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The Search for an "Artless Art": Aesthetics and American Culture

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In recent attempts to recover the concept of the aesthetic for American Studies, the turn to the aesthetic has the function of countering (and possibly revising) the politicization of the field since the 1970s. However, arguments for a return to aesthetics face the difficulty of having to come up with a convincing definition of their key concept. With the exception of John Dewey, aesthetic theory in America has remained underdeveloped, and for a number of (good) reasons, nobody wants to return to the New Critical formalism of the Fifties. The problem is aggravated by the fact that American culture seems to pose an often irritating challenge to traditional aesthetic theory and established aesthetic criteria. This provocation will be my starting point: What happens to the aesthetic in a society in which utilitarianism and individualism are supreme values? One way of countering (self)accusations that American society and culture have been hostile to aesthetic values has been to claim that American culture has been shaped by conditions of democracy and thus offers a unique illustration of democratic culture and a democratic aesthetics. What exactly does that mean, however? In what sense can American culture be understood as manifestation of a democratic aesthetics? In the following paper, I will discuss these questions in three parts: In the first, I will have another look at what happened to the concept of the aesthetic in recent revisionist approaches in American literary and cultural studies. The purpose is to show that these new revisionist studies do not reject the aesthetic but redefine it. In the second part, I want to show that this redefinition is part of an ongoing tradition in American culture which may be characterized as a drive toward what can be called the artlessness of art. In the concluding third part, I want to suggest a possible explanation for this drive by drawing on Tocqueville in order to reassess the concept of a democratic culture and its impact on the idea of the aesthetic.

I.

My first public lecture in academic life was a critique of the Myth and Symbol School in American Studies with the very Germanic title “Das ästhetische Vorverständnis der American Studies” (“Aesthetic Premises in American Studies”). In my essay I argued that the then dominant approach in American Studies, represented by books like *The Machine in the Garden* by Leo Marx, may have been motivated, as American Studies scholars of the first generation claimed, by an attempt to discard the idea of aesthetic autonomy in order to be able to draw on literary texts for an analysis of American culture. However, as I argued, this approach was still decisively influenced by unacknowledged aesthetic premises of the New Criticism and its claim that specifically literary qualities of a text manifest themselves in sets of dualistic patterns, ironic tensions, or repetitions with variations. Scholars of the Myth and Symbol School then projected such literary patterns onto American culture as a whole, so that their description of American culture and society always led to the same predictable claim of a “culture of contradictions” – a term coined by Lionel Trilling on which the Myth and Symbol School drew in order to criticize, as Trilling had done in his discussion of Vernon Louis Parrington, a naively progressivist liberal tradition. Just as Trilling wanted to make a case for the complexity of (American) culture, the Myth and Symbol School used oppositions, conflicts, tensions or contradictions to provide a seemingly shallow American culture with existential depth, a tragic vision, or the power of negation. As Frederick Crews put it in a later critique: “The real America is to be sought, then, in those relatively few books produced by ‘dialectically’ capacious minds” (72). In a correspondence between Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx, presented by Brian Attebery in *American Quarterly*, my point was later conceded when Marx writes to Smith about my essay: “. . . curiously, I find his argument, so far as I can penetrate the language, pretty convincing,” and Smith replied: “As to what I think about Fluck: he is of course a young man who is taking out after one of the Fathers and he certainly goes in for all he can get in the way of scoring points. But in my own case I must admit that he has touched a weak spot. I do recognize that I had internalized so much New Criticism that I said somethings [sic] and even thought some things I would not now endorse” (Attebery 330-1).

How times have changed! Today, it is hard to imagine anybody who would want to claim that aesthetics, not to speak of a formalist aesthetics, is still too dominant in American Studies. By now it has become a frequent complaint that there is hardly any aesthetics left in a heavily politicized field. In his introduction to the volume *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, Emory Elliott registers the striking unwillingness of the new revisionism in American Studies to address questions of aesthetics: In their determination to reject the idea of aesthetic autonomy, literary and cultural American Studies consider the call for a return to aesthetics either as a

conservative ruse, cunningly employed by those who want to diffuse the revisionists’ critique of power or, at best, as outmoded and irrelevant in a time of rhetorical criticism and discourse analysis. Ironically enough, however, this argument implies that the very thing that is criticized – namely the definition of the aesthetic by New Critical formalism – is still assumed to be the authoritative way of defining the aesthetic. If the aesthetic is equated with the idea of an autonomous sphere and the idea of autonomy stands in the way of a historical or political reading of a literary text, then revisionists intent on pursuing such readings have to do away with the aesthetic and redefine it as yet another discursive power effect.

Examples of this “anti-aesthetic attitude” abound in revisionist criticism. One need not think of Mark Seltzer’s radical Foucauldian argument that the power of art is really, at a closer look, the art of power. The more interesting critics are those who are less schematic. These arguments often take F.O. Matthiessen’s seminal study *American Renaissance* as their point of departure. Sacvan Bercovitch’s and Myra Jehlen’s *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, which must be considered the break-through volume for the new revisionism in American Studies, provides a case in point. Trilling and his critique of Progressivism had been a crucial point of reference for the Myth and Symbol critics. Now the left liberal Matthiessen is taken as point of departure. Crews gives a plausible explanation for this shift when he says about Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*: “. . . it was the first book both to claim international stature for the alleged giants of the mid-nineteenth-century . . . and to demonstrate their responsiveness to the New Critical techniques of analysis that were helping to illuminate another recently secured canon, that of modernism” (72). Matthiessen, in other words, was the first to link democracy and formalism and, by doing so, created a new form of authorization for the study of American literature. However, in Matthiessen’s world and that of the liberal tradition, a literary work can only be one of the two: either “aesthetically valuable” or, on the other hand, “ideological.” Art is distinguished by the fact that it transcends politics and ideology. In contrast, Sacvan Bercovitch claims in a well-known essay on ideology:

For, though in some sense, certainly, a work of art transcends its time – though it may be transhistorical or transcultural or even transcanonical – it can no more transcend ideology than an artist’s mind can transcend psychology; and it may even be that writers who translate political attitudes into universal ideals are just as implicated as the others in the social order and, in the long run, are perhaps more useful in perpetuating it. (“The Problem of Ideology” 639)

Is the aesthetic “nothing but” ideological then? Bercovitch takes pains to avoid this impression which, in the final consequence, might run the risk of inspiring the question why there should be a discipline of literary studies at all. With reference to the writers of the American Renaissance he says:

This is not at all to denigrate their achievement. Nor is it to deny that American writers have sometimes used the symbol of America to expose ideological contradictions, and so on some level turned the cultural symbology against the dominant culture. Nor, finally, is it to forget the special capacities of language to break free of social restrictions and through its own dynamics to undermine the power structure it seems to reflect. It will continue to be a function of literary history to define what is extraordinary, irreducible, and uncontained about our major texts. ("The Problem of Ideology" 639)

One such "irreducible" dimension is the text's ambiguity. In New Critical formalism, ambiguity is one of literature's main devices to distance itself from ideology. Ambiguity sets up resistance to simple messages and thereby to the text's instrumentalization for political or ideological purposes. However, if there is no longer any ontological difference between art and ideology, then ambiguity can also have an ideological function. One of the best objects of demonstration for this claim must be Hawthorne to whom revisionist critics have returned again and again in order to show that, in the words of Bercovitch, Hawthorne uses representational modes like ambiguity and irony to absorb and refashion "the radical energies of history" (*The Office of 'The Scarlet Letter'* 90).¹ Similarly, Jonathan Arac's interpretation of "The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*" in the same volume *Ideology and Classic American Literature* begins, in his words, "from the recent debate over 'indeterminacy' in interpretation" (247) in order to show that the openness usually associated with this indeterminacy and "mystified as the value of 'art' has encouraged neglect of the ideological limits on the 'positions' themselves" (263). Instead of liberating us from ideology, the aesthetic turns out to be an especially cunning and effective form of ideological containment, because it skillfully employs a liberal illusion of freedom and resistance in order to authorize the ideology of American exceptionalism.

The crucial point for Bercovitch and Arac, then, is not that the aesthetic in its traditional formalist version may be misused as authorization of an elite, for example in order to put down ethnic writing and prevent its cultural recognition. Aesthetics has an ideological function not because of suspect undemocratic elite values but because of its founding premise, namely the claim to constitute a separate and autonomous sphere of value. Thus, in contrast to Emory Elliott, the goal of revisionists like Bercovitch or Arac is not to argue for a multicultural aesthetic but to find ways to overcome the separation between art and politics. Bercovitch leaves no doubt about this when he says: "More than that, we can thereby open directions in criticism which have been obscured, ideologically obscured, by the separation of

¹ See also Bercovitch's chapter "The A-Politics of Ambiguity" in his *Office of The Scarlet Letter* where he describes the function of Hawthorne's ambiguous modes of representation as the purpose "to rechannel indeterminacy into pluralism, conflict into correspondence, and relativism into consensus" (24).

art from politics" (100). And in the way in which Bercovitch defines his own project in his follow-up book *The Office of The Scarlet Letter*, this separation has already broken down: "I want to repoliticize *The Scarlet Letter* (in Aristotle's broad sense of the political) by turning the text inside out and the context outside in: to explain the novel's aesthetic design in terms of cultural strategies of control and to allow the culture to reveal itself in all its radical potentiality through its representation in the text" (XVII). One should be fair here: Bercovitch is not arguing for a dismissal of the concept of the aesthetic and its replacement by the category of the political. On the contrary, he wants to show in detail how the aesthetic dimension works. In doing so, he is also not aiming at an ideological unmasking based on the assumption that the aesthetic dimension of the text is veiling a political purpose which only the politically aware critic can extract from underneath its surface. In contrast, Bercovitch's point is that the ideological work is done exactly through the aesthetic dimension of the work. His goal is not to eliminate the aesthetic but to overcome the misleading separation of art and politics because only in this way can the concept of the aesthetic be used for a critique of American ideology.

II.

Contrary to the criticism of conservative critics, then, the new American Studies is not intent on dismissing the aesthetic but on eliminating the idea of its autonomy. In this, it stands in a long line of similar attempts, beginning in Europe in the 18th century and in the United States with American transcendentalism. In effect, one may argue that such a project is built into the idea of the aesthetic itself as it was first defined by Baumgarten, namely as a mode of sensuous perception (*sinnliche Erkenntnis*). As sensuous perception, the aesthetic is a form of knowledge in its own right that needs no authorization beyond itself. This opens up entirely new possibilities for an ongoing process of individualization that begins to accelerate at about the same time in Western societies. The usefulness of the aesthetic for this process lies in two aspects. Philosophically speaking, the aesthetic licenses and encourages the articulation of a subjectivity that does not conform to ideals of Christian self-submission or the claims of reason. Socially speaking, individual voices considered as marginal, as too emotional or even "childish," as "uncontrolled" or even "primitive," can gain cultural representation when they express themselves in an aesthetic mode. Both of these processes, the extension of the idea of subjectivity and the articulation of claims for cultural representation have their common denominator in the concept of recognition. However, and ironically enough, the promise of recognition also works against the idea of the aesthetic, for the prospect of recognition opened up by the realm of the aesthetic can only hope for social or political consequences, if it is not considered "mere fiction." Thus, a cycle is set in

motion: The aesthetic is used for the purpose of claiming recognition (for example, by articulating imaginary elements that cannot yet be expressed in any other way in a culture), but, at the same time, the authorization through an aesthetic mode must aim at overcoming the barrier between art and life in order to secure its social relevance. The aesthetic is discovered as a new and effective mode of self-authorization, but the logic of that authorization necessitates a move against the idea of the aesthetic as a separate realm.

This paradoxical logic can be observed again and again in modern culture, including American culture. Modernism's attack on the aura of the work of art, for instance in Dadaism or surrealism, is well-known, as is postmodernism's programmatic anti-aesthetic (Foster) or de-aestheticization (Rosenberg) in movements such as pop art, junk art, or abject art. But the process started much earlier, as can be demonstrated by going back to two major stages and movements of American culture in the 19th century, American transcendentalism and American realism. In transcendentalism, the aesthetic is a crucial element of self-culture, but by no means a privileged one. It is – or should be – part of everyday life. This is most radically illustrated by Thoreau in his chapter "Sounds" in *Walden*. In *Walden*'s economy of scarcity, art objects have no place. On the contrary, in its institutionalized form, art is part of a social mechanism of self-alienation. The aesthetic therefore has to be rediscovered and redefined as a direct sensuous experience that goes beyond institutionalized aesthetic forms. As Thoreau puts it in his *Journal*: "The music is not in the tune; it is in the sound" (4:144). John Cage has demonstrated at a later stage how such a delimitation of the aesthetic opens up entirely new possibilities of experience, because the accidental sounds of everyday life – the sounds of a plough, birds, the wind, church bells – are now included and are drawing attention to themselves as sounds. A preconceived idea of art as a separate realm would stand in the way of this extended form of aesthetic experience. Traditional ideas of the aesthetic have to be dismissed in order to make a new form of aesthetic experience possible. However, we should not forget the purpose of this extension. It is created, after all, in order to transcend the self-alienation produced by the division of labor. A broadened definition of aesthetic experience can give substance to Thoreau's existence and therefore it is employed to demonstrate to the reader of *Walden* that Thoreau's form of existence is the more profound and substantial one. Thus, overcoming the separation of art and life is also a clever move of self-authorization by claiming that it is aesthetic experience which transcends the commodification of daily life.

Classical American realism does not present, as is often claimed, a pendulum swing back from the romantic period but must be seen in a continuity. Such a claim may appear counter-intuitive at first sight. After all, in contrast to transcendentalism the aim of realism was not to transcend the profanity of everyday life but to accept it and to represent it "truthfully". But what exactly does it mean to depict

reality truthfully? Again, it means to overcome the separation of art and life.² William Dean Howells puts it succinctly: "The light of civilization has already broken even upon the novel, and no conscientious man can now set about painting an image of life without perpetual question of the verity of his work" (48). In American realism, this project of truthful literary representation rested on two premises. One is an almost metaphysical assumption that reality is governed by moral laws. Thus Howells can say: "We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true? This truth, which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry – this truth given, the book cannot be wicked and cannot be weak . . ." (49). If vice is represented truthfully, it will recognize its true nature and recoil. As Howells wrote in a review of Hardy's *Jude, the Obscure*: "Vice can feel nothing but self-abhorrence in the presence of its facts" (152). Consequently, if a literary work is truthful to life, it is, by definition, also great art: "In the whole range of fiction we know of no true picture of life – that is, of human nature – which is not also a masterpiece of literature, full of divine and natural beauty" (49). The truthful is the beautiful; "truly" truthful representation gives the literary text its aesthetic dimension: "But beauty, Senor Valdés explains, exists in the human spirit, and is the beautiful effect which it receives from the true meaning of things" (84).

This is most obvious in the case of Tolstoy. In effect, it is the basis of Howells's great admiration for Tolstoy's work. Tolstoy has managed to achieve the seemingly impossible, namely to make the ethical and the aesthetic identical: "It is usual to speak of the ethical and the aesthetical principles as if they were something separable; but they are hardly even divergent in any artist, and in Tolstoy they have converged from the first . . . In Tolstoy the meaning of the thing is so supreme that the delight imparted by the truth is qualified by no consciousness of the art" (172). Again, we encounter the highly paradoxical phenomenon of an "artless" art which, for Howells, is the only form of "true art" and as such best suited to reveal the moral meaning of reality: "There had been many stories of adultery before 'Anna Karenina,' – nearly all the great novels outside of English are framed upon that argument, – but in 'Anna Karenina' for the first time the whole truth was told about it." Tolstoy's work proves that the truth can "never be anything but moral" (173). This also means, however, that great art has to be deeply "ethical"; if it is not, the aesthetic gains dominance and we have no longer "truthful" art. Real art has to be "artless." It can only be artless, however, if it is ethical, because it is the moral sense that transforms representation into art.³

² For a more detailed version of this argument, see Fluck 2005.

³ Cf. also Stephen Crane who presents almost the same argument: "I decided that the nearer a writer gets to life the greater he becomes as an artist, and most of my prose writings have been toward the goal partially described by that misunderstood and abused word, realism. Tolstoy is the writer I admire most of all" (Pizer 165).

I once toyed with the idea of offering a seminar on American aesthetic theory, but when I put together a list of suitable candidates and looked at the list of names such as Archibald Alison, George Santayana, or Monroe Beardsley, the prospect was so depressing that I dropped the idea. There is one remarkable exception to the rule, however, and that is John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, which drew the theoretical consequences from the development I have sketched here by arguing that the aesthetic is not an inherent property of a text or object, so that an object either possesses aesthetic qualities (and can then be called art) or fails to do so. Instead, in drawing on the example of a man who is approaching the Manhattan skyline on a ferry and who looks at one and the same object first from practical and commercial perspectives and then takes an aesthetic attitude towards the same object, Dewey demonstrates that the aesthetic is constituted by an attitude which we take towards it (140). As I have written in a different context:

The aesthetic, here, is not a word for the intrinsic property of an object. Nor is it identical with art. Hence aesthetics, as a philosophical discipline, is not only and not necessarily a philosophy of art. Nor is it restricted to the study of beauty. Experiences of the sublime, the uncanny, the grotesque, even the ugly have produced their own powerful and influential aesthetics. As a branch of philosophy, aesthetics has a much broader range than the beautiful. Historically, it emerged as a 'science of sensuous knowledge (*sinnliche Erkenntnis*). As Dewey implies, such a mode of perception is part of daily experience and hence, potentially, an everyday occurrence. ("Aesthetics and Cultural Studies" 86)

Consequently, it makes no sense to be against aesthetics, since the aesthetic attitude is part and parcel of daily life. The borderlines between aesthetic experience and everyday life are blurred and highly permeable. Similarly, at about the same time, the Czech structuralist Mukařovský, in his essay on the aesthetic function in architecture, stated that "there is not an object which cannot become its vehicle or, conversely, an object which necessarily has to be its vehicle" (244). The point here is not to reaffirm these by now familiar positions in aesthetic theory but to show how pragmatic aesthetics can be seen as a movement in which the ongoing attempts to overcome the separation of art and life receive a new and sustained theoretical justification. Moreover, Dewey's *Art as Experience* not only offers an aesthetic theory which is designed to overcome the barrier between life and art. It carries the movement towards an "artless art" still one step further by reconceptualizing art as aesthetic function.

III.

What is the reason for these recurring attempts to overcome the separation of art and life? What is their driving force? In scholarship inspired by the new social movements, insistence on the primacy of the aesthetic is identified with a social and political hierarchy that prevents recognition of the cultural claims of marginalized groups. In emphasizing the – from their point of view – unacknowledged political and ideological function of the aesthetic, these scholars do not necessarily mean that the aesthetic is by definition the carrier of conservative or reactionary messages. What they mean is that in conceptualizing aesthetic values as universal standards, a seemingly "innocent" way has been found to justify social and political hierarchies. As Emory Elliott puts it: "The critic in judgment who assumes that there are universal standards of beauty – that 'we all recognize a beautiful face or a great poem when we see one' – will be likely to erase or subordinate an array of human differences and forms of creative expression as being inferior or systematically excluded and marginalized" (3). Consequently, Elliott points out: "The issue then is not whether we can rid ourselves of the disciplines that address the desire for beauty and art; rather, it must be how to redefine the parameters of 'art' and formulate new questions for evaluating cultural expression in ways that are fair and just to all" (9). In other words: The claim for a reconsideration of the aesthetic is made in the name of democratic values. This introduces yet another perspective on the topic and suggests that we should add another dimension to the debate by re-situating it in a venerable American tradition, the search for a democratic aesthetics. If the attack on the aesthetic is made in the name of a radically egalitarian idea of democracy that refuses to take hierarchies for granted, then the question arises whether such an argument must lead to an elimination of the aesthetic or whether it does result in a new version of democratic aesthetics.

There is, of course, by now a sizable literature on the question of a democratic culture and a democratic aesthetics in the United States, in which democratic art is defined as authentic art of the people or as that type of art which articulates democratic ideals and goals. In such definitions, the implied notion of democracy is that of a society based on egalitarian ideals which may not be fully realized yet, however, so that a democratic art is needed in order to affirm and strengthen the democratic ideal. In effect, the description of American democracy as a political system in which the idea of equality has been successfully realized has made Alexis de Tocqueville's study *Democracy in America* a major target of criticism in current revisionist scholarship. Tocqueville's study opens with the famous statement:

No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions. It was easy to see the immense influence of this basic fact on the whole course of society. It gives a particular turn to public opinion and a particular twist to the laws, new maxims to those who govern and particular habits to the governed. (9)

In response, it has become almost a critical routine in current American Studies to point out that Tocqueville was obviously blind to the rampant inequality in the Jacksonian Period. Since he spent hardly more than nine months in the U.S. and relied heavily on such North Eastern upper-class informants as Jared Sparks or William Henry Channing, he seems to have missed entirely what was really going in America.⁴

However, such a criticism seems unable to grasp what is interesting in Tocqueville's analysis. What limited Tocqueville's view, the Olympean perspective of a French aristocrat who interpreted and evaluated everything in comparison with conditions at home, can also be regarded as a major strength of his analysis, because it allowed him to grasp a fundamental transformation that the new political system of democracy brought about. From the large-scale perspective of a comparison between aristocratic and democratic society, Tocqueville's understanding of equality does not refer to the idea of social or economic justice, but to the (then revolutionary) idea of equality of rank. Equality of rank means that, in principle, nobody can claim to be better or more worthy than anybody else. This puts social and cultural life on a new basis, for it creates a need on the part of the citizens of a democratic society to find new sources of recognition. Amy Gutman has described these new conditions brought about by democracy in her introduction to Charles Taylor's *The Politics of Recognition*:

In the ancient regime, when a minority could count on being honored (as 'Ladies' and 'Lords') and the majority could not realistically aspire to public recognition, the demand for recognition was unnecessary for the few and futile for the many. Only with the collapse of stable social hierarchies does the demand for public recognition become commonplace, along with the idea of the dignity of all individuals. Everyone is an equal – a Mr., Mrs., or Ms. – and we all expect to be recognized as such. (6)

In his own plea for a politics of recognition, Charles Taylor uses this point of departure to argue for a multicultural politics of mutual respect. For Taylor, recognition means acknowledgment of the other person's dignity and leads to a demand for equal respect. My own reading of Tocqueville (who actually does not use the term recognition) points in yet another direction and starts at a more basic level: Since the worth or importance of a person is no longer defined by social rank, as it still is in aristocratic societies, the individual is forced to take it upon herself to demonstrate her worth to others, because nobody else will do it for her. This is especially true in a society of immigrants with great cultural diversity and great mobility, because this mobility increases the frequency of encounters with strangers and creates a need on the side of the individual to develop commonly understandable forms of self-presentation. A race for recognition sets in which fuels the rest-

⁴ For a recent example of such criticism, cf. Gary Wills, "Did Tocqueville 'Get' America?"

less individualism Tocqueville describes as a particular feature of American democracy and which Marshall Berman, in following Karl Marx's description of modernity in *The Communist Manifesto*, interprets as a characteristic of modernity in general.

Inevitably, this new condition created by democracy must also affect the role of the aesthetic. Although Tocqueville, as Garry Wills has recently pointed out in exasperation, seems devoid of any particular interest in American art and American intellectual life and does not mention any major American writers, in effect, may not even have been aware of their existence (we have to recall for fairness's sake that he made his trip in 1831), he nevertheless offers a helpful sketch of a culture in transition from aristocratic culture to a modern self-culture. For brevity's sake, I will have to focus here on the two aspects that are most obviously linked with the question of recognition. One consequence of Tocqueville's starting premise is that, in contrast to Taylor, the problem of recognition is not discussed as an issue of moral philosophy but as a problem of identity formation in the new system of democracy: If everybody is equal, then the problem must be for the individual how to distinguish oneself from all the others who are equally equal:

They have swept away the privileges of some of their fellow creatures which stood in their way, but they have opened the door to universal competition: the barrier has changed its shape rather than its position. When men are nearly alike, and all follow the same track, it is very difficult for any one individual to walk quick and cleave away through the dense throng which surrounds and presses them. (Tocqueville 537)

For Tocqueville, this explains the strong elements of performance in American culture which he emphasizes in a chapter on what he calls, obviously in reference to the vernacular tradition of the tall tale, the bombastic style in American culture. However, the usefulness and explanatory value of his emphasis on performance goes far beyond this one aspect, as Maria Slowinska has shown in distinguishing between four possible meanings of the term performance in Tocqueville. The first can be described as an increased need for a self-definition and self-presentation which can no longer rely on established social conventions. As Tocqueville argues in his chapter "Some Reflections on American Manners," social and geographical mobility intensifies this challenge by undermining social norms and subverting the authority of manners:

The men who live in democracies are too fluctuating for a certain number of them ever to succeed in laying down a code of good breeding, and in forcing people to follow it. Every man therefore behaves after his own fashion, and there is always a certain incoherence in the manners of such times, because they are moulded upon the feelings and notions of each individual, rather than upon an ideal model proposed for general imitation. (249)

The second meaning, Slowinska points out, “in which performance enables people to distinguish themselves from each other is related to the understanding of performance in theatrical terms; it is the insistent urge to present oneself assertively to other people, to call attention to oneself” (593) which is the point of Tocqueville’s chapter “Of the Inflated Style of American Writers and Orators.” This cultural emphasis on theatricality can lead to a third function of performance, often observed in connection with American society, that of a performative self that reinvents himself in an act of self-creation and ever new acts of self-fashioning. As Tocqueville puts it: “In the confusion of all ranks everyone hopes to appear what he is not, and makes great exertions to succeed in this object” (565). Finally, Tocqueville’s comments on the theatre indicate a fourth function of performance: “In democracies, dramatic pieces are listened to, but not read. Most of those who frequent the amusement of the stage do not go there to seek the pleasures of the mind, but the keen emotions of the heart” (602). Tocqueville’s chapter “In What Spirit the Americans Cultivate the Arts” provides a suggestive elaboration of this observation:

The social condition and the institutions of democracy impart, moreover, certain peculiar tendencies to all the imitative arts, which it is easy to point out. They frequently withdraw them from the delineation of the soul to fix them exclusively on that of the body: and they substitute the representation of motion and sensation for that of sentiment and thought: in a word, they put the real in the place of the ideal. (468)

Tocqueville’s observation of a shift from “soul” to “body” may be his most amazing insight into the development of modern culture. As Slowinska points out, this interest not in the ideals of moral elevation or self-transcendence but in the somatic dimension of the aesthetic experience already points in the direction of a “propensity towards immediacy, sensuality, corporeality” (576) which characterizes contemporary culture and has led to the reemergence of a phenomenological aesthetics (in the work of Vivian Sobchak and Richard Shusterman). However, this aesthetics of embodiment and immersion is only the latest stage in the struggle to overcome the separation of art and life, as Susan Sontag was the first to point out in her essay “One Culture and the New Sensibility”:

All kinds of conventionally accepted boundaries have thereby been challenged, not just the one between the ‘scientific’ and the ‘literary-artistic’ cultures, or the one between the ‘art’ and ‘non-art’; but also many established distinctions within the world of culture itself – that between form and content, the frivolous and the serious, and (a favorite of literary intellectuals) ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. (297)

“Post-aesthetic” theories about an ongoing process of “de-aestheticization” (Rosenberg), the “delimitation of the aesthetic sphere” (Wellershoff) or the “disfranchisement of art” (Danto) have all tried to grasp this new unified sensibility constituted by the ever new attempts to overcome the separation of art and life, which we have traced here.

IV.

How can one account for the “artlessness” of American culture? This has long been a key issue in debates of the quality of American cultural and intellectual life. Explanations usually refer to Puritanism, or the belatedness of the colonial situation, or the high priority of commercial values. In this essay I have suggested another explanation: Americans did not run away from art because they were Puritans, ‘provincials’, or in pursuit of money. Rather, beginning with transcendentalist self-culture they were in the forefront of transforming art into the aesthetic, or more precisely, into aesthetic function. “Artlessness,” then, does not mean lack of art but, quite on the contrary, should be seen as manifestation of an advanced art or an advanced view of art. As I have tried to show, the driving force in this process is a restless individualism in search of attention, recognition and respect, a self-culture whose development America has pioneered. The aesthetic function has proven immensely useful for this pursuit of recognition – and the more the idea of art has been transformed to ideas of aesthetic function and aesthetic experience, the more useful it has become for the purpose. And yet, it is part of the paradoxical logic of this form of self-authorization that it only seems to work, or, at least, that it seems to work best, when it is achieved by forms that are not under suspicion of being “merely aesthetic.”

As we have seen, the ensuing redefinition of art as an aesthetic function goes in the direction of a performative mode of representation in which the lines between art and life become increasingly blurred and permeable. Democracy, I have argued, furthers this drive toward performance, and American democracy has played a pioneer role in this development in its transformation of aristocratic and bourgeois forms of culture, including the idealist tradition of *Bildung* and self-education, into a democratic self-culture. Within the context of this self-culture, the aesthetic function has become increasingly useful for authorizing claims that go beyond the aesthetic, such as those of political movements (see Fluck, “Radical Aesthetics”). It has become increasingly useful because it works both ways. Not only is the aesthetic redefined, and liberated from the idea of an autonomous aesthetic realm, but by doing so, the political can also hope to gain new authority by means of the aesthetic. This authorization, in turn, can proceed in two ways: one is to rely on the immediacy of aesthetic effects, the other is to draw on the cultural capital of the institution of art. As a matter of fact, the aesthetic in the form, for example, of advertising, fashion, or political propaganda, is not yet considered sufficient for authorization, and perhaps even suspect. Hence, in order to become effective in cultural debates, the aesthetic needs the cultural capital of the institution of art. Thus, in the final analysis the power and politics of the aesthetic consist in another striking paradox. It can only become effective by denying that it is an autonomous sphere,

but the success of this denial will depend on the institutionalization of the aesthetic as a separate realm.

The full significance of this development for cultural theory has not yet been sufficiently realized. Critical theories of modernity have traditionally posited a split between an ever growing social and economic realm governed by the logic of instrumental reason and a counter-realm of resistance constituted by culture and drawing on the negating potential of art. The development I have traced here leads exactly into the opposite direction: Once the separation of art and life is erased to such an extent that only institutional contexts can determine with authority what an aesthetic object is, the aesthetic, too, must be submitted to a logic of instrumental rationality, that is, to rules and requirements that have as their primary purpose the efficient management of the institution itself. The recent controversy about the sale of one of the major paintings in the history of American art, Asher Durand's "Kindred Spirits," by the New York Public Library provides a case in point. The sale was not motivated by the fact that the aesthetic value of the painting had been revalued and put in question. On the contrary, it was motivated by the fact that the institution needed money in a time of diminished financial resources and decided to take advantage of the high market value of Durand's painting in order to strengthen other parts of its collection and be better positioned in an increasingly competitive field of exhibition venues. Priorities are thus reversed: The goal is no longer to house and preserve aesthetic objects but to use art as a bargaining chip for securing the future of the institution. The ultimate irony in the search for an "artless art" that I have traced here thus lies in the fact that in its increasingly radical attempts to make art relevant by overcoming the separation of art and life, it paves the way for an incorporation of the aesthetic into the iron cage of instrumental rationality.

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Sonderdruck aus

The Power and Politics of the Aesthetic in American Culture

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ULLA HASELSTEIN

Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg
2007