

[This text is from the book *Art History Versus Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2005), and it was posted in this form on www.jameselkins.com. Please see that website for the history and context of the essay, and to contact the author.]

WHY DON'T ART HISTORIANS ATTEND AESTHETICS CONFERENCES?

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This was a talk given at the 1996 American Society for Aesthetics conference. It was a second attempt to talk to aestheticians about the two disciplines.

— Chicago, July 2004

In October last year, in the St. Louis meeting, I gave a talk on Jay Bernstein's book *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Adorno to Derrida*. At the time I had a number of things I wanted to say about his book, but I soon found myself unsure about how I could address the issues in a way that would seem sensible to any art historians who might also attend the session. That problem proved debilitating. As the conference approached, I realized my prefaces and parentheses were growing more rapidly than the arguments they were supposed to protect, until finally I noticed that what I found most intriguing about Jay's book was that it was somehow unrepresentable to art history. I started paring away my comments

on Jay's reading of Derrida, in order to make room for a kind of art historical explanation of Jay's concern with Kant. I tried framing my dwindling remarks in such a way that what Jay had written could sound less like a philosophy of history and more like a history of philosophy—in other words, so it would be an historiographic study of a certain episode in the reception of Kant, rather than a theory about art in any less constrained sense. In doing that, I began to wonder about the very idea of rearranging someone's philosophic genealogy so it could make sense as history: that is not part of what most art historians would say that they do. Eventually, the few art historians in my imaginary audience divided themselves into two factions: one group interested in using Kant to speak about the anti-aesthetic, and another concerned with the heritage of the late eighteenth century in Germany—in other words, people who specialized in the two periods most fully represented in Jay's footnotes. At that point I more or less gave up writing about *The Fate of Art*, and I started trying to write directly about the differences between our two disciplines.

The talk I ended up giving was really pretty unmodulated. I think I began by saying something like this:

It is notoriously true that art historians virtually never look at the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, or the *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik*—not to mention the twenty-odd other aesthetics journals published throughout the world. Most developments of interest to art history are reported in its own journals, and when artists are discussed in the pages of aesthetics journals, the essays are not consistently cited in subsequent art historical literature.

And so forth. The idea was to make a survey of some of the more readily apparent differences between the disciplines in order to see if they might lead toward a single kind of explanation. All I knew for sure was that I did not want to settle for the kinds of answers my colleagues in art history had offered when I asked

why they did not go to aesthetics conferences—they had said, for example, that aestheticians don't talk about artworks, and that they don't care about history. Those observations have some truth to them, but it isn't the kind of truth that can help get conversations started.

Eventually I settled on an explanation that is two-thirds philosophic argument and one-third historical objection. Today I am going to recap it briefly, and offer some responses and addenda that couldn't fit in last year's conference. I have two excuses for reviving the same argument: first, because I still think it is the best way to pose the difference between the two disciplines, and also because it seems like a project worth working at: I can't imagine two disciplines that are better suited to one another, more securely historically intertwined, than art history and aesthetics. The two share common traditions regarding the ways that artworks create meaning, and they even share notions of rebellion against some of those meanings. It may be a good sign that there are some very interesting art historians in this room [Michael Holly, Keith Moxey, Stephen Bann, Anne Wagner, Thierry De Duve, and Tim Clark were present, among others] but I would say, without sounding too curmudgeonly, that I am not sure if that constitutes a trend, or even if it means anything in particular. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that we art historians are a small minority here. The two disciplines really have relatively little academic life in common: our conferences, our journals, and our departments remain disjoint. My hunch is that the best way to address that is to try to find a subject on which we could agree to disagree, and that is the purpose of the argument I am going to recapitulate.

The argument concerns the nature of what is taken to be either irreducibly visual or ungeneralizably singular about artworks. Art history would then be the discipline that clings to either or both possibilities, and aesthetics the discipline that abstracts or otherwise generalizes them. It's true that the words for what counts

as singularity or uniqueness are variable between the disciplines. What art historians might call the uniqueness of the object, or its detail or specificity, philosophers might call its nonidentity, or its quiddity, or its ontological status. (They would not, technically speaking, call the property I have in mind *particularity*, which is opposed to generality in the Kantian philosophy. But I am talking here about vernacular usages, where uniqueness slides into particularity.) What art historians might call an object's visuality or uncoded form, philosophers might refer to as its aesthetic dimension, or its immanent materiality. Here, for the sake of this argument, I am going to take it that translations are usually not difficult; the root problem is not so much differences of vocabulary, as a difference of differences.

Nor is it the case that the differences between alternate senses of what is inherently visual about a work of visual art, or what is unique about a given visual object, are notations of difference that can be assigned to one or the other discipline. Just because a text confines itself to concepts such as "the object *qua* object" or the *Ding-an-sich*, rather than the sticky details of Pollock's gestural marks, does not mean it is somehow farther from whatever might count as the particularities of the visual. Art-historical texts that bristle with details can still depend on the most broad assumptions about artworks; and conversely, aesthetics texts that keep to the language of metaphysics can still turn on unique encounters with unique works. Hence, I don't mean to propose anything about the true or accurate description of artworks, but rather about the perception of disciplinary distances.

So here is the argument, in a form I hope is clearer than the one I gave last year. Imagine two societies that live on distant islands—call them Ah and Ae. ("Ah" for art history, "Ae" for aesthetics.) Although they are neighbors in their archipelago, they are very far apart, so that they are just barely visible to one another in good weather. One day, a trader arriving from Ah carries with

him a request from the people on Ah for a picture of their own island as it appears from Ae, and he brings with him a picture that had been made on Ah, purporting to show the island Ae. No one on Ae recognizes the odd shapes in the drawing, but they comply anyway, and after a time the trader returns with the message that no one on Ah recognized their island in the strange picture sent over from Ae. People on the two islands study the drawings, and conclude that it is probably best to stay where they are, since the people on the other island clearly can't draw, and they may not even be able to see straight. For diplomacy's sake they even send some letters back and forth, arguing about whose representation is worse, and they end up deciding that the members of the opposite tribe have no idea how to talk about pictures to begin with.

I find this to be a fair allegory of my own experience as an art historian speaking to aestheticians about the gap between the disciplines. In my parable, the people on Ah have different ideas about what makes a picture naturalistic than do people on Ae, but the differences between their differences are such that no one on either island has a theory that encompasses the practices on the other. The central problem, both in the parable and in universities, is why accounts of the difference seem different to the two sides. If the natives of Ae and Ah were on either end of a long telescope, then a single account—a single optical equation—could explain both distortions, and satisfy both sides. As it is, there is disagreement on the nature of the difference between the two representations.

Last year I quoted a passage from Jay's book in which he is concerned with what he calls the "threefold departure from theory" current in the practice of art:

[B]ecause art authorizes unique, individual items, it tendentially works against the hierarchy of universal and particular; because art is bound to the life of particulars, it tendentially celebrates the claims of sensuousness and embodiment; because its prac-

tices are tendentially governed by the claims of sensuousness and particularity, it instigates an alternative conception of acting, one which binds doing and making, *praxis* and *poiesis*, together (p.12).

Where is a philosophy, I asked in response to this passage, when it can theorize these concerns, but only by mentioning them as philosophic constructs or as moments in other philosophic texts? What does it mean to occupy a position that knows the need to say what it lacks, and even—as it transpires in the course of the book—that knows lack as a necessary aspect of the position allegedly most different from it, but that does not experience the necessity of “embodying” even a single “tendentially particular,” sensuously unique object? How does the ongoing exclusion of actual examples of tendential uniqueness, as opposed to references to the concept and existence of tendential uniqueness, affect an argument that defines itself as an act of hybridization, as Jay’s does?

That was the gist of the paper I read last year, which was partly about nonvisuality in Jay’s book and in Derrida. In his response, Jay said that my reading treated his and Derrida’s failures to engage visual specificity as if they were “flatly failures of will or intellect, failures to find the right mode of filling a space just there to be filled.” On the contrary, he said, “there isn’t any space yet that can be routinely filled.” The aporia, in his view, is a “categorical disposition of universal and particular governing everyday life,” so that “the difficulties of art and philosophy token and repeat that aporia, they do not make it.”

Thinking of things that way, it can seem as if misunderstandings between the disciplines might ultimately be due to the ways the aporia is negotiated. But I am not sure that the gap can even be addressed as such—as an aporia within or between existing ways of talking. If it were, then it should be possible to imagine interdisciplinary texts that discuss, for instance, whether the aporia is best described in a philosophic manner as a categorical

disposition of universal and particular governing everyday life, or in some other, less orderly way. In other words, no matter what was believed about the solubility, origins, meaning, or significance of the aporia, it would be open to discussion. It might turn out to be a practical matter, or it might not; it might be assigned to Western metaphysics, or it might not. Whatever the terms of the debate, such a conversation would follow the model of the two islanders on either end of a long telescope—they would disagree, but they wouldn't disagree on *how* they disagree. But I don't know any discussion of that sort, and so I have come to doubt that the aporia is a single object to both sides.

Luckily, because of the format of these sessions, I have had a year to think about what I could say in answer to Jay's response. And it is essentially this: that the problem is not the truth of what he claims, but that it is a claim. When writers like Jay, whose work entails the existence and nameability of the aporia, approach questions of particularity or uniqueness and discern an abyss between the immanent object and the domain of conceptualization, they tend to assume that the configuration is available as a logical proposition—something like: "Immanent materiality is separated from the conceptual by an aporetic gap." Once it's put that way, any number of propositions might follow as logical inferences.

I think this is where much of art history parts company with aesthetics. Individually, and in different contexts, the three elements of the proposition—"immanent materiality," the aporia, the "domain of concepts"—might find places in historical and critical discussions. But together they form a sentence that art historians might regard with suspicion. By definition, the "domain of concepts" is amenable to logical argument, but *ex hypothesi* the aporia (or the "abyss" or the "gap") is not a concept but a marker of an undefined absence. And what about "immanent materiality"? Since it is, by definition, the complement to the "domain of concepts," how are we to understand what it means in the proposi-

tion “Immanent materiality is separated from the conceptual by an aporetic gap,” given that the proposition is grammatical and does, after all, consist of fairly ordinary words? “Immanent materiality” is not a concept analogous to “illogic” or even “deviant logic.” What would it mean to say—as the proposition implies—that the uniqueness, or the particularity, or the nonverbal, undescribed, in-enarrable, “purely visual” portions of an artwork are conceptualized in the same sense as the phrase “domain of concepts”?

From a philosophic standpoint, what is at stake here is a relation (*aporia*) between two things (immanence and concepts). That is the picture of *Ah*, as it might be drawn by someone on *Ae*. Since the relation itself is in question, the proposition seems entirely open to rival interpretations. But I think things look very different from the standpoint of the history of art. It is not clear that a phrase such as “immanent materiality” does justice to what happens in the studio or in the viewing of a work, when an artist is just plain confused about the work, or when an art historian is absorbed in a single object, or that it captures those experiences in the same way as a phrase like “domain of concepts” captures whatever analytic tools may be applied. The two are not conceptualized in an analogous fashion. For one thing, “domain of concepts” is an example of the class it names, while “immanent materiality” is a concept borrowed from the “domain of concepts”—that is, from the very reservoir of philosophemes that it ostensibly counterbalances. Its analytic purchase is uncertain since it is used to name the very domain of experience that excludes it. What’s more, the act of borrowing itself is suspicious, and so, I think, are the critical consequences. If we begin to doubt the conceptual pedigree of “immanent materiality,” the proposition disintegrates into a deeper uncertainty: without a name for the first thing, there can be no relation, even an aporetic one. Instead of an unknown relation (*aporia*) between two things (say, materiality and concepts), we have an unknown relation (*aporia*) between something known

(the domain of concepts) and something *else* unknown, and that other thing cannot be understood without giving up what is known. That, I propose, is the picture of Ae, as it might be drawn by someone on Ah.

This may seem an unlikely point on which to lay the entire miscommunication between the disciplines, but I think it is at the heart of the difference between the differences between the disciplines. If there is truth in it, it may help explain why conversations and conferences have not brought the disciplines closer together. At least I think this is a step forward from the usual explanations, and I propose it as a way of thinking why people might want to identify themselves as art historians or aestheticians: it would depend, in this light, on what they might make of the proposition.

In order, for example, to value the chronicling of that act, it is necessary *not* to see the relation as such; so artists who begin to take some version of the proposition as philosophers do, might be tempted to give up art and start doing philosophy. And conversely, aestheticians who start to perceive the problems entailed in claiming that the proposition is a well-formed sentence might be likely to begin writing something that resembles art history, at least in its skepticism about the value of the proposition as a logical claim.

I'd like to close with an observation about the level of noise at last year's conference. I was startled then by the number of lunch-time and dinner conversations that were given over to *arguments*: people were scrapping, in a good-natured way of course, over various positions and theories held by their colleagues. The same is true of journals like the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*: to borrow some of the common language of philosophy, art historians don't often find themselves "compelled to admit" that they are "trying to have it both ways," or are "blocked" from saying what they think they ought to say, or "committed" to some "position" that might end with an "-ism." Now I wouldn't want to say art historians don't argue, but there was something about the perva-

siveness, the naturalness, and the inexhaustibility of some of the arguments that I heard that struck me as very different from the somewhat less deliberate conversations I've heard over the years at art history conferences. I wonder if that phenomenon might be connected to the general tacit acceptance of propositions per se, and perhaps especially the proposition I have been considering.

In my experience few art historians have articulated ways of thinking about the relation between particularity and conceptualization. They haven't made up their minds, and they probably haven't thought much about the problem—or thought of it *as* a problem. To some degree, art history does not seem to want answers to these questions: or to put it more exactly, it may depend on not seeing them *as* questions.

— Montreal, October 1996

After the session in Montreal, Michael Kelly, who was in the audience, said that I might consider that my problem was, in fact, solved. He mentioned the Encyclopedia of Aesthetics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), which he was editing, and which has a number of art historians as contributors. He also noted that the audience included a number of art historians, including Thierry de Duve. We counted about eight. I asked him where the other 13,992 were — because the College Art Association has about 14,000 members. The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics has an unusual collection of authors (just as this book does): I think both are exceptions that prove the rule.

*At the 1995 conference, Jay Bernstein read a response that included a very specific description of a work of installation art. Part of the idea was that “there isn't any space yet that can be routinely filled.” In 1999, his response appeared in a strangely modified form, in a footnote to his essay “Aporia of the Sensible: Art, Objecthood, and Anthropomorphism,” in *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics**

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*of the Visual, edited by Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell
(London: Routledge, 1999), 235-36.*

I think these issues remain unsolved.

— *Chicago, June 2005*

