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## Contemporary Aesthetics: Perspectives on Time, Space, and Content

*Ossi Naukkarinen*

### Abstract

What is contemporary aesthetics? The answer to this question is often simply stated rather than carefully elaborated, even if the current nature and scope of the discipline is far from self-evident. To examine how both the concept and the field of contemporary aesthetics can be understood, I suggest that it is useful to consider three themes: the time, space, and content of aesthetics, i.e., the questions of when, where, and what contemporary aesthetics is. Through this, it is possible to construe a conceptual space of contemporary aesthetics and to compare different instantiations of it with each other.

### Key Words

contemporary aesthetics, contemporaneity, content, space, time

### 1. Introduction

The easiest way to describe contemporary aesthetics is to say that it covers everything that is currently done in the academic discipline so named. This is true at the rudimentary level but it opens up several further questions: What kind of entity are we trying to comprehend when talking about contemporary aesthetics? What is the nature and scope of "the contemporary" and is it synonymous with "the present?" Where and how does contemporary aesthetics manifest itself? Where are the boundaries of the discipline? Is aesthetics always and only an academic discipline? Is aesthetics of today different from aesthetics of the past decades and centuries, and in what ways?

These are topical questions in a world that is becoming more and more global in the sense that there are no self-evident geographical, linguistic, or ideological centers of academic fields but competing actors who might have wildly different ideas of the answers. In such a situation, scholars and teachers should be able to clearly communicate what their conception about contemporary aesthetics is and why. This is important because our idea about what is contemporary reveals what we think is relevant and worth focusing on, in our own society, today. Moreover, what we deem important for any reason tends to define what contemporary is for us. Often, non-contemporary conceptions are not seen to be useful or even intelligible. Different ideas of contemporaneity are related to different ideas of the current field's most important features.

When we search for our own answers, it is useful to pay attention to at least three themes: the time, space and content of aesthetics, i.e., to when, where, and what aspects of contemporary aesthetics are significant. Beyond helping us define our own notions of contemporary aesthetics, the points of view can be used in analyzing the issue of contemporaneity

in other fields. I will concentrate on the first two themes and provide only some tentative remarks of the last one. First, however, we need to more clearly focus the issue by considering some implicit conceptions manifested in important recent works of aesthetics.

## 2. Implicit conceptions

Every new publication, event, or lecture on aesthetics necessarily presents at least an implicit interpretation of the field or of its parts, suggesting what is currently relevant to the field. Perusing, for example, the latest issues of this journal, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, provides an idea of what contemporary aesthetics is, although the idea is necessarily limited—even if by no means wrong—if no other sources are consulted.

However, there are contexts where a more explicit analysis of contemporary aesthetics would be in order. Everyone who teaches philosophical aesthetics should be able to clearly articulate what kinds of lectures and curricula are relevant to students right now and why. Introductory courses, undergraduate textbooks, companions, encyclopedias, and anthologies that seek to present the best contemporary work, especially those containing the word pair “contemporary aesthetics” in their title, evoke expectations related to this. Whenever the field is introduced, one would assume that the introduction is relevant right now, presents things that are currently happening, but also analyzes how the picture of the contemporary situation has been formed. Surprisingly, explications of this kind are fairly rare.

First, there are textbooks that are otherwise interesting and clear but that do not raise the issue of their temporal nature, instead presenting themselves as if they were written in no particular period of history. Colin Lyas’ *Aesthetics*, for example, is written in such a way that it is difficult to say how he perceived *contemporary* aesthetics in the mid 1990s, when the book was published.<sup>[1]</sup> This might have to do with two aspects of analytic aesthetics, whether flaws or just characteristics of it, that have been pointed out by Richard Shusterman: the neglect of both social context and history of the phenomena addressed, art or otherwise.<sup>[2]</sup>

In Marcia Muelder Eaton’s *Basic Issues in Aesthetics*<sup>[3]</sup> and Robert Stecker’s *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*,<sup>[4]</sup> the time-related nature of their approaches is briefly mentioned: They say that they offer a picture of current or contemporary aesthetics, each at their own time of publishing. Richard Eldridge’s recently updated *Philosophy of Art*,<sup>[5]</sup> which does not cover the whole field of aesthetics but only the philosophy of art, also pays attention to some of the latest currents in aesthetics. However, none of these authors analyzes at length how each formed their understanding about contemporary aesthetics and how they see what “contemporary” or “current” is.

In the preface to the third edition of *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, Joseph Margolis goes a bit further. He explicates how the three editions are different from each other because they were compiled at different historical moments. “Every age understands itself as a transition: consolidating what is best,

against disruptive pressures; absorbing new conceptions, to liberate us from what confines our entrenched habits of thought; doubting the viability of legitimating either commitment, previously endorsed or now admired.”[6] He notices that each contemporary moment has its own needs, but even he does not explicate how to understand “contemporary” (in 1987).

The situation is not much different in publications that include the term “contemporary” in their titles. Part One of the book *Contemporary Aesthetics*, entitled “What is Aesthetics?,” and which includes the essays “Twentieth Century Aesthetics” by Monroe C. Beardsley and “Recent Work in Aesthetics” by Joseph Margolis,[7] does give a good picture of what these writers wanted to include in the discourse of the early 1970s. In *Contemporary Aesthetics – A Philosophical Analysis*, R.A. Sharpe writes: “I have tried to present a picture of how the main problems in aesthetics appear in the last quarter of a century....”[8] Again, in *Contemporary Studies in Aesthetics*, Francis J. Coleman merely states: “In this book I have brought together a compendium of many of the more influential and stimulating articles in aesthetics written during the past thirty years.”[9] Yet, these authors do not explicate how they have actually considered what is contemporary and on which grounds they have based their conceptions.

One of the broadest and many-sided presentations of contemporary aesthetics is the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* edited by Michael Kelly. The second edition (2014) contains some 800 hundred essays in six volumes. In the Preface to the first edition (1998), Kelly explains that “To capture these multiple dimensions, the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* has been created using a definition of aesthetics as ‘critical reflection on art, culture, and nature.’”[10] Seen from this perspective, aesthetics is not merely a sub-field of philosophy but includes many different disciplines and has local and global aspects. The *Encyclopedia* tries to encompass “the key centuries (eighteenth to twentieth) and countries (Germany, France, Great Britain, United States) in the history of Western aesthetics,”[11] different disciplinary perspectives, various cultures, many of the arts, various critiques of aesthetics, and dozens of other views.

Kelly also gave a name to the period in which the work for the first edition was done and characterized it briefly: “One of the marks of our present age, which is typically characterized as postmodern, is a skepticism toward any claims about philosophical systems or historical grand narratives....”[12] This skepticism led the editors to take the postmodern, critical attitude into consideration and provide good reasons for their choices. Kelly continued, “Topics were chosen according to the following general criteria: (1) philosophical or critical significance in the histories of aesthetics, art, or fields related to aesthetics or art; (2) relevance to contemporary aesthetics; and (3) historical or contemporary importance in non-Western cultures.”[13] Nonetheless, even if they are much more critical than many others, Kelly and his fellow editors do not really analyze what is “contemporary” and why these things have “relevance to contemporary aesthetics.” They do say what aesthetics means for them and give plenty of examples of that—that is, they suggest what is relevant, but they don’t

say what “contemporary” is, in either 1998 or 2014.

The situation is similar to that in such volumes as *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, *A Companion to Aesthetics* and *Theories of Art Today*.<sup>[14]</sup> Moreover, in my experience, browsing through various Internet pages does not reveal anything more substantial on the matter, even if it is possible that somewhere in the digital universe there are gems that I have not found. Even this electronic journal, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, refrains from defining what the contemporary is.

It seems to be rather typical for many widely used, well-known and in many other ways excellent works on aesthetics, that they don’t problematize the concept of contemporary aesthetics. I emphasize that the tendency of not analyzing what contemporaneity is does by no means diminish the value of such important publications. My aim is not to criticize them but simply note that addressing this theme has not been typical in academic aesthetics. In many other fields the self-reflection that is necessary for understanding the nature of the contemporary state of that field has been very active for a long time, for example, in gender studies, post-colonial studies, and historiography. The perspectives offered by them have also been utilized in philosophical aesthetics, in other ways, but for some reason this has not typically resulted in an analysis on the nature of the field’s contemporaneity.

### **3. Time: When is “contemporary?”**

In different sub-fields of historical studies—the history of the visual arts, theater, music, architecture, philosophy, political events and processes, and so on—the issue of periodization is practically as old as the fields themselves. It is probably impossible to form any idea of history without periodization, i.e., without dividing the past into certain phases, periods, epochs, or eras. Giants of philosophy, such as Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx, had their own ways of periodizing. We are all used to period names such as the Renaissance, Middle-Ages, and Romanticism, and we may even take them as given. However, after analyzing a number of historiographical questions, Thomas Postlewait showed that in theater studies alone there have been at least twenty-two different principles for periodizing history, each including several sub-categories. Periods have been formed by focusing on political empires and dynasties (Hellenistic, Hapsburg, etc.), normative attributes (primitive, festival, etc.), chronology (the seventeenth century, between the wars, etc.), audience types (bourgeois, aristocratic, etc.), performance modes (Noh, baroque), institutions, famous playwrights, and so forth.<sup>[15]</sup>

Postlewait’s message is that we necessarily construct such periods and that they are stipulative, nominal interpretations. No period exists as such in the past, and none of them has a singular, indisputable identity. We simplify many things when we make use of them but that is not a problem that we can solve for good; rather it is an unavoidable feature of such tools.<sup>[16]</sup> We must be critical about them exactly because we cannot do without them. We must ask why we think that a certain period starts and ends at some particular time, what kinds of features characterize it, even if we give a period a

name and some characteristics, how many phenomena that existed during that time frame actually represented the supposedly dominant currents of that period, which things are related to what kinds of periods and which out-live them? In aesthetics we can ask, in which sense can we speak of aesthetics of antiquity, the Renaissance, the twentieth century, modernity, and postmodernity? Are all of them periods or something else?

Such questions clearly have to do with the history of aesthetics and are dealt with by specialists in it, such as Władysław Tatarkiewicz and Paul Guyer.<sup>[17]</sup> However, they are just as important for understanding the contemporary situation. Yet unlike other periods, the contemporary era is still here; we are living it. Furthermore, the fact that we think that there are periods that have ended indicates that we think that we are living a contemporary period that, in turn, will end sooner or later and become history. When, why, and how this will happen is unclear, although some ideas related to this are also sometimes pondered by philosophers of aesthetics.<sup>[18]</sup> Our ideas and beliefs about the past and the future clearly affect our ideas about the present, but I cannot go into the relations of these three modes of time in this article. Instead, I will concentrate on analyzing the concept of the contemporary.

The word 'contemporary' is sometimes used as a term that indicates that its users refrain from taking a stand on the questions of the kind of times we are living in, what we should call the present, and when it started. It is supposed to simply refer to anything existing or happening presently, simultaneously with us. But as soon as we start to think about it, questions arise that should be answered carefully.

First, what is the temporal scope of contemporaneity, i.e., when did the present start and can we know when it will end? 'Contemporary' in the year 2014 most probably refers to this year. However, a single year, not to mention shorter periods, appears to be too short and arbitrary a unit to define the scope of contemporaneity for an entire academic field. So, when did the contemporary era start? What can be considered being "the same time" as ours today? What kinds of things need to happen that make it end?

As we saw above, many authors operate by paying attention to the last few decades; some tens-of-years might not be a completely useless rule of thumb even if that is not very exact. Also, in a recent international call for papers of the Italian journal *Rivista di Estetica*, the theme was entitled "The Contemporary," and this period seems to be understood to have started in the late 1970s to early 1980s.<sup>[19]</sup> On the other hand, it is quite possible to focus on much longer periods and suggest that in some ways we are still living a period that can be called modern. In everyday parlance, at least, 'modern' often simply means "new," "the latest"—or "contemporary." But of course, whether modern aesthetics is the same as contemporary aesthetics is a complicated debate. In Tatarkiewicz's *History of Aesthetics*, modern aesthetics started in 1400 and ended in 1700,<sup>[20]</sup> whereas some others suggest that modern aesthetics really began with Kant and ended at some point in the twentieth century.<sup>[21]</sup> Another

opinion is that we have left the modern behind and are living a postmodern period, as we noted Michael Kelly writing (at least, that was the case in late 1990s). Still others suggest that postmodern is also already history and that the current period started after the postmodern in 1990s. This is how Terry Smith described the situation in *What is Contemporary Art?*,<sup>[22]</sup> and the same idea can be applied to aesthetics. However, it is not senseless to say that both postmodern and contemporary are smaller entities within the much bigger whole of modernity,<sup>[23]</sup> although, at the same time, modern is and will always be what is the latest. It is not at all clear how to call the present period or to pinpoint when it started and for how long it has been going on.

If one thinks that modern and postmodern (or romantic, baroque, etc.) are not contemporary phenomena but something that belong to the past, one must have an idea about why this is so. Something substantial must have changed so that present phenomena must be understood in a new and different way. The point of Smith's book in 2009 was to show that such changes really had occurred and that they should influence our approaches to and theories about works by such artists as Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Matthew Barney, and Tracey Emin. What these changes are, according to Smith, cannot be analyzed in more detailed here, but they are related to various strands of globalization and digital communication. Art that is created in this context is different from modern and postmodern art and thus calls for new kind of aesthetic theory. It is not self-evident that temporal frames must be drawn like this, but Smith's solution clearly shows that defining *any* kind of frame for contemporaneity has an impact on which theoretical and other tools we think are needed for understanding contemporary aesthetic phenomena, whether art or otherwise. Moreover, as we focus on certain issues that we find important, it is easy to think that precisely those issues are contemporary while others are obsolete.

There are also borderline cases. Arthur C. Danto's work can still be seen as contemporary in many senses even though he is, unfortunately, not among us any longer as an active author. I believe that we still live the same contemporary period he was a part of, whatever the name of that period is. Danto was one of the front-row aestheticians in the English-speaking world who saw the role of time to be quite central in art and the philosophy related to it, linking his ideas directly with Hegel's thinking. Interestingly, he sometimes wrote about very old works of art and operated with timelines covering hundreds of years. Yet he sometimes stated that the present period of the complicated mix of art, historical awareness, philosophy, and criticism more or less started with Andy Warhol in the 1960s, while at other times he focused on the very latest exhibitions and currents in his criticism in *The Nation* and elsewhere.<sup>[24]</sup> What Danto found relevant at any given moment may have been created a long time ago; there are different starting points for different phenomena important for the present. How long the contemporary period or moment is, is a flexible matter; in one sense, we are contemporaries of Warhol (and Danto), in another, we are contemporaries with things that are happening around us right now.

This is why we have to make a distinction between recent

phenomena (publications, events, ideas, theories) that have been or are being produced during the present period and those from earlier periods but still relevant to us, such as Plato's or Kant's theories, independently of how and when we think the contemporary period has started. Are Plato and Kant a part of contemporary aesthetics? I think that they are, unlike things that have been forgotten and are not in active use right now. Their ideas are often seen to be interesting in themselves and they are also used as tools for understanding present day phenomena. Interestingly, however, even forgotten theories and ideas may become re-contemporized, as has been happening with John Dewey's thinking since the end of the twentieth century through the neo-pragmatism of Shusterman, Thomas Leddy and others.

Not everything that is currently produced is equally distinctive for the discussion of contemporaneity, but many publications and lectures simply continue the tradition in the form that was developed much earlier. Yet, exactly the bulk of most of the publications, in any field, comprises the most typical cases of any given period. Not everything can be new, innovative and epoch-making. This issue, too, has been analyzed by historians: is history to be described through what was usual, typical, and everyday-like or through breaks, changes, and exceptional events and individuals? Similarly, when we speak of contemporary aesthetics, are we referring to the bulk of the present or to the most exceptional, best, and innovative cases that are clearly different from cases of earlier periods? One possible way of thinking is that there are simply several schools, styles, or traditions living side by side, some older, some younger, and that as long as they are productive and active, be they innovative or more traditional, they are examples of contemporary aesthetics.

To sum up: there are phenomena, questions, and ways of thinking that have existed for a very long time and are still relevant to contemporary aesthetics (hundreds or thousands of years: the human interest in pictorial representation, modernism broadly taken), ones that have come about later but still span significant periods (tens of years: conceptual art, analytic aesthetics), and some things that only cover recent or short periods (years or months: the latest internet developments, publications in aesthetics in the year 2014), all of which have their role in the whole of contemporary aesthetics. Some old periods and phenomena from them are no longer relevant and they are not really part of the contemporary situation.[\[25\]](#)

#### **4. Space: Where is aesthetics?**

While historians actively problematize time-related issues, including periodization, a group of academics in social sciences, cultural studies, gender studies, globalization studies, post- and de-colonial studies, humanistic geography, and elsewhere question the traditional conceptions related to places, regions, borders, centers, peripheries, and other spatial themes. This current, which had already gained interest in late 1970s through Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*,[\[26\]](#) also has its bearing on considering the scope of contemporary aesthetics.

The root question here is, where is contemporary aesthetics? A fine example of this kind of research attitude closely related



to aesthetics is Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*,[\[27\]](#) where she interestingly analyzes "the global literary space" and its changes over the centuries. Does such a space exist? In which way? When was it born? What kinds of texts are noticed in it? Such works should have made us sensitive to the question of "where?"

Indeed, spatial questions have received more attention in the core areas of aesthetics than the time-related questions of contemporaneity. For example, the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* clearly pays attention to them, there are special volumes of journals and events on non-Western aesthetics, and the international congresses of aesthetics organized by *The International Association for Aesthetics* have taken place in different parts of the globe to make sure that various voices and ideas will interact. There are strong signs of a widening of the geographical and linguistic boundaries of academic aesthetics and the present journal has also been active in this process. At the same time, it has become more and more evident that the word 'aesthetics' should be used in the plural, not in the singular: there are different aesthetics in different places as there are different aesthetics in different periods. A recent book addressing the versatility of the field and presenting a number of key figures behind such broadening of tendencies is Monique Roelofs' *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*.[\[28\]](#)

Despite the critical and broad-minded attitude of some publications, looking at much of the literature written in English one would still think that the discipline exists mainly in the USA, Canada, and the UK. Most authors come from these countries and many issues they address are of the same origin, even if the so called Continental tradition is often noticed. By looking at the national societies of aesthetics listed on the web page of *The International Association for Aesthetics*,[\[29\]](#) one might get a somewhat different idea. Yet while there are almost two hundred independent countries in the world, only twenty-nine national societies are mentioned, only one of them from Africa and three from Asia. Aesthetics seems to be a very Western endeavor, even if not entirely Anglo-American. Does this mean that aesthetics does not exist in other countries? Most probably not, but it does not get much visibility, at least in English publications.

A matter which is of a different scale but still of interest is how aesthetics exists within national borders. In the US, the American Society for Aesthetics has done some work in clarifying the state of aesthetics within the country: "During the fall of 1998 the American Society for Aesthetics conducted a survey of the chairs of philosophy departments in North America in order to gauge the status of aesthetics (or the philosophy of art) in the American academy. In particular, the survey was designed to ascertain what proportion have philosophers of art on staff, what aesthetics courses are offered, what the demand for those courses is, and how many graduate departments are training students with a competence in aesthetics."[\[30\]](#) However, the results presented on the webpage are already fairly dated and represent the situation solely in North America. I am not aware of similar surveys done in other regions. We do not really know where contemporary aesthetics resides.

Be the perspective national or international, the question of the center and periphery, so dear to post-colonial studies, must be asked: Which areas or spots on the map of aesthetics are hot and actively interconnected, which are somewhere in the fringes of topical discussion, and which are completely outside of it? Are there different kinds of hot areas and networks independent of each other? How has the map changed over the past hundred years?

I do not think that the spatial situation can ever be completely balanced. A number of factors affect the map of actors contributing to contemporary aesthetics. It is always a result of various kinds of processes, conflicts, intellectual fashions, political events, economic currents, and power struggles. Some actors and areas get more attention and have more influence than others. Who, from where, and doing what will be included? What kinds of things does a map or even an entire atlas cover? Institutions, publication channels, individual scholars, events, women, men, different languages, schools of thought? There can never be a complete picture of this because the whole is simply too complex for anyone to comprehend in detail.

When we discuss the scope of contemporary aesthetics, we should actively ask these questions and test our different ways of mapping. The map and its actors look very different from the perspective of the US and, say, Gabon. Still, even if the perspective of the English-speaking actors seems to be globally rather dominant, I am not sure that they can be accused of not paying attention to all the different areas on the map in the way that political actors have sometimes been accused of colonializing or even forgetting whole countries or regions. Rather, scholars from Scandinavia, South America, Africa, and elsewhere have the responsibility to take care of their own traditions and current situations, to affect the atlas and its contents. Many issues in aesthetics are very culture-dependent and thus must be dealt with locally, i.e., by scholars and other actors who know enough of such local issues, language-dependence, or otherwise.[\[31\]](#)

Even if there are issues that are so local that they cannot really be understood elsewhere, in some cases the globally dominant English discourse is enriched when other perspectives are noticed. This is accomplished by societies and in events mentioned above, and by authors such as Yuriko Saito, who has not only presented Japanese aesthetics to Western readers but also opened up new perspectives on Western cultures with the help of it.[\[32\]](#) Still, the question remains whether this simply means including new aspects in the dominant Western discourse or truly respecting the idea that there are completely different centers and quarters in the broad field of global aesthetics. It may well be that in some cultures the whole Western idea of contemporaneity, which values change and newness, is not considered important.

More generally, I believe that there are phenomena in contemporary aesthetics that are fairly global or very widespread (interest in the arts, Kant's philosophy), some that are more culture-dependent (conceptions about French art by French aestheticians), and some that are very local, even individual. All of them have their place in the totality of the

contemporary situation, and we should be sensitive to all these levels in the same manner that we need to be sensitive to various time layers.

I assume that while scholars in aesthetics become better at using large data bases and their combinations, so-called big data will bring new knowledge to the current field of aesthetics. Thus far, extensive results of this type of research have not been published. To my knowledge, there are no large-scale data analyses on where publications in aesthetics have been published, in which languages, by what kind of people, how they are related to each other and to publications in other fields, what is the overall volume of activities in aesthetics as compared with some other fields' activities, where courses in aesthetics are taught, and so on. Such issues could be analyzed and presented in charts and images, but carrying through such analyses requires team work that has not been very typical in the humanities. It is probable that working practices developed in the so-called digital humanities will eventually change the situation.<sup>[33]</sup> The scope of aesthetics in the age of databases and data flows probably looks rather different from that of traditional universities, printed books, and physical locations. In many ways, data do not have locality at all and it is sometimes mind-boggling to try to figure out where and how things in the internet actually exist. How the atlas of aesthetics of Google, Amazon, Scopus, university databases, Facebook, Twitter, and other digital systems will look remains to be seen.

#### **5. Content: What is aesthetics?**

When we try to understand when and where contemporary aesthetics exists and manifests itself, we must have an idea of what we are looking for. Not everything that can be included in the category has the name 'aesthetics' stamped on it. Are we looking for texts, people, institutions, ideas, theories, or what, and what makes all these things instances of aesthetics?

Philosophically, we should have a conception of the ontology and epistemology related to aesthetics: what is aesthetics and how do we know that?

Depending on our way of defining what aesthetics are we will have a very different map of the current field. The field of Analytic Aesthetics is probably somewhat different from the Continental, Psychoanalytic, Pragmatist, or Marxist traditions, even if liberal minds can include all these in the comprehensive picture. But even liberal minds have some limitations: not everything is aesthetics. This is probably the biggest, toughest, and longest-living question any field of knowledge faces: how to define itself? I am not trying to offer an answer to this question here; the debate has been going on since the days of Baumgarten and will continue. Instead, I just refer to some problematic issues that we face when we try to find our own answers.

First, can works written in, say, anthropology, the social sciences, or psychology, following their terminology and methodology, be considered aesthetics if they focus on the arts or beauty? Many issues relevant to aesthetics are actively dealt with in these fields, even if not philosophically. One only has to think of the activities of the *International Association of Empirical Aesthetics*, pursued mostly by

psychologists. In fact, this is still a fairly simple case because the association openly uses the name 'aesthetics' in its title, but there are other contexts where the name is absent and yet what is done seems to be, at least partly, aesthetics. I am thinking, for example, about Susan B. Kaiser's work in the social psychology of clothing.<sup>[34]</sup> Also, in environmental aesthetics the borderline between philosophical aesthetics and natural sciences is often very thin, if it exists at all.

On the other hand, it is not evident that everything that is called aesthetics is aesthetics in the sense that I understand it. Do we have quite different uses for a single word; is this a case of homonyms? There have been interesting discussions over the term in art education and even suggestions for strongly questioning the usefulness of it because, according to some authors, the word seems to be referring to too many things or to not much at all.<sup>[35]</sup> Taken to the extreme, this would mean that in some sense contemporary aesthetics does not really exist or is some sort of illusion. But if contemporary aesthetics doesn't exist, what would all that be that I have thought belongs to that category?

Moreover, we need to consider whether aesthetics is something that happens only in academia—in philosophy or elsewhere—or whether some of the things done by artists, fashion designers, art educators, critics, cooks, carpenters, athletes, hairdressers, web designers, and cosmeticians are equally important parts of the field of contemporary aesthetics? At least, they address aesthetic issues, their activities by far outnumber anything academic aestheticians could ever imagine doing, and they create things that academic aestheticians are also interested in. Some artists and artworks explicitly comment on and develop themes that occupy philosophical aestheticians' minds. This current that is openly pondered in the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* becomes evident in a number of exhibitions and biennales, along with books such as *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*.<sup>[36]</sup> The difference between academic and non-academic aesthetics is blurry, as is nicely stated by Kevin Melchionne at the end of his article in *Contemporary Aesthetics*: he says that he "paints and writes aesthetics."<sup>[37]</sup> And perhaps, in the end, we can even think that some animals have their aesthetics, as David Rothenberg has argued.<sup>[38]</sup> It is possible that they really consciously pay attention to aesthetic matters and in that sense have their aesthetic ideas and preferences, even if not verbal theories.

It is crucial to realize which perspective to aesthetics one is adopting and tell it openly. I don't have a problem with stating that aesthetics is something that is created by academics at universities and disseminated in linguistic form (as books, articles, web pages, lectures, and speeches), that is, what is labeled as aesthetics by aestheticians themselves. And I don't have a problem including a nebulous group of artists, designers, journalists, athletes, and their products in the sphere of aesthetics, either. These are two very different ideas of what aesthetics is and how it should be approached ontologically, epistemologically, and otherwise, and they may be useful and comprehensible in different situations. One of the most promising approaches is presented by Casey Haskins. Even if he focuses on academic circles of aesthetics,

he sees aesthetics as an “intellectual network” that includes and connects very different instances of aesthetics together, evolves over time, and does not have a clear, dominant center and operation practices, nor a single ontology or epistemology. [39]

Again, we can make use of a tripartite scheme. If there are very old, “middle-aged,” and quite recent strands in contemporary aesthetics considered temporally; global, culture-dependent, and local phenomena considered spatially; there might be explicit, semi-explicit and implicit cases of contemporary aesthetics' content.

Together, these three axes form an imaginary or metaphorical three-dimensional space of contemporary aesthetics. We can try to posit different instances of aesthetics into this space and see how they are related to other cases. A philosophical essay on the definition of art published in this journal belongs to a different location of this space than an opening speech of an art exhibition in a small town in South Korea.

This kind of space is a metaphorical construct, not a neutral picture of a reality. But many, if not most, theories and other conceptual entities are exactly that. Still, it can be a useful tool for demonstrating the multifaceted aspects and versions of contemporary aesthetics. The next step, then, is to discuss them in more detail and probably debate whether all types belong to the field or space of contemporary aesthetics or, rather, to the past, to the future, or outside aesthetics altogether. It may also make it easier to clarify from which linguistic, cultural, philosophical, methodological, or other standpoint one is approaching the contemporary field.

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## Endnotes

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[23] Whether we should speak about modernity, the modern, or modernism, and whether these terms refer to periods, attitudes, styles, or something else is a matter of debate. On this, for example, Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

[24] All these aspects come together, for example, in Arthur C. Danto, *Encounters & Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

[25] Although it is not exactly the same, this tripartite model can be compared to ones addressing overlapping period durations in historical studies presented by Fernand Braudel and Norbert Elias. See Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, pp. 167–168.

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[31] One reason for why this may not be so easy in current academia is that scholars all over the world are pressured to publish in English.

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