

Aesthetics and Its Future — Problems and Perspectives

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I.

The reason for dealing with the future of an academic discipline has nothing to do with a wish or need to tell fortunes. In the case of economics, the future is, of course, of very specific interest. As a discipline, economics is basically concerned with developing means of predicting economic developments. As we know, this task has not been carried out very successfully lately. Conversely, we have no need to really know what is going to happen in the field of aesthetics, at least not as scholars. Our reason for discussing the future would basically be the fact that this question immediately draws attention to the present state of things — to boundaries, functions, agencies and dynamics within the current physiognomy of the discipline. Only through an analysis of this state can the question of needs and future trends be dealt with properly.

It is certainly no secret that the field of aesthetics might be more adequately characterized in the plural, as several different fields. Some of these fields conceive themselves as arising from and embedded in their very own traditions, rather often not even interested in or capable of entering into a dialogue with other traditions, although these refer to the same concept at least at headline level. To really understand what is going on within the discipline or disciplines of aesthetics, one must look back and investigate how these different traditions and understandings were founded, how they were developed, and how they have been interacting over the course of history. In other words, the question of the future engenders the question of the past. Of course, the history of aesthetics cannot be understood or told in a few words in a presentation like this.

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Still, it can be roughly outlined and told in what has been termed a “reconstructive re-description” (in another context by Richard Shusterman¹). So this is what I will try to unfold in what follows, my point of departure and purpose still being the question of the future of aesthetics.

II.

As we know, the term aesthetics was invented by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten during the 1730s and developed in his *Aesthetica* (1750-1758).² In the years to come, the term and the discipline spread in Europe at an astonishing rate considering the technologies for information exchange at that time. For instance, a chair of aesthetics was established at the University of Copenhagen as early as in 1788. This, however, does not imply that the discipline as such was unambiguously defined and delimited already at that time. On the contrary, Baumgarten’s definitions and reflections themselves were rather loose. Not even his own immediate successors, such as G.F. Meier (1718-1777), were especially true to his ideas. The most prominent and influential further development of the concept of aesthetics in Baumgarten’s own age was signed by Immanuel Kant.³ Despite the huge differences between Baumgarten and Kant, in particular regarding Kant’s emphasis on the judgment of taste and on reflexive relationality, Baumgarten and Kant actually do agree about certain decisive, fundamental properties of the concept. They both conceive of aesthetics as a broad concept, especially in terms of comprising more than just the reflection upon art. Furthermore, they both basically see the aesthetic as something connected to a specific kind of relation between subject and object concerning a certain kind of experience or perceptive mode.

¹ See Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth. Dialectics of Criticism and Culture* (Ithaca; Cornell UP 2002), esp. pp. 202ff.

² Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Theoretische Ästhetik. Die grundlegenden Abschnitte aus der “Aesthetica” (1750/58)*. Übersetzt und hrsg. von Hans Rudolf Schweizer. Lateinisch-Deutsch (Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1988); *Ästhetik 1-2: Teil I-II, §§ 1-613 u. §§ 614-904* Lateinisch- Deutsch. Übersetzt, mit einer Einführung, Anmerkungen und Registern herausgegeben von Dagmar Mirbach. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner 2007).

³ Above all in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft. Werkausgabe Band X*. Hrsg. von Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp 1968 (1790)).

The invention — or the discovery, as some would put it — of the aesthetic is essentially an integral part of the ongoing eighteenth-century formation of the Modern in its widest sense. This process is above all a process of establishing distinctions, of dividing society (and social signification as a whole) into different areas with distinctive rules for the internal and external exchange of meaning. The autonomous field or system of art — the term now being used as a collective singular comprising the singular art forms — is conceptually completed at roughly the same time as the invention of the concept of aesthetics (as we have learned from, among others, Paul Oskar Kristeller⁴). This conjunction is neither coincidental nor void of consequences for the interrelationship between art and the aesthetic in the process that followed.

III.

In early Romanticism, the interrelationship between art and the aesthetic underwent a radical transformation which came to influence the further development of aesthetics as a discipline dramatically and decisively in the centuries to come. The new constellation may be described metaphorically as a “marriage” between art and the aesthetic, as I have shown elsewhere.⁵ Whereas in Baumgarten an experience of art and artworks clearly forms part — but not the only part — of what is conceived of as aesthetic perception and appreciation, early Romanticism establishes a kind of symmetrical alliance between art and the aesthetic, among other things including the fact of shared borderlines. Symptomatic in this respect is the famous *Älteste Systemprogramm des Deutschen Idealismus*, “The Oldest System Program of German Idealism”, a fragment written by Hegel, Hölderlin or Schelling in 1796-97.⁶ In this fragment it is stated that beauty

⁴ Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts”, in *Renaissance Thought and the Arts*, Coll. Essays (Princeton: Princeton UP 1980).

⁵ Morten Kyndrup, *Den æstetiske relation. Sansoplevelselsen mellem kunst, videnskab og filosofi* (København: Gyldendal 2008); “Art Theory Versus Aesthetics. The Story of a Marriage and its Decline and Fall”, *Perspectives on Aesthetics, Art and Culture*, ed. by Claes Entzenberg and Simo Sääntelä, (Sthm.: Thales 2005); “Aesthetics and border lines: “design” as a liminal case”, *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 35. (Sthm.: Thales 2008).

⁶ “Oldest System Programme”, see <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Hegel,+Georg+Wilhelm+Friedrich/>.

shall become the idea to unite all ideas; the aesthetic act becomes the highest achievable act of human reason and the one to unify the true and the good. The emphasis on *truth* here is decisive, and truth does indeed become the cornerstone of this new relationship, of this marriage, between art and the aesthetic. According to the fragment, poetry should be considered the teacher of mankind. Only poetry shall survive all sciences and arts.

A couple of decennia later, in Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, aesthetics is defined as philosophy of art, *tout court*. But this is to be understood in a very specific sense. In the monstrous historical and systematic architecture of Hegel's aesthetic thinking, once again poetry is the art form representing the highest achievable historical level of development. And why? Because, as it is stated, only in poetry has the spirit been set free, is no longer restricted by "*das äusserlich-sinnliche*", by the sensuous element, by the surface.⁷ The highest level of art is the level at which art transgresses its own status as sensuous and becomes sheer truth — in other words, when art finally becomes philosophy — according to Hegel. Aesthetics thus becomes philosophy of art in the sense that its aim is to extract and expose the truth content of art and art works, their *Wahrheitsgehalt*, as it is phrased later on, for instance by Adorno.⁸ This, indeed, is a somewhat paradoxical approach, since the task of aesthetics is thus transformed into going behind or beyond what seems to be the most immediate and important property of its object: its sensuous quality. Still, this paradox, resting on a delicate balance of symmetry and asymmetry between art and aesthetics, lays the ground for a very strong alliance, a "marriage", in which the transactional axes are capable of keeping the relationship alive. The price for keeping this alliance going has, however, been high. In certain respects this "speculative tradition", as it has been called by Jean-Marie Schaeffer in his severe critique of it, may have been extremely damaging to art itself by making it — in Schaeffer's view — "ec-

⁷ Hegel, G.F.W., *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I* (Frankfurt am M.; Suhrkamp 1986), p. 123.

⁸ Th.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 9. Aufl. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1997). See also Albrecht Wellmer "Wahrheit, Schein, Versöhnung. Adornos ästhetische Rettung der Modernität", *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne. Vernunftkritik nach Adorno* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1985), pp. 9-47.

statically cognitive”⁹ And in this continental tradition, aesthetics — still according to Schaeffer — has ended up depriving itself of any credibility as a scholarly discipline by insistently conflating descriptive and evaluative approaches.

Damaging or not, aesthetics in this continental sense became an integral part of the art system’s self-understanding and thus its self-defense — in other words, part of its ability to recreate itself, of its *autopoiesis*, as it has been termed by Niklas Luhmann.¹⁰ In this sense, the alliance implied immediate mutual advantages to both art and aesthetics — to the latter, for instance, that of being included in the distinct aura of autonomous art and consequently set free from basic purposive rationality — *Zweckrationalität*. — as well as from scientific objectivity. Conversely, this alliance has certainly entailed problems. While the accusation that it literally ruined art may be somewhat exaggerated, aesthetics in this continental tradition has most certainly engendered a series of problematic and obscure interrelationships and borderline quarrels within aesthetics. One is that this aesthetic tradition has produced a chronically problematic interrelationship with the endeavors of the “art sciences” — that is to say, comparative literature, art history, musicology and so forth. Furthermore, aesthetics has developed an increasingly problematic relationship to art itself, especially from the twentieth-century avant-garde and modernist movements and onward. Even its position in philosophy has become increasingly unclear, primarily due to its insistently evaluative approach.

IV.

Of course, many alternative traditions of understanding aesthetics and the aesthetic developed over the two centuries since romanticism. These included several attempts to revive the Kantian understanding of aesthetics and efforts to extend the understanding of aesthetic perception to the

⁹ Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'Art de l'âge moderne* (Paris: Gallimard 1992) — transl. into English as *Art of the Modern Age. Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger* (Princeton: Princeton UP 2000); *Les Célibataires de l'art. Pour une esthétique sans mythes* (Paris: Gallimard 1996); *Adieu à l'esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard 2000).

¹⁰ Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am M.; Suhrkamp 1995).

field of psychology (e.g., Gustav Theodor Fechner's work¹¹). None of these, however, could really match the influence of what is known as the continental tradition in aesthetics. In the light of this influence, it is interesting to note that over the centuries this tradition became still more inadequate and awkward in its relationships both to its fields of objects and to its neighbouring disciplines. To be sure, certain developments in practice and in theory may even be interpreted as rebellions against the continental tradition's dominant understanding of art.

Above all, this interpretation (as a rebellion) seems plausible concerning the historical changes in art itself, especially in the twentieth century. Whereas the aesthetic understanding of art emphasized the truth content of artworks, art itself seemed to be attempting to escape or resist such an understanding ever more frenetically by producing works that simply could not be perceived adequately within the framework of this paradigm of truth content. This is, of course, in particular true of the historical avant-garde's (and in a broader sense modernism's) radical questioning of almost any thinkable traditional category of art understanding: the very concept of the artwork as an entity, the form/content distinction, the status of "style", craftsmanship as the exponent of mastery/genius and so forth. What kind of privileged truth would the *Gehalt* of a readymade be? In what sense would a Dadaist performance contribute to a distinctively deeper insight into the spirit of mankind? Or, later on, how could the sheer doubling of everyday phenomena in what was called *Sozialplastik* in itself represent some elevated truth about everyday life? Of course, certain occurrences of the avant-garde (e.g., surrealism) might in some sense fit into the cognitive paradigm of continental aesthetics, and surely twentieth-century art as a whole may be interpreted as deeply *reflexabhängig*, that is to say, dependent by negation on this paradigm. Art is becoming increasingly busy investigating above all art's own nature, and thus turning art, as it is put in Schaeffer, into something "ecstatically cognitive", deprived of any sensuous quality.

However, notwithstanding an understanding of the historical changes in art as an open rebellion or just as an alternative line of development, the

¹¹ See for instance Gustav Theodor Fechner, *Zur experimentalen Ästhetik* (1871); *Vorschule der Ästhetik I-II* (1876).

representatives of this paradigm of aesthetic understanding fell short of possessing explanatory force and of offering an adequate understanding of what was at stake in contemporary art. A prominent example is Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno's rejection of, for instance, jazz music *tout court* and of Igor Stravinsky's work as kitschy non-art.¹² Concurrently, alternative understandings were developing in the "art sciences departments", most often detached from the departments of aesthetics, which in turn belongs to Philosophy. This of course is another long story, but to make it short, the wish and need for an adequate understanding of modern art gave rise to a theoretical development which was above all based on various understandings of artistic significations as *acts* rather than as stable containers of truthful meaning. Rooted in phenomenology, in early formalism and in structuralism, pragmatism and semiotics, the second half of the twentieth century would eventually offer theoretical and analytical tools and devices from, for instance, theory of reception, enunciation analysis, advanced narratology, performative aesthetics and so on. One would even encounter the term *Rezeptionsästhetik*, a somewhat pleonastic designation compared to the original endeavours of early aesthetics. But this time it came from 'below' and was rooted in the art sciences, in this case *Literaturwissenschaft*. However, the more these new ways of approaching and understanding artworks became adequate in terms of their power of explanation as regards art, the less they could be fitted into the understanding of art in continental aesthetics as above all a distinctively privileged emanation of truth.

This state of non-adequacy became obvious and increasingly intolerable also to philosophical aesthetics itself. Over the twentieth century quite a few new traditions in aesthetics appeared, mutually different but united in their critique of the basic paradigms of the continental tradition. The analytical tradition, especially strong in the Anglo-American area, is of course one prominent example. But also on the continent broader concepts of the aesthetic were developed. The 1992 conference *Die Aktualität des Ästhetischen* in Hannover became a real confrontation between the existing tradition and efforts to renew and broaden the concepts. Karl-Heinz Bohrer's famous words in the inauguration address may stand as

¹² Th.W.Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (Tübingen: Mohr 1949).

a monument of that discussion: “Ein Terror liegt über dem Land: Die Akzeptanz des Ästhetischen”, he said.¹³ Efforts to establish a somewhat secularized aesthetics, an aesthetics capable of understanding, for instance, contemporary society’s obvious thorough *aestheticization*, were here interpreted as *Terror*. Indeed, this is quite an astonishing term, but symptomatic of the intensity of the discussion, which has reigned ever since, especially in Germany. Today we meet different outlines of broader concepts in, for instance, the work of Martin Seel, Gernot Böhme or the now US-based Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht.¹⁴ The French-speaking area has seen similar changes in the conceptualisation of the aesthetic. Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s harsh critique of what he calls the “speculative tradition” has already been mentioned. But one might also point out endeavours as different as Thierry de Duve’s re-injection of Kant “after” (in a double sense) Duchamp, Jacques Rancière’s re-interpretation of the political versus the aesthetic (*très à la mode* right now), or Gérard Genette’s interesting cool-minded analysis of the aesthetic as purely relational.¹⁵

Returning to the question of the future of aesthetics: Are we not on the whole in a privileged situation, given the many current fruitful endeavours, given the thorough critique of obviously obsolete alliances, and given the productive attempts to bridge old gaps between approaches of the art sciences and of philosophical aesthetics, respectively, and the unfolding and self-understanding of art? The answer to this is both yes and no. It is “yes” in the sense that this settlement is highly necessary and certainly

¹³ *Die Aktualität des Ästhetischen*. [Der Kongress „Die Aktualität von Ästhetischen“ 2.-5. Sept. 1992...]. Hrsg. von Wolfgang Welsch in Zusammenarb. mit Ivo Frenzel (München: Fink 1993). See herein Karl Heinz Bohrer, „Die Grenzen des Ästhetischen“.

¹⁴ Martin Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2003); Gernot Böhme, *Ästhetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre* (München: Fink 2001); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2004).

¹⁵ Thierry de Duve, *Nominalisme Pictural. Marcel Duchamp, la peinture et la modernité* (Paris: Minuit 1984), *Au nom de l’art. Pour une archéologie de la modernité* (Paris: Minuit 1989), *Du nom au nous* (Paris: Éd. Dis Voir 1995), English translation/reworking *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT 1996). Jacques Rancière, esp. *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La fabrique 2000). Gérard Genette, *Loeuvre de l’art. La relation esthétique* (Paris: Seuil 1997). In English as *The Aesthetic Relation*, trans. by G.M.Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1999).

contains inspiring, path-breaking and promising approaches. But unfortunately the answer is “no” in a couple of other respects: one is related to the fact that although several new approaches are at hand, in many ways they are still astonishingly different; the other is based on the fact that the older traditions are seemingly still alive and even very strong in some places, especially the continental tradition including its confluences and confusions of evaluation and description. And although divergences, quarrels and debates may be pertinent, often useful and even indispensable to a scholarly field, this is not necessarily true of every disagreement. In the case of aesthetics today, the quarrels seem to include very fundamental issues, such as the discursive status of the discipline, its primary tasks, and its position in the disciplinary landscape. These are issues actually pertaining to which playing field you want to choose. Decent conflicts provide shared playing fields. Different playing fields very easily make any discussion downright counterproductive — and may lead to nothing but the construction of closed camps — that is, to exclusively private battlegrounds. Private battlegrounds may be nice to have for the owner and his crew, but they are of little interest to anyone else.

V.

So, the really interesting question would obviously be: Is it possible to find and define a joint battleground or playing field like this? Or, if we leave behind the metaphors of fighting and game-playing: Is it possible to agree about certain fundamental delimitations, within the framework of which at least the most important traditions and initiatives in aesthetics today could consent to work, not “together” in terms of everybody agreeing about everything, but as part of a joint endeavour where we agree on how and when to disagree within aesthetics as one discipline? No one can actually know whether this is possible or not. But one might point out certain core issues to start out with in order to achieve this goal. Once again based on the historical reconstruction, I would propose three key problems or areas to be worked out as a precondition for establishing a common playing field. Areas to be cleared up, if you wish.

First, the relationship between art and the aesthetic should be thoroughly redefined. The old-fashioned (and conceptually obsolete) marriage

between the two should be terminated and replaced by a modern *concupinat*, based on distinctions and mutual respect rather than on resemblances and ownership. In other words, it is important to acknowledge that the territories of art and the aesthetic, respectively, have different conceptual modes and therefore do not share borderlines. The distinction should thus be based on the fact that any artwork may be aesthetic in the sense that it may be part of an aesthetic relation. But on the other hand, an artwork's "aestheticity" is not exhaustive of its properties as a whole: an artwork (like any other artefact) has other qualitative dimensions, which may be studied as such in their own right. Similarly, aesthetic relations and aesthetic value are not to be found only in connection with artworks. So design, nature, in principle everything which may be perceived as addressing us by establishing a relation of this distinctive aesthetic kind, may be or become "aesthetic". As Wolfgang Iser has put it recently, the aesthetic may be understood as a "modelling operation".¹⁶ Or, as Gérard Genette writes in *La relation esthétique*, the aesthetic is "not dispositional, but resultative".¹⁷ To spell it out: The field of the aesthetic is neither smaller nor greater than that of art, which in turn is neither smaller nor greater than that of the aesthetic. They are just different, one pertaining to a certain mode of perception and the other to a certain discursive area. This of course should be worked out thoroughly.

The second, closely connected issue is the question of *where* to find the aesthetic. Is aesthetic value absolutely relational and exclusively singular? Or is it object-bound: inherent to certain objects which are thus in possession of "aesthetic quality"? The answer is neither the one nor the other, but both, although in different modes. Real — or realized — aesthetic value is relational and does include a judgment of taste in a Kantian sense. But artefacts, including artworks, may be construed as possessing potential aesthetic value as a function of their embedded, "enounced"

¹⁶ Wolfgang Iser "Von der Gegenwärtigkeit des Ästhetischen", *Dimensionen ästhetischer Erfahrung*, hrg. von Joachim Küpper und Christoph Menke (Frankfurt; Suhrkamp 2003), referring to W.C. Wimsatt "Generative Entrenchment and the Developmental Systems Approach to Evolutionary Processes", *Cycles of Contingency: Developmental Systems and Evolution*. Ed. Susan Oyama, Paul E. Griffiths, Russell D. Grayms (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT 2001).

¹⁷ Genette, *op.cit.* 1999, pp. 10-11.

enunciation.¹⁸ This potential or embedded aesthetic value may be analysed and discussed, just as implied effects of reception can be. So the answer could be that the aesthetic is here *and* there, but in different modes of existence — this of course needs to be investigated further as well.

The third issue, then, would be that of the status and task of the discipline itself, especially concerning the question of value. Not many would disagree that the aesthetic is about the ascription/engendering/perception of a certain kind of value. But what should the discipline itself do? Should aesthetics *represent* aesthetic value, serving as the Supreme Court judging the amount and quality of aesthetic values in relations, artefacts or whatever? Would a scholar in aesthetics be the person especially trained to pronounce privileged aesthetic judgments, and the discipline thus one that acts, so to speak, as the correlate of ordinary people's everyday aesthetic judgments? Or, conversely, should aesthetics rather be the discipline *studying* the pronunciation of aesthetic judgments, their mechanisms, history, importance — in short, the engendering and effects of aesthetic value, parallel to the study of any other existing phenomenon in the world we live in? Or to put it in another way: Is the task of aesthetics cognitive in the sense that it investigates a phenomenon in order to achieve knowledge about it, exactly like any other human "science" (as we call it on the continent), knowledge that can also be shared and explored in other contexts? Or is the task of aesthetics basically evaluative, the purpose of which is to distinguish between levels of aesthetic quality? This question is unavoidable because it touches upon the very criteria of pertinence for the discipline's achievements. Of course, scholars of aesthetics may and will pronounce aesthetic judgments — everybody does so all the time. And when we are acting as, for instance, art critics, the pronunciation of judgments is the very purpose of our professional activity. But as soon as we start claiming that we, *qua* scholars of aesthetics, represent and are capable of pronouncing distinctively privileged aesthetic judgments, we can no longer be viewed as studying these judgments in value-free and objective scholarly approaches. We will have to choose between these approaches.

¹⁸ "Enunciation" refers to Émile Benveniste's work, see *Problèmes de linguistique générale I-II* (Paris: Gallimard 1966-74). For instance herein „La forme et le sens dans la langue“ (Bd. II pp. 215-238; originally published 1967). As concerns "enounced enunciation", see Kyndrup, *op.cit.* 2008, pp. 93ff.

As may be evident from this discussion, in my opinion the blaming — as in Schaeffer — of major traditions in aesthetics (especially the continental one) for having conflated the evaluative and the descriptive is highly justified.

VI.

Returning to the question of the future once again: Let us imagine for a moment that the relationship between art and the aesthetic had been successfully cleared up, thus establishing a broad consensus concerning the field of object, the delimitations and the discursive mode of the discipline, or at least a pronounced consensus on a roadmap for solving these problems. Then one might ask again: Would aesthetics as a discipline have a future? Should it? And if so, why?

The answers to these questions would be based on an examination of at least two major issues. The first is the question of whether aesthetics as a discipline is actually capable of constituting a genuine field of knowledge. The second is the question of whether our world in fact needs this kind of knowledge. Would it be useful to anybody? It shall be noted that these two issues should be examined independently, and that the confirmation of just one of them might be sufficient in order to support a future for aesthetics. In academic history we have examples both of areas which do not constitute genuine disciplinary fields as such — “cultural studies”, for instance — and yet which are cognitively useful, and, conversely, genuine disciplinary fields whose achievements have not at any given time appeared immediately useful; mathematics might serve as an example here.

However, aesthetics, it seems, would hardly have any problems in either of these respects. Of course, there is still a long way to go concerning the status and delimitations of its fields of interest. As mentioned above, the separation from art — and from philosophy of art — seems to be a precondition for establishing real research in art’s distinctively aesthetic potentials and effects. But based on an approach to the aesthetic as a distinct kind of perceptual mode including the engendering of a certain kind of reflexive judgment and thus ascription of value, it should be clear that a discipline studying aesthetic relations in this manner — their specificity,

history, extension, mode of function — might easily constitute a genuine disciplinary field. This of course presumes that aesthetic relations actually can be distinguished from other kinds of relations. But not many would doubt they can be distinguished, even with increasing ease, inasmuch as they form part of modern society's seemingly ever growing differentiation processes. So yes, the establishment of a genuine, delimited field of object is definitely within reach — providing, of course, that a joint, institutional effort to achieve such a disciplinary process of convergence is being made.

The question of usefulness is not too difficult to answer either. The world we live in, our surroundings as a whole are increasingly characterized by having been consciously *formed* to address us, to make us enter into value-based relations. This applies to all kinds of products, from clothes and food to our physical surroundings in the form of architecture, urban space, even the landscape. We live in a world of *design*, in a designed world, in a world addressing us each and every moment. The establishment of aesthetic relations is part of this ongoing invitation to take a stance, to judge and to choose. It is a sociological fact that the extension and importance of judgments of taste are growing, both as concerns their role in our individual lives (and the more prevailing the younger the generation) and their importance quantitatively as well as qualitatively in society as a whole. This process of *aestheticization*, as it is being called, includes of course the mode of function of the mass media — and evidently that of the art world.

It is not difficult to see that if we are to live in an “experience society” like this, we need to understand its mechanisms and ongoing processes. We need to analyse the physiognomy and extension of the process of aestheticization and we need to be able to distinguish between various types of aesthetic and quasi-aesthetic relations. We also need to be able to subdivide these relationalities and to delimit them towards other kinds of relations simply in order to understand the world we live in, its mechanisms, and its impact on socialisation, on individual identity, on creativity, and on the quality of our lives in a general sense. These needs are definitely reason enough for the “usefulness” of aesthetics as a discipline. And yet there is even more to it: This development in our society has turned the creation and spread of aesthetically addressed artefacts in the widest sense

into a very important field economically as well, with the result that the use and distribution of resources within this field is becoming increasingly important, also economically, to society as a whole. Equally important is of course the development of adequate methods for aesthetic production in the widest sense, including methods for analysing the effectiveness and quality of engendered aesthetic relations. All this undeniably calls for scholarly insight into the nature and life of aesthetic relations, and for skills in aesthetic analysis in general.

VII.

The need for and the usefulness of insight into aesthetics in the general sense described above is thus hardly disputable. On the other hand, there would probably be differing opinions about what to highlight on the research agenda. So, to make this discussion of the future of aesthetics more concrete, I shall end this short presentation by proposing two areas which, in my view, would be distinctively productive topics in the current situation of the discipline.

The first topic concerns what is called autonomy of art — in particular as compared to the “autonomy” or specificity of the aesthetic. As I have argued, it is important to distinguish between the establishment of art as an autonomous area or system in Modernity on the one hand and the conceptualisation of a certain mode of perception — the aesthetic — on the other. But just as the aesthetic has been misunderstood in various ways (especially by interpreting it as purely object bound), serious short-circuits are around in the understanding of the historical changes in and the anatomy and function of art’s autonomy. “Autonomy” is often understood in terms of an exclusively thematic category, as an imperative that art must in fact not deal with real-world problems such as political and social matters. So every time art goes social or political or interferes directly in everyday life, it is proclaimed that this is a transgression of art’s autonomy, that art is being brought “back to life” — in other words, the supposed project of the historical avant-gardes pops up again. This, however, is a serious, reductive misunderstanding of the mode of function of art’s autonomy. Art’s autonomy today is by no means restrictive or delimitating

concerning what art could do, where it could do it, and its intentions. Art has no borders “outside” itself; art’s borderlines are far more advanced: they are internal and pertain to art’s mode of function as a producer of meaning. Art’s autonomy implies that whatever art — artworks, artists in the name of art and so on — does is being done *as art* and is understood as art. “Political art” is thus not politics, but art going political. This fact of course represents the enormous freedom of art — and its prison as well. Anyway: the recurring idea that art’s autonomy is coming to an end based on art’s intervention into other life spheres cannot be sustained. From a semiotic perspective, “art” is stronger than ever. It is literally capable of turning shit to gold, absence to meaning, resemblance to difference — as we have seen over the course of the twentieth century. If an adequate understanding of the distinctive anatomy of art’s delimitation problematic is so important to aesthetics, it is because the aesthetic dimension of art is on the one hand of crucial importance in dealing with artworks — and on the other should still be distinguished from art’s “artness”, which includes much more than its aesthetic capacities.

The other topic of specific and current interest concerns the development of tools and methods for analysing the embedded aesthetic “directedness” of artefacts in general. This is a matter which concerns distinctive levels of the artefacts, but which — once again with a primary reference to artworks — does not exhaust their qualitative properties as a whole. In his book on Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze proposes dividing the total amount of relations of any given *énoncé* into three *tranches d’espace* (“slices of space”) — the three of them being in function simultaneously and yet mutually independent.¹⁹ They are referred to as *complementary* (concerning “home” or other discursive fields), *collateral* (concerning semantic or semiotic connections to other artefacts of the same genus) and *correlative*, respectively. The correlative slice concerns the artefact’s relationalities, its specific ways of establishing relations to its own sender and receiver. Aesthetic quality and potentials clearly pertain to the correlative level. Although real aesthetic value is singular and is produced in individual aesthetic relations, artefacts — from artworks to design — are engendered

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze’s re-phrasing of Michel Foucault’s *L’archéologie du savoir* in terms of *tranches d’espace* is to be found in his *Foucault*. (Paris: Minuit 1986), esp. pp. 14ff.

in order to produce certain aesthetic effects. The ability to analyse these is of core importance to aesthetics (both in the macro-perspective of society and in micro-perspectives such as the delivering of useful tools to the sphere of aesthetic production). In this respect, aesthetic analysis also seems to be an obvious locus for fruitful cooperation between aesthetics and, for instance, “art sciences”, art theory, linguistics/semiotics and sociology.

So much for a couple of topics we need to know and think more about. I cannot help concluding this essay by once again emphasizing one approach we do *not* need in aesthetics: the one seeing the discipline of aesthetics as an instance of defining and maintaining norms for aesthetic value. We definitely need to distinguish sharply between the study of aesthetic relations, judgments and values *and* the pronunciation of aesthetic judgments by active partakers in these relations. The task of aesthetics is not to represent aesthetic values, but to study the engendering of aesthetic values (and their anatomy, importance, history and so on). Aesthetics must insist on drawing a clear distinction between its fields of study and its own activity if it is to be taken seriously as an academic discipline. And the future of aesthetics, I believe, is not that of a brotherhood of shared judgments of taste. It is that of a scholarly discipline, the achievements of which are highly necessary for our understanding of the world we live in.