

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

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Kant's aesthetics is rarely discussed in relation to contemporary art. If the art world wants a philosophical framework born of German idealism, it is usually Hegel's dialectic, with predictions of the end of history and the death of art, that is drawn upon. As several authors in this special issue observe, the lack of attention given to Kant by the art world and recent art theory is probably due to his aesthetics being strongly associated with modernist formalism, principally as a result of Clement Greenberg's writing. Furthermore, while Kant's treatment of the sublime might attract interest, the fact that the greater part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* focuses on beauty and judgements of taste can give the impression that his aesthetics has little to offer contemporary art.

This special issue of *Kantian Review* aims to demonstrate the relevance of Kant to contemporary art and aesthetics. All the articles started their lives as papers presented at the 'Kant, Aesthetics and Contemporary Art' conference held online on 22–24 October 2020 and organized jointly by Cardiff University and Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales, UK. The idea for a Kant and aesthetics conference and special issue came from *Kantian Review* editor Howard Williams. I added the theme of contemporary art because I think there is a lot in the third *Critique* that is relevant to it, and I wanted the challenge of addressing the lack of attention given to Kant.

The articles developed from the conference and included in this special issue provide a rich display of the different paths Kant's philosophy opens up within the contemporary. It has not been possible to include all the papers from the conference, but it is hoped that some may appear in later editions of the journal. The articles presented here divide into three themes: (1) the role of concepts in aesthetic judgement (Fileri, Vaccarino Bremner); (2) Kant and recent aesthetic theory (Zuckert, Lemos); and (3) Kant and contemporary art (Hughes, Costello, Guyer, Cazeaux).

The first two articles focus upon the relation between concepts and aesthetic judgement, and show how the relation can be illustrated using encounters with modern works of art. The first article – 'Concept-less Schemata: The Reciprocity of Imagination and Understanding in Kant's Aesthetics' by Luigi Fileri – draws out the role played by the schematization of the categories within the freedom of the aesthetic imagination. From claims made within the first *Critique*, the schematization of the categories is ordinarily taken to be transcendental preparation for the employment of a determining, empirical concept. However, as Fileri points out, it is not the

case for Kant that the necessity of the pure concepts only applies in acts of cognition. What Filieri highlights is the fact that Kant's system allows for an aesthetic schematism, one that does not exercise the objective determination of an empirical concept. The aspect of aesthetic judgement we need to consider, he argues, is the fact that it involves a reciprocal relation between the freedom of the imagination and the lawfulness of the understanding. Schematization has to occur because aesthetic judgement is a judgement; it requires the lawful ordering of its constituent terms but it is not an ordering that requires the determinative employment of concepts. Instead, it is an ordering that reflects the power of judgement itself. An aesthetic judgement might focus on a flower or an artwork but the item – as an object to be perceived, known, determined – will not be the true object of the judgement. Rather, its object will be the item *as if were made for the purpose* of being judged through the free lawfulness of the understanding. Thus, there is a schematization without concepts because there is a judgement in relation to an object, but the object in question is one that is treated as if it had been designed to stimulate an interplay of the faculties. Filieri takes us through the process in relation to Picasso's series of *Bull* lithographs.

It is the changes that concepts undergo within aesthetic judgement that is the subject of Sabina Vaccarino Bremner's article 'On Conceptual Revision and Aesthetic Judgement'. The claim that concepts undergo change within aesthetic judgement might seem odd, since such judgements are generally understood to be concept-free. However, as Vaccarino Bremner indicates, such an understanding overlooks the fact that one of the capacities assigned to genius by Kant is being able to express what was previously unnameable. A feature of aesthetic ideas, she argues, is that they can 'enlarge' concepts, so that what was unnameable becomes nameable. The enlargement process is assisted by the fact, acknowledged by Kant, that the aesthetic appreciation of art is discursively communicated over time. The periodic nature is vital, Vaccarino Bremner argues, as it gives commentators the time to come to terms with the ideas that are found in novel, stimulating and challenging works. The relevance of these aspects of Kant's aesthetics to modern art is confirmed when it is recognized that modernism effectively amounts to what might be called a semantic turn, whereby art is recognized primarily to be a form that is *about* something. Illustrating the point with Tracey Emin's artwork, *My Bed*, modern art exemplifies the process whereby grappling with the aboutness of a work enlarges the concepts that are available to us.

The ways in which Kant's philosophy of art is implicated, either explicitly or implicitly, in recent aesthetic theory are the subject of the next two articles, from Rachel Zuckert and João Lemos. Arguably one of the most prominent engagements with Kantian aesthetics in recent decades, certainly within the continental tradition, is Jean-François Lyotard's reading of the Kantian sublime. For Lyotard, as for other poststructuralist authors, sections 23–39 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* form a text that exemplifies the difficulties faced by philosophy in trying to reconcile the binary divisions of modern thought, such as reason and nature, sensible and super-sensible. Lyotard's reading is the subject of Zuckert's article, 'Presenting the Unpresentable: Jean-François Lyotard's Kantian Art-Sublime'. Her focus is the departure that Lyotard makes from Kant in his own attempt to address the heterogeneity posed by the idea of a sensible presentation of an idea of reason that is, by definition,

unpresentable. As Zuckert argues, it is precisely this heterogeneity that constitutes the sublime for Lyotard. What is of interest, she argues, is the theoretical difficulty that Lyotard's adaptation brings out in the Kantian sublime. As her study shows, this direction leads to an examination of the meaning of presentation and towards the idea that presentation is more complex than the action of setting-forth content. Furthermore, recent art theory and practice might help to make this complexity manifest.

In 'Kant and Recent Philosophies of Art', João Lemos examines the contemporary relevance of Kant's philosophy of art by looking at how it stands in relation to recent theories within analytic aesthetics. He focuses on Kendall Walton's contextualism and Berys Gaut's ethicism on account of their being theories that have become well-established in recent decades and that have the ability to accommodate recent artistic practices. According to contextualism, the capacity of an artwork to have aesthetic impact depends in part upon those features of the work which are (to use terminology from Walton quoted by Lemos) 'standard, variable and contra-standard'. Such attention to the ways in which components in an artwork contrast with one another to determine its expressive capacity, Lemos suggests, can be found in Kant's treatment of aesthetic ideas. In relation to ethicism, it is argued that assessment of the ethical attitudes displayed in a work can form part of its aesthetic evaluation. This, Lemos observes, is anticipated by Kant's assertion of the importance of ethical content being one of the components that constitutes a work, especially with a view to participating in and sustaining the free play of the imagination and to attracting enduring interest from audiences and critics. As Lemos shows, this dimension is evident in the distinction that Kant draws between poetry and oratory.

The relation between Kant and contemporary art is explored by four articles. In 'The Temporality of Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art', Fiona Hughes looks at what Kant's philosophy brings to the question of contemporaneity when it is applied to art and, in turn, how works of art help to display these aspects of Kant in operation. At the heart of the paper is the concept of time as a transcendental framework, a framework that operates as a condition of possibility. Alongside the familiar senses of contemporary, i.e. occurring at the same time, being of the moment, Hughes adds a third sense: 'sharing time over a temporal gap'. The significance of identifying a gap is that it calls attention to the idea that to consider someone else as contemporary is to posit oneself in relation to them within time, in other words, to employ a framework. The Kantian basis for the framework she finds in the Transcendental Aesthetic from the first *Critique* and the Third Analogy from the third. The relevance of this approach for art, Hughes asserts, is that it allows us to recognize how artists elect to posit themselves in relation to predecessors, with the artwork displaying the network of relations between the current artist and their predecessor. The multi-media artwork *The Refusal of Time* by William Kentridge and late Palaeolithic cave art are offered as examples through which the various relations within time as a transcendental framework can be plotted.

The applicability of Kant's aesthetics to conceptual art is the focus of Diarmuid Costello's article, 'Conceptual Art and Aesthetics Ideas'. The challenge posed by conceptual art to Kantian aesthetics is its rejection of the aesthetic approaches to art that are commonly associated with Kant, for example, conceptual art's declaration that the art lies in the idea and not in the work's sensible form. Acknowledging that

there are competing (problematic) notions of conceptual art, Costello offers a definition in terms of non-perceptual art: works of art that either have no sensible properties (the strong version) or which do possess sensible properties but their appreciation does not exhaust appreciation of the works (the weak version). While it is the strong version that poses the greater problem for Kant, Costello shows that there are resources within the third *Critique* that go beyond the 'art as beautiful, sensible form' thesis and allow Kant's theory to accommodate both strong and weak cases of non-perceptual art. The most important elements from Kant's philosophy here, he suggests, are the concept of the aesthetic idea and the associated notion of the aesthetic attribute, a representation of the imagination that expresses one idea's affinity with another. As Costello demonstrates, the presentation of non-perceptual art, strong or weak, for exhibition cannot avoid manifesting the work in ways that provide its supposedly ideas-based content with aesthetic attributes. The presence of these attributes means the work performs in ways that lend themselves to Kantian theorization.

Just how the question of the applicability of Kant's aesthetics to contemporary art should be understood is considered by Paul Guyer in 'Kant's Theory of Modern Art?' The question mark is present in the title because Guyer wants to call attention to the uncertainty around what 'modern' means, and because he wants to challenge the idea that there is something specific about the modern or the contemporary that would prevent Kant's philosophy from being relevant. There is a danger, he thinks, of identifying theories of art, from Kant and from others, such as Arthur Danto, George Dickie, as theories that try to accommodate art of a particular period to form, for example, a theory of modernist art, say, in relation to the avant-gardism of Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol. However, for Guyer, it is important to remember that these theories, including the one from Kant, are seeking to theorize not just art of specific periods or isms but rather art as a practice *that does what it has always done*. If 'modern' or 'contemporary' is taken to mean 'what is current', and modern (or contemporary) art is art doing what it has already done *currently*, then Kant's theory of art is modern (or contemporary). Guyer's premise is that no matter what new forms or isms emerge with developments in art, Kant's aesthetics will necessarily apply because his theory is rooted in *the concept of genius*. This counts as a theory of current art because genius creates 'exemplary originality' and, therefore, creates work that sets the scene for what is to follow.

My article, 'Judging Contemporary Art with Kant', takes a different approach. Whereas Guyer takes the terms 'modern' and 'contemporary' to be interchangeable in meaning 'what is current', I work from the understanding within art theory that there is a difference between the two. 'Modern' is typified by art that is medium-specific, that is, it explores the forms and effects that are made possible by the medium, as exemplified by abstract expressionist painting. 'Contemporary' is not so straightforward. In recent art theory literature, the word is associated with art that poses a challenge to judgement either because it raises ethical questions or because care is needed in determining the conditions under which individual works of art are interpreted, as a result of the fact that there are no longer any limits on the form art can take. It is, I think, contemporary art as a challenge to judgement that confirms the relevance of Kant's aesthetics. It is not the sections on beauty from the third *Critique* that supply the relevant detail, I maintain, but those that set out the

concept of nature's subjective purposiveness, the transcendental assumption that allows judgement to bring the diversity and contingency of nature under unifying concepts and thereby to form experience. With this concept, I argue, Kant offers a theory of judgement coming to terms with a manifold that is well-placed to give an account of the process whereby an artwork with no material limits on its constitution is interpreted.

If there is one thread that emerges from the papers in this collection it is that the 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgement' is not limited to theorizing the eighteenth-century concept of beauty or to providing a foundation for twentieth-century modernism. One of the most important consequences of Kant for aesthetics is that the subject is placed by him at the core of his critical philosophy, at the centre of a theory of judgement that seeks to reconcile the super-sensible dimensions of nature and freedom, and to bring together the work of the first two *Critiques*. This means that aesthetics is given a significance that extends beyond a philosophy of art, narrowly conceived. While the coherence of the critical project continues to be a subject of Kantian scholarship, few would endorse the view that the philosophy of art contained in the third *Critique* is merely an incidental or last-minute addition to the project. It is there because rethinking the aesthetic introduces concepts and structures that are vital to what Kant wants to define as the power of judgement. With developments in art in recent decades raising fundamental questions about its identity and value, the analyses conducted in this volume show how Kant's aesthetics can produce novel ways of thinking about contemporary art and, perhaps more surprisingly, novel accounts of how art helps us to think.

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