

7. Conference of the Bavarian American Academy:

The Power and Politics of the Aesthetic in American Culture

Amerika Haus München, June 9-11 2005

[The conference program is listed below.]

The aesthetic is back on the agenda of cultural criticism. During the last decade, a number of important studies have set out to reexamine the role of the aesthetic in art, culture and society.

Reassessments of Aesthetic Theory

Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) offers an extensive Marxist comment on the history of the aesthetic as a key concept of bourgeois society. In the enlightenment period, art attains autonomy from church and court and becomes a self-referential commodity. With the constraints to signify in a closely regulated discursive space no longer operative, art celebrates its materiality, and plays itself off to the recipient's sensuality without demanding a distinct and definite cognitive interpretation. For Eagleton, it is this siting of art in a discursively underdetermined space where the recipient is allowed to engage in a self-indulgent play with his or her perceptions and fantasies that made it a privileged topic of moral philosophy. For aesthetic experience allegedly provided a more complete view of the subject as a free and self-governing agent than an observation of the subject's practical activities, which find a limit in natural facts and the will of others. By defining the beautiful as a harmonious mediation between bodily sensation and conceptual thought brought about by the imagination, Kant took aesthetic judgments as the basis of a sympathetic intersubjectivity, since these disinterested judgments are based on subjective, yet universal responses to formal qualities of the object. Eagleton interprets idealist philosophy as effectively treating aesthetic experience as a process of self-discovery and self-discipline, since it amounts to a refashioning of the subject from the inside when imagination fails to produce a schema in the encounter with the sublime and the subject discovers itself as origin of moral law. Since for Kant aesthetic experience also proves the ready availability of things for the human intellect, Eagleton maintains that the resulting notion of "the world is uniquely ours" reflects the standpoint of consumption (92). Idealist philosophy is effectively foreshadowing postmodernity, in which art loses its elated status of signifying freedom, and aesthetic experience becomes a pervasive cultural phenomenon, extending its sway over cognitive and moral discourses. Postmodern consumer culture destroys difference between high and low art by treating both as commodities fashioned to different tastes; for Eagleton, the widely diagnosed aestheticization of politics is a phenomenon that includes recent cultural critiques of canon-formation that seek a symbolic redress of social ills. While he treats the ideology of the aesthetic as a corollary of capitalism, Eagleton wishes to uphold the notion of subjective freedom as a necessary critical concept.

Against the backdrop of the American "Culture Wars," Wendy Steiner, in *The Scandal of Pleasure* (1995), makes a passionate plea for public recognition of what she describes as the "aesthetic paradox," i.e. the double reference of art both to reality and to itself as artifact. In an effort to bypass the stale juxtaposition of differing politics of representation, Steiner argues that art produces a virtual cultural space that allows the reader or spectator to "understand without assenting, to go over to the other side and still stay home, to be violated and yet in control" (212). Steiner grounds her argument in a brief characterization of art as iconic: any artwork establishes a relation of similarity (to reality) and at the same time signifies itself and creates a "magic circle" around itself. This contradiction leads to a categorical confusion in the recipient, which in turn becomes the pre-condition of aesthetic experience as a mode of enjoying or resisting the virtual power of art. Aesthetic experience, for Steiner, is an intense moment of confrontation with oneself and one's relation to others, as art "dramatizes to us what we like and care about, and how we relate to others who are moved the same way or not" (211). Steiner celebrates affective reactions of pleasure and pain, both as moments of lived intensity and as moments of instigating reflection; individual responses to the aesthetic

may thus be seen as providing a platform for an encounter with social and cultural otherness that transcends the clichés of cross-cultural perception.

American Perspectives

While views on the role of the aesthetic in the US differ widely, they all testify in various ways to the continuity of liberal aesthetics. Philip Fisher represents perhaps the most provocative position. In *Still the New World* (1999), he depicts the United States as a culture whose identity as a new nation is predicated on the capitalist energies of creative destruction. On the one hand, America's economic and technological dynamic uses the imagination as a resource for innovation; on the other, the same dynamic reshapes the aesthetic field as a marketplace that assigns supreme value to the new. By the same token, Emerson's philosophy can be seen as rooted in enterprise capitalism because it evokes a world predicated on imaginations that are constantly recreated by new ideas and technologies; in this scheme, each generation ends up as "immigrants" who need to adapt to new conditions and new ways of life. The glaring lack of traditions and entrenched social habits in America finds its equivalent in the aesthetics of realism and abstraction. Fisher aptly characterizes the recent culture wars as a "civil war within representation" (51), a basically aesthetic conflict that seeks to redeem the failures of a democratic, multicultural society increasingly marked by social divisions.

In marked contrast, the contributions to a collection of essays edited by Emory Elliott, *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (2002), reflect on the consequences for the aesthetic brought about by the ideal of cultural diversity. Many of the authors invoke Dewey's thesis that aesthetic judgment does not necessarily play itself out in a separate social sphere but is grounded in human experience as such, in order to argue for a comparative, multicultural definition of art whose social functions varies in different cultures of the US. The objective of critical discourse, then, is to analyze the cultural embeddedness of art-works, and to confront established notions of the aesthetic with distinct symbolic practices of meaning within aggrieved communities. Insofar as contemporary art combines elements from different cultural backgrounds with new structures of intertextuality, it displays a complexity and contradictoriness typical of globalized cultural space. The "as if" statements of art serve to probe and experience the consequences of this new situation, as they allow for imaginative explorations of cultural otherness and a subversion of ideological givens.

But there are also dissenting voices. While some are concerned that the postmodern culture of lifestyle and postmodern theories of textuality produce a ubiquity of aesthetic judgment that threatens to dissolve the moral issues of diversity and transform them into mere entertainment, Winfried Fluck argues that the political critique of the ideological function of art is based on self-projections of critics as political agents who thereby effectively underwrite the deplored pan-aestheticization. If liberal aesthetics has come under attack for its embracing gesture towards oppressed groups, it has clearly also taken the premises and cultural definitions of art into a different direction. As Robyn Wiegman points out, what we need is a cultural studies project that looks at different modes of identity-construction and in so doing, questions the status of art as a unanimously shared cultural practice.

The papers will address the following issues:

Art and the Marketplace. How do literary texts or artwork mitigate their status as commodities? How do artists conceive of their status as entrepreneurs and/or as spokespeople for an oppressed group? How do minority artists address the "inclusionary gestures" of liberal aesthetics? Does realism continue to be the foundational aesthetic medium of democracy?

Aestheticization of Politics – Politics of Art. Do the critical discourses on a pan-aestheticization of culture announce the end of art as the Western tradition conceives of it? Or does art evolve into a new powerful discourse that promotes a cultural awareness of self and other in an age of diversity? What are the social consequences of the obvious change of forms of political contestation in our media society, which are routinely described in terms of style and

performance? What about the ethics of art?

Art and the Aesthetics of Lifestyle. How to account for the fact that luxury items such as Mercedes cars or Rolex watches are displayed as artworks in museums, galleries and other public spaces? What is involved when symbols of cultural identity become fashion items and are marketed world-wide? Has American popular culture effectively been translated into a contemporary mode of self-fashioning?

A Return of the Aesthetic? Is the liberal concept of art something to be defended against its detractors at this time and age? Will the concept of form make a comeback as a repository of aesthetic value? What theoretical models are used today to account for aesthetic pleasure? What about the notion of artistic merit?

Program of conference

Thursday, June 9

4:00 – 6:00 p.m.

BAA business meeting

6:15 – 7:00 p.m.

Welcome

7:00 – 7:50 p.m.

Emory B. Elliott (University of California, Riverside) "Terror, Aesthetics, and the Humanities in the Public Sphere"

Introduction: Ulla Haselstein (Free University of Berlin)

7:50 – 9:00 p.m.

Reception

Friday, June 10

9:30 - 10:50 a.m.

Judith Halberstam (University of Southern California) "Notes on Failure"

Chair: Jochen Achilles (University of Würzburg)

10:50 - 11:05 a.m.

Coffee break

11:05 a.m. – 12:25 p.m.

Juliane Rebentisch (University of Potsdam) "The Politics of Art and the Power of the Aesthetic"

Chair: Udo Hebel (University of Regensburg)

12:25 - 2:15 p.m.

Lunch break

2:15 - 3:35 p.m.

Barbara Vinken (University of Munich) "Signs of the Time: The Designer as Rag Picker"

Chair: Kerstin Schmidt (University of Bayreuth)

3:35 – 3:50 p.m.

Coffee break

3:50 - 5:10 p.m.

Fred Moten (University of Southern California) "Gestural Critique of Judgment"

Chair: Harald Zapf (University of Erlangen)

Saturday, June 11

9:30 - 10:50 a.m.

Winfried Fluck (Free University of Berlin) "Aesthetics and American Culture"

Chair: Helmbrecht Breinig (University of Erlangen)

10:50 - 11:05 a.m.

Coffee break

11:05 a.m. - 12:25 p.m.

Miles Orvell (Temple University) "Photography and the Dilemmas of Postmodern Culture"

Chair: Klaus Benesch (University of Bayreuth)

12:25 - 2:15 p.m.

Lunch break

2:15 – 3:35 p.m.

Philip Fisher (Harvard University) "Wonder and Attention: Aesthetics of Singular Objects"

Chair: Berndt Ostendorf (University of Munich)

3:35 – 3:50 p.m.

Coffee break

3:50 – 5:10 p.m.

Panel discussion

Moderators: Klaus Benesch (University of Bayreuth), Ulla Haselstein (Free University of Berlin)

Panelists: the conference speakers

4:45 p.m.

End of conference