

# Community Sense: The Cohesive Power of Aesthetic Judgment

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## Abstract

Sociologists have undertheorized the role of aesthetic judgment in group identification. The author argues that the communication of aesthetic judgments in face-to-face interaction powerfully works to confirm or deny feelings of group belonging. The author introduces the concept of “community sense,” the public face of shared aesthetic judgments that is communicated and upheld within a group. The author illustrates this concept through an ethnographic case study of an erotic arts club, a group predicated on achieving a shared sense of “good” and “bad” taste. The author shows how the community sense is formed, challenged, and sustained in interaction, examining three characteristics of aesthetic judgments—derivation in form, visceral force, and intersubjective validity—that together constitute a strong basis for feelings of belonging and distinction. This setting acts as a wedge to access larger theoretical concerns, as the author explore the relationship between aesthetic judgment and feelings of group belonging in diverse contexts.

## Keywords

aesthetic judgment, face-to-face interaction, group formation, symbolic boundaries

One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one’s community sense . . .

—Arendt ([1977] 1992:75)

Aesthetic judgment is a “most efficient ‘group-maker’” (Hennion 2004:137), but sociologists have largely overlooked the role of aesthetic judgment in group formation and maintenance. In this article, I argue that individuals experience feelings of belonging and distinction through the communication of aesthetic judgments in face-to-face interactions. Perceived commonalities—whether they provide the impetus for interaction, are discovered in interaction, or are transformed through interaction—are confirmed and denied by others through communication. Groups are thus constructed and sustained through interaction. Interaction

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often involves the communication of aesthetic judgments—interpretations of sensory experiences encountered in everyday life. As individuals assert agreements or disagreements in aesthetic judgments deemed relevant to group identification, their feelings of group belonging are powerfully confirmed or denied. The communication of aesthetic judgments offers a particularly potent source of group feelings, because the sensuous forms from which they are derived provide fodder for communicating a shared social reality, evoke visceral responses that can produce strong emotions, and are intersubjectively validated within group interactions.

Drawing from the political theorist Hannah Arendt ([1977] 1992), I use the concept of “community sense,” the public face of shared aesthetic judgments that is communicated and upheld within a group, to analyze the relationship between aesthetic judgment and feelings of group belonging, or “groupness” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:20). I argue that aesthetic judgment constitutes groupness. I developed this theory through participant observation at a sensual figure drawing session—which I call the Salon, at the Storyville Social Club, a pseudonym for a private erotic arts club—as well as from in-depth interviews with the participants. The analysis focuses on the group’s critiques leading up to two shows in which members participated, as aesthetic judgments of artworks were most observable in these settings. By communicating aesthetic judgments of artworks, members crystallized the group’s boundaries, making distinctions between others they perceived as “shock-seekers” or “prudes,” and affirmed their own taste in a soft, emotional eroticism. Some members transgressed these boundaries by presenting artwork that other members deemed inappropriate, but members ultimately upheld the public face of taste by smoothing over disagreements in aesthetic judgments.

When group identification is nascent, is in flux, or becomes destabilized, aesthetic judgments have a more significant impact on groupness, as members must more actively negotiate group identification. The Storyville Social Club, where aesthetic judgments were repeatedly and explicitly communicated in the formation and maintenance of group boundaries, is an ideal setting for examining the relationship between aesthetic judgment and groupness. This group coalesced around a shared sense of erotic art, negotiating the fuzzy boundaries between fine art and pornography. The case illustrates how individuals experience visceral reactions to their sensory environment, the shared experience of which confirms or denies groupness when deemed relevant to group identification. Aesthetic judgments of artworks were most salient to groupness in the Storyville Social Club, but the communication of aesthetic judgment is not confined to art worlds; aesthetic judgment occurs in diverse group settings. In everyday life, individuals sensuously experience their surroundings and communicate these aesthetic judgments. When expressed within a group, individuals see aesthetic judgments of certain forms as indicators of belonging or distinction, and their agreement or disagreement in these aesthetic judgments strengthens or weakens groupness. Analyzing the communication of aesthetic judgments in group contexts emphasizes the emotional, embodied, and sensory foundation of groups.

This article is organized in four sections. In the first section, I theorize the concept of community sense, establishing my claim that the communication of aesthetic judgments works to confirm or deny feelings of belonging. I begin by examining the relationship between groupness and interaction, arguing that perceived commonalities are confirmed or denied by others through interaction, whether commonalities were posited in advance of interaction, discovered within interaction, or transformed through interaction. Next, I explore the relationship between interaction and aesthetic judgment, claiming that aesthetic judgment is not only a product of social location but also shapes and is shaped by interaction. Finally, I analyze the relationship between aesthetic judgment and groupness, focusing on

three characteristics of aesthetic judgment—derivation in form, visceral response, and intersubjective validity—to show how the communication of aesthetic judgments in a group context confirms or denies feelings of belonging. In the second section, I describe the setting of the Storyville Social Club and my methods for analyzing this case. In the third section, I use this case to examine how group members formed, challenged, and sustained their community sense through members' communications of aesthetic judgments. In particular, I emphasize how (1) the derivation of aesthetic judgment in the material forms of artworks allowed members to erect group flags, certain images they repeatedly invoked in interaction, which delineated the community sense; (2) certain aesthetic judgments provoked a visceral response in individuals which threatened the community sense; and (3) despite disagreements, the group members upheld the public face of taste, which validated the group. In the fourth section, I use this intensive analysis of a small group as a wedge to access larger theoretical concerns, exploring how the communication of aesthetic judgments confirms or denies feelings of belonging in diverse group settings.

## THEORIZING COMMUNITY SENSE

### *Group Identification in Interaction*

Groupness, the collective sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, arises when a group of individuals perceive that they share a significant commonality that makes them distinctive from others and binds them to one another (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Perceived commonalities act as a powerful group cohesive insofar as individuals find them significant to their self-identification (Turner and Oakes 1986). Groupness occurs in tandem with the creation of symbolic boundaries, conceptual distinctions that categorize people, objects, and practices (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnar 2002). In proposing commonalities with some, individuals simultaneously imply distinctions from others (and vice versa). Empirical studies of symbolic boundaries reveal various bases for differentiating between “us” and “them,” including religious, class, epistemic, and cultural distinctions (Beisel 1998; Gieryn 1983; Grazian 2003; Lamont 2000).

Drawing together insights from micro- and macro-sociological research to explain the relationship between interactions and groupness, I illustrate that individuals (1) form groups on the basis of collectively expected commonalities; (2) discover perceived commonalities through interaction; and (3) strengthen, transform, and deny perceived commonalities through interaction. Sociologists have traditionally assumed that social networks produce worldviews, including moral values and taste, but recent studies, particularly network analyses, show that cultural worldviews also generate social networks (Lizardo 2006; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010). Expected commonalities can be posited prior to interaction, as individuals often feel communion with those whom they have never met. These expected commonalities are based on past interactions, by virtue of which individuals extend the boundaries of groupness to include others whom they believe share this commonality, as in the case of geographically dispersed subcultures (Hebdige 1979). When expected commonalities precede interaction, they often provide the impetus for individuals to intersubjectively confirm groupness through interaction (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001).

Individuals may interact because of expected commonalities or for other purposes; once in interactions, people can communicate perceived commonalities, confirming expectations or discovering unexpected agreement. Micro-sociological studies of “culture in interaction” (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) illustrate how individuals communicate commonalities and

differences within interaction. People who locate commonalities in interaction are more likely to sustain their ties, with rare commonalities acting as strong bridges for sociability (DiMaggio 1987). Ties between people who find themselves at odds are more likely to decay (Vaisey and Lizardo 2010). Discovered commonalities encourage sustained interaction, as they facilitate smooth interaction and confirm individuals' self-concepts (Goffman 1959). For example, Rivera's (2012) study of elite professional service firms reveals that employers hire applicants who demonstrate commonalities in cultural tastes, as they feel they can work more easily with coworkers with whom they are "culturally matched." Over time, discovered commonalities harden into distinct group cultures, or "idiocultures": shared systems of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs, of which certain elements are more salient and are repeatedly referenced to crystallize group identification (Fine 1979). Idiocultures are produced within interaction, but members are often drawn together nonrandomly on the basis of expected commonalities, which are subsequently validated in interaction.

Expected commonalities, which form the basis for interaction, can also be denied when disagreements are communicated in interaction (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Group identification does not merely arise from the discovery of similarities and differences, but it is continually reinforced or transformed as new experiences provide opportunities for group members to communicate perceived commonalities and differences. Because the confirmation or denial of commonalities cannot be unequivocally determined in advance of interaction (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), the result of interaction is always unpredictable. Interaction is a fickle environment for groupness.

### *Aesthetic Judgment in Interaction*

Groupness is formed and maintained through interaction, but interaction does not occur in a vacuum. Human beings are surrounded by a world of sensuous forms they constantly perceive, and they often communicate their interpretations of these forms to one another. In this way, interaction is often precipitated and shaped by aesthetic judgment. *Aesthetic judgment* is a notoriously "slippery" (Fine 1992:1269) term that sociologists have defined with varying degrees of breadth, including affective and cognitive responses to artistic products (Benzecry 2011; Fine 1995), embodied reactions to artistic objects and mundane material forms (Bourdieu 1984), and qualitative experiences of material and social forms, such as abstract concepts (Martin 2011). I define aesthetic judgment as the process by which individuals perceive sensory experiences and affectively evaluate those experiences.<sup>1</sup> Sensory experience relies on the perception of sensuous forms through multiple channels: smell, taste, touch, and sound in addition to visual perception (Klett 2014; Waskul and Vannini 2008). Individuals selectively attend to forms and specific qualities of forms to navigate the social world. Aesthetic judgment involves more than merely using the senses, as the reaction must always be interpretive (Kant ([1790] 2000)). For example, while exclaiming at the beauty of a sunset is an aesthetic response, shielding one's eyes from the blinding rays of the sun is not. Aesthetic judgments also include second-order sensory experiences: mental associations and images, deriving from firsthand or vicarious experiences, that are stored in memory "as a simplified and perhaps distorted pattern of neural associations gleaned from perceptual and sensory experiences" (Ignatow 2007:126). Defining aesthetic judgment as arising from sensuous forms encountered in everyday life permits its examination in diverse social spheres, while retaining an analytic focus on sensory experience, as the definition does not encompass all qualitative experience.

Aesthetic judgment shapes social interaction. The relationship between aesthetic judgment and social interaction is largely undertheorized within sociology,<sup>2</sup> but studies of

materiality show that the qualities of forms shape how one interacts with these forms and one's social surroundings (McDonnell 2010; Rose-Greenland 2013; Rubio 2012). In the case of music, songs played in various social contexts "afford" (DeNora 2003), but do not dictate, particular emotions, thoughts, and actions. For example, particular tempos are played in department stores to enliven shoppers or in airports to provide a calming atmosphere (DeNora 2000), and individuals may purposively manipulate their own moods by playing certain songs in specific environments (Gomart and Hennion 1999). Examining the "inside" of interaction through micro-sociological studies reveals that aesthetic judgments shape social interaction (DeNora and Krzys Acord 2008; Eyerman 2006; Kaufman 2004).

Social interaction also shapes aesthetic judgments. Bourdieu (1984) claimed that aesthetic judgments are shaped by habitus, that is, dispositions acquired through individuals' experiences and social position that shape how they are inclined to judge future experiences. The concept of habitus emphasizes the constant and embodied activity of aesthetic judgment, as habitus is a disposition through which social relations become objectified in familiar objects, "impress[ing] themselves through bodily experiences which may be as profoundly unconscious as the quiet caress of beige carpets or the thin clamminess of tattered, garish linoleum, the harsh smell of bleach or perfumes as imperceptible as a negative scent" (p. 77). As one continuously confronts new social conditions, one's habitus adjusts with the evolving biography of experiences. Bourdieu (1996) recognized that social interaction shapes aesthetic judgments, but the concept of habitus cannot show the process by which this occurs, except as individuals shift their social position through class mobility; habitus does not provide an account of how individuals negotiate aesthetic judgments in face-to-face interaction (Beisel 1993; Born 2010; Hennion 2004; Wolff 1993).

Similarly, empirical research on deliberative judgment, including aesthetic and nonaesthetic judgment, finds that individuals' judgments are influenced by the communicated judgments of others (Friedkin and Johnsen 2011; Schneiderhan and Khan 2008). Studies of small groups, such as book clubs (Childress and Friedkin 2012), academic peer review panels (Lamont 2009), and restaurant workers (Fine 1995) suggest that, although privately held judgments may or may not change in the course of interaction, individuals tend to amend their expressed judgments to correspond with community standards. Because groupness is validated and invalidated through interaction, and aesthetic judgment both shapes and is shaped by interaction, it follows that the communication of aesthetic judgments is one way individuals confirm and deny groupness.

### *Community Sense: The Public Face of Taste*

Sociologists have recently begun to explore the topic of aesthetic judgment, which has a long lineage in philosophical thought. Beginning with the work of eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, scholars have increasingly focused on the intersubjective quality of aesthetic judgment. In the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt explicitly addressed the relationship between aesthetic judgment and groupness by reinterpreting Kant's theory of judgment. Arendt ([1961] 2006) claimed that the communication and shared support of aesthetic judgments generate powerful feelings of groupness. She argued that through aesthetic judgments, one not only makes public one's judgments of objects but also reveals with whom one belongs and what kind of person one is:

We all know very well how quickly people recognize each other, and how unequivocally they can feel that they belong to each other, when they discover a kinship in question of what pleases and displeases. From the viewpoint of this common experience, it is as

though taste decides not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in it. . . . Wherever people judge the things of the world that are common to them, there is more implied in their judgments than these things. By his manner of judging, the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of person he is. (p. 220)

In communicating one's tastes to others, one discloses one's subjectivity, making it possible for others to discover whether individuals "belong to each other" by confirming or denying intersubjectivity in judgments of taste. Arendt argued that in making aesthetic judgments, which may seem private, we reflect on the collective, expressed judgments of others with whom we interact. Aesthetic judgments are thus rooted in what she called a "community sense" (Arendt [1977] 1992:75).<sup>3</sup> Interpreting Arendt, Zerilli (2005) claimed that the differences and commonalities found in communicating judgments of taste are "by no means given in advance of the act itself" (p. 165), meaning that they emerge within interactions. Although one may propose shared taste in advance of interaction, one can find agreement or disagreement only in their actual communication. Using Arendt's reference to "community sense" as a point of departure, I argue that aesthetic judgments (1) are derived from forms, (2) generate visceral responses, and (3) are intersubjectively validated in interaction. Together, these characteristics constitute a potent combination for strengthening or weakening feelings of group belonging.

### *Derivation in Form*

Aesthetic judgments reflect perceptions of forms, rather than indicating something inherent in the forms themselves. However, by communicating aesthetic judgments of the same forms, individuals can transcend their personal experience of forms to construct a shared social reality. In this way, form creates the possibility of communication. Fine (1995) gave the example of eating pretzels to show how individuals achieve a shared social reality through the communication of sensory experiences:

Consuming pretzels, I cannot determine in theory, for example, if your sensation of salty is the same as my sensation of salty. All we can know is that we are responding to the same stimuli, and we might gain some intersubjective confidence by the fact that we both liken the taste of this food to other foods that we both have tasted, choose to drink water after consumption, brush off the salt, or make an appropriately salty face, referring to the potency of the sensation. (pp. 265–66)

The existence of the pretzels themselves allows us some basis for communication, as individuals can assume they are responding to the same form, even if they have different aesthetic judgments of this form. Moreover, the shared experience of eating pretzels stabilizes the social reality: one can reference the taste of pretzels when not eating pretzels, confident that others will be able to tap into this shared meaning by recalling their own sensory experiences of eating pretzels.

When people interact in a group context, forms provide fodder for individuals to identify with one another and negotiate group boundaries by offering opportunities to communicate agreements or disagreements in their aesthetic judgments (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). These opportunities arise repeatedly as a group encounters new forms, and as forms are recalled and repeatedly referenced to invoke feelings of groupness or distinction. Expressions of agreement and disagreement crystallize a group's shared sense of their commonality by demarcating a realm of agreement that inscribes the community sense. Certain forms are deemed relevant

to group identification in different settings. These forms act as “group flags” (Farrell 2001), marking the boundaries of the group and that of other groups, as aesthetic judgments are communicated among members and compared with those of perceived nonmembers.

### *Visceral Response*

Individuals draw idiosyncratic aesthetic judgments from the same forms, but these judgments are not arbitrary; rather, forms are nonneutral surfaces whose qualities “call forth” certain responses<sup>4</sup> (Hennion 2003; Silver 2011). For example, Witkin and DeNora (1997) examined how the material environment of an office space reinforces corporate culture:

[The room was] purged of volume, color, and texture. It was filled with rectangular planes which visually flattened the entire space. . . . Men wore dark suits, plain in color, smooth and devoid of texture. . . . This was a place for encounters between heads rather than bodies. The aesthetics of the room . . . abstracted the head from the body. . . . Its aesthetic control of the environment is an important part of the development of a corporate social being, one that is centered around the rational-technical and calculative values of organizational life. (p. 5)

The materiality of the office space, including the employees, afforded individuals a certain “rational-technical” style of interaction. When individuals engage with forms, they have an embodied experience that shapes how they draw meaning and interact with one another (Alexander 2008).

Visceral responses to forms often drive interactions. Haidt’s (2001) social intuitionist model of moral judgment separates moral reasoning, the conscious mental activity of rendering a moral judgment out of perception, from moral intuition, the sudden emergence in consciousness of a moral judgment without conscious awareness of moral reasoning, claiming that the latter precedes and gives rise to the former (Haidt 2001).<sup>5</sup> Arendt’s theory of aesthetic judgment is consistent with Haidt’s definition of moral intuition. Arendt ([1977] 1992) argued that in the process of aesthetic judgment, we do not derive reason about particular phenomena from universal principles, but instead attend to the particular and then search our minds for the universal that applies in this case. Aesthetic judgments often generate visceral responses that individuals then attempt to reconcile with post hoc justifications of moral reasoning. For example, Katz (1999) described the sensory experience of embodying one’s car while driving. When cut off by another driver, one feels intense anger as though one’s own body has been aggressed. The visceral sensation of being cut off, coupled with the galling image of the offending car’s rear end, provokes crude gestures and expletives such as “giving the finger” and exclaiming, “Asshole!” Only later does one make sense of one’s anger by interpreting oneself as the victim. Katz (1999) explained,

*But this self-reflection does not take the form of thought. Drivers usually do not perceive themselves as cut off and then decide to construct their anger; rather, it is in seeing themselves cut off that they first find themselves angry. (p. 227)*

The force of the visceral response cues individuals to their moral judgment and creates the need for justification. Because not all aesthetic judgments are seen to embody moral concerns, the moral connotation imputed to certain aesthetic judgments affords them extra social significance. In turn, the aesthetic experience eliciting moral judgments—the materiality of morality—gives moral judgments a strong emotional pull.

When individuals communicate aesthetic judgments to others in a group context, these judgments are charged with visceral feeling. Aesthetic judgments can powerfully strengthen or fracture a group when they are associated with the group's perceived commonality, as these judgments carry a heavy emotional valance. For example, Benzecry's (2011) ethnography of an opera house describes how opera fans are intently attuned to the music. Fans feel a communion with others who express their listening similarly—eyes closed, fist clenched, kneeling—as they imagine them to share their aesthetic experience, while they scorn those who sit in the orchestra and seem to listen casually, judging these audience members as consuming opera only as a means to display social status. For the fans, opera is an experience of “moral listening” that improves the individual; thus, they judge others' expressions of their aesthetic experience as indicative of core commonalities and differences. Sensory experiences that are deemed socially salient are transmitted into visceral feelings of belonging and distinction. Individuals “*feel* [italics added] that they belong to each other” (Arendt [1961] 2006:220), because the community sense is literally felt.

### *Intersubjective Validity*

One can communicate one's aesthetic judgments by placing particular sensory experiences under more general categories. One shares aesthetic judgments with others with the assumption that they are using the same general schema (i.e., what I define as beautiful is roughly equivalent to what you define as beautiful), which is validated or invalidated in communication (Arendt [1977] 1992; Schutz 1953). When one makes aesthetic judgments, one takes the possible judgments of others into account, and in communicating one's judgments, one seeks the assent of others (Arendt [1977] 1992:67).<sup>6</sup> This assent provides validation; in other words, validation of aesthetic judgment derives from the support of others in its communication, as it “gains in validity to the degree that it has liberated itself from merely individual idiosyncrasies” (Arendt [1961] 2006:222). In this way, the claim to validity is not only intersubjective but also local, as it can never extend beyond the community to which it is communicated (Arendt [1961] 2006; Fine 1995).

Returning to the example of the driver who is cut off in traffic, Katz (1999) explained that if the driver is unable to narrate the event to others in a way that seems to justify the uncouth response, one's anger dissipates and is replaced with embarrassment. Drivers may justify their reactions to others in different ways, such as by using instrumental reasoning, explaining that they were already late to work, or drawing on visually motivated justifications meant to elicit a visceral response, exclaiming that the offending driver's vehicle was an SUV with crass bumper stickers. Individuals are judged not only for their aesthetic judgments, but also for how they justify these judgments. In the absence of validation from others, individuals feel their reaction to the sensory experience itself is invalid. Because visceral reactions are inner subjective states, individuals find them to be socially validated only when they are communicated to and confirmed by others.

The Latin maxim *de gustibus non est disputandum* states, “In matters of taste, there can be no dispute.” In fact, individuals dispute matters of taste all the time. One may find a painting beautiful, while another may judge it to be ugly. One can also make arguments for liking or disliking the painting, for example, by alluding to its technical or conceptual features. However, the premises of these arguments rest on subjective concepts of what constitutes good or bad painting in general. When individuals find incongruities in aesthetic judgments on the basis of different subjective premises, there is disagreement without resolution. Instead, individuals are likely to conclude that they judge differently and, if the disagreement is deemed salient to their self-identifications, that they are different kinds of people.



People tend to gravitate toward others who validate their taste and pull away from those with whom a stalemate has been reached (Vaisey and Lizardo 2010), as the intersubjective validation and invalidation of aesthetic judgments confirms or denies feelings of groupness. In a group context, repeated intersubjective validations of aesthetic judgments can concretize the collective sense of belonging to the group, as members come to see themselves as sharing a community sense. In turn, feelings of belonging tend to nudge members toward agreement. However, the community sense is distinct from intersubjective validity, in that the community sense represents the group's public face of taste, rather than reflecting complete consensus in individuals' judgments. Intersubjective validation stabilizes into a public face of taste, which is always vulnerable to being undermined by communicated disagreements in aesthetic judgments.

### *The Case of Erotic Art*

I draw on an ethnography of an erotic arts club to illustrate the concept of community sense. Artworks involving sexual content, precariously situated between fine art and pornography (Beisel 1993; Ellis 1980; Nead 1992), are fertile objects for examining agreements and disagreements in aesthetic judgments. These contested objects often become fulcrums for identification and distinction. For example, Butler (1990) described the case of Robert Mapplethorpe's X Portfolio, an exhibition of black-and-white photographs depicting homosexual sex, which provoked federal hearings and protests over their display. The photographs provided the material fodder for communication, enabling individuals to express identification with and opposition to certain groups (DeNora and Krzys Acord 2008), and constructing groups that cohered in interaction over the exhibition, rather than in advance of it. In pushing the boundary of permissible sexuality, erotic art is heavily morally laden; therefore, when individuals judge erotic art to please or displease them, they also express judgments about what kinds of sexuality are appropriate. In doing so, they find themselves judging the forms confronting the group, but, more importantly, judging one another by virtue of communicated aesthetic judgments.

## INSIDE THE STORYVILLE SOCIAL CLUB

During 2012 and 2013, I conducted two years of participant observation at weekly sensual figure drawing sessions at the Storyville Social Club. The club was owned by Freddy and his wife Marie, a prominent burlesque dancer, and it was affiliated with Marie's burlesque troupe, which performed at the club and provided models for the Salon. The Salon had 8 regular attendees, but Freddy estimated that there were approximately 60 members of the Storyville Social Club, which hosted other events, including nude literary readings, erotic film screenings, and burlesque performances.

When the club first opened, Freddy and Marie invited their artist friends to become members. People who attempted to join later needed sponsorship from an existing club member and had to complete an application that asked about their preferred art discipline, literature, hobbies, and their opinion on two essays, which Freddy had written on his conception of eroticism. However, after the club had been open for two years, Freddy and Marie altered the application process, deeming it "inappropriate" for properly assessing whether potential members were the "right fit." In lieu of the application, Freddy and Marie invited prospective members to attend several public events, vetting the individuals through face-to-face interactions in the hope that the new process would act as a more effective gatekeeper. Freddy explained that prospective members must display "an openness to the pervasive sexuality at the club," but they must not mistake the space for a sex club.

I confined my analysis to participants of the Salon, as this group was involved in sustained face-to-face interactions, whereas the other club members were not always acquainted and encountered one another only sporadically. Of the eight regular attendees, there were two women and six men, ranging in age from their late 20s to late 50s. The artists, who were of mixed income, included professional and amateur artists, mostly working professionally or doing freelance work in the arts, such as graphic design, illustration, or musical composition, although some held other occupations. All of the artists and models identified themselves as heterosexual, and many were married or in committed relationships. Their significant others supported the members' participation in the Storyville Social Club and were often members of the club as well; however, the artists sometimes found the need to "screen out" friends, coworkers, or extended family from knowledge of their participation, as they felt these people may disapprove. The Storyville Social Club was important to the artists, as it allowed them to interact with other adults who were passionate about erotic art, a mutual interest they often found lacking in their other relationships. The Salon operated as a community of artists who interacted both inside (e.g., during the figure drawing sessions) and outside the club.

During the figure drawing sessions, the model dressed in burlesque paraphernalia: nude except for meticulously painted lips and dark mascara, hair ornaments, gaudy pearl or gold jewelry, and stiletto heels. The model usually took off parts of her costume between poses until she was fully nude, creating the impression of an intermittent striptease. I participated fully as an artist in the Salon by sketching the models, socializing with other members during the session and afterward at a nearby bar, and contributing to critiques and the club's art show. The members seemed to accept my dual role as an artist and a researcher, and they treated me primarily as a fellow artist. As a young woman, I was an outlier in the group. However, my gender did not seem to be a significant distraction. Models were often complimented for their femininity, but female artists were primarily treated as "one of the boys." Moreover, my gender facilitated my entrée into the club, as Freddy stated that he was more eager to accept female members, because he was less concerned about their enacting improper sexual etiquette.

After one year of participant observation, I conducted 11 in-depth interviews, including 9 interviews with regular attendees of the Salon and participants in the club's show and interviews with Freddy and Marie. Interviews lasted about one and a half hours and were audio-recorded. During the semistructured interviews, I questioned the artists about their involvement in the Storyville Social Club, their participation in the Salon, their art, and their view of eroticism. My focus on the communication of aesthetic judgments in group interactions emerged from observing other members' frequent assertions of their intense identification with the erotic sensibility espoused at the Storyville Social Club and their disassociation with alternative perspectives on eroticism. Because members' affirmations of belonging and distinction were made most fervently when certain forms were presented—artworks that they deemed to exemplify their view of eroticism or ones they opposed—I realized that these forms themselves elicited visceral responses and provided opportunities for communicating perceived commonalities and differences. I interviewed participants only after spending a significant amount of time in the field, which allowed me to reflect on significant events during interviews, such as moments of expressed disagreements between members. This strategy gave me access to members' perceptions, which were not always visible on the surface, and provided greater insight as to how aesthetic judgments shaped feelings of identification and distinction. I centered my analysis on events at which communications of aesthetic judgments were most observable. These included critiques at the Salon, at which members presented their artworks to each other for feedback prior to two group art shows:

the Kinsey Institute Juried Art Show, an annual erotic art show at Indiana University, and the Storyville Social Club's own show.

Triangulating between my interviews and ethnographic observations, I analyze the process by which members formed, negotiated challenges to, and sustained groupness by communicating their aesthetic judgments, maintaining what Arendt ([1977] 1992) called a "community sense" (p. 75). At the Storyville Social Club, shared aesthetic judgments of erotic artworks translated into strong feelings of group belonging and sharp boundaries of distinction. Although individuals initially became members because they expected to find a shared taste in erotic art, which they held as significant to their self-concepts, they negotiated the group's public face of taste upon interaction with other members. The case of the Storyville Social Club reveals how aesthetic judgment constitutes groupness by illustrating how specific characteristics of aesthetic judgment—derivation in form, visceral response, and intersubjective validity—shape group formation and maintenance.

## ILLUSTRATING COMMUNITY SENSE

### *Forming the Community Sense*

At the Salon, during a critique leading up to the Kinsey show, the artists clustered around impressionist lithographs of burlesque dancers and Degas-inspired bathing scenes, which were scattered across the stage. The artworks were made by Julie, an attractive, middle-aged printmaker. She lamented to the group that the previous Kinsey show featured erotic artwork that she found to be in bad taste: "Last year's show had a lot of what I consider gratuitous nudity that didn't tell a story, that just showed a nipple. . . . I don't think I have a lot of edgy work." Freddy consoled her, saying, "Edgy is a shortcut. Is it edgy if I glue googly eyes to my balls [and call it art]?" Subsequently, "googly eyes on balls" art, which the artists characterized as sexually explicit imagery that lacked emotional depth, became the paradigmatic expression of the erotic art the artists disparaged.

These artists were opposed not only to artists who used sexually explicit images to shock viewers but also to those who devalued all sexually explicit art on the basis of its explicitness alone. Evan, a graphic designer in his mid-30s, said, "What bums me out is that there are four square inches of the human body, where if you show it, you cross a line and it is perceived to have less value" (field notes). He explained that the Storyville Social Club had become a refuge for him in the face of those who rendered the erotic mundane: "This place saved my life. All of my friends from high school wear sweatpants and go to Costco on the weekends. They've given up." These artists saw both the "googly eyes on balls" artists and the Costco shoppers in sweatpants as failing to appreciate the erotic sense, considering the former to conflate explicit imagery with eroticism and the latter to neglect eroticism altogether. Between these two poles, the artists inscribed their community sense by seeking to illustrate a soft sensuality in their art.

These artists marked the boundary of good taste not by which body parts were portrayed but by how they were depicted. For these artists, eroticism was determined by whether they perceived the image to have an emotional undercurrent of intimacy. Several times during the critique and during other Salon events, Freddy, to the concurrence of the other artists, contrasted the "googly eyes on balls" art to *L'Origine du Monde*, a nineteenth-century oil painting by Gustave Courbet that depicts the genitals and torso of a nude woman reclining spread-legged (see Figure 1). He asked the group, "What is the difference between Googling the word 'pussy' and *L'Origine du Monde*? The painting is not a shortcut. It is shocking, but there is a difference from, 'I'm going to paint a pussy.'" He deemed the former images as solely intended to sexually arouse or shock the viewer, whereas he found the latter to exhibit



**Figure 1.** *L'Origine du Monde*.

an emotional sensitivity that engages the viewer's imagination. In an interview, Freddy elaborated on the distinction:

The thing about [*L'Origine du Monde*] to me that makes it infinitely more sexual than a photograph is the sheer amount of time spent on the details, and the time spent in the room with the model—the unabashed peering into this woman's vagina for however many hours and days.

For Freddy, the detail with which the pubic hair was depicted revealed an intimacy between the artist and the model, whereas the Googled “pussy” images failed to be erotic because they exposed only naked flesh. Freddy and the artists repeatedly conjured images of “googly eyes on balls” art and *L'Origine du Monde* in group discussions. These forms acted as group flags and inverted group flags (Farrell 2001), which publicly expressed the distinctiveness of their erotic sensibility by epitomizing what it was and what it was not.

Despite the wide variety of artistic styles among the artists, ranging from representational oil paintings to comic strips, the artists viewed their submission to the Kinsey show as a group entry—in effect, a group protest. Deeming the jury to have a different community sense, privileging “googly eyes on balls” art, they hoped their work would provide a welcome contrast. At the critique, Freddy said,

If they turn us down, it will be more proof that we are doing something we should do. . . . It will be a gauge of how important what we are doing in this room is. . . . Erotic art has become shorthand for, “Come see my show. It's shit.” But then you've got people who are doing the same subject matter, but their execution elevates it. You get a lot of mileage out of misrepresenting things that I hold dear: art and sexuality and their combination.

Brad replied, “But we are different. We are here to do the whole thing.” Raising her fist, Marie shouted triumphantly, “We have to fight them from the inside!” The artists presented



**Figure 2.** Eternity's Sunrise.

their submissions as a collective subversive act intended to establish their own community sense by placing themselves in sharp juxtaposition with another community.

Of the members of the Storyville Social Club who submitted to the Kinsey show, only Freddy's piece, *Eternity's Sunrise*, a photogram picturing a nude woman on a swing from a vantage point beneath the swing (see Figure 2) was accepted. Freddy and Marie drove four and a half hours to the show. Freddy explained that he went to the show in the hope of finding at least one kindred spirit—proof that the community sense might be shared outside the club. He stated that “even if there had been one interesting piece, it would have been worth it.” They were sorely disappointed. After 20 minutes, they left in disgust. At the Salon the following week, Freddy stated that they were “furious” about the show, which he described as “horrific.” Freddy mocked the show, exclaiming, “It was like, here is a giant dick with a light switch, and it says, ‘Light Switch for the Vatican.’ I get it: priests like dicks.” During an interview, Marie further explained that she disliked the artwork because it lacked multiple layers of meaning. Marie claimed that these works revealed the artists’ lack of courage, as the artists had politicized sex in a way that “takes the sex out of sex,” rather than rendering themselves vulnerable to their audience by displaying what they felt to be erotic. Freddy and Marie asserted that the artwork reflected poorly on the artists’ moral integrity, portraying aesthetic judgments as a symbol of moral stature (Mandoki 2007; Saito 2007). By mocking the artworks with the other members, Freddy and Marie elicited the residue of these forms,

raising them in the group's imagination as inverted group flags (Farrell 2001) that portrayed everything the Storyville Social Club was not.

Freddy stated that when he saw the show, he became offended that his work was accepted, feeling mistaken for a "googly eyes on balls" artist, but he was able to reconcile his participation in the show when he saw that the other attendees did not appreciate his work:

When we went to the show, I was like, "No one is even looking at it." It was awesome. And I felt weird and angry and bad and also kind of vindicated, because I hated all of the other pieces in there. If I had liked every other piece of art and people didn't care about mine, I would have been really, really mad, but since I didn't like anything else, it was like, OK, it is cool that no one really liked my stuff. . . . I like to think that is special and it comes from a different approach, especially to the erotic stuff. And feeling like a complete outlier or outsider at that show, made me go, "OK, cool, yeah." (Interview)

Because others who were not a part of his community failed to show interest in his work, he could prove to the group that he did not share the foreign community sense after all. Freddy discussed his aesthetic judgments by referring to his visceral reaction of feeling "weird" and "angry." He expressed that, although he was in the group exhibited in the Kinsey show, he was, nevertheless, not *of* this group. In interacting with attendees at the show, a group that Salon members perceived to have a different community sense, and relating his experience of mutual disgust and noninterest upon returning, Freddy provided the group with confirmation that their community sense was, in fact, distinct. Members intersubjectively validated their community sense not only by expressing agreements in aesthetic judgment but also by asserting that these aesthetic judgments were deemed invalid by others with a different community sense.

*Eternity's Sunrise* suffered a lack of favorable judgment by some, and others failed to see it as erotic art at all. The piece features a vagina prominently at the center of the composition, but it is abstractly rendered by a curling insignia. The work refers to the eighteenth-century oil painting by Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing*, which shows an elderly man pushing his wife on a swing, swathed in the layers of her gowns, while a younger man illicitly watches, ensconced in the bushes, supposedly enjoying a sight to which the viewer is not privy. During an interview, Freddy explained, "If you understand [the Fragonard] reference, then you realize, 'Oh, that's a swing,' and then the picture starts to form." A viewer familiar with the Fragonard painting might recognize the vertical bar in Freddy's composition as a swing and the coiling emblem above it as a vagina; however, one unfamiliar with this piece may conclude that these shapes are mere abstractions. During the critique, Brad, a professional representational painter, praised the work's flexibility in interpretation: "What is neat about it is that if you were a person that would object to lascivious imagery, on what grounds could you object to this?" As Freddy explained to the other artists, the subtlety of the erotic connotations allowed him to leave *Eternity's Sunrise* hanging on the wall in their home when Marie's mother, a devout Christian, visited, as she was unaware that she was looking at a depiction of her daughter's vagina. As one who did not view the world with this sense, she missed the erotic interpretation. By not interpreting the artwork in terms of Freddy's intentions, she revealed herself as an outsider to the community to which he belonged. In contrast to Marie's mother, the other artists asserted themselves to be insiders, laughing when Freddy presented his piece and claiming that they saw his intentions right away. Familiar with the Fragonard reference, they perceived the inside joke—the vagina that was visible only to some. The implicitness of the imagery acted as a shibboleth that allowed those who shared the community sense to communicate with each other, while remaining opaque to outsiders.

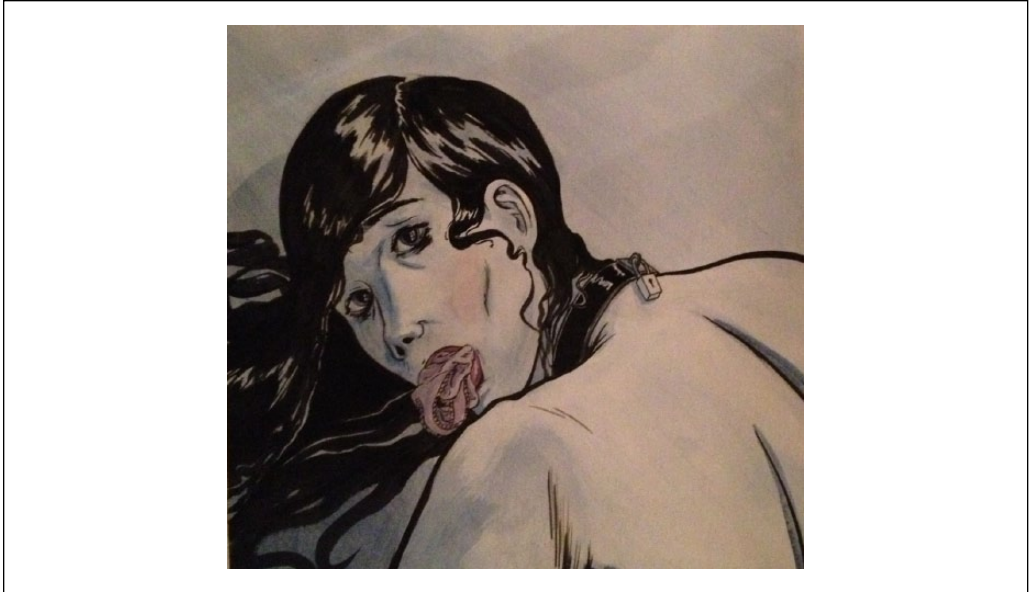
In communicating their aesthetic judgments, the members shared much more than their taste in artworks; they delineated their community sense, conveying the kind of people they were, and, by extension, with whom they belonged. Communicating shared aesthetic judgments required members, first, to express that they saw through corresponding lenses by placing objects in the same social categories, unlike Marie's mother, and second, to show that they evaluated the world similarly by ascribing these objects the same good or bad affective valance, unlike the attendees of the Kinsey show. Artworks provided the material fodder for groups to communicate and confirm this community sense. Some work, such as *L'Origine du Monde* and *Eternity's Sunrise*, served as group flags; other work, those deemed "googly eyes on balls" art and artwork in the Kinsey show, acted as inverted group flags. Individuals identified members and nonmembers to each other by expressing approval of and opposition to (or nonrecognition of) these artworks. When members crossed into other group territories, they worked to communicate their continued allegiance to their community by waving these flags in conversation with other members. People whose expressed judgments placed them outside the border of the community—the shock-seekers and the prudes—were not simply seen as judging differently but as judging differently because they were fundamentally different kinds of people. In particular, outsiders were deemed morally deficient in seemingly lacking the courage to make themselves vulnerable by expressing their erotic feelings. The moral community inscribed within these boundaries drew its cohesive power from the communication of aesthetic judgments. Certain forms acted as vehicles for moral meaning, as the group members repeatedly presented and discussed artworks that they perceived to epitomize either their community sense or the community sense of outsiders.

### *Challenging the Community Sense*

In the aftermath of the Kinsey show, Freddy decided to host his own erotic art show, which Evan jokingly claimed should be titled "Too Hot for Kinsey" (field notes). Fearing "200 penis submissions" in the "googly eyes on balls" vein, Freddy opted against an open call for submissions, allowing only members of the Storyville Social Club to submit their work. He chose the theme "vulnerability," intending this to be interpreted in ways that were "empowering," rather than "victimizing," to the subject portrayed as vulnerable. Some members' submissions, however, challenged the community sense by pushing the boundary of good taste in their aesthetic expressions of vulnerability.

Nathan, a freelance illustrator in his late 20s, quietly showed a small ink and watercolor sketch of his intended piece to Evan and me prior to the formal critique of the artists' submissions. The sketch pictured a woman's face looking backward with an apparently fearful expression; she had a pair of pink, lace-trimmed underwear stuffed in her mouth and a locked collar strapped around her neck. As Nathan later explained in an interview, he had gotten the idea for the piece from his girlfriend, who suggested they enact that particular scene during BDSM<sup>7</sup> sex play. Evan, looking slightly uncomfortable, probed Nathan, "So you want her boundaries to be pushed but not violated?" Nathan said, "Yeah." I offered that he could clarify this intention by using a warmer color scheme and widening the woman's eyes so that she appeared more conscious. When I asked if this was helpful, he said, "Yeah, just seeing your reaction was helpful, just that you weren't totally freaked out by it. . . . I was trying to hit that sweet spot where it was vulnerable, but not over the line." Nathan used Evan's and my affective reactions to gauge whether he was within the boundaries of good taste, hitting the "sweet spot" that elicited an emotional reaction from the viewer without rendering a sexually violated subject.

The following week at the critique, Nathan presented the nearly completed piece, a large watercolor painting (see Figure 3). The content of the image was similar, but he had added a



**Figure 3.** Nathan's Piece.

pink flush to her cheeks and widened the eyes. The artists fell silent when Nathan presented the piece. Brad asked, "What's in her mouth?" Nathan replied nervously, shifting his feet, "It's, uh, a pair of panties." Brad stared at the painting speechlessly, his mouth hanging open. Nathan gave a stuttering explanation of the painting, "So, where do I start on this. I wanted a complexity of emotion. A mix of uncertainty and fear. It's an S/M [sadism and masochism], top/bottom thing." Silence fell again, which Freddy broke by joking, "A lot of people don't realize that Evan modeled for this." The room erupted in laughter as if a pressure valve had been released. Nathan tried to calibrate the reception: "Do any of you feel like I am way off base on this one?" Tim, a suburban video game designer in his 40s, replied, "It is definitely disturbing. If you didn't describe it, I would not know that she is a willing participant. . . . I think there is room on her back for a tattoo." Nathan asked him what it would say, and Tim replied, "I don't know, 'I love BDSM'?" prompting another round of cathartic laughter. Freddy said, "Well . . . I am not very aware of BDSM culture, but to me the collar says that she is a willing participant." Evan agreed, "I definitely got that." Brad demanded, "What about this tells the viewer that it is not someone being completely victimized?" Nathan stated,

That was the challenge. I tried to do that with the collar and [the expression in] the eyes. In my sketch, I had her eyes more closed and then when I added the blue, I was like, "Oh my god, she looks like a corpse."

Brad continued to stare at the painting with his mouth open, shaking his head and shrugging as if unconvinced. Tanya, a real-estate agent in her 50s, stated, "There's an edge to it." Nathan replied, "Well, I wanted to keep some of that." Freddy said,

[Permissiveness] is something we try to do in this room, give people permission to have fun, to enjoy themselves sexually. It is a subtle balance. I am uncomfortable here, because the permissiveness is not at the forefront. Even if she had the slightest grin . . .





**Figure 4.** Nick's Piece.

He trailed off, and Marc broke the silence, joking, "You could add a Twister board in the background," eliciting more laughter. Again, Nathan resisted politely, "I don't want to soften it too much." Freddy replied, "All you need is one brushstroke [on the lips]." Nathan thanked everyone for their comments, saying, "I kind of felt safe presenting it in this space because you all know me." The next week, Nathan submitted the piece, unaltered, to the show. Freddy put his arm around Nathan's shoulder, looking at the piece contemplatively. He questioned Nathan's decision not to change the mouth, asking, "It didn't feel right?" Nathan replied, "No, it didn't." Freddy nodded, saying, "All right, man," seeming to accept this explanation.

After Nathan presented his piece, Nick lay three black-and-white photographs on the stage. The first two photographs pictured a shapely nude woman in stilettos holding a cloudy plastic pane through which her blurred body was visible; the third photograph portrayed a different nude woman lying spread-legged in a wooden box, her slender body encased in a transparent shower curtain (see Figure 4). Nick described the context in which the photograph was taken,

It was a very sexually charged day. The room was 96 degrees. We were sweating. That shower curtain had been in the trunk of my car for three years, and I had just been waiting for a model to choose it and want to play with it.

Freddy joked, "He had to unroll the dead body first," triggering a round of laughter. Nick continued,

She is holding the plastic in place, not against her will. What I always want to do in my work, especially with female figures, is to empower them. In one sense, you think, who is being exposed? Is it the model or the viewer?

The other artists seemed to concur with his stated intention of female empowerment. Evan said, "She seems very powerful," and Nathan interjected affirmatively, "It is super hardcore." Freddy concurred, "It is very sensual to me. It is raw, but sexy." Freddy, as the club's owner, acted as the "guardian" (Goffman 1963:210) of good taste. In response to Nathan's piece, he remained silent before voicing apprehension in the midst of others' expressed

discomfort; in response to Nick's work, in contrast, he was the first to voice approval, which was followed by the vocal praise of other artists. Individuals' judgments are shaped by the judgments of others, but these lines of influence are drawn over an unequal terrain of power; people more central to a group tend to have more sway. Although aesthetic judgments can elicit a spectrum of visceral responses, the structure of a group mediates the interactions in which these responses become publicly expressed and amended.

The following week, as we hung our work for the show, Tim entered without a piece. When I asked him where it was, he sheepishly replied, "I'm going to sit this one out. I couldn't get it ready in time." Later, during an interview, he confessed the overriding reason for his nonparticipation: "To me, Nathan's image looked like a person being raped, and it made me uncomfortable to the point that I did not want to be a part of [the show]." Tim, who had little exposure to BDSM culture, explained that he "totally missed that intended message"; however, even after Nathan's explanation, the piece troubled him, as he felt the image still looked like a rape scene. Ultimately, he chose not to participate in the show, because he did not want his piece to be associated with art that could be interpreted as promoting violence against women. For Tim, the artwork failed aesthetically to present a morally inoffensive image. Because of his personal relationship with Nathan, Tim may have believed that the aversion he experienced was not the artist's intention, yet still felt a negative visceral response to the painting, which he viewed as portraying rape, rather than consensual BDSM play. Alternatively, Tim's negative reaction may have stemmed from being morally uncomfortable with the BDSM play in which some group members engaged, even though he believed he should accept other group members' sexual practices. In either case, Tim's visceral response to the image caused him to privately question his group ties, requiring him to justify his reaction so as to continue to feel part of the group.

Although there were no objections during the critique, another artist had lingering feelings of unease about Nick's piece. Tanya confessed in an interview that the piece viscerally disturbed her:

It bothered me the whole way home and when I was trying to go to sleep, primarily because I felt like I didn't even get a chance to talk about it because of the dynamics that night in the group. It looked to me like the figure was being violated in some way, and it looked like that figure was being held captive. . . . The fact that figure also looked to me very young, like an adolescent, was very violating to me. . . . And no one else was addressing that or seemed to care. Like no one else even acknowledged that, and I was like, "What's going on? Why am I having this strong reaction to that and no one else is?"

Despite Nick's explanation of the piece, Tanya still felt that it portrayed nonconsensual sex and thus found it to be in bad taste. She was further disturbed by her perceived inability to voice her opinion because of the group "dynamics." When I probed as to why these dynamics did not allow her to express her concerns during the critique, she stated, "I thought that [Freddy] had already made it clear that he loved this, and it was the best out of the three works there." For Tanya, Freddy's affirmation represented the legitimated group viewpoint; she was thus hesitant to contest his judgment of taste, as this would place her in opposition to the community sense. Her unacknowledged concern made her feel alienated from the group: she felt alone in her unease, as if she did not share the community sense.

When members' aesthetic judgments pushed the group's boundaries of good taste, they risked being seen as outsiders; thus, members actively calibrated how they presented their work to the group, offering accounts and tempering the images. To stretch the limits

of good taste while remaining in good standing within the group, Nathan contextualized the piece by explaining it as a portrayal of BDSM sex play, rather than rape. Moreover, he repeatedly attended to others' affective reactions to assess whether he had crossed the line, ready to "save face" (Goffman 1961:51) if necessary. Nick, aware that the "rawness" of the image potentially challenged the group's boundaries of good taste, emphasized that it portrayed consensual sex. He attenuated the impact of the photograph by displaying it alongside several pieces that displayed softer eroticism, emphasizing the playfulness of the situation and explaining his artistic intentions in terms of female empowerment.

Although the group style (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) allowed interaction to occur despite differences in aesthetic judgments, it did not undo these differences. Some members continued to experience visceral, negative reactions to the artworks. Even when members seemed to accept Nathan's and Nick's elaborations, recognizing that the images were intended to portray scenes of consensual sex, feelings of unease persisted. Members' intellectual understanding that the images portrayed "good" sex did not always override their visceral sense that the images depicted "bad" sex. Aesthetic judgments were charged not with reason but with strength of feeling. Confirmed agreements in aesthetic judgments strengthen groupness, but discovered disagreements weaken it, as these strong feelings generate moral judgments that draw people into or away from a group. This is evidenced by Tim's decision to not participate in the group show and Tanya's anxiety over feeling alone in her negative judgment. Although most communities do not rely on absolute consensus, disagreements in aesthetic judgments are deeply felt and can decisively fracture group ties.

### *Sustaining the Community Sense*

In the following weeks, the artists sought to uphold the community sense by reconciling these challenges. During an interview, Tim explained,

I like the artist, and I don't think the artist meant anything mean or evil, but that was the impression I had [of the piece]. It surprised me when I saw it. . . . It didn't communicate to me the message that was intended. I think if I didn't know the artist, it would be like, "What jerk made this?"

Tim blamed the art, rather than the artist, for being in bad taste, believing that the innocuous message that must have been intended was merely miscommunicated through the piece. He asserted, however, that had he not already had a favorable perception of the artist, he would have found the piece to reflect poorly on its creator. Because he already saw Nathan as a member of the community, he sustained this belief by removing Nathan's responsibility for the offending image. Notably, Tim admitted the real reason for his nonparticipation only in a private interview, and he later asked me not to disclose this information to other group members so as not to cause "hard feelings among friends" (field notes). The community sense was maintained by reconciling these interactions "backstage" in a way that shored up potential breaches (Goffman 1959; Golden-Biddle and Rao 1997).

The next week at the Salon, Tanya leaned over to Nick, whispering,

I have to tell you, I was really disturbed by this. After I saw it last week, it bothered me the whole car ride home. It was just that she looked so young to me, almost childlike, and I have two girls at home.

Nick replied, "Oh, OK, well she wasn't actually young. She is very athletic, she's a dancer, so that's why you have those slim lines." He also explained that the model was kneeling with her legs tucked under her, making her appear shorter. Tanya nodded, explaining that this was evident now that she was able to view the photograph more closely. She said, "And now I am noticing her tattoo, so I know that she is not actually a child." Nick asked Tanya if she could tell that the model was holding the sheet, rather than being bound in it, and Tanya nodded again. Later, I asked Tanya how she felt about the image after confronting Nick, and she stated that she was no longer disturbed by the image after viewing it more closely (field notes). Reconsidering the piece in a certain context may have produced a different interpretation, but forming an alternative interpretation that conformed to the group's consensus may also have alleviated the anxiety of feeling like an outsider.

Disagreements in aesthetic judgments, which weakened the community sense, were not always resolved by agreement but were smoothed over by interpersonal work. Tim claimed that his judgment that Nathan's artwork was in bad taste did not change, and although Tanya said that she was no longer offended by Nick's photograph, her private judgments may not have matched her newfound acceptance of the piece. Although these inner feelings are inaccessible to all but the individual, one can analyze how individuals' aesthetic judgments are accounted for and expressed in interaction. Tim sustained the community sense by viewing the object rather than the artist in bad taste, effectively restoring Nathan to the group and allowing himself to maintain a feeling of groupness with Nathan. Tanya did this by realigning her own interpretation to fit with that of the group, bringing herself back in agreement with the community sense. Both Tim and Tanya settled these issues backstage, so as not to disrupt the public face of taste by calling the community sense into question in front of other members. Their performed consent to the community sense stabilized the group. Similarly, Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) conceptualized groups as having a shared "group style," patterns of interaction that arise from shared understandings of what constitutes appropriate participation within a local group setting: dominant styles are formed and maintained on the group's front stage, while submerged styles usually emerge backstage. Groups not only maintain a shared style of interaction, but also a shared way of perceiving and judging the world, which is expressed through interaction. Community sense relies not on complete private agreement, but on a perception among group members that, in general, they "feel" the world in a similar way. When disagreements arise, individuals assert intersubjective validity in their aesthetic judgments by reconfirming the public face of taste. Sustaining the community sense provides the comfort of perceiving visceral experiences as a shared social reality, maintaining individuals' sense of belonging, not only to others but also to themselves.

## BEYOND THE STORYVILLE SOCIAL CLUB

Sociologists have largely overlooked the relationship between aesthetic judgment and groupness. I argue here that the communication of aesthetic judgments in face-to-face interaction powerfully works to confirm or deny groupness. Using the empirical case of the Storyville Social Club, I illustrate the concept of community sense, the public face of shared aesthetic judgments that is communicated and upheld within a group. Prospective members are initially attracted to the club because they believe they share the group's community sense, but the community sense is formed, challenged, and sustained in interaction. Through the concept of community sense, I examine three characteristics of aesthetic judgments—derivation in form, visceral force, and intersubjective validity—that together constitute a strong basis for feelings of belonging and distinction. Attending to the communication of aesthetic judgments highlights the emotional, embodied, and sensory foundation of social interaction.

In the Storyville Social Club, individuals formed a community sense by communicating aesthetic judgments over particular works of art in a group context. Encounters with artistic forms provided the group with opportunities to confirm their belonging to each other. These interactions allowed group members to communicate their shared way of seeing the world in both perception and evaluation, as well as their distinctiveness from others' ways of seeing. Certain forms, such as *L'Origine du Monde* and "googly eyes on balls," became group flags and inverted group flags, epitomizing the group's communal sense of pleasure and disgust. Moreover, these forms persisted in the collective memory of the group long after the physical encounters ended; group members repeatedly invoked these images to express belonging or distinction. Forms provided fodder for communication, allowing the group to express and stabilize a shared social reality.

However, few groups maintain complete public consensus among members at all times, and this fodder occasionally provokes disagreements in aesthetic judgments among group members, weakening the community sense. When Storyville members presented works of art that they suspected might push the boundary of the community sense, they actively calibrated their presentation and tempered the images so as to remain within the boundaries of good taste. These elaborations were not always sufficient, and some members remained unsettled by the works. Some artworks, such as *L'Origine du Monde* and *Eternity's Sunrise*, evoked potent feelings of intimacy that, in finding these feelings to be held in common, translated into a fervent sense of belonging to each other. Other artworks, such as those Nathan and Nick presented during the group critique, elicited forceful emotions of disgust and unease, which worked just as powerfully to rupture this sense of belonging. Aesthetic judgments stimulate visceral responses, which members transmit into strong emotions of belonging or distinction, depending on whether they find themselves in agreement or disagreement with others.

These disagreements threatened the validity of the community sense by denying intersubjective agreement among members, so repair was crucial for sustaining the community sense (Alexander 2001). Disagreements in aesthetic judgments particularly troubled members who found themselves in the minority, not only because they felt unsettled by the works of art themselves but because they felt alone in their unfavorable visceral reactions. These feelings caused them to feel estranged from the community sense, and, by extension, the group. Members worked to reconfirm the community sense by revising their original interpretations of the works or hashing out disagreements backstage. They realigned aesthetic judgments that were at odds with the group's dominant public taste, interpreting these initial feelings of unease and disgust as less significant in the face of their general agreement with the community sense. This not only allowed them to interact smoothly with other members, but it also reaffirmed their feelings of belonging. Sustaining the public face of taste despite specific disagreements allowed members to preserve their groupness and a sense of intersubjective validity in communicating their aesthetic judgments.

The case of the Storyville Social Club exemplifies how aesthetic judgments underlie feelings of belonging and distinctions, which are negotiated through interaction. Aesthetic judgments of artworks are explicitly communicated in this setting, and the group is demarcated by strong symbolic boundaries, but the communication of aesthetic judgments occurs in wide-ranging group contexts. Some groups are explicitly organized around the sharing of sensory experiences, such as wine connoisseurs, music fans, art movements, and, of course, the Storyville Social Club. However, the communication of aesthetic judgments in the formation and maintenance of groups is not confined to such groups. Aesthetic judgments play a significant role in feelings of belonging and distinction in diverse social spheres, because sensory experiences occur in everyday life (de la Fuente 2010; Light and Smith 2005;

Mandoki 2007; Saito 2007). Sports fans often embody their felt affiliation to teams by donning imitation jerseys of their favorite players; aerial views of sporting events often picture stadiums awash in two colors, split sharply down the middle. U.S. presidential campaigns play particular songs during rallies to generate emotional identification with the candidate among supporters. Religious congregations are steeped in “sensational forms,” including iconic images, garb, and architecture, that underpin the religious identity of particular sects (Meyer 2010:751). One may attend a different congregation within the same sect and, by engaging with familiar forms, tap into a similar sense of belonging. A person visiting from a different religious sect, however, might feel estranged by the same forms, experiencing an unsettling sense of eeriness, sterility, or flamboyance. In these cases, individuals tend not to explicitly communicate to others their aesthetic judgments of these forms, but instead engage silently with the forms en masse. However, these forms are not dormant, in their quiet presence they continually activate and reinforce group feelings.

Aesthetic judgments are an ever present feature of experience; however, depending on the formation and stability of the group, they have different impacts on group identification. Groups may be nascent or more fully formed.<sup>8</sup> When groups are in the process of forming, individuals must more explicitly negotiate group identification to establish and maintain group standards (Abbott 1995). In these instances, members express their aesthetic judgments about certain forms, and these judgments crystallize the group’s boundaries. By repeatedly waving certain forms as group flags and inverted group flags (Farrell 2001), the group’s idioculture (Fine 1979) becomes more robust and durable. Group identification stabilizes once the dominant group style and idioculture is clear to all members and dissent is weak or sublimated. At this time, members have little need to continuously negotiate their identification through explicit communication of aesthetic judgments. Wearing the sports jersey of one’s favorite player suffices, as the forms that become part of the group’s idioculture provide a familiar and seemingly obdurate backdrop grounding the community sense. When aesthetic judgments are overtly expressed, members tend to publicly affirm their agreement with the established group identification. In stabilized groups, aesthetic judgment usually reinforces group identification.

However, the communication of aesthetic judgments can also undermine group stability, transforming group identification. For example, Zubrzycki (2013) illustrates how the manipulation of national symbols, in particular, the image of Saint John the Baptist, allowed the Québécois to envision a new national identity. In the final performance of this “aesthetic revolt,” protesters overturned a papier-mâché float of Saint John the Baptist during a parade, breaking off the patron saint’s head, which the public, following the press, interpreted as a decapitation of an enfeebled saint. This image of the “decapitation,” disseminated by the media and discussed widely, represented a fatal blow to the religious identity of the nation and facilitated the emergence of a secularized Québécois identity. The physical reworking of the icon did not merely reflect citizens’ discontent with their national identity, it was an essential resource for communicating a new national identity (Zubrzycki 2013). When group boundaries become vulnerable to change, individuals must more explicitly negotiate their group identification by communicating aesthetic judgments of forms that they deem salient to their identification. In these instances, the communication of aesthetic judgments can facilitate the transformation of existing group identifications.

Of course, these are ideal types. Groups are not simply nascent or stabilized but exist on a continuum. Within every group, some aesthetic judgments reinforce group identification while others weaken it. When members communicate aesthetic judgments that depart from the community sense, a group may either transform or reaffirm its community sense accordingly. In the Storyville Social Club, expressed agreements in aesthetic judgments crystallized

and strengthened group identification, while disagreements unsettled the group, leaving group identification vulnerable to redefinition or reaffirmation. To sustain the group's public face of taste, nondominant aesthetic judgments were largely dealt with backstage. Members preferred to stabilize the group rather than renegotiate the group's boundaries and risk the exclusion of themselves or others. The influence of aesthetic judgments over group identification cannot be predetermined or predicted, as individuals continuously encounter new forms and interpret these forms within group interactions. Because the communication of aesthetic judgments is a capricious process, even the most ostensibly stable groups can always be undermined.

The case of the Storyville Social Club is particularly useful for understanding how aesthetic judgments work to confirm or deny groupness in small groups with morally loaded boundaries. The communication of aesthetic judgments was particularly visible in this setting, as all group members were expected to communicate their judgments of artworks presented during critiques and informal discussions. Groups of all sizes have local interactions in which members communicate aesthetic judgments, but in large groups, such as nation-states, aesthetic judgments are also communicated to individuals who are not in direct contact, as when the media disseminated the image of Saint John the Baptist. Certain forms may be more salient in face-to-face interaction, while others may be more significant as iconic images communicated across a dispersed audience. Groups also possess different structures that shape how aesthetic judgments are communicated within the group and the significance of certain aesthetic judgments in constituting groupness. For example, in groups that are either implicitly or explicitly hierarchical, certain members may have great influence in constituting groupness by communicating their aesthetic judgments, while others may find themselves ignored or may communicate their aesthetic judgments mainly backstage. Like all interactions, the communication of aesthetic judgments is shaped by the size and structure of the groups in which they occur.

The case of the Storyville Social Club is revealing of how aesthetic judgments constitute groupness, because the sexual content of the artworks evoked moral judgments, which tend to elicit strong sentiments of belonging and distinction. However, aesthetic judgments that are not viewed as morally charged may also constitute groupness. For example, artists often seek out other artists who they deem to have similar ideas. When artists regularly share these ideas through direct interaction or by viewing one another's work in exhibitions, their respective bodies of work sometimes coalesce into a recognizable style or technique, which the artists and others may consider an art movement (Farrell 2001). Artists who identify as part of the same movement may conceive of their work as expressing certain moral values that bind them together and make them distinct from others. These perceptions of shared artistic interests, gleaned from aesthetic judgments of one another's artworks and their social interactions, also create the impetus for and sustains interaction. Individuals ascribe different kinds of social significance to aesthetic judgments. For aesthetic judgments to constitute groups, individuals must communicate that these judgments are significant subjectively and intersubjectively. The reason for the aesthetic judgment being deemed significant is important only insofar as this reason allows the aesthetic judgment to be communicable as significant. Aesthetic judgments that constitute groups often express moral judgments, because moral judgments are easily recognized as sources of groupness and distinction. Further research is needed to understand how group size and group structure affect the saliency of different kinds of aesthetic judgments in constituting groupness.

Individuals engage with the world sensuously. In group contexts, individuals often communicate aesthetic judgments to construct a shared social reality, and certain aesthetic judgments become highly charged markers of group identification. Through interaction,

individuals construct a community sense, the public face of taste, which is maintained within the group. Attending to the micro-interactional context in which aesthetic judgments are grounded and communicated reveals that aesthetic judgments are not merely the detritus of social relations but work to form and transform groups themselves through interaction. In communicating aesthetic judgments, individuals may create warm and tight webs of belonging or rend group bonds.

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## NOTES

1. Perception and judgment are not discrete processes but flow seamlessly together and are bidirectional, as sensations cause action and actions (i.e., the way we physically move) channel sensations (Martin 2011). I thus consider aesthetic judgment to be the full range of experience from sensuous perception to the conscious mental activity of evaluation. Similar to Martin's (2011) "social aesthetics," I analyze aesthetic judgment as the perception of forms. My definition is narrower than Martin's, however, as it is limited to the interpretation of direct and indirect sensory perception, excluding the perception of abstract social forms.
2. Since the 1970s, the sociology of culture has been dominated by the "artworlds" and "production of culture" perspectives, which tend to analyze aesthetic judgment only insofar as it is related to the organizational context of production and circulation, rather than the sensory experience of these works (Becker 1982; DiMaggio 1987; Peterson and Anand 2004). Moreover, previous examinations of aesthetic judgments tend to examine distinctions between broad social categories, such as class (DiMaggio 1982; Gans 1974; Peterson and Kern 1996), or focus on how aesthetic judgments are embedded within social milieus by using archival data to examine the historical reception of artworks (Baxandall 1972; Crane 1987; Witkin 1997). These analyses leave aesthetics effectively mute (Krzysz Acord 2010; Taylor 2002), failing to explore how aesthetic judgment is negotiated in face-to-face interactions.
3. Kant addressed how one communicates one's subjective aesthetic judgments in a way that posits the agreement of others. In making aesthetic judgments, Kant ([1790] 2000:123–24) claimed that everyone may make the same aesthetic judgments, terming this potential for shared aesthetic judgments *sensus communis*, or common sense. For Kant, when we form aesthetic judgments, we reflect on the possible judgments of everyone else (pp. 173–76). However, although Kant's *sensus communis* is fundamentally social—he argued that one cannot find pleasure in an object unless one's feelings are communicable to others—it is disembedded from particular social milieu, as it excludes particular community standards as a basis for judgment, requiring a theoretical, universalized assent that, indeed, may never occur in reality (p. 162; see Zerilli 2005:186n). Some social theorists have maintained this definition, arguing that the *sensus communis* merely posits expected consensus to an imagined community (Gronow 1997; Lyotard 1988; Simmel 1905); others, including Arendt ([1977] 1992) and Zerilli (2005), rejected this definition, instead applying Kant's concept to particular communities that have both members and non-members (Martin 2011; Schutz 1953). I use the latter model, which opens a window to theorizing aesthetic judgment as constituting groupness.
4. This is similar to Silver's (2011) account of the "moodiness" of action, in which actors attend to the atmospheres of specific situations. Silver analyzed moods as constitutive of situations that form a nonneutral medium for action. Moods set the internal standards of appropriate action, making "open demands" to which actors can respond by affirming or diminishing the mood (p. 211).
5. Similarly, Vaisey's (2009) dual-process model of culture shows that action can be motivated by both conscious thought and unconscious, embodied dispositions (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010). Haidt (2001) claimed that even this conscious reasoning is derived from "hot" cognitive-affective complexes.
6. Although one cannot offer logical proofs for aesthetic judgments, Arendt ([1977] 1992:72) argued that one can attempt to persuade others of one's aesthetic judgments. This led Arendt, and later Zerilli (2005),



to posit aesthetic judgment as a model for political judgment, as it opens the democratizing possibility of rhetoric in a public sphere.

7. *BDSM* refers to a broad range of sexual practices involving bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism, of which S/M (sadoomasochism) is a part.
8. Similarly, Swidler (1986) distinguished between periods, ranging from individual lives to social epochs, that are “settled,” in which culture organizes and anchors patterns of actions, and those that are “unsettled,” in which culture affords new patterns of action. In the latter case, differences between ideologies and rituals are more highly charged and laden with significance.

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