This volume is a collection of sixteen new papers by psychologists of art, most of whom are prominent in their fields. The papers bear witness to the diversity of empirical aesthetics, provide a useful overview of some of the issues and approaches in the field, and in many cases make new contributions to it. The papers are somewhat variable in quality, but many are of a high standard. The topics covered range widely: film award ceremonies, chair design, theories of creativity, what goes on in teaching art at US high schools, strong emotional experiences of music, and the role of personality in artistic style are just some of the topics covered. Most of the papers, however, bear in some way on either creativity or aesthetic experience. The approach is empirical, occasionally employing unexplained jargon or terminology that only someone with an advanced understanding of statistics will grasp (try this, from p. 53: ‘The first eigenvalue for the analysis was 5.27 and the second eigenvalue was 1.32, providing fairly strong evidence for a single factor solution, using a scree test as a criterion.’). For the most part, though, the writing is accessible and succinct.

Several contributions in the volume bear on issues debated by philosophers. For instance, James Cutting argues that a prime determinant of artistic canon formation is what he terms the ‘mere exposure effect’. He tested on various audiences pairs of French Impressionist pictures, one of which was well known and the other not: adults preferred the more familiar of the two paintings in each pair in 59 per cent of all trials. He also tested and rejected the hypothesis that this was because the artistically better paintings are both well known and also preferred. He interspersed in his lectures without comment shots of the less-well-known pictures; after this exposure, when the students were tested again on the pairs of pictures, many reversed their preferences, now slightly preferring the pictures that they had been shown more frequently in lectures. This kind of result, though of course very far from decisive in its implications, clearly bears on philosophical discussions about the objectivity of aesthetic judgement.

There are several other empirical findings that will be of interest to philosophers. Sandra Russ discusses the extensive research material concerning the relation between children’s pretend play and their creativity, and shows that their propensity to engage in pretend play, particularly when it is affectively charged, correlates significantly with their creativity, measured using standard tests. Believers in
the connection of creativity to the free play of imagination will find some support for their views here, and will also be led to ponder on the role of emotion in creativity.

Gerald Cupchik takes Edward Bullough’s idea of psychical distance, frequently criticized by philosophers, and tests it empirically: when asked to identify with the protagonist of a work, readers experienced fresh emotions, but when asked to be a sympathetic spectator, they more frequently dwelled on their own emotional memories. This finding suggests that something is right in Bullough’s idea, or in related notions, while leaving a great deal of conceptual work to be done by the philosopher.

David Miall discusses empirical research which shows that, when presented with the same text, readers who are told that it is a literary work read it at a pace 10 per cent slower than those who are told that it is a newspaper report; and the former group of readers remember more of its stylistic features than do the latter group. Believers in the existence of a distinctively literary mode of appreciating texts will find this result of considerable interest and not a little comfort.

Philosophers of art, then, will discover in these and other chapters in the volume a great deal that is of interest to them. Indeed, in the light of reading this volume, it is to be regretted that philosophy of art has become relatively uninterested in empirical investigations, since there is a rich field of work represented here, which is at least suggestive for philosophical work and is sometimes directly relevant to it. Philosophers of art have probably shown their greatest interest in empirical work in respect of simulation theory, but that topic does not even feature in this volume: there is more empirical work than is dreamt of in our philosophy.

Conversely, it is to be regretted that the great majority of empirical aestheticians, judging from the writers in this book, are unaware of, or simply uninterested in, the writings of contemporary analytic philosophers of art. This is most striking in the ubiquitous use of the notion of the aesthetic, which receives no conceptual discussion, and in practice seems to be simply equated with pleasure or what people prefer. There is also a tendency among certain authors here to get nervous around value judgements—scare quotes sometimes spring up when concepts like better are deployed here. Yet one wonders how one could discuss aesthetics adequately without taking the idea of value seriously, and likewise creativity involves not just the idea of something new, but of something valuable. Philosophers might help to soothe the positivist qualms on display here.

Finally, several papers would have benefited from discussion of philosophers’ work: Russ’s otherwise excellent paper does not, for instance, make any reference to the long philosophical tradition, of which Kant is the most famous exponent, which connects creativity to the free play of imagination, and which might have suggested further avenues of exploration for her empirical work.

The lesson, then, is that philosophers of art ought to pay more attention to the rich variety of empirical work being done on the arts, and that psychologists of art ought to pay more attention to the writings of philosophers on art. A sustained dialogue between the two fields would be welcome, either through conferences or volumes in which philosophers and psychologists discuss each other’s work. Meantime, philosophers interested in how the empirical discussion of art bears on their work will find this volume a good place to learn about what is evidently a vibrant and interesting field.

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doi:10.1093/aesthj/ayl043