To Whom/What & Where this Address May Run: A Digital Thing

Monique Roelofs—July 17, 2018

This written, electronic object before you has discontinuous parts, among which I instigate relations. These parts feed into incongruous, intermingling streams of address. There is, for example, the biographical path made up of more or less conventional tales of self. This line calls up instances of feminine whiteness, ambiguous sexuality, coloniality, and (im)migrant/researcher status, elements that are modulated by class and nation, and whose entanglements stretch between different places in Europe and the Americas. It will be hard to find the location of our encounter in this stream. This flow, after all, which travels from all sorts of things and people to me, to you, back to them/us, and onward, came about long ago and stretches widely.

Then there are the academic lineages, which conjure figures from whom we can learn about address. Artists like Zora Neale Hurston, Julio Cortázar, Clarice Lispector, Nagisa Oshima, Pope.L, Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, and Zanele Muholi come together in this track, along with scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Miriam Hansen, Barbara Johnson, Gayatri Spivak, and Judith Butler. Reaching a bit further, we also meet Louis Althusser and Walter Benjamin. By thinking of these artists and writers not only as users of the notion of address, but also as experimentalists who have brought into being critical practices and theories of address (and continue to do so), we can both learn about the gaps in our understandings and enactments of address and summon new zones of exploration. That way we activate ignorance to arrive at further nonknowings—ones that prompt as-of-yet unthought ideas; we can lift particularities and generalities out of context and have them generate unforeseen singularities; we can have our digital thing reorder and conspire to spawn other productions, generating different incongruities and relations. This digital thing now is already taking a more defined form, making itself a home within a field of experience that, with every word, gains in density. More ways of reaching for and toward the present object arise, more ways of being there with it, perhaps of not yet finding it and wishing for it (or even of wishing it away).

As a part of my experimental pedagogy and writing practice, I ask that we—with the backing of public cultures, education systems, artworlds, and everyday entities—think for ourselves and take responsibility for gathering the tools we need in order to do that thinking. This line of reflexive address produces connections between actors as widely apart as Oshima and Althusser, and between things as divergent as the objects made by Ligon, Pope.L or Muholi, and Johnson: paintings, performances or photographs, on the one hand; essays or books, on the other. Like any object, this digital thing I’m putting in front of you—through strands of mediation involving language, images, libraries, curators, catalogues, artists, data-gatherers, philosophers, machines, sounds, other objects (eyeglasses? electricity cables? fans?)—can be disassembled and recomposed in various ways. When you insert yourself into the pedagogy and the writing that the thing holds up to you, and fold yourself into my-our thing, you create new relations in it. “Our” thing, meanwhile, cannot be readily found, because the “us” that it indexes will remain stretchable and perhaps liable to compression: fantasized as
well as partially real. We will have to keep making it, if only because of the need to replenish vehicles of memory.

Regardless of where you come upon this digital entity and what shape you give to it, however, address will always be at work in it and in your engagement with it; and so will be the operations of the aesthetic—that interminably multimodal web of cognitively modulated object-, people-, and place-oriented/orienting practices, of which, as I argue in my book *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, the field of the aesthetic consists. In the aesthetic, we, then, find a mobile scaffolding, a driving and guiding wellspring of evolving relationships between people, between things, and between places, as well as between all those elements.

The aesthetic, indeed, *needs* address, as the plane of organizational forces and junctures that allows aesthetic meaning to move or to hold still in place, and as an array of impulses from, toward, and within relationality. Once we mobilize address for aesthetics, it opens up all sorts of questions, at once desirable and treacherous—possibilities of person-thing interactions, love, collectivity, intimacy, distance, bodily being, feeling, sensation, understanding, and social negotiation. For the aesthetic is full of promises—forms of address that typically also carry threats. And through address, the aesthetic can be a simultaneously focal and dispersive point where new politics and new relationality take form.

**Note toward further address**

You can find a sample of theoretical approaches to various aspects of address in the short, selected list of scholarly treatments below. This bibliography brings together starting points that might not in the first instance occur to those who are new to the topic. I have omitted artworks as well as some of the most widely known philosophical perspectives.

A more extensive discussion of the notion of the aesthetic sketched in this digital object and of the understanding of the aesthetics-address linkages voiced here is to be found in my book *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*. That book, more than that, investigates the differential, aesthetically mediated relationships between people, things, and people and things in which we take part (what I call “aesthetic relationality”), and explores how those relationships both draw on and generate constellations of race, class, gender, coloniality, and sexuality, among other intersecting forms of difference and identity. These insights and the transdisciplinary methodology signaled in this digital thing receive additional elaboration in my two newly finished book manuscripts on address, the first of which is under review.

The introduction to *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* follows below: reproduced, here, as a component of this digital thing—by permission from the publisher.*

**Selected bibliography**


**Bio of the author (morphed into digital-thing designer for the occasion of this address)**

Monique Roelofs is Professor of Philosophy at Hampshire College. Her book *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (Bloomsbury, 2014) analyzes the aesthetic and its metamorphosing ties to politics in terms of its key elements of relationality, address, and the promise/threat. Her articles have appeared in journals such as *Hypatia, Confluencia, differences, M/m Print Plus Platform*, and *Texte zur Kunst*, and in anthologies such as the *Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Race* (2018). Having recently completed two new book manuscripts, “Arts of Address: How We Relate to Language, People, Things, and Places” and its sequel “Aesthetics, Address, and the Making of Culture,” she currently is at work on a coauthored book on aesthetics and temporality in Latin America and a coedited collection on Black Aesthetics.

* I’m grateful to Bloomsbury Publishing for permission to reprint the below excerpt from *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (2015 edition). My thanks also go to Gordon Hall for inviting this thing into their curated collection “Address Not Found” for the *Library Stack* digital archive; to Ferda Kolatan for an inspiring conversation about objects and relations; and to Norm Holland and Anna Schrade for their feedback.

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The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic

Monique Roelofs

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Introduction

The aesthetic is a pervasive phenomenon. It is found not only in the arts, but also in our endeavors as everyday actors who eat, drink, touch, move, see, hear, read, or not, who address or don’t address one another, occupy some and not other places. From Plato through the Enlightenment to the present, aesthetic theories and practices have realized promises as well as threats coiled within the aesthetic.

Such pledges and menaces are among the multimodal, embodied forms of address that we direct at one another, at objects, and toward our environments. They help to shape social and material affiliations and disconnections we inhabit. They suffuse the desirability of aesthetic experience, as well as the turmoil it provokes in the ethical, ecological, epistemic, and political planes. This book locates the aesthetic in sequences of ever-evolving promises and threats we manufacture as participants in webs of relationships and address.

Following a period of disrepute, the aesthetic currently enjoys heightened prominence. Artists, theorists, and activists find new use for it as a category of experience, a template for criticism, a dimension of agency, a motor of collectivity, and a marker of value. The rise of the aesthetic animates a wide array of cultural projects, capacities, and agendas. In contemplating directions we might wish this upswing to take, however, we need to engage philosophical conundrums that continue to unsettle the aesthetic’s foundations.

Twentieth-century artists and scholars have brought us face-to-face with the rocky past and troubled present of the aesthetic. The notion’s traditional cultural and theoretical supports have appeared to founder. Between the 1960s and 1980s, longstanding critiques of aesthetic paradigms blossomed, precipitating modes of analysis and production that transformed the arts and humanities. While these developments persisted, the late 1990s initiated a countervailing current. Aesthetic strategies of creation, schemes of reading, plans of collaboration, and blueprints for action began to spring up with renewed vitality across cultural fields. In the second decade of the third millennium, skeptical stances thus coexist with celebratory embraces of traditional vocabularies, alongside more qualified investments in aesthetic matters. Institutional forces congeal around these viewpoints, contributing their part to a collectively produced platform in which aesthetic and anti-aesthetic
operations converge and veer off in separate directions. Conflicting and intermingling assemblies of aesthetic tendencies and anti-aesthetic impulses make their presence felt in academic disciplines, bodily regimes, commemorative projects, archival collections, methods of historical inquiry, transportation systems, urban renewal tactics, and practices surrounding the production, preparation, and eating of food. They show up in exhibition spaces, sites and organs of performance, austerity plans, sexual routines, the pleasures of tourism, media conglomerates, and data-processing designs. These structures embody propensities to endorse as well as reject aesthetic possibilities of various sorts. In the boisterous field of cultural production and uptake, insight flows abundantly from refractory angles.

This situation clamors for concept building. Difficulties that have materialized require further excavation, and, when unearthed, point up unexpected lines of defense. Contrasting modes of reading and divergent forms of cultural participation not only acknowledge and implement but also challenge disparate kinds of aesthetic phenomena. Existing controversies linger, surfacing in alternative arenas. Our polemics demand a shift of ground. Major philosophical gaps in the notion of the aesthetic remain. They are yet to be contended with.

The following pages explore such lacunae in an effort to reach a tenable understanding of the irresistible awareness to which recuperators rightly turn: a sense of the stubborn attractions and possibilities held out by aesthetic form, experience, and interaction. But how can we affirm the desirability of the aesthetic without downplaying the mayhem it produces within individual lives and the cultural trajectories encompassing them? This quandary necessitates a conceptual change. The present book makes a case for the centrality of the notions of promises and threats, of relationality, and of address. At the play in art and theory, shaping everyday practice and other realms of culture, retooled and joined together, these concepts yield a framework for a more expansive opening up of questions that have haunted us now for quite some time.

Uniting the following chapters is their inquiry into the fluid link between the aesthetic and the political, a tie that we forge and reforge as we give shape to the everyday. The mutating bond between aesthetics and politics reflects unanticipated ways in which the aesthetic primes our existence and our daily activities mark the aesthetic. Among the detailed stories I will tell, a narrative arises that understands the aesthetic as an assembly of conceptually inflected, socially situated, multimodal, embodied practices. Harboring antagonisms and reorientations, this capacious field admits of no tidy distinctions from endeavors we might wish to call non-, anti-, an-, pre-, or post-aesthetic. Recurrent dips into the history of aesthetic theory will highlight the extensive scope of at once aesthetic and political strategies that undergird differentially inhabitable social orders and embed them at levels of meaning where passion, perception, rationality, and imagination not only go together but also are in conflict. Modes of interpretation come into being in this territory. Examining visions of beauty, ugliness, detail, nation, ignorance, and cultural boundary, the following chapters explore the interpretive web that gives the aesthetic its vast reach.
Time Slice

Bringing out the intricate presence of aesthetic meanings in our day-to-day lives calls on a range of methods. Accordingly, my argument develops in conversation with divergent perspectives. Crosscurrents arise among analytical aesthetics, continental philosophy, decolonial thought, and black and Latin American studies. Strategies of cultural analysis take shape alongside approaches in art history and literary theory. Themes in critical race feminism speak to viewpoints in social and political philosophy. Because the investigation proceeds in dialogue with a posse of fields, a good many endnotes along with occasional vignettes called time slices support our discussion. Curious readers are invited to visit these areas of the book if they like to delve into backstories or dwell longer with subjects.

These segments provide a sense of salient debates that have taken place in various quarters and suggest topics for further reflection. Since they allude to a broad array of disciplinary histories and interests, I ask the reader to use these sections in a manner that creates an enjoyable readerly rhythm of interruptions and continuities among earlier, present, and future forms and questions.
Notes

Introduction

1 Along with other cultural developments, Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades and the Dadaist movement have inaugurated numerous critical approaches in the arts and theory, challenging everyday aesthetic configurations, theoretical schemata, and artistic frames of meaning. Hal Foster's (1983) anthology on postmodernist anti-aesthetic projects and programs prominently contests influential tenets of the Western aesthetic tradition. Calling into question "the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas" (xxv), this locus classicus of the anti-aesthetic employs Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytical, decolonial, deconstructive, and feminist perspectives, among others, to develop critical methods of cultural analysis and practice.

2 Proponents of the so-called aesthetic turn that accord little theoretical credit to twentieth-century critiques of aesthetic models include Hickey (1993); Scarry (1999). Announcing beauty's resurgence, a much-cited report on this shift sketches a field of ostensibly transparent contrasts (such as those between politics and pleasure or artistic goodness; cultural analysis and aesthetic evaluation; literary and historical scholarship; cultural specificity and commonality [Heller 1998]). The article's framing obfuscates conceptual, artistic, and political dimensions connecting as well as dividing stances the text advances as favoring and opposing beauty.

3 Many theorists recognize limitations of historical aesthetic frameworks while simultaneously valorizing conceptual, experiential, practical, and rhetorical elements such outlooks make available. For a drastically abbreviated list of such works that appeared toward the end of the previous century, see hooks (1990); Benjamin and Osborne (1991); Buck-Morss (1992); Beverley (1993); Žižek (1993); Bhabha (1994); Lowe (1996, 156–8, 176); Jameson (1998); Johnson (1998).

Perspectives that selectively affirm, dispute, and revise dimensions of aesthetic structures inform also an extensive scope of twenty-first-century accounts. A brief sample includes Rancière (2004); Redfield (2003); Bérubé (2005); Mignolo (2007); Halsall, Jansen and O'Connor (2009); Kelly (2012); Spivak (2012).

Several theorists propose to rethink polarities between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic. See, among others, Kester (1997); Meyer and Ross (2004). Displacements of this sort pervade also Gloria Anzaldúa's writing. She brings together Aztec, Nahuatl, and Chicana conceptions, images, metaphors, stories, performance practices, and other artistic forms with critiques of certain Western aesthetic procedures (1987). Thereby she enacts modes of transculturation that realize a condition she describes as mestiza consciousness, or, a borderland state of continual transition. Mobilizing established genres (such as the English and Spanish languages, poetry, theory, autobiography) in the process of transforming them, she interweaves aesthetic and anti-aesthetic modes.

In Roelofs (2014), I argue that anti-aesthetic strategies, as represented in Foster (1983), invoked by other theorists, including Arthur Danto and Gayatri Spivak, and enacted in artworks by, for example, El Anatsui and Teresa Margolles, significantly entwine themselves with aesthetic formations they critique.