

Wolfgang Welsch

Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics

Introduction: Outline of the Problems

1. The prevailing understanding: aesthetics centred on art

What is aesthetics? The answer given by the encyclopedias is clear. The Italian *Enciclopedia Filosofica* defines aesthetics as "disciplina filosofica che ha per oggetto la bellezza e l'arte".⁽¹⁾ Correspondingly, the French *Vocabulaire d'Esthétique* determines aesthetics as "étude réflexive du beau" and "philosophie et science de l'art".⁽²⁾ The *Academic American Encyclopedia* says: "Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy that aims to establish the general principles of art and beauty."⁽³⁾ And the German *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* explains (a bit more complicatedly, because it is German): "Das Wort 'Ästhetik' hat sich als Titel des Zweiges der Philosophie eingebürgert, in dem sie sich den Künsten und dem Schönen [...] zuwendet".⁽⁴⁾ In short, aesthetics is considered as *artistics*, as an explication of art with particular attention to beauty. The discipline's traditional name as 'aesthetics' seems to be wrong, because in fact it doesn't have - as the name suggests - aesthetics as its point of reference, but art - so the name 'artistics' would be much more appropriate.

I however, as the title of my paper indicates, intend to advocate an understanding of aesthetics which goes beyond this traditional understanding, beyond the scope of an *artistics*. But can such an attempt be legitimate? Does the term 'aesthetics' lend itself to a transartistic meaning?

With respect to the older tradition this clearly is the case. Baumgarten, the founding father of aesthetics, created the expression 'aesthetics' precisely with recourse to the Greek word class (*aisthesis*), (*aisthanesthai*), (*aisthetos*) and (*aisthetikos*) - that is, to expressions which designate sensation and perception altogether, prior to any artistic meaning. Baumgarten established the new discipline in order to improve our sensuous capacity for cognition. This is why he defined it as the "science of sensuous cognition" and gave it the name 'aesthetics'. It was to comprehend all kinds of sensuous cognition. Even the prophecy from the birds' fly was - quite natural along the basic line of this understanding - to be an issue of aesthetics. The arts, on the other hand, didn't even get a mention among the scope of aesthetics.⁽⁵⁾

Current usage of the word - beyond the academic sphere - is not restricted to art either. In everyday language we use the term 'aesthetic' even more often outside of than within the artistic sphere, when speaking, for instance, of aesthetic behavior or an aesthetic lifestyle, or of aesthetic peculiarities of media or an increasing aestheticization of the world.

The *discipline* of 'aesthetics', however, has restricted itself for a long time to questions concerning art - and more on conceptual than sensuous issues of art. This tendency began with Kant's *Critique of Judgment* of 1790 and was definitely established through Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* between 1817 and 1829. Since then aesthetics has been understood exclusively as a philosophy of art. For centuries this

conception remained the dominant understanding of aesthetics, shared by philosophers as different as Hegel and Heidegger or Ingarden and Adorno. Today the mainstream of aesthetics still follows this conception. The academic discipline tends to restrict itself to artistic - no matter how uncertain the notion of art itself may have become in the meantime.[\(6\)](#)

Certainly, there have been counter-tendencies to this predominant outset in the history of aesthetics. For some authors, aesthetics did not aim at art but at alternative forms of life. Think, for example, of Schiller and his shift first from artistic to political and then to pedagogical art and finally to the "art of life" ("*Lebenskunst*") - an idea picked up on by Marcuse's advocacy of a new social sensibility; or think of Kierkegaard and his description of aesthetic existence, or of Nietzsche's fundamentalization of aesthetic activity, and finally of Dewey's integration of art into life. But these counter-tendencies didn't really manage to change the design of the discipline. To a certain extent they even shared the basic presumption of traditional aesthetics that art forms the focus of aesthetics; these reformers also continued to consider art as being the very model of aesthetic practice altogether, as well as the paradigm for the shift to the new understanding they advocated.

To sum this up: traditional as well as contemporary aestheticians seem to be held captive by the picture of aesthetics as artistic. And, continuing this allusion to Wittgenstein, one could say: "And we cannot get outside this picture, for it lies in our discipline and this discipline seems to repeat it to us inexorably."[\(7\)](#)

2. Overcoming the traditional prejudice

a. Singularity of works versus the universal concept of art

But there are very good reasons to escape from the aesthetics-artistic equation or - to quote Wittgenstein again - "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle".[\(8\)](#) For one of the central problems of traditional aesthetics was that it didn't even fulfil its responsibility. It was incapable of doing justice to the singularity of artworks.[\(9\)](#) On the contrary, the aim of aesthetics was deliberately shifted to the establishment of a universal and everlasting concept of art.

Schelling, for example, frankly expressed this when he declared that a philosophy of art had to treat only "art as such" and "in no way empirical art",[\(10\)](#) and that his own philosophy of art was a mere "repetition" of his "system of philosophy" - this time implemented with respect to art, just as on another occasion with respect to nature or society.[\(11\)](#)

But this traditional strategy is untenable - and has long since appeared so to sensitive people. Robert Musil, for example, derided such aesthetics as the attempt to find the universal brick fitting every work of art and being suitable for erecting the whole edifice of aesthetics.[\(12\)](#) The practice of art doesn't consist in exemplifying a universal concept of art, but involves the creation of new versions and concepts of art.

And these new concepts will certainly have some aspects in common with the concepts formerly dominant, but differ from them sharply in other, no less important, aspects. This is obvious in every shift from one style or paradigm to another. Hence, artistic paradigms are connected by some overlaps from one concept to the next (by 'family resemblances' in the Wittgensteinian sense), but there is no universal pattern common to them all or representing an essential core of all works of art. There is no such thing as an essence of art.[\(13\)](#)

This, however, means that the traditional approach is mistaken on principle - even within the narrow scope of an aesthetics referring to art alone. It is necessary to move on to a different, pluralistic type of aesthetics.

b. In favor of an extended understanding of the discipline

But the reorganization of aesthetics which we currently have to consider must go even further.

Thus far I have only discussed the paradigm change due within the classical frame of aesthetics, that is, within artistics: we can no longer be held captive by art's essentialistic picture. But it also proves necessary to go beyond this whole frame - the traditional equation of aesthetics and artistics. The inner pluralization of aesthetics is to be supplemented by an outer pluralization: by an expansion of the discipline's field to transartistic questions. This is what I want to advocate in this paper.[\(14\)](#)

In the first section I will develop some of the main themes for an aesthetics beyond aesthetics. In the second section I will make some suggestions as to how the territory of aesthetics should be reorganized. In the third section I will try to demonstrate the importance of aesthetic's expansion even for the analysis of art itself. Art can more adequately be dealt with in the perspective of an aesthetics which is not restricted to the analysis of art alone.

I. Some Main Themes and the Relevance of an Aesthetics

Beyond Aesthetics

There are, generally speaking, two groups of reasons for a broadening of aesthetics: the first refers to the contemporary *fashioning of reality*, the second to the contemporary *understanding of reality*.[\(15\)](#)

1. Aesthetic fashioning of reality - embellishment

a. Global aestheticization

Today, we are living amidst an aestheticization of the real world formerly unheard of.[\(16\)](#) Embellishment and styling are to be found everywhere. They extend from individuals' appearance to the urban and public spheres, and from economy through to ecology.

Individuals are engaging themselves in a comprehensive styling of body, soul and behavior. *Homo aestheticus* has become the new role-model. In *urban areas* just about everything has been subjected to a face-lift in recent years - at least in the rich western countries. The *economy* too profits largely from the consumers' tendency not actually to acquire an article, but rather to buy themselves, by its means, into the aesthetic lifestyle with which advertising strategies have linked the article. Even *ecology* is on the way to being an embellishment sector favoring a styling of the environment in the spirit of aesthetic ideals like complexity or natural beauty. *Genetic engineering* finally is a kind of genetic cosmetic surgery.

It is surely not necessary to expand on these tendencies towards embellishment and globalized aestheticization in detail - the phenomena are all too obvious. I want instead to consider the relevance of these recent developments for aesthetics.

Aesthetic activity and orientation have always borne upon the real world - however little, on the other side, the discipline of aesthetics may have taken this into account. What's new today is the extent and the rank of these aestheticizing activities. Aestheticization has become a global and primary strategy. And this has an impact on contemporary as well as traditional aesthetics.

b. The impact on contemporary aesthetics

The impact on contemporary aesthetics follows from the fact that these phenomena not only represent an extension of the aesthetic, but at the same time alter its configuration and valency. Hence aesthetics - as the reflective authority of the aesthetic - must seek out the state of the aesthetic today in fields such as the life-world and politics, economy and ecology, ethics and science. It must, in short, take account of the new configuration of the aesthetic. This does not mean that the globalization and fundamentalization of the aesthetic is simply to be sanctioned - but it belongs on today's agenda for every sufficient aesthetic diagnosis and critique.

c. The relation to traditional aesthetics

The effects on traditional aesthetics become evident when we ask whether tradition has ever advocated a globalization of the aesthetic. Clearly this is the case. Some prominent aesthetic programs of the past have stood up determinedly for a global aestheticization, from which they even promised themselves the definitive fulfilment of all our tasks on earth and the ultimate happiness of mankind. Remember, for example, how the *Oldest System-Program of German Idealism* swore by the mediating power of the aesthetic: by linking the rational and the sensuous, aesthetics was to cause "the enlightened and the unenlightened [...] <to> join hands", so that "eternal unity reigns among us", this even being considered "the last and greatest work of mankind".⁽¹⁷⁾ In the same way mediators of aesthetic ideas like the Arts and Crafts Movement or *Werkbund* and *Bauhaus* were convinced that a globalization of the aesthetic would altogether improve the world.

These old aesthetic dreams seem to be being realized in the present aestheticization. But the irritating fact which demands explanation is that the results today are quite different from the original expectations. They are, at the very least, disappointing. What was meant to endow our world with beauty ends up in mere prettiness and pushiness, and finally generates indifference or even disgust - at least among

aesthetically sensitive people. In any case, nobody would dare to call the present aestheticization straightforward fulfilment. Something must then be wrong with this redemption of old aesthetic dreams. Either the current application of old programs is inadequate, or these venerable programs themselves already contained a flaw, one which has just remained hidden so far, and which is now being revealed. Sometimes redemptions can equate to revelations. This, I think, is the case with the current aestheticization.

d. Some flaws in globalized aestheticization

What reasons are there for the disappointment with the present aestheticization? What are the critical points to be highlighted by aesthetic reflexion on these processes?

Firstly: fashioning everything as beautiful destroys the quality of the beautiful. Ubiquitous beauty loses its distinguished character and decays into mere prettiness or becomes simply meaningless. You can't make what's exceptional a standard without changing its quality.

Secondly: the strategy of globalized aestheticization falls victim to itself. It ends in anaestheticization. The globalized aesthetic is experienced as annoying and even as terror. Aesthetic indifference then becomes a sensible and almost unavoidable attitude in order to escape the importunity of this ubiquitous aesthetic. Anaestheticization - our refusal to continue to perceive the divinely embellished environment - becomes a survival strategy.[\(18\)](#)

e. Repercussions for traditional aesthetics

Hence criticism of traditional aesthetics is called for. Firstly, objection is due to the wholesale praise of beauty. Aesthetics has usually praised beauty and beautification, and believed it had good reasons for doing so. But it never considered the consequences of the globalized beautification which it advocated and which we are today experiencing. It never even conceived that globalized embellishment might disfigure the world - instead of perfecting, or even redeeming, it.

Secondly, one of the flaws of traditional aesthetics was to promote beauty alone (or predominantly) and to neglect other aesthetic values. In other words, it forgot the discovery, which was aesthetics' own, that *variatio delectat* - and not a single aesthetic quality alone. This flaw becomes painfully clear in the present embellishment. Aesthetics - possibly the actual discipline of plurality - had falsely singularized itself and failed to recognize that homogenization - and be it making everything beautiful - is systematically wrong.

Thirdly, the efficacy of traditional aesthetics in the household of our cultural beliefs and desires needs to be critically questioned. The acclamation of beauty championed by traditional aesthetics has repeatedly served as rhetorical support for the current aestheticization processes. The traditional passion for beauty kept us from considering the negative effects of aestheticization, even when these had long since become obvious. Aesthetics has every reason to become self-critical.

f. Résumé

In this sense, the current aestheticization not only brings with it new problems and tasks for contemporary aesthetics, but also has critical repercussions for traditional aesthetics. Hence the issues of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics not only concern those who are already willing to broaden the reach of aesthetics, but likewise represent an obligatory subject for those who still adhere to aesthetics' traditional framework. The aesthetics outside of aesthetics cannot today be ignored, even if you only want to develop a valid version of aesthetics within aesthetics.

2. Aesthetic apprehension of reality

A second group of arguments in favor of the turn to an aesthetics beyond aesthetics refers to the current *apprehension of reality*. This has become more and more aesthetic.

An obvious predominance of images and aesthetic patterns exists today, not only in the current shaping of reality addressed so far, but in the current mediation and apprehension of reality as well. In earlier times, to count as being real, something had to be calculable; today it has to be aesthetically presentable. Aesthetics has become the new leading currency in the reality trade.

Again, I don't want to go into these phenomena in detail. They are far too familiar and have often been analysed. Instead, I will consider the effects of these developments on aesthetics and point out some of the new tasks for aesthetics in the face of these developments.

I concentrate on just one point - on what I call the "derealization of reality" - and two of its consequences - the reconfiguration of *aisthesis*, and the revalidation of experiences outside electronic media.[\(19\)](#)

a. Derealization of reality

The "derealization of reality" stems from the fact that reality - as nowadays primarily conveyed by the media - is deeply affected by this type of mediation.[\(20\)](#) And this one is determined by the peculiarities of media aesthetics, which generally favors the free mobility and weightlessness of bodies and images. Everything is an object for possible electronic manipulation, and within the media 'manipulation' is no longer a normative, but practically just a descriptive term. Whatever enters the realm of television steps into a realm of transformability instead of constancy. If there is a "lightness of being" anywhere, then it is in the electronic realm. Accordingly, the media themselves increasingly present their pictures in modes of virtuality and playfulness.[\(21\)](#)

This attitude towards media-reality is extending more and more to everyday reality too. This comes about because everyday reality is being increasingly formed, presented and perceived according to media

patterns. In that television is the main bestower and the role-model for reality, derealization leaves its mark everywhere. The real is tending to lose its insistency, compulsiveness and gravity; it seems to be becoming ever lighter, less oppressive and less obligating. Already the importunity of media's presentation of reality no longer creates affliction, but rather its opposite: indifference. If you see the same images - however impressively they may be arranged or intended - on different channels on the same evening or repeatedly over several days, then their impact is reduced: sensation plus repetition creates indifference.

In the wake of such mechanisms our attitude towards reality - inside and outside the media - becomes more and more as if it were simulation altogether. We no longer take reality quite so seriously, or as being quite as real. And amidst this suspension of reality we judge and act differently too. Our behavioral patterns are becoming increasingly simulatory and interchangeable.

Because the processes named are occasioned by peculiarities of media aesthetics their consideration is an obligatory agenda for every contemporary aesthetic theory which intends not to ignore, but to analyse the present state of the aesthetic and hence to do justice to its responsibility.

*

Let me briefly mention a further point: even outside the media the comprehension of reality has become largely aesthetic. Take science as example: today it is becoming more and more aware of the profoundly aesthetic character of its models and discoveries - think of the Big Bang or the fairy tales about quarks and strings. The aestheticization processes in the everyday world discussed before are ultimately supported by a cognitive and epistemological aestheticization which (noticably since Kant and definitely evident in our times) shapes the ground of our thinking - and this, I believe, for irrefutable reasons, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere.[\(22\)](#)

b. Reconfiguration of *aisthesis*

Furthermore a reconfiguration of *aisthesis* can today be observed. For instance, one of the consequences of media dominance is the challenging of the primacy of vision which had shaped occidental culture since the Greeks and which culminates in the television age.

Vision was traditionally favored because of its hallmarks of distance, precision and universality, because of its capacity for determination and its proximity to cognition. From Heraclitus, via Leonardo da Vinci, through to Merleau-Ponty, vision was considered our most excellent and noble sense.

In the meantime, however, the patterns underlying this privilege - dominative patterns of perception and cognition - have been subjected to critique by authors like Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida and Irigaray.[\(23\)](#) What's more we are currently experiencing that vision is in fact no longer the reliable sense for contact with reality that it was once held to be - this no longer holds in a world in which physics has become indemonstrable, and just as little in the world of media.

At the same time, other senses have attracted new attention. Hearing, for example, is being appreciated anew because of its anti-metaphysical proximity to the event instead of to permanent being, because of its essentially social character in contrast to the individualistic execution of vision, and because of its link with emotional elements in opposition to the emotionless mastery of phenomena through vision.[\(24\)](#) Touch has found its advocates in the same way, due both to new developments in media technology as well as to its emphatically corporal character - this again in contrast to the 'pure', uninvolved character of vision.[\(25\)](#)

In the wake of such developments an increasing departure arises from the traditional hierarchy of the senses - with vision on top, followed by hearing through to smell. The cards of sensibility are being reshuffled. Instead of a firmly established hierarchy one tends either to an equitable assessment of all senses, or (which I would prefer) to different, purpose-specific hierarchies.

Aesthetics should make these new states of *aisthesis* and the accompanying transformation of cultural patterns the object of its analyses. By doing so it could presumably also help us carry out these transformation processes in a clearer and more reliable way. Besides, therein lies a chance for aesthetics to change from a rather dusty old discipline to being an interesting field of contemporary analysis and discussion again.

c. Revalidation of non-electronic experiences

Another consequence of media experience and the derealization tendency consists in the revalidation of experiences outside electronic media. The general scheme is the following: in contrast to the peculiarities of media-reality (or media-derealization) a new appreciation of non-electronic reality and modes of experience arises - one in which particular emphasis is put on those traits which are neither imitable nor substitutable for by media-experience. The highly developed electronic world doesn't simply overcome or absorb traditional forms of experience - as some media enthusiasts would have us believe - rather, a revalidation of ordinary experience complementing media-experience can be observed. This point has received too little attention in the discussions of recent years.

Thus we are today learning to value anew the resistibility and unchangeability of the natural as opposed to the universal mobility and changeability of media-worlds, and in the same way the persistence of the concrete as opposed to the free play of information, the massivity of matter as opposed to the levitation of imagery. In contrast to arbitrary repeatability, uniqueness gains value afresh. The electronic omnipresence awakens the yearning for another presence: for the unrepeatable presence of *hic et nunc*, for the singular event. And we are discovering anew the body's sovereignty and intransigence. - Think, say, of Nadolny's "discovery of slowness",[\(26\)](#) or of Handke's praise of weariness.[\(27\)](#)

In order not to be misunderstood: of course I understand these tendencies not as a simple counter-program to the artificial paradises of electronic worlds, but rather as a program complementary to them. These counter-elements do not deny the fascination of electronic worlds; nor is it simply a matter of returning to sensuous experience, such as this might have been in pre-electronic times. Rather these revalidations are also tinted by the experience of electronic media. And there are obvious links between electronic and non-electronic experience. Sometimes natural experience is just the thing lovers of virtuality are after too. My

favorite example are the electronics freaks of Silicon Valley, who in the evening drive to the coast to watch those truly incomparable Californian sunsets before returning to their home computers and diving into the artificial paradises of the Internet.[\(28\)](#) They switch quite naturally between the two types of reality and enjoy their complementarity.

In accordance with the prevalent media-tendency, on the one hand, and the revalidation of non-electronic experience, on the other, our *aisthesis* is becoming twofold. It pursues both media-fascination and non-media goals. And there is nothing wrong in this duality. On the contrary, we have here an interesting example of the widespread turn to plurality which is emerging in the present day. We are becoming capable of wandering to and fro between different types of reality and experience. Contemporary *aisthesis* is perhaps the domain where this is already happening the most naturally and successfully.

d. Résumé

Having, in my introductory remarks, voted that the discipline of aesthetics should transcend the traditional equation of aesthetics and art, I have weighed up in this first section of my account the influence of the current aestheticization processes on contemporary as well as on traditional aesthetics, and have in the meantime pointed out three specific fields of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics: the derealization of reality, the reconfiguration of *aisthesis*, and the revalidation of accustomed forms of experience. These are important issues for any contemporary aesthetics which wants to do justice to its name. Aesthetics would criminally hurt itself if it left the discussion of these issues solely to sociologists and psychologists or the feuilletons.

II. Towards a New Form of the Discipline

In a second section I now want to sketch the new structure of an aesthetics including the aspects mentioned and encompassing all dimensions and meanings of the aesthetic. I address three questions: why is it conceptually sound to demand such an expansion of the discipline? What are the advantages of a truly comprehensive aesthetics? And what will the disciplinary structure of such an aesthetics look like?

1. Conceptual clarification: polyvalency and family resemblance of the term 'aesthetic'

Though the expression 'aesthetic' exhibits a considerable variety of different meanings, these are linked by "family resemblances", and this still guarantees a possible coherence of the discipline - even after its opening to aspects of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics. Of course, one has to differentiate sufficiently between the different meanings and usages and to respect their case-specific, not general applicability. But if this - in keeping with aesthetics' spirit of specification - is done, then the overlaps will also bring about an aesthetics which manages to cover the full range of the expression 'aesthetic' and the various domains and states of *aisthesis*. There are no good reasons for aesthetics to restrict itself to artistic. One may, of course, do this in one's own research - just as other aestheticians may primarily focus on non-artistic aspects. But *as a discipline* aesthetics should comprehend the *full* range of such endeavours.

2. Interdisciplinary and institutional advantages of expanding the discipline

To what extent will such an expansion prove advantageous for the discipline itself? In no longer being restricted to a narrow set of questions, aesthetics can achieve more intense contact and interchange with other disciplines, and gain new fields of research. This would bring an advantage not only with regard to the breadth of its issues, but on the institutional level as well. The type of aesthetics I advocate will meet with greater interest, both for its broader spectrum and for its contributions to contemporary problems, and it is likely to meet with greater support - including more financial support for its research activities.

3. Transdisciplinary design of the discipline

What, finally, will the structure of the discipline of aesthetics be in the wake of such an expansion? My answer is surely not surprising: its structure will be transdisciplinary. I imagine aesthetics being a field of research which comprehends all questions concerning *aisthesis* - with the inclusion of contributions from philosophy, sociology, art history, psychology, anthropology, neurosciences, and so on. *Aisthesis* forms the framework of the discipline. And art is one - but, as important as it might be, only one - of its subjects.

The following could sound more surprising: I imagine the parts referring to *aisthesis* as being effective branches of the discipline of aesthetics. They are to be integrated in its institutional structure. Aesthetics ought to be interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in itself - instead of displaying interdisciplinarity only when occasioned by meetings with other disciplines. In an aesthetics department, as I envisage it, all the branches mentioned ought to be taught; and the individual aestheticians themselves ought to have considerable knowledge of them, and be in a position to teach at least some of these branches themselves - and not just, say, an ontology of art or the history of taste.

Certainly, such shifts of a discipline's design don't happen every day, but one day - for good reasons - they may take place. For a coming generation the transdisciplinary structure of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics could be fairly self-evident. Outside of the discipline this already seems to be the case.

III. Advantages of an aesthetics beyond aesthetics with respect to art analysis

Ultimately an expansion of aesthetics to issues beyond art will also prove advantageous for art analysis itself. For art always reaches out beyond art, refers simultaneously to transartistic phenomena and states of the aesthetic. This, however, can adequately be taken into account only by an aesthetics which has transcended the aesthetics-artistics equation.

1. Art transcends the borders of traditional aesthetics

a. Art's reference to the state of the aesthetic outside art

Even when apparently autonomous, art has always and quite consciously reacted to states of the aesthetic in the world surrounding it. Formerly, in a world more aesthetically sparing, it demonstrated the Elysium of beauty. When in the modern world sensibility has been under threat, art has understood itself as the harbinger and rescuer of the sensuous (as with Matisse and Dubuffet). Where embellishment is rife, as it is nowadays, art can see its responsibility in countering this and behaving decidedly demurely (as in *arte povera* and *concept art*). Contemporary art reacts to the dominance of media images in particular; it can oppose their importunity, emulate it, or operate with the frictions between traditional artistic patterns and current media perception.

Whatever the relationship is in detail, works of art require attention to their reference to other modes of design and perception and an understanding of their specific intervention in the artistic as well as transartistic states of the aesthetic. There is no sufficient description of art which would not have to incorporate aspects of an aesthetics beyond artistics.[\(29\)](#)

b. The state of the aesthetic outside of art as influencing the reception of art

And our perception of artworks is affected by the state of the aesthetic outside of art too. This is why Adorno - who certainly, as almost no other, recognized the importance of art's autonomy - wrote: "How deeply <the> innervations of art are rooted in its position in reality could be felt in the bomb-shattered German cities during the first years after the war. Faced by the material chaos, the optical order, which the aesthetic sensorium had long since repudiated, abruptly allured once again as blessed."[\(30\)](#) Even when, for aesthetic experience, order had long since revealed itself to be a synonym for instrumental rationality, an order destroyed could still rouse the aesthetic yearning for order. The seemingly purely-aesthetic perception - this Adorno makes clear - is blatantly determined by contrast.[\(31\)](#) Aesthetic experience would be systematically misrecognized if it were stripped of its references to reality.

c. Views of the world

Moreover, the energy of works always transcends their frame, the museum's threshold or the moment of their observation. The works can generate new views of the world. Among the key experiences with art belongs the fact that, upon leaving an exhibition, one is suddenly able to perceive the world with the eyes of the artist, through the optics of his or her works, in the light of the aesthetics they exemplify.[\(32\)](#)

This is pretty much natural and undistorted behavior: to engage art's perceptual form in the perception of reality too, not to shut oneself off from the efficacy of artistic optics, but to operate and experiment with them. The elementary aesthetic experience is not that art is something closed, but rather that it is able to open one's eyes to ways of viewing the world.[\(33\)](#) Works of art are often tools for an extended or intensified perception of reality.

d. Entanglements between art and reality

Consider further how forms of perception which today appear natural and self-evident originated historically in processes in which art played a pioneering role - romantic art for example had a key role for the perception of the world of mountains: the crowds visiting mountains today follow the paths opened by the new, not terrible, but 'beautiful', comprehension of the mountains created by Romantic painters and poets. Several parts of our everyday perception as well as of common behavioral patterns are a sediment of generations of art experience, as George Steiner has shown: as Sunday-walkers we follow in the footsteps of Rousseau, and in our acts and expressions of love we follow Romeo and Juliet, using a rhetoric established by Petrarch's phrase book.[\(34\)](#)

2. The complexity of aesthetic perception

Following the thematization of art's specific reference to the state of the aesthetic in the world surrounding it and the entanglements between art and reality, I furthermore want to show that such transartistic references are not introduced to art from the outside, but are internal to it, inhere within the singular artwork. And in doing this I will also demonstrate that the perception of artworks always is poly-perceptual, that it comprises *several* modes of perception - not just one, a supposedly exclusive aesthetic mode, be it contemplation or perception of form.[\(35\)](#)

a. Examples from the visual arts

Just think of a painting which you all know: Goya's *Shootings of 3 May 1808* in the Prado Museum.[\(36\)](#) This picture cannot simply be received in an aesthetically contemplative manner. It offers not just an exciting color dynamics and compositional innovations, but simultaneously carries out the interpretation of a historical event, and its aesthetic impulse aims for a specific understanding of what's portrayed: things such as this shooting are no longer to occur, this pattern of events is to be breached.

Several perceptual modes intersect in the perception of the work: the observational manner of the picture and its artistico-aesthetic arrangement, the expressive manner of its dynamics, the historical manner of the events of 3 May 1808, the narrational manner of a shocking model plot, and the appellative manner of future intervention and prohibition. The explosion in the picture aims for the end of such deeds and simultaneously detonates the process of merely 'aesthetic' representation and reception. The picture pierces the contemplation-cocoon in favor of a multidimensional perception, transcends it towards contexts of communication and life.[\(37\)](#)

A general finding can be derived from this: the perception of art is not restricted to a single aesthetic feat. Rather, a multitude of feats and diverse perceptual modes cooperate in the perception of a work.

A traditionalist aesthetician would probably object: of course several ways of perceiving are in play with respect to Goya's picture, but only one of these is the specifically aesthetic one, and this is the one to be dealt with exclusively *in aestheticis*. This argument, however, comes close to an oath of disclosure. One would be admitting that in this 'aesthetic' constriction not even art, but at best one element thereof, can be

understood. An aesthetics which limits itself to an 'aesthetic' of this sort would render itself recognizable as a narrow-gauge aesthetics.

Furthermore, quite often intericonic perception is required. An artwork can contain explicit references to other artworks. Manet's *The Shooting of Maximilian* of 1868,[\(38\)](#) for example, obviously has Goya's work as a foil - just as his *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* has drawings of ancient river gods by Raphael, preserved through etchings by Marcantonio Raimondi, as its subtext, and his *Olympia* has Titian's *Venus of Urbino* - and through this Giorgione's *Slumbering Venus* - as model.

Or take Marcel Duchamp's Mona Lisa parody *L.H.O.O.Q.* of 1919 as a further example.[\(39\)](#) Its intericonic structure is evident. In addition a semantic dimension is to be included: the sequence of letters in the title is to be read as "elle a chaud au cul" - "her ass is hot". How ridiculous the retreat to mere aesthetic contemplation would be in this case! In order to understand a work such as this you must not only see, but also know, suspect, make inferences. Things here are not settled by orientation towards self-referentiality alone. Reflexion is more important than contemplation.

In such cases, it is evident that the perception of the latter work has to include the recognition of the former and an assessment of how the predecessor is appropriated, praised, ridiculed, exploited, or whatever. Otherwise our perception would simply be deficient. If now someone would, in view of such works, still cling to contemplation as the sole legitimate aesthetic outlook, then petty-mindedness would be close, and censorship not far distant. Whatever doesn't reveal itself to the merely contemplative approach is then faulted, denounced and dispensed with. "That's no longer art", these people will say, or "it's just a marginal effect at most" which is "unworthy of attention".[\(40\)](#)

Single artworks can require quite unexpected kinds of perception - perceptual feats which for another work would be completely irrelevant.

Take Munch's painting *The Scream* as example. You haven't actually perceived it until you've *heard* a scream - an incessant scream which makes you tremble. Visual perception, in this case, must proceed through to an acoustic one.

Or in some of Malewitsch's works our perception cannot contain itself to seeing the elements distributed on the canvas, rather it must - especially when confronted with black fields - break through the painting's plane and extend into the cosmic (and this I mean quite literally: once your perception of a black field shifts to the proper perception of black - which, in physicists' terms, means of nothingness - your glance is absorbed into a tunnel and thrown out into the cosmic).

Pollock's drip paintings require kinaesthetic perception. You literally get to dance (and perhaps Barnett Newman's statement that the painter is "a choreographer of space" creating "a dance of elements, of forms" could best be applied to Pollock).

But woe betide anyone insisting on this with Sol LeWitt - what's required in his case is mathematical perception.

b. Musical examples

Or consider examples from music. With Mozart, you should certainly talk about technical innovations concerning the composition of sonatas or operas. But through this you should not omit the one perceptual feature, which, it seems to me, is most specific to Mozart: his music opens heaven, it seems to sound from heaven, giving access to a celestial sphere. (Which, by the way, is an unmistakable criterion in distinguishing Mozart from Haydn - which is often said to be so difficult.) So in this case it is obvious that an awareness of cultural features in a broader sense has to enter into the perception.

Or in some of Bach's fugues there are moments when you can practically hear salvation.[\(41\)](#) Would we want to object reprovingly that music has thus drifted into the transaesthetic and must be pruned back to the phantom of a pure-aesthetic? Petty-mindedness of this type would go too far for everyone. Bach wanted to create music, not just to comply with a reductionist aesthetic theory.

Adorno once highlighted art's double nature - being autonomous and yet maintaining relations to the world - with reference to Beethoven. He said that one is not conversant with a Beethoven symphony unless one understands the so-called purely musical events in it - but that, in just the same way, one has to perceive in it the echo of the French Revolution. And he identified as the task of philosophical aesthetics understanding how both elements mediate themselves in the phenomenon.[\(42\)](#) "Aesthetic experience", he stated, must "transcend itself".[\(43\)](#) - This is *in nuce* what I want to point out here on the whole: that the aesthetic constitutively has need of the transaesthetic too.

Or think of John Cage's way of ordering occurrences and elements, and of building and changing structures. What we experience here is not the execution of a consistent logic but rather the offspring of various potentials, each of them being as fascinating as they are tentative and fragile. And this experience will affect not only our musical habits and expectations but our understanding altogether - of ourselves, of society, of the world.

*

Of course, poly-perceptivity applies to all kinds and genres of art, not only to the visual arts or to music, but as well to dance and theatre, film and literature. It's only that I don't have time to go into more detail here.

c. Résumé: art-perception is poly-perceptual

In summary: works of art require a manifold of perceptual feats. They transcend the merely contemplative dimension; historical dimensions belong to them as well as semantic and allegorical, societal, everyday or political dimensions - and, of course, emotional, imaginative and reflective experiences too. The perception of art is on principle poly-perceptual, not mono-perceptual. Not that the whole palette of these and further perceptual modes must be at play in every work, but a number of, even several of, these perceptual modes always take part.

Without the introduction of everyday perceptual competence you wouldn't even be able to recognize the objects in pictures, and likewise the perception that a gesture is reaching out and yet at the same time shying away from taking its grasp would not be possible without a certain maturity and sensitivity on the perceiver's behalf. References to the life-world thus belong to the receptive process in the same way as intericonic allusions, or specifically cultural references and emotional attitudes. The claim of immediate and monotypical perception, the dogma of immaculate perception is a myth anyway. Only a poly-perceptual attitude can do justice to artworks.

3. Aesthetics beyond aesthetics - to the benefit of art analysis too

What results from this? If art constantly brings into play a whole palette of sorts of perception, then aesthetics too, as the reflexive authority of the aesthetic, obviously has to be in a position to take account of diverse sorts of perception and differing constellations, and to do justice to them. In other words: the perspective of perception - which I take to be essential for art altogether, because artworks are meant to generate perception - favors an *aisthesis*-focused type of aesthetics *even for the purposes of art analysis*. For this type is capable of accounting for the whole range of art-stipulated perceptions and therefore allows for a fuller comprehension of art altogether than any traditional, ostensibly art-directed aesthetics did.

Therefore an aesthetics which expands itself beyond aesthetics to the full extent of *aisthesis*, as advocated in this paper, is necessary not only for the sake of a full grasp of the aesthetic in its contemporary state, but also for the sake of an adequate understanding of art. This could ultimately be the penetrating argument for an aesthetic beyond aesthetics, motivating even the partisans of an art-centered aesthetics to give it a thought or even to switch sides.

-
1. *Enciclopedia Filosofica* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni Editore, 1967), vol. 2, col. 1054.
 2. *Vocabulaire d'Esthétique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), p. 691 and p. 692 resp.
 3. *Academic American Encyclopedia* (Danbury, Conn.: Grolier Inc., 1993), vol. 1, p. 130.
 4. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel: Schwabe & Co.), vol. 1 (1971), col. 555.
 5. Baumgarten certainly used examples from the arts, especially from poetry, but only to illustrate what aesthetic perfection - as the perfection of sensuous knowledge - could be.
 6. During the years when I tried to broaden the scope of aesthetics, I predominantly met with resistance within the framework of academic aesthetics (at least in the German-speaking world) whereas my efforts have found far more interest and support outside the discipline - from cultural institutions or theoreticians in other fields. A result of my attempts was the congress "Die Aktualität des Ästhetischen" which took place in Hanover in September 1992. It assembled experts from various fields: philosophy, sociology, political science, feminism, media studies, design, neurophysiology, philosophy of science, art practice and art history, and with a couple of thousand participants it found broad resonance. (The contributions are published in *Die Aktualität des Ästhetischen*, ed. Wolfgang Iser, Munich: Fink, 1993).
 7. Wittgenstein said: "A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*,

trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, New York: Macmillan 1968, p. 48e [115]).

8. Ibid., p. 103e [309]. - This was how Wittgenstein answered the question as to what his "aim in philosophy" was (ibid.).

9. I have discussed the problems of traditional aesthetics in more detail in "Traditionelle und moderne Ästhetik in ihrem Verhältnis zur Praxis der Kunst" (*Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, XXVIII, 1983, pp. 264-286) and presented my alternative suggestions for the first time in *Ästhetisches Denken* (Stuttgart, Reclam, 1990, 4th edition 1995).

10. Letter to August Wilhelm Schlegel, 3 September, 1802, quoted from: *Aus Schellings Leben. In Briefen*, vol. 1, ed. G. L. Plitt (Leipzig: Hirzel 1869), pp. 390-399, here p. 397. In his *Philosophy of Art* Schelling explained: "None of what the more vulgar sense calls art can occupy the philosopher: Art is, to him, a necessary apparition flowing out directly from the absolute, and only insofar as it can be evinced and measured as such does it have reality for him." (Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst* [lecture Jena, winter semester 1802-3], reprint of the 1859 edition, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1976, p. 384)

11. Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, p. 7 and p. 124 resp. - The result of this outset is that a philosophy of this type knows no way of saying anything about real art. When Schelling became Secretary General of the Munich Akademie der bildenden Künste he was obliged through this office to give lectures about the philosophy of art. But he remained silent. He lectured not once throughout his fifteen years in office. If it comes to the verdict, to the confrontation with art, the philosophy of art remains speechless. The hour of reckoning becomes the oath of disclosure for this type of aesthetics.

12. Cf. Robert Musil, *Tagebücher*, ed. Adolf Frisé (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1976), p. 449.

13. This incidentally was clear already for Cicero who stated that "there are almost countless genres and styles [...], all different in their peculiarity, but praiseworthy as a genre" (Cicero, *De oratore*, III 34). And he similarly said: "There is only one art of painting, and yet Zeuxis, Aglaophon and Apelles were completely different from one another; and none is amongst them, whom one might accuse of deficiency in his art" (ibid., III 26).

14. Cf. Antonio Banfi's similar claim: "Lasciar valere l'esperienza estetica in tutta la sua varietà, complessità, universalità, senza limitazione alcuna, è la prima condizione di un'estetica filosofica" (Antonio Banfi, "I problemi di un'estetica filosofica", in: *Opere*, vol. 1, a cura di L. Eletti e L. Sichirolo, Reggio Emilia, 1986, 9).

15. I have developed these thoughts more broadly in "Aestheticization Processes: Phenomena, Distinctions, and Prospects" (in: *Undoing Aesthetics*, London: Sage, 1997, pp. 1-32). I will partly rely on this essay.

16. 'Aestheticization' means that the unaesthetic is made, or understood to be, aesthetic.

17. "The 'Oldest System-Programme' of German Idealism", in: *Hegel Selections*, ed. M.J. Inwood (London - New York: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 86-87.

18. I discussed this for the first time in "Ästhetik und Anästhetik" (in: *Ästhetisches Denken*, pp. 9-40). - If there is still a task for art in public space today, then it consists not in introducing ever more beauty into the already over-embellished environment, but in stopping this aestheticization-machinery (cf. my "Contemporary Art in Public Space: A Feast for the Eyes or an Annoyance?", in: *Undoing Aesthetics*, pp. 118-122).

19. For derealization and revalidation see the essay "Artificial Paradises? Considering the World of Electronic Media - and Other Worlds", in: *Undoing Aesthetics*, pp. 168-190.

20. By "media" I will - in the following - always refer to electronic media, without suggesting that there might be any kind of experience independent of media of *some kind or other*.
21. For the viewers the desire for media-entertainment is gaining the upper hand in the same measure as their former reality-belief is decreasing. - I am referring here primarily to television, although this is somehow an old-fashioned medium in today's electronic world. It is, however, the one which everybody knows and uses. And the effects of the more advanced technologies are not qualitatively different, but intensify the derealization tendency.
22. Cf. my "Basic Aesthetic Features in Contemporary Thinking", in: *Undoing Aesthetics*, pp. 33-59.
23. Cf. Martin Jay's survey *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994).
24. Cf. for more details the essay "On the Way to an Auditive Culture?", in: *Undoing Aesthetics*, pp. 150-167.
25. Consider in this context also Richard Shusterman's proposal for a new, body-centered type of aesthetics - of "somaesthetics", as he calls it (cf. Richard Shusterman, "Somaesthetics and the Body/Media Issue", *Body and Society* 3:3, 1997, pp. 33-49).
26. Sten Nadolny, *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit* (Munich: Hanser, 1983).
27. Peter Handke, *Versuch über die Müdigkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989).
28. Cf. my essay "Information Superhighway or Highway One?", in: *Undoing Aesthetics*, pp. 191-202.
29. In this sense already John Dewey emphasized: "Esthetic experience is always more than esthetic" (John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in: *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 10, Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, p. 329).
30. Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), p. 237 f.
31. Klee had, already in 1915, noted a connection of this type in another way: "The more shocking this world (just as today), the more abstract the art, whereas a happy world produces a worldly art" (Paul Klee, *Tagebücher*, Cologne: DuMont, 1957, p. 323).
32. Goethe had already described and paid tribute to this. Upon entering a cobbler's workshop, he believed suddenly he could see a picture by Ostade before him, "so perfect that one ought only really to have hung it in the gallery. [...] It was the first time that I came to notice in such high degree that gift, which I subsequently exercised with greater awareness, namely to see nature with the eyes of this or that artist to whose works I had just dedicated a particular attentiveness. This ability has accorded me much enjoyment" (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Part II, Book 8). In the *Italian Journey* he speaks of his "old gift, that of seeing the world with the eyes of that artist whose pictures have just impressed me" (*Goethes Werke*, vol. XI, Munich: Beck, 8th edition, 1974, pp. 7-349, here p. 86 [8 October, 1786]).
33. This is not at all astonishing, since the artistic perceptions were themselves developed in contact, and in coming-to-grips with environmental as well as other artistic perception. Therefore, they are also able to intervene in the realm of our experience and to reconfigure our world's aesthetic nexus.
34. Cf. George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 195 resp. p. 194.
35. I first presented the following arguments in the essay "Erweiterungen der Ästhetik" (in: *Bild und*

Reflexion, eds Birgit Recki and Lambert Wiesing, Munich: Fink, 1997, pp. 39-67). In the meantime, I developed a more elaborated version of this topic under the title "Poly-perception: On the Perception of Artworks" (The Monroe C. Beardsley Memorial Lecture 1998, Philadelphia, Temple University, 27 March 1998).

36. Francesco Goya, *The Shootings of 3 May 1808 in the Manzanares Valley*, 1815, Madrid, Prado.

37. Anti-fascist demonstrators in Paris in the 1930s carried with them placards on which the picture had been copied. Its transgression of the museum's threshold was not just metaphorical.

38. Edouard Manet, *The Shooting of Maximilian*, 1868, Kunsthalle Mannheim.

39. Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, Philadelphia Museum of Art, collection of Louise and Walter Arensberg.

40. Cf. Arnold Berleant's strong criticism of traditionalistic aestheticians' focus on contemplation: "Disinterested contemplation has become an academic anachronism" (*Art and Engagement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991, p. 33). "Contemplative theories impede the full force of art and misdirect our understanding of how art and the aesthetic actually function" (*ibid.*, 45).

41. The inner-musical prerequisite for this can even easily be identified: every resolution of dissonant tension offers the chance of being developed through to salvation.

42. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie*, p. 519.

43. *Ibid.*