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## Positioning and Discernment: A Comment on Monique Roelofs's The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic

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## Positioning and Discernment: A Comment on Monique Roelofs's *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*

Kathleen M. Higgins

### Abstract

Monique Roelofs's *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* is groundbreaking in its nuanced account of the potential and limitations of the aesthetic for creating a more just, humane world. Particularly timely are Roelofs's analyses of the ways in which racial and gender stereotypes are reinforced and the operations of what she calls "racialized aesthetic nationalism," the tendencies of aesthetic values to shore up schisms along racial, ethnic, and national lines. I raise questions, however, about the appropriateness of aesthetic criticism that stresses sins of omission, the desirability of insisting that the broad nexus of social relations always be kept in view, and the danger that foregrounding minority group membership and gender will reduce individuals in marked categories to mere exemplifications of such status.

### Key Words

address, aesthetic subject, affect, Barthes, Botero, Danto, Enlightenment, ethnicity, foreground, framing, gender, intersectionality, post-structuralism, *punctum*, race, subject

### 1. Introduction

Monique Roelofs's *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* sets a new bar for accounts of the relation of aesthetics to politics. It demands that we move past naïve enthusiasms and condemnations to recognition that the aesthetic has both inherent possibilities and inevitable limitations. It also insists to all who are concerned about political justice and morality that the aesthetic dimension of life must be taken seriously as the basis on which transformations toward relational thriving and more just arrangements must occur.

The aesthetic is central, Roelofs argues, to our navigation of interpersonal relationships and corporeal space, and this is the basis for great expectations concerning its potential to benefit culture. However, celebration of its promise has historically been bound up with unjustified discriminatory schemes that have excluded certain people. The Enlightenment model of the individual subject engaged in disinterested contemplation is too decontextualized and generic to deliver on its promise to create a world of equality and mutual respect, and it ignores the fact that aesthetic perceivers are never really disinterested but instead are historically situated parties operating within a concrete political world.

Nevertheless, Roelofs sees real promise in the aesthetic, though not because it offers a clear route to the ideal world. Its positive potential instead lies in its power to hold incompatibles in tension with each other and make us aware of the complicated ways we relate to each other and to our

world. The promise, however, comes with risks and threats. Drawing certain things into visibility relegates others to the background or occludes them, and aesthetic loves and longings can motivate cruelties and new exclusions even as they expand sensitivity in other ways. Thus, we need to remain vigilant, even when the aesthetic makes positive contributions to our understanding of social reality.

## **2. Aesthetic address**

Central to Roelofs's analysis is the idea of aesthetic address. She raises broad and important questions in this connection: To whom does a work appeal? What aspects of self-identification are reinforced or eclipsed by a work's form of address? Whom does the form of address exclude? How are the specificities of inclusion and exclusion accomplished? What responses are elicited from the audience? What does an artwork implicitly promise, and what threats go hand in hand with its promises? How are relationships modeled and negotiated by the work? How do artworks promote political affiliations, exclusions, and insights?

Recognizing that the value of the concept of aesthetic address depends on its convincing application to specific cases, Roelofs demonstrates its usefulness for interpreting cases across a wide array of media. She presents illuminating case studies that span poetry, film, literature, sculpture, painting, drawing, television series, journalistic accounts, critical writing, and architectural designs, along with everyday environments. In each instance, she considers ways in which the work or phenomenon in question addresses the audience and encourages relational perspectives on the larger context.

## **3. Race, gender, and the Enlightenment**

Roelofs draws particular attention to ways in which the aesthetic reinforces or challenges unjustified exclusions of certain people from full moral, social, and political consideration. She theorizes what she calls "racialized aesthetic nationalism," the implicit tendencies of aesthetic values to shore up a sense of "us" and "them" along racial, ethnic, and national lines.<sup>[1]</sup> She elaborates by itemizing diverse ways in which aesthetic address can support a system where one distinguishes one's own group from others and defends against their encroachment on what one takes as one's own. A particularly forceful and focused illustration is her discussion of a Dutch journalist's column about a ride in an Amsterdam taxicab driven by a presumably Arab immigrant. Roelofs shows how the writer utilizes numerous rhetorical devices to enlist the reader's support for his sense that his rightful aesthetic home is threatened by the alien cabbie and the atmosphere in his cab.

Roelofs also extends feminist aesthetic discussion by showing the ways that features of presentations masculinize, feminize, or, most interestingly, do both in relation to an object, and how these processes intersect and modify each other. I particularly commend her chapter on the gendered detail, which offers extensive analysis of Johannes Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid*, and her account of Fernando Botero's representations of human bodies in the chapter on racialized aesthetic nationalism.

Roelofs offers some surprises. Most often, the contemporary artists and theorists she criticizes come from the Left, ostensibly the political segment from which one might expect the greatest enthusiasm for her project. For example, she begins her analysis of the double-edged character of the cultural promise of the aesthetic with a discussion of a work by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. We might expect that Neruda would represent the voices of those excluded from the audience presupposed by traditional aesthetic culture. However, Roelofs quickly points out exclusions and absences in Neruda's own idealized view of the desirable cultural future. Indeed, she draws attention to his inconsistency in presenting himself as a spokesperson for the common man while simultaneously restricting the range of those he considers possible allies and implicitly acquiescing in unacknowledged social inequities.

Similarly, in her chapter on the racialization of aesthetics, she follows a discussion of the racist assumptions of Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel with a consideration of three figures whose works represent something of a contrast: Jamaica Kincaid, Frantz Fanon, and Alice Varda. However, in spite of their obvious challenges to the views of the earlier philosophers, Roelofs shows that these figures, too, share with them certain problematic assumptions. Roelofs seems to favor a strategy for dealing with conceptual frameworks built on binaries that derives from post-structuralism. In this strategy, the first move is to challenge the hierarchy set up by a particular binary, and the second is to reverse the hierarchy. But this leaves the power of the binary in place along with any pernicious consequences it may have. The third, quintessentially post-structuralist move is to displace the entire system, and this is what Roelofs sees as necessary. She criticizes Kincaid, Fanon, and Varda for being content with reversing binaries, leaving the Enlightenment's scheme of rigid oppositions in place.

Roelofs's willingness to surprise agrees with what she takes to be the most important contribution of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, in her view, is most promising when it startles us, disrupting our habitual ways of seeing or drawing our attention to something we have ignored. Aesthetics is the dimension where complexities become evident. So when the aesthetic is doing its proper work, our standing expectations, which typically over-simplify, are likely to be thwarted. Roelofs attempts to do something similar with aesthetic theory.

Roelofs's big-stakes project is extremely timely, as it deals with issues such as the affective substratum of racism and issues of cultural ownership. Her analysis of racialized aesthetic nationalism is particularly relevant in the context of the United States since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and, I suspect, in that of Europe as it is being flooded with immigrants.

#### **4. Criticizing sins of omission**

Much as I admire this book, I have some questions about Roelofs's views on critical sins of omission and the demand for political discernment. To motivate my discussion of these questions, I will focus on two instances where Roelofs criticizes

a particular theorist's approach.

The first case is Roland Barthes's approach to photographs within his influential work *Camera Lucida*. Roelofs complains that Barthes allows much to fall through the cracks in his analysis of photographs in terms of the *punctum*, the detail that emotionally touches the individual viewer, in opposition to the *studium*, the more general human interest appeal of the photograph, which viewers interpret it by making use of "a classical body of information" about its subject matter.<sup>[2]</sup> Barthes's emphasizes the impact of the *punctum*, and Roelofs takes issue with this.

In general, Roelofs is dubious of perspectives that emphasize the individual spectator's singular response, and this is one of her grounds for criticizing Barthes's emphasis on the *punctum*. I agree with her that focus on the individual spectator has been excessive since the Enlightenment, and that social and contextual features have often been ignored as a consequence. But is it appropriate to object to all accounts that focus on the response of the aesthetic perceiver who experiences in a singular way? Is it fair to demand that the entire web of social relationships be kept in view in every aesthetic analysis?

It seems to me that even if it is valuable to recognize that photographs can tell us much about social relationships and alert us to our own relationships with what is depicted, this is not the only legitimate way of reading a photograph. The photograph can facilitate the intimacy of one-on-one connection, and this seems to be Barthes's concern. The emotional climax of his book is his description of his personal emotional response to seeing a photograph of his deceased mother at the age of five and recognizing in it the same person he knew in her adulthood.

Barthes's interaction with the photo of his mother is not outside of relationship, though it is not concerned with the broader social nexus. What he claims to see in the picture of his mother is what made her the unique person she was. When he looks for an image that really "is" his mother, he is seeking a connection with her. Attending to the photo is a relational gesture. Barthes's being bereaved and his awareness that his mother to be no longer within the historical and social context are among the factors that lead to this individual and particular focus. Barthes sees this particularity of response as relevant to other encounters with photos, including those in which social context seems more pertinent. Roelofs rightly observes that this is only one aspect of relating to a photograph, but I don't see it as an aspect that lacks value, even if others are also important.

Let us consider another of Roelofs's critiques. She criticizes Arthur Danto's interpretation of the paintings and drawings of Abu Ghraib by Columbian artist Fernando Botero on a number of grounds, some of which I find problematic. Danto agrees with Roelofs that Botero's Abu Ghraib works are powerful. The problem, as Roelofs sees it, lies in his explanation. Danto considers the power of the Abu Ghraib series to be based on appeals to the viewer's empathy. This, according to Roelofs, inappropriately restricts attention to the affective response of the individual viewer. Again, she finds the attention to

responses of "the viewer," in the singular, to be insufficiently appreciative of the co-presence of people and objects in the physical world and the vulnerabilities that arise from this. She sees Botero's work as drawing attention precisely to these things through his figures' "fleshy materiality."<sup>[3]</sup>

Roelofs thinks Danto's emphasis on the affective supplants appropriate attention to the social and political dimension of Botero's art. She admits that affect "can be a political incentive" but claims that to focus attention on the viewer's affective response deprives the works of their potential impact.<sup>[4]</sup> Emphasis on the affective facilitates the viewers' avoiding the realization of their own structural contribution to injustice abroad.

Although she acknowledges Danto's closing line that, "the pain of others has seldom felt so close, or so shaming to its perpetrators," Roelofs responds, "empathy and shame . . . fall drastically short of an aesthetically discerning uptake of an artistic imperative commanding justice . . ."<sup>[5]</sup> Here, I think, she short-changes the potential political power of emotion. Indeed, she reflects this when she characterizes viewers' responses using 'affect' and 'feelings,' words that suggest vague and nebulous states, rather than 'emotion,' which involves focus and direction toward specific objects. The emotion of shame, like all emotions, arouses action tendencies. In this case, it motivates the perceived need to rectify the situation. Moreover, I don't think Danto restricts his reference to shame to those who directly perpetrated the prisoner abuse. The implied accusation in his closing line is directed at the perpetrators broadly considered; it implicates all of us who are members of the nation with policies leading to these acts.

Roelofs recognizes that ignoring certain things is essential to aesthetic experience if only because interpretation requires framing. Yet she thinks some ignoring is culpable, as her critique of Danto makes clear. She criticizes him for not linking the work by Botero that he admires (the paintings and drawings of Abu Ghraib) with work that he does not (Botero's prior oeuvre). Roelofs does a spectacular job of bringing out grounds for interest in Botero's depictions of human figures, among them their implicit critique of reigning bodily norms and their complicated intertextuality, which bring them into conversation with artists across a long swath of international art history. She complains that Danto ignores Botero's relationship to the broader artistic tradition and relegates him to outsider status, as is shown by his acquiescence in the common characterization of the artist's style as "mannerist" and his failure to take his earlier work very seriously.<sup>[6]</sup>

I don't question that Danto is missing things concerning Botero's earlier work, and that his inattention to the complex relationship that Botero has to the European tradition reflects this, as does his largely Hegelian vision of art history that implicitly takes "the art world" to be a Northern and Western phenomenon. But it may be unfair to expect a reassessment of Botero's overall output or an account of physical co-presencing of humans and objects in relation to Botero's art in a relatively brief column in *The Nation* on a particular exhibition. Certainly, it seems more than a little uncharitable

to argue that Danto's omissions render "the Abu Ghraib oeuvre a proper item for consumption by a proprietary, racialized, and nationalist cultural sensibility."[\[7\]](#)

To make a more general point, I wonder when and under what circumstances complaints about sins of omission are justified.

I do not doubt that missing some things is a fault. Recently, while walking in an airport after a flight, I noticed that a pilot ahead of me had a suitcase with words stitched on it. "One man," said one line, "One woman," said the next. I briefly thought, "Ah...a romantic!" But my next thought was, "Wait!

That's not what that means! The pilot's a homophobe!" My only excuse for being so oblivious on that occasion is jet lag.

But there are many reasons for omitting considerations, and many strike me as acceptable as long as one does not take them to be the only way to see things. After all, there are inevitably trade-offs and framings. Is it always illegitimate for someone to focus on matters unrelated to political inequalities? Is it never appropriate to focus on form, for example?

The point of accusing someone of omission is a rhetorical move but a dangerous one, for it invites the "*tu quoque*" response: what are *you* ignoring? So one might ask Roelofs the following. In spite of Botero's merits that you itemize, isn't it still possible that his characteristic style *does* have something of the gimmick about it?[\[8\]](#),[\[9\]](#) Aren't you ignoring the fact that by acknowledging his earlier dismissal of Botero, Danto accentuates how powerful he takes the Abu Ghraib work to be?

Danto's comparison of Botero's figures to Macy's parade figures is comical, and it associates them with innocence, making it all the more striking when he suggests that precisely this quality of these figures intensifies our impression of others' pain in the Abu Ghraib works.[\[10\]](#) And in light of the fact that Danto is often quite critical of white American artists, can it really be fair to suggest that he is critical of Botero's earlier works because he is Latin American, as Roelofs does when she asserts, "It is highly unlikely that these seasoned critics would have disregarded the self-conscious intertextuality of an oeuvre so rapidly in the case of a white artist of European or Anglo-American descent."[\[11\]](#)

## 5. Foregrounding race and gender

This leads me to another general question about the status of aesthetic analysis that is not focused on politics. As exciting as what Roelofs elsewhere describes as "critical race feminist aesthetics" is, should race and gender and their intersections always be the focus within aesthetics? I cherish the goals of Roelofs's project but I still think that the effect of consistently foregrounding the social nexus might have unintended consequences.

Questions about what should be foregrounded and when are complicated. I remember once seeing a rerun of a 1950s TV show about doctors and being appalled that the person who turned out to be guilty of the crime at the center of the drama was played by the one person in the cast with an Asian face. My first thought was to think, "How racist!" My next thought

was, "But should it be a principle that people from minority groups are not to be cast as bad guys?" Probably this *should* be the rule in casts where only one person is a member of a minority, a situation that may be objectionable in itself. The exclusion of the Asian actor as a candidate for the bad guy role is probably more excusable than is the exclusion of all but white male actors from playing ethical doctors. But our goal should be to make differences of race, ethnicity, and gender less inflamed than they are now. Perhaps we can dream of a time when such status is not so marked as it is, and where Asians can play roles of any sort without its seeming to be a comment on being Asian.

True, this is not our social world. But I see problems with consistently making minority group status our primary focus, if only because it tends to reduce members of these groups to exemplifications of this status. Ignoring it can lead to shocking unfairness but dwelling on it can also keep barriers intact. A female graduate student in studio art once told me that she didn't know if she wanted to think of herself as a "woman artist," and I saw her point, even if it was obvious to both of us that she *will* be regarded as a woman artist and that this will affect her chances and opportunities for professional success. Roelofs is right that race and gender are going to be factors in how works are presented and interpreted, but it may be that having these structures in mind at all times reinforces their importance.

## 6. Conclusion

Still, for the foreseeable future the importance of race and gender in artworks is undeniable, and we overlook these structures of inequity at the peril that they will be mindlessly reiterated. And that is what makes *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* such an important work. It demonstrates how the aesthetic and aesthetics, which we often tend to see as inherently humanizing, can themselves insidiously undermine the very values they appear to support. The book is an educating work that trains the reader through its astute analyses of particular cases to probe deeply into the actual effects of the way aesthetic works address us. At the same time, it gives new life to the idea that the aesthetic can help to heal the social world, prompting richer and more nuanced ways of understanding the familiar and directing us toward untried possibilities. In short, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* is nothing less than groundbreaking.

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## Endnotes

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[1] Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 131.

[2] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 25-25.

[3] Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, p. 164.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 166.

[5] Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, p. 166 and Arthur Danto, "The Body in Pain," *The Nation*, November 27, 2006, p. 26.

[6] Danto, "The Body in Pain."

[7] Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, p. 171.

[8] This is a question that might be raised in connection with many artists' distinctive styles.

[9] Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, p. 161.

[10] Danto, "The Body in Pain," p. 23.

[11] Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, p. 175.