



antae



L-Università
ta' Malta

COVER IMAGE: Detail from 1964 replica of 1919 original, Norton Simon Museum, Association Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris/Artists' Rights Society (ARS).

Marcel Duchamp, *La Joconde/L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919, Tate Modern, London.

antae (ISSN 2523-2126) is an international refereed journal aimed at exploring current issues and debates within English Studies, with a particular interest in literature, criticism, and their various contemporary interfaces. Set up in 2013 by postgraduate students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, it welcomes submissions situated across the interdisciplinary spaces provided by diverse forms and expressions within narrative, poetry, theatre, literary theory, cultural criticism, media studies, digital cultures, philosophy, and language studies. Creative writing and book reviews are also encouraged submissions.

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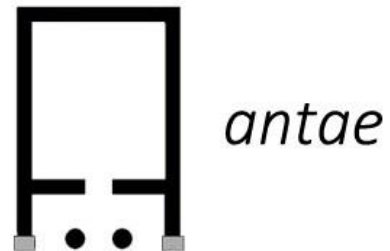
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Editorial

Kurt Borg, Aaron Aquilina

University of Malta, Lancaster University

The aesthetic is truly and necessarily trans-, multi-, and inter-disciplinary. It intersects with the entire spectrum of critical thought, including but not limited to philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, theology, literary studies, media and technology studies, gender studies, game studies, political science and theory, sociology, and anthropology. The study of aesthetics invites research and analysis informed by multiple disciplines; no one discourse comes close to exhausting aesthetics. Furthermore, the inherent complexity of the aesthetic not only leads to an openness that can be termed inter-disciplinary, but—keeping in mind the myriad possibilities of the grammatical category of the prefix—also encompasses non-, extra-, or even anti-disciplinary approaches. It is thus apt that *antae*, which embodies this ethos by presenting itself as a journal on the interspaces of English studies, dedicates a special issue to aesthetics.

This issue also presents a selection of papers that originated in a 2018 conference on the aesthetic and its reconfigurations. In 2018, the Department of Philosophy of the University of Malta hosted the 5th edition of its international conference, *Engaging the Contemporary*, which featured around fifty speakers.¹ The *Engaging the Contemporary* series started as a seminar in 2014 on Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, commemorating the anniversary of their death (thirtieth and tenth respectively) and bringing together scholars to discuss their work, especially regarding its extensions and uses beyond its original confines. A year later, in 2015, it focused on the work of two other contemporary philosophers, Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière. Future editions of *Engaging the Contemporary* became international conferences. In 2016, the conference considered Speculative Realism in relation to Phenomenology, while the 2017 edition dealt with issues in contemporary political philosophy and social theory. The overarching concern of this conference series revolves around the ability of philosophy and academia to engage with the contemporary, and asks questions such as: What tools do we have at our disposal to engage with the present? Where can matters change, and how? How can academic research inform such debates? The rationale of this conference series is that, contrary to many misconceptions, philosophy does not happen in a vacuum but rather within historical and social contexts to which philosophical ideas react and give new meanings.

With this in mind, the 2018 edition of the conference foregrounded a broad branch of philosophy—aesthetics and the philosophy of art—and invited different theoretical and

¹ This took place on the 1st and 2nd of November at the Valletta Campus of the University of Malta. See <https://www.um.edu.mt/events/etc2018> [accessed 1 December 2019].

methodological viewpoints to engage with it. Moreover, the conference theme was also motivated by the fact that Valletta was one of the cities that in 2018 had the title of European Capital of Culture. The title of “capital of culture” brought with it various, often spirited, debates (which can be further explored in the articles of a 2017 *antae* special issue on Malta and the arts and, especially, in a 2018 response article by Aaron Aquilina).² What does it mean for a city to be a capital of culture? What remains of the possibility of subversive art in view of state co-option? What can be said on the politics of memorials and memorialisation? How do capitalist and neoliberal cultures impact artistic practices? What, after all, is art today? How is it experienced and how does it affect its observers? The conference was, implicitly and in some form, a contribution to this debate.

‘Engaging the Contemporary 2018: Reconfiguring the Aesthetic’ addressed current debates on aesthetics and the philosophy of art in four related ways, namely by: i) re-viewing the *history* of aesthetics; ii) re-examining philosophical *concepts* in aesthetics; iii) reflecting on the relationship between aesthetics and traditional and emerging *media and art forms*; and iv) considering the *intersections* of aesthetics with various academic and non-academic disciplines as well as broader discourses and practices. This fourfold engagement attempted to consider the multifaceted nature of the aesthetic: from theories of sensual perception to the philosophy and practice of aesthetic production and reception, as well as concepts of art and beauty and their critical questioning and creative transformation.

The conference sought to challenge sedimented ways of thinking by moving beyond the established disciplinary boundaries that segregate the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic. While recognising the continuing role of both established and relatively recent aesthetic forms, one must also explore the outcomes of when the aesthetic *spills over*, as it seems to do by necessity, into other discourses and practices. An emphasis on the place and form of the aesthetic in contemporary times, moreover, calls for an inquiry into categories of contemporary artistic expression and judgement, questioning the commodification of art and beauty in contemporary cultures, and challenging the standardisation of aesthetic norms in capitalist societies.

But, before all this, one observes the gesture typical of philosophical practice: that is, to engage with a concept by tracing its history. This is not just historical work for its own sake, but a way of seeing how philosophical ideas—old and new—can speak to the contemporary, how philosophy can shed new light on old problems. One aspect of discussing aesthetics today also means engaging the aesthetic in history. The history of philosophy is rich with differing accounts of what constitutes the aesthetic. The notion of beauty, often seen as the primary concern of aesthetics, has been invoked and debated by canonical authors such as Plato, Aquinas, Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and others. Another task of this historical investigation is to explore discussions on aesthetics by those usually marginalised by the canonical shadow, as well as critical investigations of connections between aesthetics and constructions of gender, race, and class. A further concern of such a historicising approach is to locate the aesthetic in underexplored places, such as writers’

² See *antae*, 4(2-3) (2017), and Aaron Aquilina, ‘Again, Plato’s Garden, Again’, *antae*, 5(1) (2018), 101-119.

styles, tone, writing, and ethos. Apart from rooting contemporary debates, history can also function to prioritise, legitimise, or reify particular understandings of the aesthetic that must be subjected to scrutiny.

A different but related approach recognises that central concepts in debates on aesthetics are continually revised and challenged. A notion such as creativity has entertained connotations that range from artistic genius to transgression to divine illumination to, more recently, entrepreneurship and innovation. The notions of art, beauty, and the sublime themselves have been subject to extensive rethinking and reconfiguration. Treading further conceptually, debates in aesthetics have engaged with the core concepts in the repertoire of philosophy, such as truth, value, ethics, reality, representation, and form. While these concepts have illuminated philosophical debates on aesthetics, philosophy does not have a monopoly over concepts, and these core concepts are also part of many other domains; moving between discourses, new pathways of thought about aesthetics emerge.

Debates on aesthetics and art must be sensitive to the variety of media and emerging art forms, as well as to how each form might defy the notion of medium. While aesthetics in traditional debates might have been more immediately associated with painting, sculpture, photography and film, this association has been widened. Not only have the performing, digital and applied arts widened the realm of aesthetic productions and their media quantitatively, but they have also necessitated a radical rethinking of what art is, where it could be looked for, and who gets to decide what constitutes it. Following Susan Sontag's and Judith Butler's reflections on, for example, war photography, the increasing presence of visual images and film through the spread of digital media needs to be theorised critically.

The connection between aesthetics and politics is another rich arena of debate. Constructed as opposites in notions of aesthetic autonomy, their relationship has also been debated in many other ways. While hegemonic discourses tend to consider political, committed art as automatically of lower aesthetic value, other conceptions, such as Rancière's, productively explore links between politics and aesthetics. In this context, the role of perception (*aisthesis*) in the political realm can be studied, as well as, for example, questions on the interconnections between aesthetic norms and politics pertaining to the body or to changing views of nature and the built environment. Following Walter Benjamin, a problematic aestheticisation of politics can also be observed in current political media practices and spectacles; at the same time, it is highly relevant to ask how Benjamin's positive counter-concept, the politicisation of art, is or can be theorised and practised today.

Without wanting to sound romantic about it, this approach to aesthetics calls for the practice of a more ancient understanding of philosophy, where knowledge is not as fragmented and divided into specialised disciplines, each marked by their technical jargon. Universities thrive on having knowledge neatly divided into different and clearly demarcated pigeonholes. While respecting intellectual rigour, embracing true diversity in academia implies that inter-disciplinarity be not just a buzzword but a regular practice in universities. This *antae* issue, including contributions from the *Engaging the Contemporary* conference alongside other

submissions, are a contribution to this healthy and dynamic practice of truly thinking the present and engaging the contemporary.

This issue thus opens with Tünde Varga's essay ('The Power of Imagination? Aesthetic Autonomy and Critique in Contemporary Art'), which appraises the cultural and political legacy of Western notions of "art" that still haunts our contemporary. Varga aims to reconsider the aesthetic and its role in shaping current political and social spaces; to this end, her examination is initiated through a meta-analysis of academic debate on art systems and their respective definitions and is then moved towards discussions on the recurring dismissal of imagination, creativity and art practice, the role of institutional critique, and ethical, political, and socio-historical responses to art. Ultimately, as Varga argues, understanding the socially constructed basis of the notion of aesthetic autonomy allows us to conceive—or at least meditate—new possibilities of expression and of enacting a shifting of the borders of what "art" can be.

Following from Varga's wider scope of discussion are two articles that delve into particular manifestations of aesthetic practice. David Prescott-Steed's essay ('Towards a Sensibility of Infinity: the Abyss and Anish Kapoor') invites us to look at the enigmatic work of Anish Kapoor, whose artworks blur the lines between the finite and the infinite, the structured and the boundless. Evoking our own groundlessness, Kapoor's sculptural works raise questions around our contemporary state—one lacking a particular sense of "self presence"—against the indeterminate backdrop of our late-modern cultural condition. In a discussion encompassing problematisations of (self-)identification, (cultural) memory, the space of the audience, representation, origin, and death, Prescott-Steed interrogates the motifs of the void and the abyss in order to bring out the counter-capitalist sentiments evoked in Kapoor's quiet and meditative sculptures. In contrast, Andrea Austin's article on the aesthetic logic of Mattel's Hot Wheels ('Hot Wheels, Cool Cars, and an Aesthetics of Simulation') highlights the loud declarations of company aesthetics to make their toy cars look new, shiny, and cool. Indeed, Austin at length interrogates the meanings and usage of the word "cool"—as expressed not only through the visual iconography of the toy cars but also through associated media and accessories—in order to follow aesthetic relations that bridge the real, the hyperreal, and the simulation. This leads her, in turn, to investigate the development of technological postmodernity, as well as posthumanity, as epitomised by aesthetic direction: where *going somewhere* means also *getting somewhere*.

The following two articles more overtly engage the philosophical aspects of the aesthetic. The first, an essay by Luca Siniscalco ('Cosmological Creativity: an Aesthetic World Perspective'), looks at symbolical and imagistic interpretations of the world enabled through a hermeneutical approach, here considered as an alternative instrument or route towards an alternative structuring of reality and the world of phenomena. Siniscalco traces the tensions between the philosophical traditions of the figure of the genius and those of more cosmological, and less individual, perspectives. In light of this dualism, Siniscalco considers images as a "bridge" between artist, creation, and world—an idea that he develops by turning to Heidegger's idea of the Fourfold in order to highlight the artist as mediatory subject in the eternal exchange between self and world. Similarly, the essay by Rômulo Eisinger Guimarães

and Robert Farrugia ('Kant and Henry on Kandinsky and Abstract Art: concerning the Inward Turn in Art') also looks at the ever-changing dynamics between nature and the artist, the external and the radically internal. Engaging with Kandinsky's argument in favour of non-representational art, Guimarães and Farrugia examine this inward turn in art by bringing in Kant's aesthetic judgements and Henry's phenomenology of life to bear on the idea of how abstractionism may point towards the subject's innermost dimensions. As such, the authors triangulate these three thinkers in order to foreground the relation between visible art and the utterly invisible yet lived interiority of the subject.

Luca Vargiu's essay ('Notes for an Aesthetic Approach to Walking') follows four distinct approaches towards a philosophical and artistic appraisal of walking, namely: 'odology', 'hodological space', 'strollology', and 'walkscapes'. Despite their divergences and unique perspectives, Vargiu here sees in common a distinct attempt to understand the relation and dynamic configuration of body and space and, as such, attempts to sketch the subject as, specifically, the *walking* subject. Spaces and sites are thus given aesthetic meanings and values as they are imbued with, and at times made indistinguishable from, emotions, ideas, and various bodily sensations. Vargiu's essay, then, examines the possibilities for considering walking as an aesthetic practice, or even as an artform in and of itself.

With this focus on the subject's body there comes, invariably, a social appraisal of the body's value. The following two articles deal with bodies that have been relegated to spaces termed marginal but, as both articles suggest, this act of power also inherently allows for a resistance of such classification. Casey Robertson's essay ('Exploring Means of Transgender Agency through Aesthetic Theory and Practice') analyses the intersections between aesthetics and gender in order to illuminate potential new connections, pathways, and possibilities for the transgender movement, aesthetic theory, and political engagement. Robertson looks, in particular, at trans* studies and the transgender movement, building on Singer's concept of the transgender sublime in order to unearth the matrix of affects at stake in these connections, as well as to reveal how aesthetic sensibilities may function, socio-historically, as both a liberal and repressive shaping of bodies, transformations, and perceptions. Robertson thus figures an aesthetics of emergency that allows for the possibilities of mobilisation and agency from the marginal spaces of trans* subjectivity. Gail McFarland (in her essay 'Stacey Abrams: Never Conquered. Always Black.') is similarly interested in the representational and transformational sites of marginalised agency, and to this end analyses Stacey Abrams's non-concession speech in terms of the intersections of aesthetics with the politics of race and gender. McFarland sees Abrams as both the object and subject of her political message, and further notes, in line with Fred Moten, how Abrams's performance may be understood as an expression of fugitive Blackness: that is, the aesthetic manifestation of historically practised oppression expressed as social, political, and economic identity. McFarland's analysis ranges from the linguistic to the televisual, focusing on gaze, tone, and even clothing in identifying the speech as a moment of resistance to the hegemonic powers of race, class, and gender.

As noted earlier, and as the following two contributions evidence, notions of the aesthetic are never far from the literary. Ella Mudie's essay ('Gutted buildings: the hapticity of demolition in Émile Zola's *The Kill*') looks at Zola's second instalment of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle

and its foregrounding of the haptic interface between body and (built) environment. Mudie begins with the historical and receptive conditions of the novel and subsequently turns to the inherently interdisciplinary study of affect, the spatial shifts of late modern capitalist society and the *haussmannisation* of Paris, and the concept of touch in materialist and economic contexts. Thus marking the novel's relevance to contemporary debates on the place of aesthetics in literary criticism and beyond, Mudie's reading connects modernity's structures of feeling and alienation with those same structures demolished in *The Kill*. Gabriel Zammit's essay ('W.G. Sebald and the Poetics of Total Destruction') looks at different forms of destruction—specifically, the destruction wrought by the past on present potentialities of representation and experience. Focussing specifically on *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Austerlitz*, Zammit works with Benjaminian and Kantian thought in order to analyse Sebald's idea of witnessing, as well as the textual and stylistic representation of this destruction through a manner of literary montage that lets appear the aporetic breaking of subjects and their contexts. Zammit concludes by suggesting that the Sebaldian performance of the sublime sets up a powerful critique of rationality which has troubling implications on the concept of history while disallowing the foreclosure consequent to the sublime reflex.

Moving to the final two articles of this double issue, it seems this editorial must end on a sour note; both Aubrey Tang and Markéta Dudová deal with the "disgusting" and its relation to the aesthetic. Tang (in 'Hong Kong's Cinema of Cruelty: Visceral Visuality in *Drug War*') looks at Johnnie To's 2012 film in order to address the failure of common narrative strategies in the face of sociopolitical ideology, specifically in terms of China's socialist judiciary and Hong Kong's capitalist economy. Tang argues how repulsive visceral images may function as the cinema's aesthetic response to current paradoxical political ideologies, where involuntary bodily responses—such as hyperventilating and defecation—mark the political subject's lack of power and comprehension; in short, the powerless of the political abject. The essay's focus on the gestic aesthetic thus challenges the limits and borders of the body in both potentially positive as well as disturbing ways, with an examination of the trespassing of the state into bodies deemed criminal or unassimilable. Likewise, Dudová (in 'The Aesthetics of Vomiting in Nietzsche's Philosophy') analyses how vomiting and the concept of disgust are linked to the aesthetic and the sublime, further relating vomiting to the expressive and emetic functions of language. Beginning with Longinus and moving on to Romantic conceptions of vomiting, Dudová traces the disgusting as an underlying structure of the aesthetic, rather than its "other", and locates nausea as both a social mechanism as well as, relatedly, a textual practice structuring the philosophy of Nietzsche. Ultimately, Dudová's essay brings this issue to an apt full circle, pushing the boundaries of the aesthetic into the non-aesthetic and, in so doing, blurring any distinguishing lines.