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DIRECTIONS FOR A NEW AESTHETICISM

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1. The idea of a new aestheticism is now explicit in both philosophical aesthetics and cultural theory with the publication of Gary Iseminger's *The Aesthetic Function of Art* and an anthology of essays edited by John Joughin and Simon Malpas critiquing the anti-aestheticism of literary theory.[1] Both are significant in marking a wider trend reacting to, broadly speaking, intellectualised and historicised accounts of art, refocusing on the idea of appreciation itself, and working away from the emphasis on ideology and disregard for the particularity of works in, especially, literary theory. This broader context also includes renewed debates running within philosophical aesthetics about non-perceptual aesthetic properties and the aesthetic experience of conceptual artworks, and about beauty in art, considerations that have engaged two philosophers normally identified by their commitment to art theoretical and historical (and by extension, non-aesthetic) accounts of artistic making and viewing, namely Noël Carroll and Arthur Danto.[2] So Carroll acknowledges that what's at stake is an aesthetic theory of art that is potentially 'back in business', while Danto's 'surprising' theoretic re-engagement with the concept of beauty has been noted by Diarmuid Costello.

While acknowledging this background, I place this stricture on a new aestheticism: that its analysis and beliefs are in a developmental relation to traditional aestheticism. Iseminger relates

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[1] Gary Iseminger, 'A New Aestheticism', in *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Cornell University Press, 2004); *The New Aestheticism*, eds. John Joughin and Simon Malpas (Manchester University Press, 2003).

[2] See Carroll's 'Non-perceptual Aesthetic Properties: Comments for James Shelley'; and Diarmuid Costello's 'On Late Style: Arthur Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty*' (both in The British Journal of Aesthetics, 44(4), October 2004, pp 413-423 and pp 424-439 respectively).

his aestheticism to Monroe Beardsley's aesthetics and notes affinities with Victorian aestheticism generally; Carroll, on the other hand, proposes an account of aesthetic response which is 'deflationary', according no special relation between art and the aesthetic, a basic tenet of any aestheticism worth the name.[3] Clearly, if an aestheticism fails to explain this special relation, then accounts like Carroll's come into play, but for the purposes of this paper I limit examination of the aesthetic to theorising that could reasonably be said to support an aestheticism, its traditions and aims.

The basic thrust of the new aestheticism in philosophical aesthetics and cultural theory is to defend some conception of the aesthetic as fundamental, or at least equiprimordial with other notions, in the theory and practice of art, thus capable of both accounting for the existence of art activities and supplying a distinctive methodology and phenomenology of art making and appreciating. In what follows I present and criticise Iseminger's new aestheticism, concluding that the aestheticism it delivers is too narrowly focused on artistic modes of production and reception. I then note the broader aesthetic considerations characteristic of pragmatist aesthetics in John Dewey and Richard Shusterman, contrasting their life-centred accounts of the aesthetic with Iseminger's art-centred one, before suggesting a new aestheticism that might synthesise these approaches around the notion of 'good work'.

2. Iseminger seeks to establish his new aestheticism in the context of debates in analytical aesthetics, particularly those around the definition and value of art, rather than in direct relation to cultural movements associated with the 'Victorian Aestheticism' of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde.[4] Specifically, Iseminger's new aestheticism is developed from the aesthetic theory of Monroe Beardsley. Beardsley defined art aesthetically, and characterised the aesthetic as an exhilarating, integrated, free and non-practical delight felt in the presence of an object when experienced correctly.[5] Iseminger identifies functional and valuational theses here, namely that a

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[3] See, for example, Carroll's 'Four Concepts of Aesthetic Experience' in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge U.P., 2001).

[4] Iseminger, p.4.

[5] See 'An Aesthetic Definition of Art', for example, in Hugh Cartier (ed.) *What is Art?* (Haven Publications,

work of art is so by intending to function to afford aesthetic experience (the functional thesis, F) and is good if it does have that capacity (the valuational thesis, V) – and he calls this traditional aestheticism. His new aestheticism reckons to improve on the traditional, Beardsleyan version by meeting objections to it while retaining what are taken as some incontrovertible intuitions about art and the aesthetic and their relation that warrant, indeed demand, some kind of philosophical aestheticism. Iseminger identifies a number of objections, mainly antiessentialist and antipsychological. The intuitions are about the special link between art and the aesthetic, and about the necessity of experience for appreciation. Iseminger's project is to 'explain and defend a new version of aestheticism that aims to honor the intuitions and avoid the objections'.[6] The new functional and valuational theses designed to achieve this are:

> (F') The function of the artworld and practice of art is to promote aesthetic communication.
> (V') A work of art is a good work of art to the extent that it has the capacity to afford appreciation.[7]

The fundamental antiessentialist objection to aestheticism is that, traditionally, it defines art aesthetically, but that no necessary and sufficient conditions can be given for something to be a work of art (aesthetic conditions or otherwise) since art by its very nature is 'expansive, adventurous and novel'. More specifically, antiessentialism claims support from the existence of supposedly non-aesthetic works of art, thus the omnipresence of Duchamp's works in philosophical aesthetics, and from what Iseminger calls 'hyperaesthetic' art, namely art with religious or political aims. Iseminger supports this objection against traditional aestheticism but claims his functional thesis F' makes no essentialist claim about art. He also argues F' embraces the historicism and institutionalism that lies behind the objection by incorporating the social institution or practice called the artworld.

1983), pp 15-29; reprinted in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, eds., *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 2003).

[6] Iseminger, p.22.

[7] Iseminger, p.23.

The antipsychological objection to aestheticism is sceptical about the existence of a distinctive aesthetic emotion or experience or state of mind, or at least doubts it is an experience exclusive to art. It centres on the apparent lack of distinctiveness of characterisations of the aesthetic, concluding that aesthetic experience is a myth and/or that it must fail to do the art definitional work aestheticism demands of it. George Dickie has famously criticised attempts to isolate a special aesthetic attitude of 'distancing' or 'disinterest', arguing that appropriate responses to artworks are cases of 'paying attention' to them rather than indicative of a special attitude of putting aside or distancing oneself from private and practical concerns.[8] Additionally, even assuming a distinct aesthetic experience, Duchamp's works cut here too, since along with other conceptual works (and political and religious works too), so the argument goes, they have properties that are totally independent of any characterisation of aesthetic experience. Iseminger argues that his new aestheticism does not fall to the antipsychological objection because V' contains a new idea of the aesthetic state of mind called 'appreciation' which can be unpacked in a way which is not suspect like the notion of aesthetic 'disinterest', and is sufficiently rich to account for supposedly antiaesthetic art like Duchamp's and political art like Brecht's.

3. Clearly, the success or otherwise of Iseminger's project hangs on his account of appreciation (and its relations with the aesthetic and with art). He defines it as 'finding the experiencing of a state of affairs to be valuable in itself'.[9] 'Experiencing a state of affairs' is further explained as a direct knowledge that the state of affairs is the case; it can be sensory but is not merely so, involving as it does conceptual capacities and possibly prior knowledge; and 'experiencing' involves getting it right – thus Iseminger calls the concept an epistemic one. To find something 'valuable in itself' is characterised as thinking a state of affairs is good, rather than just liking it, and so making a claim on other people that they to ought to think the same; it contrasts too with finding something instrumentally valuable, as a mere means to some other valued end. So in appreciation as a whole, one knows a state of affairs to be the case and believes the experience

[8] George Dickie, 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude', American Philosophical Quarterly 1 (1964), pp.65-65.
[9] Iseminger, p.36.

of it to be valuable in itself.

Having conceded to the antiessentialist about art, Iseminger challenges the antiessentialist to say what is wrong with his admitted essentialism about appreciation. Similarly, he defends his 'appreciation' against the antipsychological objection by appealing to its congruity with the facts of finding experiencing valuable in itself: so the claim is that it is not a myth but a fact of human existence. Iseminger rightly notes too that there remains the question of whether his account of appreciation can be rightly labelled 'aesthetic'. His appeal is to the proposed paradigm case of aesthetic communication, which stated in its most general form is someone designing and making something to be appreciated by somebody else. And it is this which the artworld functions to promote.

So is appreciation like this and how is it essentially aesthetic? The question is particularly apposite for Iseminger, given it is a notion which is familiar and comfortable in non-aesthetic theories of art, and Iseminger's stated project to honour certain aesthetic intuitions as well as meet objections.

4. Iseminger takes a limited set of what he calls 'aestheticist intuitions' as a touchstone of aestheticism, listing four, all of which contain art as a key term. So there is said to be an intuition about 1) a close connection between art and the aesthetic; 2) that experiencing an artwork is necessary for appreciating it; 3) that there is a distinction between artistically relevant and irrelevant properties; and 4) that the criterion of artistic value follows from the nature of art.[10] It might as easily and correctly be said that these are intuitions about art, and nor are they propositions that if true commit us to aestheticism. For instance, these intuitions could be honoured by an art theory committed to artistic intention and critical retrieval by audiences, which characterised these without any reference to the 'look and feel' of works. If this would indeed be stipulative, then it properly suggests that intuitions about the aesthetic are somewhat different from Iseminger's aestheticist intuitions. Aestheticism can, and does, (and must) feed off intuitions that are not exclusively about art – so we see that intuitions about the aesthetic,

[10] Iseminger, p.10.

reflected in ordinary language use, are about an experience that is felt, immediate, non-mediated, pleasurable and whole. Iseminger rejects this phenomenological approach, but does recognise that some independent account of the aesthetic is necessary if the aestheticist intuitions are to be genuinely aesthetic, so that there is indeed something to be called aestheticism.

His notion of appreciation simpliciter is meant to supply this (in Iseminger's words, it is meant to be a means of 'breaking into aesthetic space'). It consists of appreciating a state of affairs, so that, formally, one finds experiencing x's being F to be valuable in itself; Iseminger offers the example of finding the gracefulness of a spheroid to be valuable in itself. But what is happening in the example? Firstly, the shape of a thing has been identified (a spheroid); and an aesthetic judgement has been made, that the spheroid-shaped thing is graceful. Moreover, that experience has been valued in itself. Clearly this mode of appreciation contrasts with, say, appreciating the speed of my broadband internet connection – my judgement here does not involve any aesthetic concepts like gracefulness; and I experience the speed but I do not value the experience of it in itself, but rather because of the function it performs, namely faster downloads. The problem for Iseminger is that, although different types of appreciation are acknowledged, the case that appreciation has been defined simpliciter and independently of the aesthetic appears dubious since 'experiencing x is F as valuable in itself' introduces distinctively aesthetic notions (experiencing value, non-functional value). Also, the example of appreciating the spheroid, easily contrasted with other appreciations, introduces aesthetic predication (and by extension, non-aesthetic). So the clause 'x is F' is, and should properly be, complicated by considerations of aesthetic and non-aesthetic concepts, thus asking, for example, what makes 'graceful' aesthetic? And the attributive and predicative application of aesthetic concepts needs consideration too: so is the spheroid a graceful spheroid or graceful tout court? In other words, the account of appreciation simpliciter imports but does not properly acknowledge or expound aesthetic notions; it is not 'simpliciter', but then nor is it sufficiently granular to be recast as an account of aesthetic appreciation.

But, in any case, Iseminger identifies the aesthetic as a particular kind of transaction around appreciation, so that it is the intentional actions of people to design and make things for appreciation, and that are appreciated, that properly constitutes an 'aesthetic communication'.

This account of the aesthetic is intended to show it prior to and independent of art and thus justify some kind of claim to aestheticism. It is axiomatic that we can describe making artefacts independently of artistic making (think of basic tool making). But does the same apply to making artefacts for appreciation, and that are in fact appreciated (the kind of appreciation of intentionally graceful spheroids rather than of a technologically advanced internet connection)? It would seem, rather, that making for appreciation is already a complex affair in which makers must be aware of the likely appreciative responses of their audiences, who in turn have knowledge of makers' intentions and products. It is argued, reasonably, that 'making special' and taking a delight in beautiful objects are basic to the human condition; but their nexus in intentional making for aesthetic response is paradigmatic, I would suggest, of art and not, as Iseminger, argues, the aesthetic ('aesthetic communication'). This distinction has a theoretic and practical significance, given that Iseminger concludes a functional thesis F' for new aestheticism in which the artworld, rather than activities of making and appreciating themselves, promote aesthetic experience. Artworld institutions put the means in place, perhaps, for artists and spectators alike to experience art (so Arts Council England funds artists to carry out their work and offers loans for people to buy and view art for themselves), but clearly works themselves engage us experientially. Iseminger would hardly deny this, but then why introduce the notion of the artworld per se promoting aesthetic experience? The problem remains even if the notion is loosely conceived around 'artists', since the functional thesis F' then states only that artists promote art (if the argument is correct that 'aesthetic communication', in Iseminger's formulation, is in fact a description of art). Artworld functioning, like Arts Council England's (or in extremis, state-controlled artworlds like those in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia), is contingent on many social and political factors, and aestheticism traditionally recognises this, bracketing artworld activities off from the natural bases of aesthetic experience. We see this especially in Deweyan aesthetics, and also in Marxist and feminist formulations.[11]

In summary, Iseminger's new aestheticism as formulated in theses F' and V' is suspect in

[11] I look at the Deweyan approach in sections 5 and 6 below. For introductions to the latter, see Stefan Morawaski's 'Introduction' to *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* (International General, 1977), and Mary Devereaux's 'Feminist Aesthetics' in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (OUP, 2003).

three main areas. 1) Its 'aestheticist intuitions' are too narrowly construed from the outset, exclusively focused on art considerations and failing to address a wider set of aesthetic intuitions, familiar for instance in ordinary language use of 'aesthetic'. 2) It fails to deliver an account or characterisation of the aesthetic per se, its 'aesthetic communication' around 'appreciation' paradigmatic of artistic modes of production and reception. It therefore fails to address the antipsychological objection raised by Dickie that there is not a distinctive aesthetic experience. 3) The notion of artworlds functioning to promote 'aesthetic communication' seems untenable given their social contingency; and if 'aesthetic communication' is exclusively artistic, then the functional thesis F' ceases to be an aesthetic one. In conclusion, we need to look elsewhere for the genuinely aesthetic considerations necessary for a new aestheticism.

5. For Dewey 'the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience'.[12] Experience proper is characterised as an aesthetic experience, an interaction in which a human being naturally engages some part of their environment to a felt and satisfactory conclusion that allows it to be recalled and discussed as such. The key driver in Dewey's thinking is establishing the continuity of 'normal process of living', of ordinary human functioning, with art; so that to conceive of 'art as experience' is to witness art as experience at its most intense, as an interaction at root like all others between a human organism and its environment in so far as it involves effort and undergoing, but especially vital in so far as both artists and spectators alike spend their efforts to a consummatory moment of felt satisfaction. Furthermore, such experiences stand out by modifying experiencers; they are said, by Dewey, to 'energise and inspire'. Shusterman notes this privileging of experience over the object (the work of art) and Dewey's identification of the essence and value of art in 'the dynamic and developing experiential activity through which they are created and perceived'.[13]

Dewey's aesthetic theory postdates by a decade or so Duchamp's *Fountain*, but there is no mention of it or any other of his works. *Fountain* is often cast by opponents as the nemesis of

[12] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Perigree, 1980), p.3.
[13] Richard Shusterman, 'Pragmatism: Dewey', in *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (2001), p.102.

aesthetic theory, but Dewey's proposition that an artwork is essentially the experience of it does not a priori rule out conceptual works for aesthetic theory, given that his characterisation of experience does not stipulate the proper objects of that experience. If, however, we trade in deflationary versions of aesthetic experience, tending to narrowly identify the aesthetic with the concept of beauty, and beauty with perceptual form, and thus aesthetic appreciation of art with formalism, then works like *Fountain* are problematic. It seems, in this schema, that if conceptual works really are artworks, they are only explicable as such in non-aesthetic ways (they are not formally beautiful). Dewey's broader naturalistic account of the aesthetic at least suggests a way in which conceptual art can be aesthetically appreciated in making and viewing. So, the maker repudiates the state of contemporary art and places a urinal in an art gallery; we are aware of the existence of *Fountain*, its maker and making, and make our judgement on it: in both cases, there is a felt sense of an action done to completion that can be publicly and critically assessed, there is 'an experience'. In short, there is, therefore, no counter-argument in conceptual artworks, since these too have experiential effects. The same goes for so-called 'disruptive' artworks, which might be experienced as disturbing or perplexing. However, the real issue with Carroll and Danto (who can concede aesthetic qualities in conceptual artworks without necessarily abandoning non-aesthetic theories of art) is about all art being essentially or necessarily aesthetic, both denying that artworks are primarily aesthetic. While Iseminger's art-centred aestheticism falters here (with 'aesthetic communication' seemingly trapped in an artistic/artworld paradigm), Deweyan responses look outside of artworlds to the natural roots of artistic behaviours, to the notion of 'an experience'. But can this 'experience' support definitional conditions for arthood, or supply some 'special relation' between art and the aesthetic, thus warranting aestheticism?

Shusterman argues that confusion follows if Dewey's account of aesthetic experience is made definitional of art. It follows because the historically determined concept of art cannot be reshaped to the extent that it is coextensive with Deweyan aesthetic experience; so, for example, however powerful the aesthetic experience of sunsets, they are not going to be reclassified as art. Robert Stecker sums this point up by suggesting that the 'pervasiveness of the aesthetic outside of art per se' always ultimately prevents it being a sufficient condition for being

an artwork.[14] Still, Shusterman continues that aesthetic experience is a general background condition for art; it is necessary for art's existence, and this condition concerns the point rather then the extension of the concept of art.[15] Shusterman identifies the 'end of aesthetic experience' with Danto's rejection of it on the grounds that it fails to demarcate art. But, he continues, its redemption lies in the Deweyan tradition that recognises the 'transformational', rather than demarcational or definitional, aspect of aesthetic experience. In other words, aesthetic experience is an important concept because it directs us to the experience itself, and to an experience, moreover, that is worth having, indeed is life affirming. If Iseminger's aestheticism is epistemic and art-centred, its aesthetic intuitions driven by considerations of art and its proper appreciation, and the operation of artworlds, then Dewey and Shusterman offer a broader life-centred view, in which a greater emphasis is given to the phenomenology of experience per se, particularly its somatic features, which Dewey signifies with his primary interest in the aesthetic behaviour of the 'live creature'.[16]

6. If Carroll and Danto now acknowledge that a distinctive aesthetic response to art exists and is one kind of appropriate response, but only one and without primacy, where does this leave an aestheticism, either like Iseminger's or Shusterman's, that reciprocally acknowledges that aesthetic experience fails the art demarcation test? Despite marking an end to the moratorium on aesthetic experience, there is little suggestion of substantive shared ground. Carroll's deflationary account of aesthetic experience excludes 'interpretive play' as an aesthetic interaction with art (and marks this exclusion as a fatal flaw in any aestheticism), while 'new aestheticism' and a pragmatic approach like Dewey's, for instance, can still suggest interpretation is properly expressed in a felt sense of (dis)liking, characterising the whole as aesthetic. Also, Carroll's 'narrative' approach to identifying artworks, whereby artworks are identified by their relation to the canon of existing artworks, tends to discount the expectation of artists and spectators in making and viewing art that works are valuable and experientially powerful, and that it is this

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[14] Robert Stecker, 'Definition of Art', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (OUP, 2003), p.143.
[15] Richard Shusterman, *The End of Aesthetic Experience*, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 55:1, 1997.
[16] Chapter One of Dewey's *Art as Experience* is titled 'The Live Creature'.

potentiality that motivates their creation and viewing.[17] Both Iseminger and Shusterman, unlike Carroll, note similar necessary background conditions of art. Behind these differences, the thought operating on the aestheticist side is that the sources of art are the pleasures of making and viewing in themselves. Iseminger puts faith in the 'persistence of aesthetic communication' and in the necessary existence of artworld practices functioning to support it, while Shusterman tends to hedonism and a permissiveness about art.[18] But a further direction for aestheticism, following its traditions, is also indicated by this thought – one that emphasises pleasure in, and the whole process of, *work*.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century Arts and Crafts movement embodies the work-centred view of the aesthetic, with its emphasis on the manner in which artefacts generally, including artworks, are produced (and by extension, appreciated). Only artefacts produced in an appropriate manner are capable of being art. Calling it 'useful labour', William Morris identified three elements, namely producing a product worth having, pleasure in making, and the hope of rest after labour.[19] Dewey makes a similar point when he suggests that the full participation of workers in the production and disposition of their products is a determining element in the aesthetic quality of the experience of things produced.[20] These features provide the basic structure of an aesthetic notion of good work. But no doubt a sophisticated aestheticism, if fully developed, synthesises all the art, life and work aspects of the aesthetic; and in so doing, it would honour a fuller range of aesthetic intuitions than Iseminger's new aestheticism. In such a schema, the *work* of art, that structure of good work in production and reception that art exemplifies, is the ground of an aestheticism that properly explains the art and life aspects of the aesthetic. This aestheticism is universal and moral, antithetical to the Western, fine art Artworld and understanding the aesthetic as at the core of human endeavour and flourishing. Its direction indicates the (re)construction of societies around aesthetic modes of

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[17] Noel Carroll, 'Art, History and Narrative', in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge U.P., 2001).

[18] Iseminger, p.137. And Shusterman has recently talked of the potential for sexual behaviour to be aesthetic: 'In search of aesthetic experience', London Graduate Conference, 11 June 2004, University of London; and he has defended some popular culture's claims to art status.

[19] William Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', The Collected Works, Vol. 23 (Russell and Russell, 1966).

[20] Dewey, p.343.

production and reception rather than, as in Iseminger's more limited construct, aesthetic communication's promotion through the functioning of artworlds.