THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF AESTHETICS

I. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed a dramatic broadening in the scope of aesthetic inquiry. No longer focused exclusively on the arts and natural beauty, the mainstream of aesthetics has entered a delta in which its flow has spread out into many channels before entering the ocean of civilization. Several decades ago, environmental aesthetics began to attract interest and has grown to be an important focus of present-day inquiry in aesthetics. Along with environmental ethics, it has become part of the broader scope of environmental studies and the environmental movement in general. This expansion has continued, interpreting environment not only as natural but also as social. Aesthetics has been applied to social relations and political uses, and now, most recently to the objects and situations of everyday life. Similarly, the course of the arts has displayed a succession of changes over the past century and a half, increasingly rejecting traditional paradigms of representation and incorporating into their subject-matter and practices the everyday world, along with active participation by their audience. It would seem that art has overstepped all boundaries, boundaries between art and non-art, between artist and perceiver, between art and life. Some might say that it has lost its identity entirely.

Scholars committed to the study of the fine arts and traditional forms of natural beauty may consider this enlargement of the arts and extension of aesthetics a corruption of the standards of those disciplines. This, of course, ignores the fact that, as an area of scholarship, aesthetics is of comparatively recent origin, beginning with Baumgarten’s Aesthetica in 1750. Less dogmatic scholars may take these changes as worth inquiring into in their own right and perhaps as signifying a change in the condition of aesthetics. I should like the follow the second course here, for I think that these developments signify not only greater inclusiveness but a fundamental alteration in the nature of aesthetic inquiry. Put most directly and succinctly, this changes the field of aesthetics from an aesthetics of objects to an aesthetics of experience, an aesthetics of sensibility. This essay proposes an account of how this has come about and what it signifies.
II. The transformations of art

Developments in the visual arts since the late nineteenth century display a fascinating succession of movements and styles. Among the most notable movements are Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Fauvism, Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Surrealism, Dada, Abstract Art, Pop Art, Op Art, and Conceptual Art. These developments provide a surprising array of treasures for the museum-goer and rich material for the art historian. They are, however, more than changes in style, and they display more than degrees and variations in representation and abstraction. The changes seem to puzzle the mind as they dazzle the eye, posing seemingly bizarre innovations that present insoluble obstacles to efforts at understanding the meaning of modern art and frustrating attempts at determining its boundaries. Let us cast an eye over this succession of movements to see if there is some underlying logic to their sequence.

Impressionism, to begin, is usually explained as an attempt at capturing the fleeting effects of light, especially sunlight, on objects and landscapes. Things seem to lose their solidity and appear to vibrate with solar energy, dissolving into vaguely-defined, multi-colored hues as the atmosphere is charged by sunlight. With Post-impressionism, objects regained solidity and radiated a strong presence, while Fauvism flourished with untamed brushwork and intense hues. In Expressionism objects were colored in the rich tones of powerful emotion, but this was then replaced by the dissolution of solidity into the geometrical structures of cubism, sometimes broken up into their parts, rendered multi-perspectivally, or made transparent by displaying their inner structure. Futurism, in contrast, transmuted the solidity of objects into the disconcerting dynamism of frenetic motion. With the iconoclasm of Dada, ridicule was cast at the once noble objects of artistic idealization and bourgeois contentment by introducing the prosaic and irreverent into the sanctorum of art, while Surrealism transformed the world of ordinary objects into the bizarre distortions and irrational juxtapositions of dreams.

As the visual arts became emancipated from the constraints of representation, the figurative center of art was increasingly abandoned. Its representational subject-matter became unimportant and the purely pictorial elements of hue, texture, form, and composition became the source of rich originality. Artists forsook any attempt at capturing the world of objects, and used color and form for their visual effect alone. One could consider Pop Art the antithesis of abstraction, where common objects and commercialized forms take center stage larger than life, or it could be the apotheosis of abstraction, presenting stylized illustrations as pure illustration. Abstraction reappeared in the subtle variation of repeated simple forms for
their pulsating effect on the eye, ingeniously exploited by Op Art, while in Conceptual Art the object disappeared from space and became only an imaginative construction.

This kaleidoscopic survey of the modern course of the visual arts verges on parody, but at the same time it reveals a fascinating process of transfiguration. In this succession of movements one may see imaginative transmutations of the art object under the influence of light, of the eye, of emotion, and of dreams, along with varying degrees of manipulation of the object’s structure, its solidity, and its variability as it is influenced by thought and imagination. This might be seen as a history of the iconoclasm of the modern artist, constantly defying conventional expectations and traditional modes. That would turn it into an account of art movements that increasingly reject traditional paradigms and incorporate the everyday world and viewer participation. This history could then be read as an account of the vagaries of artistic imagination coupled with the unbridled irreverence of the artist. To be sure, one can often find such expressions in manifestations of the artistic temperament and its inclination to notoriety.

However, I should like to suggest another, very different reading. This is to consider the course of modern art as a narrative of transformation, not of objects, but of experiences. Indeed, these developments may signify a shift from object-based art to experience-based art. The account displays not so much a sequence of distorted or abandoned objects as a progressive sequence of ways of seeing. The object becomes less important as the visual effect increases in significance until, in abstract and conceptual art, the object disappears entirely. From its dissolution into light and color in Impressionism, the tactile sense of its pure physicality and weight in Post-Impressionism, its transformation into a stimulus for evoking an emotional response in Expressionism, its structural dissolution in Cubism, its physical dissolution into movement in Futurism, its replacement by parody in Dada, its oneiric transmutation in Surrealism and into an ocular stimulus in Op Art, its disappearance in abstract art in favor of the sensibility of pictorial qualities, the lampooning effect of its parody in Pop Art – all these have made the object less important or not important at all. In its place was art’s effect on the spectator.

But to put it this way is actually misleading because it masks a crucial difference: the audience in art is no longer a spectator but has become rather a participant and co-creator, absorbing the visual or textual materials, responding physically at times to its stimulation, and intellectually as well as emotionally to its social critique (i.e., Futurism’s glorification of war,
Dada’s critique of bourgeois society), and by its participation, activating the art object. It is essential to understand that this transformation in the arts did not turn appreciation into pure subjectivity, into psychological effects disconnected from the body, the art work, and the situation. Rather these arts demanded sharpened awareness and acute perceptual attention to their sensible qualities. They required recognizing the effects of art as conscious body experience: physical as well as mental. Often this was required by the perceptual demands of the art work for active participation in an appreciative process that collaborates with the artistic one. Indeed, these traditionally separate functions were fused in experiencing art. We have, in short, the transformation of an art of objects into an art of experiences. What does all this signify? To respond to this question, let me turn to the scholarly analogue of the artistic process.

III. The transformations of aesthetic inquiry

While art has undergone a series of transformative changes, aesthetic theory has largely remained mired in the framework and concepts of the eighteenth century, grounded mainly in Kant’s aesthetics. I have written at length elsewhere about the persistence of obsolescent concepts such as aesthetic disinterestedness, contemplation, purposiveness without purpose, the quest for universality, and the subjectivity of aesthetic judgments, as well as questioning distinctions such as pure and adherent beauty, the sensible and the supersensible, and aesthetics and morality.¹ Important as these ideas may have been two centuries ago in establishing aesthetics within the framework of a systematic philosophy and giving legitimacy and independence to the arts, these concepts have become increasingly irrelevant to the actual practices of artists and the appreciative experiences of the art public.

Despite being constrained by outmoded and irrelevant aesthetic concepts, aesthetic inquiry has, in recent decades, pursued a number of directions that reflect the expanded scope of the arts and aesthetic appreciation. The art public has been increasingly willing to accept the use of innovative art materials and the widening range of art experiences that extend beyond the museum or concert hall and into the home, the workplace, the street, and the field. More significant still is the complete alteration of aesthetic appreciation from the receptive contemplation of objects to an active aesthetic engagement with the materials and conditions of art works. Nor is it any longer clear or even possible to separate aesthetic value from moral value as the social significance and uses of art and the aesthetic have come into greater
prominence. Further, the increasingly political applications of the arts belies their traditional exclusivity.

Along with the innovative approaches of the arts has come an enlargement of the scope of aesthetic experiences, and new interests have emerged over the last several decades. Among these are environmental aesthetics, aesthetics and politics, social aesthetics, including relational aesthetics, and everyday aesthetics. The progressive broadening in the scope of aesthetic inquiry and away from the conventional venues of art began by focusing attention on environmental aesthetics. It started with a return of attention to nature and an exploration of modes and conditions of appreciation that differ greatly from the contemplation of distant scenes. Walking in the woods, paddling a stream, hiking in a wilderness, driving down a highway or along a rural road in an agricultural landscape, and sailing a boat were recognized as occasions for aesthetic pleasure, occasions where an intrinsic part of the enjoyment lay in entering into some activity in the landscape. At the same time, recognition grew that aesthetic engagement in environment embraces more than the appreciation of nature, for a large part of environmental experience in the developed world takes place in cities. Urban aesthetics began to enter into environmental discourse and including the built environment expanded the conditions and possibilities of appreciation. Even outer space became a subject for aesthetic awareness.

Recognizing an aesthetic interest in environment has had powerful implications for aesthetic inquiry more generally, for aesthetic inquiry became concerned not only with art objects but with aesthetic situations. And this shift was not only a conceptual one but a material one: the focus of appreciation was no longer on a discrete object but on a situation, and the traditional dualistic assumption of Western philosophy that considered appreciation a subjective response to an external object became increasingly inappropriate and challenged. I have proposed replacing it with the concept of aesthetic engagement that reflects the embeddedness of the appreciator in every environmental context. A related development is the formulation primarily by Chinese environmental aestheticians of ecological aesthetics or eco-aesthetics.

Once environment gained aesthetic legitimacy, it led to other enlargements of the venues of aesthetic appreciation. One lies in discerning aesthetic values in social contexts, where aesthetic values are found in situations involving different forms of human relationships such as friendship, family, and love. They are also present in other associations as well, but
often in a negative form. Indeed, negative aesthetic values are common in commercial situations, voluntary associations, and, indeed, all forms of social relations. Such contexts have led to recognizing perceptual experiences common in them negative in character, and identifying such forms of aesthetic negativity as aesthetic affront, aesthetic pain, and aesthetic depravity has led to broadening the scope of aesthetics to include negative values. And because these values identify harmful practices, aesthetics merges with ethics to form a basis for social criticism.  

A similar development is the idea of relational aesthetics developed by the French critic Nicolas Bourriaud. Applied to the work of a number of contemporary artists, relational aesthetics recognizes that their art creates a social space, a context for human relationships. The art work then becomes an occasion for human interactions and the audience is turned into a community. This is a development in the understanding of aesthetic experience, but the force of traditional aesthetics has co-opted its insight by the practice of the art world in replacing the term ‘relational aesthetics’ with ‘relational art,’ thus turning a situation into an object. The insight remains valid, nevertheless.

Political aesthetics is yet another broadening of inquiry closely allied with social aesthetics. Jacques Rancière has called attention to the political implications of sensibility: its distribution, its control, and its uses, and develops this in the service of an argument for radical democracy. Going about this from another direction, Crispin Sartwell has interpreted the force of political ideology from the fact that it is actually an aesthetic system, and he sees politics operating by creating an aesthetic environment. Employing similar materials, Davide Panagia has related the force of an idea to the bodily sensations that accompany it. He finds sensation at the source of political thought and the aesthetic as the source of political action. My own recent work has joined closely both the social and the political implications of the aesthetic. Recognizing that the heart of the aesthetic lies in sensibility, I have claimed that developing the capacity and awareness of aesthetic sensibility leads to immensely broader and richer social experience. At the same time, through an awareness of negative aesthetics and the negative sublime, aesthetic sensibility provides a powerful tool for criticism by recognizing the human consequences of exploitative commercial and political practices.

Perhaps the most recent direction to emerge from the liberation and expansion of aesthetic experience is what is known as the aesthetics of everyday life. Although there is
presently a flowering of work on everyday aesthetics, the possibility of aesthetic gratification in ordinary objects and events has long been known, even if degraded by prevalent philosophical theory. Widely valued by poets, especially Romantic poets and those in Asian traditions, the aesthetic in everyday situations has also been recognized by novelists, as well.\textsuperscript{12} It may be most convenient, though, to locate its contemporary origins in John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*.\textsuperscript{13} In that book Dewey argued against the separation of art from life by basing aesthetic experience on the biological and cultural conditions of human life. He located the aesthetic, not in an internalized awareness of sensation and feeling, but in “a complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events.”\textsuperscript{14} Further, Dewey maintained that “the aesthetic…is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience.”\textsuperscript{15}

I shall not attempt a chronology of the development of the present interest in the aesthetics of everyday life. Instead, let me mention some significant stages in its emergence. An important source came from the innovations that were occurring in the arts in the mid-twentieth century. A prime influence was the work of the American composer and theorist, John Cage. Experimental and innovative, Cage’s interest in aleatoric (chance) music became influential, especially through his piano work of 1952, 4′33″, which consisted in the chance sounds that occurred during that interval of time. Happenings, a predecessor of present-day performance art that originated in the 1950s, eliminated the separation between the art work and the viewer, who became a participant in the work, which often comprised the unscripted, chance events of an ordinary situation.

Such innovative developments in the arts had a profound effect on concurrent work in aesthetics. Beginning in the 1990s, a series of step in the expansion of aesthetic appreciation were taken that resolutely rejected the traditional separation of art from life activities, in the conviction that art has no boundaries. Two books published in 1992 made an extended case for a broader and more inclusive understanding of the aesthetic so as to include all activities within the purview of art. David Novitz’s *The Boundaries of Art*\textsuperscript{16} abjured all limits to art and extended the aesthetic to personal and social relationships and from these to politics. My book, *Art and Engagement*,\textsuperscript{17} extended an argument I had first made in 1970,\textsuperscript{18} and developed the philosophical implications of considering aesthetic appreciation in both traditional and contemporary arts as active engagement. The book elaborated a theoretical position for the
enlargement of aesthetic experience that would include the objects and events of daily life based on the practices and experience of the arts, themselves.

Since these publications, there has been a proliferation of work developing and detailing the unbridled extension of the aesthetic. The aesthetics of everyday life is the most recent stage of this progressive broadening in the scope of aesthetic inquiry that had begun with environmental aesthetics and important work has begun to appear. *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* is a collection that appeared in 1995 that included essays on such topics as social aesthetics, the aesthetics of place, unplanned building, landscape, sport, weather, smells and tastes, and food.\(^{19}\) Katya Mandoki’s *Everyday Aesthetics* of 2007 was the first extended treatment of the subject.\(^{20}\) An English-language version of a book originally published in Spanish in 1994, Mandoki’s *Everyday Aesthetics* is a far-reaching study of aesthetic theory of breath-taking scope and originality that centers around the crucial role of aesthetics in the contemporary highly technological and complex societies in which we now live. This was soon followed by another volume with the same title and an equally distinctive and original focus, Yuriko Saito’s *Everyday Aesthetics*.\(^{21}\) Richly informed by the author’s native Japanese culture and her long experience teaching at a school of art and design, this book details the pervasive presence and influence of the aesthetic over the many facets of everyday life, remarkable and unremarkable alike. The most recent addition to these extended treatments is Thomas Leddy’s *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*.\(^{22}\) Leddy develops an extensive critical review of much of this literature, as well as the current scholarly debates, leading to his own contribution in the form of a phenomenological approach to aesthetics. He proposes the concept of ‘aura’ to identify the quality an object can have when experienced as aesthetic. It is a quality that is not confined to art objects but to the culturally-conditioned experiences of everyday life.

IV. Conclusion: The transformations of aesthetic theory

I have painted a broad canvas on these pages, rather like one of Constable’s wall-sized landscapes, and I hope it shares their realism in offering some theoretical and historical perspective on developments in art and aesthetics. For besides the greater range of interests and applications in aesthetics, these developments have demonstrated the obsolescence of traditional concepts. Let me suggest some implications that seem to emerge from the trends in aesthetic experience and theory I have been detailing here. Although I cannot ascribe all of the
ideas I shall mention here to each of the authors I have mentioned, I think that the trends I have identified join to support this transformation of aesthetics.

To begin, it is clear that there is a sharp dislocation between the practices of many contemporary artists, their art works, and the experience and behavior of the art public, and modern aesthetic theory, especially as it has been formulated by Kant. That theory is grounded in a separation between the subjectivity of aesthetic experience and the objectivity of the art object, in a separation between beauty and utility, and in the sequestering of the arts and natural beauty in museums and privileged views and away from the ordinary course of human life activities. While such theory may be thought to honor the special aesthetic forcefulness of the noblest artistic creations, it does so at the expense of severely constricting the scope of aesthetic appreciation, and that belies the prevalence of aesthetic value in human cultures. Is it possible to have a theoretical frame that retains the validity of the sacred experience of great art and awesome natural scenes while, at the same time, recognizing and accounting for the fact that aesthetic interests pervade every domain of human experience?

I believe that it is possible and that we need concepts that can accommodate both in proper proportion. This can be provided by enlarging the scope and understanding of aesthetics. First, we need to overcome the fragmentation that results from the many divisions drawn by traditional theory, such as between the appreciator of art and the art object, between beauty and utility, and between cognitive and non-cognitive experience. We need, in fact, a unifying concept that can admit connections, mutual influences and reciprocity. Such a concept may be found in the notion of an aesthetic field, an idea that embodies the understanding that the presence and functioning of aesthetic values occurs in a context that encompasses the principal factors in the occurrence of aesthetic value. To this purpose I have proposed the idea of an “aesthetic field.” The aesthetic field can accommodate artistic innovation and expanded appreciative occasions for appreciation, for it enfold the four functional constituents: the objective, the appreciative, the creative, and the performative, none of which is independent of the others.23

The central idea in appreciation now becomes aesthetic engagement, which recognizes the active participation that appreciation requires and that the arts increasingly require. We also need to recognizes and accept the dissolution of the art object, which now can be something of ordinary use or no object at all but a perceptual experience or only an idea, nor need it be
complete and polished but rather a processive event like much of daily life. The context of appreciation has also changed along with the unity of the art object, both of which now share the incompleteness of ordinary experience. That is why the human environment now becomes the locus of the aesthetic and the context in which the specific questions should be addressed.

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1 Most of these ideas characteristic of traditional "modern" aesthetics find their support in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790, 1793).


6 Originated by the art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 book, *Esthétique relationnelle (Relational Aesthetics)*. Bourriaud later associated this idea to the effects of the Internet on mental space.

7 See *Relational Aesthetics*, pp. 113, 13.


Consider, for example, this passage from *Daniel Deronda* (1876): “[U]nder his calm and somewhat self-repressed exterior there was a fervor which made him easily find poetry and romance among the events of everyday life. And perhaps poetry and romance re as plentiful as ever in the world except for those phlegmatic natures who I suspect would in any age have regarded them as a dull form of erroneous thinking. They exist very easily in the same room with the microscope and even in railway carriages: what banishes them is the vacuum in gentlemen and lady passengers. How should all the apparatus of heaven and earth, from the farthest firmament to the tender bosom of the mother who nourished us, make poetry for a mind that has no movements of awe and tenderness, no sense of fellowship which thrills from the near to the distant, and back again from the distant to the near?” George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876) (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 221.


23 A further sign of the extension of the aesthetic may be seen in the annual French observance in Marseilles of a *Semaine de la Pop Philosophie*. See www.lesrencontresplacepublique.fr (accessed 14 August 2012).