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## The Institutional Margins of Aesthetics: A Study Proposal

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## The Institutional Margins of Aesthetics: A Study Proposal

Jozef Kovalčík  
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### Abstract

A considerable number of classical texts in aesthetics and cultural philosophy were originally published outside of the framework of institutionalized academic scholarship. One can begin the modern story with two loners, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, then continue with the Frankfurt School and end the short list with the French "wave" (Blanchot, Bataille). Contemporary aesthetics benefits also from the work of thinkers like Susan Sontag and Nicolas Bourriaud, who have a huge scholarly impact but who built their careers outside academia. We intend to 1) sketch out a short historical overview of the scholars within aesthetics who could be considered to have worked in the institutional margins, 2) ask if there may be a particular advantage to working that way, and 3) defend and develop a more conscious relationship toward academic margins: could we benefit from a more active relationship with this phenomenon? In arts this is commonplace, and concepts like "outsider art," "outlaw art," and "alternative art" are words that point to different spheres of work in a respectable manner. We may find value in using them to give the margins more institutional justification, which would, in the end, profit the whole institution. This is something we hope to see happen in aesthetics.

### Key Words

academy, alternative, contemporary aesthetics, history of aesthetics, institutions, marginal, outsider

### 1. Introduction

In the "Cabinet of Cynics," chapter 7 of the *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1987), Peter Sloterdijk, who, in a rather naïve and sentimental fashion, hails all forms of anti-institutionalism, rolls out the carpet for Diogenes as the prototype of a philosopher of the margins:

Since Diogenes was one of those philosophers of life for whom life is more important than writing, it is understandable why not a single authentic line from him has been preserved. ... As anti-theoretician, anti-dogmatist, anti-scholar, he emits an impulse that resounds everywhere where thinkers strive for a "knowledge for free people..."

Sloterdijk warns us about

...the danger of underestimating the philosophical content of cynicism, precisely because it has been handed down "only" anecdotally, is great. That even great spirits of the caliber of Hegel and Schopenhauer have fallen into this trap can

be gleaned from the history of philosophy.<sup>[1]</sup>

The truth is, of course, that it is hard to find an older example of a victorious philosophical outsider than Diogenes. He witnessed the rise of written philosophy in Plato's work and then the rise of the first academy run by Aristotle. He lived in a barrel, masturbated in public, and famously offended Alexander the Great by asking him to move away from the sun when the latter came to talk with him. Still Diogenes made a career when he was hired by Alexander to teach philosophy.

Sloterdijk himself has made a career by working outside the framework of academia. He has published widely without footnotes and in non-academic forums, and he has left his texts full of provocations and speculations that a pedantic scholar could easily shoot down if he or she liked to search for problems. Still, Sloterdijk has become one of the leading figures of cultural philosophy in Europe.

One can, of course, work outside legitimate institutions and publish in forums that do not satisfy academic expectations, such as using footnotes, well-documented sources of information, and, distribution beyond the academic network. More importantly, one can build a career by working like this. Yet, we have not found anyone focusing clearly on this issue, although it seems to be quite central to the careers of many classic texts. While recognizing the valuable nature of work done outside or on the outskirts of the main framework is common in the arts,<sup>[2]</sup> one could ask how it is possible that, of all disciplines, aesthetics does not recognize anything like this in its own sphere? The arts have produced a broad range of concepts that highlight important work done outside the mainstream. Alternative spaces in visual art, underground art, and outlaw and outsider music, literature and arts, all these differentiate between the center and the periphery but with high respect paid to the margins. Maybe we should at least ask ourselves as aestheticians, whether there are benefits in working in the margins, and whether there any way we could develop a more conscious and productive approach to this issue?

In this essay we will sketch out of a history of major scholars who have, in one way or another, been working in the margins of aesthetics (Section 2. Notes on the history of the margins of aesthetics). We will then investigate some of the advantages of working in the margins (3. Resources on the outskirts of aesthetics). Finally, we will defend a more rewarding way to deal with the margins of aesthetics (4. The future of the margins.) The arts, with their well-functioning systems of appraising the margins, have a big role in helping us to understand the issue.

The topic is certainly too broad to be fully explored in one article, and it may be that our own contribution will not change anything. Yet, we need to make at least marginal notes on the history of aesthetics need.

It should be said that we are not against institutions. Rather, both of us believe that institutional structures are necessary for a flourishing existence of this practice. This is exactly why we believe that institutional margins should be discussed. We want to ameliorate the way the mainstream handles the

margins in our field.

A critical reader might ask, why not do this within the academic margins as, for example, in *E-flux*, *Art Pulse*, *Atlántica* or any other non-academic art journal that readily publishes essays and manifestos of an aesthetic nature? Our decision to search for a highly respected and central academic journal for our text is justified, we think, for we truly want to inaugurate a discussion about our discipline. In America, *Contemporary Aesthetics* is in many ways in between the institutionalized and the marginal. And it is not the central publishing medium for any school of aesthetics. It is, however, internationally the most acclaimed publication of aesthetics that reaches scholars in all schools of philosophy.

We believe that, in most cases, it is unproductive and unnecessary to stay outside the mainstream. We understand why pioneers might easily choose platforms that are considered marginal in academic terms, or why some of them do not choose or are not allowed to work in academia, but we do not think there is any reason for us to make it harder for their thoughts to reach the heart of our discipline, which they, in the end, often manage to do after some time has passed. We need to update our idea of the world of aesthetics. The margins have always been there and still have an impact. Why not embrace the diversity of work done in aesthetics more consciously?

## **2. Notes on the history of the margins of aesthetics**

In *Songs in the Key of Z* (2000), Irwin Chusid describes "outsider musicians" as unpredictable. They do not fit the standards of the field they are working in. He then discusses the original use of the word 'outsiders' in descriptions of art made by prison inmates and mental patients and, more importantly, claims that in music the word is used to point out a lack of competence. Outsider music thus mostly means naïve and self-taught work.[3]

The original French phrase "*art brut*," which Roger Cardinal carried over into English in 1972, focuses more on art created outside of the boundaries of the official culture, and it was first coined and used successfully by the painter Jean Dubuffet.

The city of Lausanne in Switzerland still hosts a Dubuffet Museum of Art Brut. This original use did not narrow the competence of artists but focused more on institutional margins. Dubuffet also paid tribute to *art brut* artists by stating that he did "not believe that (his) work (has) been influenced by any particular form of Art Brut. All that can be said of them is that they have been encouraged and stimulated by my realizing the legitimacy of forms of art different from cultural art, and my conviction – in view of various examples – that it is possible to obtain more complete and fruitful means of expression through paths altogether distinct from those followed by cultural art." [4]

The way we have been absorbing anarchic and marginal work into the canon of art, from historical avant-garde groups to contemporary outsider movements like West Coast lowbrow art and the underground [5] is, in the context of this paper, the same phenomenon: the stream of inclusion of marginal or outsider work. Thinking about outsiders and margins in this

way, it is easy to say that the history of philosophy is in many ways quite a repository of individuals fitting this model. To name some of the most influential thinkers who have shaken the central paradigms of Western philosophy, one could point a finger at René Descartes, the eccentric who meditated in a huge stone oven and fled France for the Netherlands to evade the Inquisition, and Charles Sanders Peirce, who, after an impressive start, ended his "career" in Milford, Pennsylvania in poverty.

We find the most (in)famous example of outsider-ism in its full development and glory in the case of Friedrich Nietzsche. He built his "real" career in philology, published politically and philosophically incorrect books, and wrote philosophy in a literary fashion. Because of him adapting and working within the university system. Nietzsche left academia and became what we may diplomatically call an "independent philosopher." R. J. Hollingdale wrote in his article, "The Hero as an Outsider" in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, that Arthur Schopenhauer, the first person in the freelance market of German philosophy to shake up the world, was, in fact, the model for Nietzsche's work,

As every philosophical topic of interest to anyone but a professional logician or epistemologist was banished from the German universities of the 1850s – and that was the practical outcome of the political and ecclesiastical censorship – philosophy was not brought to heel or reduced to an obedient servant of state and church, as was of course the intention. What happened was that German philosophy split into two: into an academic philosophy to which no one any longer paid attention and whose reputation sank to an unprecedented low for Germany, and a freelance philosophy existing outside and independently of the university whose practitioners were able to discuss those questions, alone of interest to the nonacademic public, which the academic philosopher was inhibited from approaching.<sup>[6]</sup>

Hollingdale wisely insisted that the mythical narratives surrounding both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (loners with interesting lives) have no special value for their philosophy. At the same time, though, he forgot to ask what the cash value was for their work outside of the institutional framework. If Hollingdale portrayed the academic world as an ivory tower and its philosophical work as something that did not have any value outside of its own hermetic activity, why did he not point out that maybe Nietzsche and Schopenhauer needed their freedom from these constraints? As much as the myths of their interesting lives are worth criticizing from a philosophical point of view, as much do we need to rethink their choices in regard to the pioneering nature of their work.

Søren Kierkegaard was rich enough to dismiss the established publishers of his era. He printed his own books, even under pseudonyms like "Fireman" and, far from being a celebrated scholarly figure in his small and peripheral country, was an outsider in Danish society. The university was one of the main targets of the critique of enlightenment made by Theodor W.

Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who chose the form of an independent institute and established the Frankfurt School at the outskirts of the university world to be free to express their idea of truth. Partly an outsider even in this group, Walter Benjamin was also the first significant academic dropout. His rehabilitation work was not approved, and his publishing activities were far from the mainstream during his lifetime. It is a good question whether Benjamin could be considered an academic scholar at all, as his writing is thoroughly essayistic. Nevertheless, all the thinkers we have mentioned have had a huge impact on the world of aesthetics.

Clement Greenberg's abstract expressionist rebellion against kitsch, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," was originally published in the Trotskyan *Partisan Review* (1939), and his main affiliation with theoretical thinking was in the form of criticism and essays. However, when that essay was published, he was working in the customs office. The whole wave of French post-war philosophy was actually dominated by outsiders, as well. For many, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, and Pierre Klossowsky are still central names in the history of philosophical thinking on the arts, although their careers were not really carried on at the university. Barthes never defended a Ph.D. and Bataille worked as a librarian. Many of them established their own art journals, like *Acéphale* and *Tel Quel*, so as to control their work and be free to write in a non-academic manner.

This applies to later waves, like deconstructionism, too. Jacques Derrida (who, like Wittgenstein, received a Ph.D. at a very late stage of his career) and some other thinkers now labeled as postmodernists, like the philosophizing psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek, are sometimes playfully referred to as "rogues" because of their dismissal of academic rules. It is important to note that Žižek actually publishes widely, for example, in art journals, on the Internet, and even in newspapers. We are more likely to read his text in *The Guardian* or *E-Flux* than in an academic journal.

Many contributors to aesthetic theory have also chosen ways of writing that label them more as essayists than scholars. Umberto Eco is very much a mixed figure here, as he has published many really legitimate and dry academic texts, and yet his biggest scholarly impact is, undeniably from his essays and columns. His main works in aesthetics, *The Open Work* (*Opera aperta* 1962) and *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964), are not mentioned as frequently as his newspaper writings, be it in café discussions on philosophy or references in academic articles.

There are also essayists who are more clearly scholars and writers than Eco but who, as philosophers of art and culture, still have more impact on aesthetics than most of the legitimate scholars in the field could ever dream of. Here we refer to the insights and arguments of such authors as Leo Tolstoy and, to take a modern one, the late Susan Sontag. "What is Art?" and "Notes on "Camp" are constantly mentioned, discussed, and often analyzed in aesthetics, though their work is not really scholarly. And even today we have freelancers like Paul Virilio and we have had philosopher/art critics who have written about aesthetics in

very free ways, like Arthur C. Danto. If we had a well-functioning citation index in aesthetics, these names would stand taller than many central names who publish in refereed journals. Even artists writing provocatively about visual culture, such as Guy Debord, are often mentioned in academic articles, although tracing the places and contexts of where their work was done leads us very far from academic centers.

Today, we have a profession called scholar that comprises much more than just reading, writing, and lecturing. Nearly everyone with an academic job has a huge load of administrative work, and the contemporary forms of professionalism in our field demand flexibility and hard work apart from scholarly interests. While the history of the development of our institutional framework would be an interesting topic for study, it is beyond the scope of this paper. But it is still important to note that many of us working in this discipline feel that some refereed journals seldom produce any new discussions. There seems to be a growing feeling of something that could be called "professionalism" in the way scholars nag about small mistakes made by other scholars and the way we often publish just to make publication points. It is this modern, or even more, contemporary institutional framework that we have to think about when we wonder why someone with the motivation and gift for aesthetics would want to write and work outside of their main profession.

### **3. Resources on the outskirts of aesthetics**

How is it possible, taking our sketch above into account, that there is virtually no acknowledgement, no discussion, and no not even historical reflection about this phenomenon? It is actually easier to understand this in the traditional areas of philosophy, but our area of study, the arts, offers us quite a handful of classifications that have been produced that note, respect, and support the special nature of the work done in the margins. We have outlaw country music, alternative exhibition spaces, garage rock, grass root galleries, and independent publishers, to name a few examples. It would be productive to try to shed some light on the margins of aesthetics in connection with the arts, with the help of the terms mentioned, and so to see their cash value in another context.

We often mention the fact that avant-garde groups were included quite late in our reading of what modern art is. Here Peter Bürger has provided the fundamentals for seeing these groups first as outsiders and then as central for our reading of modernity in the arts.<sup>[7]</sup> The same pattern in the history of scholarly work is present in many of the examples we have already mentioned. It seems that this type of an institutional outsider career path is more typical for our field than, for example, for economics, sociology, or philology, where illustrious individuals have made their careers almost exclusively at universities in the departments devoted to their disciplines. On the other hand, there are famous eccentrics and outsiders in mathematics, too, the brightest star now being Grigori Perelman, who solved one of math's greatest mysteries. He published his analysis online and has not even come to collect the prizes his pioneer work in mathematics has earned him.<sup>[8]</sup> It seems that aesthetics has several of these kinds of people, and therefore there may be value in

discussing this.

But since we keep moving names and texts from the margins to the center of our discipline later on, is it not possible that we would miss many great contributions by dismissing the margins? Is it not possible that we might discuss them faster in the core of our discipline? There is no value in slowness when one wants to debate an issue that has been raised because of changes in culture and the arts.

Of course, we should not forget that new stars have been made with the help of major refereed journals and traditional academic frameworks, as well. Wolfgang Iser and Richard Shusterman have used well the existing support of institutions of aesthetics while still publishing original texts. But why do some scholars choose to work in the margins? To be sure, some of us just do not win in the career game, which requires much more of us than just publishing. But could it also be that, for some reason, some of the work done in these margins would have been impossible to do inside the academic world? Or is it that it is more fruitful to debate, publish, and lecture outside of academia in some cases? To delve into this, we need to use concepts borrowed from art and popular culture to shed light on this practice.

Most of the do-it-yourself recordings today are done with mixing boards and a set of headphones, but a more productive analogy for aesthetics might be found in garage art. As a musical style, garage rock evolved in the 1960s and in many ways anticipated the rise of punk music in the 1970s. Later, garage meant also less of an interest in virtuosity and playing correctly but something that people in music like to call "authenticity" or, in less academic terms, "attitude." The term often pops up when someone wants to point out that the music is not over-produced and that its makers do not fear making mistakes. Many bands feel like getting back to the original garage where they rehearsed, to get out of the rat race of commercial pressure, publicity work, and other institutional burdens.

We think that this sounds somewhat like what Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and, later, the Frankfurt School wanted to do in the quest for getting back to basics without a strict institutional framework. So, as Led Zeppelin went to a distant cottage in Wales to make their third record, and Bruce Springsteen downgraded back to the basics soon after his huge success with *Born in the USA*, it is understandable that some academics who work in the crossfire of referees and an overload of administration might want to quit so they could do their life-work in a more fruitful way. Is that why Paul Virilio and Kant connoisseur Thierry de Duve have remained freelancers? Both philosophers are highly appreciated in our discipline and certainly could have found a job in academia if they wanted one, but they chose not to.

In music, the label "garage" can even be very useful in creating a successful career. Garage does not indicate non-professionalism or lack of education. Sometimes it can even be the opposite. Metallica's early work is considered garage, though for a rock band of the late 1980s, the band is musically very well educated, some of its musicians having a long history in classical music. In this case, however, we are

talking about a musical style, which is of less interest for us here.

But this is important: Garage gives us the impression of being directly man-made. It is rebellion against homogenization, mass culture, and mass design. In our times, it is easy to attribute a special value to something that looks, sounds, and feels man-made. Scholarly and academic culture, with its tight formal matrix – here we think about some of the most traditional academic journals – might sometimes work a little like the music industry, making all papers look the same, and making most professionals write without taking any risks, in the end writing sometimes only that colleague x is wrong because of reason y. The tight formal matrix of the academic journal culture removes the personal quality.

Another important background for the use of “garage” here is technology. In the discussion of technological innovations, we find the garage to be a place where a major part of our innovations are still done, outside of universities and corporate research units. It still seems that it is productive to let an amateur innovator spend a great deal of time by himself in his garage, and this is something companies and even some universities aspire to create by building labs, factories, and playgrounds for interdisciplinary work (i.e., the start-up culture), where the employees would have a good time, testing their intuitions in groups in a good spirit. Creating atmosphere might function well at times, but many major innovators seem to favor a still freer way of working.

Both uses of the concept ‘garage’ lead us in the same direction, to see how we need formally free ways of working, and how many good ideas and insights emerge only when we are able to keep up a good basic spirit of work, something neo-liberalist university policies are definitely not reinforcing. In the work of Žižek, you can still smell the “attitude,” to put it into rock terms. The garage as professional strategy might sound naïve, but in many cases writing needs downshifting and a change of context; the fear of making mistakes is too big in our profession.

‘Alternative’ and ‘grass root’ are concepts that are used frequently in the arts. Alternative exhibition spaces and alternative stages or self-made grass root exhibition sites have been one of the main ways of fostering new ways of doing contemporary visual and performing arts. At one point it seemed that half of our artist friends were each running their own space. On the other hand, these concepts have been so widely used for such diverse matters that they are already inflated. Often alternative and grass root no longer even stand for providing something else; they are just different career paths. Still, alternative spaces are mainly where people have been trying out their ideas in a framework that is not under much control and not as stressful as institutional spaces. Alternative film festivals are for those who are interested in “something else,” and they offer the possibility of showing and funding small productions. The same can be said about shadow art fairs.

In writing up research, we often overuse references and matrixes borrowed from natural science. We think that long booklists back up our argumentation better. But references

and citations should only help us prove our point, not be used to technically cosmetize the research before publishing to make the paper or book look more academic. (One could also ask here if there is an aesthetic formalism or academic text that could provide a good topic for an article?) This is what we believe Sloterdijk is actually announcing, that you can work without these constraints.

And here we would like to think about the context. Like public art spaces, contemporary art museums, and Kunsthallen that in the art world suffer from institutional restraints, heavy administration, and competitive culture, many of our academic forums, like conferences, refereed journals, and the university do not always help us to work well or provide the best possible context for our work. So as many artists choose to work in grass root galleries and out in the street, Brian O'Doherty wrote his famous texts about the white cube in *Art Forum* (which then ended up to be *Inside the White Cube*), Peter Sloterdijk and Boris Groys work in art schools, Nicolas Bourriaud created relational aesthetics by curating and writing speculative theoretical texts for catalogues (where the form of writing is free) and, to end the short list, Camille Paglia's provocative texts on sex and gender have mostly been published in books of essays. There are also differences between academic publishers and here, too, one could think about the possibility of openly alternative academic publishing houses. (Today they do not really exist.)

In the alternative and grass root forums, texts are read and criticized with less interest in just finding mistakes. Texts are not just arguments but sometimes transcribed panel discussions, interviews with famous philosophers (*Art Pulse* has lately published lengthy interviews with Gianni Vattimo and Zygmunt Bauman), and sketchy essays where new ideas can be brought up and tested, even in a dialogue with practical matters (art and its mediation). In the same way, alternative spaces in our field could take the form of panel discussions in biennales, public talks, and other forms of communication, such as documentary films (Žižek's documentary on film and psychoanalysis is analyzed in depth in many academic papers), and even newspaper columns (Umberto Eco in *L'espresso*).

Seeing these margins of our institution as alternative spaces reminds us of the need to have some spaces for sketching out thoughts (some of us think by writing) and of the way dialogue between scholars, the public, and the arts can sometimes be productive, not just for educational purposes, but also for scholarly work itself. Scholars learn in dialogue, although we do not have a very strong tradition of writing the history of our scholarly debates. Wouldn't it be useful to acknowledge this? If scholarly work needs these margins and procedures to some extent, maybe we could somehow endorse our relationship with them.

The institution, moreover, also gets stuck in paradigms and it can be really hard to break away from them from the inside. Sometimes discussions need to grow in the margins before becoming elevated into the mainstream. This has largely happened with traditions like feminism, queer thinking, and Marxism, which have slowly become academic norms, no matter how much they have been criticized for being non-

scholarly traditions.

Our last words about “alternative” are that the alternative does not have to be in opposition to the mainstream. It can be, of course, if that is what is seen as productive, but we would like to focus on professional work in ways that differs from the most legitimate and institutionalized ways of working.

Another issue is the cross-disciplinary nature of most margins. In the arts it is normal to think that crossovers happen in certain institutional territories, and one often acknowledges their importance. One can acknowledge the way academia has paid tribute to institutions like MIT for bringing people of different backgrounds to work together. But could we not also do the same when it happens in the art world? Sitting in panel discussions and taking part in art world debates, one has to be able to discuss with sociologists, people from artistic research, and sometimes just theoretically-minded artists. Biennales like *Documenta* and *Manifesta* offer platforms for theoretical discussions that have benefitted mainstream discussions on neoliberalism, art’s autonomy, post-colonialism, and political art, to name a few.<sup>[9]</sup>

And we should not forget that Jean-François Lyotard had to discuss his theses about the changing world with people from other disciplines, as well as with politicians. That is how the idea of the postmodern appeared as the result of a commission ordered by the Canadian province of Quebec. For many, postmodernism has been an annoyance, but it is one of the great narratives of our time, and has been tested in various ways in the academy as well as in aesthetics.

Scholarly journals deal with a very narrow and specialized audience, which is fine when you have a point to make that is mostly about the tradition of aesthetics, itself and not about problems that could have wider recognition. No wonder new winning ideas are often published in forums that reach people across disciplinary boundaries. If physicist David Bohm and feminist philosopher and writer Helene Cixous had only made publication points, we would likely not know about them and their impact would never have changed their own disciplines. Jean Baudrillard’s and Slavoj Žižek’s reactions on September 11th were also first published in newspapers and on the Internet, and soon formed the basis for philosophical discourse on the issue. This would never have happened if their texts had been published in academic refereed journals one or two years after the event and reached only small professional audiences. We do not really read refereed journals from other disciplines, but we read books, especially books of essays, which are an important way to test and absorb ideas on a broader level.

So, working in the margins has a meaningful impact by broadening the scope of philosophical and aesthetic thinking, and we definitely see it as something aesthetics should have more of, that is, a dialogue with other disciplines and with art. Aesthetics has much to give to other branches of thinking, so it should embrace its possibilities to work in the margins of its own institutions in territories where it is natural to mix with other perspectives and methods of thinking.

One scholarly field has already been there, and gone further.

Feminist and queer theory have taken good notice of “outsiderism,” and bell hooks has even tackled cultural issues close to aesthetic theory in *Outlaw Culture* (1994). ‘Outlaw’ is a word that neatly captures the way one can be inside and outside the academy at the same time if one does not fit the racial, class, or other criteria that people attach to the word ‘scholar.’ The victory of the words ‘outsider’ and ‘outlaw’ in feminist and queer debates comes from a painful and complex background, stemming from the fact that being homosexual meant, for long time, being an outlaw, and being a woman meant staying in the shadow of men, and still does in most countries. Here it has been a natural thing to understand the meaning of inside and outside. The same applies to Marxist and anarcho-syndicalist theory, where female scholars like Emma Goldman had to work outside the mainstream of philosophical thinking.

However much we try to make the world a better, more inclusive place, we, the authors of this text, are sure that there will always be minorities that work more or less outside the mainstream. People working in an institutional framework could try to be more forthright in recognizing the work made in the margins. This is, of course, what we also hope, as representatives of two small languages, Finnish and Slovakian. We frequently have to work in the English language and then use a native speaker to revise our text. (We could use French or German too, as those languages have a wide audience among aestheticians.) And we know that some of our national classics could be better recognized in the international world of aesthetics but have been dismissed because of the marginal languages and cultures they represent. Jan Mukarovsky and Yrjö Hirn, the former better known than the latter, were both outstanding scholars at the beginning of the twentieth century, and their ideas of a broader use of the concept of art in aesthetics, something they both shared, could easily be seen now as historically early,<sup>[10]</sup> but history is written by the winners, as Walter Benjamin once said.

Like feminism and queer studies, psychoanalysis has, for a long time, also been run as a discipline by more or less outlaws, as it is not a scholarly field that is well accepted in the academia (with the exception of France and possibly Slovenia). Slavoj entered the academic world quite late in his career, and he has famously continued publishing in alternative forums, like *Guardian*, *E-Flux*, as we have mentioned. Jacques Lacan’s impact on philosophy and aesthetics has grown huge, and yet in many countries you still face problems if you end up writing about his work.

In his inspiring work, *On Creativity* (1998),<sup>[11]</sup> David Bohm discusses the anti-survivalist side of art, religion, and scientific thinking by claiming that pioneering work in these special fields of human culture is often done with an uncompromising attitude where one risks one’s own survival. To understand this and to note how many scholars choose to follow their own path could mean not only to understand better what we are doing but to help keep our discipline sustainable. Without seeing outsiders or anti-institutionalists, or even anything heroic, quite the contrary, our article should not be dismissed as teenage revolt: what we want to stress here is a fact of life that in this field, people work fanatically and often make

decisions that seem, at least at first, to be against their careers. However, their work is sometimes picked up by other fields. The thoughts of many of them become known only when they are very old, if at all, and some of them become important only after they are dead. Careers can be launched in an easier fashion by doing what is expected, but this will only fuel mediocrity in the long run, and mediocrity does not contribute to our discipline. The history of philosophy and aesthetics is filled with books that have been written against all possible expectations.

#### **4. The future of the margins**

To develop new forms of thinking we sometimes need a context where risks are appreciated, mistakes may be considered interesting, and pedantic work is seen as less valuable than new ideas. Many of us seek inspiration from the essays of Susan Sontag, the literary loner Søren Kierkegaard, and Peter Sloterdijk, and if the academic world will not grant these types of thinkers the opportunity to work inside its walls, then let us at least follow what these types of thinkers do outside of the mainstream and give them more support. We should also encourage art schools to hire scholars with different criteria, and this is one course that could be emphasized: Umberto Eco, Peter Sloterdijk, Nicolas Bourriaud, Camille Paglia, and Boris Groys were first employed by art universities. Why do people first need to work on the outside for twenty-five years and then give them glory and jobs?

We hope that, with our sketchy history and our use of the analogy of art and popular culture, we have been able to shed light on a possible territory for research. If nothing else, we hope to have succeeded in raising the question of whether our discipline should find a way to interact with its margins. We might even need an in-depth historical analysis of our own institutional history with a focus on its margins. On the other hand, we need to learn more from the arts and their modes of appreciation taking the margins into account, and to test how these ways of thinking could benefit aesthetics (and maybe, more broadly, philosophy). Could we have a journal called *Margins of Aesthetics*? Or, as music magazines often have one page for outsider music, could we not somehow make notes in our journals about the aesthetic debates outside of our academic discipline? Even music magazines do not do this because they would just be thinking about "something else" outside the mainstream. This would be about the future of popular music. Everyone knows that new things are not always born in the center of the institution.

And as we in the West have already opened our eyes to recognizing that there are aesthetic traditions outside the Western world, as we males have understood that we have to follow more carefully what females do and write, and as whiteness can no longer be a criterion for who can be a scholar and who cannot, in the same way we should study and report on what we find in marginal languages. The authors of this text are together able to read about a dozen languages, seven of which are spoken by between two and ten million people. In all these languages, one might find something that could be of high interest to global aesthetics. But it is hard to

distribute these ideas, as only representatives of “major” languages seem to have legitimacy for international aesthetics. To come from a small country means that you are automatically marginal.

To get back to Diogenes (and Sloterdijk), whether we meet a cynic, a barking dog out in the street, or just someone whose work does not fit our institutional matrix and who therefore has to stay outside our system, we need to consider the fruits of their work and to acknowledge that these scholars are out there all the time, ultimately benefitting our discipline. We should appreciate them more. How can we open our institution to meet these thinkers faster and more effectively? The arts and some of our fellow disciplines offer us ideas on how to embrace their institutional positions conceptually, as alternative, garage, outsider, or even outlaw. We hope to inaugurate a discussion on how to accomplish this in aesthetics.

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### Endnotes

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[1] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 158-160.

[2] See e.g. Irwin Chusid, *Songs in the Key of Z. The Curious Universe of Outsider Music* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2002) and Roger Cardinal, *Outsider Art* (London: Studio Vista and New York: Praeger, 1972).

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. x-xii. According to Chusid the term ‘outsider’ became a commonplace no earlier than in the 1990s.

[4] Jean Dubuffet, *Bâtons rompus* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1986), p.73.

[5] Both are studied in Kirsten Anderson, *Pop Surrealism: The Rise of Underground Art* (San Francisco: Last Gap, 2004).

[6] R.J. Hollingdale, "The Hero as an Outsider," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, eds. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 71-89. Quote on page 74.

[7] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[8] See Luke Harding's note on the Perelman case in *The Guardian*, Tuesday 23 March 2010. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/23/grigory-perelman-rejects-1m-dollars>).

[9] One can here think about the strong impact of, e.g., Irit Rogoff, Sarat Maharaj, and Okwui Enwezor.

[10] Jan Mukarovsky, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* (Ann Arbor: The Department of Slavic Languages and Literature, University of Michigan, 1970). Yrjö Hirn, *Origins of Art. A Psychological and Sociological Inquiry* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1900). Mukarovsky's book was originally published in 1936.

[11] David Bohm, *On Creativity* (London: Routledge, 1996).