



Apt Perception, Aesthetic Engagement, and Curatorial Practices

Emine Hande Tuna 
University of California Santa Cruz, US

Octavian Ion
Independent scholar, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies the account developed by Susanna Siegel in *The Rationality of Perception* to aesthetic cases and explores the implications of such an account for aesthetic engagement as well as curatorial and exhibitionary practices. It argues that one's prior outlook – expertise, beliefs, desires, fears, preferences, attitudes – can have both aesthetically good and bad influences on perceptual experiences, just as it can have both epistemically good and bad influences. Analysing these bad influences in cases of 'hijacked' aesthetic perception will reveal that, unless we recognize that our perception of high-level and low-level aesthetically relevant properties is norm-governed, we will be at a loss to explain what goes wrong in these cases. Just as perception can be rational or irrational, so too can it be apt or inapt.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Emine Hande Tuna

University of California
Santa Cruz, US

ehtuna@ucsc.edu

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Cognitive states and processes, such as reasoning, inference, beliefs, desires, and actions, are subject to assessment as rational or irrational. For instance, it is irrational to believe that flying monkeys dance over the heads of teenagers on the day they turn 13. Likewise, it is irrational for one to desire to relive one's teenage years if one recalls those years as having been torturous. Perception, by contrast – conscious experience through the five sensory modalities – is widely thought to fall outside the scope of rationality considerations. Moreover, this asymmetry seems to be a commonsensical implication of how perception works. It feels odd to say that perceptual experiences – for instance, experiencing the prickliness of one's newly growing facial hair – can be rational or irrational. We typically take such experiences for granted, considering them input that our cognition ought to accommodate, certainly not as something we have to answer for. Yet one's prior outlook – expertise, beliefs, desires, fears, preferences, attitudes – can sometimes negatively affect and distort the way one perceives things, for instance when a teenager's belief that everyone is against them influences the way they perceive the behaviour of others, or their conception of their desired body shape influences the way they look at themselves. To put it in Susanna Siegel's terms, one's background cognitive states can hijack one's perception.¹ If we follow traditional theories of perception, we are at a loss to explain how such experiences and their cognitive repercussions can be skewed, and how perceivers can be blameworthy. But if perceptual states are themselves subject to rationality considerations, and their status qua representations can thereby be questioned, then an inquiry into how such experiences are formed may reveal that, in some cases, illicit factors are at work and perceivers may justly be held accountable. This intuition is what drives Siegel's *The Rationality of Perception*, in which she argues that perception can properly be qualified as rational or irrational.

The first goal of this paper is to investigate how Siegel's rethinking of perceptual experience impacts the aesthetic domain. We argue that there are parallel cases of hijacked perception in aesthetics. One's prior outlook can have aesthetically good and bad influences on perceptual experiences, just as it can have epistemically good and bad influences. Analysing these bad influences in cases of hijacked aesthetic perception will reveal that, unless we recognize that our perception of high-level and low-level aesthetically relevant properties is norm-governed, we will be at a loss when it comes to explaining what goes wrong in these cases. Siegel's solution to the problem of hijacked perceptual experience is that perception can be rational or irrational. Even though this solution points in the right direction in epistemic cases, it cannot work in cases of hijacked aesthetic perception. The solution to the problem of hijacked aesthetic perception is that aesthetic perception can be *apt* or *inapt*. This diagnosis constitutes the aptness of perception thesis (APT in short). It will turn out that, sometimes, when things go awry in aesthetic cases it is not because perception is irrational but because it is inapt.² Our experiences are aesthetically charged: aptness and inaptness are transmissible from the higher level to the lower level and vice versa. We present a case where the perceiver is blameworthy for the inaptness of their perception but not thereby irrational. Our aim is not to oppose Siegel's account but to complement it by examining the adverse effects of cognitive permeation – also commonly referred to as cognitive penetration – in a domain other than the epistemic.

1 Susanna Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

2 Even though the account presented here can be extended to our aesthetic perception of nature and everyday objects, here the focus will be aesthetic perception of artworks.

The second part of the paper explores the merits of APT. The analysis of hijacked aesthetic perception informs and grounds a new contextualist theory of aesthetic normativity. In declaring that perception can be apt or inapt, the existing usage of aptness is not extended to perception; rather, aesthetic aptness is redefined. Aesthetic aptness has to do with whether one's prior outlook places proper or improper weight on aesthetic perception. The only norm guiding all instances of aesthetic perception and the aesthetic practices they inform (for instance, appreciation, criticism, curation, conservation) is 'not allowing one's prior outlook to have improper weight' or, put as an imperative, 'don't be biased'.³ This is a radically new way of looking at aesthetic normativity that takes avoidance of bias rather than accuracy as its aim. Our take on normativity is what mainly differentiates our view from the other rich-content theories of aesthetic perception, which take the underlying notion of normativity to be to get things right. We argue that the agreement of one's assessment of an artwork with art-historical or critical consensus does not make a person immune to aesthetic blame (because the assessment can still be biased), nor does an incorrect assessment indicate aesthetic blameworthiness (because the assessment can be free of bias). The process and context of aesthetic engagement matter. If the person does not allow their prior outlook to place improper weight on their perception, the mere inaccuracy of their assessment does not change the fact that their assessment is apt. One of the outcomes of the account is that it presents a pluralistic theory of aesthetic engagement by allowing for radical aesthetic disagreements without rendering taste subjective. The paper ends with a discussion of some practical implications this pluralistic model of aesthetic engagement might have for curatorial and exhibitionary practices.

II. COGNITIVE PERMEATION OF AESTHETIC PERCEPTION

The issues of cognitive permeation of aesthetic perception and aesthetically good influences on perceptual experiences have been addressed within the literature.⁴ Just as medical expertise allows a doctor to identify a tumour when looking at an X-ray, aesthetic expertise allows individuals to recognize aesthetically relevant properties

3 The account of aesthetic normativity presented here admits that there can be other *pro tanto* rules that guide particular aesthetic experiences and practices (such as genre norms, standards for curatorial conduct, standards for writing museum labels, and so on). But in cases of conflict these rules ought to be overwritten by the only general norm we have. This issue is beyond the scope of this paper and will not be discussed further.

4 On cognitive permeation in the aesthetics context, see Richard Wollheim, 'Danto's Gallery of Indiscernibles', in *Danto and His Critics*, ed. Mark Rollins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 28–38; Joseph Margolis, 'Farewell to Danto and Goodman', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998): 353–74; 'A Closer Look at Danto's Account of Art and Perception', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (2000): 326–39; Peter Lamarque, *Work and Object* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Dustin Stokes, 'Cognitive Penetration and the Perception of Art', *Dialectica* 68 (2014): 1–34; 'Rich Perceptual Content and Aesthetic Properties', in *Evaluative Perception*, ed. Anna Bergqvist and Robert Cowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19–41; *Thinking and Perceiving: On the Malleability of the Mind* (London: Routledge, 2021); Bence Nanay, 'Cognitive Penetration and the Gallery of Indiscernibles', *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2015): no. 1527; *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For empirical research on the issue, see Sunil P. Gandhi, David J. Heeger, and Geoffrey M. Boynton, 'Spatial Attention Affects Brain Activity in Human Primary Visual Cortex', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 96 (1999): 3314–19; John L. Delk and Samuel Fillenbaum, 'Differences in Perceived Color as a Function of Characteristic Color', *American Journal of Psychology* 78 (1965): 290–93; Daniel T. Levin and Mahzarin R. Banaji, 'Distortions in the Perceived Lightness of Faces: The Role of Race Categories', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 135 (2006): 501–12.

of an artwork that otherwise might not be considered salient.⁵ Recognizing such properties helps one to identify what the object expresses or represents, and to form a fitting aesthetic reaction. Drawing on work on cognitive permeation especially by Siegel and Fiona Macpherson, it has been argued that cognitive states, such as beliefs or concepts about art, can causally influence perceptual experiences of art.⁶ Simply put, such cognitive states not only permeate the experience of high-level properties (for example, properties of being elegant, garish, vivid, or energetic) but also low-level properties of artworks (for example, properties of having a certain colour, shape, or organization).⁷

To use the much-quoted example from Ernst Hans Gombrich, knowledge of Piet Mondrian's earlier works and the restrictions he imposed on his art, such as using straight lines, monochrome grids, and a minimal colour palette consisting of primary colours, black, and white, can influence an expert's perception of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*.⁸ To a novice, who lacks this knowledge but is still familiar with modern art, *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* might look serene, cold, or orderly. An expert, however, might perceive the painting differently due to their knowledge of Mondrian's body of work. They would see it as energetic, as if it is pulsating with sound. Likewise, an expert's knowledge of the nearly monochromatic Rothko multiforms can influence their perception of the works in the Rothko Chapel in Houston. While an expert might perceive interesting colour differences in the Rothkos, a novice might only see uniformity.⁹

It is true that expertise can affect one's perception of high-level properties of artworks, as in the Mondrian example, and low-level properties of artworks, as in the Rothko example. Yet one should be cautious in interpreting this diagnosis. First of all, this diagnosis should not be used in a one-size-fits-all fashion. Second, the cognitive

5 We adopt Nanay's definition for 'aesthetically relevant properties as properties that are such that attending to them makes an aesthetic difference' (Nanay, *Aesthetics*, 89). He suggests replacing the term 'aesthetic properties' with 'aesthetically relevant properties'. We also prefer using the term 'aesthetically relevant properties' because its broader scope targets properties that might otherwise fly under the radar. The term encompasses traditional 'aesthetic properties', such as being unified, vibrant, serene, delicate. Most importantly, it also captures high-level properties that traditionally have been considered as 'nonaesthetic or natural properties', such as having a wave-like contour, depicting a vanilla sky, containing an image of an eagle, as well as low-level properties of objects (shape, colour, composition, and so on), as long as they are relevant for our aesthetic engagement. For further discussion of properties that traditionally have been considered aesthetic, see Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic Concepts', *Philosophical Review* 68 (1959): 421–50; Alan H. Goldman, 'Aesthetic Qualities and Aesthetic Value', *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 23–37; *Aesthetic Value* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995); Nick Zangwill, *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Jerrold Levinson, 'What Are Aesthetic Properties?', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 79 (2005): 211–27.

6 Susanna Siegel, *The Contents of Visual Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); 'Cognitive Penetrability and Perceptual Justification', *Nous* 46 (2012): 201–22; Fiona Macpherson, 'Cognitive Penetration of Colour Experience: Rethinking the Issue in Light of an Indirect Mechanism', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 84 (2012): 24–62.

7 See especially Stokes, 'Cognitive Penetration'; Nanay, 'Cognitive Penetration'; Nanay, *Aesthetics*.

8 Ernst Hans Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 7th ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1984), 296–97.

9 This is an example that Stokes uses in his 'Cognitive Penetration'. The notion that expertise can affect the perception of low-level properties has some empirical support. For instance, it is noted that grey bananas look more yellowish than other grey patches. See especially Christoph Witzel et al., 'Object Knowledge Modulates Colour Appearance', *i-Perception* 2 (2011): 13–49.

permeation of aesthetic perception has further implications that have not been noted in the literature. The main implication will be that aesthetic perception can be apt or inapt. Each of these points will be further elaborated on below.

Usually, rich-content theories of aesthetic perception that accept cognitive permeation do not develop completely new theories of how aesthetic perception works. They rather use cognitive permeation as an explanation to support one of the most influential views in philosophical aesthetics – namely, Kendall Walton’s view as he laid it out in ‘Categories of Art’.¹⁰ The ‘Categories of Art’ appeared on the scene at a critical juncture in philosophical aesthetics when formalist and/or empiricist views of art appreciation and criticism were losing their ground against contextualist or cognitivist views.¹¹ Walton’s aim was to challenge the formalist status quo by suggesting that we can ourselves, in perceiving works of art, link the non-aesthetic properties of artworks to aesthetic properties, and that this link is mediated by art-historical considerations, contrary to what formalists maintain.¹² Walton’s thesis held that ‘what aesthetic properties a work seems to have, what aesthetic effect it has on us, how it strikes us aesthetically often depends (in part) on which of its features are standard, which are variable, and which contra-standard for us’.¹³ Non-aesthetic properties of artworks are grouped under ‘standard’, ‘variable’, and ‘contra-standard’ properties depending on the category membership of the work in question. A standard property is one by virtue of which a work belongs to some particular category. A variable property is one that neither qualifies nor disqualifies the work’s membership in that category. A contra-standard property with respect to the relevant category is one whose existence tends to disqualify its membership in that category.

Consider Picasso’s *Guernica*. Under the category of modern painting, *Guernica* strikes us as violent and dynamic. In a society, Walton wants us to assume, that does not have any other paintings but only *Guernicas* that vary with respect to bas-relief dimensions, *Guernica*’s flatness would be variable and the figures on its surface would be standard. When viewed under the category of *Guernicas*, it would look cold and stark, or perhaps dull and boring. The same features get associated with different aesthetic qualities, depending on which category we use, because what counts as standard, variable, and contra-standard is category-relative. Rich-content theorists like Stokes argue that the reason that categorizing a work differently can alter our perception of it is that our knowledge of categories of art permeates our perception. If the right categories are used, the work will be perceived correctly. The employment of wrong categories, on the other hand, will result in not only an incorrect perception of the artwork but also an erroneous evaluation of its properties.

Cognitive permeation might be the mechanism behind the variation between perceptual experiences due to aesthetic expertise, and as an explanation it fits well with Walton’s theory. But there is an alternative explanation that Walton himself acknowledges: perceptual learning. Perceptual learning theories too are rich-content theories: unlike traditional theories of perception, which deny that higher-level properties are perceptible, perceptual learning accounts accept that we can

10 Kendall L. Walton, ‘Categories of Art’, *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334–67.

11 Brian Laetz, ‘Kendall Walton’s “Categories of Art”: A Critical Commentary’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 287.

12 Walton uses the traditional definition of aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties. As previously mentioned in ft. 5 above, this paper does not follow this usage.

13 Walton, ‘Categories of Art’, 343.

perceive higher-level properties. What they reject is that cognitive permeation is the mechanism responsible for our ability to perceive higher-level properties. Instead, they claim that, through exposure to multiple examples of a stimulus, a relatively long-lasting change occurs in one's perceptual system that improves their ability to respond and adapt to their environment.¹⁴ Madeleine Ransom argues that perceptual learning furnishes the underlying explanation for Walton's account in the 'Categories of Art'.¹⁵ The perception of those living in the society of Guernicas is altered by all the training they received through exposure to multiple examples of Guernicas. That is why they would come to perceive *Guernica* as dull or lifeless. Perceptual training results in an accurate perception of the work. Here lies the difference between cognitive permeation and perceptual learning: according to the former, subjects infer that *Guernica* is dull or lifeless from their knowledge of the Guernica category. According to the latter, they categorize it directly in perception under Guernicas and see it as dull or lifeless relative to the prototypical Guernicas, rather than inferring properties from the artwork's category.

From our perspective – and Walton's response to Ransom's 'Waltonian Perceptualism' indicates that he concurs with us on this – features from each of these accounts might contribute to the production of aesthetic expertise.¹⁶ Both accounts assume that we aim at correctness in our aesthetic endeavours (we want to get things right) and they just provide competing explanations. In this regard, it is unwarranted to use cognitive permeation in a one-size-fits-all fashion and assume that all of our aesthetic perception is cognitively permeated. The available data pertaining to aesthetic categorization does not mandate either of these views as clearly superior, and the choice is underdetermined by the evidence.

Although cognitive permeation may not always be the operative mechanism at each instance when expertise makes a difference to perception, this potentiality does not impugn our account as our focus and assertions are not directed towards positive cases where the perception of a work's aesthetic features goes smoothly for someone who possesses expertise. Cognitive permeation has further implications that have not been noted in the literature. The hypothesis being defended here is that perceptual experience itself can be apt or inapt. This implication has not been noticed because scholars have been solely interested in tracking what happens when things go right. To ground our hypothesis, we want to look at instances of hijacked perceptual experiences in the aesthetic domain, instances when things do not go right but awry.

III. HIJACKED PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE, AESTHETIC AND OTHERWISE

This section uses Siegel's own examples to illustrate her strategy for evaluating cases of hijacked experience in the epistemic domain before turning to a discussion of how analogous cases of hijacked experience arise in the aesthetic domain. After developing our central example of hijacked aesthetic perception, we discuss some

14 Robert L. Goldstone, 'Perceptual Learning', *Annual Review of Psychology* 49 (1998): 585–612.

15 Madeleine Ransom, 'Waltonian Perceptualism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78 (2020): 66–70.

16 Kendall L. Walton, 'Aesthetic Properties: Context Dependent and Perceptual', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78 (2020): 79–84.

alternative explanations of what goes wrong in this specific case and the problems they face. Then we present our own solution.

Siegel defines hijacked perception in the following way: ‘When perceptual judgements or perceptual experiences arise from processes that give prior outlooks too much weight and fail to give proper weight to perceptual inputs (if there are any such inputs), we can say that the outlook hijacks the perceptual states’.¹⁷ She argues that the problem of hijacked perceptual experience arises in situations where there are two opposing pressures on how to evaluate a perceptual experience.¹⁸ To see how it works, think of two people, Jack and Jill. Before seeing Jack, Jill fears that Jack is angry with her. When Jill sees Jack, her fear causes her to perceive Jack as angry, even though this is not actually the case, and this perception strengthens her fear. On the one hand, we feel pressure to say that there was something wrong with Jill’s perceptual experience of Jack. After all, Jack was not really angry, and Jill perceived him to be angry because she expected him to feel that way. On the other hand, we feel pressure to say that there was nothing irrational in how Jill formed her judgement since it really did appear to her that Jack was angry. It is these two opposing pressures – namely, the pressure to say that it is rational for Jill to believe her eyes and the pressure to say that it is not – that constitute the problem of hijacked experience. If perception is not subject to rationality considerations, as traditional epistemology has it, then we are at a loss in determining what went wrong in the Jill and Jack case. Siegel’s intuition, and we side with her on this, is that Jill is blameworthy here. Jill’s perception of Jack as angry was partly moulded on the basis of her fear, which does not merely produce a false belief in the present case but distorts Jill’s perception. Therefore, Siegel’s solution to the problem of hijacked perceptual experience is to hold that it is not rational for the subjects of hijacked experiences like Jill to believe their eyes. The underlying presupposition of this solution is that the relationship between the psychological precursors – which constitute one’s prior outlook – and the perceptual experience is inferential: perceptual experiences can be inferred from their psychological precursors.¹⁹ A perceptual experience (such as Jill’s) is the conclusion of an inference from a prior outlook (such as Jill’s suspicion that Jack is angry). What makes Jill irrational and hence blameworthy is that she allowed her prior outlook to have improper weight on her perception. The epistemic status of her perception is grounded in the etiology of the experience. Her perception is irrational not because it resulted from a process of deliberation governed by norms of rationality and it failed to conform to these norms. It is irrational because the causal route leading to that experience is problematic.

We believe analogous ‘hijacked experience’ cases can be constructed in the aesthetic domain. Here is an example of the sort of hijacking of aesthetic perception that we have in mind:²⁰ *Sunset at Montmajour* is a beautiful oil painting, comparable to *The Sunflowers* or *The Bedroom*, all of which were painted around the same time by Vincent van Gogh. Yet *Sunset at Montmajour* spent a century in an attic, collecting

17 Siegel, *Rationality of Perception*, 5.

18 *Ibid.*, 6.

19 *Ibid.*, 19.

20 This example is partly fictitious and partly based on historical facts. For the historical facts, see Louis van Tilborg, Teio Meedendorp, and Oda van Maanen, “‘Sunset at Montmajour’: A Newly Discovered Painting by Vincent van Gogh”, *Burlington Magazine* 155 (2013), no. 1327, 696–705.

dust. In 1908, Christian Nicolai Mustad purchased it following the recommendation of Jens Thiis and displayed it with pride as the centrepiece of his home until a dinner guest, the Norwegian consul in Paris, Auguste Pellerin, who was also an entrepreneur and a direct competitor of Mustad's, as well as a collector of some repute, raised doubts about its authenticity. Once the centre of attention, Van Gogh's masterpiece was discarded in an attic and forgotten. In 2013, the painting was rediscovered and authenticated. What is interesting about this story is the shift in Mustad's perception of *Sunset at Montmajour* that occurred after the question pertaining to its authenticity was raised. His perception of the properties of the painting changed: the wild, thick brushstrokes no longer looked wild or unruly but studied, the warm yellows no longer seemed expressive but hollow, and the painting no longer struck him as beautiful. Mustad's perception is one of the many examples of hijacked aesthetic perception, and he is not aesthetically blameless.

How can we explain the dramatic shift in Mustad's perception? According to 'sparse content' theories of perception, we are passive recipients of sensory data, and perception is always innocent.²¹ The sparse-content theorists would claim that Mustad could only perceive low-level properties (for example, properties like colour, shape, or organization), and that high-level properties (being wild, unruly, dull, expressive, and so on) are not the content of his perceptual experience. These theories would explain the shift as a shift in Mustad's interpretation of the same sensory data, not as a shift in sensory perception. But, all else being equal, such an explanation appears more shallow than an explanation that appeals to a shift in experience. It fails to engage with the fact that this is a very striking painting, which makes it hard to accept that the mere possibility of its being inauthentic would stifle the original judgement Mustad formed with regard to it, especially if he could continue to see the painting as it is.

Perceptual learning theories of aesthetic perception might try to explain the situation by claiming that Mustad lacked the necessary expertise to correctly perceive the work. He did not see the work as expressive, unruly, and beautiful because of lack of necessary perceptual training with respect to Van Gogh's works. The issue is that Mustad's initial perception was accurate. At the beginning, Mustad processed the work as a Van Gogh, perceived the colours as expressive, the brushstrokes as unruly, and the composition as beautiful. His perception was altered. An explanation that appeals to lack of acquaintance seems rather unconvincing given Mustad's earlier perception of the work. The radical shift in Mustad's perception is unlikely to have been the result of miscategorizations due to lack of familiarity with Van Goghs. If this explanation were accepted, then we would be forced to come up with an *ad hoc* explanation of how he got it right in the first place.

Another thought might be that the example can be handled by rich-content theories of aesthetic perception that take perception to be cognitively permeable, and assert that we can perceive higher-level properties. According to these theories, a change in one's cognitive state (for instance, from the belief that *Sunset at Montmajour* is an authentic Van Gogh to the belief that it is not) can result in a change in one's perception

21 See Michael Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness: A Representational Theory of the Phenomenal Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); *Consciousness, Color, and Content* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Fred I. Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981); Austen Clark, *A Theory of Sentience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Athanassios Raftopoulos, *Cognition and Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Kevin Connolly, 'Perceptual Learning and the Contents of Perception', *Erkenntnis* 79 (2014): 1407–18; *Perceptual Learning: The Flexibility of the Senses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

of the higher-level aesthetic properties of the work. Indeed, this is the explanation we would get from any extant theory of aesthetic perception that appeals to cognitive permeation. One of the drawbacks of these existing aesthetic theories is that they would deliver an evaluative assessment of the shift in Mustad's perception that does not square well with our basic intuitions. The starting point of these theories is the assumption that expertise leads to aesthetically appropriate or correct perception and subsequent assessments. The notion of cognitive permeation appears as a mere afterthought, that is, as the explanans for this unquestioned assumption. Since according to this framework relevant art-historical and critical facts should always inform our perception and resulting assessments, Mustad was right to perceive the painting in the way he did and blameless for not appreciating it, given what he took the relevant facts to be – namely, that it was fake.

It is true that he was right not to appreciate the painting, given what he took the relevant facts to be. Yet at the same time we feel pressure to say that, although the painting's authenticity was in doubt, Mustad should have been able to see the painting's wildness, expressiveness, and beauty. After all, it was actually a real Van Gogh. Here we have the two conflicting pressures that make up a case of hijacked experience. But some caution is required here when applying Siegel's analysis to the Mustad case. The first thing to notice is that we cannot simply rely on Siegel's own strategy as presented in the Jack and Jill case. Siegel's strategy was to argue that perceptual states themselves are rational or irrational, and their rationality or lack thereof depends on the inferential processes that contribute to their formation. Siegel's solution does not help us to get to the heart of the matter. Mustad did not form the belief that *Sunset at Montmajour* was a fake because his tarot reader told him that 'things are not as they seem' or because his great-grandmother showed up in his dream reproaching him or belittling him for wasting money. He formed his belief on the basis of reliable-enough testimony. Louis van Tilborg, Teio Meedendorp, and Oda van Maanen provide us with the historical context. They state that 'expressing doubts about what later turned out to be perfectly genuine works by Van Gogh was not unknown around 1910. The art world was jittery at the time, possibly because of a rise in the number of forgeries in circulation, and as a result owners felt uncertain.'²² So Pellerin, who was no novice when it came to modern art, has more credibility than the tarot reader or the angry great-grandmother. Of course, there are other factors that contributed to Mustad's decision to permanently banish the work to an attic. Mustad perceived Pellerin as his rival, and owing to this rivalry he felt more annoyed and angry at the suggestion that his cherished purchase was a fake. But these factors do not change the fact that the relative credibility of Pellerin's testimony suffices to put Mustad epistemically in the clear.²³ Hence, Mustad was not irrational in coming to doubt the authenticity of the painting. But it is hard to say that he is blameless, given that he failed to give proper weight to perceptual inputs in virtue of giving too much weight to his prior outlook.

22 Tilborg, Meedendorp, and Maanen, "'Sunset at Montmajour'", 702.

23 Indeed, Siegel discusses a case where someone is epistemically blameless in the way Mustad is even though the testimony they rely on is much less credible than Pellerin's: For example, suppose your mother fears that the water is unsafe to drink, and she comes to believe that the water is as she fears it to be. Her fear is unreasonable, let's suppose, and so is her belief. When she warns you not to drink the water because it is toxic, you believe her. So now you believe that the water is unsafe to drink. Your belief may be false, but even so, it is, arguably, well-founded. It is reasonable for you to believe her – she's your mother. If your belief is well-founded, then the ill-foundedness of your mother's belief does not transmit to yours, even though you formed your belief on the basis of testimony from her. (Siegel, *Rationality of Perception*, 168)

In this case of hijacked aesthetic experience, the opposing pressures are the pressure to say that it is apt or appropriate for Mustad not to see the work as wild, expressive, and beautiful, and the opposing pressure to say it is not. Influences on perception can come from knowledge, beliefs, desires, fears, preferences, and attitudes (that is, evaluative mental states that attribute value or disvalue to objects, events, ideas, individuals, and groups). All of these influences belong to our outlook on the world, reflect our core values and who we are, and constitute the lens through which we perceive the world. Just as our prior outlooks can have aesthetically good influences, they also can have bad influences, as exemplified in Mustad's perceptual shift. Mustad's concerns for originality and monetary value and his anger and annoyance at being embarrassed in front of a rival resulted in a shift in his attitude towards *Sunset at Montmajour*. The work was no longer deemed worthy of aesthetic attention and appreciation. He could no longer see any value in the work or see the work itself. This devaluation distorted his perception. Here what was hijacked was not the quality of perception but the perception itself: the warm yellows, the thick brushstrokes, the texture of the paint did not look the same to him. The yellows were not expressive anymore, the brushstrokes ceased to look unruly and wild, and the paint no longer had the creaminess that Van Goghs have as a signature feature. He failed to give proper weight to these perceptual inputs due to his background beliefs, attitudes, and emotions. Instead, he perceived the brushstrokes as studied and warm yellows as hollow. His distorted perceptual experience further strengthened his negative aesthetic evaluation of the painting and the belief that work was of no value. This bottom-up contamination following the top-down one is a consequence of what we call 'aesthetic charge': aptness and inaptness are transmissible from the higher to lower level and vice versa. If a perceptual experience could be the conclusion of an inference, as Siegel claims, this inference could modulate its aesthetic status (aesthetic aptness or inaptness), just as it could modulate its epistemic status.²⁴ It is in this sense that experiences can be aesthetically charged. Now we have the solution to the problem of hijacked aesthetic experience: it is not apt for the subjects to believe their eyes. Given his first-hand experience of the painting, Mustad should have reconsidered his aesthetic priorities and should not have given the weight he did to Pellerin's testimony. He should not have allowed his concerns for monetary value and originality to influence his perception. He allowed his prior outlook to place improper weight on his perception of the painting and failed to recognize the meritorious qualities of the painting, which should have otherwise led him to aesthetically engage with it instead of banishing it to the attic.

Here we can formulate 'the aptness of perception thesis' (in short, APT): both aesthetic perceptual experiences and the processes that give rise to them can be apt or inapt. Here we are not applying the existing usage of aptness to perception. Instead, aesthetic aptness is redefined. Aptness means not allowing one's background cognitive states to improperly influence aesthetic perception.

IV. IMPLICATIONS OF APT

What are some of the implications of APT? The implications are overarching; however, here the focus will be only on its implications for reconceptualizing aesthetic engagement, or so-called 'proper' aesthetic engagement, and its practical implications

24 Ibid., 21.

for curatorial and exhibitionary practices. APT, by shifting the focus from correctness to reduction of bias and thereby allowing for radical disagreements, supports a pluralist understanding of aesthetic engagement. However, the question of how we can reduce hijacking within this pluralist model arises especially if correctness cannot serve as a guide. To answer this question we turn to installation art and site-specific art. The pluralist engagement entailed by APT is common in these art forms, which often involve immersive experiences that challenge traditional modes of aesthetic engagement. Different tools have been employed in installation art and site-specific art to promote this engagement, offering strategies to reduce hijacking, regulate aesthetic charge, and minimize the suppression of perceptual inputs by prior outlooks. We argue that these strategies can be incorporated in a museum setting, so as to allow for more pluralistic aesthetic engagements with artworks and thereby help with reduction of bias.

What constitutes ‘proper’ aesthetic engagement according to APT? What kind of theory of aesthetic normativity does APT support? Given that there are no strict norms one should follow to properly engage with artworks – except not giving improper weight to one’s prior outlook – proper aesthetic engagement can be brought about in various different ways. First of all, the work itself demands that the audience is engaged in certain ways. Such demands can be both general and specific. The *Mona Lisa* demands to be looked at; Billie Eilish’s ‘Bad Guy’ demands to be heard. ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ demands that we contemplate on the evanescence of the material world. Miró’s *The Hunter (Catalan Landscape)* demands a comparison with his *The Tilled Field*. These demands can be met through different levels of cognitive activity, some higher, some lower. Even though the results of our analysis of hijacked aesthetic perception can support a theory that reduces aesthetic engagement merely to perceptual experiences (similar to the Waltonian tradition with its current representatives, such as Adrian Stokes and Bence Nanay, and similar to Arnold Isenberg and Frank Sibley), we believe that this view would be incomplete and some aesthetic engagements like reading ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’ require higher-level cognitive activity (similar to the Kantian tradition). We should understand engagement in more pluralistic terms: depending on the object, the level of cognitive activity might differ, not only because different works make different demands but also because we approach these works with different demands. We expect them to be certain things or to do certain things. For instance, we demand that comedies make us laugh, or we expect to be moved by a psychological drama. Even at the level of perception, our prior outlooks place demands on how we perceive and also on what we are perceiving. Sometimes these demands match the work’s demands, and sometimes an equilibrium can be reached. Sometimes our prior outlooks hijack our perceptual experiences in a way that leads us to completely miss out on the demands of the work. Permeation becomes hijacking when we fail to grasp the demands of the work. We may have access to the demands of the work by doing our homework and reading and researching about the work, as discussed in the Mondrian and Rothko examples. Unlike other accounts of aesthetic perception that also accept cognitive permeation (Stokes’s and Nanay’s accounts), our account does not entail that proper engagement can only be achieved through cognitive permeation of perception by art-historical and critical knowledge. While it is certainly advantageous for a perceiver to be knowledgeable about art history and criticism, and to approach the work with an awareness of its place in the art-historical narrative, this is not necessary. Additionally, expertise does not guarantee that hijacking will not occur. Remember Clement Greenberg, whose philosophical commitments to formalism and strong preference for abstract expressionism led him to overlook pop art. The only thing that is necessary is for the perceiver not to allow their prior outlook

to place *improper* weight on their perception of the work. Even though it is impossible for us to prevent our prior outlooks from influencing our perception, what is necessary for us is to keep them from hijacking our perception as much as possible.

Of course, we might never know whether we are successful at fully eliminating bad influences of our prior outlooks on our experiences. We cannot exactly know when we are bias free and responding to the demands of the work and not merely imposing our own. Unfortunately, we are not that transparent to ourselves.²⁵ Practising and exposing ourselves to a variety of different experiences and art forms helps. Working actively on our biases helps. Others can help. We can share with others works we like and dislike, and discuss our reasons for appreciating those works. There is no one cure for biases but this does not mean we cannot work on them, especially together. Some external strategies can also be employed to minimize hijacking and regulate aesthetic charge. Given that art-historical and critical knowledge is not required, what else can do the job?

Analysing the implications of APT for aesthetic engagement with installation art and site-specific art installations helps us make some headway in answering this question. We think that installation art, unlike traditional works of painting and sculpture, encodes within the artwork guidance for apt perception. The term 'installation art' is hard to define precisely, given the vast diversity of works that vie for that label, but for a rough-and-ready characterization it refers to works that are immersive, requiring patrons to physically engage with, and enter the works.²⁶ Some of these works are not confined to museums or galleries. They are placed in specific locations. An apt perception of the work is facilitated by the awareness of their specific location. For instance, Micha Ullman's *Empty Library* (1995) is located in Bebelplatz, where Nazis students and professors participated in a massive book burning on May 10, 1933. The *Empty Library* is an underground library in the middle of the square, which you see only by bending down and peering into it through its transparent glass ceiling. Our perception of the work as a reminder of the Nazi atrocities and of the weight of unforgetfulness is partially inferred from our awareness of its location and the history of the location. The work would not have the same effect, say, if it were located in Kreuzberg or in Santa Cruz. Its location perhaps is one of the constituents of the work, but it is also at the same time what facilitates and modulates our apt perception of the work.

One of the most aesthetically intriguing aspects of installation works is that they can be aptly perceived in multiple ways. To take a bold example, consider Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, from 1985. The work is a space that the visitor can peruse, with walls, coat racks, posters, and so on. Unlike a traditional encounter with a painting or sculpture, the visitor participates in the work by roaming around in the space and browsing the eponymous flying man's things. Each visitor brings their past life-experience and associations with them, and each is able to reconstruct the scene, perhaps in their unique way. As we can see in this example, one's psychological make-up and prior outlook are crucial components in the completion of the work, through reconstructing the work's narrative. The problem starts when one's outlook distorts or even completely undercuts one's engagement, for instance when one fails or refuses to engage with *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* because one cannot see it as art, as a manifestation of talent.

25 See Ronald de Sousa, 'The Mind's Bermuda Triangle: Philosophy of Emotions and Empirical Science', in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, ed. Peter Goldie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 95-117.

26 See Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (London: Tate, 2005).

Even though aptness does not require art-historical knowledge, this does not mean that such dismissals will be allowed. Prejudices and biases on the part of appreciators are taken to undermine apt perception. Novices who cannot see the value of *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment*, or who cannot see it as art, because their perception is hijacked by their narrow beliefs concerning what counts as art and what kind of talent the artist should possess and display through their work, are considered to be inaptly perceiving these works. But one does not need an art-historical background to overcome such biases. Installation art, by inviting appreciators to participate, facilitates their engagement. This presents a model to follow in restructuring our exhibitionary and curatorial practices to support apt engagements.

We are interested in museum practices that increase the accessibility of artworks regardless of art-historical knowledge and that involve strategies for enabling engagement with artworks, in a way that encourages visitors to return to and feel at ease, rather than intimidated, in a museum space. For a first-time museumgoer, the experience of seeing one artwork after another on the white walls of partitioned rooms might create a sense of detachment or even alienation. Such barriers cannot be compensated by bombarding audiences with facts. Indeed, sometimes too much information and direction can lead to hijacking. For instance, the 2021 exhibit *In Relation to Power: Politically Engaged Works from the Collection*, at the Nasher Museum of Art states right at the entrance what visitors should expect from the exhibition. The exhibition 'reveals some of the ways in which artists address political systems and either comment on, consent to, and in many cases vehemently resist the dynamics of inequitable systems of power found therein'.²⁷ The works are divided into three main categories: 'Image & Ideology', 'Text & Subtext', and 'The Body Politic'. The works from the Nasher Collection that are grouped under the category of the Body Politic, we are informed, are meant to explore 'the incorporation of the body to confront, resist, and reverse long-standing abusive authority, implicit and explicit bias, and violent, corporeal aggression. In doing so, artists use the body as a site of immense political consequence and a potential agent of change'.²⁸ Unfortunately, after being conditioned by this much information, the full-size works by Mickalene Thomas and Kara Walker – which would otherwise have been captivating and mesmerizing for the viewer – fade into the background, become dull, and lose their characteristic features. For instance, you cannot see the eroticization of her subject matter in Thomas's work if you are primed to see the work merely as something that is meant to resist abusive authority. The painting looks beautiful and forceful but not erotic.

White partitioned rooms, commonly known as 'the white cubes', have been a centre for criticism for mainly decontextualizing artworks and leading to impoverished aesthetic experiences.²⁹ If the compensation cannot be done by providing endless information – as evidenced in the Nasher case – what can be done? We believe exhibitionary and curatorial practices that encourage a diverse range of aesthetic engagements in line with APT are called for. These types of practice are more commonplace, as we have argued above, in exhibitions of installation art. The 2019 Mickalene Thomas exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) employed a method that fits well with the idea of

27 'In Relation to Power: Politically Engaged Works from the Collection', *Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University*, 2021, <https://nasher.duke.edu/exhibitions/in-relation-to-power-politically-engaged-works-from-the-collection/>.

28 Ibid.

29 See especially Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

aesthetic engagement entailed by APT. In this exhibit, the setting was structured in such a way as to immerse the audience in Thomas's works, and to invite the audience to see the world from her perspective. While you are sitting in a 'living room', reminiscent of Thomas's New Jersey home as a teenager, you are surrounded by silkscreens depicting scenes from *The Color Purple*, and in the centre you see video installations of Eartha Kitt singing. The audience feel immersed and are carried by the entirety of the aesthetic experience itself. Visitors do not need to read or watch Thomas's interviews in order to see that the gaze in her work is a black woman's gaze loving other black women.³⁰

Similar kinds of strategies can be used to create such aesthetic engagements when it comes to more traditional works that we are more used to seeing in white cube-style exhibitions. In the 2018 AGO exhibit of Rebecca Belmore's works, the typical four-white-wall setting was used to the advantage of recreating (or at least approximating) the experience of being hunted down in a snowy forest. Belmore's *March 5, 1819*, which is a two-channel video installation running on parallel walls, is a reenactment of a young Beothuk woman and her husband, Nonosabasut, being chased and hunted by colonialists. As the audience tilt their heads from one projection to another, the white background melts away and strengthens the feeling of being in a snowy forest and adds to the intensity of the experience.

To sum up, APT sanctions a pluralistic account of aesthetic engagement that can account for our diverse engagements with installation art. This framework can be used in a museum setting to increase the accessibility of artworks regardless of art-historical knowledge and enable engagement with artworks, in a way that might prevent hijacking.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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30 See Art Basel, 'Meet the Artists | Mickalene Thomas', YouTube video, 3:50, posted by 'Art Basel', 3 December 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2jHZChQGho>.

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