

(Re)Discovering Aesthetics

An Introduction

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TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY DISCOURSES in art history, philosophy of art, and art practice have inherited a long tradition of aesthetics, as well as of the many important challenges that have been brought against this tradition. Increasingly, however, contemporary art historians, philosophers, artists, and curators acknowledge the limitations of traditional aesthetics while renegotiating the continuing and fundamental importance of aesthetic questions. Their work is not just a continuation of traditional aesthetics but, in effect, a “rediscovery” of aesthetics. With this rediscovery comes a growing awareness of the cross-disciplinary¹ nature of aesthetics and, therefore, of the interconnectedness of art history, philosophy, and art practice. This book brings together important international voices from these three fields that rearticulate traditional aesthetical positions with a view to developing an aesthetics that can respond to contemporary issues and circumstances.

This book shows that recognition of pernicious theoretical and practical limitations of traditional aesthetics does not necessitate the elimination of aesthetics tout court. Instead it brings about its “rediscovery” in a way that breaks sharply with older models. This rediscovery of aesthetics drives a complex but dynamic and valuable set of discourses and debates exploring the material character, theoretical influences, and, increasingly, political contexts of artworks and their explanations.

In this regard, many of the essays in this volume are reactive: against formalism, against the sovereignty and autonomy of the traditional view of aesthetic judgment, and against context-free universalist approaches to

questions of validity and truth in aesthetics. They are not, however, only reactive, because many of them actively seek to determine the conditions and implications of aesthetic identifications and explanations of artworks and of their public and private reception. From these discussions emerge diverse and powerful contestations of traditional aesthetics that open a wide field of possibilities for future aesthetics.

“Rediscovering Aesthetics” thus promises a renewal of interpretation and debate within and across the various disciplines that work to undermine and replace traditional models of theoretical explanation.

The focus on cross-disciplinary approaches is one of the most important aspects of recent aesthetics. It underscores the fact that aesthetics has no single definition or subject matter. It is taken to mean simply “philosophy of art”;² following Immanuel Kant’s lead, it also invokes general questions of beauty and taste³ (an approach that has come under attack for its alleged reliance on the sociopolitically problematic notion of “pure” aesthetic judgments⁴); and it also refers to various types of “sensuous” experiences and effects more generally, such as experiences of the ugly, the disgusting, and so on.⁵ In an even broader context, one also hears of an “aesthetization” of entire cultural domains, such as religion or politics. Due to its polysemy, aesthetics can appear like an arbitrary placeholder for a wide range of incommensurable issues. Aesthetics’ seeming lack of “substance,” combined with stereotypical ideas about its preoccupation with subjective taste and ineffable emotions, to some suggest nonrigorous reflection and uncritical value judgment. This nurtures the two perhaps most serious concerns to which any rediscovery of aesthetics must respond: It involves withdrawal either from critical and rigorous thinking or from social action and life.⁶ The key issue is how to maintain a role for critical thought in aesthetic discourse that ensures that aesthetics is not relativized to the point where it dissolves into a mere matter of taste. One possible way is to provide open but discursively negotiated spaces in which different approaches and explanations can be debated and criticized without the presumption or expectation of agreement. We hope that this volume offers such a space.

In the first part of this introduction we outline recent rediscoveries of aesthetics in art history and art theory, philosophy, and art practice. It is written keeping in mind readers who are either new to aesthetics or new to the ways in which aesthetics has been taken up in areas other than their own. Those who are well familiar with aesthetic discourses across the various fields might want to jump to the second part. There we highlight

three themes that we consider crucial for maintaining a critical position on any rediscovery of aesthetics: the issue of validity (motivated by inquiries into the peculiar validity of aesthetic judgments), the issue of subjectivity (motivated by the stipulated “special link” between aesthetics and the human subject), and the issue of the political dimension of aesthetics (highlighted by the political implications of pluralist approaches to aesthetics, such as the need for negotiation and appeal).

Recent (Re)Discoveries

Art History/Theory

In art history and art theory, aesthetic considerations have only recently been rehabilitated as the analysis of experiential or perceptual qualities of historically reconstructed artworks. Thereby “rediscovered” aesthetics is freed from concerns with beauty and taste, which historians tend to treat with great suspicion.

This suspicion seems justified, at least initially. Until recently art history, in many respects, relied upon its distance from aesthetic reflection to ensure its autonomy and credibility as a distinct discipline. Art history, it seemed, did not need aesthetics to achieve good results. Indeed, aesthetics might remove art history from what properly concerns it, namely, the concrete and changing historical circumstances of the emergence and development of particular artworks and styles. Aesthetics, understood as little more than connoisseurship, is thus taken to compromise the historically rigorous or “scientific” study of art in the Germanic tradition of *Kunstwissenschaft*.⁷ In short, at the heart of the art historical suspicion lies the legitimate concern that attention to specific art objects, styles, periods, and so on (and to their historical, sociological, anthropological, and other contexts) could be replaced with personal taste.

Another art historical suspicion identifies aesthetics with attempts to provide general ontologies of artworks, definitions of art “as such,” or analyses of isolated aspects (depiction, make-believe, artistic or moral value, etc.). Art historians often consider these philosophical issues far removed from the art historical “business as usual”⁸ as they appear directly opposed to art historical concerns with material and historical specificities.

One important source for renewed interest in aesthetics is the historiographic turn of art history following the publication of major texts on

the history of the discipline.⁹ This “archaeology” has uncovered an uneasy relationship with art history’s immediate neighbors: philosophical aesthetics and visual culture studies. In the view of many art historians, both philosophers and researchers of visual culture neglect the rigorous and systematic study of particular artworks in their specific historical contexts for the sake of establishing universal accounts of either art and aesthetic experience (philosophy) or images in general (visual culture studies). The disciplines thus make an uneasy *ménage à trois*, which, as W.J.T. Mitchell put it, catches them in an unresolved “triangulation.”¹⁰

However, if art history is distinct from one of its immediate neighbors—visual culture studies—then this is precisely by virtue of its relationship with the other—philosophical aesthetics. After all, art history is the study not of images or the visual in general but of very particular objects—works of art—that, at the same time, have been the paradigmatic objects of aesthetic judgment. This suggests that art historians might have to acknowledge that aesthetic considerations and processes have formed part of the conditions under which that work has been understood historically. This is true also for “an-aesthetic” and “anti-aesthetic” practices of twentieth century and contemporary art because they too (perhaps most of all) are dialectically related to aesthetics.

For these reasons any wholesale rejection of aesthetics by art historians (both traditional and “new”¹¹) appears not only somewhat disingenuous but also neglects some potentially important implications of aesthetics for art historical practice.¹²

Philosophy

In philosophy, the claim of a “rediscovery” of aesthetics is perhaps most contentious. However, while philosophers working, for example, within phenomenological, hermeneutical, or post-structuralist frameworks have continuously granted aesthetics a central role in their overall thought, the status of aesthetics within philosophy as a whole has been a troubled one. Often considered less serious or less important than “core” disciplines of philosophy such as ontology, epistemology, and ethics, aesthetics has also suffered, especially in the Anglophone tradition, from a considered “dreariness” that John Passmore had already identified in the 1950s.¹³ In 2003 Richard Rorty still described Anglo-American aesthetics as “the most isolated and least respected branch of what one calls ‘philosophy’”¹⁴

and even on the current official Web site of the American Society of Aesthetics, Mary Devereaux observes:

there is little room for disagreement: philosophers widely regard aesthetics as a marginal field . . . not only in the relatively benign sense that it lies at the edge, or border, of the discipline, but also in the additional, more troubling, sense that it is deemed philosophically unimportant.¹⁵

Devereaux suggests that this marginalization “is relatively recent, largely an artifact of the rise of analytic philosophy itself,” whose emphasis on linguistic philosophy, logic, and conceptual analysis most likely pushed aesthetics away from the central position it had enjoyed until the days of British Idealism (in opposition to which analytic philosophy was conceived). Consequently, aesthetics became associated with so-called continental philosophy and a more literary style of thought. Moreover, since the 1960s, aesthetics has been under attack for its traditional foundationalism, elitism, and bourgeois values. The identification of aesthetics with the institutional perpetuation of capitalist ideology has cast serious doubts on its legitimacy.¹⁶

That aesthetics recently has received much attention, especially in analytic aesthetics,¹⁷ despite these serious concerns is perhaps due to the fact that, as conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth said, art theory, and art itself, have become “more philosophical”¹⁸ and self-reflexive. A more likely explanation, however, is that recent philosophical aesthetics has been paying more attention to art. Less inclined to follow the stereotypical philosophical impulse to ignore material and historical particularities and to concentrate on conceptual or ideal universals, aesthetics has gained new vigor and, above all, has added new, “undreamy” substance to the debate. As Anita Silvers has said, “Happily, . . . we have begun to get aesthetics right, for philosophy now turns to art, rather than art to philosophy, for illumination.”¹⁹ According to Peter Osborne and Andrew Benjamin this also means that philosophical aesthetics needs to cross its institutional boundaries: “Philosophy and criticism become inextricably intertwined, and both become bound to art history.”²⁰

The Art World

Contemporary art criticism, curatorial practice, and art practice have also seen a significant reevaluation of aesthetics. Mark Wilsher, commenting

in *Art Monthly* on the ongoing debate about aesthetics and artistic practice in the journal, observes that aesthetics is returning in a “surreptitious rather than overt form” as renewed reflections on “the idea of beauty.”²¹ Celebrated examples include the installation artist Olafur Eliasson who creates spectacular (and extremely popular) artworks, which are, above all, sensuously pleasing. Other examples include the unapologetically sensuous films and installations of Bill Viola and Matthew Barney’s astonishing *Gesamtkunstwerk* [total work of art], the “*Cremaster* film series.

There are specific historical reasons for the art world’s regained “aesthetic appetite.” They include, for example, the desire, inherited from the modernist avant-garde, to differentiate oneself from preceding artistic generations and paradigms. Currently, this plays out in a move away from the postmodern era (itself a problematic concept), which, in order to borrow Hal Foster’s term, was “anti-aesthetic”²² at least insofar as its rejection of modernism implied a rejection of modernist aesthetics.

A renewed interest in art of the 1960s and early 1970s has also been central to the current reevaluation of aesthetics.²³ First, this occurred because aesthetics gained prominence in art of the 1960s as the target of resistance and opposition. When the work of Marcel Duchamp was rediscovered by Fluxus artists as well as Robert Rauschenberg and later by Bruce Nauman and Robert Morris, it was appropriated as a means to criticize a modernist doctrine enforced by Clement Greenberg. Subsequently, in rejecting Greenberg’s limited version of formalist (Kantian) aesthetics, these artists anticipated a link between antimodernism and anti-aesthetics that became characteristic of postmodern discourse and art practice. Thus artists of the 1960s explicitly engaged with aesthetic questions and paradigms even if only to reject them.

Second, art practice after modernism challenged the traditional distinctions that had long supported the (self)recognition of aesthetics as a unitary discourse. It radically challenged the notion of an ontologically stable work of art by exploring what Lucy Lippard famously called the “dematerialised” art object.²⁴ Further, when the distinction between art and nonart was blurred (which led Arthur Danto to his famous reflections on the “end of art”²⁵), the loss both of the art object’s identity and of the distinction between “art and life” resulted in a corresponding loss of certainty about what the rightful object of aesthetics actually was. Just as art was “up-for-grabs,” so was aesthetics.

Third, the recent resurgence of interest in art of the 1960s has motivated a general reassessment of its own aesthetic dimension. For example, minimalism has proved receptive to theoretical accounts couched in phenomenological, bodily, sensuous, and aesthetic terms, which is not surprising given the influence that artists and critics at the time (such as Robert Morris and Rosalind Krauss) drew from phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty.²⁶

However, aesthetics remains problematic for art practice. It has been argued that a return to narrowly aesthetic and stylistic issues anachronistically divorces artworks from their original volatile economic, political, social, and historical contexts. The critical edge of radical art practice from the late 1960s and early 1970s may thus be blunted by the focus on effect, spectacle, and falsely constructed notions of communality and spirituality.

These objections have catalyzed curatorial defenses of a new aesthetics. For example, the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud has criticized traditional, less “spectacular” art practice for falsely asserting “an independent and private symbolic space.” In opposition, he announces aesthetics’ necessary move into “the realm of human interactions and its social context.”²⁷ However, the “aesthetic turn” as a curatorial strategy is also contentious because it is feared to prioritize aesthetic (i.e., sensuous, playful, or pleasurable) effects over critical social and political dimensions of contemporary art practice.

Such objections, however, apply not only to the practical business of making, curating, and writing about art. They should inform all debates about aesthetics and about the implications of its recent rediscoveries.

Themes of (Re)Discoveries

In this second part of the introduction we will briefly discuss three core themes that are meant to indicate important general issues for critical cross-disciplinary debate: the issue of validity, the issue of subjectivity, and the political dimension of aesthetics.

It is important to acknowledge that discussing these themes in relation to aesthetics does precisely not mean newly to “discover” aesthetics, as if one could ignore its rich and problematic history, or nostalgically to “rediscover” it, as if one could go back behind “*an*-aesthetic,” “anti-aesthetic,” or “in-aesthetic” critiques.²⁸ Rather, it is precisely attentiveness to

the complex history and problematic nature of aesthetics that makes possible a more historically and politically sensitive view of both its inescapability and its potential.²⁹

In art history, philosophy, and artistic practice, structures of justification and legitimation obviously involve institutions and consensual efforts. But even though beliefs in transcontextual universal ideas of value and truth have been destabilized, the need to identify or establish standards, if only as situational agreements, remains. In the light of our everyday practices of making claims, of judging and of being judged, the outright denial of the possibility of such standards is both ethically dubious and theoretically unconvincing.

The notion of aesthetic judgment helps to understand how standards of truth and value, now understood in terms of *validity*, can be maintained despite their contextual nature. The critical point here is that validity claims about artworks are paradigmatic insofar as they are framed by contextual factors, which acknowledge positions within conventional, historical, and thus social and political situations. At the same time, however, humans are both free in making aesthetic judgments (they typically do not refer to “objective” cognitive or moral, normative demands) *and* are open to question the limits and frames of reference of these judgments. (Humans instead appeal to their sense of “communal values” and are thus left to negotiate disagreement and dissent).³⁰ Accordingly, validity claims in general must be recognized as phenomena that, like artworks, evoke multiple interpretations, not universal, once-and-for-all explanations. They are not based on abstract, extra-worldly principles but are features of the complex everyday disciplines and practices we use to understand and explain them. Thus, aesthetic judgments show how we expect discourse to function in general—not in a neutral and absolute way but as interlocutory, argumentative, and open to debate.

The position outlined here can be appreciated more fully in light of a philosophical tradition that has, at least since Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Kant, anchored aesthetics in the experience, creativity, taste, and judgment of human subjects, whose sensual and affective characteristics are regarded as irreducible to cognitive capacities or objective principles. In contemporary discourse, this is often investigated in terms of not transcendental but concrete (i.e., embodied and situated) subjects who experience the contingency and particularity of their sociohistorical situations. Consequently, because individual subjects always already find

themselves within an intersubjective context, there is no single perspective available for them from which they could make absolute judgments. This also means that our judgments do not always get assent from everyone and that there is no single way to enforce assent. Others are always free to dissent or ignore our claims, so that, for example, Barnett Newman might well be right to say that aesthetics is for many artists “like ornithology must be for the birds.”³¹

As a consequence of the social character of human identity, aesthetic judgments (or experiences) are never politically neutral, but they are utterly implicated in structures of social power and division, without however—and this is important—being reduced to narrowly political or social concerns. As Andrew Bowie has shown, one of the most important lessons we learn from aesthetics is that “it is a mistake for philosophy to relegate subjectivity to being merely a function of something else, such as language, ideology, history, or the unconscious.”³² On the contrary, aesthetics reminds us of the irreducibility of human subjectivity.³³ At the same time, it teaches us to attend to how we live through and negotiate our own autonomous (yet embedded) subjectivity in order to form and defend our individual (yet socially committed) and relative (yet by no means merely private) positions on grounds of personal and social experiences. Aesthetics is thereby inextricably connected with issues of subjectivity, validity, and politics.

Understood in this way, aesthetics effectively takes on board the criticisms Hal Foster described as “anti-aesthetic” and thus becomes “a practice, cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic . . . or rooted in a vernacular.”³⁴ Such aesthetics, as Paul Mattick pointed out, “is actually quite unlike ornithology.” Artists themselves participate and intervene in aesthetics because they, “unlike birds in the wild, are engaged in a cultural and therefore historically evolving activity.”³⁵ The role of aesthetics in this activity as well as in the construction of communities of shared values and “truths,” and hence the complex relationship between aesthetics and politics, are thus of critical importance.

At the heart of this debate lies the question of the autonomy of aesthetics. Simply put, the question is: If there is an autonomous “aesthetic realm,” does this mean that it is separate from social (and thus political) realms, or does its very autonomy provide the opportunity for resistance, dissent, and freedom, in short the opportunity for political action? The

early Greenberg, for example, argued polemically that the avant-garde's antipathy to kitsch placed it in a dialectical and politically charged relationship with capitalism. Thus, whilst radical art was tied to the bourgeoisie by an "umbilical cord of gold" it also offered an alternative value system to, *and thus critique of*, capitalism.³⁶

The question of aesthetic and artistic autonomy in the arena of political action receives a considered articulation in critical theory. Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, for example, argued that aesthetics has an important function in the project of freeing practical reason from the dominance of "instrumental rationality." This position resurfaces in Adorno's polemical call for art's autonomy. In distinction from an art for the masses that promises radical democracy, he posits a "committed art" that proves its commitment by continually struggling to liberate itself from "the real," that is, by continually reasserting its autonomy from the political and social status quo as well as from its inescapable materiality.³⁷ Clearly, then, exploring the possibilities aesthetics affords for politics does not imply a single position or approach but allows for different and even diverging views.

However, it can also be argued that art gains a political agency by giving up its independence from sociopolitical values. According to this view art is political precisely because it is deeply embedded in society and can change peoples' opinions. The highly charged works of Joseph Beuys and Hans Haacke, for example, take political action as their driving force. They bring to mind Benjamin's call for an "activist art" for which the artist puts "an end to his autonomy" and uses his artistic activities in the service of the political goals he supports.³⁸

In conclusion, we propose that rediscoveries of aesthetics need not merely reflect earlier dilemmas but can bypass or even transcend them. For example, many of the contributions to this volume show that the opposition between modernist aesthetics and postmodern anti-aesthetics is already being surpassed by contemporary aesthetics (in philosophy as well as art history) and by contemporary art practice. This opens up an entire realm of questions that had been closed during much of the second half of the twentieth century, when it seemed almost impossible to conceive of aesthetics in terms of anything but the opposition between modernism and postmodernism. Now there are also political reasons for getting beyond that deadlock. As Isobel Armstrong warns us in *Radical Aesthetics*, by neglecting aesthetic questions, these "questions are implicitly left to the

reactionaries—an assumption that makes it more rather than less important to remake aesthetic discourse.”³⁹ For the issue of aesthetics—far from being a matter of mere connoisseurship or apolitical enjoyment of beauty and pleasure—is relevant to the preservation of the possibility of criticism and debate in a pluralist world.

Synopsis

The contributors to this volume do not adopt a single, coherent, and agreed line. This is to be expected since they come from different theoretical and practical backgrounds whose presuppositions and practices are being reshaped in significant ways as interpretation and debate emerges. This has important implications for aesthetics under construction. The essays in this volume—under the influence of critical theory, feminism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, pragmatism, and other paradigms—often show, rather than explicitly say, what is at stake here: That henceforth aesthetics must strive to escape from the limitations of abstraction and disinterestedness in favor of a more historically and politically sensitive view that recognizes both the inescapability and positive potential of aesthetics.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on a rediscovery of aesthetics in art history, the second section contains philosophical reflections on the status of aesthetics in contemporary discourse and on the future of aesthetics, and the third section emphasizes the complex relation between specific art practices and aesthetics.

1. Aesthetics in Art History and Art Theory

Richard Woodfield gives a historical account of the ambiguous relationship between aesthetics and the discipline of art history. He points out that the first rediscovery of aesthetics occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century when academic philosophical aesthetics was rejected in favor of a new aesthetics that drew from the materials of art history. It was called *Kunstwissenschaft* by Ernst Gombrich and others. Woodfield concludes that contemporary art historians stand at “the end” of art history. Thus, they are free to escape the straightjacket imposed by the Enlightenment concept of art and its modernist consequences.

James Elkins conducts a discussion on why any rediscovery of aesthetics by scientific discourse is problematic. Art and science, he suggests,

are very different because they have different value systems and thus different criteria of success. For example, few artists have been decisively influenced by science (although many have been influenced by technology) and virtually no scientists have required art in their work (although many have used it). Moreover, Elkins argues that science and art put different values on such terms as “beauty,” “aesthetics,” “elegance,” and so on. He concludes that the two cultures really are substantially separate, resulting in different accounts of image production and interpretation.

Michael Ann Holly discusses the art historical writings of British art historian and critic Adrian Stokes. She uses Stokes’s *Stones of Rimini* to reveal a new model of writing about art that blends scientific and poetic moments. It is concerned with both art historical facts *and* aesthetic judgments. She further explores how art history is an essentially melancholic activity as one mourns and attempts to reconstruct the “lost” objects of historical and aesthetic reflection. In turn, this opens up a discussion on the nature of art historical discourse and on the role that aesthetic judgment plays in art historical method.

David Raskin argues that art had never forgotten aesthetics; rather, it was trapped in an orthodoxy from the 1960s when “nothing short of conviction mattered at all.” Through a discussion of positions advanced by Rosalind Krauss, Michael Fried, and T. J. Clark, Raskin questions how modern and postmodern art challenge us precisely to separate facts from values.

Richard Shiff explores the disconnection between experiences of artworks and the language used to describe those experiences. He argues that a model of aesthetic experience can be used to reappraise art from the 1960s (late and postmodernist art). He examines how works by Newman, Bridget Riley, Donald Judd, and Richard Serra produce relevant perceptual effects that need to be accounted for in terms of the phenomenological experiences they engender.

Thierry de Duve engages in aesthetic terms with Robert Morris’s work from the late 1960s. He thus shows that anti-aesthetic art remains part of modernist aesthetic discourse. He returns to Kant’s account of aesthetic experience in the *Critique of Judgment* and applies it to minimal and conceptual art. In particular, de Duve demonstrates empirically that Morris’s work illustrates how Kantian “free play” remains relevant to art hitherto characterized as antiformalist and anti-aesthetic.

II. Aesthetics in Philosophy

Arthur Danto thinks that aesthetics will be an inescapable feature of experiencing art as long as “there are visible differences in how things look.” He claims that the concrete future of aesthetics will be conditioned by the overall differences between the disciplines of art history and philosophy. He holds that the rediscovery of aesthetics involves a rethinking of the role played by aesthetic qualities in the visual presentation of meanings. Danto’s argument thus implies a major turn from ontological questions (which he had previously made central) to aesthetic questions.

Diarmuid Costello argues that aesthetics became marginalized in postmodern art largely due to the dominance of art critic and theorist Clement Greenberg. Costello discusses how Greenberg’s coupling of medium specificity with aesthetic quality, and his grounding of this in a limited reading of Kant, overdetermined subsequent art world conceptions of aesthetics. Thus, when Greenberg’s theories were rejected by artists and writers, so too was a particular understanding of aesthetics. Costello investigates the historical conditions of this rejection and suggests how Kant’s theory of art might be used to retrieve aesthetics for contemporary debate.

Paul Crowther criticizes the ways in which art has become a primarily managerial phenomenon. He claims that in late modern and post-modern times, art is often reduced to a position of “use.” What artworks mean is determined by critical, historical, curatorial, and administrative interests, which are “parasitic” upon art practice. In this guise, he argues, art has no significant future. To secure a post-managerial future for art he proposes a rediscovery of aesthetics as the rediscovery of the intrinsic value of art and of aesthetic judgments for evaluating the merits or demerits of particular artworks.

Nicholas Davey argues for a rediscovery of hermeneutical aesthetics that examines how meaning shows itself in special ways in our encounters with artworks. He, with Hans-Georg Gadamer, shows how the hermeneutic nature of aesthetic experience highlights the dialectic between “the disclosed” and “the withheld” characteristic of all attempts at understanding and interpreting.

Peter Osborne holds that the recent revival of aesthetics heralds a new openness to some problems posed by twentieth-century art but a foreclosure of others. In particular, he finds a return to Kantian modernism

problematic. He argues instead for a return to a different conception of modernism, one concerned with negation and mediation. Such modernism structures the entire field of contemporary art understood as a field of historically critical practices.

Wolfgang Welsch argues for an “aesthetics beyond aesthetics” because in its institutional form, often universalist or formalist in character, aesthetics has been incapable of doing justice to the singularity of artworks. Invoking Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances,” he claims that there is no essence of art. He advocates the opening of aesthetics to transdisciplinary issues beyond art. Art is still the main interest here, but its analysis now requires the introduction of transdisciplinary perspectives.

Adrian Piper uses contemporary art practice to question philosophical aesthetics. In an unusual move, she juxtaposes Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* with contemporary art practice. She tests the soundness of Kant’s theory against the processes of art production and objects to his claim that intuitive awareness of an object or process does not constitute a form of knowledge.

III. Aesthetics in Artistic and Curatorial Practice

Carolee Schneemann surveys her radical artistic practice from the last forty years to explore complex interconnections between aesthetics, performance, politics, pornography, and censorship. She poses two questions to her own work: To what extent does its erotic content subvert its formal properties? Can its feminist base lend new meaning to existing aesthetic issues? She argues that performance art reconfigures the experience of aesthetic reflection by expanding the boundaries of art beyond the surfaces and frames of modernism. She also reveals how throughout her career censorship has attempted to subject her work to aesthetic constraints with specifically political consequences.

Robert Morris poses a series of questions about the supposed innate nature of aesthetics. Through various authorial voices he interrogates the meaning and truth of aesthetics and brings several deflationary notions of aesthetics into play. In order to open a new adventure of thinking the possible he invokes Analytic Cubism, the readymades of Duchamp, and the work of Jasper Johns and Simone Foti. He holds that rethinking commodity capitalism can lead to a new visual democracy by undercutting the elitism of “high art” in favor of democratic folk art.

Claire Bishop, from a curatorial perspective, explores contemporary art practices under the names of “experimental communities” and “socially engaged,” “community-based,” “dialogic,” “littoral,” “participatory,” “interventionist,” “research-based,” or “collaborative” art. She explores how such practices are linked by a belief in the empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas. Using examples from the work of Superflex and Jeremy Deller, she discusses how such practices engage in a redeployment of aesthetics in social spheres. She concludes that the best recent collaborative art makes both art and collectivity more complex.

Michael Kelly conducts a detailed analysis of Gerhard Richter’s Baader-Meinhof series. He takes Richter’s paintings as pictorial statements about matters of (political, artistic, personal) life and death—matters that anti-aesthetic theorists typically consider beyond the “representational substance” of today’s art. Kelly investigates Richter’s resistance to anti-aesthetic interpretations of his work and explores it as a site of regeneration of aesthetics as a theoretical practice that can explain and support the substantial accomplishments of artistic practice.