

On Some Novel Encounters with Fine Arts

Where to Search for Aesthetics and Where Aesthetics May Have Something to (Re)search

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In this paper, I examine some of the various ways, spaces, and situations in which one can currently encounter aesthetic content and have an aesthetic experience. By focusing on examples coming from the world of fine arts, my survey will tackle a double question: I will try to investigate where to search for aesthetics and where aesthetics may have something to (re)search. Considering the novel forms of art presentation that are related to the spread of alternative exhibition spaces, I will examine the emergence of new audiences, the rising power of the art market and art commerce, and their dubious influence on the creation of new standards and canons of art. | Keywords: *Aesthetics, Aesthetic Experience, Infrastructure of Contemporary Art, Art Market, Art Fairs, Museums*

Imagine an average visitor during her holiday spending some time in a luxurious shopping mall where high-end works of art are also shown. If she still has some time to kill between shopping, dining and movies, she may also enjoy for example Juan Miró's works, just to quote an actual example, as it happened in the Polygone Riviera mall in France (Sansom, 2016 and Somhegyi 2017). Besides watching the works, she may perhaps also wonder how come that these works are now available to be observed so easily and for free, as so far she had normally seen famous artists' works in museums with expensive entrance fees. Let's also imagine this was not her last day in the vacation, but has two more, on which she is planning to go to see the recently opened experimental art space, the Muzeum Susch of the Polish collector Grazyna Kulczyk in the relatively close-by Swiss Alps. (Collector Grazyna Kulczyk's, 2019) Our imaginary tourist is curious of it also because it is not in a traditional art hub, not in downtown New York and not even in Zurich, but an hour from Basel. Therefore, while driving back she may be wondering why the

rich collector decided to show the art pieces in the remote and isolated location, and how the experience of travelling there and back adds to her experiencing the exhibited piece.

In the above imaginary situation, we have seen different sets of questions that involve various forms of arts and their experiencing, consumption, and appreciation. This example encompasses some possible research areas for the contemporary aesthetics of fine arts – the field I am focusing on in this paper – that I think may be worth mapping further, for example by examining diverse forms of encounters with aesthetic content in today's world. As we shall later see, this investigation is also an enquiry into aesthetics as a discipline. Indeed, while identifying new problems to be studied in aesthetics, we can also learn something new about the discipline per se. Mine is thus a “quest for aesthetics” in a double sense: both as a search for the ‘aesthetic’ and as a search for where aesthetics may have something to (re)search. Specifically, I aim to examine some of the new occasions of encountering aesthetic contents, forms, and experiences today, while considering how aesthetics as a discipline can contribute to the understanding of these complex issues.

There are many areas and aspects where aesthetics as a discipline needs to apply its methods, occasionally also renew its approaches, in certain cases justify its legitimacy and – let's not be afraid of claiming it – also defend its authority. From the myriad of possible issues, however, here I will only focus on the broad area of fine arts, in order to come back to the multiple aesthetic experiences of our imaginary tourist form above: what are the new forms, novel modes and innovative ways of encountering aesthetic content, how do they affect art appreciation and what can aesthetics as a discipline search in this?

Long gone are the days of “classical” forms of encountering visual and fine art works – if, there were at all, i.e. if we can nominate or consider any one particular period's or era's ways, venues, traditions and norms of encountering pieces of art as standard. In fact, art appreciation is continuously changing throughout history. Many art lovers still think and are perhaps nostalgic of the time when museums were simply places of exhibitions and galleries were to sell the works. However, this description is not only idealised in many ways but also heavily simplified, as the situation had never been so clear and straightforward.

For example practically right from the beginning, museums – both as actual institutions as well as the very concept of the museum itself – can be interpreted as somehow dubious, and their “pure scientific” image can be brought into question. This is especially the case when considering the aspects and instances of rivalry between the newly established institutes of the nation-states of the 18th-19th centuries, also with regard to their impulsive ways of collecting objects from Antiquity, partly motivated by the consideration that the (new) nation hosting and displaying the origins of human culture is not only the legitimate inheritor of the actual objects, but also the culmination of human culture itself. (Somhegyi 2020, chapter 11.)

Looking at the other side, another well-known fact and art historical commonplace is that the commercial art galleries were and are not necessarily only in the service of financial gain, but often helped to promote avantgarde art, well before progressive contemporary pieces could make their way in large national institutes. In this way commercial galleries often contributed to the “institutionalising” of the progressive pieces, hence, in a curious change of positions sometimes bold commercial galleries may have substituted the function of museums in canonising works. Well-known historical examples of this highlight the role played by small galleries and studios, independent exhibitions, and salons in promoting Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting in the late-19th century. A few decades later, in the ‘40s, a similar role was played by Peggy Guggenheim’s museum-gallery, “Art of this Century”. This space contributed to better public dissemination of avant-garde art by exhibiting the work of some leading art figures, who in some cases (e.g., Pollock, Motherwell, Baziotes) had their first one-man shows there (Guggenheim, 2005, 314.). Today for-profit galleries often organise bolder, more innovative, and more inspiring exhibitions than large-scale institutions, mixing contemporary and classical pieces – although these latter are not for sale, but are exhibited just for curatorial reasons.

The situation was thus never really straightforward, however in today’s world it gets even more complex, due to several factors and challenges. One is definitely the radical increase of contemporary – and, in fact, also of classical – artworks’ prices. The higher and higher auction records definitely grab the attention of even those who are not really interested in and/or following neither the classical nor the contemporary art worlds’ events, it is enough to think of the hype around the 450-million-USD *Salvator Mundi* by Leonardo in 2017. These spectacular prices, breaking records, breaking news and sometimes even breaking of artworks – just remember Banksy’s half-shred piece... – definitely confuse the non-specialised members of the larger public, and then this confusion contributes to, what’s more: nurtures, the ambiguity in the relationship between aesthetic and market value. This is not surprising, however, since the complicated nexus between the financial and aesthetic value is much convoluted and often very contradictory. Indeed, the dichotomic connections between these two values is not easy to trace even for the specialists. For example, philosopher Mark Sagoff (1981) argues that economic value, though seemingly easy to grasp, can be used to understand more about the aesthetic value of art. Towards the end of his paper, aesthetic value is distinguished into two kinds of value: (1) the value of art as an institution, and (2) the relative value of an individual piece of art (Sagoff, 1981, 328). In the conclusion, however, Sagoff approaches the question of the basic difference between aesthetic and economic value by translating it from the realm of the philosophy of art to that of anthropology (*ibid.*). He claims that: “The difference between the aesthetic and economic value of art, then, may be simply explained. It is the difference between the sacred and the profane.” (Sagoff, 1981, 329).

It may be worth comparing Sagoff's understanding of the difference between aesthetic and economic values with some considerations by Tomas Kulka, published in the same issue of *The British Journal of Aesthetics*. In his conceptual distinction between artistic and aesthetic value, which also takes into account cases of fakes, forgeries, and copies, Kulka argues that artistic value is what determines the significance of a particular piece and its status in the history of art – i.e. how “new” the piece is and whether it can be considered as a turning point in the history of art. Aesthetic value, on the other hand, describes the particular qualities of that work of art, e.g. the visual qualities of a painting. When artworks are involved, these two kinds of values are not necessarily on the same level (e.g. equally high or low) but may have completely different ratios. For example, an aesthetically unsuccessful work can later acquire significance in the history of art; alternatively, as the years go by, a well-executed piece can be forgotten. Nevertheless, as Kulka claims: “It seems to me that a certain minimal presence of each of the two-component values is necessary for an object to qualify as a work of art.” (Kulka, 1981, 343).

Sagoff's and Kulka's treatments of the various kinds of values that are attached to artworks may help us both clarify why the audience is often confused when faced with contemporary art and also understand some of the anomalies involved in today's art consumption. This adds to the fact that undeniably certain works have an established although often not clearly understandable fascination – a classical example is the *Mona Lisa* that is currently practically invisible due to the large masses of tourists in front of it, while in the neighbouring rooms there are at least five other very fine Leonardo paintings that remain almost unnoticed compared to the lure of the *Mona Lisa*. Or, as George Goldner, former chairman of the drawings and prints department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York recalled, “A week after the sale of the *Salvator Mundi*, I happened to be at the National Gallery and I wandered into the room with *Ginevra de' Benci*, which is a much better painting in much better condition than the *Salvator Mundi*. There was not a single other person there.” (Italics in the original. Quoted in Ruiz, 2018)

Another addition to the complex landscape of contemporary art world, institutions and market, is the growing – and, naturally, again greatly ambiguous – role of private collectors. Their connection and (inter)relationship with art institutions are not without tensions and mutual jealousies, mainly regarding financial possibilities and/or state sponsorship. In any case however we can see amazing private collections, many of them can easily dwarf the possessions of numerous national or state museums. This may, at first, seem as a pure gain for visitors who thus have more places to choose from, however, again not as simple as that. At least two questions arise that could perhaps have even more attention in aesthetic discourse. One is whether these private collections are only for the pure sake of art and were born because of the owner's passion for art, or, if not, how much of strive for increasing status symbol, legitimacy of wealth or even pretentiousness is behind the collection-building? It is thus not surprising if for many, these questions – *mutatis mutandis* – are reminders of the debates over the scientific purity of 18th-19th

century museums. The other question worth examining from an aesthetic viewpoint and especially with its consequences for aesthetics is how much the art commerce in general and private collections in particular modify the canon of art, especially that of contemporary art that is understandably and necessarily still more flexible than the more established classical canon, even if this latter is never entirely fixed either, see for example the recent re-discovery and re-evaluation of Baroque woman painters.

Adding some further concerns to the above considerations on art, its market and the aesthetic consequences of their relationship, especially with regard to the ever blurrier division of functions between the actors and factors of the art infrastructure, we can also mention some potential issues with the large-scale art events, including the mushrooming art fairs. During these three-four-day commercial events the participating galleries show their artists, as in most of the fairs it is not directly the artists, but the galleries representing them that exhibit. The fairs, especially the leading ones are very expensive, to the booth rental one also needs to add the shipping costs, customs, insurance, accommodation, travel, per diem etc. For many art collectors the fairs are the primary acquisition events, and they enjoy the opportunity of having a great overview of the contemporary offer plus they also appreciate the publicness of the fair and the transparency of the event. Based on these one might easily think at first that the galleries participate solely for the hope of selling the works to the collectors visiting the fair. However, again we cannot simplify it as much, because, speaking honestly, the well-visited fairs may also serve as a great general publicity for an artist. Despite the few days of opening, the biggest fairs are seen by several thousands of visitors, and obviously not all of them are full-time collectors, but also curators, art critics, advisers, journalists, patrons, politicians, specialised bloggers, influencers or general art-lover intellectuals. Hence it is not surprising that many artists are often happier of participating in a leading art fair, than even in the National Gallery of a smaller country, since the difference in visitor number can be ten-fold. Naturally this also gives a large responsibility to the organisers and selection committees of the fairs too, as the large number of visitors and the diffuse media coverage often disseminates the aesthetic content seen at the fair much more than in the case of a gallery or museum show. Hence again a game changer shaking up the traditional division of functions, especially if we add the issue of entrance fees – although most of the fairs have quite pricy entrance ticket, some fair organisers decide not to charge visitors or at least heavily subsidise the ticket for students, thus strengthening their mass-educative function in the palette of cultural events.

It would however be too easy to explain the popularity of these events with the glittery hype around some forms and manifestations of contemporary art. It is perhaps explainable or partially explainable with the interest of the visitors in other, new places and forms of experience. And naturally this could again be analysed with regard to its aesthetic consequences – can we perhaps simply say that, at least in some ways, visitors are right in desiring novel forms of experiencing art? This may also make us remember Robert Ginsberg's

affirmation: “Experience, not theory, is the creative source for responding, reflecting, and exploring. Philosophers who work on aesthetic matters need to keep their soul full of experience – and not only of aesthetic objects.” (Ginsberg, 1986, 78) Agreeing with Ginsberg we can say that the wider public’s seeking for novel forms of experience can be considered as natural, and the new approaches of art consumption should not be automatically judged as unprofessional or lowbrow and popular in the negative connotations of the words. This is also because, from a historical perspective, artworks have been presented in a variety of ways in different periods. We can observe changes in styles and designs in the installation of art pieces and exhibitions, which shapes the way art lovers experience the shown artworks. It is sufficient to quote some examples to illustrate this claim. Consider for instance the usual display of paintings in late-Baroque and 18th-century aristocratic galleries, where the pictures densely filled the walls, their frames almost touching each other – as portrayed e.g. in the paintings by Giovanni Paolo Panini or Hubert Robert. Compare this to the 20th-century sterile and homogenous white cube-type spaces, where artworks are presented as detached from one another to be enjoyed separately, with no exogenous visual element and no other work interfering with the recipient’s perception. Obviously, these two exhibition spaces allow for completely different experiences of art. In the latter experience, as the pieces stand on their own, one focuses on the qualities of the individual artwork rather than on the (possible) connections between the artworks exhibited. Referring back to Kulka’s above-mentioned distinction, in the Baroque installation style of the princely galleries it is the artistic value that emerges, while aesthetic value stands out in white cube-type spaces.

This, however, only works at the level of the actual and individual display: but what if the entire exhibition is organised in a non-traditional space? For instance, what would happen if we installed the artworks in a classical ruin, in an abandoned factory, in an airport, or a container in the middle of a large metropolis? Again, the peculiar location influences the way we perceive the exhibited works and opens up new interpretative perspectives that may not come up in more traditional venues. Since a novel venue and a new way and style of exhibiting can add further interpretative layers and also increase and diversify the aesthetic experience – in virtue of the “surprising” character of the presentation – they can lure into the exhibition even those visitors who do not generally attend to art shows. Optimistically, this kind of “alternative” exhibitions may bring back the less-dedicated public to traditional museums, once their curiosity has been raised by these special occasions. Hence, what seemed just a natural change in the style of art exhibition may be intentionally used for good purposes – yet always *cum grano salis* –, to promote valuable aesthetic experiences and raise awareness on the insights art can provide us with.

What’s more, the proper and scholarly aesthetic examination of the lure of encountering artworks in new contexts and of the fascination of alternative modes of art consumption could also help finding bold answers for the current challenges that classical museums have to face, since undeniably traditional

museums still have not only high relevance but also growing responsibility. Tristram Hunt, director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London summarised some of these tasks: “In an era of deepening nationalism and parochialism, where accounts of ethnic purity and manifest destiny abound, the ability of museums to tell complicated stories of hybridity and cosmopolitanism is vital. (...) Museums need to be brave in confronting the big issues. (...) Museums need to provide a civic arena for contentious debate. Through our exhibitions and public programme, we can frame and generate discussion with the kind of respectful and inclusive approach that is so often absent from contemporary political discourse. As politics gets more heated, we shouldn’t fear that it is too difficult to entertain all shades of opinion under our roofs. We can show leadership in curating the ethics of disagreement.” (Hunt, 2018) Hunt’s opinion is also extremely useful for finding novel ways of function and functioning of the museum. The investigation of these tasks may also remind us of Boris Groys’ recommendation, who argues for the museum to be converted from a place where we merely contemplate objects to one where things happen (e.g. lectures, presentations, discussions, screenings etc.), hence an institute that keeps an intellectually fertile flow of events and activities. (Groys, 2013) These more event-like and experiential curatorial projects can ideally attract new audience into the old institutes, without losing the visitors with more classical taste.

All this may also convince us that there should be even more cooperation between the various institutions instead of rivalry and mutual jealousy. The bold, experimental and experiential projects, crossover collaboration between actors and factors of the wider art infrastructure can be rewarding for all, and aesthetics as a discipline can only benefit when following and analysing these tendencies and the numerous potential insights gained from the conscious analyses of these issues and phenomena. One of the areas to be further investigated, and from which important contributions to aesthetics may arrive, concerns the nature of experiencing, enjoying, and even “benefiting” from art. How does the perception of art change when novel modes of art presentation arise? How can we identify and investigate the aesthetic implications that this addition may have for the perception and interpretation of artworks that particular modes of exhibition and/or non-traditional venues provide? This leads us from aesthetic questions to questions of aesthetics itself, i.e., to an investigation of whether we have the right tools to evaluate such new issues within the discipline of aesthetics. Does aesthetics need to re-invent itself – its methodologies, approaches, and forms of research – in order to offer a thorough analysis of these new phenomena in art and in the perception and consumption of art? Should aesthetics focus on tightening its connections with other forms of scholarly and intellectual engagements with art, such as art criticism, art history, critical curatorial studies, sociology of art? Or does it rather have to emphasise the particular aspects of art that can only be described within (traditional) aesthetic research?

Coming back to our original questions and also to our imaginary average art-inclined tourist from the beginning of this paper, we shall then not necessarily

worry if she sees Miró's works in the mall for the first time, or if she ruminates not only on the artworks but also over her own experiencing of these very artworks in the isolated private contemporary art collection in the Alps, because all this may be natural additions in the offers of showing and encountering artworks today. Our work and duty, however – as professionals and practitioners of aesthetics – is not merely to describe these novel ways of encountering art, but also to individuate those areas in which aesthetic scholarship may be particularly useful to analyse such phenomena, examine questions about art and its presentation and, if relevant, warn us about the possible threats arising from the modifications of taste that may influence the canon driven by economic or political reasons. We shall not be afraid to consider aesthetics as a leading platform for discussing art, rather than an academic discipline practiced in universities and separated from the actual art world. This is why the careful investigation of new ways of encountering art may become an enquiry into the present state, the role, and the future of aesthetics itself. By finding adequate and inspiring solutions to address current issues in contemporary culture, aesthetics will not only secure its status as a legitimate academic discipline but will also open up new possible worlds where to search for aesthetics and where aesthetics may have something to (re)search.

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