INTRODUCTION

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Why associate aesthetics and contemporary art? Framing an answer to this question depends on addressing both terms. Given the aging of postmodernism as a critical category, and the absence of any plausible replacement for it, the ‘contemporary’ has become the default cultural periodization for the artistically current. It is, however, notoriously difficult to specify the contemporaneity of contemporary art. Nevertheless, notwithstanding reservations about its suitability, ‘contemporary’ art has been taken on as the generic name for the post-postmodern art that began to emerge in the 1990s but which is only now receiving the serious and sustained theoretical attention that it demands if it is to be taken as a critical, rather than merely a journalistic or curatorial, category.¹ But can ‘aesthetics’ be of any use to us here? Isn’t it the case that the ontological grounds of art after modernism – an art after Minimalism and Conceptual art – consists, following Hal Foster, in being ‘anti-aesthetic’, renouncing the conjunction of aesthetics and art, dispensing with Greenberg’s late insistence that ‘art and the esthetic don’t just overlap, they coincide’?²

The beginnings of an answer might be outlined by pointing to the fact that a conjunction of art and aesthetics does not imply a coincidence and, moreover, never did. Kant argued that if an aesthetic judgment were to be qualified by the concept ‘art’ it would becomes a logically conditioned judgment, and thus no longer purely aesthetic. Hegel famously pointed out the inadequacy of the term aesthetics for a discourse on art.³ Thus we need not wait for Judd to declare that a work of art ‘needs only to be interesting’ in order to recognize that aesthetics and art do not sit in harmonious relation.⁴ Following Adorno we can observe that ‘art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived.’⁵ However it is a mistake simply to invert formalist modernism’s error and to oppose an intransigent anti-aestheticism to aestheticism. Taking such a strategy – one that can plausibly be associated with the discourse of
postmodernism as it developed in the visual arts – unwittingly confirms formalist modernism’s error while mistakenly believing it has overcome it.\(^6\)

The aim of this book then is to investigate what aesthetics and art might have to do with each other in the contemporary moment, to interrogate the character of their conjunction. Doing so, however, means more than reconsidering the relation between two fields. Rather, as the assembled articles demonstrate, this also implies rethinking the changing historical character of both ‘aesthetics’ and ‘art’ as well as, concomitantly, the changing historical character of their relation. Grasping the contemporary conjuncture of art and aesthetics is necessarily a historical task.

Such a task is, of course, already under way. Torn between a revival of aesthetics and the persistence of conceptualism, critical writing about contemporary art has come to focus on differing views of its aesthetic dimension. The context and character of these debates has, however, shifted markedly since the 1960s, with changes in art practices, institutions, political contexts, theoretical paradigms and, in particular, with the global extension of the Western art world since 1989. The public sphere on which both avant-gardist and neo-avant-gardist critiques depended no longer exists in a recognisable form. Artists, even when they are making painting and sculpture again, do so from the perspective of the collapse of medium specificity as a legitimating discourse. Significant contemporary art works with the dissolution of artistic limits, acknowledging the challenges involved in so doing. Museums and galleries have long since incorporated art in the ‘expanded field’, such that it is the art institution, rather than any ontological criteria specific to the art work itself, that now seems to ratify art’s status as such.\(^7\) Art no longer sequesters itself from (the politics of) everyday life, or even from the domain of direct practical use, and on the contrary frequently defines itself by intervening, such that instrumentalization, rather than aestheticization,
INTRODUCTION

presents itself as the more significant risk for contemporary practices (as demonstrated by the controversies, already academicized, surrounding Relational Aesthetics).³

Recently then, after a long period of hostility to aesthetics prompted by a mistaken belief in its complicity with ‘spectacle’ and the commercial aestheticization of everyday life, or, more locally, the conservative formulae of reactionary postmodernism, art discourse has reopened to aesthetic considerations. Many anglophone art historians and critics have refocused their attention toward aesthetic aspects of ‘theory’ with Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic regime and Alan Badiou’s inaesthetics arguably constituting something like opposed poles here.⁹ (This is perhaps not before time given that ‘Continental philosophy’ since Kant has been characterized by the centrality of aesthetics to its particular mode of questioning.)

The (re)turn to philosophical aesthetics has prompted several recent edited anthologies of critical work. To name and briefly discuss a representative selection: Peter Osborne’s From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses (2000), acknowledging that contemporary art stands on the ruins of beauty, sought to tentatively reconsider the relevance of the aesthetic, thought as the constitutive excess that marks art of from other forms of intellectual production; Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey’s Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies (2002) examined the dominant aesthetic assumptions that underlie art historical enquiry, enquiring as to whether these assumptions stood up to the challenge posed to them not only by recent developments in aesthetics but also in visual studies; James Elkins’ Art History versus Aesthetics (2006) staged a confrontation between disciplines by bringing ten aestheticians and ten art historians into a roundtable and publishing the results of their extended debate; Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen and Tony O’Connor’s Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy and Art Practice (2009), in contrast,
engaged the overlap between artistic and academic fields, enquiring after the current role of aesthetics within and across them.

This volume also emerges from a transdisciplinary encounter, featuring contributions from philosophers, art historians and artists, all of whom work against narrow disciplinary specialization. The majority of the essays originate in talks given on the occasion of an international conference on ‘Aesthetics and Contemporary Art’ held in London (March 13–14, 2008). The conference was organized as a collaboration between two academic institutions: the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP), then at Middlesex University, now moved to Kingston University London; and the Collaborative Research Centre 626 ‘Aesthetic Experience and the Dissolution of Artistic Limits’ (CRC) at the Free University Berlin. The character of this volume thus stems from the nature of the two institutions and the tone of their collaboration. The CRC is a research centre that brings together a group of scholars from different disciplines including art history, film studies, comparative literature and philosophy. As a whole, it is devoted to exploring the tripartite question of (i) whether and to what degree it is possible to speak of the singular nature of aesthetic experience; (ii) whether forms of aesthetic experience exist that are specific to the artistic realm; (iii) whether forms of aesthetic experience exist that are specific to the individual arts. The CRMEP is the leading centre for postgraduate level study and doctoral research in Continental Philosophy in the UK. Its philosophically informed approach to contemporary art sits within a broader commitment to the field of post-Kantian European philosophy, a position also characterized by a strong emphasis on broad cultural and intellectual contexts and a distinctive sense of social and political engagement. Contributors then based at the CRMEP and included in this book are Peter Osborne, Éric Alliez, Stewart Martin and Luke Skrebowski; contributors then based at the CRC
are Christoph Menke, Juliane Rebentisch, Dorothea von Hantelmann and Armen Avanessian. In addition, this volume includes articles from Sebastian Egenhofer (University of Basel), John Rajchman (Columbia University), Pamela M. Lee (Stanford University), Brian Holmes (independent critic), and the artists Luis Camnitzer and Art & Language. All of the participants share a common engagement in the relation between aesthetics and contemporary art, while approaching this issue from different angles.

The intention of this volume is to investigate contemporary questions by acknowledging the entire sweep of the historical emplotment of art and aesthetics, from the eighteenth century through to the twenty-first. In so doing the aim is not only to consider the ongoing relevance of the aesthetic tradition but also to contribute to the development of that tradition as it evolves, not always in parallel, with the historical development of art. Such a strategy is recommended by the fact that the notion of the aesthetic, which had for many years been utterly dismissed, has returned in unforeseen ways. Consequently, this collection reconsiders the place of the aesthetic in contemporary art, with reference to several orienting themes: aesthetics understood as ‘sensate thinking’; the dissolution of artistic limits attendant upon art’s post-medium condition; the status of post-autonomous artistic practices; the question of exhibition-value; the aesthetics of curation in a global artworld. The organization of the volume follows a simple schema: starting with more general aesthetic problems and moving through to quite specific reflections on the aesthetics of particular curatorial regimes or artistic practices.

In the first essay of the collection a connection can be traced between the origins of the discipline of aesthetics in the late eighteenth century and the present. In ‘Not Yet. The Philosophical Significance of Aesthetics’, Christoph Menke investigates the paradoxical place of aesthetics within philosophy in general, distinguishing ‘a ‘philosophy of poetics’
(the origins of which can be found in Aristotle) from ‘aesthetics’ in order to show how modern philosophy originates with the emergence of the latter. He demonstrates that it is not only the question of aesthetics’ relation to art that needs to be considered but also whether aesthetics can be thought as ‘proper’ to philosophy or, on the contrary, whether it puts philosophy itself into question. As such, Menke’s text, sets out a fundamental problematic inflecting the relation between philosophy, aesthetics and (contemporary) art.

Focusing exclusively on the time frame of modernity, in ‘Aesthetics of Form Revisited’ Armen Avanessian investigates the two constitutive fields of knowledge of the discipline of aesthetics: theories of the production of the various arts on the one hand, and theories of their perception and reception on the other. Rereading the modern history of the complex notion of ‘form’, he discusses the specific interrelation of both fields within modernity, up to and including contemporary artistic practice and theory. Concepts such as Documenta XII’s ‘migration of form’ demonstrate that problems attending the theorization of form which originated at the beginning of modernity are still active today.

The requirement to combine the theorization of art works with the theorization of their reception is also at stake in the essay by Juliane Rebentisch, ‘7 Negations. Against Aesthetic Affirmationism’. Against reductive modernist aesthetics, which she reproaches Alan Badiou for attempting to resuscitate, Rebentisch develops an alternative account of artistic autonomy as occurring between (art) object and (empirical) subject, deploying a renewed understanding of ‘aesthetic experience’ informed by the transgression of the conventions that govern the identity of the traditional art mediums and genres.

Éric Alliez, in his ‘Undoing the Image (Signposts of a research Programme)’, investigates the way in which modern art and the modern idea of art have problematized images, leading to a crisis in the very notion of the image, and
with it the ‘aesthetic’ identity of art. For Alliez, this crisis is constitutive of modern art from Manet onwards but finds its strongest expression in the radical break with the aesthetic image effected by both Duchamp and Matisse (albeit in radically different ways). This break, he argues, constitutes contemporary art, relaunching a conflict around the question of the sensible the development of which he traces in the work of Gordon Matta-Clark.

Making an alternative reading of the aesthetic character of contemporary art, Sebastian Egenhofer, in his essay ‘Aesthetic Materiality in Conceptualism’, takes up questions of materiality, not from a phenomenological perspective but by going back to Kant via Duchamp and several classic minimalist and conceptual artists. According to Egenhofer these artists’ works set up aesthetic experience as the location of a mediation between the sensual and the conceptual, thereby destabilizing the opposition between the two terms.

In ‘The Fiction of the Contemporary’ Peter Osborne addresses the problem of the contemporary as a problem of the fictitious temporal and spatial unity of the present. Arguing that ‘fictitiousness’ or ‘fictiveness’ is a condition of the representation of the contemporary, he draws out the consequences of this condition for art. Osborne’s essay develops this problem at two levels. First, he considers the historical ontology of the art work, understanding contemporary art as distinctively post-conceptual. Second, he examines the fictionalization of artistic authority and the collectivization of artistic fictions in the work of Walid Raad/The Atlas Group (1999–2005), developing a case study in critical canon formation in contemporary art.

The inseparability of the question ‘what is contemporary?’ from the question ‘what is global?’ is at issue in the contribution by John Rajchman, ‘The Contemporary: A New Idea?’. Enquiring as to whether there is or could be a global art history or philosophy, he tracks the development of contemporary art, examining a series of historical ruptures: 1945,
1968, 1989. Rajchman claims that the broad, world-historical development from ‘modern’ to ‘contemporary’ demands a new global history of artistic and aesthetic changes. He argues that this involves posing new questions at once inside and outside Europe and America, in order to determine the particular character of philosophical and artistic ‘actuality’ today.

Also departing from the historical horizon of 1989, Stewart Martin, in his ‘Short Treatise on Art’, insists that in order to ask fundamental questions about the character of contemporary art we must also ask fundamental question about art’s relation to capitalism. Acknowledging the daunting scale and scope of such a project – for both philosophy and aesthetics – Martin nevertheless insists that the magnitude of the question must be acknowledged if we are to address its fundamental character. To this end he discusses art in relation to a currently world-determining capitalism and its putative opposite, namely communism.

Art & Language present ‘Feeling Good: The Aesthetics of Corporate Art’, a polemic against a contemporary art world thoroughly dominated by corporate capital and in thrall to the institutional theory of art. They reflect on the ways in which art institutions do not seem to require a working aesthetics of any kind since they are quite content with the circularity involved in an institutional theory of art which, although theoretically questionable, serves to legitimate their expansion. Challenging the contemporary configuration of the corporate art world while remaining sceptical about ‘post facto intellectualizing in the university’, Art & Language suggest an experiment in what they call a ‘practical aesthetics’ of resistance.

In her essay ‘The Rise of Exhibitions and the Exhibition as Art’ Dorothea von Hantelmann also sets out from the contemporary configuration of the globalized artworld, She tracks the widespread adoption of the Western format of the exhibition and links its success to the proliferation of
Western market ideology characterized by a linear notion of time, the valorization of the individual and the centrality of the production and commercial distribution of material objects. For von Hantelmann, it is a specific format that is now distributed globally, rather than a particular notion of art. Tracing this development back to Minimalism’s situational turn, her thesis sets up a new ontological challenge for aesthetics.

Revealing ‘The Invisible Hand of Curation’, Pamela M. Lee focuses on one of the most successful developments of the Western exhibition format, the biennial. She makes a close critical reading of Robert Storr’s 52nd Venice Biennale and its quasi-Schillerian injunction to ‘Think with the Senses/Feel with the Mind’. Lee examines curatorial practice as an aesthetics in its own right, critically interrogating the ways in which Storr’s aestheticizing rhetoric served to mask the ways in which his Venice Biennale participated in the broader tendency of the contemporary biennial to naturalize the imagery of contemporary geopolitics while neutralizing the art world’s relation to the associated phenomena of globalization.

Brian Holmes examines the ways in which the neutralizing tendencies Lee observes in the global biennial are also at large in the gentrified urban landscape in his contribution, ‘The Rules of the Game: Activist Art in the Creative City’. Holmes examines activist art projects – particularly Eva and Franco Mattes’ Nikeground (2003) – that seek to refuse the increasingly commodified forms of urban experience by grounding a new form of autonomy, not of the art work but of the body politic. Nikeground, for Holmes, is an example of ‘reverse imagineering’, that is the deconstruction of aestheticized control techniques and their reconfiguration as emancipatory strategies engaging people in a direct and transformative relation to the technical procedures that modulate their experience of daily life.

In the last essay of the volume Luis Camnitzer discusses ‘The Two Versions of Santa Anna’s Leg and Other Things’,
telling us the tales recounting the destiny of the famous Mexican General’s amputated left leg. He reads the fetishism surrounding Santa Anna’s leg as an allegory of the history of art and aesthetics alike. The surprising thesis of his contribution is that postmodernism was born in December 1838 and modernism followed a few years later in 1848. Camnitzer’s contribution can be understood as a theoretical counterpart to his artistic resistance against the Eurocentrism of the aesthetic tradition and he concludes by critiquing the character of Milan Kundera’s arguments in defence of a Weltliteratur, opposing, by extension, any parallel conception of Weltkunst while holding open the possibility of a ‘good’ globalization.

The final contribution to this volume mirrors the first in circling back to a specific set of historical problems that are held to inflect the overarching relation between aesthetics and art in the present. All of the contributors develop original ways to interrogate the character of the conjunction between these two fields and, in so doing, demonstrate the ways in which their relation remains at stake and, moreover, of signal importance as we attempt to specify what is at stake in the ‘contemporary’.

NOTES
3. ‘These lectures are devoted to Aesthetics. Their topic is the spacious realm of the beautiful; more precisely, their province is art, or, rather, fine art. For this topic, it is true, the word Aesthetics, taken literally, is not wholly satisfactory, since “Aesthetics” means, more precisely, the science of sensation, of feeling.’ Hegel, Aesthetics: Lectures of Fine Art, Vol. 1, trans. T.M. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p. 1.

