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Lesson: Notes for an Introductory Lecture

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It all begins with basic materials: cellulose, lipids, proteins, plastics, our physical presence among other physical presences and the sensations those presences produce. The term 'aesthetics' comes from the Greek *aisthētikos*, meaning to perceive, or 'relating to perception by the senses'1 ('perception' from the Latin *percipere*, meaning to 'seize, understand'), thus aesthetics is understanding that arises through the senses (from the Latin verb *sentire*, meaning to 'feel') when bodies come into contact with one another. And so, aesthetic judgment is situated in the world of things, not concepts, and aesthetic meaning is the result of physical experience rather than the 'reading' or 'decoding' of the abstract, symbolic or metaphorical. In short, aesthetics does not produce meaning in the manner language does.

Objects have no meaning in themselves, rather they are prompts for a field of possible meanings that are dependent on context. Meaning often implies something fixed, but in this instance, let's understand meaning as that which arises as the result of an object's exposure to a specific circumstance. That is, objects facilitate certain outcomes rather than contain certain meanings, and each interaction presents the possibility for a range of outcomes to arise that are not wholly predictable. These interactions accumulate over time, thus the meaning of an object is ever evolving. When we assume that objects simply contain meaning, this complex dynamic is obscured.

Aesthetics is a primary form of communication whose effects are material, manifest through the actions and behaviours it engenders. The form of an object dictates how we relate to it and to one another while around it, for example how we treat a person behind a desk differently from one across a table from us. These effects are established through repetition, and these systems become more complex when realized on a societal level where aesthetics serve to indicate an array of nuanced power relations. For example, when we are confronted with a traffic light, a police officer or enter a library, our role within a network of power relations is communicated to us in an instant, and our behaviour changes as a result. These changes are immediate and often automatic or unthought. We perform in radically different and often incongruous ways in different contexts, or to put it more precisely, we occupy different subject positions depending on the context and how we are being addressed. This is how aesthetics is political. It signals our role as members of the polis (the citizenry). It tells us how we are to expect to be treated and how we should treat others. This is what Jacques Rancière was referring to when he wrote of the 'distribution of the sensible', as 'the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it … determin[ing] those who have a part in the community of citizens.'2

But what about art? The most precise thing one could say about art is that it is a discourse about aesthetics staged through aesthetics, and thus has the capacity to both examine and enact the production of aesthetic meaning. Therefore, art is capable of interrogating how aesthetics produces a distribution of the sensible, while also speculating on how this distribution might be transformed or expanded. Like philosophy, which seeks to know knowing, art seeks to perceive

perceiving in its broadest sense. Thus, art must keep this process of perceiving open; it must endlessly defer an arrival at conclusive meaning to maintain its focus on how meaning is established.

One way that art holds aesthetic meaning at arm's length is by making the familiar strange, placing meaning at the horizon, out of reach but still in sight. In so doing, art reflects what it means to be in a world of aesthetics. It affirms that to be human is to be *within* aesthetics, not simply a consumer of aesthetic messages, but within a dynamic system of aesthetic producers. Art requires circulation to keep its object of inquiry present; stasis is its enemy, for its meaning is established through its exposure to a range of circumstances. This transitory nature is what John Kelsey was pointing to when he wrote, 'The gallery is … an activated space where information, bodies, and money are rapidly circulated, and where this power of circulation is momentarily frozen in images and objects.'3 If we fail to realize that the stasis of the exhibition space is momentary, we will see in the exhibition hall what Theodor Adorno punned into existence – the museum as mausoleum – and artworks as *memento mori*. 4 The exhibition hall (whether a museum, kunsthalle, commercial gallery, etc.) is a distribution hub for the work of art, expanding the circulation of artworks through the actions and activities that take place in these contexts (schools serving a similar function), and in so doing, they are also producers of an artwork's meaning.

Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I,* c.1514, engraving, 24 cm × 18.8 cm

Objects are given meaning through use, and over time certain uses become naturalized. Through the accumulation of patterns of use, certain conventions become standardized. Painting, for example, has developed a certain set of base conventions (e.g. canvas, rectilinear form, wall as support, portability). These conventions form the starting point for a dialogue, an agreement regarding the nature of the communication that will be taking place. For example, if a painting has a 'conventional' relationship to the wall on which it hangs, we would be acting in bad faith if we were to discuss the paint on that wall as part of the work. In art, these conventions designate what is inside and what is outside of the work. The boundary between the work and its surroundings is manifest through its adherence to convention.

Conventions arise from the patterns of behaviour that objects encourage, and constitute a tacit agreement between entities engaged in communication. Conventions are thus reinforced over time even as they slowly change form; like a path worn through a meadow, day to day changes are often imperceptible. Convention is necessary, because in order to communicate we must begin with a point of reference, something that we hold between us collectively. But just as convention helps to make actions understandable by identifying them as significant, it also turns a blind eye to things whose significance is emergent or unexpected. Thus we often discount the context in which an artwork is shown and the significance of 'secondary' materials, such as writing about the work, documentation, the artist lecture and so on. Such materials are the chief means by which an artwork enters the public sphere. This is why Dan Graham's comment that works of art only exist once they have been written about and photographed continues to resonate.5 Graham's insight was to see these extensions of the work of art as an essential element of its existence in the world, for how a work lends itself to being photographed, or is available to written description is central to how it is understood, especially to those who will never see it in person (who are in the majority). In this sense, works of art only exist *as art* through their circulation and distribution.

Each aesthetic production is a recombinatory process, a piecing together of fragments taken from elsewhere. Matter is never destroyed, it is simply recycled: the gold filling in your tooth was once at the centre of a star. Likewise, all productions are dependent on the existence of previous productions (one could think of convention as the aggregate of this dependency). The anthropologist and semiotician Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed the *bricoleur* as the model aesthetic producer who 'derives his poetry [*poesis*] from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he 'speaks' not only with things … but also through the medium of things … by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities.'6 In short, the *bricoleur* draws things from her/his surroundings to redirect their circulation through the world. Because they operate under clear constraints, they also present the possibility of alternative productions that could be conceived under those very same constraints. This is how bricolage objects are not only things, but also propositions of a certain ethics of production, indicative of an attitude towards making that privileges transparency and foregrounds interdependency. Thus bricolage is a potent tool for the disenfranchised, since it works against self-validating power by tinkering with established meaning, undermining the myth of its solidity by displaying our ability to repurpose and pervert it to alternate ends.

As Vilém Flusser defines it, communication is 'a process by which a system is changed by another system in such a way that the sum of information is greater at the end of the process than at its beginning'.7 To communicate is to add; there is no communication that is subtractive. While all communication is materially indexed, we do not always know what to look for. Consider an example that Kenny Goldsmith offers in his book *Uncreative Writing*. When one writes an email, a mass of additional information is attached to the text by the email program.

This text is the material trace of the network that distributes the text, and is usually invisible to both the sender and receiver.8 In the act of sending, the message is produced, for it does not exist as an email prior to its being sent. Distribution is always concrete and integral to production. Even the internet, the collective fantasy of a dematerialized anomie, leaves ample physical residue around the world.

Google data centre, Pryor, OK

As Google says, ‘Visit where your computer has already been’.

To this end, what would the pulsing electricity that transmits an email be without the computer or program to receive it? Is there really a clear boundary between these entities? And if not, how would we claim one as the message and the other as mute carrier? If this seems unanswerable, it might help simply to reverse the flow and work against convention. For example, let’s place a digital image into a word-processing program (a computer program acts like a convention). When we open an image file in a word processor, we see a stream of symbols that make little sense. Without the proper interpretive conventions in place, the image is no longer an image, yet the file remains unchanged. And what if once we open the image file in a word processor, we treat it accordingly? What if we edit it and then try to open it within an image application? Small changes enacted within one program create large transformations within the context of another. When these two applications or conventions are read ‘against’ one another, the logic of the image file is partially revealed. But what is this new form that exists between these applications, between modes of distribution? Is it a new possibility or a dead end?

Image file (WB_05613_Framed copy.tif) of Walead Beshty, *White Curl (CMY/Four Magnet: Los Angeles, California, February 27th 2013, Fuji Color Crystal Archive Super Type C, Em. No. 166-016, 05613)*, 2013, colour photographic paper, 129 x 272 cm

Image file (WB_05613_Framed copy. tif)' opened with Macintosh TextEdit

Corrupted image file (WB_05613_ Framed copy.tif')

The notion of critique or negation is a convention borrowed from philosophy; it is part of a language game. Only in a hypothetical world could one object negate or even be 'about' another. This is why negation and critique make no sense in art or in the world of objects; they are conceptual and linguistic operations alone. For example, when Rauschenberg erased De Kooning's drawing, he did not negate it he added to it, placed marks on top of it. The original drawing is still present, both in the object's history and literally within the object itself. The drawing is more than what it was, not less. All activities are additive; this applies even to those actions that seem immaterial such as discussion, which can radically transform the meaning of an object. No one managed to use the transformation that discourse can effect on aesthetic objects more dramatically than Marcel Duchamp. As Thierry de Duve observed, the ready-made put on display the 'pact that would unite the spectators of the future around some object, an object … bearing no other function than that of a pure signifier of *the pact itself*.'10 De Duve is describing the social contract of art, the agreement we tacitly make to contextualize something in a certain way. The ready-made displays the pact that initiates the social relations around an object and the behaviours that ensue. Duchamp showed that this agreement did not require a specific object (which is not to say that his objects were not specific); the object simply acts as a marker of an agreement, a fulcrum around which a particular social organization forms, and meaning arises from how this group makes use of that agreement. All aesthetics are the result of a similar sort of pact, and art is where it is possible to lay that agreement bare.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953, drawing, traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame, 64.14 x 55.25 x 1.27 cm, Collection SFMOMA

Digitally enhanced infrared scan of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953, showing traces of the original drawing by Willem de Kooning

This agreement constitutes the quality of the art object that Rosalind Krauss termed 'exhibitionality'.11 The term 'exhibition' comes from the legal context, from the Latin exhibere, literally to 'hold out' before an authority. And so an exhibition is a presentation to a sovereign power. Once this meant the king, but now it implies the public, a term that capitalist democracies like to keep vague. Art is where this agreement is consciously made, where individuals can step back and consider the aesthetic agreements they engage in on a daily basis and reimagine them. This social agreement is where the politics of the art object lie, defined in the room, not somewhere else but immediately in front of you. Thus the work of art exists in the collective that is constituted through the artwork's existence as a point of reference.

REGEN PROJECTS

Marcel Duchamp, In Advance of a Broken Arm, 1915, wood and galvanized iron snow shovel, 132 cm high

This text, like all texts, conceals its collective nature. While it may be written in a singular voice, it is an amalgam of many entities. The voices of the editors, designers, printers, binders, shippers, shop assistants who sold it to you or the web page you ordered it from are all at work in the text, covered over by inks and varnishes, cellophane and UPC codes. All of these together constitute the meaning of this text. Yet we are taught not to think of all the mediations through which it has passed, changing along the way; we think instead of a single individual addressing us. When we consider that we are actually dealing with an object, an object with a history specific to itself that is comprised by a multitude, we are allowed a possible opening into expansive worlds within worlds.

Some closing practicalities. Art school is an abstraction of the art world, but the world it reflects is not necessarily a contemporary one. Consider these studio critique scenarios: one school founded in the 1980s, another school founded in the 1700s and a third from the early 1960s. Art schools are dispersed around the world like alternate universes, microcosms of the best intentions and the most stubborn biases. One must remember the art school is an artificial scenario, a fantasy, and some are pleasant while others are perversely hellish. Regardless of their construction, art schools reflect possibilities rather than facts. They contain a history of ideas and methodologies that are the product of their axioms; none are accurate, each is a fun house mirror, a distorted schema of the world. They provide a place from which to speculate on what the conditions of being an artist might be rather than a testament to what an artist necessarily is.

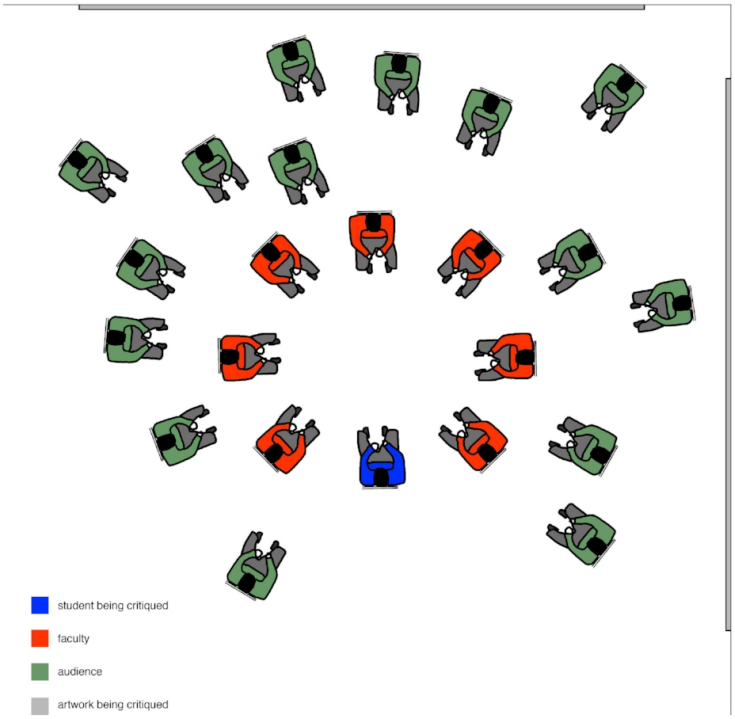

Diagram of critique scenario at Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, CA

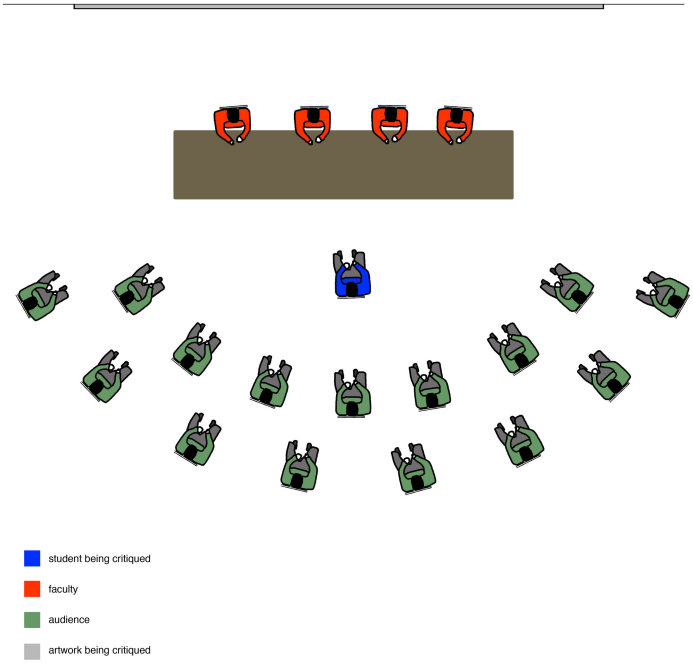

Diagram of critique scenario at Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT

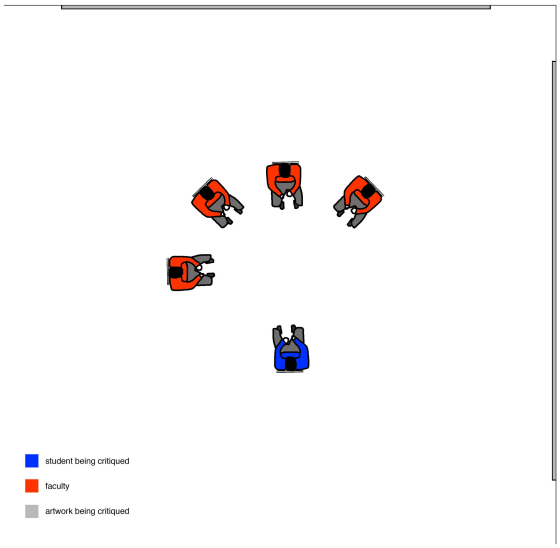

Diagram of critique scenario at California Institute of the Arts, Los Angeles, CA

Remember that the conversation is always changing, and that there are many taking place simultaneously. If none are to your liking, you can easily invent a new one. Also, despite the amount of time wasted on discussing it, the market is not as powerful as some pretend. It does not think or make judgements. It is incapable of representing or communicating complexity. It is furtive, inconsistent and at best one circulation system among many. Those who discuss it with exuberant derision are most often its clergymen, giving it divine provenance and false solidity. The only rule is not to try to outthink it; the market is too stupid to outwit; treat it like the wind.

Speaking of clergymen, self-proclaimed populists who champion themselves as plain-spoken 'tell it like it is' warriors of art appreciation, are not to be trusted. Populism is a code for thinking that people are stupid; the populist critic uses this as an excuse to exercise self-validating authority. When artists are articulate about their work, the populist whines about elitism. Art requires a large investment of time and energy. Its discussion is complex and requires study and expertise. But just because the discussion of art is complex, it does not mean that it is elitist. Doctors are not elitist because they employ complex technical terminology. Art is one of the few disciplines where the claim is made that a complex discourse among its professionals makes its offerings elitist. The problem with this faux issue is that it conceals much more repressive and problematic aspects of art and aesthetics, mostly that access to the commons and to public discourse is almost exclusively mediated by large corporations and the supposedly inalienable right of free speech is often predicated on wealth. The populist critic is often the agent of such monopolies. Approach one of these critics and suggest that the next time they need medical treatment, you will act as their doctor. If necessary, act as their doctor against their will.

Amnesia has its advantages and disadvantages. Get a Whitney Biennial catalogue from twenty years ago, do the same with a twenty-year-old auction catalogue; how many artists do you recognize? Do the same with *Artforum*, and pay attention to names in the ads, both those of the artists and the galleries. Find out who had the cover of *Artforum* the most over its entire history. Have you heard of him or her? Consider all the impending disappearances.

Notes

1. The more common definition, ‘a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, esp. in art’, was adopted into English in the early nineteenth century, having been coined in Germany in the late eighteenth century as ‘concerned with beauty’. This definition refers to the philosophical field of aesthetics. It is not germane to this discussion.

2. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Paris: La Fabrique- Éditions), 2000, p. 12.

3. John Kelsey, ‘100%’, in *John Kelsey, Rich Texts: Selected Writing for Art*, Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw eds. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 19.

4. Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Valéry Proust Museum’, in *Theodor W. Adorno, Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shirley Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967), p. 175.

5. Dan Graham, ‘My Works for Magazine Pages: “A History of Conceptual Art”,’ in Gary Dufour, *Dan Graham*, exh. cat. (Perth: Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1985): pp. 8–13.

6. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 21.

7. Vilém Flusser, ‘On the Theory of Communication’ in Vilém Flusser, *Writings,* Andreas Ströl ed., trans. Erik Eisel (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 8.

8. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York, Columba University Press, 2011), p. 30.

9. See James Glanz, ‘Cloud Factories: Power, Pollution and the Internet’, *The New York Times*, 22 September 2012.

10. Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, (Minneapolis/Oxford, University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 115. Emphasis added.

11. Rosalind Krauss, ‘Photography’s Discursive Spaces,’ in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1985), pp. 131–50.