Pleasure as the Aim of Art (Lausanne, 26-28 Nov 26)

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Antoine Gallay

Pleasure as the Aim of Art? The Place of Pleasure in Seventeenth-Century European Art Theory and Practice .

“Its purpose is to please and to arouse various passions in us,” wrote Descartes about music in 1618; “dramatic poetry aims solely at the pleasure of the spectators,” according to Corneille in 1660; as for painting, “its end is delectation,” asserted Poussin in 1665. While historiography generally associated the notion of pleasure with eighteenth-century art and literature, it appears that pleasure already had a significant place in attempts to define the arts during the previous century – a place that this conference seeks to reassess. This event, which marks the conclusion of the SNSF research project Peindre et penser la peinture en France durant le premier XVIIe siècle (2023-2027), will provide an opportunity to discuss a notion that was unexpectedly frequent throughout the texts under consideration.

Until then, pleasure had been only one of the three shared aims of rhetoric, music and painting – ranked in order of importance as instructing (docere), moving (movere), and finally pleasing (placere). Yet the practices and discourses that developed over the course of the seventeenth century, in France and across Europe, offer a more nuanced picture, in which the pre-eminent role that pleasure would assume in the following century gradually takes shape. From this perspective, the aim is not to reduce the seventeenth century to a mere transitional period, but rather to analyse the specific logics that emerge within it. First, it is necessary to consider the various conceptions of pleasure when associated with the senses of sight and hearing, as well as with certain cognitive faculties (imagination, understanding). This also entails examining how pleasure was discussed – through which metaphors, within which lexical fields (play, love), and by means of which terms (the “delectation” used by Poussin had already become, according to Richelet, “an old word scarcely used except in jest”).

One will then turn to the intellectual, religious and social contexts in which this conception of pleasure was elaborated and transformed. Long subordinated to higher ends (docere and movere), pleasure gradually acquired a degree of autonomy over the course of the seventeenth century, to the point of being posited as a possible end of artistic experience. This development may be related to certain philosophical currents: in France, to what extent did Gassendi’s Christian Epicureanism or Saint-Évremond’s neo-Epicureanism contribute to making artistic pleasure compatible with moral and spiritual demands? Consideration will also be given to how this issue appears in writings on art by those whom historiography has termed the “libertins érudits”, particularly François La Mothe Le Vayer and Samuel Sorbière.

Conversely, resistance to artistic pleasure helps to clarify the norms it disrupted. What arguments sought to devalue pleasure as the end of art? What religious, moral and intellectual conceptions do they convey, and in what contexts were they articulated? Moreover, in matters of taste, pleasure may appear as an ambivalent criterion that can also diminish its value: while it may provide support to aesthetic judgement, it may also be accused of undermining its rigour by introducing a personal and subjective dimension.

Finally, it is important to consider the concrete practices in which different conceptions of artistic pleasure were shaped. Modes of engaging with works – silent or aloud reading, solitary or collective experience – clearly generate different forms of pleasure, involving distinct regimes of attention, temporalities and sociabilities. Private reading, particularly of poetry, encourages an internalisation of pleasure, whereas public reading or theatrical performances shift it towards a shared and mediated experience. Likewise, conversation about painted or sculpted works, especially in learned circles or amongst art amateurs, constitutes a specific space to produce pleasure, grounded in discussion and exchange.

Although artistic pleasure is primarily approached from the standpoint of reception, it may also be considered from that of production: the pleasure of creating – painting, performing, writing or composing – as well as the pleasure of imitation, which goes back to Aristotle. To what extent was creative pleasure conceptualised and theorised by seventeenth-century writers, and according to what temporal frameworks? An anthropological, historical or mythological temporality would present pleasure as a driving force in the “invention” of the arts; a biographical temporality would refer to the artist’s early “inclination”; finally, a properly poetic temporality would enlighten the pleasure experienced in the making of a singular artwork.

The relationship between the pleasure of the creator and that of the spectator constitutes another key line of enquiry. The pleasure anticipated from the audience may be understood as a horizon of creation, capable of shaping artistic choices and procedures, and thus of influencing the artist’s own pleasure. The modes of interaction between these two forms of pleasure raise a further crucial issue: the emergence of a conception of art in which creative pleasure becomes the very end of artistic practice. This dimension is evident, for example, in amateur practices pursued for relaxation or entertainment, or in the very idea of artistic work as a “vocation” rather than a “trade” or “profession”. Within this conceptual framework, to what extent can creative pleasure function as an argument for elevating the status of the arts?

Considering both creation and reception, this conference proposes to examine the various facets of artistic pleasure in seventeenth-century Europe. The perspectives developed may invite a broader reconsideration of the complex place of pleasure in early modern thought on art, its potential role in the construction of a system of the arts (Du Bos and especially Batteux) and in the development of eighteenth-century aesthetics (Baumgarten, Burke, Kant). Often regarded as secondary, pleasure may thus be reinvested with genuine heuristic value, both for analysing past discourses and practices and for reflecting on our own ways of apprehending, engaging with and even studying works of art in the broadest sense.
Papers may address the various arts of the long seventeenth century – painting, literature, architecture, music, dance, theatre – particularly from the following perspectives:
• the place of pleasure among the other functions of the arts in theoretical discourse

• the place of artistic pleasure among different definitions of pleasure
• debates on the legitimacy of pleasure as the end of art and the intellectual, religious and social contexts in which they were formulated
• criteria for the valorisation or devalorisation of artistic pleasure
• the assignment of pleasure to specific artistic forms or genres
• the place of creative pleasure in biography and historiography
• the different types of pleasure generated by different modes of engaging with artworks
• interactions and tensions between the pleasure of the creator and that of the spectator
• creative pleasure and the (de-)professionalisation of the arts

Both case studies and broader, cross-disciplinary approaches are welcome. Contributions addressing creative pleasure, still relatively understudied, are especially encouraged. Papers may be delivered in French or English, but a passive understanding of French is recommended.

Proposals (approximately 500 words) with a short bio-bibliography, should be sent by 1 July 2026 to Gabriel Batalla-Lagleyre (gabriel.batalla@unil.ch) and Antoine Gallay (antoine.gallay@unil.ch).

Organizers:
Gabriel Batalla-Lagleyre (University of Lausanne)
Antoine Gallay (University of Lausanne)

Scientific committee:
Jan Blanc (University of Lausanne)
Léonie Marquaille (University Bordeaux-Montaigne)
Pauline Randonneix (University of Lausanne)

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