

The Subject

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**Towards a Theory of
Aesthetic Justice**
Erin Schwartz

On a spring morning in 1972, thirty-two high-rise apartments come crashing to the ground. Smoke, atomized concrete and fragments of beloved objects left behind stand frozen in time, then are propelled outward, twisting through the air, by the power of the dynamite laced through the building's skeleton. Nobody is left in these apartments when they fall. They had been slowly evacuating for a long time: residents leaving as memories of violence, both singular and systemic, overwrote former sites of community. These walls, stairs, pipes, wires have failed so thoroughly to protect the living bodies who inhabited them that, according to the state of Missouri, their total annihilation is necessary. The towers were praised just two decades before as an exemplar of modernist architecture used for social good. Now, they are turned into rubble and dust that disperses in a cloud.

What comes after the high-rises fall? With the advent of postmodernity, we saw the partial disintegration of a violent universal—the Western subject—a monolith more difficult to deconstruct or

to pulverize than the failed housing projects in Missouri. With the end of modernism, the white male colonizer came under critique from all sides. A multitude of subjects pulled back the curtain to reveal a Wizard of Oz, a hunched and impotent figure at the controls of a massive, suddenly absurd green mask. Postmodernity did not kill the Western universal in-itself, but perhaps it poisoned it by revealing the violent apparatuses by which its universality is accumulated.

But these full-throated critiques saw their heyday forty years ago. We now stand at the point of exhaustion. A poisoned universal is before us, and its sickened body seems not necessarily worth saving. And the same violent apparatuses of oppression are as robust as ever, despite the atrophy of their totalizing organ; the poison seems to have missed its mark. It is at this moment that critique appears of contemporary art's indeterminacy, relativism, subjectivity, the lack of criteria for evaluating value. The argument is made that multiculturalism—the explosion of difference that rebelled against mod-

ernist standardization—has been recuperated by late capitalism. The language of protest appears in McDonald's commercials, and every stock image of the professional workplace displays an unimpeachably diverse composition of ethnicities and genders. Of course everyone is different; everyone is just as different as everyone else. Now, would you like to buy this shampoo for girls who went to public school in the 1990s?

There is a problem with this, though: recuperation has a remainder. There are things picked up and things left behind, indigestible bits that must be spit out. What type of difference did late capitalism swallow up, and what will it find undigestible?

We say that multiculturalism has been recuperated by late capitalism, but that recuperation has not been thorough. When problematizing the indeterminacy of contemporary art, the target should not be subjectivity-in-itself, it should be power: the structures of oppression laid bare by political critique that still persist. Establishing

criteria for art on the shifting sands of our contemporary rubrics of value is impossible not because multiculturalism has been thoroughly territorialized by capitalism, but because *difference is the ground on which capitalism is being undermined*. True difference, constituted through communal encounters and an ethical engagement with the other, is a poison pill to capitalism. It is only its reduction — difference-without-another — that can support large-scale exploitation of laborers, the abstraction of objects away from the materiality of their production, the conflation of the subject with pure exchange value.

The indeterminacy of critique we see is a fissure in the ability to accumulate sufficient cultural capital to create and enforce categories of value. Contemporary art is indeterminate because capital is losing its power to wholly determine. This is to say that contemporary art must concern itself with justice. The context of its indeterminacy is the growing chasm between difference as represented by capitalism—a difference that totalizes—

and true difference-in-relation. And to work towards stability, the artist must throw their weight to one of these poles. Aesthetics oriented towards a justice of difference do not necessarily have to be political, or didactic: there are a multitude of just practices. But a contingent ethics that recognizes our time as a time of flux is necessary.

Difference and the universal are not opposites—there simply exists a certain discourse of universality whose antithesis is difference. Jettisoning the universal by mistaking this part for the whole was the mistake of postmodernism. Universality and difference are both integral to relation: we emerge as individuals through a transcendent recognition of the Other, of someone outside of ourselves. We are distinct individuals born out of the shared potentiality that preceded us. Moving forward, we need a revitalized universal constituted of difference, an ethics that manifests from the entanglement of all things.

Excerpts from *Log,* a living Google Doc Aaron Graham

There is something about remembering specific facts, letting them stick as individual entities in your brain. That type of keeping facts filed away in your memory keeps them separate from all other facts. Like items in an encyclopedia that sit next to each other but never interact. Like stories in a newspaper that sit next to each other but never become contaminated by one another. They are bubbles that are unaffected by other bubbles around them. But facts aren't just something to remember. They have affect. The fact can be forgotten but the feeling remains. What happens when we let the facts interact? We forget the specifics and are left with a strong cocktail of emotions and premonitions. You read an article, don't remember anything. Together all these facts paint a picture of a system that can't be seen. It's image is elusive, it's factual limbs flailing about striking you in the gut. It's that feeling you can't forget. It leaves you feeling a fool. In arguments facts are the used as ammunition, like some conspiracy lunatic you are left with nothing but a; "trust me man".

bubble trouble:

- states
- borders
- universities, knowledge, (jstor, aaron shwartz)
- newspapers (topics)
- news (one story to the next)
- wealth
- facts ^^
- images
- images of war and death, visualizations

Jet lag:

I arrived in Stockholm. I flew from Shanghai. The time difference between Shanghai and Stockholm is nine hours. I felt a little tired after the long flight but needed to stay up to adjust to the time difference.

The biggest difference is the difference in time. the difference in our idea of what our future time will hold.

Collectors, carl. Have an idea of time moving forward. An idea of progress, of events.

young artist>collect>have shows>make connections>bigger studio>more production>meet “important” people>curators>included in shows with big name artists>value increases over time>solo show>have museum shows>value increases>become part of the canon= culture has been nurtured and created. Collectors believe they are nurturing culture. They may even think that it wouldn’t exist without them. It is a money making scheme that feels better. Make you feel important, intellectual, cultural. It is all done with the idea that the time we all have ahead of us all is stable. Reliable. and maybe it is reliable for people like him and other people that have that kind of money. the “1%”. There are projections that 100 million ppl will die by 2030 if we fail to act on climate change. it is projected that 90 percent of those deaths will be in developing countries. there is no question. that we are failing. at least currently. that projection is most likely pretty conservative.

I dont see our time ahead like carl.

archival.
global warming.
culture for who. museums for who? in a 4c degree world. who will be there to look at the art. our future is being wiped away.

You are lost.
You come across a town.
A man is tied to a wooden post.
You see two men arguing in front of the tied up man.
They are excited to see you because they need someone to settle their argument.
You tell them that you can help.
They tell you that the man that they have tied up is a thief. He has stolen a loaf of bread from a store and now they are going to kill him for his crime.
They are arguing the best way to kill the man.
One man argues that the best way to kill the man is to hang him in front of the towns people.
That way it will deter others from committing

similar crimes. The other man argues he simply needs to suffer the consequences for his crime. Making an example of him is barbaric and unnecessary. He argues that the best way to kill the man is to shoot him. It is quick and there would be no struggle.

They turn to you.

They ask. Who do you agree with? What is the best way to kill this man?

You agree with the man who wants to shoot him. You agree that it would be best to shoot the man because it would be quick and it would put him out of his misery. You argue that hanging him would put him in extreme pain and he would suffer for several minutes. You agree that it is unnecessary to make an example out of the man. What you really believe is that the man should not be killed at all. You think that it is barbaric to kill a man simply for stealing a loaf of bread. Perhaps he was hungry and could not afford the loaf. Perhaps he was rich and simply felt like taking the bread. Either way, you believe that

capital punishment is not appropriate. But you have picked one of the sides that have been presented to you. You picked the best option out of the two. You pick the option that has more logic and facts to back it up. You pick the option that you believe will win the argument in the end.

You want to win the game. At the same time you have forgone the opportunity to state what you truly want: for the man not to be killed at all. By picking the best option that has been presented to you, you have agreed to kill a man for stealing a loaf of bread.

Cooperation with destructive institutions by engaging in the political process grants them legitimacy through complicity. We accept a limited realm of debate and become co-opted and incorporated into industrial culture. We create the illusion that the system works, both to the public and to ourselves, which only masks the real problems.

we are dying for a new art movement because we are scared of death. we cling to the idea that

our contemporary moment is unique. we need to know that what is 'now' is a progression from what was 'then'. We need to see that we are present, thinking, being, absorbing our world. as if to say. we are here. we are alive. this moment is different and here is why.

scrabble racks. with same letters. different combinations.

hybrid car. vanity licence plate. same letters as scrabble letters.

both drawings on music stands.

sandwiches wrapped in white paper with napkins on brown paper bag.

slideshow on screen outside with these objects around.

You cannot delete the 'Stocks' application from the iPhone.

I tend to be attracted to hippy shit and politics. but why are the aesthetics always so bad. Even in art. So many 'politically minded' artists have

either the worst aesthetics or they are just not interested in anything formal. I want both. I want to make a drawing one day and then burn something down the next. I guess paul chan comes close...but still.

The funniest thing you can do is walk around with your left shoe on your right foot and your right shoe on your left foot. Its the funniest joke i can think of.

new years resolution:

In 2015 I want to create and share more. This past year I spent more time overthinking things than I would have liked. I spent too much time behind the computer feeling annoyed or bitter or critique-y. I spent time too much time sitting around wishing that certain worlds existed instead of being proactive and taking steps to realize those wishes. I realize now that what I want

to do in this world will not begin from a conversation away from the art object or image. I realize that I will never be satisfied with the world as it is, with art as it is. In order for me to bring about a world that I want to live in I need to start creating things that depart from the current reality and make things that exist within an entirely new world, artworks that follow their own set of laws.

I can only ever be mediocre theorist, critic or writer. I am best as an artist. The best thing I can do is embrace the freedom that comes with being an artist.

I have realized that conviction is hard to distinguish among artists. I want to make more of an effort to find artists that have the same conviction as me. I want to work on forming new bonds and a network of solidarity. The market thrives on a total depletion of solidarity between artists. Artists are so eager to jump head first into the market (not always for bad reasons, even if they are bad reasons it doesn't make them a villain or a bad person). The astronomical amounts of stu-

dent debt that accumulates after just four years of pursuing a degree has put my generation at the bottom of a deep hole that we are required to climb out of before we can even embark on our adult lives. By the time we climb out, our ambitions and hunger for a better world dries up. This is the way the system was designed. This puts artists in a position that makes it nearly impossible to say no. Artists today are hungry for any opportunity to get their work out there and rise through the ranks of the art world. There is little opportunity for artists to develop demands from the institutions that hold the keys to their potential success. Opportunities to seize the leverage points necessary for change have been lost and forgotten. You cannot demand change if you already put your name on the waiting list. I want to remember that I can issue demands. I want to work with other artists who share this desire. We are soon to forget that today's art institutions are beholden to artists. Art institutions have been successful in avoiding this truth by using the market to create a rat race amongst art-

ists. This atomizes artists working today and prevents solidarity from building and communities from forming. Art institutions wield a substantial amount of power within contemporary society. I want to work towards forming demands that would require said institutions to step in line with artists who spend time envisioning new systems. I want to demand that these institutions take steps towards realizing those visions. I want to talk to other artists that share these desires, I want to work with other artists on fleshing out what the best plan of action is. My focus on art institutions is not to reform them. I do not wish to spend all my time working towards changing these institutions just so I can feel better about subscribing to them. Honestly I would rather see existing institutions dissolve completely. I no longer see them as an essential or healthy component of a more egalitarian art world. My interest is mostly in the power these institutions yield in today's society. I want to utilize that power. Artists are no longer reliant on these institutions.

All works are free. Click on image to download.
Installation instructions.

Preliminary Notes on Formedness

Luke Moore

I want to sketch out a mode of thought, a disciplinary amalgam that we could call meta-morphology. What I am here calling “Formedness” (for-MED-ness) names the evasive object of inquiry in this meta-morphological approach, an approach that hopes to trace the contours human-made things and firstly, reverse engineer their social and material ontology, their “having-been-made-ness” – *and secondly*, to explore the transcendent implications that permeate from manipulated matter more so now than ever, in our age of ceaseless “datafication.” Meta-morphology names this tracing, and it also marks the intersecting point of aesthetics, sociology, history, technology, economics, and ultimately *epistemology*– as these fields shift, melt, and recrystallize *through time* like 5-dimensional tectonics. That is, to think of Formedness is to contemplate *simultaneously* the material base of human production, the societal zeitgeist, *and the vast metaphysical field that coagulates in and through such production*. All this is to say, simply, that meta-morphology examines the historically specific conditions, persistent design features,,

materials, and ideological values of human-made objects in history, through an admittedly cosmic, if not hallucinatory understanding of Being.

On the more “grounded” side, to think of Formedness is to think through a fundamentally archeological – or at very least, socio-historically diagnostic frame of mind.¹ That is, thinking through Formedness is to approach designed objects as *constituent parts that manifest a semiotics of the greater milieu and its correlative epistemologies –whereby such parts are not merely the signs of this milieu, but also the milieu itself.*

Simple enough. But in pursuing a discussion of Formedness one must cautiously avoid any reductive tendency toward easy essentialisms, and refuse to flatten the complex problematics of representation, meaning, cognition, subjectivity, materiality, and the unknown.

¹ Admittedly, at its most basic level, to think of and through Formedness is perhaps a bit old fashioned – because it presumes some degree of faith, or at least interest in the cogency of meaning itself. However, rather than taking a “Correlationist” viewpoint, where the outside world and subjective cognition are always at odds with one another, I favor a more holistic or interwoven understanding of the age old subject/object dynamic.

In this preliminary draft, I hope to first explore the qualities of Formedness today, and in so doing, propose a hasty sketch for an unapologetically “techno-mystical” metaphysics of the manifest.

Anthropology of the Present – Things with Ghosts

Today’s Formedness is most often spread across the surface of consumer products - particularly appliances and tech goods – the general and increasingly expansive plethora of novel or utilitarian subject-extensions (tools and toys) that interface with lived experience. Ignore the particularities of function for now, and think of the vast array of recurring and variant forms found throughout every corner of the built environment, from a mass-market coffee maker to a luxury SUV to the Hadron Collider; think of all those injection-molded plastics, die cast aluminums, routed urethanes, and those extruded acrylics with the heat formed contours and perfectly fitting parts. Ridged, pleated, ribbed and studded, these molded shapes, pressed with texture or the pristine lack thereof

demonstrate the vast meta-landscape of hyper-optimized and computer-regulated productivity of advanced global capitalism. Such forms make up the “minor” yet ever-present architecture of our time. When these many banal forms, made from plastic, metal, or something yet unknown, are considered as a whole, they concatenate a massive vocabulary of contemporary design, of contemporary thing-ness, which is simultaneously both the cause and symptom of our visual everyday, our *aesthetic episteme*. Furthermore, if we pull back to a more macroscopic or cosmic standpoint – these forms may be conceived of as the material vessels made in, imbued with, and *haunted by* our collective, awe-inspiringly complex existence within society in and through the fluctuation of time. That is, in short, the sum total of made things, invariably recycled from an unfathomable yet finite quantity of primordial “star dust,” manifests the material mesh that maps – *imperfectly and incompletely* - the vast expanse of knowledge and experience – and in so doing, points both to the grandeur of existence *and the*

sublime and terrifying void beyond the horizon of the knowable. Both the banal and the extraordinary are always already colored by the shadow of this cosmic expanse- or the Ideal, the Sublime, God, the Lacanian Real, Nietzsche’s “Dionysian Oneness,” or whatever other philosophical formulation that you might plug into this variable – the variable that marks the place of the ineffable.

But back at the level of the mediate and material, the prevalence of particular shapes or patterns, for example, the radial “rounded” corner, is not simply the product of consumer demand or utilitarian necessity, but is of course inter-linked with the capacity of available production technologies: the body of knowledge, if you will, which precedes any executable design or manifestation of Formedness. For example: the smooth, mathematically complex shapes, seemingly inherent in vector-based design constitute a central pillar of contemporary Formed-ness. And because of that, when these vector-based objects are considered through an understanding of Formedness, one might experi-

ence a profound appreciation for the vast solidification of time and inter-subjectively generated knowledge (plus some labor and all that) that precedes such phenomenon. The proliferation of information technology and capitalist expansionism has served to exaggerate this scale and through which Formedness is manifested today.

Or to roll back some of my spiritualist tonality, we could say that it is the very datafication of anything and everything today that forces us to ponder an afterlife of information – and how such ghosts of thought and experience might hover around us and our ostensibly mute objects. That is to suggest that we are in fact living in that “internet of things” – not only because of actual web interconnectivity, but also because, as stated before, such crafted objects themselves already exist as material nodal points in the temporal stream of technical information development - in the stream of “progress” – though I propose no ultimate end. Again, Formedness does not simply distil or depict the productive or technological status quo

- Formedness also maintains the ability to both embody and delimit the many facets of socio-psychological conditions. That is, taken to its logical limit, Formedness constitutes the horizon of knowledge made manifest, a concretized field of what is knowable - as this field shifts through time.

If moral restraint and delicate grandeur are attendant upon - or dissolved within the stitching of a Victorian gown, what pulses beneath the computational lines of a Tesla Model X? And more so: What might such Formed-ness of the current represent - “accurately” or not - to a future mind, after catastrophe - to a future pair of eyes that reads our forms as relics, as ruin, as evidence? How might the fragments of our Formedness be interpreted, archived, worshiped, or feared?

Universal Locality: The Importance of Bodies

Kyle Laidig

The transcendent object descending from on high -- its glimmering surface blinds the gathered masses, prostrate to its desirous intangible form. The wilting lilies stand anew and launch into impassioned speech while the stoic silently weep, the children gaze longingly. free at last free at last -- the network has come to save us from our abject containers -- here at last to unite us in ways both bold and true. It has always been our unforgiving materiality which has divided us in the end -- the limits of my reach always delimited by the wingspan of my fragile arms -- my potential forever stunted by the limited volume within my meager chest. The internet as shiny ulysses, dripping with honey, shining like a thousand suns. A universal forum, the digital agora.

Behold the horrifying logic of the network -- we are all equally different within its reticular spread -- assumed to be perfectly the same -- totally de-racinated and utterly vulnerable to the accumulation of power -- the resonance of true intensities -- the machinations of which are cloaked by

its undulating mesh. How may we reorient ourselves as we are inundated from all sides, orifices engulfed with the poisonous “common fluid”? To put it plainly, where and how do we begin to assert ourselves within such a pernicious cycle?

The internet is a red herring. This is not to dismiss the accommodations it affords us -- increased potential for communication and trade globally amongst other valuable capabilities. The internet did, in fact, allow for the emergence of new communities to emerge and opened up discursive spaces unavailable previously. It also “dematerialized” many functions of everyday life -- and therein lies the problem. The problem is not that the internet truly dematerializes the everyday or that it disembodies labor but rather that it hides the material conditions and mechanisms that allowed these functions to be enacted.

There lies beneath the surface of the ocean, creeping in obscurity between all continents, cables of unimaginable lengths. These cables are them-

selves the arteries of the internet, fiber optic cables that bring it stability and speed on a global scale. Similarly, the data that inhabits the internet is stored on web servers, in various locations all over the world. Behold, the internet has a body! Sever those cables -- bomb those data centers and quickly the ineffable hydra of the “cloud” is vanquished. Of course, our aim is not to destroy the internet, but perhaps it is to dismantle capitalism and the fact of the internet’s fundamental locality and materiality may provide us with an operational model by which we may act in the present. If we can understand that the internet itself is bodied -- what then can we understand about its true power? The network has an incredible potential for organizing dispersed beings. Think of the Arab Spring -- what traction would it have gained had the protest been comprised *only* of texts 140 characters or less? It is when the immaterial network is embodied -- transfigured onto the streets with fists and shouts -- that a contemporary revolution becomes manifest.

Network capitalism is a red herring. This is not to say that late capitalism is not indeed increasingly powerful or dangerous. It is also not to say that late capitalism is not accelerating rapidly. What it is saying is that network capitalism is actually no different from your garden variety capitalism -- that it operates on the same modality of pure exchange -- the demand for complete sameness of all its constituent individuals or nodes. It is an incredibly successful red herring because it has recuperated our last great hope, that of multiculturalism. One would say that multiculturalism is the protest of total difference, the complete locality of individuals, and that, through the egalitarian proposal of the network, capitalism has swallowed that difference whole. Yet one must look more carefully at the kind of difference capital has seemingly ingested -- the multiculturalism that it has absorbed is one wherein difference is countable, or reducible to the digital. This is not truly difference but rather the apprehension and knowability of total locality -- this is not difference itself. Difference is not an income bracket or a rubric of

ethnic inheritance -- it is the undeniability of experience, the irrefutable dimensions of our coordinates upon the universe of things and events.

How then may we reconcile ourselves within the supposed immaterial framework of a global network and the materiality of our homes? Perhaps it begins by a two-part utterance. It is not to say, "think global, act local" but rather "act global, act local". The problem with late capitalism is that it pushed locality to the far margins, making it only apprehendable on a totally local scale (as with various DIY movements). Simultaneously, it has increasingly cleared out the center, the public, as a viable space for asserting difference through various modalities of policing (i.e. corporate security within Times Square). It is therefore our responsibility to assert ourselves as different by promoting locality within the global space -- to maintain a fervent and specific sense of one's "home" online. In tandem, we must also propose a type of universality within the regional -- organize a group show in your hometown (or in the woods for that mat-

ter) comprised of artists from around the world. The world is constituted of irreducible difference and the marching order is to see ourselves as not equally different but differently equal -- that no one may be exchanged for another but that all must work to relate upon the grounds of our true commonality -- the fact of our shared existence.

