourdieu, for whom "aesthetic distance" serves "to conceal a social reality"; T. J. Clark, who holds that "behind pure art's illusion . . . there exists a reality of economic, political, and ideological constraints"; and Hal Foster, who is said to hail "the advent of the postmodern as inaugurating a break with the illusions of avant-gardism."<sup>17</sup> Rancière then concludes, somewhat abruptly, that "this form of critique has almost totally gone out of fashion." The preface then continues with a second genealogy, in which "aesthetics has come to be seen as the perverse discourse which bars . . . the pure encounter with the unconditioned event of the work." Here Rancière names Jean-Marie Schaeffer's *Adieu à l'esthétique* (2000), Alain Badiou's *Petit Manuel d'inesthétique* (1998), and the work of Jean-François Lyotard, concluding that all three want "to extract the glorious presence of art out from under the suffocating discourse on art."<sup>18</sup> In the introduction, he offers two more genealogies, different from the first, with a differing cast of characters. In art history and philosophy, Rancière says, there is an attitude that "aims to extricate artistic pursuits" from social and utopian goals, and to demonstrate art's "singular power of presence," often using the sublime. He names Thierry de Duve's *Look!* (2001), which sees art's power as "the founding of a being-in-common, anterior . . . to politics" (p. 20), and Jean-François Lyotard, who "radicalizes the idea of the sublime," so that modern art's purpose is "to bear witness to the fact of the unrepresentable." (Later Rancière says Lyotard's philosophy is an "anti-aesthetics of the sublime" [p. 99].)

17. Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, translated by Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 1–2.

18. Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 1–2.



That is the first genealogy; the second is the position “keenly asserted by artists and professionals working in artistic institutions,” namely that art is “a way of redistributing the objects and images that comprise the common world as it is already given.” Such “micro-situations . . . vary only slightly from those of ordinary life and are presented in an ironic and playful vein.” Here he names Pierre Huyghe, but Nicolas Bourriaud or Dominic Willson might have been better choices.<sup>19</sup> These twin lineages in the preface and introduction, each of them doubled, set up Rancière’s argument in the book, permitting him to position himself outside the work of each of the authors.<sup>20</sup> The question for the reception of Rancière in the art world—which is debated in this book—will depend in part on how plausible his sense of art writing is, and how plausible these genealogies are as framing moves, and as indications of his understanding of art history.

5. *James Meyer and Toni Ross* coedited a forum on the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic in the *Art Journal*.<sup>21</sup> They take a certain relation between the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic as given, writing that the two “may not be reconciled” but “calibrated in a less polarized way” or brought into “closer proximity.” The duality is assumed, and a third term, or super-vening discourse, is not theorized.<sup>22</sup> Thus they describe one of their contributors, Alex Alberro, as arguing that “aesthetic pleasure and critical engagement are fundamentally irreconcilable.” They implicitly disagree, but characterize the irreconcilability as an “anti-aesthetic claim”: that is, a claim made from one of the two positions, which then appropriates criticality.<sup>23</sup> In general, theorizing about the relation between the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic is a project of, or in the wake of, the anti-aesthetic. They observe that is necessary to avoid equating “aesthetics and conservative taste, or vested ideological interests,” as well as “appeals to visual pleasure . . . in the recent beauty revivalism,” but it is an “achievement” of the anti-aesthetic to show the “alignment” of aesthetics and conservatism. For this book, Meyer and Ross’s project highlights the common assumption—one that is especially difficult to shake—that theories and revivals of beauty or the aesthetic will not be able to assist reconceptualizations of the anti-aesthetic, unless of course those revisions are intended to overthrow, erase, or bypass the anti-aesthetic.

19. Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 21, 457, respectively.

20. A third genealogy appears in *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, a book that argues Freud was trying to suppress an existing “aesthetic unconscious” characterized by a “nihilist entropy” and a belief in the “anonymous voice of an unconscious and meaningless life.” There the positions include Louis Marin, Georges Didi-Huberman, the Zola of *Doctor Pascal*, and Lyotard (reprising the role he played in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*). Rancière, *Aesthetic*

*Unconscious*, translated by Debra Keates and James Swenson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 54, 61.

21. Meyer and Ross, “Aesthetic/Anti-Aesthetic: An Introduction,” *Art Journal* 63 (2004): 20–23, first presented at the College Art Association meeting, 2003.

22. Meyer and Ross, “Aesthetic/Anti-Aesthetic,” 20.

23. Meyer and Ross, “Aesthetic/Anti-Aesthetic,” 21.

6. The book *Rediscovering Aesthetics* (2009) is the delayed product of a conference held in Cork, Ireland, in 2004.<sup>24</sup> There are at least three other texts that derive from the same conference.<sup>25</sup> The editors' position is that aesthetics should be recognized as implicated in history, and the principal model for that implication is Foucault. If "truth and falsity" in aesthetics "are recognized as involving contextual criteria," they write, then aesthetics is "linked to, and part of, the beliefs and practices of particular ways of life, world-views, philosophical theories, traditions, and social systems." This does not lead to "an unproductive relativism," but to the inability to know whether Habermas's idea of "the force of the better argument" can ever decide the issue "in a neutral way." Deep "institutional and cultural preconditions . . . rule out, or at least challenge, canonical conceptions of art, beauty."<sup>26</sup> *Rediscovering Aesthetics* also records other viewpoints, but the editors' contribution is a clear recent example of the possibility of dispersing aesthetic judgments by writing them into particular institutional structures.
7. Wilfried van Damme's *Beauty in Context: Towards an Anthropological Approach to Aesthetics* (1996) takes a consistently anthropological approach, tempered by an interest in scientific verification.<sup>27</sup> The book has almost no citations of Kant, Danto, or other aestheticians, and its sense of aesthetics is presented as entirely dependent on field research. Van Damme allows that some aesthetic qualities are universal (he names *symmetry*, *balance*, and *clarity*, and proposes that *smoothness* and *brightness* might be added to the list) but asserts that aesthetic preference is relative to a "community's sociocultural values and ideals."<sup>28</sup> It is significant that anthropological approaches to aesthetics have almost no place in art criticism or theory, even though accounts like Van Damme's exemplify a sort of cultural relativism common in the contemporary art market.<sup>29</sup>
8. *Terry Eagleton* has written succinctly but provocatively on aesthetics, especially in an essay called "The Ideology of the Aesthetic."<sup>30</sup> For him aesthetics is the "dense, swarming territory" outside systematic

24. Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, and Tony O'Connor, eds., *Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy, and Art Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

25. Halsall, Jansen, and O'Connor, "Aesthetics and Its Object—Challenges from Art and Experience," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 5, no. 3 (2006): 123–26, and a special issue, *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics Online* 1–3 (2004). The final roundtable for the conference is the basis of the book *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, edited by James Elkins, *The Art Seminar 1* (New York: Routledge, 2005), although Francis, Julia, and Tony were not involved with that roundtable.

26. These citations are from the version in *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*.

27. Van Damme, *Beauty in Context: Towards an Anthropological Approach to Aesthetics* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

28. Van Damme, *Beauty in Context*, 134, 308.

29. There are many other anthropological studies; their diversity can be exemplified by Hans Belting's *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich: W. Fink, 2001), which rewrites continental anthropology, and Crispin Sartwell's *Six Names of Beauty* (New York: Routledge, 2004), which is a philosophic analysis of six aesthetic traditions. Van Damme's is, I think, the most extensively researched and conceptually consistent.

30. Eagleton, "The Ideology of the Aesthetic," *Poetics Today* 9, no. 2 (1988): 327–38.

Enlightenment philosophy, “the first stirrings of primitive, incipient materialism, “experience,” “the life of the body.” This capacious sense of aesthetics leads him to the somewhat surprising conclusion that “the major aesthetician of the twentieth century might thus be said to be the later Edmund Husserl, whose phenomenology will seek to disclose the formal, rational structures of the *Lebenswelt* in what he calls a new ‘universal science of subjectivity.’”<sup>31</sup> Freedom, on the other hand, counts as an anti-aesthetic moment, because it is noumenal in Kant’s critique and therefore “cannot be represented and is thus at root anti-aesthetic.”<sup>32</sup> The “two greatest aestheticians,” Eagleton argues, are Marx and Freud, philosophers of the “laboring body” and the “desiring one.”<sup>33</sup> It is a concise Marxist reading, intended to provoke aesthetics into a much wider field, and as an abstract goal, that broadening is shared by a number of contributors to this book.

9. An undefined but growing literature studies the *aesthetics of migration, exile, and diaspora*. The literature here includes Patricia Pisters’s work on “nomadic aesthetics,” Mieke Bal’s essay on “migratory aesthetics,” and T. J. Demos’s essay on the “aesthetics of exile” for the Tate Triennial in 2009.<sup>34</sup> This literature draws on Deleuze and many other authors to help define the expressive, and often optimistic, content of migratory experience, both in the art world and beyond it. In some measure the literature is continuous with relational aesthetics, but it also has the potential to become a separate field.
10. *Affect theory*. I think it would be fair to say the participants were often surprised at how affect theory continued to resurface as a promising way “beyond” the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic. The difficulty was in saying exactly what affect theory was, and what work it would do in the academy or in art practice. During the event I made notes on the sources people mentioned under the rubric of affect theory. A bewilderingly diverse bibliography was invoked. As I write this, it has been nearly two years since the event, and I have a growing collection of possible sources for affect theory. The list has grown so much that it may be helpful here if I present it as a list within my listing. The entries are in no particular order.
  - (i) *Trauma theory*. Some people take affect theory to be about intense, traumatic experience, forming a link to the literature on trauma and psychoanalysis; examples include Jane Bennett’s *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* and James Thompson’s *Performance Affects*.<sup>35</sup>

31. Eagleton, “Ideology,” 328.

32. Eagleton, “Ideology,” 334.

33. Eagleton, “Ideology,” 337.

34. Bal, “Three-Way Mis-Reading,” *diacritics* 30, no. 1 (2000): 2–24, and Bal, “Heterochronotopia,” in *Migratory Settings*, edited by Murat Aydemir and Alex Rotas (Amsterdam: Rodopi,

2008), 35–56 (thanks to Maureen Burns for this and for reporting on Pisters’s unpublished papers); Demos, “The Ends of Exile: Towards a Coming of Universality?,” in Bourriaud, *Alter-modern*, 75–88.

35. James Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect* (London:

- (ii) *The biomediated body.* Others, such as Patricia Clough, emphasize the effect of information, technology, capital, and race on the current sense of the body, creating what Clough calls the “bio-mediated body.”<sup>36</sup> There is also some affinity between the “biopolitics” and “biomediated body” that Clough advocates and the “object-oriented ontology” coined by Graham Harman.<sup>37</sup>
- (iii) *Neurobiology and neuroaesthetics.* Affect is a current interest in brain science, and there have been several writers on art who have tried to use the new research.<sup>38</sup>
- (iv) *Animal affect.* An important recent trend in science, which is apparently still not part of art discourse, is the affective neuroscience of animals, whose central figure is the Estonian scholar Jaak Panksepp.<sup>39</sup> He considers neural correlates to human affective states, and his work has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the neural nature of free will and the relation between animal and human consciousness. The neural correlates Panksepp studies also resonate with work done about the human-animal relationship by authors from Derrida to Peter Singer.
- (v) *Massumi’s position.* Other theories, such as Brian Massumi’s, stress the nonverbal, uncognized aspects of affect.<sup>40</sup> It appears that Massumi will emerge as the principal source cited for theories of affect in the arts, and so it is worth saying briefly that art-world citations misuse his theories, reading affect as a matter of emotion, feeling, or mood. Massumi is explicitly against this; from his point of view affective states can never be cognized: they represent a richness that is structurally, differentially

Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

36. Clough, “The Affective Turn,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 25, no. 1 (2008): 1–22; Clough, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, edited by Clough and Jean Halley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 207; see also *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, edited by Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995); Nigel Thrift, “Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,” *Geografiska Annaler ser. B, Human Geography* 86, no. 1 (2004): 57–78.

37. Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2002); see also Clough, “The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine, and Bodies,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 206–25.

38. Anthony Jack, Abigail Dawson, Katelyn Begany, Regina Leckie, Kevin Barry, Angela Ciccio, and Abraham Snyder, “fMRI Reveals Reciprocal Inhibition Between Social and Physical Cognitive Domains,” *NeuroImage* (2012),

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1053811912010646> (paywall). See also David Freedberg and V. Gallese, “Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience,” *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences* 11, no. 5 (2007): 197–203. I thank Ellen Rogers for bringing the essay by Jack et al. to my attention. In general, there has been a turn in the humanities and related sciences toward the study of emotions; see, for example, Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard, “Biology’s Gift: Interrogating the Turn to Affect,” *Body and Society* 16, no. 1 (2010): 29–56; and *Wie sich Gefühle Ausdruck verschaffen: Emotionen in Nahsicht*, edited by Klaus Herding and Antje Krause-Wahl (Berlin: Taunusstein, 2007).

39. Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

40. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Lee Spinks, “Thinking the Post-Human: Literature, Affect, and the Politics of Style,” *Textual Practice* 15, no. 1 (2001): 23–46.

disjunct from the states we call emotions. “Intensity,” he writes, is “a nonconscious, never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder,” and its relation to language is one of “interference, amplification or dampening.” In his account “there is no correspondence or conformity between qualities and intensity.”<sup>41</sup> This is an extralinguistic, antisemiotic position, distinct from the uses to which his work is sometimes put.

- (vi) *Deleuze and Guattari*. Massumi’s principal source, Deleuze, and Deleuze’s frequent collaborator Félix Guattari, are also pertinent in contemporary affect theory. (Both are dependent on Spinoza, but in my reading, Spinoza is more an enabling text than a necessary source.) Among the more interesting possibilities here is bypassing Deleuze in favor of Guattari’s *Chaosmosis*.<sup>42</sup>
- (vii) *Synesthesia*. Some directions in contemporary art theory stress ideas such as synesthetic and immersive environments and Neoromanticism, which are compatible with strands of affect theory. An example in this book is Timothy Vermeulen’s Assessment; he has been active in the theorization of “metamodernism,” a theory of contemporary art that emphasizes affective values.
- (viii) *Political theory*. Among the many sources for affect theory that weren’t mentioned during the week are a number of books in and around political theory that have things to say about affect and culture, for example Jane Bennett’s ecological theory text *Vibrant Matter*; William Connolly’s books, such as *A World of Becoming* and *Neuropolitics*; and of course some essays in *The Affect Theory Reader*.<sup>43</sup>
- (ix) *Clinical psychiatry*. There is also affect theory in clinical psychiatry, not only in Silvan Tomkins, whose work has entered art theory through Eve Sedgwick, but also in an extensive clinical literature.<sup>44</sup> Central in this field is the Mental Status Examination, in which affect has a disputed but central role.<sup>45</sup>

41. *Parables for the Virtual*, 24–26.

42. See, for example, Elvind Røssaak, “Affects and Medium: Re-Imagining Media Differences Through Bill Viola’s *The Quintet of the Astonished*,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7, no. 3 (2009): 339–54, citing Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, translated by Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), arguing that affects are “modes of existential apprehension” (Guattari, 95; Røssaak, 341).

43. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Gregg and Seigworth, *Affect Theory Reader*. For

a review of the *Reader* see Todd Cronan, <http://nonsite.org>, no. 5, 2012. In addition see Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22 (2004): 117–39; and Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

44. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, vol. 1, *The Positive Affects*, and vol. 2, *The Negative Affects* (New York: Springer, 1962 and 1963).

45. Paula Trzepacz and Robert Baker, *The Psychiatric Mental Status Examination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); see also Andrew Sims, *Symptoms in the Mind: An Introduction to Descriptive Psychopathology*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1995). A related study is Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

- (x) *Anthropology*. Affect theory is also a current interest in anthropology, where the readings include a variety of disparate texts, including “nonrepresentational theory,” proposed by Nigel Thrift.<sup>46</sup> An excellent review essay by William Mazzarella—to my mind the best overview of affect theory to date—proposes a cultural and anthropological reading, associating affect with a “depolitical” dream of immediacy.<sup>47</sup>
- (xi) *Geography*. There is at least some interest in affect in the field of geography, including “nonrepresentational theory” and several studies of “affective geography”—the spatially articulated meanings of culture, materialities, and diaspora.<sup>48</sup>
- (xii) *Presence*. And finally, any accounting of affect theory would have to include the history of the rediscovery of presence. After the poststructural critiques of unmediated presence, there has been an accelerating awareness of the necessity of rethinking presence: first in the outlier George Steiner; and then in authors like Hans Gumbrecht; and most recently, in new work by Keith Moxey and Michael Ann Holly.<sup>49</sup> Presence—plenary experience, immersive or immediate experience—is re-emerging as an object of theory.

It isn't easy to know which of these will emerge as affect spreads through the humanities, but I would guess that for most writers what matters is the newly found permission to speak about feeling, mood, emotion, and other unsystematic, inarticulate, embodied, subjective experiences. The slightly technical term “affect” is generally taken as a contrast to what is imagined as the cold, disaffected, systematic, intellectual poststructuralism that dominated art writing from the 1960s to the 1990s. In that sense, affect theory denotes a gesture away from an imagined intellectualism and toward an open-ended acknowledgment of the embodied nature of experience, rather than a determinate theory of uncognized “intensities,” as Deleuze would say.

46. Thrift, *Nonrepresentational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2007); for a use of “nonrepresentational theory” see Kathleen Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 445–53. See also Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 754–80. I thank Joe Masco for telling me about Stewart and the sources in the next two notes.

47. Mazzarella, “Affect: What Is It Good For?,” in *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization*, edited by Saurabh Dube (New York: Routledge, 2009), 291–309, available at [http://www.academia.edu/366261/Affect\\_What\\_is\\_it\\_Good\\_For](http://www.academia.edu/366261/Affect_What_is_it_Good_For). See also Joseph Masco, “‘Survival Is Your Business’: Engineering Ruins and Affect in Nuclear America,” *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2008): 361–98.

48. Yael Navaro-Yashin, *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Post-War Polity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); the book is a study of the projected and constructed meanings of Turkish Cyprus. I thank Zhanara Nauruzbayeva for bringing this to my attention. See also Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* (2009), available at <http://www.journals.elsevier.com/emotion-space-and-society>. “Atmosphere” is a leading trope for several authors; see also Stewart, “Atmospheric Attunements.”

49. Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Moxey, *Interrupted Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

In the Seminars transcribed here, Eve Meltzer proposed a new understanding of affect as the necessary, structural effect of systematizing, anti-aesthetic projects of the 1970s like Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*.<sup>50</sup> For Meltzer, such conceptual projects show "affective interest in disaffected mastery." So far, hers is the most art-historically specific account of affect, and it has the interesting consequence of locating affect in the very time and place that gave rise, in the current account, to cold, mathematized, schematized, intellectual art—the kinds of art against which contemporary affect-laden art is said to have rebelled.

- ii. *Other positions.* Beyond these ten there are any number of others. Among the texts that helped frame this book are Antoon Van den Braembussche's *Intercultural Aesthetics: A Worldview Perspective*, the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, edited by Michael Kelly, and Joaquín Barriendos's work on geo-aesthetics.<sup>51</sup> Kelly and Barriendos are among the Fellows in the Seminars transcribed here. Theories continue to multiply: just a few days before the event in Chicago, the sociologist Tony Bennett presented his critique of Rancière's critique of Pierre Bourdieu at a conference at the Tate Britain.<sup>52</sup> Bennett's argument was that Bourdieu's association of the aesthetic with class was insufficient, and it should be considered instead as "a form of cultural practice" or "a culturally specific form of processual ethics," alongside bureaucracy, which "emerges, as in Weber, as a parallel form of ethics, involving a sense of responsibility and liberty." He listed several "versions of the relations between aesthetics and critique," including Adorno, Said, Eagleton, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Rancière, and noted those positions all neglect the "kinds of tutelage" and "priestly authority" that actually govern the processual workings of critique. The talk made it possible to begin thinking of a sociology even further divorced from Bourdieu's conclusions, even if it would be even more indebted to Foucault. Bennett's is just one of an uncountable number of other positions that could be added to a list like this one.

#### ENVOI

There is little hope that any book on the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic can have the coherence, not to mention the impact, of *The Anti-Aesthetic*, because practices and positions have multiplied so drastically. And even aside from the entirely bewildering profusion of texts, there is the fact that debate on these issues is intense but sporadic, so that it is not clear how to go about comparing

50. She discussed parts of what is now her book *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

51. *Intercultural Aesthetics: A Worldview Perspective*, edited by Antoon Van den Braembussche, Heinz Kimmerle, and Nicole Note (New York: Springer, 2009); Michael

Kelly, ed., *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), with an expanded six-volume edition in preparation; Barriendos, in *Art and Globalization*, Stone Art Theory Institutes 1 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

52. Bennett, *Guided Freedom: Aesthetics, Tutelage, Expertise*, Tate Britain, July 2010.

positions. It is helpful, I think, to distinguish *first-order* from *second-order* problems. If I ask whether a given art practice can be usefully called “anti-aesthetic,” or if I try to find weaknesses in Rancière’s critique of conventional aesthetics, then I am working on first-order problems. Second-order problems are matters of *how* to compare theories, practices, and concepts. After I decide that it is not rewarding to read Bourriaud’s texts for the arguments they might contain, I may begin to wonder how his texts have been understood as useful or inspirational, or what happens when they are read alongside other sorts of texts. If my question is what the participants in the Critical Art Ensemble mean by the word “art,” then my problem is a first-order one. If I ask how to compare elisions of the word “art” in statements by the Critical Art Ensemble or the Yes Men with uses of “art” in, say, Danto or Rancière, then my question is a second-order one.

Such second-order problems can be illuminated by paying attention to the language we use. There were times during the event in Chicago when it seemed the conversation was articulated, and even guided, by a small set of relatively unexamined metaphors, which were being used to explain how contemporary practices were related to Modernisms, aesthetics, anti-aesthetics, and other historical moments. Among our recurrent metaphors four, perhaps, stood out:

*Drifting:* at one point we were talking about a Modernist position and a contemporary position that seemed unrelated. They could just drift apart, someone said. What kind of drifting would that be? A contemporary artist, let’s say, might spurn some of the theoretical positions we were exploring because they seemed wrong, or she might refuse them as irrelevant. The two kinds of drifting could be usefully distinguished: there’s a passive drifting, in which practices and positions are carried naturally apart; and there’s an intentional drifting, in which a practice or position avoids another one by presenting itself as moving “naturally” away.

*Writing against:* at some moments writers articulating the anti-aesthetic conceived of their project as writing against the aesthetic. But what, exactly, did that mean? Was it substantial reconceptualization, or a simpler process of reversing values or terms? In our discussions, this came up in the assessment of the literature around the *informe* in the 1990s. From the beginning, writers engaged in that project were concerned about the degree to which they were inverting aesthetic terms into anti-aesthetic terms, rather than reconceptualizing. Given that that issue is still unresolved, it might be useful to look instead at what could be meant, in any given context, by “writing against” another body of writing.

*Refusal:* there are various refusals in the week’s Seminars: refusal to read, refusal to theorize, refusal to understand, to consider, to see. Some contemporary practices are enabled by refusing to engage the pertinence of the theoretical and historical formations that attempt to account for them. Such refusals should be considered alongside implicit refusals, on the part of some theorists, to engage some contemporary practices. This is not to say either side stands in



need of correction: it is to say that the gesture of refusal is central, in many ways, to this subject, which is unevenly encountered by all sides.

*Beyond*: the metaphor of this book's title suggests two things: that the participants hoped to find a third term, either by achieving a kind of Hegelian *Aufhebung* or by deconstructing the dualism of aesthetic and anti-aesthetic; and that the participants wanted to move away from the debates that have structured politics and aesthetics in art from the 1970s to the present. Moving away (drifting? refusing?) is different in kind from synthesizing or deconstructing. We decided to keep the original title, *Beyond the Aesthetic and the Anti-Aesthetic*, as a reminder of this most fundamental of all differences.

The subject of this book is hard enough given the explosion of the art world and art theory in the last thirty years, but it becomes especially challenging once it becomes clear that the work of conceptualizing practices is so discontinuous, so fragmented, that there is often no helpful precedent for how to compare and interpret the many positions. Nevertheless, I hope this book, which brings together philosophers, historians, and practitioners, can help elucidate the current condition of the problem and begin to think about what might be beyond it.

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