“TRUE JUST ART”

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“the artwork must live up to its own internal demands, one of which is to live up to more than its own internal demands”

(Lambert Zuidervaart, p. 208)

"A particular accomplishment of aesthetic intuition is to make present in their nontransparency the unrecognized and unused possibilities that emerge here [consciously lived presence]"

(Martin Seel, p. 16).
I. INTRODUCTION

How are we to understand the relationships among art, justice, and truth? They are distinct philosophical concepts and concerns. But some kinds of art contribute to social justice, or claim to do so. Should art and justice be conceived separately or jointly when we analyze art aspiring to make such contributions? And what does truth have to do with the art/justice connection, especially if we understand art as the realm of appearance? Finally, if truth is involved, does it have to be distinctively artistic truth, implying that appearance is not only compatible with truth but possibly a distinct sphere of truth?

Lambert Zuidervaart and Martin Seel provoke these kinds of questions, especially when their work is analyzed in consort. Like Zuidervaart, I am interested in art that is relevant to social justice, but I am not convinced that artistic truth is needed to secure this relevance. Historically, starting with Plato’s epistemological, if not metaphysical, distinction between truth/reality and appearance/art, art has almost always suffered politically as well as ontologically when it has been conceived in relation to truth. I worry that this will still be the case even if truth is artistic, and even if truth were reconceived in the image of art (e.g., truth as disclosure), as Martin Heidegger advocates. At the same time, however, I am not convinced that understanding art first and foremost in terms of the concept of “appearance” (and notably without reference to truth) will
enable us to link art and justice in any meaningfully political way. So let me explain my concerns and see what other alternatives there are to understand how art qua appearance might contribute to social justice.

Before I address the above questions, however, let me identify more of my agreements with Zuidervaart and Seel because we agree on some methodological and substantial issues, which should contextualize and temper my critical remarks.

First of all, I agree with one of Zuidervaart’s main methodological aims, namely, to “recast philosophical theories to address recent developments in art” (p. 219, fn. 4). Contemporary aesthetics should indeed be calibrated to contemporary art.² Seel makes a compatible claim in saying that the arts “set the decisive test that aesthetics has to stand” (p. xii).³ And he adds: "This has always been the task of philosophical aesthetics: to be an apology of aesthetic practice, while drawing on an understanding of its best possibilities" (p. 36).

Also, contrary to the dominant tendency in modern and contemporary art theory to understand art in terms of an anti-aesthetic stance, Seel argues that the particularity of art “must find expression in art’s aesthetic particularity” (p. xii).⁴ As the author of two books on the anti-aesthetic stance in art, aesthetics, and art theory (in which I argue that only by being attentive to the aesthetic dimension of contemporary art can we understand it), I could not more heartily agree with
Seel’s strategy and aim. Here, Zuidervaart concurs, for he wants “to counter recent anti-aesthetic rhetoric” in art theory (p. 221, fn. 24).^5

I also welcome Seel’s strong defense of the importance of aesthetics within philosophy, on theoretical as well as practical grounds:

[From the perspective of *theoretical* philosophy, aesthetics makes an indispensable contribution] because it uncovers a dimension of reality that evades epistemic fixation but is nonetheless an aspect of knowable reality (p. 17).

[From the prospective of *practical* philosophy, aesthetics makes an indispensable contribution] because it is concerned with a particular possibility for human life, one that discloses the presence of one’s own being as an end in itself (p. 18).

Now let’s see exactly what art’s indispensable contributions are and what truth’s got to do with them, especially when art is also just. In the end, I will agree with Zuidervaart that “the societal importance of the arts depends to a notable degree on their aesthetic worth” (p. 213), but disagree that aesthetic worth in turn depends on artistic truth. And I will agree with Seel that the concept of appearance is vital to any aesthetic theory, but will disagree that we can fully articulate this concept without taking into account the seemingly nonartistic interests integrally tied to appearance as art.
II. CONCERNS ABOUT ARTISTIC TRUTH

It is clear that most modern or contemporary philosophers who defend a notion of artistic truth are challenging Plato’s characterization of art as being doubly removed from the Forms and thus from truth – the artist’s bed imitates the carpenter’s bed which imitates the Form of the bed. They argue not only that art is no longer merely a lie, deception, or illusion but that it has cognitive value and even that there is _artistic_ truth. But it is possible to elevate art out of the cave to which Plato condemned it ontologically (as well as epistemologically) without claiming that there is such a thing as artistic truth. Arthur C. Danto argues, for example, that contemporary art, starting with Pop, achieved an ontological victory by transfiguring the commonplace into art and that it did so using only (the concept of) embodied meaning, not truth. In addition, there are examples in contemporary French philosophy where the traditional conception of propositional truth is questioned as a way of achieving an ontological victory for art. For example, Jacques Derrida challenges Heidegger’s conception of truth in art as a way to establish a philosophical place for art, even suggesting at times that art replace philosophy. The list could go on.

Against the background of these various philosophical alternatives to the Platonic conception of art that do not rely on truth, Zuidervaart and Seel pursue instead the Hegel-Heidegger-Adorno tradition. Why this preference?
I think one answer can be found in Hans-Georg Gadamer, who is motivated to defend truth in art (in the first part of *Truth and Method*) by the alleged subjectivization of art and aesthetics in modernity from the eighteenth century to the present, starting in aesthetics with Kant. Emerging in the eighteenth century, aesthetics is itself an artifact of the subjectivization of art within modern culture as a whole, not just within philosophy. Starting in the nineteenth century, especially with Hegel, truth is offered as the counterweight to art’s subjectivization. Heidegger is an heir to this strategy, for he focused on Van Gogh’s art, a symbol of modern self-expressive art, while offering his alternative conception of truth as the origin of art.

As I have argued elsewhere, I do not think Heidegger’s strategy works, nor Gadamer’s, but not simply because they do not make persuasive philosophical arguments. The basic reason is that the problem is not one that will yield to philosophical argumentation alone. It is a larger cultural and historical problem.

What concerns me is that because aesthetics, like art, is invariably linked to subjectivity, any critique of the subjectivity of aesthetics typically entails a critique of aesthetics – witness Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s critiques of aesthetics. This is one of the myriad reasons for the persistence of the anti-aesthetic stance in modern and contemporary art theory. But this stance is a
mistake, as Seel argues, albeit while having different concerns: "This protest against an exaggerated subjectivization of aesthetics is by no means an objection to the eminence of artistic appearing. Quite the opposite. What is precisely of importance to him [Heidegger – but also to Seel] is an appropriate concept of this appearing" (p. 12). I am also interested in an appropriate concept of appearing, but for me, part of the appropriateness is that appearing also be compatible with art’s subjectivity so that we can recognize and realize the political potential of art, which was not Heidegger’s concern. It is not clear whether it is Seel’s concern either (at least in Aesthetics of Appearing), though he acknowledges that aesthetic interest does not exclude other interests.13 My difference with Seel here is that some of the “other” interests are not secondary to art (“even if action goes further”) but are in fact integral to the practice of art. I think Zuidervaart makes my point well, if unwittingly, when he says that “the artwork must live up to its own internal demands, one of which is to live up to more than its own internal demands” (p. 208).

So what is “appearing” that is subjective, yet political as well as aesthetic? Here, I think we need a conception of “appearing with” to account for the subjectivity of art in such a way that the result is the intersubjectivity of art (to use a once popular but now virtually defunct word).14 For a work of art does not appear to just one person, though we think of it phenomenologically as
appearing to people individually and variously. The intersubjectivity of the subject of art is the counterpart of the objectivity of the art object, with the latter being a function of the object’s materiality. To use Seel’s terms, aesthetic appearing has a material presence that can be responded to in a multiplicity of subjective ways, but this multiplicity, what he calls the play of appearances in/of “the aesthetic appearing of an object,” is also objectively present. That is, the multiplicity of subjective responses to an aesthetic appearing is not evidence that the appearing is merely subjective but, rather, that it is also objective. Subjective perception that is also objective is shared perception, but it is not simply perception that achieves objectivity by being shared. One source of this objectivity is the fact that, as Seel argues, aesthetic perception is also durational, though focused in the here and now, because it is a process, that is, it comprises not so much what appears but the process of appearing: "The aesthetic object is the object of a genuine form of perception that is concerned not with some of its objects appearances [Erscheinungen] but with their process of appearing [Erscheinen]" (pp. 3-4). My disagreement with Seel at this point is that he insists that such perception is for the sake of appearing: "To apprehend something in the process of its appearing for the sake of its appearing is a focal point of all aesthetic perception" (p. 14; italics added). By contrast, if appearing is understood as “appearing with,” it includes the others to whom the
object is appearing and, moreover, they – the participants – become integral to
the appearing as those for the sake of whom there is an appearing. To clarify
“appearing with,” consider Zuidervaart notion of “imaginative disclosure,”
which he describes as “an intersubjective process of exploring, interpreting, and
presenting aesthetic signs under the triple expectation of authenticity,
significance, and integrity” (p. 202).20 Imaginative disclosure, like art itself, is
subjective yet objective, individual yet collective. In the end, I want to
understand this imaginative process of participating in objective aesthetic
appearances without appealing to truth – but while adding justice.

III. TRUTH AND THE SOCIAL IMPORT OF ART
Zuidervaart links the “import” of art and the “truth” (throughout Artistic Truth).
For example, he says “Adorno’s idea [of Wahrheitsgehalt] allows one to attribute a
non-propositional import to art phenomena that is true or false but is neither
presentational…nor expressive”; to account for this import, Zuidervaart
continues, one needs a full-fledged “truth theory – roughly, what truth is, what it
means, and what it does” (p. 6; italics added).21

Zuidervaart’s claims about artistic truth are deeply Adornian, but they are
also reminiscent of Gadamer’s claim about artistic truth in Truth and Method: "The
fact that through a work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any
other way constitutes the philosophical importance of art, which asserts itself against all attempts to rationalize it away."\textsuperscript{22} This connection is hardly surprising since Zuidervaart calls his approach to art “critical hermeneutics,” suggesting an Adorno-inspired mixture of Gadamer and Michel Foucault.\textsuperscript{23} But this connection is also problematically revealing because Gadamer is clearly interested only in the “philosophical importance of art,” not its social import, while Zuidervaart is clearly interested in art’s social import. But is he possibly conflating the two types of import? He seems to believe that art’s social import is in some sense grounded in its philosophical import: artistic import implies that art guides our understanding of the public’s “interpretive needs,” but art cannot provide such guidance without artistic truth.

Consider Zuidervaart’s use of the concepts of “disclosure” and “validity” (p. 118). If we claim that art is disclose, that it can reveal “things” that we may not be able to experience in other ways, as both Zuidervaart and Seel argue, we need to be able to validate our claim. Truth is one type of validity, following Jürgen Habermas’s schema of validity, which Zuidervaart adopts, with qualifications.\textsuperscript{24} But if we claim that art has social import and recognize that such a claim is subject to truth conditions, that does not mean that we are committed to the view that there is such a thing as \underline{artistic truth}.\textsuperscript{25}
Such a claim about artistic truth seems to be Heidegger’s innovation or conflation, depending on how you look at it. He believes not only that art can disclose truths about things, such as the equipmentality of equipment (e.g., regarding a pair of shoes depicted in a Van Gogh painting), but that in doing so it reveals two other truths: a truth about art, namely, that it can disclose truth; and a truth about truth, namely, that the way truth is disclosed in art (via the tension between Earth and World) is also the way every truth is disclosed, concealing and unconcealing itself at the same time. The combination of these three truths (a truth disclosed in art; a truth about art as being disclosive of truth; and a truth about truth, which happens to be disclosed in art) is the substance of Heidegger’s claim that truth is the origin of the work of art, that truth is at work in the work of art. But the third truth is the key to his claim about art’s origin. Zuidervaart seems to be saying something similar, implicitly, by insisting that for art to have social import, it not only must disclose truths but truth itself must be artistic.

Zuidervaart seems to conflate two interrelated claims:

(a) It is true that art is disclosive (by virtue of its imaginative cogency).

and

(b) What art discloses is true.\(^{26}\)

With a third, Heideggerian-like claim:
(c) What art discloses is a truth about truth, rendering truth artistic. That is, Zuidervaart seems to believe that we cannot make a case for (a) and (b) unless we accept (c).  

At the same time, Zuidervaart breaks from Heidegger at a key point by rejecting the Heideggerian standard that a disclosure in art is true only if it comports with authenticity, our ability to live facing our being-towards-death. Zuidervaart argues instead that the standard should be what is “life-promoting and life-sustaining fidelity to principles that [we] hold in common and that hold [us] in common” (p. 100). At this point, he is appealing to a political principle about “societal flourishing” (p. 202), which is why he feels compelled to link art theory with social theory.  

I welcome Zuidervaart’s shift from metaphysics to politics, but I want to ask why the link between art theory and social theory is not enough. Why do we need artistic truth, which would only bring us back into Heidegger’s world, which I believe is deeply anti-aesthetic because of his residual critique of the subjectivization of art and aesthetics.

IV. ART, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE PUBLIC

Zuidervaart says there are two distinct but, for him, related spheres of discussion of artistic truth: philosophy (aesthetics) and art. He claims that artistic truth has fallen on hard times in both spheres because of three main challenges: (1) the “social constructedness” of contemporary art, as distinct from the autonomy of
modernist art; (2) the primacy of context over form; and (3) the “embrace of contemporary contingency,” as distinct from the “orientation to the future” (utopianism?) that characterized modernism (p. 1). “These developments dramatically reconfigure the field onto which the idea of artistic truth must map” (p. 1).

I see how social construction, context, and contingency are challenges to certain contemporary philosophical conceptions of truth, though even I think Donald Davidson’s semantic conception of truth is compatible with these challenges, at least according to Richard Rorty’s pragmatist account of it. In any case, I do not see how social construction, context, and contingency challenge contemporary art. In fact, artists and art theorists alike have been invigorated by these so-called challenges, believing that they allow art to break from narrow conceptions autonomy, form, and futurism (at least, say, Clement Greenberg’s account of them), thereby opening more possibilities for art. At the same time, when artists and theorists seem willing (and at times eager) to avow art’s heteronomy (social dependence or support), they avow it as a condition for art’s autonomy, not as a rejection of any and all notions of autonomy. The emphasis on context – in participatory art, for example – is not exclusive of form if, as Umberto Eco argues in his theory of the “open work” of art, art is open (has a context) because of its form so we need not worry about its losing form when it is
open (in its context). As for art’s commitment to the future, it is very much alive still, though, as we will see more later on, the future lives in the here and now (along with Adorno’s conception of the unrealized or suppressed past).

I do not see that many people in the art sphere are committed to restoring artistic truth, as Zuidervaart claims. He seems to have in mind the art world efforts to defend art and believes that to defend art successfully, one must make reference to artistic truth: “a new theory of artistic truth is needed to do justice to the arts in their contemporary institutional settings” (p. 217). It is not that he believes contemporary artists are talking explicitly about truth, though some may. He points instead to the fact that “they clearly seek ways in which their publics can pursue cultural orientation through interactively creating, exploring, and presenting aesthetic signs” (p. 218). And he (again) insists that art cannot provide such orientation without truth. Acknowledging that the art world may actually resist any talk of truth, Zuidervaart responds by invoking Adorno’s claim that, although what contemporary art needs most is “a philosophical idea of artistic truth,” it is at the same time what it resists most (p. ??). I take this resistance more seriously than Zuidervaart does because, if aesthetics is to be calibrated to contemporary art, it has to take seriously art’s attempts to achieve its ends, political and otherwise – without truth. We still need to critique these
ends and efforts to realize them, and truth claims will be made along the way. But **artistic** truth may only be a barrier on this way.

### V. AESTHETIC PERCEPTION

Seel’s well-articulated conception of “appearance” hinges on his account of aesthetic perception (intuition) in the context of perception in general:

...an aesthetic intuition can be exercised solely in the context of a perception equipped with names and general concepts; only within this framework is it possible to confront something in its particularity (41).\(^{32}\)

Our aesthetic perception of individuality or particularity presupposes our grasp of general or universal concepts, which means we first have to be able to highlight an object conceptually in its determinateness, in principle, in order to perceive its individuality (or, indeterminacy) aesthetically.\(^{33}\) This makes aesthetic perception secondary, even derivative.

Yet Seel also claims that artworks “require a perception different from [from the perception employed in] all other objects of perception” (p. 105) and, as a result, there is something in aesthetic perception that we cannot experience elsewhere else.\(^{34}\) As I understand it, that “something” is particularity. How can the earlier claim that aesthetic perception is derivative be reconciled with the claim that it offers us something unique? My worry is that art gets lost in Seel’s
account of aesthetic perception, even though a general motivation for it is a defense of the aesthetics of appearance and thus of art. More specifically, what is lost is the very individuality or particularity of objects to which art provides us (possibly unique) access.

Let me express the worry in terms of a question: What does aesthetic perception really provide, according to Seel?

Aesthetic are those objects that in their appearing stand out more or less radically from their conceptually determinable exterior image, sound, or feel. They are given to us in an outstandingly sensuous manner; they are grasped by us in an outstandingly sensuous way (p. 22).35

How can I distinguish my aesthetic perception from my general sensuous perception? By focusing on particularity rather than generality? But that answer assumes what it is meant to clarify – particularity? How do I know what it means to focus on particularity if I have to start (even just logically) with generality to arrive at it? Knowing that the difference between the two modes of perception may be one of degree rather than of kind, as I think Seel believes, does not clarify the difference.36 Saying that aesthetic objects are perceived in an "outstandingly sensuous manner" does not help either, because "outstandingly" is meant to highlight or capture the object’s particularity, presumably, and I am still not sure what that is.37 Seel seems to answer these kinds of concern by clarifying the shared perceptual context – “the entire sensuous receptivity of human beings” (p. 212, fn. 1) – within which general and aesthetic modes of
perception take place. But this context is too broad and, in any case, it is the contrast between these modes that we are trying to clarify and knowing the context within which the contrast plays out does not provide such clarification.

Let me bring Judith Butler’s recent work into the discussion because she makes some distinctions that are relevant and helpful. She distinguishes between the apprehension and recognition of injustice and argues that we can recognize an injustice cognitively only if we first apprehend it sensuously. Moreover, she argues that we can apprehend an injustice mainly, if not only, through the sense experience of works of art (or other forms of representation, such as journalistic photographs) that render the injustice sensible. Artistic apprehension is important (to use a term Butler does not use) in a predicament where the conceptual scheme of recognition (e.g., liberal political theory) is the cause of the exclusion of particular individuals, such as queer people or undocumented immigrants whose rights as humans, not merely as citizens, are not fully recognized within the prevailing political scheme. The struggle for recognition for these individuals requires stepping outside that scheme and art becomes the space of this struggle, the space where that scheme is itself an object of critique. Here, I might quote a key line from Seel’s own account of appearing: "A particular accomplishment of aesthetic intuition is to make present in their nontransparency the unrecognized and unused possibilities that emerge here
[consciously lived presence]" (16; underlining added). Sensuous experience
occasioned by art enables us to become aware of what is unrecognized through
conceptual thinking alone. In short, recognition of the unrecognized requires
apprehension and aesthetic perception makes such apprehension possible.

To clarify Butler's claims and their relevance to this discussion, let me
introduce the artwork of Adrian Piper. She is relevant here not only because she
is a philosopher and a conceptual artist, but especially because one of her pivotal
concepts is the “indexical present,” which she defines as “the concrete,
immediate here-and-now“:

My work springs from a belief that we are transformed – and occasionally
reformed – by immediate experience, independently of our abstract
evaluations of it and despite our attempts to resist it.41

Though Seel may not endorse this connection, Piper’s indexical present is
reminiscent of his own notion of the “here and now” : ”Aesthetic intuition is a
radical form of residency in the here and now” (p. 33). But there is a distinct
difference here, which has to do with difference: while Piper sees the indexical
present as an opportunity for us to come to know the Other (in her case, a Black
Other, the Other as Black), Seel sees it an occasion for us to come to know
ourselves: “In this attentiveness to the momentary play of appearances, there
emerges an intuiting awareness of presence – and awareness of a here and now
that also encompasses an awareness of my here and now” (p. 32).42
In pointing out this difference between Seel and Piper, however, I am not suggesting that we have to choose between self-consciousness and consciousness of the Other. Rather, I want to emphasize that the “here and now,” the “indexical present,” is a very rich experiential space that is structured, in Piper’s words again, by an “immediate relationship” “between the art object and the viewer as a kind of medium for social relations” – and a form of what I earlier called “appearing with.” Aesthetic theory needs to capture this richness and social relations – self-consciousness and consciousness of the Other together. Moreover, I want to emphasize that the here and now is the space of particularity created and sustained primarily, if not exclusively, by art. The difference between Seel, on the one hand, and Butler and Piper, on the other, is whether (consciousness of) particularity presupposes (consciousness of) universality or whether we first apprehend particularity while resisting generality or universality.44

VI. CONCLUSION

My title, “True Just Art,” can mean a number of different things, depending on where the emphasis is placed and, of course, on how the three underlying concepts – truth, justice, art – are understood. For example, it can mean that “just art” is true, making art “just” and “true” at the same time. However, unless we stipulate that all just art is true, it is sometimes not true. What does that
mean? Does it mean that “just art” is sometimes false? But what is “false just art”?

(a) Is “false just art” a case of art aspiring to be just that fails? Then what remains? Is it just (i.e., merely) art?
(b) Or, is “false just art” actually “unjust art,” that is, art that serves the cause of injustice, despite any intentions to be just?
(c) Or, is “false just art” simply not art? This would imply that art aspiring to be just must truly be just in order to be art.

These options and permutations get increasingly complicated until and unless we sort out the underlying ontology of art and its relationship to justice and truth. Whatever the title means, however, art should be the subject, and ‘true’ should be a modifier and qualifier of “just art” rather than a restriction on the potential of art to contribute to justice.
1At the very beginning of *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls says that justice is “the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought” (TJ, p. 3). Justice and truth are fundamental virtues but in different domains. However, By contrast, Jürgen Habermas, who sometimes debated with Rawls about justice, insists that a theory of truth is vital to any conception of justice. But he does not argue that justice is grounded in truth; rather, truth and justice are considered equiprimordial components of his theory of communicative action, which, among other things, entails a Kantian conception of separate, but equal types and spheres of validity claims: truth, rightness (e.g., justice), sincerity (e.g., expression).

Rawls does not discuss art in his theory of justice, nor in any of his writings, to my knowledge; and Habermas does give art a place in the theory of communicative action, albeit as involving only a relatively minor type of validity claim concerned with expression. If we now throw art into the justice and truth mix here, what is the result? Art is different from truth and justice because it is a practice, whereas justice and truth are regulative concepts for our theoretical or practical activities. If art were to have its own “first virtue,” it would presumably be beauty, as it has been historically, though today beauty would have to be broadly construed – everything from the beautiful to the ugly – to include all the aesthetic predicates one might experience in contemporary art or use to judge it. In any case, art is a not a “first virtue” and is instead dependent on beauty or else truth or justice, if it wants to be virtuous, which I take to mean if it is to excel at what it does. Or, perhaps because of the relative absence of the traditional conception of beauty in modern and contemporary art, art is now dependent on both justice and truth, thereby linking art theory with both social theory and truth theory. Such links are Zuidervaart’s ambition. But where is beauty in his combined theories? Switching to Seel, I can see where beauty is present in the form of “appearing,” but I wonder how the process of “appearing,” as he understands it, can be linked with justice in a way that it is one of art’s internal demands?

Elaine Scarry’s *On Beauty and Being Just* is an attempt to link a classical, pre-modern notion of beauty (qua symmetry, equal in all directions) with a modern conception of justice as fairness (Rawls). While she makes a powerful case for the link between beauty and justice, or art and ethics/politics, I think her case would be strengthened if she were to adopt a more modern conception of beauty or a conception of art without beauty. She might also need a different conception of justice, too.
This may seem like an obvious methodological principle because it is one that is common in other fields of philosophy, especially in the philosophy of science and the philosophy of mind, fields that are well calibrated to their respective counterparts in the empirical sciences. But analytic, philosophical aesthetics in the U.S. and England is largely at odds with this move because it deliberately models aesthetics on one of the leading fields of philosophy, such as the philosophy of mind (e.g., by making a turn to cognitive science) with the hope that by doing so it will enhance the status of aesthetics in philosophy.

I say “deliberately” because the American Society for Aesthetics, for example, had a committee on the status of aesthetics in the profession (of which I was a member), which recommended precisely this strategy. To give an even more recent example, a number of analytic aestheticians have recently introduced meta-aesthetics, on the model of meta-ethics, which, as far as I can see, removes aesthetics further from art.

Seel immediately adds the important point that aesthetics can stand the test of the arts only if it embraces the “extra-artistic phenomena of the aesthetic – nature, decoration and design, fashion and sport, as well as all the other occasions of sensuous alertness that is an end in itself” (p. xii). Rather than obscure or weaken the aesthetic particularity of art, Seel argues that the broadening of the aesthetic to the extra-artistic actually makes it more possible for us to understand the arts in terms of how their “objects differ not only from other things but also from other aesthetic objects and events” (p. xii).

Seel specifically critiques Arthur C. Danto’s turn away from aesthetics (pp. 119-22).

Elsewhere, Zuidervaart says he refuses “to embrace the deaestheticization of either art or culture” (p. 65).

Richard Wollheim defends a similar ontological victory in art, in effect, when he develops his conception of seeing-as, which, while set against the background of realism, does not depend on truth, at least not in any direct way.

Zuidervaart is insistent that, if there is artistic truth, it is “located in something other than propositions” (p. 5). In the end, truth is located in the work, as it is for Adorno and Heidegger (p. 123).

Similarly, Michael Foucault argues that art has important epistemological as well political roles, all without truth (except in his late work where truth is discussed as a virtue).

Zuidervaart compares poststructuralist critiques of truth to deflationary accounts of truth in analytic philosophy (p. 6).
Holding Kant responsible for the alleged subjectivization of art and aesthetics is a mistake, though it is true that he accepted the separation of art from truth and the inherent subjectivity of aesthetic judgment (if not of aesthetic experience). For he also insisted that aesthetic judgment can be universal, in principle, which initiated his struggle with the seemingly oxymoronic notion of “subjective universality.” That he engaged in this struggle without appealing to any notion of artistic truth is instructive, I think, as it represents an alternative to the Hegelian-Heideggerian-Gadamerian lineage that Zuidervaart and Seel sustain (I will leave Friedrich Nietzsche out of the picture for now, but he is clearly part of the story here).

Heidegger’s strategy was, in short, to reconceive Van Gogh’s art in terms of truth, hoping that he could likewise reconceive the entire tradition of modern art that Van Gogh symbolized.

Similarly, Walter Benjamin argues that aura has been lost in modern art as the result of the cultural development of mechanical modes of reproduction (e.g., photography and film), not as a result of any philosophical developments.

For example, Seel argues that aesthetic intuition “is always distinguishable by not being an exclusively purposeful activity and by being alert to a dysfunctional presence of phenomena. It is always concerned with sensing its objects, even if action itself goes further and takes the path of cognitive or instrumental appropriation” (p. 29). He adds: “Aesthetic intuition can accompany other activities that are themselves not aesthetic actions—such as listening to music while driving in heavy traffic” (p. 29). Of course, driving is not exactly politics, but Seel leaves room for more links between aesthetic and other interests.

One model for “appearing with” is Habermas’s notion of communicative rationality, which could be read as a form of “rationality with” in contrast to “instrumental (means/end) rationality” which excludes people (i.e., the “with”). Also, “appearing with” might also be a mixture of Zuidervaart’s notions of the “social” and the “postsubjective.” On his account, authenticity is linked to the personal, significance with the social, and integrity with the postsubjective (pp. 133-34).

Seel: "the meaning of aesthetic practice: in the multifarious forms of this practice we are drawn into a play for the intuition of presence" (xiii).

Seel: "The aesthetic appearing of an object is a play of its appearances" (37).
As Seel notes, the fact that perception is subjective does not mean that it is always right, as David Hume discussed in “On the Standard of Taste” while responding to the skeptic who insisted that sentiment is always right. Nor does it mean that subjective perception is merely subjective, to use Kant’s term for qualifying the kind of subjectivity associated with aesthetic experience and judgment. Subjective perception can also be wrong, but, not to worry, because the possibility of error is tied to its being objective. The question, of course, is what objectivity means here.

As we know, Kant grounded this objectivity – even universality – in the free play of the cognitive powers – reason, imagination, and understanding: if these powers are universal, and the pleasure associated with aesthetic experience is construed as the effect of the free play of those powers, then the effect or pleasure can be universal as well.

Seel: "Yet this concentration on the momentary appearing of things is always at the same time an attentiveness to the situation of perception of their appearing—and thus reflection on the immediate presence in which this perception is executed. Anesthetic attentiveness to what happens in the external world is thus inattentiveness to ourselves too: to the moment here and now. In addition, aesthetic attentiveness to the objects of art is frequently and attentiveness to situations in which we do not find ourselves and perhaps never will: to a moment now and never” (16).

Of course, Zuidervaart also links authenticity, significance, and integrity to truth, but that is the link I objected to elsewhere.

On p. 208, Zuidervaart translates (equates) the “sociohistorical import” of art with its Gehalt (as in Wahrheitsgehalt).

Zuidervaart: “If my own account of artistic truth is correct, then questions about the significance of artworks necessarily lead to questions of integrity, just as interpretations of an artwork’s import necessarily guide interpretations of a public’s interpretative needs in relationship to the artwork” (p. 211).

Elsewhere, he argues that artistic truth has three dimensions: authenticity, significance, integrity (p. 208): Authenticity (“the expectation that art phenomena be true with respect to the experience or vision from which competent art making allows them to rise”) and significance apply to all art in modern Western societies, whereas integrity “pertains primarily to those art products which are institutionally constituted as artworks” (p. 208). My refrain here is: Why can’t we talk about authenticity, significance, and integrity without truth?

Gadamer, Truth and Method, tr. Joel Weinsheimer…, p. ??.

Zuidervaart, Introduction, entitled “Critical Hermeneutics”; and page 222, fn. 27, where he acknowledges that he borrowed the phrase ‘critical hermeneutics’
from Hans Koegler, who combines Gadamer and Foucault. See Koegler,… For a related version of critical hermeneutics, see also Grant Kester…

24 See Zuidervaart, pp. …

25 This would involves Zuidervaart’s shift from “art talk” to “art discourse,” where the latter “thematizes the validity dimensions” of the former, but without artistic truth (pp. 134-35).

26 Discussing Adorno, Zuidervaart argues that “every work having import (Gehalt) calls for judgments about the truth or falsity of its import” (p. 123). Fine, but such judgments do not justify artistic truth.

27 To make this point in terms of Zuidervaart’s equation between “true with respect to” and “imaginatively disclosive of” (p. 208), made in his clarification of “authenticity,” I am suggesting that a work can be imaginatively disclosive and we can assess whether what it is disclosive of is true, without adding the further claim that truth is artistic.

28 Zuidervaart even defines truth as “the life-giving disclosure of society” (9; 207).

29 Zuidervaart himself accepts historical contingency as an “unavoidable” feature of contemporary society (p. 65).

30 Zuidervaart argues in his conclusion that “For them [the artists whose work is discussed in the conclusion], as for philosophers who care about the future, the link between art and truth remains an urgent and protean question. It is the question why aesthetic worth is societally important. It is the question whether authenticity, significance, and integrity are necessary for the pursuit of solidarity and justice. It is the question how imagination can contribute to the historical opening of societal blockades. Indeed, it is the question of artistic truth” (p. 218).

31 Zuidervaart concedes the debate about artistic truth would be “interesting but unimportant” if it were indeed merely philosophers’ concern (p. 3).

32 The quote continues: “Only within this framework is it possible first to highlight something as a determined, a particular entity, and second to grasp it such that it comes to perception not in terms of one of its determinations or another but in its individuality.”

Seel: "Aesthetic appearing is thus a mode of the sensuous givenness of something. The relation of perception and aesthetic perception is determined within the domain of sensuously accessible phainomena. Aesthetic are those objects that in their appearing stand out more or less radically from their conceptually determinable exterior image, sound, or feel. They are given to us in an outstandingly sensuous manner; they are grasped by us in an outstandingly sensuous way" (p. 22).

For Seel, “intuition” is equivalent to “perception”: "In place of the concept ‘perception’ I sometimes use, for reasons of style, the concept of ‘intuition’ as a
designation for the entire sensuous receptivity of human beings, not just the sense of visual intuition" (p. 212, fn. 1).

33 Seel: “Only where concepts are in use can something be highlighted as this object and possibly perceived in its particularity” (41). Yet he also says that an object does not have to be fixed epistemically to be recognized aesthetically; the point is that we are not fixated on conceptual knowledge when we are engaged in aesthetic perception, though we must presuppose the conceptual framework that makes such fixation possible (p. 48).

Whereas Adorno emphasizes the nonconceptual dimension of aesthetic experience, Seel emphasizes the dependence of this same dimension on the conceptual, which seems to be his way of interpreting Kant’s notion of the free play of cognitive powers that accounts for the pleasure we experience in the presence of beauty.

34 Seel’s even stronger claim, which I imagine Zuidervaart might accept, is the following: "To say that it is phenomena of appearing that constitute the be-all and end-all of aesthetic behavior means to say that here, in attentiveness to what is appearing, something can be found or experienced that cannot be found or experienced anywhere else" (p. 36; underlining added). This means, among other things, that “No consciousness of one’s present is possible without aesthetic consciousness” (p. 16).

35 Seel continues: “This applies no less to articles of clothing and locomotives than to symphonies and novels, no less to grass on the side of the road than to the banal objects in the domain of modern art” (p. 22).

36 For example, Seel says that aesthetic perception is a "specific execution of sensuous perception (pp. 88-89).

37 If Seel’s account evokes earlier notions of the aesthetic attitude, it also resurrects critiques of that attitude. For more on the “aesthetic attitude” and critiques of it, see…

38 Seel: “The relation of perception and aesthetic perception is determined within the domain of sensuously accessible phainomena” (p. 22).

39 Seel includes all aesthetic objects, not just artistically aesthetic objects, within the scope of aesthetic perception, which I applaud, but it means that he cannot appeal to art alone to clarify aesthetic perception (unless he were to argue that aesthetic perception in art defines aesthetic perception overall).


41 Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present I,” p. ??; the quote continues:
“Because my creative commitment is inherently political, I am primarily motivated to do the work I do by a desire to effect concrete, positive, internal political change in the viewer, independently of – or in spite of – the viewer’s abstract aesthetic evaluation of my work.” Later, she says: “Work that draws the viewer into the indexical present provides a healthy antidote to xenophobia. Xenophobia expresses fear of the other’s Singularity through the imposition of inadequate, stereotyped categories of classification. Human beings are inherently conceptualizing creatures; we never have unmediated access to ‘raw experience’. But most of the categories by which we make sense of our experience are poorly drawn rules of thumb that rarely capture the essence of concrete particulars. We get into trouble when the concrete particulars. We distort or misidentify are other people. Holding certain kinds of other. people at arm's length makes it easier to get into this kind of trouble, because it relieves us of the opportunity to check our theories about them against the particulars of their presence. No amount of abstract analysis, no matter how astute or politically correct, can escape this trap, because xenophobia is merely an extreme tendency of which ordinary failures of vision and sensitivity are the norm.

Artwork that draws one into a relationship with the other in the indexical present trades easy classification and hence xenophobia—for a direct and immediate experience of the complexity of the other, and of one’s own responses to her. Experiencing the other in the indexical present teaches one how to see” (p. 248).

42 Seel sees aesthetic consciousness as being primarily about self-consciousness: "Attentiveness to what is appearing is therefore at the same time attentiveness to ourselves" (xi). “No consciousness of one’s present is possible without aesthetic consciousness” (16).


44 I think there is a connection worth exploring here, but not now, between this kind of resistance to universality and the earlier resistance I mentioned to artistic truth as a necessary component of the defense of contemporary art.

An example of resistance to generality/universality might be Occupy Wall Street, specifically its resistance to making any particular demands because making demands to a general/universal system implies the legitimacy of that system. Occupy’s intention, as I understand it (having been a nonresident member of Occupy Charlotte), was to indict the system itself. By “system,” they meant the economic system that generates the inequities between the 99% and the 1%, but also the set of all political parties – Democrat, Republican, Tea, or Libertarian – that, collectively not just individually, have failed to address the inequities or, worse, have created or perpetuated them. Art played an important
part in the Occupy movement, and the movement has in turn had a significant impact on contemporary art, especially participatory or socially-engaged art. Can we understand and explain art’s role here without a concept of artistic truth?