

What is Social Aesthetics?

By Peter Blouw

As a branch of philosophy concerned with the value and meaning of artworks, aesthetics has traditionally focused upon the evaluation of self-contained objects such as paintings, sculptures, and poems. Early debates in the field considered whether or not the beauty of such art objects is universal (eg. Baumgarten, Kant, Hume). More recent debates began to inspect the role of social, cultural, and economic conditions in regulating judgments of aesthetic value (eg. Bourdieu, Eagleton), and have evolved to consider not just the tangible products of artistic creativity, but also the processes involved in their production and reception (eg. Born). The term “social aesthetics” is reflective of this shift of attention towards process, and is generally understood to posit the evaluation of artistic practices in reference to the social relations that they initiate. Or to put it another way, social aesthetics is the study of art practices in terms of the forms of communication that they prompt, but it also encompasses the study of human social interactions as aesthetic phenomena.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the concept of social aesthetics originated. In the early twentieth century, the philosopher John Dewey claimed that art products have aesthetic significance due to the experiences they evoke over time (Leddy), and thereby provided an early account of art in process-oriented terms that are amenable to social analysis. Dewey also claimed that “acts of social intercourse are works of art” due to their requisite creativity and temporality (qtd. in Sawyer 155), but he did not use the term

social aesthetics or consider in detail the ways in which certain forms of sociability are immanent in artistic practices.

Art movements such as Surrealism and that of Situationist International have also preceded the emergence of social aesthetics. The surrealists developed the literary technique of automatic writing, which involved artists attempting to write without conscious intentions in an effort to “create transparent, total communication” (Rasmussen 371). More generally, the purpose of automatic writing was to “change life” by revealing a “paradoxical community where communication takes place when no one expresses [themselves]” (380, 372), and the practice accordingly draws much of its significance from the form of sociability it intends to create. The situationists, led by the intellectuals Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, were an active political organization in Europe during the mid-twentieth century primarily committed to the advocacy of anti-capitalist forms of political organization.¹ Their attitudes toward art were central to their political commitments, but differed sharply from those of the surrealists: Debord and his followers viewed conventional art as an inertial force that reflected its social context, and argued that its abolition “made possible a life of play, freedom, and community” (383). Rather than focusing on the interpretation of art and events more generally, the situationists were concerned with “*creating* situations, as opposed to passively recognizing them in academic or other separate terms” (“Questionnaire,” original emphasis). But as with the surrealists, social forms were a focus of the situationists’ creative practice, and so the collective point to be drawn from these brief descriptions is that a consideration of the links between the social and the aesthetic has a long-standing history amongst artists as

well as academics.

More recently, in the mid-1990's, gallery curator Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term "relational aesthetics" to frame the understanding of a growing number of visual art installations that solicited audience interaction. Arguing that creative works ought to be "evaluated on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce, or prompt" (qtd. in Downey 270), Bourriaud examines artists such as Rirkrit Tirivaniya, whose installations often revolved around cooking meals for gallery viewers, and Liam Gillick, who created set pieces of everyday objects accompanied by instructions for audience use (Bishop 58-61). The meaning and value of such works, according to Bourriaud, should be defined extrinsically and in terms of the communicative acts and inter-subjective relations they initiate. As such, the similarities between relational notions of artistic value and social aesthetics are plentiful.

What, then, is the difference between social aesthetics and relational aesthetics? Most likely, it is one of scope. Proponents of relational aesthetics have largely restricted their attention to visual art, whereas scholars of social aesthetics have engaged in the analysis of a range of performance practices including musical improvisation (E. Lewis, "Definition"). This distinction also highlights the relevance of social aesthetics to the research goals of the ICASP project. To consider musical improvisation as a model for community building and "ethical dialogue and action" is to analyze an aesthetic practice – collaborative music making – in reference to the social relations that are intrinsic to it (Heble et al.).

Examples of studies drawing on the idea of social aesthetics are accordingly common amongst ICASP researchers. George Lewis, for instance, defines musical improvisation as a “*social location* inhabited by a considerable number of present day musicians, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds and musical practices, who have chosen to make improvisation a part of their musical discourse” (qtd. in Fischlin and Heble 3, emphasis added), and examines more generally the cultural relationship between what he calls “Afrological” and “Eurological” musical paradigms (G. Lewis 131). Jason Stanyek, too, has considered the collaboration between the jazz musicians Chano Pozo and Dizzie Gillespie as an example of music fostering the creation of an intercultural and Pan-African community (103-106), and Eric Lewis has recently discussed the work of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in reference to social aesthetics, claiming that group’s performances “have a social dimension internal to their very status as art practices” (“Paris, August 1969”). Finally, Georgina Born has argued on more theoretical grounds that conceptualizations of cultural production should avoid the “twin poles of formalism or sociological reduction” (225), and instead focus upon the “constellation of simultaneous social, institutional, technological, aesthetic, and discursive forms” that intersect within all cultural practices and products alike (224). In other words, the social and the aesthetic are mutually constitutive, and neither in isolation can explain artistic production.

Overall, then, social aesthetics is a rich and developing field guided by a number of questions crossing disciplines as varied as philosophy, musicology, sociology and cultural studies. The goal of the field is perhaps most easily described as the creation of

work that adequately theorizes the social properties of artistic practices. At a recent conference hosted by the ICASP project, fourteen presentations were given on social aesthetics in relation to practices as varied as Brazilian music, Jazz, performance art, theatre, filmmaking, and the use of social media devices (Heble et al. b). Scholars documented the ways in which these practices and their attendant social relations are situated in relation to a broader cultural context, and examined their political implications. The value of such work is that it has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between art and society, and given the increasing degree to which artistic practices like music making have been associated with political activities such as human rights struggles (eg: Fischlin and Heble), such understanding is highly important. In all, as cultures and societies are increasingly intertwined in an era of globalization, social aesthetics can provide much needed insight into the specific ways in which aesthetic products and processes influence how people communicate with, engage with, and understand one another. And for anyone interested in improving such engagement and understanding within and across societies, the study of social aesthetics accordingly offers a good place to start.

Notes

1. Situationist International was founded in 1957 and dissolved in 1972. It is most well-known for its involvement in fomenting the infamous student and worker strikes of 1968 in France. For more information on the theoretical underpinnings of the Situationist movement, see Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*.

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