# aestheticsequalspolitics

## new discourses across art, architecture, and philosophy

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# 8   THE AESTHETICS OF ABSTRACTION

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Abstraction occupies a problematic location within art over the past century. It is both one of the key attributes used to describe the difference between modern art and the artistic endeavors that preceded it, and at the same time it is used as a scapegoat for the failures of the same art. For each apologist that has argued the values of abstraction, there is an equivalent attack leveled against it. This stalemate is in large part due to the multiple definitions and manifestations that abstraction has put forward over the past century. In an initial attempt to define such a contentious concept, we could begin with the following associations: abstraction is the reduction toward an essence, the transcendence of appearances toward an underlying idea, the rejection of visual similitude between the art form and the way in which the world visually appears, the objective logic of mathematics, the autonomy of a work of art from its social and material contingencies … the list could go on. Both sides of the abstraction debate would probably agree to the tone and implications of these definitions, disagreeing only in their valuation. One side sees these qualities as desirable; abstraction pulls art out of trivial historical styles dominated by academies and social hierarchy, it provides art with contact to more eternal concepts, it gives art an ability to combat the market forces of kitsch commodities and situates art in a progressive position at the forefront of culture. The other side of the argument views the same qualities as suspect. Their objections would be as follows: abstraction places art on an elitist formal pedestal offering little regarding the social and political troubles of the modern world, it naively claims a separation from material forces, it is founded on quasimystical gibberish, and it is just as easily commoditized, if not more so due to the ever-accelerating economies of exchange. If we understand the sense in

both sides, it would seem that abstraction is a rather confused battleground, one perhaps ready to be abandoned in taking up more contemporary discussions. Yet, abstraction refuses to go away. In many ways, abstraction is taking on several strange new aspects in much contemporary art.

In what follows, I will argue that many of these disagreements and confusions surrounding discussions of abstraction in relation to the arts occur due to two reasons. First, the meaning of abstraction is different for ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics. The second reason follows from the first: aesthetics is typically held in a secondary position, dependent on ethics and epistemology for justification. In most instances, the definitions of abstraction within ethics and epistemology are imported into aesthetics as the substance of an aesthetic position. This drift of meaning from one set of inquiry into another creates both confusion regarding what abstraction exactly entails and reinforces doubt regarding the legitimacy of aesthetics as an independent mode of engaging the world. Our first task will be to untangle aesthetics from its dependence on ethics and epistemology and secondly to show how abstraction plays very different roles in each of the three philosophical modes, and through this attempt to develop a more robust description of how abstraction operates within aesthetics.

To guide the following essay, the arguments of several contemporary thinkers will be employed, specifically the theories associated with Speculative Realism and the relations between politics and aesthetics as put forward by Jacques Rancière. In Rancière's argument, abstraction in art is a descendent of the mid-nineteenth-century movement known as Realism. It may at first sound odd to pair what would appear to be antithetical concepts, but one of the interesting outcomes of exploring the relation between abstraction and aesthetics is that abstraction and realism are revealed to not be the dialectical enemies they are commonly assumed to be, but to be constantly playing with each other in a state of exchange.

## ETHICS, EPISTEMOLOGY, AESTHETICS

The terms ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics describe three different philosophical modes of relating to the world. The most common definitions would be something akin to the following: Ethics mediates relations by an appeal to a higher ideal of which specific physical instances are but contingent manifestations. It is concerned with general ideas beyond their

material instantiation, for example, the ideals of beauty, truth, and virtue found in the dialogues of Plato. Ethics revolves around how these ideals affect human behavior, the questions of morality. Epistemology is concerned with knowledge, how we know what we know, how this is substantiated, and how this is communicated. Since the Enlightenment, epistemology has been primarily focused on cognitive acts and the logical processes through which we justify beliefs to become verified truth. With Immanuel Kant, aesthetics was explained as the ability to form judgments regarding sensory qualities, with special attention to the ideas of subjective taste and disinterested pleasure.[1] Aesthetics as used in this essay partly reflects Kant's definition, but owes more to Jacques Rancière's resuscitation and revaluation of the term *Aisthesis*. In his definition, aesthetics refers to the manner in which qualitative information regarding the world is made sensible, distributed to our sensory capacities.[2]

There are several overlapping concerns here between these three philosophical modes. They all grapple with judgment and with how one may convey these observations to others (otherwise known as the problem of representation). It is not an overstatement to say that in the past two centuries aesthetics has suffered greatly in relation to the other two. Both ethics and epistemology are seen as more solid philosophical foundations; aesthetics is placed in a secondary, derivative position. Ethics-based arguments state that if an artwork is "true" to its concept, function, and idea, a "good" aesthetic will be an automatic result. Ethics posits a direct correspondence between truth and beauty. Epistemologically, if an artwork stems from the knowledge of its formal composition, its narrative content, and its sociological context, the aesthetic will be successful within its genre. Epistemology is not concerned with the transcendental truth value of art; it accepts the simulations of art as long as cultural knowledge is constructed and conveyed through the artwork. In both of these accounts, aesthetics is justified by an appeal to other philosophical modes. The reasons for this are multiple, but there are recurring motifs. One is that aesthetic judgments are too subjective; they rely too much on specific experiences as opposed to general concepts. Another common belief is that aesthetic judgments are confused, hence the difficulty in explaining the convictions of an observation in clear, precise language. The third prevalent fear is that aesthetics are ultimately a mask for the real underlying social and political forces instrumental in the production of culture. The methods of critical theory,

be they ethically or epistemologically based, are to uncover these hidden forces and make the observer aware of what lies beneath the seduction of beauty. The interpretations that we may take from these common condemnations of aesthetics are telling of a certain paranoia in modern thought. Aesthetics cannot be trusted. If left alone, aesthetics is either unethical or conceals knowledge. Both conclusions leave aesthetics in a very tenuous position.

Toward the end of the previous century and the start of the current one, there have been several attempts to revamp aesthetics. These come from philosophers and theorists as varied as Dave Hickey, Steven Shaviro, Elaine Scarry, Jacques Rancière, and Graham Harman. Each of these thinkers along with several others have argued for the independence of aesthetics as a mode of relation in the world. They have argued for the "vernacular of beauty" outside of the institutions that mystify through formal interpretation (Hickey).[3] They have argued that aesthetics should not be reduced to ethical beliefs or knowledge systems of abstract generalizations (Shaviro).[4] They have argued that aesthetics can lead to the desire for ethical behavior as opposed to ethics as an alibi (Scarry).[5] They have argued that aesthetics triggers the curiosity that lays the foundation for knowledge structures (Scarry).[6] They have argued that aesthetics can engender political transformation through its own operations (Rancière).[7] And in one case, there is an argument that aesthetics can be considered "first philosophy," a mode of relation between things that comes prior to all other philosophical speculation (Harman).[8]

If we redefine the three philosophical modes as describing various relations between objects, without privileging the human/world relation, we begin to see some clear differences. Ethics describes the relations between objects as mediated by a transcendental concept. Epistemology describes the relations between objects by breaking down what is empirically available into smaller simpler parts and generalizing their structural relationships. Aesthetics describes the relations between objects by engaging directly with the qualities an object makes available.

Abstraction is a crucial component of both ethics and epistemology. Ethics abstracts toward a higher transcendence; objects are too simple. Epistemology abstracts toward simpler elements; objects are too complex. We can identify here several aspects noted previously regarding common notions of abstraction. When abstraction is defined as the transcendence of

the material realm toward one of spirit, or ideal truth, we have an ethical explanation. When abstraction is defined as the breaking down of phenomena into repeatable general patterns, we have an epistemological explanation. It would seem that there is no place for abstraction in a direct aesthetic encounter. Aesthetics attempts to hold the concrete reality of an artwork in focus without internalizing it up into pure idea or analyzing it down toward systemic knowledge. From an aesthetic position, there should be no abstract art, only concrete art.[9] These observations suggest that we may have to find another way of describing abstraction in aesthetics, or cede the territory of abstraction entirely to the other two philosophical investigations.

## AESTHETICS AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY

Aesthetics as first philosophy sounds like a stretch. Isn't aesthetics a branch of philosophy, one that at its best is explained by other more important philosophical concepts such as metaphysics, ontology, and, as we have seen already, epistemology and ethics? How is it that a philosopher could possibly suggest that aesthetics comes prior to these other philosophical concerns? Yet this is exactly what Graham Harman's object-oriented philosophy proposes.

As extreme as this may sound, on second glance the idea may not be so surprising. If metaphysics deals with first principles, it derives these principles from observations of reality. The initial way any object relates to another is through the manner that it senses the other. Harman describes this initial sensual relation as aesthetic. Similarly, if ontology addresses what does and does not exist, aesthetics initiates this question. And to paraphrase Elaine Scarry, beauty can instigate the search for knowledge and the desire to be just. It is aesthetics that can lead toward epistemology and ethics. Beauty produces the desire for truth, it in itself may or may not be "true," but that is beside the point, for the evaluation of truth is not a fundamental aesthetic criteria.[10]

In order to address the differences that are suggested by "aesthetics as first philosophy" from other philosophical stances, it will be necessary to explicate some of the key ideas in Harman's argument. Harman posits that in attempting to consider the qualities of an object, we should avoid what he calls undermining and "overmining."[11] Undermining attempts to explain an object by breaking it down into smaller pieces and producing

a general system that explains the relations of the smaller parts. This is a classic tactic of epistemology. The problem that Harman sees with undermining is that although it may produce knowledge regarding the relations of smaller components, in doing so, the initial object has disappeared. This reduction to more base elements can continue in ever-diminishing smaller and smaller levels, each time further from the consideration of the initial object. The other tactic is what Harman calls "overmining." In this process, the object is too specific to be real; instead it is only internal intuitive ideas that are real. Ethics is an example of "overmining," for it argues that material existences in the world are not as real as the eternal transcendent ideas that structure our categories of access to the world.[12]

The term that best describes the close attention to an object is aesthetics. Aesthetics attempts to engage with the entire range of qualities that an object presents to an observer, or for that matter that any object presents to any other object. To resist undermining and "overmining" is to privilege aesthetics as the first mode of relation between things. It is of tantamount importance to state here that these aesthetic relations do not exhaust the object. There is always something that withdraws from our access. Harman uses the example of fire burning cotton.[13] The fire and the cotton are in a relation with qualities of each other different from our human sensory relation to either fire or cotton. We cannot know their relations, but it does not mean that they are not real, nor does it mean that the fire/cotton relation is more real than our own qualitative experience of the pair. Aesthetics does not exhaust reality; it is an introduction.

In a way, Harman thus proposes a method for aesthetic attention. Do not analyze the object away; pay attention to its qualities. Do not ascend into your subjective ideals; the object is really there and it has qualities that you will never have access to. Elaine Scarry presents several wonderful remarks on beauty that can serve as an addendum to Harman's proposition. For Scarry, beauty triggers the desire to reproduce the beautiful object.[14] This could mean copying it through drawing or photography, but it initially means that we look at it longer, for we don't want it to go away. Beauty thus elongates and intensifies attention. A second aspect of beauty is what Scarry calls lateral displacement.[15] Beauty makes us aware that there are other things beside ourselves; we are displaced from the center of the production of the world; we step outside of ourselves for a moment. We become attentive objects amongst other attentive objects.

## ABSTRACTION AND ALLUSION

I want to return now to the question of abstraction. It would seem at first that abstraction would have no role in a philosophy that resists the reduction implied by undermining and the transcendence implied by "overmining." But this is not necessarily the case. Although Harman does not discuss abstraction directly in this manner, I speculate that there is an interesting aspect of *aesthetic* abstraction that works well with the discussions of object-oriented philosophy. First though, let us try to clarify what aesthetic abstraction might be that is different from the definitions tied to epistemology and ethics.

In his essay "Abstraction with and without Modernism," Stefan Heidenreich defines abstraction in art as having four qualities. First, abstraction is to subtract or take away; it has a negative relationship to something bigger. Second, something had to previously exist—abstraction is anterior to a precedent. Third, abstraction is a refinement that subtracts the superfluous and consolidates the essential, thus a moral dimension. Fourth, abstraction is a process, a movement, not a trait or a style.[16]

These four attributes of abstraction as described by Heidenreich are well stated and most likely would be generally accepted. What I will propose though is that these are exactly what we need to reject when attempting to describe the aesthetics of abstraction. I will address them point by point.

… *abstraction is to subtract or take away.* … Abstraction is not necessarily a smaller or simpler instance of a more complex reality. This is an epistemological use of abstraction. Abstraction in aesthetics may mean to take something away, but it also may mean adding something as well. To draw a figure through its bounding contour is an abstraction produced by adding lines that are not there to begin with. The addition of these lines intensifies attention toward the bounding shape of a figure. Instead of subtraction, abstraction in aesthetics behaves almost as a substitution.[17] Abstraction can shift relations by crossing aspects between mediums. The linear contour is a mode of abstraction within drawing translated into painting. Collage is another example where the medium bash of material fragments aggregates into the realm of painting. Kurt Schwitters appropriates fragments of paper decontextualized from their original source in order to combine them as if they were painterly strokes. A painter such as Gerhard Richter substitutes the abstract smear of pigment to estrange the

medium of photography by resembling photo blur; paint does not blur, lenses blur. All of these substitutions involve an abstraction of aspects from one medium and a reinsertion into that of another. This is a substitution, a genre hybrid producing tensions within the artwork, not a subtraction to a more essential purity.

... *abstraction is anterior to a precedent.* ... This is an attempt to ground abstraction as a nonutopian act that builds from a precedent. It is an attempt to construct a knowledge system for abstraction. But, the aesthetics of abstraction does not require a legible precedent. What it requires is a background. Though this does imply that it comes *after* something, the legibility of the sequence is not the important aspect. One does not need to see the previous stage next to a current stage to have the aesthetic affect. The explanation of abstraction as a procedural transformation dates back at least to how Theo van Doesburg famously explained abstract art in his *Principles of Neo-Plastic Art.*[18] A step-by-step increase in abstraction extracted from a visually legible figure toward pure two-dimensional geometric form and color. But these steps are an attempt to explain a system, to present a logic, an epistemology for abstraction. Aesthetic abstraction does not need the systemic logic of transformation; it instead estranges a relation with an existing background, be it past, contemporary, or future. The aesthetics of abstraction disrupt the temporal flow, changing the manner in which one experiences the background. For instance, Robert Irwin's insertion at the Whitney in 1977 titled *Scrim Veil-Black Rectangle-Natural Light* completely transforms the aesthetics of an existing space with the most minimal of abstract interventions. Irwin's installation produces a "new" Whitney museum.

... *abstraction ... consolidates the essential, thus a moral dimension.* ... To describe abstraction as essential and moral is clearly an ethical argument. Abstraction in aesthetics does not reveal an essence; it is amoral. It does so not by removing the superfluous, but by transforming specific qualities of an object. This is often through allusion to qualities that do not typically belong to the object in question. This allusion Harman describes as a tension between a real object and its sensuous qualities.[19] Something is ruptured, or altered, or substituted, and allusions begin to intensify engagement rearranging sensible information. This aspect of abstraction is far from a moral essentialism. For Rancière, aesthetics alters what a community believes *can* be said through the *ways* in which reality can appear. This

redistribution can establish ethical behavior, but in the aesthetic moment, there is no clear ethical stance regarding truth, morality, use, or tradition.

... *abstraction is a process, a movement, not a trait or a style*. ... Abstraction can be a process, and I agree with Heidenreich that it is not a style locked into a specific historical moment. But, the aesthetics of abstraction do not require a process to be legible, reenacted, rehearsed. The process necessary in the aesthetics of abstraction is the length and intensity of attention that the abstraction triggers for aesthetic engagement. In this manner it *is* a process as it extends into the duration of sensation. But, the aesthetic qualities of abstraction are not procedural, or revelatory of a hidden method. In order to explain this a bit further, we will look to the origins of "defamiliarization" as an aesthetic idea in early twentieth-century Russian Formalism.

The term "defamiliarization" is first put to use as an aesthetic theory by Viktor Shklovsky in the 1917 essay translated into English as either "Art as Technique" or "Art as Device."[20] In this argument, Shklovsky suggests that art slows down, elongates, and intensifies attention. This elongation is the aesthetic experience itself. "And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. ... By 'estranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest."[21] The devices deployed by an artist to produce this effect are likened to a "defamiliarization" or "estrangement" of an assumed familiar reality.

Although Shklovsky does not use the term "abstraction," each of the devices he identifies operates through an abstract cut into the familiar to expose the artificiality of the construct. It is here that we may speak of the double nature of abstraction in aesthetics. Aesthetic abstraction is not only an intervention, not only an act; it is also the quality of the revealed construct. For example, Shklovsky identifies such literary devices as the shifting of point of view from the human to the animal and the description of an event that focuses only on affects while refusing to name the action.[22] These techniques involve a high degree of abstraction in writing as well as in reading. With familiarity, language becomes naturalized. When fluent, we read through language toward content, forgetting exactly how abstract language actually is. Defamiliarization cracks this smooth legibility and focuses attention onto the abstraction of the entire construct. It is important to reiterate that this is an aesthetic experience. Shklovsky is drifting aspects of poetry, for instance the "roughing up" of language, toward prose.

Poetry allows the reader to hear a word that is familiar to them in a new way. These allusions come from a blockage of smooth, seamless communication. This is different than the techniques of critical awareness in much contemporary art criticism. Criticality seeks to make the viewer/reader aware of hidden structures and assumptions. It seeks to make these underlying forces known, and by raising awareness create political change. Defamiliarization and estrangement in aesthetics do not provide new knowledge; they may lead to the desire to know, but in the moment of engagement, what is actually operative could be called a "redistribution of the sensible."

## "THE REDISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE"

The framework that has been structuring this essay through the distinctions between ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics owes a great deal to the tripartite division that Jacques Rancière lays out regarding the relation between social structures and sensible information. At the heart of Rancière's argument is that aesthetics redistributes sensible information in manners that allow new constituencies to form; in other words, political transformations are a result of aesthetics.[23] He identifies three major categories for the relations between society and art. The first is the regime of the Ethical. This can be seen in philosophical stances toward art such as one presented in Plato's *Republic* where art is condemned for producing illusions, confusing reality and image. True ideas are transcendental and what we can sense of them in our embodied experiences is only a copy. Art that reproduces the sensory is thus further removed, a copy of a copy. The only good art is an ethical art, an art that is built out of true craft practices in relation to function and tradition.[24] The second regime is that of the Poetic or Representational. This regime does away with the moral and ethical strictures, instead claiming that art operates through a knowable set of conventions to deliver poetic content. This regime is by and large an epistemological one. It is built out of the philosophy of Aristotle and finds its major examples from the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance to the Beaux-Arts Academies of the nineteenth century. Importance is placed on the hierarchy of genre conventions and the rules that structure the production and interpretation of the artwork. Knowledge is necessary to both understand compositional procedures, and to interpret the narrative content extracted from sanctioned sources such as Classical mythology or

Biblical allegories.[25] The third category is the regime of Aesthetics. Rancière identifies this as emerging in the nineteenth century through Realism in literature and painting. What changes here is a new attention to the everyday, the vulgar, the quotidian. There are direct attacks on the institutionally established genres of art. There is a focus on descriptive detail rather than analogical symbolism or narrative interpretation. The Aesthetic regime puts into question what is art and how can it be identified?[26]

There are several reasons for the arrival of the Aesthetic regime during the nineteenth century. One is that art was being made for a rising, newly educated public (commonly labeled as the bourgeoisie), not for the anointed aristocracy. In Rancière's argument, aesthetics was part of what allowed this new constituency to identify itself and politically collect. Art was being produced for new institutions of public display, new cultural archives. The museum redistributed the fragments of other eras and cultures into a single space of display. As Rancière notes, this gathering of collected artifacts became decontextualized fragments, leading to alternate interpretations of the historical development of art.[27] Art is no longer conceived of as a gradual evolution modeled on organic growth and decay, but instead was beginning to be understood as a record of ruptures and transformations, tensions produced through simultaneous contradictory impulses. Aesthetics became the manner in which one could begin to describe these tensions between reality and its representation.

The advent of Realism was not a more "real"-looking painting or a more "real"-sounding literature, but instead a loosening of acceptable content with an emphasis on the manner in which an art object challenged conventions of technique and display. The practice of art production was no longer one established through a patron commissioning a craftsman, but instead a relation between an artistic sensibility and the sensibility of a largely anonymous public.[28] This shift meant that the knowledge of the public could not be assumed, and instead the art object needed to be able to exist as its own autonomous object. These objects could then shift aesthetic conditions by presenting alternative sets of associations and affective states. Fredric Jameson in a recent book *The Antimonies of Realism* effectively argues that Realism produced a whole new set of emotional states through the descriptive details of bodily affects.[29] These emotional states were outside defined categories, and thus provided an affective realm for a developing audience more in line with the complexities and ambiguities of living in a rapidly transforming industrial society.

Part of Rancière's argument is to show that "modern" art is not a twentieth-century art initiated with abstraction, but that abstraction in art was made possible because of the aesthetic transformations of the middle of the nineteenth century. An artist must be free to paint any subject before they may paint a black square.[30] Early twentieth-century abstraction is also the heir to Realism's efforts to disturb assumptions of how reality is mediated through art. Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich were all convinced that they were creating artwork that allowed access to a true reality, a deeper reality. They may have seen this as leading toward a higher truth, but their art initiates this through an aesthetic provocation, one involving abstraction. Rancière brings to light the autonomy of aesthetics from the ethical and the epistemological. Aesthetics does not operate through a representation of truth, nor does it operate by articulating a knowledge system. Aesthetics operates through tensions between the sensory and the intelligible, one that cannot be properly conceptualized prior to the redistributing break. This is true even though these redistributions spark theoretical arguments regarding the importance of the transformation, and even if they lead to ethical stances. These are aspects of the political that emerge from the aesthetic.

Although Rancière is arguing that abstraction in art is not the primary issue, when we look at the examples he identifies, we find a number of abstractions at work. Decontextualization, for example, is a very abstract operation. To cut a fragment from one location and move it to another creates a disjunction from the conditions contingent for its original creation. This rupture allows the object to float free and enter into new relations, produce new allusions. It is well documented that two of the most important moments for twentieth-century abstraction, the *collage* and the *readymade*, require exactly this pretense of decontextualization for recombination. And, to emphasize the collusion described in this section further, both the collage and the readymade are not only abstract in their contextual rupture, but are also seen as foundational moments of a new attitude toward realism in twentieth-century art.

## CRITICAL AWARENESS AND AESTHETIC ABSTRACTION

The difference between raising critical awareness through revealing hidden structures and the aesthetics of estrangement is crucial and easily confused, so let us take a moment to untangle them. Both approaches use abstraction.

but in radically different ways. Critical theory primarily seeks to expose the
assumptions that operate within a given system of beliefs and their represen-
tation. It seeks to make one aware of the power relations behind appearances
and expose the biases that often go unnoticed. The goal is an increase in
knowledge, and from this, an emancipation from the economic, political,
and social constraints that are typically concealed. As discussed previously,
abstraction plays a crucial role in the construction of epistemological systems
of critical awareness. Epistemological abstraction allows connections to be
drawn, networks of relations to be articulated, and lineages of influence to
be exposed. But, these abstractions are different in *kind* from abstraction as
used in aesthetics. An aesthetic abstraction does not seek to produce knowl-
edge. Its sole effect is to destabilize and redistribute sensible information.
You see differently, you feel differently. This is prior to any cognitive under-
standing of the affect being produced. This does not make aesthetic abstrac-
tions anti-intellectual (it is not a primitive regression). Aesthetic abstractions
are full of allure as Graham Harman would describe the effect.[31] Something
is there and not there at the same time. Aesthetics grapples with this para-
dox. Attention is intensified, but not legitimized by exposing the under-
lying power structures operating in a capitalist society. The intensification
is toward the qualities of the object; critical awareness is secondary. Another
way to say this is the difference between *close reading* and *close attention*.
Abstraction within epistemology offers a deeper level of understanding
motivations and structural ties; it replaces one reading with multiple others.
Abstraction within aesthetics disturbs the assumptions of the background
without immediately filling them with another level of content. Instead,
it intensifies or elongates the attention paid to the object or event and, in
doing so, makes one doubt initial assumptions without offering an answer.

## AUERBACH/DEMAND/BRETHOUWER

Abstraction is active in many guises in contemporary art, and it does not
need to look like geometric art, abstract expressionism, minimalism, color-
field painting, or conceptual art. I would like to briefly outline three
instances where an aesthetics of abstraction is at work in contemporary
practice.

Tauba Auerbach produces several different types of work that are dif-
ficult to categorize within a single medium. In a recent exhibition, the

three-dimensional work appears as abstract geometric sculptures. When displayed in conjunction with the paintings in this exhibition, these objects take on the allusion of tools used for producing the paintings through an uncanny similarity between the painted marks and the form of the sculptural objects.[32] At this moment, the abstraction of the sculpture and the abstraction of the paintings are altered into a direct realism of tools leaving traces in matter, a pure indexical mark. In a different series titled *Folds* (2012) (see figure 8.1), work that is initially understood as painting has a feeling of being somewhere between sculpture and photography. This series consists of what appears to be highly three-dimensional,



Figure 8.1
Tauba Auerbach, Untitled (Fold), 2012, Acrylic on canvas/wooden stretcher, 60 × 45 inches, 152.4 × 114.3 cm. © Tauba Auerbach. Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

folded, painted surfaces. What Auerbach has done is folded canvas, spray-painted the folds with a diachronic paint in different orientations, and then stretched the folded canvas onto painting frames. In the end they sit perfectly flat, yet they have a trompe l'iole effect of a thick dimensionality, a trompe l'iole without the technical virtuosity usually associated with still-life realism. These paintings appear simultaneously as high abstraction in the vein of Frank Stella's banded paintings of the late 1950s and as extreme realism in relation to the suggested depth and raw materiality. This is all even stranger in that, on first approaching the paintings, they appear as photographs. The observer has to get extremely close to the canvas, to the raw materiality to believe that they are actually paintings. This close attention is created by the inability to determine if the objects are presenting an aesthetics of abstraction or realism.

Thomas Demand is known for his photographs of models made from paper (see figure 8.2). The paper models are made as exact replicas of photographs of real-world environments. The models are then photographed from exactly the same angle as the original photograph. What results is a very strange realism, for the photos are real documentary photos of real environments; they just happen to be real paper environments, not



Figure 8.2
Thomas Demand, Copyshop, 1999, C-Print/Perspex, 183.5 × 300 cm. © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

the spaces they seem at first to present. What is necessary for the uncanny affect produced in Demand's work can be called a form of abstraction. This is produced by the loss of detail at a certain level, by the tightness in the range of materiality, a muted luminous reflectivity, or the reveal at the edge of surface construction. All these effects are the result of the literal limits of the actual material, paper. But, the aesthetic effect is to make the "real" spaces start to look a little fake, to look abstract. This is a tension between reality and representation, a tension where the observer is judging abstraction solely on the effects of real material behavior. It should be clear how odd it is that the sensorial qualities of a real material objectively documented through photography are the aesthetic trigger toward abstraction.

Harmen Brethouwer is in the midst of an ongoing project, where he is interacting with different modes of cultural production, otherwise known as art (see figure 8.3). He took the radical step to "custom design" his own formats for the artwork, one two dimensional and one spatial. The two forms, a square panel and a cone-shaped object, never change, only the articulation and the scenario. The series that I would like to discuss here belongs to the wall-hung squares. In this series, each panel is painted as a different stone texture. This is the traditional art of marbling, of painting a wall to look like a material it is not. On first glance, these look like stone samples, like real material. But, on closer inspection, they are revealed to be painted. Brethouwer has hired several of the world's top faux-marble painters and given them a square panel upon which to improvise their material composition. This improvisation is key, for to master the imitation of a specific species of stone grain, it is not enough to copy a real example, for the painter must have the skill to cover any changing dimension of wall. This means that the painter must abstractly construct an image that resembles the behavior of stone grain. With Brethouwer's panels, the aesthetic elongation of attention produces a strange inversion, for many of these fragments start to not resemble material so much as they resemble painting, that is they resemble abstract expressionism.[33] Now the works are no longer fake stone, they are fake abstract paintings, or as Brethouwer titled the show in which they were displayed, *False Abstracts*. Furthermore, this raises the interesting question: what exactly is false about these abstract works in the new context of Brethouwer's project? The abstraction should lie in the repetition of the overall form.

**Figure 8.3**
Harmen Brethouwer with Michael van de Laar, Breche Violet, 2008, oil on mdf,
50 × 50 cm. Courtesy of Gallery Hidde van Seggelen.

yet here it lies within the articulation of the surface; it lies at the moment
that one begins to doubt the stoniness of the paint.

Each of these artists in very different ways provokes an estrangement
through aesthetic propositions. Each of them in a different way uses
abstraction as an aesthetic device. But, interestingly, it is not the look
of abstraction that is the immediate aesthetic engagement. All three art-
ists actually produce work that initially evokes realism, and then through
abstraction, produces a doubt regarding the reality of what you are

perceiving. Abstraction does not necessitate a style of geometric form; it does not require a reduction to essences, even though it always works within a medium; it is not medium specific; it is more often medium promiscuous. Many of the things we have been told about abstraction in art over the twentieth century are true, but only in relation to the ethical and epistemological modes of inquiry. It is time to pay closer attention to how abstraction has been operating within aesthetics independent from other philosophical arguments that have served as the basis for so many interpretations of abstraction in art.

## ABSTRACTION EVERYWHERE

In attempting to lay out a different terrain for an aesthetics of abstraction, there is a danger in overextending the application of the concept. The world is increasingly filled with abstractions, with hyperrealizations found everywhere we look in daily life. The financial market has moved from gold to fiat to algorithms. Labor has moved from muscle to class to processing. Social relations have moved from rural collectives to urban densities to data analysis. Image distribution has moved from frescos to photographs to JPEGs.[34] We can consider all of these as increasingly abstract. If the world is getter ever-more abstract, then maybe abstraction in art is just a representation of this accelerating reality.[35] When considering the art market as the exchange of capital, does not abstraction grease the accumulation of wealth? Does an aesthetics of abstraction really just *represent* the reality of late capitalism?

But, is this an *aesthetic* abstraction? Or is this not more indicative of the manner in which knowledge, data, and capital are all accelerated through streamlining their flow?[36] This does of course concern aesthetics, but it seems at odds with the effects that have been discussed thus far regarding aesthetic abstraction. The effects identified in this essay have all attempted to slow, to block, to frustrate, to elongate, to intensify, to estrange the aesthetic engagement. These would seem to run counter to the frictionless flow of art coded as capital. If abstraction is tied to acceleration, it is a very rough acceleration. Jerry Saltz, the senior art critic for *New York* magazine, has recently described the top-selling art of the current market as "Zombie Formalism."[37] He references a variety of artwork, primarily painting that is the most "liquid" in the monetary exchange of the art market.

Interestingly, it is all abstract art, primarily of a variety that references the abstract art made from the 1950s to the 1970s. This is the art that collectors and dealers are exchanging, and there is a cadre of artists producing and feeding this market. It must be acknowledged that a style of abstraction allows this work to flow at top speed, as several familiar versions of abstraction have become very marketable. But, again, are we talking of an aesthetics of abstraction here? I think that the argument could be made that this stylistic abstraction is a form of academic art. It is operating through a knowledge of the codes and conventions through which to produce saleable commodities. It is based on an epistemology of what kind of marks on canvas create the stylistic codes for the look of abstraction. This makes the art abstract, but in the terms discussed throughout this essay, the aesthetics is backed by an appeal to the knowledge of an abstraction practiced over a specific time period, by specific artists, represented and promoted by specific institutions, not to an aesthetic abstraction that is outside and independent of epistemological claims.

Aesthetics demands close attention toward an object. It refuses to analyze it or transcend it. It grants objects all of their sensorial reality and all of their withdrawn depths. It focuses on the tensions between qualities received and implicated allusions. It allows leaps from attention into the speculations of alternate realties. For aesthetics to do all this requires abstraction. We experience the world habitually, as a background. Aesthetics refers to the moments in which this background is engaged in an alternate manner. This estrangement of the background is often created through the devices of abstraction.

## NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790; Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1952).

2. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis* (New York: Verso, 2013).

3. Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993).

4. Steven Shaviro, *Discognition* (London: Repeater, 2015).

5. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

6. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just.*

7. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

8. Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011).

9. Marcus Steinweg, "Concrete Abstraction," in *Public Abstraction* (Koln, Denmark: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Koing, 2015).

10. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just.*

11. Harman, *Quadruple Object.*

12. Harman, *Quadruple Object.*

13. Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2011).

14. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just.*

15. Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just.*

16. Stephan Heidenreich, "Abstraction with and without Modernism," in *Public Abstraction* (Koln, Denmark: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Koing, 2015).

17. Robin Evans, "Abstraction in Painting, Architecture, Mathematics," Architectural Association Lecture, March 11, 1987.

18. Van Doesburg, *Principles of Neo-Plastic Art* (New York: The New York Graphic Society, 1966).

19. Harman, *Quadruple Object.*

20. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990).

21. Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose.*

22. Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose.*

23. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics.*

24. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics.*

25. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics.*

26. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

27. Rancière, *Aisthesis.*

28. Rancière, *Aisthesis.*

29. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomes of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013).

30. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics.*

31. Harman, *Quadruple Object.*

32. *Projective Instruments* (Paula Cooper Gallery, 2016).

33. Hans den Hartog Jager, "False Marble and Abstract Painting" in *False Abstract* (The Hague: De Zwaluw Publishers, 2009).

34. Peter Halley, "Notes on Abstraction" in *Selected Essays: 1981–2001* (New York: Edgewise, 2013).

35. Halley, "Notes on Abstraction."

36. Boris Groys, *On the New* (New York: Verso, 2014).

37. Jerry Saltz, "Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?," *Vulture*, June 17, 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/why-new-abstract-paintings-look-the-same.html?mid=imdb.

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