An Examination of Aesthetics:
In light of four major art movements encompassing contemporary art.

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Abstract
This dissertation examines Aesthetics from a Fine art perspective, using a theoretical framework that works in a chronological manner. Contemporary art includes a variety of approaches to aesthetics while adopting styles and movements that have existed since the 18th century and breaking new ground as time passes. This paper aimed to come to a coherent understanding of the various guidelines that are used to judge contemporary art.

What started off as an examination of aesthetics turned instead into a discourse over the various perceptions of art, categorized into four main themes or styles. These are Realism, Expressionism, Formalism and Postmodern Pluralism. An analysis of the seminal theories of these genres leads to an understanding of how different types of art decide within themselves as to what constitutes being good, or bad; i.e. their aesthetic valuation.

Apart from the knowledge I gained in actually discussing the work, many of the lessons were learnt in trying to connect two seemingly connected yet disparate fields. The dissertation itself and how I approached it, gave me a clearer understanding about the nature of aesthetics and they way it relates to art. The decision to divide art into subdivisions came as a result of realizing that art is essentially too diverse in nature to be grouped into one category. Therefore, I looked towards finding similarities and ended up with the idea that all art could be categorized into four main points of view. These are often contradictory and any argument for one aspect of judgment or criteria alone is a paradox. As soon as you start examining the social constructs and the historical context of a work of art, contemporary ideas start to demonstrate how these ideas are meaningless.

I did end up with an understanding on how aesthetics could be viewed from four distinct points of view that make up the major way they are perceived. These
judgments are interchangeable and one artwork can be judged using other criteria to
decide whether or not they have been successful. In conclusion, the importance of
aesthetics is therefore inherent in the artwork, the art process, and the ideas the work
generates. Also, the existence of both subjectivity and objectivity within art as a way
to judge art and to realize that there they are both sides of the same coin was the
conclusion I arrived at.
Introduction

Since the early 19th century, artists have expanded the definition of what constituted art. To a point where the lines between what is and isn’t art have become increasingly blurred. The introduction of new media, such as digital imaging software, new synthetic materials, and digital cameras have also impacted the umbrella of art. Conceptual art has taken it a step further where the actual physical object is no longer relevant, it’s the idea that takes precedence. In this scenario, I hope to understand the relation of aesthetics to contemporary art.

The main aim of this dissertation was to examine the importance, or relevance of aesthetics in a fine art context to contemporary art. I aimed to have an understanding of aesthetic guidelines (if there were any) that are used to judge art; and to figure out if there are any commonalities or universals that can be used to judge all art. Whilst trying to answer this main question, I found that I had to address many other questions before. This led to the way this dissertation is essentially structured. I examine the various perspectives on art making and viewing with regards to the various seminal theories that led to the point we are at today, i.e. with no perceived rules as such about art. These perspectives are divided into four main points of view. Beginning with realism and focusing mainly on the idea of imitative art as explored by Plato and Aristotle’s ideas on representation, leading to the various ways aesthetics are approached by artists working with emotion through Expressionism. The third and fourth
perspectives, formalistic and postmodern pluralist; are harder to unite to any
one definition or way of defining. The reason for this is also examined.

The conclusions are made using the theories as basis for the main
arguments for each specific kind of art. The conclusions I derived from the
discussions, not only answers the basic question about the importance of
Aesthetics but also indirectly, answered any related questions that arose as a
result of trying to attempt the first one.

These questions are important because they help identify how we
perceive art in today’s society. Whether aesthetics are still important to society
as they were in the past. For anyone involved in art practice, these are important
considerations to ponder about. For me they are especially pertinent, as I will be
a part of the contemporary art scene soon enough and perhaps finding answers
will help me and my art.
Literature review

I begin by referring to how I am defining art as a concept within my dissertation. Morris Weitz outlines in his essay, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics (1956) art as an open concept. “A concept is open if its conditions of application are emendable and corrigible; i.e., if a situation or case can be imagined or secured which would call for some sort of decision on our part to extend the use of the concept to cover this, or to close the concept and invent a new one to deal with the new case and its new property.” Therefore, as no necessary and sufficient conditions exist for being a work of art, art is an open concept. According to him, instead of searching for a definition, we should investigate how the concept of art is actually used and in what circumstances it is correctly employed.

In establishing the parameters of what I constituted as art, I looked to Georges Dickie. In his 1974 publication, titled “Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis”, Georges Dickie postulated a theory about the existence of an artworld that is comprised of and dependant on theory, art institutions and art history. “A work of art in the classificatory sense is (1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld).” George Dickie, Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis (1974)

Moving on to realism and representation, I use Plato’s observations on mimetic art. In Book V of The Republic, Plato talks about art in context to representation. He talks about mimesis, and the value of representation. Plato’s Allegory of the Cave
talks about the Ideal forms, and the Allegory of the Three beds is used to illustrate how a work of art is thrice removed from reality and therefore is an imperfect representation of reality. Ideally, Plato would like to banish the artist from his heaven of ideal forms, as he hold the imitative nature of representation removed from truth and essences. It is an illusion which we take as reality.

Contrary to this point of view and adding to the discourse on imitative art, I follow up with Aristotle’s refutation and correction of previously held notions. Aristotle talked about mimetic arts in his treatise, “Poetics” (384–322 B.C.). According to him, "Imitation is natural to man from childhood” and man learns by imitating. He held that Art, like tragedy (theatre) is imitative, and as we learn from imitation, art becomes an outlet for learning and teaching. Aristotle used the example of a tragic play to hint at a larger, universal meaning for art. He felt that it could be used, not only for creativity, but also as a tool for knowledge, to raise consciousness and bring the masses to a more morally righteous life. One important element of his aesthetics is his theory of the “catharsis", or purging of the emotions "through pity and fear", that is accomplished through art. He held this emotional catharsis to be a good thing.

The idea that art could be classified using similarities between them as uniting factors came from Arthur Danto. Arthur Danto, in his work titled, “The End of Art”, declared that that the need for defining what art was; was futile, as there could not be any homogenous and consistent method of defining it, and instead championed the idea of “a family-resemblance class of things”. He used the example of Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box to raise the issue of what constituted the difference between an ordinary object and an artwork. He talked also about the end of painting as no further improvements could be made in the pictoral representations of the world, post
photography. In his other work, “Artworld”, he emphasized the role of art “theory” in determining the difference between ordinary objects and art. He states,

“It is the theory that takes it (the object) up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is. Of course, without the theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld, one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory as well as a considerable amount of the history of recent New York painting…. The world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one. It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible. It would, I should think, never have occurred to the painters of Lascaux that they were producing art on those walls. Not unless there were Neolithic aestheticians.”

Expressionist theories expound the value of human emotion, this idea is referred to by Benedetto Croce. “What is Art” (1913), follows Benedetto Croce in identifying art with intuition. He denied that art did not have the “character of conceptual knowledge” and instead felt it acted better as allegories or symbols, rendered conscious through form as expression. This idea is taken forward by John Dewey. In “Art as experience” (1934), Dewey states that when we think of art, we tend to perceive them as art objects. This is a mistake; the experience of creating or encountering the object is the real art. If a work is separated from these experiences, it
becomes detached from life. Dewey held that art is a rarefied and intense form of experience. Another aspect of expressionism talks about symbols and language. Nelson Goodman addresses language, symbols and representation in “Languages of Art on twentieth century aesthetics” in 1968. Goodman’s primary contribution to the discourse was to define works of art as symbols within symbolic systems. He also proposed to treat the troubling issues of representation and expression as semantically based enquiries of reference and denotation. The idea of trying to come up with a standard of aesthetic experience was attempted by David Hume. In “Of the Standard of Taste” David Hume seeks to question the idea of a standard of taste. The main idea behind his theory being that taste varies in reality, especially regarding the particulars of a piece of art. The judgment of art therefore, should include the interpretation of it and the establishment of an aesthetic experience thus occurs once this is done.

Formalist theorists focusing on form include Clive Bell, whose contributions laid the groundwork for later theories on formalism. Art as significant form: Clive bell talks about art being “significant form” in his essay, “The Aesthetic Hypothesis”. This essay is an excerpt from the book “Art”, originally published in 1914. In this essay he put forward a theory that art was “Significant Form”. He stated that the “The starting point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion”. This is not something he holds true for everyone, but feels that it is invoked by a particular concept, that of “Significant Form”. A fact, he says, acknowledged by "all sensitive people". Formalistic theory also relies heavily on the theories championed by Clement Greenberg. In his essay, “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940) Greenberg emphasized his preference for form over subject matter and encouraged art to be “entitled to respect for its own sake”. Music he felt, exemplified pure form because of its “absolute nature, its remoteness from imitation”. Greenberg felt that
standards of taste were fluid and in time, more inclusive theories of art would supplant current ones. He questioned the legitimacy of imitative arts to be at par with abstract expressionism. In his other text titled, “Modernist Painting” (1960), he stipulated that purity in art was a result of having to create an experience that was intrinsically valuable and could not be accessed in any other way. His third work, “After Abstract Expressionism” (1962), in which he addressed the conceptual importance of a work. He held inspiration alone to belong to the individual, everything else including skill, he said, could be acquired by anyone. Inspiration cannot be copied or imitated.

Post structuralist theories are too broad to be covered in their entirety but one seminal author is Jean François Lyotard, who wrote “The Postmodern Condition” in 1979. This essay stated his “incredulity towards metanarratives”, which is how Lyotard describes his opinion of what postmodernism means. This idea changed the perception of narratives within art as fluid; and therefore open to interpretation in a new way each time it is undertaken. This idea is taken further in “Simulacra and Simulation, 1985” which is a philosophical treatise by Jean Baudrillard that discusses the interaction among reality, symbols and society. Baudrillard talked about how most of our perceptions are based on simulations, which have come to be so representative of reality that they have taken on a reality of their own. This theory is very important to understanding not only art, but the world itself.
Research methodology

There are many kinds of artworks that this paper will not be looking at. These include, art sold at craft fairs, work done by people in amateur art classes, objects made by self taught artists whose work is generally referred to as “outsider art”. The inclusion of these would add confusion as they do not fit the criteria I have used in the selection of the kind of art I am looking at.

I reviewed the literature available to me in the School library and did not manage to find any significant titles that were relevant to my area of research, with the exception of maybe one book on Clement Greenberg’s writings on aesthetics. Therefore, I decided to refer to the Internet as a guide to what other contemporary literature is available regarding art and aesthetics. I shortlisted a number of books and ordered them online through amazon.com. The list of books I’m referencing for this dissertation are as follows: “Why is that art? – Aesthetics and criticisms of contemporary art”; “Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art”; “Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985”; “Theories and documents of Contemporary Art – A Sourcebook of Artist’s Writings”; “Criticizing Art – Understanding the Contemporary” and “Art in Theory 1900-2000 An Anthology of Changing Ideas”.

The other research covered in the literature review includes realism and Plato and Aristotle’s ideas about representation and art. Photography and its effect on art is briefly discussed. Expressionism and Cognitivism are introduced and pave the way for a brief overview of Leo Tolstoy’s contribution to the field of art writing. Followed
by Benedetto Croce, R.G Collingwood, John Dewey and Nelson Goodman. Which leads to formalism and the questions relating to beauty. Clive Bell’s perspective is examined. Post modernism, post structuralism and structuralism are introduced and the theorists relating to them, Ferdinand De Sassure, Roland Barthes and Baudrillard are also examined.

Upon receiving these texts and reviewing them, relating only relevant data within them as the complete texts are diverse in the subjects they tackle, but all addressed aesthetics in one way or another.

The interviews that I plan on conducting will be diverse in the range of subjects that I choose. For instance, I will be selecting not only art practitioners but also from the general laymen whose conscious understanding of art and aesthetics is rudimentary at best. This will highlight, I hope the polarity that exists within society about perceptions of art and the understanding of aesthetics. The list of artists I want to speak to is still under consideration due to the volatility of availability of the artists in question. However, the preliminary list includes, Rashid Rana, Adeela Suleman, Huma Muljee, Quddus Mirza, Imran Mir, Tassaduq Sohail, Muzzamil Ruheel, Naiza Khan, Aisha Khalid, Hamra Abbas. Once I have the confirmations about their individual schedules, I will have a clearer picture as to who all I will be interviewing.

Note: After a number of attempts to conduct meaningful interviews with a range of people, both art practitioners and non-art practitioners, I came to the conclusion that this would not yield any kind of meaningful results. The questions I was addressing were too complex for some people and too philosophical for others. A general lack of knowledge about the subject by most people and a lack of willingness to engage with the topic, made it very difficult to get any kind of substantial results
with. People often made contradictory statements, most often could not define most of the basic terminology I was using. If I gave them my definition, it would cause bias, as they would only take the perspective I was giving them. In the end, I have decided to go for the text-based approach
Data Analysis:

The point is of the dissertation is to end up with a cohesive understanding of aesthetics, based on what has already been written about the field. Art and aesthetics are irrevocably bound and it is impossible to talk about aesthetics in a fine art context, unless I connect it somehow with the four major art movements that occurred which are, realism, expressionism, formalism and postmodern pluralism. These four encompass most of the varying styles of art that has been produced since the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. Most of which coincided with the burgeoning field of the philosophy of Art. The relevance of aesthetics today is based in large part on the texts I have reviewed.

The framework of the dissertation will follow a chronological format. I begin by discussing realism and representation; move ahead to art that deals with expression and emotion. What follows is formalism with its concern for purity of form, and finally ends at postmodern pluralism, which combines elements of structuralism, poststructuralism and post modernity. These categories are not the only kinds of art that has been created. However, most art styles fall into either of the four categories I have decided to focus on.

The texts reviewed are seminal works within the field and without them; the main ideologies of the subgenres would not have been what they are. Their addition to the discourse changed the discourse itself. A lot of text has been written about the subject of aesthetics. Apart from primary texts that make up the foundation of each theory, a lot has been written in critique of, and in favor of each perspective. I am not
delving into that rabbit hole. The constraints of time and length forced me to reduce and simplify the approach. The other constraint was to decidedly not reference any artists as examples of each category. The reason again to not open that Pandora’s box was because if I mentioned one artist (or God forbid, more than one) in each category, I would firstly, be implicitly making a judgment about the work itself, and secondly I would be passing on notions of what each category holds as exemplifications of itself; secondly, I would have to present arguments as to why the piece belonged to the specific category I had placed it in, and also would have had to address the aesthetic considerations for it, from that point of view. Had this paper been a much more intensive examination of itself, those additions to the discourse would have made it all the more easier to grasp, but because this dissertation focuses instead on the fundamentals of theory, rather than on empirical study, I think it works. However, it remains to be seen whether I can end up with any coherent answer by the end of it.
Analysis

Before I begin to talk about art, I must make a clarification. The Oxford Companion to Philosophy defines Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy. The terms aesthetics, philosophy of art and art theory are interrelated but are not the same. The term aesthetics has multiple meanings. It is defined as a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste and with the creation and appreciation of beauty, it can also be taken to mean a particular taste for, or approach to what is pleasing to the senses and especially sight. Aesthetics can also classify an experience or a value as an aesthetic experience or aesthetic value. It is also used to refer to criteria by which some people judge art, such as the “feminist aesthetic” or the “formalist aesthetic”. However, my aim is not to examine it from a philosophical perspective, but indirectly, from an artist’s point of view; where aesthetics in its primacy means particular tastes and artistic styles and methods of execution. It is a combination of style, experience and value and in some cases criteria, but is not dependant on them.
1. Art

Art can be defined via two kinds of approaches, the classificatory and the honorific. The honorific approach to art, defines those objects as Art, which deserves the honor of being called “art” There is often an implicit judgment that “art” means “good art” or “great art”. A number of attempts have been made to identify and name the honorable qualities of a good work of art. However, most of these methods focus on art that is meant be perceived as such, without regard to its function. It often leads to the exclusion of non-traditional art; that may have a function, such as religious iconography from non-western cultures. On the other hand, Honorific definitions aim to identify the basic essentials of a work of art. These questions have come to be known as Ontological – what is art? ; Epistemological –how do we know if something is art? And Institutional – who decides what is art?

In 1956, Morris Weitz (The Role of Theory in Aesthetics (1956), following in the footsteps of Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested that we consider art to be an open concept. An open concept that defied any set of rules or conditions. He stipulated that the best way to categorize art was to find familial resemblances between them. This idea works very well with trying to understand art today. Since there are so many kinds of art practices today, it is impossible to differentiate between art and non-art. His theory allows for the debate to move beyond what is or is not classified as art, but that within art there are subgenres that could be put together and compared in some coherent manner. When you start to talk about finding resemblances within work, the idea of trying to identify the various subgenres emerges. This in itself is not an easy task, as there are numerous movements within art that are very distinct from each other; both in their theoretical approach and in the visuals they presented. What resulted was the idea that all art could be divided into four main themes or points of
view on what makes an artwork good or bad. The ideologies behind them are very
different and I will take them one by one and examine the main differences in
perception and within each style, look at what is “supposed” to be good; bad or
indifferent. There is another theory that will influence the method of discourse. As I
am not talking about art that is craft based, or amateur, etc; it is important to
acknowledge the contributions made by Georges Dickie, whose account on
Institutional Art (Art and the Aesthetic, 1974) lays the basis for the way this
dissertation essentially works. Dickie’s emphasis on the importance of the “artworld”
and art theory as a way of defining art is very important. According to him, a work of
art is an artifact, which is given the status of being “Art” by a member of the art
institution acting on its behalf. The artist “participates with understanding” in the
making of the art to create the art object, which is then displayed to the art world. The
public is defined as a set of persons who are prepared to understand to a degree, an
object that is shown to them. The artworld is defined as the totality of all the artworld
systems. An artworld system is a framework for the presentation of art by an artist to
an artworld. The basic idea behind this is the fact that the valuation of art is done via a
system of interrelated decision makers, rather than any one authoritative agent who
bestows the status of “Art” on an object. People who make up this system of
interrelated decision makers include artists, collectors, curators, critics, and art
historians, gallery owners, amongst others. The interdependency that exists between
these decision makers is a definitive quality of contemporary art practice.
Understanding this theory makes a significant difference to the way I perceive art in
my own setting. Very often the assumption is made that the success of the artist or art
lies in itself. Realistically, there are a lot of factors that count towards making an artist
successful. But I digress.
2. Realism:

The first approach I am examining is realism. Realism is the oldest theory of art in western aesthetics. It is known by a few other names, including Mimetic theory, copy theory, imitation theory and rerepresentationalism. Western art for the most part was more of a realism-based tradition till expressionism opened up other horizons for accepted expression. Realistic works of art aim to “realistically” depict what can(or was) be seen through the eyes. It aims to represent without idealization or stylization or abstraction, rather tries to stay as close as possible to rendering a realistic representation to an original.

Mimetic theory came to us by way of Plato and Aristotle. Their concepts of “Realism” overlapped the concepts of “Idealism”. The purpose or object of beauty, according to this perspective, is the real in its ideal or perfect form. Both Aristotle and Plato however, disagreed with the value placed on art within society, specifically in reference to imitative art. Aristotle valued art, whereas Plato (Plato, Book V, The Republic, c. 380b.c.) wanted to strip away the power and prestige afforded to art and artists by society. Plato held that there were two worlds, one physical world, tangible to the senses, which are deceptive and cannot be trusted; and the invisible world, open to the intellect that is freed from emotion and illusion (Plato, Book V, The Republic, Allegory of the Cave, c. 380b.c.). Mimetic art imitates a world that is already far removed from the real authentic reality. The idea, or rather, the Form of a thing is more real than its physical existence. Since the tangible world is an imperfect reflection of the universal world of forms, any human observations of these imperfect reflections would also therefore be imperfect. Art, removed from any notion of real truth, is an inherently flawed imitation of an already imperfect world. Therefore art as imitation is irrelevant to what is real. A work of art is thrice removed from the reality
it depicts, and thus neither to be trusted or valued. (Plato, Book V, The Republic, Allegory of the Three Beds, c. 380b.c.) This notion of not being able to represent reality is essential to understanding an aspect of realistic works. The inherent bias present in works created by a human hand will always be a factor to be considered when viewing realistic works. The idea that it represents what is or was, is questioned. Realistic art cannot be taken for granted to represent reality. It is an expression of an idea of what is real.

Aristotle on the other hand does not believe in a heaven of ideal forms. (Aristotle, Poetics, 384-322b.c.) Although he felt art is imitative, he did not feel like the artist simply imitates nature, but also finds the best amalgamation of nature. Works of art are therefore better than the original. This takes Plato’s idea of representation further by adding meaning to the discourse. According to Aristotle, beauty is a real property of beautiful things. He held the view that in order to sensibly call something “beautiful” one has to know what it is first. Beauty is based on knowledge and then on appearance and finally the function of the object in question. He linked beauty to form and form to meaning. So in order to really understand a realistic work of art, one must try to find meaning within it. Try to look at what it is comprised of and what it denotes. For Aristotle, form must always be subservient to the links the artwork makes in the real world. Aristotle also talked about the importance of cohesiveness in establishing beauty. (Aristotle, Poetics, 384-322b.c.) What it refers to is the idea that combinations of the different parts make up a whole that is beautiful. It cannot be achieved with individual elements. For instance, a disproportionate hand would not go with a proportionate figure no matter how beautiful the hand is in itself. (Aristotle, Poetics, 384-322b.c.) This leads us to the conclusion that realistic works of art must be examined for meaning, cohesiveness in
their parts; viewed with the knowledge that it is a representation. Realism brings attention to the subject matter of the artwork. Expression is secondary to what is being expressed. The only problem is that most often than not, the style itself promotes the misunderstanding that it is “realistic”. The idea that a realistic work is uninfluenced by personal bias and choice is encouraged in realism. It often leads to the misunderstanding that what they represent; actually is or was, rather than a specific point of view of an artist.

The question of what it means to call something “realistic” arises. What does it really mean to say something is realistic? Any painting, picture, or photograph, no matter how close it comes to depicting something, is not real. Showing anything the way it really is; is an impossible task. An object is simply too complex to be rendered realistically. It is made up of a million atoms, each of which come together to make up a whole. It may also be a person, a thing, a friend, etc; all of these constructs make the object real. The impossibility of depicting all those multiples means that it is impossible to truly realistically depict something. And if it were possible to somehow depict all these facades together, the result would not be a realistic one.

When looking at realistic art; art that is made or perceived to be Realistic, the focus is usually on the subject and is often taken to be simply, “the way it is”, although it is a depiction made by a person of certain skill, medium and constraints. Most points of view on realism tend to redirect the focus back to the creation of the image, and raise questions about why and how we take it to be real. There is another drawback of valuing art through realism; Artists who work outside this realm, are often burdened with the popular prerequisite that has been informally established; the extra pressure of being able to “draw realistically” as proof of their credibility and skill. This idea is encouraged by laymen (whose knowledge of art is suspect at best); who consider the
art of mimeticism, to be a higher kind of art; a standard by which all other artwork is judged. They are often entrenched in their expectations that all art should aspire to be realistic, and cannot appreciate any other kinds of artistic expression. On the other hand, artists who work within this realm are also head suspect by the art establishment at large, especially critics; who often consider realism to be an outdated and exhausted theory. (Terry Barrett, Why is that Art, aesthetics and criticism of contemporary art, 2007)

There are other reasons for the lack of interest in representational art. The invention of the Camera Lucida and the Camera Obscura in the 18th century as drawing aids led to progress in realistic artworks. The indirect nature of the transfer of the object being represented still left more to be desired. The invention of the camera subsequently changed everything. If a perfect representation were needed, a camera would do the job better, faster and cheaper than an artist could. This leads to the inevitable question of whether photographs are more real than other forms of realistic representation. There are essentially two points of view about this. One holds photographs to be privileged information and unique. The other point of view holds that photographs are no more real than other forms of representations as they are “human constructs”. The removal of the human element in the actual transfer of object to image makes it more realistic and less prone to error than other realistic representations. According to Roland Barthes (1915-1980), who wrote about photography and reality, photography was more real than any other medium as it afforded a kind of proof that what he sees in a photograph actually happened (Barthes, Camera Lucida, 1980). No other medium he felt could give such certainty. He went so far as to refer to it as, “that which has been.” However, one aspect that often gets ignored when we talk about photography supplanting realistic painting is that the
development of the modern camera was done in relation to how pictures were perceived in Europe since the time of the renaissance artists. The fact that the naturally round Camera Obscura image was boxed in to a rectangular format to fit the traditional expectations of a painting, led to the canonization of the rectangular format for photographs; which has lasted to date. Photographs are a social construct just like other realistic works of art.

The popularity of realism based work faded as it has served one of its primary purposes, to reach the pinnacle of accuracy in depicting a subject. Realism however, accounts for only one kind of artistic expression. The arguments about reality and representation become a little redundant when the subject being expressed is emotive. This leads us to the second category, expressionism.

3. Expressionism:

Expressionist points of view examine the role of emotion in art. It promotes the idea that artists are inspired by emotional experiences and they use their skills in different mediums to create a work of art, which will in turn recreate those emotions in an audience. The process of creating the art is the articulation of the feelings of the artist, who struggles to reveal them in his chosen medium. This expression could not have taken any other form. The subject for expressionist art therefore is the human subject.

Cognitivism is a more modern version of expression. It correlates to the rise of modern art in the 18th century with the falling popularity of the mimetic tradition. Expressionism was born from Romanticism with its anti industrial revolution and rationalistic point of view, emphasizing very strong emotions such as horror and awe, which it considered sublime aesthetic experiences. It offered a freedom from classical
notions of art and elevated the position of the artist within society. They saw the artist as the polar opposite to the scientist. The artist could access certain kinds of knowledge that was not attainable by the scientists. It is the expression of emotion in form. Leo Tolstoy (Tolstoy, What is Art?, 1897) introduced a third element to the discourse. The viewer. He asserted that an artist passes on experiences or emotions he has experienced to others who are affected similarly and experience them as well. He gives an example of an author who writes when he is sad or unhappy, when successful can make the reader sad or unhappy by reading his work. A successful work of art therefore, is able to recreate those emotions in the person viewing the work. This is an important consideration to bear in mind when viewing expressionist art works.

Expressionism talks about art providing a specific kind of experience or knowledge, which cannot be gained in any other way. One way of knowing is via emotions. Artworks use cognitive reactions that teach us about the world. This reaction process is part of the functioning of art; the result is the gain in knowledge, refinement in beliefs and a greater understanding. What we gain through this process is what we enjoy about the work essentially. An artwork requires complex acts of artistic interpretation, and a public discourse about such should be part and parcel of the functioning of art. Within the realm of cognitivist theories, Croce (Benedetto Croce, What is Art, 1913) talked about art as intuition. According to him, the artist provides a form to intuitive expression for the experience. It is the articulation of chaotic ideas in a coherent manner. Every artwork is unique and individual and in order to understand it, we need to understand its uniqueness. Croce held that there were no rules in art anymore and beauty within art and nature were two different things. Art is an expression and should be perceived as such as well. Dewey
(Dewey, Art as Experience, 1934) felt that artists not only transcribe emotions but also struggle with them while creating them in a tangible, cohesive form. The work is shaped by the artist's desire to communicate, regardless of whether the work is shown or not. The artist works for his/her self and is in conversation with oneself. R.G. Collingwood, who agrees with previously held notions, that art is mental, takes this idea further. Expressionism expresses, but creation and appreciation are acts of the imagination as well as the work of art itself. He credits imagination with a part to play in the art process. The viewer, once he has observed the artwork, must recreate it using his imagination. This reconstruction through the observer leads to a better appreciation of the work. The process itself also leads to self-discovery for the artist. (Terry Barrett, Why is that Art, aesthetics and criticism of contemporary art, 2007)

Nelson Goodman added to the discourse by addressing how emotions function cognitively. The sensitivity within art aids us in recognizing the same nuances and subtleties in the real world. Expression is not limited to feeling. Works of art therefore should be understood rather than just appreciated, experienced aesthetically or seen just for their beauty. (Goodman, Languages of Art on Twentieth Century Aesthetics, 1968)

Understanding a work of art means interpreting it accurately. Observing how, what it means and how those meanings interact with other perspectives in the world. There may always be more than one correct interpretation. This is especially true in art as it is replete with symbols. Different interpretations allow us to view the same work in a new/different context we may not have otherwise paid attention to. According to Goodman, works of art all belong to a symbol system. There are two ways to make references, either by denotation or by exemplification. An object can denote one thing and exemplify another. A symbol may even simultaneously refer to
multiple things. In an artwork, everything counts towards meaningful expression; the selection of the medium, the colors, the form, the paper used, the line quality, the neatness or the lack thereof, all count as meaningful contributions to the work of art. Expression is more liberating than preceding art forms as it allows the creator to be freed from language and meaning. It is less restrictive, it allows a work of art to be understood directly. Art uses non-discursive language. It cannot be translated into literal terms. It makes references to things explicitly or implicitly. The viewer ought to reconstruct the artist’s decisions in order to better understand an artwork. The symbolism within expressionist works must therefore be examined from the perspective of the artist. (Goodman, Languages of Art on Twentieth Century Aesthetics, 1968)

4. Formalism:

The third element of the discourse is Formalism. Art often focuses on the form of a work. Form refers to the perceptual aspects of a work and how they correspond to one another. It is a theory of art that asserts that judgments about art should be detached from social and moral ones and that the aesthetic qualities of art can stand alone. The sole importance, from a formalist point of view, is given to the compositional/abstract qualities of a work. The adage, “art for art’s sake” is associated with formalism. Formalists shift the focus of the viewer and the artist, solely on the form; all other references within the work are disregarded. (Terry Barrett, Why is that Art, aesthetics and criticism of contemporary art, 2007)

Formalism began as art theorists started to examine aesthetic experience. What makes something aesthetically pleasing? What is beauty? Is it subjective, etc. David Hume (Hume, Of the Standards of Taste, 1757) set out to establish how judgments of
art could be empirical. He talked about how the experience of viewing something leads to further contemplation of it. It isn’t enough just to see it; the act of mentally engaging with an artwork leads us to establish its value. Hume also talked about beauty not as something that pre-exists but is rather the result of having considered something in and of itself. The decision to imply something as “beautiful” is the cognitive result of having considered it carefully.

In order to experience art through a formalist lens, it is necessary to have an aesthetic attitude. This attitude is a voluntary manner of perceiving and is not triggered by randomness. It focuses on the concern only for aesthetical aspects of something. Anything can be perceived aesthetically, from trash to magnificent renaissance art. The opposite of this also holds true. Disinterestedness is an important part of this attitude. It refers to a certain detachment. This disinterest or detachment allows us to view works of art for their own sake. An unintended consequence of this is the removal of meaning and origin from artworks. (Terry Barrett, Why is that Art, aesthetics and criticism of contemporary art, 2007)

Clive bell talked about significant form, which he felt determined, a work’s value. (Bell, The Aesthetic Hypothesis, 1941) Significant form refers to the elements, arranged to create an “aesthetic emotion”. It is a distinct emotion, and establishes a causal link between the work and the viewer. If a work has significant form, it will be seen in the viewer’s response. This will only occur if the work has significant form. This assertion basically refutes expressionist and realistic points of view. The idea that anything with significant form is considered art. There are allowances that works may not have significant form and it is also possible for differences between people to cause differing reactions. (Bell, The Aesthetic Hypothesis, 1941)
Formalist theory relies heavily on the works of Clement Greenberg who in, “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940)” went a step further and stated that everything except the form of the work should be ignored. He rejected anything that tried to create any kind of illusions and external references. Greenberg felt that purity in art needed to arise out of being true to its own form, the expression of which would yield knowledge and satisfaction for its own sake. (Greenberg, Modernist Painting, 1960) Greenberg’s theories led to the rise of the idea that the concept is more important than the actual work, as only the idea, the inspiration cannot be imitated. (Greenberg, After Abstract Expressionism, 1962) Everything else was imitable. Formalist art therefore needs to be examined for its own sake, for its uniqueness in trying to achieve a completely pure form.

The fourth category I will be addressing is Postmodern Pluralism, which talks about the underlying structure of things. There is a lot of confusion within this genre of art, as it is multidisciplinary and borrows from a variety of texts and ideas. Within postmodern pluralism lies, structuralism, post structuralism and finally post modernism.

5. Structuralism:

Structuralism views all cultural phenomena of as signs. Language, is a system of “signs” composed of “signifiers”(words) and a “signified”(mental idea). The word and the idea of the object conjoined in the mind create an understanding together. There is no real relation between the two. As long as the community, within which the language is set, concedes on the meaning of the word, the connections between them become irrelevant. (Terry Barrett, Why is that Art, aesthetics and criticism of contemporary art, 2007). What this basically means is that the way we define
something by using a term as its label, may not necessarily have any correlation to the actuality of the object. The label is a signifier of what that object is. The subjectivity of perception and how we define something is revealed. Roland Barthes talked about the removal of the author as the giver of meaning and encouraged the viewer to play a more active part in giving meaning. (Barthes, Death of the Author, 1968). Therefore, when interpreting an artwork, the person viewing it, must give meaning to what is in front of them, instead of trying to find out what meaning the artist gave it.

Poststructuralists talk of works as texts, which can only be understood in relation to one another. The idea that authors are not original but reorganize elements within a framework, using what has already been done before. They prefer to look at the world as inexhaustible and relatable signifiers whose meaning is fluid and open.

Deconstruction is also an important aspect within this realm. Deconstruction is ambiguous and part of the reason for its ambiguity is that it isn’t immune from self-criticism, i.e. the deconstruction of deconstruction. (Terry Barrett, Why is that Art, aesthetics and criticism of contemporary art, 2007) In a text, by expressing something and tying meaning to it, there is an implicit negation of its opposite meaning. The meaning intended is usually given precedence over its opposite. Deconstruction shows the fluidity between the two meanings as interchangeable. Things do not have meaning till we apply them. Anything can be explained in a number of ways. The consequence for art therefore, is that, since meaning is fluid, the way a person perceives an artwork, the meaning that is given to it, is subjective but must be examined for the binary opposites that exist within something that makes an assertion, in order to understand it.

Postmodernism, as Lyotard (Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 1979) asserted, was a rejection of any meta narratives. Metanarratives, are oppressive and
he instead mini narratives that are temporary. According to Lyotard, the purpose of art is to blur the boundaries of discourse and to challenge the norm. This assertion changed the way art was to be created and perceived. What it in effect means is, that any kind of theory that tries to explain it all, or tries to create guidelines or established rules, is disregarded. The purpose of art is to exist outside these established rules and guidelines. This idea coupled with Baudrillard’s assertion that what we perceive as real, are representations of representations. (Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, 1985) He argued that everything around us has degenerated into a simulation of reality. The Internet, TV images, advertisements, etc all create a reality of their own and obscure what is really real. Everything is a representation of a representation of a representation. The distance between the reality and representation has become so great that the representation takes on a reality of its own. Both these concepts are integral to understanding most contemporary art today. A lot of what comes before this loses meaning in the face of the idea that it is just a simulation and is rejected for its attempt to make universal claims.
Conclusion

What this dissertation had hoped to achieve by the end of this paper was to have a cohesive understanding about Aesthetics and how important they are as considerations in context to contemporary art. I hoped to not only answer this main question, but also the many other mini questions that arose while trying to answer the first one. The focus of these questions stayed within the realm of the main question (sub questions within the main question.) I feel like most of the questions I had about the subject are more than answered and I think have ended up with a lot of clarity in how I perceive aesthetics importance in contemporary art.

Before I even got to writing about the subject it self, research on it led to certain conclusions, that had to be arrived at in order to connect it to my relevant field, fine art. Aesthetics is a very vast field of study in its own right. The relation to fine art had to be made using the various styles artists have adopted over the past 200 years and categorizing them very broadly into four distinct groups. In trying to establish if there was some kind of underlying unity to aesthetic judgment, in the past, as well as contemporarily, it was apparent that there doesn’t need to be a unifying factor. The reason for this is that they in their own right stand for different points of view and are therefore distinct from one another. Also, the references being made are all based on their (artworks) acceptance as art, which unites them in one way or another. This approach was adopted after realizing that one could talk about aesthetics to no end but make no reference to art whatsoever. Aesthetics has more to do with Philosophy within itself as an essential aspect of it, with theories relating just to aesthetics in its purity. I shied away from referencing those texts directly, as they needed, perhaps a far keener mind than mine to make sense of them. I did however;
attempt to understand them and to relate that understanding in the way I could with regards to my discussions about aesthetics in the context I’m using.

It is redundant to compare across styles/movements and genres as each of these has evolved its own set of sub aesthetic guidelines, or ways of perceiving a particular artwork as good or bad. The idea of classifying something together based on “familial resemblances” as Weitz put it, worked very well for me. This allowed me to move beyond the various differences and try to just see how they judged the purity of their own perspective in the theories they put forward. These theories influenced the art that is/was being produced around it.

Since I was no longer trying to see what the best point of view was, the comparative nature of the initial discourse became void. This was because I recognized that there is no need to compare. They each stand for completely different things and approaches to art. It was no longer about who had the best aesthetics, but rather about what each considered good.

The failure of interviews as a way of empirically answering my question arose early on and I had to figure out another way to make sense out of it. The interviews did not work out as in most cases as knowledge about the subject was lacking; or if the individual in question had a rudimentary understanding of art and aesthetics, the point of view was so individualistic that trying to collate any data based on similarities seemed impossible. Despite the fact that this dissertation was being written in an arts college, the fact emerged that most students do not have a comprehensive knowledge or understanding of art history, forget aesthetics. The few practicing artists I spoke to, made me feel like I was not ready to understand what it was that I was trying to undertake. Most people, who knew what they were talking
about, felt that it was too vague an approach that I was adopting. The lack of any kind of substantial information being yielded by the interviews made me give it up as an empirical aspect to my study.

This discourse allowed for an understanding of what we value in art, and in a way the progress of human thought from representation to the complete rejection of representation. A lot of theories already exist on the subject and it would probably take a PhD student to undertake the examination of each individual contribution. There are many people whose contributions to the field of aesthetics and art have not been addressed in this dissertation. Therefore, in order to simplify things for the reader, and myself only the seminal works adding to the discourse have been examined.

I will admit, the texts I had to review and grasp before I could even begin writing were at times, so confusing in their terminology and phrasing that it became almost impossible to explain their work. They often defied being summed up in a few lines as they are so extensive in their discourses. Just referring to how they talked about art and aesthetics and not referring to anything else within it makes it very hard for someone to understand the way they meant to explain something. Plato and his 21st century counterpart both addressed representation as imitation. Imitation is imperfection. The way I represent each idea may not have been the initial intent of the author. By talking about it and referencing other references, I am reproducing these arguments again in an imperfect manner. I would therefore, highly recommend reading the main texts that are the backbone of this dissertation. The way the ideas are presented are thought provoking and may lead to a better understanding of the subject at hand. Also, if this study were to be taken further, one would possibly examine
specific artworks and hold them to the criteria accorded to them. I would also perhaps, include more authors whose contributions I unfortunately could not address.

As far as aesthetics in contemporary art goes, I have come up with a number of conclusions have resulted regarding the importance/relevance of it. So, is aesthetics an important concern for contemporary art? The answer very simply is, yes. But this answer needs clarification and perhaps interpretation.

The first interpretation establishes what we already know, in a way. The understanding of aesthetics allows us to look at the way in which we place value on things. It tells us what we value in art, and perhaps, in a broader sense, how we perceive the world around us. It also leads to a kind of expansion in the horizon of the person learning about these points of view and allows the person to contemplate the possibility of looking at the world in a completely different manner. It also helps identify indicators of beauty within certain contexts, and otherwise.

Another way to interpret that answer is to turn the question on its own head. To whom is it important? The artist, the viewer, the critic, or the collector? Each individual perceives the aesthetic value of the art object in a different manner. If the artist decidedly makes a certain kind of choice in the method or sub aesthetics he chooses to follow, he implicitly decides to negate all other perspectives or narratives that are open to him. On the other hand, a rejection of aesthetic concerns is also a binary opposition within itself, as by not conforming to a specific theology, the opposite becomes a theology in itself. By not conforming, the artist is still conforming.

The critic has his own perspective of how he values art, and that may not necessarily have anything to do with the aesthetics of the art work itself, but rather
may reflect the workings of how art is valued in the art market. Similarly, the viewer and the collector may value a specific artwork based on their own needs and desires that art fulfills. These questions are important as they allow us to critically examine the way individual actions lead to the valuation of art in posterity. The value of art in posterity may not have anything to do with its aesthetics, but may be considered great for other reasons.

The idea of what we consider beautiful, is both subjective and objective. If we consider beauty to be subjective, the argument for it would be based on the similarities between cultures, and individual points of view. These considerations are a result of perceiving something from a specific point of view within a social construct. This social construct is made up on a number of influences, which alter our perception and make each individual on Earth, completely unique. Therefore, what one person may find beautiful in one place, another may not find so beautiful. However, if one were to adopt an objectivist stance to this, it could be argued that since humans are biologically and physiologically the same, it would also hold true, that although we are all different we are also the same. Social structures the world over are similar as well. The differences, do count, but there is a lot of scope for finding similarities, given that the sample of the data is large enough to find patterns.

Since the idea of there being any possibility of an underlying unity to current aesthetics has already been refuted, the unifying judgment of them is similarly nullified as well. I feel aesthetics are subject to time, place and the discipline in which they are being applied. Each perspective is not right or wrong but is subject to judgment according to the standards held true for that specific style.
For realistic works of art, an important consideration is given to the accuracy in the quality of depiction. Skill is therefore an important factor to consider. Also, the purposes of making a realistic work of art differ from one artist to another. An important aspect of understanding realistic works of art is to try to see beyond what is being represented through to the person depicting. Shifting the focus more on how the image was created and why we consider it as real or realistic. In my opinion, is that realistic works of art are interesting to look at and should be examined them for their own function, and to not be held to any kind of higher expectation than what it already aims to do. Expressionist works of art on the other hand, equate good aesthetics with the expression of emotion such that the work needs not to represent realistically what is being expressed, but rather works subliminally with the viewer. A critique of realist works however, is that the idea that is in a way superficial and it is all right with being so. Also, I personally agree with the notion that realistic works of art are a little outdated, as there are a myriad and one ways that our culture replicates reality. So much so that these imitations are what we now perceive as reality.

Expressionist art I have come to realize, to me comes across as the most selfish kind of art. The artist works for himself, and part of the aesthetic exchange happens in the making, the articulation of the artwork. The expression of the artist transcends what he or she often creates. The image itself loses meaning and the expression of the artist precedes everything else. Because it is freed from meaning and language and is based on something intangible, works of art are liberated from the conventional points of view that oppose it as the main purpose of art. However, even this idea is refutable. As there are many artists who don’t concern themselves with emotions or the expression of emotions. Rather try to do the exact opposite. Work with the medium for its own sake rather than to communicate a certain feeling.
Formalism art perceives art in a completely different manner. It rejects representation outright and emotions as unimportant. The form of the object should be examined for its own sake. The form must be examined for its faithfulness in the chosen medium of expression. The artwork must be examined for the beauty that lies within it and the only way this can be done is by engaging mentally with the work itself. Any reference that a formalist work of art makes consciously or unconsciously is disregarded. An important factor in judging formalist art is the disinterestedness in the process of viewing it. This is one of the defining characteristics that make the aesthetic judgment of formalist art, to be more difficult than other kinds of art. Most people do not feel like they understand it, it often leaves people feeling like they are being cuckolded by the art institution at large into accepting things that are not conventionally considered art.

Post structuralist works are even harder to understand as they basically deconstruct everything to a point where it becomes impossible to talk about anything. The deconstruction of language, of the way we communicate, and the method by which we give and receive meaning leads to confusion. The idea that the social constructs in which we live, are simulations of reality and the rejection of any kind of meta narrative renders any subscription to any kind of narrative a superficial act. The person viewing the artwork should give his own meaning to it. All the while being aware that the way he perceives something is based on simulations and representations of ideas and mental concepts. There is nothing original anymore. So the idea of having rules that govern art, also completely lose meaning. This is fundamentally a conundrum faces by contemporary artists. How to judge aesthetics in a situation where what u mean by aesthetics, art, artist, etc are all considered labels and not what they actually are. The meaning of them is fluid. In the end, I would like
to point out that the aesthetic value of Art, lies in the art object itself, the process of creating that art, and in the ideas the work generates. These three are the fundamentals of what constitutes aesthetics within a work of art.

The fact is, any argument for one aspect of judgment or criteria alone is a paradox. As soon as you start examining the social constructs and the historical context of a work of art, contemporary ideas start to demonstrate how these ideas are meaningless. That what they represent is also a construction. And the meaning of it is fluid. Therefore it is very difficult to conclusively come up with a list of criteria that doesn’t contradict.

We have the privilege of adopting any perspective or aesthetic preference we want, all are equally valid. Art theory can only go so far to understand what methodologies people adopted in order to fulfill their purposes in art.

In summation, aesthetics are important for contemporary society, but the value each individual might place on something is based on the perspective they hold, which most often than not varies from person to person. The examination of the various sub aesthetic genres I have looked at help me understand how contemporary art; that does not aim to bind itself to a specific theory, still uses the same underlying themes that they address in a number of ways. The result is therefore, an understanding that each genre holds certain standards by which it aims to be successful. What I understand as a result is the various ways in which aesthetic judgments are made and received. The importance of it thus comes to light. The subjectivity and the inherent objectivity and the play of both dichotomies, reveals the ever-changing and defiant nature of art.


<http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/Barthes-