

Aesthetic Investigations

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Aesthetics as First Philosophy

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Aesthetics, or the philosophy of the arts, is not first philosophy as it has been conceived of in the last two millennia—it is not metaphysics, not about how the world is independent of human perceivers. Nor is it a science, if we take that to be the effort to account for the nature of events and objects in the world in objective terms. Instead, aesthetics is an applied philosophy—a philosophical approach of how we perceive or represent the world, and this includes art: aesthetics is also about art, as this too is concerned with how we perceive and represent the world (I am not saying that artists are in the business of representing the world; most of them are not). I wonder, though, how aesthetics so conceived could fail to be the first among philosophical disciplines? What can be more urgent than understanding how we perceive and represent the world? The world itself—or God, or the big bang, or genes, atoms and neurons—as if these answers can do without perception and representations? (That is a rhetorical question).¹

We are in the business of trying to fathom how humans, of all sorts and kinds, perceive or represent the world—not how animals unlike us do these things. Our interests are human interests. No other animals seem interested in explaining or understanding the world objectively or “as it is in itself”; none are interested in flying into space or solving religious struggles, in warding off massive climate change or famine, in diversification, and so on. The world that we perceive and represent is the world as *we* perceive and represent it. But it is a subjectivity that we share—amongst ourselves. Artists and aestheticians do *not* see this as a contradiction.

Aesthetic investigation is what both artists and aestheticians are good at: how do we, as human animals, perceive and represent the world—and

this includes how we perceive works of art. Works, more often than not, can be understood as some sort of phenomenological scrutiny of such perception and representation. Artists need not represent—especially in twentieth and twenty-first century art fewer and fewer artists do. But this does not make their work less *about* our means of representing.

Whatever else this means, it most certainly points to art’s inherent anarchism. Art often lacks due—i.e. automatic—respect for established values and norms, and for established ways of representing. And I do not mean anarchism in the political sense, or revolt for the sake of revolting. If it is art, it always also aims for aesthetic merit; and is appreciated for providing a suitable audience with a rewarding experience. Artists must be original, must create something meaningfully (!) new. Since aesthetics is about art, among other things, it must be open to this merit-aspiring anarchism.

We say that art is an autonomous practice—that is what this means, too. But much requires sorting out. And that is where *Aesthetic Investigations* comes in. In this, our first issue you can read intelligent articles on such diverse issues as the atrocity involved in our dealings with iconic photographs (Geurts); The fact that distinguishing real from fictional worlds presupposes a clear distinction between genres of representing—documentary versus fiction—a distinction which may not be all that clear (Worth and McBratnie; and Buckman); How one can allude correctly (!) to something that is yet to come (Holt); How artistic and aesthetic values and properties differ, and how the aesthetic is unavoidably contextual (McFee). Two authors, guest edited by Josef Früchtel, argue that the nature of art practice, and of our thinking about it, stem from “the age of aesthetics”, the eighteenth century: art practice is autonomous—this is denied only in the field of academics, not in art practice itself—romanticism is still in place (Doorman); also, Hegel’s arguments regarding the form and unity of a work of art still hold strong (Feige).

Next to these peer-reviewed articles, that more nearly contribute to existing debates in aesthetics, two sections, *Arts and Artists*, and *Fresh* are devoted to contributions from artists and, respectively, aestheticians, and allow them as much leeway as they want. Make a solemn promise to yourself—right now, I mean—to read all of these contributions!

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NOTES

1. I, for one, think that a coherentist metaphysics is the best warrant for an adequate understanding of the world. Debates about truth are bound to surface regularly.

Science may be among our best bets, but it deals only with what befits its scientist methodologies. Aesthetic values, among others, are not included, nor is everything else subjective.