



09.19.2014
Free Parking Space

THOUGHTS ON ART IN LIFE

The word "aesthetic" has a long and complicated history and it has been used to mean many things. But a simple way of thinking about it would be to say that it refers to the realm of the visual, specifically in relation to art. It might also involve some sort of beauty. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the term became associated with "art for art's sake" and "formalism." The aesthetic amounted to the visual effects of an image that operated independently, or almost independently, of recognisable subject matter – the "purely visual" impact of colour, line and shape. The English critic Roger Fry said that if you saw a bull in a field, you could appreciate it aesthetically if you could put aside any practical concerns, such as fears of being gored by the bull – and perhaps if you put aside any awareness that it was a bull at all. But this is bull, really. Even if the bull is not actual but instead a picture, we will tend to read the image through our knowledge of bulls, or the colours, lines and shapes will carry with them traces of "bullness." So the word "aesthetic" fell out of fashion around the same time that the ascendancy of modernist abstraction began to wane. When "life" got itself caught up in art again, looking at things aesthetically began to seem beside the point.

Certainly the word "aesthetic" seems to have little meaning when applied to performative, participatory kinds of art-making. Indeed, it was precisely the point of this approach to art, when it began to develop in the 1960s, to overturn the emphasis on a putatively passive mode of looking in the experience of "traditional" forms of art. When art moved beyond its concern with the material properties of historically favoured media, it suddenly became apparent that "art" did or could encompass a much fuller range of experiences, and that "visuality" had previously been blindly privileged.

Yet people still made, recognised and thought about "art," even if they were involved with objects and actions that had more in common with the stuff of everyday life than with stuff previously associated with art – that were commensurate with the very materials of things in the world and completely at odds with the materials and techniques that conventionally conjured up the imaginative world, the world that might produce an aesthetic experience. In other words, the prior history of artworks and their attendant modes of experience colours any slice of "life" that is singled out, played out and analysed in a way that is detached from its ordinary, unselfconscious manifestations. Obviously in rejecting the aesthetic-ness of art – trying to negate it – you necessarily invoke and thereby affirm it, but even simply ignoring it is

strategic and, within the necessary context of art, constitutes an attitude towards the aesthetic. But we need a fuller, richer sense of the word – one that includes any possible or potential feeling or sensation that is experienced with the kind of heightened awareness or impact automatically acquired when you see or do things in a way that deliberately frees them of their customary, instrumental roles, rules and patterns of behaviour. The aesthetic has always been about this limited, provisional freedom within life.

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