

ARTICLE

On Conceptual Revision and Aesthetic Judgement

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Abstract

This paper calls into question the view typically attributed to Kant that aesthetic judgements are particularist, resisting all conceptual determination. Instead, it claims that Kant conceives of aesthetic judgements, particularly of art, as playing an important role in the *revision* of concepts: one sense in which aesthetic judgements, as Kant defines them, ‘find a universal’ for a given particular. To understand the relation between artistic judgements and concepts requires that we consider what I call Kant’s diachronic account of aesthetic ideas, or how such judgements unfold in the course of communication and reflection. My reading draws Kant much closer to debates in the philosophy of art on the semantic dimension of artworks. Here, illuminating the way in which aesthetic judgements about art can play a role in conceptual revision allows us to make sense of the way in which modern artworks contest concepts rather than merely presenting or expressing them.

Keywords: Kant; aesthetic judgment; conceptual change; contemporary art; reflective judgment

I
Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgement is typically contrasted with his account of cognitive (or determining) judgement on the basis of its particularism. While the determining judgements of which Kant gives an account in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Logic* are characterized in terms of the subsumption of particulars (the manifold of intuition) under universals (categories or empirical concepts),¹ no empirical concepts are needed for an aesthetic judgement to be drawn: ‘In order to find something good, I must always know what sort of thing the object is supposed to be, i.e. I must have a concept for it. I do not need that in order to find beauty in something. Flowers, free designs . . . do not depend on any determinate concept, and yet please’ (*CPJ*, §4, 5: 207).² Free beauty, as contrasted with dependent or adherent beauty, is free in that it does not ‘depend’ on an already given concept. Similarly, §6 of the *Critique of Judgment* defines the ‘beautiful’ as ‘that which, *without concepts*, is represented as the object of a universal satisfaction’ (*CPJ*, 5: 211, my emphasis).

As such, aesthetic judgement has often been construed as impervious to conceptual fit. Béatrice Longuenesse distinguishes determining judgements from what she terms ‘merely’ reflective judgements on the grounds that in the latter, ‘the effort of

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the activity of judgement to form concepts *fails*. And it fails because it *cannot* succeed. This is the case in “merely reflective” *aesthetic* judgement, where the agreement of imagination and understanding is of such a nature that it cannot be reflected under any concept’ (2001: 164, citing FI, 20: 220–1, 20: 223–4). Where reflective judgement has been treated as affording an account of conceptual formation and revision, this has been addressed primarily under its teleological rather than its aesthetic guise (see Allison 2001: 21–4, Ginsborg 2006).³ Indeed, commentators have taken the paradigmatic instance of reflective judgement, and thus ‘mere’ reflective judgement, to be aesthetic judgement, precisely because of its lack of connection to concepts.⁴

This strategy of interpretation, however, leaves underdetermined key textual points. For instance, why does Kant immediately add to the citation of §4 above: ‘The satisfaction in the beautiful must depend upon reflection on an object that *thereby leads to some sort of concept* (it is indeterminate which)’ (CPJ, 5: 207, my emphasis)? And how does the understanding of aesthetic judgement just summarized relate to the definition Kant advances of reflective judgement—both aesthetic and teleological—in the published Introduction of CPJ as required when ‘only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found’ (CPJ, 5:179)?

Scholars have, in part, responded to these questions by considering Kant’s account of *aesthetic ideas*, or representations of the imagination which resist the application of determinate concepts. The presentation of aesthetic ideas in a given artwork is taken to express moral ideas (Savile 1987, Allison 2001), rational ideas more broadly (Chignell 2007),⁵ or empirical concepts (Matherne 2013). While Matherne does suggest that aesthetic ideas can thereby ‘perform a cognitive function by “expanding” our empirical concepts’ (36),⁶ less attention has been paid to the role aesthetic judgement plays in *revising* concepts. Instead, the scholarly emphasis has been primarily on the *expression* and *representation* of preexisting (mainly rational) concepts: in other words, the scholarship has remained implicitly committed to the paradigm of conceptual subsumption rather than conceptual formation, the model of determining judgement rather than reflective judgement.

Matters are somewhat different when it comes to Kant’s influence on the philosophy of art. Here, Kant’s theory of aesthetic ideas has been invoked precisely to shed light on the ‘semantic’ nature of post-representational art: namely, that artworks must essentially be *about* something, a meaning that they embody (Duve 1996; Danto 1974, 2007, 2013; Costello 2013, this volume). The paradigm of artistic representation having broken down with the advent of modernism, this intrinsic ‘aboutness’ has become central to the very concept of art. Indeed, much art of the twentieth century, at least prior to the end of art,⁷ takes as its object its own concept (‘art’).

However, the philosophy of art, too, has tended to treat the semantic dimension of art as determinate, akin to determining, rather than reflective, judgement. On the latter accounts, artworks still *have* a given meaning, or are *about* something, making it less clear how they can contest meanings, or question the notion of signification. Here Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgement is appealed to precisely in order to account for this degree of semantic determinacy.

This leads us to a closer consideration of what is semantically *indeterminate* about aesthetic judgment, in particular in the case of modern and contemporary art. The interpretation I advance in this paper, I suggest, gives us a more helpful theoretical apparatus for making sense of how art, beginning with modernism,⁸ does not merely

denote what it shows; how, in other words, it also has endeavoured to alter the bounds of the very concept 'art', leaving a trail of new concepts and propositions (definitions, movements, manifestos) in the process. While this is not to say that theorists have overlooked the fact that art since the twentieth century interrogates the meaning of representation, posing questions such as 'what is art?', the resources in Kant to make sense of art's current role in *re(forming)* concepts, including its own concept, have been neglected, or so I will argue.

I consider the role of artistic conceptual revision in light of what I call Kant's *diachronic* theory of how unsubsumable artistic particulars can alter available discursive resources. Such a process, Kant suggests, requires extended communication and reflection across the artworld, implicating both art makers and viewers, and holds the potential to revise the concepts (or, even, the 'ideas') of a great many things beyond the concept 'art' alone. As I will conclude, while it is right to say that aesthetic particulars cannot be *subsumed* under existing universals, they play a constructive role in (in)forming *new* universals—a function that may be considered intrinsic to art after the demise of the representational paradigm.

II

Kant claims that aesthetic particulars cannot be *subsumed* under existing universals, but that they do play a constructive role in forming *new* universals. In responding to aesthetic particulars, subjects attempt to grasp all that is currently 'unnameable [*das Unnennbare*]' when adhering to 'the mere letter of language'—all that eludes their determinate conceptual schemes (*CPJ*, 5: 316). We might take this as a rearticulation of the common view that aesthetic judgement is inherently particularist: aesthetic experience is 'unnameable' in that it inescapably eludes concepts or language use. Yet, on the next page, Kant says that genius, or the capacity to make aesthetic pleasure 'universally communicable', involves a

faculty for apprehending the rapidly passing play of the imagination and *unifying it into a concept* (which for that very reason is *original* and at the same time discloses a *new rule* [*eine neue Regel eröffnet*], which could not have been deduced from any antecedent principles or examples), which can be communicated without the constraint of rules [*ohne Zwang der Regeln*]. (*CPJ*, 5: 317; my emphasis)

That is, while the immediate reception of an aesthetic particular resists subsumption under any determinate concept, its production *does* require the creation of a new 'concept', which Kant characterizes variously as 'original', as disclosing a 'new rule', as unavailable for deduction 'from any antecedent principles or examples', and as capable of being 'communicated'.

Aesthetic ideas

In what sense can aesthetic judgement thereby be said to meet with conceptual formation and revision? To answer this requires us to take up Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas. First, aesthetic objects that have 'spirit' [*Geist*], Kant says, prompt 'aesthetic ideas' in the spectator, or representations of the imagination which 'no language fully

attains or can make intelligible [*verständlich*] . . . no concept can be fully adequate to them' (CPJ, 5: 314). Because aesthetic ideas cannot be determined by concepts, they give the spectator the 'impetus to think more, although in an undeveloped way, than can be comprehended in a concept, and hence in a determinate linguistic expression [*bestimmten Sprachausdrucke*]' (CPJ, 5: 315).

The process of attempted conceptual determination aesthetic judgement instigates, then, is seemingly never complete, though it is constructive. In so encouraging the activity of thought, aesthetic ideas come to 'approximate a presentation of concepts of reason (of intellectual ideas)' (CPJ, 5: 314). While aesthetic ideas are intuitions that elude conceptual schemes, intellectual or rational ideas are concepts that lack application to any determinate intuition.⁹ Aesthetic ideas and rational ideas are 'counterparts' (CPJ, 5: 314) in that each offers an approximation of the other: an aesthetic idea approximates a sensible representation of a rational idea, while a rational idea approximates a concept of an aesthetic idea. As examples of rational ideas, Kant lists 'invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation', 'death, envy, and all sorts of vices', 'love, fame', 'a cosmopolitan disposition', and 'the consciousness of virtue' (CPJ, 5: 314, 316). Kant notes that some of these can be known, in part, through experience, including death, envy, love, and fame, but the artist's task in representing such ideas is to make them 'sensible beyond the limits of experience' (CPJ, 5: 314).

At a first pass, we might take an aesthetic idea to correspond to a given sensible representation of one (or more) of these examples of rational ideas: a painting about death, say, or a novel about envy. This would correspond to the traditional way of accounting for the artwork's disclosure of a 'new rule': that it expresses or represents an idea of reason.¹⁰ We might think that Kant's talk of the 'new' or 'original' nature of the concept being so 'unified' can be attributed to the fact that the choice of concept is, in some way, up to the artist, or to the viewer. While a particular chair can only be subsumed under a determinate set of concepts—'chair', 'four-legged', 'solid'—applying concepts to James Joyce's *Ulysses* is a much more open-ended affair: thinking about the work in light of its treatment of 'time', 'Dublin', or 'the boundary between self and world' can each afford rich and productive readings, and the conceptual framework we apply is, to some degree, up to us, as beholders of the work.

While the conceptual open-endedness of art is an important aspect of what Kant affirms by way of his account of aesthetic ideas, my sense is that Kant means something stronger than this, and indicates this quite explicitly in the text. Aesthetic ideas are defined as *unintelligible*, as *unnameable* (CPJ, 5: 314, 316), and are to be distinguished from rational ideas precisely on this basis. Kant does not just mean by this that they are conceptually indeterminate; instead, he insists repeatedly that they 'let one think more than one can express in a concept determined by words' (CPJ, 5: 315). Kant gestures here toward *gaps* in our conceptual repertoire, and as a consequence, I will suggest, to the ways in which they admit of *alteration*. Indeed, Kant claims that the aesthetic idea, in eluding the grasp of any determinate concept, 'aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way', allowing the 'addition to a concept of much that is unnameable' (CPJ, 5: 315, 316, my emphases). Kant's point is neither that particular artworks remain strictly particular, detached from any conceptual relation, nor that they can be fit to an indeterminate array of concepts. Instead, he asserts that, in this case, the particulars *alter* the universals with which they are associated. Thus, it is characteristic of the imaginative process aesthetic ideas stimulate that it

contributes to our repertoire of universals. Kant describes this process, of aesthetic ideas giving way to rational ideas, as the creation of ‘another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it’, whereby ‘nature can be transformed by us into something entirely different, namely into that which steps beyond nature’ (*CPJ*, 5: 314). The creation of something new in the sensible domain—art—also culminates, Kant claims in this passage, in the creation of something new in the intellectual, *discursive* domain.

Communication

While aesthetic ideas initially elude the bounds of discursivity, they do eventually *find* expression. Kant insists not just on the role aesthetic ideas play in facilitating *thought*, but also on their role in facilitating *communication*. In other words, their contribution is not merely monological, but dialogical. The free play of the cognitive faculties occasioned by beautiful objects lays claim not only to *universal* (or intersubjective) *validity* [*Gemeingültigkeit*], but to *communicability* [*Mittelbarkeit*] (§§8–9); while the two terms are often taken to be synonymous,¹¹ the second is stronger than the first (Vaccarino Bremner [forthcoming](#)). Where the claim to the universal validity of aesthetic judgement might suggest that it is sufficient for subjects to project the viewpoints of others from their armchair (as it were), Kant’s repeated references to the universal *communicability* of such judgements indicates that they must be able to be actively *shared*, *mitgeteilt*, with others. While Kant sets up his discussion of the subjective satisfaction of judgements of beauty in §6 and §8 of *CPJ* by referring to their ‘universal validity’, in §9 he transitions to describing them in terms of their ‘communicability’ and ‘universal capacity for communication’.¹² Later, Kant claims explicitly that the *sensus communis* is not just ‘common [*gemeiner*] sense’, but ‘communal [*gemeinschaftlicher*] sense’ (*CPJ*, 5: 293, my emphases): not just *Gemeingültigkeit*, but the stronger criterion of being able to impart one’s cognitive disposition to others, *Gemeinschaftlichkeit*.

The stronger criterion of communicability entails, in part, that aesthetic judgement is importantly implicated in actual instances of *communication* between subjects. And, indeed, this dimension of aesthetic evaluation is something Kant refers to repeatedly. Beautiful art ‘promotes the culture of the mental powers for *sociable communication*’ (*CPJ*, 5: 306, my emphasis); taste encourages ‘*communication with others*’ (*Anth*, 7: 244). As Michel Chaouli insightfully suggests, this dimension of artistic experience marks a significant point of contrast from aesthetic experience of nature—the latter still governed, he argues, by the paradigm of beauty rather than that of meaning, or sense. In the case of natural beauty aesthetic judgement takes the form of ‘the terse utterance, “*This . . . is beautiful*”’ to which the addition of any other predicate would be superfluous, tainting the purity of the judgement with conceptual determinacy. But in the case of art, ‘the remark that *this*—this poem, this painting, this drama—is beautiful at best marks the beginning of what we need to say to convey the stream of thinking it has occasioned in us’ (Chaouli 2017: 184).

Thus, Kant suggests that the ‘communication’ of aesthetic judgements is really the attempted communication of *aesthetic ideas*. The genius required to produce beautiful works consists in ‘the happy relation . . . of finding *ideas* for a given concept on the one hand, and on the other, hitting upon the *expression* for these, through which the subjective disposition of the mind that can thereby be produced, as an accompaniment of a concept, can be *communicated* to others’ (*CPJ*, 5: 317, my emphasis). That is, genius consists

precisely in the capacity to ‘communicate’ what *can’t* be named, what remains unintelligible—the capacity, that is, to somehow, and mysteriously, cast into concepts what eludes available conceptual repertoires. Spirit, then, is the talent ‘to express what is *unnameable* in the mental state in the case of a certain representation and to make it *universally communicable*’ (CPJ, 5: 317). A successful artwork brings into the sphere of meaning what initially seemed to repel it.

Thus Kant also suggests that new concepts can be, and indeed ought to be, *produced* in the course of this process: what is initially ‘unnameable’, ‘unintelligible’, or eludes ‘the mere letter of language’ nevertheless ‘*leads to some sort of concept* (it is indeterminate which)’; ‘the rapidly passing play of the imagination’ can be ‘*unif[ie]d* . . . *into a concept*’ (CPJ, 5: 207, 317, my emphasis). Indeed, if we think of how communication of aesthetic judgement might unfold over time, to be able to communicate our aesthetic judgements calls on us first to attempt to *form* the concepts by which to express them, or to alter the concepts we have in order to encompass them; only in the first instance can the communication at issue express merely the pleasure they elicit. If we think of Kant’s theory in *diachronic* terms, we can see how concepts come into play in Kant’s account of aesthetic judgement, albeit only once communication of the pleasure beautiful objects occasion in the viewer is *already underway*.

The diachronic criterion of art

Kant insists that the subjective effects of an art object (or artifact) cannot be considered in restriction to a given time-slice; instead, they must be understood in terms of how they unfold *over time*. The importance of this diachronic dimension of Kant’s philosophy of art is reinforced by the distinction he draws between the agreeable and the beautiful arts.

The kind of communication the agreeable arts elicit is characterized as aimed solely at ‘making the time pass unnoticed’, as mere ‘diversion’ (CPJ, 5: 305, 306, 326). The relevant criterion has to do with the *content* of the communication or thought these arts arouse. They consist, for example, in creating a setting (by means of ‘table-music’, say, or ‘entertaining stories’) in which ‘much can be chattered about and nobody will be held responsible for what he says’, which encourages ‘free conversation . . . without anyone paying the least attention to its composition’ (CPJ, 5: 305). Thus, while agreeable arts promote sociability and communication, it is of a sort whose *content* is irrelevant. The agreeable arts are ‘intended only as momentary entertainment, not as some enduring material for later reflection or discussion’ (CPJ, 5: 305). They help us to pass time, only to be subsequently forgotten; they do not persist in our reflection *over time* once the social occasion has come and gone.

As Kant suggests in the next paragraph, the agreeable arts contrast in this respect with the beautiful arts (CPJ, 5: 305). The beautiful arts also promote our capacity for communication (CPJ, 5: 306). Yet such art is not aimed at the end of sociability or enjoyment; instead, it is ‘purposive in itself’ and ‘without a purpose’ (CPJ, 5: 306). Unlike agreeable art, the content of beautiful art is relevant: beautiful art must ‘dispose the spirit to ideas’, whereas art ‘aimed merely at enjoyment . . . leaves behind it nothing in the idea, and makes the spirit dull, the object by and by loathsome, and the mind . . . dissatisfied with itself and moody’ (CPJ, 5: 326). There must be something *enduring* in the artwork for it to be successful, and its propensity to endure appears to be bound up with the degree to which it can elicit ideas in the spectator.¹³

The endurance of art in time has to do with the degree of *determinacy* of the ideas a given artistic product expresses. Music, for example (such as the ‘table-music’ Kant identifies as merely agreeable), relies on ‘determinate ideas’ (such as melody, harmony, and tone) rather than ‘indeterminate’ ideas (such as those of a moral or rational cast) (*CPJ*, 5: 328, 5: 329–30). It is thus ultimately ‘transitory’ and the ideas it presents ‘burdensome’, as opposed to ‘lasting’ and ‘enduring’ artistic media, such as poetry or painting (*CPJ*, 5: 330, 329).¹⁴ As a result, in his evaluation of the different media of beautiful arts, Kant suggests that ‘indeterminate’ ideas are to be preferred over the ‘determinate’ (*CPJ*, 5: 328–30).

To sum up these points, aesthetic objects, artworks, occasion aesthetic ideas, or representations that cannot be determined by concepts. Because they elude the current bounds of discursivity, they occasion ‘thought’, and indeed, they do this to a greater degree than determining judgements,¹⁵ since, despite the subject’s inability to bring this mode of experience under a concept, she nevertheless keeps trying, in a process that never comes to a definitive close.

Free and dependent beauty

There is a degree, then, to which artworks expressing indeterminate ideas can be thought of as closer to free beauties than dependent beauties. Such a claim may seem strange: I have been insisting on the conceptual or semantic dimension of artworks, whereas Kant defines free beauty as what ‘presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be’ (*CPJ*, 5: 229). Indeed, those who have insisted on a semantic interpretation of Kant’s philosophy of art have put considerable emphasis on Kant’s theory of dependent beauty.¹⁶ Yet Kant insists that dependent beauty involves not just the semantic, but the *purposive* character of a given object: dependent objects ‘stand under the concept of a particular end’; that is, they are conditioned by the concept of a *purpose* which they have been designed in order to serve (*CPJ*, 5: 229). For example, ‘a church, a palace, an arsenal’ are all *functional* objects; they serve a determinate end and are judged in part by how well they achieve that end (*CPJ*, 5: 230). The meaning of a teapot, no matter how beautiful, is restricted to its functionality in brewing and pouring tea;¹⁷ this aspect of its aesthetic meaning, at least, is not open to interpretation, or to subjective disclosure by the viewer. By contrast, a flower, Kant claims, is freely beautiful only when considered in abstraction from its biological function:

Flowers are free natural beauties. Hardly anyone other than the botanist knows what sort of thing a flower is supposed to be. Even the botanist, who recognizes in it the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end if he judges the flower by means of taste. (*CPJ*, 5: 229)

Dependent beauties rely on *determinate* concepts, in particular concepts of a given function they are to serve. They correspond much more closely to Kant’s characterization of ‘art in general’ in §43 as production orientated to purposes (‘production . . . through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason’, *CPJ*, 5: 303), including the agreeable arts, rather than the fine, or beautiful, arts in particular.

Free beauties, by contrast, are purposive *without a purpose*—just as Kant claimed, we saw, for the beautiful arts in §45 (*CPJ*, 5: 306). They still do involve connection to concepts

(namely, aesthetic and rational ideas), but the greater the degree of *indeterminacy* of the ideas on which they rely, the more 'beautiful' they are—the more 'spirit' they have. And, I'm inclined to say, the *freer* they are: the less dependent on a determinate concept which could exhaust the meaning they impart on the viewer. In this respect, 'free' art objects might be thought to be analogous to the natural objects Kant cites as examples of free beauty in §16: the flower, the hummingbird, the bird of paradise. Like these examples, what a sufficiently indeterminate art object is 'supposed' to represent cannot be known in advance (nor can its meaning be settled by its maker's intention); instead, its meaning should, Kant urges, be inexhaustible and multiplicitous, open for an attempted, and partial, bestowal of subjective meaning by the viewer. While an 'indeterminately conceptual' artwork therefore *invites* the viewer's attempt to bring it under conceptual determination, any given determination must remain just that: *attempted*. The potential revision of our available discursive resources arises out of our asymptotic approach towards a final bestowal of sense upon the art object.

This dimension of conceptual indeterminacy falls out of the cognitive process required to form a judgement of taste at all, by which our mental powers are set into a 'free play, since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition' (*CPJ*, 5: 217). In other words, aesthetic experience involves a state of mind by which conceptual operations—in particular, the cooperative activity of the imagination and understanding to take in a sensible manifold—are undertaken *without* concepts given from the outset. This is particularly so when it comes to judgements of free beauty, for which 'no concept of any end for which the manifold should serve the given object . . . by which the imagination, which is as it were at play in the observation of the shape, would merely be restricted' (*CPJ*, 5: 229–30). Because we share our cognitive faculties with all other subjects, it is this state of mind, the experience of this free play, which admits of universal communication, since it is 'cognition' as such which 'is the only kind of representation that is valid for everyone' (*CPJ*, 5: 217).

The degree to which a given artwork admits of indeterminacy in our attempts to bring it under a conceptual determination (in its *ideas*) also corresponds to the degree of freedom accorded to the imagination in its 'play' of reflection upon it. And this also draws in the dimension of *time*: such an experience, if sufficiently rich, must unfold *over* time. If the aesthetic meaning of a given art object is given too easily, or given already in advance, there is nothing left for the subject to 'do', cognitively speaking; the diachronic dimension of the experience is thereby cut off too early. When an artwork involves indeterminate ideas, rather than the total abstraction of leafy borders or ornamentation *à la grecque* (*CPJ*, 5: 229), we might take the imagination to play, not merely with sensible forms, but with concepts.

III

I have been arguing against an interpretation of aesthetic ideas on which they merely *express* or *represent* concepts (including rational ideas). Instead, I have suggested, they indicate points of inadequacy in our conceptual schemes (namely, where they are outstripped by sensible experience) and, by 'adding' or 'enlarging' available concepts, show that they admit of revision. Against the expression or representation model of aesthetic ideas, I have advocated for thinking about aesthetic judgement in terms

of *attempted* conceptual determination, a process that can ultimately bear on the semantic contours of the concepts themselves. If aesthetic ideas can be thought to function as attempted or provisional schemata for rational ideas, their function must be conceived quite differently than that of schemata of the categories. In the first *Critique* Kant characterizes the latter as working to enable a fit, a direct application, between particulars and rational principles. But, as Rachel Zuckert puts it, in the case of rational ideas, ‘the schema must always *defer* such fit, *obstruct* any sense of seamless application, in order to prevent empirical complacency’, where ‘empirical complacency’ picks out a lack of awareness that our available concepts might be *wrong*, ‘might require (even drastic) revision’ (2017: 101).

The self-reflection of post-representational art

Where does the foregoing leave us when it comes to the philosophy of art? Since modernism, art has in part been characterized by a shift from mimesis or representation-alism to a much more inclusive interpretation of art (something along the lines of what Danto 2007 terms art as ‘embodied meaning’). This transition was achieved in part by art’s propensity, beginning with modernism, to play with its own self-ascriptions, broadening the bounds of the definition of the very concept of ‘art’.

If art, under nineteenth-century realism (say), gave itself a determinate end—the end of faithfully representing reality, as it appeared to naked perception—one way to conceive of the efforts of modernists, beginning with the impressionists, was to call this very end into question, interrogating the nature of the concepts it presupposed (‘reality’, ‘perception’, ‘true-to-life’). We might say that the former movement in art is more *dependently beautiful* than the latter, on Kant’s characterization of it: subordinate to the determinate function of representation, cognitively restricting its reception by the viewer. Danto’s favorite examples, Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes*, do not in fact *serve* the function of cleaning pans; Duchamp’s *Fountain* does not actually *serve* the function of a urinal. In either case, the work dares the viewer to interpret it functionally, but also *resists* any such ready functionalism: after all, it is found displayed in a museum, set out for aesthetic evaluation. While *Fountain* remains an intentionally produced object,¹⁸ its very intentionality is at issue for it: no longer handcrafted by the artist himself (see Goldsmith 1983), but merely *selected*, introducing an alteration in the very notion of what intentionality—*purposiveness*—means when applied to an artwork.

Duchamp’s and Warhol’s respective works therefore dispense altogether with the old representational condition on artworks. They do not *represent* a Brillo box and a urinal; they *are* a Brillo box and a urinal, albeit in a museum rather than the grocery store or restroom. To the extent that they seem to call for the application of the concept ‘art’, they also—at least initially—*defy* any such ready application. In either case, to the degree that any fit between universal (‘art’) and particular (‘Fountain’, ‘Brillo Box’) can be successful, the universal must first admit of revision in order to accommodate them.

Similarly, after the midpoint of the twentieth century, the artworld began to feature artworks titled, simply, ‘Untitled’, which ‘are about . . . aboutness, and their content is the concept of art’ (Danto 1974: 148). A Rothko, a Newman, or a Still arguably each *alter* the very concept of art: from the stance of the spectator, they need not be

about anything at all, other than the very concept of 'aboutness'.¹⁹ In so doing, they, too, may be thought to be 'free beauties', of a sort; they intentionally defy the task of representation, resisting the application of any determinate concept to them. To the degree that one might attempt to apply even the very indeterminate concept 'aboutness' to them—a concept that cannot accord with any determinate empirical object—such artworks call into question the very legitimacy of such a concept, interrogating what it means to be *about* something. For this reason, I resist talking too quickly of a work 'possessing a meaning' or being 'about something', as if every work had a *determinate* meaning or dealt with a *determinate* concept whose identity is simply up to the artist to disclose to the viewer. Instead, the meaning of any given artwork must in principle remain open-ended; open, that is, for affiliation to *new* concepts.²⁰

Conceptual introduction and revision

One defining feature of the history of art in the twentieth century as it pursued its quest to broaden the bounds of 'art' was the new art-historical concepts left in its wake: impressionism, fauvism, futurism, Dada, cubism, surrealism, abstract expressionism, minimalism. Indeed, many of these movements were accompanied by a corresponding manifesto which sought to chart out a new art-historical definition. André Breton's manifesto of surrealism, for instance, gave both a dictionary definition *and* an encyclopedia entry, as if to presuppose its own world-historical importance in advance: 'SURREALISM, n. Pure psychic automatism, by which one proposes to express, either verbally, in writing, or by any other manner, the real functioning of thought. Dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral preoccupation' (Breton 1924: 26). Breton presupposes the diachronic and dialectical dimensions of the reception of art in positioning himself as instigator of an art-critical discourse rather than as depicter of experience. In so doing, he demonstrated his cognizance of art's new role: no longer *representing* reality, but *creating* it, by way of introducing new categories. Indeed, the case of surrealism was one instance in which the coining of a new artistic concept added a new term, the 'surreal', to our everyday conceptual schemes. Others have conjured into being new objects altogether: Duchamp's 'readymade', Calder's 'mobile'.

An artist can self-consciously attempt to set the terms of discussion, as the manifestos of minimalism, surrealism, and futurism each suggest. In other cases, new terms are coined by the artworld in the course of reception. Either way, the birth of new aesthetic possibilities comes hand-in-hand with the attempted coining of new concepts by which to make sense of them. A commentator remarks on the emergence of pop art: 'Almost at once, the names proliferated: Commonism, Popular Realism, Anti-Sensibility Painting, the New Sign Painting, Factualism, Common Object Art. "Pop," which didn't come into use until later in 1962, had been coined in 1958 by an English critic', while its creators were newly minted 'New American Dreamers', given their focus on 'mass man and his artifacts' (Scherman 2001: 68, Tillim 1962: 34-7). Here, the 'proliferation of names' was instigated by critical discourse about the new art form, in an ongoing activity of discussion that took place over the course of years. The fact that Pop *lasted* in collective discourse also occasioned the need for its new name: its promotion of unrepresentable ideas including mass production, industrialization, commodification, and late-stage capitalism in turn

stimulated communication about it, as well as the ideas it attempted to represent, and therefore a need to *name* it.

We might think of the new art-historical concepts that emerge in the course of this enduring activity of communication as akin to the process by which empirical concepts emerge in the activity of teleological judgement, given the many affinities Kant cites between aesthetic and teleological judgement in the two Introductions of *CPJ*.²¹ In teleological judgement, reflection on an unrepresentable idea of reason, such as a system of nature or natural teleology, guides the power of judgement in its observation of empirical phenomena, enabling it to carve up reality into new empirical concepts. The idea of nature as systematically ordered, for instance, leads the subject to interpret the tiger swallowtail it comes across not as mere mechanism, nor as a contingent accumulation of unrelated parts, but as an *organism* admitting of a purposive mode of explanation. The ensuing capacity to *name* the particular ('tiger swallowtail') imbues the universals that initially guided this determination ('organism', 'system of nature', 'teleology') with greater specificity: a new token falls under the type.²² Yet Kant leaves open the prospect that the guiding universals might themselves admit of future revision: purposiveness giving way to functionalism, perhaps, or natural teleology to natural selection.²³

Art's attempts at conceptual revision, too, go beyond its (seemingly narcissistic) preoccupation with its own self-ascriptions.²⁴ The birth of the term 'stream of consciousness' bore not just on the notion of literature and what it ought to achieve (though it did do that too, of course), but also on the nature of memory, inner reality, and subjective experience. That is: the term came into being to pick out an attempted *revision* of our conventional understandings of memory, inner reality, subjective experience. While realist narrative presupposed an external standpoint on the self—that we *think* in much the same way we *talk to other people*—the literary modernists objected that what is in fact more real, more true-to-life, is an inner *flux* of experience that takes an altogether different phenomenological form. (In this respect, literary modernism might fruitfully be compared to philosophy of its time: to the phenomenology of Heidegger, say, or Merleau-Ponty.) Similarly, we might take the birth of the vanishing point in Renaissance art to merely be evidence of the successful learning of a new technology to represent what had always been available to perception (Danto 1986: 91), or else, with Erwin Panofsky (1927) and Marshall McLuhan (1962: 162, 174, 288), to introduce a new style of perception altogether.

Kant's own examples of the ideas of reason made sensible by aesthetic ideas would seem to admit of these transformative possibilities, including, as we saw above, the 'idea of reason of a cosmopolitan disposition', 'the consciousness of virtue', 'the kingdom of the blessed', 'love', 'envy and all sorts of vices', 'fame', 'the kingdom of hell' (*CPJ*, 5: 316, 5: 314). As Paul Guyer notes, these are morally significant notions—or indeed, thick concepts (1979: 362): as Bernard Williams (1985) first suggested, both truth-tracking and normatively weighted terms which are bearers of socially situated practical knowledge.²⁵ That is, such notions often have an intrinsic *contingency* built into them, due to their reliance on empirical content; they arise at a given time and place, for a particular social group. They therefore, Williams claimed, have a date of birth, as well as an expiration date (indeed, they are famously apt for 'destruction' by 'moral reflection'). Like Williams' examples of 'treachery', 'promise', or 'courage' (1985: 129), they are each liable to take on a particular empirical 'colour', unlike 'thin'

concepts such as ‘right’ or ‘good’. ‘Virtue’, ‘hell’, ‘envy’, and ‘love’ each have empirical referents (as well as being normative), picking out a given state of affairs that holds true in the world. ‘Virtue’ or ‘fame’, ‘hell’ or ‘love’ each took on a very different empirical tinge—to the extent that they existed in the same way at all—in fourteenth-century Ravenna than they do for us today, a difference reflected in the historical chasm between the aesthetic idea of ‘hell’ conjured, respectively, by Dante’s *Inferno* and Kevin Smith’s *Clerks*, indicating that they *do* change on a sufficiently broad historical scale.²⁶

How should we think of these ingredients—esthetic ideas, the generation or alteration of empirical concepts or ideas of reason, dependent and free beauty, communication—coming together in the reception of a given artwork?

Consider Tracey Emin’s controversial work, *My Bed* (Figure 1). The viewer is confronted with Emin’s own bed after the artist experienced a long period of



Figure 1. Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998. © Tracey Emin, courtesy of the Tate, London.

heartbreak-fuelled depression: rumpled, stained sheets, extinguished cigarettes, empty liquor bottles, period-stained underwear, condoms, lubricant, balled-up tissues, batteries, a mirror. On one level, the artwork can be taken to call for a simple cognitive act of subsumption: faced with the particular of a bed, I apply the empirical concept 'bed', with its attendant function of providing a place to sleep. But of course, this particular bed does not serve this function, or any clear determinate function: its meaning is not dependent on the concept 'bed' *simpliciter*. While subsumable under the empirical concept 'bed', this particular bed also resists such ready subsumption. It is, in addition, an aesthetic idea conjuring up thick ideas of reason: vulnerability, heartbreak, depression, femininity, sexuality. When considered in this manner, in abstraction from its ostensible purpose, it can take on the status of a free beauty — much like Kant's example of the flower abstracted from its biological function (*CPJ*, 5: 229).

My reading of this example, of course, is only one possible interpretation that can be given. Indeed, *My Bed* is a hotly debated work, eliciting polarized opinions both within the art world and outside of it. In 1999, the art critic Adrian Searle proclaimed in the *Guardian*, 'Tracey, you just go on and on, in an endlessly solipsistic, self-regarding homage to yourself . . . There's nothing to see in your work but you, your mood swings, your sentimentality and your nostalgia. It's all so mawkish, so cloying' (Searle 1999). Others instead see the usage of the bed as a powerful symbol for birth, death, shame. The aesthetic idea provided by *My Bed* has certainly prompted communication, in part because it has catalyzed more aesthetic disagreement than agreement. And this discourse concerns, to a significant degree, whether the aesthetic idea relates successfully to lofty, indeterminate ideas of reason, where to do so would entail at once *expressing* the rational idea and *contesting* it. Does *My Bed* stretch and alter the bounds of concepts such as 'birth', 'death', 'confession', showing us a new possible instantiation of such concepts whose indeterminacy puts them outside of our empirical grasp? Or does the work amount to nothing else, ultimately, than one individual's mere sentimentality and solipsism? These are questions that do not arise only in the course of individual reflection on the work, but that are played out in the various avenues of communication and controversy the work prompts. Interestingly, the piece can achieve such conceptual alteration even among those who deem it an utterly failed artwork: it can extend the scope of 'vulnerability', for instance, even if its extension is denounced as 'cloying sentimentality', or an ominous precursor to the social media era of putting oneself on display. It is, in part, in talking and thinking about art and artistic representation²⁷ that such proposed revisions are, like it or not, put into practice.

IV

The considerations I have raised in this paper suggest that we do away with the understanding of aesthetic ideas as merely *expressing* or *representing* concepts, in particular rational concepts. Instead, I have proposed a model of aesthetic ideas as normatively calling for in the *revision* of rational concepts, as well as the possible introduction of *new* empirical concepts. Kant offers a diachronic theory of how this process unfolds: art that admits of connection to indeterminate ideas also *persists* in the thought and talk of its viewers, resulting in communication about what is initially

'unnameable' or 'unintelligible' (and therefore, as non-discursive, what would seem to be, but is not, incommunicable). Along the way, I have suggested ways in which this alternate model of aesthetic ideas also requires us to revisit traditional pairings in the scholarship, such as free versus dependent beauty, or universal validity versus communicability.

In addition, I have argued, this model better fits the direction art has taken since the advent of modernism. Art has come to question its traditional function of representation in all its senses. The relevant shift, that is, is not merely from representation of nakedly perceived reality to representation of abstract, indeterminate concepts, but from a governing paradigm of representation to one of *change* or *revision*—perhaps with the cognizance that every attempted representation already introduces an alteration in what it aims to represent.

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Notes

1 I use contemporary parlance in distinguishing between particulars and universals: Kant's own distinction is actually threefold, between singulars, particulars, and universals (A70–1/B96). As Lu-Adler (2014) argues, particular judgements are distinguished from universal judgements in that the former are of indeterminate or partial extension, whereas the latter have unrestricted extensions; both are distinguished from singular judgements, which represent individuals (picking out exactly one object) rather than a common term (a multitude of objects). When I refer to particulars and universals in this paper, my usage maps onto Kant's singular/universal distinction.

2 Parenthetical references to Kant's writings give the volume and page number(s) of the Royal Prussian Academy edition (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*), which are included in the margins of the translations. English translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. I use the following abbreviations: *Anth* = *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; *CPJ* = *Critique of the Power of Judgement*; standard A/B pagination = *Critique of Pure Reason*; FI = First Introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*; JL = *Jäsche Logic*.

3 Though see recent contributions to special issue of *Con-Textos Kantianos*: Geiger (2020), Ginsborg (2020).

4 Aesthetic judgement 'differs from other exercises of the reflecting power of judgment in being constituted by "mere reflection on [the representation of a beautiful object] (without any intention of acquiring a concept from it)"' (Gorodeisky 2021: 377, citing CPJ, 5: 190). Kant, meanwhile, refers to both aesthetic and teleological judgement as 'mere' reflective judgement (FI, 20:220–1).

5 'There is no reason that the model cannot be extended to almost all of the rational ideas: mathematical, religious, metaphysical, and moral' (Chignell 2007: 420).

6 See also discussion in Savile (1987: 171).

7 By which I mean Arthur Danto's thesis that the gatekeeping of art, the restriction of its own definition in order to keep some works 'out' ('that's not art') and others 'in', would eventually come to an end, such that the 'artworld'—the context, institutional and otherwise, of artistic production—would finally be 'disenfranchised' (Danto 1985). See also Danto (1997) for a later assessment.

8 Many of the examples I cite are of modern art; nevertheless, the phenomena I reference do not end with modernism, but continue to be relevant. Consequently, I will also refer to postmodernism in art. Broadly, I am interested in this paper in art made after the demise of the representational paradigm, so I will at times refer to 'post-representational art' when I aim to capture a broader historical swath of artistic production (from modernism to contemporary art). This is not to say that such art cannot be representational: it merely indicates, as a historical fact, that it was made after art ceased to be commonly identified with representation or mimesis. Indeed, the relevance of the perceptual properties of an

artwork to its aesthetic appreciation cut across the contemporary/modern/postmodern periodizations in art history; see, e.g. Costello (2013, this volume). I am indebted to Diarmuid Costello on this point.

9 As such, for the purposes of this paper, I consider ideas to be universals, as well as concepts, albeit indeterminate ones. Of course, artworks can promote reflection on determinate concepts, in addition to indeterminate concepts, as will become clearer in my consideration of Kant's appraisal of music below.

10 This model of explanation can be found in Guyer (1979), Allison (2000), Chignell (2007), and Geiger (2021), as well as Savile (1989) and Matherne (2013), though the latter pair each also refer to the cognitive development afforded by aesthetic ideas in enabling us to better comprehend rational concepts, which comes closer to my own account.

11 The two terms are often treated as interchangeable (Guyer 1982: 23n, Ginsborg 2014: 143).

12 Though references to universal validity do appear in later sections, e.g. *CPJ*, 5: 279, 5: 281, 5: 289, 5: 340-1.

13 As Thierry de Duve remarks, we should not therefore take Kant's insistence on communication to refer to the finding of *agreement*; indeed, communication lasts longer when it meets with *conflict*. Once meaning is settled, art's urgency dissipates: 'The word "art" exists, certainly, but when it signals accord, it is already past. Only when it is in conflict does it make history, when its meaning lies in its being transformed and destroyed as much as created' (1998: 19).

14 Though see also Kant's invocation of 'what are called in music fantasias (without a theme), indeed all music without a text' as an example of free beauty in §16, suggesting that musical improvisation, at least, escapes scored music's 'burdensome' dependence on determinate concepts (*CPJ*, 5: 229).

15 See above, that aesthetic ideas give the 'impetus to think more . . . than can be comprehended in a concept'; a determining judgement, in which the concept is already given, would not *per se* occasion thought that exceeds the bounds of the concept (*CPJ*, 5: 315).

16 'If a work has *any* semantic content at all, it will be dependently beautiful (or "beautiful as . . .") for Kant' (Costello 1993: 155).

17 Though, here again, we are confronted with examples like Meret Oppenheim's furry teacup (*Object*, 1936), which *frustrates* the very attempt to subsume the object under its conventional function.

18 And thus, arguably, may never admit of the degree of 'freedom' of the flower or the bird of paradise, since its purposiveness or intentionality is inextricable from it in a way that is not the case for the natural organism; see Savile (1993: 103) on the apparent superiority of the natural over the artistic in Kant's account of free beauty (though Kant himself never makes any categorical claims in this regard, and does employ both natural and artifactual examples).

19 Of course, this isn't to say that these artists *themselves* conceive of their works as about nothing; Newman described his paintings as 'metaphysical', as instances of 'revelation'; Rothko characterized his own art form, which he termed 'emotional or dramatic impressionism', as concerned with the 'tragic', with 'pain, frustration, and the fear of death' as 'the most constant binder between human beings' (Newman 1965: 259; 1948: 173; Rothko 1970: 35). What is relevant, however—and without wanting to wade too deep into the controversial waters of author intention—is that their content, by way of the indeterminacy of what they depict, is nevertheless left to some degree up to their viewers. I am indebted to Lydia Goehr on this point.

20 See also Costello on this point (Costello 2013: 284; 2008: 257).

21 Kant refers repeatedly to 'nature as art', 'nature . . . regarded as art', 'nature [which] proceeds technically, i.e. as at the same time an art' (FI, 20: 204, 20: 215, 20: 218; see also 20: 251), and holds that the 'aesthetic faculty' of the power of judgement 'be recognized as contained in one faculty together with the teleological and as resting on the same principle' (FI, 20: 244).

22 See, in particular, discussion in §§66-67 of the *Critique of Teleological Judgment*, though this line of argument extends throughout this text.

23 See also Kant's characterization of concept formation in the *Jäsche Logic* (*JL*, 9: 94-5n).

24 Danto's characterizations of art sometimes seem to go in this direction, given his emphasis on art's 'becoming of its own theory' with the end of art. But of course, art does much more (and less) than this, as he notes (1986: 80).

25 Perhaps for reasons along these lines, Kant claims that 'taste contains a tendency toward an external advancement of morality', in part because of its role in facilitating communication (*Anth*, 7: 244).

26 Whose protagonist is also named Dante, suggesting, I have always thought, that the latter might be read as an allegory of the former—a possibility I have so far not come across in any extant film criticism.

27 I'm largely focusing on conceptual and non-perceptual visual art in this paper given my space constraints, but this is a thesis that I take to apply more broadly: literature, film, music, and other media can all admit of a similar process.

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