

**Proceedings of the  
European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 7, 2015

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

**esa**

## **Proceedings of the European Society of Aesthetics**

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: [proceedings@eurosa.org](mailto:proceedings@eurosa.org)

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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## Table of Contents

### **Paul Crowther**

*The Need for Art, and the Aesthetics of the Self: A Copernican Turn* 1-21

### **The Aesthetics Group**

*Turn, Turn, Turn: Civic Instrumentalisation and the Promotion of  
Autonomy in Contemporary Arts Funding* 22-45

### **Gemma Argüello Manresa**

*Participatory Computer-Based Art and Distributed  
Creativity: the Case of Tactical Media* 46-67

### **Zsolt Bátori**

*Photographic Deception* 68-78

### **Alessandro Bertinetto**

*Gombrich, Danto, and the Question of Artistic Progress* 79-92

### **Stefan Bird-Pollan**

*Benjamin's Artwork Essay from a Kantian Perspective* 93-103

### **The Branch Collective**

*Towards Gesture as Aesthetic Strategy* 104-114

<b>Camille Buttingsrud</b> <i>Thinking Toes...? Proposing a Reflective Order of Embodied Self-Consciousness in the Aesthetic Subject</i>	115-123
<b>Ilinca Damian</b> <i>On What Lies Beneath the Process of Creation</i>	124-136
<b>Wiebke Deimling</b> <i>Moralism about Propaganda</i>	137-147
<b>Daniel Dohrn</b> <i>According to the Fiction: A Metaexpressivist Account</i>	148-171
<b>Damla Dönmez</b> <i>Saving 'Disinterestedness' in Environmental Aesthetics: A Defense against Berleant and Saito</i>	172-187
<b>Luis Eduardo Duarte Valverde</b> <i>Net.Art as Language Games</i>	188-196
<b>Colleen Fitzpatrick</b> <i>Empathy, Anthropomorphism and Embodiment in Vischer's Contribution to Aesthetics</i>	197-209
<b>Jane Forsey</b> <i>Form and Function: The Dependent Beauty of Design</i>	210-220
<b>James Garrison</b> <i>The Aesthetic Life of Power: Recognition and the Artwork as a Novel 'Other'</i>	221-233
<b>Aviv Reiter &amp; Ido Geiger</b> <i>Kant on Form, Function and Decoration</i>	234-245
<b>Carmen González García</b> <i>Facing the Real: Timeless Art and Performative Time</i>	246-258

<b>Nathalie Heinich</b> <i>Beyond Beauty: The Values of Art — Towards an Interdisciplinary Axiology</i>	259-263
<b>Kai-Uwe Hoffmann</b> <i>Thick Aesthetic Concepts — Neue Perspektiven</i>	264-279
<b>Gioia Laura Iannilli</b> <i>The Aesthetics of Everyday Life: Suggestions for a Reconsideration of Aesthetics in the Age of Wearable Technologies</i>	280-296
<b>Jèssica Jaques Pi</b> <i>Repenser Picasso. Le Désir Attrapé par la Queue et les Iconographies Culinaires de l’Absurde et de la Stupeur</i>	297-316
<b>Mojca Küplen</b> <i>Art and Knowledge: Kant’s Perspective</i>	317-331
<b>Iris Laner</b> <i>Science, Art, and Knowing-How: Merleau-Ponty on the Epistemic Qualities of ‘Experimental Practices’</i>	332-362
<b>Regina-Nino Mion</b> <i>The Unpredictability of the Political Effect of Art</i>	363-369
<b>Vitor Moura</b> <i>Kundry Must Die — Stage Direction and Authenticity</i>	370-390
<b>Michaela Ott</b> <i>Aesthetics as Individual Affections</i>	391-405
<b>E. L. Putnam</b> <i>‘Bring a Camera with You’: The Posthumous Collaboration of Ahmed Basiomy and Shady El Noshokaty</i>	406-415
<b>James Risser</b> <i>Sensible Knowing in Kant’s Aesthetics</i>	416-427

<b>Salvador Rubio Marco</b> <i>Philosophizing through Moving-Image Artworks: An Alternative Way Out</i>	428-438
<b>Lisa Katharin Schmalzried</b> <i>Beauty and the Sensory-Dependence-Thesis</i>	439-463
<b>Niklas Sommer</b> <i>Schiller's Interpretation of the 'Critique of the Power of Judgement' — A Proposal</i>	464-475
<b>Tak-Lap Yeung</b> <i>Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of Kant's 'Judgment' and its Difficulties</i>	476-493
<b>Elena Tavani</b> <i>Giacometti's 'Point to the Eye' and Merleau-Ponty's Painter</i>	494-511
<b>Daniel Tkatch</b> <i>Transcending Equality: Jacques Rancière and the Sublime in Politics</i>	512-528
<b>Connell Vaughan</b> <i>Authorised Defacement: Lessons from Pasquino</i>	529-551
<b>Oana Vodă</b> <i>Is Gaut's Cluster Account a Classificatory Account of Art?</i>	552-562
<b>Katarzyna Wejman</b> <i>Plot and Imagination Schemata, Metaphor and Aesthetic Idea — A Ricoeurian Interpretation of the Kantian Concept of Imagination</i>	563-578
<b>Zsófia Zvolenszky</b> <i>Artifactualism and Inadvertent Authorial Creation</i>	579-593

# ***The Aesthetic Life of Power: Recognition and the Artwork as a Novel ‘Other’***

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ABSTRACT. In her use of the term “subjectivation,” Judith Butler follows Michel Foucault in describing how melancholy defines the emergence of subjects as they are induced to perform rituals in order to gain recognition from broader social forces. Butler specifically breaks her account down in terms of five key paradigms—Hegel’s Unhappy Consciousness, Nietzsche’s Bad Conscience, Freud’s Ego, Althusser’s Interpellation, and Foucault’s Power-Resistance Dynamic. All of these sources form her narrative of the body being turned on itself and trapped in a skin-tight prison, sentenced to go through ritual motions in order to get through the day, with the repetition itself bringing a meager measure of freedom in the form of rage re-appropriating the terms of the ritual/symbolic field. However insightful and influential her work may be, Butler’s account of the subject does not go far enough in exploring the role of either aesthetic experience or artistic creativity in escaping the walls. The argument here is that in both aesthetic experience, that is beholding artworks as an observer, and in moments of felt artistic creativity, there lies access, however oblique, to new modes of meaning and order less determinately chained to social power. More precisely, the artwork can also serve as an “Other” and a novel source of the type of recognition that forms self-consciousness and the topos of psychic life. Art, like other people, can also set up a turn-on-self and initiate the encounter of consciousness with itself. However, art, with its intentionality and temporality exceeding determination in discourse, serves as a jumping off point for changing the basic stakes of permanence, necessity, and contingency in subject life, especially when one fashions one’s bodily life as a work of art. This points to the value of reconsidering the *Psychic Life of Power* by appreciating its aesthetic life.

## **i. Introduction**

With a career spanning back to the 1980s and with renown for her 1990s books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler also spends a

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great deal of her time addressing the subject more generally in a way that overlaps with her more specific work on gender, although by her own admission these broader efforts are “less known—and less popular—dimensions of [her] philosophical work.”<sup>1</sup> This part of Butler’s oeuvre examines in broad terms how external power forms and regulates its psychic life, with many forms of alterity animating and constraining the subject, not just sexual difference, which Butler specifically casts as “not the primary difference from which all other kinds of social differences are derivable.”<sup>2</sup> While gender and sex have profound implications for the subject, Butler does not make these the major focus in this less popular strand of her thinking. In this context the term “subject” refers rather broadly to that which characterizes being human in the world, namely a self-reflexive, self-examining, self-critical, socially impelled, embodied agency. Here, the figure of the subject more generally represents a turning-on-self initiated by pressure from without, from what is other (with sexual difference still being a major dimension of that alterity).

## 2. Butler and Hegel

Butler proceeds from the view that a subject’s identity arises from external normativity, which initiates and takes up residence within and thus initiates the inner sphere of self-consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Butler starts with the leading figure of nineteenth-century German idealism, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who sees what he terms “unhappy consciousness” as the internalization of two desires toward freedom and negation, which themselves follow from the split between what he takes to be the representative figures of what he identifies as the immediately prior mode of consciousness, that of the master and the slave.<sup>4</sup> For Hegel, the struggle between master and slave is motivated by the fact that self-consciousness exists only in and for itself through recognition—recognition, which in Butler’s particular reading of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* serves as the *only* means for fulfilling

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<sup>1</sup> Butler: *Senses of the Subject*, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Hegel: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 163.

the desire to persist in one's being.<sup>5</sup> Reflection requires a mirror for self-consciousness in the form of another self-consciousness to recognize it. Here, the notion of recognition drives self-consciousness and it appears in terms of the two extremes of the slave's self-negating recognition of the master on the one hand and the freedom that the master acquires by being so recognized on the other.<sup>6</sup>

These desires toward freedom and negation are internalized inside of a single unhappy consciousness in such a way that neither desire dominates, thus giving self-consciousness nothing but the most fleeting satisfaction.<sup>7</sup> Here, the drives toward freedom in pure thought and negation become forms of stoicism and skepticism respectively, forms in between which the unhappy consciousness vacillates internally.<sup>8</sup>

For Butler this sets up a situation in self-consciousness where a skeptical character emerges as a "watching self, defined as a kind of witnessing and scorning, differentiates itself from the self witnessed as perpetually falling into contradiction."<sup>9</sup> By despising the stoic part that gets drawn into contradiction, self-consciousness therefore "appears as negative narcissism, an engaged preoccupation with what is most debased and defiled about it."<sup>10</sup> Self-consciousness, in such a state, exists as it does by virtue of what it hates and wishes did not exist.

Of course these examinations of the master-slave and unhappy consciousness dynamics contain some of Hegel's most compelling insights, and more to the point, these sections develop Hegel's approach to Butler's main concern—the development of self-consciousness as a turning of the self upon the self. With it being fairly clear that the final stages of Hegel's narrative of spirit (i.e. religion and the Prussian-style state) would sit uneasily with Butler's project and her interrogation of power structures, it is little wonder that she brackets off her own appropriation of Hegel.

However, by truncating her analysis of Hegel, Butler closes herself off to certain resources that could help with the unsatisfying implication of

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 145-146; Butler: *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 43 [emphasis added].

<sup>6</sup> Hegel: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 163, 168.

<sup>9</sup> Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*. p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

her work that the subject's psychic life must be one of either latent, low-grade melancholia or passionate, self-protective rage. One such resource exists in Hegel's description of art as another late stage of consciousness where he broaches the topic of freedom in a way relevant to Butler's project, namely in terms of how the artisan acquires self-knowledge through resolving a particular instance of the riddle of physical nature and intelligible character in the single, individual artwork in a manner not mediated not by another party (like the master), but by the artisan's own production.

Unlike the portions on the master-slave and unhappy consciousness dynamics from Hegel's account, in these later sections labor is neither alien, nor alienating. Whereas consciousness earlier becomes unhappy since neither the slave's labor nor the master's desire can offer either party the recognition and freedom from contingency that each desires, here the stakes for labor are rather different. Rather than work and desire being set off as each other's limits, as is the case during the master-slave stage, this conceptual dyad is brought into unity through an artisan fashioning the artwork.<sup>11</sup> The artisan's work ceases to be a foreign thing, ever in danger of acquisition and annihilation by uncontrollable outside forces, and instead becomes familiar and congenial, though it is still not speech or anything fully animate that might provide full reciprocal recognition. And so, in this iteration self-consciousness moves past the unhappiness earlier described by Hegel, by acquiring a new basis for positive self-recognition and understanding as the artisan crafts the artwork and the artwork builds the artisan's self-understanding.

Read through a certain lens, Hegel brings insight to the idea that, while artworks do not possess the full autonomy of thinking and acting human beings, they do still take on a life of their own. This can be seen as contributing to the view that art expands human self-consciousness by showing how something formed and created can still nonetheless exhibit spontaneity similar to what is sought amidst the perils of subject life.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

### 3. Butler and Nietzsche

A similar point can be made with regard to Butler's limited appropriation of Nietzsche. What Hegel sees as the split between recognized and recognizer internalized in unhappy consciousness, Friedrich Nietzsche, working a few decades later in the German tradition, rearticulates in his notion of the bad conscience—a socially driven split of the self into tormenter and the tormented. Working from this convergence, Butler reasons that a profound unhappiness develops as social forces set up and “create” the psyche, with the social regulating the psychic sphere so that action in society takes place within norms.<sup>12</sup> In both cases, social forces form the layout of the mind, regulating it and negating socially unacceptable behavior.

Therefore, in Butler's reading of Hegel and Nietzsche, the social regulates the psychic, leading to an internalizing of society's value. This enables the will to be tame enough to get by in society. The self, being so constituted, does not really possess its own will, but is formed in relation to others. Hence, in explaining the relational self, Butler writes that “the ‘will’ is not...the will of a subject, nor is it an effect fully cultivated by and through social norms.”<sup>13</sup> She suggests instead that the will is “the site at which the social implicates the psychic in its very formation—or, to be more precise, as its very formation and formativity.”<sup>14</sup>

This turning of the self back upon the self forms the inner/outer, psychic/social threshold. Hence, according to this view, there is absolutely nothing like any kind of movement of the pre-given self from inside of some psychic realm outward into the social world through presence and/or action.<sup>15</sup> There is no core, no eternal soul that comes prior to the social implication of the psyche. Peeling back the onion only gets more onion and combing through the sediment of past social relationships only yields more sediment. And so, describing how an “I” is formed “is not a matter of discovering and exposing an origin or tracking a causal series, but of describing what acts when I act, without precisely taking responsibility for the whole show.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> Butler: *Senses of the Subject*, p. 16.

Hence, for Butler, this kind of self “does not stand apart from the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and con[FB02?]icting moral frameworks” but is instead “already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, rehabilitation and not redemption would seem to make sense here. Though Butler does not put it this way in her reading of Nietzsche and the imposition of *slave* morality, the implication is there—the challenge here is gaining, or perhaps regaining, a sense of *nobility*. However, beyond the moral connotation there is also an artistic component to nobility that must also be recognized.

As concerns the Nietzschean questions of regaining nobility, it bears mentioning here that the third yes, the holy yes, the child stage of Zarathustra’s metamorphoses is about saying “yes” to repetition in the eternal recurrence of the same. Though Nietzsche famously avoids directly stating what an affirmation of recurrence would be, casting it instead as a dance and a secret between male Zarathustra and female eternity, the stakes are sufficiently clear.<sup>18</sup> One must be able to bear each moment repeating eternally, including all of those cutting and formative moments of felt loss in which slave morality takes hold bit by bit as one negotiates for recognition and survival. Butler does not take on this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought in her theory of self, nor does she deal with rehabilitation through ritual practice. This is unfortunate, because when it comes to answering Nietzsche’s challenge to affirm recurrence, what could be better than honing each gesture, each word, each action in order to raise each moment up to the level of practiced art? How could one better embrace repetition than by learning to regard the repetition of bodily action as an art, as ritual, as something to be honed and made graceful in each varied scene of appearance, address, and performance?

Butler’s sensible, sober approach is perhaps necessary since the Dionysian side of Nietzsche is sometimes too intoxicated and incoherent to be philosophically useful. She goes to great lengths to avoid importing any *deus ex machina* into her narrative of self-development, and so audacious statements on redeeming the past and turning “all ‘it was’” into “so I willed it!”<sup>19</sup> probably go a bit too far for her. Nietzsche’s more heady

<sup>17</sup> Butler: *Giving an Account of Oneself*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche: *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 284.

<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche: *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 175.

writings, like *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, hold out the possibility of grandiose, cosmic spontaneity and new beginnings that would overly complicate, if not outright contradict, Butler's meticulously framed project.

However, in his brief, yet profound, essay "On Truth, Lies, and the Extramoral Sense" Nietzsche takes up the basic idea of a founding turn-on-self in a way quite similar to how Butler would describe it more than a century later. However, his account diverges where it advances, in rather lucid fashion, the possibility of artistic creativity pointing to a way out of the self-as-social-prison.

Beyond speaking directly to Butler's project and anticipating her appropriation of Foucault's notion of subjectivation as the mechanistic formation the imprisoned subject, Nietzsche writes here in a more deliberate, clear, and frankly, useful manner about "redemption" of the self through artistic creativity than elsewhere. And this gives a firmer basis for reassessing the role of artistic creativity and aesthetic experience in Butler's account of the subject.

For Nietzsche, this type of "redemption" consists in getting past the idea that language delineates the world in a necessary way and realizing that artistic creativity stands as the way out of these confines. For him, the rectification of language in the notion that it is based in some grand notion of truth is itself the basis for social regulation. He speaks of metaphor becoming hard and fixed, becoming ossified, and in so doing conditioning the belief that for each image, for each object, there is some necessary and hard-wired nerve impulse.<sup>20</sup> In this regard the will to truth becomes the basis of enslavement to a normative order and a further ossification of the self.

Therefore, on this score redemption is not some recovery of original and self-stable essence, for that would merely replicate the structure, so familiar in the philosophical tradition taking after Plato, of willful pursuit of permanent truth. Instead, Nietzschean redemption consists in *remembering*. This means remembering that the stony metaphor-world of common language was itself once artistically created and that a kind of extramoral artistry can dissolve it, rendering language and thought fluid.

And so, speaking in the language of Butler's project, Nietzsche sardon-

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<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche: "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne", p. 883.

ically identifies the “security” of the everyday subject as being a prison of self-consciousness. Unlike Butler, Nietzsche points to artistic creativity as the means of escape. He writes:

Only by forgetting this primitive metaphor-world...only through the undefeatable belief that this sun, window, and table might have a truth in itself, in short, that one forgets oneself as a subject, and indeed an artistically creating subject, does one live with any calm, security, and consistency: if one could get out of prison walls of this belief for a moment, then “self-consciousness” would immediately be gone.<sup>21</sup>

Butler sets out more-or-less the same dilemma regarding the prison walls of self-consciousness, with the body becoming the normative subject’s skin-tight prison. However she does not go further and explore the role of either aesthetic experience or artistic creativity in escaping or even refiguring the walls. The argument here is that both in aesthetic experience, that is beholding artworks as a feeling observer, and in moments of artistic creativity, there is access, however oblique, to new modes of meaning and order less determinately chained to social power. Art thus points to powers beyond power and to creativity beyond normativity. How so?

#### **4. Arendt on Art and Appearance on the Scene**

What matters, and what shines forth independent of any particular view of history, is the superlative enduring quality of artworks. Speaking on what this means for *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt addresses the issue directly:

Whether this uselessness of art objects has always pertained or whether art formerly served the so-called religious needs of men as ordinary use objects serve more ordinary needs does not enter the argument. Even if the historical origin of art were of an exclusively religious or mythological character, the fact is that art has survived gloriously its severance from religion, magic, and myth.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 883-884.

<sup>22</sup> Arendt: *The Human Condition*, p. 167.

Though she decries the link between art and mytho-religious magic in her own description, Arendt sees artworks as exemplary with regard to survival through the ages, thereby ascribing a kind of magic to them. Arendt speaks of the consummately and “intensely worldly” quality of artworks in comparison to things generally. Her words here sound very much like those of Kant on non-purposive purposiveness in artistic beauty, particularly with her own description of how separation from everyday use makes artworks durable over and above change and corrosion in nature.<sup>23</sup> Arendt goes on to conclude that when it comes to artworks “their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages. In this permanence, the very stability of the human artifice, which, being inhabited and used by mortals can never be absolute, achieves a representation of its own.”<sup>24</sup>

Arendt’s approach is rather helpful because the convergence that she draws between *Schein* and *Sein*, between appearance and being, points to a possible resource beyond discursive formation for addressing subjectivation (addressed elsewhere in my work).<sup>25</sup> Now recall that in Butler’s understanding, subjectivation is a comprehensive process—meaning that there is nothing that exists beyond it as a prior interior remainder. For her, there is no such thing as a bodily remainder that might aid the subject, since the body as such is “destroyed” in the constitutive loss that founds the subject body within the normative bounds of a skin-tight prison, setting up the interior and the exterior. Rather, the body only becomes a body that matters with a recognized, intelligible social existence by being called, by being hailed into existence. This is what Butler has in mind with her appropriation of Louis Althusser’s hypothetical scene of interpellation where a police officer yells “Hey, you there!”, leading “you” turn around and recognize “yourself” in this hail with a literal turning of the self back upon self, where the self, so recognized, guiltily submits before the law without reason.<sup>26</sup> Butler’s basic point is that this type of interpellation plays out thousands of times in the subject’s life, where outright pejoratives, lesser slights, and indirect cultural messages hail the subject into being, into act-

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 167-168.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-198.

<sup>26</sup> Althusser: “*Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’État*”, p. 31.

ing out a certain role as if on cue.

However, Arendt can still add to this discussion, since she points to something genuinely “beyond” interpellation, namely the very manner in which appearance on the scene occurs. She makes the strong case that appearance is coextensive with being, particularly in political realms, writing, “Everything that is, must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing publicly and being seen.”<sup>27</sup>

And so, applying this to the logic of subjectivation, it becomes clear that one shows up on the scene prior to each and every hail into social existence, prior to each and every passionate attachment in ongoing subject life. Subjectivation seems to exploit the necessary publicity of human life, the seeming compulsion of *having* to appear on the scene and having to do so continuously in order to be and to persist in being. One cannot be constantly hailed into existence by perceived authorities, by Althusser’s hypothetical police officer, or even by petty slights, unless one is compelled to be there (as *Dasein*), thrown into the scene out on the street with a readiness and perhaps eagerness to be so hailed.

However, Arendt’s point, and one that is well taken when it comes to subjectivation, is that being-as-appearance can be refined. Everything may have to appear publicly in order to be, but some things are better at doing so. This is what artworks, as non-purposive and durable things do; they appear, and thus exist, in a fuller way. Arendt draws a both a distinction and a continuum between artworks and things, writing:

For although the durability of ordinary things is but a feeble reflection of the permanence of which the most worldly of all things, works of art, are capable, something of this quality—which to Plato was divine because it approaches immortality—is inherent in every thing as a thing, and it is precisely this quality or the lack of it that shines forth in its shape and makes it beautiful or ugly.<sup>28</sup>

Now, the idea being presented in this project, following Arendt, is that basic appearance on the scene takes place before and beyond the processes of

<sup>27</sup> Arendt: *The Human Condition*, p. 173.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

interpellation and subjectivation driven by passionate attachment. Appropriating a tangent of Arendt's logic and adding a twist of Butler's notion of subjectivation, the idea here is that artworks have the almost magical potential to call into question core notions of presence and absence in a way that can disrupt the basic logic of preserving oneself through preserving what is absent and lost in the ideals of conventional slave morality within the locus of self-castigation called conscience.

And so the point explored in my broader work is that by paying attention to artworks *and* by moving to refine one's own bodily life and appearance on the scene in terms of art, a subject can then become something of an artwork with a life of its own and with a timeframe and sense of purpose (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) far surpassing that of mortal life. The particular suggestion here is that, if the body is always undergoing subjectivation and always having first to appear, then the body—with its basic appearance, presence, comportment, and countenance always being formed by the "objective" world—can be similarly refined in terms of how it appears on the scene, perhaps also taking on a life of its own and finding a different sense of mortality and purpose beyond what has been inculcated in the course of subject life. Put yet another way, if appearance is in some way beyond the dynamic of interpellation and subjectivation as a condition of the possibility of its occurrence, then why should art, as the apex of appearance vis-à-vis endurance, not become a model for the subject body in its struggle for survival amidst a host of normative demands? If either art or the artful body can in some manner surpass subjectivation, even if just momentarily and in fits and starts, then why should the senses of time, durability, and purpose at play in art not radically alter the nature of subject self-recognition?

This can be thought of as trading off of prevailing definitions of art—whatever art is, it arrests attention, standing out as art not nature, per Immanuel Kant, or with art securing poetic justice such that the artist *earns* the initial right to attention, per leading contemporary continental philosopher Stanley Cavell.<sup>29</sup> If art captures attention, it does so by being extra-ordinary, by rising above the din of mere signs. In capturing atten-

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<sup>29</sup> Kant: *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, p. 306; Cavell, Stanley: *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 237.

tion in this manner, art is not merely *subject to* recognition, rather it issues a *claim for* recognition. When applied to how the appearance and emergence of the subject body, this changes the stakes.

## 5. Conclusion

And so, if the bad conscience, the social psyche trapping the body, is a horrible artistry, then knowingly reclaiming the body through art makes sense. If the moral discourse forming the bad conscience and trapping the body is a fiendish artistry, then why not fight it with art? If what is sometimes the wretched art of conventional language has the power to bind, then what prevents art from having the power to loosen those strictures of recognition? However, if artistic power is to be brought to bear, there must be a medium—but what? It needs to be something present at hand and not a *deus ex machina*, and moreover it needs to change the stakes of bodily imprisonment through recognition.

And so the solution to this problem of acquiring recognition outside of the normal confines of subjectivation is clear—the body must *itself* become that artful medium and become meaningful on its own terms. If the body can become artful and acquire whatever limited “magic” it is that artworks bear that allows them to disrupt conventional structures of purposiveness, then the body can become a different kind of other. Rather than just beholding one’s body as a subject beholds any mere object, one’s body can, over time, become a source for a less pernicious and less imprisoning form of recognition, which can do at least something to counter the prevailing and entrenched form of recognition that drives subjectivation encounters. What is needed then is a theory of bodily appearance, of bodily presence, of bodily performance, of bodily practice, and one that does not ascribe any undue and inexplicable creativity or spontaneity to the body or to art, but which nevertheless develops a serious account of the possibility of a certain kind of subject freedom. This is explored elsewhere in my work.

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