

## “A Beautiful Future for Aesthetics: Three Avenues of Progress”

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What is the future of the ASA—and of philosophical aesthetics more generally? Those of us planning to enter the field might be worried. Where is it going? Where *should* it be going? I will make some suggestions about how the ASA can ensure a healthy and beautiful future—both for itself as an organization, and for the future of philosophical aesthetics and philosophy of art. I will outline three main opportunities. First, I will suggest fruitful new directions of research *within* philosophical aesthetics. Second, I will show how the ASA can be fruitful within the academy at large, encouraging *interdisciplinary* work in aesthetics. Finally, I will show how the ASA can spread its wings beyond the academy, *engaging the public* regarding aesthetics. Pursuing any of these avenues helps to ensure a healthy future for the ASA and aesthetics.

What do I mean by a ‘healthy future’ for the ASA? Mainly, I mean a **well-populated** future. This involves, first, *number of members*; the ASA will be well-populated if it has lots of members. But it also means *diversity of membership*. Sherri Irvin has recently shown that aesthetics has a diversity problem, especially regarding publication.<sup>1</sup> The ASA needs active members who identify as minorities in terms of their ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation, and ability status. Besides being inclusive of minority voices, the ASA ought to strive for diversity in terms of disciplinary identification; the ASA will be healthy if it includes academics from outside of philosophy, and non-academics. My suggestions below are aimed at promoting a well-populated future in all of these senses.

These two kinds of population growth—a membership that is both more numerous and more diverse—are mutually supporting. But they also support other crucial dimensions of a healthy future. They support a more vibrant future for the ASA, and for aesthetics generally. And they support an intellectually responsible future. We can’t get aesthetics and art right if we focus only on one tradition of making, appreciating, and philosophizing about art; likewise, aesthetics suffers if it comes only from a single people-group.

### 1. New directions within aesthetics

I will outline three main growth areas within philosophical aesthetics: (1) promoting social and political issues in research; (2) a focus on non-western, non-‘classical’ art; and (3) a focus on non-western traditions of aesthetics.

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<sup>1</sup> Sherri Irvin, “Diversity in Aesthetics Publishing”, accessed February 28 2016 at: <http://www.aestheticsforbirds.com/2014/10/diversity-inclusiveness-in-aesthetics.html>

**New directions in intra-disciplinary research:** *The present:* Philosophy of art has been intra-disciplinary. It has engaged work in metaphysics—think of the sizable literature on the ontology of music. More recently, it engages work in philosophy of perception and normativity.<sup>2</sup>

*The future:* Increasingly, many branches of philosophy are engaging social and political issues. In philosophy of mind, work on implicit bias is a growth field. In philosophy of language, work on slurs is a growth field. In metaphysics, work on the ontology of race, gender, and sexual orientation is a growth field. It is time for aesthetics to engage social/political philosophy in a concerted effort.

Of course, engaging social and political issues is not new in aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> But there has not been a consistent, sustained focus on particular social and political issues. There are several natural lines of research here: What's the relationship between art and implicit bias? Is artistic formalism inconsistent with social efficacy of art? How does art contribute or detract from social inequality? Is Western fine art essentially a means for class-stratification? Mainstream art is connected very tightly in many peoples' minds with the struggle for social equality, both as a negative and a positive force. Think of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, or the issue of diversity at the Oscars last spring.

There are three ways that ASA can promote social/political work in aesthetics: (1) by promoting workshops on this topic at national and regional conferences, both at the ASA and the APA; (2) by promoting smaller stand-alone conferences—modest, half-day affairs—on this topic in major metropolitan areas; and, (3) by sponsoring larger conferences on this topic. These conferences could take one of two formats: they could either (i) feature aestheticians as presenters, who raise social-political issues from the direction of aesthetics; or (ii) feature both aestheticians and social/political philosophers as presenters, who raise issues from both directions.

**Moving beyond the traditional boundaries of the field.** In tandem with an increased engagement with social/political issues, aesthetics—where it deals with art—ought to move beyond its traditional boundaries of application. Much philosophy of art focuses on western 'classical' fine art-music.<sup>4</sup> For example: despite the plethora of literature on philosophy of music, there is very little attention devoted to music outside the western 'classical' tradition.

*Moving beyond a focus on western 'classical' artworks.* First, research in contemporary aesthetics will benefit from more engagement with contemporary art. The contemporary art-world is changing rapidly; installation art and sound art are increasingly common in museums, but there is so far very little literature on these art-forms.<sup>5</sup> Since they are different in many ways from traditional art-forms, it's not clear that traditional analyses of art will apply to these art-forms. Philosophers need to be aware of, and learn from, developments in sound art, installation art, and contemporary fine art. Furthermore, and in concert with the last point, much

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Aesthetics and the Sciences of Mind*, edited by Currie, Kieran, Meskin, and Robson (New York: OUP, 2014); see also Bence Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (New York: OUP, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the work of Lydia Goehr, Jonathan Neufeld, and Paul C. Taylor.

<sup>4</sup> Witness the literature on ontology of music, which focuses nearly exclusively on western 'classical' music.

<sup>5</sup> What literature there is often shows that these artforms challenge our understanding of art. See for example Sherri Irvin, "Installation Art and Performance: A Shared Ontology" in Christy Mag Uidhir ed, *Art and Abstract Objects* (New York: OUP, 2011); Andy Hamilton, "Music and the Aural Arts," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2007).

contemporary fine art is political in nature; consider Kahinde Wiley's work. We can learn useful lessons about the interaction between aesthetics and social-political philosophy by focusing on such art.

*Moving beyond western traditions of theorizing about art.* Aesthetics will grow if we learn more not just about other traditions of *making art*, but also about other traditions of *theorizing and philosophizing* about art. Indian aesthetics is a rich tradition of aesthetics, but it is featured very little at ASA meetings. Paul C. Taylor's new book on black aesthetics will hopefully encourage this trend with its engagement of non-eurocentric traditions of art and aesthetics. The time is ripe for the ASA to take explicit, institutional steps in this direction as well, so that philosophical aesthetics is not still marred by a myopic focus on western traditions of art-making and aesthetic theory.

Here are some institutional steps that the ASA can take to extend its range: the ASA can educate aestheticians on non-western traditions of art creation and philosophical aesthetics. At national meetings, the ASA could feature a scholar who can accessibly introduce and interrogate the history of some contemporary art-trend, or some tradition of non-western art. To move beyond western traditions of theorizing about art, the ASA can take formal steps to educate philosophers on non-western traditions of aesthetics. The ASA can promote workshops on black aesthetics or Indian traditions of aesthetics, for example, so that philosophers of art are more aware of the history of these traditions. The ASA can promote sessions on, say, black aesthetics and philosophy of art at the national conference. The ASA could sponsor afternoon-long workshops in large metropolitan areas such as LA and NYC. By actively promoting knowledge about non-western traditions, we can better incorporate those traditions into the field, and inject the field with under-represented perspectives about aesthetics and art.

Of course, the ASA stands to benefit by taking these steps. Increased engagement with social and political issues will be healthy for the discipline. A piecemeal approach that involves only western 'classical' art cannot be fruitful, and it is not intellectually responsible. Indeed, the western high-art trajectory in the literature cannot be healthy for the future of the discipline. Undergraduate students will not be drawn to aesthetics if it does not deal with the kind of art they regularly engage.

## **2. New directions for promoting aesthetics between disciplines**

Aesthetics is an object of research across various academic disciplines: anthropology, social psychology, neuropsychology, art criticism, African-American studies, and sociology, to name just a few. Aesthetics is not the sole province of philosophy. Furthermore, philosophical aestheticians are eager to bring extra-philosophical research on board, but often lack familiarity with other disciplines. The ASA ought to take institutional steps to promote and facilitate cross-disciplinary research and interaction. I will suggest two ways that this can be done.

First, the ASA can help philosophers of art and aesthetics become educated with aesthetic research across disciplines. For example, it could commission "state of the art" review articles from authors in history, psychology, African-American studies, religious studies, disability

studies, for example. In these articles, a noted academic in some non-philosophical area could take a substantial literature in that field, and explain it to philosophers. For example, we could have a sociologist explain research on the ‘omnivore thesis’ in sociology: what lessons have been learned through research, and how this research is evolving. If philosophers know about research in aesthetics from outside philosophy, aesthetics will be healthier, diverse, and more intellectually responsible.

Second of all, the ASA can help to promote an inter- or cross-disciplinary journal of aesthetics. As mentioned above, aesthetics is increasingly uniting various academic disciplines. While much of this work relates to each other, it remains fragmented in its production and dissemination. There is no single venue for discussion that connects threads from these fields. Scholars in one field don’t know the state of aesthetics research in other fields. Given this situation, it seems that a respectable but truly inter-disciplinary journal would be ideal for the study of aesthetics and art.

There is good precedent for this practice. Consider journals such as *Religious Studies* and *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. These are well-ranked journals which unite various disciplines in the study of religion and cognitive sciences, respectively. Given that they have been successful, and given that the situation in these fields is relevantly like aesthetics, it seems that a cross-disciplinary aesthetics journal would be successful.

The existence of such a periodical would be a huge boon to research in aesthetics. And, of course, the ASA stands to benefit substantially in particular from creating, or helping to create, such a journal. It would promote the ASA across several disciplines; it would encourage membership across several disciplines; and it would encourage attendance at ASA meetings.

### **3. New directions for promoting aesthetics to the public**

**Aesthetics is popular.** Americans love art and artists. Most Americans care far more about Kanye West and Taylor Swift than they do about politicians, CEOs, moral saints, or scientists. But, further, many Americans love to think about art. Consider the influx of recent books for popular audiences on the philosophy and psychology of art: Anjan Chatterjee’s *The Aesthetic Brain*, Alva Noe’s *Strange Tools*, Sarah Thornton’s *Seven Days in the Art World*, and A.O. Scott’s *Better Living through Criticism*. Consider the numerous think-pieces online about the music video for Beyoncé’s “Formation”. Clearly, there’s a significant population of people who really care about thinking about art. Philosophy of art is unique among philosophical subfields for having a domain that lots of Americans really care about. If the ASA actively targets this population, it can retain a more substantial presence, and gain more members from outside of the academy.

Here are several ways the ASA can target the public at large:

*Public talks and discussions.* In public lectures the ASA could engage more public and accessible issues of art and neuroscience, art and race, etc. These discussions could involve (say) a philosopher, an artist, and a public figure. By doing this, we can give people the tools to think about aesthetics themselves and thereby promote aesthetics and the ASA. These talks could take place at public libraries in major metropolitan areas.

*Start a YouTube channel, featuring videos on aesthetics produced by the ASA.* The ASA could produce something along the lines of John Corvino's videos on morality, which the APA is now supporting. Perhaps some ASA members, well-versed in technology and production, could put together some smart and snappy videos which explain core questions or issues in philosophy of art. Corvino's videos are excellent examples of how this might be done.

*Applied aesthetics.* Usually, philosophers start by explaining things as generally and abstractly as possible. This means that aestheticians usually start from some general meta-aesthetic perspective—for example, some standard problem or puzzle in the field. In my experience, non-philosophers find concrete cases far more interesting than abstract, general theses or puzzles.<sup>6</sup> To target these people, aesthetics should focus on particular artworks, or particular issues in the art-world, or issues in popular arts. By discussing concrete cases of art, aestheticians and the ASA can better command the attention of non-academics

*Sponsor a high-school essay competition.* The ASA should encourage high schoolers to argue about art and aesthetics. For example, the ASA could sponsor an essay prize for high school students. Perhaps the winning prize could be featured on the ASA website.

#### **4. The importance of a committee for outreach:**

I have suggested ways that the ASA can—and ought to—take concerted, intentional, institutional efforts to promote aesthetics—ways to do aesthetics beyond traditional boundaries of the sub-discipline, to promote it to the academy beyond philosophy, and to promote it beyond the academy to the public at large. If the ASA is to grow, we cannot rely upon the random efforts of its members. If it is to create a substantial impact on these areas, there must be a concerted and intentional effort on the part of the ASA to re-think its mission. To accomplish this goal, I recommend that the ASA form a committee on outreach.

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<sup>6</sup> Again, I take a cue on this point from John Corvino. See Corvino's recent article on applied philosophy: <http://www.philosophersmag.com/index.php/tpm-mag-articles/11-essays/113-applied-philosophy-out-of-the-closet>