

# Introduction

## Aesthetics after the Speculative Turn

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### Origins

ANY EXPLORATION OF ART AND sensuous cognition from a speculative realist perspective must contend with the legacy of not only Kant's first critique but also his third.<sup>1</sup> For a speculative realist *aesthetics*, Kant's legacy is a crucial foil for two related reasons: first (and this is the better-explored argument), because his radically anti-metaphysical demand "that the objects must conform to our cognition" is the most prominent and influential manifestation of what Quentin Meillassoux calls "correlationism" in *After Finitude*; second, and more specifically, because Kant's aesthetic theory is a theory not of objects but of the human response to natural and artistic beauty.<sup>2</sup> That Kant's aesthetics is as unreservedly subject-centred as his first critique

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Preface to the Second Edition" in *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 110. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009), 5.

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becomes immediately clear if we consider that the central term in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* is “taste.” In focusing on this most crucial notion of eighteenth-century reflections on art, Kant joins fellow aestheticians of the age in bidding farewell to onto-theological theories of beauty revolving around notions such as *harmonia*, *consonantia*, and *integritas* to develop experientially grounded accounts of the production and reception of art that employ a wholly different, subject-centred and sensually inflected vocabulary: aesthetic idea, aesthetic feeling, sensuous cognition, the imagination, genius, the sublime, and taste.<sup>3</sup> If Kant’s Copernican revolution and its assertion that “we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them” relegated realist epistemology to the margins of philosophical inquiry for over two centuries, his theory of aesthetic judgment likewise shifts our attention away from real-world objects and towards the subject’s experience.<sup>4</sup> In a related vein, Kant’s notion of beauty is explicitly anti-metaphysical in that it locates beauty neither in artworks’ correspondence with a divinely ordered cosmos nor in objects themselves. Instead, beauty is in the mind of the beholder; it is something we experience: we “speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a property of the object and the judgment logical (constituting a cognition of the object through concepts of it), although it is only aesthetic and contains merely a relation of the representation of the object to the subject.”<sup>5</sup> More precisely, the pleasurable experience of beauty is an effect of the harmonious interplay of the cognitive faculties of understanding and imagination.<sup>6</sup> Finally, if Hartmut Böhme is correct in considering eighteenth-century theories of the sublime as an integral part of the Enlighten-

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<sup>3</sup> For a good account of this shift, see Monroe C. Beardsley’s classic *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 140–208.

<sup>4</sup> Kant, “Preface,” 111.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §6, 97.

<sup>6</sup> See Paul Guyer, “Beauty and Utility in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2002), 35:3, 449–50.

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ment's project of achieving mastery over unruly nature, of submitting *le grand dehors* under human beings' cognitive control, then Kant's reflections on the dynamical sublime, a feeling that grows out of the subject's pleasurable recognition that its reason ultimately prevails over awe-inspiring nature, are an integral part of that project.<sup>7</sup> Monroe C. Beardsley puts it aptly: "It is our own greatness, as rational beings, that we celebrate and enjoy in sublimity."<sup>8</sup>

For all these reasons, then, Kant has emerged as speculative realism's most prominent foil. Yet any attempt to think metaphysics and aesthetics together must contend with a second, equally formidable opponent, a somewhat earlier philosopher greatly admired by Kant: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. Kant based his own lectures on metaphysics on what was then the German-speaking world's major treatise on that subject—Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* (1739)—and he inherited Baumgarten's understanding of aesthetic judgment as aesthetic (sensuous) cognition.

It was Baumgarten who coined the term "aesthetics" in his M.A. thesis *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (1735).<sup>9</sup> The brief definition he gives there, in §116 of his short treatise, will come as a surprise to many readers of these pages. In Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther's translation,

Therefore, *things known* are to be known by the superior faculty as the object of logic; *things perceived* [are to be known by the inferior faculty, as the object] of the science of perception, or *aesthetic*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Hartmut Böhme, "Das Steinerne: Anmerkungen zur Theorie des Erhabenen aus dem Blick des 'Menschenfremdesten'" in *Das Erhabene: Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Grössenwahn*, ed. Christine Priess (Weinheim: VCH, Acta humaniora, 1989), 160–92.

<sup>8</sup> Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 219.

<sup>9</sup> This text has been published in English translation as *Reflections on Poetry/Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954).

<sup>10</sup> Baumgarten, *Reflections*, §116, 78, original emphases. In the Latin/Greek

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Baumgarten's distinction between the superior faculty (reason) and the inferior faculty (the senses) corresponds to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's successive set of differentiations between obscure and clear, confused and distinct, inadequate and adequate, and symbolic and intuitive cognition. In Leibniz's scheme, in which the second term of each pair is always the preferred one, reason allows for clear and distinct cognition while the senses allow only for clear and confused cognition.<sup>11</sup> In Baumgarten's account, sensory perception allows us to know things with clarity but intuitively and thus without the conceptual distinctness of reason—without, in Baumgarten's words, “clarity intensified by distinction.”<sup>12</sup> What makes Baumgarten's contribution exceptional in 1735 is that he not only joins Leibniz in refusing to follow Descartes' outright dismissal of clear but confused perception but strives to give sensuous cognition its rightful place within the philosophical system of rationalism. This comes out clearly in his better-known definition of “aesthetics” in his two-volume *Aesthetica* (1750/58), a work that can rightly be called the foundational text of modern aesthetics. In Jeffrey Barnouw's translation,

Aesthetics, as the theory of the liberal arts, lower-level epistemology [*gnoseologia inferior*], the art of thinking finely [literally, beautifully, *ars pulchre cogitandi*], and the art of the analogy of reason [i.e., the associa-

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original, “Sunt ergo νοητά cognoscenda facultate superiore objectum logices; αισθητά. ‘επιστήης. αισθητικης sive AESHETICAE.” Baumgarten, *Reflections*, §116, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Betrachtungen über die Erkenntnis, die Wahrheit und die Ideen” in *Hauptschriften zur Grundlegung der Philosophie, Teil 1*, trans. Artur Buchenau, *Philosophische Werke: in vier Bänden*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1996), 9-15. Leibniz's set of distinctions further refine the Cartesian differentiation between the clear and distinct perceptions afforded by reason and the clear but confused perceptions afforded by the senses. See Descartes' famous wax example in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Ian Johnston, ed. Andrew Bailey (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2013), 46-52. See also Ralf Simon, *Die Idee der Prosa: Zur Ästhetikgeschichte von Baumgarten bis Hegel mit einem Schwerpunkt bei Jean Paul* (Munich: Fink, 2013), 30-31.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Ästhetik [Aesthetica]*, trans. Dagmar Mirbach, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007), §617, II: 604, our translation.

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tive or natural-sign-based capacity of empirical inference common to man and higher animals], is the science of sensuous cognition.<sup>13</sup>

Sensuous cognition, then, belongs to lower-level epistemology in that it depends on the inferior faculty of the senses. But it is structured analogous to reason, is subject to the same truth conditions as reason (the principle of sufficient reason and law of noncontradiction),<sup>14</sup> and accounts for such a great variety of human experience that the philosophical tradition from Descartes to Christian Wolff has disparaged it at its own loss. In Baumgarten's words, "A philosopher is a human being among human beings; as such, he is ill-advised to believe that such a great part of human cognition is unseemly to him."<sup>15</sup>

Baumgarten's valorisation of the senses and of sensuous cognition was daring for its time, especially for a rationalist philosopher. Yet it is precisely that boldness which puts him at odds with the speculative realist project. Baumgarten's aesthetics appears as subject-centred as Kant's: both conceptualise aesthetics as a question of human consciousness, be it under the heading of "taste" or "sensuous cognition." As such, both appear to be correlationist thinkers through and through.

The remainder of this first section of our introduction argues that this is a hasty judgment. Let us begin with Kant, for whose aesthetics the argument has already been made, and then turn to Baumgarten. Recently, one of the contributors to our special issue has made the suggestion that it is precisely Kant's much maligned notion of disinterestedness that sketches a way out of the correlationist circle as it describes

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Barnouw, "Feeling in Enlightenment Aesthetics," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (1988), 18, 324; the square brackets are Barnouw's. In the Latin original, "AESTHETICA (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae." Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §1, I:10.

<sup>14</sup> See Constanze Peres, "Cognitio sensitiva: Zum Verhältnis von Empfindung und Reflexion in A. G. Baumgartens Begründung der Ästhetiktheorie" in *Empfindung und Reflexion: Ein Problem des 18. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Hans Körner et al. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1986), 31-39.

<sup>15</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §6, I:14, our translation.

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a way for human beings to relate to the real world that does not subject it to conceptual thought. In *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (2009), Steven Shaviro writes,

When I contemplate something that I consider beautiful, I am moved precisely by that something's separation from me, its exemption from the categories I would apply to it. This is why beauty is a lure, drawing me out of myself and teasing me out of thought ... The aesthetic subject does not impose its forms upon an otherwise chaotic outside world. Rather, this subject is itself *informed* by the world outside, a world that (in the words of Wallace Stevens) "fills the being before the mind can think."<sup>16</sup>

Kant distinguishes between three types of pleasurable experience: that of the agreeable, that of the good, and that of the beautiful. Only the last of these is disinterested; only "the beautiful" is "an object of satisfaction without any interest."<sup>17</sup> Disinterestedness here means that the experience of the beautiful involves neither desire for sensual gratification (as would Emmentaler cheese, which we may find agreeable) nor the satisfaction granted by the conceptual mastery of an object in view of its pragmatic purpose (as would a multi-functional bike tool, which we may find good because it is useful).<sup>18</sup> Shaviro notes that, unlike the judgment of the good, the judgment of the beautiful involves no subsumption of the object under a determinate concept (the concept of an end in our example of the bike tool). And it is for this reason that aesthetic experience and judgment gesture beyond the correlationist mantra that, in Meillassoux's words, "we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 4-5, 12, original emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §6, 96.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, Kant distinguishes between two judgments of the good; our example does not cover the moral good, which is an end in itself. Our understanding of Kant's notion of disinterestedness is indebted to Paul Guyer, "Disinterestedness and Desire in Kant's Aestheticism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1978), 36:4, 449-60.

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other.”<sup>19</sup> This is why, in Shaviro’s reading, the Kant of the third critique, the Kant who proposes that “the judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (neither a theoretical nor a practical one), and hence it is neither grounded on concepts nor aimed at them,” emerges as a potential ally of speculative realism.<sup>20</sup> In our volume, it is Francis Halsall who most explicitly engages with the Kantian notion of the judgment of taste and its relevance to today’s debates within speculative realist circles.

More generally speaking, quite apart from either Kant’s reflections on disinterested pleasure or Graham Harman’s provocative declaration that “aesthetics becomes first philosophy,” it may be in aesthetic thinking that we should look for a way out of the correlationist path laid out by Kant’s first critique.<sup>21</sup> It is this supposition that prompted us to solicit papers for a special issue on speculative realist approaches to aesthetics in the first place. And it is that very same supposition that invites us to return to the origin of aesthetics in Baumgarten once more. True, the Baumgartian understanding of aesthetics as “the science of sensuous cognition” seems to lead us straight down the correlationist road. But it does so only if we disregard the provenance of Baumgarten’s thinking about sense perception. Baumgarten was a philosopher trained in the rationalist tradition of Descartes, Leibniz, and Wolff. As such, he belongs to the very history of ideas in which Meillassoux situates his claims concerning the necessity of contingency: “I’m a rationalist, and reason clearly demonstrates that you can’t demonstrate the necessity of laws: so we should just believe reason and accept this point: laws are not necessary—they are facts, and facts are contingent—they can change without reason.”<sup>22</sup> And yet, as we will see, Baumgarten

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<sup>19</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §5, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” *Collapse* (2007), 2, 221.

<sup>22</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, “Time Without Becoming,” *Speculative Heresy*, [http://speculativeheresy.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/3729-time\\_without\\_becoming.pdf](http://speculativeheresy.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/3729-time_without_becoming.pdf) (accessed June 26, 2013).

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represents a rationalist tradition quite different from that evoked by Meillassoux (or Ray Brassier, for that matter).

In giving the senses their due, Baumgarten does not subscribe to the eighteenth-century empiricist (and thus by definition correlationist) creed of contemporaneous British aestheticians such as Francis Hutcheson and David Hume. Instead, he strives to establish a science of sensuous cognition from *within* the bounds of rationalist thought. That Baumgarten's aesthetics is ultimately metaphysical to the core becomes clearest in section xxxiv of the *Aesthetica* ("The Absolute Aesthetic Striving for Truth"). There, he writes,

Indeed, I believe that philosophers can now see with the utmost clarity that whatever formal perfection inheres in cognition and logical truth can be attained only with a great loss of much material perfection. For what is this abstraction but loss? By the same token, you cannot bring a marble sphere out of an irregular piece of marble without losing at least as much material as the higher value of roundness demands.<sup>23</sup>

Four paragraphs later, Baumgarten adds a remarkable observation:

Above all, the aesthetic horizon delights in those particular objects that exhibit the greatest material perfection of aestheticological truth, in the individuals and the most specific of objects. These are its woods, its chaos, its matter [*sua silva, Chao et materia*] out of which it chisels the aesthetic truth into a form that is not entirely perfect yet beautiful, always in the attempt to lose as little materially perfect truth as possible and rub off as little of it for the sake of tastefulness.<sup>24</sup>

Baumgarten has a remarkably strong notion of truth, which we have learned to distrust in the wake of Nietzsche and his post-structuralist heirs (on potential Nietzschean ramifications for speculative realism, see Theodor Leiber and Kirsten Voigt's contribution to this volume). As we will see in the second

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<sup>23</sup> Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §560, I:538, our translation.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, §564, I:542, our translation.



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section of this introduction, it took Alain Badiou to return aesthetics to the question of truth. For Baumgarten, sensuous cognition allows us to glimpse something of that which reason's striving for abstraction and formal perfection denies us: the richness, multiplicity, plenitude, and particularity of things, the "woods," "chaos" and "matter" of the real world.<sup>25</sup> More precisely, not only sensuous but all cognition is ultimately based on what Baumgarten calls "*fundus animae*" (the dark ground of the soul), which is a repository for infinitesimally small pre-conscious, unconscious, and half-conscious sensuous perceptions (Leibniz's *petites perceptions*) that ensures the soul's continuing activity even when we sleep and mirrors the plenitude of the universe.<sup>26</sup> For Baumgarten, neither reason nor the senses can ever fully access the infinite universe, but the aestheticological truth of artworks approaches that ideal in that it gives form to the material perfection of things in their multiplicity and particularity: "Aestheticological truth brings the light of beauty into the *fundus animae* by working a beautiful form out of the chaotic woods."<sup>27</sup> In his contribution to our

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<sup>25</sup> See Peres, "Cognitio sensitiva," 36.

<sup>26</sup> Baumgarten puts it thus in the *Metaphysica*: "There are dark perceptions in the soul. Their totality is called GROUND OF THE SOUL [FUNDUS ANIMAE]." Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, 7th, rpt. ed. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1963), §511, 176, our translation. For good discussions of the *fundus animae* and its relation to Leibniz's *petites perceptions*, see Hans Adler, "Fundus Animae—Der Grund der Seele: Zur Gnoseologie des Dunklen in der Aufklärung," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* (1988), 62:2, 197-220; Peres, "Cognitio sensitiva," 39-40; Tanehisa Otabe, "Der Begriff der 'petites perceptions' von Leibniz als Grundlage für die Entstehung der Ästhetik," *JTLA* (2010), 35, 46-49; and Simon, *Die Idee der Prosa*, 26-46. Note also that while the *fundus animae* seems akin to what Freud would later call "the unconscious," Simon rightly insists that the two are categorically distinct (27-28).

<sup>27</sup> Ralf Simon, *Die Idee der Prosa*, 50, our translation. Note that the resulting artwork is not just form; it is *beautiful* form because it manages to retain something of the plenitude of things instead of reducing them to the sterile formulae of scholasticism (which Baumgarten disparages in §53 of the *Aesthetica*). See Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §§557-58, I:534-36; §§562-65, I:540-44. In Wolfgang Welsch's words in "Ästhetische Grundzüge im gegenwärtigen Denken" in *Grenzgänge der Ästhetik* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996), 81: "Aesthetics—which Baumgarten introduced as a Trojan horse into the fortress of the

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volume, Sjoerd van Tuinen taps into this rationalist tradition to argue that artworks themselves can be speculative. Yet not even the aestheticological truth of art can capture the truth of the world in its totality; Baumgarten “liberates himself from the idea of total access, from the ideal of complete cognition and thus also from the traditional obsession with absolute assurance and certainty.”<sup>28</sup> In this model, only God is able to cognise things simultaneously in their formal and material perfection; only he possesses metaphysical truth. Ultimately, then, Baumgarten turns out to be a rationalist quite different from Meillassoux: Baumgarten, too, aims at the real, but he does not presume that the absolute can be recuperated. Instead, he stresses human finitude, i.e., our ultimate inability to access the real. For that reason, even though Baumgarten is clearly no empiricist in its eighteenth-century sense, his thinking has the closest affinities not with Meillassoux’s work but with those speculative realists we describe as—rather unusual—empiricists in the third section of this introduction (Harman, Shaviro, Iain Hamilton Grant, Tim Morton). Baumgarten’s framing of aesthetics as a theory of experience, sensation, and sensuous cognition lays the ground for their expansion of aesthetic thinking into the non-human world.

Not unlike Kantian disinterested pleasure, sensuous cognition allows us to experience the real in its confused beauty rather than subjecting it to conceptual thought. Perhaps, it is in sensuous cognition and aesthetic experience that “intuitions without concepts” are *not* “blind” after all.<sup>29</sup> If, from the perspective of what N. Katherine Hayles in this issue calls the argumentative, philosophical variety of speculative aesthetics (an aesthetic theory born out of the spirit of speculative realism), one of the thorniest questions concerning

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sciences—brings about a change in the concepts of science and cognition: henceforth, genuine cognition is aestheticological cognition, and genuine science cannot ignore its aesthetic determinants” (our translation).

<sup>28</sup> Steffen W. Gross, “Felix Aestheticus und Animal Symbolicum: Alexander G. Baumgarten—die ‘vierte Quelle’ der Philosophie Ernst Cassirers?” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* (2001), 49:2, 285, our translation.

<sup>29</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 193-94.

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aesthetics is that of human access to the real, then both Kant's and Baumgarten's inquiries into forms of access that are not primarily conceptual in nature at the very least allow us to imagine non-correlationist ways of relating to the universe of things. For a speculative realism that does not follow Meillassoux in trying to reclaim the absolute on purely rational grounds this is a crucial, though underexplored legacy.

But let us not jump too quickly from eighteenth-century aesthetics to the new metaphysicians. As the following section shows, the speculative realists are not alone among contemporary thinkers in returning to the original meaning of aesthetics as a theory of modalities of perception.<sup>30</sup>

### Contemporary French and German Aesthetics

Aesthetic matters have generally witnessed a strong return in philosophy and other disciplines of the humanities in the last fifteen years.<sup>31</sup> In this section, we briefly survey some of the influential positions in contemporary aesthetics in order to establish what it means to pursue aesthetics in the twenty-first century and how these contemporary discourses in turn contribute to understanding the content, aims, and possible limits of speculative aesthetics.

Let us begin with two thinkers whose work has been greatly responsible for the present resurgence of aesthetics in philosophy, art history and criticism, media and literary studies: Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière.

In the *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Alain Badiou claims that what we lack today is a proper understanding of the relation between art, philosophy, and truth. In his view, three schemata have so far determined our understanding of this relation.

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<sup>30</sup> For a similar assessment, see Ernst von Glasersfeld, "Farewell to Objectivity," *Systems Research* (1996), 13:3, 279-86.

<sup>31</sup> See John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas, eds., *The New Aestheticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Jonathan Loesberg, *A Return to Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Thomas Docherty, *Aesthetic Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

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He terms these schemata the “didactic,” the “classical,” and the “romantic.” The didactic and the classical schemata have their origin in Greek philosophy, in Plato and Aristotle, while the third schema, as its name implies, was established in the Romantic age.<sup>32</sup> According to the didactic schema, art produces a “semblance” of truth while truth is in fact “external to art” and only conceivable in philosophy. In the romantic schema, “art *alone* is capable of truth,” a truth that philosophy can only approximate. And in the classical schema, there is no truth to art at all—art is only cathartic, and “not at all cognitive or revelatory.”<sup>33</sup>

Badiou holds that the major schools of thought of the twentieth century were but continuations of these schemata: Marxism was a continuation of the didactic schema—we see this in the work of Brecht, for whom art makes manifest an external, philosophical truth, that of “dialectical materialism”; German hermeneutics was a continuation of the romantic schema—we see this in the work of Heidegger, where only the poet truly “maintains the effaced guarding of the Open,” meaning only art discloses the truth that philosophy can at best proclaim or register; and psychoanalysis was a continuation of the classical schema—we see this in the work of Freud and Lacan, for whom art is mainly therapeutic and has no claim to truth outside of the “imaginary.”<sup>34</sup>

Crucially, Badiou holds that the twentieth-century continuations of the inherited schemata led to a “*saturation* of these doctrines.” The major schools of thought in the twentieth century, while unable to establish a new schema for the relationship between art, philosophy, and truth, have all reached certain—political, quasi-theological, institutional—dead ends, ultimately relinquishing any claim to truth on the part of art. Badiou suggests that this is due to the fact that none of these schools of thought established a notion of artistic truth that

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<sup>32</sup> Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 1-5.

<sup>33</sup> Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 2-4, original emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-7.

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is *proper* to art itself. In his words, they missed out on articulating a notion of artistic truth that is both “immanent” and “singular”—a truth that is manifest *in* art and, in the particular form in which it is manifest, *only* in art.<sup>35</sup>

In the didactic schema, the truth of art is singular yet not immanent: singular because art is a semblance and because semblance is unique to art; yet not immanent because truth ultimately belongs to philosophy. In the romantic schema, the truth of art is immanent yet not singular: immanent because art (and only art) makes truth manifest; yet not singular because this is a truth that philosophy also aspires to. In the classical schema, the truth of art is neither singular nor immanent: art is merely therapeutic, without any claims to truth whatsoever. Yet only through a singular and immanent notion of artistic truth can we find a way out of the dead ends of the predominant aesthetic discourses of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup>

Badiou holds that we can only arrive at such a notion if we give up the idea that *the work of art* is “the pertinent unity of what is called ‘art.’”<sup>37</sup> Any notion of artistic truth that proceeds from the work of art as the bearer of that truth must necessarily fall back into the aporiae of the established schemata. Rather, Badiou suggests, we have to comprehend the pertinent unity of art as an

Artistic configuration initiated by an evental rupture ... This configuration, which is a generic multiple, possesses neither a proper name nor a proper contour, not even a possible totalization in terms of a single predicate. It cannot be exhausted, only imperfectly described. It is an artistic truth, and everybody knows that there is no truth of truth.<sup>38</sup>

Badiou’s evental notion of artistic truth cannot be exhaustively discussed here.<sup>39</sup> Yet what we can grasp from this brief

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<sup>35</sup> Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 7-9, original emphases.

<sup>36</sup> See *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> For a more extensive discussion of Badiou’s inaesthetics and his evental

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account is that Badiou perceives the major aesthetic discourses of the twentieth century to have reached certain historical limits, which in his view is based on their failure to properly comprehend the truth of art, that is, to establish a notion of artistic truth that is both singular and immanent, according to which art is “irreducible to philosophy,”<sup>40</sup> and in which philosophical aesthetics becomes an “inaesthetics,” a thinking about art that “makes no claim to turn art into an object for philosophy.”<sup>41</sup> And in order to achieve such a notion of artistic truth, we must first consider what we talk about when we talk about art: the author, the work, the recipient, or, as Badiou suggests, an event?

In the *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou returns to an issue that centrally concerned Baumgarten at the inauguration of aesthetics as a discipline—the relation between art, truth, and philosophy. How does Baumgarten’s notion of this relation fare in the schemata of Badiou? Baumgarten seems to firmly remain within their limits, yet a clear assignment of his notion of artistic truth to one of the schemata seems quite difficult. As stated earlier, aestheticological truth has the advantage over the truth procedures of reason that it provides us with a material, concrete kind of truth that reason alone—because of its necessary abstraction—cannot deliver. This might suggest that we are dealing with an immanent yet not singular kind of truth here, i.e., with the romantic schema: art (the aestheticological truth procedure) aspires to the same kind of truth that philosophy (the truth procedure of reason) does, but whereas philosophy’s truths are purely formal, art retains something of the plenitude of the universe in giving form to matter and thereby presenting a perhaps even more comprehensive form of truth. Yet one could also argue that this more material form of truth is in fact merely complementary: while art does bring forth a special kind of

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notion of artistic truth, see Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 193–208.

<sup>40</sup> Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, epigraph.

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truth, this kind of truth, because it is not strictly based in the procedures of reason, remains subordinated to philosophical truth—Baumgarten is a rationalist after all. This would then suggest the didactic schema: art is singular in that it produces a concrete, material kind of truth, yet truth in its highest form is not immanent to art, but only to philosophy.

The exact position of Baumgarten in the schemata of Badiou appears ultimately undecidable—it oscillates between the romantic and the didactic—but what is clear is that he certainly does not present a notion of artistic truth which is both singular and immanent, i.e., a kind of truth which in Badiou's view would do justice to a contemporary aesthetics that manages to overcome the dead ends of the major schools of thought of the twentieth century.

Since Badiou's schemata shed light on both the historical and the contemporary landscapes of aesthetics, relating speculative realism to them should prove illuminating with respect to its position vis-à-vis other contemporary currents. Given that speculative realism does not denote a unified doctrine, such juxtaposition should also shed some light on internal differences within the movement. This is a thread we will take up again in the third and last section of our essay. For now, let us continue with our brief and selective survey of contemporary positions by turning to another prominent French thinker: Jacques Rancière.

Whereas Badiou's work invites us to think about the relation between art, philosophy, and truth, with Jacques Rancière we are given the opportunity to address matters of politics and aesthetics. Arguably, the relation between politics and aesthetics is one of the central issues of Rancière's oeuvre. For the purpose of our brief survey, we will focus on Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics*—a book that nicely sums up his aesthetico-political project.

One obvious way to think about the relation between aesthetics and politics would be to think about the avant-garde, yet Rancière holds that “avant-garde thinking” has today turned into a form of “nostalgia”—a form of thought that only still

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claims the utopian in its absence.<sup>42</sup> This is best perceived in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, in which art becomes “witness to an encounter with the unrepresentable that cripples all thought” as a means to accuse or prevent the “arrogance of the grand aesthetic-political endeavour to have ‘thought’ become ‘world’”—an endeavour that has become ideologically dubious, and must hence be rejected, which means for art to reject thought, or rather, to present that which cannot be attained by thought.<sup>43</sup> This however renders such an avant-garde thinking politically powerless.

Rancière’s aim is not to proclaim, once more, “the avant-garde vocation of art or ... the vitality of modernity that links the conquests of artistic innovation to the victories of emancipation.”<sup>44</sup> Rather, he wants to develop a basic terminology by which we can properly understand the particular relation of aesthetics and politics. In order to achieve this, Rancière holds that we must first acquire a clearer conception of the term aesthetics.<sup>45</sup> Crucially, Rancière suggests that aesthetics must not be understood in its more narrow definition, as the philosophy of art, but more broadly and fundamentally, “in a Kantian sense ... as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to experience.”<sup>46</sup> Aesthetics in this sense is concerned with what Rancière famously calls “the distribution of the sensible”: “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.”<sup>47</sup>

Rancière returns here to the very origins of aesthetics—and not only Kant’s notion of aesthetics, but also to that of

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum 2004), 9.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



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Baumgarten as the science of perception. Yet Rancière gives this notion an emphatic political twist that both Kant and Baumgarten lack. With Rancière, a pleasurable experience can never be disinterested, but is always already interested, shaped by and in turn shaping the distribution of the sensible in pre-discursive—because it pertains to the very basic acts of perception—ways; likewise, whatever is formed out of the plenitude of the universe strives not after an absolute truth, but an ideological one: the aesthetic is not metaphysical, but political.

Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* presents a fundamental rethinking of the relation between politics and aesthetics, which is, crucially, based on a general redetermination of what aesthetics is concerned with: not just with art practices, but more fundamentally with modes of sense perception. Only through such a return to the origins of aesthetics can we finally understand the political import of artistic practices. Rancière's point is that at its very core, the aesthetic act is political: sense perception is always an act that is itself structured and structures that which is perceived, granting the visibility of some objects and rendering others invisible (which affirms the power of some social groups at the cost of others), promoting some genres of art and disqualifying others. Aesthetics *means* the distribution of the sensible.

This very claim—that aesthetics cannot be separated from politics, but is, at its core, entwined with it—is a particularly interesting one to consider with regard to speculative realist thought. Like Rancière, some of the representatives of speculative realism also return to the origins of aesthetics as the science of perception and sensuous cognition in order to newly determine its basic character and thereby general import for philosophy and adjacent disciplines. Yet whereas this redetermination in Rancière suggests that the aesthetic is essentially political, in speculative realism it leads to a marginalisation, if not erasure, of the political. Of course, the basic *non-human* approach of speculative aesthetics might necessitate this: in its establishment of an aesthetics

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that goes beyond the human scope of things and addresses relations of objects regardless of our investment in them, the political—arguably an essentially human realm—gets dropped from its list of concerns.

Such an assessment of aesthetics after the speculative turn might make one assume that it is an *apolitical* project that attempts to re-establish a newly purified aesthetics, which from a partisan position would render it potentially problematic on ideological terms. Yet such an assumption would be quite short-sighted. For even though the non-human aims of speculative aesthetics disengage it at its core from any political relations, this must not mean that political issues might not re-enter the discussion. It might even be that precisely such a program might help us gain a new understanding of how political action takes place, which is what one of our contributors, Thomas Gokey, suggests. Gokey's essay is interesting for a further reason, because he conceives the speculative possibilities of political action in terms of an avant-garde practice—precisely the practice that is declared obsolete by both Rancière and Badiou.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the fact that Harman in his essay engages with the question of what the next avant-garde might look like solidifies our assumption that a speculative aesthetics might pose not just one but several challenges to other popular aesthetic discourses of our time.

We will now move from France to Germany for our last discussion of a contemporary position, and consider the recent developments in aesthetics there. Very helpful in this respect is the collection of essays titled *Falsche Gegensätze: Zeitgenössische Positionen zur philosophischen Ästhetik*. This book brings together essays by some of the major figures in contemporary German aesthetics—Andrea Kern, Jens Kulenkampff, Christoph Menke, Martin Seel, Ruth Sonderegger, and

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<sup>48</sup> See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9-10. Badiou holds that the avant-garde, despite its attempt of being a proper twentieth-century aesthetic, did not manage to overcome the obsolete schemata, but rather formed a combination of two of them: the avant-garde was “didactico-romantic.” Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 8.

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Albrecht Wellmer—and in the editors' introduction contains a concise statement of their common pursuit.

The basic gesture of recent German aesthetics is similar to that of Badiou and Rancière: it presents a fundamental challenge to some of the persistent premises of modern aesthetic theory. In this, it is specifically concerned with the relation of aesthetics to theoretical and practical philosophy (according to the modern division of philosophy). As Andrea Kern and Ruth Sonderegger claim in their introduction to *Falsche Gegensätze*, we are confronted today with two problematic understandings of this relation.

The first understanding claims that aesthetics assesses a kind of experience which is autonomous and therefore stands in no relation whatsoever to a “theoretical and practical experience of the world,” because to argue that there is such a relation would undermine the distinctiveness of aesthetic experience and thereby also of the discipline of aesthetics. The authors hold that such a view implies a “marginalisation” of aesthetic experience for our everyday life, and of aesthetics for philosophy. Aesthetic experience thus at best ends up being just a form of “relief from the ordinary, a diversion, a distraction.”<sup>49</sup>

The second understanding assesses the relation between aesthetic, theoretical, and practical experience in a diametrically opposed way. Here, aesthetic experience is no longer conceived as autonomous, “irreducible to the ordinary experience of the world,” but conversely represents “the highest form of precisely those experiences that theoretical and practical philosophy also want to comprehend.” For in aesthetic experience, the world appears to us “in the whole fullness and variety of possible interests and purposes,” rather than being approached under particular aspects, as in practical or theoretical philosophy. Such an understanding however implies that aesthetics, which assesses this experience, is no

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<sup>49</sup> Andrea Kern and Ruth Sonderegger, “Einleitung” in *Falsche Gegensätze: Zeitgenössische Positionen zur philosophischen Ästhetik*, ed. Andrea Kern and Ruth Sonderegger (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2002), 7-8; this and all subsequent translations are ours.

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longer just one of the major disciplines of philosophy, but rather attains the status of “the only *true* philosophy.”<sup>50</sup>

The main problem that Kern and Sonderegger perceive here is that these positions are often assumed to be “mutually exclusive”—that it seems impossible to conceive of an aesthetic experience which is both autonomous *and* informative for our everyday lives and the other domains of philosophy. Yet this is the view that the contributors to *Falsche Gegensätze* want to establish. Even more emphatically, they argue that “precisely through the particular way by which it is related to ordinary, everyday experience,” aesthetic experience “turns into an autonomous one.”<sup>51</sup>

Kern and Sonderegger suggest three central concepts for determining this particular relation of aesthetic experience to other experiences: “reflection, aporiae, and play.” The terms themselves already suggest why aesthetic experience is not congruent with ordinary experience—not because it has no relation to it at all, but because it “*relates* itself to it” in a special way—reflectively, aporetically, playfully. The authors hold that this is a crucial point, for it implies that there is a close link between aesthetic experience and the basic gesture of philosophy itself: in philosophy, as in aesthetic experience, “we relate ourselves ... to our *relation* to the world.”<sup>52</sup>

Such a reconception of aesthetic experience leads to a fundamental redefinition of the position aesthetics takes among the other domains of philosophy: aesthetics is no longer either marginal nor of the highest significance to practical and theoretical philosophy, but now instead stands in a “reciprocal relation” to them. Yet the status of aesthetics does remain special. Because of the philosophical character of aesthetic experience, aesthetics transcends the status of being merely one of the major disciplines in philosophy, but rather becomes the discipline for the contemplation of philosophy: in its reflection of aesthetic experience, aesthetics “cannot

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<sup>50</sup> Kern and Sonderegger, “Einleitung,” 8-9, original emphasis.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, our emphasis in second quote, original emphasis in third quote.

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forbear to reflect the relation of its subject to philosophy and with that to reflect philosophy itself.”<sup>53</sup>

We register here a further attempt to fundamentally renegotiate some of the central terms of traditional aesthetics, in this case the relation of aesthetics to practical and theoretical philosophy. Importantly, the contributors to *Falsche Gegensätze* put forward not only that we need a new understanding of this relation, but also that such a new understanding might imply that the discipline of aesthetics claims a special status inside philosophy. Such a diagnosis is reminiscent of Harman’s already quoted assertion that aesthetics become “first philosophy.” Yet Kern and Sonderegger’s assessment is of a markedly different character: whereas in Harman’s program, aesthetics becomes *metaphysics*, in Kern and Sonderegger it attains a *metaphilosophical* status.

Summing up our survey of recent French and German contributions to aesthetics and their relation to speculative realist concerns, we can say that one of the fundamental gestures of contemporary aesthetics, by which it attempts to reinvigorate debates about art, is to reconnect such debates to the original concerns of the discipline—to the questions of sensation, sense perception, and sensuous cognition that already occupied Baumgarten and, subsequently, Kant. Connecting again these two divisions of aesthetics—the philosophy of art and the science of sensuous cognition—seems to be one distinctive characteristic of the current writings on aesthetics that creates new valences and yields prolific new ways by which to renegotiate both the relation of aesthetics to the other domains of philosophy and the more specific matters of aesthetics itself. It comes as no surprise, then, that several of the contributions to this issue straddle this division as they ask some of the most fundamental questions about aesthetics and sensuous cognition even as they engage with specific works of art: Roberto Simanowski on digital art, Magdalena Wisniowska on Samuel Beckett’s television

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<sup>53</sup> Kern and Sonderegger, “Einleitung,” 10-11, original emphasis.

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plays, van Tuinen on mannerist painting, Robert Jackson on the modernist legacy in contemporary video and sculpture work, Harman, Bettina Funcke, and Gokey on avant-garde art. Together with Halsall's reflections on Kant's third critique, these essays make up the second part of our volume, "The Theory of Art," where we bring together those texts that engage most directly with artistic concerns.

Where precisely contemporary reformulations of aesthetics should lead us is a matter of dispute, and the various approaches apparent in aesthetics today vary greatly in terms of their specific aims. Yet they all seem to share something in their pursuits, namely that they all attempt to re-establish the aesthetic in its *distinctiveness*. This means to establish the aesthetic as something *specific*, as in Badiou's claim that art has its own proper truth that is irreducible to other discourses and can never be appropriated by them (which consequently turns any truthful philosophy of art into an inaeconomics); and also as something of *special importance*, as in Rancière's suggestion that politics is always (also) grounded in aesthetics, and in Kern and Sonderegger's claim that aesthetics is the exceptional discipline of philosophy in which philosophy and its other disciplines can be reflected.

Like the other contemporary aesthetic discourses, speculative aesthetics also lays claim to the distinctiveness of the aesthetic, putting forward equally programmatic statements about the particularity of its status precisely by bringing together matters of sensation with matters of art, which consequently enables an extensive re-evaluation of the proper matters of aesthetics, which, as in Claire Colebrook's contribution to our volume, might very well turn out to be the inherent aestheticism of matter itself. The first part of our issue, entitled "The Art of Theory," assembles these more programmatic interventions featuring, besides Colebrook's essay, the contributions of Shaviro, Leiber and Voigt, Matija Jelača, Hayles, Jon Cogburn and Mark Allan Ohm, and Miguel Penas López.

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### Aesthetics and Speculative Realism

Having traced the historical origins and, by means of paradigmatic examples, the contemporary landscape of the discipline of aesthetics and the attendant problems and questions it grapples with, we will now try to determine the place of the recent speculative turn in continental philosophy within this field.<sup>54</sup> In order to do so, both historically and systematically, let us first return to the beginnings of aesthetics and its early eighteenth-century prehistory in the discourse on taste.

In his entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, James

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<sup>54</sup> Of the original four speculative realists, Graham Harman has undoubtedly been the most explicit advocate of aesthetics. His claim that aesthetics has to be viewed as first philosophy and his theory of allure are well known by now. In addition to the already mentioned “Vicarious Causation” see also his “Aesthetics as First Philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human,” *Naked Punch* (2007), 9, 21-30 and particularly his *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 101-44. Quentin Meillassoux in turn has recently given us his reading of Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés* in Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé’s Coup de Dés*, trans. Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012). And while Iain Hamilton Grant has not explicitly written on aesthetics per se yet, given his Deleuzo-Schellingian dynamic process philosophy, it is safe to say that aesthetics plays a crucial role in his metaphysical project. One need only remember that Schelling pronounced “aesthetic intuition” as “merely transcendental intuition become objective” and art thus consequently “at once the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy” (F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1978), 231), and that for Deleuze aesthetics is the “apodictic discipline” (Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2004), 68). From the original four, only Ray Brassier has voiced his disdain for aesthetics (“Against an Aesthetics of Noise,” *Transitzone*, nY, <http://ny-web.be/transitzone/against-aesthetics-noise.html> (accessed September 18, 2013)). To these four thinkers, one should add Steven Shaviro and Reza Negarestani, the latter engaging aesthetic form directly by means of theory fiction. See Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria* and Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2008). In addition, Timothy Morton just published his *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013) that takes up Harman’s philosophy in order to develop an aesthetic account of causality. Finally, one should mention Armen Avanessian’s project of a speculative poetics and the book series related to this project: *Spekulative Poetik*, <http://www.spekulative-poetik.de/> (accessed September 18, 2013).

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Shelley emphasises the antagonistic stance theories of taste adopt vis-à-vis rationalist theories of beauty. He describes the situation thus:

Rationalism about beauty is the view that judgments of beauty are judgments of reason, i.e., that we judge things to be beautiful by reasoning it out, where reasoning it out typically involves inferring from principles or applying concepts ... It was against this ... that mainly British philosophers working mainly within an empiricist framework began to develop theories of taste. The fundamental idea behind any such theory—which we may call *the immediacy thesis*—is that judgments of beauty are not (or at least not primarily) mediated by inferences from principles or applications of concepts, but rather have all the immediacy of straightforwardly sensory judgments; it is the idea, in other words, that we do not reason to the conclusion that things are beautiful, but rather “taste” that they are.<sup>55</sup>

In this vein, if one were to paint a broad-brush picture of speculative realism, one could maintain that what we are witnessing today, what is discernible now that the very first wave of the speculative turn has hit the shore and the ripples have subsided, is a new struggle between rationalism and empiricism *within* contemporary speculative philosophy in general and its take on aesthetics in particular. In fact, aesthetics is the domain that brings to light precisely this divide. Devoting a special issue to speculative realism and aesthetics thus not only provides an opportunity to survey what the speculative turn in all its variety might bring to the discourse on aesthetics, but comes with the added value of sharpening the focus on this variety itself. In analogy to Shelley’s account, one could thus say that for the contemporary rationalists, mathematics (Meillassoux) and science (Brassier) dictate the discourse on and the place of aesthetics within the larger framework of epistemology with the concomitant intent to hunt down any manifestation of the, in their view, illusory “immediacy

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<sup>55</sup> James Shelley, “The Concept of the Aesthetic,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/aesthetic-concept/> (accessed September 23, 2013), original emphasis.



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thesis.” The empiricists (Harman and Grant, but also Shaviro and Morton) in turn insist upon “immediacy” and a theory of taste in disguise holding that we immediately taste something before we conceptually know it. Brassier voiced this divide within speculative realism precisely along these lines in a 2009 interview, where he said that he is

Very wary of “aesthetics”: the term is contaminated by notions of “experience” that I find deeply problematic. I have no philosophy of art worth speaking of. This is not to dismiss art’s relevance for philosophy—far from it—but merely to express reservations about the kind of philosophical aestheticism which seems to want to hold up “aesthetic experience” as a new sort of cognitive paradigm wherein the Modern (post-Cartesian) “rift” between knowing and feeling would be overcome ... Some recent philosophers have evinced an interest in subjectless experiences; I am rather more interested in experience-less subjects.<sup>56</sup>

This passage indeed seems to suggest that aesthetics is the domain where the differences among the speculative realists are most acutely on display. In addition, Brassier’s juxtaposition highlights the inverse importance accorded to experience (empiricism) on the one hand and the subject (rationalism) on the other, thus confirming our labelling of the two opposing camps as empiricists and rationalists respectively. Resuming our genealogical recovery of the empiricist notion of taste from a contemporary point of view, let us emphasise that we spoke of a theory of taste in disguise since this traditional expression is barely ever mentioned in the respective speculative realist writings.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, these theories of taste would

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<sup>56</sup> Brassier, “Against an Aesthetics of Noise,” n.pag.

<sup>57</sup> Morton, while not discussing it in detail, does refer to it in passing several times in his latest monograph. Morton, *Realist Magic*, 77, 89, 131, 168, 201. Shaviro in turn discusses taste more extensively, particularly throughout the first chapter of his *Without Criteria*. Shaviro, *Without Criteria*, 1-16. Both treat taste in the context of Kant’s analytic of the beautiful precisely, as already indicated in our first section, because 1) Kantian judgments of taste are not regulated by concepts, and 2) because Kantian judgments of taste are disinterested. This moment in the discourse on taste is attractive to these thinkers because it seems to offer a potential entryway to things as they are, that is, reality itself.

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have to be de-humanised as they apply to the fabric of reality as such, not just the realm of the human faculty of judgment. It becomes clearer what we are trying to say if we complement taste with intuition, sensation, and perception (as it actually happened in the history of aesthetics itself, as Baumgarten's aesthetics qua sensuous cognition followed on the heels of early British reflections on taste).<sup>58</sup> Thus, in Harman's (and Morton's) object-oriented framework, aesthetics, as manifested in the theory of allure, refers to one object tasting, intuiting, sensing, perceiving another object; in Grant's Schellingian transcendental naturalism, aesthetics concerns the tasting, the intuition of nature's forces and potencies; and in Shaviro's Whiteheadian cosmology, which he further develops in his contribution to this volume, it adequately describes the domain of prehension, that is, the domain of relationality per se. For all these thinkers, any encounter whatsoever is always the site of aesthetic experience (and the emphasis rests on both of these terms equally). In these philosophies, aesthetics is other to conceptual knowledge, and prior to it. Given the expansion of aesthetics into the non-human realm, this is also the moment when aesthetics is pushed from the domain of human epistemology into that of general ontology. Ceasing to be a particular kind of human relation to the world, it becomes a general descriptor of relationality of/in<sup>59</sup> the world. As López argues in his contribution to this volume, Gilbert Simondon's relational ontology has ventured into this terrain half a century before the speculative realists. It is in exploring that same space, albeit under the banner of a substance ontology, that Harman has ventured to call aesthet-

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<sup>58</sup> One would have to mention Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator, with Notes, and a General Index*, 2 vols. (New York: Printed by Samuel Marks, 1826), Anthony Ashley Cooper (Third Earl of Shaftesbury), *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), all of which were published between 1711 and 1725 and thus well before Baumgarten coined the term "aesthetics" in 1735.

<sup>59</sup> The choice of the preposition depends on whether one favours a relational ontology (of) or a substance ontology (in).

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ics first philosophy: in this framework, human epistemology only builds on and comes after the general aesthetic structure of/in being. Indeed, “subjectless experience” underlies and comes to determine cognising subjects.

It is this centrality of aesthetic experience that the rationalists dispute. They view such a hypostatisation of aesthetic experience beyond the human realm as illegitimate and unfounded. Why use terms such as perception or intuition for describing non-human relations? According to the rationalists, this not only confuses a very human trait for a trait of reality in general; much worse, it actually impedes and hinders the rational inquiry into human and non-human relations, just as Jelača argues in staging a face-off between Sellars and Deleuze in his contribution. Thus, for the rationalists, epistemology qua rational inquiry governs and determines aesthetics. By their lights, any immediate “tasting” of anything is but a human fiction. Consequently, they do not have much to say in this regard, as Brassier himself makes unmistakably clear in the passage quoted above. All they have to offer for this discourse is to call it out for its “irrationalism.”

Our neat dichotomy of rationalists vs. empiricists is too neat, though, and needs to be complicated. After all, the advent of Kant’s transcendental philosophy separates this older debate from everything that came afterwards. Nothing remained the same after Kant’s invention of the transcendental. His Copernican revolution marks the decisive turning point in the history of modern philosophy *as it intervenes precisely in this debate between rationalism and empiricism*. It is in this context that Meillassoux’s diagnosis of correlationism, a diagnosis all speculative realists agree on, needs to be located. As Paul J. Ennis has convincingly shown,<sup>60</sup> the charge of correlationism is precisely directed against transcendental philosophy.<sup>61</sup> Thus, we have to add transcendental philosophy

<sup>60</sup> Paul J. Ennis, *Continental Realism* (Winchester: Zero, 2010).

<sup>61</sup> This is also the reason why Meillassoux has ventured to propose the term subjectalism as a complement to the earlier correlationism in one of his recent essays, Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign,” <http://oursecretblog.com/>

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to the mix. What we are witnessing in speculative realism is to a large extent a reworking of the transcendental. What all of the speculative realists retain from the Kantian invention of the transcendental is its *immanence*.<sup>62</sup> All speculative realists are firmly concerned with this world and their respective philosophies are thisworldly. What they all reject is Kant's Copernican revolution, which Meillassoux in *After Finitude* denounced as a "Ptolemaic counter-revolution."<sup>63</sup> What is rejected is thus the centrality of *human experience* and its *conditions of possibility*. However, while one part of speculative realism particularly rejects the *human* in human experience, the other side rejects precisely the *experience*. On the one side, what results is an *ontological* recasting of the transcendental as it applies to reality per se: a transcendental empiricism (Grant, Harman, Morton, Shaviro); on the other side, we have an *epistemological* account of the powers of human thought to pierce this very same reality: a transcendental rationalism (Brassier, Meillassoux). As such, both of these strains of thought are to a certain extent already present in Kant. This is why Kant, harking back to the very beginning of this article, is both speculative realism's worst enemy *and* best friend.

With respect to aesthetics, we could also recast this divide in terms of Badiou's tripartite division discussed above. In this vein, the transcendental empiricist camp of speculative

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txt/QMpaperApr12.pdf (accessed October 24, 2013). A revised version is forthcoming in *Genealogies of Speculation: Materialism and Subjectivity since Structuralism*, ed. Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). The neologism serves to recuperate and subsume within his sweeping critique both idealist and vitalist philosophies whose point of origin Meillassoux ultimately traces to the pre-transcendental idealism of Berkeley.

<sup>62</sup> Already Gilles Deleuze acknowledged and emphasised this point in his own critique of Kant: "Kant is the one who discovers the prodigious domain of the transcendental. He is the analogue of a great explorer—not of another world, but of the upper or lower reaches of this one." Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2004), 171.

<sup>63</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 119. It is perhaps worth noting that this is not Meillassoux's coinage and has been in use at least since Bertrand Russell's original publication of *Human Knowledge* in 1948. See Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1. Of course, discussions of Kant's "revolution" date to even earlier.

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realism would be engaged in a radical reworking of the Badiouian romantic schema, while the transcendental rationalist camp could be said to either propose a renewal of the classical schema or a development of Badiou's own inaesthetics. The lack of publications that explicitly take up aesthetics makes it difficult to assess Brassier and Meillassoux on this point. Risking a judgment, it seems to us that Brassier could be said to endorse the classical schema, while Meillassoux seems to be more in line with Badiou. Admittedly, we are on very thin ice here. These diagnoses are based on Brassier's rejection of the category of experience on the one hand, and Meillassoux's following remarks from "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition" on the other:

My materialism is so far from being hostile to empiricism, that in fact it aims to found the absolute necessity of the latter. My only disagreement with the empiricist is that I affirm that he [sic] is *absolutely* correct: If you want to know or think what is, you must *necessarily* (from my point of view) do so by way of a certain regime of experience: scientific experimentation (the sciences of nature), historical and sociological experience, but also literary and artistic experience, etc. And here, my role is to prevent a certain philosophical regime from contesting the sovereignty of those "disciplines of experience" I have enumerated.<sup>64</sup>

Meillassoux, like Badiou, defends the disciplines' autonomy both from one another and from philosophy. As a result, it seems to us that Meillassoux should be sympathetic to Badiou's inaesthetics project. Also, note that while Meillassoux thus carves out a space of truth pertaining to art, this space remains purely empirical—it is given ("what is") and thus a manifestation of facticity. Meillassoux, however, is interested in founding the absolute necessity of the contingency of such facts—the "speculative essence" or "factuality" of facticity which itself is not a fact.<sup>65</sup> This is why Meillassoux is not an empiricist. It is also the reason why he is not that much

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<sup>64</sup> Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition," 12, original emphases.

<sup>65</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 79.

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interested in art.<sup>66</sup> He is happy to leave discussions about art to the experts in the respective “disciplines of experience,” that is, aesthetics and theory of art.

This is consistent with the fact that Meillassoux just published an extensive reading of Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés*: the truth of the poem is intrinsic to literary (or artistic) practice, but this intrinsic truth it produces is indicative of another, philosophical, truth—and this is where Meillassoux’s interest lies. According to Meillassoux, Badiou reads the uncertainty and hesitation in Mallarmé’s poem as congruous with his own notion of the event. In this vein, the word “perhaps” as employed in the poem points to a future to come, “awaiting a truth that would come to complete it in the same time as abolish it, replacing its hypotheticity with an effective certitude.”<sup>67</sup> Meillassoux thinks that this leads to “devaluing or relativizing the interest of [Mallarmé’s] poetry” as it integrates and cuts down to size the function of the “perhaps,” which, according to Meillassoux’s own reading, lies in its hypostatization: the absolutisation of chance.<sup>68</sup> Such diagnosis, of course, is not very far from Meillassoux’s “necessity of contingency” thesis—hence his interest in *Coup de dés*.<sup>69</sup> In the context of

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<sup>66</sup> The same holds true of Meillassoux’s relation to the sciences—this goes a long way towards explaining the lack of actual scientific discourse in *After Finitude* despite its initial appeal to the sciences in its discussion of the arche-fossil.

<sup>67</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, “Badiou and Mallarmé: The Event and the Perhaps,” trans. Alley Edlebi, *Parrhesia* (2013), 16, 38.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>69</sup> How the aesthetic is to be situated in relation to contingency in Meillassoux’s overall philosophical system is hinted at in the excerpts from *L’inexistence divine* included in Harman’s study of Meillassoux. There, Meillassoux employs the notion of beauty as *the* indicator of the justness of a possible future world of justice and thus, in Kantian fashion, inextricably ties the aesthetic to the moral. Where in Kant the experience of beauty parades the world before our eyes “as if [it] had been created in conformance with ... moral ends” and thus opens up the possibility of God, in Meillassoux, assuming that a perfect just world were incarnate at some future point in time, it would—in accordance with his principle of unreason and the necessity of contingency—reveal “*the emergence without reason of an accord between reason and the real.*” The experience of beauty would thus be an indicator

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our discussion, what is remarkable in Meillassoux's account is that he castigates Badiou for not being faithful enough to the truth of the poem, that is, for failing to live up to his own inaesthetics. Meillassoux then proceeds to out-Badiou Badiou himself.

A similar picture to that drawn from Badiou's tripartite classification of aesthetic discourse emerges from Kern and Sonderegger's introductory survey. When Kern and Sonderegger contest both the notion that aesthetics is the "only true philosophy" and the idea that it is but philosophy's servant,<sup>70</sup> they reject the romantic and classical schemata of art. In turn, their recasting of aesthetics as metaphilosophical could possibly even be seen as a reworking of the didactic schema as aesthetics thus provides philosophy with the mirror to observe itself as it is engaged in its epistemic project.<sup>71</sup> If we take these recent trends into account, it seems that Badiou's diagnosis of the death of the three aesthetic schemata is ill-fated as all three seem to be well and alive. A Badiouian might of course maintain that these strands are helplessly lost as they are caught in their dead ends and that only a proper inaesthetics provides the royal road of escape. Whatever the repercussions, it seems to be clear that speculative realism is divided between a retrieval (in the Harmanian sense elaborated in his contribution to this issue) of romantic aesthetics and its complete dismissal (Brassier); or, minimally, a profuse lack of interest towards it (Meillassoux).

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of the contingency of justice incarnate, and only a world that offers this experience would be a just world. Quentin Meillassoux, "Excerpts from *Linexistence divine*," trans. Graham Harman in *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* by Graham Harman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 218-19, original emphasis.

<sup>70</sup> Kern and Sonderegger, "Einleitung," 8-9.

<sup>71</sup> It is telling that Kern and Sonderegger do not have a word to say about ontology and only evoke ethics (practical philosophy as concerned with the good) and epistemology (theoretical philosophy as concerned with truth) as the other central disciplines of philosophy besides aesthetics. Equating theoretical philosophy with epistemology, their understanding of philosophy is very much in line with twentieth century's anti-metaphysical outlook. Philosophy is indeed reduced to an epistemic project.

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The speculative realist retrieval of romantic aesthetics as expounded by its transcendental empiricist wing also goes a long way towards explaining the lack of an explicit discourse on politics. A short juxtaposition with Rancière's position should prove illuminating in this respect. From the point of view of the speculative realist retrieval of romanticism, Rancière's *socio-political* notion of the distribution of the sensible has to be recast in *metaphysical* terms. It is due to speculative realism's larger metaphysical outlook that aesthetics becomes divorced from the political; or, rather, the political becomes just one tiny field within being where the aesthetic plays out and politics can thus not assume a central role in its determination. Against advocates of a politics of being who argue for an inherently political structure of being and thus might object to such an argument, we agree with the speculative realists that politics needs some rudimentary form of *polis* to take place, and a mere congeries of things—what object-oriented thinkers call Latour Litanies—does not make a *polis*. Thus, distribution has to be recast as a *neutral* ontological, not *partial* socio-political activity (or occurrence; or process—pick your favourite term).

With this observation, we have reached the end of our short foray into the historical and systematic ramifications of the contemporary aesthetic landscape. As a means to conclude this survey, let us return once more to the heyday of aesthetics that started with Kant and continued through all of German Idealism. We have stated that speculative realism in large parts amounts to a retrieval of just this tradition, an argument that Cogburn and Ohm present in much more detail in their Whig history of speculative realism, which serves to introduce their own concerns with truth and fiction in their contribution to this special issue. In this vein, aesthetics in the twenty-first century, at least in its speculative guise, amounts to *either* a radical reworking of German Idealism (the speculative realist transcendental empiricists) *or* it amounts to nothing much at all (the speculative realist transcendental rationalists). Strikingly, the latter position comes close to Jens Kulenkampff's diagnosis in his contribution to *Falsche Gegensätze*. Having



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dismissed both Kant's and Hegel's metaphysical commitments as obsolete, Kulenkampff closes his essay with the following provocative remark:

European aesthetics before Kant is in truth but a prehistory to philosophical aesthetics, and philosophical aesthetics from Hegel onwards is nothing but a variant of either Kantian or Hegelian aesthetics. If, however, Kant and Hegel are no longer available as reference figures for a philosophical aesthetics, then aesthetics might indeed survive as a sub-discipline within academic philosophy, and the label "Philosophical Aesthetics" continue to exist, but a philosophical aesthetics worthy of the name is long dead.<sup>72</sup>

Contra Kulenkampff (and contra the transcendental rationalist wing of speculative realism), however, speculative realism's transcendental empiricists testify to the ongoing relevance of the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition as can be witnessed in their central reworking of the transcendental and the importance of figures such as Schelling and Kant himself. Let us be clear on this point, then, and state it as succinctly as possible: speculative aesthetics in the twenty-first century is German Idealism redux.

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<sup>72</sup> Jens Kulenkampff, "Metaphysik und Ästhetik: Kant zum Beispiel" in *Falsche Gegensätze*, 80, our translation.

# Speculations

## Æsthetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## Speculations V

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