

# Aesthetic Difference: On the 'Wisdom' of the Arts

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## Knowledge and Judgment

What sort of knowledge is transmitted through the arts? How does art produce knowledge, if it does so at all? This essay seeks to address these questions. No doubt, all the answers we attempt to give to these questions are bound to be insufficient, which is partially due to the simple fact that we try to formulate them in a non-artistic medium of academic discourse. For its part, however, this fact confronts us with questions about the relation between artistic practice and aesthetic theory, between the 'labor' of the aesthetic and the philosophical reflection.

Asking the most general question in this context – how does art *think*? – is certainly not the same as asking: How does the *artist* think or what does she think about during her erratic journey of her creative processes? Rather, the question is: What does the specific form, the mediality of aesthetic knowledge consist in? Put differently: How does a work of art formulate its 'arguments'? What characterizes its specific mode of thought in contrast to, say, that of the sciences or the discursive practice of philosophical debate? These questions only make sense if we keep ourselves from the prejudice of attributing all thought to something that thinks, a subject of thought. We need only recall here that the so-called 'linguistic turn' marked the transition away from philosophy's traditional concern with the realm of thought and its foundation in consciousness and towards its interest in the mediality of thought and language and their grammatical and rhetorical underpinnings. Thus, in one of the founding documents of the 'turn', the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein (2016) did not analyze the 'thought' or the 'idea' that had been two of philosophy's core concepts up through German Idealism, but rather the logic of the 'expression of thoughts'. For both Wittgenstein and other thinkers of the linguistic turn, the 'thinking thing', the subject 'that has thoughts', as G.W.F. Hegel put it, no longer plays a crucial role. Rather, decisive are the forms of speech and the structure of their articulation, or, put succinctly, the medium and its forms of praxis, their respective possibilities and limits.

Philosophy has often traced our capacity to think back to our capacity for language. We think because we can speak, because language allows us to follow, formulate, and justify lines of argumentation, posit assertions, and give force – however fragile or debatable – to our convictions. For this reason, the philosophy of the last 300 years has, like Descartes, attributed our ability to think to the self-certain 'I' and its ability to express itself in concepts and statements. Thinking is, above all else, an activity of the mind and its manifestation in language, and is expressed through propositions that can take the form of statements, questions, claims, guesses, the construction of models and metaphors, as well as through fictionalization, narration, and the anticipatory hypotheses of the 'as if', whose primary form is the conditional. At the center of all of these forms of expression is the little grammatical particle 'as'. Something is determined to be 'as something else', is narrated 'as something', is understood 'as something', so that the 'as-function' as modal conjunction forms the nucleus of all signification. It is used to produce sense in language. "A thought is a proposition with a

sense” writes Wittgenstein (2016: 31). Meaning is bound to its structure. In propositions, we posit thoughts, interpret them, examine them, weigh them, negate them, or judge them to be ‘true’, ‘correct’, or ‘false’. Further, the copula ‘is’ sits at the core of all statements and judgements. Something *is* something else. For instance, the astronomer might say that the planet Jupiter *is* a gas giant, and Sigmund Freud might have said that the psyche *is* repressed drive. Knowledge – that is, the formulation of a conviction – is articulated in these statements. The claim that *something is something else* might also be more precisely understood or expressed with the help of the formulation ‘*something as something else*’. In short, the as-function at the core of signification and the is-structure at the center of the proposition reveal themselves to be equivalents.

From this perspective, there is no thinking, meaning, or knowledge without the medium of their expression: language. In particular, these things would not exist without the functions of is-statements and as-statements, the primary functions of all argumentation, reasoning, and refutation, or, indeed, of the expression of knowledge itself. From the same point of view, however, *one cannot say that art thinks*, because the work of art is not articulated in the form of the ‘is’ – at least not necessarily and not in those works where perception is privileged over symbolism. Nor is it articulated in the form of the ‘as’, which remains indeterminate and ambiguous to the senses. So what can it possibly mean when we say that art thinks, that thoughts or meanings are ‘expressed’ in the media of art? Or, in other words, what does it mean when we say that there is a non-linguistic form of knowledge and that the work of art can be understood as a non-discursive mode of ‘argumentation’?

#### Paradigm 1: Picasso’s *Tête de taureau*

Let us consider an example. Art puts forth its ‘arguments’ through, what I call ‘singular paradigms’ (Mersch 2014). They present themselves in the mode of examples. And just the same, only examples can help us grasp the nuances of aesthetic thought (Schaub 2010). The example that serves as our point of departure is a classic work: Pablo Picasso’s 1942 montage *Tête de taureau*. Picasso put an old bicycle seat and some handlebars together in such a way as to make them look like something completely different, namely, a cattle skull. The sculpture’s force is derived from its simplicity. At the same time, it exemplifies on multiple levels what I would like to call the ‘aesthetic *epistēmē*’, the specific form of knowledge transmitted by the aesthetic and the artistic.<sup>1</sup> Picasso’s unprecedented combination of two everyday objects strips them of their function and thus provokes an alternate mode of seeing, insofar as it allows *something to appear as something other*. It does so by bringing something new to the sober composition that is not contained in the individual objects themselves. And in doing so, it turns the montage into a complex allegory. One might be tempted to say that the act of combining the objects is analogous to the ‘is’ or ‘as’-functions of language: a set of handlebars and a bicycle seat *are* a cow skull. Is this translation into language sufficient? Does it say everything about the work? The proposition *does not show how both are combined with one another*, nor does it say anything about their spatial arrangement. Beyond that, if one simply wanted to construct an allegory, combining any old set of handlebars with any old bicycle seat would have been sufficient, a fact readily apparent in the many imitations

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<sup>1</sup> We must draw a distinction between art and aesthetics. Aesthetics deals with everyday practices of composition, design, and presentation that don’t necessarily qualify as ‘art’. What distinguishes art from aesthetic practices and makes it art is a specific mode of sensory reflexivity. See also Mersch (2004).

of Picasso's work. But it is the found objects themselves that really make the work, objects that draw much of their force from the very contingency of their discovery. It is the find of *this* specific seat and *this* specific set of handlebars with their wear and tear that allow *this* unique appearance with *this* particular symbolism to transcend mere formal allegory. And only *through* these singular objects in their very specificity does the work give us a glimpse of the specter of death and mortality.

We thus have an 'as' that acquires its particularity through a 'through'. In turn, we might define this 'through' as the particular composition of the 'as'.<sup>2</sup> The singularity of this 'as' and its composition can only be *perceived*. Thus, every detail becomes significant, and it is this meticulous treatment of detail that makes the work's craftsmanship compelling and effective. Marcel Duchamp called these minute details that are only accessible to perception *inframincen*: the barely noticeable, inconspicuous elements whose perception requires a degree of attention that must be able to uncover the subtlest properties of the object. Thus, the quality of the leather and its wear and tear, its coloration, the rust on the handlebars, their exposure to the weather, the nakedness of the objects' raw form, the right-angle joining the two objects, their placement on the wall, etc. Every detail, no matter how unassuming, plays a role, *shows itself with the other elements*, 'speaks'. Even the bronze that completes the work shows something of that specific quality of the found object. The work and its materials bring together the oldest – the origins of European culture in the worship of the Sacred Bull – and the newest – the ruins of this culture in the wake of the two World Wars. Even despite the noble bronze, Picasso's work reveals this culture for what it was at that time: junk. It is no matter of coincidence that the work was produced in the middle of the Second World War, amidst the cultural break that went along with it: Europe's catastrophe. The cow skull is emblematic of this catastrophe. *The* central figure associated with the name of Europe, the classic mythological symbol of all Mediterranean cultures is the sanctified animal of the cults of *Apis*, *Baal*, and *Taurus*, who presided over the festivities of the earliest cities and thus came to represent springtime in the Babylonian zodiac. The animal's extraordinary significance also seems to show itself in the earliest forms of the first letter of the alphabet, *aleph* or *alpha*, which were both originally written as a triangle standing on its point, a form preserved by our **A** only if one turns it upside down. It appears again, this time transformed into an icon, at the beginnings of European science in the *tetractys* of the Pythagoreans, as well as in alchemy in the mystic **Y** of the triadic substances (*tria prima*), the supposed origin and destiny of 'everything'. Finally, it returns in the triadic form of the 'first', the principle of the holy trinity. Picasso's version is composed of old scrap objects cast in durable material that bears, and even fixes, the mark of devastation.

For sure, all of these considerations play out on the level of the work's *configuration*, on the level of the *origins of its symbolism*. And yet, the montage of the waste forms a full circle that not only encompasses life and death, but also the entire cycle of occidental culture. Thus, time and its historicity are unavoidably congealed in the object. Whether or not it was intended, the epoch and its disasters are sedimented in every fiber of Picasso's found objects. And it is precisely thus that the 'thought' embodied in them escapes language. The way they are put together, their 'com-position', their simple gesture make an exhaustive discursive explanation

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<sup>2</sup> The duplicity of the prepositions 'as' and 'through' forms the core of the medial as performance: When something acquires its form *as* something *through* something else, the 'as' at once acquires medial form, a point formulated succinctly in Friedrich Nietzsche's famous statement: "Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts". Quoted in: Kittler 1999: 200. See Nietzsche (1981: 172); also Mersch (2010).

of the work impossible. And yet, the composition makes a ‘thought’ perceptible. It is the immediate manifestation of an ‘argument’, if we understand the word in its various senses at once as *argumentum*, a minor drama, and embodiment of a *showing* and a *self-revealing*. What’s more, the act of bringing together a bicycle seat and handlebars recalls Lautréamont’s statement about the ‘accidental encounter’ of ‘a sewing machine and an umbrella’ on a ‘dissecting table’, two objects whose shock-like conjuncture triggers a literal ‘re-flection’, not merely a reflex, but a reversal or a ‘surreal’ effect. Similarly, René Magritte (1979: 60-61) writes in his collection of image-text aphorisms *Les mots et les images*: “An object encounters [*rencontre*] its image, an object encounters [*rencontre*] its name. It comes to pass that the image and the name of the object encounter one another [*se rencontre*]”. Picasso’s piece is a confrontation without precedent, and the relations of its elements to one another are without hierarchy. It thus has a certain similarity with the ‘arbitrariness’ described by Ferdinand de Saussure, its elements connected haphazardly in the sense of the *arbitrarius*, a manifestation without ‘motivation’. And yet, its effects have to be adequately ‘read’: Picasso’s *Bull’s Head* contains an entire encyclopedia of associations, images, and symbols. The knowledge that it brings forth is thus not a primary function of the aesthetic event, but a secondary effect of the complex interpretive work spurred on by a feeling of uncanniness and terror.

#### Cognition and Reflexivity

One might conceive of this encounter, this ‘conjuncture’ and the relations that it brings into being as the special accomplishment of a mode of artistic production that has to be interpreted on the basis of its production and the practices bound up with it, and not on the basis of the artist’s intention, ‘genius’, or authority. No doubt, intention and authority are of marginal significance for the interpretation of this type of artistic production, because it is irrelevant whether or not the relations contained in the work were actively produced or passively ‘came to be’. Adopted from branches of aesthetics that lay particular weight on artistic production, this perspective is no doubt indispensable if we intend to analyze the artistic *epistēmē* as the product of a practice or ‘artistic act’. However, the aesthetics of artistic production has a reputation for privileging the subject, reducing artistic invention to the artist’s imagination and eccentric creative gifts, and thus of reinstating the 19<sup>th</sup> century cult of the genius. Just the same, it might appear as if we wanted to attribute the symbolic and performative ‘force’ of Picasso’s work to his unique act, an act that can, so the story goes, have its origins in nothing other than in the *mind of the artist*. In this vein, the interpretation of the work would have an equally important status. And similar to the artist’s creative gesture, the labor of interpretation and its endless play of meanings also takes place in the mind of the recipient. According to this line of thought, knowledge is produced *through a double process of symbolization* that relies on the participation of both the artist-author and his recipients. It follows that, in this reading, both are conceived of as acting with ‘ingenuity’ and ‘intelligence’ and thus *as thinking agents*.

Rather than take this route, we have opted to concentrate on the *practice of combination* itself. However ingeniously artist and recipient might act, it is sufficient to begin with their practices and to analyze *what* these practices do and *how* they do it. Of course Picasso’s work is a symbolic act. The act of symbolization has more or less been the standard form of artistic production during the entire era between the early modern period and modernity, and Picasso’s piece is no exception here, insofar as the *representation of something* (bicycle seat

and handlebars) *as something* (cow skull) stands in the foreground and functions as the primary means of artistic expression. The work's aesthetic argumentation is accomplished *through* a relation that has the end of making *something else* visible, namely a symbol. However, the decisive factor is not the unique 'find' that defines the work, the combination of two objects without precedent, nor is it the fact that its symbolic content is produced *through* a surplus of associations. Decisive is the work's reflexive dimension, which works parallel to its symbolic dimension. The avant-gardes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century made this self-reflexive dimension of the artwork into a key element of their artistic productions: the reflexivity of the material, the choice of artistic media, the way they are placed together such that the techniques of montage and the fall of the dice of chance play an equally important role, the 'new' creative principle of letting found objects fall into place. Thus, the work not only has a symbolic dimension, which, in line with the very definition of allegory, 'reveals something different'. It also makes a statement about itself. That which it 'gathers up' and through which it attains its inspiration, that which, in the words of Theodor W. Adorno (2002: 120), makes up its "enigmaticalness", the secret of the way it joins its elements in a time that is out of joint, all these things taken together make a statement about the possibility of art in the age of its destruction.

Picasso's work thus contains two moments of knowledge: a 'statement' made by the very medium and material of the found object, and a statement *about the act of enunciation*, about the artistic form of articulation itself and the shape it takes in the object. With a bit of hyperbole, one could almost say that this knowledge is a knowledge generated *by art with art through art*, that it is art's way of analyzing itself. More than an analysis of *something*, this self-analysis *thematizes art's own mediality*. And more than anything else, it is precisely this sort of reflexivity that distinguishes art from non-art. It might be the most significant aspect of the arts' capacity to bring forth knowledge, of their particular form of 'wisdom' that separates them from all other modes of generating knowledge.

### The Conjunctionality of the Aesthetic 'Proposition'

So what sort of knowledge is produced by the aesthetic? And anyways, wouldn't it be more precise to formulate this knowledge in language, in a discourse on the *Tête de taureau*? And if this were the case, wouldn't that imply that art is a form of conjecture or experience whose indirect mode of expression remains ambiguous and whose tendency towards devolving into an endless series of interpretations remains inferior to the clarity of scientific propositions? But if one considers Picasso's found object montage as a 'proposition' in itself and compares it with the discursive propositions that we needed to approach it and describe it, then it becomes readily apparent that the discursive mode by no means has the upper hand here when it comes to simplicity. Rather, it is precisely the 'force' of the sculpture that reveals itself to be the distinguishing factor. As with Picasso's piece, artistic works do not express the 'as' of their signification through a judgment that says things are this or that, nor do they do so by listing off a series of attributes. The 'is' is not the dominant factor in artistic predication. Art deploys other means. Metaphorically speaking, the aesthetic 'proposition' makes a *leap*. *It leaps through its specific mode of combination*. The *combinatio* is a 'putting together'. It combines at least two elements that were not connected with one another beforehand. Instead of being based on the copula, the *combinatio* is founded in the 'and', in addition or in *conjunction*, which has the particular property of simultaneously connecting and separating.

Hence, both the separation of elements and their connections are always visible side-by-side in works of art, precisely because they operate in the aesthetic, in the realm of perception. Whether it be foreground or background, temporal succession or spatial coordination, the work of art does not permit any hierarchization of its elements. This is why the ‘artistic proposition’ and the leap it makes are never unambiguous. They play with the openness and ambiguity of the conjunction in such a way that the connection of elements produces an irresolvable tension. The simplicity of the artistic ‘statement’ and its ‘wit’ in the form of ‘wittiness’ or cleverness – understood in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a significant aspect of the artist’s *ingenium* – are definitive for the combination, the ‘cut’ of the montage. Combination and montage are founded in the principles of continuity, contrast, and contradiction. And in contradistinction to the discursive *contraditio* and its logical consequences, the montage’s contradictions coordinate the contrasted elements alongside one another, holding them in perpetual suspension, transformation, or imbalance.

When asking questions about the arts’ mode of formulating propositions, their *epistemology*, or the specificity of artistic knowledge, we are inquiring into a *form of knowledge production that operates in the mode of the ‘And’*, or in the mode of *conjunctuality* (Mersch 2015). The ‘And’ here stands for the wealth of other conjunctions that can connect or separate two elements, such as ‘Or’, ‘both ... and’, ‘not only ... but also’, ‘neither ... nor’, etc. It would thus be more appropriate to speak of a hinge *between conjunction and disjunction*. In contrast to the copula, they do not bring about the synthesis between subject and predicate that defines the logic of determination. Rather, they produce a literal ‘*compositio*’, the kernel of which is *difference*. *If art thinks, then it thinks in the medium of ‘com-position’*. It puts (*ponere*) together (*com*) dissimilar elements, bringing them into a common context or “constellation” (Adorno), but in such a way that the dissimilarities of the dissimilar are preserved while their differences remain perceptible. Art’s mathematics is thus not one of resolution, but of unification. While the *copula* merges subject and object into one another, the ‘com-position’ emphasizes and retains the singularity of its parts. The ‘And’ proceeds not through negation, but through affirmation. Its relations can unfold in space, like in an installation, or in time, like music or poetry, or they can be rhythmically accented, bringing a unique dynamic into the artwork’s specific mode of temporalization.

And yet, simply putting together whatever happens to be lying around isn’t enough. Certainly, every random series of things or actions forms an aesthetic arrangement, but that does not mean that every such arrangement makes sense, produces knowledge, or stakes out an artistic position. In order to produce aesthetic knowledge through an artistic arrangement, the work’s conjunctuality must *transcend* the sum of the arrangement’s parts, must refer to something that goes above and beyond the arrangement itself, must stage an *inversion in the ‘And’* that reveals an Other or an *alterity*, or gives rise to a sudden insight. In the words of Rainer Maria Rilke’s (2011: 361) *Fifth Duino Elegy* the work’s conjunctuality forms that non-discursive nexus where the mere constellation, its “laborious nowhere” “leaps around and changes” “from the pure Too-little [...] / into that empty Too-much; / where the difficult calculation / becomes numberless and resolved”. Wittgenstein (1958, 193ff.) referred to this shift as a “change of aspect”.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to discursive propositions, which always either express a judgment, construct a metaphor, or draw a logical conclusion, the juncture (and interstice) in question here marks that part of the ‘aesthetic proposition’ where its ‘epistemological leap’

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<sup>3</sup> See also Wittgenstein (1988), 103ff., 111ff., 333ff.

takes place. It is the site of a non-subjective reflexivity that plays with perception and its materials, and is located exclusively in the realm of the sensory. In Picasso's piece, it is born out of the encounter between two worn out, discarded bicycle parts. The way they are connected forms a snapshot of the state of a culture whose symbol is the bull's head, while in the same moment, their conjoining serves as a testament to the potentiality of art in general. Only in such a moment does art happen, and thus, only in such a moment does the particularity of the artistic *epistēmē* and its unique form of knowledge come into being.

### Catachrestic 'Joints'

The various modalities of conjunction and disjunction and the ways in which materials are joined and assembled can thus be seen as the defining elements of artistic knowledge. My claim is that the capacity of an artwork's joints and assemblages *to provoke reflection and produce knowledge stands in direct correlation to the degree to which these joints and assemblages are constructed in a 'catachrestic' way*. I use 'catachresis' here as a metaphor for the various figurations of those "thing-languages" in which Walter Benjamin (1996: 73) saw the language of art itself. 'Catachresis' is a rhetorical figure in which an expression wholly divergent from conventional use is forged in order to say something inexpressible or as yet unsaid. For this reason, catachresis is not normally included in the classic canon of rhetorical devices, even if it is sometimes included in its canon of figures. In truth, however, it is an *impossible figure* that exceeds the limits of rhetoric. Like the 'joke', it is a 'non-figure'. The catachresis is often viewed as a transgression or an abuse of language because it goes beyond established meanings and disrupts the distinction between rhetorical registers in order to say something at the margins of the expressible. It enables the speaker to make use of 'other' modes of speaking and of the sorts of inversions manifest in riddles and contradictions, thus allowing her to constructively shape their dissonances and aporias into a third that can only be hinted at.<sup>4</sup> In a certain respect, catachresis proceeds without measure or limit. In the symbolic, it is that monstrosity which reveals a *heteronomy* that cannot be directly referred to by any one sign but which nevertheless must be saddled in some form of speech. As the semiosis of the non-semiotic, asemiosis of a semiotic process, it crystallizes into something 'irresolvable', a chiasmus without cadence.

So to what extent can we even speak of 'knowledge' here? My thesis is as follows: *catachrestic joints* in the form of chiasmi, contrastive constellations, or paradoxes – to name just a few – are that which goes beyond the chance 'com-position' of the aesthetic arrangement. They are that which supplements the aesthetic conjunction/disjunction, the configurations of the 'aesthetic proposition' that simultaneously connect and separate. It is these catachrestic joints that produce knowledge in art. *They form the true sites of artistic creativity*. Against Hegel (1894: 75), artistic creativity is not exhausted in "the imagination which creates signs" characteristic of that author-subject who has so often served as the gravitational center of theories of the inventiveness of the arts and their imaginative force. Rather, the mystery of the *creatio* reveals itself to be aporetic, because nothing new can be wholly new (otherwise it would remain incomprehensible and alien), and, conversely, the new can never be entirely reduced to something already known without losing its novelty (Mersch 2005). Thus, artistic productivity cannot be grasped as a semiotic process, a fact that becomes

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<sup>4</sup> On catachresis and its non-figural use see Mersch (2002), esp. 28ff.

readily apparent when one tries to uncover the semiotic content of a complex musical composition, a poem, or a performance that transcends all attempts at documentation. Nor can it be understood as the product of the extravagant eccentricity of the artistic imagination that looks upon its creations as if some kind of ‘will to art’ were preserved in them. Rather, it is founded in a practice of thinking that proceeds in leaps and aporias, that constantly finds new ways of bringing forth curiosities, contradictions, and discordances. These curiosities and contradictions bear witness to the radical risk of an adventure that is characterized by its lack of an explicit goal and determinate end point, an erratic undertaking that philosophy has always associated with transgression and madness. One might say that ‘art’s *esprit*’ consists in nothing other (Fliescher 2014: 240-251).

Aesthetic and scientific knowledge are thus distinct from one another in their very mediality. They literally speak different ‘languages’. The ‘aesthetic proposition’ articulated in the form of conjunctions and disjunctions does not produce a positive, calculable output, nor does it bring forth statements whose content can be summed up as ‘true’ or ‘false’. ‘Aesthetic propositions’ are more approximate to transitions, passages, or agitations that bring the *doxa* of our perceptions, convictions, and maxims and the normative structures of the political and its institutions into a state of *crisis*. *The aesthetic brings forth knowledge by causing such crises*. Its specific mode of knowledge takes the shape of critique and reflection. In this respect, artistic knowledge has something in common with philosophical knowledge, even if it has less to do with the principles, foundations, and archives of theoretical discourse or the transcendental conditions of possibility of experience and their implicit metaphysical premises. Artistic knowledge takes aim at the unquestioned obviousness of the “distribution” (*partage*) of the sensible (Rancière 2004), the order of the perceptible and imperceptible and the apparatuses that separate art from non-art. It makes our relations to the world of things perceptible, exposes the complexities and forces of technology, deploys the strategic cunning of well-placed inversions, makes tangible the ever growing totalization of the economic and the consequences thereof, and unveils society’s power relations and latent forms of disciplining. Such examples could be listed *ad infinitum*. Art incites such reflections through practices both demonstrative and indirect. Thus, its knowledge is a knowledge of reflection. The knowledge of art is not related to the positive knowledge of scientific research, but to the negative knowledge of disruptions, separations, or dissonances whose discordant nature ‘makes you think’. Its indirectness and ‘illogical leaps’ are a function of the *conjunctural figuration of the aesthetic* and its *paradoxical or chiasmic constellations* that we found to be the opposite of the grammar of the discursive copula. The leap does not explain. It *demonstrates*. Aesthetic knowledge *illustrates and discloses*. It illustrates by instantiating differences. It does so by engaging in specific *practices of difference* that produce contrary or contradictory formations; experiencing them places one in a state of persistent reflexive unease. Reflexivity is meant here in the sense of an ‘echo’, a ‘reflection’ of that which we think we already know (*epistēmē*) or have knowledge of (*mathēsis*), a reflection that simultaneously unsettles and opens up prevailing epistemic frameworks. *The knowledge of art is thus always already a critique of knowledge*.

## Paradigm 2: The Forced Entropy of Artistic Intoxication

The key distinguishing feature that allows us to conceive of scientific or philosophical propositions and the ‘aesthetic proposition’ as distinct media of showing and signifying is the

respective presence or absence of the attribute of discursivity: while the former are part of a discourse that constructs concepts in order to articulate arguments, the latter is a non-discursive schema that posits contradictions and paradoxes in arguments that proceed in the mode of catachresis. In fact, contradictions and paradoxes are exemplary objects of dispute, capable of producing considerable breaks that discourse and its reliance on the 'logic' of predication is compelled to 'do away with'.<sup>5</sup> In the realm of the aesthetic, however, they force one to think in a reflexive way that must be able to simultaneously entertain multiple lines of thought without preferring or excluding any particular solution. Artistic productivity derives its distinctive energy from its ability to wade out this undecidability, bringing it to its extreme in order to bypass the conventional ways of solving a problem. *This also means that we encounter the reflexive knowledge of the aesthetic in those moments when art's catachrestic figurations produce ruptures and fissures that give rise to irresolvable differends.* The irresolvable does not generate a trap or an impossibility, but rather a *vexation*. The *vexation* is the emblematic figure of aesthetic knowledge.

Cyprien Gaillard's terrifying, uncanny 2010 installation piece *The Recovery of Discovery* demonstrates this point in exemplary fashion. The piece fused the reception of the work of art with its unbridled consumption, which resulted in the work being completely and utterly destroyed in a matter of days. That which Picasso harnessed in a rich, yet simple symbol the installation brought to the point of 'diabolical' entropy with breathtaking speed. An almost sublime light blue step pyramid a few meters in height filled a gigantic white cube. Bathed in the white light, it radiated an almost enigmatic tranquility. The step pyramid formed a constellation. The way it was set up with the exhibition space and the special lighting made for an object that was as symbolic as it was conjunctural. The 'joke' (wit), however, was that it was made of a bunch of cases of *Efes* beer. At the opening of the exhibition and in the days that followed visitors were invited to drink the beer as they pleased. Everybody who wanted to could open up a bottle, drink up, and literally guzzle down the 'work of art', whose auratic symbolism of course has strong foundations in our culture and the aesthetic tradition of sublime. On opening day hundreds of visitors climbed the sculpture, tore open the cases of beer, and emptied them without hesitation until pieces of the pyramid began to fall apart, beer bottles broke, glass shattered, and the terrible stench of stale beer began to fill the room. After a couple of days, the only thing left of the pyramid was an amorphous pile of trash that bore hardly any resemblance to the work's original shape. The extent to which the sculpture was destroyed and the speed with which its decimation took place were enough to surprise the artist himself. Reception turned into destruction, participation led to ruin. The work's inherent contradiction manifests itself at the precise moment where the reception of the work is joined with its consumption. The enjoyment of culture encompasses its own liquidation. The knowledge of art is thus made into a direct experience of the irreversibility of a process in time that is triggered by the heedless indulgence in a satisfaction afforded without cost or consequence. Its more general correlate is no doubt the shameless dialectic of desire and consumption in the age of capitalism, which lives on the negation of objects, their 'nature', and their materiality. In contrast to the thermodynamic principle of entropy, the economic analysis of production and consumption, and the psychoanalytic interpretation of desire and

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<sup>5</sup> The idea that the principle of non-contradiction is a necessary condition of thought is present as early as Parmenides, and is explicitly formulated no later than in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Its unconditional validity for logical thought derives from the fact that a single contradiction is sufficient to make it possible to use the logical calculus to rationalize any random proposition.

the death drive, the work of art both puts these things on display and simultaneously critiques them. This critique and this showing are products of the work's perceptibility. Its reflexive knowledge is carried in the wake of a trauma. Its artistic *epistēmē* reveals itself in the end as cathartic.

Can this strategy and ones like it be systematized in some way? There is no real sufficient answer to this question. Art's practices are just as 'in-finite' as they are inexhaustible for no other reason than that art necessarily operates in the form of the singular. They always make space for new finds, alternative approaches, and a play of unforeseeable results. This is why we can only ever speak of art in examples, examples that are always more than what abstract reflection can say about them. This implies that art remains wholly inaccessible to a complete reconstruction in discursive propositions, and that it is nevertheless hardly inferior to discursive modes of thinking and explaining. Thus, aesthetic knowledge can *never* be the object of a universalizable definition. And yet, art and aesthetics constitute a praxis of knowing *sui generis* that seems to be, in some respects, superior to that of scientific and philosophical praxes of knowing.<sup>6</sup> What we might call an 'aesthetic' or 'artistic' *epistemology* can thus only be approximated or, at best, made plausible through examples. In the end, however, nothing can substitute the immediate confrontation with the arts' modes of praxis and their inherent *epistēmē*.

Translated by Adam Bresnahan

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<sup>6</sup> This superiority lies in art's specific mode of showing, so long as it is bound up with a practice of argumentation. On the use of images in this context, see Mersch (2007).

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