Jonah Siegel, Professor of English at Rutgers University, will present a talk entitled “Interesting: Desire and the Body of Inspiration.”

The slow return of beauty into critical conversation over the last couple of decades has been followed more recently by what is in some ways a more self-evidently Victorian concern: disinterestedness. Even though they are evidently closely related in the nineteenth century and in long-standing critical formulations the topics have not typically been put into conversation; however, perhaps because of a widespread sense that we understand how they work together. This paper is intended to energize the conversation about interest by interrogating its presence in nineteenth-century fantasies about the sources of inspiration in the desires of the human body. (What would it look like to imagine art as interested in the ways sex is?) The representation of the loves of the Old Masters in art and literature will be a principal source, but the talk will also touch on a tradition of skeptical response to Kant in nineteenth-century philosophy.

This event is made possible by the Wetmore Fund for Literature.

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