

adventures in aesthetics

rethinking aesthetics beyond the bifurcation of nature

A 2020 online workshop organised by
Melanie Sehgal & Alex Wilkie

Thursday 25th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Friday 26th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Tuesday 30th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Wednesday 1st July: 14:00 – 17:00

Please note: all times in BST

with contributions by

Heather Davis

Matthew Fuller

Nicholas Gaskill

Andrew Goffey

Michael Guggenheim

Maximilian Haas

Michael Halewood

Cecile Malaspina

Mike Michael

Marsha Rosengarten

Martin Savransky

Melanie Sehgal

Alex Wilkie

Why Adventures of Aesthetics?

Since the 18th century and the event of modern science, the nature of aesthetics, aesthetic practices and the habits of thinking about aesthetics have, by and large, mirrored the ordering of science founded on the bifurcation of nature. Whereas science and scientific practice has forcefully mobilized itself around ‘bare nature’ independent of ‘culture’ and the ‘social’, aesthetic thinking has also colluded in this opposition, concerning itself with the experiencing subject, perception and artistic expression.

Recently, however, the question of the aesthetic has begun to proliferate in unexpected areas of inquiry wholly ignoring these modern bifurcations. In times of anthropogenic climate change and mass extinction on the one hand, and increased dependency on ‘technoscientific’ deliverance on the other, Alfred North Whitehead’s (2004 [1920]) diagnosis of the bifurcation of nature seems to receive a new pertinence and urgency. New ways of thinking about and doing aesthetics as a more-than-human realm open up the very real and concrete possibility that aesthetic processes and capacities are not the preserve of privileged human actors – such as artists, architects, designers and their audiences or users – nor do they simply concern the beautiful and the sublime. Although philosophers of science, notably Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, have taken up the challenges posed by the bifurcation of nature and its implications for understanding and thinking with scientific practices and knowledge production, less attention has been paid to its corollary for aesthetic practices and processes.

Meanwhile, in the face of new cosmological possibilities and cosmopolitics (Stengers 2005) engendered by epochal propositions, such as the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2002), Capitalocene (Moore 2015) or Chthulucene (Haraway 2015), there is a demand for new ways of thinking and feeling, new knowledge and aesthetic practices beyond the bifurcation of nature that engendered modern science and its aesthetic mirror image. The proposition of this workshop, then, is to imagine ways of addressing this demand and explore, or gamble, on the prospect that aesthetics might be thought and practiced differently, and, in so doing, acknowledge the historicities of thought that have sought a different image of aesthetics. Thus, we might wager that today aesthetics – rather than ontology or ethics – should be placed at the centre of philosophical as well as social and cultural experimentation and that aesthetics should be recognised as the primary manner of care and concern for the world.

Hence, far from criticizing aesthetics at large or suggesting that, by being irredeemably marked by the bifurcation of nature, the realm of the aesthetic has become superfluous, this workshop seeks to inquire into the importance and scope of a ‘new aesthetic paradigm’ as Felix Guattari (1995) envisioned it: not confined to a special realm of society but rather as transversally cutting across every domain of experience and “placed on the manner of being” (ibid. 109). However

tentative and speculative such a task might remain, it derives its importance from the fact that changing not only modern habits of thought but also those of feeling and perceiving today has become an urgent task. We might, then, wager that today – when the limits of the framework of western modernity have become clearly palpable in multiple areas of experience – there is a particular import in placing aesthetics at the centre of experimentation in knowledge practices. Hence, this interdisciplinary workshop, sets out to explore this wager by considering the following propositions:

1. How might a wider idea of aesthetics (and anaesthetics) manifest today and how might it be appreciated in knowledge practices? What images of thought does it make possible? What does the move from neutrality, objectivity and facts to an aesthetic constructivism make possible?
2. How to account for the aesthetic (and anaesthetic) nature of current knowledge practices? What roles does the aesthetic play in knowledge practices not conventionally associated with it (e.g. sciences and social sciences)?
3. If a new aesthetic paradigm designates a production of existence that concerns the capacity of entities to feel, how might we detect new modes of ‘being affected’ in the world and how do we as knowledge practitioners respond?
4. How does a generalized notion of aesthetics relate to historically prior and/or non-western ways of conceiving of the aesthetic? Can we learn from these to refigure western habits of thought?
5. What repercussions does such an aesthetic paradigm have on existing aesthetic practices as well as the philosophical discipline called aesthetics?

References

- Crutzen, P. J. 2002. Geology of mankind. *Nature*, 415(6867), 23.
- Guattari, F. 1995. *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm*. Indiana University Press.
- Haraway, D. 2015. Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin. *Environmental humanities*, 6(1), 159-165.
- Moore, J. W. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso Books.
- Stengers, I. 2005. The Cosmopolitical Proposal. In: Latour, B. and Weibel, P. eds. *Making things public*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 994-1003.
- Whitehead, A. N. 1933 [1967]. *Adventures of ideas*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Whitehead, A. N. 2004 [1920]. *The concept of nature*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Programme

Please note: All times are in british summer time (BST). We will be using Zoom for the workshop and we will send out Zoom invitations for each meeting

Session 1: Introduction: why adventures in aesthetics? Thursday 25th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Chair: Melanie Sehgal

Introduction

Melanie Sehgal & Alex Wilkie:

A new taste for life: Value ecologies and the aesthetics of the otherwise

Martin Savransky

Values of aesthetics and cosmology in Whitehead and Guattari

Maximilian Haas

Session 2: Anesthesia, noise & disease Friday 26th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Chair: Martin Savransky

Toward an aesthetics of infection

Marsha Rosengarten

The aesthetics of dissociation, torpor and paralysis

Cecile Malaspina

Spasms

Matthew Fuller & Andrew Goffey

The aesthetics of a never event: Prehensions and clinical malpractice

Alex Wilkie

Session 3: Aesthetics & practices of care within and beyond the arts Tuesday 30th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Chair: Marsha Rosengarten

Adventures in aesthetics response

Heather Davis

Whitehead on aesthetic feeling, metaphysics and the possibility of art

Michael Halewood

High finishing: On the aesthetics of care/care of aesthetics in social scientific research

Mike Michael

Materiations: How to practice un-bifurcating socio-material practices

Michael Guggenheim

Session 4: Aesthetics & adventures in/of education Wednesday 1st July: 14:00 – 17:00

Chair: Alex Wilkie

Back to the classroom: On aesthetic education

Nicholas Gaskill

Schools of feeling

Melanie Sehgal

Closing Discussion