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Come Back Aesthetics

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March 29, 2015, Doris Sommer

for Patricia Vieira, "The Philosophical Salon," in *The European*

Come Back Aesthetics

Who needs the Humanities today? Everyone does. Otherwise we give up all hope for freedom, social justice, and general human development in the tradition of Enlightened modernity. Modernity hasn't failed, Jurgen Habermas wrote, to nudge us beyond pessimism years ago; the problem is that we haven't achieved it yet. One fundamental reason for the delay has been the demotion of Judgment as a core faculty of human understanding. Judgment never gained the ground that Immanuel Kant hoped to win away from imperious Reason in his *Third Critique on Aesthetic Judgment*; and it hardly interrupts today's personal and collective practices on speed. Getting and spending, surviving, defending spin out of control to a rhythm of narrow Reason, an apparently logical necessity.

To pause for Judgment, beyond reason, would be to regain a measure of our humanity, a freedom from the gridlock of mathematical thinking. The Humanities stage that pause; they train the faculty of Judgment by pausing to consider works of art, and human creativity in general. It is the faculty that everyone needs in order to stop and to take stock of what one is doing. This is one fundamental reason to study culture through the Humanities.

Today more than ever, language, literature, and related fields of cultural constructions strain against the predictable, compact and self-perpetuating and sometimes defensive notion of culture that still informs the social sciences. For humanists as well as artists, culture has an almost opposite value from compactness. It means the interruption of shared practices; and it excites the kind of disconcerting delight that Kant appreciated as the stimulus for free Judgment and for candid unscripted conversations. Those disinterested and delightful moments can lead to inter-subjective agreements, to common sense. This faculty for pausing to step back and take stock, is

basic to all disciplines. But the best training ground for Judgment is the carefree area of aesthetics. The reason Kant gives in his *Third Critique* is simple: deciding if something is beautiful responds to an intense experience without obeying any established principles. Therefore, the decision is free from prejudice. Aesthetic Judgment is an exercise in unbiased evaluation, a knack that science and civics need as much as art does. So, interpreting art, can train us to support urgently needed change. This is not a deviation from humanistic attention to the mechanisms of art production and reception. It is a corollary and a homecoming to civic education.

Asking who needs the Humanities has seemed too long like a rhetorical question. When administrators ask it, they announce budget cuts and re-structuring. To be fair, students ask it as well, as do their parents concerned about their children's professional futures, including enough solvency to pay off staggering college debt. Voting with their feet, students go elsewhere; enrollments in literature and other humanities courses continue to fall in departments that survive administrative ravages without disappearing altogether.

Hurt and apparently helpless, we humanists look on, as our field erodes ever nearer to our footing. More petulant than compelling, our defenses have not bothered to argue a case, as if it were self-evident and only philistines would ask. The very lessons we teach students are lost on us. We don't deign to back up claims, nor remember that the first rule of rhetoric is to know one's public. We disdain the public by dismissing its skepticism. And yet, as trainers of Judgment, as a vanguard of acknowledging new sensibilities in ways that may mitigate some levels culture-coded violence, humanists could re-claim our central importance for human development. We are cultural agents by virtue of coaching students to notice points of view, contexts, precarious meanings, and the efficacy of the arts to reframe and refresh the world.

All of us would do well to consider art's ripple effects, from producing pleasure to triggering innovation. And recognizing art's work in the world makes us all cultural agents: those who make, comment, buy, sell, reflect, allocate, decorate, vote, don't vote, or otherwise lead social,

culturally constructed, lives. But humanist pedagogy can fulfill a special mission by keeping aesthetics in focus, lingering with students over the charmed moments of freely felt delight that enable fresh perceptions and foster new agreements. More apparently practical people rush past pleasure as if it were a temptation to derail reason. We are haunted, it seems, by a Weberian superstition about enjoyment being close to sin and a deterrent to development. But we could learn a countervailing lesson from aesthetic philosophers. Kant knew that sociability and politics begin with delight; and Schiller knew that the passion for art-making, alternating between taking risks and making judgments, was the antidote for the kind of earnest Reason that had brought the French Revolution to bloody excess.

Judgment, trained on pleasure, can perhaps save us. Humanists should say that when anyone asks.