

In my paper I will address two recent philosophical criticisms of empirical approaches to art. Rationalism claims that insights from empirical aesthetics cannot provide justifications for aesthetic judgments (Dorsch 2014). Enactivist accounts of art criticize that empirical approaches to aesthetics are methodologically not suited to contribute to our understanding of the value art (Noë 2015). I will argue that both dismissals are misdirected. They do not properly identify the explanatory project of empirical aesthetics and therefore systematically underestimate the contribution it provides for a proper conception of artistic evaluation.

Against the rationalist dismissal I will defend the empiricist program of identifying sub-personal component processes that contribute to our evaluation of art. The requirement that such processes have to be available to conscious scrutiny of a suitable observer begs the question against empirical aesthetics. Against enactive claims I will show that the structure of our active and exploratory engagement with artistic values can to some extent be traced in neuroaesthetics (via the evaluative subsystems involved in our engagement with art) yet concede that this research needs to be supplemented by conceptual clarifications and behavioral hypotheses. I will discuss recent research paradigms in empirical aesthetics that could be seen as direct contributions to questions regarding the structure of our evaluative engagement with art. I will argue for a partial resuscitation of “beauty” as an aesthetic merit of works of art – despite its widespread philosophical dismissal – and present studies that we conducted regarding “artistic beauty” (as opposed to natural or physical beauty). Against both criticisms I will maintain that a strict separation of psychological preference and evaluation and artistic value is misguided.