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Excerpt

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PAUL MATTICK, JR.

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## INTRODUCTION

The opposition of "culture" to "nature" suggests the historical character of the former; if nature is that which is given, at least for the temporal span relevant to human experience, culture is that which is constructed, and so maintained, destroyed, or reconstructed by human action in time. And yet human beings have tended to discover in the practices and institutions of the particular modes of social life in which they find themselves universal features of their existence. In Western Europe, and the societies shaped under its influence, it is only during the last several hundred years that the idea has gained ground that history is marked by discontinuities as well as continuities and by the production of new phenomena of social life rather than a cycling through a set of constant alternatives.

No doubt this is in large part because these centuries have seen a social transformation not only profound, and affecting every area of social life, but also extremely rapid and marked by a continuous dynamism: the development of the capitalist mode of production. This was true in particular of the period of revolutionary change – in politics, economy, technology, and modes of thought – that made itself felt, even where its direct effects were limited, throughout Europe in the decades on either side of 1800. It is not surprising that under the tremendous impact of this experience the idea of modernity, as a historical period fundamentally different from what preceded

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it, developed, and with it the beginnings, in Enlightenment thought, of a conception of history as characterized by fundamental innovation.

Though already by the time of Karl Marx's writing this conception could take the form of a thoroughgoing insistence on the historical specificity of the practices, institutions, and modes of thought of different forms of social life, the conventional wisdom even of "modern" society continued to discover in its own institutions essential features of any imaginable society. This prejudice, as Marx proposed, could it seems be overcome only to the extent that present-day society revealed its insufficiencies, its incapacity to solve the problems to which it gave rise, and so suggested the idea (however hard to believe) of its own eventual historical limits.

In this regard the period of the later 1960s has been of particular importance for the intellectual life of the United States and Europe. Although the worldwide eruption of social movements during this time, within a global order then thought to be threatened only by excessive affluence and intellectual conformity, posed no actual challenge to that order, it provided a great stimulus to historical and critical thinking. Not only in history proper but in the social disciplines generally the past twenty-odd years have seen increasing appreciation, among academics and other intellectuals, of the historical character of cultural objects and of the necessity, if they are to be understood, of viewing them within their complex social contexts. This has been reflected also in important work in such areas of study as literary criticism, history and philosophy of science, and art history. Philosophy has been a major exception, remaining an academic field characterized by very little in the way of historical self-consciousness. Although philosophy is largely occupied with the study of historical texts, they are typically treated as if they are the products of contemporaries rather than of participants in discursive contexts that may be quite different from those of the present day.

In particular, as a glance at even recent anthologies of aesthetics or issues of the aesthetics journals will show, the philosophy of art is still basically oriented in an unhistorical, even when nonessentialist, fashion. This can be seen most clearly in the continuing debates about the definition of art; but even historical work (say, on the development of Kant's thought or on the aesthetics of gardens) tends to isolate philosophical writing from its historical context and so confer the appearance of timelessness on its issues. The present

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collection of essays is intended as a challenge to this *modus operandi*. Their authors work with a variety of analytic and historical methods and share allegiance to no particular theoretical outlook, but all rest on the conviction that aesthetic ideas, of the present as well as the past, can be fully understood when seen not only in relation to intellectual and other social contexts but as themselves constructed in history.

The publication of Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in 1750–8 marks, it is generally agreed, the formal debut of aesthetics as an autonomous field of discussion, whose origins may otherwise be traced to British writers earlier in the same century. Insofar as aesthetics is taken to name the theory of art along with the theory of beauty (and allied notions), its starting point could also – as Tatarikiewicz suggests in his *History of Aesthetics* – be dated by the appearance in 1747 of Batteux's *Système des beaux-arts*, which first defined the modern group of fine arts. The eighteenth century is indeed widely acknowledged to contain the origin of what Kristeller called “the basic notion that the five ‘major arts’ constitute an area all by themselves, clearly separated by common characteristics from the crafts, the sciences and other human activities,” a notion that “has been taken for granted by most writers on aesthetics from Kant to the present day.”<sup>1</sup>

The discovery by modern aestheticians of the beginning of their discipline in the mid-1700s, however, is almost invariably accompanied by the identification of an earlier origin in classical Greece. The editors of a current textbook anthology are typical in finding that the central concerns of aesthetics have their starting point, “as does so much in philosophy, in the thought of Plato.” They acknowledge “that Plato held nothing like a modern conception of the arts, and that he identified what we call art with a form of craft,” only to insist that “Plato’s view of poetry and painting as imitative in nature set the stage for practically all discussions of the nature of Western art for the next two thousand years.”<sup>2</sup>

These writers seem not to notice, for instance, that the logic of

<sup>1</sup> Wladyslaw Tatarikiewicz, *History of Aesthetics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), I, p. 4; Paul O. Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts” [1951], in his *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> George Dickie, Richard Sclafani, and Ronald Roblin, eds., *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1989), pp. 1, 5.

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Socrates's argument in the *Ion*, with which their anthology begins, depends on a *contrast* between poetry, a matter of divine inspiration and temporary madness, and *technai* like painting, sculpture, and flute playing, which are subjects to be mastered.<sup>3</sup> Plato does develop his argument against poetry in Book X of the *Republic* by way of an analogy with painting, but it is poetry alone that he wishes to banish from his ideal city, as Alexander Nehamas has pointed out. Further, although poetry is today paradigmatic of fine art, Plato attacks it not as such but for its role in the civic ritual-cum-entertainment that drama was then. In Nehamas's words, "Nothing in Plato's time answered to our concept of the fine arts, especially to the idea that the arts are the province of a small and enlightened part of the population . . . and Plato holds no views about them."<sup>4</sup>

If we turn to the topic of beauty, the other central object of aesthetic theorizing, the story is much the same. As Kristeller observes, this concept "does not appear in ancient thought or literature with its specific modern connotations." In particular, the distinction between aesthetic and moral value so basic to the modern conception is only inconsistently made in Greco-Roman theory, and it is symptomatic that the analysis of beauty from Plato to Augustine and Saint Thomas and well into the Renaissance involves no or little consideration of the arts. As late as 1724, Kristeller points out, de Crousaz thought nothing of substituting a chapter on the beauty of religion for one on music in the second edition of his *Traité du beau*.<sup>5</sup> It seems to be only with the development of the modern category of the fine arts that beauty becomes a properly "aesthetic" concept, with even natural beauty defined by analogy with the pleasure afforded by artworks, formally construed.

But it would also be too simple to say that the appearance of aesthetics was a response to the emergence of the "fine arts." As

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the Greek contrast between art (*techné*) and poetry, see Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980), pp. 73ff.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Nehamas, "Plato and the Mass Media," *The Monist* 71, no. 2 (1988): 224. Nehamas goes on to point out that "part of what makes the fine arts fine" in contemporary culture "is precisely the distance they have managed, over time, to insert between representation and reality"; that is, what is today conceptualized under the name of the aesthetic attitude involved in great part the decline of the mimetic element to which Plato objected (pp. 226–7).

<sup>5</sup> Kristeller, "Modern System," p. 166; see pp. 167–8, 176–7, and 197.

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Pierre Bourdieu has argued, “the work of art exists as such . . . only if it is apprehended by spectators possessing the disposition and the aesthetic competence which are tacitly required.”<sup>6</sup> These spectators themselves had to be produced, and we can see what is now called aesthetics at work in the process by which they were brought into being. That is, art as social practice and aesthetics as mode of talk about it were clearly interdependent in a way to which a phrase like “theory of art” does scant justice. The founding texts of modern aesthetics can be seen therefore as attempts not so much to understand as to aid in the transformation of earlier forms of production into a new practice of art.

We may take as example a text commonly identified as the inaugural work of aesthetics “as practiced by professional philosophers today.”<sup>7</sup> Addison’s essays *On the Pleasures of the Imagination* (1712) were (Martha Woodmansee has pointed out) addressed not to philosophers of art but “primarily to a rising class of bankers, merchants, and manufacturers who had so recently achieved a modicum of the leisure enjoyed by the aristocracy that they were still in the process of developing ways to fill it.”<sup>8</sup> Recommending to this readership such pleasures as those afforded by the visual arts, music, architecture, natural “prospects,” and above all literature, Addison praises the pleasures of the imagination as ones “that the Vulgar are not capable of receiving” and that give the man open to them “a kind of Property in everything he sees” (*Spectator*, no. 411). In this way aesthetic contemplation is promoted at once as a gentlemanly pursuit, a marker of social status, and a training in the experience of individual ownership, all in the general context of an effort to improve the “National Taste” (see no. 409).

The programmatic role of aesthetic writing can be seen as well in a negative reaction that makes clear the historical novelty of locating the essence of aesthetic experience in a liking (to use Kant’s phrase) “devoid of all interest,” and so in sharp contrast with both moral judgments and judgments of utility. As late as 1815 Quatre-

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1987): 203.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Kivy, “Recent Scholarship and the British Tradition,” in Dickie et al., eds., *Aesthetics*, p. 255.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Woodmansee, “Toward a Genealogy of the Aesthetic: The German Reading Debate of the 1790s,” *Cultural Critique* 11 (1988–9): 203–4.

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mère de Quincy objected to the display of artworks in museums on the ground that the removal of works from their original political, religious, and moral uses would lead inevitably to an art “conceived without passion, executed without warmth, and viewed without interest.” The collection of artworks without regard for their social functions could mean nothing “but to say that society has no use for them.”<sup>9</sup> If we think of the eighteenth-century reclassification of the activities and objects that now form the fine arts not as the revelation of a character previously obscured but as the development of new social functions for them, the idea of art’s autonomy, here opposed in a losing rearguard action, can be understood to mark that reclassification itself. It names the new uses these items, removed from their original uses, acquired, as markers of the place of new and old upper classes relative to each other and to those below them, as sites for the formulation of individual and group interests, as embodiments of national history and of individual genius, and as materials for the construction of a mode of sensibility characterized by distance from material necessity and so free to cultivate responsiveness to sense experience.

Did aesthetics, then, truly begin together with art in its modern sense only in the eighteenth century? Beyond being in conflict with the nearly universal understanding by aestheticians of the history of their own field, such a view makes difficult to understand the conviction on the part of eighteenth-century writers on art and beauty that they were continuing a form of discourse practiced by the ancients, as evidenced in their constant reference to the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Cicero, Quintillian, Pliny, and the supposed Longinus as guides in the matter of artistic theory, as well as to ancient works of art as exemplars of artistic practice. And, after all, don’t our art museums count among their treasures Greek pots and Roman sculptures, not to mention Egyptian mummy wrappings and Assyrian bas-reliefs?

The normal solution to such problems is to discern identity of content beneath terminological or even conceptual disparity. Thus we have a form of intellectual history common to many fields: a cultural category is seen as having been originally “embedded” in

<sup>9</sup> Quatremère de Quincy, *Considérations morales sur la destination des ouvrages de l’art* (Paris, 1815; Paris: Fayard, 1989), pp. 31, 37.

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other cultural institutions only to emerge into full view as an area of human practice in the modern period. An example is provided by the history of economics. Schumpeter's magisterial *History of Economic Analysis*, like histories of aesthetics, both notes that economics "rose into recognized existence . . . between the middle of the seventeenth and the end of the eighteenth centuries" and begins its survey with "Graeco-Roman economics."<sup>10</sup> Schumpeter's explanation for the late appearance of political economy as an autonomous discipline points to the allegedly "common" and "drab" character of economic life, which therefore for a long time elicited less specifically scientific curiosity than, say, natural phenomena.<sup>11</sup> Given that economic theory as it developed after 1700 has for primary subject matter the principles of production and distribution of goods in a market society, more plausible explanations point to the laying of the foundations of industrial capitalism in this period.<sup>12</sup> But the belief of economists that their theories represent "more than the laws appropriate to a particular social system"<sup>13</sup> itself rests on the idea that the entities and relations described by those laws have existed in all cultures, in however disguised forms. Economics, in such views, became a science in the modern period because "the economy" emerged from its coverings of religion, politics, or kinship into the clear light of the marketplace.

Similarly, a recent attempt to grapple with the "historicity of aesthetics" describes the career of this field since its Greek origin as passing through centuries when it "took on the garb of whatever philosophy appropriated it, reflecting in turn cosmological, metaphysical, religious, moral, and epistemological theses until, with the Enlightenment, it emerged with an identity more truly its own."

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, ed. E. B. Schumpeter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Eric Roll, *A History of Economic Thought* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1946), pp. 10ff. Roll, whose book is based on the idea that economic thinking is determined by "the economic structure of any given epoch" (p. 4), nevertheless finds in "ancient thinkers . . . the starting point of all social theory" (p. 11). In any case, his approach implies, of course, that every epoch has an *economic* structure. On the history of economics, see Keith Tribe, *Land, Labour and Economic Discourse* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), for an argument that "economics" can really be said to begin only in the nineteenth century, by way of a significant conceptual break from the earlier "political economy."

<sup>13</sup> Roll, *History of Economic Thought*, p. 10.



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In this, according to this author, aesthetics followed the path taken by the arts themselves, which emerged from the integument of political and religious function in the same period. As a result, “when with the eighteenth century the autonomy of aesthetics was proclaimed, it appeared that at long last a major force in social activity – art – had finally achieved intellectual recognition.”<sup>14</sup>

From this point of view, although Plato understood the arts differently from the way we do, his subject matter was nevertheless the same as ours. This is inherent in the very concept of “autonomy,” which suggests the idea of the disengagement of a previous existent from its earlier subordination to other social institutions. (“Autonomy” thus expresses in a positive way what a pessimistic–Romantic view of modernity – Quatremère provides an early example, John Dewey a more recent one – might describe as “alienation,” the removal of art from its meaning-giving relation to everyday life or ritual.) The implication is that the practices of present-day society represent fundamental features of human life, found in all other social systems although only among us freed from obscuring “extrinsic” institutions.<sup>15</sup>

The difference between distant past and present thus takes on the form of points along a history of aesthetic doctrines. Museums have made this manner of considering the past a principle of their physical organization. In the museum (as in the texts of art history) artifacts removed from their original contexts – ritual objects from

<sup>14</sup> Arnold Berleant, “The Historicity of Aesthetics – I,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 26, no. 2 (1986): 102.

<sup>15</sup> “Different forms of institutionalization blend into or arise out of extrinsic institutions such as religious, economic, or political organizations” (Julius M. Moravcsik, “Art and Its Diachronic Dimensions,” *The Monist* 71, no. 2 [1988]: 165). With respect to similar conceptions in political economy, Marx’s critique is basic: “The materials and means of labor . . . play their part in every labor process in every age and under all circumstances. If, therefore, I label them as ‘capital’ . . . then I have proved that the existence of capital is an eternal law of nature of human production, and that the Kirghiz who cuts down rushes with a knife he has stolen from a Russian so as to weave them together to make a canoe is just as true a capitalist as Herr von Rothschild. I could prove with equal facility that the Greeks and Romans celebrated communion because they drank wine and ate bread, and that the Turks sprinkle themselves daily with holy water like Catholics because they wash themselves daily” (Karl Marx, “Results of the Immediate Process of Production,” *Capital* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976], I, pp. 998–9). For an extended discussion of the limits of cross-cultural and transhistorical generalization, see my *Social Knowledge* (London: Hutchinson, 1986).



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early twentieth-century Central Africa, say, or from Renaissance Florence – are assembled together with pictures painted with museum display in mind as examples of “art.” Similarly, the history of aesthetics is constructed by assembling texts of many different types to form a sequence illustrating a narrative. This can be seen most explicitly in Tatarkiewicz’s great *History*, put together out of extracts from classical, medieval, and early modern writings. What holds these pieces of text together as elements of a history is the framework provided by Tatarkiewicz’s relatively orthodox conception of aesthetics, by this means treated as a category applicable to many kinds of writing from a variety of periods and cultures.

To whatever extent the modern system of the fine arts can be traced back beyond the Renaissance to the Greeks (and beyond) or related to the productions of other cultures, such research demands a careful comparative study of changing relationships between practices, classifications of them, and reflexive attempts to understand, evaluate, and develop those practices and classifications. With respect to the effort to analyze the meanings of words like “art,” Raymond Williams has observed that “the most active problems of meaning are always primarily embedded in actual [social] relationships and . . . both the meanings and the relationships are typically diverse and variable, within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change.”<sup>16</sup> However, despite recent bows in the direction of historical thinking, aesthetics has not taken this feature of its subject matter very seriously.

In the continuing preoccupation with the definition of art that has been a central interest of recent Anglophone aesthetics, for instance, attempts to locate essential attributes of art objects or activities have lately given pride of place to explanations in terms of context. By some this context is seen as a set of social practices or institutions, by others as primarily theoretical, with art theory or even specifically philosophy the maker of art. Versions of both approaches may naturally emphasize that art develops in history. But even such views typically hold to the underlying assumption of continuity, justifying the unproblematic use of “art” throughout that history. Though Arthur Danto, to take an eminent instance, is willing to see art as having come, in the present period, to an end, he sees this

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 22.

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outcome as the result of an “internal development” determined by art’s “historical essence” and as leading to a stage of thought “*outside* history, where at last we can contemplate the possibility of a universal definition of art.”<sup>17</sup>

It is no accident that attempts of contemporary aestheticians to comprehend the nature of art so often lead them to examine such test cases as Duchamp’s *Fountain*, Warhol’s Brillo Boxes, and performance art. These philosophical efforts – which themselves followed at a distance the lead of minimalist and conceptualist artists – are responses to a specific development in art history, the phenomenon of the avant-garde, originating in the later nineteenth century and central to the evolution of art throughout the twentieth. This phenomenon involved the posing of challenges to the official and accepted art of the time – challenges made in the name of art itself. Historically these challenges were victorious; impressionism, once shocking, quickly became a successful style, and Duchamp’s readymades had to be manufactured in series to meet the demand of museum collections. This development is not unrelated to the expansion of the sphere of art to include all sorts of objects once ruled outside it: non-European artifacts, so-called folk objects, photographs, and even movies. The attempt to describe this complex historical transformation as finally revealing the key to the nature of art, however, represents on the analytical level the same procedure as that by which the museum by folding the readymade within its embrace removed the sting of its challenge to earlier conceptions of art.

Already twenty years ago, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault pointed out that such categories as “literature” and “politics” – like “economics,” “art,” and “aesthetics” in current usage – are recent ones, “which can be applied to medieval culture, or even classical culture, only by a retrospective hypothesis, and by an in-

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Danto, “Art, Evolution, and the Consciousness of History,” in his *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 204, 209; and see pp. 187–210, where Danto goes so far as to speak of evidence for “something like artmaking” as “part of the human phenotype, doubtless with a basis in the DNA,” for as long as we have archeological records (p. 196). For another example, see Noel Carroll’s “Art, Practice, and Narrative,” *The Monist* 71, no. 2 (1988): 140–56 (in which note the identification of the “core activities of the practice of art,” p. 153, and the admitted “necessity of recourse to certain issues of function” transcending history in the definition of art, p. 155, n. 12).