

A Plea for Aesthetics

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Aesthetics is the philosophical study of art and beauty. The American abstract expressionist artist Barnett Newman once quipped that “aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds”. Once upon a time—when the birds could still read—this statement may have been true. Michelangelo, Shakespeare and J. S. Bach probably had no need for aesthetics. There were no pressing philosophical questions to be decided by them before they could turn to the creation of their masterpieces. But over time the situation has changed. It has become less and less obvious what artists in their respective art forms are supposed to be doing, and, especially, for what purpose they are supposed to be doing it. Beauty? Pleasure? Knowledge? Political awakening? Nothing in particular? As this list suggests, various answers have been proposed, but none has been universally accepted. Moreover, agreement on the purpose of art does not settle how—in what medium, genre, or style—that purpose ought to be achieved. Clearly, artists cannot avoid answering such questions. They are of immediate practical relevance. In this respect, art and science seem to be in a different situation. Philosophers of science also debate the purpose of science—truth or predictive success?—but scientists, for the most part, can ignore this debate because the options are sufficiently similar to each other to have no immediate practical relevance. By contrast, artists either struggle to find answers to the aforementioned questions, or they have to take answers for granted. Either way, they make themselves vulnerable to philosophical criticism. One might disagree, and think that it is simply up to artists to choose a purpose for their work, as well as a means of achieving it. But that is to assume that the choice is indifferent, in other words, that the options are equally good. And that is a controversial, philosophical assumption. Think, for example, of how G. E. Lessing, Friedrich Nietzsche, Eduard Hanslick, Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg, and Roger Scruton have all argued for or against a certain way of practicing art. In other words, artists cannot avoid making philosophical assumptions. These assumptions change, of course, and so form part of the history of art. Even the practices of curating and conserving art are based on substantive philosophical assumptions that can, and have been, questioned; for example, assumptions regarding the meaning and the persistence [survival] conditions of works of art. To add one local example: a recent exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of Art (“A Sense of Place: from Turner to Hockney”) organized one of its rooms around the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. This distinction owes its clearest and most influential statement to two 18th century philosophers: Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. For all of these reasons, I would say that, nowadays at least, aesthetics is for the artist (and the art historian and the art curator) what birds are for the ornithologist: something to be studied.