

Aesthetic Theory

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Dieter Mersch, Sylvia Sasse, Sandro Zanetti

Introduction

*Emphasizing art as an instrument of analysis
(rather than of expression, statement, etc.).*

Susan Sontag

There is no theory which is not in some way related to perception—to αἴσθησις (*aísthēsis*)—and in this sense to the aesthetic, to the sensually perceptible. Conversely, perceptions without theoretical conceptualization, and thus without a relationship to theory—θεωρία (*theōria*)—dissipate into indeterminacy. Theories are unable to form without perspectives or ideas concerning what they are about (just as sensual perception would remain diffuse without the power of distinction and judgment). They would also—in the way they are *formulated* as arguments or, more generally, as figurations which make use of texts and discourses—be imperceptible and incommunicable if they did not refer back to perception-oriented media, through which they first become readable and comprehensible. Readability in a double sense—of the senses and of comprehensibility—is coupled to basal structures in the realm of language where the sensual aspect of language becomes just as noticeable as its ability to function conceptually. The merely seen or heard, in contrast, would, without theory, remain blurred or indistinct, consisting solely of scattered stimuli and affections.

It was an insight of the Enlightenment, specifically Immanuel Kant and his dictum that perception without concepts is blind and thought without perception empty, that both sides are reliant upon each other and belong together.¹

1 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

The *Critique of Pure Reason* famously begins with a “transcendental aesthetics.” The assumption that theory is originally aesthetic, and that the aesthetic is genuinely theoretical—an idea advanced in this book—leads us, however, to further terrain. For the aesthetic character of theory includes more than just the simple fact that readings are always sensually mediated, and the theoretical character of the aesthetic is not exhausted—with a view to Kant—in the “synthesis” of apprehension and apperception or the schematism of the “imagination.” It also includes the form of representation,² medial and figural framing, the work on language, articulation, and embodiment, the various techniques and modalities of articulation as well as the *formation* of terms and concepts.³ The theoretical character of the aesthetic can in turn be seen, for example, in the various methods of dream interpretation, its poetics of “condensation” and “displacement,”⁴ and even more fundamentally in the specific procedures of attention, of sensitivity to detail, to nuance. These forms of attention and relation at times seem similar to

In German: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1956), p. 97f.

2 The necessary coupling of theoretical outlines to processes of representation (and their underlying economies of affect) makes clear why it is possible to find a theory “attractive.” See Joachim Küpper et al., eds., *The Beauty of Theory. Zur Ästhetik und Affektökonomie von Theorien* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2013). The fact that “theory” could be seen as *chic* or even as a lifestyle (and even still can) is based on the implicit need for representation of “theory,” i.e. every form of theory. For more on the historical boom of “theory” as an article of faith and lifestyle in France and Germany of the 1960s to 1980s, see Philipp Felsch, *Der lange Sommer der Theorie. Geschichte einer Revolte 1960–1990* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2015). On the relationship between design and thought see Daniel Hornuff, *Denken designen. Zur Inszenierung der Theorie* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014).

3 For more on the creation of terms/concepts, compare Deleuze and Guattari’s model of the “conceptual person” as well as of “percept, affect, and concept” in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

4 See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (published in German in 1900), trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1955), pp. 296–299, 322–326.

or even interchangeable with artistic praxis and allow the idea of a “particular nature,” as Alexander Baumgarten called it, of “aesthetic knowledge” to appear plausible.⁵

A further consideration relates to the question of the “effect” or “efficacy” of theories. For there is, as rhetoric in antiquity was already aware, no text or persuasive speech, and thus no theoretical statement, without its artificial construction, without the voluntary or involuntary use of stylistic means, without a τέχνη (*technē*) involving and simultaneously undermining the sphere of the senses. This “technique” or “artistry” is not limited, as it is in Plato’s critique of sophistry, to turning the weaker item into a stronger one. Rather, this technique is what engenders the argument in the first place, allowing it to develop its efficacy. At the same time, affectivity, as expressed in processes of perception, contains a specific form of associativity and thought, one which Theodor W. Adorno referred to with the aporetic expression “synthesis without judgment.”⁶

Moreover, theories, their propositionality,⁷ and the arrangement or dynamic of their continually enacted arguments largely exist on the foundation of a peculiar topography, which provides motifs and perspectives through which a thing or matter

5 Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Ästhetik*, ed. and trans. Dagmar Mirbach, Vol. 2, Part 1 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2007), §§ 30, 38; Baumgarten, “Metaphysica,” in *Texte zur Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, ed. and trans. Hans Rudolf Schweizer (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983), § 511.

6 Theodor W. Adorno, “Erpresste Versöhnung” (1958), in *Gesammelte Schriften in 20 Bänden*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss and Klaus Schultz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), pp. 251–280, here p. 270.

7 See in contrast Gottfried Gabriel, “Literarische Form und nicht-propositionale Erkenntnis in der Philosophie,” in Gottfried Gabriel and Christiane Schildknecht, eds., *Literarische Formen der Philosophie* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1990), pp. 1–25. On the specific relationship between philosophy and literature, see Christiane Schildknecht and Dieter Teichert, eds., *Philosophie in Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp / Insel, 1996); Richard Faber and Barbara Naumann, eds., *Literarische Philosophie – philosophische Literatur* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999).

is observed. We could also speak here of models, always implicit or concealed, which have been discussed under various names throughout the history of philosophy and which stubbornly undermine the naïve illusions of an “analysis” calibrated on the basis of logic or rationality. Walter Benjamin speaks in this sense of “thought-images,” Hans Blumenberg of “absolute metaphors” which can no longer be broken down into more fundamental elements, Martin Heidegger of language as a “showing” (*Zeige*) containing its own performance. These “models” further thought just as much as they thwart it by questioning the manageability of discursive means and demanding transparency and lucidity in their own rhetorical composition.

Due to these limitations, the philosophical formulation of theories has become systematically confused and disoriented while, in the same breath, relentlessly attempting to generate new words, formulations, and genres in order to understand and define what needs to be thought. We could speak in this context of an “endlessly” aesthetic character to the texts which continues to develop while repeatedly producing points of connection, as the situational constellations which end up in the texts are constantly changing. At the same time, we cannot avoid the fact that the aesthetic is an unavoidable feature of everything theoretical. That is also true where theories or their “models” are at their most formal: consider computer programs, always written and thus formulated, and their algorithms which, like mathematics, are genuinely aesthetic in their being designed concisely and simply, or elegantly presented, or based on symmetries and other aesthetic principles.

Something similar can be said of perception and in particular of art. We should not forget that aesthetics, as a philosophical discipline, was, from the very beginning, ambiguous, positioning itself *between* a theory of perception in the sense of *αἴσθησις* (*aisthēsis*) and a theory of art or the arts. The latter was first and foremost a poetics and later an authorship-based doctrine of creative activity, and even later an institutionalized practice which was largely self-referential in permanently ques-

tioning and expanding upon its own self-concept. The former, in contrast, was never limited to the sphere of art.

Philosophical aesthetics took on the task of both theorizing the various positions as well as justifying their theorizability. It was also characterized by a typical “backwardness” or reserve. For the act of theorizing continuously refers back to perceptions and remains oriented towards them, with the perceived and perceivable being respectively confirmed, corrected, or discarded. Even the “exact” sciences are only able to “verify” or “falsify” their data to the extent that a respective individual data point—through whatever technological or medial means—has been made visible or audible.

In theories of perception—whether of Aristotle, Baumgarten, Hegel, Husserl, Wittgenstein, or Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to name only a few—a differentiation is repeatedly made between the “that” and the “what” of perception, its object (or always-precarious “content”) and the act of perception itself. It became clear that the latter remains to a certain extent singular (as I cannot perceive the perception of another) and cannot be questioned without falling into a contradiction or instability with respect to our relationship towards the world.

This in no way means that theories are sufficiently or exhaustively explained by their relationship to the aesthetic—just as αἴσθησις (*aísthēsis*) is not exhausted in the forms of synthesis, whether of *imaginatio*, *memoria*, or other forms of concentration. The claim is simply that theories cannot dispense with the relationships which condition their aesthetics, and that, specifically, they are defined—in their claims, their justification, and their relevance (if any)—by *the way* in which they are *unable* to dispense with these relationships. Conversely, the arts are also much more than simply a praxis of θεωρία (*theōria*) or, more recently, of “research,” as they maintain their own relationships to knowledge and in doing so always also raise the question of what art is and what characterizes arts as arts.

In the case of theories, we need to take into account their indisputable connection not only to rational justifications and

methods but also to the public institutions which define their exoteric pathos, their emphasis on ceaseless publication and review. With respect to the arts, it is the structures of exhibition and curation, their marketability and economic value, as well as their participatory engagement, which appear important and push artistic practices in the direction of the ethical or social. Nonetheless, one of the major intentions of the following essays is to show that the aesthetic nature of theory and the theoretical nature of aesthetics are in a certain way *conditiones sine quibus non* in the sphere of philosophical aesthetics just as much as in literary and art criticism.

This double meaning, an implicitly chiasmic constellation, is already latent in the title: *Aesthetic Theory*, which was intentionally kept simple and austere in order to leave open various directions of inquiry, the abundance and surplus, so to speak, of perspectives. For if the aesthetic is *prima vista* merely a thematic object of inquiry in “aesthetic theories”—i.e. aesthetics as a phenomenon *and* discipline—, then it proves to be critical for our task that its theorization can hardly be brought to light otherwise than through an *aesthetically*-qualified mode of involvement, work, and recapitulation, as well as the presentation of material and medium, or ways of writing as scene and process. These in turn relate directly to one’s own acts, the grammatological textures of putting something into writing, the means of doing this, its “models” and “figurations”—in order to simultaneously intervene in them.

Martin Heidegger spoke in this context of an “outline” (*Aufriss*, implying a “rift” or “rupture” in German) through which “we try to speak about speech *qua* speech,”⁸ where the expression “outline” is itself reminiscent of aesthetic procedures originating in architectural methods of drafting and sketching.

8 Martin Heidegger, “The Way to Language,” in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 112. In German: Martin Heidegger, “Der Weg zur Sprache,” in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1975), pp. 239–268, here p. 241f.

And Adorno did not think of the outline of his *Aesthetic Theory* as a simple theory concerned with aesthetic phenomena or art specifically as its subject; rather, he was always acutely aware of the aesthetic implications and relationships at play in his own formulation of a theory which uninterruptedly co-composes, distorts, and warps the work or “takes a turn” at the moment it begins to develop its power of persuasion. In his much-discussed interview in *Der Spiegel* on May 5, 1969, Adorno confessed: “I am a theoretical person who feels that theoretical thinking is extraordinarily close to its artistic intentions.”⁹

It thus makes sense that the title of Adorno’s posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, which we are freely borrowing less as a citation than as a program, conceives of theory as something aesthetic and theoretical work as an intrinsically aesthetic project—and not as a theory *about* aesthetics. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* should be considered a thoroughly *composed* work which at every moment refers to the media and instruments of its own composition and thus remains mindful of what makes it possible in the first place.¹⁰ It is the correlate of the subject it concerns: art itself, to the extent that its theory

9 “‘Keine Angst vor dem Elfenbeinturm’. Spiegelgespräch mit dem Frankfurter Sozialphilosophen Theodor W. Adorno,” *Der Spiegel* 19 (1969): pp. 204–209, here p. 204. (Translated by Brian Alkire.)

10 We remain in urgent need of a historical-critical edition of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*—with images of the handwritten manuscript and its corrections: not just the documented “aesthetic” work but what is on the paper itself. See Martin Endres, Claus Zittel and Axel Pichler, “‘Noch offen’. Prolegomena zu einer Textkritischen Edition der Ästhetischen Theorie Adornos,” *editio* 27 (2013): pp. 173–204. Rüdiger Bubner’s criticism misses the mark here in the idea of a “becoming aesthetic” of theory in Adorno. See Rüdiger Bubner, “Kann Theorie ästhetisch werden? Zum Hauptmotiv der Philosophie Adornos,” in Burkhardt Lindner and W. Martin Lüdke, eds., *Materialien zur ästhetischen Theorie Theodor W. Adornos Konstruktion der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), pp. 108–137, here p. 133. For the question is not *how much* a theory performs an “aestheticization” of itself (and for Bubner, “aestheticization” is something purely negative: silence about its own foundations, thetics instead of argument, etc.), but *to what extent* and *how* a theory (including Bubner’s) is in a relationship to its own aesthetics.

and thoughts themselves proceed artistically. For this reason, it does not conceal its origins in that which is its goal. Philosophy not only requires the “friendship” of art, as Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling noted:¹¹ it also participates in art, in the aesthetic: it must be composed, i.e. written in an aesthetic way, in order to articulate itself.

But this aesthetic qualification of theory is only one dimension of *Aesthetic Theory* and its immanent chiasm, as something similar is true of theoretically-reflected objects, procedures, or events, which are not only taken up and commented on by theory but are themselves also “theories” in the sense of *θεῶμαι* (*theōmai*), of astonishing presentation or appearance, specifically to the extent that art reveals itself as *θεωρία* (*theōria*). In this way, in fact, the task and difficulty of “aesthetic theory” doubles. It does more than just theorize something aesthetic while itself implying an aestheticization of theory: the correlates which are its subject, aesthetic phenomena, reveal themselves to be theories, which in turn present themselves in the garb of aesthetic practices, in this way coming before our eyes or ears.

Without this kind of genuinely “theoretical” understanding of art, we would not be able to judge the epistemological potential of works like Kasimir Malevič’s Suprematist white or black squares, or Marcel Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, or Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés*. These projects called into question not only the understandings of art prevalent at the time of their composition and the connected normative ideas of a corresponding “aesthetics.” They also demonstrate how thinking about art requires an altered mode of perception, or even how art enters into a “discourse” with itself, taking part in the conversation about art.

Suprematism, to take up the example of Malevič, was not formulated as a “theory” exterior to the image but was rather

11 See Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1974), pp. 122–131. [In English: *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 96–103.]

evident in the work, e.g. in the Square of 1915, which only later became the emblematic *Black Square*, developing a non-representational and non-figurative philosophy of the image. With this, Malevič made a contribution not only to art but to aesthetics, as a theory of the iconic which broke with the traditional function and conception of the image as representation, and the traditional gaze as “seeing-as.” Duchamp’s *Large Glass* (1915–1923) not only referred back to a theory of perception; it *developed* one which involved its observers while simultaneously leading them away from the sphere of the senses to the level of the concept. The “image object” (Husserl) and the image *as* object, i.e. inside and outside, blend together with the result that we are no longer dealing with a representation but with an installation which generates its own reality. Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés* likewise referred not merely to a possible theory of reading, starting with the material, sensually-perceptible distribution of words on the double-facing pages of a book, but also to printing design as an integral component of the work of theory, which begins in perception in the act of reading without stopping and remaining there.

So from both directions—aesthetic theory as text and discourse on the one hand and aesthetic praxis as θεωρέω (*theōreō*), as insight or ways of making visible on the other—a connection exists to the original meaning of θεωρία (*theōria*), which conceives of theory as a form of seeing, as “intellectual intuition” (*intellektuelle Anschauung*) or simply as perspective or point of view. This also means that theory should itself be defined as a form of praxis: a praxis of theory formation or theorizing. Or as Goethe trenchantly said: “Every act of seeing leads to consideration, consideration to reflection, reflection to combination, and thus it may be said that in every attentive look on nature we already theorize.”¹²

12 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1970), p. xl.

Peter Szondi in turn held that theorization of this kind can crystallize into an “immanent theory” in an artistic—literary—work itself: “I do not at all consider the theoretical examination of a concrete literary work inappropriate and I believe in an immanent theory which is always more pointed than the work itself.”¹³ That an “immanent theory” of this kind was “more pointed” than the “work” for Szondi indicates that he conceived of the theoretical dimension of art, here of literature specifically, as transgressive: it is the thorn which can and even should cause one to begin thinking, and not only within the confines of academic scholarship. Stated another way: for Szondi, the assumed immanence of theory in the work of art proves not to be conclusive or closed but rather something decidedly open to interpretation, something generally dialogical.¹⁴

In the 1950s, Mikhail Bakhtin suggested, with a view to his own “aesthetic activity,” that literature is always also the artistic perception or recognition of language. He was referring to a tradition in Russian philosophy and literary theory which saw the literary work not as an object of theory but as theory via aesthetic means. Bakhtin read both Rabelais and Dostoevsky, for example, as authors who not only formulated their philosophy but also represented it. Formalist theorists in turn, some of whom were themselves artistically active (e.g. Viktor Shklovsky), sought in the 1910s both to make form the main criterion of analysis in the arts and to move form as a category to the center of theory. It is no coincidence that the Formalists experimented with various genres and approaches to writing.

13 Peter Szondi, Letter to Karl Kerényi, 7 August 1958, cited in Christoph König and Andreas Isenschmid, *Engführungen. Peter Szondi und die Literatur* (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 2004), p. 48 [translated from German].

14 On an immanent theory of this kind, see e.g. Luzius Keller, “Literaturtheorie und immanente Ästhetik im Werke Marcel Prousts,” in Edgar Mass and Volker Roloff, eds., *Marcel Proust. Lesen und Schreiben* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1983), pp. 153–169.

The French poststructuralists also experimented with forms of theory and theory construction. The *Théorie d'ensemble*, published in 1968 by the *Tel Quel* group, formulated “theory” as a program, beginning with the very title. In the foreword to this work, the guiding “junction words” (*mots-carrefours*) were defined: “Écriture, texte, inconscient, histoire, travail, trace, production, scène.”¹⁵ These theoretical outlines gain further development in the textual experiments—inconceivable without *Tel Quel*—of thinkers like Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, and Foucault, e.g. in the latter’s “idea reportages” (*reportages d'idées*). Philipp Felsch also understands “theory” itself as a genre where the point is not to aestheticize theory but to make its own aesthetics visible.¹⁶

In all of these experiments and theoretical ventures the question arises *how* the relationship between theory and praxis, between texts and their subjects, between concepts and their content can be thought and realized in detail. How, and between which participants, does the dialogue, the engagement, the critique take place? Art and literary criticism fundamentally answer these questions in the specific *way* they approach their subjects, images, texts, documents, or events. Every theory *behaves*, whether intentionally or not, in a specific—and aesthetically-defined—way towards its subject and in doing so allows some aspect of this subject in itself to appear (and also causes much to disappear).¹⁷ Under the paradigm of

15 *Tel Quel*, *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), p. 9.

16 Felsch, *Der lange Sommer der Theorie*. On the boom in aesthetic theory, see Anselm Haverkamp, *Latenzzeit. Wissen im Nachkrieg* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2004), p. 85f.

17 The connected issue of the use and point of theory is discussed in Mieke Bal and Inge E. Boer, eds., *The Point of Theory. Practices of Cultural Analysis* (London and New York: Continuum, 1994). The specific situation of *literary* theory, whose medium of articulation, representation, and argumentation coincides with its subject’s medium, is explored in Boris Previšić, ed., *Die Literatur der Literaturtheorie*. Sammlung Variations 10 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

“art as research,”¹⁸ advocated for in Zurich starting in the 1950s by Serge Stauffer, later founder of the F+F school for experimental design,¹⁹ experiments were undertaken in the field of artistic practice where art was intended to make a contribution to research, and thus to theory. In theory, in turn, there has been a major acceleration in recent decades of research working with the concept of the “theoretical object,” foregrounding and taking seriously the possibility that the “objects” to be investigated—phenomena, events, and processes—are “theoretically loaded.”²⁰

But what does this mean for the praxis of research—and for that of the arts? If we take seriously the philosophical claims of the arts, their genuine praxis of *θεωρέω* (*theōreō*), then there is no question of valuing theories performed in a scholarly context higher than other forms of theory construction. This is also true of the claims in the essays collected here. They feature reflections which highlight the aesthetic implications of discourses

18 See Jens Badura et al., eds., *Künstlerische Forschung. Ein Handbuch* (Zurich: diaphanes, 2015); Elke Bippus, ed., *Kunst des Forschens. Praxis eines ästhetischen Denkens* (Zurich: diaphanes, 2009); Corina Caduff, Fiona Siegenthaler and Tan Wälchli, eds., *Art and Artistic Research / Kunst und Künstlerische Forschung*. Zürcher Jahrbuch der Künste 6 (Zurich: Zürcher Hochschule der Künste / Scheidegger & Spiess, 2010); Sibylle Peters, *Das Forschen aller. Artistic Research als Wissensproduktion zwischen Kunst, Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013).

19 See Serge Stauffer, *Kunst als Forschung. Essays, Gespräche, Übersetzungen, Studien* (Zurich: Scheidegger & Speiss, 2013), pp. 53–55, and Michael Hiltbrunner, “Fragen, Methoden, Prozesse, Archive, Forschende Kunst bei Serge Stauffer und an der frühen F+F Schule,” in Ute Holfelder et al., eds., *Kunst und Ethnografie – zwischen Kooperation und Ko-Produktion?* Kulturwissenschaftliche Technikforschung 7 (Zurich: Chronos, 2018), pp. 113–126.

20 See Mieke Bal, “Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois’ Spider as Theoretical Object,” *Oxford Art Journal* 22, vol 2 (1999): pp. 103–126; Yves-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, and Rosalind Krauss, “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch,” *October* 85 (1998): pp. 3–17; Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1995), pp. 22–41; Louis Marin, *Opacité de la peinture. Essais sur la représentation en Quattrocento* (1989) (Paris: Éditions de l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2006), pp. 21–62.

just as much as the epistemic implications of aesthetic events. The interfolding of theory and aesthetics, however, always evokes a limit or resistance, with the result that every formation of a theory will always remain risky and keep a chronic distance from itself. It is disputable, for example, whether such a project is even possible in the framework of an academic publication with its corresponding format requirements and traditions, or even in the medium of a book or digital text—a fundamentally fruitful skepticism which ensures continued discussion.

Each essay collected in this volume has a different answer to the question of *how* it behaves towards its “aesthetic-theoretical counterpart,” its subject or theme. The contributions emerged over the course of a multiyear cooperation between theorists from various disciplines of the Centre for the Arts and Cultural Theory at the University of Zurich and from the Zurich University of the Arts. In the spirit of its guiding question, the intention of this volume is not to provide conclusive answers but to open up further perspectives.