

“The Future of Aesthetics and the ASA”

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In this essay I focus on a sub-field within aesthetics, the philosophy of art. While I realize that the field of aesthetics is broader than the philosophy of art, I choose to focus narrowly because the philosophy of art is the discipline I work in and feel most able to comment on. The philosophy of art embraces creativity, expansive thinking, interdisciplinary approaches, and my personal favorite, weirdness, while still adhering to analytic philosophy protocols. To me, this is its biggest asset: the mixture of analytic, clear thinking and expansiveness. Similarly, while art is an historical medium, great artists are often on the forefront—they see what is not yet seen. The philosophy of art should pursue a similar tension between proper attention to the past, and forward thinking across social and political boundaries. I will say more below by what I mean by that. But in brief, I encourage the field of aesthetics to focus more on hiring persons of diverse backgrounds and with diverse interests.

Specifically, the American Society for Aesthetics has a chance to pave the way as folks in many academic disciplines move towards implementing more inclusive, diverse sets of pedagogical practices and hiring more under-represented faculty members. Many sub-fields of philosophy have already begun this process. For example way many departments and sub-fields of philosophy have already tried to attend to the diversity problem is by placing more attention on social/political topics in conference themes. The theme of many recent conferences has been philosophy of race or gender, or the social implications of language. These are important topics that are finally getting their due notice.

Beyond conferences, in ethics, the dominant lines of thinking lately seem to largely include social/political philosophy. In addition, feminist philosophy, the philosophy of language, and arguably even philosophy of mind and metaphysics have trended towards a more political and inclusive sets of views. Academia seems to finally be taking note of the need for a more progressive system, one that is more representative of the variety (race, class, gender, etc.) of folks working academics. Relatedly, students would benefit from being taught by a diverse mix of professors, especially minority and female professors. The field of aesthetics has the opportunity to intentionally hire qualified persons who come from diverse backgrounds and/or can teach non-Western philosophy of art. This in turn will encourage students of diverse backgrounds to join the field.

As it stands, to study the philosophy of art in the West is, for the most part, to philosophically study Western art taught by Western male Professors. This fact changes the way students understand the field. Minority voices have been sorely missed from the Western narrative. As mentioned above, the American Society for Aesthetics should pursue a more inclusive roster of teachers and cross-cultural texts. Many art history departments, for example, offer courses on

Indian art, Chinese art, and Japanese art, just to name a few. In my experience, there has been hardly any mention of non-Western artists or artworks in philosophy of art courses.

Secondly, I see the philosophy of art benefitting from more direct collaboration with film studies programs, fine arts programs, dance programs, music programs, etc. Artists, critics, and scholars ought to cross-fertilize ideas with each other. A great benefit of studying the philosophy of art is its interdisciplinary nature. It is a field with many academic allies. Traditionally, the philosophy of art has not been as interdisciplinary or interactive a field as it could be. It seems many philosophers of art have been hesitant to collaborate with scholars in English or Art History, fields with considerable overlap. This is not at all to say that this sort of dialogue does not happen. But it does seem rare.

I would recommend that increased interdisciplinary collaboration start at a conference and talk level, and then work its way into the classroom. The keynote speaker for philosophy conferences does not need to be a distinguished philosopher. Many artists/non-academics are just as well versed in the philosophy of art as philosophers are. It has been my experience in graduate school that many of my colleagues studying aesthetics are former artists—musicians, dancers, filmmakers, etc. Part of writing well about a specific art form is about knowing the form from the inside. On my view, philosophers can benefit from learning more directly from artists. Moving forward, we ought to invite more artists into our conferences to join in on the conversation. I noticed that the ASA recently awarded \$7,000 to a conference on the Ethics and Aesthetics of Stand-Up Comedy at Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA. This is exactly the kind of interdisciplinary move I believe will strengthen and diversify the field. I hope the program includes some comedians speaking about their work and encourages fruitful dialogue between philosophers and artists.

Another idea to increase philosophers' collaborations with artists involves more philosophical work on and attention towards museums. A project worthy of further study is an analysis of the ways in which how museums are curated and works of art are titled/commented on affect our artistic evaluations. For example, many of the comment placards accompanying paintings leave out details that do not fit into the traditional male-dominated, heterosexual narratives of Western Art. Many women artists have been silenced and underrepresented, not for lack of talent or productivity, but because they do not fit into the story that has been told about who the major players are in the visual arts. A re-working of the placards at iconic establishments like The Metropolitan and The Guggenheim is, at least in part, a philosophical project. Philosophers of language could work alongside aesthetes to design a more accurate, socially progressive understanding of the history of art as well as the ways in which the medium at large is moving forward.

Finally, I'd like to address experimental possibilities for the field going forward. If the social inclusivity and interdisciplinary aspects of my suggestions above are taken into account, the field of aesthetics will be more diverse, more interesting, and more in line with the way our culture is headed. But, then, what is the next step? I suggest a more creative, open-ended writing style become more acceptable in certain cases within discipline. Aesthetics is largely about art. Art is weird, confusing, unfinished, and often experimental. It may be of benefit to aesthetes to incorporate a few of these aspects into their written work. I am not suggesting an overhaul of

analytic philosophical standards by any means. Clear arguments and explanations must continue to be hallmarks of the form. Yet, written work about artwork need not fit in a neat, linear, paper format. Perhaps aesthetics papers would benefit for more inclusion of artwork, more differentiated, non-traditional line-breaks, or more images doing work among text in a paper or in a conference PowerPoint presentation.

I think the field of aesthetics could benefit from embracing its study of art and emulating aspects of artistic practices. Philosophical study of all kinds is a creative pursuit insofar as it requires expansive thinking, bridging gaps, rigorous analysis, and the need for new solutions to old problems. Perhaps there is room in the field to engage with texts and present papers in a less rigidly defined way.

To summarize my suggestions for the ASA moving forward, I believe we need to focus on three key areas: 1. Strongly pursuing diversity among students and professors (with particular focus on female and minority hires), 2. More active collaboration with arts departments and an interdisciplinary focus at conferences, and 3. Staying open to non-traditional formatting in written aesthetics work.