

# What Art(ists) Demand of Us

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*In The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, Mikel Dufrenne argues that the aesthetic object is dependent on a public audience to come into its full existential reality. A work of art demands to be realized as an aesthetic object by way of being aesthetically perceived and evaluated by one or more spectators. It expects of the public the recognition and consecration of its value as a work with more than mere ontic value. In this view, a painting insists that we give ourselves over to be haunted by its colors, all the more because it has gone to the effort of arranging itself under our gaze. This paper considers Dufrenne's personification of the work of art in relation to what appears to be a tangential work—Linda Martín Alcoff's "Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment"—to suggest that there is no perception of the visible, aesthetic or bodily, that is not imbued with racialized value.*

In Chapter 3 of *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Mikel Dufrenne argues that the aesthetic object relies on a public audience to come into its full existential reality. Specifically, the work of art *demand*s to be realized as an aesthetic object by way of being aesthetically perceived and evaluated by one or more spectators. Moreover, it *expects* of the public the recognition and consecration of its value as a work with more than mere ontic value. This paper examines Dufrenne's personification of the aesthetic object alongside a seemingly unrelated work—Linda Martín Alcoff's "Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment." I pair Dufrenne with this piece, which advances a theory of racialized perception, to illustrate that his notion of the aesthetic object can be brought to bear on race as it is lived in each of our bodies. I begin by establishing that Dufrenne is largely speaking of the aesthetic object as interacting with audiences both of its own accord and owing to its creator. In doing so, Dufrenne does not attend to the question of how an object is capable of acting on the individual, of demanding that its invitation to be experienced as a work of art be accepted. I argue that this lack of disambiguation gives rise to the more interesting question of how a demand to be perceived can come from something that is neither straightforwardly subject nor object. I turn to Alcoff to show us how racially embodied beings, like the aesthetic object that is not yet a work of art, long to be recognized yet have certain expectations thrust imposed on them by the white Other. By bringing Dufrenne's concept of the aesthetic object to an interpersonal register, I hope to instantiate Alcoff's claim that there can be no perception, or in our case viewing of something created by an artist, that is not racialized.

## Dufrenne on the Work of Art

Dufrenne begins the chapter, "The Work and Its Public," by asserting that the aesthetic object exists to be spectated; it cannot come into its full reality on its own, so the public must do it the favor of attesting to its existence. By bearing witness to its sensuous qualities, the public bestows on the work the only value that it could possibly have. The colors of a painting, for instance, are colors "only

through and for whoever perceives them”<sup>1</sup>; when a painting ceases to be contemplated, its colors recede to their ontic status as mere chemical and light reactions. The painting, however, does not sit idly by as it awaits this judgment. All the while, “Every object demands to be perceived and to effect a convergence upon itself.”<sup>2</sup>

The spectator helps facilitate a work’s completion by serving as a performer and as a witness. When the work is framed by a traditional performance, the spectator functions primarily as a performer within the audience. Here, the “total event”<sup>3</sup>—the buzz of anticipation emanating from the audience in addition to the main event—is a work of art. The spectators as audience form “a backdrop of pure silence, a human silence charged with attention...to create the most favorable climate for aesthetic perception.”<sup>4</sup> This atmosphere of attentiveness allows the colors of a painting or the actors in a play to better convey their works’ calls to be aesthetically perceived.

The spectator maintains a more intimate relation with the work in their capacity as witness, which does not require a traditional performance space. The emphasis from performer to witness shifts “according to whether or not a given work of art requires a performance which is separate from its original creation.”<sup>5</sup> While the spectator as attentive performer pays “homage” and “docility” to the work as its assistant, the work for the witness is “a forceful lover who draws the spectator to precisely those points where he must place himself in order to become a witness.”<sup>6</sup> The performer may choose whether to commune with a performance, but the witness is no more than a “registering apparatus.”<sup>7</sup> The work glues the witness to the perspective from which it is most expressive. A painting “compels us to assume” the space that awaits our aesthetic perception.<sup>8</sup> Dufrenne writes from the perspective of the witness that

I have derealized myself in order to proclaim the painting’s reality and that I have gained a foothold in the new world which it opens to me, a new man myself...in making myself unreal, I forbid myself any active participation. By becoming disinterested in the natural world which I have left, I have lost the ability to be *interested* in the aesthetic world. I am within it but only to contemplate it. Moreover, this is all that the work expects of me—that I stay in it and get to know it from within...it expects him to play the game.<sup>9</sup>

Having undergone the process of deconstructing oneself, the witness is rewarded with a new footing in the aesthetic world. As Dufrenne states, this is only possible if the witness plays the “game” in the role of registering apparatus assigned to them. Yet, Dufrenne also maintains that a painting is *created* to be seen from a certain perspective. He claims, for example, that a sculptor decides the best vantage

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<sup>1</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans Edward S. Casey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 49-50.

<sup>5</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 48.

<sup>6</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 57.

<sup>9</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 57-59.

point from which to have spectators view their work: “With respect to a piece of sculpture, there are likewise, as Waldemar Conrad states, ‘privileged perspectives’ on which the sculptor has decided.”<sup>10</sup> Does the work of art exist for others of its own volition or can its demands simply be ascribed to its creator? If the latter is the case, then on what grounds does Dufrenne refer to the aesthetic object and the artist interchangeably?

In the opening footnote of the chapter, Dufrenne states that he will not be investigating the psychology of creation, i.e., the motivations an artist might have for creating. He does share, however, that “even if the artist creates for himself, that is, tries to solve his own artistic problems in becoming an artist, his work, once it has been completed, detaches itself from him. It is a rare artist who decides of his own free will to remain his work’s only spectator.”<sup>11</sup> Here, both the artist and the object somehow willingly detach from one another so that the object can find others to attest to its qualities. The artist, on the other hand, experiences “the anguish of self-doubt...No matter how great his self-confidence he is well aware that he cannot be both judge and client, that he is never the wholly impartial spectator of his work, and that only the verdict of the public matters.”<sup>12</sup> Although it is the artist who, having laboriously created the object to recruit spectators, undergoes agonizing doubt that the object will be ratified into a work of art, Dufrenne inexplicably traces the demand for the object to be perceived to the object itself. We might wonder, then, whether the expectations of the artist and the object refer to the same phenomenon. Without an account of how the aesthetic object’s desire to be perceived coheres with the artist’s selfsame desire, there is room to speculate that it is simply the creator who demands that his work be allowed to effect a self-convergence.

Rather than pursuing this interpretation so as to fill in the gap in Dufrenne’s exposition, I wish to sit for the remainder of this essay with the very indeterminacy of the desire for self-determination. What is potentially disclosed in the ambiguity itself is the articulation of an entity that is at once ontic and ontological, an entity that is forever denied the possibility of self-convergence. What Dufrenne offers us is not a theory of mere aesthetic perception, but an intimate theory of the relation between an object as forceful lover and the perceiver who may choose to withhold intimacy. We are dealing, that is, with an ontic object created by an ontological being that is somehow compelling spectators to assume a designated space in their world. I turn now to Alcoff’s piece on the phenomenology of racial embodiment to shed light on the incoherence of an object that asks to haunt spectators with its sensuous colors.

## Alcoff on Racialized Subjects

Alcoff begins her piece by motivating a contextualist approach to race. She observes that there have been concerted efforts to denounce the past and current realities of race, with a complete nominalism on one end and a universalism on the other. Contemporary critical race theory has worked to do away with such notions of race while acknowledging that race still permeates our political, sociological, and

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<sup>10</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 46n1.

<sup>12</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 46-47.

economic lives. Race may not correspond to human biology, they claim, but it remains tied to our lived realities which determine our perceptual practices and what we take to be visible. Therefore, rather than avoiding the use of racial concepts altogether or treating race as an essential component of identities, Alcoff suggests that we view race metaphysically as “socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and produced through learned perceptual practice.”<sup>13</sup> Racial identities are as real as they are the products of our cultural perceptual practices. Moreover, “race operates pre-consciously on spoken and unspoken interaction, gesture, affect and stance,”<sup>14</sup> which is why it has proven so difficult to pinpoint and transform. One’s habitual posture, even once recognized, cannot be altered overnight. Alcoff invokes Merleau-Ponty to argue that “racialization structures the visual sphere and the imaginary self, and can block the development of coherent body-images.”<sup>15</sup> Although it operates in the backdrop of lived experience, race permeates the realm of the visible. This is why, for Alcoff, the phenomenological approach is useful; considering the way that each individual distinctively experiences race and harbors tacit knowledge about race in their bodies helps keep the notion that racism is the natural consequence of human cognition at bay.

Provided that racialization saturates our visual spheres, Alcoff makes the compelling case that “there is no perception of the visible that is not already imbued with value.”<sup>16</sup> There is no perception of aesthetic objects, then, that is not racializing, i.e., is not an operation of particular sedimented racializing habits. “The process by which human bodies are differentiated and categorized by type,” Alcoff writes, “is a process preceded by racism...the experience of race is predicated first and foremost on the perception of race.”<sup>17</sup> Here, race is constitutive of perception and forms the background from which the sensuous qualities of things stand out. Again, this operation escapes critical reflection, for perception “represents sedimented contextual knowledges”<sup>18</sup>—i.e., racial knowledge lurks at the level of common sense.

To demonstrate the logic of racist perceptions, Alcoff has us consider Jack Kerouac’s mentality as he takes a stroll in the predominantly Black and Mexican neighborhoods of Denver. In his journal entry of that evening, Kerouac expresses a desire for a place in the non-white world since he feels that he does not belong in the world assigned to him. Since his non-white body image does not align with his white body, he is unable to actively choose who he takes himself to be. Alcoff suggests that more and more whites are experiencing the corporeal malediction of Kerouac “as they come to perceive the racial parameters that structure whiteness differently in different communities...and may find that none of these can be made coherent with their own preferred body or postural image.”<sup>19</sup> An important point to consider, however, is that this white corporeal malediction is the result of an internal mismatch between one’s white body and their own perceived postural image. The white body feels foreign to itself with its non-white body image, but it is ultimately able to freely move about in both white and non-white worlds. Those who call the white world home will always be perceived as embodying the true signification of white existence. Perception of the white body does

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<sup>13</sup> Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 17.

<sup>14</sup> Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 17.

<sup>15</sup> Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 18.

<sup>16</sup> Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 19.

<sup>17</sup> Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 18, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 18.

<sup>19</sup> Alcoff, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 20.

not determine its fate or worth—the white experience is perceived as “full self-presenting”<sup>20</sup> and so need not ask to effect any convergence on itself.

Compare Kerouac’s experience to the obstruction of the development of coherent body-image for the Black body, as illustrated in George Yancy’s “White Gazes: What it Feels Like to be an Essence.” This piece conveys that unlike the white body, the Black body is not perceived as fully presenting. Instead, spectators have to doubly work to penetrate the value laden essence of the Black body in order to get at the body as existence. Yancy alludes to the fact that he need not utter a single word to be perceived as already anti-white, beast-like, and thirsty for violence. Each click of a car door locking as he walks by is a laceration, rendering his body “the site of microtomy and volatility.”<sup>21</sup> This echoes Alcott’s saying that the materiality of the body is volatile, for racializing factors do not merely represent, but “actively produce the body of a determinate type.”<sup>22</sup> Each click of a car door Yancy hears materializes an entity unrecognizable to Yancy himself. Yancy’s experiences of being gazed at in a Black body have made him to feel reduced to an essence, “ontologically flat, mere things awaiting on the will of white people, that is, those possessing the only true power of transcendence and the true capacity to *know*.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, he knows that his image as a monster was sealed before he ever stepped on to the elevator with the white woman. It precedes him everywhere he goes. Articulated in terms of Dufrenne’s work, the Black man in possession of the essence of the Black object longs for recognition and to commune with his fellow beings. Others will not bestow their perception on his mere thing, and so because the work of art is an aesthetic object only if it is experienced, the Black body will not be allowed to take up space in the field of visibility. Insofar as the white gaze never penetrates beyond its fixed essence of hostility, it may never stand out as ontologically salient; it is not allowed to embody its meaning, for it is virtually invisible. Recall what Dufrenne says in regard to the colors of a painting:

What happens to the colors in a painting when they are no longer reflected in a look? They return to their ontic status of things or ideas; they become chemical products or light vibrations and are no longer colors. They are colors only through and for whoever perceives them, and the painting is truly an aesthetic object only when it is contemplated.<sup>24</sup>

If we take “color” in this passage as referring to the Black subject, then Dufrenne’s theory of aesthetic perception is compatible with a theory of a racially saturated fields of visibility. When the Black body is withheld value and consecration via perception, it remains a mere ontic thing. Its demands for public perception go unheard. In an earlier article, Yancy shares an experience with a former white math teacher in which he felt “ontologically locked into my body...He did not ‘see’ me, though. Like Ellison’s invisible man, I occupied that paradoxical status of ‘visible invisibility.’”<sup>25</sup> Yancy was seen *as*

<sup>20</sup> Alcott, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 18.

<sup>21</sup> George Yancy, “White Gazes: What it Feels Like to be an Essence,” in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment and Race*, ed. Emily Lee (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 48.

<sup>22</sup> Alcott, “Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment,” 19.

<sup>23</sup> Yancy, “White Gazes,” 53.

<sup>24</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 48.

<sup>25</sup> George Yancy, “Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 4 (2005): 219.

not fully presenting, which means that his lived reality—covered up by his “hyper-visible”<sup>26</sup> Black sensuous quality—failed to be witnessed. It is a condition of the Black body that it is not ratified by public judgment; its demands to be contended with perpetually go unheard and it is granted existence only through and for the witness. The status of the Black body correlates to what Dufrenne calls “ambiguous status of the aesthetic object, which exists both for us and in itself.”<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

This essay has considered what of Dufrenne’s theory of aesthetic perception can be used in support of a theory of racial embodiment and fields of visibility. I found it somewhat suspect that Dufrenne says little on the matter of the artist’s desires for their work of art yet attributes the capacity to demand and exert power over others to inanimate objects. Rather than attempt to locate the boundary between the artist and their work, I argued that it is this very incoherence of desire that makes Dufrenne’s work relevant to our being in a world permeated with racial identity. Specifically, the aesthetic object in its efforts to become a work of art resonates with the struggle of the essentialized Black subject to be registered in its existence. With the perspectives of Dufrenne and Alcoff combined, we can see that the ambiguous status of the work of art pertains in an unexpected way to the mediation of perception through our sedimented racializing habits.

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<sup>26</sup> Yancy, “Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body,” 219.

<sup>27</sup> Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 71.