



# Introduction

**María José Alcaraz León**   
University of Murcia, ES

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**EDITORIAL**

**HUP** HELSINKI  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



FACULTY OF ARTS  
Charles University

## ABSTRACT

Recent debates on the validity of Aesthetic Testimony and the centrality of the so-called Acquaintance Principle suggest that there is more to the proper exercise of aesthetic judgement than mere endorsement of allegedly correct aesthetic judgements. For example, although it is reasonable to follow experts' judgements in certain matters of fact, it seems less acceptable to simply endorse or adopt experts' judgements in the aesthetic domain. That reliance on testimony, by contrast to some other areas of judgement, is not sufficient for aesthetic judgement has encouraged scholars to focus in turn on the importance of the personal involvement and autonomy of the aesthetic agent.

This special issue focuses on phenomena related to failed exercises of aesthetic judgement. The choice of the theme is motivated by the belief that a careful analysis of failures in aesthetic judgement can reveal significant aspects of the nature of aesthetic experience itself as well as the roles that perception, imagination, and learning have in its proper exercise.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**María José Alcaraz León**

University of Murcia, ES

[mariajo@um.es](mailto:mariajo@um.es)

---

KEYWORDS:

aesthetic judgement;  
aesthetic misappreciation;  
aesthetic inconsistency;  
aesthetic absence;  
aesthetic personality

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Alcaraz León, María José.  
'Introduction.' *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LX/XVI, no. 2 (2023): pp. 107–114. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.440>

The present volume aims at exploring the practice of aesthetic judgement by focusing especially on phenomena that challenge the widely held conception of this practice as a rationally constrained activity. This is not a completely novel aspiration given that there is a wide literature examining the possibility of reconciling the sentimental basis of the aesthetic judgement with its alleged normative status. However, this special issue contributes significantly to the discussion by paying attention to a class of phenomena, not infrequent in our aesthetic practices, that reveal some often-undermined aspects of aesthetic judgements. Focusing on aesthetic inconsistency, omissions in aesthetic appreciation, or intrapersonal aesthetic disagreement, among others, serves to explore these frequently overlooked aspects of the exercise of aesthetic judgement. It also helps to clarify the rational commitments involved in aesthetic appreciation, to acknowledge different forms of failure of aesthetic judgement, and to assess the sense in which one is obliged to engage in particular appreciative acts. This special issue of *Estetika* thus expands and contributes to such classical problems of aesthetic judgement as aesthetic disagreement, aesthetic consistency, and failure of aesthetic judgement, but does so by approaching them from perspectives offered by certain puzzling phenomena.

The first contribution to the volume is by Eileen John, who addresses the problem of aesthetic consistency. Partly dwelling upon Ted Cohen's seminal article 'On Consistency in One's Personal Aesthetics', John distinguishes between two main forms of aesthetic consistency.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, there is consistency among one's reasons for judging or appreciating; on the other, aesthetic consistency can be understood in terms of a coherent aesthetic personality. John critically considers both kinds, concluding that neither seems to provide a true ideal towards which we as aesthetic appreciators should aspire. In their stead, she proposes a third kind of consistency at 'the level of reflection on the desirable functions of art'.

John's rejection of the idea that aesthetic consistency of the first two kinds is something we should strive for lies in taking seriously the often defended holistic and particularist functioning of aesthetic reasons. She observes that this form of coherence would be at odds with the common particularist conception of aesthetic reasons that authors like Cohen or Fabian Dorsch have persuasively put forward.<sup>2</sup> As she argues, if the considerations we offer as reasons for an aesthetic judgement lack the general character we expect from reasons in other domains, it seems that there is little, if any, room to expect a consistent use of these considerations in aesthetic reasoning. If aesthetic reasons always operate holistically, the fact that a particular aspect of a work is acknowledged as aesthetically value-conferring in one case can hardly ground the belief that new occurrences of the same aspect will contribute likewise in other cases. Thus, the expectation that we can consistently appeal to certain considerations as reasons that justify aesthetic judgements across the board dissipates. Aesthetic consistency cannot, therefore, be cashed out in terms of consistency of aesthetic reasons.

John's analysis of the second type of aesthetic consistency, which some authors have recently characterized in terms of aesthetic personality, shows that this type of consistency is not promising either. Her critical approach to this strategy begins

---

1 Ted Cohen, 'On Consistency in One's Personal Aesthetics', in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106–26.

2 Ibid. and Fabian Dorsch, 'Non-inferentialism about Justification: The Case of Aesthetic Judgements', *Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (2013): 660–61.

by acknowledging the openness and flexibility we should embrace as attentive and thoughtful aesthetic appreciators. If, as she argues, good aesthetic appreciators should pursue the openness necessary to 'respond aptly to whatever kinds of artistic goods they come across', one's particular aesthetic attachments should be left aside in favour of a responsive attitude towards the variety of aesthetic values available to us. And this suggests that the disposition required from a good appreciator seems to undermine the primacy of pursuing the aesthetic consistency proper to cultivating aesthetic personality.

John's scepticism about the desirability of pursuing aesthetic consistency in either of the first two kinds is finally supported by the recognition that those whom we take to be good critics do not seem to possess the kinds of consistency analysed. In her view, acknowledging that the people we take to be thoughtful critics do not satisfy these ideals should reinforce our lack of confidence in the ability of the two kinds of consistency to actually do any philosophical work in grounding a viable conception of the practice of aesthetic judging.

The final section of John's article is devoted to exploring, in a more optimistic vein, a more viable form of aesthetic consistency. This kind of consistency rests on people's developing 'aesthetically significant principles' concerning what is taken to be valuable about art. Although John admits that the concern for certain broad artistic values can generate some form of consistency, she also thinks that the principles in question are so broad and general that they can hardly be understood in terms of aesthetic personality or profile. Rather, they express the basic interest that we take in art in a way that bounds aesthetic appreciation to a more general and shared activity of judging.

In her article 'Failure as Omission: Missed Opportunities and Retroactive Aesthetic Judgements', Elisabeth Schellekens explores three scenarios where the activity of aesthetic appreciation is precluded or downplayed, thus impeding a proper aesthetic judgement. She begins by distinguishing these scenarios from the much more common cases of aesthetic judgement's failure in which we get things wrong about an object's aesthetic value: the case when we think that a novel is subtler than it actually is and the case where we fail to make a bona fide aesthetic judgement due to the interference of non-aesthetic considerations – as when we attribute undeserved aesthetic value to a work because we have some personal attachments with its author.

In contrast to these more common cases, the omission of aesthetic judgement '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'. This failure by omission can happen in at least three distinct scenarios. The first has to do with an apparent lack of aesthetic quality that prevents the appreciator from even adopting an appreciative attitude towards the object. The second scenario explores failures by omission due to the object of appreciation lacking an adequate ontology. A typical example is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. In this case, the object fails to be appreciated aesthetically because the main ontological category under which it is experienced prevents its aesthetic appreciation. A third case of a failure to appreciate an object aesthetically takes place when 'an artwork's aesthetic quality or value is somehow obscured by other qualities in that same work'. The examples of this kind of failure by omission range from missing some aesthetic value due to overriding moral or political

concerns to being incapable of recognizing certain artistic procedures as bearers of aesthetic value. What makes all the above scenarios examples of the same type is the mechanism operating behind the failure: in each case, the established ways of aesthetic apprehension impede the appreciators from paying attention to certain aspects of the object that may be key to appreciating it comprehensively.

Schellekens's analysis of these scenarios and the reasons behind the different kinds of failure by omission do not only illuminate some ways in which aesthetic appreciation can go awry without being simple cases of making the wrong aesthetic judgement. Failures by omission are definitely instances of aesthetic failure, for they involve failing to grasp the work's aesthetic value or neglecting the relevance of some aspects to a work's aesthetic value. But the significance of failures by omission is greater. In all the cases examined, the failure by omission can be corrected by later appreciators making accessible, together with their revisionary judgements, aspects that become aesthetically relevant, thus changing the possible considerations that an appreciator may look at when justifying her aesthetic judgement. The dynamics whereby innovative works demand a new set of aesthetic reasons, changing in turn the very appreciative practice under which they aim to be appreciated, is a key feature of our aesthetic practices and of the way they evolve. In this regard, the cases examined in Schellekens's article make us more aware not only of possible sources of aesthetic failure but also of the fragility or provisional nature of our aesthetic reasons. Examining them makes salient such failures' ulterior impact on the actual development of our appreciative practices.

Uku Tooming's contribution, 'Aesthetic Disagreement with Oneself as Another', explores a common phenomenon – namely, that of reconsidering and changing one's previous aesthetic evaluations. Somewhat surprisingly, this phenomenon has received little attention in comparison to interpersonal disagreement; even the literature on personal aesthetic consistency and aesthetic identity has focused on other forms of consistency, such as consistency among one's aesthetic reasons or aesthetic preferences.

The novelty of Tooming's approach consists in his analysis of this phenomenon in terms of aesthetic disagreement and, in particular, as a form of aesthetic intrasubjective disagreement. One advantage of this approach is that it permits analysing the phenomenon as analogous to interpersonal aesthetic disagreement, where two aesthetic peers disagree over an aesthetic evaluation, and hence examining the weight that the autonomy principle has in these scenarios.

Tooming begins by challenging the common assumption that our present aesthetic judgement always overrules our previous ones. He does so by noting that we have no reason to think that our present dispositions to judge aesthetically are better-trained, more refined, or less subject to possible interferences from different biases. After all, as Tooming writes, 'we should not be confident that our aesthetic taste is always improving and maturing over time'. Our present aesthetic judgements are no less vulnerable to error than our previous ones. So under which circumstances are we warranted in persisting in our present judgement?

Tooming appeals to the idea of aesthetic personality to defend that persisting in one's present judgement can be justified in some cases. According to Tooming's characterization, aesthetic personality is not exhausted by a set of aesthetic preferences; rather, we should view it as 'a set of dispositions to like or dislike different aesthetically relevant properties and their configurations'. Using this notion,

Tooming defends the view that revising one's present aesthetic judgement in light of intrasubjective disagreement may be warranted when one's present aesthetic self shares with one's previous aesthetic self an aesthetic identity or personality. As he puts it, 'revising one's judgement in response to intrasubjective disagreement is sometimes appropriate but only when the former and present selves share the same aesthetic personality'.

On the other hand, when the two selves exhibit noticeable differences in their aesthetic personalities, one's present aesthetic judgement can be preserved. This means that, when my aesthetic identity changes substantially, I can 'appeal to autonomy and just persist in my present verdict'. Once we adopt this view, Tooming claims, we can still explain the primacy we attach to our present judgements and the default authority we tend to ascribe to them while acknowledging that there may be cases where revision might be appropriate.

Tooming also considers three possible objections to his analysis. The first challenges the compatibility of Tooming's position with a realist account of aesthetic value. The second considers an epistemic worry concerning our capacities to adequately recognize ourselves as having or lacking an aesthetic identity across time. Finally, he addresses a possible worry emerging from the empirical data available seeming to indicate that people do not tend to treat aesthetic disagreement as solvable. Tooming's treatment of these worries aims at reconciling our realist intuitions concerning aesthetic values with the role of the autonomy principle in aesthetic judgement and the empirical data available concerning cases of intrasubjective disagreement.

In 'Aesthetic Absence and Interpretation', David Fenner focuses on a particular aesthetic experience, which he labels 'aesthetic absence', related to an awareness of something being missing or absent in an object of aesthetic appreciation. While such experiences are not exclusive to art, his approach pays special attention to their occurrence when confronting artworks.

The examples that Fenner introduces to illustrate the experience of aesthetic absence are Salvatore Grau's sculpture *Io sono*, apparently composed of thin air, and Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Fenner argues that in each case there is an initial experiential response to a sense of irresolution or a lack of understanding, devoting the rest of the article to clarifying this response, its interpretative role in aesthetic experience, and its value.

Fenner addresses three main features of the phenomenon of aesthetic absence. The first is its phenomenological character. The second is its relation to interpretative efforts to dissipate it or at least to accommodate it within a plausible understanding or interpretation of the work. The third is the elucidation of its value within the framework of aesthetic experience.

Concerning the phenomenological aspect of the experience of aesthetic absence, Fenner draws especially from Anna Farennikova's account of the characteristic affective and phenomenological aspects of this experience.<sup>3</sup> Fenner acknowledges both its negative or puzzling affective character and its more positive dimension, describing the former in terms of frustration, a sense of something missing, or an 'itch' and the latter in terms of a pleasurable surprise or a reflective stimulus. In addition to the experience's phenomenological dimension, there is a parallel question concerning

---

3 Anna Farennikova, 'Seeing Absence', *Philosophical Studies* 166 (2013): 429, 441-42.

its cognitive character. The issue here is how to characterize the expectations that are allegedly being thwarted, whether in cognitive or non-cognitive terms. In this context, Fenner departs from Farennikova's proposal. To support her view that in these experiences absence is part of one's perceptual content, Farennikova endorses a cognitively charged view of perception. As Fenner points out, Farennikova's view is 'that we literally see the absence, and this perception is unmediated cognitively'. By contrast, Fenner does not think that the cognitive element is present in the experience of aesthetic absence. The missing aspect thwarting our expectations is primarily formal. However, he concedes that, when we successfully engage in resolving the puzzle generated by the aesthetic absence, succeeding involves a cognitive process that permeates the work's interpretation.

Fenner then continues to analyse the importance of the experience of aesthetic absence not only to the primary experience of the work but also to the work's very identity as an artwork. Aesthetic absence triggers an interpretative process aimed not only at making sense of its alleged lack of sense or puzzling character but also at acknowledging its very contribution to the work's artistic identity. It is the process of making sense of the puzzle posed by aesthetic absences that we explore different interpretative venues, aiming at accommodating them in a coherent understanding of the work.

Fenner closes his article by acknowledging the special aesthetic value that aesthetic absence provides to certain artworks. According to him, we linger in experiences that offer endless free play with a double awareness of their unsolvable nature.

'In Defence of Tourists' by Michel-Antoine Xhignesse critically examines some of the reasons that may explain the widespread disapproval of tourists' characteristic aesthetic experiences. He identifies two main problems – the motivation problem and the appreciation problem – and shows that neither of them can justify the disapproval.

The motivation problem questions tourists' aesthetic experiences appealing to the fact that they may be motivated by the wrong kind of reasons. To address this worry, Xhignesse appeals to the notion of practical identity. Taking seriously tourists' practical identity can show that their attitudes and forms of appreciation are perfectly in tune with their practical identities' constitutive values and aspirations. Although these may motivate tourists to engage with objects of aesthetic appreciation in a way that is somewhat different from the standard experience of the expertise, there seems to be nothing particularly blameful about their attitudes to objects that are expected to be of high aesthetic value. Moreover, their genuine interest in having aesthetic experiences by engaging with such works is shown in their effort to expend a great amount of resources to get to places where they can directly experience the objects believed to be aesthetically rewarding. This behaviour can only be explained, according to Xhignesse, by an underlying commitment to what is commonly referred to as the 'acquaintance principle' and, consequently, by a genuine interest in having an adequate aesthetic experience.

The appreciation problem emerges when we acknowledge that tourists tend to look for lower-grade aesthetic experiences in comparison to experts or connoisseurs. According to Xhignesse, this should not be too troubling if we realize that this is just the natural consequence of the kind of motivations and practical identities of tourists. Xhignesse only excludes poseurs or bad tourists from his analysis. The latter are solely motivated by reasons concerning social status and recognition, sacrificing

any genuine aesthetic interest to the satisfaction of their aspiration to an apparent social status. But not all tourists are bad tourists or poseurs. When they simply aim at appreciating whatever may be believed to possess aesthetic value, their tendency to enjoy objects of less value can be perfectly accommodated as an expression of their genuine aesthetic interest and effort at appreciating. Moreover, we should not put much burden on the kinds of objects selected by tourists because tourists, just like experts, are subject to the effects of aesthetic luck and to such contingent aspects as one's education or upbringing that can influence one's capacities to engage and appreciate certain aesthetic objects. This is why we should underplay the opposition between experts' and tourists' aesthetic behaviour. Both seem to behave rationally, given their respective practical identities, in pursuing certain aesthetic engagements and in fostering certain aesthetic experiences.

The volume closes with Paisley Livingston's review of Matt Strohl's book *Why It's OK to Love Bad Movies* (Routledge, 2022). As Livingston acknowledges, the novelty of Strohl's approach is that it aims at accommodating certain aesthetic preferences for movies that are simultaneously acknowledged to be flawed without making these preferences merely subjective likes or aesthetically unwarranted. What is more, his argument is not only that we can aesthetically enjoy some bad movies despite their acknowledged flaws but that our aesthetic enjoyment can be partly based upon the recognition of those flaws. Livingston's critical line targets precisely the sort of defence that Strohl offers for this thought in his book. Livingston has two main charges against Strohl's account. The first concerns the structure of his argument. According to Livingston, it is unclear whether what vindicates a positive evaluation of certain flawed movies is precisely their flaws or other aspects that the movie may possess, and that make it attractive or interesting. The second concerns the kind of positive description that Strohl provides when he gets into some examples to illustrate his claim. Livingston only focuses on one of these descriptions – that of Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* – but he suggests that his comments on Strohl's approach could be extended to the rest of the examples analysed. According to Livingston, Strohl fails to show that the features cited in favour of his claim truly obtain and that the positive valence attached to some of Wood's infamous mistakes is the result of a redescription and over-interpretation of Wood's cinematic work, rather than a serious acknowledgement of these flaws as what they are. Livingston concludes his review by noticing that this move is doubly pernicious to Strohl's view. First, it seems to undermine his commitment to 'discriminating artistic achievement' as key to artistic appreciation. And, finally, it renders his approach a mere attempt to justify one's whimsical love for certain objects by partly projecting onto its less appreciable aspects an undeserved significance. As Livingston notices, this is what Stendhal described as 'crystallisation'.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

This research has been possible thanks to the funding received by the research project "Normative Aspects of Aesthetic Appreciation" (PID2019-106351GB-I00) from the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## REFERENCES

- Cohen, Ted. 'On Consistency in One's Personal Aesthetics.' In *Aesthetics and Ethics*, edited by Jerrold Levinson, 106–25. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511663888.004>
- Dorsch, Fabian. 'Non-inferentialism about Justification: The Case of Aesthetic Judgements.' *Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (2013): 660–82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9213.12063>
- Farennikova, Anna. 'Seeing Absence.' *Philosophical Studies* 166 (2013): 429–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-012-0045-y>

Alcaraz León **114**  
*Estetika*  
DOI: 10.33134/eeja.440

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:  
Alcaraz León, María José.  
'Introduction.' *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LX/XVI, no. 2 (2023): pp. 107–114. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.440>

Published: 14 September 2023

COPYRIGHT:  
© 2023 The Author(s).  
This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

*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.