

adventures in aesthetics

rethinking aesthetics beyond the bifurcation of nature

A 2020 online workshop organised by
Melanie Sehgal & Alex Wilkie

Thursday 25th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Friday 26th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Tuesday 30th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Wednesday 1st July: 14:00 – 17:00

Please note: all times in BST

with contributions by

Heather Davis

Matthew Fuller

Nicholas Gaskill

Andrew Goffey

Michael Guggenheim

Maximilian Haas

Michael Halewood

Cécile Malaspina

Mike Michael

Marsha Rosengarten

Martin Savransky

Melanie Sehgal

Alex Wilkie

Why Adventures of Aesthetics?

Since the 18th century and the event of modern science, the nature of aesthetics, aesthetic practices and the habits of thinking about aesthetics have, by and large, mirrored the ordering of science founded on the bifurcation of nature. Whereas science and scientific practice has forcefully mobilized itself around ‘bare nature’ independent of ‘culture’ and the ‘social’, aesthetic thinking has also colluded in this opposition, concerning itself with the experiencing subject, perception and artistic expression.

Recently, however, the question of the aesthetic has begun to proliferate in unexpected areas of inquiry wholly ignoring these modern bifurcations. In times of anthropogenic climate change and mass extinction on the one hand, and increased dependency on ‘technoscientific’ deliverance on the other, Alfred North Whitehead’s (2004 [1920]) diagnosis of the bifurcation of nature seems to receive a new pertinence and urgency. New ways of thinking about and doing aesthetics as a more-than-human realm open up the very real and concrete possibility that aesthetic processes and capacities are not the preserve of privileged human actors – such as artists, architects, designers and their audiences or users – nor do they simply concern the beautiful and the sublime. Although philosophers of science, notably Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, have taken up the challenges posed by the bifurcation of nature and its implications for understanding and thinking with scientific practices and knowledge production, less attention has been paid to its corollary for aesthetic practices and processes.

Meanwhile, in the face of new cosmological possibilities and cosmopolitics (Stengers 2005) engendered by epochal propositions, such as the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2002), Capitalocene (Moore 2015) or Chthulucene (Haraway 2015), there is a demand for new ways of thinking and feeling, new knowledge and aesthetic practices beyond the bifurcation of nature that engendered modern science and its aesthetic mirror image. The proposition of this workshop, then, is to imagine ways of addressing this demand and explore, or gamble, on the prospect that aesthetics might be thought and practiced differently, and, in so doing, acknowledge the historicities of thought that have sought a different image of aesthetics. Thus, we might wager that today aesthetics – rather than ontology or ethics – should be placed at the centre of philosophical as well as social and cultural experimentation and that aesthetics should be recognised as the primary manner of care and concern for the world.

Hence, far from criticizing aesthetics at large or suggesting that, by being irredeemably marked by the bifurcation of nature, the realm of the aesthetic has become superfluous, this workshop seeks to inquire into the importance and scope of a ‘new aesthetic paradigm’ as Felix Guattari (1995) envisioned it: not confined to a special realm of society but rather as transversally cutting across every domain of experience and “placed on the manner of being” (ibid. 109). However

tentative and speculative such a task might remain, it derives its importance from the fact that changing not only modern habits of thought but also those of feeling and perceiving today has become an urgent task. We might, then, wager that today – when the limits of the framework of western modernity have become clearly palpable in multiple areas of experience – there is a particular import in placing aesthetics at the centre of experimentation in knowledge practices. Hence, this interdisciplinary workshop, sets out to explore this wager by considering the following propositions:

1. How might a wider idea of aesthetics (and anaesthetics) manifest today and how might it be appreciated in knowledge practices? What images of thought does it make possible? What does the move from neutrality, objectivity and facts to an aesthetic constructivism make possible?
2. How to account for the aesthetic (and anaesthetic) nature of current knowledge practices? What roles does the aesthetic play in knowledge practices not conventionally associated with it (e.g. sciences and social sciences)?
3. If a new aesthetic paradigm designates a production of existence that concerns the capacity of entities to feel, how might we detect new modes of ‘being affected’ in the world and how do we as knowledge practitioners respond?
4. How does a generalized notion of aesthetics relate to historically prior and/or non-western ways of conceiving of the aesthetic? Can we learn from these to refigure western habits of thought?
5. What repercussions does such an aesthetic paradigm have on existing aesthetic practices as well as the philosophical discipline called aesthetics?

References

- Crutzen, P. J. 2002. Geology of mankind. *Nature*, 415(6867), 23.
- Guattari, F. 1995. *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm*. Indiana University Press.
- Haraway, D. 2015. Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin. *Environmental humanities*, 6(1), 159-165.
- Moore, J. W. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso Books.
- Stengers, I. 2005. The Cosmopolitical Proposal. In: Latour, B. and Weibel, P. eds. *Making things public*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 994-1003.
- Whitehead, A. N. 1933 [1967]. *Adventures of ideas*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Whitehead, A. N. 2004 [1920]. *The concept of nature*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Programme

Please note: All times are in british summer time (BST). We will be using Zoom for the workshop and we will send out Zoom invitations for each meeting

Session 1: Introduction: why adventures in aesthetics?

Thursday 25th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Chair: Melanie Sehgal. Co-Chair: Alex Wilkie

Introduction

Melanie Sehgal & Alex Wilkie:

A new taste for life: Value ecologies and the aesthetics of the otherwise

Martin Savransky

Values of aesthetics and cosmology in Whitehead and Guattari

Maximilian Haas

Session 2: Anesthesia, noise & disease

Friday 26th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Chair: Martin Savransky. Co-Chair: Melanie Sehgal.

Toward an aesthetics of infection

Marsha Rosengarten

The aesthetics of dissociation, torpor and paralysis

Cécile Malaspina

Spasms

Matthew Fuller & Andrew Goffey

The aesthetics of a never event: Prehensions and clinical malpractice

Alex Wilkie

Session 3: Aesthetics & practices of care within and beyond the arts

Tuesday 30th June: 14:00 – 17:00

Chair: Marsha Rosengarten. Co-Chair: Alex Wilkie

Adventures in aesthetics response

Heather Davis

Whitehead on aesthetic feeling, metaphysics and the possibility of art

Michael Halewood

High finishing: On the aesthetics of care/care of aesthetics in social scientific research

Mike Michael

Materiations: How to practice un-bifurcating socio-material practices

Michael Guggenheim

Session 4: Aesthetics & adventures in/of education

Wednesday 1st July: 14:00 – 17:00

Chair: Alex Wilkie. Co-Chair: Michael Guggenheim

Back to the classroom: On aesthetic education

Nicholas Gaskill

Schools of feeling

Melanie Sehgal

Closing Discussion

Biographies

Heather Davis is an Assistant Professor of Culture and Media at Eugene Lang College, The New School, in New York. Her current book project traces the ethology of plastic and its links to petroculturalism. Heather has written about the intersection of art, politics, and ecology for numerous art and academic publications and lectured internationally, including at MoMA (New York), HKW (Berlin), the National Gallery of Canada, Yinchuan Biennale, and the Sonic Acts Academy (Amsterdam). She is the co-editor of *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015) and editor of *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada* (MAWA and McGill-Queen's UP, 2017).

Matthew Fuller is Professor of Cultural Studies. With Usman Haque, he is co-author of 'Urban Versioning System v1.0' (ALNY) and with Andrew Goffey, of 'Evil Media' (MIT), Editor of 'Software Studies, a lexicon' (MIT) and co-editor of the journal *Computational Culture*. He is involved in a number of projects in art, media and software and is the author of the forthcoming, 'How to Sleep, in art, biology and culture' (Bloomsbury).

Nicholas Gaskill is Associate Professor of American Literature at the University of Oxford and Tutorial Fellow at Oriel College. He is the author of *Chromographia: American Literature and the Modernization of Color* (University of Minnesota Press 2018) and an editor of *The Lure of Whitehead* (University of Minnesota Press 2014). He works on pragmatism, largely construed, and aesthetics, with a special interest in literature.

Andrew Goffey is Associate Professor in Critical Theory and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts at the University of Nottingham. He is an author and theorist, writing in the space between philosophy, science and culture, and is the author, together with Matthew Fuller, of *Evil Media* (MIT Press, 2012).

Michael Guggenheim is a Reader in the Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London where he also Co-Directs the Centre for Invention and Social Process, alongside Marsha Rosengarten and Alex Wilkie. Michael has directed an ERC research grant entitled *Organising Disaster: Civil Protection and the Population*. He was a member of the research group *Communicating Disaster* at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) Bielefeld. He has co-edited the volumes *Disasters and Politics: Materials, Experiments, Preparedness* (Wiley Blackwell/The Sociological Review) and *Inventing the Social* (Mattering Press).

Maximilian Haas is a post doctoral researcher at the DFG-Graduiertenkolleg Das Wissen der Künste, Universität der Künste Berlin. Maximilian studied applied theater studies at Justus Leibig University in Giessen and defended his dissertation in media studies at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne on the topic of *Animals on Stage: An Aesthetic Ecology of Performance*. He has taught courses at universities and colleges of art in Giessen, Cologne, Bochum, Berlin, Dresden, and Vienna. Maximilian's recent academic work has focused on the aesthetics of contemporary (performative) art and themes of science and animal studies, in addition to the philosophy of poststructuralism, new materialism, and pragmatism.

Michael Halewood is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Essex. He is the author of *Rethinking the Social through Durkheim, Marx, Weber and Whitehead* (Anthem Press, 2014) and *A. N. Whitehead and Social Theory: Tracing a Culture of Thought* (Anthem Press, 2011). Michael is co-editor of *Butler on Whitehead* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012) and he is the translator of *Nature as Event: The Lure of the Possible* by Didier Debaise (Duke University Press, 2017).

Cécile Malaspina is a philosopher based in London. She is 'Directeur de Programme' at the College International de Philosophie, Paris, and will be running their London seminar on the 'Aesthetics of Noise' at King's College from 2020, where she is a visiting fellow. She is the author of *An Epistemology of Noise* and an official translator of Gilbert Simondon. She is also a member of the editorial board at Copy Press and *Angelaki, Journal for the Humanities*.

Mike Michael is a sociologist of science and technology, and a professor at the Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology at the University of Exeter. Research interests have touched on the relation of everyday life to technoscience, the use of design to develop a 'speculative methodology', and the role of aesthetics and affect in the making of publics. Recent publications include (co-authored with Andy Boucher et al.) *Energy Babble: Entangling Design and STS* (Mattering Press, 2018) and *Actor-Network Theory: Trials, Trails and Translations* (Sage, 2017).

Marsha Rosengarten is Professor in Sociology and Co-Director of the Centre for Invention and Social Process, Goldsmiths, University of London. Marsha's research has provided the health and medical field with conceptual analysis for tackling the medical and policy challenges posed by biomedical interventions (including HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis) and associated issues with research and implementation. She is co-author with Alex Wilkie and Martin Savransky of an edited collection *Speculative Research: The Lure of Possible Futures* (Routledge, 2017), co-author Mike Michael *Innovation and Biomedicine: Ethics, Evidence and Expectation in HIV* (Palgrave, 2013) and author of *HIV Interventions: Biomedicine and the Traffic in Information and Flesh* (University of Washington Press, 2009) for which she received the Foundation for the Sociology of Health and Illness Book Prize 2010. Her most recent articles focus on the logics of biomedicine within the global health fields of HIV, Ebola and Tuberculosis drawing from process-oriented approaches in Science and Technology Studies, Speculative Philosophy and Feminist Theory.

Martin Savransky is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London. His writing and scholarship spans pragmatist philosophy, postcolonial studies, radical pluralism, and political ecology. He is the author of *Around the Day in Eighty Worlds: Politics of the Pluriverse* (Duke University Press, 2021), and *The Adventure of Relevance* (Palgrave, 2016). He is co-editor of *Speculative Research: The Lure of Possible Futures* (Routledge, 2017), and guest-editor of "Isabelle Stengers and the Dramatization of Philosophy" (*SubStance*, 2018) and of "Problematizing the Problematic" (*Theory, Culture & Society*, 2021). He is currently working on a new project on the concept of "cosmoecology" and the plural revaluation of ecological values.

Melanie Sehgal currently serves as Junior Professor of Literary, Science and Media Studies at the European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder). Her research as a philosopher working on pragmatism, process philosophies, science and technology studies, postcolonial and feminist perspectives as well as on the historiography of philosophy centers on ways of thinking beyond the divides that shape modern thought such as the distinction between nature/culture, fact/fiction, knowing/believing, modern/non-modern etc. Melanie is the author of *Eine situierte Metaphysik. Empirismus und Spekulation bei William James und Alfred North Whitehead* (Konstanz Univ. Press 2016). Together with the artist Alex Martinis Roe, she leads the multidisciplinary working group FORMATIONS, which experimentally develops transdisciplinary techniques of knowing beyond modern habits of thought. She is also a member of the Interdisciplinary Network for the Critical Humanities Terra Critica.

Alex Wilkie is Reader in Design and Social Science in the Department of Design and a Co-Director of the Centre for Invention and Social Process (Sociology), alongside Michael Guggenheim and Marsha Rosengarten, hosted by the Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London. Alex is co-author of *Energy Babble* (Mattering Press) and co-editor of *Studio studies: Operations, Topologies & Displacements* (Routledge, CRESC Series); *Speculative research: The lure of possible futures* (Routledge, CRESC Series), and; *Inventing the Social* (Mattering Press).