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Volume 6, 2014

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

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## Table of Contents

<b>Christian G. Allesch</b> <i>An Early Concept of 'Psychological Aesthetics' in the 'Age of Aesthetics'</i>	1-12
<b>Martine Berenpas</b> <i>The Monstrous Nature of Art — Levinas on Art, Time and Irresponsibility</i>	13-23
<b>Alicia Bermejo Salar</b> <i>Is Moderate Intentionalism Necessary?</i>	24-36
<b>Nuno Crespo</b> <i>Forgetting Architecture — Investigations into the Poetic Experience of Architecture</i>	37-51
<b>Alexandre Declos</b> <i>The Aesthetic and Cognitive Value of Surprise</i>	52-69
<b>Thomas Dworschak</b> <i>What We Do When We Ask What Music Is</i>	70-82
<b>Clodagh Emoe</b> <i>Inaesthetics — Re-configuring Aesthetics for Contemporary Art</i>	83-113
<b>Noel Fitzpatrick</b> <i>Symbolic Misery and Aesthetics — Bernard Stiegler</i>	114-128

<b>Carlo Maria Fossaluzza &amp; Ian Verstegen</b> <i>An Ontological Turn in the Philosophy of Photography</i>	129-141
<b>Philip Freytag</b> <i>The Contamination of Content and the Question of the Frame</i>	142-157
<b>Rob van Gerwen</b> <i>Artists' Experiments and Our Issues with Them — Toward a Layered Definition of Art Practice</i>	158-180
<b>Geert Gooskens</b> <i>Immersion</i>	181-189
<b>James R. Hamilton</b> <i>The 'Uncanny Valley' and Spectating Animated Objects</i>	190-207
<b>Iris Laner</b> <i>Learning by Viewing — Towards a Phenomenological Understanding of the Practical Value of Aesthetic Experience</i>	208-228
<b>Jerrold Levinson</b> <i>Blagues Immorales</i>	229-244
<b>Shelby L. J. Moser</b> <i>Perceiving Digital Interactivity — Applying Kendall Walton's 'Categories of Art' to Computer Art</i>	245-257
<b>Vítor Moura</b> <i>Seeing-From — Imagined Viewing and the Role of Hideouts in Theatre</i>	258-275
<b>Lynn Parrish</b> <i>Tensions in Hegelian Architectural Analysis — A Re-Conception of the Spatial Notions of the Sacred and Profane</i>	276-285
<b>Francesca Pérez Carreño</b> <i>Sentimentality as an Ethical and Aesthetic Fault</i>	286-304
<b>Christopher Poole</b> <i>The Fall of Reason and the Rise of Aesthetics</i>	305-315
<b>Mateusz Salwa</b> <i>The Garden — Between Art and Ecology</i>	316-327

<b>Lisa Katharin Schmalzried</b> <i>Kant on Human Beauty</i>	328-343
<b>Albert van der Schoot</b> <i>Musical Sublimity and Infinite Sehnsucht — E.T.A. Hoffmann on the Way from Kant to Schopenhauer</i>	344-354
<b>Pieter Shmugliakov</b> <i>Transcendentality of Art in Kant's Third Critique</i>	355-366
<b>Kristina Soldati</b> <i>Meaningful Exemplification — On Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A'</i>	367-378
<b>Valerijs Vinogradovs</b> <i>Kant's Multiplicity</i>	379-401
<b>Ken Wilder</b> <i>Las Meninas, Alois Riegl, and the 'Problem' of Group Portraiture</i>	402-421
<b>Mark Windsor</b> <i>Art and Magic, or, The Affective Power of Images</i>	422-435
<b>Pavel Zahrádka</b> <i>Does "Great" Art Exist? A Critique of the Axiological Foundations of the Artistic Canon</i>	436-456
<b>Zsófia Zvolenszky</b> <i>Artifactualism and Authorial Creation</i>	457-469

# ***Learning by Viewing — Towards a Phenomenological Understanding of the Practical Value of Aesthetic Experience***

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I will shed light on the question of whether or not aesthetic experience can constitute practical knowledge and, if so, how it achieves this. I will compare the approaches of Nelson Goodman and Edmund Husserl. Both authors treat the question of which benefits aesthetic experience can bring to certain basic skills. While one could argue alongside Goodman that repeated aesthetic experience allows for a trained and discriminating approach to artworks, according to Husserl, by viewing aesthetic objects we can learn to perceive in a more undiluted fashion and to qualify our own perception against the backdrop of the conceptual framework that shapes our everyday experience. As a consequence, aesthetic experience is not to be regarded as something that only contributes to a normatively loaded involvement in the distinct field of the ‘aesthetic’. I will argue that a phenomenological account is also of interest for understanding the practical value of aesthetic experience beyond the confined field of the arts.

There has been a great deal of discussion lately concerning the epistemic value of aesthetic experience in the field of philosophical aesthetics. Numerous books and papers have addressed the question of whether the experience of artworks or of the aesthetic taken in a more general sense can contribute to knowledge acquisition.<sup>1</sup> If it can, what is the distinct kind

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<sup>1</sup> One could, roughly, distinguish two complementary accounts focusing on this question: While cognitivist approaches are positive about the contribution of aesthetic experience to knowledge acquisition, anti-cognitivist approaches deny any distinct epistemic qualities of aesthetic experience. For a general overview of the epistemic qualities of aesthetic experience and the cognitivism-anti-cognitivism debate see Berys Gaut, “Art and Knowledge,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford

of knowledge constituted in the course of aesthetic experience? Is it different from knowledge constituted in the course of ordinary experience? Is it different from knowledge constituted in the course of scientific experience?

In my paper I will draw on the relation of aesthetic experience and knowledge addressed by these discussions with one slight, but critical shift: I will not ask whether aesthetic experiences contribute to knowledge acquisition of a theoretical kind; rather, I will investigate if and to what extent aesthetic experience contributes to knowledge acquisition of a practical kind. By knowledge of a practical kind or “practical knowledge” I do not mean moral knowledge in the sense of practical reasoning.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I mean knowledge concerning praxis, i.e. knowledge about how to do something.<sup>3</sup> In this sense aesthetic experience would not enable

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University Press, 2003): 436–50; Rosalind Hursthouse, “Truth and Representation,” in *Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. Oswald Hanfling (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 239–96; Eileen John, “Art and Knowledge,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2005), 417–29; Peter Lamarque and Haugom Olsen Stein, “Truth,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics. Vol. 4*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 406–15; David Novitz, “Epistemology and Aesthetics,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics. Vol. 2*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 120–23. For cognitivist approaches see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1985); John Gibson, “Cognitivism and the Arts,” in *Philosophy Compass* 3.4 (2008): 573–89, for anti-cognitivist approaches see Peter Lamarque, “Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries,” in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran, (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 127–42; Jerome Stolnitz, “On the Cognitive Triviality of Art,” in: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (July 1992): 191–200.

<sup>2</sup> In contemporary debates, there is a vivid discussion of the interrelation of aesthetic experience and practical, or moral, reasoning. Cf. Matthew Kieran, “Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals,” in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 337–51; Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (eds.), *Emotion and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Noël Carroll, “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge,” in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60.1 (Winter 2002): 3–26. For an overview see Sarah E. Worth, “Art and Epistemology,” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2003), accessed September 12, 2014, doi: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/art-ep>.

<sup>3</sup> In *The Concept of Mind* (1949) Gilbert Ryle introduces the epistemic distinction between “knowing that” and “knowing how.” He considers the inarticulate, implicit, bodily mode of “knowing how” as more grounding than the explicit, propositional, rational mode of “knowing that.” Cf. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 28–32.

one to state *what* something is, how it could be used or how it should be judged. Rather, it would result in some kind of inarticulate, implicit, operative and embodied knowledge. For instance, visual aesthetic experiences could lead one to develop an informed and critical way of looking. In the case of auditory aesthetic experiences, one could develop a nuanced and differentiated sense of hearing.

In order to shed light on the question of whether or not aesthetic experience can constitute such practical knowledge at all and, if so, how it achieves this, I will discuss two approaches: the cognitivist-constructivist account of Nelson Goodman and the phenomenological account of Edmund Husserl. In comparing their very different theories, some intriguing arguments about the practical value of aesthetic experience can be found. Both – albeit implicitly – treat the question of which benefits aesthetic experience, taken as a distinct praxis, can bring to certain basic skills. While one could argue alongside Goodman that repeated aesthetic experience allows for a trained and discriminating approach to artworks, provided that it responds to some sort of normative claim, Husserl's late account of representation (*Darstellung*) brings about two arguments that dispute Goodman's claim. According to Husserl, by viewing aesthetic objects we can, firstly and more generally, learn to perceive in a more undiluted fashion and we can, secondly and more specifically, learn to qualify our own perception against the backdrop of the conceptual framework that shapes our everyday experience. As a consequence, aesthetic experience is not to be regarded as something that only contributes to a normatively loaded involvement in the distinct field of the "aesthetic" or that is only aimed at training an expert who deals with an historically specific conceptual framework, but should rather be considered as brightening our perceptual skills on a more general level. Therefore, a phenomenological account is also of interest for critical approaches beyond the confined field of the arts.

In the concluding part of my paper I will draw on some remarks by Husserl to sketch a phenomenological account of aesthetic experience that can explore to what extent aesthetic experience constitutes practical knowledge and which, therefore, contributes to a better and more comprehensive understanding of the epistemic value of aesthetic experience, broadly understood. Such an approach is of utmost interest especially in light of a recent shift of focus from theoretical to practical and embod-

ied knowledge.<sup>4</sup> In order to avoid any misconceptions, I will show that the phenomenological account I introduce does not bracket all the concerns of a cognitivist-constructivist account, which are of importance for a differentiated approach in philosophical aesthetics. I will argue that the phenomenological approach rather facilitates a critique of the historically concrete conceptual framework that, according to Goodman, underlies every experience, including aesthetic experience. In this sense, the phenomenological point of view serves as a kind of critical method for addressing the relativity and, thus, the constructed historical nature of every experiential system and its objects.

### **1. Theoretical vs. Practical Knowledge**

In order to comprehensively discuss the issue of aesthetic experiences' epistemic value, it is not only necessary to have a clear concept of the aesthetic and to understand the distinct way we experience it, it is also indispensable to shed light on the notion of knowledge. In contemporary epistemology, the field of the epistemic is often treated as comprising different kinds of knowledge. In the history of philosophy, however, knowledge has often been restricted to articulate forms of "justified true belief." Knowledge, in this understanding, amounts to sentences of the form "I know that p" expressed by a knowing subject who is well aware that her belief "p" is not only well justified (through rational reasoning, experience or the testimony of a trustful second person, for instance), but that it also is true. Knowledge of this kind is directed towards true pro-

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<sup>4</sup> It is mainly within recent empirically informed Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Sciences that embodied knowledge, mostly grasped as "embodied cognition," has become of interest. See for instance: Evan Thompson and Francisco Varela, "Radical Embodiment: Neural Dynamics and Consciousness," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 5 (2001), 418–425; Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Anthony Chemero, *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009); Robert D. Rupert, *Cognitive Systems and the Extended Mind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Lawrence Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Joerg Fingerhut, Rebekka Hufendiek, and Markus Wild (eds.), *Philosophie der Verkörperung: Grundlagentexte zu einer aktuellen Debatte* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013).

positions or facts.<sup>5</sup> I can know that p, if and only if I believe that p, if my belief is justified, and if p is a fact, which implies that p is true.

The traditional notion of knowledge limits the epistemic field to (inwardly or outwardly uttered) sentences of the form “I know that p.” This *knowing that* confines knowledge to holding true propositions in the mind and expressing them. In contrast, a non-reductionist epistemological account also sheds light on other forms of knowledge. A practical kind of knowledge in this context refers to competences, operations and abilities of a capable subject, which are, by the way, in most cases indispensable to finding out truths and, thus, allow for the acquisition of theoretical knowledge. Such *knowing how* cannot be fully grasped when regarded as a mere application of theoretical knowledge.

Consider the following example: When somebody informs me of the correct combination of movements that one must perform in order to ride a bike, the knowledge conveyed to me is of a theoretical kind and will, very likely, not enable me to ride a bike the minute I try to apply this knowledge (e.g. that I have to hold the handlebars, start to pedal, balance my weight, etc.). Riding a bike just like other forms of practical knowledge, such as knowing how to ski, knowing how to sing, knowing how to dance, knowing how to draw etc., cannot be reduced to a set of theoretical rules or standards underlying an action. Rather, they consist in a complex intertwining of the awareness of such rules or standards (whether they be explicitly at hand or only implicitly, that is, on an operative level, but not on a conscious or reflective one) and the (bodily) ability to apply them in action. Accordingly, in order to acquire practical knowledge, it is indispensable to perform and to evaluate specific premises (if there are such premises, in the form of either explicit or operative rules or standards) in the very process of repeated performance. As Ryle puts it, a person comes to ‘know how’ by applying “criteria [or standards] in performing critically, that is, in trying to get things right”.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ryle holds that this understanding of knowledge, and the conception of mental conduct linked to it, amount to an “intellectualist doctrine.” See Ryle, *Concept*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ryle, *Concept*, 29. Interestingly, Ryle introduces a comparative setting in which he parallelizes the “canon of aesthetic taste” and the scientific “inventive technique” as paradigmatic examples of practical knowledge. Namely they both entail performing a ‘knowing how’ without being able to articulate the proper theoretical criteria which

Once we take theoretical and practical forms of knowledge into account, the issue of fully understanding the epistemic value of aesthetic experience becomes even more complex. Talking merely about theoretical knowledge, it is possible to focus on the content conveyed in the course of aesthetic experience and to ask whether it contributes to constituting any specific knowing-that. But when the discussion begins to also involve practical forms of knowledge, it becomes necessary to consider not only the content – what it is about – but also the praxis of aesthetic experience, i.e. how it is performed. If it is possible to acquire practical knowledge in the course of aesthetic experience, it is of interest to find out what distinguishes aesthetic experience as a praxis that not only aims at conveying contents – in terms of different themes or subjects – but that is directed towards a practical involvement of the aesthetic beholder.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. Goodman on the Epistemological Validity of Art**

Nelson Goodman is an author who is very well aware of the impact that aesthetic experience has upon knowledge acquisition. Regarding the issue of the epistemic character of artworks and aesthetic objects more generally, he can be considered as one of the chief pioneers of a 20 century philosophical movement that sheds light on the relationship of aesthetic experience and knowledge. Basically, Goodman is positive about the contribution of aesthetic experience to knowledge acquisition. In his understanding, aesthetic experience can be compared to scientific experience in terms of being inventive, eliciting “novel objects and connections.”<sup>8</sup> “[T]he

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would ground the execution or the performance in some thorough consideration.

<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid further complication of the discussion, I will only focus on the view of the beholder in this paper; however, the issue could be discussed also by focusing on the perspective of the artist and his aesthetic experience in the course of aesthetic production. Authors like Merleau-Ponty contend that the aesthetic experience of the artist is conveyed to the beholder through the aesthetic object, that is, in his terms, the image. Such an approach would allow to take both the perspective of the producer and the beholder into account all at once. I leave the reflection upon which advantages and problems that this account offer for another occasion.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 33.

picture,” he states, “– like a crucial experiment – makes a genuine contribution to knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, for him “the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding, and thus [...] the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology.”<sup>10</sup>

What Goodman asserts is that aesthetic objects such as pictures are not only means to convey existing knowledge; to use the language of epistemology, they do not simply impart contents and bear a testimonial character. Rather, they actually *are productive of* knowledge in creating a novel approach to the world. They are regarded as means of invention, discovery, creation – as means of enlarging and advancing already existing knowledge. The novelties they elicit concern both the discovery of unknown objects and the disclosure of unacquainted connections. Thus, in his constructivist notion, Goodman regards the field of the aesthetic as one “way of worldmaking,” since it participates in the construction of a contextual framework which constitutes the sense of an historically distinct lifeworld. Every such lifeworld is characterized as a specific system of symbols or classification, comprising the proper syntactic and semantic means in order to ground its genuine sense. Here, Goodman’s account comes out in opposition to the general acknowledgement of the (quantitative and qualitative) difference between the knowledge produced within the field of aesthetics and the knowledge produced within ordinary life and, even, the sciences.

What we come to know through aesthetic experience, then, according to Goodman, is a novel aspect of the world, and we somehow participate in constructing it precisely by forming this new knowledge. The discovery of unknown objects and the disclosure of unacquainted connections are to be regarded as elements within theoretical knowledge: We discover something new and come to understand how it is structured, how it is connected with other objects. And we can (re-)obtain it as an expressible and repeatable knowing-that: I can articulate it as my knowledge that an object exists, that it has certain qualities, that it bears a certain relationship

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<sup>9</sup> Goodman, *Languages*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 102.

with other objects, that it has a certain symbolic sense and shows a specific systemic embedding. In this, however, such knowing-that does not directly hold any practical value. It is not classified as a knowing-how that enables us to act in a specific way, it does not constitute any new skills, but consists in conveying information about the factual states of specific objects and their relationships.

Besides emphasizing the epistemic impact that aesthetic experience has on the theoretical level, Goodman also provides a clue for answering the question of whether and to what extent aesthetic experiences can contribute to the constitution of practical knowledge. The practical dimension Goodman focuses on is quite strictly confined, though, and concerns the trained eye, ear or hand of the expert. In the context of understanding how to train an organ of perception to be sensitive enough to realize those indispensable differences for expressing the distinct artistic qualities of an artwork, it is important to face processes of repeated aesthetic experience, tending towards a “training [of] my perception to discriminate”<sup>11</sup>. This is because, according to Goodman, “what one can distinguish at any given moment by merely looking depends not only upon native visual activity but upon practice and training”<sup>12</sup>. Aesthetic experience as a praxis, then, is not only an immediate way of responding to aesthetic objects. Rather, it is linked to the formation of a certain form of practical knowledge, a knowing-how to look at a picture, a knowing-how to listen to music, a knowing-how to approach a sculpture etc. This does not mean that aesthetic experience could not be constituted without this specific kind of knowing-how. Rather, Goodman suggests that the more our organs of perception are trained within the boundaries of a historically and culturally concrete conceptual framework, the better they can detect those differences, qualities, and details. Further, these features qualify as a distinct system of classification within that very same framework and an untrained beholder would possibly not even become aware of them. On this very general level, it seems that Goodman holds a strong and convincing argument in defense of the practical value of aesthetic experience, stating that aesthetic experience constitutes a kind of knowing-how to practically en-

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<sup>11</sup> Goodman, *Languages*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> Goodman, *Languages*, 103.

gage with objects in an aesthetically informed way.

A problem, however, arises with his approach. Goodman not only contends that through practice and training one becomes perceptually acquainted with a specific conceptual framework, learning to detect its characteristic traits. He further argues that this specialized way of perceiving, learned through practice and training, also carries with it a normative motif. We not only learn to approach an aesthetic object differently, we learn how we actually *should* approach it. But how do we know how we should perceive this artwork, how we should look at it, how we should listen to it etc.? If aesthetic experience enables us to become the “better lookers” or the “better listeners” – in terms of those lookers or listeners we actually should be – where does the normative inclination arise from such that what we can learn in the course of aesthetic experience is a better way of perceiving and not, say, a worse or just different way? This question strongly challenges the practical value of aesthetic experience. Goodman holds two central arguments that hint at the normativity operative in aesthetic experience and, at the same time, restrict, if not cut off the practical value of aesthetic experience (after it has already been stated).

First, what we can learn in terms of a “better” seeing (and not just more detailed or trained one) does not primarily depend upon our actual “aesthetic activities”<sup>13</sup>, but to a great extent depends on a normative set of rules that dictate how one should look at something. This assertion put forward by Goodman seriously qualifies the general statement concerning the knowing-how constituted through aesthetic experience. Training and practice alone do not give one the knowing-how of an expert; it is thanks to some sort of claim about how one should look at the picture that one learns to act in favor of a given norm. According to Goodman, this normative claim is not only effective as a rule to be applied, as some sort of regulative instance in the very act of looking, rather, the hypothesis is that the normative claim directly affects how somebody actually perceives an aesthetic object. As a consequence, it is not through repeatedly engaging in the praxis of aesthetic experience that we become the “better lookers”. Goodman states that it is the normative claim that changes the way an aesthetic object is experienced. In this sense, there are “differences in or

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<sup>13</sup> Goodman, *Languages*, III.

arising from how they [the pictures] are to be looked at”<sup>14</sup>. The practical value of aesthetic experience, then, is radically curtailed. Thus whether or not I become a better looker does not depend on the actual aesthetic experience, on my “visual activities”, as Goodman contends. Rather, in order to achieve the ability to look at a picture like an expert, I must have knowledge about the way I should look at it. Without such previous theoretical knowledge expressed in the form of a normative claim,<sup>15</sup> there is no practical knowledge to be acquired. Before I can look at a picture in a normatively qualified way, somebody has to tell me that I am to look at it differently. As a consequence, without being acquainted with the normative claim pertaining to another way of looking at a picture in order to make out an aesthetic difference, I would not even be able to enter the practical process of “train[ing] my perception to discriminate”.<sup>16</sup>

Goodman’s second argument has to do with the fact that the kind of “practice and training” he refers to does not serve as a general qualification of perception. Quite to the contrary, it merely serves as a means for adapting the norms or schemata of a historically or culturally concrete conceptual framework. This seems only natural as for Goodman every perception is formed by the norms and schemata of such a framework. “That we know what we see is no truer than we see what we know. Perception depends heavily on conceptual schemata.”<sup>17</sup> Since, according to Goodman, it is our (explicit and implicit) knowledge about the world that guides the way we perceive it, every construction, that is, every invention or discovery is founded upon the premises of existing cognitive concepts. Consequently, what we actually experience does not matter as much as what we already know about what we experience. How we experience matters little; what matters more is what we already know about how to experience (or come to know about it through a normative claim). A question that might arise in this context is how any of the inventive aspects of

<sup>14</sup> Goodman, *Languages*, 104 ref.

<sup>15</sup> However it is not clear at all what exactly we are being told when someone informs us about the way one should look at a picture.

<sup>16</sup> The “knowledge of the origin of a work [...] informs the way the work is to be looked at or listened to or read, providing a basis for the discovery of nonobvious ways the work differs from and resembles other works.” Goodman, *Worldmaking*, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson Goodman, “Art and Understanding: The Need for a Less Simple-Minded Approach,” in *Music Educators Journal* 58 (1972), 142.

aesthetic experience Goodman argues in favor of can enter this vicious circle of pre-constructed conceptual schemata guiding our perceptions.

To summarize, although Goodman hints at the practical value of aesthetic experience, his cognitivist constructivism seems to be highly ambivalent regarding the epistemic nature of the aesthetic in the end. According to him, there is not only theoretical, but also practical knowledge constituted in the course of aesthetic experience. Practical knowledge consists in the formation of the eye of the expert, which is more skilled to look at pictures and evaluate their artistic distinctiveness than the eye of the layman. But at the same time the formation of the eye of the expert depends on the historical, contextual, that is, theoretical knowledge about the artistic object introduced by way of a normative claim. And although Goodman states that the nature of aesthetic experience is inventive, it is not clear how the novelties elicited through artworks can exceed the existing conceptual schemata, provided that the very possibility of their production and even their reception, builds upon exactly the same conceptual schemata which are supposed to be surpassed.

As argued, there are several difficulties that arise in the Goodmanian account, if one is to understand the practical value of aesthetic experience. They mainly concern the normative and conceptual pre-conditions of aesthetic experience. Both the normative and the conceptual pre-conditions are bound up with Goodman's overemphasis on theoretical knowledge. Though Goodman contends that the praxis of aesthetic experience is indispensable in order to attain a differentiating and discriminating perception of artistic objects, he draws on the normative claim in order to explain a sophisticated change in aesthetic perception. Moreover, since what and how we perceive depends upon our (implicit or explicit) understanding of the schemata of our lifeworld, aesthetic experience ultimately results from the concepts we already have concerning the appearances, meanings and values of aesthetic objects. With this emphasis on the normative and conceptual conditions of aesthetic experience, it hardly seems possible to convincingly account for how aesthetic praxis might have an impact upon perception or how practical knowledge can be constituted in the course of aesthetic experience.

### 3. Husserl on the Practical Value of Aesthetic Experience

With the outlined difficulties in mind, I wish to introduce a second approach, the phenomenological approach of Edmund Husserl, in order to discuss the practical value of aesthetic experience. My choice might be surprising, as, unlike Goodman, Husserl's works do not primarily treat aesthetic issues. Although there are some interesting remarks on questions concerning aesthetic experience and also regarding the ontology of representational or fictional objects, Husserl did not develop a proper aesthetic theory or a philosophy of art. Indeed, it is not the artwork that is of interest for the phenomenologist; rather, he focuses on the object of aesthetic experience, for which he often employs the terms representation (*Darstellung*) and image (*Bild*). As a consequence it is not surprising that Husserl's account hardly – if at all – forms part of the discussions of 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophical aesthetics. However, I am convinced that the phenomenological approach Husserl developed and revised repeatedly over a period of nearly five decades is very useful for discussing aesthetic issues and problems. The phenomenological perspective turns out to be fruitful especially when it comes to the task of grasping if and to what extent aesthetic experience can contribute to the constitution of practical knowledge.

Phenomenologically, the focus of speaking about aesthetic issues is on the act of aesthetic experience – how it is characterized, how it differs from other acts – and on the nature of the aesthetic object, which is regarded as an intentional object of the aesthetically perceiving consciousness. One advantage that the phenomenological viewpoint offers for coping with aesthetic issues is that it allows for a clear and ready definition of the aesthetic that is not developed against the backdrop of the institutional framework of the arts. The aesthetic is taken as a phenomenal qualification of objects that correlates to a distinct way of experiencing. An object is aesthetic if it is perceived aesthetically and aesthetic perception or aesthetic experience is characterized by purity, purposelessness, freedom, and pleasure.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> In his reflections on aesthetic issues, Husserl is strongly influenced by Kant's Third Critique. Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898–1925)*. *Collected Works Volume XI*, trans. John B. Brough, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 168, ref.; Edmund Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewußtsein, Erinnerung. Husserliana XXIII*, ed. Eduard

Accordingly, for an object to be aesthetic it has to be experienced in this peculiar way.

On the surface, the Husserlian approach to aesthetic experience might appear as similar to the Tingle-Immersion-theory Goodman refers to in *Languages of Art*. This theory is said to raise the claim that aesthetic experience is properly understood as a pure, free, joyful, and pre-conceptual mode of encountering an artwork. Accordingly, “the proper behavior on encountering a work of art is to strip ourselves of all the vestments of knowledge and experience (since they might blunt the immediacy of our enjoyment), then submerge ourselves completely and gauge the aesthetic potency of the work by the intensity and duration of the resulting tingle.”<sup>19</sup> It is certainly not surprising at all that Goodman regards the Tingle-Immersion-theory not only as “absurd on the face of it,” but also as “useless for dealing with any of the important problems of aesthetics.”<sup>20</sup>

By taking a closer look on his writings, Husserl’s emphasis on the purity and purposelessness of the aesthetic admittedly does not disappear. The phenomenological approach is somehow idealistic in this respect. However, in opposition to Goodman’s reading of the Tingle-Immersion-theory, the Husserlian notion of aesthetic experience operates with a concept of practical knowledge that is illuminating for the discussion of the epistemic value of art. And it is this concept of practical knowledge that serves to demonstrate that the purity and purposelessness of aesthetic experience is not the consequence of a loss of “all the vestments of knowledge and experience” but rather is quite the opposite. It is a practically enacted, critical attitude towards “all the vestments of knowledge and experience,” that is, towards our actual beliefs, our “natural attitude,” as Husserl puts it.<sup>21</sup> The critical potency of aesthetic experience is thanks to its non-commonness, to its difference from ordinary experience. And the very same critical po-

Marbach, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1980), 145, ref.

<sup>19</sup> Goodman, *Languages*, 112.

<sup>20</sup> Goodman, *Languages*, 112.

<sup>21</sup> In his phenomenological methodology Husserl states that it is necessary to bracket the natural attitude, in order to be able to directly approach phenomena, that is, in order to experience how something is given to the experiencing consciousness. Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie. Husserliana III/1*, ed. Karl Schuhmann (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 56.

tency makes aesthetic experience an epistemic praxis, which, for Husserl, can in some respect even be compared to philosophy, at least with respect to its epistemic value. Aesthetic experience enables one to generate new insights by changing point of view, by – practically – enacting a different way of perceiving.

With this, Husserl contends, like Goodman, that aesthetic experiences strongly contribute to knowledge acquisition, even if he is not interested in understanding the theoretical knowledge that might be conveyed through aesthetic experience. Both Goodman and Husserl hint at the epistemic impact of aesthetic and scientific experience and at the parallels between aesthetic and scientific practice.<sup>22</sup> One core difference in this context – besides their diverse methodological approaches, of course – is that Husserl compares aesthetic experience to philosophical experience in parallelizing the aesthetic attitude with the philosophical attitude. According to Husserl, to approach an object in an aesthetic manner means to open up one's mind to a general striving to understand, thus becoming open to fundamentally *theoretical* concerns. Aesthetic experience is *theoria* “in the original sense. Delight in seeing that understands; correlatively, the *theoretical* interest, delight in seeing-in, in the understanding of the concrete type that belongs to a time as a characteristic part. [*Theoria* im eigentümlichen Sinn. Freude am verstehenden Schauen, korrelativ das *theoretische* Interesse, am Hineinsehen, Verstehen des konkreten Typus, der zu einer Zeit als charakteristisches Stück gehört.]”<sup>23</sup> The *theoria* Husserl that refers to must not be confused with theoretical knowledge. *Theoria* must be regarded as an activity, as praxis, as a knowing how.<sup>24</sup> And aesthetic experience opens up the possibility to engage in this praxis.

For Husserl, there are some intriguing parallels between the way we approach the world aesthetically and the way we approach it philosophically. In a letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal he contends that the attitude operative in aesthetic experiences is connect to the phenomenological at-

<sup>22</sup> Goodman, *Languages*, 255.

<sup>23</sup> Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, 643; Husserl, *Phantasie, Bildbewußtsein, Erinnerung*, 541.

<sup>24</sup> This thought can already be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Theoria*, here, is regarded as specifically human activity. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. and trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), X, vi, 8.

titude he favors for philosophical investigations.<sup>25</sup> What makes them akin to one another is their relation to ordinary experience and commonsense. While ordinary experience is characterized as our everyday dealing with common objects based upon our natural attitude and beliefs, aesthetic experience as well as scientific – or philosophical – experience is classified as non-ordinary and thus “unnatural.” For Husserl, ordinary experience is accompanied by an attitude that is indispensable for our everyday business; without relying on our naturally formed beliefs, it would be impossible to fulfill the simplest tasks. In this sense, Husserl does not generally devalue the natural attitude operative in ordinary experience, when he contends that we have to put it in brackets in order to gain truly phenomenological insight. He only differentiates between the “normalizing” value of the natural attitude, enabling us to live our lives and perform our duties on the one hand, and the epistemic value of the phenomenological attitude that allows one to break the circle of common beliefs and customs on the other hand. Taking on a phenomenological attitude does not mean leaving all of our ordinary knowledge behind; rather, it means adopting another perspective on it. As phenomenologists executing the reduction, we do not perform our common beliefs and customs. Rather, in bracketing them we suspend them, we do something else, that is, we engage in a different form of praxis which induces a different kind of perception. Doing something else does not mean, though, that we can (or even should) leave our natural attitude or our everyday knowledge behind. It rather means that we view it from another angle, from a critical distance. Suspending our natural attitude, then, also means we obtain a glimpse of it, viewing it from a critical perspective.

The different praxis in which the phenomenologist engages is defined via a restriction or limitation – Husserl speaks of “Reduktion” or “Époché.”<sup>26</sup> Restricting her view, the phenomenologist tries to solely concentrate on what is actually given in an experience. This means that in taking on the phenomenological attitude I try to focus on nothing else than on what and how I actually perceive, what and how I actually imagine, what and how I actually recall etc. In reducing the field of experience to its

<sup>25</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Briefwechsel. Band VII: Wissenschaftlerkorrespondenz*, ed. Karl Schuhmann (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 133–34.

<sup>26</sup> Husserl, *Ideen I*, 122–33.

content (what is actually given) and mode (how it is given), the phenomenological experience is a restrictive way of experiencing that, nevertheless, allows one to perceive aspects of the given that are normally out of sight.<sup>27</sup>

Comparing the Husserlian understanding of the epistemic value of aesthetic experience to Goodman's notion of the epistemic nature of the arts, one core difference becomes evident: While Goodman subordinates the practical dimension of aesthetic experience to a preceding theoretical insight, uttered in the form of a normative claim, Husserl indicates that a true theoretical insight can only be made if the praxis is altered, if, in other words, the approach to the experienced object changes. Both philosophers introduce aesthetic experience as one important experiential field allowing for the alteration of practices. Accordingly, Goodman and Husserl point towards the interconnection of practical and theoretical knowledge in aesthetic experience. Nevertheless, they display different emphases. For Goodman, theoretical knowledge is indispensable in order to promote the advancement of practical knowledge. Husserl, on the contrary, holds it is necessary to engage in a different praxis in order to provide the right basis for gaining new theoretical insights.

#### **4. Aesthetic Experience and Practical Knowledge – a Phenomenological Perspective**

With this difference in mind, Husserl's parallelization of phenomenological and aesthetic experience proves to be appropriate for developing a comprehensive approach to understanding the practical value of aesthetic experience. If one can only adopt the phenomenological attitude by practicing a specific form of engagement with objects, and if the phenomenological attitude and the aesthetic attitude are connected in this respect, then the aesthetic attitude too must correspond to some specific praxis. The praxis peculiar to aesthetic experience is then – in some way – a restrictive way of experiencing as well; it limits the view to the aesthetic

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<sup>27</sup> The main difference between the phenomenological and the aesthetic attitude, however, comes down to a difference between a knowledge producing and a knowledge enacting praxis. Unlike the phenomenological attitude, the aesthetic attitude does not aim at having specific insights; rather, it solely aims at enacting a different style of experience.

and its proper way of being given. Experiencing aesthetically, thus, suspends processing or discerning useful or useless aspects of the perceived. However, it is not merely trained to detect historically specific traits of the perceived. If it were, aesthetic experience would always be pre-determined either by a normative claim or a given conceptual outline concerning what should be regarded aesthetically and how to experience it aesthetically. Rather, aesthetic experience – as a free, pure, pleasure-oriented and purposeless praxis – is immediately directed towards the given, regardless of whether it serves any needs. In adopting an aesthetic attitude, therefore, one can and, probably, must learn a different way of perceiving as well as a different way of dealing with the perceived.

Approaching the issue of aesthetic experience's practical value phenomenologically, we could claim that performing an aesthetic attitude entails the bracketing of the received view. This is because in experiencing aesthetically one strives towards an actual looking (or listening, touching etc.) and thus can overcome what s/he already knows or believes to see (or hear, touch etc.). In this respect, the phenomenological approach reaches beyond the cognitivist-constructivist account of Goodman without negating the givenness of underlying conceptual schemata that constitute the actual experiential system. From the phenomenological point of view, every experience is conceptually founded, since it entails that something is always perceived *as x*. That something is perceived *as x* means that there are a number of natural beliefs<sup>28</sup> involved in the constitution of an object as an intentional object, that is, as an object intended by an experiencing subject. These natural beliefs consist of personal and collective, implicit and explicit knowledge and convictions concerning the perceived object, its context, its history, its purpose etc. Still, in aesthetic experience – just as in phenomenological experience – experiential objects do not unfold the same way they normally do in natural experience. This does not mean, however, that all concepts or beliefs are simply cut off from experience. It does not mean, in other words, that something is plainly and purely being perceived, without being regarded *as x*. Rather, in the realm of the

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<sup>28</sup> According to Husserl's genetic phenomenology, perception is doxastic, meaning that it is bound to historically and culturally grown beliefs. Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil. Untersuchungen zur Genealogie der Logik* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1985).

aesthetic, one perceives something *as if* it were x (or y or z).<sup>29</sup> The experiential mode “as if” is characteristic of aesthetic experiences, since only the free and purposeless space they constitute allows the perceiver not to immediately assign the perceived object a certain sense, use or benefit. The aesthetic space, therefore, facilitates a perceptual praxis that suspends immediate attributions (regarding something *as* x) exactly because it is free to consider alternative ones (regarding something *as if* it were x or y or z).

It is this freedom that also marks the core difference between phenomenological and aesthetic experience. While the phenomenological attitude means to evoke philosophical insights and ultimately aims at the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, the aesthetic attitude is free not to do so – but still it is somehow inclined towards this. Looking at an object aesthetically, one is free to look just for the sake of it. To just be looking is not something ‘natural’, as we normally do not engage in such ‘just for the sake of it’-practices. Therefore, it is also something we are not used to doing and, consequently, something we do not know how to do. The space of aesthetic experience – being sensual and pleasure-oriented – invites us to perform such alien practices and become in a way familiar with it.

The epistemic feature of aesthetic experience is not exhausted by this apprenticeship in ‘looking just for the sake of it’. The change of view bound up with the performance of ‘just for the sake of it’-practices comes along with a different way of experiencing. Experiencing something in a different way, further, is the very basis for gaining new insights and, therefore, for extending not only one’s practical, but also one’s theoretical knowledge. Expertise in the very process of aesthetic experience, then, qualifies as a foundation also for the diversification of one’s actual knowing-that.

So what is it that we actually learn through aesthetic experience in a practical respect?

As aesthetic experience can be regarded as a free space that allows for suspending operative natural beliefs and that simultaneously motivates a different way of encountering an object, it deepens our knowing-how to perceive in a twofold sense. First, by drawing the attention to the actual

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<sup>29</sup> This is especially true for representational modes of the aesthetic, such as images or narrations. Whether or not this is also applicable for non-representational modes of the aesthetic, such as music, must be left for a separate investigation.

object and the way it is given, it enables us to perceive in an undiluted fashion. Second, by implementing a critical distance between the way something is normally perceived and the way something can be perceived aesthetically, it allows one to qualify one's own experience against an historically concrete conceptual framework. In this, aesthetic experience – taken phenomenologically – turns out not only to embody the very process of enhancing practical knowledge but allows one to reflect upon it. If a person gains some 'know-how' by applying "criteria [or standards] in performing critically, that is, in trying to get things right,"<sup>30</sup> aesthetic experience not only motivates the knowing-how to perceive in a way that is somehow alternative to our natural perception (as it opens up an alternative angle of perception), it also marks the critical potential of this learning curve. Accordingly, what we can learn in the course of aesthetic experience in a practical respect, is to extend our perceptual abilities by perceiving differently *and* to critically reflect upon this difference in the very act of perception. When we are "trying to get things right" in the realm of the aesthetic, there is always more than one possibility to do so, since aesthetic experience is not limited to the one and only synthesis of grasping something *as x*. Aesthetic experience opens up a free space for playfully examining the possibilities of regarding something *as if* it were *x* or *y* or *z*. Examining the possibilities this way proves to have consequences not only for the development of our practical knowing-how to perceive, but also for a reflection upon the very status of this knowing-how.

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<sup>30</sup> Ryle, *Concept*, 29.

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