

The Captivating (and Rebellious) Act of “Thinking Together”: A Book Review of *Diversity of Aesthetics*

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Abstract:

This book review examines *Diversity of Aesthetics*, a recent book collection that addresses the timely issues of collective action, art and the complicity of heritage institutions in grand structures of race and capital. The review considers the book’s stylistic structure as a series of conversations and discusses its strengths and weaknesses. It recommends the book to scholars of art, social criticism, museums, and social movements, praising it as a captivating text.

Der fesselnde (und rebellische) Akt des „gemeinsamen Denkens“: Eine Buchbesprechung zu *Diversity of Aesthetics*

German Abstract:

Diese Buchbesprechung befasst sich mit der kürzlich erschienenen Buchsammlung *Diversity of Aesthetics*, die sich mit aktuellen Themen wie kollektivem Handeln, Kunst und der Komplizenschaft von Kulturerbe-Institutionen in großen Strukturen von *Race* und Kapital auseinandersetzt. Die Besprechung betrachtet die stilistische Struktur des Buches als eine Reihe von Gesprächen und diskutiert dessen Stärken und Schwächen. Sie empfiehlt das Buch Wissenschaftler_innen aus den Bereichen Kunst, Sozialkritik, Museen und sozialen Bewegungen und lobt es als faszinierenden Text.

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Petrosiants, Andreas and Jose Rosales (eds.): *Diversity of Aesthetics*. New York: Common Notions Press, 2025. 176 Pages, 20.00 USD. ISBN: 978-1945335310.

Following George Floyd’s death at the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis, in May 2020, a wave of protests, demonstrations and attacks to racialized monuments and buildings swept the globe. In the cultural field, questions of inequality, inclusion, racial representation and justice can be split into a periodization of ‘before’ and ‘post’ 2020. In the wake of the 2020 protests against racism, it is common to find mission statements and commitments to diversity, inclusion and equality (DIE) on the homepages of museums, galleries, universities and more.

Diversity of Aesthetics tackles themes of collective action and infrastructural systems of art, capital and culture in the post-2020 moment. The conversations took place at the height or soon after moments of collective protest across the globe. The collection brings together three conversations of artists, scholars, practitioners and activists with highly varied backgrounds and foci who all converge at the point of culture and collective action. The book was planned originally as a series of roundtable discussions to take place in the Spring of 2020 at the Emily Harvey Foundation in New York City, however, the global pandemic prevented this from happening. The insights gained during the period of the Coronavirus allowed editors and speaker-writers to collect and share “various conspiratorial anti-institutional and insurgent ‘speculative’ practices” (p. 9).

The book is theoretically underpinned by Marina Vishmidt’s prolific work on cultural, economic and social concerns in the art world and beyond. Vishmidt was an art theorist, writer and editor who thoroughly explored the interplay between art, labour and value while interspersing her analyses with consideration of greater societal structures. Vishmidt was central to the collection and unfortunately passed before its publication. The work is largely dedicated to her and her

work. Vishmidt's theoretical fingerprints can be seen across the three volumes as footnotes, references, citations and neologisms central to the conversation. A central theoretical framework of Vishmidt's that guides the discussions in the volumes is that of "infrastructural critique" (p. 8). The core idea of the theory is to look beyond the institutional structures of art, culture, society and capital in order to devise a new imaginary of being and importantly, being together.

The first volume offers practical and imaginative exercises of dissent in the art world. In this conversation, a panel of artists, practitioners, and theorists – Michael Rakowitz, Shellyne Rodriguez, Stephen Shukaitis and moderated by Andreas Petrossiants – explore the various possibilities of collective action in the art world outside the proverbial white cube. As the volumes are conversations, the verbatim transcriptions may not meet the standards of citational practices, but this is not the intention of the book. Indeed, the book's structure is a resistive form, weaving contemporary jargon and expletives between dense theoretical concepts. The matter of style therefore requires the reader to be flexible enough to keep up with the theoretical concerns while open to these theoretical ideas to be challenged or even dismissed.

The speakers in the volumes also express their dissatisfaction with form and language itself. Michael Rakowitz, for example, argues that statements about oppression and equality have been appropriated and reproduced to the point that they have become "anesthetized" (p. 175). As such, the panel argues that art must be embedded in communities, be functional and be lived rather than theorized. These concepts are referred to in various arenas across the world such as Iran, Minnesota and New York City. Readers will benefit from crucial insights that have heightened relevance for current issues in the same spaces. For example, consider the 2026 diasporic and domestic protests in Iran, as well as anti-Immigration and Customs and Enforcement (ICE) organizing efforts in Minnesota. Art is not merely theorized and critiqued as a cultural practice or leisurely pastime, but also as an arena for demonstration, community building, and collective dismantling. The conversations offer valuable insights to the realities of being a cultural worker or as Shellyne Rodriguez calls it, a "knowledge worker" (p. 21). The conversations in *Diversity of Aesthetics* offer exciting juxtapositions such as Rodriguez placing

an Adidas sneaker next to Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* to a class of young, inner city school kids on a visit to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) to show the tangled relationships of value, art, the viewer and the museum. These provocations are written in a language that is both highly conceptual and accessible to readers outside the academic world.

Readers searching for a more traditional style of art and cultural critique will still find it in abundance. The book continues in the footnotes, offering trails to concepts, theorists, and historical events such as the infamous *Art Strike* and Gustav Metzger's *Years without Art*, as well as more contemporary events, such as the MTL+ "Decolonize this Place" demonstrations. The conversations are less dialogue and more practices in "thinking together" (p. 60) while connecting the art worker to broader questions of labor and means of production.

The second volume continues the thematic thread of collective action and protest, with a focus on strikes in the 'Global South,' Iran, and actions led by migrants and asylum seekers across Europe. This volume flits between the art world and the factory, moving between arenas of culture and more conventional arenas of labor. The outcome of this parallelization is to show the ubiquity of resistance as well as the various faces it can take, whether of solidarity across class lines or underground approaches of organization. The work continues not as critique but rather as a roadmap and call for action.

The last volume, titled "Looting," is valuable for readers who may have been searching for a different textural dimension. Saidiya Hartman, Rinaldo Walcott and Christina Sharpe offer historical insights to the narrativization of looting and collective action. The conversation is moderated by Vicky Osterweil, who readers will recognize as the author of the incendiary book, *In Defense of Looting* (New York 2020). The conversation toys with the multitude of looting and positionality of the act as it relates to race as well as institutions such as Euro-American museums. It refers once again to collective protest and presents looting as direct action against racial capitalism. The conversation will be seen as a crucial discussion for practitioners and activists engaged in conversations around museums, provenance research and restitutive justice.

The conversations across the volumes when looked at collectively may appear somewhat convoluted. The exercise of bringing together contemporary matters of revolution, protest, art and cultural critique is one that requires heavy lifting. However, the endeavor is worth the work for the reader. *Diversity of Aesthetics* strongest suits is bringing together diverse, and sometimes, quite randomized combinations of respected voices from different fields, the result is a dizzying but powerful call to action and resistance.