

Francis Halsall, Julia Jansen, and Tony O'Connor, eds.
Rediscovering Aesthetics: Transdisciplinary Voices from Art History, Philosophy, and Art Practice.
Stanford: Stanford University Press 2009.
322 pages
US\$65.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-8047-5990-8)
US\$24.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-8047-5991-5)

Rediscovering Aesthetics consists of a series of essays divided into three sections indicated by the subtitle of the book: 'Aesthetics in Art History and Art Theory', 'Aesthetics in Philosophy', and 'Aesthetics in Artistic and Curatorial Practice'. The voices deployed vary widely with respect to subject matter, methodology and style; the authors range from academic luminaries such as Arthur Danto, Thierry de Duve and Michael Kelly to artists engaged in art criticism and theoretical discourse such as Robert Morris, Carolee Schneemann and Adrian Piper. The discussions, though varied, for the most part deal with visual arts.

In the spirit of (post)modern self-reflexivity, preoccupied with ends and resurrections, the book addresses the alleged rejection and neglect of aesthetics by philosophy, art history and art itself, and attempts to recover and reinvigorate it. Framing the intention, editors open the discussion by an introduction dealing precisely with the '(Re)Discovering of Aesthetics'. They begin by emphasizing the inter- or cross-disciplinary nature of aesthetics and thus an inherent interconnectedness of the principal fields framing the sections of the book, namely, art history, philosophy and art practice. The meaning of aesthetics, the editors remind us, is itself multifarious: for Hegel it is philosophy of art, for Kant a matter of beauty and taste, for Baumgarten (who coined the term as we know it today) it deals with sensuous experience, whereas for contemporary aestheticians like Carolyn Korsmeyer, it is a matter of the ugly rather than the beautiful or the sublime. Whether something is beautiful or ugly is ultimately a question of taste so, no matter the viewpoint and interpretation, aesthetics is most frequently criticized for being insufficiently rigorous and serious, unlike, for instance, the art historical science. However, despite the attempts to reject or neglect aesthetics, art history—as the study or art works—inevitably relies upon philosophical aesthetics in trying to address the fundamental issue of the constitution and definition of art. Thus, settling the score, along with the more recent discipline of visual culture studies, art history and aesthetics remain interdependent. Aesthetics, further contend the editors, plays a central role in continental philosophy. Given the dominance of analytic philosophy in Anglo-American academe, this prominence is ultimately overshadowed, thus securing a general impression of the secondary value of aesthetics in comparison to such philosophical disciplines like ontology, epistemology and ethics. With regard to art practice, the opposition to aesthetics ranges from Duchamp's 'anaesthetic' declarations and attitudes to what the critic and theorist Hal Foster phrases as the 'anti-aesthetic' tendencies of postmodernism.

Works of artists/philosophers such as Robert Morris and Carolee Schneemann testify to the ambivalent relationship between aesthetics and art practice: on the one hand, philosophical aesthetics infuses and permeates their artistic practice; on the other, they refuse to interpret aesthetics in terms of unifying, rigid philosophical principles.

In what follows I provide a brief exposition of three essays, one from each section, and conclude with an overall evaluation. Richard Woodfield's '*Kunstwissenschaft* versus *Ästhetik*: The Historians' Revolt Against Aesthetics' provides a detailed account of the development of art history starting with Heinrich Wölfflin (widely considered to be the 'father' of modern art history) and extending to Ernst Gombrich (considered by many as the most influential and popular art historian of the twentieth century). This account examines the establishment of art history as a modern academic discipline with a view to its relationship toward aesthetics. Early *Kunstwissenschaft*, as it develops in the German-speaking academe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rejects aesthetics in a twofold manner: first, it rejects the post-Kantian philosophical aesthetics because of its idealism and abstraction, which ultimately divorces art from its objective, material and historical context; second, it rejects aesthetics in the sense of empirical appreciation of art that reduces it to subjective connoisseurship. This rejection, however, according to Woodfield who aptly navigates through the German scholarship of the period, is not an outright negation but rather an attempt at reevaluation of aesthetics. Playing upon the Alois Riegl's (another important figure in the early development of modern art history) notions of *Kunstwollen* ('will to art') and *Kunstbegehren* ('desiring to art') as the *spiritus movens* of an art historical epoch, Woodfield draws a parallel between the start of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Both beginnings are testimonies to a tremendous creation and expansion of new genres and media and the reevaluation of the very nature of the work of art. Thanks to the insistence of art history on the concrete, material aspect of the art work, aesthetics can now reinforce the aspirations of art history in escaping the 'straightjacket imposed by the Enlightenment concept of art and its modernist consequences' (33).

Arthur Danto's 'The Future of Aesthetics' is one of the most interesting, if academically suspect, essays: it is interesting because it represents a self-reflection on an opus spanning over forty years, anecdotes and all; it is academically suspect because it verges on the incoherent. Danto defines aesthetics as 'the way things show themselves, together with the reasons for preferring one way of showing itself to another' (103). The art works are defined as '*embodied meanings*' as they are about something and they are embodied in the material of the object (112). Thus, aesthetics is not a necessary component of art. The background and assumptions supporting this inference are numerous: Danto's reaction to the pop art of the 1960s, Hegel's notions of objective and subjective spirit, Peirce's aesthetic qualities, Heidegger's moods, Sartre's nausea, exploitation of the mood of terror by the US Department of Homeland Security and the Nazi Nuremberg trials. Here Peirce and Heidegger curiously illustrate a liberation of aesthetics from its traditional preoccupation with beauty and a relocation of this beauty

within the domain of the ‘ontology of being human’ (115). Hence, according to Danto, the rediscovery of aesthetics would consist in the move away from ‘ontological preoccupations’—ontological, one is to presume, in the pure, non-Peircean, non-Heideggerian sense of the word—and toward a pragmatic, life-oriented perspective (116). Indeed, there are flashes of lucidity in the analyses of the works by Andy Warhol; at the same time, there are intriguing references to such things as metrosexuals and the TV show ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’, presumably exemplifying an effect of ‘activist’, ‘diversified’ and ‘deconstructionist’ aesthetic practices (105).

Robert Morris’ ‘Toward an Ophthalmology of the Aesthetic and an Orthopedics of Seeing’ in many ways encapsulates the overall intention of the editors: it is an interdisciplinary effort that considers art in the broad sense of the word (not just visual arts but also music, dance, and new media and genres), incorporates both analytic and continental philosophical traditions, and is occasionally interspersed with quasi-poetic self-reflective spurts. Working with a deflationary theory of truth, Morris attempts to devise a general strategy applicable to avant-garde art and beyond. The Art Club Déflationnaire, as Morris labels it, includes Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Jasper Johns and Simone Forti, and insists on ‘the celebration of the ordinary’ and thus ‘an implicit rejection of the sublime’ (236). The Art Club Déflationnaire paves the way for the democratization of art and the general explosion of the post-high art that we are witnesses to at present.

Rediscovering Aesthetics is an impressive collection that lives up to the mission outlined in its subtitle. The internal exchange is rather notable as well. Thierry de Duve’s ‘Kant’s “Free Play” in the Light of Minimal Art’ deals in part with a work of art by Robert Morris. Diarmuid Costello’s ‘Retrieving Kant’s Aesthetic for Art Theory After Greenberg: Some Remarks on Arthur C. Danto and Thierry de Duve’ includes a criticism of Danto’s and de Duve’s positions; Robert Morris and Carolee Schneemann famously collaborated in the 1960s. Overall, this book is to be highly recommended to both experts and merely curious readers.

Vladimir D. Thomas

Herzing University New Orleans