Books Forum Introduction

Contemporary physiology of art

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Today, the desire of the early Nietzsche (2011a) to provide an aesthetic justification of life has the musty smell of the nineteenth-century German bourgeoisie pilgrimaging to Bayreuth hoping to find art to provide the salvation religion no longer offered. The publications reviewed in this Books Forum, however, render the later Nietzsche's 'physiology of art' prophetic. After his break with the 'metaphysics of art', Nietzsche (2011b) began to look at art as an expression of biological life and at life as a work of art. This could serve as a definition of bioart today.

Fernando Vidal discusses two new books on the neurophysiologization of art and aesthetic experience by situating them in the emergent fields of neuroaesthetics and neuroarthistory. Whereas Nietzsche judged the value of Wagner's operas by their effects on his guts, Ludovica Lumer and Semir Zeki's *La bella e la bestia* looks to the brain to understand the experience of beauty. Following the Italian philosopher Chiara Cappelletto's *Neuroestetica*, Vidal dismisses this reduction of aesthetic judgment to the activation of neural reward centers as both ahistorical and ill-suited to explain important questions of aesthetics, such as why someone might enjoy paintings such as Francis Bacon's that do not reflect traditional or supposedly natural standards of beauty.

Beyond this vivisection of the experience of art, artists have refunctioned biotechnologies for the

purpose of making bioart. This development is reflected upon by two books reviewed by Tom Idema. Robert Mitchell's *Bioart and the Vitality of Media* presents attempts at biocultural consciousness raising: visitors to art galleries and museums are invited to conceive of themselves not just as spectators of biological artwork, but as part of a biological milieu. In contrast to the conception of art presupposed by neuroaesthetics, bioart, as Mitchell understands it, is not simply a matter of an individual subject's perception, but an expression of life itself transcending any particular living organism. Advocating an aesthetics in plant breeding that privileges profuse variation over the ideal forms of 'kitsch plants', George Gessert's *Green Light* also challenges the neuroaesthetic focus on beauty. Situating this emergent field in the broader problem space of biotechnology opens it up to the political controversies surrounding the remaking of nature. Gessert defends the supposedly irresponsible experimentation of bioartists as a worthy antidote to the unholy alliance of kitsch and totalitarianism.

If these small samples of recent publications are at all representative of their fields, it would seem as if, in the neural realm, the controversies mostly revolved around an aesthetics of reception whereas the genetic focus of bioart rather gave rise to heated discussions of artistic production. Together, these lively domains show that, more than a century after Nietzsche's polemics against *Artisten-Metaphysik*, the relationship between the biological and the aesthetic continues to be a site of contention.

References

- Nietzsche, F. (2011a) *The Birth of Tragedy, or Hellenism and Pessimism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Libraries.
- Nietzsche, F. (2011b) *The Case of Wagner. Nietzsche Contra Wagner. The Twilight of the Idols. The Antichrist*. Toronto: University of Toronto Libraries.

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