



A Hunger for Aesthetics: Enacting the Demands of Art (Columbia Themes in Philosophy, Social Criticism, and the Arts)

Michael Kelly

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For decades, aesthetics has been subjected to a variety of critiques, often concerning its treatment of beauty or the autonomy of art. Collectively, these complaints have generated an anti-aesthetic stance now prevalent in the contemporary art world. Yet if we examine the motivations for these critiques, Michael Kelly argues, we find theorists and artists hungering for a new kind of aesthetics, one better calibrated to contemporary art and its moral and political demands.

Following an analysis of the work of Stanley Cavell, Arthur Danto, Umberto Eco, Susan Sontag, and other philosophers of the 1960s who made aesthetics more responsive to contemporary art, Kelly considers Sontag's aesthetics in greater detail. In *On Photography* (1977), she argues that a photograph of a person suffering only aestheticizes the suffering for the viewer's pleasure, yet she insists in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) that such a photograph can have a sustainable moral-political effect precisely because of its aesthetics. Kelly considers this dramatic change to be symptomatic of a cultural shift in our understanding of aesthetics, ethics, and politics. He discusses these issues in connection with Gerhard Richter's and Doris Salcedo's art, chosen because they're often identified with the anti-aesthetic though their work is clearly aesthetic. Focusing first on Richter's Baader-Meinhof series, Kelly concludes with Salcedo's enactments of suffering caused by social injustice. Throughout, he reveals the place of critique in contemporary art, which, if we understand aesthetics as critique, confirms that it is integral to art. Meeting the demand for aesthetics voiced by many who participate in art, Kelly advocates for a critical aesthetics that confirms the power of art.

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