

BOOK REVIEW

Analyzing Art and Aesthetics

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Analyzing Art and Aesthetics
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INTRODUCTION

Inspired by the thirteenth annual Artefacts meeting, held in Washington, DC in October 2008, *Analyzing Art and Aesthetics* (Artefacts series, Vol.9) investigates the materiality of science and technology, focusing on art and aesthetics. The volume asks and answers question like: How have artists responded to developments in science and/or technology, in their own times, or from the past? Moreover, how make art forms as diverse as glassblowing, sculpture, drawing, and painting responded to discourse and achievement in the arenas of science and technology, or inspired innovation and discovery in these fields? Rather than limiting the discussion to art alone, the conference organizers also invited participants to consider aesthetics, a field originally conceived as the philosophy of beauty, but

reframed in recent years to include the scholarly consideration of sensory responses to cultural objects. When considered as aesthetic objects, how do scientific instruments or technological innovations reflect and embody culturally-grounded assessments about appearance, feel and use? And when these objects become museum artifacts, what aesthetic factor affect their exhibition? For all of these questions, the participating scholars looked for answers in the material objects themselves. By doing so, this volume reconsidered how science, technology, art, and aesthetics influence one another.

Analyzing Art and Aesthetics includes contribution from 19 leading scholars based in the academic arena as well as the museum world in a diverse range of disciplines who explore the significance of artistic interventions into scientific discourse as well as the impact of science and technology on the development of art ranging from the late eighteenth century to the present. The essays have been broken into three sections, each with its own introduction that will enable readers to focus on overarching categories: Artist interpret Science and Technology; Aesthetics of Technology; and Models as Aesthetic Objects.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The three sections include both topical analyses and exhibit overviews. The first section of the book "Models as Aesthetic Objects" explores the models used to account for or "explain" science and technology, all mediated by aesthetic and stylistic considerations, can serve as a primer in material culture analysis. Models alternately manipulate scale, defy fragility, or systemize the natural or built environment. This section incorporates detailed studies of models produced from the late nineteenth century to the present and used to study topics as diverse as architecture, botany, pathology, and color. Katherine Ott, Ellery Foutch, Erin McLeary and Dirk Buhler examine models themselves and how models often created to be objective archetypes can take on different meanings as they are collected by museums. These essays demonstrate that the museum environment can reveal assumption, often invisible, embedded in the construction of prototypes for the study of something else. Together they ask us, when surveying such mediating instruments, what does it mean to construct, as Otto argues "an aesthetic of truthfulness"?

The second section "Aesthetics of Technology" explores how the question of "aesthetics", or the scholarly consideration of the elegance, beauty, or ineffable pleasingness exhibited by a human work, has fascinating applications in the realm of technology. Although originally associated with artistic production, this section remind us that aesthetics involves all cultural products, including technologically oriented artifacts. Moreover, technologies themselves exert vital influence on the development of aesthetics in the realm of art. Exploring technologies for their aesthetic qualities provides insights into aspects of their material realization that might otherwise be overlooked. In his study of the "Kilmer complex" Barney Mergen explores the impulse to construct technologies "not meant to be seen". As he reveals, the choice to design cell phone towers to masquerade as trees, rendering them "invisible", reflect myriad culturally mediated assumptions. Similarly, Margaret

Weitekamp investigates toys as a means for "naturalizing" modern technologies, transforming spaceflight from something potentially threatening to something safe, appealing, and even cute. As essays by Bryan DeWalt, Alison Taubman, and Martha Fleming demonstrate, the environment of the museum provides an ideal setting for teasing out some of the technological aesthetics of art and some of the aesthetic attributes of technology and its representation. The photographic practice of Yousuf Karsh reveals itself as a fascinating intersection of artistic, technological, and political trends when explored through an exhibition jointly hosted by the Canada Science and Technology Museum and the Portrait Gallery of Canada. Alison Taubman and Martha Fleming examine the interpretative aesthetics present in museum themselves, particularly as specific technologies are selected to illustrate nation building or the evolution of medical practice.

Together, these studies reveal that assessments of aesthetics are not purely subjective. Rather historically grounded principles underlie desirable landscapes, mathematical proportions shape perceptions of friendliness, and technologies carry with them, in their very construction, the histories of their creation, use, and purpose.

The third section, "Artists Interpret Science and Technology" describes how important it is to bring unfettered creative thought to fields generally recognized for their "useful" outcomes. In this section, historians of art, science, and culture explore the myriad ways that artists have engaged science and technology. These interdisciplinary connections are both international and transhistoric, with essays exploring the work of artists from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States from the eighteenth century to the present. Beginning with David Bjelajac's analysis of John Singleton Copley's symbolic exploration of medicine, healing and alchemy in *Watson and the Shark*, this section is organized chronologically. Essays by Tom D. Crouch, Christine Mullen Kreamer, Peggy Aldrich Kidwell, J. D. Talasek, Elizabeth A. Kessler, and Anne Collins Goodyear delves into

the materiality of the artistic intersection with science and/or technology. From scrapbooks full of clippings or symbolic representations of cosmic stories to the glass plates that capture starlight or the medical technologies that manifest human genes, physical things link artists, science and technology. This section concludes with a three-part case study focusing on a recent collaboration between artist Shih-Chieh Huang and marine biologist Lynne R. Parenti examining their groundbreaking exploration of marine phosphorescence. Program organizer Jane Milosch explains the context of their partnership, coordinated by the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (SARF) program. The SARF program positions artistic explorations as a form of intellectual inquiry, based on the premise that artists, like other intellectuals, have rigorous methods for connecting and offering new insights into a broad range of fields of knowledge, including science and technology. As this variety of topics and approaches demonstrates, the realms of mathematics, science, and technology stimulate the artistic imagination with glimpses into technologies of the future, new modes of organizing information, and new ways of understanding the self. Through

their imaginative engagement with the culture of science and technology, artists provide new avenues for understanding how science and technology shape (and have shaped) our world.

SUMMARY

Recommended: As a collection of essays, a sourcebook for graduate or undergraduate seminars, and a resource for museum professionals, *Analyzing Art and Aesthetics* not only provides an in-depth framework for thinking about the topics addressed in these pages but also offers lessons with a much broader application. We hope that these essays will help museum studies students think about how to exhibit scientific and technological artifacts, art historians to rethink the ramifications of science and technology for the development of visual culture, and historians of science and technology to reconsider the aesthetic dimensions of the material they study. Above all, we hope that these essays, drawn from a broad range of disciplines, will demonstrate the benefit of interdisciplinary study for reinterpreting the rich material culture we occupy.