ESTETIKA
THE EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS

Failure as Omission: Missed Opportunities and Retroactive Aesthetic Judgements

SPECIAL ISSUE
RESEARCH ARTICLE

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HUP HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I distinguish between different kinds of failures of aesthetic judgements with a view to exploring a form of failure that involves the outright omission of aesthetic judgement. Such omissions come to pass when an object of attention could or ought to have been experienced and judged aesthetically but where such an experience or judgement simply failed to arise, and can be traced back to at least three kinds of reason: (1) lack of aesthetic quality; (2) lack of appropriate ontological status; and (3) lack of aesthetic prominence. I shall examine some aspects of this kind of failure and argue that a missed opportunity to experience an object of attention's aesthetic character is a missed opportunity to engage with that object's aesthetic potential where such potential, although not always accessible to us, can nonetheless retroactively be said to pertain to the object in a meaningful sense also under experientially unfavourable conditions. This warrants talk of rehabilitation to some degree.

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KEYWORDS:
aesthetic cognitivism; aesthetic judgement; community aesthetics

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Schellekens, Elisabeth. 'Failure as Omission: Missed Opportunities and Retroactive Aesthetic Judgements.' *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LX/XVI, no. 2 (2023): pp. 131–144. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.439

DOI: 10.33134/eeja.439

I

Failures of aesthetic judgement have largely been neglected in philosophy for at least two reasons. First, the very idea that we can *fail* when we make aesthetic judgements seems to assume some form of objectivism or cognitivism in so far as such judgements are presumed to be assertions capable of being inadequate or incorrect. This approach, it is fair to say, has been considerably less popular than its subjectivist and non-cognitivist counterparts, and any phenomenon that appears to involve the idea that aesthetic judgements can be misguided, incomplete, or erroneous has thus also been deemed less compelling.[1] Second, and relatedly, the making and endorsing of aesthetic judgements has been conceived as a highly individual act, the recording or otherwise of one subject's personal experience of aesthetic value.[2] Together, the prospects of any purported failure of aesthetic judgement being of any real consequence appear poor indeed: if there is no normative standard against which an aesthetic judgement can be deemed inappropriate or unsuccessful, and if such judgements only ever capture a single subject's aesthetic encounter, then it is hard to see what, if anything, it might mean to suggest that such judgements can fail. Either there is no genuine failure to begin with or it is a kind of failure with no serious ramifications other, possibly, than the loss of a certain kind of enjoyment or experience for the individual in question. Failures of aesthetic judgement are thus at best failures for one.

Clearly, hypothetical conclusions of this nature have done little to boost the standing of aesthetic value and experience in philosophy, and have contributed to the conception of aesthetics as a field largely disconnected from reason, knowledge, and the common good. Setting that larger perspective aside for now, however, this paper will seek to re-evaluate the assumption that failures of aesthetic judgement can at most be personal defeats. I shall distinguish between different kinds of failures of aesthetic judgements with a view to exploring a form of failure that can be shown to have led to significant consequences well beyond the remit of the individual object–subject relation – namely, the outright omission of aesthetic judgement.[3] Such omissions come to pass when an object of attention could or ought to have been experienced

1 For more on subjectivism in aesthetics, see Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Alan Goldman, *Aesthetic Value* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995); David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1757), in *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 3–24; Mohan Matthen, 'The Pleasure of Art', *Australasian Philosophical Review* 1 (2017): 6–28; 'New Prospects for Aesthetic Hedonism', in *Social Aesthetics and Moral Judgment: Pleasure, Reflection and Accountability*, ed. Jennifer McMahon (New York: Routledge, 2018), 13–33; Servaas van der Berg, 'Aesthetic Hedonism and Its Critics', *Philosophy Compass* 15, no. 1 (2020); David Wiggins, 'A Sensible Subjectivism?', in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 185–214.

2 For more on the individual nature of the making of aesthetic judgement, see Jerrold Levinson, 'Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992): 295–306; Marcia Muelder Eaton, 'The Intrinsic, Non-supervenient Nature of Aesthetic Properties', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52 (1994): 383–97; Frank Sibley, 'Particularity, Art, and Evaluation,' in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 88–103; Robert Stecker, 'Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Value', *Philosophy Compass* 1, no. 1 (2006); Alan Tormey, 'Critical Judgments', *Theoria* 39 (1973): 35–49.

3 In ethics, the notion of failure as omission is far more widely discussed, especially in connection with moral responsibility and action. For more on this debate, see Giovanni Boniolo and Gabriele De Anna, 'The Four Faces of Omission: Ontology, Terminology, Epistemology and Ethics', *Philosophical Explorations* 9 (2006): 277–93; Gregory Schwartz, 'The Ethics of Omission', *Think* 18 (2019): 117–21; Pascale Willemsen, *Omissions and Their Moral Relevance* (Paderborn: Mentis, 2019).

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aesthetically – and judged accordingly – but where such an experience or judgement simply failed to arise. In other words, the putative failure in question occurs when, due to some lapse, oversight, or confusion, a candidate object for aesthetic appreciation was not seen or grasped as such.

A failure to deem the object of appreciation adequate for an aesthetic judgement of any meaningful kind can be traced back to at least three different kinds of reason: (1) lack of aesthetic quality; (2) lack of appropriate ontological status; and (3) lack of aesthetic prominence.[4] What all cases have in common is some kind of failure on the part of the aesthetic subject (conceived either as an individual or a collective) to access or tap into an object's aesthetic character or potential. Some such failures seem to be voluntary – a kind of conscious refusal to engage with an object aesthetically – although most are probably best characterized as involuntary. Either way, the habitual aesthetic processes leading to a proper aesthetic judgement never get off the ground, so to speak.

To be sure, many instances of omitting to make an aesthetic judgement are apposite and need not be revisited. To seek an aesthetic reassessment of one's own early unsuccessful efforts at writing poetry or drawing, for example, might not be called for. Some aesthetic endeavours are really best left unassessed; not everything carries aesthetic potential. However, and as I will argue, other omissions have profoundly changed the way we think or have thought about art, beauty, and more. Such instances strongly suggest that at least some failures of aesthetic judgement can have wide-ranging ramifications not only for one individual, the aesthetic subject herself, but for an entire aesthetic community – present and future.

To establish this, I will focus on art cases where such an omission is eventually followed by the prospect of grasping the aesthetic value of the object at hand: art cases where we (either individually or collectively) begin to see the aesthetic object for what it is and succeed in both experiencing and judging it accordingly. Sometimes this happens gradually, over time, and at others more suddenly. What has changed? Or, rather, has anything changed? With the help of examples, I will shed some light on this phenomenon, aided by the three kinds of reasons mentioned above. The question then arises of whether we can speak of retroactive aesthetic judgements or whether omissions of this kind, once addressed, can be said to yield aesthetic judgements that apply not only in the here and now but backwards in time too. The idea is worth considering not least since it underlies many of our general discussions of such cases and the way in which we speak of *re*claiming an artist's rightful place in a certain tradition, *re*habilitating our appreciation of a particular style or piece, or *re*storing some work to its deserved place in a specific collection. Our language in such instances tends to be what I shall refer to as 'corrective', that is to say that it seeks to rectify in the present some failure (often of omission) of the past. What we need to do now, according to this thought, is to amend that past.

Although there will be little room here to fully develop this idea and connect it to existing arguments for aesthetic objectivism and cognitivism in art, I shall explore some aspects of this practice and claim that a missed opportunity to experience an object of attention's aesthetic character is a missed opportunity to engage with that object's aesthetic potential where such potential, although not always accessible to

4 Although I do not wish to exclude the possibility that there are also other kinds of reasons for such omissions, I will limit myself to an examination of these three kinds for the purposes of this paper.

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us, can nonetheless retroactively be said to pertain to the object in a meaningful sense also under experientially unfavourable conditions. This warrants talk of rehabilitation to some degree even if caution ought to be exercised in using such corrective language. Some failures to engage aesthetically with art can be explained at least in part by the fact that artists or artworks intentionally position themselves exactly at the cutting edge of what we (either individually or collectively) are capable of apprehending or appreciating, and so blame, if indeed there is any, cannot straightforwardly be ascribed to one aesthetic agent.

II

Aesthetic judgements seem capable of failing (or of failure) in several ways. One kind of failure simply consists of 'getting it wrong', in so far as the attribution of a particular aesthetic quality or aesthetic value seems ill-matched to the experience that the object's character tends to afford. Such cases can range from being entirely misguided (for example, '*O* is delicate' instead of '*O* is garish') to more fine-grained confusions (for example, '*O* is lugubrious' instead of '*O* is melancholic'). Either way, some form of aesthetic experience or apprehension takes place, the process of aesthetic judgement is initiated, and a judgement is indeed made, but the *content* of the judgement seems unwarranted or inappropriate. This kind of failure, assuming we can use that terminology, amounts roughly to a judgement being mistaken.[5] In other words, in so far as it fails it is the content of the aesthetic judgement that fails to capture or correspond to the aesthetic character of the object of appreciation.

Another kind of failure amounts to what we can describe as a failure of aesthetic judgement qua aesthetic judgement. Here, some form of aesthetic experience or apprehension takes place and the process of aesthetic judgement is, again, initiated. A judgement (of some kind) is made but that judgement fails to meet all the criteria of a bona fide aesthetic judgement. Such failures can occur, for example, when snobbery, bad taste, or a certain kind of weakness of aesthetic will comes into play, and the attempted aesthetic judgement ends up, rather, as a mere echo of someone else's opinion, or as a judgement grounded in the wrong kind of reasons, or simply as an expression of personal preference.[6]

Whereas the latter can be described as attempted aesthetic judgements that fail to meet some generally accepted criteria set for such judgements to qualify as distinctly *aesthetic*, and so fail internally, so to speak, the former amount to failures of aesthetic judgements to secure their own accuracy, relevance, or authority in virtue of their

5 Clearly, the mere possibility of such a failure in turn relies on the possibility that some aesthetic judgements are more accurate or appropriate than others, even though it does not necessarily entail that all such judgements are objective. At least some aesthetic subjectivists allow for (a degree of) adequacy or appropriateness (see Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste' or Wiggins, 'Sensible Subjectivism?').

6 For more on these phenomena, see Matthew Kieran, 'The Vice of Snobbery: Aesthetic Knowledge, Justification and Virtue in Art', *Philosophical Quarterly* 60 (2010): 243–63; Zoe Johnson King, 'On Snobbery', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 63 (2023): 199–215; Irene Martínez Marín, 'The Aesthetic Enkratic Principle', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 63 (2023): 251–68; Mélissa Thériault, 'Bad Taste, Aesthetic Akrasia, and Other "Guilty" Pleasures', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51 (2017): 58–71. Again, the mere possibility that these kinds of cases constitute proper failures of aesthetic judgement relies on the idea that there are certain conditions that such judgements have to meet in order to be bona fide aesthetic judgements, such as being based on the right kind of reason(s) and, moreover, that a judgement shaped largely by snobbery or weakness of will, say, cannot be thus grounded. I shall not discuss these concerns here.

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content. That is to say, whereas one might say by means of shorthand that in the one case it is the aesthetic judgement that fails the given object it appraises (or the experience that object can afford) to some degree, in the other it is the aesthetic judgement that in some sense fails itself, or at least our expectations of what such a judgement ought to be.

Obviously, aesthetic judgements that fail qua aesthetic judgements can also have unwarranted or misleading content – sometimes the two kinds of failure overlap. For example, a judgement that fails to meet all the marks of a bona fide aesthetic judgement for reasons to do with snobbery can also fail in the first sense by asserting something misguided or misplaced. Similarly, the aesthetic judgement of an *akratic* aesthetic agent, too weak-willed to carry the attempted aesthetic judgement through and landing instead in an expression of desire or bias, say, might well have content that is unsuitable or unfitting. Yet failures of content are not always the result of failures qua judgement, for the former can also stem from misperceptions, conceptual or categorical confusion, linguistic ignorance, or underdeveloped aesthetic sensibilities. Nor is the content of attempted aesthetic judgements always straightforwardly mistaken, for such judgements can end up making assertions that just happen to capture the aesthetic character of the object of attention despite not meeting all the relevant criteria. Although distinct, these two kinds of failure are not always easy to tell or hold apart.

Now, the third kind of failure – the omission of aesthetic judgement – has already been described as the failure that comes to pass when an object of attention could or ought to have been experienced and judged aesthetically but where such experience and judgement simply failed to occur owing to a lapse of appreciation or some other oversight. One might also think of this as a case of suspending our aesthetic experience or belief. The three different reasons behind such oversights will be contextualized and examined in greater detail shortly.

Omissions of aesthetic judgements are not, however, to be confused with negative aesthetic judgements (which may eventually turn out to be mistaken), even though failing to engage in aesthetic appraisal can at times seem to involve or run close to a fleeting separate (negative) impression or assessment that the object of attention's aesthetic character fails to warrant any positive appraisal. Again, although some such overlap cannot be ruled out in practice, the two kinds of cases are theoretically distinct. For far from all omissions of aesthetic judgement are grounded in the affirmative (yet negatively valenced) assessment that something is aesthetically bad, uninteresting, disturbing, poor, or otherwise below par. The latter are still assertive judgements of the kind '*O* is *F*' and have specific aesthetic content (albeit negative) to the extent that the aesthetic qualities in question (for example, ugliness, disharmony, or kitsch) tend to count against positive aesthetic evaluations. Although such negative judgements may lead to other aesthetic omissions further down the line, including omissions to develop more detailed forms of perceptual, imaginative, or affective engagements with the object of attention, omissions to advance encouraging recommendations to others, or omissions to grant the object a second aesthetic chance, it would be inaccurate to describe them as omissions per se where the latter are first and foremost *absences* of aesthetic experience and judgement.[7] A negatively valenced aesthetic judgement is still an aesthetic judgement. With that said, let us now look a little closer at failures of the third kind.

7 It is of course possible that such a negative aesthetic assessment (which may eventually turn out to be mistaken) precedes the omission of a more full-blown aesthetic judgement, but even in such cases the two evaluative acts are best conceived as distinct.

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III

Failures of omission, or aesthetic judgements that deserved to come about but failed to, have altered the course of art, the history of ideas, and more. They have affected not only the artistic canons we have relied on and the narratives we have shaped to explain the history of art, but also the way in which we think about beauty and the role and function of the artist. As the norms governing our ideas of beauty, art, and artists have changed, so too have the norms which govern our sense of what counts as a valid object of aesthetic experience. Consequently, failures of omission often occur in relation to things found at the boundaries of our aesthetic and artistic expectations so that objects at one time ignored as insignificant, non-aesthetic, or non-artistic come to be revisited and reassessed. Arguably, too, their relevance reaches further still by contributing to changes in the way society in general thinks about such things as gender equality, minority rights, religious freedom, and civic responsibility. Given that societies have always relied on art to explore the norms and ideals they use to regulate themselves, it stands to reason that many art-historical and societal changes go hand in hand. I will explore this argument further below. For now, however, it suffices to note that a proper account of failures of omission can be shown to refute the claim that failures of aesthetic judgement in general are relevant only or even primarily to the subjective experience of the individual who makes them, resulting perhaps in them missing a particularly rewarding aesthetic experience or an opportunity to exercise their aesthetic taste to the full. Rather, the fall-out of failures of aesthetic judgements can be far-reaching.

In this section I will examine some omissions of aesthetic judgements of artworks of a public nature. These particular omissions have merely been temporary (ranging from a few to over one hundred years) in so far as our general aesthetic opinion of them no longer considers them inadequate or unworthy targets of aesthetic judgement. They have thus, from the perspective of history, been redressed. It is important to note, however, that such rehabilitation is often quite accidental, the result of the hard and persistent work of a handful of scholars or enthusiasts, perhaps, and very often dependent on the physical preservation of materials, pieces, and documentation. Had they not been thus remedied, we would arguably think quite differently today about not only a variety of artistic practices but also some wider social phenomena. Failures of aesthetic judgement can, it would seem, have more far-ranging implications than we tend to assume.

III.1. CASE I: LACK OF AESTHETIC QUALITY

A first reason for omitting to make an aesthetic judgement about an object of attention is that it lacks aesthetic quality or value. In other words, the object fails to afford any aesthetic experience (or any such experience of noticeable significance). Quite naturally, therefore, we neglect to pass proper aesthetic judgement on it for the simple reason that the object does not present itself to us as a suitable object for such kinds of judgement.

Omissions of this kind occur for different reasons. In some cases, they are simply due to the potential object of appreciation not even reaching or becoming known to a wider public. Franz Kafka, for example, received almost no recognition during his lifetime and destroyed the greater part of his literary output. Had it not been for his friend Max Brod, who explicitly went against Kafka's instructions and worked tirelessly to publish the texts Kafka was working on around the time of his death (including *The Trial*), our

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contemporary history of twentieth-century literature would look very different. Not only is Kafka now generally accepted as one of the greatest European writers of the early twentieth century, he is also considered central to many subsequent literary and philosophical developments, including existentialism.[8] What is more, he is one of very few writers whose name has become a commonplace in everyday discourse, where the adjective 'Kafkaesque' is frequently used to pick out the kind of slow and irrational bureaucratic machinery with which several of his novels, such as *The Trial*, are concerned.[9]

A comparable case is that of Emily Dickinson, who published a mere 10 poems and one letter in her lifetime. The few critics who read these poems perceived them to be almost entirely lacking not merely in aesthetic merit but in aesthetic quality of any kind. The poems were immediately seen as inadequate, too lacking in both poetic craft and moral decorum to deserve a serious reading. Nor did this failure of omission rectify itself particularly speedily in the years following Dickinson's death. Almost five decades later, the poet and critic Harold Mono could still write of Emily Dickinson as 'a school-girl [...] most dumb to the art of poetry'.[10] Others would call her work 'no more than [the] jottings' of a naive child who failed to produce 'musings of a full grown, fully educated woman'.[11] Dickinson was thus considered incapable of producing serious poetry, worthy of aesthetic engagement, and during her life was, as literary critic Judith Farr notes, 'known more widely as a gardener, perhaps, than as a poet'.[12] The correlation between omitting to engage with and judge Dickinson's poetry aesthetically, and our later reevaluation of their aesthetic relevance and power, is symptomatic of long-term changes and shifts in our attitudes towards both poetry and women.[13]

In these two cases, the failure of omission is fairly complete, less a case of negative critical aesthetic assertion and more one of the lack of any significant aesthetic engagement at all.[14] In other examples, however, such distinctions are perhaps less

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8 For more on Kafka's relation to existentialism, see Jacob Golomb, 'Kafka's Existential Metamorphosis', *Clio* 14 (1985): 271–86.

9 The successful rectification of the omission, whereby Kafka's surviving works were brought into a public sphere in which they could be appreciated and judged, has thus had consequences not only for the history of literature but for how we relate to certain aspects of society more widely. One might even be so specific as to suggest that our conception of how certain kinds of bureaucratic tasks are interconnected has partly been shaped by Kafka's writings.

10 Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 2007), vii.

11 Ibid., iii.

12 Judith Farr, *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), xx.

13 Dickinson's work is valued today in large part because of how marvellously it reveals the details and depths of the rich inner life of a well-read but in many respects otherwise unremarkable and largely untravelled middle-class person. In contrast to Kafka, who interpreted society's lack of interest in his work as a cue to destroy it, Dickinson carefully arranged for the preservation of her poetry. So while the vast majority of Kafka's work remains beyond the possibility of aesthetic judgement, Dickinson's *oeuvre* has over the intervening century and a half gone from being deemed beneath aesthetic and artistic criticism to a position from which it manages to provide criticism with many of the norms according to which poetry is judged aesthetically.

14 Again, Dickinson's poetry was not so much judged to be aesthetically bad as simply not a viable candidate for proper aesthetic assessment. That is not to say that some negative assessments were not associated with this act of aesthetic neglect, but it is likely that these assessments were primarily directed at, say, the moral adequacy of Dickinson's subject matter or the ways in which Dickinson's personal artistic ambitions clashed with the more family-oriented social expectations middle-class women were held to at the time.

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clear-cut where the idea of omitting to judge an object aesthetically seems to run closer to making or asserting negative aesthetic assessments, such as we saw in Section II. One case of that kind is that of the *Salon des Refusés*, an exhibition that took place in Paris in 1863 and in which the paintings on display were specifically those which had been rejected as irrelevant or unsuitable by the jury of the official *Salon de peinture et de sculpture* that year. Here the idea of omission can be interpreted quite literally: the works being physically excluded from the Royal Academy's exhibition.[15] At the same time, many of the paintings exhibited in the *Salon des Refusés* (such as Eduard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863) were subsequently recognized as masterpieces and are now widely acclaimed as some of the most important paintings in the early development not only of impressionism but also of the call for moral freedom emerging at the time.[16]

What makes the case of the *Salon des Refusés* so interesting and relevant to the present argument is the way it sheds light on a critical moment in the history of art where a number of paintings, deemed inappropriate as objects of bona fide aesthetic experience by virtue of both artistic style and subject matter,[17] eventually succeeded in forcing the issue of a reassessment of the prevalent criteria of aesthetic judgement. In other words, the very public nature of the act of omission opened the way for the existing standards of evaluation to become far more visible than before, which in turn led to a reassessment of those features generally considered aesthetically significant. In contrast with most cases, then, where such processes are gradual and only dimly recognizable, here a single exhibition led to the very features and styles of painting that had served as the grounds for aesthetic omission (that is, grounds for not being seen as aesthetically valuable) being transformed into those aspects upon which aesthetic attention now became explicitly focused. And this, in turn, opened the way for elements of contemporary society previously hidden from art to be actively depicted in painting, including the everyday actions and environments of ordinary people. The transformation occurring in the reassessment, in other words, is not merely one leading us from a negative to a positive aesthetic assessment but one in which stylistic and thematic features and traits move from a kind of aesthetic invisibility to a state of aesthetic visibility.

In this sense, the three cases discussed here all highlight the way in which aspects of certain elements of artistic representation and expression become discernible as reasons for aesthetic engagement. In Kafka, the strongest single element is perhaps the particular kind of angst associated with the alienating mismatch between human subjectivity and the increasingly inhuman apparatus by which society is structured. In Dickinson, one might point to the explosive intersection of a distinctively female experience of the world with the traditionally masculine preserve of idealist philosophy. With the *Salon des Refusés*, it is perhaps a new and liberating relationship between us as human beings and the natural and urban landscapes that surround us that comes to the fore. In all cases, however, the development of both societal and artistic norms interact, the one becoming expressive of the other in such a way that features which were previously ignored or overlooked in aesthetic experience instead become a worthy object of aesthetic attention.

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15 The case is a classic example of the 'succès de scandale'. The exhibited paintings attracted almost more attention from the public and press, albeit mostly in the form of mockery, than the official *Salon* itself.

16 For more on this point, see Adam Parkes, 'A Sense of Justice: Whistler, Ruskin, James, Impressionism', *Victorian Studies* 42 (1999): 593–629.

17 As in Dickinson's case (see ftn. 14), there is a question about whether any negative assessment involved is distinctly aesthetic or, rather, grounded in, for example, social or moral norms of appropriateness or adequacy.

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III.2. CASE II: LACK OF ADEQUATE ONTOLOGY

A second reason for the occurrence of omissions of aesthetic judgement relates to the way in which the object of aesthetic attention may be thought to lack the right ontology to be assessed aesthetically. That is to say, the object is so startling or unusual, say, that the public and critics fail to see it as possible candidate for aesthetic experience and, as a simple result, aesthetic engagement of any kind is suspended. In contrast to the examples explored above, the cases relevant to a perceived ontological mismatch are not primarily ones where particular stylistic or thematic features eventually move from being aesthetically invisible to aesthetically visible. Rather, it is the object itself that becomes subject to some kind of appreciative adjustment.

An obvious example is the urinal that Marcel Duchamp submitted in 1917 under the title *Fountain* to an exhibition of the newly established Society of Independent Artists. As is well known, the urinal was neither made by Duchamp nor significantly manipulated by him, beyond the addition of a fake signature ('R. Mutt') and the act of presenting the object in a context strongly at odds with how such objects are usually found. In this case, as with the *Salon des Refusés*, the omission of aesthetic judgement was a public event. The Society refused *Fountain*, following a vote of its members, on the grounds that the object could not reasonably be considered a work of art and as such failed to meet the standards set for aesthetic appreciation. However, the circumstances of the original attempt to display *Fountain* remained relevant to its subsequent journey for the reason that the Society had specifically stipulated that the exhibition should be open to all artists wishing to display their work. As Duchamp's friend and colleague Beatrice Wood argued later, part of the point of the exhibition, in addition to displaying interesting new works of art that diverged from contemporary norms, was to do away with selective appreciative criteria altogether and delegate that evaluative function to the artists themselves. The point was, wrote Wood, 'for the artist to decide what is art, not someone else'.

Here, then, is a case where through a slow process of critical adjustment, an omission of aesthetic judgement eventually emerges as such. In 1917, the sense was clearly that exhibiting a prefabricated urinal in an art exhibition constituted a kind of category mistake. However, by virtue of bringing to a head the issue of artists' freedom to establish the critical criteria according to which their art should be understood and appreciated – a development with roots in the *Salon des Refusés* – Duchamp's *Fountain* paved the way for the radical realization that this power implied a freedom to denote all sorts of objects as art, not merely those associated with existing artistic traditions and the aesthetic habits they exemplify and which thereby evolved as objects worthy of aesthetic experience and judgement.

The possibilities opened up by the piecemeal rehabilitation of *Fountain* and other 'readymades' (arguably not yet entirely completed) profoundly transformed aesthetic practices. Later works such as Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964), as well as many artworks central to the conceptualist tradition, including Adrian Piper's *Catalysis* (1970–1973) and Felix Gonzales-Torres's *'Untitled' (Portrait of Ross in L.A.*, 1991*)*, are unthinkable without the historical process initiated by the aesthetic omission prompted by *Fountain*. Nor are such examples limited to the world of visual art. It is no exaggeration to say that the first half of the twentieth century is awash with examples, from music, literature, and dance, in which works which challenge the ontological categories associated with those artforms gain acceptance as valid objects of artistic and aesthetic engagement. For example, in his development of the 12-tone method of

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composition, and dispensing with the centuries-old norm that musical melody and harmony should be pleasing, composer Arnold Schönberg presented the listening public with works that initially struck the uninitiated ear as being more noise than art or music.[18] Similarly, the surrealist poets, such as André Bréton and Robert Desnos, presented as poetry experimentations that substituted the creative steps traditionally associated with the artform with mechanical and chance processes, delegating the poet's task of finding meaning in the work entirely to the reader.

Generally speaking, the force with which so many artists of this period on several fronts made their work available for aesthetic engagement by creating new (or no!) objects, new sounds, new combinations of words and material, paved the way for how we today almost take for granted that anything from performative actions to silence or the mere listing of ideas can be understood as a valid object of aesthetic experience. Crucially, this paradigm shift within the artworld has, in turn, contributed more widely to the cross-fertilization of ideas between art and politics (such as Ai Weiwei's *Harlem Shelter 1* from 2017), art and morality (such as Ja'Tovia Gary's *Citational Ethics: Toni Morrison 1987* from 2021), and art and society (such as in the art collective Gentle/Radical's project *Doorstep Revolution*). Had these omissions not been addressed, and had the aesthetic potential of such objects of appreciation not been rehabilitated, we would most probably think differently about art itself as well as the numerous questions and concerns it highlights in often unfiltered and direct ways.

III.3. CASE III: LACK OF AESTHETIC PROMINENCE

A third and, for us, final common reason for omissions of aesthetic judgement is that an artwork's aesthetic quality or value is somehow obscured by other qualities in that same work. In these cases, the object fails to afford any (significant) aesthetic experience because our attentive focus is drawn elsewhere. To the extent that the character of our experience is inflected by primarily non-aesthetic concerns, the aesthetic aspect of experience thus dwindles and becomes more or less unnoticeable, something that in turn leads us to fail to pass aesthetic judgement on it.

While in the previous two kinds of case most of the examples involved transitions in which either aesthetic features or objects underwent some kind of transformation (that is, going from aesthetic invisibility or unappreciability to visibility or appreciability), we are here concerned with art where the work's political or moral qualities or standing, say, eclipse its capacity to afford distinctively aesthetic experience and judgement. It does so at least until such a time that the political or moral status of that artwork is no longer considered critical or overwhelming in some sense, at which point the aesthetic features of the objects can come into their own.[19]

The history of art is littered with examples of works that only with time came to be appreciated primarily for their aesthetic merit or value in this way. Jonathan Swift's literary essay *A Modest Proposal* (1726) and D. H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers* (1913) were initially considered so shocking and morally reprehensible that the

18 For more on this evolution, see Harvey Sachs, *Schoenberg: Why He Matters* (New York: Liveright, 2023).

19 This idea is closely connected to the debate regarding autonomism versus interactionism in art, that is, the discussion about whether moral and aesthetic value are either autonomous or interact in particular artworks. For more on this problem, see Adriana Clavel-Vazquez, 'Rethinking Autonomism: Beauty in a World of Moral Anarchy', *Philosophy Compass* 13, no. 7 (2018) and Matthew Kieran, 'In Defence of the Ethical Evaluation of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41 (2001): 26–38.

DOI: 10.33134/eeja.439

question of their aesthetic value was hardly raised except in so far as it was simply assumed that nothing with such horrifying moral content could ever be anything but aesthetically undeserving. Similarly, much propaganda art only becomes a viable aesthetic candidate, so to speak, when the threat or danger posed by the work's political content recedes. Of course, in many instances, particular styles and movements are dismissed and rendered illegitimate in their entirety, such as in Stalin's attack on Dmitri Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934) and musical modernism, or the Nazi regime's categorization of expressionism in literature, music, and visual art as 'degenerate'.[20]

Although instances of aesthetic omissions of this kind tend to be easier to find in strictly regulated cultures, such as fanatic religions or belief systems and totalitarian regimes, it would be wrong to think that they cannot also arise in more liberal societies. The scrutiny and condemnation of a large quantity of American cultural production under the McCarthy era, for example, tried to condemn a large portion of mainstream Hollywood films as communist and anti-American regardless of artistic innovation or achievement. Nor is the phenomenon limited to political and moral concerns. The paintings of the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint were for decades deemed aesthetically insignificant on the grounds that they were first and foremost vehicles for a kind of obscure spiritual experience antithetical to proper artistic aims. Again, the entire literature of early Renaissance sacred polyphonic was rendered problematic in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation on the grounds that its artistic complexity adumbrated its liturgical and textual function.

Of course, many artworks carry different kinds of value simultaneously, and on many occasions these manifestations of value can interact fruitfully in ways which contribute to the overall merit of the artwork in question. Although the cases under scrutiny here concern occasions when the character or content of the non-aesthetic kinds of value are such that they override or outperform the work's aesthetic value, it is also true that the opposite can happen. That is to say, sometimes a work's aesthetic value can mesmerize us in such ways that we fail to discern its moral or political content. What I have sought to highlight here is the way in which an artwork's aesthetic character can, at times, be overshadowed by the force of the other kinds of value attributable to that same work. When that happens, we may fail to apprehend the work's aesthetic potential to the point that we fail to make any kind of aesthetic judgement about it either involuntarily (due to overpowering manifestations of other kinds of value) or voluntarily (such as when we rule it out aesthetically for reasons to do with these other kinds of value).

IV

Failures of omission leave their mark on the ever-changing contours of art and its histories. A broader case can also be made for the claim that such omissions, much like the art we come to highlight and celebrate, can influence how we relate to a range of things well beyond the confines of art-making. Rehabilitated works such as the

20 One way to describe the Nazis' assessment of such avant-garde art is that the moral and political value accorded to the artists and their world-perspective far outweighed (negatively) any aesthetic potential of the works they created, and that these negative moral evaluations were considered so grave that it was also thought to follow logically that a proper aesthetic evaluation of these works was entirely out of the question. For more on this topic, see Stephanie Barron, ed., '*Degenerate Art': The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (New York: Abrams, 1991).

DOI: 10.33134/eeja.439

ones discussed above support these claims by providing us with concrete and direct comparisons between, on the one hand, the perspective or view we now have (after the rehabilitation) and, on the other hand, what *could* have been had the rehabilitation not occurred. An omission to experience and assess artworks aesthetically is, then, not necessarily merely a missed opportunity to gain some personal enjoyment or reward. It is also a missed opportunity to let art affect the course of the world and our conception of it in the particular way that successful works can, that is to say by inviting us to think about events, persons, and our relations to them in novel ways.

Art history involves transformations whereby the aesthetic potential of artworks comes in and out of visibility, so to speak, which is to say that the possibility of apprehending aesthetic value is not always straightforwardly available to us. Artworks can speak to us at certain times, and seem mute to us at others. Different people come to appreciate aesthetic objects at different times (and some never do). The reasons for these kinds of shifts vary. When the conditions are right, an artwork can itself contribute to initiating this change by forcing a new way of engaging with art into being – forging a new 'way in' to an artwork's aesthetic potential. But there is nothing to guarantee that the very omissions that have now been redressed will not, at some point in the future, reoccur. Or indeed that the greatest omissions of this kind have not passed us by entirely, perhaps irretrievably. Considering the complex and adventitious conditions that have to be met for an aesthetic recovery of this kind to take place, it is probably fair to claim that only a small minority of such omissions will ever become known to us, surviving in neither matter nor memory.

Is this to say that there is but one course that the world and our beliefs about it are destined to take and that art, through what it recognizes or overlooks, either follows that path or deviates from it? Almost certainly not. So why, then, one might ask, speak of *re*claiming an artist's rightful place in a certain tradition, *re*habilitating our appreciation of a particular style or piece, or *re*storing some work to its deserved place in a specific collection? After all, strictly speaking, such talk is only entirely uncontroversial when an artwork or artist, at one time commended but since forgotten, is brought back to our attention and appreciation, *re*discovered after a certain period.

At least two observations can be made in this connection. First, the retroactive aspect of these corrective practices strongly suggest that there is some sense in which aesthetic objectivism and cognitivism capture important intuitions about how we experience, assess, and value art – namely, that we can be misguided or wrong about our aesthetic judgements, including when we omit to make them. One might even say that such practices reveal a desire or need to review, reinterpret, and at times rewrite the explanatory paths upon which we place art and its evolutionary trajectory. Part of what it is to engage with art of the past is to revitalize our relations to these works, and such a process can involve a reconceptualization of our aesthetic evaluations. At the same time, and second, these are not paths or judgements set in stone, recognizable to us at all times or indeed valid for all eternity. If we instead think in terms of potential, and view aesthetic value as an experiential possibility (if not always an actuality), what we come to understand when we re-evaluate our aesthetic assessment of certain artworks – or our omissions thereof – is that this potential is there (and in some sense perhaps always was). One way of making sense of this talk of restoring, redressing, and reclaiming is thus to acknowledge that what has changed in between the 'before' and 'after' of aesthetic rehabilitation is not the object itself, which remains more or less intact, in principle at least offering more or less the same aesthetic experiences. Rather, it is the highly complex combination

DOI: 10.33134/eeja.439

of factors, including artistic and social expectations, moral codes, and individual sensibilities, which must align for aesthetic apprehension and appreciation to become available.[21] What we failed to see in the artwork is now within grasp, even though it may not remain so.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The writing of this article was supported by a research grant from the Templeton Religion Trust's programme 'Art Seeking Understanding: Putting Aesthetic Cognitivism to the Test'.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Schellekens, Elisabeth. 'Failure as Omission: Missed Opportunities and Retroactive Aesthetic Judgements.' *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LX/XVI, no. 2 (2023): pp. 131–144. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.439

Submitted: 26 June 2023
Accepted: 02 August 2023
Published: 14 September 2023

Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press in cooperation with the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.

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