# The Double Helix of Aesthetics and Self-Enacting Intentionality

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***Abstract.*** *In modern history, aesthetics has taken on truth and experience as the two principal thematics of our engagement with the world. The aesthetics of truth is most closely associated with the linguistic turn, which revealed the conflict arising from the immediate presence of material form, the fluidity of interpretation, and the uncertainty of meaning. The experiential approach to aesthetics emphasizes how everyday life experiences are continuous with our unique encounters with art. But there is no experience without truth value and no truth disclosure without experiential content. These two inextricably intertwined strands constitute the double helix of aesthetics.*

*Building on this insight, we propose a general theory of aesthetics centered on what we call "self-enacting intentionality and singularity" in relational perception. When we perceive the Other aesthetically, we momentarily step outside our habitual self, creating an exterior vantage point from which to perceive ourselves anew. In this state, we are both preserved and transcended as accounted for in Hegel's concept of "*Aufhebung*." The theory suggests that genuine aesthetic experience requires entering into a transformative relational perception, creating a space where self and Other become mutually constitutive. This*

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*relational approach invites care and action in everyday life, offering a practical framework for addressing contemporary environmental and social challenges through compassionate engagement with our world.*

## Introduction

One of the most profound shifts in modern thought has been the liberation of meaning from rigid hierarchical structures. In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida's famous claim that "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte"—"there is nothing outside the text"—marks the end of an era that stretches back to classical Greece and the god Hermes.[1] This shift dismantles the traditional logocentric worldview with its fixed boundaries and oppositions—according to preestablished orders of perception as emphasized in Jacques Rancière's political-aesthetic notion of "the distribution of the sensible"—between the essential and the peripheral, inside and outside, ergon and parergon, native and foreign, striated and smooth.[2] These once-stable dichotomies seem to have broken down irreversibly. The traditional dynamic of absence and presence, where absence served to validate and elevate presence, has given way to a rhizomatic whole. In this new understanding, we find only interconnections, freed from predetermined forms and prescribed outcomes. In the process, this discursive tension between order and relation has pushed aesthetics beyond its traditional bounds, where it gathered force, particularly under the influence of Immanuel Kant, as artistic encounters with beauty and pleasure.

The history of aesthetics is marked by several moments of radical change. One such turning point was Harold Rosenberg's *De-definition of Art*, in which he identified disillusionment with the art object as a self-contained aesthetic entity as central to the upheaval sweeping through contemporary art.[3] "The post-art artist carries the de-definition of art," observes Rosenberg, "to the point where nothing is left of art but the fiction of the artist."[4] This reached its logical conclusion in Robert Morris's *Statement of Aesthetic Withdrawal* where he formally declared his construction *Litanies* to be stripped of all aesthetic quality and content.[5] Morris's concept of anti-form further challenged traditional aesthetics through action art, highlighting his radical questioning of visual qualities in painting—qualities he dismissed as "ridiculous."[6] Instead, he emphasized materiality and tools. As cohesion and predetermined aesthetic characteristics lose ground, they are replaced by the fundamental operations of materiality and the act of creation itself. This new aesthetic language emerges from action and material engagement, embracing transience and instability. Relational art and aesthetics in Nicolas Bourriaud[7] and immersionism in Williamsburg in the 1990s, where living context was posited as infused with dynamic webs of interconnections, captured the spirited evolution of this emerging consciousness.[8]

This subversive repositioning of practice and meaning is by no means exclusive to art. The de-materialization and de-aestheticization of art evolved alongside broader attempts to understand aesthetics in everyday life. By the twentieth century, scholars increasingly recognized that aesthetic principles permeate all aspects of daily experience, not just formal art. This rethinking of aesthetics has developed along two main paths: the "aestheticism of truth" and the "experientiality of the aesthetic." While the first approach has deeper historical roots, contemporary scholarship has focused more intensely on the second.

This article proceeds first with an analysis of the literature in the light of the "duality of aesthetics," reviewing the key developments associated with the aestheticism of truth and the experientiality of the aesthetic. This is intended to set out the problem of aesthetics in more definite terms and to articulate the requirements and principles of a general theory of aesthetics. After expounding the proposed general theory and its key moments and principles, we discuss our "theory into action" fieldwork conducted in Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia through the lens of the Playful Eye as practice to elicit aesthetic responses and experiences. In the concluding part, the inherent connections between aesthetics, care, and action will be elaborated.

## Literature Review: The Duality of Aesthetics

The "aestheticism of truth" has ancient roots in Plato's *aletheia* and Aristotle's concepts of hylomorphism and mimesis. However, it finds its most vigorous expression in modern approaches to semiotics, hermeneutics, and literary theory, particularly in their focus on the fundamental and originary acts of reading and understanding as foundational. This approach emerges essentially from critical readings of "text" in its broadest sense. We can trace this line of thought through many key thinkers: from Husserl and Shklovsky, through Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Adorno, Derrida, Gadamer, and Blanchot, to Barad's new materialism. Despite their differences, these thinkers share a core idea: Thought reveals itself through creative encounters with text-reality, transforming both reader and text in the process. The event of meaning finds its definitive articulation in Hans-Georg Gadamer to the effect that the original meaning can never be reproduced, rather the text can only be made intelligible for the reader and the audience.[9]

In this view, every object or aspect of reality becomes a material text that invites hermeneutic reading. Each reading, shaped by historical conditions, gives rise to a unique framing of meaning. At its heart, the aestheticism of truth challenges Kant's divisions between theoretical, practical, and aesthetic realms. It argues that the aesthetic open-endedness of reading (and specifically of engagement with art in Gadamer's view) and its inherent truth disclosure value (in Martin Heidegger's view) exceed the notion that

sets the boundaries of knowledge exclusively based on theoretical and practical reason.[10] In thus considering the originary autonomy of the matter and presence, the aestheticism of truth also transcends the Cartesian subject-object divisions.

To understand how truth emerges in aesthetics, we must examine how we engage with objects. Friedrich Nietzsche's influential argument that truth is merely "an army of metaphors," along with his declaration of the death of transcendental meaning, profoundly shaped twentieth-century thought. Theodor Adorno builds on this in his *Aesthetic Theory* where he contrasts two ways of engaging with the world: mimesis and constructivism. Unlike traditional mimesis (imitation), Adorno's mimesis involves transforming and recreating the world through direct engagement. In constructivism, we approach objects through preexisting systems and categories, leading to what Adorno saw as reification and the totalizing of society.[11] While constructivism imposes our preconceptions onto objects, mimesis allows thought to find itself reflected in the world.[12]

Edmund Husserl's call to go "back to the things themselves" through the epoché—where we bracket our natural judgments—represents a way to reconcile subject and object without imposing constructed systems.[13] This emphasis on direct engagement with objects also appears in Viktor Shklovsky's aesthetic theory where he stresses the importance of fresh, prolonged perception.[14] Heidegger's statement that "language speaks" suggests language has its own autonomy, but more importantly it points to how meaning emerges through acting on the matter.[15] This active, constitutive view of language is echoed in Maurice Blanchot's concept of "parole essentielle" (essential speech)—contrasted with "parole brute" (brute speech)—where literary language doesn't simply represent reality but creates and evokes fictional worlds.[16]

Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasizes this active engagement in *The Primacy of Perception,* stating that "we experience a perception and its horizon 'in action' [*pratiquement*] rather than by 'posing' them or explicitly 'knowing' them."[17] This focuses on perception as an active process and highlights how meaning emerges through direct encounter rather than abstract knowledge. Karen Barad develops this idea further in her performative new materialism, using quantum physics' double-slit experiments to show how measuring devices actively shape what we observe.[18] She introduces the concept of "agential intra-action" to describe this process where observation and measurement don't simply record but help constitute reality.[19,20]

Works like Derrida's *Glas*,[21] which juxtaposes Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy with Jean Genet's autobiographical writings, Robert Smithson's earthwork *Spiral Jetty*,[22] and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*,[23] demonstrate how texts resist fixed interpretations and constantly generate new meanings. These works are deliberately fluid and complex, playfully

defying any attempt to reduce them to a single, definitive reading. Each new context and each new reading brings forth different meanings, as the text continues to exceed its past interpretations.

In this aesthetic approach to truth, the act of reading becomes what Barad describes as an "agential intra-active space"—a relationship where reader and text are fundamentally entangled, each shaping the other's meaning. As Duncan White observes about Smithson's work, "To read [it] is to be involved in an act of production."[24] The text presents itself openly as an artificial construct rejecting any pretence of being natural or organic.[25] Instead, it invites readers into a space of ongoing uncertainty and possibility, always on the verge of creating new meaning. This relationship from within the reading experience disrupts established systems of power and meaning. It challenges constructivism and determinism—those forces that try to "keep things in order" by making the artificial seem natural. Instead, it keeps meaning perpetually open and in motion.

In parallel to these developments, a major transformation in aesthetic theory occurred when John Dewey moved away from German idealism's focus on beauty, pleasure, and disinterested contemplation toward a pragmatic understanding of aesthetics as experience.[26] Dewey saw fundamental connections across all types of experience, leading him to criticize what he called the "museum conception of art"—the way modern capitalism isolates art from everyday life and intellectual engagement.[27]

This critique reveals a key aspect of Dewey's pragmatism: his effort to place direct experience at the center of aesthetics and to show how aesthetic experience is continuous with daily life. He challenges what he sees as a philosophical fallacy—the tendency to approach inquiry through preconceptions and predetermined frameworks rather than through actual experience. He argues that this same fallacy led to the museum conception of art that separates art from life. Although Dewey shares some starting points with thinkers focused on the aesthetics of truth, his path leads in a different direction, emphasizing experience itself, not least the experience of everyday life, as the foundation of aesthetics. Building on Dewey's focus on experiential aesthetics, contemporary theorists like Katya Mandoki,[28] Richard Shusterman,[29] Yuriko Saito,[30,31] Sianne Ngai,[32] Thomas Leddy,[33,34,35] and Wolfgang Welsch[36,37] have expanded our understanding of aesthetics beyond traditional notions of beauty and institutional art. Their work explores how aesthetic experiences permeate everyday life—from a walk down the high street to a cup of coffee in a bar.

The central idea uniting these diverse approaches is that aesthetic sensibility has no boundaries and can emerge in any interaction with the world. What matters is the subject's openness and engagement. An aesthetic experience can arise from something as simple as noticing a tree along the road or a pile of clothes on the floor—provided there is a moment of meaningful

connection between subject and object. In these everyday aesthetic experiences, beauty takes on broader meanings beyond the classical ideal. It might manifest as the pretty, the cute, the zany, or the interesting, creating moments of pleasure or offering glimpses into how we are connected to the wider world around us.[38] In the Deweyan universe, the key is not the object itself but rather our willingness to engage with it aesthetically, whether for pleasure, spiritual edification, or a sense communication, always within the broader context of everyday life.

## Towards a General Theory of Aesthetics

The way meaning diverges and multiplies during reading—what Derrida calls "dissemination"—represents the ultimate expression of truth-focused aesthetics.[39] Meaning emerges through the fluid act of reading itself, shaped by shifting interpretive horizons and the contingent contexts—both internal and external—that guide our understanding. But this process is not merely abstract. The act of reading and engagement contains moments of revelation or presence—what Heidegger calls "Ereignis" or parousia—that unfold within a unique temporal and experiential space.[40] This reflects the fundamental unity of truth and experience: Experience always carries truth value, and truth always possesses experiential content. Each domain enriches the other, deepening both our cognitive understanding and our sensory engagement.

Meaning cannot arise without some manifestation or appearance of the text/object/Other, and nothing can appear without the presence of a specific subject (not the abstract or ideal self, but a particular individual) in what Barad calls "intra-action"[41] and Gadamer terms the "fusion of horizons."[42] The object presents itself as the face of the Other, and the process of engagement draws out the experiential core of meaning-making, which in turn shapes the qualities of that experience. Any aesthetic theory that hopes to account for everyday life must address this dual nature—how meaning and experience mutually constitute each other in every aesthetic encounter.

Contemporary aesthetic theory has developed along the lines of these two main strands. One strand examines how aesthetic engagement reveals truth, while the other explores how aesthetics emerges from everyday experience. Though both approaches have greatly expanded our understanding of aesthetics, we still need a unified theory that can connect them. Such a double helix theory would need to (1) address fundamental questions about the nature of aesthetics by integrating insights about truth and experience; (2) explain how aesthetics operates across the full spectrum of human life, from high art to everyday objects, from the sublime to the repulsive; and (3) clarify how aesthetic awareness can inform our response to wicked

contemporary problems and shape both our care for the world and our actions within it.

The need to integrate these theoretical approaches to aesthetics is particularly urgent in our current moment. We face unprecedented environmental, social, and economic challenges that require both rigorous analysis and deep experiential engagement with the world around us.

As Saito emphasizes, "Aesthetic experience is developed through attention to the specifics of the object in its entirety without imposing preconceived ideas or judgments, while activating imagination and actively engaging with the object of appreciation."[43] The mutually constitutive relation that obtains between truth and experience and the agentive relationality that lies at the heart of the experience of knowing the Other are subversive to systems of orders, preconceptions, and constructivism.

We now turn to a more concrete examination of how these abstract principles manifest in actual aesthetic encounters. The tension between order and relationality that emerges from this theoretical framework finds practical expression in specific models of aesthetic engagement, models that move beyond traditional dichotomies of beauty and ugliness, subject and object. By examining how individuals encounter and relate to both artworks and everyday objects, we can better understand how theoretical insights about truth and experience translate into concrete practices of attention and care. This practical turn reveals how aesthetic experience might serve as a bridge between phenomenological understanding and ethical action.

## Aesthetic Experience as Self-Enacting Intentionality and Singularity

What makes an experience aesthetic is not simply its object (such as an artwork) or an idealized, disconnected observer but rather how we actively engage with and relate to what we are experiencing. Take watching a sunset: We can either glance at it briefly or fully immerse ourselves in the moment. While the sunset and viewer are the same in both cases, the quality of engagement differs dramatically. This difference emerges from two key concepts: how we consciously direct our attention in "self-enacting intentionality," and how we relate to what we are experiencing in the "singularity" of relational perception.

To understand aesthetic experience, we need to examine how basic elements of cognition transform in aesthetic contexts. Attention becomes "aesthetic intentionality"—a deliberate, focused engagement. Perception becomes "relational perception"—we become aware not just of what we are experiencing but of our relationship to it. Meaning becomes "self-enactment"—we bring into being an alternative version of ourselves through memory or immediate experience of presencing. In an aesthetic experience,

we encounter something—"the Other"—directly and uniquely in its present, concrete form. Rather than seeing it through abstract concepts or symbols, we engage with its immediate, sensory reality. This direct encounter, whatever its length, always focuses on the specific, tangible qualities of what we are experiencing.

This creates a tension: While the physical thing is immediately present, its meaning remains fluid and uncertain, as Derrida notes.[44] In our everyday lives, we rely on established frameworks and categories to make sense of things. But in aesthetic experiences, we are temporarily released from these familiar structures. Instead, we form a more open, direct relationship with what we are experiencing. It is as if we go "off the map," stepping away from our usual organized ways of understanding the world and allowing ourselves to experience each moment freshly, without predetermined paths rooted in our sociality.

The aesthetic experience occurs at a specific intersection of time and place. To capture this unified spatiotemporal context, we use the term *topotemporality* (spacetime as understood and created in human context) where body and mind work together to focus and direct attention. Through this unified integrated bodymind awareness, we engage with the sensory qualities of what we are experiencing more deeply than merely observing surface-level features.

Consider an encounter with a painting: We begin by using our bodymind awareness to explore colors and compositional details. We do this through the lens of what Gadamer calls "foreknowledge"—everything we already know and believe about art.[45] As our engagement deepens, we enter an "intra-active horizon of awareness"—a way of connecting that allows us to perceive not just the painting but our relationship to it. At its deepest level, we reach "self-enacting intentionality." Here, something extraordinary happens: We temporarily step outside our usual solipsistic way of being where we see ourselves as separate from what we are experiencing and enter a unified state. At this new vantage point, we are afforded a glimpse into ourselves beyond our habitual self in everyday life.

In an aesthetic experience, we engage with what Gilles Deleuze calls "virtuality"—a stream of consciousness that runs parallel to physical reality.[46] This involves experiencing a version of ourselves different from our habitual self by connecting with memories and/or by being fully present with what we are experiencing. Take the example of spending time with a painting: Through deep aesthetic engagement, we might connect with a memory where we see a past version of ourselves intertwined with the painting's forms. Alternatively, we might enter into the painting's "world," temporarily stepping outside ourselves to experience a new perspective on who we are. This self-enactment develops alongside relational perception—each reinforcing the other—leading to an awareness of how self and Other

are intertwined. In this state, we are both preserved and transcended, invoking the concept of "Aufhebung."

Modern art provides an interesting case study. When confronted with something unexpected in an art exhibition—as audiences once were by Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* or Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*—our usual categories of understanding fall away, as noted by Arthur Danto in relation to the latter work[47] and elaborated on by Jadranka Skorin-Kapov as "exceeding expectations."[48] After the initial shock and questioning, we begin to engage with the object's physical reality in its specific time and place. We do this through self-enactment, allowing ourselves to be drawn into a playful interaction with the artwork, discovering new ways of seeing beyond our usual perspectives.

In self-enactment, work and self enter into a mutual, intra-active space where both can emerge anew through their relationship. In his nature-mysticism articulated in the seminal *Nature Humanised: Nature Respected*, Ronald Hepburn reflects on our experience of nature through the lens of nature ideas and images as the products of culture, tradition, art, and genetics and underscores the unitive moment by way of an example of entering a forest where we bring the "forest idea into active relation with the actual forest in external nature." "If I am receptive and imaginatively alert," Hepburn continues, "the outcome is something new."[49] Along the same lines, David Cooper notes that "integral to the gardener's enjoyment of her garden may be the sense that what she sees before her is the product neither of human effort nor of natural processes alone, but of their 'fusion.'" This captures the notion of self-enactment as "joint-fashioning" between subject and object.[50]

With art, this self-enactment is triggered by the artwork's uncanny unfamiliarity due to its representational ontology (classical art), or abstraction (modernist art), or simply situated particularity (conceptual art—seemingly ordinary objects arrayed in a gallery room like Warhol's *Brillo Box*) and how it shifts attention within its specific topotemporality. In contrast, with everyday objects and phenomena, the self must engage more actively to achieve this interaction. An artwork's truth emerges through experience—specifically through a series of moments where the bodymind engages intentionally with it in its topotemporal context. This experience is simultaneously shaped by self-enacting intentionality—how the self directs itself toward uncovering the artwork's truth. This is highlighted in Leddy's insight that "the experience of the painting as it emerges in the creative process becomes part of the experience of the tree, and the experience of the tree part of the experience of the painting, the two mixed up in ways that would be hard to disentwine."[51] In essence, aesthetic experience occurs when self-enacting intentionality and singularity meet in a relational perception of the Other. This would explain why religious and spiritual rituals, as art's origins, have always been inherently enactive and performative in their symbolism.

Self-enactment operates through three layers of valency (contingency of thought) in virtuality: "valent abstraction" shaped by everyday understanding and mood, "parallel abstraction" influenced by ingrained beliefs, and "singular abstraction" based on evidence and memory. Aesthetic experience can influence all these layers and contributes to "self-other sublation"—where self and Other achieve transcendent unity in aesthetic experience. Singular abstraction's virtuality is where aesthetic experience primarily occurs, and it can interact with and guide both parallel and valent abstraction, altering our everyday experiences and more importantly the relations we form therein.

We can understand aesthetic experience by examining its place within the broader spectrum of human experience. At its most fundamental level lies nonintentional sensation—raw, objectless internal sensations like pain. Above this exists intentional perception, where we actively recognize and engage with objects based on prior knowledge. Aesthetic experience transcends both in the moment of what Heidegger terms "Gelassenheit" (letting-be) and inner truth revelation, fostering a unique connection and agentive relationality that enables an intra-active horizon of awareness, aesthetic insight, and self-Other sublation.[52]

This structure illuminates why aesthetic experience requires more than an empirical attitude of theoretical observation and practical engagement. It demands an openness to "presencing"—allowing ourselves to fully encounter the Other in its complete reality. The phenomenological concept of "mood conditions" highlights how our mental state and environment profoundly shape these experiences. We see this dynamic in everyday encounters with art and nature. For instance, there exists a fundamental difference between having music play in the background versus entering into genuine relational perception with it, allowing self-enacting intentionality to emerge. Similarly, our experience of nature transforms when we move beyond casual observation as well as nature-image and nature-idea or nature-myth, adopting Hepburn's terms into true aesthetic engagement characterized by deep intra-action and the potential for self-Other sublation.

Perhaps most significantly, aesthetic experience represents a distinct epistemological mode—a way of knowing that transcends both empirical observation and abstract conceptualization. Through the interplay of valent, parallel, and singular abstraction, we achieve an understanding that, however briefly, unifies subject and object, self and Other, in aesthetic oneness. The crucial insight is that empirical perception alone cannot equate to aesthetic experience, just as surface objectivity fails to capture aesthetic depth. Genuine aesthetic experience requires entering into agentive relationality that transforms both our worldview and self-awareness, creating a singular moment of truth-revelation and aesthetic insight through self-enacting intentionality and experience.

## Theory to Practice: The Playful Eye Model

We now illustrate how our theoretical framework operates in concrete engagement practices where any phenomenon can be an object of aesthetic experience, whether or not it has been expressly designed as an object of aesthetic engagement. Every encounter with the phenomenal world contains the potential for relational perception or general relationality—which we expand on below in relation to care and action—where the presence of the Other becomes the site of dedicated attention and self-presencing (*Anwesen*) for self-Other sublation, be it a blade of grass, a mental image, a view through a window, an artwork, or for that matter, a discarded cigarette butt.[53]

The Playful Eye model described here offers an approach to facilitating the kind of transformative aesthetic experience we have expounded above.[54] We refer to these methods as "practices" rather than "exercises" or "activities" because the method encourages repeated engagement over time to encourage familiarity with and the deepening of the experience. Practice instructions are also presented for solo use and partner use, where the aesthetic experience can be shared and reflected on.

Developed initially in museum and gallery contexts as a set of embodied contemplative practices for visitors to engage with art and artifacts, challenging habitual modes of perception, creating what we have termed an "intra-active horizon of awareness," the method was trialled in collaboration with visitor engagement staff at various institutions, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art and the Getty Center, as either in situ or online experiences.[55] The model's five-theme (body, mind, vision, imagination, action) approach corresponds to our theoretical layers of abstraction—valent, parallel, and singular—while providing a practical mechanism for achieving aesthetic insight and self-Other sublation.

"Body" practices, grounded in Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "lived body," direct attention towards somatic awareness as a mode of aesthetic perception. Practices of conscious breathing, micro-movements, and proprioceptive attunement challenge the traditional separation between observer and observed. By highlighting what Shusterman calls "body consciousness," participants can begin to experience the dynamic relationality we have theoretically described—a state where the body becomes an instrument of aesthetic engagement rather than a passive receptor.[56] Corresponding to our concept of "singular abstraction"—the ability to encounter each phenomenon in its unique particularity, suspending preconceived interpretative frameworks—"mind" practices draw on Husserl's phenomenological attitude and are designed to cultivate the capacity for sustained, nonjudgmental attention both to the world around us and to our own inner states. Participants are invited to observe habitual categorizing tendencies, judgments, positive and negative, along with any other thoughts or images that

present themselves to awareness, all the while maintaining a state of open presence.

"Vision" practices are designed to challenge and subvert ocular habits. Exercises in peripheral vision, sustained focus, and relational observation transform vision from a passive, receptive process that serves practical tasks to an active mode of engagement. The act of seeing becomes itself a form of self-enacting intentionality, revealing how perception is fundamentally creative and agentive rather than merely reproductive or passive.

"Imagination" practices promote what we have termed "parallel abstraction" through playful practices of perspective-shifting and creative response. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's concept of "material imagination," participants are invited to enter into the inner life of observed phenomena to soften the boundary between self and Other—and the possible and impossible.[57] These practices manifest our theoretical insight that aesthetic experience involves a temporary transcendence of individual consciousness while maintaining individual identity.

Finally, "action" practices invite participants to act on and with the world around them and each other, through spontaneous creative acts that might involve dancing, singing, drawing, and mime, demonstrating how aesthetic experience need not be a passive contemplative state but an active, transformative encounter with the world.

The five themes are not discrete or mutually exclusive, each potentially contains elements of others. For example, body practices inevitably involve mental awareness and to some extent imaginative perception; mental practices are always embodied and potentially generative of action; vision practices engage both somatic and cognitive dimensions. The emphasis may shift—a body practice might foreground physical awareness while still involving subtle mental and imaginative elements—but the underlying interconnectedness remains. This approach reflects the model's core theoretical premise: Aesthetic experience is a dynamic, relational process where somatic awareness, perceptual engagement, and imaginative cognition are not discrete dimensions but rather are interconnected aspects of a unified experiential whole.

In 2020, COVID-19 restrictions on travel and access to gallery spaces obliged us to relocate a planned study of Playful Eye practices in the Gapar Aitiev National Gallery of Art in Bishkek and redefine its scope. In collaboration with staff at the Osh Regional Gallery of Art in southwestern Kyrgyzstan, we ran a workshop in a wooded parkland adjacent to the gallery. Instead of artworks, the twenty participants engaged with natural elements such as trees and rocks.[58] Serendipitously, this led to a redirection in our approach to the investigation of situated aesthetic experience "beyond the art museum." In May 2021, we replicated this work in Dobolu, a village outside the provincial capital of Naryn, in collaboration with the director of the

village's small museum of local history, followed by a larger scale investigation of residents' aesthetic experience of their domestic environments and the landscapes of the surrounding Tian Shan mountain range.

Over several days in the autumn of 2023, we recorded audio and video interviews with residents, produced an extensive collection of photographs and videos of village life, conducted our own Playful Eye practices, and incorporated an autoethnographic component, containing reflections on our aesthetic experiences in the village and of the documentary process itself. This material was subsequently presented in the form of a multimedia installation at the Naryn Regional Gallery.[59] Our analysis of the interview data and our reflections on our experience of life in Dobolu led us to contrast the directed, formalized, and situated model of aesthetic experience based on Playful Eye instructions with villagers' less self-conscious experience of everyday life.

In both modes, an aesthetic dimension is present, though its dominance in experience varies considerably in relation to other pragmatic concerns. In the directed activities of the Playful Eye, the subject consciously selects one from amongst the wide range of potential objects of interest, either because it invites or commands attention or conversely because it does not. Its existence may be "off the beaten track" of attention or elicit dislike or disgust, conditions that indeed may make something appear as a less privileged aesthetic object. In short, one's attitude begins with openness to phenomena and attempts to resist judgment, including attributions of beauty or ugliness. As one of the Osh participants noted, "At first I thought, 'It's just a tree, what's there to see?' But after spending time with it, I started noticing things I would have never seen before. Not just about the tree, but about how I was relating to it."

## Care and Action

The purpose of each Playful Eye practice is to promote agentive relationality through self-enactment—the connection between subject and object with the aim of dissolving the boundary between them. Every practice involves a call and response—a certain kind of to-and-fro, a movement Gadamer identified as a fundamental characteristic of play—in the development of a relationship with the object.[60] It emerges from the mass of Otherness to be an interlocutor—a subject that we allow to be in its being as we would wish to be allowed to be in our own (*Gelassenheit*). Above all, our relationship to the object is grounded in a recognition of the mystery of being—a mutual inflection of subject and object in Heidegger or nature mysticism in Hepburn (as a nisus to consider and appreciate the world as a unity or an undifferentiated whole).[61] The object is not a part of us and yet our attention brings it into being in a way that could not exist without us, and it will never exist

again in quite the same way. Just as we discover the object in its being, we discover something of ourselves through this relationship. Through Playful Eye self-enacting practices and relational perception, we attempt to set aside judgment for connection and manifestations of the ineffable that present themselves for the duration of the encounter. As we relate to the Other—our partner in the aesthetic practice—relational questions inevitably emerge. How is it connected to me and to everything else in the world? After all, "when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."[62]

To identify an object is to frame it as the center of attention and to set aside time to engage with it without any objective other than to relate to it. It is this act of framing that distinguishes self-actualizing intentionality from casual perception, unconscious awareness, or a subsidiary dimension of an activity directed to some other end. The act of setting aside time and space to slow down and relate to the Other without personal interest is of course at variance with velocitized modernity, where issues of productivity, purpose, and advancement are dominant. As we slow down in the topotemporality of self-enactment, we become more acutely aware of the blurred boundary between self and Other. It is also in an intra-active sensing of the other that we come upon the whole of which we are a part. The process sets the relational conditions for empathy and sympathy, both of which originate and take root from aesthetic experience.[63]

At the heart of this approach is compassionate engagement and agentive relationality—the active cultivation of connections between subject and object. While this echoes the theories of Theodor Lipps[64] and Robert Vischer,[65] we move beyond empathy/*Einfühlung* to include actively reaching out with compassion, acknowledging the otherness of the Other—towards a more-than-self and more-than-human vision of the world—and its intrinsic worth, whether it is typically valued or not. Formal concepts of beauty or ugliness are as irrelevant as any other judgment under this model. Inevitably, we do make judgments, but our primary task in relating to the Other is to note judgments—and set them aside. Everything is worthy of compassionate attention and care—from the abject and abandoned to even the vilest and most contemptible figures whose actions outrage decency and morality. In cultivating this faculty, our own center of consciousness shifts away from the restless stream of thoughts and feelings towards the presence of the Other. A decision to act will move us from aesthetic experience into the world of action, from aesthetics to ethics, which we will discuss below in more detail.

Crucially, in terms of care and action, the question of agentive relationality requires an understanding of what responsibility we bear toward the object. For Emmanuel Levinas, the face of the Other presents an unconditional obligation to respond.[66] This response must acknowledge both the

Other's vulnerability and its capacity to transcend mere existence. The face makes two fundamental demands: "Do not kill me" and "Help me live." These demands persist regardless of whether the Other reciprocates—its humanity is justification enough. But, caring extends to include the necessity of action. Saito holds that "my care for another person needs to be actualised in some form of action. No matter how much I insist that I care about my mother, if I never lift a finger to do anything for her even if I am able, my so-called care remains empty, invoking the common criticism, 'talk is cheap.'"[67]

While this ethical consideration has been extended to some animal species, we remain a long way from acknowledging such obligations to the broader more-than-human world of the plants, landscapes, and ecosystems that sustain us. The notion that we might extend this consideration to the world of manufactured objects is likely to be thought of as absurd. Herein lies the challenge. Imagine being in a nondescript parking lot on the outskirts of town. Everything in this space—the discarded plastic bottle and carton, the cigarette butt, the patch of moss, the broken microwave by the curb, the mountain, the field, the distant horse and rider—exists within vast webs of connection that brought them (and us) to this space and will continue to shape our journeys. We are not unrelated, and our aesthetic experience reminds us of this fundamental connection. Ecological thinking, observed Paul Shepard, is a kind of thinking across boundaries.[68] Our first obligation is to recognize these connections, and the theory of relational perception provides a framework for doing this. What service does this Other extend to me, and what service might it require? How might we care for the Other? Through the aesthetic encounter and insight, we make a small covenant: offering at least our attention, a bearing witness, a carrying forward of memory. We may not act, but we cannot be entirely detached. Empathy begins with noticing, though noticing doesn't guarantee feeling, nor feeling care. It is not enough for action, but it's a prerequisite.

To be sure, aesthetic experience alone does not amount to care and responsible action towards the Other, but it stands in a close and vital relation to it. The key to grasping the complex dynamics and transitions across the three phases of engagement lies in the nature of relationality as an underlying concept. We never start from absolute ignorance and solitary life but rather from immanent sociality and an a priori sense of relationality that guides our daily affairs in life. This "general relationality" is grounded in the common theme of life that constitutes our normative consciousness of the Other, the natural urge, for example, to help an older person struggling to get on the bus. This spontaneous response enables germinal moments of aesthetic engagement. Aesthetic experience, as self-enacting intentionality and singularity, represents a movement from general relationality to agentive relationality, the type of relationality to which care and action essentially belong.

My caring effort and the action which I demonstrate in situations regarded as morally wrong or harmful to the Other follow from self-enactment in agentive relationality. Unlike the fleeting instance of general relationality, agentive relationality endures and effects an immanent and sublated moment of self-consciousness of which the Other becomes an indispensable part. Self-enactment in agentive relationality leads to an "aesthetic insight" in which the chasm between self and Other fades away and "intentionality of care" rises. In intentionality of care, the self expands its directedness beyond the Other's idea to the "Other's life." The former's often-inadequacy is surpassed by the self's openness to the latter's concrete emergence in a real moment of an encounter.

In the subsequent phase where action may ensue from intentionality of care, aesthetic pragma takes charge. Aesthetic pragma constitutes a concrete situation of topotemporality charged with aesthetic insight. It entails the lucid possibility of empathic action in the way the bodymind comprehends and is able to realize it. To reach the phase of aesthetic pragma, one must attain and pass through aesthetic insight as a necessary step. The more we cultivate agentive relationality (through Playful Eye practices, for example), the more we are disposed to care and take action for the betterment of the more-than-self and more-than-human world. In sum, the triad of aesthetics, care, and action correspond to these interlinked phases: aesthetic moment as it arises in general relationality, aesthetic insight as formed in agentive relationality, and aesthetic pragma as performed in actual relationality.

## Conclusion

The theoretical framework outlined in this article provided the foundation for investigating how aesthetic experience operates in specific contexts, particularly focusing on the interplay between relationality and directed attention. In contrast to much of the philosophical literature that tends to abstract models of aesthetic experience from specific contexts, our research aims to explore how that experience is inherently situated, embodied, and enmeshed with the contingencies of time, place, and circumstance (topotemporality). This investigation set out to test and expand upon our understanding of how self-enacting intentionality and the various layers of virtuality manifest in actual aesthetic encounters and the manifestations of the double helix of truth and experience therein.

When confronted with what structures of power conceive as chaos, individuals and entire societies can seek refuge in rigid control systems—a dynamic that depth psychology, from Freud to Jung, might interpret as a defense mechanism against anxiety and uncertainty. This tension between order and disorder extends into aesthetics. Plato privileged harmony and proportion as reflections of stable, eternal Forms; Kant sought subjective

universality—universal principles of beauty—which supposes an underlying order, but this is only one interpretive key to what might constitute this nebulous thing we call aesthetic experience. The term *beauty* has been forced to carry more weight than it can bear, which is one of the many reasons why it is so out of favor with poststructuralism and has a quasi-taboo status for many scholars today.

The model challenges the Enlightenment conception of aesthetics that emerged from Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten onwards. Where Kantian aesthetics centered on disinterested judgment and Romantic sensibilities emphasized passionate individual expression, this model operates through the sensible as the primary mode of connection to the Other—of relationality. It opens possibilities for dynamic engagement through sensory experience rather than evaluative judgment. It does not (or at least attempts not to) order, rank, or discriminate. The model foregrounds interconnectedness and the inherent worth of the Other, recognizing both natural and manufactured entities as fellow travellers and potential interlocutors worthy of care. Through the sensible, it establishes relationality that transcends the subject-object divide that is characteristic of modernist thought. This approach aligns more closely with premodern worldviews that don't distinguish between aesthetic and nonaesthetic experience. By grounding itself in sensible connection rather than judgment, the model offers insights for addressing contemporary environmental and social challenges through compassionate engagement with our world. In this regard, it aligns with Mare Vihalem's observation that

> aesthetics has been a matter of politics and not only of philosophy from the very beginning [. . .] Its subversive power has for a long time been explored mostly in the context of artworks. However, it is only quite recently that the discourse of everyday aesthetics has been reaffirming the potential of aesthetics to affect the perception of the sensible.[69]

The relational model deftly bridges the gap between "is" and "ought" and invites us to cross it, but it does not oblige us to do so. The act of relating can be enough to connect ("only connect"[70]) to gain insight and to present ourselves with the invitation to action.

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