Aesthetic Awareness in Sound Art

Don Ritter
School of Creative Media
City University of Hong Kong

Keywords
Aesthetic judgments, awareness, sound art, political economy of art.

Abstract
Aesthetic awareness is defined as a conscious understanding of how and why one makes aesthetic judgments. This paper discusses the notion of aesthetic awareness and its relevance when judging various forms of art, with an emphasis on sound art. The intended purpose of aesthetic awareness is to enhance an understanding of the influences and consequences of aesthetic judgments, accompanied with a realization of the social and economic function of art. The contents of the paper are based on academic writings in aesthetics and philosophy of mind, extensive discussions with international artists and art students, and formal interviews with art curators from North America, Europe and Asia. The paper presents a detailed discussion on the process of aesthetic judgment, including an extensive list of aesthetic criteria being used in the judgment of art.

Introduction
A primary goal in aesthetics is to investigate aesthetic judgments, the decisions people make when they decide what is art and what is good art. [1] Imagine two friends who visit an art museum and then begin arguing over the quality of a sound art installation being exhibited. One friend states, “It’s garbage, a child could have created that with a cheap smart phone.” The other friend disagrees and arrogantly responds, “Anyone who knows anything about contemporary art would know this installation is fantastic. It embodies humanity’s disillusionment with justice and authority.” He emphatically adds that the artist of the installation is very popular at museums and galleries in New York City, and François Pinault—the wealthy art collector and owner of Christie’s auction house--recently bought the artist’s work. [2] He finishes his justification by mentioning the artist had studied during the 1990s with video artist Nam June Paik. [3] Now imagine a sound artist standing on a street corner near the museum where the two friends are arguing. This artist has created a sound work, duplicated it fifty times onto audio CDs, and then written the work’s title onto each copy with a blue felt-tip marker. He tries selling the CDs on the street by inviting passers-by to listen to his work through headphones connected to a smart phone. No one accepts his
invitation or purchases a copy of the CD. The two friends at the museum have expressed their aesthetic judgments verbally, while the passers-by on the street have expressed theirs by showing no interest in the sound artist.

This article intends to describe the notion of aesthetic awareness, which can be defined simply as having a conscious awareness of how and why one makes aesthetic judgments. A fundamental aspect of aesthetic awareness is the perspective that aesthetic judgments are intersubjective: a truly objective aesthetic judgment is not possible, though we may act as if our judgments are fact when they are merely in agreement with the subjective judgments of others.

The term aesthetic awareness refers to a particular manner—or style—for making aesthetic judgments that is comprised of the following characteristics:

- awareness of the aesthetic perspective for making aesthetic judgments
- awareness of what may have influenced the use of a specific aesthetic perspective
- awareness of any consequences that might result from using a specific aesthetic perspective

The rest of this article will discuss aesthetic awareness in more detail, but I will briefly describe an aesthetic perspective as an idiosyncratic method used by a person for judging the quality of artworks. A person’s aesthetic perspective is comprised of a specific manner for experiencing the aesthetic features within an artwork, a collection of specific aesthetic criteria for judging those features, and a specific manner of using those criteria.

It is also necessary to describe what I mean by the term awareness, which is related to the term consciousness. Philosophy of mind is the branch of philosophy concerned with consciousness. The various explanations for consciousness within the philosophy of mind range from the notion that everything in the universe has consciousness—a concept known as panpsychism [4]—to the idea that human consciousness is a fundamental principle that cannot be fully explained, like the principles of space, time, or mass. [5]

Consciousness is everything we experience: it can be conceived of, most simply, as what abandons us every night when we fall into dreamless sleep and returns the next morning when we wake up. Without consciousness, as far as we are concerned, there would be neither an external world nor our own selves: there would be nothing at all. [6]

The term awareness is used in this paper to describe a state of mind that is different from simply being awake; it will refer to purposely directing the mind’s attention onto a specific thought or onto a specific perceptual phenomenon in the physical world. In formal studies involving awareness, human subjects are considered to have awareness of a phenomenon only if they can verbally report its presence. [7] The level of awareness available to a person can vary
accord-according to knowledge and experience; a person who has studied music should have a higher level of awareness for music than someone who lacks the knowledge for directing attention onto specific musical features, such as timbre, rhythm, or melody. Lev Vygotsky—the first psychologist to recognize the significance that cultural productions have in forming our thinking and conceptual development—wrote, “The general law of development says that awareness and deliberate control appear only during a very advanced stage in the development of a mental function, after it has been used and practiced unconsciously and spontaneously.” [8] While instructing visual art, I notice that many students consistently create symmetrical compositions. When this tendency is brought to their attention, some students are unaware of their inclination and others are unaware of the notion of symmetry. I am designating a compositional decision that is made knowingly by an artist as a cognizant compositional decision, while one that is made without awareness as an incognizant compositional decision.

The numerous definitions being described in this paper are intended to provide a mindset for directing attention onto the aspects of aesthetic judgments that will enhance an awareness of how aesthetic judgments are made. I will use the term aesthetic feature—or simply feature—in reference to any characteristic of an artwork that can affect its aesthetic value, its degree of evaluation as a good or bad artwork. A symmetrical arrangement of eight audio speakers, a certain loudness level, and an artist’s nationality can all be aesthetic features within a sound installation.

The complement of an aesthetic feature is an aesthetic criterion, or simply criterion, which is an idiosyncratic rule that states the aesthetic value of an artwork can be influenced by the presence of an associated aesthetic feature. A specific aesthetic criterion will be identified using the word ‘aesthetics’ preceded by the associated aesthetic feature, such as ‘unique concept aesthetics’ being a criterion that responds to a unique concept. The term art object, as used by Roman Ingarden, will refer to the specific artwork that is subjected to an aesthetic judgment. [9] The term audience will refer to the individual person or group of persons making an aesthetic judgment.

This dichotomy for compositional decisions mentioned above—cognizant and incognizant—can also be applied to aesthetic judgments. Some people have no problem making aesthetic judgments, but they are unable to verbalize which criteria they use for making those judgments. An aesthetic criterion that is used by a person with awareness is designated as a cognizant aesthetic criterion, such as a person stating that a sound installation is good because it is very loud. An incognizant aesthetic criterion refers to a criterion that a person uses without awareness—such as a person who always prefers music in 4/4 time without understanding what is a time signature. Regarding the development of awareness, psychologist Jerome Bruner states “prior to the development of self-directed, conscious control, action is, so to speak, a more direct or less mediated response to the world. Consciousness or reflection is a way of keeping mind from (if the metaphor will be permitted) shooting from the hip.” [10]
The fictional narrative presented at the beginning of this introduction is intended to be an example of persons lacking in aesthetic awareness. The art enthusiast claimed that he judged the sound installation as being good because of its concept—“humanity’s disillusionment with justice and authority”—but he does not actually discuss this concept with his friend. Instead, he describes the exhibiting artist’s affiliation with key players in the art world: museums and galleries in New York City, François Pinault, and Christie’s auction house. Conversely, the artist who tried selling his sound work on the street corner may be unaware that art audiences often require artists to have affiliations with institutions in the art world—rather than with a street corner—before they will consider directing their attention to an artist’s work.

A primary issue in the philosophy of mind is the mind-body problem, which investigates the type of relationship our consciousness has with the physical world that our bodies inhabit. The two most common doctrines in the philosophy of mind are monism and dualism. Monistic theories propose that the mental and physical aspects of our reality are essentially the same, while dualistic theories propose that two distinct parts of reality exist: a non-physical reality that is the domain of the mind, and a physical reality that is the domain of the body. [11] This mind-body problem is analogous to the potentiality of an objectively good artwork (monism) versus the notion that a physical artwork is inherently different than the subjective experience of that artwork (dualism). The perspective of this paper is a dualistic approach, supporting the notion that no artwork can be objectively good because an artwork can only be experienced through the subjective consciousness of an audience’s mind. A consequence of aesthetic awareness is the ability to discern that the aesthetic quality of an artwork cannot be objectively good.

The Institutional Theory of Art, as described by philosopher George Dickie, states that “works of art are art as the result of the position or place they occupy within an established practice, namely, the artworld.” [12] Although the art world is theoretically comprised of a large number of international institutions and persons involved in the creation, distribution, promotion or sale of art, the high-end world of contemporary art is dominated by a relatively small group of art institutions and wealthy collectors who wield the authority to designate which artists achieve significant success and which do not. [13] The success of an artist is determined by many factors, but the prominent art collectors, art museums, and art galleries of the world ultimately decide which artists are given the opportunity for a livelihood through art. A typical consequence of a top collector, such as Pinault, buying an artist’s work is a drastic increase in the selling price of all the artist’s work. An increase in artistic income and opportunities are also likely to occur after an artist’s work is bought or exhibited by a major museum, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), the Tate Modern in London, or the National Museum of Modern Art at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. When the ownership and exhibition history of an artwork—its provenance—involves prominent collectors and museums, an artwork will likely sell at a high price and, consequently, be considered a good work of art. [14]
This brief discussion on the relationship between *provenance* and aesthetic judgments leads to a discussion about why an artist’s work will increase in economic value after it is bought by a prominent collector or exhibited at a prestigious museum. Various media—including books, sculptures, and artworks—have been used over the millennia to endow certain people, ideas, or social institutions with a high degree of worthiness. Today, this function is usually delegated to mass media using formats classified as propaganda or advertising, while fine art is usually spared an association with the masses and assigned a more elegant role in society. All media have a potential to enhance a particular entity, to promote it, provide it with profit, or give it a desired level of esteem. The propagation of media with particular aesthetic features can strengthen the concepts, people, or social institutions that associated with those characteristics. Judging a specific artwork as being good after it has been exhibited at a prestigious museum becomes a promotion for that museum through an acknowledgement of its authority. An exhibition offered to a young artist who studied at a revered university can become a promotion for that university. Admiring a sound installation because it uses a certain type of software can become a promotion for that software.

A core idea in this paper is that aesthetic judgments can function as mechanisms for promoting particular entities. This entity can be a concept, such as justice; a person, such as François Pinault; or a social entity, such as the MoMA. When an entity is promoted through an aesthetic judgment, with or without awareness, that entity is given a certain degree of worthiness. An entity that receives a high level of worthiness is treated with esteem and given social and financial opportunities that are not available to other entities. The intended consequences of aesthetic awareness are a realization of the influences of a specific aesthetic perspective and a recognition of which entities are being promoted through that perspective. The ultimate function of aesthetic awareness, which will be discussed later, is to provide an understanding of the social and economic function of art.

The notion that aesthetic judgments are promotional mechanisms has evolved through my formal research on media and aesthetics and, also, through my experience as a sound and digital media artist. [15] Much of the information within this paper is derived from a series of research interviews with artists, administrators, theoreticians, and curators of various forms of contemporary art, including sound art. [16] The remainder of this paper will discuss how the directing of attention onto aesthetic judgments and aesthetic perspectives can enhance recognition of the influences and consequences of aesthetic judgments and, ultimately, an understanding of the political economy of art.

**Process of Aesthetic Judgment and Aesthetic Perspective**

The *process of aesthetic judgment* is a conceptual model that outlines how people decide if an artwork is good or not, if it has high aesthetic value or low aesthetic value. The proposed model can be applied to the judgment of works created in any medium, but certain aesthetic criteria to be discussed are particularly relevant to sound art.
People prefer artworks containing the aesthetic features they associate with good artworks, but they dislike artworks lacking in those features or containing the features they associate with bad artworks. The aesthetic perspective used by a person for judging artworks is unique to that individual because aesthetic judgments can be influenced by various factors, including persuasion, context, motivation for making judgments, personal values, knowledge, and the characteristics of human perception. The model proposes that a person evaluates an artwork using an idiosyncratic aesthetic perspective that is comprised of the following components:

- a manner for experiencing aesthetic features
- a manner for using aesthetic criteria
- a collection of specific aesthetic criteria

The outcome of an aesthetic judgment can be viewed as a summation of fulfilled criteria, each having a positive or negative degree of influence on the aesthetic value of the art object. Different persons, consequently, will have disparate aesthetic judgments of the same art object when they use different aesthetic perspectives. The primary goal of the model is not to explain how the mind actually processes aesthetic judgments, but to provide a mindset for recognizing the influences and consequences of aesthetic judgments.

**Experiencing Aesthetic Features**

A person experiences only a portion of the aesthetic features contained within an art object because some will be imperceptible, incomprehensible, or irrelevant to that person. As a result, the same art object will be comprised of different aesthetic features when different persons perceive it.

*Objective aesthetic features* have no subjectivity; they are not open to interpretation by different audience members. The physical size of an artwork is an objective aesthetic feature because anyone with normal perceptual abilities would agree that a 5 x 5 meter sound installation is actually that size. In contrast, *subjective aesthetic features* are open to interpretation. ‘Beauty’ is a subjective aesthetic feature because the amount of beauty contained in a work will vary according to who experiences it.

Features are classified as *intrinsic aesthetic features* when they are physically present and perceivable within an art object. Examples of intrinsic features within sound art include physical size, physical components (audio speakers, amplifiers, wood, etc.), sound sources (musical instruments, recordings of natural phenomena, synthesized sound, etc.), loudness of sound, musical key, pitch ranges, rhythm, and tempo. *Extrinsic aesthetic features* are not physically present within an art object, and they are recognizable only by people who have the appropriate knowledge associated with the feature. Extrinsic features include the symbolism within an art object, the manufacturer of an art object’s technology, gender of the artist, age of the artist, nationality of the artist, exhibition history of the artist, provenance of the art object, and the educational institution where the artist studied. The research interviews
indicated that extrinsic features can sometimes be more influential than intrinsic features within aesthetic judgments.

In addition to the intrinsic-extrinsic and objective-subjective dichotomies, aesthetic features can also be categorized according to their perceptual, conceptual, social, and technological characteristics. Perceptual aesthetic features are those that are perceivable through the human senses, such as melody, rhythm, tempo, color, and physical scale. Conceptual aesthetic features refer to the ideas and symbolism that are associated with an art object, including interpretations not intended by the artist. An audience can perceive the conceptual features of an art object only after having the knowledge for distinguishing and understanding those concepts. The social aesthetic features of an art object refer to the social relationships that exist between the audience and creator of the art object, such as being a friend, relative, or stranger. The social aesthetic features of an art object are subjective—they will vary between audience members. Technological aesthetic features are related to the specific technologies used for creating, distributing or experiencing an art object, such as a certain brand of audio speaker or a specific type of computer.

An apparent aesthetic feature is a feature whose presence is acknowledged by the person who experiences it. When a person states that the timbre of sound within a musical work is amazing, this timbre is an apparent aesthetic feature for that person. Certain aesthetic features of an art object may be imperceptible to some audiences because of inappropriate knowledge, physical disabilities, or lack of awareness. Features within an art object that are unperceivable to a person—for whatever reason—are designated as unapparent features.

It is unlikely that all of the aesthetic features within an art object will affect a person’s aesthetic judgment. The features that are acknowledged by a person’s aesthetic perspective are called regarded aesthetic features because they have a capacity to affect that person’s aesthetic judgment. The counterpart of a regarded feature is a corresponding aesthetic criterion. A disregarded aesthetic feature is actually present within an art object, but its presence has no influence on a person’s aesthetic judgment because it is not within that person’s aesthetic perspective. Features that are within an art object but not perceived by a person are unapparent features, while those that are perceived by a person but considered irrelevant are disregarded features.

Using Aesthetic Criteria

An aesthetic criterion is an idiosyncratic rule that states the aesthetic value of an art object will be increased or decreased by the presence of an associated aesthetic feature. For instance, a person could prefer artworks containing the feature ‘unique concept,’ but dislike artworks containing the feature ‘beauty.’ A criterion is designated as a positive aesthetic criterion when the presence of the associated feature causes an increase in the aesthetic value of an art object. When the presence of a particular feature within an art object
decreases a work’s aesthetic value, the criterion associated with that feature is labeled as a negative aesthetic criterion.

The fulfillment of a positive aesthetic criterion will not necessarily produce an experience of high aesthetic value for an audience because an aesthetic perspective may require the fulfillment of many criteria. For similar reasons, the fulfillment of a negative aesthetic criterion will not necessarily produce a judgment of low aesthetic value. A fulfilled criterion, positive or negative, can affect the aesthetic value of an art object to different degrees. Aesthetic criteria that have the greatest influence on the aesthetic value of a work are designated as person’s primary aesthetic criteria, while those having a lesser influence are designated secondary aesthetic criteria.

Figure 1 - Aesthetic perspective: Example of an aesthetic perspective comprised of a negative criterion (beauty) and two positive criteria (good concept and unique concept). © Don Ritter, 2015. Used with permission.

Figure 1 represents an aesthetic perspective comprised of three aesthetic criteria that individually respond to ‘good concept,’ ‘unique concept,’ or ‘beauty.’ The primary positive criterion, good concept aesthetics, is a positive criterion represented by the largest sized container on the positive side of the balance, while unique concept aesthetics is a secondary criterion also on the positive side. Beauty aesthetics is a secondary criterion on the negative side of the balance that is more influential than the uniqueness of an art object’s concept, but less than the primary criterion.

The aesthetic perspective depicted in figure 1 was the most common perspective discussed by participants during the research interviews. Most of the interviewees stated that their primary positive criterion for judging artworks
was a good concept, followed by the uniqueness of that concept. Many of these participants also stated that the presence of beauty within an art object significantly reduced their liking of a work, meaning beauty is their negative aesthetic criterion. Figure 2 represents this aesthetic perspective being used to judge an art object containing a good and unique concept, but lacking in beauty: positive aesthetic judgment. Figure 3 represents this same aesthetic perspective being used to judge an art object that contains beauty and a unique concept, but lacking in a good concept: negative aesthetic judgment. An interesting aspect of this aesthetic perspective is that the aesthetic criteria being used are primarily responding to subjective aesthetic features: beauty and good concept.

**Figure 2** - *Positive aesthetic judgment*: depiction of the aesthetic perspective in figure 1 producing a positive aesthetic judgment. © Don Ritter, 2015. Used with permission.
The aesthetic criteria that are consciously used within a person’s aesthetic perspective are being designated as that person’s *cognizant aesthetic criteria*. If a person is aware of having a preference for very large-scale art objects, the criterion *large-scale aesthetics* is a cognizant criterion for that person. If a person uses specific aesthetic criteria without awareness, these criteria are designated as the person’s *incognizant aesthetic criteria*. People who use incognizant aesthetic criteria predominantly within their aesthetic perspectives are unable to explain why they like a particular artwork, or they may state that a work is intuitively good.

**Subheading: Aesthetic Criteria**

Aesthetic criteria can be generally classified in accordance with the four categories of aesthetic features: conceptual, perceptual, social, or technological. *Conceptual aesthetic criteria* are associated with the idea or concept conveyed by the art object, and *perceptual aesthetic criteria* are associated with the perceptual experience provided by the art object. *Social aesthetic criteria* are associated with the social relationship between the audience and artist of the art object, and *technological aesthetic criteria* are associated with media technology used to create the art object.
I have identified 225 different aesthetic criteria that people apparently use when judging artworks of various media and styles, but this collection is too large to discuss within the scope of this article. A smaller collection will be presented that are popular or relevant for judging sound art. The criteria were identified using the following methods: formal research interviews with curators, artists, theoreticians, and administrators of contemporary art; observations or discussions with artists and fine art students; readings on art and aesthetics; observations in mass media; and informal questioning of people, including those not involved or interested in art.

Recall that an aesthetic criterion can be used in a positive manner: the presence of the associated feature will produce an increase in the aesthetic value of the art object; or in a negative manner: the associated feature will produce a decrease in the aesthetic value of the art object.

Accessible concept aesthetics: the art object conveys a concept that can be easily understood by anyone.

 Appropriation aesthetics: the art object contains aesthetic features that are appropriated from existing art objects, such as a sound work containing music appropriated from a commercial recording.

Artist’s effort aesthetics: the art object was created by an artist who exerted significant effort to create it.

Artist nationality aesthetics: the art object was created by an artist of a particular nationality.

Artist recognition aesthetics: the art object was created by an artist who has received significant recognition through major exhibitions, awards, or media coverage.

Artist-written code aesthetics: the art object involves computer programming that was created by the artist of the work.

Art market aesthetics: the art object is being sold on the established art market. [17]

Attractive technology aesthetics: the art object is created with technological devices that are attractive.

Artist appearance aesthetics: the artist who created the art object has unique appearance.

Beauty aesthetics: the art object is considered to be beautiful.

Celebrity artist aesthetics: the artist of the art object is a well-known and admired.
Complex concept aesthetics: the art object conveys a complicated concept.

Complex technology aesthetics: the art object was created using complicated technology.

Correlative aesthetics: the art object contains an aesthetic feature that is correlated with external phenomena.

Deceased artist aesthetics: the artist of the art object is deceased.

Definitive medium aesthetics: the art object is created using a medium that is presented as being superior to other media.

Definitive style aesthetics: the art object is created using a style that is presented as being superior to other styles.

Disinterested audience aesthetics: the art object provides its audience with no practical reason for liking it.

Educated artist aesthetics: an artist who is formally educated in art created the art object.

Exclusive aesthetics: the art object is disliked, inaccessible, or unknown to the general public. [18]

Expensive aesthetics: the economic value or selling price of the art object is expensive. [19]

Familiarity aesthetics: the art object is familiar to the audience.

Fashionable aesthetics: the style of the artwork is currently fashionable.

Female artist aesthetics: a female artist created the art object.

Foreign artist aesthetics: a foreign artist created the art object.

Formal aesthetics: the formal aspects of the art object are its primary aesthetic features rather that its concept.

Good concept aesthetics: the art object conveys a concept that the audience considers good.

Hereditary aesthetics: a descendant of a well-known artist created the art object.

Inexpensive value aesthetics: the economic value of the art object is low.

Inexpensive technology aesthetics: the art object was created using inexpensive technology.
Institutional artist aesthetics: the artist who created the art object is associated with a reputable institution.

Intention aesthetics: the artist had a particular intention for creating the art object.

Interactive technology aesthetics: the art object uses interactive technology.

Intellectual aesthetics: a high level of knowledge is required to understand the concept of the art object.

Laborious aesthetics: significant labor was used to create the art object.

Large data aesthetics: the art object is comprised of a large amount of data.

Large resources aesthetics: the art object uses a large amount of resources.

Large-scale aesthetics: the art object is physically large.

Long duration aesthetics: the temporal experience provided by the art object has a long duration.

Male artist aesthetics: a male artist created the art object.

Mass media aesthetics: mass media are used to distribute the art object to its audience.

Materialism aesthetics: the art object promotes materialism, the notion that material objects are more important than intellectual, spiritual, or cultural concerns.

Meaningful aesthetics: the art object conveys a meaningful concept, one that is relevant to the audience.

Minimalist aesthetics: the art object provides a minimal perceptual experience.

Motion aesthetics: the art object incorporates motion.

Nepotistic aesthetics: a friend, colleague or relative of the audience created the art object.

Newest technology aesthetics: the art object was created using the newest technology.

New aesthetics: the art object is a new work of art.

Non-academic artist aesthetics: the artist who created the art object is not an academic.

Old artist aesthetics: an old artist created the art object.
Old technology aesthetics: the art object was created using old technology, such as analog audio equipment from the 1960s.

Opportunistic aesthetics: the audience receives a potential opportunity in exchange for a positive judgment of the art object.

Overstated concept aesthetics: the art object conveys a concept in an unambiguous manner.

Perceptually aggressive aesthetics: the art object contains an aggressive perceptual experience, such as loud sirens.

Performance aesthetics: the art object is presented as a live performance.

Permanence aesthetics: the art object is created using materials that are very permanent.

Pleasure aesthetics: the art object provides the audience with an experience of pleasure.

Pioneering artist aesthetics: the art object was created by an artist who is considered a pioneer of a certain artistic style or technique.

Pioneering artwork aesthetics: the art object is considered to be a pioneering artwork.

Popularity aesthetics: the art object is very popular and liked by many people.

Practical aesthetics: the art object provides a practical function in addition to being an artwork.

Professional artist aesthetics: a professional artist created the art object.

Promotional aesthetics: the art object has been promoted through significant media coverage.

Provenance aesthetics: the art object has a history of being owned or exhibited by prestigious institutions or persons.

Realistic aesthetics: the art object provides an experience that is perceptually realistic.

Rebellious artist aesthetics: the artist who created the art object is rebellious.

Repulsive aesthetics: the art object contains features that many people find offensive, immoral, or extreme.

Scandalous artist aesthetics: the artist who created the art object has been involved in scandalous or illegal activities.
Serious artist aesthetics: the art object was created by an artist who speaks seriously about the art object without humor or casualness.

Sexually provocative aesthetics: the art object conveys a perceptual experience that is sexually provocative.

Skilled artist aesthetics: the artist of the art object is highly skilled.

Sound aesthetics: the art object contains aesthetic features that involve sound.

Suicidal artist aesthetics: The art object was created by an artist who committed suicide. [20]

Tool aesthetics: the art object was created using a particular tool or technology, such as a certain software or a model of musical instrument.

Tradition aesthetics: the art object is created using a style that is based on an established tradition.

Underdog artist aesthetics: the artist who created the art object has been disadvantaged for some reason.

Unique concept aesthetics: the art object conveys a concept that is unique.

Unique style aesthetics: the art object uses a unique style. [21]

Young artist aesthetics: a young artist created the art object.

**Conclusion**

The various ideas and terminology within this paper are intended to direct the reader’s attention onto the intricacies of aesthetic judgments, but the ultimate goal is to enhance an awareness of the influences and consequences of aesthetic judgments, and a realization of the social and economic function of art. Sociologist Vincent Mosco states “political economy is the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources.” [22] The power relationships that exist in the art world today involve artists who produce art, and art dealers, museums and curators who distribute art; but the rulers of the art world hierarchy are the prominent art collectors who profit from art financially and socially, and who determine—through their acquisitions—which artists become successful and which do not. Aesthetic awareness is intended to be a mindset that enables a conscience understanding of the political economy of art by directing attention to the influences and consequences of aesthetic judgments.

Economist Don Thompson discusses in *The $12 Million Stuffed Shark* how high-end artworks are valued economically, and how clandestine strategies
are used to increase the value of artworks sold by art dealers and auction houses. Thompson describes how the 2007 sale of Mark Rothko’s painting *White Center* for $72.8 million was determined primarily by provenance because the painting’s previous owner was the billionaire art collector David Rockefeller. [23] [24] The aesthetic criteria that people use when making aesthetic judgments—such as *provenance aesthetics*—often correspond with the specific entities that seek high levels of authority, money, or esteem through art.

The notion that art and culture can provide certain people with a high level of worthiness or “distinction” has been thoroughly examined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who proposes that the hierarchies of social status are created and sustained through “taste,” and that the function of elite art is to create an elite social class. [25] Bourdieu states that the prevalence of a particular “taste,” which is called an aesthetic perspective in this paper, reinforces a social stratification into lower, middle, and upper class. The cultural artifacts that a society considers to be superior are usually the most expensive and, consequently, inaccessible to the masses. If a person is sufficiently wealthy and able to purchase the best cultural artifacts—such as artworks by the most prominent artists—this person consequently procures elitism by obtaining what is inaccessible to most persons. In contrast, people without access to the best artifacts may feel culturally disempowered or, at least, encouraged to feel that way. [26]

Although our preferences for commercial products are obviously influenced by external factors, such as the pervasive advertising that dominates mass media—the notion that our aesthetic judgments are being influenced is a less obvious phenomenon. We can become aware of what is influencing our aesthetic judgments through aesthetic awareness, by having a conscious understanding of our aesthetic perspectives. A person who prefers sound installations that use a certain type of software may have been influenced by the company that produced that software or by existing owners of the software. In a similar fashion, art history books, art education, and popular beliefs about media can influence a person to prefer artworks that use a certain medium while disliking others. Between ourselves we can disagree on what is good art and what is not, but we are all influenced to use certain criteria by the same physical world that exists outside of our subjective minds. We cannot avoid being influenced by reality because we need a basis for our aesthetic judgments, but we can be aware of what has influenced us and aware of the consequences of those decisions.

References and Notes


[4] Panpsychism is described as “the doctrine that the physical world is pervasively psychical, sentient or conscious (understood as equivalent).” See Robert Audi, ed., The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 640.


[15] For a more detailed discussion on how aesthetic judgments can function as mechanisms for promoting particular entities, see

Don Ritter, “The Ethics of Interactive Installations,” in *Interactive Media Arts*, ed. Antoni Porczak (Krakow: Academy of Fine Arts, 2009), 105-123.

[16] A total of 60 research interviews were made by the author with curators of contemporary art from Australia, Austria, Canada, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Japan, Slovakia, and USA. Each participant was asked to answer 10 specific questions related to the judgment of art, and the interviews ranged in duration from 35 to 150 minutes. The goal of the interviews was to have participants disclose how artists and artworks are actually chosen for exhibitions. Participants were promised anonymity for their responses, but many of them were associated with major institutions of art. The interviews were conducted in Banff, Berlin, Karlsruhe, Linz, Montreal, New York, Prague, San Francisco, and Sante Fe between 2001 and 2007.

[17] “If you broached the issue of beauty in the American art world of 1988, you could not incite a conversation about rhetoric—or efficacy—or pleasure—or politics—or even Bellini. You would instead ignite a conversation about the marketplace. That, at the time, was the “signified” of beauty.” Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty, Revised and Expanded*, Kindle version (Chicago: The university of Chicago Press, 2009), 167.


[19] “Even when the world economy began to collapse [world economic crisis of 2008], the contemporary art market kept on rising. The prices were absurd and obscene. The billionaires had turned it into a game that only they could play. Its rules were a mystery.” The Great Contemporary Art Bubble, dir. Ben Lewis, written by Ben Lewis (2009), http://bmnet.muvies.com/reviews/3107-the-great-contemporary-art-bubble/ (accessed 27 April, 2015).


[21] “To be against what is new is not to be modern. Not to be modern is to write yourself out of the scene. Not to be in the scene is to be nowhere.” Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 68.


[24] “David Rockefeller (born June 12, 1915) is an American banker and philanthropist who served as chairman and chief executive of Chase Manhattan Corporation…. As of September 2013, his net worth is estimated to be US $2.8 billion, ranking him among the 200 richest people in the world…. Another major source of asset wealth is his formidable art collection, ranging from impressionist to postmodern, which he developed through the raising of his mother Abby and her establishment, with two associates, of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929. See David Rockefeller’s page on Wikipedia, “David Rockefeller,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Rockefeller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Rockefeller), (accessed 27 April, 2015).


[26] For a recent book on the on social function of art, see Ben Davis, 9.5 *Theses on Art and Class* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

**Author Biography**

Don Ritter is a Canadian artist and writer who has been active internationally in the fields of sound art and digital media art since 1986. His recent writings discuss the relationships between aesthetics, ethics, and digital media. Ritter has held professorships at Concordia University in Montreal, Pratt Institute in New York City, Hanyang University in Seoul, and currently in the School of Creative Media at City University of Hong Kong.