
Chapter 16

The Aesthetic Politics of Environment

Introduction

It is one of the wonders of philosophy that an idea should persist despite all possible evidence for abandoning it. Of the many ideas to which this comment can apply, the one that is most pertinent here is the belief, widespread in the Western tradition, of the autonomy of art. The reasons for this are understandable. Many factors connected with art suggest that much of its force and value lie in the relative independence of making and appreciating art. The creative impulse is always unbridled and unpredictable, and often it is coupled with the healthy influence of deliberate iconoclasm. Less obvious is the directness of aesthetic engagement in appreciation and its opportunity for original experience. But independence is different from autonomy, and claims for absolute autonomy in art as in social life may be wishful but are ungrounded.

The historical course of the aesthetic and the artistic does not support the idea that the artistic enterprise is or should be wholly self-directed. On the contrary, the social history of the arts demonstrates their responsiveness to forces in the human world. Whether as subject-matter, referent, incentive, or motive, the larger and all-inclusive social world is immanent in

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1 This essay develops the final chapter in my recent book, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2010). I acknowledge with appreciation the similitude of my title and subject to Jacques Rancière’s *Le partage du sensible; esthétique et politique*, although the inquiry here is independent of his. I also want to acknowledge with gratitude the valuable assistance of Yuriko Saito and Riva Berleant in refining this essay.
art in diverse and often unpredictable ways.² And, conversely, aesthetic perception, which lies at the heart of art, is immanent and pervasive in the human world. Exposing the many strands and layers of the influence of the aesthetic reveals as much about human sociality as it does about art.

Illuminating the pervasiveness and importance of the aesthetic presence was the task of my recent book, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*.³ This essay carries that process still further, particularly into the regions of political theory. It aims to show that the energies of the aesthetic process invariably encompass and engage the social world, and that the implications of artistic practice and aesthetic experience are necessarily political. Let us consider how thoroughly interwoven are the social, the political, and the aesthetic.

**Aesthetic perception**

Aesthetic theory, it has often been observed, rests on perception, and aesthetic appreciation has its locus in sensory perception. Nothing in human experience is pure, simple, or direct. There is no simple sensation, no pure sensory perception, no experience of any kind that is not thick with associations, meanings, structures, and feelings. Aesthetic inquiry begins in such a condition. Its perennial challenge to that inquiry, as in philosophy and indeed in all query, lies in recognizing the initial complexity of perception and responding to its demands as

² These considerations say nothing about historical and social factors, such as the aesthetic movement, *art pour l'art*, and other expressions of romantic ideology.

we work to increase our knowledge and deepen our understanding. The philosophic centrality of perception is what gives aesthetics its wider importance, for aesthetics stands at the origin of the philosophic process and remains central to that process. It is not simple or easy to peer through the conceptual miasma that blankets perceptual experience. For as I have noted, perception is never wholly private but is encased in multiple associations, structures, and assumptions through which it is shaped, directed, and interpreted.

A stunning revelation emerges as we begin to recognize the forces that inform such experience, and realize that these influences have profound political implications. It means, in fact, that there is no clear beginning: no pure sensation, no initial axiom, no original condition, no sensus communis. Nor can we begin with consciousness, with radical subjectivity, phenomenology notwithstanding. In fact, we must recognize the presumption rather than the priority of subjectivity, that storm anchor of the Western philosophical tradition.

Subjectivism, moreover, is not only a misleading idea and a dangerous illusion; it is also an obstacle to a transformative politics. Few commentators have been able to liberate themselves from its tenacious grip, and this inability functions to impede and perhaps even prevent the founding of a true politics of freedom. For freedom, as it is commonly understood in the West, is bound up with the related tradition of individualism, yet the assumptions underlying individualism can also be placed in serious question. But how else can we proceed? How else can we conceive of freedom, of the political sphere, of the human world, if not in terms of subjectivity and individualism? This is where aesthetics can make a critical contribution.

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4 Subjectivism is one of the most pervasive and powerful intellectual forces in modern Western thought, resembling here Cartesian dualism to which it is related, and its influence is almost equally ineradicable.
In its root meaning as sense perception, aesthetics, when pursued by setting aside cognitive meaning and pre-judgment, establishes a kind of radical phenomenology. Perception is never pure, never somatically direct, as William James pointed out, for we invariably edit and add to sensation. In addition to its traditional concern with cognitive processes, one of philosophy’s unending tasks is to identify, articulate, and examine the grounds and significance of pre-cognitive processes and, perhaps we might add, post-cognitive ones, as well. This examination is exceedingly difficult since the very influences that philosophic inquiry seeks to expose are at work clouding and obstructing that very effort. These processes are well disguised behind multiple structures designed to hide or render them palatable, from the euphemisms of linguistic fig leaves to self-gratifying, pseudo-scientific cosmologies that are usually religious or ideological in origin. Burke saw the danger with admirable clarity: “When we go but one step beyond the immediately sensible qualities of things, we go out of our depth. All we do after, is but a faint struggle, that shews we are in an element which does not belong to us.”

Influences on perception

Leaving the natural attitude, adopting the classic precondition of phenomenological description, is just one of philosophy’s primary steps. To suspend the assumption of existence only begins Salome’s dance by discarding the outermost of the many interpretive

5 “[T]he general law of perception, which is this: that whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes out of our own mind.” William James, Psychology (Holt, 1892), p. 329.

6 See Part One, especially Chapter Four.

7 Edmund Burke, Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Part Four, Section 1, pp.117-118.
layers that veil sense perception. Indeed, the source of much of the continuing freshness and vitality of the arts lies in their uninhibited reliance on pre-cognitive perception, a vitality that persists despite every effort to capture and constrain art by external controls and reductive explanations. Let us consider some of what we now understand about the multifarious influences on sense perception.8

We well know (with all the qualifications that must be assigned to any knowledge claim) that social influences and compulsions affect our apprehension of the very data of sensory perception. Social psychologists have amassed a large body of experimental evidence that documents the effects of such influence.9 Of special relevance here is the continuing work in the sociology of knowledge that began in the 1920s and ‘30s, work that presents a powerful challenge to the presumed objectivity and independence of truth. This research shows clearly how our understanding of reality is socially constructed, and that “whatever

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9 Among the classical experiments are Asch’s studies on the influence of social pressure on visual perception and Hastorf and Cantril’s study of the influence of motives on group perception. Studying the perception by the onlookers of a contentious football game, Hastorf and Cantril concluded that “out of all the occurrences going on in the environment, a person selects those that have some significance for him from his own egocentric position in the total matrix.” The event they studied “actually was many different games” and the varying accounts observers gave of what took place were equally real to them. The study found that people’s perceptions were influenced by what they wanted to see. The researchers concluded, “In brief, the data here indicate that there is no such ‘thing’ as a ‘game’ existing ‘out there’ in its own right which people merely ‘observe.’ The game ‘exists’ for a person and is experienced by him only insofar as certain happenings have significances in terms of his purpose.” Albert Hastorf and Hadley Cantril, “They Saw a Game: A Case Study,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1954.
passes for ‘knowledge’ in a society…is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations,” forming the reality that is generally taken as the standard. Indeed, the very foundation of what is distinctively human in perception lies in its character as a socially and historically achieved activity that is constantly changing. This character, whether it be informed by a religious, scientific, or any other world view, invests perception with cognitive, affective, and teleological characteristics that exemplify it as a social and not merely a biological or neurophysiological activity. What is more, perception is not the action of a specific sense-modality, such as sight or hearing, or of the perceptual system alone but an activity of the whole organism. Heidegger himself recognized the powerful influence of cultural tradition. "All philosophical discussion, even the most radical attempt to begin all over again, is pervaded by traditional concepts and thus by traditional horizons and traditional angles of approach."

In recent decades deconstruction has emerged as a methodology of critical analysis that exposes underlying assumptions and raises basic questions about cognitive knowledge. Taking this critical stance without adopting a preconceived limit or predetermined end leads
to permanent yet productive incompleteness. We might even extend the scope of
indeterminacy by recognizing in the body of theoretical and practical knowledge provided by
the sciences the unavoidable but qualifying influence of the experimenter on every
investigation. What well may be emerging here is a notion of human knowledge vastly
different from the ideals of objectivity, certitude, and completeness that have stood as the
standard from classical times to the twentieth century.

This is not intended as a digression into an epistemological study, but it is necessary
for our critical purposes to acknowledge these factors as the ground for any discussion of
fundamentals and beginnings and not to elevate consuetude beyond its proper measure. This
acknowledgment does not psychologize or sociologize philosophy. It is essential, however, to
recognize that philosophy is not and has never been an entirely independent inquiry.
Philosophy’s claim of primacy is specious if it does not take into account the psychological
and social conditions that affect all inquiry, its own included. The attempt to find a true
beginning in consciousness, whether perceptual or cognitive, cannot be sustained. However,
we need not wait for neuropsychology to explain what constitutes consciousness: brain
functions may generate organic events but they do not dissolve or replace their manifestations.
Consciousness may be a question but it is not an answer.

Considerable illumination comes from the work of anthropologists, sociologists, and
other behavioral scientists who have demonstrated in detail the formation of conscious
thought through the human interactions by which cultural, linguistic, historical, and cognitive
structures and ideas are shaped and absorbed. The body of evidence these sciences have
accrued is overwhelming. What is needed is to acknowledge that evidence and incorporate its
implications into our philosophical deliberations. Putting aside traditions and doctrines
ignorant of such knowledge is the pre-condition of fresh and liberating understanding. However, acknowledging such influences on the knowledge process is hardly the final truth either, for we cannot legislate future inquiry. Its value lies in enabling us to dispense with inherited doctrines that cannot endure the light of present knowledge.

**Art as revelatory**

These observations are particularly germane to our experience of the arts in part because of their revelatory power, their capability of vision that is direct and penetrating. For this reason, appreciating the arts demands open receptivity, and this openness is perceptual. The arts work through complex sensory modalities. Painting, for example, is not exclusively visual. It has tactile overtones that come from the qualities of the surfaces represented, as well as from the brushwork of the pictorial surface itself, which varies with the artist’s technique and often takes on greater importance in abstract art. In representational art, tactility emerges in the virtual “feel” of the depicted surface: the glaze of a vase, the coarseness of a plastered wall, the roughness of the cobbles of a street. Pictorial experience also incorporates the viewer’s physical responsiveness in body stance, muscle tension, and spatial awareness. Painting is unavoidably multi-sensory.

As we consider our experience of art, it is necessary to recognize that the arts differ from each other in significant ways, including their sensory range. No art, as must now be clear, relies exclusively on a single sense. What is true of pictorial experience is equally true of other art experience. Music and dance performances bring together theatrical and somatic factors in the physical presence of both performer and audience, in the body awareness of space and place, and in the empathetic participation in the execution. The range and manner of sensory participation obviously varies with the art and with individual performances and
audiences, but it is always multi-modal. Perceptual engagement is especially broad and complex in environmental experience, and synaesthesia may be the most accurate description of sensory involvement here. The perception of landscape, for example, is never exclusively visual but employs somatic, kinesthetic, and haptic sensibilities, all of them fused with sight and sound. In addition, it is essential to avoid assuming one specific art as paradigmatic, as is often done with painting, taking the measure all the others against the structural and material features of pictorial art.

An aesthetic politics

If the arts and perception more generally are socially embedded and informed, to what kind of politics can an aesthetics of perception lead? Much of the history of Western political thought is mired in myths, and some of the most persistent of these purport to describe the origin of the human community. Indeed, origins are one of the favored subjects of myth, and the seventeenth-century fiction of the state of nature incorporated many of the common explanatory features of such myths. I call this idea a fiction because it is an entirely conjectural construction. It offers a presumably rational explanation of the formation of community out of a loose, inchoate collection of people who may, in a correlative myth, contract with one another to establish political order. The presumptive conditions under which they make this social contract vary with the version, such as the classic ones proposed by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau or, more recently, by Rawls’s notion of the “original position.” And just as varied are the political orders that they are used to justify, from absolute monarchy to liberal democracy.

One can understand the appeal to the Age of Reason of so rational a reconstruction of society, but this merely adds a second myth to the first, the myth of a social contract to that of
a state of nature. And it is the product of its own social history, providing a fictitious account that panders to our present age where the narrow calculation of self-interest reigns dogmatically and results in a wider unreason that produces global dislocation, exploitation, and conflict. Still, in spite of the absence of any paleoanthropological evidence to support it, the myth of a pre-social condition persists.

A philosophical process guided by aesthetics can help identify and expose the multiple layers of assumptions, constructions, axiomatic presuppositions, and cultural beliefs that obscure sense perception so thickly. Salome’s dance continues. Still, we can ask whether the landscape of an aesthetic politics begins to appear through the haze. Do we discern there the polis as the model of an aesthetic polity? With all its historical limitations and moral failings, the polis was, for a brief time in ancient Greece, actual. Much of its appeal lies in the fact that the polis joined community with law and a participatory, self-determining socio-political process in which, for those who were citizens (a huge limitation), there was no alienation from the state. Is such an ideal still useful as an achievable goal of human community?12

**The perceptual commons**

Where else can we turn for an aesthetic politics? A suggestive direction lies in the notion of a perceptual commons, the ground of all perceptual experience.13 Because the grounds of perception are necessarily, immediately, and universally present and accessible, they have a common claim. One does not have to establish a “right” to the air we breathe or to unimpeded movement and unpolluted space. All these are appropriated without challenge


13 See *Sensibility and Sense*, pp. 208-212.
in the activity of sustaining life. The presence of life constitutes its own claim. We can also make perceptual claims: to the viewscape as publicly accessible, to quiet public space, for air and water that are pure and healthful and not altered or controlled for others’ convenience or profit; in short, for environment that promotes life and well-being.

Such a commons is grounded in perception, and perception emerges from the persistent fact of life itself. All these derive from what Kant called “the right to the earth’s surface that belongs in common to the totality of men…” However, I call these claims, not rights. The concept of rights is leads to complexities of argument that entail problems of circularity, and the idea is itself a political construct, if not another political myth. A claim, on the other hand, is a simple assertion evidenced in behavior and grounded on the conditions necessary for life. While there is no limit to claims that can be made, what distinguishes perceptual claims is their immediacy in experience and their primacy for sustaining life itself.

The “original” commons is a material commons in which land and other natural resources belong to no one but are held by everyone, as in Locke’s account of the origin of property. Similarly, the perceptual commons is a social, indeed a human planetary resource, and it is implicated by being available and accessible where life is present. These commons do not have recourse to a “state of nature;” their claim does not rely on a constructed, fictional history. The commons rests ultimately on what we may call the perceptual condition, a situation that does not begin with a prior agreement or a complex arrangement but with simple presence. And it rests equally on the biological condition. No one has to prove his or her “right” to air for breathing, and a person’s living presence is the sole justification needed.


15 Commons do exist and have existed historically in actual societies.
for exercising that claim. Such claims lead to the claim to satisfy other vital requirements: to
water, to protection from the weather, to food, to safety. These organic conditions lead
seamlessly to social ones needed to secure them. This has significant implications for claims
to social services and benefits, but this cannot be developed here. It is enough for our present
purposes to offer the idea of perceptual claims to the most basic life-sustaining resources.  

What does the idea of a perceptual commons contribute to an aesthetic politics? There is much here to be discovered, for the perceptual commons is a germinal idea that can
grow in many directions. It can contribute to dispelling the mists of myth that obscure the
direct force of experience; our thought is thickly clouded by such myths. Still more important,
the concept of a perceptual commons provides a basis for commonality and the nurturing
support it can provide, and for welfare to replace conflict as the dominant social
preoccupation.

Many features of a positive politics are implicit in the idea of a perceptual commons. The presence of such a commons entitles everyone to participate equally in its enhancements
and possibilities. Entitlement without access is empty, and therefore conditions must be
present that enable everyone to make free and full use of the commons. Enabling, however,
is not sufficient in itself, for people have not only to be informed and allowed but induced to
participate. Therefore, the availability of the commons and an appreciation of its significance
need also to be promoted. From this commons there emerges, not the familiar ethics of
penury, but an ethics of profusion. Starting with the whole, the whole of natural resources,
the whole of perceptual possibilities, we can generate an ethics of care, not conflict; of justice,
not privilege. It might be said that perceptual equality precedes and underwrites political equality.

To emphasize the aesthetic in experience is to engage in openness, connectedness, cooperation, and to allow vulnerability. Ken-ichi Sasaki observes that “When it was coming into existence, aesthetics was charged with the real and urgent philosophical problem of its time: how to construct a new world.”¹⁷ This remains its continuing charge in the face of what stands as a perennial problem of the anti-social. Perhaps emancipation from a tradition of negative mythologies (such as a “state of nature” with limited resources) and from the practices of negative sociality (self-interest as the basis of society) will make it possible for a

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¹⁵ There is no simple analogy between the material commons and the perceptual commons. The difficulties usually detected in the first usually rest on the prediction that self-interested users will exploit material resources for their private benefit but with overall consequences that result in the depletion or destruction of those resources, the so-called “tragedy of the commons.” Arguments condemning the material commons as impractical or impossible rest on assumptions about self-interest presumed to be “human nature” but which is actually cultural nature and cultural behavior. Further, they fail to recognize the determining influences of cultural traditions and training in sociality that can and do succeed in maintaining material commons.

Such questions and presumed difficulties do not affect the perceptual commons for obvious reasons. The organic limits on consumption deter their overuse (one can breathe only a limited quantity of air), while space and air pollutants, such as smoke particles, industrial and “entertainment” sounds, noxious odors, and the like, are intrusive by their very presence, while enjoying their absence knows no bounds. It is enough to note here that, while ultimately related in the unity of human being and the human world, these commons are distinguishable and entail different issues. Thus their arguments are independent of each other.

new aesthetics to provide a source from which new patterns can develop and fresh models emerge that we can pursue in the quest for positive culture.  

The task of constructing the outlines of a new world is, I believe, the most urgent philosophical challenge of our time, and this challenge can best be undertaken by starting with the aesthetic. But why the aesthetic? Because the aesthetic offers the means for clear, unclouded vision. But aesthetics, while foundational, is not sufficient and, as far as a philosophic contribution is concerned, we must include the major domains of philosophic thought: ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social and political philosophy, but all guided by an aesthetics of perception. It is necessary to cast the range of inquiry broadly in order to establish its proper context. But the prior task remains of clearing the terrain of many of the conceptual and structural obstacles that confound our thought and occlude our understanding, difficulties for many of which philosophy is particularly responsible. Here a radical aesthetics can be a powerful tool: it can illuminate and liberate our grasp of a world that carries our indelible mark.

Such a vision brings us to the need for recognizing and shaping environment. It may be that the perceptual commons identifies the establishing conditions of the human environment, that is, of the human world, and that in shaping environment we are enhancing

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18 It is not in the spirit of these remarks but nonetheless necessary to acknowledge that any and all of these features of a positive aesthetics can easily be subverted and turned into instruments of oppression, as human history documents so eloquently. But my purpose is not to safeguard aesthetics from sadistic misuses. There will always be those whose ingenuity can devise ways to drag the banner of human ideals in the mud. If humans ever develop a civilized culture, such perverse efforts will wither on sterile soil and their perpetrators awarded compensatory treatment.
and making coherent all its participating constituents. How this perceptual landscape is designed, appropriated, and populated concerns everyone, and it allows many possibilities, both aesthetic and political. We cannot help but be affected by the brash and exploitative appropriations of this commons in the political, military, industrial, and commercial co-optations of the perceptual conditions of human life. Here the aesthetic and the moral merge inseparably.

The co-optation of sensibility

The human environment is nothing if not perceptual.\textsuperscript{19} It is in and through perception that human life is sustained, indeed, that it becomes possible. This understanding of aesthetic perception has powerful moral implications. We have recognized that life has a claim on the means to sustain it and, because this claim antecedes every other, it takes priority. A newborn does not have to prove its claim to the breath of life: it inhales to take in air without motive, without thought, as a purely somatic response to its new conditions. So in like manner we must recognize the human claim to the means for supporting life.\textsuperscript{20} I think it is necessary to go still further and include, as inseparable from organic functioning, needs usually identified as emotional, psychological, social, and even, yes, aesthetic. As integral beings, such life requirements are fused in the full functioning of human being.

All these are organic, existential, human claims on the perceptual commons, on the conditions that make life possible and fulfilling. Such needs do not have to be proved; they do not have to be justified. That is why they are simply claims. And because they are

\textsuperscript{19} This is not to endorse subjective idealism but to recognize that the human experience of environment rests on perception.

\textsuperscript{20} This claim is, of course, socially, historically, and technologically relative.
inherently perceptual, they are also aesthetic. One does not have to make a legal case for pure, unpolluted air. Activities that pollute the atmosphere in a locality threaten the life-processes of those who live there. Such practices are not only unaesthetic but immoral. And if the argument be made that a sunset seen through the haze of pollution is more beautiful than otherwise, this may be so only for the distant observer. Those who must inhabit the haze view it otherwise. A parallel case can be made for sound pollution, such as the intrusion of canned music, engine noise, and loud conversation in public space, whether it be in the supermarket, the restaurant, or the city street. The argument for activities that produce environmental pollution has a specious plausibility that comes only from asserting a so-called right to do as one wishes without considering its effect on others, and by detaching the aesthetic from the rest of human concerns. The moral and the aesthetic are often symbiotic and, in a world of continuities, nothing is entirely insulated from any part of the whole.

Landscape pollution provides another example. The claim can be made that a healthy environment includes the experience of both visual and physical space. Intrusions into that space must be justified on grounds that they promote health, safety, and well-being in general. Thus the practice of peppering the roadside with strident signage commercializes the natural environment. An especially egregious form of visual pollution consists in co-opting a scenic view by installing giant billboards in the center of a prime vista in the countryside. Urban landscapes exhibit similar forms of appropriating public visual space. Similarly, the design of built environments should be guided not primarily by economy or traffic control in the interests of efficiency but by its contribution to promoting and enhancing safety and well-being. Such a general principle needs to be implemented with sensitive regard to specific conditions, and it is a valuable standard against which to judge the commercial appropriation
(i.e., co-optation) of public space. In fact, it is a useful measure of any proposal for the planning, design, and construction of districts and buildings, streets and highways, parks and gardens, towns and cities.

It is clear that fulfilling perceptual needs is at the same time both an aesthetic and a moral demand. These needs take precedence over human institutions: economic, social, and political. Indeed, they should more properly determine them. The father who steals a loaf of bread to feed his starving children is exercising a moral-aesthetic claim that supersedes any social construction. There are other ways of justifying such claims as these and they are often expressed in political slogans such as “Human rights over property rights!” and in calls for radical economic and social change. It is well to be clear about the aesthetic-moral grounds for these efforts and not try to justify them by a cognitive system that fails to recognize they rest on basic perceptual claims.

Appealing to perceptual experience exposes an insidious practice endemic in consumer culture. Perception is, rightly, the experience of humans and, as we earlier observed, it is never pure but is unavoidably shaped by all the conditions that give content and meaning to human experience. Many of these influences on perception are circumstantial and largely unselected: language, education, custom, and other social conditions. Some practices are designed for the purpose of gaining influence and control. Thus when people make perceptual choices, they may not be at all “free” but instead are often externally influenced and even directed. And it is in such cases that we confront another juxtaposition of the aesthetic with the moral. The appeal to “free choice” or “personal taste” overlooks the crass fact that choices are never wholly free nor are determinations of taste simply personal. Just as political propaganda is a powerful means for inciting political action, commercial propaganda,
which we customarily euphemize as “advertising,” is quite as powerful, perhaps even more so because, by being so pervasive, it is largely unnoticed yet all the more influential.

While political force is exercised by legal and judicial means, commercial force must use more subtle mechanisms to lead people to act willingly for the purposes and in the interests of the market. The motive of advertising is to excite desire in people and turn them into consumers. In fact, in a market-dominated society there are neither people nor citizens but only consumers. The mechanism at work in a market economy is not need but desire, and cultural fashions and social movements are appropriated and transformed into instruments for social control. Political interests use this mechanism to gain and exercise political power; economic interests use it to influence consumption and enhance profitability.

A word has come into use that identifies this mechanism of appropriating public space, human behavior, simple interests, our very sensibility: that word is ‘co-optation’. One meaning of co-opt is “to take over or to appropriate.” Aesthetics may be thought of, most generally, as the theory of sensibility. What, then, is co-opted in the political and economic use of aesthetics? Our very sensibility! Thus sensibility is formed and guided in the interests of control and marketing. People’s desires and taste are shaped, not to promote health or fulfillment, let alone aesthetic interests, but to produce profit or increase power. This may be called “the co-optation of sensibility.” Because the concern of co-optation with sensibility, it becomes a profoundly aesthetic matter; because of its interest in controlling behavior, it is a profoundly political matter; because of its effects on human well-being it is a profoundly moral matter. Here the aesthetic and the moral are again indistinguishable: in this context they combine inseparably.
Thus as the perceptual commons is environmental, it is aesthetic; as it is appropriative, it is political; and as it is social, it is moral. The perceptual origins and elaboration of the aesthetic lead it to the political and the moral where it can offer a unique social contribution. The aesthetic can then become the ground for what Nietzsche called the revaluation of values. Such a recognition of the significance of the aesthetic led Sasaki to note, “What we learned from early modern aesthetics is that when basic values become suspect, or even invalid, aesthetic judgment is the only path towards the establishment of new values.”21 The aesthetic is thus not only a powerful instrument for social criticism: it has the still greater power to transform the human world by supplying its standard of fulfillment.

Aesthetic experience, then, inevitably spills over into the moral world and both are capable of a full normative range. When perception is positive, it enhances the aesthetic and the moral, and when harmful, damages both. We can, therefore, no longer look at any event as exclusively aesthetic, for this only contributes to its isolation. Similarly, we must free ourselves from the myth of aesthetic disinterestedness, a view that rests on a contrived, even false ordering of the world.22 It is one thing to identify and distinguish aesthetic value; it is

21 Ibid., § 5.
quite another to separate it from its inherence in the objects, events, and conditions of the
human world, its larger home.

What is most forceful in fulfilled experience with the arts is our complete absorption
in perceptual experience that has temporal depth conjoined with the resonances of memory
and meaning: aesthetic engagement. Yet this account of aesthetic experience in the arts is
also a description of human relations, both personal and social, at their most fulfilling. It is a
description of a social aesthetic, and indeed of the human environment en tout. Most fully, it
represents our best understanding of the world of human experience. Indeed, in the human
environment, the moral, the social, and the political are thoroughly interwoven, and their
implications for an aesthetics of environment provide grounds for critical judgment and
claims for gratification. In the aesthetic we discover the human world, and in reconstituting
the aesthetic, we lay the groundwork for reconstructing a more humane world. Our world is
first aesthetic but at the same time moral, and that is why the aesthetic verges on the political
and where its transformative powers make possible a unique social contribution.

Ashgate, 2005); "Ideas for a Social Aesthetic," in The Aesthetics of Everyday Life, Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (eds.).