

Aestheticisation Processes of Everyday Life

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This article aims to draw attention to contemporary aestheticisation processes of everyday life that have come to influence the field of art and design. It introduces some of the theoretical concepts developed in the social sciences to explain these aesthetic processes and links this explanation to a position that has emerged recently in aesthetic theory. Looking at the opposition between culture and art – fine art in particular – this article argues for the side of culture, without however elaborating this position in great depth. This needs to be done at a later time, in a debate that should perhaps include the present theoretical – and practical – repositioning of the artefact in society and the underlying ontological change in subject-object relationships. This article mainly highlights two publications that have gained importance in the past few years and may help art and design to position themselves in the contemporary world: Manuel Castells' book *The Information Age. Economy, Society and Culture. Volume I: The Rise of the Network Society*, published in 1996 and Lash and Urry's *Economies of Signs and Space*, published in 1994. A third book, Kevin Kelly's *Out of Control, The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems and the Economic World* (1994) points to a complementary field of evolutionary processes that arise as a consequence of the concepts introduced by Castells and Lash: the increasing importance of participative schemes to art and design.

Let me give two examples to illustrate my point about the increasingly aesthetic nature of everyday life. First, the launching in 1997 of 'World Images', the visual concept behind the new corporate identity of British Airways, as a pluralistic cultural (or multicultural) message.¹ A series of different images commissioned from artists and craftsmen all over the world was integrated into the British Airways identity, featuring most prominently on the tailfins of their aircraft. It is easy for us to dismiss this as an inappropriate use of art, although this may well be true, but it should be noted first and foremost as a remarkable event. Not only do the new works of art used for British Airways identity have a global origin, but the airline's identity has also become highly differentiated, with almost every tailfin carrying a different work. In other words, a contemporary, if not postmodern, global vision of the power of art as a cultural sign triumphed over a deterministic graphic corporate identity. The other example I want to mention is the fact that the two objects that sold best at the 1996 European furniture market, for the first time ever, were connected to a specific designer. They were a stool designed by Philippe Starck (for Driade) and Ron Arad's bookworm (for Kartell). This is all the more remarkable since 95% of the European furniture industry, with an annual turnover exceeding 500 billion euros, is not designer-oriented, and mainly produces kitsch and generic mass products, most of which copy or mimic historical styles.

Contemporary Aestheticisation Processes

Contemporary aestheticisation processes extend over many different aspects of life and are now influencing the design component of objects as well as spaces in cities. Increasingly, elements of reality are being aesthetically transformed. Thus Wolfgang Iser points out that reality as a whole is increasingly looked at as an aesthetic construct. He goes on to say that what may appear superficial at first sight, that is, the increasing trend to furnish reality with aesthetic elements seemingly as an aestheticisation only of surfaces, in fact goes deeper, affecting the form of culture as a whole (Iser 1997).² This has led to the emergence of new theoretical concepts that attempt to free aesthetics from its narrow confinement as art theory,³ and instead to widen it to a mode of reflection on perceiving and experiencing reality. Adorno's aesthetic theory,⁴ generally thought to be the most important theoretical contribution in the field of contemporary aesthetics, introduced the possibility of understanding aesthetics in a wider sense, beyond art itself, by including the beauty of nature. However, Adorno still sees it as a theory of beauty and the sublime and is therefore firmly rooted in classical aesthetics. Consequently, he insists on the autonomy of the arts and their distance from social reality. Gernot Böhme (1989) has attacked this position, developing a theory of 'atmospheres' that transgress cognitive perception and its deterministic position. In his approach aesthetics becomes a critique of judgment (as in Kant's third *Critique*) and a theory of sensual experience in general, not just of works of art. Experiencing subjects operate in the flux of time, in the midst of things happening, and understand things as cultural, not just utilitarian, objects. They also have to make judgments concerning these things and experiences that have become meaningful. Thus these judgments increasingly become individual rather than universalised. Individual judgments have to be communicated and shared, which increases the importance of intersubjective

¹ The later debate and subsequent reintroduction of a stylised Union Jack as the national symbol on British Airways' tailfins does not compromise the original importance of 'World Images'.

² Iser calls this 'epistemological aestheticisation', a fundamental substratum of ongoing aestheticisation processes, which as a notion was initiated by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Iser 1997, 38).

³ Mainstream aesthetic theory from Schiller to Adorno is a theory of art, art production and art experience (Böhme 1989)

⁴ Adorno, Theodor (1973). *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp.

understanding (Lash 1999). Consequently, the relationship between subjects becomes community oriented and the fundamental subject-object relationship⁵ shifts to one of subjects and objects, people and things, on the same level, where people no longer dominate and control the world of things, but instead take part and immerse themselves in the atmosphere of a configuration of objects, an environment of things, a 'material culture'.

Art has not ceased to affect us; it is just that the process we call art is happening elsewhere, in areas that may be called by other names. The traditional sites of artistic activity seem to be losing their power, while new sites for art, such as public spaces, are becoming more powerful. Perhaps we have been looking for art in the wrong places (Eno 1995).

Flows

The following explanation of the new aesthetic condition that is influencing social activity and our spatial environment is mainly based on the assumption that this new condition is increasingly characterised by flows. Influenced by the capacity of new information and communication infrastructures and by the improvements in rail, road and air travel, an economy – and ultimately a world – of a new, different, type is emerging and changing human interaction. It is dominated and characterised by flows – flows of information, of images, of money, of goods and of people that are increasingly connected and that circulating faster all the time. As phenomena on macro-socioeconomic level they not only manifest themselves but they also cause a series of impacts at micro-levels, influencing both social interaction and the design of objects and space.

As the subjects of newer concepts in social and economic theory that are gaining in importance, these phenomena are linked: the flows of capital, money, commodities, labour, information and images create a series of impacts with different consequences. First, they are responsible for constituting a network economy, and networks are becoming the dominant social morphology of society (*The Network Society*, Castells 1996). Because these networks are used for communication their content is increasingly bound up with cultural signs. Second, as it becomes necessary for people to evaluate and judge these signs and to become involved in the increased production of culture, an aesthetic and reflexive movement captures society (*Aesthetic Reflexivity*, Lash and Urry 1994). People critically reflect upon their social condition, and can find new meaning, in a different form, in the various spheres of social life. Third, this new meaning tends to be found mainly within the production of culture, which increasingly calls for a specific 'culture of production' – that is, its producers are highly critical of the quality, atmosphere and nature of their work and of the place where they work. They tend to be highly involved and want to participate in decision-making.

The Network Society

The flows themselves are only comprehensible if networks are taken into account, because it is through networks that people and objects are able to gain mobility. By 1992, network technology was already the fastest-growing part of the computer industry. This reflects the rate at which every sector of business is electronically organising itself in networks. Networking is revolutionising almost every business. It alters what we make, how we make it, how we decide what to make and the nature of the economy we make it in (Kelly 1994). Networks are made up of a few basic elements – 'bridges' or 'links' connecting points or nodes. These links stand out in lesser or greater relief from a background or 'support structure' and transmit or transport 'traffic' (Lash and Urry 1994). Networks are open structures capable of unlimited expansion and integration of new nodes provided each new node can communicate within the network. A network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system,⁶ susceptible to innovation without its balance being jeopardised (Kelly 1994, Castells 1996). In his fundamental work *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells refers to networks as the new social morphology of our societies.

⁵ To think in terms of the relationship between subjects and objects ties in with the central philosophical preoccupations of modern Western thought. The whole theme of subjects and objects in modern Western thought can be traced back to Descartes' 'cogito, ergo sum', [ok??], which sees the world in terms of human subjects on the one hand (a mind or consciousness which thinks, knows, believes and ascribes meanings and values to the world) and objects on the other (the world seen as 'matter in motion', as a collection of things which interact, which can be observed and grasped in the form of facts, but which are in and of themselves devoid of subjectivity, of mind or spirit, of meaning or essence) (Slater 1997).

⁶ Kelly in particular, in *Out of Control, The New Biology of Machines* (1994), stresses the cybernetic aspects of networks as self-organising systems. In his view a pure network has the following traits: *distributed*, *decentralised*, *collaborative*, and *adaptive*. For a company this would mean that it has no single location but dwells in and between many places; it outsources as many activities as possible to subcontractors; it looks for symbiotic partners in strategic alliances; it shifts its attention from products to services (customer support). A network is a factory for information. (Kelly 1994: 189-194).

'While the networking form of social organisation has existed in other times and spaces, the new information technology paradigm⁷ provides the material basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure. Furthermore, I would argue that this networking logic induces a social determination of a higher level than that of the specific social interests expressed through the networks: the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power.' (Castells 1996: 469).

In other words, the existence of networks and their tendency to function in a bottom-up direction is becoming more powerful and important than existing modes of top-down decision-making.

The network morphology reorganises power relationships, making the presence or absence of a particular actor in the network a critical factor for change in our society. This applies to commercial companies, so-called network enterprises, not just in their internal organisation, but particularly in their relationship to other companies, but it applies equally to institutions such as universities or hospitals, and of course to cities. Every day provides fresh evidence for the fact that the new economy is organised around global networks of capital – it has become part of our experience in news headlines, especially of mergers. More importantly, however, beyond the networking of capital, firms and localities, the convergence of social evolution and information technologies in particular has started to create a new basis for the structure of society. At the core of the social structure is the process of work. If we follow Castells, the new information technologies are transforming work and employment in two ways: one effect is the individualisation of work, and the other is the fragmentation of society.

'The new social and economic organisation based on information technologies aims at decentralising management, individualising work, and customising markets, thereby segmenting work and fragmenting societies. New information technologies allow at the same time for the decentralisation of work tasks and for their coordination in an interactive network of communication in real time, be it between continents or between floors of the same building.' (Castells 1996: 265).

At the same time we realise that culture is increasingly becoming the main content of the new information and communication structures.

'Cultures are made up of communication processes. And all forms of communication, as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard taught us many years ago, are based on the production and consumption of signs. [...] In all societies humankind has existed in and acted through a symbolic environment.' (Castells 1996: 372).

In this connection Castells also states,

'In a broader historical perspective the network society represents a qualitative change in the human experience. [...] Because of the convergence of historical evolution and technological change we have entered a purely cultural pattern of social interaction and social organisation. This is why information is the key ingredient of our social organisation and why flows of messages and images between networks constitute the basic thread of our social structure.' (Castells 1996: 477).

Thus what is specific to the new communication system, organised around the electronic integration of all communication modes from print to multimedia, is that its content is increasingly culture,⁸ and that it consists largely of images and signs.

⁷ Information's critical rearrangement is the widespread, relentless act of connecting everything to everything else – communicating between all beings and all objects. All the most promising technologies now making their entrance are chiefly based on communication between computers – that is to connections rather than computations. All the major consequences of stand-alone computers have already taken place (Kelly 1997: 140)

⁸ The notion of culture in this case strongly relates to visual culture and particularly public culture. Zukin (1995) in her investigations of public culture argues for a new sense of culture that 'is broader than the high culture of museums and social elites and more specific than the old definition of a society's generally accepted patterns of how to see, think, and act'. Culture as 'collective lifestyle' appears as a meaningful, and often conflictual, source of representation. (Zukin 1995, 263)

Aesthetic Reflexivity

In this context, an interesting aspect of contemporary societies is the fact that people are increasingly able to monitor and evaluate these images and to place themselves within the world, both historically and geographically. The more societies modernise, the greater the ability of knowledgeable subjects to reflect upon their social conditions of existence. Lash (1994) calls this 'reflexive modernisation'. In a world of ever-faster change and growing abstraction the process of reflexivity opens up possibilities for the recasting of meaning in work and in leisure and for the heterogenisation and complexity of space and everyday life. Confronted with the increasingly cultural content of flows, reflexivity becomes aesthetic – a notion for which Lash and Urry argue in their book *Economies of Signs and Space* (1994). They assert that the majority of people in the developed countries produce 'semiotic' rather than industrial goods. The mobility of these objects or goods in flows changes their nature – they are progressively emptied of both symbolic and material content and thus of their traditional local meaning. Culture in pre-modern societies was exercised through symbols, which were full of meanings, contents, peopled with gods and demons. In contemporary society the production of culture and the regular manufacturing industry are becoming more and more alike. Production is focusing increasingly on signs rather than on material objects. Non-material goods such as pop music, cinema or video also have a substantial aesthetic component (Lash and Urry 1994).

Because of the component of sign value or aesthetic image in material objects, design is becoming a more important aspect in the production of goods.

'This aestheticisation of material objects can take place either in the production or in the circulation and consumption of such goods. In production the design component comprises an increasing component of the value of goods. The specific labour process is becoming less important in its contribution to value-added, and the design process is progressively more central. This can be seen in the increased research-and-development or 'design intensity' of even industrial production. This increased R&D intensity is often importantly aesthetic in nature, as in the case of clothes, shoes, furniture, car design, electronic goods and so on. Further, goods often take on the properties of sign value through the process of 'branding', in which marketers and advertisers attach images to goods.' (Lash and Urry 1994:15).

Thus, in addition to the component of knowledge or information intensity, an increase in design intensity is becoming apparent in industrial production; as the labour process looms less large in production, the design process is becoming more and more prominent. Economic life itself is acquiring cultural characteristics.

But even though objects are progressively being emptied of meaning and people are bombarded by an overload of signs, the contemporary condition of society is producing not just a flattening but also a deepening of the *self* [?? Logic?? Reformulate please] – as we have seen, people are becoming more reflexive, more critical. Through this growing reflexivity, which is gradually freeing individuals from traditional social structures, people reflect upon their condition, and find fresh meaning in the various spheres of social life. In terms of consumption, aesthetic reflexivity can be seen in several senses. First, there is the increase in the element of choice in consumption. Styles of dress, for example, involve a very important set of identity choices, constituting an aesthetic-expressive dimension of the modern self.

'Finally this increased aesthetic reflexivity of subjects in the consumption of, for example, travel and of the objects of the culture industries creates a vast real economy. It produces a complex network, which Zukin begins to capture in *Loft Living*, of hotels and restaurants, of art galleries, theatres, cinemas and pop concerts, of culture producers and culture "brokers", of architects and designers etc.⁹ (Lash and Urry 1994: 59).

The importance of aesthetic reflexivity lies, perhaps, in its contribution to people's ability to judge and distinguish images and symbols operating at the level of feeling. Travel, for example, has become an increasingly important experience in developing

⁹ In her later book *The Cultures of Cities* Zukin draws attention to the new symbolic economy of culture for cities: 'As a set of architectural themes, it plays a leading role in urban redevelopment strategies based on historic preservation or local "heritage". With the disappearance of local manufacturing industries and periodic crises in government and finance, culture is more and more the business of cities – the basis of their tourist attractions and their unique, competitive edge. The growth of cultural consumption (of art, food, fashion, music, tourism) and the industries that cater to it fuels the city's symbolic economy, its visible ability to produce both symbols and space.' (Zukin 1995: 1-2)

this ability. Many of the signs or symbols that advertise commodities or goods, in TV commercials for instance, are connected with places and travel and a sense of 'cosmopolitanism'. Referring to aesthetic reflexivity as part of a critical historical movement linked to people's increasing mobility, Lash and Urry state:

'We have therefore argued: first, that in the "West" over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a reflexivity about the value of different physical and social environments has been established; second, that this reflexivity is partly based on aesthetic judgements and stems from the proliferation of many forms of real and simulated mobility; third that this mobility has served to authorise an increased stance of cosmopolitanism – an ability to experience, to discriminate and to risk different natures and societies, historically and geographically; and fourth, that the social organisation of travel and tourism has facilitated and structured such a cosmopolitanism.' (Lash and Urry 1994: 256).

Thus aesthetic reflexivity raises the critical awareness and concern of people for their own environment.

The Space of Flows

The economy of flows does not leave urban space untouched – it has a significant impact on the nature of that space. Consider the case of Lille. The new rail link between London and Paris runs through the Channel tunnel. One stop of the high-speed Eurostar train has created a new urban business centre – Euralille (Koolhaas 1996). Rem Koolhaas has referred to a 'quantum leap' in the city's position. Lille, once a significant mining and textile town, is now part of a depressed industrial region in Northern France. Lille lies at the geographical centre of the heavily trafficked business triangle connecting London, Paris and Cologne. Yet for years, business traffic literally flew over the city.

'But two new givens – the tunnel between England and the continent and the TGV network – will transform Lille as if by magic and make it important in a completely synthetic way. Not only will it become the intersection of major north-south and east-west axes, but reduced travel times, through train and tunnel combined, will minimise the importance of distance and suddenly give Lille a strategic position: it will become the centre of gravity for the virtual community of 50 million Western Europeans who will live within a 1½ -hour travelling distance.' (Koolhaas 1995: 1158).

Only through a change in the mode of transportation is Lille able to connect to the inter-metropolitan business network and to become a potential node in this network. The new high-speed rail link between Paris, London and Brussels competes with air traffic, as total travel times between city centres are about the same. Thus as Castells (1996) points out, a business centre does not exist by itself but by virtue of its connection to other places organised in a network that forms the actual unit of management, innovation and work. Typically, the programmes of such urban spaces are clustered around information, communications and advanced producer services and are dependent on telecommunications, aviation routes (or in this case high-speed rail links) and major tourism and leisure attractions (Lash and Urry 1994). Right next to [or opposite??] the new TGV station at Euralille we find a series of office towers housing a World Trade Centre, a bank and a hotel, while a huge new conference centre has been built only a short distance away.

Thus a place like Euralille can exist only by being connected to other business centres, as part of a network. With the increased presence of flows in our economy, Castells (1996) makes a case for the 'space of flows', in which he refers to the city as a process,¹⁰ rather than as a place possessing history and an identity. Because function and economic power in society are increasingly organised in such a space of flows, the structural domination of its logic essentially alters the meaning and dynamics of a place as we know it – the space of place.

'Dominant functions are organised in networks pertaining to a space of flows that links them up around the world, while fragmenting subordinate functions, and people, in the multiple space of places, made of locales increasingly segregated and disconnected from each other' (Castells 1996, 476).

Throughout the global networks, 'capital and labour increasingly tend to exist in different spaces and times: the space

¹⁰ The space of flows is an abstract space of creating opportunities for the flows of business information. It becomes concrete in the way offices spatially organise their global transactions and in the services offered to businesspeople, such as airport lounges etc.

of flows and the space of places, instant time of computerised networks versus clock time of everyday life. Thus they live by each other, but do not relate to each other [...]’ (Castells 1996: 475). Castells goes on to assert that unless cultural and physical bridges are deliberately built between these two forms of space, we may be heading for a life in parallel universes whose times cannot meet, because they are warped into different dimensions of a social hyperspace. On the one hand we are projected and connected throughout the world, while on the other our lives and experiences are rooted in places, in their culture and in their history.

Evolutionary Decision Making Systems

All this leads increasingly to a notion of potential, participation and open-ended solutions, whereas planning and design in a traditional sense only provide a deterministic path as a method of decision-making. Existing design tools are technocratic and only allow disordered, one-off, discontinuous change, instead of ordered, continuous change – incremental change over time. Kelly points to the nature of tools that continually pump in bits of change – they have an adaptive evolutionary spirit; they need a heart of change at the core of the system (Kelly 1994: 354). He defines an evolutionary change that will gradually replace existing structures: ‘Evolution is a structure of organised change. But it is more. Evolution is a structure of organised change which is itself undergoing change and reorganisation.’ (Kelly 1994: 362).

The genius of an evolutionary system is that it is a mechanism for generating perpetual change. Evolution is a conglomeration of many processes, which form a society of evolutions. *Change changes itself.* Because new technological tools have to fit within an existing system, the process of their introduction is by its very nature evolutionary. New innovations actually grow organically – sprouting slowly from earlier technologies. Most evolutionary changes are organic in nature.

‘The only way for a system to evolve into something is to have a flexible structure. [...] A decentralised redundant organisation can flex without distorting its function, and thus it can adapt. It can manage change. We call that growth. [...] But we cannot import evolution and learning without exporting control. [...] There is no control outside a self-making system.’ (Kelly 1994: 448).

Thus design decision-making may have to abandon its linear, mechanical, and unworkable notion of control. Appropriately, the icon of the Network Society, the Internet, has no centre – it is a bunch of nodes or dots connected to other dots.

‘The Net is the archetype – always the same picture – displayed to represent all circuits, all intelligence all interdependence, all things economic and social and ecological, all communications, all democracy, all groups, all large systems.’ (Kelly 1994: 25).

In this sense the Net becomes an emblem of multiplicities – out of it comes ‘distributed being’, which Kelly defines as follows:

‘When the sum of the parts can add up to more than the parts, then the extra being (that something from nothing) is distributed among the parts. The spirit of a beehive decides as a whole when and where to move – it possesses intelligence that none of its parts does. A single honeybee brain operates with a memory of six days; the hive as a whole operates with a memory of three months, twice as long as the average bee lives. Likewise the behaviour of an economy, the thinking of a supercomputer, and the life in us are distributed over a multitude of smaller units (which themselves may be distributed). Whenever we find something from nothing, we find it arising from a field of many interacting smaller pieces.’ (Kelly 1994: 469)

As a banner the Net is hard to live with, because it is a banner of non-control. A network is the least structured organisation that can be said to have any structure at all. This means decentralised control – no central planning. This ‘distributed control’ cannot just be implemented; it has to be grown from simple local control. Complexity must be grown from simple systems that already work. Divergence is part of complexity, but divergence needs to be kept together. A plurality of truly divergent components can only remain coherent in a network. No other arrangement – chain, pyramid, tree, circle, or hub – can contain true diversity working as a whole. This is why the network is nearly synonymous with democracy or the market.

‘A distributed, decentralised network is more a process than a thing. In the logic of the Net there is a shift from nouns to verbs. Economists now reckon that commercial products are best treated as though they were services.

It's not what you sell a customer, it's what you do for them. It's not what something is, it's what it is connected to, what it does. Flows become more important than resources.' (Kelly 1994: 25).

In the Net there are no chains of linear causality, there is only circular causality. In the realm of recursive reflections, an event is not triggered by a chain of being, but by a field of causes. Rather than cause and control being dispersed in a straight line from their origin, they spread horizontally. Control is not only distributed in space, but it is blurred in time as well. In this context the development of distributed text or hypertext as HTML (Hyper Text Mark-up Language) in the World Wide Web is an interesting example. Hypertext is a texture of signs that point to other signs.

'The total summation of what we call knowledge or science¹¹ is a web of ideas pointing to, and reciprocally educating each other. Hypertext and electronic writing accelerate that reciprocity. Networks rearrange the writing space of the printed book into a writing space many orders larger and many ways more complex than of ink on paper [...]. At the same time the very shape of this network space shapes us. It is no coincidence that the postmodernists arose in tandem as the space of the network formed.' (Kelly 1994: 465-466).

Kelly goes on to explain that in the last half-century the uniform mass market produced by the Industrial Age has collapsed into a network of small niches generated by the present information tide. What remains is an 'aggregation of fragments' – the only kind of whole we have. Our society has become a working pandemonium of fragments – a distributed network, in fact, much like the Internet itself. People in a highly connected yet deeply fragmented society can no longer rely on a central canon for guidance. In the process of connecting everything to everything else, computers elevate the power of the small player – they make room for difference. In this context Kelly quotes Bolter: 'Just as our culture is moving from the printed book to the computer, it is also in the final stages of the transition from a hierarchical social order to what we might call a "network culture"¹².'

This has major consequences for the world of art and the way artists react. The difference between art and engineering is now defined by the fact that artists are becoming curators, regarded much more than in the past as connectors of things, people who scan the enormous field of possible places for artistic attention and draw attention to a specific sequence of things. Instead of a straight kingly line of succession (a crown passes down the generations) there is suddenly a broad field of things that come to be called 'art', cultural things using technologies like photography and film. Early modern art history simply broadened the line to include more things we regard as art, but what postmodern thinking suggests is that there is not one line but a field, a field through which people move in different ways. Thus there is no longer any such thing as art history – instead there are multiple 'art stories'. A curator creating meanings or perhaps 'new readings' is making something new. People create or act as curators all the time simply by choosing to be in one particular place in the field rather than another. In the traditional classical view, art objects are containers of some kind of aesthetic value. That value is entirely a product of the interaction we have with them. Things become artworks not because they contain value, but because we are prepared to see them as artworks, to allow ourselves to derive art experiences from them, before them, to frame them in contexts that confer value on them. In art you are rehearsing a repertoire of feelings that you might have about things, of ways of reacting to things, of how it would feel to be in that place. (Eno, 1995)

Conclusion

The driving forces of contemporary aestheticisation processes are at once cultural and technological – cultural through their content, technological because this cultural content flows increasingly via new information and communication infrastructures. The capacity of the new information and communication infrastructure is creating a new type of economy. It is dominated and characterised by flows – flows of information, of images, of money, of goods and of people, that are increasingly connected and that circulate ever faster through networks that are becoming the dominant social morphology of society. In a broader historical perspective, the network society represents a qualitative change in the human experience. At the end of his *Rise of the Network Society*, Castells concludes that beyond the modern age and the Industrial Revolution, which saw the domination of Nature by Culture, we are entering a new stage in which Culture itself refers to Culture (Castells 1996: 477). What this means is that we can regard culture as its own self-organising, self-evolving system – a system that sets

¹¹ Kelly (1994: 454) makes a case for scientific knowledge as a parallel distributed system. 'It has no centre, no one in control. A million heads and dispersed books hold parts of it. It too is a web, a co-evolutionary system of fact and theory interacting and influencing other facts and theories'. Science can be pictured as a network of agents searching in parallel over a rugged landscape of mysteries.

¹² Bolter, Jay David (1991). *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*. Lawrence Erlbaum

its own agenda. It also means a fundamental shift in the subject-object relationship – people no longer dominate things, but coexist with them through atmospheres expressed by a configuration of things. We clearly live in an era in which the world of things, the economic sphere, has become thoroughly ‘culturalised’ – culture is a global business. Culture is doing business in the corporate world: global entertainment corporations such as Sony, Time Warner, Disney and Bertelsmann, whose business is the production and distribution of ‘cultural’ hardware and software,¹³ are among the most powerful economic actors in the world (Du Gay 1997). Furthermore, a growing proportion of goods and services across an ever-wider range of sectors, beyond entertainment, can be conceived of as ‘cultural’ goods. As we have seen, this has led to an aestheticisation of everyday life, to an increased production of culture by ever more people and to a new aesthetic theory reflecting on the change of the relationship between man and nature – that is, with man no longer dominating, but increasingly taking active part in environments through experiences of atmosphere. Whether this is an opportunity or a threat for art – or both – remains to be seen, and will be the subject of an ongoing debate.

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¹³ Sony, for example, deals in consumer electronics from PCs to Walkmans, music, film, television and computer games, Time Warner and Bertelsmann also deal in print media and satellite broadcasting, but not in consumer products.