

"Transdisciplinary Aesthetics"

by Jill Bennett

National Institute for Experimental Arts

University of New South Wales, Australia

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**TRANSDISCIPLINARY AESTHETICS.** Transdisciplinary aesthetics is the study of *aisthēsis*—of sensory perception, its organization and management, and of expression—deriving methods from a range of disciplinary approaches without prioritizing the interests of disciplines themselves. It is characterized by an expansive outlook that envisages *aisthēsis* operating across many different empirical contexts, including but not limited to art and popular culture. Its emergence is, in part, prompted by the rise of networked media, which mobilize affect and sensation in relation to a range of ostensibly “non-aesthetic” subjects and events. Transdisciplinary aesthetics extends and refines the analysis of *aisthēsis* as process, drawing on theories of affect to trace aesthetic operations and their effects in the world at large. With this focus on understanding the empirics of the contemporary mediatized world, its scope is defined by the dynamics of process—and by the capacity of aesthetics to cut across disciplinary lines—rather than by a fixed group of objects.

Ranging across media, science, popular culture, and the practices of everyday life, transdisciplinary study does not stake a claim to an enlarged sphere of material culture in the way that visual culture studies expand from art history into popular culture and media. Instead, it retains a single commitment: to be unconstrained by an object domain. Broadly then, the descriptor may encompass any process-based account of aesthetics that both understands *aisthēsis* to operate in an unbounded field and seeks to articulate the nature of aesthetic operations in emergent contexts. Art is ultimately only one of its possible subjects (Welsch, 2008, p. 191) but is best understood as a key means of enacting transdisciplinary aesthetics rather than simply as an object of analysis (Bennett, 2012).

By virtue of its incursions into many different domains, transdisciplinary aesthetics is informed by philosophy, sociology, art history, psychology, anthropology, the neurosciences,

biology, and other fields (Welsch, 2008, p. 191) but is not to be confused with multidisciplinary. Whereas multi- and much interdisciplinarity serve to reinforce and extend home disciplines by proliferating and importing approaches (Nicolescu, 2002), transdisciplinary aesthetics affirms the capacity and value of *aisthēsis* as a mode of investigation in a much more general sense. Hence, in disciplines outside the arts—such as political theory, for example—transdisciplinary method is evinced by an “aesthetic turn” (Shapiro, 2012).

The lack of an object, however, makes transdisciplinarity unfathomable from a discipline-bound perspective. According to Nicolescu:

From the point of view of classical thought, transdisciplinarity appears absurd because it has no object. In contrast, within the framework of transdisciplinarity, classical thought does not appear absurd; it simply appears to have a restricted sphere of applicability.

(2002, p. 44)

This formulation succinctly crystallizes the tension between the traditional concept of aesthetics defined by its objects, and the transdisciplinary orientation toward process, which explores a broader sphere of applicability.

This tension is arguably more deeply entrenched in aesthetics than in most fields. Aesthetics is often considered to be a branch of philosophy, lacking its own distinctive concepts (Berleant, 1991). Moreover, it has been argued that aesthetics fails to meet the criteria of a discipline because its objects are nonexclusive: Art and beauty—its most common objects—are shared with art history; questions of sensory perception are shared with psychology, those of judgment and value with philosophy and so forth (Mandoki, 2007, pp. 3–6). To the extent that aesthetics perennially fails to satisfy the discipline test, it inclines toward transdisciplinarity before the fact, proffering techniques with application across a vast field. The “transdisciplinary,” in effect, names and re-frames what in classical terms is deemed a failing, and in doing so identifies a key impulse.

#### **The Emergence of Transdisciplinary Aesthetics.**

The theoretical underpinnings of transdisciplinary aesthetics may be located in a number of key works that in different terms identify the open field of operation—notably Bal’s *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, and Massumi’s *Parables for the Virtual*. Bal envisages concepts emerging as they travel through various disciplines, generated through a “co-production.” Here, Bal builds on Roland Barthes’s argument that interdisciplinary practice is distinguished from multidisciplinary on the basis that it is no longer a question of lots of people from different disciplinary perspectives looking at the same objects, but rather the creation of a new object (Bal, 2002, p. 26). This radical form of interdisciplinarity comes close to what many now call transdisciplinarity, the latter embodying the “traveling,” border-crossing nature of production. For Massumi, who makes a distinctive argu-

ment against the emergent discipline formation of cultural studies, expression and process are driving concepts. Massumi (2002) argues that Cultural Studies has missed process and expression—by which he means precisely the natural trajectory of aesthetics toward an open or “whole-field”—opting instead for the creation of yet another object domain. The whole-field for Massumi is a transdisciplinary space open to practitioners from anywhere—a field in which “process lines” may be followed (2002, p. 253), much like the threads of Bruno Latour’s (1993) “network.” The transdisciplinary impulse traces threads wherever they may lead, because objects are no longer to be understood as the products of isolated disciplines but of amalgams. Massumi’s argument that expression is overlooked by those disciplinary methods that cannot track process highlights the potential for aesthetic analysis in any disciplinary domain—a potential unrealized by an aesthetics that cannot accommodate the free-flowing nature, the sheer sweep of affect and sensation. In so doing, it points to the conclusion that in order to address the dynamics of *aisthēsis* at all, aesthetics must be transdisciplinary.

Transdisciplinarity is not achieved on a single axis at the meeting point of two neighboring disciplines (Welsch, 2008, p. 191). Conceived in this way, bilateral interdisciplinarity misses what it means to function in an “open” system as opposed to across adjacent silos; and as a consequence, it restricts the object of enquiry, quite literally constrains the object so that we do not envisage its fluid relations (Bennett, 2012, p. 28). Transdisciplinarity in this sense is generative; committed to movement through a field that is uncharted from a single disciplinary vantage point. Its objects are akin to Latour’s hybrid amalgams, generated and transformed as they move through a network or open field—objects that cannot be envisaged from a disciplinary standpoint. Specializing in the dynamics of sense perception and expression, transdisciplinary aesthetics elaborates not simply the production of such objects but the “processual specificity” (Massumi, 2002, p. 253) of *aisthēsis* in the field. In other words, it articulates aesthetic activity as a specific modality contributing to the production and embodiment of knowledge.

The language of networks and systems, of vectors, flows, and processual aesthetics is not simply figurative in this context. It has emerged from media theory and cybernetics to describe the processes and relations that media and technology have come to embody (Massumi, 2002; Rossiter, 2003; Munster, 2013). It is “in media” that, as Latour suggests, we starkly encounter the object as an imbroglio: a hybrid construction of which no single discipline is custodian. Moving within the network is not a theoretical flight of fancy but an empirical necessity if we are to understand our objects. While epistemology, social science, and science maintain their privileged vantage points in separation from one another, these are partial and increasingly limiting: “If the crea-

tures we are pursuing cross all three spaces, we are no longer understood" (Latour, 1993, p. 5).

Along with media studies, the "affective turn" has been formative for transdisciplinary aesthetics, developing accounts of sensory-affective perception and expression, and fostering a return to Alexander Baumgarten's concept of *aisthēsis* as sense-based knowledge (Clough and Halley, 2012). Its extension through media studies has promoted a means of addressing the mobility of affect rather than simply expression as a "particularity" or property of a subject/object (Massumi, 2002). Affective transactions create transversal links between objects, and new relational spaces that fall outside the parameters of any discipline's organizational base. Media provide conduits and vectors through which this can occur on a vast and unpredictable scale. Aesthetics opens up the analysis of sensory experience and expression in fluid environments or networks, thereby becoming an important means of investigating subjectivity and its organizing structures. The study of *aisthēsis* for this reason cannot occur "inside" art history or philosophy, or within any framework that privileges its own disciplinary concerns and approaches over external engagement.

**Transdisciplinary Aesthetics versus the Anti-Aesthetic.** Transdisciplinary aesthetics has been associated with the rediscovery of aesthetics in the field of visual culture in the wake of postmodernism (Halsall et al., 2009). While the fields of both aesthetics and art dramatically broadened in the second half of the twentieth century, attempts to harness aesthetics in the service of formalist art produced a schism with postmodernism, casting the latter as "anti-aesthetic" (Foster, 1983). The hiatus in aesthetic theory created by the "anti-aesthetic" is redressed in recent work (Elkins, 2006; Halsall et al., 2009; Bennett, 2012). The challenge in this "rediscovery" is to address, rather than continue to evade, the changing ground of contemporary practice after postmodernism; in other words, to develop a robust aesthetics that no longer retreats to formalism and purism but that is flexible enough to withstand the transformation and hybridization of its putative objects.

From postmodernism onward, art practice itself moved steadily toward transdisciplinary aesthetics. In this sense, analysts of aesthetics focused on contemporary art have been confronted by the changing nature of the object itself. If today art is thoroughly imbricated in "other" practice, then it no longer represents a stable disciplinary object.

The rise of cultural studies and the postmodern turn away from formal aesthetic preoccupations led to calls for much greater engagement with the social world. The turn against aesthetics has been attributed to the field's own failure to keep relevant, to develop a sociological dimension and build multidisciplinary practice. Mandoki, for example, cites Janet Wolff and Pierre Bourdieu's attacks on aesthetics for its otherworldliness and failure to engage history and social science in any robust sense (2007, pp. 4–5). Mandoki builds on

such critique to argue that aesthetics is not only about the ontological status of art and beauty but also a problem with political, social, anthropological, and neurological dimensions. As such, it requires an interdisciplinary orientation. Mandoki affirms the integration of discipline perspectives rather than their "transcendence." Here, a terminological difference separates Mandoki from the advocates of transdisciplinarity—and effectively from transdisciplinary thinkers in media fields. What for Mandoki signals transcendence is for others such as Nicolescu a relational connector, enabling greater empirical focus. Nicolescu argues:

As the prefix *trans* indicates, transdisciplinarity concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all discipline. Its goal is the understanding of the present world, of which one of the imperatives is the unity of knowledge. (2002, p. 44)

At stake here is the alignment of method—and intellectual effort—with contemporary systems of knowledge production. Transdisciplinary aesthetics is at once a reconceptualization of objects and of our proprietary hold over them. As such, it is a means of prioritizing external engagement over the interests of a discipline, and of contending with the dynamics of a networked world. This outward-facing, relational disposition grounds a new empiricism, a "super-empiricism" (Rossiter, 2003), characterized by its responsiveness to unfolding process and real-world contingency. In this respect, transdisciplinary aesthetics may be understood as the generation of frameworks and methods for the wider deployment of aesthetics in the contemporary world. The concept of a practice that is forged through an encounter with its outside is increasingly manifested in relational, dialogic, and participatory aesthetics, as well as in new forms of hybrid art practice that combine nonaesthetic skills and perspectives. Such practices whittle away at the institutional boundaries of aesthetics and art, not only to make statements about art but also to directly expand the deployment of the aesthetic in a field that is categorically open and emergent. This, in turn, entails adaptation.

Through the lenses of transdisciplinary theory, we may question the intellectual gain in carrying off objects to our home disciplines if these objects are now co-produced at the junction with multiple other disciplines, "traveling" or set in motion from the inception. Interpretative methods for the contemporary context require not just a multidisciplinary gaze but an adaptation to processual aesthetics (Rossiter, 2003): a means to keep up with the flow. Transdisciplinary aesthetics effectively enables us to envisage different kinds of objects, to understand new kinds of interconnection, new means of transmission and embodiment. But if it is a reaffirmation of aesthetics in the wake of postmodernism, it retains and builds on the postmodern openness to diversity and change, to an empirical world rich in media and content.

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JILL BENNETT