

## REVIEWS

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**Janet Wolff. *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, ix + 183 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-14096-6**

1983 saw the publishing of *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* authored by Janet Wolff,<sup>1</sup> a short book remarkable in its time for bringing under one roof two approaches towards artworks – namely, analytic aesthetics and a Marxist-informed sociology of art, which were – at least in those days quite reasonably – considered mutually irreconcilable, and for doing it in a way that would give each its due. This move has come from rather unexpected quarters, since Wolff received a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Birmingham, home to the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies, which is famous for giving birth to the academic interdisciplinary movement of cultural studies, usually considered hostile towards philosophical aesthetics. *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty* is the second publication by Wolff to have the word ‘aesthetics’ in its title, a sign of her continuing interest in questions she discussed some twenty-six years ago.

*The Aesthetics of Uncertainty* is a collection of six essays (plus an introduction and an afterword) written over the last twenty years. They can usefully be divided into three categories. In the first two chapters (‘Groundless Beauty: Feminism and the Aesthetics of Uncertainty’ and ‘English Art and Principled Aesthetics’) Wolff investigates the idea of uncertain, yet principled aesthetics. The three chapters that follow are the earliest of this collection, and are described by her as ‘case studies in uncertain aesthetics’ (7). They may, however, also be read independently of the first two chapter-essays as exercises in art criticism devoted to specific similarly themed artworks (Chapter 3: ‘The Iconic and the Allusive: The Case for Beauty in Post-Holocaust Art’), the work of the American-born painter R. B. Kitaj (Chapter 4: ‘The Impolite Boarder: Kitaj’s “Diasporist” Art and Its Critical Response’), and the fate of German-speaking Expressionist painters in wartime Britain (Chapter 5: ‘“Degenerate Art” in Britain: Refugees, Internees, and Visual Culture’). The last chapter (‘The Sociological Image’) is a reflection on methodology in sociological writing today, and since it deals neither with artworks nor with aesthetics proper, it constitutes a category of its own.

What is or ought to be uncertain about aesthetics? In the introduction, ‘The Desire for Certainty – and the Timeliness of Doubt’, Wolff situates her work, as it were, after the Fall. What has fallen are Modern certainties, the supposedly

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Wolff, *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983).

universal and unshakable foundations of science, morals, and culture. These Modern certainties have come under attack in the wake of 1968 by the tide of intellectual currents usually identified by the prefix post- (postmodernism, poststructuralism, postmarxism, postcolonialism, but also new waves in psychoanalysis, critical theory, and feminist criticism). Wolff, herself a distinguished feminist scholar, embraces the intellectual contributions of postmodern criticism, but tries to think through the consequences beyond mere recognition of the failings of essentialist and foundationalist thought. If we are to take – as Wolff thinks we must – the postmodern critique seriously, what conclusions should we draw from it for our understanding of culture? Perhaps not surprisingly, in her quest for a satisfactory answer Wolff is trying to steer her ship between the Scylla of unabashed relativism and the Charybdis of reactionary, ‘precritical’ conservatism. What she looks for is a ‘postcritical’, uncertain, yet principled aesthetics.

For Wolff, the question of value plays the central role in her pondering the idea of postcritical aesthetics. In the first two essays ‘Groundless Beauty’ and ‘English Art and Principled Aesthetics’, she takes on the general hostility of the cultural criticism towards any signs of an autonomous (that is, self-legislating) aesthetic realm of values. By cultural criticism she means ‘the multiple and diverse challenges in the past three decades to the notions of a “pure” aesthetic and of universal and transcendent values in art’ (33). This camp basically comprises three currents: postcolonial and feminist criticism of ‘exclusionary practices involved in canon formation’, sociological criticism of art institutions, and hermeneutic criticism of aesthetic formalism: ‘hermeneutics, ideology critique, semiotics, psychoanalytic criticism’ (151).

The first essay is devoted to feminist hostility towards beauty. According to Wolff, that hostility has several sources, one being that ‘the philosophical language of the beautiful and the sublime has historically [...] been strongly gendered’ (12) and that visual beauty has in Western art been generally identified with representations of women (often nudes), raising suspicions as to the ‘disinterestedness’ of the pleasure it produces. Feminist uneasiness about beauty can reasonably also be interpreted as being consequential to the questioning of art-historical canons: art considered ‘feminine’ or produced by female artists has usually had greater difficulty being accepted into the canon of great works of art. Feminist critics have usually also tended to praise politically or socially committed artworks and have taken the category of beauty to stand in the way of delivering a political message to its audience (12–17).

While Wolff embraces all these arguments as more or less correct, she opposes the kind of generalizing conclusions that regard beauty as an obsolete, if not

reactionary category. She is convinced that none of the worries expressed above provides sufficient reason to dismiss beauty completely or to reduce aesthetic judgement to its unconscious determinants. Once we admit that the beauty discourse in the West has been strongly gendered, does it mean that any talk of beauty must be gendered as well? Or similarly, if we admit that certain art currents or genres have been marginalized because of their alleged femininity, does it follow that such artworks must be introduced into the art canons regardless of their artistic or aesthetic merit? (16) And lastly, if we part company with the 'precritical' conception of beauty as a universal and apolitical value, must we conclude that beauty has no place in postcritical aesthetics? To all these questions Wolff answers in the negative.

It is clear that these problems do not relate solely to the feminist discourse. They all generally evolve around the question of aesthetic evaluation and its principles. Wolff worries that if the principles underlying our aesthetic judgements can all be explained away in terms of 'social structures and ideological interests' (20), then nothing remains but irreducibly subjective, sensuous experience and no room is left for the question 'How good is it?'. As she argues in 'English Art and Principled Aesthetics', to disclose the prejudices fuelling our value judgements does not mean that the question of value disappears.

An influential answer to cultural criticism's objections to aesthetics has been the call for pluralistic aesthetics that would treat all value judgements as relative to a given social setting, that is, culturally specific.<sup>2</sup> But one doubts whether such a pluralistic aesthetics deserves the name it bears, because to use the name 'aesthetics' for an enterprise that unmasks every aesthetic value as supporting a given social hierarchy<sup>3</sup> seems a rather drastic way to reform aesthetics: what is left of it is indeed just a name, since its aim is to exorcize any talk of aesthetic value. Wolff seems to be well aware of this when she writes: 'Art professionals [...], confronted by the new postmodern relativist aesthetic, still have to continue their work as cultural mediators and select works to display, buy, and promote to the public. Moreover, whether or not they are actually called to account on this, they surely need to be able to defend their choices in

<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, Moxey, a leading proponent of New Art History, asks: 'What would happen to the history of art if [...] it abandoned its subscription to the belief that aesthetic value depends on a universal human response, and that that response can best be gauged by the response of the community's most culturally sophisticated members?' His answer was that aesthetics should be something 'concrete, specific, local, rather than indefinable, ineffable, and universal'. Keith Moxey, 'Animating Aesthetics: Response to the Visual Culture Questionnaire', *October* 77 (1996): 57–8. It is exactly this either-or situation that Moxey forces aesthetics into and Wolff tries to avoid.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

aesthetic (rather than, or at least as well as, social or political or pragmatic terms.' And she hastens to add: 'Sometimes, too, this will involve adjudicating *between* competing canons' (21, emphasis in the original).

Here, Wolff bases her argument on practice: curators, art critics, and others still argue about how good works are, despite most of them, arguably, being aware of the shortcomings of precritical aesthetics. But on its own, this argument from practice would be too weak: the pluralist aesthetician could still convincingly challenge it by maintaining that the judgements of art critics are based on aesthetic norms specific to a given tradition they adhere to (for example, avant-gardist, modernist, realist, classicist); and when they do adjudicate between canons, they simply project their values onto a sphere where radically different norms apply. Indeed, this has been the standpoint of some British art historians whom Wolff discusses in the second essay. The revealing of the Francocentric modernist bias ('the MoMA narrative'), persistent in the mainstream modern art history of the last century, has led these scholars to re-evaluate certain English paintings solely on the premise that they cannot be judged by criteria originating from a different cultural tradition, in this case, the French Postimpressionist (35).

But Wolff makes another claim. The pluralist aesthetician presumes that there exists a common normative ground underlying value judgements in a given cultural or social formation, which makes it possible for the members of that formation to reach an agreement, however situational and endemic to that formation it is, on criteria of aesthetic merit. Wolff's strategy is not to attack this position from a universalist perspective;<sup>4</sup> rather, she questions the pluralist's assumption that it would be easier to reach an agreement 'within each social group about its criteria and its hierarchies of art [...] than assessing works across a broader field' (25). In either case, 'criteria [...] must be argued for and agreed upon' (25), if there is to be any kind of agreement on them: since there is no such thing as pure aesthetics, the criteria for aesthetic evaluation always involve ideological motivations and there are no obvious grounds for presuming that a *reasoned* agreement on the criteria for judgement will be easier to reach on an intra-communal basis.

Wolff often emphasizes that aesthetic evaluation is never purely aesthetic, in the sense of relating only to the formal qualities of artworks. It is, 'amongst other things, a function of social structures and ideological interests' (20), 'always situational and a product of its contemporary culture and its values'

<sup>4</sup> As, for example, Crowther has done. For him this line of argument betrays the conservative nature of supposedly progressive cultural pluralism. See Paul Crowther, 'Defining Art, Defending the Canon, Contesting Culture', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44 (2004): 361–77.

(42), it 'often mix[es] the purely formal with referential criteria' (50). But her point is that these often implicit 'referential criteria' do not necessarily have to deepen cultural hegemony or push through a hidden agenda of the ruling social order. By making them explicit we do not as if *a priori* discredit any aesthetic judgement as necessarily biased, instead, we open a way for the practice of 'uncertain aesthetics'.

In drafting her view of uncertain, yet principled aesthetics, Wolff claims to have found inspiration in recent political and moral philosophy. Though she quotes Zygmunt Bauman, Claude Lefort, and Nancy Fraser, she seems to rely heavily on *Principled Positions*, a collection of essays edited by Judith Squires.<sup>5</sup> The moral that she draws from Squires and other contributors to the volume is that even though values are contingent and grounded in communities, their criteria are not immune to inter-community dialogue (23). Principled ethics must start from the assertion of uncertainty as its 'home ground' (37, the words are Bauman's). This again means asserting that there are no universal, ahistorical values, but only locally embedded, context-dependent ones. In Wolff's interpretation, contemporary ethical and political theory 'focuses on the emergence and development of shared discourses of value in the context of community' (23). The underlying argument seems to run like this: in societies, ethical values tend to be presented as natural, though in fact they are only *naturalized* in an ideological process that helps to keep the ruling social order unquestioned. But they can be disclosed as such in a rational, self-reflective debate about evaluative criteria. And because the debate is rational, it can transcend the communal context. The role of theory here is not just to describe, but to be involved in the 'denaturalization', to be active in the reasoned debate.

This rather Habermasian ideal of discursive rationality Wolff wants to implement into aesthetics: 'I want to suggest that the procedures of responsible ethics I have discussed – procedures based on reasoned dialogue in the context of community – may be employed in debates about aesthetic value' (24); 'the establishment of criteria of judgement and of hierarchies of works of art is, ideally, the product of reflexive deliberation in the context of communities of interpretation' (25 and 37). But imagine that this ideal discursive situation has been reached and our evaluative practices have been stripped of all the hidden and unconscious interests: what, if anything, remains of aesthetic judgement? Is there anything in aesthetic evaluation that is immune to such a reasoned

<sup>5</sup> Judith Squires, ed., *Principled Positions: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993). The authors of the essays (Chantal Mouffe and Paul Hirst among others) may best be described as writing from a post-Marxist perspective.

critique? Wolff does not offer a straightforward answer, but it is reasonable to assume that she must think there is. Otherwise, what room would be left for uncertainty?

Let us briefly turn to the essays she calls 'case studies' in uncertain aesthetics. But already in the first of these, 'The Iconic and the Allusive', uncertain aesthetics (in the two previous essays presented as a critical assertion of the necessarily uncertain base of aesthetic judgement) is transformed into the aesthetic of uncertainty, that is, an appraisal of uncertainty or allusiveness as the best artistic means of expressing Shoah themes in art. But does the acknowledgement of the uncertain foundation of our evaluative practice imply anything about the kind of artistic techniques to be preferred by this practice? If it does, Wolff does not explicitly elaborate on this anywhere; if it does not, she is guilty of committing a *non sequitur* since she establishes no direct link between uncertain aesthetics and the aesthetic of uncertainty. In fact, she fails to distinguish between them. The only thing they have in common is the general atmosphere of uncertainty which they share, but in the first case, uncertainty means groundlessness, in the second indirection.

Nevertheless, the essay does relate to a theme, discussed in the previous chapters, in bringing up the topic of beauty. According to Wolff, from the point of view of uncertain aesthetics, most of the anti-aesthetic arguments against beauty lose urgency. This has been the main conclusion of Chapter 1, where, in arguing that beauty is no obstacle to 'moral education and political action' through art, Wolff approvingly quotes Kathleen Marie Higgins's polemic with Arthur Danto,<sup>6</sup> in which Higgins puts forward the idea that beauty invites contemplation, allowing us to reflect on our moral and political commitments. In Chapter 1, Wolff used this suggestion to curb the feminist disapproval of beauty. In the essay 'The Iconic and the Allusive', Wolff repeats Higgins's argument (71–2) to support her opinion that 'allusive realism' in the artistic thematizing of the Shoah is aesthetically as well as morally superior to both literal figurative (iconic) representation, which fails to engage the beholder in an interpretative dialogue with the subject-matter, and pure abstraction, which bypasses the question of the Shoah altogether. By allusive realism she means non-iconic, yet not purely abstract representation, realist enough to catch our attention, yet allusive enough to engage us in the active work of interpretation which is both aesthetic and moral at the same time (69): aesthetic because it makes us aware of its perceptible qualities, moral because we are invited to reflect on the uneasy subject of the artwork.

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Marie Higgins, 'Whatever Happened to Beauty? A Response to Danto', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 281–4.

Thus far, this debate proceeds well even without introducing beauty. But Wolff stresses that the allusive realist artworks (paintings) she discusses (by Morris Louis, R. B. Kitaj, Ben Shahn) are beautiful: they give us 'visual pleasure and [manifest their] own particular beauty' (72). Since in the first chapter, however, she expressly makes a distinction between pleasure experienced and beauty perceived ('It goes without saying that these *are* distinct; we can find pleasure in the unbeautiful and observe the beautiful without pleasure' [13], emphasis in the original), visual pleasure cannot bear the burden of the argument. But any other account of what beauty might be is missing. Wolff states several times that she is not in the business of defining beauty (29, 72, 145), but her acknowledging it does not make the matter less urgent. In discussing some other works she does mention 'gorgeous color', 'complex composition', 'elegance of composition' (73) as signs of their beauty, but these are just remarks in passing. One may legitimately reply to her the way Danto replies to Higgins: 'It is up to her to show that what she calls beauty really is that and not something more like wisdom.'<sup>7</sup>

Skipping the two essays on Kitaj and the German artistic diaspora in Britain, which, interesting as they are, contain considerably less theory, we briefly turn to the last chapter. There, Wolff reflects on the recent return to impressionist writing in sociology, an 'imagistic sociology', as she calls it (120). Such sociology abandons the project of discovering underlying structures through a rigorous and systematic analysis of social behaviour and instead focuses 'on the concrete to illuminate the broader historical moment' (124). As one might have guessed by now, this greater interest in metaphoric writing is explained again by the loss of faith in Enlightenment certainties, this time through the recognition that 'any type of sociological framework is a construct' (125). At this point, one would reasonably expect Wolff to call for an uncertain 'postimpressionist' sociology to supersede postmodern micrological writing, a step that would be in line with the main argument of her book. But Wolff instead defends the revival of imagistic sociology, which springs from a 'dissatisfaction with dry and abstract forms' of systematic sociology (136). The reasons are, she suggests, mostly aesthetic: social scientists look with 'aesthetic envy' at the possibilities of creative writing and endorse it perhaps with the hope of making their work more persuasive. This may come as a surprise to the reader, because it abandons the path Wolff has followed so far, and one is left to wonder how this 'aesthetic envy' might be related to the principled uncertainty of the earlier chapters. Wolff herself suffers from this envy as the essayistic character of her writing clearly demonstrates.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur C. Danto, 'Art, Essence, History, and Beauty: A Reply to Carrier, a Response to Higgins', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 284–7, 287.

And since such writing does not permit any systematic treatment of the key problems she raises, it is only fair to assume that uncertainty on the part of the reader is something Wolff is willing to risk.

It has been Wolff's choice to present her book not as a collection of essays on loosely connected topics (perhaps grouped in thematic subsections), but as a volume united by the theme of uncertainty in aesthetics, which, according to her, reflects the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty in Western society (see her Introduction). By itself, however, uncertainty is a pretty vague concept, and can easily become a mere catch-all notion. Despite the odds, Wolff succeeds most of the time in persuading the reader that the essays hold together. But significant cracks do appear now and then.

Upon Wolff's recommendation, the essays on post-Shoah art, Kitaj, and German Expressionists in Britain should be read as 'case studies' in uncertain aesthetics. By this I take her to mean that in them she applies some of the ideas presented in the first two chapters (despite the fact that the former predate the latter). Thus the essay on artistic representations of the Shoah presumes that ethical and aesthetic criteria are not clearly separable or opposed; the essay on Kitaj engages in disclosing the motivations behind supposedly pure aesthetic judgements; and "Degenerate Art" in Britain' may be read as a demonstration of the shifting nature of the criteria in a given cultural setting. But, as is apparent in Wolff's unwarranted shift from uncertain aesthetics to the aesthetic of uncertainty in Chapter 3, the danger that the 'aesthetics of uncertainty' would become a mere catch-all term never diminishes: the term gives shelter to such diverse phenomena as 'postcritical aesthetics,' certain trends in contemporary art, as well as 'aesthetic envy' in academia.

Also, in the Introduction, her narrative presents us with the 'before-and-after' scheme. First comes the fall of the self-assured precritical Enlightenment aesthetics believing in the possibility of pure, universal criteria of beauty and other aesthetic categories. The fall is brought about by cultural criticism, which unmasks all the motivations behind a purported aesthetic autonomy. But after the stormy days of the postmodern re-evaluation of all values comes post-critical theory, which patiently reconstructs out of the debris the uncertain debate on values. This simplified picture serves Wolff well in her showing the pitfalls of 'pluralistic aesthetics'. But as such, it does not stand up to scrutiny. It would not take much work to demonstrate that many features of the post-critical aesthetics of uncertainty have in reality been part of Occidental aesthetic theory from the inception of aesthetic discourse in the very Enlightenment that has supposedly been brought to ruins by cultural criticism. It was Rousseau who claimed that a taste for beauty originates only with the dawn of social intercourse (for him



one of the sure signs that virtue has all but left the stage). His admirer, Madame de Staël, wrote a treatise on the interconnections between social institutions and literature as early as 1800. And historicism has always been a strong, at times dominating current in aesthetic theory, at least since Herder. (This is not to suggest of course that nothing has changed since Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, or that cultural criticism has been attacking only straw men.) But perhaps one should not forget that Wolff's aim is not to preach to the converted, but rather to remind those who thought that they were done with aesthetics once and for all, that a principled aesthetics, an aesthetics of uncertainty, if you will, may be of some help in finding our way past the Scyllas and Charybdises of our age. And this is surely to be welcomed.

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