

neuroaesthetics and critique

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Neuroaesthetics is an emerging discipline that attempts to utilise innovations in brain-imaging technology and the broader disciplines of neuroscience, cognitive science, and evolutionary biology in order to open up what is claimed to be an entirely new space for studying and evaluating artistic production both past and present. The stated goal of neuroaesthetics is to understand the “neural substrates of human aesthetic experience”.¹ That is to say, neuroaesthetic accounts of art attempt to naturalise artistic practice and aesthetic experience by locating both in dynamic brain events. Rather than being limited to a discipline-specific readership, however, neuroaesthetics has proven to hold mass appeal, with the findings of various scientific experiments working their way into a host of popular publications. To date, such titles include, but are certainly not limited to: Margaret Livingstone’s *Vision and Art: The Biology of Seeing*, John Onian’s *Neuroarthistory*, Stephen Davies’ *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, Evolution*, and Jonah Lehrer’s *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* and *Imagine: How Creativity Works*. Indeed, as the neuroscientist and philosopher Raymond Tallis has argued, the neurobiological study of creativity and its products has become a “growth industry” in recent times.² The emergence of such a growth industry has prompted many in the humanities to assume what appear to be conservative—if not reactionary—positions against this emergent discipline. As Nima Bassiri has argued, the apparent extension of neurological inquiries across various humanities domains has produced the attempt to shore up a “biological constructivism” that places cultural processes

firmly at the centre of subjective phenomena, against the apparent “biological essentialism” of the neurosciences.³

While it is important to avoid an uncritical acquiescence to the claims that neuroaesthetics might make about its capacity to unearth truths about art, it seems equally important to ensure that such a critical engagement with a neurological turn in the arts does not descend to the level of a mere defence of territory. This should be done not only to prevent the repetition of clichés about the incommensurability of the humanities and the natural sciences, but also to prevent the question of the specific characteristics of the emergence of such a neurological turn in aesthetics from falling out of sight. Accordingly, rather than attempting to produce either a defence of traditional humanities approaches to art, or a championing of the purported innovative and progressive mixture of science and humanities scholarship, there is a need to find alternative modes of inquiry. Put differently, this paper looks to engage with the line of questioning introduced by Bassiri in his contribution to the volume *Neuroscience and Critique*, when he writes:

Instead of asking how the neurosciences are encroaching on or unduly dictating the terms of subject-formation, we might ask: what would incite clinicians, researchers and even institutions for that matter to speak and think neurologically about people, when there may have been no essential reason to do so in principle?⁴

Rather than viewing the neurosciences as having overstepped their bounds (as if to suggest that scientific researchers themselves have collaborated in a project to undermine or overtake work within the humanities), Bassiri poses the question of what function the knowledge produced by neuroscience might play in a broader political and cultural milieu. It is worth keeping in mind that, even if certain researchers were committed to finding biological explanations for aesthetic experience, the value of neuroscience is not self-evident. Microbiology and immunology are just two examples of disciplines within the life sciences that could provide novel pathways into conceptualising artistic practice and aesthetic experience. Nevertheless, humanities scholarship has tended to look towards neuroscience as a potential site for collaboration. Accordingly, if neurology is increasingly advanced as *the* science of art, it is worthwhile considering how the truth claims of this science function discursively. That is to say, beyond a critique of those specific truth claims, what can be discovered by critically investigating the ends to which such truth claims have been deployed in the reframing of art and aesthetic

experience?⁵

This paper looks to the work of champions of neuroaesthetics and neurobiological approaches to art such as John Onians, Denis Dutton, and Steven Pinker in order to investigate the ways in which these figures deploy neurological discourse in order to reshape art's subject matter. While there are ample critiques of the internal consistency of attempts to naturalise artistic activity and aesthetic experience via neurology, such critiques typically overlook the broader function of neuroaesthetic discourse—i.e., to shift discussion of art away from questions of cultural particularity and political dissensus. In this way, not only does the discourse of neuroaesthetics present the risk of a conservative, if not a reactionary push to view art as independent of political questions, but, moreover, it raises questions of whether there is room for critique in a manner of discussing art that seems so thoroughly technocratic and post-political.

NEUROLOGICAL DISCOURSE

In his text “Who Are We, Then, If We Are Indeed Our Brains?” Bassiri attempts to carve out a space for a critique of neuroscience that belongs neither to the mode of compliance or simple renunciation. His investigation contends not with the task of questioning the validity of the truth claims of neuroscience as a specific kind of scientific knowledge, but rather with the kinds of subjectivity that are fashioned through such knowledge.⁶ He claims that, far from being inevitable, the “incitement to tell the neurological truth of ourselves” has emerged out of a specific context and should be engaged accordingly.⁷ The question then, for Bassiri, is not ‘Are the neurosciences correct in their account of subjectivity?’ but is, instead, something more like ‘Why are these accounts being called upon now?’ Of use for this paper is the way in which Bassiri’s Foucauldian approach links neurological discourse to the political problems facing specific institutions and disciplines. Such an approach allows for a critical space to be opened in which the desirability and suitability of neuroaesthetics can be questioned. As a case study of this kind of approach, Bassiri engages with the way that certain forms of medical knowledge were called upon in the nineteenth-century to help deal with the impacts that new forms of technology were having on the previously dominant notion of a stable and unified self. As Bassiri argues, over the course of the nineteenth-century, the question of the relationship between pathology and industrial accidents had emerged as a significant medico-juridical affair.⁸ Train accidents, and subsequent litigations by passengers raised the significant medical and legal question

as to the possibility that certain industrial shocks might cause lasting illnesses.⁹ As Bassiri states,

The primary forensic inquiry that framed the examination of traumatically induced psychoneuroses was not responsibility or accountability, but rather authenticity. Given the possibility of generous compensation, suspicion emerged around the motives of plaintiffs or injured parties, along with the belief that many were simply simulating illnesses, in an attempt to defraud railroad companies, employers, or the state.¹⁰

Against a progressive model of scientific inquiry, Bassiri develops an interesting genealogy of neurological discourse that situates it—although not exclusively—within a particular period of crisis regarding the self. If it were possible that an industrial shock—like that of a train accident—could cause someone to pathogenetically emerge with a radically different set of behaviours—and perhaps as a radically different person—a new body of knowledge would be required to instruct prominent institutions on how to tell a ‘real’ case from one that was simply simulated. In other words, if a radical shock or trauma could produce an almost entirely different person, prior knowledge that would be used to adjudicate the authenticity of a claim in court—especially on regarding personal injury or suffering—would have to be able to take into account a certain notion of subjective plasticity that was hitherto unavailable. As Bassiri writes,

Nineteenth century neurological discourse was not mobilised to salvage a stable conception of personhood but instead to provide a system of knowledge by which to ground and render intelligible these new deviations and abnormalities of the self, pathological possibilities that were intertwined with emerging forensic conundrums and novel political-economic concerns.¹¹

In other words, rather than neurological discourse functioning as a mere extension of prior medical and legal notions of selfhood, they are presented by Bassiri as functioning to enable established institutions to deal with the veritable “crisis of the modern subject,”¹² a crisis that, amongst other places, can be located in the legal challenges offered by newly emerging industrial accidents. Indeed, for Bassiri, such an example helps to demonstrate how “a system of knowledge was mobilised to make sense of people, at a moment when the category of personhood found itself in a precarious moment of indeterminacy and preoccupation.”¹³

By engaging with neurology as a discourse, and one that gained a certain dominance due to its capacity to allow phenomena to be understood in certain ways, we can challenge the purported self-evident status of claims about the innovativeness of a neurologically grounded aesthetics, without having to argue against its specific truth claims. Indeed, one could very well wonder why neuroscience has been grasped as the advanced and innovative field through which aesthetics should be reborn. The vast majority of benefits that a neurological turn in aesthetics would offer are still speculative, and, given that there are many other life sciences that are advanced and that capture the imagination of the public and funding bodies—such as microbiology—one wonders what it is that neuroscience has allowed art theorists and historians to see? Instead of studying the brain to better understand art, why not turn to the biome of the human organism in order to forge a new aesthetics?

Accordingly, and for the purposes of this article, the question that follows from Bassiri's work is whether or not a similar crisis can be seen within discourses around contemporary art. If we suspend the notion that neuroaesthetics has caught the attention of art theorists and historians because it is simply the next most advanced study of art—relying, as it does on advanced mechanical imaging technology—we can pose the question of the way neurological discourse functions in the accounts of those who study it and champion it.

NEUROAESTHETICS VERSUS THEORY

While many of us are now accustomed to hearing discussions of a crisis in art—or of the 'end' or 'death' of art—we hear less often of a crisis in aesthetics. Yet, such a crisis seems to be precisely what is diagnosed by prominent philosophers of art such as Arthur Danto and Noël Carroll. For Danto, the emergence of 'theory' in the 1970s—embodied in the work of figures like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault—presented a challenge to the dominant modes of aesthetic inquiry that prevailed throughout the majority of the twentieth-century.¹⁴ As Danto argues, "theory was then to define the attitudes of many who entered academic life by the eighties," insofar as it "tended to split departments" into those who treated art in terms of aesthetic or formal qualities and those that pursued art in terms of political categories.¹⁵ Similarly, Noël Carroll notes a fundamental split between those philosophers of art and critics that view their role as necessitating the evaluation of art by way of conventional aesthetic categories, and those that view their role to be that of providing political critique. He writes:

I maintain that what might be called *artistic* evaluation—evaluation in light of artistic categories—is fundamental, whereas the ruling theories of criticism endorse primarily political evaluation and are often even suspicious of artistic evaluation.¹⁶

While Carroll qualifies that he would not contend that the “political is never an appropriate dimension of criticism,” he nevertheless maintains that the difference between his position and that of ‘theory’ entails the he sees aesthetic or conventional evaluation of artworks as “always apposite” whereas for those engaging in ‘theory,’ this is not always the case.¹⁷ “Their interpretations,” i.e., proponents of theory, “pave the way for negative evaluations of candidates in terms of sexism, classism, logo-centrism, etc.”¹⁸

The dominance of ‘theory’ and continental philosophy in discussions of art has created the opportunity for an alliance to emerge between scientific approaches to aesthetics, and more conservative approaches to the philosophy of art. While neuroaesthetics is often discussed as being an exciting and innovating field within the overall study of art, its discursive functioning typically involves shoring up the study of art in terms of perception, beauty, and universality, against the tendency of theory to focus on mediation, power, and the particularity of culture. As Marcello Frixione has indicated, much work in neuroaesthetics is accompanied by a normative dimension that either tacitly or overtly reinforces specific understandings of what art should be.¹⁹ While Frixione is careful to avoid arguing that all neuroaesthetic research must involve a normative claim on what counts as ‘true art’, we can translate his argument into a strong and weak normativity that can be persistently observed. On the one hand, the weak normative claim, which typically issues from the way research is structured, involves the tendency for neuroaesthetic research to restrict itself to questions about the brain’s functioning during the experience of beauty. As Alexander Kranjec,²⁰ and Bevil R Conway and Alexander Rehding²¹ have argued, this tendency is most likely a product of the dominance of beauty, in Western culture especially, as a conceptual category for distinguishing artworks from other objects, and the relative ease of studying conventionally beautiful artworks neurologically, when compared to more avant-garde or conceptual artworks. This weak claim is not made consciously, and is instead implied through the ways in which studies frame aesthetic discourse so as to reinforce conservative ideas about what constitutes an artwork—i.e., framing art in terms of its status as a beautiful object. On the other hand, the strong normative claim involves the overt argument that knowledge of brain functioning

while experiencing art provides us with knowledge of what art should be. This strong claim is often, though not always, accompanied by a direct attack on the perceived dominance and deficiencies of theory and continental philosophy within the academy and art institutions.

The clearest example of this strong normative dimension can be found in the work of John Onians. On Onians' account, it is not simply that neuroaesthetics can function to provide an explanation of the neuronal substrate that underpins aesthetic experience, but that, moreover, neurological discussions of art can help us to move beyond the dominance of 'theory' and continental philosophy. The influence of these two heterogeneous traditions, on Onians' account, has become so dominant within the contemporary academy that there is an urgency to take seriously the newly emerging development in cognitive neuroscience.²² Onians remarks that, if a student were to utilise an explanatory framework that borrowed from evolutionary biology or cognitive neuroscience, "he or she would almost automatically be marked down. Even discussing the possibility of the influence of nature on culture is likely to be rejected in a knee-jerk reaction".²³

Beyond stifling free thought in the classroom, Onians believes that approaches drawing on Marxism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and continental philosophy also function to limit the very possibility of critical thought about art.²⁴ In order to illustrate this problem, Onians turns to drawings from the Chauvet caves in France—works that date back roughly 32,000 years.²⁵ Onians claims that the depictions of bears discovered in these caves are vastly superior to those found in the Lascaux caves (produced 15,000 years later), and even drawings of bears completed by Renaissance greats such as Leonardo da Vinci.²⁶ "The only images", Onians claims, "that match these as studies of the form and behaviour of animals are those of modern wildlife photography."²⁷ The explanation provided argues that the purported superiority of these 32,000 year old works lies in the absence of a cultural tradition that would have obscured the 'artist's' capacity to see nature directly.²⁸ As Onians states, the superiority of the Chauvet cave works lies in the fact that "the neural resources that guided the makers' hands were ones that had rarely—or never—been exposed to art, but much exposed to real animals".²⁹ The supposed inferiority of later works is analogous to what Onians sees as approaches to art that emerge out of cultural studies and 'theory', insofar as "most of the theoretical frameworks used by social historians—whether they are Marxist, Freudian, Semiotic, Structuralist, or Post-Structuralist—lay emphasis on the particular importance of words".³⁰ Unfortunately for such historians, so Onians

argues, “a main function of words is to stop our brain using all its resources to pursue an objective enquiry into the data sent to it by our senses”.³¹ Neuroaesthetics, then, beyond providing us with an understanding of the brain functions that accompany aesthetic experience, can also help us to understand what is fundamentally flawed about discourse analysis, close attention to language, and the role of concept creation in artistic practice. Indeed, Onians contends that neuroscience can also help us to explain why so many academics are wrongly attached to traditions like Marxism and post-structuralism, insofar as

the mere mention of the name Marx or Benjamin, Freud or Lacan, Foucault or Derrida, Deleuze or Agamben, to a reader or listener who has decided to place their trust in one of them, ensures that their caudate nucleus encourages their nucleus accumbens to deliver them a neurochemical reward; and so important is that reward to such a reader or listener that the last thing they would do is question it. This is why the last thing that so-called “critical” approaches are is critical.³²

Further examples of this strong normative claim can be found in the hugely successful *The Art Instinct* by the American philosopher Denis Dutton. In this text, Dutton holds that neuroaesthetics could and should serve as a much-needed catalyst for major reform in the approaches to thinking about art. As he states,

a determination to shock or puzzle has sent much recent art down a wrong path. Darwinian aesthetics can restore the vital place of beauty, skill, and pleasure as high artistic values.³³

The depiction of contemporary art as being misguided—insofar as the concept of beauty or certain notions of technical skill have become less central in discussions of art since at least the early twentieth-century—and of the humanities as being stagnant are common themes that surround the popular discourse of neuroaesthetics, as is offered by figures like Dutton. However, it is important to note that this appeal to conventional forms of artistic production is specifically related to the absence of something like a universal scientific perspective in contemporary thought. For example, prior to making these remarks about “Darwinian aesthetics,” Dutton laments the impact of figures like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Thomas Kuhn, and Benjamin Lee Whorf, insofar as he sees them as being partly responsible for the rise of notions of “forms of life” or “paradigms” that have produced an inability to universalise scientific knowledge.³⁴ It seems that, by Dutton’s ac-

count, the “wrong path” that recent art has been sent down is inseparable from the concomitant crisis of aesthetics, insofar as the dominant forms of philosophy, philosophy of science, and linguistics within the twentieth-century have hindered our capacity to think of the truth claims of aesthetics as being truly universal. Accordingly, without such a universal perspective, artistic practices become, following Dutton’s account, impoverished by an absence of normative strictures.

Steve Pinker echoes these complaints about the absence of a universal scientific vision in contemporary humanities works. In an article entitled “Science Is Not Your Enemy,” he claims that, while any diagnoses of the contemporary “malaise” within the humanities would have to take into account the “anti-intellectual trends in our culture” and “the commercialisation of our universities,” there is the need to acknowledge what he refers to as the “self-inflicted” damage that has occurred in the humanities.³⁵ Pinker argues that not only have the humanities become stagnant—suffering at the hand of the “defiant obscurantism, dogmatic relativism, and suffocating political correctness” of postmodernism—but that the solution is to be found in the possibilities offered by the natural sciences.³⁶ As he states,

a consilience with science offers the humanities countless possibilities for innovation in understanding. Art, culture, and society are products of human brains. They originate in our faculties of perception, thought, and emotion, and they cumulate and spread through the epidemiological dynamics by which one person affects others. Shouldn’t we be curious to understand these connections? Both sides would win.³⁷

It seems difficult to separate the purportedly neutral scientific advances that have led to the possibility of a neuroaesthetics, from the broader reaction to reassert a normative idea of art based on championing notions of beauty. Consciously or unconsciously, conservative ideas about what art is and what kind of conversations about art matter typically accompany neuroaesthetic discussions of art. Especially on the question of the flows of political power in the shaping and production of art, neuroaesthetics seems to be mute, or openly hostile. In this way, neuroaesthetics appears, not such much as a radical rupture with the dominant strains of late twentieth-century discourses on art, but instead as part of a broader nostalgic and conservative turn towards the universality of the beautiful and away from art’s implication in the particularity of political struggles. As Janet Wolff reminds us, over the course of the 1990s the “return of beauty” emerged as a point of

contention that captivated many. Amidst a flurry of publications declaring the ascendance of beauty, influential critics like Dave Hickey declared that beauty was of central importance to art criticism in the nineties, while Klaus Kertess—curator of the 1995 Whitney Biennale—argued that there was a need to make beauty central as opposed to the political emphasis of previous biennales.³⁸ Similarly, the science wars of the 1990s saw continental philosophy and ‘theory’ castigated as a charlatan’s trick, and an enemy of reason,³⁹ and theory written off as irrelevant if not overly contentious.⁴⁰ As Hal Foster writes, over the 1990s and early 2000s it could be observed that, as a consequence of being

bullied by conservative commentators, many academics no longer stress the importance of critical thinking for an engaged citizenry, and, dependent on corporate sponsors, many curators no longer promote the critical debate once deemed essential to the public reception of difficult art.⁴¹

This broader cultural backlash against the reframing of artistic discourse through the lens of traditions like Marxism, feminism, and continental philosophy, should give us pause to reconsider the claims that neuroaesthetic’s value lies in its capacity to push discussions about art beyond some kind of impasse. While it is conventional to see neuroaesthetics framed in terms of exciting new possibility for the study of art, its function seems to be closer to that of reinforcing conservative ideas about what art is and should be. According to neuroaesthetics, the ‘innovative’ approach to researching artistic activity enjoins one to study it in terms of classical aesthetic categories like beauty. Or, as with figures like Onians, Dutton, and Pinker, neuroaesthetics is taken to enjoin one to see the issues raised by ‘theory’ and continental philosophy as stifling and obscurantist. Indeed, it is interesting to note that for Raymond Tallis, a severe critic of the epistemological incoherence of neuroaesthetics, there is a “bitter irony” in the “swing to biologism”⁴² that has accompanied the “neurological” turn in art. On the one hand, Tallis is critical of this turn in the work of art critics like Norman Bryson, insofar as the latter is seen to have accepted pseudo-scientific truth claims about art.⁴³ On the other one hand, Tallis congratulates Bryson for abandoning the view that art and science are “simply collections of signs”.⁴⁴ Thankfully, on Tallis’ account, Bryson has left behind the notion that art is fundamentally implicated by political concerns, and that truth claims are inextricably bound to the flows of power.⁴⁵ It seems then that, even for a critic of neuroaesthetics like Tallis, this appeal of a discursive shift away from the cultural and political mediation of art is desirable.

THE RETURN OF PRESENCE

Though she does not mention Onians, Dutton, or Pinker, their work can be aligned with what Janet Wolff has referred to as the “lure of immediacy”, or the return of presence within the aesthetics and art theory of the late nineties and early twenty-first-century.⁴⁶ For Wolff, neuroaesthetics can be seen as one attempt among several others—such as the turn to affect, the post-human, and new notions of materiality—to move beyond the discussion of art in terms borrowed from ‘theory’, cultural studies or sociology, and to return to the “presence” that artworks purportedly offer.⁴⁷ Wolff states that there are three primary factors motivating this turn away from the discussion of language, culture, politics, and mediation, and toward the “unmediated” presence of the artwork: the marginalisation of emotion and affect in cultural theory; the perceived absence of discussions of taste outside of sociological parameters; and the persistence of the mythical status of artworks as being able to “escape” or “transcend” the linguistic or conceptual.⁴⁸ Following Wolff’s argument, we can see neuroaesthetics recast as a discourse of stabilisation rather than one of innovation. While neuroaesthetics cannot undo the pluralism of the world of contemporary art, it can nevertheless offer a universal discourse for its study and evaluation. Indeed, neuroaesthetics allows a return to the materiality of the artwork, a reassertion of the primacy of beauty in the study of art, and the marginalising of politics in restructuring of aesthetic philosophy. Further, and as William P. Seeley has observed, despite their claims to innovation, recent aesthetic studies grounded in cognitive and neurological science share a great deal with conventional philosophical inquiry—such as that of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten—insofar as neuroaesthetics and cognitive aesthetics are “not so much a new direction as a contemporary spin on a traditional view of philosophical aesthetics.”⁴⁹ Neuroaesthetics has perhaps become such a compelling way of engaging with art, not because it is more sophisticated than other scientific engagements with art, nor because it innovates on the work currently done by cultural theorists, but because it allows for a reemphasis of aesthetics as a singular and autonomous discipline, the affirmation of the beautiful art object as being of universal significance, and of aesthetic discourse as autonomous in relation to questions of politics and power.

If ‘theory’ and continental philosophy has shown the experience of art to be mediated, and therefore implicated in a whole manner of political, existential, and conceptual questions, neuroaesthetics can once again make art fully present. This is not to say that neuroaesthetic discourse sees itself as being free of any form

of mediation. Indeed, we find within such accounts the clear argument that art's truth cannot be located except via the mediation of neurological science. Nevertheless, that truth can be made present and universally so, insofar as it can be connected to brain events that purportedly condition its possibility. Wolff herself wonders whether or not neurobiological accounts of art offer us particularly useful perspectives, insofar as they seem to further remove us from the phenomena in question.⁵⁰ Notwithstanding the techno-scientific mediation required to produce neuroaesthetic research, the discipline runs the risk of framing art as synonymous with the evolutionary and neurobiological account that describes it. While figures like Onians, Dutton, and Pinker might overtly argue that 'theory' and continental philosophy's critiques of self-identity, presence, and positivistic accounts of truth need to be cleared away to make room for the valuable insights into art offered by neuroaesthetics, their work appears to support the inverse claim. Rather than clearing space for such insights into art and aesthetic experience, the value of neuroaesthetics, as it features in the writing of these aforementioned thinkers, appears to be precisely that of producing an argument for emancipating art from discussions of cultural and political mediation. Indeed, following this line of argument, art's previously complicated meaning can once again become self-present and self-assured, that is, once aesthetics has become a neuroaesthetics.

NEUROAESTHETICS AND THE POST-POLITICAL

Part of the value of resisting the narrative of scientific 'overreach' can be found in the way it avoids playing into an unhelpful dichotomy between, on the one hand, a science characterised as innovative and enterprising, and on the other, a humanities tradition that is largely static and conservative. If the humanities are simply to assume the position of defending itself, it runs the risk of uncritically reproducing characterisations of the humanities as traditional, conservative, and oblivious to the ideas of the natural sciences. For this reason, it is important to not only challenge the idea that there is no serious dialogue between the humanities and the natural sciences, but also to challenge the idea that there is little value to humanities' critiques of the ways in which such dialogues are dominantly framed. As was stated at the beginning of this paper, there is no need to bemoan a discord between 'traditional' humanities scholarship, on the one hand, and the life sciences on the other hand, insofar as the work of figures like Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Catherine Malabou, Adrian Johnston, Slavoj Žižek, Elizabeth A. Wilson, and Donna Haraway—to list only a few—all show an interest in engaging critically and creatively with current research in neuroscience and microbiology. However,

while this paper has not attempted to defend or protect traditional humanities approaches from the ‘encroachment’ of the life sciences, it has nevertheless been argued that it is important to critically investigate specifically how neuroaesthetics has been framed as useful, and how the specific theoretical horizon produced by neuroaesthetics functions to privilege certain ways of thinking, whilst presenting itself as a discourse of neutral scientific truths. If critics of the neuroscientific turn within the humanities limit themselves to defences of territory, or to immanent critiques of neuroscience’s truth claims, then there is the potential to miss the opportunity of investigating why thinkers and practitioners within the humanities would be interested in speaking with a neuroscientific vocabulary.

It is a common trope of neuroaesthetic discourse to posit both the imminent arrival of innovative knowledge concerning art, and to argue that a ground must be cleared in order for such knowledge to exist. Especially in the writing of figures like Onians, Dutton, and Pinker, we find the argument that neuroaesthetics cannot emerge without a fundamental challenge to the humanities’ purported aversion to the natural sciences. Nevertheless, perhaps the risk presented by this desire to clear the way for the flourishing of neuroaesthetics in the academy and popular imaginary alike should be thought of less in terms of the possible disappearance of the humanist notion of personhood at the hands of the natural sciences—a notion that has been thoroughly critiqued within theory and continental philosophy. Instead, perhaps the more concerning risk that can be located in neuroaesthetic thought is its implicit or overt desire for a post-political and technocratic aesthetics. Indeed, neuroaestheticians would not be unique in their turn to neuroscience to escape political dissensus. As Pykett,⁵¹ and Nadesan⁵² have respectively argued, the utilisation of neuroscientific research to understand economic and political crisis often functions to depoliticise the function of governance. The sociologist William Davies provides a particularly depressing example of this risk in his book *The Happiness Industry*, where he discusses the turn by politicians, researchers, and journalists towards brain science and neurochemicals to explain the global financial crisis.⁵³ The issue with such a turn towards the neurological is not that it might come to replace ‘traditional’ humanities’ forms of inquiry. Again, such a view overemphasises the influence of neuroscience and underestimates the innovations already occurring within its respective fields and traditions. Instead, what is disquieting is the often-overt tendency for neuroscientific discourses to oppose discussions of power and political struggle. Instead of acknowledging the inextricable relationship between knowledge and power, such discourses function to reframe phenomena in technocratic terms, reaffirming the ascendancy of the

specialist, and dampening dissensus through an appeal to universal knowledge.

Writing on neuroscientific and neurobiological approaches to art, Jean-Pierre Changeux states that

there is an evident evolution of art. Yet this evolution surprisingly seems to show no obvious progress although it demonstrates constant renewal, possibly as a consequence of still largely unexplored universal features of human brain interaction with fast-changing social and cultural environments.⁵⁴

Here, the implication seems to be that, if artistic activity has changed rapidly—and especially over the last two hundred years—it is because the universal features of the human brain have come into contact with a rapidly changing society. While the human brain would move us towards certain universal modes of aesthetic inquiry, that universality is shaped by the particularity of the culture one finds oneself in. Aside from being an ontological problem, the question of whether or not art shows us a perpetuation of certain universal human traits—even though they are in some ways differentiated through a long historical evolution—is also a political question, a question of whether or not art should be viewed as brain activity or as an event. We can contend that, if the art of the twentieth-century—from Dada to Gutai, Edvard Munch to Jean-Michel Basquiat, from Claude Cahun to ORLAN, and from Fluxus to the Otolith Group—showed a tendency towards subverting our very expectations of what constituted an artist, a body of knowledge, and an audience, then this should not be subsumed under the notion of a universal brain encountering a rapidly changing world. Instead, we should take seriously the political challenge offered by these various groups and individuals—i.e., to understand art's role as being that of challenging, even if gently or subtly, our tendency to overlook, if not suppress difference in favour of apparent stability and consensus.

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NOTES

1. Marcus T. Pearce et al. "Neuroaesthetics: The Cognitive Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 11, no. 2 (2016): 265–279, 265.
2. Raymond Tallis, "Was Schubert a Musical Brain?" in *Reflections of a Metaphysical Flâneur and Other Essays* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 56.
3. Nima Bassiri, "Who Are We, Then, If We Are Our Brains? Reconsidering A Critical Approach To Neuroscience," in *Neuroscience and Critique: Exploring the Limits of the Neurological Turn*, eds Jan De Vos and Ed Pluth (London: Routledge, 2016), 44.
4. *Ibid.*, 46.
5. Although this is a significant form of inquiry. See Raymond Tallis', *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis, and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2014); and Raymond Tallis, "The Limitations of a Neurological Approach to Art," in *Lancet* 372, no. 9632 (2008): 19–20; as excellent introductions to this kind of critical literature.
6. Nima Bassiri, "Who Are We, Then, If We Are Our Brains?" 56.
7. *Ibid.*, 57.
8. *Ibid.*, 51.
9. *Ibid.*, 51.
10. *Ibid.*, 51.
11. *Ibid.*, 56.
12. *Ibid.*, 56.
13. *Ibid.*, 56.
14. Arthur Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 139.
15. *Ibid.*, 139.
16. Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 5.
17. *Ibid.*, 5.
18. *Ibid.*, 5.
19. Marcello Frixione, "Art, the brain, and family resemblances: Some considerations on neuroaesthetics," in *Philosophical Psychology* 24, no. 5 (2011): 699–715, 709.
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