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## Practices of Form: Art – Philosophy – Life – History

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### ABSTRACT

This article canvases some of the issues involved in the idea of form as a practice in Kant, Blumenberg and Foucault, and it also outlines the different contexts and approaches the individual papers collected in this Special Issue use to explore this idea.

### KEYWORDS

Form; practice; art; life; history

Most of the essays collected here had their origins in a workshop held on the topic of the legacies of German Idealism at Monash University in September 2015.<sup>1</sup> However, German Idealism is a reference point for some of the essays rather than the determining frame for all of them. The topic of form is the common thread, which our contributions follow in different intellectual contexts and use it to address a diverse set of problems. In this short Introduction I will briefly discuss some of the issues involved in the idea of form as a practice, and then outline the different contexts and approaches the individual papers use to explore this idea.

We can differentiate the general category of perceptible form from the notion of image. An image may be defined as an intentionally produced likeness of the appearance of some thing (either at rest or in action) “in the static medium of the surface of another thing”.<sup>2</sup> This technical definition of the image draws attention to the conceptual effort involved in understanding an appearance as an appearance (a likeness of a bison as opposed to the real creature). However, it understates the way that although such depictions step out of ordinary experience they also artificially transform such experiences. In the meanings they convey, images are unmoored from the bond of likeness and become primarily instruments of communication, which act on their environment by way of engaging their recipients. The definition of the image must, in other words, take account of its capacity to communicate complex meaning, which may also reframe the perception of the environment beyond it. The fact that images are capable of such communication relates to their power to engage recipients. This effective communication of meaning in sensible form is the crux of the idea of a “practice of form”.

The manner in which attention is captured and an environment re-calibrated through the experience of a sensible form may be compared to other approaches to the topic of selection. In fields like rational choice theory the problem of the selection process underpinning decisions in human behaviour is treated.<sup>3</sup> Rational choice theory considers how to minimise factors such as erroneous beliefs in decision-making procedures. The premise of the idea of a “practice of form”, in contrast, is that the selection of form may act as an

artificial site of meaning that may alter and even replace the “real” environment of “choice”. This environment needs to be replaced because it is raw, or unprocessed in its complexity.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the replacement function of form cannot conflict with any of the risky or dangerous aspects that inhabitants need to negotiate in their environment. It can, however, help to deal with them by creating a new, adaptive horizon in which actions that might seem possible but futile against the horizon of the “real” environment are seen not just as technically possible but also meaningful to undertake. The artificial site of meaning provided by the sensible form is transferrable to new situations and can act as a tool in managing them. It sets up a type of path dependency. Indeed the selection of form may even define the environment where the choice is made. In this perspective, it is meaning rather than the choice that frames human behaviour: it acts as a patterning filter that pre-commits individuals to specific paths of action. A set of such artificial meaning-selections may build up a new context for encountering an environment. The point has significance for the place of aesthetics within the different branches of philosophical research. The traditional categorisation of aesthetic questions in the field of “values” overlooks the practical significance of form in human life. Aesthetic form is generally categorised as what is surplus to need.<sup>5</sup> But form may instead be considered as one important way of managing vital (human) needs. This position overrides the limitations that the traditional division of fields of philosophical research imposes on research in aesthetics.

Obviously, one can think of the idea of form as a practice in several different ways. The idea is famously associated, for instance, with Foucault’s late work on ethical self-fashioning, and it has a background of sorts in modern philosophical aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> There are more comprehensive philosophical approaches to the components of this idea than one can derive from Foucault’s conception of “ethico-aesthetic practices”. The distinctive Kantian formulation of the experience of the free attunement to nature’s singular forms of beauty in the aesthetic feeling of pleasure may be cited in this connection. It was Kant’s view that this experience supports and encourages moral action, since it “shows” that nature is “responsive” to our vocation for freedom.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Kant thought that the study of ordered forms in nature can propel the cognitive ends of the natural sciences since such forms provide qualified, analogical support for the idea of a teleological order in nature and thus encourage the synthesising use of reason’s ideas. It is useful to keep in mind that these conceptions suggest that the aesthetic and teleological perception of form have a practical utility, for (moral) action and cognition, which run against the modern association of form as a (merely) aesthetic category.<sup>8</sup> The general point about how form exceeds the status of an aesthetic category, may be made more precise if we take in a wider set of references for the study of the connections between form and action and include too the rhetorical arts of formulating and expressing a position. A few of these are worth mentioning here to indicate the scope of the connections involved.

The practical significance of sensible form requires that we distinguish it from the way modern aesthetics specifies it in terms of its autonomy from the venal interests of a “subject” and the testable knowledge claims that can be asserted of an “object”.<sup>9</sup> Form is a category that works, to some extent against these specifications, when it is an instrument of practical knowledge. Such knowledge requires meaningful experiences which may in turn rely on formal patterning of situations. In these respects, form supports the practical knowledge necessary for action. The position is arguably present in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* [1790]. However, it is carefully formulated in thinkers like Hans Blumenberg,

who sees in Kant only an incomplete approach to the topic.<sup>10</sup> What is particularly interesting for our purposes is that Blumenberg extends the functions of practical knowledge based in the experience of form to rhetoric.

Blumenberg seems to be mindful of the fact that words alone and even silence may provide an experience akin to “action”. The terms of his analysis are attuned to the existential expectations and satisfactions that particular experiences of form extend to those who inhabit them. Images create contexts of action. Hence, rhetoric can pattern and mark the world in the ways necessary to motivate an agent committed to practices as a type of self-conception and self-definition. The idea of practice of form may also be used to track how the shaping role of form can be transferred between situations. In this respect, Blumenberg’s conception includes the speculative constructions of philosophy as an instance of form that may have a shaping role on the practical comportment.

The fact that meaning constellations can forge practical dispositions implies that rhetoric is much more important than a functionalist account would imply. In Blumenberg rhetoric is vested with the capacity for delaying action, undertaking action in substitutive forms, and so on. Thus “rhetoric is form as means”<sup>11</sup> in Blumenberg’s conception, because rhetoric covers the entire behavioural sphere in which the process of reflective reasoning supplies motives for “action”; reasoning, as he says, is the activity that manages the provisionality of reason. Similarly, the stamp or imprint that is transferable is itself a way of isolating features of a situation that is now (i.e. by this marking) seen as amenable to reasoning reflection. Symbolism, hyperbolism or other “substitutive” tactics of rhetoric may underlie the moral treatment of a “topic”, since the moral “topic” is formed and not “given”. Silence or inaction is susceptible of moral understanding because they are first understood as potentially “rhetorical”. For his part, Kant uses examples of aesthetic form in nature to convey the idea that moral acts are at home in the world. The schema of this relation between form and meaning may be used to organise the study of different scenes in modern philosophy. There is, for instance, the seeming paradox found in some important texts of modern philosophy that practical knowledge is gleaned through the experience of sensible forms which convey meaning despite the absence of discernible intention to do so. The Kantian position on the significance of natural beauty as an “independent” corroboration of the human moral vocation is an example of this.

Let me now turn to outline the points of intersection between some of these ideas about form and the papers in this collection. The title “practices of form” refers to the different ways in which form can frame action, which is understood, pace Blumenberg, to include rhetorical patterning (of action contexts) as well as intellectual “fashion”.

The first three papers take up the specifically aesthetic aspects of the operation of the image in the contexts of fantasy, illusion and ascetic practices of life. Eli Friedlander’s essay treats Walter Benjamin’s writing on the work of the German sculptor and “botanical” photographer Karl Blossfeldt. Within this compass, Friedlander carefully unpacks Benjamin’s position on fantasy and imagination and elucidates its points of connection to Goethe’s ideas of the vegetal as well as to the fantasy world of Grandville’s *Animated Flowers*. In Friedlander’s focus on the botanical and the vegetal in Blossfeldt and Goethe we get a vivid impression of the artificial means involved in the presentation of “nature” by which it is adapted to an aesthetico-practical sensibility. The idea of “practice” may appear to be less significant than the idea of form in Friedlander’s essay. As he

presents Benjamin's position on this material, however, fantasy is a practice that intensifies the perceptual sensitivity for types: fantasy, he shows, is in Benjamin's conception a practice of deformation in which an integrated medium of dense similarities is produced. In Friedlander's account of Benjamin, the integrated experience of the whole cosmos that once belonged to magic is transferred to the "technical" arts, like photography.

Life practices are the key theme in the next two pieces, which deal specifically with the role of form in practices of self-transformation. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky's essay is a comprehensive study of the intricacies of Nietzsche's conception of "illusion". In Nietzsche, crucially, illusory forms act as frames for living, whether in ideas of God or practices of life. Her piece captures the shifts and contradictions in Nietzsche's conception of self-transformation and gives particular attention to the role of female figures like Ariadne in his thinking. At the mid point of the issue, Amir Ahmadi considers Peter Sloterdijk's "general ascetology" as this is presented in his 2009 book, *You Must Change Your Life*. Sloterdijk's celebrated reputation as a polemicist is reframed in Ahmadi's piece: the essay scrutinises the central theses of Sloterdijk's conception of self-transformation. It shows how Sloterdijk's idea of "practicing life" as a generalised frame for analysing modernity covers over its historical anchors in early Christianity. Ahmadi's analysis gives critical attention to Sloterdijk's questionable interpretation of key religious images that underlie his account.

The final two papers approach our topic in the context of the issues of interpretation involved in the reception of ideas and figures from the history of philosophy. A proper name is a practice of form: it creates a stamp that channels reception in certain directions and blocks others.<sup>12</sup> The idea of a practice of form has a loose structure here in the roles of filiation and obsolescence in the history of analytic philosophy. Knox Peden treats Spinoza through Donald Davidson's work; and Paul Redding examines Hegel's metaphysics through J. N. Findlay. In Peden's case the idea of Davidson as an "extravagant Spinozist" is in equal parts a provocation for those who would dismiss the relevance of the history of philosophy for the practice of "doing philosophy", and a way of getting some perspective on Davidson's position on action. Peden carves out the Spinozist subtleties of the tone of indifference in Davidson's treatment of the signal moral and metaphysical commitments of his contemporaries' interest in the category of autonomy. Redding, on the other hand, gives careful attention to Findlay's recuperation of Hegel's reputation through his study of Hegel's *Logic*. The affiliation studied here does not court such controversy as Peden's reconstruction of the connection between Davidson and Spinoza must evoke. Nonetheless, Redding's essay also raises the issue of the influence that intellectual fashions can have on the constitution of fields of study. In each case, there is a practice of form at stake. In Peden, it bears on the relevant frame of reference for intellectual practices, which, he shows, must include the study of the attitude that philosophers adopt toward the history of the discipline. And, in Redding's essay this general claim is given quite specific exemplification. His analysis of the status of modal logic amongst Hegel's interpreters shows that modal actualism is more than a sub-field of metaphysics, or a topic in Hegel's *Logic*: it constitutes an important point of continuity between the attention of early twentieth century analytic interpretations and more recent directions in the reception of Hegel.

## Notes

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2. Jonas, "Image, Tool, Grave," 75–86, 82–3.
3. Elster, *Ulysses Unbound*.
4. Luhmann, "System as Difference," 37–57.
5. Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*.
6. See Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence"; and Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 255.
7. Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, §42 'Of the Intellectual Interest of the Beautiful', 165–70.
8. The potential points of interaction between aesthetic form, action and cognition has recently become a topic of interest, although it has not always been connected in any systematic way to the presence of the position in the history of modern philosophy. See Nanay, *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception*.
9. This is a paraphrase of the Kantian definition of aesthetic disinterest.
10. Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, 4.
11. Blumenberg, "An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric," 429–58, 431.
12. Foucault, for instance, makes this point when he identifies the author as a principle of 'rarefaction' of discourses. See Foucault, "The Discourse on Language," 221.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on Contributor

*Alison Ross* is Associate Professor in Philosophy at Monash University. Her books include *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy* (2007); *Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image* (2015); and *History and Revolution in Walter Benjamin* (forthcoming, 2018).

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