Vol. 17 No. 2

DEBATES *in* AESTHETICS

Debates in Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed, open-access journal for articles, interviews and book reviews. The journal's principal aim is to provide the philosophical community with a dedicated venue for debate in aesthetics and the philosophy of art.

BSA BRITISH SOCIETY OF AESTHETICS

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Vol. 17 No. 2
March 2022

Edited by Sarah Kiernan and Claire Anscomb

Published by
The British Society of Aesthetics

Typesetting
Sarah Kiernan and Claire Anscomb

Proofreading
Laura Cadonna

Typeface
The Brill, designed by John Hudson
Avenir, designed by Adrian Frutiger

Cover
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ISSN 2514-6637

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Kiernan and Claire Anscomb

It is our great pleasure to introduce this special issue devoted to the Sixth British Society of Aesthetics Postgraduate Conference, 'Beyond Human: The Aesthetics of Nature and Technology', which was hosted at the University of Kent in February 2020. The aim of the conference was to unite discussions in aesthetics relating to nature and technology – two drivers of enormous changes in our world. In this issue there are two original articles that were presented at the event, which touch on both of these themes. In one, an understanding of our aesthetic constitution is sought through an examination of the relationship between human and nature (Parente), and, in the other, the use of protheses that do not mimic human limbs is explored along with how these affect readings of disability in the context of visual art (Montalti). There is also an interview where Laura Partin discusses the notion of deception in contemporary art with the artist Santiago Sierra.

Filomena Parente's article focuses on the work of the Italian art critic, painter, and philosopher Gillo Dorfles (1910-2018), and discusses his

work on the phenomenological relationship between nature, artifice, and aesthetics. Parente argues in favour of Dorfles' view that the things we perceive to be 'artificial' are really cohesive parts of nature that have been shaped by humanity according to our inherent aesthetic constitution. Moreover, she states that, for Dorfles, it is as much our need for creativity as our need for legacy or mastery over nature that causes us to mould the world around us into the 'artificial' environments that we live in.

The article begins by arguing that the sharp distinction between the 'natural' and the 'artificial' that is widely accepted within contemporary culture is not based on any significant or tangible difference between nature and man-made artefacts but is simply the result of a phenomenological process called 'objectualization'. Parente emphasizes the role of 'objectualization' in the formation of the conceptual distinction between nature and artefact and in the general "shaping of reality" of human experience (2022, 39). She defines 'objectualization' as the "becoming 'object'" of artworks and other items (2022, 42), but states that Dorfles chooses this terminology over the more commonly used 'objectification' to distinguish his position from that of Hegel's. What is more, she asserts that the process of objectualization is also used by people to preserve their distinct identity as subjects and prevent themselves from becoming 'lost' in their natural environment.

The article continues with the claim that the instability between what is perceived as 'natural' and 'unnatural' in man-made objects is best exemplified by works of art. In particular, 'natural' objects (such as tree trunks or beehives) that have been used within works of art or elected as objects of found art seem to present this ambivalence. Moreover, these examples demonstrate how human perception and interpretation can turn something 'natural' into an artefact through the act of objectualization. The article concludes by inviting us to consider the symbolic status of everyday objects, such as Coca-Cola bottles, and the way that

this relates to the manner in which we consider them to be artefacts distinct from nature, but with the spectre of the natural never far from our awareness.

The relationship between aesthetics and artificiality is ripe for intellectual inquiry and Parente's comparison between the two is undeniably intriguing. She has drawn attention to the similarity they share as ways in which the human psyche shapes the world around it, without failing to acknowledge the tension that exists between them. This tension arises from the fact that artefacts are created according to use, whereas our aesthetic relationship with our environment is associated with play rather than function. Parente's article hints at a resolution to this tension, and it would be a salient endeavour to explore this relationship further in future work. Dorfles' work is especially relevant to contemporary technological progress that sees human environments become more 'artificial' than ever – particularly with the increasing prevalence of virtual realities. It is refreshing to hear a perspective that does not demonize technology and exalt what is seen to be natural but instead challenges this very dichotomy as unfounded, at least in its normative assumptions. Such a challenge could be useful for reframing popular opinion of the environmental crisis as something that can be resolved through the use of new technologies rather than an unfeasible "return to nature" (2022, 40).

In her article, Montalti examines the role of aesthetics in challenging conceptions of difference and disability by analysing how non-human traits could be productively associated with disability. To do so, she takes two case studies, Aimee Mullins' role in Matthew Barney's avant-garde film *Cremaster 3* (2002) and Lisa Bufano's choreography in her work *One Breath is an Ocean for a Wooden Heart* (2007), which she performed with the able-bodied dancer Sonsherée Giles. In the former work, Mullins was presented with prostheses that recalled jellyfish tentacles and feline paws, claws, and a tail, while in the latter, Bufano used

table legs that transformed the dancers into a range of furniture and animal-like forms. Montalti draws a parallel between Bufano and Mullins' "merging with alterity" and Donna Haraway's cyborg figures who do not embody fixed identities nor aim at 'wholeness' – they are not exactly hybrids and always "in partial connection with others" (2022, 28).

Nonetheless, Montalti highlights the risk in creating this closeness between disabled bodies and non-human entities - from a sense of uncanniness, the humanity of the subjects may be diminished, as has been seen in the historical treatment of disabled people. As Montalti proposes however, "while the proximity with animals and things does not represent a productive perspective *per se* for disabled people, it can become a critical point of strength when actively chased and crafted *by* them – in our case – in art." (2022, 30) Such performances then, can challenge the notion that bodies are self-contained entities and instead allow audiences to see past stereotypes and find the flexibility of bodies.

While acknowledging that it is difficult to confirm whether such representations result in positive or negative outcomes in the audience, Montalti underscores how "these performances can enrich the imagination about what disabled bodies *can do*; the movements, the embodiment of devices and the aesthetic possibilities in creative contexts, and the ways to inhabit spaces." (2022, 31) Not however, that the aesthetic of these performances offers the same destabilizing potential. As Montalti proposes, Bufano's work, which "started directly from her own experience of disability", is less likely to be subject to "metaphorical exploitation" while Mullins' bodily difference is used to convey the characters liminality and, had Barney got his original wish to have one scene where Mullins appeared without any prostheses, "to embody the transcendence of the body", which entails a process of *othering* (2022, 32). As Montalti elaborates, rather than expressing fixity and vulnerability, Bufano used prosthesis in her performance to display flexibility and

challenge bodily normativity, while her work can also produce a critical view on the socio-economic situation of disabled people.

Montalti concludes her article encouraging further exploration into these topics by highlighting that this work shows the "primary role of aesthetics" in re-working the contours of difference and disability (2022, 33). Certainly, Montalti has established this in relation to the deployment, in artistic contexts, of prostheses that associate non-human traits with disability, but we might wonder if Montalti is also advocating for a broader claim here in relation to the place of aesthetics in challenging these narratives more generally and, if so, whether we can grant such a claim? Consider for instance, domains where practicalities tend to supersede aesthetics. For example, recently Mission Astro Access flew twelve disabled ambassadors to experience zero-gravity with the view to looking at ways to cater to inclusive space travel.[1] As it has been highlighted, this kind of pragmatic mission not only benefits disabled individuals, but also the able-bodied, as the alternative ways that the former operate suggest or require solutions that are useful for dealing with problems faced by all kinds of bodies in space, such as finding optimal ways of perceiving information (via tactile interventions at times when it may be difficult to read via sight, for instance) in various circumstances. Such cases also then, enrich the imagination about what disabled bodies can do.

Nonetheless, rather than diminishing the role of the aesthetic, exploring such cases may also allow us to helpfully explore the reaches of this realm. Consider, for instance, the experience of Mary Cooper who was able to fly around next to her prosthetic leg. Both from the perspective of the viewer who sees this event via photographic and filmic media, and from Cooper's description of the experience of the event itself, it may well be correct to maintain that there is an important aesthetic

1 Rose, Beth, ''It was magical' – meet the first disabled crew to fly in zero-gravity', *BBC News* (10 December 2021) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/disability-58902088> accessed 10 December, 2021.

component to it that contributes to inspiring and sparking ideas about the possibilities of all kinds of bodies. Further exploration then, as Montalti advocates, would be beneficial not only for those interested in topics pertaining to bodily normativity, but also for various questions in aesthetics.

In relation to aesthetic matters, while Montalti outlines the success conditions for the unusual prostheses in terms of their capacity to challenge ideas about the fixity of bodies, and highlights that "Bufano's performance appears more fruitful…" (2022, 32) on an ethico-political level, we might wonder whether the degree of destabilization impacts on the aesthetic or artistic value of the work as well. This subject is not explicitly addressed by Montalti however, and so it would be intriguing to see further work that reflects on this possibility. Furthermore, although Montalti highlights the difficulty in establishing whether such aesthetic interventions have positive or negative outcomes in the minds of audiences, we could also question (if there were in principle a way to evaluate this) whether, as has been questioned in the case of socially engaged art, this might even affect the value of the work *qua* art?[2]

Finally, through an interview with the artist Santiago Sierra, Laura Partin explores how deception has been used as a strategy in contemporary art practice to antagonize and defy audience expectations, and in doing so to "reveal an aspect of reality" (2022, 57). When this outcome is successfully achieved, as Partin outlines, it can, for some theorists like Goldie and Bishop, mean that deception constitutes an artistic merit, and for others, like Cavaillé, entail that it is ethically defensible. As Partin writes, however, for an artist like Sierra, who intentionally, and often successfully, frustrates the expectations of, and provokes strong emotions, in his audiences in order to critique social injustices, the aesthetic aspect of the works, or "the correlation between two incompara-

2 For more on this topic see: Simoniti, Vid, 'Assessing Socially Engaged Art', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (2018) 76:1, 71-82.

ble types of frustration, between the privileged and the disadvantaged", seems more important "than being perceived as ethically flawless" (2022, 57). In particular, Sierra, who himself acknowledges that he is not concerned with being perceived as ethically flawless, is an artist who, as this interview indicates, has courted controversy throughout his career for his less than saintly actions ("to repeat the evil in "homeopathic portions"" (2022, 63) as he puts it), to interrogate ethical and political issues.

This has ranged from closing and not permitting entrance to galleries to those who belong to some of the most privileged sets of society to highlight how inaccessible the world can be to those in it who do not occupy such privileged positions, to tattooing sex workers addicted to heroin for the price of a shot of the drug, to provide a "more appropriate" way "of representing the working class" (2022, 63) and highlight the injustices faced by those on the labour market. As Sierra quips, "for a brutal reality I need a brutal language" (2022, 63). Nevertheless, while the former type of action deceives and directly disturbs the lives of those who seem to be largely the target of Sierra's critique, the latter is not deceptive and has trouble evading questions about the validity and ethical permissibility of perpetuating harm towards communities who have suffered, and continue to suffer, as a result of the structural injustices in society that Sierra aims to make manifest in his work.

For instance, it is difficult to see how permanently marking four members of a vulnerable community (we might also wonder if they were really able to give informed consent due to their substance dependence) to the end of making a comment about the abuse of workers doesn't thereby justify further abuse by effectively saying "it's fine to take advantage of someone as long as it's to make a good point". One might argue that there is instrumental value in this act but that would be dependent on realizing some kind of benefit for those subject to this treatment. We could ask then, has the piece improved the lives of

working-class people? Has it given those in positions of power a new appreciation for the difficulties faced by those in the working classes? Or has it permanently altered someone's body for the sake of making a point that could be grasped by just the idea of doing it or, perhaps, considering the theme of this interview, by employing deceptive strategies, such as the use of temporary ink, and making a seemingly permanent intervention?

In response to questions surrounding the ethics of his practice, Sierra points to the fact that he makes the details of how he involves others in his practice transparent, which he suggests makes what he's doing "much more sincere" but risky as it can make him seem like "a monster" (2022, 64-64). Does sincerity counteract the effects of such ethically dubious acts? Perhaps, in relation to sincerity and to return to Montalti's point, such interventions are more meaningful when those who are disadvantaged are allowed to speak from their own experience, and not have the perspective of others on their "reality" imposed upon on them. We hope that this issue will spark further discussion in aesthetics about nature and technology, and also the ethics of artistic practice and what strategies are justifiable to the end of reflecting on, producing new narratives about, and maybe even improving, the lives of the subjects concerned, particularly when they are from under-represented communities.

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