

## The Ends of Beauty: Sinead Murphy's *The Art Kettle*

I promise you... that if you ask me for a good thing that is good for nothing, I know no such thing, nor have anything to do with it... In a word, all things that are of any use in the world are esteemed beautiful and good, with regard to the subject for which they are proper.<sup>1</sup>

These words, attributed to Socrates by Xenophon, paint a picture of the beautiful which is strikingly at odds with those attributed to him by Plato. This tension – between the Socrates who grounds beauty in the practical concerns of everyday life and the Socrates who grounds beauty in the divine perfection of the intelligible that shines through its imperfect realisation in the sensible – inaugurates a division in the philosophical understanding of beauty that still haunts us in the present day. Though both sides of this divide have had their champions – such as Hume's thoroughgoing aesthetic utilitarianism and Kant's substitution of formal purposiveness for divine purpose, respectively – it is clear that, at least in the world of art, the latter tradition has been dominant for quite some time.

If Sinead Murphy's only concern was to chart the history of this dominance, and to suggest that it be countered by a return to the notion of craft, she would have written a good book. *The Art Kettle* goes beyond this by claiming that art is a mode of control that plays an important function in late capitalism, and that therefore the return to craft is as much an act of political resistance as it is an aesthetic choice. That such a bold and compelling thesis can be defended with such subtlety, accessibility, and, indeed, brevity (in only 76 pages) is what makes this a great book, which I can recommend enthusiastically to both academics and non-academics alike. I'll do my best to summarise the core points of each chapter, tracing the overall argument before raising some potential issues for the position it develops.

'Parliament Square' sets out the guiding metaphor of the book – that the institution of art has become a means of managing the population comparable to the Metropolitan Police's tactic of 'kettling' protestors – by juxtaposing the forced removal of Brian Haw's permanent protest outside the Houses of Parliament, by means of the implementation of a kilometre wide exclusion zone, and the detailed recreation of the same protest by Mark Wallinger within the confines of this same zone, now nested safely in the heart of the Tate Britain. For Murphy, this exemplifies art's ability to take forms of creative resistance and channel them into domesticated forms of expression that are effectively self-managing.

'Stuck! Stuck! Stuck!' takes a look at the machinery underpinning the art kettle, by examining the relationship between the Turner Prize and the stuckist movement's opposition to it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Xenophon, *The Memorable Thoughts of Socrates*, bk. 3, ch. 8, pp. 106-107.

On one side lies the valorisation of art whose principal conceptual element is the challenge of determining its own nature (“the loop of ‘it’s not art/it *is* art””), complemented by a wholesale rejection of the conceptual in favour of the valorisation of feeling (“Does it move me?”) on the other. Murphy claims that these are two pathways through the same mechanism of control, which, despite sometimes seeming to turn art into life, by bringing elements of the real world into the gallery (e.g., bricks, beds, urinals, etc.), really turns life into art, by siphoning off its creative potential.

‘Disinterested Parties’ tries to uncover the root of these two halves, by tracing their historical origins to the debate between James Whistler and John Ruskin regarding the nature of art, epitomised by their infamous libel trial at the Old Bailey in 1878. Murphy identifies three parallel oppositions organising this debate: culture vs. nature, conceptual originality vs. moral feeling, and art for artists vs. art for the masses. What united the two sides in each case (the ‘thinkers’ and the ‘movers’, respectively) was their commitment to the disinterestedness of art: regardless of whether they believed art was supposed to engage with the public, they could nevertheless agree that it was not supposed to engage with their everyday concerns. This compact is the ideological core of the art kettle, and it has only been rarefied over time as its conceptual and technical flesh has sloughed away: the choice between thinkers and movers has given way to that between the art loop and the tyranny of feeling. This goes hand in hand with the emergence of the gallery and the museum as the principal sites of artistic encounter, insofar as they are places deliberately sterilised of all instrumental concerns. This is in turn bound up with the emergence of painting as the artform *par excellence*, only to be surpassed by the installation.

‘Craft’ locates an alternative to disinterestedness in the life and work of the designer William Morris, who understood and rebelled against the increasing separation of beauty and use made possible by the industrial revolution. Murphy uses Morris to highlight the inverse of the alienation of workers from the products of their labour that so concerned Marx, namely, the increasing alienation of the consumers of these products from the processes of their production.<sup>2</sup> This trend has two related elements: (i) the suppression of complex possibilities for personal fulfilment in favour of a strict opposition between simple forms of satisfaction (consumption) and pointless forms of creative expression (art), and (ii) the suppression of creative possibilities of imagination, thought, and resistance that accompany these. The suppression of craft amounts to the division of human activity into the mutually exclusive domains of artless work and useless art.

‘Anyone’ traces a further historical trend beginning with Manet’s exhibition at the Paris

---

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, this traces the dialectic of the master in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (§§190-193), corresponding to the dialectic of the slave that was so influential upon Marx’s account of alienation (§§194-196). Whether this suggests that the solution to alienation is to be found in some new form of mutual recognition (§177) I cannot say.

Salon (as interpreted by Bataille) and culminating in Andy Warhol's pop art (as interpreted by Danto), in which the 'arts of art', or the technical skills associated with artistic composition, are progressively stripped from it in the name of egalitarianism ("anyone can do it"), while actually executing an inegalitarian shift towards art that can only be appreciated by those trained in appreciation (critics). This is the historical vector that produces the art loop.

'The Human Touch' tries to save Manet from this trend by showing that his technical innovations were attempts to involve his audience in his painting, both in the structure of the work and in the content it portrayed, but that he ultimately failed to do so, and was then misinterpreted and reincorporated into the disenfranchisement of art. The systematic failure of such democratic gestures is explored further by way of Antony Gormley's Forth Plinth project *One and Other*, wherein, despite its egalitarian intent, any involvement on behalf of the public is simply converted into further alienation.

'Trafalgar Square' turns to the history of fashion – from the emergence of couture with Charles Frederick Worth to the ultimate irrelevance of technical skill with Vivienne Westwood – in order to introduce the notion of taste. This consists in an understanding of usefulness from the perspective of consumption, as opposed to craft, which consists in a similar understanding from the perspective of production. Murphy uses the history of fashion to show how the increasing deferral of judgement to a privileged class of designers, along with the increasing lack of material constraints upon those designers, allows the simultaneous separation of the art of dressmaking from craft and the everyday mode of dressing from taste. Creativity is thereby evacuated from the everyday along with discernment, and transported into a world completely devoid of the concerns of living. This removes any basis for contrast between different aesthetic norms, engendering a pervasive liberal 'tolerance' that (*contra* Danto) is to be abhorred rather than embraced.

'Put the Kettle On, And We'll Make a Cup of Tea' compares the transformation in the social role of madness that Foucault describes in *Madness and Civilisation* to the transformation in the social role of art so far described, in order to justify the claim that contemporary art has become a discipline in Foucault's sense of the term, as the internalisation of the separation between uncreative-but-purposive activity and creative-but-purposeless activity. This facilitates the subsumption of all instrumental activity under the regime of capitalism, by shunting all creativity into the fastidiously non-instrumental regime of art. Murphy extends the comparison by showing that whereas Thatcher's 'Care in the Community' creates an 'asylum without walls', contemporary art has resulted in 'Creativity in the Community' and a 'museum without walls'. This is done through an analysis of several works of art championed by Nicholas Burriard, one time curator at the Tate Britain, each of which attempts to engage the public, but does so not by eliciting any

constructive engagement, but by alienating people from their everyday lives *within* their everyday lives. She closes by considering how this warps Kant's conception of the distinction between public and private reason: counterposing private apathy to public tolerance. The only release from these is the flight into the unreasonable, yet entirely separate and disinterested realm of art, which functions as a release valve for creative resistance that thereby renders it into obedience. She closes with the suggestion that (*contra* Burriard) the only response to this situation is a fundamentalism of good taste that refuses the liberalism of indiscriminate tolerance.

Given the space available and the format in which she has to develop it, Murphy's broadly Foucauldian analysis of the social role of art is surprisingly deep, and I must say that I am largely convinced by it. Moreover, even though it cannot be developed in detail, her suggestion that art's corralling of creativity is to be challenged by an aggressive rehabilitation of craft and taste is no less compelling. The only worries I have with Murphy's picture stem from the way it interacts with the traditional division between theories of beauty with which I opened. The estimable project of reconciling use and beauty will have gone too far if it banishes the useless from the aesthetic sphere completely. The call to synthesize opposing positions is often mere cliché, but in this case I think it is warranted. Rather than treating the interested and disinterested as two approaches to the *genus* of beauty, we should perhaps see them as different *species* of beauty, neither of which should be ignored. However, this is only possible if we can provide some account of the genus to which they belong. In short, we must understand what is common to both art and craft.

I think we can see the beginnings of this within Murphy's account, insofar as she implicitly refuses to follow Xenophon's Socrates in equating beauty and use. For her, the tragedy of contemporary art lies precisely in its collusion with capitalism's inherent instrumentalism, or its progressive suppression of everyday creativity in favour of abstract utility. She champions the aesthetics of craft precisely because it lies somewhere in between art's obsession with the *purely* useless and capitalism's obsession with the *merely* useful. So, to be beautiful is *more than to be* merely useful, but in the case of craft beauty must nevertheless derive from use. Perhaps, then, to be beautiful in this case is *to be more than* merely useful, or to be better than is required by the task at hand. The technical name for this is *supererogation*. Understood this way (*pace* Hegel), beauty would not emerge from the expression of the abstract Idea of freedom<sup>3</sup>, but from the enhancement of concrete forms of freedom.

This means that the beauty of craft consists in its ability to create new practical possibilities that transcend its initial aims. This includes everything from the simple provision of greater sensuous satisfaction (e.g., a meal that is creatively seasoned), through the extension of existing

---

3 See his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, 'Introduction', §3.

practices (e.g., a musical instrument with a greater range or precision of play), to the constitution of entirely original modes of living (e.g., the internet's continuing creative transformation of social interaction). This is demonstrated nowhere better than in the contemporary craft of computer programming. One need not be a programmer to appreciate this. Talk to any programmer for long enough about their code and they'll inevitably bring up questions of beauty, freely contrasting 'elegant solutions' and 'ugly hacks', and deploying a homegrown aesthetic language of surprising subtlety. However, what is most apposite about this aesthetics – beyond parochial concerns regarding code readability, language preferences, or mathematical efficiency – is the central role played by *extensibility*, or the ability of code to be expanded upon or transposed into new contexts for novel purposes. The link between beauty, supererogation, and the enhancement of freedom is especially obvious here.

The question is whether we can make sense of disinterested beauty in similar terms. Here I believe it is important to dispute elements of Murphy's reading of Kant.<sup>4</sup> I think that her account, whilst acknowledging Kant's own biases – his privileging of natural beauty and his connection of beauty and moral feeling – locates his ideas on the right side of the historical divide, and correctly positions him upon the cusp of the shift in dominance within that tradition from the movers to the thinkers. Despite siding with the movers on the question of the moral role of beauty, Kant's aesthetics nevertheless helps to legitimise the thinkers' retreat to purely artistic interests. On the one hand, his notion of formal purposiveness transmutes the alienation of beauty from everyday purpose (as opposed to divine purpose) into its alienation from every particular purpose, thereby freeing artists to pursue their own satisfaction. On the other, his emphasis upon the cognitive role of beauty (and the sublime) inaugurates the turn towards the conceptual that ultimately exhausts itself in the art loop. However, there is more to these ideas than their role in the formation of the art kettle, and they deserve to be rehabilitated as part of the resistance to it. Though art has both degenerated as an aesthetic practice from within and been reconfigured as a mode of control from without, it may still shelter an emancipatory spark that is ripe for rekindling.

First, it's important to see that although Kant's notion of formal purposiveness forbids us from grounding the beauty of a thing in its utility, it does not for that matter completely sever the link between beauty and purpose. On the positive side, Kant holds that the pleasure we find in beauty derives from the manner in which the cognitive free play it stimulates in us satisfies a higher end of reason, namely, that our cognitive faculties be capable of synthesising a coherent picture of nature as a whole.<sup>5</sup> On the negative side, it does not preclude us from questioning the purpose of art,

---

4 This is found mainly in the 'Craft' chapter (pp. 26-27). I once more recognise that this is, by necessity, a heavily truncated reading.

5 See his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, p. 71.

or why we should aim to create and appreciate beautiful works. Moreover, the former issue suggests a possible approach to the latter, by orienting inquiry into the purpose of art towards its relation to the structure of reason. When seen in the light of the account of the beauty of craft I have proposed, this in turn suggests that we are to understand the function of art in terms of its relation to the structure of practical reason, or rather, freedom *as such*. This means that the disinterested beauty of art is only disinterested insofar as it eschews specific purposes in favour of purpose *qua* purpose.

Second, it's necessary to show that we can separate Kant's insight into the importance of the cognitive role of beauty from his too narrow interpretation of this role. If nothing else, it is important to dispute his separation of the sublime from the beautiful on cognitive grounds, in order to see the cases he distinguishes as further *differentia* of disinterested beauty. Our task is thus to provide a broader interpretation of cognitive role that establishes a continuity between disinterested beauty and interested beauty. This means understanding how the cognitive effects of art contribute to the enhancement of freedom, despite, and perhaps even in virtue of their disconnection from the everyday purposes in which craft is embroiled. I believe the notion we are looking for here is *inspiration*. This is something that can be found in the harmonious free play of the imagination that Kant ascribes to the experience of beauty, in the discordant disruption of our faculties that he finds in the experience of the sublime (or what Deleuze calls 'the shock to thought' in his account of cinema)<sup>6</sup>, and more generally in the ability of art to create novel forms that, be they sensuous compositions or conceptual connections, and unbound as they are by prior purposes, provide us with raw cognitive materials from which to forge new practical possibilities.

This is only a rough taxonomy of the relevant forms of cognitive stimulation, but it is meant to indicate the extent to which the seemingly disinterested can nevertheless empower us in cultivating and pursuing our interests. If paintings and installations are emblematic of the pathological form of disinterested art, then perhaps literature and cinema are emblematic of its emancipatory form. Even as curated art progressively degenerated in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we experienced an unprecedented explosion of speculative fiction in various media. For example, the great science fiction authors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Clark, Asimov, Le Guin, etc.) construct futures that, whilst not predictions in any strict sense, nevertheless expand our understanding of the horizon of possible action by supplying us with conceptual fragments that can be transposed into both passive anticipations and active plans (e.g., the famous anticipation of the geosynchronous satellite (Clark), ever more determinate expectations regarding the emergence of robots and AIs and plans for integrating them into our society (Asimov), or techno-social possibilities for reconfiguring gender relations (Le Guin)). Nor is this influence restricted to a purely conceptual register, as

---

6 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, ch. 7.

demonstrated by the aesthetic circuit between futurism and modernism in architecture and design, the sensory-motor circuit between modern cinematic narrative techniques and the neurological machinery of causal understanding, and the every ramifying social force of musical genres and their associated subcultures. The inspirational role of art is exemplified by this propagation of forms across a culture, be they conceptual, aesthetic, neurological, or cognitively and practically efficacious in some other way. The progressive reconfiguration of the collective horizon of action that this engenders is nothing other than what Heidegger calls ‘truth’.<sup>7</sup>

We thus have a schematic overview of the genus of beauty and its two species that combines both formal and substantive concerns. The formal component is that beauty is understood as *unconditional value*. We can oppose this to merely instrumental value, which is entirely *conditional* upon the ends for which it supplies the means. The formal distinction between interested and disinterested beauty is thus the difference between *relatively* unconditional value, which remains to some extent dependent upon a purposive context (e.g., the everyday world of office workers, musicians, chefs, etc.), and *absolutely* unconditional value, which is entirely independent of any such context. The substantive component is that the source of such value is the *enhancement of freedom*. This is a matter of expanding the space of possible action and satisfaction through the development of new capacities and new ideas for deploying them in the interconnected and overlapping projects that constitute our lives. The substantive distinction between interested and disinterested beauty is thus the difference between *supererogation*, or the elaboration of an existing practice from within its purposive content (e.g., the improvement of modes of organisation, instruments, ingredients, etc.), and *inspiration*, or the creation of new practical possibilities outside of any such context.

However, it is not clear that this schema presents us with mutually exclusive types of beauty so much as a spectrum across which two competing tendencies intertwine. One of the most common objections to Kant’s theory of beauty is that no artwork is entirely disinterested. We can do our best to subtract them from the purposive contexts of their creators, components, and even their audiences, but traces inevitably remain. For instance, the sheer ‘prettiness’ of much abstract expressionist painting straightforwardly panders to our perceptual sensibilities, the pleasure it produce stickling our interests in sensory stimulation. Moreover, there is a good case to be made that many artworks whose beauty is principally disinterested nevertheless contain components that cannot be abstracted from these contexts without ceasing to function. To take a specific example,

---

<sup>7</sup> For Heidegger, the artwork is the site of this ‘truth’, or a point within the ‘world’ – understood as this horizon of action – in which the dynamic process through which it is constituted (also called ‘strife’) becomes visible as something worked upon (Cf. ‘On the Origin of the Work of Art’). I don’t think this view can be endorsed without serious qualifications, but it is worth underlining the aesthetic themes that run through Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger.

the Department of No's 'Under Black Carpets' is a plan for a perfect bank heist, involving the simultaneous robbery of 5 different LA banks, dropping a plane on a building as distraction, and a variety of other elaborate and cunning tricks. This is all portrayed through a series of artifacts and videos that present the attempted police reconstruction of the chain of events after the fact, initially to be displayed in a bank vault in Lisbon.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the Department of No insist they are designers rather than artists is especially telling here. Though the installation does not contribute to any concrete plans for armed robbery<sup>9</sup>, it is nevertheless run through with purposive elements that simply cannot be disentangled from its disinterested beauty. It is a plan, a scheme, a plot, and to encounter its beauty we must engage with it as such; its careful design involves a level of technical skill comparable to the classical 'arts of art' despite being quite unlike them in character.

The burgeoning field of the aesthetics of games provides a more general example of this intertwining of formal and objective purposiveness.<sup>10</sup> Let's look at two rather different examples. On the one hand, the sublime intricacy of the non-Euclidean puzzle platformer *Anti-Chamber* is not something that can be understood in terms of the satisfaction of any objective end – either in terms of the escapism provided by narrative immersion or the competitive interplay between challenge and reward – and yet any formal end it satisfies is somehow submerged in an intensely articulated space of strategic action.<sup>11</sup> On the other, the exquisite melancholy the indie tabletop RPG *Polaris* demonstrates that a such a complex poetic affect can be embedded in a style of play – the unique constraint of having players describe their actions in the past tense – as much as in the narrative coordinates of its setting – the tragic arc of the inevitable fall of the greatest city that ever was or will be.<sup>12</sup> Despite ongoing controversy, I think it obvious that we are dealing with art in both cases.

Whether found hunched over computers, sat round tables, or engaged in stranger or more physical sports, the beauty we find in games lies in their creation of *constrained* spaces of strategic action that nevertheless cultivate forms of *freedom*. This point is exemplified by the game of Go, in which an elegantly simple set of rules opens up awesome array of strategies, which then subtly unfold in surprisingly delightful patterns. Whether one focuses upon the possibilities for supererogation this generates in competitive skill, or the possibilities for inspiration it generates in the interactive demonstration of emergent order, the game is undoubtedly beautiful. These considerations reveal that both the formal relativity of beauty to purpose and its substantive

---

8 The Department of No is composed of Illona Gaynor and Benedict Singleton, and details of the work can be found here: <http://we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2012/09/under-black-carpets.php>

9 As far as we are aware.

10 To see my own meagre contributions to this field, consult my paper with Tim Franklin 'Why Dungeons and Dragons is Art' in *Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy* (Open Court: 2012).

11 <http://www.antichamber-game.com>

12 <http://www.tao-games.com/>



enhancement of freedom are manifold in their variations and overlapping in their instances, though this does not therefore make a taxonomy of them impossible.

This excursus on the philosophy of beauty might seem somewhat tangential to the task at hand, namely, explaining and assessing the significance of Murphy's book, but this suspicion can be dispelled by returning to Murphy's thesis armed with the theoretical resources marshalled above. The key point to make is that the intimate relationship between beauty and freedom makes Murphy's analysis of the institution of contemporary art as a mode of control all the more powerful. It brings into focus the cultural economy of creativity of which Murphy takes contemporary art to be a perversion, or perhaps even a cultivated pathology. This is the co-operative process of creating, copying, and improving ways of living that we're implicitly engaged in, if not explicitly organising. This combination of mimetic propagation and memetic evolution of innovations in our pleasures, practices, and instruments is a sort of distributed *social cognition* through which freedom develops itself. The dual ideals of supererogation and inspiration are supposed to govern this process, and the practices of craft and art are supposed to realise them insofar as they are essential components of the *social imagination*. From this perspective, my caution against abandoning art in favour of craft amounts to the idea that imagination requires flights of fancy as much as it does practical experimentation.

In diagnosing a systematic deficit of imagination in modern capitalism Murphy is in good company. At least two other titles from Zero Books explore the same theme: Mark Fisher's broad ranging *Capitalist Realism* and Nina Power's incisive *One Dimensional Woman*. These books go some way towards demonstrating the extent to which capitalism has developed mechanisms for suppressing political imagination, be it through imposing conceptual hegemony (neoliberalism) or co-opting emancipatory programs (contemporary feminism). However, there are two key differences between these works and *The Art Kettle*. The first is simply a matter of generality: Murphy's book is concerned with the suppression of imagination *as such*, rather than simply with its political form, though it is clear that she draws strong political consequences from her analysis. The second is more subtle, and is perhaps best approached by way of the manifesto gracing the last page of every Zero Book:

A cretinous anti-intellectualism presides, cheered by expensively educated hacks in the pay of multinational corporations who reassure their bored readers that there is no need to rouse themselves from their interpassive stupor. The informal censorship internalized and propagated by the cultural workers of late capitalism generates a banal conformity that the propaganda chiefs of Stalinism could only ever have dreamt of imposing.

I always find reading this manifesto exhilarating, insofar as it encapsulates an important idea that runs across these books: there is something profoundly wrong with the academic discourses of our society and their inability to penetrate into mainstream understanding. Fisher and Power not only provide us with an analysis of how contemporary modes of living undermine our ability to think about political realities, but they also examine the sorry state of the public discourses on these topics. The very state which Zero Books aims to address. Murphy does something different but complementary in focusing upon the side of cultural production that is alluded to but not addressed in the manifesto. She takes aim at the ‘artists’ who have abdicated their social role as much as the ‘thinkers’ who Zero takes aim at. These same creatives might be found browsing Zero titles in a gallery bookshop, nodding along to the above manifesto, not realising that they too are the ‘cultural workers’ in question – that they too are complicit.

This returns us to Murphy’s own framing of the problem of the social role of art in terms of the social role of reason. The origin of this frame in Kant’s famous essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ provides a further connection to the account of beauty sketched above. To quote her at length:

We have, in short, utterly conceded human reason to the working of capital, as that merely instrumentalist subsumption of means to given ends that is so malleable in the hands of profit, tempted by the abandonment promised elsewhere by the availability of an “unreason” that has constituted, and been incubated by, the modern history of art, and that operates very well to console and to control a population whose capacities have been divided up, into the obedient pursuit of given ends that makes the population so efficient and enthusiastic pursuit of given pleasures that is now gradually and seamlessly transforming into a kind of anaesthetized spectatorship.<sup>13</sup>

The dissociation of art from reason that Murphy highlights here goes at least as far back as the romantics, but it is accelerated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the increasing influence of economics upon common conceptions of ‘rationality’ from the one side, and the critiques of these conceptions propagated by critical theory from the other, and culminates in the practical excesses of ‘postmodernity’ and the theoretical disaster of ‘postmodernism’.<sup>14</sup> This mutation of the enlightenment faith in reason rapidly became malignant and metastasised across the arts and humanities, triggering a sort of auto-immune response wherein reason was given over to attacking

---

<sup>13</sup> *The Art Kettle*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>14</sup> I scare quote both of these terms quite deliberately. I neither believe in any real historical era of ‘postmodernity’, and I believe that there are many important insights contained in Lyotard’s ‘postmodernism’. Nevertheless, the idea of ‘postmodernity’ serves well to index a certain cultural trend exemplified by Murphy’s art-loop, and the word ‘postmodernist’ has been used often enough both by those who laud this trend and those who criticise it that it serves equally well to index the theoretical nexus underlying it.

itself. One of the great ironies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that art's emancipatory power came to be located in its ability to resist reason, when, as I have tried to show, its connection to reason through the ideal of beauty is its very essence. Murphy's detailed account of how this emancipatory promise forms the core of a mechanism of oppression demonstrates the depth of this irony better than anything written hitherto.

I will conclude by considering a related, but more specific irony, which Murphy herself considers at the close of the book. Foucault's work does not just form the foundation of the analysis that Murphy presents in her book, but has additional significance insofar as it was appropriated by and used to legitimate many of the excesses of 'postmodern' theory just discussed. In particular, his work provided a basis upon which to criticise the illicit normative connotations of the opposition between the rational and irrational, and thereby to valorise modes of thought and practice that manage to escape its confines.<sup>15</sup> I fear Foucault would have been horrified by the theoretical escapology he inadvertently inspired, but he might have been equally horrified by the practical transmutation of his work into the sort of banal artistic product that this escapology encourages. It is this ironic fate which Murphy considers in closing:

*The Foucault Art Project...* was apparently comprised of the ingredients of a standard academic conference on Foucault apart from the small difference that the souvenirs in the conference shop were not to be sold and the works of Foucault were not to be understood. "I don't know Foucault's philosophy," the artist mostly responsible for the artwork wrote in his advertisement, "but I see his work of art." Poor Foucault. Become art, one can look but definitely not touch.<sup>16</sup>

The saddest feature of this is that the artist completely failed to see Foucault's work of art. In his own 'What is Enlightenment?' essay Foucault takes up Kant's attempt to characterise the attitude of enlightenment, or to formulate it as an *ethos*. There is much that could be said about this *tour de force*, but I will restrict myself to the link Foucault draws between enlightenment and art:

The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire, in the vocabulary of his day [describes as] the asceticism of the dandy who makes of his body, his behaviour, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a

---

15 Beyond Foucault's methodological innovations (i.e., the archeology of knowledge and the genealogy of power) his more detailed historical work in *Madness and Civilisation* had an important influence on these ideas.

16 *The Art Kettle*, p. 75.

work of art... This modernity does not “liberate man in his own being”; it compels him to face the task of producing himself.<sup>17</sup>

Foucault takes this “aesthetics of existence”<sup>18</sup> to be the essence of enlightenment; motivating not just individual but also collective projects of self-construction. He then articulates his own overarching philosophical project in these terms, as an expression of the enlightenment drive to identify and overcome our limits, or “to give impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.”<sup>19</sup> As such, the artist’s inability to see either the art or the craft in Foucault’s project is emblematic of the art establishment’s inability to see its own social purpose.

I will end by considering what Foucault calls the ‘stakes’ of enlightenment: “how can the growth of capabilities [*capacités*] be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?”<sup>20</sup> Here lies the beating heart of the obsessive instrumentalism of contemporary capitalism, and it is the core issue that Murphy, Fisher, and Power tackle from different angles. However, what is common to these thinkers is an attempt to dissect the ideological apparatuses that have domesticated the various emancipatory programs and forms of resistance that were supposed to, and that many still believe, pose challenges to capitalism’s oppressive tendencies. In doing so they renew the project of enlightenment, by showing us that we cannot hope to understand oppression without first understanding freedom, and therefore that the postmodern eclipse of reason has colluded with capital insofar as it has warped our understanding of both, by reinforcing the flattening of normative discourse that constitutes capitalism’s liberal visage. Murphy’s singular achievement is to demonstrate that contemporary art’s blindness to *beauty* undermines our creative freedom in precisely the way that contemporary politics’ perversion of *reason* undermines our intellectual freedom. This opens up the possibility of a new alliance between *aesthetic fundamentalism* and *political rationalism* capable of challenging the *pervasive liberalism* that capital hides behind.

---

17 Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, pp. 311-312.

18 *The Use of Pleasure*, p. 12.

19 Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, p. 316.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 317.