

AESTHETICS AND JUDGMENT – “WHY KANT GOT IT RIGHT”

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ABSTRACT

The article argues that although all scholars within aesthetics basically know and recognize it, there is a tendency in many of its traditions to forget or to underestimate the importance of the aesthetic judgment. With Thierry de Duve's short paper “Why Kant got it Right” as its point of departure, this importance is discussed. Not only its importance in aesthetic relations and to aesthetics as a discipline, but also in a broader sense, through the contribution to the overall social cohesion of society, offered by aesthetic judgments. All judgments are pronounced as-if a shared scale of aesthetic preferences did exist (which it does not). Judgments are addressed to communities, to the notion of a joint “we”, and thus they do participate in the creation and the maintenance of the social as such. Also professional aesthetic critique, including art critique, should be aware of that, since even historically achieved differentiations and divisions of labour may be lost again if not being developed and kept up to date.

KEYWORDS

(Aesthetic) Judgment, Speculative Tradition, Modernity, Romanticism, Autonomy

This brief paper is about what we all know, all scholars within the field of aesthetics – but what we, nevertheless, still seem to have a tendency to forget, or at least seem to distort or to misrepresent on different levels. At issue is which *kind* of quality or value we are actually dealing with, when we talk about aesthetic qualities or aesthetic values. What are their modes of existence, their conceptual place, their ontological status? And, of course, how come we often neglect basic questions like these?

The reasons for this are buried, as we also know, in the history of the discipline of aesthetics. That history is closely connected, and intertwined with, entangled with other disciplinary histories, above all with that of art in a modern sense.

l.

I will make use of a small article by Thierry de Duve, as my point of departure. It is called, “Why Kant Got It Right”.¹ Thierry de Duve’s groundbreaking work, in the intersection between the disciplines of art history and aesthetics, will be known to most scholars with in both fields. De Duve, Belgian by origin, has worked primarily in Canada, France, and the US, and he now lives and works in New York. His books include *Nominalisme Pictural* and *Au nom de l’art* from the 1980s, and for instance *Du nom au nous* from 1990. Most of his work until then was revised and published in English, in the MIT Press Volume *Kant after Duchamp* from 1998.² “After” is to be understood here in the double sense of the word, i.e. both “après” and “d’après” in French. You may also know Thierry de Duve’s work from his recent suite of essays about the development of the modern concept of art published in *Artforum*, from 2013-14.³ De Duve’s readings/re-readings of Immanuel Kant’s crucial and continued importance to aesthetics are, in my opinion, among the clearest and most pertinent ever given.

In “Why Kant Got It Right”, de Duve takes the good old example of Ms. A and Mr. B quarrelling over the beauty of a rose as his point of departure, when trying to explain Kant’s account of how we act, when experiencing the world aesthetically. As we know, Kant’s discussion is about whether “beauty” should be seen as a personal and subjective feeling or as an objective property of, in this case, the rose. Now Kant reflects – in de Duve’s words – “on the fact that people in general tend to speak of beauty and ugliness as if these were objective properties of the things deemed beautiful or ugly, whereas they ought to know, [...] that their only access to these properties is their subjective feeling.” To Kant, Ms. A and Mr. B are both right in claiming so-called objective validity of their judgements. Again, in de Duve’s words – “the phrase ‘this rose is beautiful’ (or ugly) actually does not ascribe objective beauty (or ugliness) to the rose; rather it imputes to the other – all others – the same feeling of pleasure (or pain) that one feels in oneself. Whether Ms. A is right in claiming that the rose is beautiful, or Mr. B in claiming that it is ugly, their disagreement amounts to *rightly* shouting at each other, even if they do it politely: *You ought to feel the way I feel. You ought to agree with me.*” And de Duve continues, “to say that people rightly claim universal approval for their aesthetic judgments, when all it takes is one exception to prove them wrong, is to say that this call on all others’ capacity for agreeing by dint of feeling is legitimate.” And this is, de Duve concludes, “what Kant understood better than anyone before, or anyone since.”

In de Duve's reading, Kant's observations lead to three important points. The first one is that aesthetic judgments imply universal address. The second one is that a true or pure aesthetic judgment is a call for agreement by dint of feeling, involuntarily addressed to all. And the third one is that what is ultimately at stake in an aesthetic judgment is neither the beauty of the rose, nor the feeling it arouses; it is the agreement. Still according to de Duve. And he concludes – now in Immanuel Kant's own words, "... beauty is not a concept of the object, and the judgment of taste is not a judgment of cognition. It asserts only that we are justified in presupposing, universally in every human being, the same subjective conditions of the power of judgment that we find in ourselves".⁴ All we do, de Duve included, is to make the presupposition that the way we feel is shareable by all, meaning that the implied 'you ought to feel the way I feel' "is what justifies me in my claim, you in yours, and all our fellow human beings in theirs, even though there is not a hope in the world for universal agreement among us."

II.

All this should of course be well known to all of us, but as we also know, varying traditions within the disciplines of aesthetics have approached these theories in very different ways and with changing emphases, and some even openly ignoring those basic properties of the engendering of aesthetic value in general. On my account, I would like to add and to emphasize in connection with de Duve's precise observations, above all, the fact that an aesthetic judgment is always *singular*. Any aesthetic judgment process establishes a very specific kind of connection between three topoi or positions. These are (1) the "I" pronouncing the judgment, the object, (2) the "it", which the judgment is about, and (3) the "we", to which the judgment is addressed. By that, the aesthetic judgment in a peculiar way connects us with the social as such, with the togetherness, or more precisely, with the idea of such a joint community, by addressing it as-if the outcome of the judgment were an objective, shared property of the object. Important here, is that the pronunciation of an aesthetic judgment thus actually creates a passage, *un passage* from the "I" over the "it" to the "we" (or to the idea of a "we"), thus actually connecting us with each other. But at the same time, this process of course, does in fact create or produce this "we", which it addresses. Just like it, in its own way, produces (and is produced by) the "I", the individual position from which "I" can pronounce this judgment. Aesthetic judgments and aesthetic value thus, I would

claim, contribute decisively to the production and maintenance of the functioning social community of modernity.⁵

Of course, neither the “I” nor the “we” are defined anew and out of nowhere, in each and every singular act of aesthetic judgment. Firstly, we are always already members of communities of taste, more or less institutionalized, in the societies, in which we live. Secondly, these communities of taste have a history, which means that any aesthetic judgment is made on the backdrop of aesthetic traditions, existing judgments, and all kinds of institutionalized attitudes. Thirdly, the objects, at least when they are artefacts, themselves embed, what might be called prescribed or implied aesthetic judgments, drawing on and referring to communities and histories of taste. So, what you do meet is actually never just a blank object, but rather an ultra-complex embedded proposal for an aesthetic judgment. In addition, artefacts always include themselves as communicative entities, “*énoncés*”; embodying their own positions of enunciation, even in terms of implied levels of positions, usually referred to as “*énonciated enunciation*”.⁶

However, despite these facts of enunciations and social embeddedness or framing: At the bottom line, the aesthetic judgment is still singular, and it produces a position-defining passage between ourselves, the object world, and the notion of a community.

III.

But back to Thierry de Duve. As some of you may know, he makes the claim, in what he calls the ‘Kant after Duchamp approach’, that the change of the concept and of the whole field of art in mature modernity produces a new position of and situation for the judgment of taste. Today, says de Duve, “this is beautiful” is replaced by “this is art”. To de Duve, the judgment of taste is transferred to an institutional level of ascribing or not ascribing possible works of art to the legitimate field of art – thus replacing “the social function of beauty” in early modernity with “the social function of art”. The judgment of taste, it should be added, remains singular and has the same general form.

The idea of such a replacement and displacement of the judgment of taste is interesting. To a certain extent, it is even adequate, but it is also disputable on several levels. It is true, no doubt, that in many contexts the “this is art”-question has both the shape and the functions of the original aesthetic judgment. But I am not convinced that these functions have been taken completely over by this rather institutional level. Aesthetic judgments are still being pronounced vis-à-vis singular artefacts, be it works of art or other perceived

objects in our shaped world, or even in nature. But besides that, the assertion of such a transference of the aesthetic judgment to the field of art exclusively, raises other clusters of problems. One of these concerns the history of the discipline of aesthetics with its notoriously delicate relationship with the field of art. Others pertain to the question about the existence of aesthetic judgments, also in connection with other artefacts than works of art.

IV.

On this occasion, I am not going to dive deeply into this disciplinary history and its problems. As we know, “art” and “the aesthetic” in the sense in which we understand the substance and the functions of these concepts today – be it with stringency or obscurity – have both come into existence as parts of the Modern. The fact that art and the aesthetic have come into existence at the same time, as parts of the same process, and even such that their formation histories are, to a great extent, mutually motivated and highly interdependent does, however, not imply that these concepts actually deal with or signify the same, neither substantially nor functionally. There has been, and there still is a historical tendency that Modernity does not want to take its own differentiations, its own production of differences all that seriously. Maybe as a defence against the limitlessness of immanence, against the frightening fact that differences, so obviously brought on by history, are actually differences that may have become mutually exclusive, emergent, impossible to restore to the unity of earlier stages. In the same way, even differentiations, such as “art” and “the aesthetic”, taking place in the very same process and being conditioned by the very same historical changes, may end up belonging to completely different registers, both conceptually and phenomenally.

As we know, the tendency to particularly reject, above all, hyper-complex asymmetrical formations of differences for the benefit of binary linkages, preferably with hierarchical order and classical inside/outside logics, also came to prevail in this case. Namely, in the sense that even before the complex and productive perspectives in the acknowledgement of the fundamentally divergent constitutions of art and the aesthetic, respectively, really came into historical and conceptual existence, their diversities were in some sense cancelled by Romanticism and its thinking. In this tradition, the aesthetic act became defined as “an act of reason”, art as “the teacher of mankind”.⁷ And aesthetics as a discipline was turned into being defined, as it is the case in G.W.F. Hegel’s aesthetic lectures, as “philosophy of art” *tout court*.⁸ In this tradition, aesthetics

becomes the discourse, which knows (or claims to know) what art *is*. In Hegel's approach, art's primary mode of existence is, as you know, narrowly connected to what might be called the truth content of art. And the truth content is that by which art, in its specific way, contributes to our cognition of the world, even in a normative sense. On the other hand, since the aesthetic is also still supposed to deal with a distinctively sensuous cognition, art becomes, literally spoken, squeezed into an aesthetic double packing, into what has been called "the aesthetic regime of art" by Jacques Rancière.⁹ The metaphor of "regime" is adequate, because it comprises the element of restraint or of discursive control of the potentials of art implied by this understanding of aesthetics. However, these restrictions actually work both ways. Art is kept caught within the understanding of its translatability into its cognitive content. Admittedly, an extremely privileged cognitive content, but still one that can be conceived and dealt with within the framework of ordinary discursive forms of exchange. Conversely, at the same time, the aesthetic is confined by its function as *the* generalised translator of art, the tough master of art and its humble servant, all at once. All in all, a function so completely different from the far more originally uncontrollable aesthetic one, both conceptually and phenomenally, in the living exchange of judgments of taste directed against the singularities.

In that way, "Aesthetic value" became a matter for the "good taste" - became something, which apparently concerns stable and thus controllable, cognitive qualities in the world of objects.

Based on the history of the coming into being of art and the aesthetic, there is nothing mysterious in this alliance or "marriage", as I have called this relationship between art and the aesthetic.¹⁰ The fact that this partnership, historically as well as functionally, comes to prove itself so surprisingly stable, is obviously due to its ability to fulfil certain manifest needs, especially for the formulation and the maintenance of the conceptual area of art. The price to pay for this, however, is firstly this peculiar and, in the long run, utterly inappropriate cognitive bias of the purpose of art - criticized explicitly by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, among others, for actually having ruined or distorted art's development this way by what he calls, "speculative tradition".¹¹ But this bias has also eventually been criticized more implicitly by art itself through all kinds of renewed emphases of artworks on sensuous aesthetic qualities, literally untransferable to cognitive truth content.

Secondly, of course, the price of this marriage has included the chronic amnesia or obscuration of certain sets of possibilities to

understand and to act according to the initial difference between the two partners. This amnesia includes the obscuration of an adequate understanding of aesthetic experience outside art, and to some extent, even an oblivion of the fundamental mechanisms and qualities of the act of pronouncing an aesthetic judgment, an oblivion which is even somewhat surprisingly often performed in the name of a discipline calling itself “aesthetics”. In a wider sense, this amnesia and its systematic downplay of the function and position of the singular aesthetic judgment is connected, above all, with an even peculiarly consistent, insufficient theoretical and historical understanding of the so-called autonomy of art. This state of things has also had a hampering effect or an adverse influence on many levels of the artistic practice, not least furthered by blinkered art criticism, in this sense too. An historical and theoretical exposure of lacunas and aporias in the various understandings of the autonomy of art, however, would require a thorough analysis and a discussion of its own, which would take us too far here. But just preliminarily, it can, at any rate, be stated that the “aesthetic regime”, in the shape of the “marriage”, has caused the autonomy of art to have been ascribed too little and too much importance, all at one and the same time. Too little importance, *inter alia*, because of the permanent “dictum of reinscription” of the quest for truth. A dictum, which despite riot after riot on the part of art, is still, to a large extent, fencing art, controlling it, not least due to curators and to an art criticism obeying this paradigm – all in all making “the institution” far more restrictive than it supposedly needed to be, when asking each work of art, which truth it represents or is about. Conversely, at the same time, the autonomy has been given too much importance because of the role and the monopoly of aesthetics as a totalizing gatekeeper, one that has obstructed any more direct understanding of the matters of artworks, i.e. political or cognitive matters, at distinct levels, respectively.

V.

Beyond any doubt, however, “aesthetics” in this speculative or cognitive tradition of “marriage” has engendered important thinking without which we would have missed substantial insights about our civilization. In this tradition, not just philosophical thinking about art, but also general philosophy on the occasion of art has unfolded. Th.W. Adorno’s work is a brilliant example. Aesthetics as philosophy of art has taught us a great deal about the role of art, not least about its outstanding cognitive capabilities. However, this tradition has taught us less about the specific properties and

mechanisms of aesthetic relationality in a broader sense, including how they actually function in connection with artworks and our aesthetic appreciations of these. In particular, the theoretical understanding and the analysis of the actual meeting with the artwork, in an aesthetical relation, is surprisingly weak within many of the traditions of art understanding. The interrelationship between prescribed/embedded and concretized aesthetic relationality, including the anatomy and the function of the pronounced judgments, has in terms of thematics, fallen into a gradually accepted deep abyss between aesthetics as a philosophical discipline on the one hand, and the individual disciplines of the art sciences, on the other hand (e.g. art history, literary science, etc.).

Aesthetics in terms of sheer philosophy of art actually makes us strangely short of concepts. We might of course then just invent some new concepts to cover these obvious lacunas adequately. However, that would not really solve the problem of the interrelationship between art and the aesthetic. The field of art, its artworks, are capable of so much more than just of being aesthetic objects. They may play a role per se for actual cognition in many contexts, for artisanship, and even for politics. Once again, the widespread simplified understanding of the base and function of the autonomy of art simultaneously narrows down and dilutes the function of art. Moreover, where aesthetic judgments are concerned, they are to be found not just in connection with artworks. Objects of design are obvious examples, but to an increasing degree, on all levels of artefacts, our contemporary world is “designed”, it is deliberately formed and thus implicitly addressed to us, also aesthetically. This “aestheticization” has an overwhelming and accelerating extension. Here, we obviously need to distinguish between genuine aesthetic relations, with their proper judgments of taste in a strict sense on the one hand, and all other possible forms of individual preferences (of taste) rather oriented towards the fulfilment of needs, on the other hand – something, which, as you know, already Kant did.¹²

Surely, however, art still needs aesthetics, just like aesthetics needs art. Art and aesthetic value in their modern senses are mutually motivated by each other, and this is true, both in terms of their processes of coming into existence *and* of their mutual functions. Without the fundamental separation of *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, which were core parts of the differentiation processes in early Modernity, there would be no “autonomous” art to address itself to the potential judgments of taste of an audience, conceptionally generalised and distinctively individualized, at one and the same time. Without aesthetic value, no art, one might say. Without audience, without

judgment of taste, nothing “particular” about art. And conversely; without art, no aesthetics, in the sense that, without “art” no particular palisade, no “templum” for the cultivation and the development of specific ‘aesthetic’ modes of addressing the world, the way these have been unfolded throughout the history of Modernity, in which art obtains exactly the function of being the initial, highly productive and privileged laboratory of the aesthetic.

VI.

Thankfully, this highly complex interrelationship between art and philosophy of art on the one hand, and aesthetic relationality and aesthetics on the other hand, today, has become increasingly acknowledged by the differing traditions of aesthetics. Correspondingly, the disciplines of the art sciences have also started to take an increasing interest in aesthetic relationality. The American art historian, James Elkins, has even recently staged a systematic discussion of the historical and current relationship between the varying positions of approach within aesthetics and art sciences, respectively. A discussion, which quite convincingly ended up demonstrating, above all, a considerable mutual ignorance in both camps.¹³

Still, although we may know the importance of the aesthetic judgment, across the varying traditions within aesthetics, we still have a reoccurring tendency to forget; to forget, above all, the singularity of the aesthetic judgment and thus the hyper-complex interplay between individual and joint layers in the phenomenon of taste. Each and every singular judgment of taste still produces a passage, connecting “me” with an imagined common sense, a *sensus communis* through a piece of shared object world. By this, aesthetic judgments have a specific and considerable civilizational force. I am not asserting that aesthetic judgments created modern civilization, certainly not. But they do form part of what makes it possible for us to live together in an overall sense. This possibility is, I should add, by no means self-evident or, for that matter, an automatic implication of *la condition moderne*. On the contrary, this ability of pronouncing sharable aesthetic judgments needs to be learned, to be developed and to be maintained. Actually, our entire educational system should attend to this far more. We should remind ourselves that also historically produced differentiations and abilities may be lost, may disappear.

I am not truly worried on behalf of the aesthetic judgment. However, signs which might make us concerned, do exist. One is the state of the professional aesthetic critique, the institutionalized

version of the individual judgment of taste. This critique performs the very same mechanisms and thus it is, not least historically, a very important player in the creation and recreation of aesthetic relationality. There is however, a tendency today that serious criticism in connection with art, design, etcetera, is losing ground, when compared to more marketing-oriented presentations of artefacts. Another concern might be the explosive development of the activities on all the social media. As we know, these may be seen, on the one hand, as a kind of democratization of access, also to pronouncing judgments in the public space. This is a positive fact. On the other hand, there is a tendency that these millions of opinions, including more or less strictly aesthetic judgments circulating in cyberspace, emphasize the “I-position” far more than the addressed “we”, that the gesture of addressing is losing importance for the benefit of promoting the “I-position” as a more self-serving entity. That might ruin the delicate balance between the positions in the ideal-typical judgment of taste and thus turn the socializing passage of aesthetic relationality into a dead end street of individual idiosyncrasies.

If that happened, it would no doubt have negative consequences for the important contribution to civilization and its mechanisms of exchange, which are signed by the judgment of taste. However, it might also change the basic mechanisms of our ways of dealing with art – and these are the very mechanisms, which, at the end of the day, guarantee and maintain the space of freedom, in which art lives, its “autonomy”. It is a known fact that autonomy does not owe its existence to the actual objectual nature of the artworks, but rather to the specific way in which we acknowledge and deal with them – and deal with each other on occasion of them.

“Kant got it right”, indeed, but “right”, not in the sense that Kant’s analysis of the aesthetic judgment provides us with a “righter” or closer understanding of the meaning of singular works of art. In a polemical opposition against an interpretation like that, Arthur Danto (in the mentioned discussion by Elkins about the relationship between aesthetics and art history) stated that, “...Kant is something that does not belong in this conversation. Beauty belongs in this conversation, but Kant belongs in the library”.¹⁴

It is hard not to agree that Kant should certainly be made available to us at the library, but his work is indeed substantially central to any discussion about beauty. This is the fact, because “Kant got it right” in the sense that his analysis and description of the premises and mechanisms of the aesthetic judgment is adequate, is true. In that sense, Kant’s analysis belongs to science, belongs to the

scientific humanities, which investigate the conditions for production and interchange of varying kinds of signification of the world in which we live – in order to acknowledge and describe them and to understand how and why we act and signify in distinctive contexts. This is what it is all about: understanding what goes on in our production of signification. Any such understanding may be adequate, may be “right” or not. Where the mechanisms of the aesthetic judgment are concerned, Kant certainly got it right.

NOTES

- 1 See Thierry de Duve, “Why Kant got it right” in *Æstetisering. Forbindelser og forskelle. Festskrift til Morten Kyndrup*, edited by Birgit Eriksson, Jacob Lund, Henrik Kaare Nielsen & Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen (Aarhus: Klim, 2012).
- 2 See, for instance, de Duve’s works, *Nominalisme Pictural. Marcel Duchamp, la peinture et la modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 1989), *Au nom de l’art. Pour une archéologie de la modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 1989); *Du nom au nous* (Paris: Éd. Dis Voir, 1995), and the English translation/adaptation, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1996).
- 3 Thierry de Duve, in this suite of articles, critically reconstructs this development of the Modern concept of art, “Pardon My French. Thierry de Duve, on the invention of art” (October 2013); “Don’t Shoot the Messenger. Thierry de Duve, on the Duchamp syllogism” (November 2013); “Why Was Modernism Born in France? Thierry de Duve, on the collapse of the Beaux-Arts system” (January 2014); “The Invention of Non-art: a History. Thierry de Duve, on the Salon des Refusés” (February 2014); “The Invention of Non-art: a Theory. Thierry de Duve, on the rise of the Art-in-General system” (March 2014), and “This Is Art”: *Anatomy of a Sentence*. Thierry de Duve, on “aesthetic judgment” (April 2014).
- 4 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteils kraft*. Werkausgabe Band X. Hrsg. von Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp 1968 (1790)), § 38.
- 5 Which is also emphasized by Thierry de Duve in discussion, see e.g. James Elkins (ed.), *Art History versus Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 65.
- 6 ‘Enuniated enunciation’/‘uttered utterance’ refers to A. J. Greimas, amongst others. See for example A. J. Greimas [and] Joseph Courtès, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary* (Indiana: University Press, 1983). See also my *Kunstværk og udsigelse*. ACTS 18 (Aarhus: Aarhus University, 2003).
- 7 See “Älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus” (“The Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism”) which probably dates from 1796-97 and was written by either Hegel, Hölderlin or Schelling. For an English version of this text, see “The Earliest System-Programme of German Idealism”, in *Art in Theory 1648-1815*, ed. Harrison, Wood, and Gaiger (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 815ff.
- 8 See Hegel, G.F.W., *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am M.: Suhrkamp, 1986).
- 9 See Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis. Scènes du régime esthétique de l’art* (Paris: Galilée, 2011).
- 10 See Morten Kyndrup, *Den æstetiske relation. Sansoplevelsen mellem kunstvidenskab og filosofi* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2008). Parts of this book’s points of views have been published in English, see Morten Kyndrup, “Art, Aesthetics – Divorce?” in: *Site* no. 33 (2013), 107-118, and in German, see Morten Kyndrup, “Ästhetik, Kunst und Kunstverständnis. Die Kunst und das Kunstwerk”, in *Neue Rundschau* Heft 1 (Frankfurt am M.: Fischer, 2012), 187-200.
- 11 Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L’Art de l’âge moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) – translated into English as *Art of the Modern Age. Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger* (Princeton: Princeton UP 2000).
- 12 See Morten Kyndrup, “Kultur og æstetisering”, in *Kulturteori og kultursociologi*, edited by Bjørn Schiermer (Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel, 2016), 419-438.
- 13 See James Elkins (ed.), op. cit.
- 14 Arthur Danto in discussion, in James Elkins (ed.), op. cit., 65.