

# What if there were no such thing as the aesthetic?

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What if there were no such thing as the aesthetic? I want to ask this question seriously. My aim is simple but immoderate. It is to leave nothing undone that can contribute to the discrediting of the category of the aesthetic and the aesthetic discourse that sustains and is sustained by it. Nothing worth the having is to be hoped for from the aesthetic.

I want in particular to do three things. First of all, I want to show how regularly unsuccessful attempts are to define the nature of art or of the aesthetic. I want to convince you, though without too much fuss, that attempts to specify what art and the aesthetic are and do turn out to be insufficiently exhaustive or insufficiently exclusive. That is, they all fail to include important forms of activity and effect that bear upon the experience of art, or fail to exclude forms of experience and effect that belong to nonaesthetic experiences.

Secondly, I want to consider some apparently more sceptical, and less essentialist accounts of how the aesthetic is defined, and the consequences of these definitions: institutional and functionalist theories of art, the principal names being Arthur Danto, George Dickie, Pierre Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton. Here, I will consider a special use of institutional arguments to rescue art and the aesthetic as a category in the work of Lyotard. The gloomy advance news is that these accounts turn out to depend on or troublingly to revert to attitudes towards the aesthetic that are just as reified and essentialist as those of serious aesthetic theorists.

Thirdly, having established, I hope, that there is indeed no such thing as the aesthetic, and that it does us no good at all to carry on allowing ourselves or other people to suppose there is, I will wonder what the consequences might be, for thinking about contemporary art and questions of contemporary aesthetics. My conclusions will be deflatingly cautious. I will also risk some generalisations about some more general gains to be had from the withering away of aesthetic discourse. Here I may see more grounds for being of good

cheer.

## The reach of the aesthetic

To what kinds of things do we typically refer when we speak of the aesthetic? I think they can be divided into three, or at a pinch four. We typically refer to aesthetic feelings; to aesthetic qualities; and to aesthetic objects and processes (for all the hoo-hah that there has been about the move away from the aesthetic object, it seems that nearly all the things that could be done and said with aesthetic objects can be done and said in much the same ways with aesthetic processes, however abstract, virtual or immaterial they may be). The difficulty in being sure about what kind of thing we are actually talking about when we are talking about the aesthetic is not the least of the problems attaching to the term.

Here might the place to respond to an objection mounted by John Armstrong when he heard a version of this paper as part of the Formation of Contemporary Aesthetics seminar he mounted for the School of Advanced Study in the University of London. John objected to my continual running together of the aesthetic as a particular mode of judgement, as first substantially defined by Kant in his third *Critique*, with discourses about the essential source or nature or effect of the work of art. It is indeed a surprise for anyone who has heard so much about Kantian aesthetics in the interpretation of works of art to go to the *Critique of Judgement* and find that there is so little there that has to do essentially with art, or indeed, any other recognisably human activity. Kant knows too well, in fact, how crippling such an association would be for his whole argument. His argument is not psychological but transcendental, in that he aims, not to characterise a particular faculty but rather to specify the conditions which would have to be met for it to exist. Aesthetic judgement would have to be that kind of judgement in which no considerations of the significance or purpose or interest of the object under judgement operated, and therefore in which the action of judging encountered itself directly, prior as it were to any kind of contingent circumstance. Kant is, in my view completely unanswerable in this phase of his argument, partly because he is working within so austere tautological a structure. If the kind of absolutely disinterested judgement that Kant thinks there might be were actually to be possible, then it really would have to be governed by the extraordinary restrictions Kant imposes on its

operations. Furthermore, if such a form of judgement were to turn out to be possible, then it would indeed be able to claim universal validity.

John Armstrong's point is that all of this has nothing necessarily to do with judgements relating to works of art. And this is not just an accident: it is necessary, not to say vital, to Kant's purpose that there should be no necessary relationship between aesthetic judgement and the judgement of a particular class of object, since if there were such a necessary relationship, then the action of aesthetic judgement would not be encountering itself alone, but would be being refracted by some alien element. It is part of the meaning of aesthetic judgement that it should have nothing essential to do with art and should be absolutely imperturbable by considerations having to do with art. And this means that John Armstrong is quite right to suggest that I was failing to acknowledge the aesthetic on its own terms in bringing forward the evidence about the functions and understanding of art that I do. The idea of 'the aesthetic', meaning Kantian aesthetic judgement, could never be significantly molested by the evidence of art or the ways in which the discourse of art functions, any more than it could be reinforced by them, since the constitutive irrelevance of such considerations is a necessary part of the coherence of the concept of aesthetic judgement.

I have two replies to this, depending on whether or not one accepts not only a) that the aesthetic would have to be what it is said to be to exist (I don't think anyone can not accept this) but also b) that, bearing all this in mind, that it actually does exist. The first is to say that, since this kind of judgement would have no relevance or interest or bearing on anything else at all, least of all on questions to do with art, truth, value, feeling, or any of the other things to which it is taken to have relevance, then it and those devoted to its characterisation could safely be left to their own, fastidiously fine and private devices. If I am to be told that I must accept the existence of 'the aesthetic' on its own (Kantian) terms, then I am indeed prepared to allow its existence on those very terms – which are that 'the aesthetic' may exist but can have no relevance to anything else but itself. Indeed, I will insist on those terms. What this means, more bargingly put, is that if aestheticians agreed to stay indoors, and keep rigorously out of the way of the rest of us, as the definition of aesthetic judgement seems to me to require them to do, then there is no reason for me to hunt them down or seek their extermination, though plenty of reasons to decline invitations to go round to their place.

But there is another reply possible, which would prise apart the conditions a) and b) specified above. My view in fact is that, given a), b) is not possible, Given the conditions that would have to be met by the thing Kant calls ‘aesthetic judgement’, there could not ever be such a thing. To borrow the elegant and, as it seems to me, decisive formulation of Barbara Herrnstein Smith:

The kinds of purity that Kant’s logic posits as necessary for objective judgements of taste do not, however, appear possible at all, at least not for sublunary creatures...Contrary to the key requirements of Kant’s analysis...our interactions with our environments are always and inevitably multiply contingent and highly individuated for each subject: our “sensations” and “perceptions” of “forms” or of anything else are inseparable from – or, as it might be said, thoroughly contaminated by – exactly who we are, where we are, and all that has already happened to us, and there is therefore nothing in any aspect of our experience of anything that could ever be, in the required sense, pure. [\(ref\)](#)

Kant only makes one significant mistake in the ‘Analytic of Beauty’; it is that, having established with such exemplary and unflinching thoroughness the necessary conditions for aesthetic judgement to exist, he then declares, in one of the most daring and amazing feats of magical *fiat* to be found in all philosophy, that all the things that he has shown would have to be, must *in fact* be. I would prefer to take Kant’s arguments much more seriously than he does himself. Nobody shows more decisively than Kant himself that the conditions required for ‘the aesthetic’ to exist, cannot be met.

Now, as it happens, the kind of aesthetic judgement specified by Kant has become inextricably tangled up for us with arguments about the nature of art. In showing that these considerations inevitably compromise the definition of ‘the aesthetic’, I am not, I think, denying Kant’s logic, but confirming it. The aesthetic cannot exist, because any and every exemplification of its operations (whether in relation to art or anything else) fatally compromises its claim to existence. The instant you take the aesthetic seriously, which is to say, consider it as something that could appear in the life of any mortal creature whatsoever, you have to give it up as a bad job.

So my response to John Armstrong is to say: you either accept that the

aesthetic as defined by Kant has something to do with ideas about art, in which case it cannot exist in the way Kant says it does, or you maintain, following Kant more rigorously, that 'the aesthetic' has nothing to do with art, because it has nothing to do with anything, which either makes it trivial or, again, compromises the claims for its existence.

It once seemed important to be able to characterise a distinct class of feelings or responses that might be called aesthetic emotions. The consensus for a long while was that an aesthetic feeling was a curiously disinterested kind of feeling, a feeling characterised only by its dissimilarity from any of the more familiar states of feeling, all of which are to be thought of as interested in some way or another, or orientated towards the achievement of some kind of gratification or yield. Where other states of feeling installed one in one's world – the world of human needs, desires and interests – aesthetic feeling was supposed to separate one from that whole realm of passions, beliefs, commitments.

It is more common in the history of aesthetic thought however to fuse such reflections with reflections on the kinds of object most commonly believed to stimulate aesthetic emotion. Those objects do not have to be artistic or made objects, but they do seem to have to exhibit certain aesthetic qualities, the most important of which has at certain times been said to be beauty, which has sometimes been defined instrumentally, by reference to its capacity to provoke aesthetic feeling, and therefore tautologically, and sometimes by reference to certain particularised values – especially unity, balance, the cooperation of parts and the whole, and so on. The arbitrariness of this criterion is disclosed from the work of Nietzsche onwards, which begins to persuade many people that qualities of energy and intensity are much more interesting and valuable than qualities of marmoreal repose (the Dionysian over the Apollonian). A certain strain of dominant, but uninspected postmodernist aesthetics has tried hard to sweep away beauty and form in favour of the values of ugliness, deformity, or melancholy dissolution in various sorts of process, event or action. Until the Nietzschean revelation of the delights of the 'sparse, counter, strange', it seemed unthinkable that anyone could base a theory of the aesthetic rather than just a slightly perverse preference on the claims of the unformed or deformed. One might therefore see this as a postmodernist assault upon the aesthetic as such, were it not for the fact that what postmodernism deploys against the Kantian aesthetics of modernism is another version of aesthetics, the

Nietzschean. However, once this view started seriously to be held, it proved extremely difficult to reconcile with the former view, and extremely difficult to know how to mount absolute claims for either criterion. Some works looked beautiful and calm, others were pleasantly tumultuous, neither seemed any more to point to a satisfactory definition of their shared aesthetic nature.

There are, of course, many other candidates for the definition of what art essentially is and does. I will briefly mention some of them.

## **‘Art takes us out of ourselves’**

‘Art...affords us pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent.’ [\(ref\)](#)

‘What we do when our experience is aesthetic retains a common element. We attend to intrinsic features in the belief that this attention will be rewarded by delight. Thus, delight in what resides intrinsically in something is a mark of the aesthetic generally.’ [\(ref\)](#)

‘The paradox of art ‘after the sublime’ is that it turns towards a thing which does not turn towards the mind, that it wants a thing, or *has it in for a thing*, which wants nothing of it.’ [\(ref\)](#)

Art may often do things like this, and creatures like the kind we currently take ourselves to be, may well sometimes find them satisfactory and desirable – though not, I would contend, under all circumstances. For example, there might be certain conditions of depleted selfhood, one might imagine, in which the self may not appear to be such an intolerable burden that to be relieved of its weight is an indisputable good. It is certain that there have been times and places where this value has not had the same force as it seems to for us. Thus, it is no good to base a definition of the aesthetic as such on such a criterion. (Quite apart from the fact that there are plenty of experiences of art which don’t seem to meet these conditions, and plenty of non-aesthetic experiences which do. The response here is usually to suggest that in the first case, we are dealing with art that is not really art, and in the second with a form of life that secretly is.)

## ‘All art is quite useless’

One of the more surprisingly successful definitions of art and the aesthetic to come out of the Kantian tradition is the claim that the aesthetic is that which is useless, and non-instrumental. This makes the aesthetic marginal, so the argument goes, in a grimly instrumentalist world. If the aesthetic is that which is marginal, that which is ignored, left over or set aside as surplus, does that in itself give it value, meaning and power? The irrelevance or marginality of art has often been associated with its autonomy, and its power therefore to stand out against dominant values. This, of course, is the Adorno option, out of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. All art is quite useless, but in a grimly instrumentalist world, this is quite useful. Here is a representative recent sample of this Adornian strain of argument:

The experience of aesthetic negativity is sovereign – not because it is a compatible dimension “in interplay,” interacting with nonaesthetic practices and discourses – but because it is a disruptive crisis...this insight opens one’s view to those contents of the autonomous experience of aesthetic negativity which are sovereign vis-à-vis the nonaesthetic dimensions of reason because they cannot be recognized without being reduced. Aesthetic negativity, taken seriously in its sovereign enactment is in no relationship of interplay with nonaesthetic reason but is instead in a relationship of interminable crisis. ([ref](#))

Marxist aestheticians have a tradition first of all of hugely overestimating the marginality of art in modernity and secondly of identifying that marginality with potency. In fact, art may not now have the same status as the Catholic Church in medieval Europe, but then it never has had. It is far from being considered irrelevant; but, even if it were, this would not make it autonomous. The assumption in this quotation is that art is wholly separate from the world of instrumental reason and calculations of needs, purposes and utility; but that separation is then turned into a significant kind of relation to that world. But irrelevance is not necessarily a relation, let alone a negation. That which is unrecognisable by or irrelevant to a system is not going to throw the system into crisis or threaten it until it has contaminated the system to a degree sufficient to threaten its functioning. It’s not going to threaten the system by remaining outside it and whispering ‘crisis, crisis...’

## ‘Art is special’

The most emphatic argument I know along these lines is put forward by Ellen Dissanayake in her *What Is Art For?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988) and *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (New York and Toronto: Free Press, 1992). Dissanayake argues that suggests that the urge to set things apart from the ordinary run of experience was so compelling in human history, that humans developed a series of autonomous processes for bringing about the sense of the special, and that this is the origin of art.. This would make the aesthetic anything that is held apart as special or *sui generis*. It would be the category of the uncategorisable. It would include or overlap with such instances of setting apart as the sacred, the transcendent and the otherwise unspeakable. The aesthetic would consist in just this capacity to hold life in suspension, to frame it, or hold it at a distance from itself, to create imaginary, or virtual spaces, to make worlds of the as-if. The discourse of the aesthetic would then perhaps be exculpated from the charge of simply inventing what it claimed to describe. The discourse of the aesthetic would in fact have been elevated to the source of the aesthetic itself, and would be the purest expression of the human desire that there should be such apertures of apartness in the world. Considered in this way, aesthetic discourse would become primary, and its objects or occasions merely secondary. The discourse which takes it for granted that such a thing as the aesthetic exists and is to be evidenced by particular works, actions, feelings or qualities, is itself an aesthetic act of *fiat*: let there be art’s power to say ‘let there be.’

Such an account can of course be taken in a positive or negative sense – as either deludedly solipsistic, or as a kind of sanative wishful thinking. The problem with either way of making the claim for art and aesthetic discourse as the special power of declaring and making special, is that there are plenty of other ways of enacting or encountering apartness or uniqueness, the counterfactual fold in the givenness of things – we do this not just when we write a story or go to the cinema, but also through trauma, illness or narcosis, when we fall in love, or go mad, or on holiday, or to sleep, when we masturbate, graduate, or give birth. The capacity and desire to hold existence self-consciously apart from itself is a common and pervasive feature of individual and social life. But it is not possible either to singularise or to generalise the processes whereby we create such forms of apartness. We may want to regularise such processes. Dissanayake thinks



that art comes precisely out the various specialised processes developed by human groups to perform this function of making special on a regular or routine basis – ritual, for example. But she mistakes a specialised function for a special function. There is no special way of setting things apart from themselves that can itself be set apart as a special sort of impulse, organ or behaviour, nor is there any golden thread running unbroken through all the different ways we have had and currently have for creating specialness or apartness. The kinds of apartness we are able to create are different kinds of apartness (not absolutely different, otherwise they wouldn't be comparable enough to be recognised as different in the first place), that stand apart in different ways, at greater or smaller distance, from different kinds of background, more or less sustainedly, and achieved through many different actions and circumstances, including through some of the things that get called art, culture or the aesthetic, but not necessarily involving them at all. Manufacturing out-of-the-ordinary things is one of the things we ordinarily do. Once again, as in the claims for the absolute uselessness of the aesthetic, or the claims that the aesthetic remits the mesmerising hold of our egoity, that which has been seen as a power that is specially active in the creation or response to works of art or artistic of cultural activity proves to be so pervasive as to provide no ground of definition for the aesthetic.

## **Anything can be aesthetic**

Now, I don't have any logical way of proving this next point, and in a way it is important for my argument that there is in fact no purely logical or non-empirical way of proving it: but in lieu of proof I am going to promise you that the more candidates I brought forward for the essential nature of the aesthetic (some more will in fact appear a little later), whether applied to feelings, qualities, objects or actions, the more irresistibly you would feel the tug of the conclusion that there are no essential and invariant features of the aesthetic, and no features that could lead us necessarily to include any phenomenon under the heading of the aesthetic. All the features ascribed to feelings, qualities, objects and actions that are said to be aesthetic are to be found without effort and in abundance in feelings, qualities, objects and actions that are assumed not to be aesthetic. Less damagingly, perhaps, but still tellingly, all experiences of art or aesthetic experiences crawl with discredibly unaesthetic features. Aesthetics has made it its business to try to squeeze these elements out of the aesthetic experience, suggesting that the longing to possess Monet's *Water-Lilies* could have nothing essential to do

with one's pleasure in looking at them, but the more honestly and unflinchingly (which is to say non-aesthetically) one looks at so-called aesthetic experiences, the more vigorously they have to be policed, in order to detect vulgarly utilitarian considerations and escort them from the premises before they can do any damage.

## **Pragmatist Aesthetics?**

I should perhaps protect myself from one misconstrual of my argument. I am not arguing for the wide diffusion of the aesthetic instinct or aesthetic responses. My scepticism about claims for a specifically aesthetic response is based on the fact that I do indeed believe that many of the same kinds of response as are employed when contemplating or consuming works of art are manifested in other kinds of activity. A viewer in a gallery becomes absorbed in the play of light and form of a painting; a child becomes fascinated by the patterns made in a pile of mud, a crossword enthusiast is swallowed up in his problem, I become absorbed in the repetitions of this sentence. I might be more absorbed in the work of art than the child with its mudpie, but I might not, and it is certain that nothing, not the form of the work of art, not its hushed environment, not any form of institutional or conventional pressure can guarantee that my absorption before the work of art will be more encompassing or of a fundamentally different kind than my absorption in other kinds of activity. Becoming absorbed is an ordinary feature of human life; and there is no single, all-purpose calculus that will enable us to take the measure of the completeness or value of different forms of absorption. They will be valuable in different ways according to changing contexts.

In fact, aesthetic theorists have been quick to acknowledge that the experiences they regard as essentially aesthetic are to be found in everyday life. But I find that they typically do so in order to sustain a fundamental distinction between minor and major, nascent and mature kinds of aesthetic experience. You can find bits of the aesthetic experience in the child's relation to its blanket or its cotton-reel, in the attentiveness of someone listening to a joke, or in the mathematician's delight in fractal recurrence, but for aestheticians, these are as it were fragments of the True Cross, scattered and fugitive hints of the true and complete experience of the aesthetic that is to be had only with the best works of art, in which aesthetic

experience is to be found absolutely and unmixed (the absence of mixing is part of the post-Kantian definition of the aesthetic). But when we find someone feeling or behaving like they feel and behave in the presence of works of art, it is not because something of the aesthetic has strayed across from its proper context, or because our essential craving for an aesthetic relation to things is finding infant expression. It is because, given that there are no essential constraints at all on the ways in which we behave or respond with works of art (there are always, of course, constraints, just as there are always interests at work in our response to art, but these constraints are contingent, and not essential: I am writing an essay on this painter, I want to show off in front of my mother, I want to behave properly in the theatre, I want to behave improperly in the theatre, I am in love, my feet hurt, I am a bit drunk), we are likely to respond to works of art in the full range of ways (including therefore all the imaginable ways of being contingently constrained) in which we respond to things both that are like works of art and that are not very much like them in the real world. You can find aesthetic experience everywhere, not because of the leaking of some portion of aesthetic quiddity into non-aesthetic contexts, but because the things that are routinely picked out as constituting aesthetic experience neither originate nor essentially inhere in the experience of works of art at all.

It follows from this, as well, or perhaps it just accords with it, that, just as the aesthetic-type experiences we have in ordinary life are not necessarily weaker or more diffuse than those we have in more credible aesthetic contexts, so aesthetic responses are not necessarily heightened or more complete forms of everyday experiences. This is the prejudice which spoils John Dewey's otherwise generous and (to me) comfortable view, in his *Art As Experience* of 1934, of the continuity of aesthetic and ordinary kinds of experience and his edifying irritation with the spiritualisation of art. He begins well:

In order to understand the aesthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd – the fire engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts. The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the

onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her good man in tending the patch of green in front of the house; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals.

But, even if one leaves aside the hilarious sentimentalising of these examples, there is something ominous in that opening phrase about the aesthetic 'in the raw'. We seem already to be in the world of Yeats's pseudo-recantation of the aesthetic, when he speaks of having to 'lie down where all the ladders start/In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart'. Dewey ends up depressingly with the following questions:

How is it that the everyday making of things grows into that form of making which is genuinely artistic? How is it that our everyday enjoyment of scenes and satisfactions develops into the particular satisfaction that attends the experience which is emphatically aesthetic? These are the questions theory must answer.

Though Dewey makes an heroic and honourable attempt to connect so-called aesthetic values and responses to the values and responses of ordinary, embodied existence. The problem with Dewey's account is that he remains so besotted with the idea that art is a special *kind* of experience, heightened, intensified and somehow more inclusive and complete.

So, although what I am proposing could be described as something like a radical pragmatics of the aesthetic. more might have been expected in the way of intellectual precedents and resources from the tradition of American pragmatics and from contemporary attempts to revive it like that of Richard Shusterman in his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* of 1992.

Surely, I have asked myself, all of this must have occurred to somebody before now? Of course it has, though not usually to aestheticians, whose professional purpose is after all to find reputable ways of keeping such suspicions at bay. One of the most disappointing experiences I had in preparing this paper was in going to read Morris Weitz's notorious paper of 1955, 'The Role of Theory in Aesthetics'. Here, I had been informed, was the most thoroughgoing dismissal of the idea that it was possible to provide any definition of art or the aesthetic. It is true that Weitz does bring forward

some burly arguments of this kind for the first part of his essay. But then he goes and spoils it all when he provides us with his reason why the categories of art and the aesthetic can never be defined. For Weitz finds the cause of the indefinability of art in art itself. Art is indefinable, he says, not because the aesthetic does not exist; it is because it is of the essence of art to be uncontainable by definitions. Weitz concludes therefore, that the aesthetic is not a non-category, but an open category. It was on the rebound from Weitz's essay that I decided on my policy of zero tolerance for talk of the aesthetic.

## **Institutional theories of the aesthetic**

It has occurred to some that it would make more sense to think of the aesthetic as a category more like that of 'weeds' than of water-lilies: a psycho-social rather than a natural category (my example is borrowed from John Ellis). Weeds are plants we don't like in the places where we particularly would prefer them not to be. It has been suggested that the aesthetic, or versions of it, such as the category of 'literature', consists of works and feelings and qualities that we do like – that we do invest with a certain kind of value, in certain kinds of preferred context. If literature is just what gets taught, in Barthes's handy pocket definition, then the aesthetic could anything that got discussed under the rubric of the aesthetic. The category of the aesthetic is what Searle calls an intentional category, one in which our judgement as to the nature or value of the things subsumed in the category is a defining component of it. The aesthetic would thus resemble the category of 'nice weather'. This sounds more alarmingly solipsistic than it turns out to be. Though in principle according to my definition, absolutely anything could get counted as the aesthetic, in practice not everything does. So this does not mean in itself that the category of the aesthetic is an empty category, for there are indisputably plenty of things to occupy it: indeed, it is of its essence that there should be things to occupy it and thus prove its naturalness and necessity. Just as there are indisputably such things as dandelions and clover, rain and snow, there are also such things as operas and action paintings, and it is, one must concede, handy to have words available to refer to these indisputably existing things, rather than having to gesture at them in mute outrage or rapture. But this line of thought does suggest that whenever we cogitate upon the nature and the possibilities of the aesthetic, or of aesthetic discourse, there might be advantage in acknowledging that we are in part discussing the nature and effects of our

own acts of description and ascription.

This outlook on things has produced in analytic philosophers of the aesthetic what has been called the institutional definition, as it is identified in the work particularly of Arthur Danto and George Dickie. In 1964, Arthur Danto declared that ‘To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of art history: an artworld.’ [\(ref\)](#) Ten years later, in his book *Art and the Aesthetic*, George Dickie framed a tighter, and somewhat chillier version of this definition:

A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld). [\(ref\)](#)

One of the objections to the institutional definition of art is that it assumes that the artworld really is an institution like other forms of social institution, capable of producing and policing forms of thought. However, it is quite easy to rescue the institutional hypothesis if one substitutes the idea of an ideologically-formed and sustained *aesthetic disposition* for the influence of a specific institution. The importance of a more diffuse kind of aesthetic disposition has become particularly apparent in the era of art’s immaterialisation and has probably moved into the space previously occupied by what people used to call ‘aesthetic emotion’. It used to be that a work of art would have to conform to certain generic or conventional expectations (rhyme in poetry, resemblance in painting, melody in music). Modernism dissolved these expectations, substituting the requirement of negation and innovation, but stabilising the work of art around its material ground or embodiment; one could be sure that a painting was, at least, unassailably and invariably the result of pigment applied to a flat surface, just as writing would be inescapably an act of inscribing words, and making music would be a matter of combining sounds. Inevitably, the material instance of the work has itself been subject to erosion, in various forms of intensification of the modernist logic of privation; in the art of the happening or event, or the unrealised concept, or the virtual art of the network, there is no single or permanent inscription or instance of the work. If there is immaterialisation through temporal evaporation – the event is always on the point of passing away from existence – there is another kind of immaterialisation through enlargement; in a hypertext, there is no text that

all readers can have and hold in common, because there are too many texts; in an open or unconcludable work – Brian Eno’s automatic composition that would take a hundred years to unfold, there is no apprehension of the whole of the work that could be complete. In neither case is there a possibility of a space of encounter between the work and its reader or viewer or audience.

For Jean-François Lyotard, this immaterialisation is to be accounted for in terms of the aesthetics of the sublime, an aesthetics organised not around the contemplation of anything that could be unambiguously given to experience and judgement, but around the call of a certain question, the question of the *what is happening?* It is clear that for Lyotard, the aesthetics of the sublime has become aesthetics as such, in the form of an outlook, disposition or mode of attention. Not only is there no necessary kind of object available for this mode of attention to be attentive to, the very question of the availability or not of an object is what forms an aesthetic mode of attention, which is actually supposed to work against the tendency of the artworld’s institutions to instance and institute. This anti-institutional definition of the aesthetic, which piggy-backs on the purely classificatory part of the definition of the aesthetic to produce an evaluative account (Lyotard is fond of telling us that there is no way of passing from description to evaluation without violence or arbitrariness, but he is adept at making the passage himself.) Art and the aesthetic is to be found wherever art is under threat or in question. Whenever you catch yourself asking ‘is this art at all?’, you can be sure that it is. For such a definition, the gap between the aesthetic and the artistic is a positive advantage.

A similarly subtle move is apparent in the account of literariness supplied by Jacques Derrida. The literary is that which poses or causes to be posed the question ‘Is this literature?’.

## **The exclusionary hypothesis**

Lyotard’s aesthetics of the sublime and Derrida’s aesthetics of indeterminacy are closely related to what might be called the exclusionary hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, art and the aesthetic have no substantial existence in and of themselves, but are given such existence, precisely by being systematically undervalued or overlooked. It can be readily agreed that the activities we classify as art have tended in some



quarters to be regarded as less and less important and prestigious. This argument needs to be treated with some scepticism, of course. The very period in which art has been disadvantaged – in which artists have struggled to retain their pride and self-esteem in a world taking less and less notice of them unless they can pay their way or produce saleable goods for the market, has seen the growth of aesthetics, the most extraordinarily improbable theories of anything that human beings have ever come up with. In so far as aesthetics has exerted a considerable force in the material world, aesthetics provides ample compensation for the disadvantage suffered by art. But, this is to the side of what I would want to be my main argument, which is that, even if it could satisfactorily be shown that art and the very idea of aesthetic work and feeling had indeed been subject to inattention or vicious persecution, it would not be for reasons that required the attentions of a qualified aesthete. The fallacy here is the suggestion that art is systematically ignored because of its secret essence, rather than for a host of more various and contingent and various reasons, which may well vary from context to context and from instance to instance. A multinational company may exert pressure on a regime to make hard for a writer who protests against their exploitative presence in her country. Another culture might systematically discriminate against certain forms of artistic activity because it favours efficiency and sees artistic activity as self-indulgent and wasteful. Those concerned to preserve the possibilities of art in inhospitable circumstances would do much better to figure out why art seems undesirable and insignificant in those particular circumstances than to assume a) that the most salient thing about art is its essentially aesthetic nature; so that b) it must be the specifically aesthetic things about art that get up the noses of the authorities, or make art seem redundant or irrelevant; such that c) the essentially aesthetic features of art – which are an irritation or an irrelevance – can be turned against the very forces that exclude art and *on the same grounds*. It's difficult to know where to begin unpicking this farrago. One might object to it simply in terms of the feebleness of its announced strategy. If it is indeed true that art is excluded by capital because it is irrelevant or non-instrumental, it is going to do no good at all to rub the noses of our newly-globalised Josiah Bounderbys in the non-instrumentality of art. It's only because art and the aesthetic are acknowledged or suspected of having a kind of higher instrumentality already that their non-instrumentality can be so triumphantly flourished.

## **Functionalist theories of the aesthetic**



In Dickie's hands, the institutional definition of art is merely classificatory and not evaluative. It just aims to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to count as art. If I say that this definition tells us little about what art does for you, or is good for, this is no failing on Dickie's part or cause for triumph on mine, because he doesn't set out to do this. Nevertheless, others have wanted to press this further to investigate the ways in which the institutional definitions of art in fact do significantly relate to what art is able to do, and what it is good for.

It would be perfectly possible to accept the factitiousness of the category of the aesthetic, to enjoy the collapse of all its grounds and guarantees, and yet to insist that the aesthetic has a call upon our serious attention, simply by virtue of the fact that it has had a determinate history and that that history continues to exert a powerful pull in the present. We need not be a Harold Bloom to argue that Shakespeare has a special status in cultural history, just as he does in traditional literary study (though it is a different special place of course). He has this place because historians cannot simply pick and choose: they must weigh the *is it happening* against the *it has happened*. Shakespeare, like Plato, Homer and Mary Wollstonecraft, just happen, ineluctably, to have happened. The cultural history of Britain is not intelligible without some account of the place in it of Shakespeare and of the aesthetic values that his work and reputation have been made to subserve.

Such a view of the aesthetic is often thought not properly to belong to aesthetic discourse itself. Functionalist accounts of the aesthetic have enjoyed a degree of respect over the last couple of decades. According to functionalist accounts, the point of the aesthetic as a category, and the activity of categorisation that it enables, will lie in the other things that the categorisation causes to happen or happen through it. On this kind of account, the aesthetic is there to pacify, distract or stupefy; for Adorno (sometimes), it functions a little like religion, to suggest that there could be another world, a World of the Blessed in which essence and accident, totality and particular would no longer be at each other's throats. Or the aesthetic is there as a displacement of other concerns, a kind of doodle-pad or dreamwork in which social issues and anxieties which for often obscure reasons cannot be addressed directly, can be worked through and resolved (or, more often, left hanging exquisitely in the air).

Pierre Bourdieu has offered the most austere economic view of the

functions of the aesthetic. For Bourdieu, the aesthetic is a kind of sorting mechanism, supplying an apparently neutral grid on to which distinctions of class power and privilege may be mapped. '[A]rt and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences', he writes. Bourdieu's paradoxical reading of the aesthetic which suggests that it is the very functionlessness of the aesthetic as a category which is the key to its function as a mechanism of cultural differentiation and exclusion.

As John Frow has pointed out, Bourdieu's account, though certainly the best and most meticulously substantiated of arguments that we have for the social function of the aesthetic, is deeply flawed by its monolithic understanding of the nature of the aesthetic. Frow argues that Bourdieu first acknowledges the dominance of the idea of an aesthetic disposition based upon a Kantian aesthetics of disinterest and distance. He then equates this model of the aesthetic disposition with a certain class experience, since the aesthetic disposition 'presupposes the distance from the world... which is the basis of the bourgeois experience of the world'. [\(ref\)](#) This allows him to read the struggles over classification with respect to works of art and cultural forms as a direct index to class structure. As Frow observes, the problem with this argument is that it essentialises both aesthetic and class identity (it is plain that Bourdieu thinks the realist aesthetic characteristic of working-class response to art is truer than the formalist aesthetic of the bourgeois). Frow finds two forms of essentialism in Bourdieu's argument. Firstly, Bourdieu assumes that distinct sociological groups have singular forms of 'class experience'. Secondly, he assumes that there is a single form of aesthetic predisposition operating within a particular class experience. Frow does not say this, but one might want to argue that the problem comes not just from the stratifying habit of mind characteristic of certain kinds of sociometric analysis, but also from a tendency to accept too readily the dominance of a particular, undoubtedly influential model of the aesthetic, and indeed to assume too readily the existence of a self-consistent realm of the aesthetic as such.

A somewhat different kind of reifying is to be found in Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, a book which offers one of the most thorough and compelling functionalist accounts of the historical workings of the idea of the aesthetic. The very power and coherence of this book is a reason to be suspicious about it. For, like Bourdieu and others, Eagleton falls into the trap

of making the aesthetic seem too substantial and continuous. Unlike Bourdieu, however, he explicitly attempts to go beyond the functionalist account of the aesthetic, but reveals in his remarks about Paul de Man's too absolute dismissal of all aspects of the aesthetic, his own covert aestheticism:

De Man's later writing represents a bracing, deeply intricate demystification of the idea of the aesthetic...In what one might see as an excessive reaction to his own earlier involvements with organicist ideologies of an extreme right-wing kind, de Man is led to suppress the potentially positive dimensions of the aesthetic in a way which perpetuates, if now in a wholly new style, his earlier hostility to an emancipatory politics. Few critics have been more bleakly unenthused by bodiliness – by the whole prospect of a creative development of the sensuous, creaturely aspects of human existence, by pleasure, Nature and self-delighting powers, all of which now figure as insidious aesthetic seductions to be manfully resisted. ([ref](#))

What Eagleton presents as a more flexibly dialectical response to the aesthetic, which can take its good with its bad, turns out to have a much softer inside, in this assumption that the aesthetic maintains a precious link with the *Lebenswelt*, an assumption that stands out stickily and unaccountably against his own functionalist demonstrations of the way in which ideas about the aesthetic have been used to constitute this imaginary sphere.

A rather commoner, broader and less easily demonstrable position than Bourdieu's is the view of art and the accompanying discourses of the aesthetic as mystification or distraction. On this view, art is a fascinating compensation for the miseries and injustices of existence and as such is to be suspected and eschewed. Like religion, art allows obscenely for the possibility of pleasure in the midst of suffering. The Adorno version of this argument routes it through the experience of the Holocaust. We have heard the question framed many times: how is it possible for the camp commandant to have spent his days overseeing the gassing and incineration of Jews and to have spent evenings listening to Beethoven? A situation such as this one is taken, quite rightly, as strong evidence against the doctrine of art's benevolent or humanising influence. But it does not provide very strong evidence for another kind of claim, which it often seems nevertheless to stimulate. For the situation is often read from the other end. It is not just that

art is insufficiently humanising or moralising, it is that by failing to be humanising or moralising, art, or our habits of experiencing art in certain ways, is actually to blame for the wickedness or injustice that it does nothing to prevent. This is a denunciation of art and the aesthetic driven by disappointment; the failure of art to live up to our own (imprudent and improbable) expectations legitimates the angry analysis of art's responsibility for everything against which it fails to offer remedy or protection. 'Poetry makes nothing happen', Auden was writing at the outbreak of the War: by the end of the War it seemed as though it was the very failure of poetry to make things happen that had made the worst of all things happen.

The mystery is why anyone should have expected art to have the civilising or moralising effect that is claimed for it and why it should have taken an Auschwitz to awaken us to the unlikelihood of art's necessarily moral or civilising influence. It's not, of course, that art could never have good effects: it's just that, like everything else, it all depends. Just as the claim that art must *necessarily* have good effects can never be sustained, so, and actually for the same reasons, it is certain that, under certain circumstances, that are easy to imagine if hard to guarantee, art will have desirable influences: it will be able to inform, enlarge, and even ennoble. The reason why art must sometimes be expected to be able to do these things is that there are no satisfactory ways of cordoning art off from a world in which many objects, events and experiences can and do have these effects. Because art and the aesthetic do not exist, it is absurd to blame art and the aesthetic for failing to avert wickedness; because art and the aesthetic do not exist, it is also impossible to protect against the infiltration of the sphere of things we call artistic works or aesthetic experiences by objects and experiences that do or may have morally desirable effects. My point is that we should not expect very much in the way of moral outcomes from discussions of art or the aesthetic *qua* art or the aesthetic.

The problem with these functionalist accounts of art is that they attempt to derive evaluative arguments from classificatory procedures. They not only describe the conditions under which works of art get institutionally and ideologically defined, they also determine the particular kinds of social and ideological work done by the institutional/ideological idea of the work of art. Here, they fall short, at least of what I would like, because, just like the worst kind of aesthete (and in my book all aestheticians are the worst

kind of aesthetician), they reify the aesthetic. There are important differences between Paul de Man, Pierre Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton on the one hand and Monroe Beardsley and Iris Murdoch on the other. Aestheticist aestheticians like Beardsley and Murdoch believe that there is such a thing as aesthetic experience just because there is, while de Man, Bourdieu and Eagleton believe that there is such a thing as aesthetic experience because aesthetic experience is formed and wholly sustained by its institutional and ideological conditions. Because they borrow so much from the tradition they claim to oppose, because they are too ready to see institutional and ideological pressures having made aesthetic discourse into an autonomous 'form of life' (as Richard Wollheim has put it, borrowing Wittgenstein's term ([ref](#))), functionalist arguments take the aesthetic far too much at its own account, typically overestimating the power and coherence of aestheticist thought in ways that are oddly similar to the over-estimation of the aesthetic as a category by aestheticians. In reducing the uses of the aesthetic to this or that function (mystification, legitimation, the maintaining of differences), functionalist accounts fail to get near to the sheer incoherence and unevenness of everyday experiences of the so-called aesthetic. They fail to attend to the failures of the aesthetic to make things cohere, the blatant failure of the aesthetic to work as a model and ideal of ultimate coherent experience. Functionalist accounts are as fixated upon the category of the aesthetic as the essentialist definitions they aim to displace.

## **The fallacy of counter-aesthetics**

The argument that the aesthetic is always, despite appearances, political, leads, not only to particular kinds of historical and political analysis of the ways in which the aesthetic works, but also to recommendations about what alternative work might instead be done with the aesthetic. Indeed, for many, it seems self-evident that the point of functionalist analysis is to change the functions of the aesthetic, or at least make it possible for them to be changed. Unless we recognise what is done to and in the name of the aesthetic, the story goes, we will never be in a position to do anything else with it. Of course, one of the options open to us here is to do nothing further with the aesthetic, in fact to cease to have anything more to do with it. There was a time when I would have regarded this as a risible dream, assuming that there is a mysteriously ineradicable pull towards aesthetic modes of thinking (towards metaphor, narrative, the body, and so forth, which would have tended to count for me at that time as 'the aesthetic') that we could

never hope to escape from entirely. According to this view, the aesthetic can never be entirely beaten back, because, like Japanese knotweed or Hodgkin's Lymphoma, you never know where and in what form it is going to pop up. Nowadays, I think that the idea of encouraging a much more complete discrediting of aesthetic discourse and an attempt to do without it much more completely (though not so much by riskily austere pledges of abstinence as by turning to a whole lot of different tasks and pleasures) has more distinct attractions for me, though it is not quite my purpose at this point in my argument. Rather, I want to try to characterise what is going on when writers and thinkers and artists begin to conceive and recommend different, which is almost always to say, more desirable, more productive, less mystifying or paralysing ways of thinking about aesthetic experiences, qualities, or objects.

Typically, we are attracted by the metaphor of recoding (the metaphor is used in the title of an influential book by Hal Foster. [\(ref\)](#)) Let us take one area of contemporary aesthetic fascination: the body. In one common form, the theory goes like this. The body, and especially the female body, has become the source of fascinated disgust and abjection; it is the opposite of the aesthetic. Women and men who affirm, by contrast, the positive power of the abjected body, aim to turn this negativity into positivity; aim to take the boundaryless, spontaneously combustible, grotesque body of neurotic bourgeois fantasy and affirm it, not as aberrant, but as central, therefore making it a value rather than a horror. To those who condone or countenance counter-discursive strategies in this way, it feels as though it were possible to identify in the body a faultline or Achilles' heel in an otherwise impregnable system. If only one could disconnect 'the body' from previous definitions, redefine it, and then insert it back into the larger economy of representations, then that economy itself would be bound to have been changed in some fundamental and desirable way. Patriarchy has depended in the past upon the disavowal of the female body. Make the female body something to be affirmed, and patriarchy would find that its steering wheel, or at least its gearstick had come away in its hand.

The thinking here is often represented as smartly strategic, but I think it's really just mechanist, by which I mean, of course, magical. The theory seems to be that it is possible to think of systems of meaning as assemblages of entirely separable components, each of which is capable of being re-engineered in crucial ways and then of having crucial effects on the larger

mechanism. The point is that it is not possible simply to extract and recode elements of a social machine and expect the machine itself to remain unaffected by the process. If one succeeds in taking a particular component out – let us call it the body – the whole of which it is a component will already have been changed in such a way that one could not expect to be able to predict how it will function when the component is reintroduced. If I take the loudspeaker out of my hi-fi and use the electrical impulses supplied from the amplifier to sequence the traffic lights in the Holloway Road, I will not have made any significant alterations to the performance of my radio: in fact, I will have made a new sort of machine altogether.

Thus, if I see the value of a certain kind of aesthetic thinking about the body – a Nietzschean-Bakhtinian tradition which values the ecstatic features of bodily experience over the idealised aesthetics of a previous tradition – as lying in the threat it was perceived as having for a certain system of values, it is bad strategy – mechanical or magical thinking – to imagine that, once projected into a positive form, it will actually still pose the threat that it was believed to pose. By the time a Nietzschean-Bakhtinian strain of thought about the body has become plausible, the system of relations will already have changed. A rather similar argument might be applied in the case of what Celia Lury has called the ‘cultural essentialism’ of certain strains of feminism. Feminism has undoubtedly been successful to the degree that it has centred on the politics of culture. Culture became a political issue for feminism when it was recognised that the sphere of ‘culture’ – in the broadest, anthropological sense, I mean – was where women lived – rather than the world of work, science or war. Culture had to be taken seriously, because women were relegated to the ghetto of culture. However, as long as culture retained its minority, it was never going to do any good to use culture itself – cultural forms, cultural study, *écriture féminine* – as a lever, when what mattered was unequal pay and systematic violence against women. Of course, it turned out to be eminently possible for culture to be used for political leverage; and it became possible at the very moment that the analysis which suggested that it was necessary (because culture was demeaningly identified with the female, and the female with culture) no longer applied in the same way. The moment it would have occurred to anyone that it might be possible to use culture as a political way out of the ghetto of culture, the ghetto would already have started to transform itself into a fairy palace of opulence and opportunity.

The point here is that what has been called ‘the aesthetic’ has often been believed to function in just this way; as a central organising principle of a system that, once extracted and re-engineered, could be used to disorganise it. But the aesthetic is not available to be extracted, patched up in various kinds of ways and put back in to do a different kind of work. This is not because the aesthetic has a protean and unpredictable essence, it is because it doesn’t exist at all in any one area, like a pancreas or a gearstick, except in the moments at which it flares into visibility and plausibility under the scrutiny of aesthetic theorists.

## Implications?

What are the implications of the expansion and explosion of the category of the aesthetic as we have seen it over the course of this century?

Undoubtedly, there are implications. but the question of what they are cannot be answered by an aesthetic enquiry, or one that assumes the determining, or even the historically determined nature of the aesthetic. One might have to ask questions framed not within the terms of the aesthetic at all. The historical investigation of the meanings and functions of the aesthetic should not be expected to yield too much in the way of positive predictions about how things are likely to go in a world in which the term comes to lose much of its plausibility and adhesive power. Indeed, it would be surprising and perhaps even illogical for an argument that suggested that there was no necessary form which the aesthetic must take, and no necessary function that aesthetic discourse must fulfil, to suppose that there are any consequences that must of necessity flow from the wide acceptance of this perspective. We might continue to think of the aesthetic as a privileged category, having found different ways to constitute its privilege or special claims, or the privilege of a different class of objects, actions, qualities and experiences, in the teeth even of arguments as irresistible as the ones you’ve been reading here. Or the category of the aesthetic might fade away, the field of human understanding and interpretation slowly being refigured in completely different ways. But whether or not it did would not depend on the nature of arguments mounted from within the aesthetic as such, or within the institutions that sediment its claims. What we do about the aesthetic will turn out to be just as contingent as what we have hitherto done with it



It is tempting to hope that because a climate of experiment with and even hostility towards the category of art has prevailed in the art of our time, that an abandonment of the discourse of aesthetics in the manner I am recommending will attune us more closely to that art, making us better able to appreciate its challenges and renewals. In an age of anti-aesthetics, we need an anti-aesthetics ourselves, that kind of thing. Tempting though this idea is, it is a fondly delusive hope. First of all, one would might simply observe that being able to understand a work of art is by no means dependent upon being in the same ideological boat as it. Secondly, and more important really, we will only be in a better position with regard to contemporary art after talk of the aesthetic starts to seem bizarre and outlandish in the same way as we will be in a better position with respect to all art of all periods – because we will be released from the difficult task of editing out all the things that works of art are and do that are so like what things other than art are and do. We may then be better able to see the manifold resemblances and overlaps between so-called aesthetic feelings, qualities, objects and actions and allegedly non-aesthetic versions of same. To imagine that the dismantling of the concept of the aesthetic might give us a special insight into the nature of certain anti-aesthetic works would be to assume still that the best place to start thinking about contemporary works is the question of the aesthetic. As we have seen, there are plenty of ways in which to maintain the privative nature of the aesthetic by embracing negation, by according a special privilege to the action of self-questioning that goes on in artistic works. But, as the old joke has it, if you want to get over there, I wouldn't start from here.

The tenuousness and tendentiousness of all definitions of the aesthetic is a permanent condition, not a newly-emergent feature of the aesthetic itself. We have certainly become much more aware of the fragility of these definitions and the implausibility of talk of the aesthetic, and some of this uncertainty is no doubt due to certain kinds of debate that have gingerly been broached among philosophers of the aesthetic, as well as within the arts. But this new climate of doubt will probably only make us better at talking about the things previously and precipitately assigned to the category of the aesthetic if we become better at doing without the category of the aesthetic. As long as we carry on trying to talk aesthetically about the impossibility of the aesthetic, we will riding the same rails and alighting at the same stations. What I am recommending is that not repressing our healthy instincts to snort and jeer when we overhear people, or ourselves, using expressions like 'the

aesthetic' will help us to become better at paying attention to the many different ways in which we pay attention to, respond to, and attempt to remake our worlds. Spending less time on the aesthetic, or what we take to be specifically aesthetic questions, might make us better at recognising and describing the mixed, imperfect and impertinent nature of all the kinds of things that we misrecognise as the operations and appearances of the aesthetic; ways of gaining pleasure, ways of complicating and clarifying feelings, forms of communication, ways of educating ourselves and each other. We will get better at swerving round the conceptual gridlocks produced by high-octane aesthetic discourse (my metaphor is taken from bicycling), and we will be less likely to be satisfied with the smeared and bleared accounts of these processes that are encouraged by a world in which the idea of the aesthetic has so much continuing authority.

## **The unavoidability of overestimation**

One of the alternately exhilarating and lowering things about writing this paper has been how much like shooting fish in a barrel it is to argue against the category of the aesthetic. Almost any book or article you pick up by anyone who permits themselves the use of the word 'aesthetic' in their title is going to come up sooner or later with a more or less delirious definition of 'the aesthetic', suggesting that the writer has either never attentively had any experience even approximating to the kinds of experience said to be aesthetic, or has never had any other kind of experience whatsoever. I would be tempted to suspect that the use of the word 'aesthetic' is a mere harmless academic quirk, were it not for this stubborn compulsion to obtuseness that seems to affect everybody who consents to use the term. I concluded that there must be lots of people who found talk about the 'aesthetic' unconvincing and silly; it's just that they never write about the topic of aesthetics. The only people who write about aesthetics are people who think there is something there to write about, and who should therefore be disqualified by their very credulity from doing so. It is this that convinces me, somewhat against my better, milder judgement, to argue for urgent purgative measures with respect to this way of talking. Aesthetics anyone? *Just say no.*

However, it is not possible for me to mount the kind of argument I have here without running the risk of falling into precisely the same kind of

hypostasising and reifying as those I claim I am denouncing. Indeed, I toyed for a while with the idea of offering my own definition of art and the aesthetic, as the very impulse to overestimation itself, but then gave it up, when I realised that it was simply a version of the 'art is special' hypothesis (the impulse to make things special finding its most emphatic form in the desire to make art itself, the mechanism for making things special, the most special thing of all). What if the investigation of the aesthetic were actually a much more various, and a much more particularised pursuit than I have been suggesting? What if 'the aesthetic' were the name of a much more complex and uneven set of arguments, that might be perfectly capable of generating from within its own history and repertoire of problems sufficiently sceptical and corrosive arguments of its own? What if 'the aesthetic' had no necessary relationship to questions of art at all? What if I have been massively overestimating the influence of the abstruse and specialised arguments that so harmlessly and nonculpably occupy aestheticians? What if trying simply to turn the page on the metaphysical thinking associated with aesthetics were itself a metaphysical gesture, doomed to perpetuate the style of thinking it wished to have done with? What if I were to be taken at my own word, and were told that, indeed, 'the aesthetic' as such did not exist, even and especially in the way in which I have had to magic it into existence in order to denounce it with such arrogant relish?

All I can say is, that if any or all of this were really the case, why, then everything will either be immaculately irremediable, or in no need of any remedy at all.