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Introduction

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This issue began as an idea for a collective meditation on fantasy and the fantastical, the monstrous and the magical, and the aesthetic curiosities and conundrums implied thereby. The ideas submitted by our authors changed all that, altering how we editors conceived the issue and the theme and the general notion of "themes", consequently altering what this issue has become. As the journal grows and progresses, it becomes that much clearer that as a forum for aesthetic thought and philosophical, scholarly writing, EA ought to define itself by its dynamism: by flexibility as much as by the uncompromised standards of peer-review. With that goal in mind, we do not mourn the fantasy-themed section but gratefully celebrate the authors whose ideas made us think beyond it, reaffirming our commitment to dynamism.

Our contributors explore such a rich variety of aesthetic problems that it almost seems unfair to bind them together with any sort of common thread. But a superficial relationship does exist between the pieces, all of which in their own ways pose the question of the potency of ideas. Can ideas really change things? Can how thinking beings think about other beings affect the constitution and efficacy of those other beings? This is a

political question, an existential question, a phenomenological question, and an ontological question. Thus, and far from least of all, it is an aesthetic question. As but one of their critical accomplishments, the following essays deepen this question. They suggest that it will always be a question with dire implications and that if it has an answer, that answer might be horrifying. Although the very possibility of aesthetic practice and experience might well hinge on the supposition that ideas can affect the physical world, our contributors imply that the reach and effective power of ideas might be limited, even overestimated. For these authors, the power of ideas is an open question, therefore it always undermines itself. Perhaps, however, it is precisely as such that ideas are most powerful.

Jane Forsey begins with a meditation on Chardin, a painter who, endorsed by Louis XV, painted miniatures of cooking pots. At the height of the Rococo era, in Paris and at court of all places where opulence reigned supreme, Chardin almost obsessively insisted upon kitchenware. Centuries before Yuriko Saito and other aestheticians acknowledged the philosophical profundity of everyday aesthetics, what could a painter have meant to say with quotidian subjects? Possibly nothing, Forsey concludes, considering Chardin's circumstances. His works are neither formalistic experiments nor attempts to draw us into the rustic human lifeworld implied by the pots. And yet, firmly pre-Duchamp, are they really simply pots? Forsey suggests that what Chardin is getting at is the fact that in the face of *things*, humans sooner or later run out of things to say. By unassumingly depicting such humble subjects that his paintings exceed the limits of interpretation, Chardin painted nothing less than what Kant called "supersensible", the unknowable "thing-in-itself" which exceeds every thought's attempt to pin it down. Forsey's approach is not technically object-oriented, but in the interest of sparking further discussion of her piece, it is worth noting that from her implied perspective Chardin seems to foreshadow Graham Harman's powerful thesis that all entities withdraw from view even as they make appearances before other entities.[1] From this standpoint, ideas cannot shape "reality" at all – only how it appears. A question to consider in light of Forsey's piece might therefore concern the relationship of withdrawal to Enlightenment in Chardin's work and that of his contemporaries. In the burgeoning Age of Reason, where in Chardin's thinking did he find room to accommodate the limitations of ideas? How did he come to realize that the darkness beyond every frontier of knowledge could be found in a simple cooking pot?

Phenomenology refuses to make life any easier for ideas. In a close reading of Sartre's ambivalent views on imagination, Sarah Marshall notes

that ideas about things cannot escape their foundations in "real" or somehow *a priori* things. As we go about the world, our perceptions compile a storehouse of "real" knowledge, which we draw on when we use our imaginations. But imagination cannot summon any "real" object to presence; it only directs our attention to "analogical" yet potent "representatives" of objects. Thus in its own private realm, the imagination weaves prior experiences into transcendent yet keenly sensible phenomena. These imagined ("irreal") beings cannot be "possessed" by the subject who imagines them; indeed a subject can only act upon imagined objects in imaginary ways. As Marshall puts it, Sartre in fact "undermines any causal relationship between the 'I' and the will with respect to the image," this despite the fact that "the image is an act of consciousness."[2] Even "real," perceived objects are always more than we can perceive, "open[ing] upon an infinite surplus with respect to what is actually present to consciousness."[3] The implication is that despite Sartre's insistence on separate spheres of action for perception and imagination, in neither sphere can consciousness fully apprehend or affect its objects. Where then is the autonomy of consciousness? Where is its power and its consequence?

The autonomy of ideas – and thus ideas' ability to influence physical events and "practical" relationships – seems to fare no better in the political realm. As Ruben Yepes observes in his critical assessment of Rancière's aesthetic politics, what we normally call "politics" (though Rancière prefers the term "police") refers to how entities are arranged and perceptibly assigned to various roles. Humans must be able to sense these arrangements; otherwise they could not order our world as we know politics do. Thus as "distributions of the sensible," politics are inherently aesthetic in the Greek sense (αἰσθητικός: pertaining to the physical senses) *and* presumably susceptible to the influence of aesthetic ideas and practices such as those that come to life in art.[4] In fact Rancière argues that among art's greatest advantages are its autonomy from politics and its ability to interrupt distributions of the sensible: art disrupts political status quos in the interests of freedom and change. What does and does not count as art is therefore an important political question. The problem is, as Yepes shows, art can only be considered "autonomous" in relation to that from which it is autonomous: to divorce itself from politics, art must in some sense bind itself to politics. So the regimes that determine and "police" distributions of the sensible risk doing the same to the aesthetics that purport to disrupt those distributions. Yepes attempts to salvage aesthetic ideas' ability to make a political difference, knowing that in order

to succeed, he must ask us to rethink the fundamentals of Rancière's acclaimed aesthetic theory.

What happened when our contributors set fire to the idea of thinking about fantasy? A fiery collection of work that calls into question the affective power of *every* idea. This de-anthropocentric humbling, paradoxically instigated by aesthetics – a practice to which ideas have always been paramount – is a matter to which we hope to return in a later volume, wherein we hope that authors continue to push ideas to their limit even at the risk of their exhaustion. Perhaps ideas are most powerful when they exert themselves upon themselves, bringing about their own self-reflexive re-evaluation, just as they did in the reformulation of this issue.

• Notes •

1 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Chicago: Open Court, 2002.

2 Sarah Marshall, "'One Must Imagine What One Denies': How Sartre Imagines *The Imaginary*," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 23.

3 Ibid., 24.

4 "Distribution of the sensible" is Rancière's well-known term. See Ruben Yepes, "Aesthetics, Politics, and Art's Autonomy: A Critical Reading of Jacques Rancière," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 43.

• References •

Harman, Graham. *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Chicago: Open Court, 2002.

Marshall, Sarah. "'One Must Imagine What One Denies': How Sartre Imagines The Imaginary." *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 16-39.

Yepes, Ruben. "Aesthetics, Politics, and Art's Autonomy: A Critical Reading of Jacques Rancière." *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 40-64.