

“The glimpse of hope that religion or politics can no longer promise...”

An Interview with Thierry de Duve

JACOB LUND. In a conversation held in 2004 at the University College of Cork, Ireland, you claim that Kant *got it right* in the sense that his aesthetic thinking is still valid and relevant. What is it Kant was right about? In the same conversation you state the following: “The work that remains to be done would be to generalize Kant, in the way Einstein, for example, generalized Newton, so that the validity of what Kant had to say about aesthetic judgement could be expanded to include later developments in the arts.” Was he only right about the aesthetic judgement, or are there other issues in Kant which are of interest in relation to contemporary art and aesthetic culture?

THIERRY DE DUVE. Before we engage in this exchange, allow me to tell you that each of your questions is so complex that the proper answer would be a chapter in a book. I hope to be able to write such a book some day but it will not be done overnight. In the meantime, I beg your pardon if I elude some of your questions or give you a very sketchy answer. I believe that Kant was right on the issue of how to define aesthetic judgements: how do they function, what is at stake in them, what do we imply when we make them? – Things like that. You see, I tend to look at Kant as if he were a scientist who made a discovery about the true nature of aesthetic judgements. You do not have to espouse Kant’s whole philosophical system to take stock of this discovery. You only need to acknowledge that his aesthetic theory should be regarded as the best, so far.

Now, about generalizing Kant’s discovery: that is the gist of the *Kant after Duchamp* approach, and it is as much a radical shift as it is a generalization. On the one hand, not all judgements about art are aesthetic, and many art theorists contend that the bare sentence, “this is art”, as applied to a painting or a sculpture, or, for that matter, to a urinal or a snow-shovel, is not an aesthetic judgement at all. I disagree: if the readymades are to be art, the sentence in question must be an aesthetic judgement.

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On the other hand, not all aesthetic judgements are about art. For Kant, absolutely *pure* aesthetic judgements are never about art; they must be about nature. Here again, some theorists contend that art theory no longer needs aesthetics because modern art is no longer concerned with the representation of nature. Well, I think differently. For very complex historical reasons, I see modernity in aesthetics as characterized by a shift from nature to art. I mean that the human and ethical significance of aesthetic judgements pertaining to nature got lost or quasi lost. But it did not get lost altogether. It was recouped by being almost exclusively transferred to the domain of art.

JACOB LUND. Do you, on the other hand, see any aspects in Kant that are out-dated? I think, for instance, of the notion of *sensus communis*, which of course is closely interwoven with the analysis of the judgement of taste but which has also been highly criticised from different positions, e.g. by Pierre Bourdieu and Yves Michaud, because of its somewhat naïve, utopian – and phallogocentric, you might add – supposition or idea of a human universality, a shared aesthetic attitude. At the same time, something like a *sensus communis* seems to be fundamental to recent democratic thought, e.g. Jacques Rancière's egalitarian disagreement with the partition of the sensible.

Another concept that may appear a bit out of place today is the concept of the genius. It does not seem to capture the way we nowadays comprehend the artist and the coming into being of a work of art. Or am I being too simplistic and unfair to Kant?

THIERRY DE DUVE. Before we declare *sensus communis* outdated, we should read Kant carefully and get the right measure of his scepticism and profound pessimism regarding human nature. What *sensus communis* boils down to is the faculty of agreeing universally by dint of feeling – call it global empathy, if you want. Are human beings equipped with such a faculty? We have all reasons in the world to doubt it, and Kant, who was anything but naïve, knew that. The one universal constant in human history is war. What Kant saw like no one else is that we cannot renounce the idea – the mere idea, the sheer, undemonstrated postulate – of us humans being endowed with *sensus communis* without renouncing our own humanity, and that judgements about natural beauty are the terrain where we automatically make this postulate. That is the only little light of hope Kant is ready to grant us, and it is not much compared with the promises made by the many utopias born out of the Enlightenment. What

is crucial, Kant sees that light of hope shine in natural beauty, i.e., in the fact that human beings are inclined to see beauty in nature. That is the gist of Kant's discovery. Apply to this discovery the *Kant after Duchamp* reasoning, and you will see what extraordinary importance art, as art, has for the future of humankind. We need art in order to retain that glimpse of hope that religion or politics can no longer promise, let alone guarantee – but beware: without art replacing religion or politics in any way. That is where the separation you talk about in your next question comes into play.

The concept of genius, you say, appears out of place today. That is true. I think we have to blame the romantic reception of Kant's third *Critique* for that. Kant's theory of genius is in a way a mirror image, on the side of the artist, of what his theory of taste is on the side of the viewer. Pure aesthetic judgements, we know from the latter, apply to nature, not to art. If pure aesthetic judgements about art are nevertheless to be possible at all, the artist must be propelled by a natural force of which he/she is largely unaware and that *gives the rule to art*. Such is Kant's definition of genius. The emphasis is on this natural force and how we should interpret it. The romantics turned nature into a mystic entity. With the scientific knowledge we have about nature, now, we should be able to give the notion of genius a new, radically non-romantic, reading.

JACOB LUND. Many recent art practices and art works are concerned with the relation between art and politics; some are even still trying to fulfill the task of the historical avantgarde and dissolve the border between art and life. Does the thoughts of Kant – whom we most often understand as the great Enlightenment thinker who separated the different spheres of human life, i.e. religion, art, politics etc., making art autonomous from the other spheres (especially from religion but also from politics) and understanding fine art as something whose appreciation should be *disinterested* – have any relevancy in relation to say Thomas Hirschhorn or Danish *Superflex*?

THIERRY DE DUVE. I have seen only one piece by *Superflex*, which I found funny and clever, but that is not enough to form an opinion. I am more familiar with Thomas Hirschhorn's work, which I hold in high esteem, even though I often disagree with its politics or with its *philosophy* (cheap Deleuzianism, for instance). Hirschhorn is someone who picks up the art-and-politics problem where Beuys left it, and that is enough to prove his ambition as an artist. He is also someone who claims to be a *formalist*,

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which I take to mean: someone who does not believe in dissolving the border between art and life – a position that I approve. It is true that Kant separated the different spheres of human life, and I find this extremely precious, as an antidote to the confusion we witness today. But he did it in such a way that the crucial thing appeared to be, paradoxically, the links between the separated spheres. Nothing is more foreign to Kant's way of thinking than the notion of autonomy as protected autarchy. Disinterestedness is an altogether different issue, a vexed one, for sure, too complex to be dealt with here.

JACOB LUND. Your signature is inevitably associated with *the enunciative paradigm*, i.e. the reformulation of the Kantian judgement of taste, 'this is beautiful', into the more general aesthetic judgement "this is art". Is this paradigm – this generalization of Kant's critique of aesthetic judgement – still reigning, or do you see any revolutionary tendencies within the last 10 years? For instance in relational art and more politically inclined art?

THIERRY DE DUVE. The reformulation you are talking about, which indeed bears my signature, should not be associated with the enunciative paradigm, which is not at all my invention. I borrowed it from Foucault. There has been a lot of misunderstanding around my usage of it, for which I am partly responsible, because for a long time I myself was not totally clear about what it meant for me. Today I think I can offer one simple element of clarification: as *énoncé*, in the Foucauldian sense, the sentence "this is art" is not an aesthetic judgement, it is a *quoted* aesthetic judgement. Which brings me to your next question, actually.

JACOB LUND. Could you imagine writing a sequel to *Kant after Duchamp, And Kant after NN*? That is, could you imagine a new artist demanding a new understanding or generalization of Kant? Marcel Broodthaers, for instance?

THIERRY DE DUVE. Broodthaers is the artist who brought me to the understanding of "this is art" as *énoncé*, i.e. as quoted aesthetic judgement. His work, and the *Musée d'art moderne, Département des aigles*, in particular, have led me to start theorizing the museum anew. It is clear that a full-fledged theory of art should include a theory of the art institution, and one that is not circular, lest the theory itself be an institutional theory. In a nutshell: Broodthaers is indicating the way toward a non-humanist relegitimation of the art museum. This has opened a new chapter in my

work, but it does not mean that I have now moved to some *Kant after Broodthaers* approach. I am working on a theory *of art*; such an endeavour would be absurd if it entailed concocting another theory for each artist, or for each major artist. Incidentally, the *Kant after Duchamp* approach owes little to Duchamp the artist, and everything to Duchamp the messenger, as I would call him. Duchamp warned us that the whole art system has changed: we have switched from the *Beaux-Arts* system to the *art-in-general* system. When? is a question I won't go into now.

JACOB LUND. It has been argued that Kant's aesthetics provided the inspiration, orientation and authority for the central developments in aesthetic theory – analytical as well as continental – for a bit more than 200 years. Do you think that there are still any Kantian features to be appropriated into new aesthetic theories; is Kant still of use in our further development of aesthetic theory? And if so, where should we go?

THIERRY DE DUVE. The last thing I want to do is tell anybody where they should go. All I can say is that Kant has done a lot for me, and still does. Although I am not interested in endless exegesis of Kant's text, I find myself drawn to it more and more. It is at once unbelievably coherent and unbelievably open. I came to realize its openness as I began reading several commentators' interpretations and discovered how divergent they were. This has encouraged me to do my own reading without bothering too much about the specialists – something I was too shy to do at the time of *Kant after Duchamp*. But the real challenge is the coherence of the text. It is such that it forces you to work out every objection you spontaneously have. You simply cannot be convinced that, in matters of aesthetics, Kant basically *got it right*, and at the same time think that he went wrong on this or that point, like disinterestedness. You must work out the contradictions, and think of Kant, very un-dogmatically, as someone whose thinking process was so acute that you had better put your feet in his footsteps than gratuitously challenge him. I still have a lot of work ahead of me.

This interview was conducted via email during the summer of 2008.