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Art and Thought
Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen, editors
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Art and thought. Now there's a brave title. Brave because it immediately conjures up an association with the heavy travail of "theory" or, more specifically, the dry, arid regions of a cognitive approach to art. Hence, the very title of this new anthology from Britain's New Interventions in Art History series, *Art and Thought*, can provoke strong resistance. But maybe things are changing: after all we have experienced the long wave of theory, then the "discovery" of beauty (as if to imply no one had ever heard of this term before), so now perhaps it is fruitful to avoid these see-sawing oscillations and finally address the relation between art and thought. At least, this is what the editors of the *Art and Thought* anthology have in mind: their approach seeks to avoid entirely "antithetical methods" that split art *from* thought, whether it be theoretical approaches that ride roughshod over "a consideration of the aesthetic,"[i] or the more "traditional" methods of art history, "formal and iconographic analysis." (8) The aim instead is to establish "the ways in which art 'thinks.'" (1)

Art and Thought is a fascinatingly diverse and intricate collection that tackles one of the most difficult and perplexing issues within art history and aesthetics. It also presents immediate difficulties for a reviewer. First of all, its varied and detailed contributions do not cohere into a unified voice—this should not be unexpected, but many contributions are also, to a greater or lesser extent, contradictory. So one must treat this book as a broad and diverse attempt to tackle a crucial contemporary topic rather than, say, the definitive resolution of a fraught relation. Yet it is customary to think of the aesthetic in precisely these terms—that is, as presenting some harmonizing resolution or fundamental mediation. In fact, the editors declare that their "volume explores the aesthetic as a means of mediating the relationship between the senses and thought." (8)

While reinforcing this mediating role as pivotal to evading the antithetical formulations that plague art discourse, the editors proceed to suggest that "post-Kantian" formulations provide the impetus for investigating the best aspect of current disciplinary reflections within art history—and that is occurring "where the boundaries are opening up." (1) The editors are then prompting us to follow this trajectory in order to think art and thought together, but a certain tension arises. Throughout this volume, mediation, in one form or another, is frequently (but not universally) assumed to be one of the leading attributes of *aesthetic* reflection. The best of current *art-historical* reflection, by contrast, pivots between a discipline and an outside, which suggests a certain tension between what is knowable, perhaps even familiar, and something yet to be dealt with or assimilated. Further complicating this scenario, the aesthetic may also be understood as suggesting that the unfamiliar may lurk within these established and familiar disciplinary boundaries. This is a counter-theme that runs throughout many of the essays (see the contributions of Puttfarken, Potts, Pollock, Melville, Costello and Rifkin, which all deal with the unfamiliarity or unexpected quality of art) and this emphasis sits uneasily with the presumption of aesthetic as forging a harmonious mediation.

Of course, this does not rule out "mediation" entirely, but it does force a rethink of how it is traditionally aligned. One way of grasping this relation is to consider art or the aesthetic in general as signaling something contrary or conflicted. Take the very practical problem I am faced with: the dilemma of how to present all this diverse material adequately. This dilemma is akin to the aesthetic problematic insofar as it asks, how does one pay adequate attention to specificity of each individual contribution, while doing justice to this breadth of engagement and thus giving some credible sense of coherence or unity to another reader? The treatment of such issues really depends upon how one regards the role of art and the aesthetic: that is, as one of exemplary mediation or something more ambiguous—as Adrian Rifkin puts it, with recourse to Lacan, art viewed in terms of "unfixity, ambivalence or unavailability." (199) These contrasting aesthetic conceptions constitute the key fault lines, I would suggest, that run throughout this new anthology and appear decisive to many of its deliberations.

These orientations each presume very different roles for critical analysis. I will call one of the most familiar modes, the "rendezvous" model of criticism: in this case, the art-historical analysis presumes an alignment between the critical interpretation and an original, sometimes more obtuse and sophisticated understanding of the artist or the artwork, an understanding which has been previously submerged or not yet fully comprehended (that is, until the arrival of the dazzling new interpretation). It is frequently the case that this model of interpretation is determined by a governing aesthetic presumption, which in the "rendezvous" case tends to stress a circuit of plenitude, autonomy or self-sufficiency. (Often this is implied negatively by suggestions that thought, theory and interpretation violate the work).[ii]

In Jay Bernstein's intriguing analysis, Pieter de Hooch's scenes of ordinary life, in particular his domestic scenes from 1658 onward, are viewed as offering an alternative to the Enlightenment model offered by Descartes, which, Bernstein objects, evacuates the sensory world. (31) The force of the argument is to assert that de Hooch was able to offer—"for the first and only time" (47)—an embodied world, which rendered "the sensible world of everyday experience …*as* self-sufficient and complete." (32) In short, de Hooch, with his "realist materialism," presents an alternative schema to mathematical abstraction (Descartes, Italian Renaissance painting as well as science). For this reason, Bernstein feels Flemish painting's great art-historical advocate, Svetlana Alpers, gets it wrong when she aligns such art with the breakthroughs of an erroneous observational science. (36-9) Instead, following Bernstein, once we realize what de Hooch achieves—and when we do, we realize that “there can be no doubt about what we are perceiving” (45)—then we realize that de Hooch is making a claim about a “self-sufficient secular world,” (42) “a wholly sensible world of touch and sight that was sufficient in itself.” Finite beings find their place in a finite world; this is the lesson we grasp from de Hooch. Bernstein asks—though by this point we should “know” the answer—whether “human artifacts—houses, alley-ways, sheds, patios—ever seemed so self-contained and world-making, composing so complete a human world—as in de Hooch’s scenes of autonomous domestic Delft life?” (47)

Well, of course, by this point the answer is obvious, but that answer can only be correct if we exclude from the list of “human artifacts” provided by Bernstein things like scientific instruments, namely microscopes and telescopes, for to include them would mean, Bernstein implies, following Alpers down a dead end that inevitably leads to an inhuman world forever exiled from the sensible world. The goal of critical analysis is implicit here, but it presupposes its aesthetic equivalent: the goal of the reading is to demonstrate a synthesis or, to use Bernstein’s favourite term, a “self-sufficiency,” wrapped up in a teleological framework that matches Bernstein’s undoubtedly fascinating analysis to a buried content that now has been unearthed. Yet for all this subtlety the impression one comes away with is of a haunted model for aesthetics and art: this an art “for the first and only time,” and thus it serves as a redundant example in considering the current viability of art and aesthetics. Hence, we glimpse ~~s~~ a model of art lost today, except as this haunted possibility. Or is it a projection? How do we gauge its limits as a reading when what is external to its self-sufficiency is already excluded (the technological intrusion)? If *art thinks*, as this volume asks us to presume it does, and if art is also presumed to be self-sufficient and complete, then any interpretative analysis must always amount to a violation of this more pristine, more thinking entity. And here’s the rub, such a formulation establishes a dichotomy again; we’re forced to deal with art and thought as either a harmonious immersion in the self-sufficient example or a perpetual diminishment of that example by means of the violent and clumsy intrusion of interpretative “thought” (the technological intrusion matched by the discursive intrusion in terms of their capacity to spoil things).

Interestingly, Michael Podro cites Kant’s explanation of the difference between intuition and understanding, perceptual and conceptual cognition in the next essay. This time the telescope plays its part in helping Kant with an analogy: The Milky Way presents itself to the naked eye as “a white band,” though through a telescope “I see the individual stars.” (57) The very tension opened by Bernstein’s exclusion of a telescope from a homely, self-sufficient world of human artifacts and Kant’s exploration of this prosthetic extension makes for an interesting point of exploration within aesthetics. It is not an issue taken up with any great relish in *Art and Thought*, except perhaps in Alex Pott’s discussion of Merleau-Ponty in regard to museums and slides, but more clearly and explicitly in Diarmuid Costello’s essay on Heidegger and Tate Modern. This haunted possibility of de Hooch is a little like Heidegger’s Greek temple, a relic, perhaps a projection to the extent that this “world” is deemed coherent to a degree that we seem incapable of projecting onto art in any equivalent way today. As models of art and aesthetics, they stand as non-possibilities for us today. Hence, Diarmuid Costello, in his essay on Heidegger and Tate Modern, strives to make Heidegger work against himself in our contemporary situation in order to contemplate "a *technological* work of art." This does not debunk Heidegger entirely, nor is it intended to, as Costello freely admits, but it does offer the possibility of thinking about a "work" that "does not merely *reproduce* its age but, like Heidegger's own examples, unleashes a *resistant potential* within it." (191) This is an exemplary engagement, but one must ask what makes Tate Modern a "work" in this recast Heideggerian mode? Is it its curatorial program? The building itself? Or the resistant works within Tate Modern that never quite conform to the inert, ahistorical purposes that are required of them? If it is the latter case, then this might be true of all challenging and resistant work, whether it is exhibited in Tate Modern or elsewhere.[iii]

What this might imply is that modern and contemporary art might not furnish a "world" in the sense that Bernstein suggests de Hooch made available or Heidegger with the Greek temple (albeit not forgetting, as Costello reminds us, how this is complicated in Heidegger by his emphasis on strife and self-concealing). This might force an equally rigorous recasting of certain cherished aesthetic models because this emphasis upon making and forging a connection to a world is emphasized many times throughout the *Art and Thought* volume. No one less than Picasso himself remarked, in the aftermath of the challenges of collage (synthetic Cubism), that the art rested upon the presumption that the world "was not exactly reassuring" and that such a displacement of objects within collage underlined how art sought to accentuate this strangeness.[iv] Picasso is a good example of the ill-fit between a traditional aesthetic vocabulary and this dawning awareness of new imperatives that might not match up well together, for he was apt to resort to the most conventional aesthetic justifications whenever it suited him.

Art and Thought contains many instances of very instructive engagements that grapple with forging a rethink of certain basic aesthetic tenets. I take Stephen Melville's analysis of "postminimalism" as a good example—particularly his conclusion in which he takes "postminimalism" to be understood as "the moment of the modernist work's becoming explicitly responsible not simply for its medium but for what in that medium both divides and exceeds it, opening it to displacement." (170) Melville's challenge is—through recourse to Hegel as well as Robert Smithson—to pose the challenges of minimalism and its aftermath in terms of sculpture rather than painting (through sculpture, art comes closest to "actual autonomy and objectivity as sculpture"). Painting, by contrast, "fully acknowledges that the world escapes it." For Melville, painting amounts to a retreat from sculpture, meaning from the three-dimensional to "a two-dimensional practice predicated upon absence" and so we understand the course of modernist painting: "painting's primacy is the moment of art's finitude and its turning toward its dissolution as philosophy, painting's primacy is itself limited." (169) But if we turn back to the example of collage, it is apparent that Picasso's explanation reinforces what Melville says about how the world escapes painting—though we should qualify it and say that it also indicates the ways in which the world escapes us in general—but what are we to say about the Russians, the constructivists, who tended to interpret collage as a spatial challenge? What can we say about these histories that denote dislocation and disruptions within our received patterns of what constitutes modernism? Melville refers to the pivotal importance of paying due heed to these dislocations in order to "reconsider some of the rough patches in our received narratives." (163) Also, along this tack, we might consider how Smithson sought not just the "necessity" of the work, but a glacial time, the geological and the industrial overlaying one another, denoting entropy rather than simple succession. This might mitigate the Hegelian tone, so we might qualify the philosophical comprehension in order to suggest, with Melville, that, yes, art must indeed "prove itself in and as its dispersion" and that for a work to sustain itself, displacement will mean "being responsible for its appearance always in and as a working of the system" (of the arts), as well as within a relation binding sculpture to painting—but with the qualification that this responsibility within such a system also means that art does not yet know itself what it will be. (169)

What this all suggests is that the aesthetic model assumed by a reading often seems to have a determinate bearing upon how the relation between art and thought is assumed to operate. The idea that art furnishes a world gives way to recognition of a different function today—to repeat Picasso, a not very reassuring model of a relation, so that we see different emphases arising in this volume—displacement with Melville; a resistant potential with Costello; artworks as "coherent deformations" with Potts, never yielding "a defineable meaning" (108); or, with Griselda Pollock citing Ettinger, artists as introducing "all kinds of Trojan horses from the margins of their consciousness; in that the limits of the Symbolic are transgressed all the time by art." (135) In most cases, this is an issue of content—that is, what the critical analysis itself is discussing, whether it be an artwork, a theory of art or an artist's practice. What I believe Kant's abiding question related to, in regard to aesthetic judgment, was the presentation itself, whether it is between art and thought, or an analysis that presents an art that somehow evades conventional discourse. The paradox is that evasion needs to be presented as clearly as possible in order to communicate. Hence, Kant's abiding issue concerns *adequacy*.

When it comes to an exemplary mediation in regard to the aesthetic, one cannot go past Kant. It is an odd quirk of history that Kant often is disparaged because of Clement Greenberg and his perceived reductive formalist criticism in the mid-twentieth century (or Roger Fry before him).[v] In his analysis, Michael Podro says that for Kant it was a redundant exercise to ponder "what lay outside the scope of our knowledge." "The only world we could talk about intelligibly was one which appeared in our experience." (54) Art appears in our experience, but this begs the question of whether the aesthetic is always intelligible within our framework of knowledge? Otherwise, if it were, then we could reasonably expect what will follow as a consequence of what has occurred in the past. As we have seen, the most fraught debates in art arise when art does *not* follow a recognized pattern—and that holds true for critics, such as Greenberg, as much as it does for artists. Podro makes clear why this seemingly more indeterminate realm is important for Kant: "to reside within our cognitive conceptualizing judgments is to experience the world as determinate." (65) (In making this point, Podro raises a point that is endorsed many times in other essays, i.e., Cavell on modern art (Vickery), Pollock's paper, Costello on Heidegger). Yet this crucial point may spell difficulties for Podro's ensuing emphasis upon an attunement between "ourselves and the world"—"we become aware of a certain reciprocity between the external object and our own projecting or imagining."

(65) Our attunement may continually be challenged by an object we never adequately determine. And we need to figure this as an issue for any critical practice that aims to deal with this fraught relation between art and thought. I may not have done justice to Podro's examination, but, as I understand Kant, the aesthetic registers this attunement as an issue of decision, of where and how to forge emphases, and so I have sought to show the fault lines that trigger the debates in this exemplary volume. In reading this book, one gains a good sense of the many, varied modes of that attunement available today.

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[i] The chief methodological culprits named are Marxist sociological models, with their recent derivation in the "analysis of visual culture," and cultural studies readings, particularly those of a psychoanalytic bent. (8) All page references to the *Art and Thought* volume appear in brackets.

[ii] For a good example in this volume, see Jonathan Vickery's explication of Fried and Cavell: "One of the paradoxes of minimal art is that, despite its apparent meaningless it has prompted a considerable quantity of "theory" or speculative criticism. For Cavell, if we have to supply an explanation or a theory for the artwork to become intelligible, then either it, or we, have failed." (119) If that is the case, and if description is more apt as Cavell argues, then there is no case for an essay like Vickery's, which attempts to explain Cavell and Fried on modern art in their own terms, because we could only benefit from reading their descriptions of art, not an essay explaining their theories of modern art. Vickery's essay is worth reading though, but that means *not* taking Cavell or Fried at their own word at times. For instance, Vickery argues that both eschew any a priori determinates for art, yet shape for Fried, as Vickery presents it, is surely the nearest possible equivalent (a point reinforced by the terms of Fried's own appraisals of Joseph Marioni's painting in the late 1990s).

[iii] Costello also makes the suggestive remark that Tate Modern's monumental quality hints at an "impending obsolescence" in the manner of the grand railway stations being built as cars went into mass-production for the first time. Will we be able to say that video killed the monumental art museum?

[iv] Cited in Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 44.

[v] Amelia Jones notes that American "modernist formalism" "oversimplified" Kant. Still that does not stop her from chastising Kant nonetheless: the modernist formalist supports his claim, she goes on to say, by recourse to "what Kant termed a *disinterested* judgment, one untainted by sensual appreciations or bodily desires." (79) Jones's triumphant tone often over-determines her arguments and the differences she wishes to instantiate. Thus, her reading of Merleau-Ponty appears rather one-dimensional, and hectoring, alongside Alex Potts's study which directly follows. Although, he characterizes Kant much the same way, I prefer Melville's imperative to attend to "the rough patches in our received narratives." (163) Rather than triumphant overcoming and quick dismissals, much of the best critical work today takes in these less heroic sounding zones.