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Aesthetics into the Twenty-first Century

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1.

The question posed for this issue of *Filozofski vestnik*, “The Revival of Aesthetics,” concerns the reappearance of aesthetics as an important theoretical realm in the international and various national discussions. Major societal shifts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries now require that aesthetics become more engaged in the world beyond the narrow corridors of the academy. In the past, philosopher aestheticians mainly have been drawn to aspects of art, or the experience of art, as seen through metaphysical, epistemological, linguistic, or phenomenological lenses. Metaphysics leads us to questions concerning the nature of art itself, and to the nature of aesthetic properties. Epistemology focuses on questions of interpretation and evaluation of art and the experiences that art provides. Linguistic studies focus on the arts as forms of symbolism with language-like features, yet distinct from other forms of symbolism. Phenomenology examines the inner experiences that an artist or a perceiver, respectively, might undergo in the processes of making or responding to a work of art. A lesser number of aestheticians, beginning with Plato and extending to the present, also have considered questions relating to the societal roles that art might play in a constructive re-shaping of, or in some instances, endangering the well being of society. There is still important work being done in all of these areas by philosophers throughout the Academy in the West, as well as throughout other parts of the world. In some cultures, philosophical reflections on art are closely tied to the religious traditions as, for example, Buddhism in China or India.

Theoretical issues extending beyond the concerns of Western philosophers with beauty and traditional art forms reinforce the need for this timely discussion. Increasingly, today, aesthetics is drawn to consider the roles of

art in society. What are its roles in reference to political, economic and other institutional considerations? Not the least of interest are the museums and other cultural institutions that are central to the dissemination of art to the people. There is a growing literature on the museum as well as on public art.¹ Additional factors concerning how we are to view aesthetics today include the emergence of popular arts and culture as well as environmental aesthetics, and gender issues as they bear on the production and interpretation of art. The changes in the popular arts and culture, the invention of new art forms in the media arts, the increasing politicization of art as a means of social change, and hegemonic globalization of once remote and distinct cultures that threaten indigenous artistic forms are among the matters that require a rethinking of the current status of aesthetics.

Given these important cultural changes, the question is how do they affect our understanding of what constitutes the domain of aesthetics? An empirical survey worldwide would surely reveal a range of practices involving different objectives and different assumptions concerning the practice of aesthetics today. World Congresses of the International Association for Aesthetics offer a small sampling of the differences among Western and Eastern scholars who are at least marginally identified with the practice of aesthetics. Even a small selection of this sort reveals significant differences in how aesthetics is viewed. A sampling of papers from the meetings of a national society such as the American Society for Aesthetics or the Chinese Society for Aesthetics, for example, would perhaps narrow the field somewhat. However, the variety of topics on a typical meeting agenda at a national society, unless intentionally manipulated to exclude or hide the differences in practice, would support the claim that there is no common agreement on what constitutes the proper domain of aesthetics today.

Is this diversity a positive boon for aesthetics or a signal of its demise? I will argue that expansion of the concept of aesthetics to accommodate the diversity among the various viewpoints in aesthetics and cultural changes affecting the practice of the arts reflects a healthy state both for aesthetics and for the arts. To hang onto narrow or fixed definitions of aesthetics based merely on the history of the field, or the history of past art, would lead to a state of obsolescence for the field. The real danger for aesthetics is that it fails to keep in touch with the evolving developments in the arts and the expanding field

¹ Nelson Goodman, "The End of the Museum," in *Of Mind and other Matters* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1984), Hilde Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently* (Lanham et al: Altamira Press, 2006) and Hugh H. Genoways, *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham et al: Altamira Press, 2006).

of interests attached to them. Of course, new development in aesthetics, or in the arts for that matter, do not bode well for those who hold to a narrow understanding of aesthetics based on traditional issues limited to the creation of art, the nature and identity of the aesthetic or art object, or the appreciation of art. Those philosophers who choose to define aesthetics narrowly in terms of the past historical views or twentieth century Analytic or Continental or Social Realist methodologies, for example, may find the current developments troubling, even threatening and may choose to ignore or exclude many important developments that might otherwise expand and enrich the field of aesthetics.

The new concerns facing aestheticians in the twentieth century require serious attention if the discipline is to maintain continued viability as an intellectual discipline. Just as art changes as cultures develop, so must aesthetics. In support of this view is a personal account of evolving engagement with aesthetics and the factors that led to embracing change and a plurality of practices as essential to the health of aesthetic today. A brief examination the state of aesthetics as it has evolved in the American Society for aesthetics since its inception in the 1940s will follow. These two lines of development, one idiosyncratic and personal, and the other focusing on the aims and outcomes of one prominent national society, will perhaps offer some useful background for understanding the current state of aesthetics and the problems confronting the discipline today. Following these considerations will be a look at some of the main concerns reflected the social and political aesthetics and the expansion of aesthetics to include the popular arts which again challenges aesthetics to move beyond its historic boundaries.²

2.

Classical views on art anchored mainly in the writings of Plato and Hegel formed the basis for my interest in aesthetics. Plato and Hegel saw the

² In the present context, I will treat aesthetics and the philosophy of art as interchangeable for reference to the revival of aesthetics today. I subscribe to the view that the reflections of philosophers' and other writers on the arts, whether ancient or more recent, can be considered under either the heading of philosophy of art or aesthetics without confusion or loss of meaning. Hence I reject the view that aesthetics is an invention of Eighteenth Century European philosophers based on a concept of art that may have emerged during that period. Such a view of art and aesthetics would seem to lack credibility in age of globalization where the arts and theories of art from many cultures ancient and modern must come together in pursuit of a deeper understanding of art and its cultural roles from many diverse cultures. See Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art* (Malden, Mass., Oxford, England, 2006), pp. 52, 53, for a recent note on this matter.

importance of the arts as a core element of human experience. Even when viewing the arts with suspicion, whether literally or in jest, Plato does not fail to grasp their importance in developing the mind and body of the citizens. Hegel understands the arts as a key element in defining each stage of history, and values the arts as one of the highest modes of human understanding. Their broad visions for the arts in reference to society at large helped to establish the necessity for philosophers to address the arts as a central feature of a good society.

The originality, imagination and subtlety of argument brought to the subject by Kant warrants his place of high regard in aesthetics; yet his efforts to isolate the aesthetic from other dimensions of life remain troubling. Kant too recognized the importance of the arts, but chose to define narrowly the domain of aesthetics as a particular type of epistemic experience based on the interplay of the human imagination with the fine arts. In contrast to Kant's efforts in this direction, John Dewey's pragmatic insistence on linking the arts and the experience of the arts to the rest of human experience provided an important antidote to the Kantian lapse.

Among aestheticians working in the twentieth century, two have been most influential: Rudolf Arnheim, who approached aesthetics and the arts from a grounding his expressionist theory of artistic creation and communication in Gestalt psychology, and Nelson Goodman, whose theory of artistic symbols gave new life to late twentieth century aesthetics. Both of these writers provided insights into the importance of the arts as a rich source of human understanding. In addition to their theoretical contributions, Arnheim and Goodman shared a deep concern for examining the connections between their theories, the particular art forms, and the role of the arts in the cognitive and emotive development. Arnheim's studies on perceptual experience and visual thinking provided critical insight into how the arts function in human experience.³ Beginning with his pioneering studies on film aesthetics in the 1930s, Arnheim's writings include important contributions on the aesthetics of virtually all of the arts including the visual arts, sculpture, dance, music, poetry, photography and architecture. Similarly, Arnheim's aesthetic theories helped shape the directions of childhood education in the arts in the twentieth century.

Goodman placed the arts alongside the sciences and other critical forms of human symbolism, including ordinary language and alternative

³ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1954). See also, Rudolf Arnheim, *New Essays on the Psychology of Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1986).

formal languages, as equally viable means of human understanding.⁴ Unlike most practicing philosophers-aestheticians, Goodman applied his theories and beliefs in the practical realms of performance and arts education. His pioneering efforts in arts education led to the founding of Project Zero at Harvard, a research project in arts education that developed a new model for arts education based on Goodman's theory of symbols in the various arts. Project Zero influenced leading theorists and practitioners of arts education to rethink their approach to this field. Goodman's ideas for activating art through the museum and the dance studio, demonstrated his commitment to applying aesthetic theory beyond the circle of academic readers. Goodman went even further in linking aesthetics to practice in his remarkable artistic collaboration in the creation of a multi-media performance work, *Hockey Seen: A Nightmare in Three Periods and Sudden Death*.⁵ He provided the concept and artistic direction for this work in conjunction with a visual artist, choreographer, composer, videographer, mask maker and a national television system.

Apart from the influences from philosophers, active participation in arts projects involving curating exhibitions, art criticism, arts education, art and social change, performance art events, and as a museum director have contributed substantially to my approach to aesthetics. Experiences as a curator and critic provided access to living artists and resulted in insight into the creation and production of art in the various media. Of particular interest are painting and sculpture, photography, and video art, and related media arts. Involvement with dance and performance art as a critic and producer, as well as occasional performer in avant garde theater projects, facilitated understanding of aesthetics issues pertaining to dance, performance art, and media arts. Opportunities as a museum director resulted in insight into the societal roles of art as it functions in the art world of exhibitions, collectors, galleries, and the auctions. Together, these experiences offer a strong case

⁴ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Company Inc., 1968).

⁵ Nelson Goodman conceived and produced *Hockey Seen: A Nightmare in Three Periods and Sudden Death*, performed in Boston, 1972, Philadelphia, 1973, and in Knoke-Heist, Belgium (1980) where it was also produced for Belgian National Television. Goodman provided the concept and directed the work. Visual artist Katharine Sturgis, choreographer Martha Armstrong Gray, composer John Adams, videographer Gerd Stern were collaborators in the project. The documentation for *Hockey Seen* including videos, concept statements and correspondence, masks, costumes, is in the collection of the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA. See the catalogue, Curtis L. Carter, *Hockey Seen: A Nightmare in Three Periods and Sudden Death: A Tribute to Nelson Goodman* (Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, Milwaukee, 2006).

for aesthetician to pay close attention to contemporary practice in the studio and in the major arts institutions of society as well as to art history.

3.

The history of aesthetics in the United States during the twentieth century and beyond is based more on disagreements than agreement on a common foundation or practice.⁶ During the first half of the twentieth century, aesthetics moved gradually away from being grounded in the metaphysics and epistemology of the previous centuries. One principal area of disagreement concerns the place of aesthetics among the agreed upon branches of philosophy. Aesthetics' relation to philosophy remains a matter of "persistent disagreement" as noted by Thomas Munro, a founding organizer of the American Society for Aesthetics.⁷ The establishment of the American Society for Aesthetics between 1939 and 1943 under the leadership of German born Felix Gatz, Thomas Munro, and others provided institutional standing for aesthetics independently of the main philosophical institutions. Munro, who was a student of John Dewey, consolidated the efforts and served as president during the formative years of the Society.

The Society's acquisition of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in 1945 with Munro as editor provided a key vehicle for publications in aesthetics.

None of this was accomplished without struggle between the competing factions representing different ideas on the methodologies and subject matter of aesthetics. The mix of participants included philosophers (C. J. Ducasse), psychologists (Rudolf Arnheim), teachers of literature, practicing

⁶ The main sources for this discussion of the American Society for Aesthetics are "Aesthetics Past and Present: A Commemorative Issue Celebrating 50 Years of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and the American Society for Aesthetics," guest editor Lydia Goehr, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51:2 (1993) and observations during my ten years as Secretary Treasurer of the ASA from 1995 to 2006. Also, editors' comments by John Fisher and Monroe Beardsley, editor and book editor of the *Journal* 38:5 (1980), pp. 235–237.

⁷ Thomas Munro, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 4:3 (1946), pp. 180, 183. The ASA was initially founded in April, 1939 at the first American Congress for Aesthetics in Scranton, Pennsylvania and was modeled after European congresses in 1913 in Germany and in 1937 in Paris. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* was initially founded by Dagobert Runes in 1941 as an independent project and became the official journal of ASA in 1945. See Lydia Goehr, "Institutionalization of a Discipline: A Retrospective of The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism and the American Society for Aesthetics, 1939–1992," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51:2 (Spring 1993), pp. 103–107.

artists in various fields points to the interdisciplinary character of the ASA in its formative years. Artists including the choreographer Martha Graham, composer Arnold Schoenberg, photographer Ansel Adams, painter Salvador Dali, conductor Leopold Stokowski, architect Erich Mendelsohn, and art historian E. H. Gombrich, attended meetings and gave papers at ASA meetings in the early days.⁸

As late as 1957, Munro characterized the scope of the *JAAC* as covering “an unusually broad field consisting of philosophic, scientific, and other theoretical studies of the arts” but also principles and problems in criticism.⁹ Munro’s presidential address of 1944 advocated an empirical-inductive approach to aesthetics calling for

a clearheaded subject, not given over to vaporous rhapsodies about beauty, but based on detailed observation and analysis of specific works of art; making use of all relevant scientific techniques, but adapting them to the unique requirements of aesthetic phenomena.¹⁰

Munro thus affirmed the move away from metaphysical views of the philosophy of art and/or aesthetics to embrace alternative empirical methodologies.

Despite these interdisciplinary aims of the early founders of the American Society for Aesthetics, the practice of aesthetics in the United States subsequently became increasingly dependent upon philosophy. The main practitioners were based in university departments of philosophy, and the opportunities for publication were mainly available in publications related to philosophy. As Lydia Goehr wrote in 1993,

Tracing the evolution of the ASA and the *JAAC* shows a movement away the original interdisciplinary ambitions [...] to aesthetics as a fully dependent part of the philosophical enterprise. [...] Not only did American aesthetics become increasingly the exclusive property of philosophers, but it found itself largely taken over in the mainstream by philosophers working within [...] the Anglo-American tradition.¹¹

Aestheticians who preferred a more inclusive participation expressed

⁸ Goehr, pp. 103, 107, 108.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁰ Quoted in John Fisher, “Editorial,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37:3 (Spring 1980), p. 235.

¹¹ Goehr, p. 102.

their dissatisfaction to a field increasingly dominated by Anglo-American analytic aesthetics, whose approach to aesthetics consisted mainly of efforts to clarify the beliefs, concepts, terms, and logic used in discussing art through language analysis. Concerns over the domination of aesthetics by proponents of analytic aesthetics were to little avail as the conference programs and journal publications continued to reflect a preference for Anglo-American analytic aesthetics. Membership and interest in the ASA and *JAAC* subscriptions fluctuated in accordance with the degree of dissatisfaction of the members and others interested in aesthetics.

In a joint editorial published in the Spring 1980 issue of the *JAAC*, John Fisher, editor and Monroe Beardsley, book editor, attempted to address the dissent in a series of editorials and to explain their view of aesthetics as reflected in the choice of articles published in the *JAAC*. Fisher and Beardsley wrote: Aesthetics “is a theoretical activity, seeking general, systematic, fundamental truths.”¹² “Aesthetics must seek and maintain the most intimate relations with artists, critics, teachers, psychologists, sociologists and the rest; but aesthetics is not art creation, not criticism, not teaching, not psychology, not sociology...”¹³

Despite the efforts of the editors of *JAAC* to define what constitutes aesthetics as theory based on generalization, the patterns have continued to shift. Earlier, in 1959, J. A. Passmore’s essay, “The Dreariness of Aesthetics,” had sounded a warning that all was not well with respect to aesthetic theorizing. As an alternative to grand-style theory-making, Passmore recommended “an intensive special study of the separate arts.”¹⁴ (In support of this investigation of the particular arts, Nelson Goodman developed his own aesthetics based on a close examination of similarities and differences the types of symbolism that distinguished one art from another.)¹⁵

A statement of Peter Kivy in the fiftieth anniversary volume of the *JAAC* in 1993 echoes Passmore’s views. “We can no longer hover above our subject matter like Gods from machines, bestowing theory upon a practice in sublime and sometimes even boastful ignorance of what takes place in the dirt and mess of the workshop.”¹⁶ Rather, “progress in aesthetics is to be made not by theorizing in the grand manner, but by careful and imaginative philo-

¹² Fisher and Beardsley, p. 236.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ J. A. Passmore, “The Dreariness of Aesthetics,” in William Elton (ed.), *Aesthetics and Language*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959), p. 55.

¹⁵ Goodman, *Languages of Art*.

¹⁶ Peter Kivy, “Differences,” *JAAC* 51:2 (Spring 1993), p. 131.

sophical scrutiny of the individual arts and their individual problems...¹⁷ The direction cited by Passmore and revisited by Kivy in 1993 is indicative of yet another refocusing of interests among American aestheticians in the 1990s and beyond. Kivy chose music to develop his own investigations while Noel Carroll chose film and others pursued architecture, dance, or photography.

Even the debate over possible dreariness of aesthetics has generated further controversy. Joseph Margolis, a leading American aesthete, expressed sympathy with Passmore's general observation concerning the dreariness of aesthetics. Yet he challenges Passmore's – and also Kivy's – solution to the problem, which was to focus on the investigation of the particular arts. Margolis argued, "I suggest that Passmore was ultimately wrong about the cause of the dreariness of aesthetics. It is *not* due to generalizations made over all the arts at once, as opposed to generalizations made over literature or music or sculpture."¹⁸ According to Margolis, the alleged dreariness in aesthetics results from a failure to recognize that aesthetic thinking is contingent on its historical context. Failure to recognize the historical nature of theorizing and the changing conditions under which the creation of art and our reflections on it take place is the reason for dreariness in aesthetics. According to Margolis, "The trick is to *say* what, at the present time the most promising lines of theorizing regarding the arts are, as well as how they connect aesthetics to the stronger currents of the day and against a tired canon."¹⁹ The mistake, says Margolis, is to assume that the main themes of aesthetics or the philosophy of art have already been established and that the task for today is to follow in the path of one or another (for example, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, or Hegel) with minor adjustments in the already existing canon. Margolis's solution leaves open the field for constantly evolving and changing perspectives in aesthetics representing the best thinking of the age in the context of social, cultural and historical changes.

4.

Leaving the Anglo-American developments, it is useful to consider an alternative trend consisting of social and political aesthetics. The Anglo-American paradigm can be said to derive from a Kantian base that presumes

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁸ Joseph Margolis, "Exorcising the Dreariness of Aesthetics," *JAAC* 51:2 (Spring 1993), p. 134.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

the independence of art from political interference and that aesthetic values are more or less independent of moral, religious and political values.²⁰ In contrast, social-political aesthetics derives from roots in G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx. Hegel's views on art, both in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, and in his philosophy of history, point to an aesthetics based on the role of the arts in culture and history. Marx, together with his followers including Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse and, more recently, Terry Eagleton, have approached the development of aesthetics from the perspective of the social and political implications of art in culture and history.

In contrast to the assumptions of a Kantian paradigm, where art is considered an intrinsically worthy enterprise and is valued for the pleasure and understanding that it provides, a social-political view of art links the art to changing social and political conditions. Ideology, political action, and social value replace appreciation of the formal and expressive qualities of art as the core of aesthetics.²¹ In extreme cases, social-political understanding of aesthetics has led to the view that the state may, or even should, regulate practices in the arts and corresponding aesthetic theory. Counter to a totalitarian understanding of the social and political role of art, Herbert Marcuse advances the notion that art may function as a symbol of resistance or revolt against the tyrannies of a totalitarian state.²² Marcuse understands the aesthetic as "the quality of the productive-creative process in an environment of freedom."²³

An environment where freedom and material and intellectual resources are joined, is necessary for the formation of a free society. Hence, art can no longer be thought of merely as an end in itself apart from political and social aims. Similarly, aesthetics must address the role of art beyond the narrow

²⁰ The division between aesthetics and politics, especially in the United States, has been increasingly encroached as academic aestheticians come to terms with the real world questions raised by government challenges to artistic expression with respect to depictions of sexuality, obscenity and public decency and the challenges of feminist theorists to the canons of aesthetics. See Mary Devereaux, "Protected Space: Politics, Censorship, and the Arts," *JAAC* 51:2 (Spring 1993), pp. 207–215.

²¹ The art critic Robert Pincus-Witten has noted that "The values promoted by Abstract Expressionism, the most formative of modern American aesthetic values, perceived social concerns as deleterious to the creation of an abstract visual art." Robert Pincus-Witten, "Keith R Us," in Elizabeth Sussman, *Keith Haring* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1997), p. 258. The dominant role of Abstract Expressionism in art coincides with the ascendancy of Anglo-American analytic aesthetics during the same period.

²² Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 81. See also Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 24–28.

²³ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 24.

spheres of art production and interpretation that pays attention only to its formal and expressive features.

Not all writers on social-political aesthetics agree that art can be viewed simply as a means for economic or political ends. Writing in the 1920s, Georg Lukács criticizes both bourgeois capitalist society and the Soviet Union for their debasement of the conditions necessary for the production of art. He argues, for example, that in a society where cultural production (including art) functions as mere commodity, or as reinforcement for state policies, the possibility of culture ceases.

Just as a man's independence from the worries of substance, that is the free use of his powers as an end in itself, is the human and social precondition for cultures, so all that culture produces can possess real cultural value only *when it is valuable for itself*.²⁴

Here Lukács appears to invoke Kant's notion that art possesses intrinsic value. Yet he repudiates the "art for art's sake" approach to aesthetics as an "aesthetic expression of the desperation of the bourgeoisie."²⁵ Art's intrinsic value is the result of the artist's labor and is conditioned by the artist's individual qualities. Accordingly, art's social and political usefulness is thus grounded in the individual creativity action of the artist producer.

The role of art in the postsocialist societies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and China during the 1980s and 1990s has given rise to a particular national-regional development in social-political aesthetics. This movement centers on the place of art in socialist and post-socialist countries during this period. Aleš Erjavec has used the term postsocialism to refer to the heirs of nations emerging from Socialist and Communist nations.²⁶ The resulting art and aesthetics embraces themes from the Western *Avant Garde* of the early twentieth century and also postmodernism of the late twentieth century. In this context, *Avant Garde* embraces social and political changes as well as changes in the arts. In contrast to social and political concerns of aesthetics in the early twentieth century, where the main effort was to free art and aesthetics from the effects of capitalism, the postsocialist movement of the late

²⁴ Georg Lukács, "The Old Culture and the New Culture," *Télos*, No. 5 (Spring 1970), pp. 22, 23. "The Old Culture and the New Culture" was first published in *Kommunismus* 1:43 (November 7, 1920), pp. 1538–49. See also Georg Lukács, "L'Art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung," *Die Tat* 18:3 (June 1926).

²⁵ Paul Breines, "Notes on Georg Lukacs' 'The Old Culture and the New Culture,'" *Télos*, No. 5 (Spring 1970), p. 17.

²⁶ Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003).

twentieth century reflects a shift from communist and socialist ideologies toward capitalism. Postmodern influences from exposure to Western artists allowed for syncretization of elements of international art practices together with arts of the respective national cultures.

In the Soviet Union, for example, the relation between power and art became the main theme of art and aesthetics with the result that aesthetics is closely linked to political power. In a politicized context such as that of the Soviet state, where Socialist Realist aesthetics prevailed, an official artist's destiny was to give visible form to the aesthetic sensibilities intended to represent the state's vision for the people as a whole. Unofficial artists cut off from the museums, exhibitions, and publications, and with limited access to developments in Western art, developed their own aesthetics of resistance parallel to official Social Realist art. Their aim was to create their own version of politicized critical art known as "Sots Art." This art was intended to examine every day life and expose the hidden reality behind the façade of the Soviet state ideology.²⁷ In contrast to the romantic notion of art based on the inner life of the artist, unofficial artists focused on external societal concerns. Their aim was to generate sufficient political impact to challenge official art and perhaps alter existing social and political life.

In Slovenia especially, the postsocialist artists already had extensive contact with Western modern and postmodern aesthetics.²⁸ There, artists' groups used postmodern eclecticism to advance democratization of their society. By adopting Postmodern strategies incorporating folk, popular and high art, the artists transformed art into a secondary discourse that served as a political means to critique static socialist culture.

Underlying these developments are assumptions taken from Marxist theory that art functions in tandem with politics in the structure of socialist and communist states prior to, and during their transformation into postsocialist societies. The social and political role of aesthetics and attending art practices that transpired in the Communist and socialist cultures, and in their postsocialist successors, is unparalleled in the Western nations of Europe and the Americas.²⁹ Here, aesthetics and the attending arts shifted

²⁷ Boris Groys, "The Other Gaze: Russian Unofficial Art's View of the Soviet World," in Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism*, translated from the German by Paul Reitter, pp. 55–89.

²⁸ Aleš Erjavec, "Neue Slowenische Kunst – New Slovenian Art: Slovenia, Yugoslavia, Self-Management, and the 1980s," in Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism*, pp. 135–174.

²⁹ It can be argued, of course, that the official arts in Western nations function to reinforce the dominant social and political values, but there is no parallel to the place given the arts in the postsocialist cultures of the late twentieth century. Unparalleled is

from an agent subservient to the prevailing political ideology and its attending values to an instrument of revolution intended to hasten the demise of totalitarian political practices.

5.

With the emergence of postmodern art practices and aesthetics, the lines dividing fine art and popular culture tend to dissolve, and popular culture has become an increasingly important topic for aesthetics. Prior to this development, the popular arts were largely neglected by aestheticians. In recent times, however, the popular arts, where transitoriness and reproducibility takes precedence over uniqueness and permanence in cultural production, have increasingly attracted the attention of major aestheticians. The Americans Noel Carroll, Richard Shusterman, and Ted Cohen are among those who have given serious attention to the aesthetics of popular culture.

In taking on popular arts and culture, aesthetics extends its range to include rock and rap music, popular media arts including television soap operas and the Simpsons, comic books, food, glamour, and the architecture of Las Vegas. Common to all of these enterprises is the characteristic of being market driven commodities, and mainly indifferent to social divisions based on class, gender, or race. In contrast to the aesthetics of traditional fine arts, which can be “aesthetically aloof” from everyday life, the aesthetics of popular arts and culture must address themes that appeal to the broad range of interests and knowledge represented in the common interests of the population as a whole.

Aesthetics of popular arts invites a number of question for its development. At the core of the discussion of popular arts is understanding how the term popular art is being used. Noel Carroll argues that popular art is an historical term that refers to the art of the common people. Folk art enjoyed by large numbers of common people is one type of popular art found in many previous societies. Carroll introduces the term mass art to refer to the historically specific arts accessible only after the invention of mass media technologies. Mass art is intended for mass consumption and embraces much of contemporary popular arts, including movies, photography, television, rock and roll recordings, video, the internet.³⁰

the direct involvement of artists and the arts in the struggle for political change evident in the postsocialist nations.

³⁰ Noel Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 184 ff. See also Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*

Attention to the popular arts has generated a range of questions of interest to aestheticians. For example, in his essay, “Liking What’s Good: Why Should We?” philosopher Ted Cohen asks whether there are sustainable reasons for preferring fine arts to popular arts, or for establishing a means to rank one as preferable to the other.³¹ Cohen’s answer is that no explanation or argument can explain differences or agreement in aesthetic preferences. Hence, it is not possible to show why one should prefer the fine arts over the popular arts apart from the fact that differences in the objects and the persons attending them generate different interest groups. Addressing a related issue, Carroll attempts show that the popularity of art is grounded in its ability to engage the emotions.³² According to Carroll,

This is particularly obvious with popular fictions – whether literary or visual; whether novels, short stories, plays, films, comic books, or graphic novels; whether a song or an entire musical; or whether still photos, sculptural ensembles, radio broadcasts, or TV shows.³³

Carroll examines the claims of emotional involvement with the popular arts with reference to the concepts of identification, simulation, sympathy, and mirror reflexes.

Perhaps the most vigorous account of aesthetics of the popular arts is found in the writings of Richard Shusterman. Shusterman notes that popular art remains very unpopular with aestheticians who often presume its aesthetic worthlessness. He challenges the arguments against the worthlessness of popular art. These might include, “allegations of its spurious satisfactions, its corrupt passivity, its mindless shallowness, its lack of creativity, autonomy and form.”³⁴ Shusterman develops his pragmatist arguments to show that there is no clear distinction between popular art and high art by arguing that “a given work can function either as popular or as high art depending on how it is interpreted and appropriated by the public.”³⁵ He develops his case with full chapters devoted to “The Fine Art of Rap,” “Affect and Authenticity in

(New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 10, and William Irwin and Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture* (Lanham et al: Rowan and Littlefield, 2007).

³¹ Ted Cohen, “Liking What is Good: Why Should We?” in Irwin and Gracia, pp. 117–130.

³² Noel Carroll, “On the Ties That Bind: Characters, the Emotions, and Popular Fictions,” in Irwin and Gracia, pp. 89–116.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³⁴ Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 7 ff.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Country Musicals,” and “Reflections in Berlin,” recounting his experiences of popular culture in the urban setting of contemporary Berlin.

6.

The list of possibilities for practicing aestheticians cited here is not inclusive, but only illustrative of some major approaches to aesthetics. Other worthy approaches would include studies in phenomenological aesthetics, feminist aesthetics and aesthetics based on the cognitive sciences. This diversity only supports the conclusion that the terms aesthetics and philosophy of art must remain open and inclusive. This conclusion should not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the history of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. In the American Society for Aesthetics, for example, it was the differences among practicing aestheticians that generated the energy to create the Society and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. It is only when a single interest group attempts to employ hegemonic tactics to dominate and exclude differing views that divisiveness occurs and threatens the well-being of the profession. Similar problems arise when proponents of a particular social-political ideology attempt to exclude opposing views.

In concluding I offer these points:

1. From the previous discussion, there is no indication of the possibility of a single understanding of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. It is essential thus for the well-being of aesthetics and philosophy of art that the practitioners are free to pursue their interests in harmony with differing views.
2. Any effort to limit aesthetics to a particular time period (e.g. beginning only in Europe in the eighteenth century) marginalizes and unnecessarily limits the field by excluding the contributions of other ancient and contemporary cultures.
3. Differences in the practice of aesthetics expands the range of interest in aesthetics as an academic discipline and expands the range of issues and the means of addressing these issues.
4. Aesthetics is enriched by its connections to other academic disciplines such as philosophy, art history, literature, psychology, anthropology and others.
5. Knowledge of the historical and contemporary arts provides essential information for developing understanding in aesthetics.