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Retrieving Kant's Aesthetics for Art Theory After Greenberg

Some Remarks on Arthur C. Danto
and Thierry de Duve

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The Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory

In art theory since the early 1980s the discourse of aesthetics has been notable by its absence. This suggests that the majority of art theorists believe that the historical or conceptual limits of aesthetic theory have been breached by the internal development of art after modernism. But why would art theorists believe this?

In answer to this question I suggest—I take it noncontroversially—that the widespread marginalization of aesthetics in postmodern art theory may be attributed to the success of the art critic and theorist Clement Greenberg. In co-opting the discourse of (particularly Kantian) aesthetics to underwrite *modernist* theory, Greenberg mediated the art world's subsequent rejection of both aesthetics in general and Immanuel Kant's aesthetics in particular. But one need only reflect on the centrality for *postmodern* theory of *anti*-aesthetic figures like Marcel Duchamp or of movements (such as surrealism), marginalized in Greenberg's account of "the best modern art," to see that for all their antipathy to Greenberg, many postmodernist art theorists continue to operate with a broadly Greenbergian view of aesthetics—which is *why*, of course, they are forced to reject it. What Greenberg valued is now devalued, but the theoretical framework underwriting those valuations is taken up into postmodern theory largely unremarked.

What I mean by this is not that terms like “medium-specificity” weren’t central to such debates—on the contrary—but rather that it was largely taken on trust that such ideas were coherent. Hence, rather than interrogating the very *idea* of a “specific” medium, the energy went into valorizing *non-* or *anti-* or *post-*medium-specific art over its supposedly “specific” competitors. Something similar holds for many of the key terms in the Greenbergian lexicon: One need only think of the fate of “opticality” to see this pattern played out.¹ Hence, while the normative dimension of modernist aesthetics was frequently inverted, its underlying theoretical framework was just as often taken over.

But I also want to argue—I take it equally noncontroversially—that Greenberg’s appeal to Kant was ill founded. This is something that Thierry de Duve’s work has brought out. If both claims are true, not only did many anti-Greenbergian theorists presuppose a broadly Greenbergian view of aesthetic theory, which is why the latter tended to be equated with “formalism” and dismissed in the face of art after modernism’s increasing conceptual complexity, but they also rejected Kant largely on the basis of the damage done in his name by Greenberg.

Indeed, Greenberg’s focus on Kant’s theory of taste, at the expense of his theory of art, *continues* to overshadow art world receptions of Kant. It is as true, for example, of those broadly sympathetic to Kant, like de Duve, to whom the widespread acceptance of several of the criticisms above may be attributed, and of those broadly unsympathetic, like Danto, who, at least until recently, took his Kant largely at Greenberg’s word. Given this, what I do in this paper is straightforward. First, I survey Greenberg’s recourse to Kant, pointing out where it is tendentious or controversial. I then go on to consider the merits of Danto’s and de Duve’s claims about Kant and the latter’s relevance, if any, for art theory after modernism. I conclude by indicating some resources in Kant’s theory of art, as opposed to his theory of taste, for retrieving aesthetics for contemporary debates about art.

Grounding Modernist Aesthetics: Greenberg’s Appeal to Kant

Greenberg famously dubbed Kant the “first real modernist,” in “Modernist Painting” (1960), because he used reason to criticize reason and thereby entrenched it more firmly in its “area of competence.”² But

Greenberg's appeals to Kant are more fundamental than this well-known remark suggests. I shall argue that misreadings of Kant underwrite both Greenberg's modernism and his formalism.

Greenberg's modernism, his characterization of the "best" modern art as a gradual reduction to, and foregrounding of, the "unique and irreducible" features of its medium, was compromised by several assumptions about the individual senses and their relation to individual arts built into his theory from the outset. From "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940) onward, Greenberg sought to align specific arts, under the influence of music, with specific senses.³ But in order to do so he was forced to conceive the intuition of artworks in terms of discrete sensory inputs. Like his psychologizing of Kant, this is essentially a product of Greenberg's deep-seated empiricism. As a result, he conflates judgments of taste, properly so-called, with what Kant would have concurred were aesthetic judgments, albeit of *sense* rather than *reflection*.⁴ That is, judgments grounded, like judgments of taste, in feeling, albeit, unlike judgments of taste, in feeling occasioned by objects impacting causally on the sense organs: what Kant would have characterized as judgments rooted in *sensation* rather than in *reflection* upon an object or perceptual configuration's "subjective purposiveness" or "finality" for cognition in general.⁵ That is, its suitability for engaging our cognitive faculties in an (optimally) enlivening way. As such, Greenberg's conception of medium-specificity attempts to align a broadly empiricist notion of cognitively uninflected sensation with specific artistic media, as though the sensory impression made by a work of art were a simple correlate of the intrinsic material properties of its medium, from which it could therefore be directly read off.

If this explains *why* Greenberg sought to differentiate the arts in terms of media, the question it provokes is analogous to that provoked by his view of the senses: Namely, *can* the arts be so easily parsed? That this proved feasible historically during the height of Greenberg's authority as a critic clearly does not make this a necessary feature of art's—or even of good art's—identity. Had Greenberg's alleged Kantianism stretched as far as the "Transcendental Aesthetic" of the first *Critique* he could have avoided this impasse. For on Kant's account of space and time as a priori forms of intuition, our perception of artworks, like our perception in general, is grounded in an originary *unity* of sensibility.⁶ It is both alien to Kant's epistemology and phenomenologically unpersuasive to construe normal instances of intuition as mere *aggregates* of the senses—the more

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so when it comes to such culturally and historically freighted entities as artworks.

Greenberg's formalism, his theoretical self-understanding of his activity as a critic in a Kantian mold, is similarly problematic. At the most general level, it suffers from his failure to distinguish between "free" and "dependent" beauty in the third *Critique*. Greenberg applies Kant's account of *pure* aesthetic judgment, a judgment about the aesthetic feeling aroused by free (or conceptually unconstrained) beauty, to artworks—thereby ignoring Kant's more apposite remarks on fine art, genius, and aesthetic ideas, in favor of an account that takes natural beauty and decorative motifs ("designs *à la grecque*, the foliage on borders or on wallpaper") as its paradigm.⁷ Above all it is Greenberg's recourse to Kant's account of pure judgments of taste to underwrite a theory of *artistic* value, as though Kant himself had had nothing to say about fine art, that is responsible for the rejection of Kantian aesthetics in subsequent art theory.

As a result, Greenberg misses two conceptual complexities that attach to artworks, even for Kant, and that ought to trouble the widespread perception of Kant as an archformalist in art theory. These are the constraints that the *concept* an artwork is meant to fulfill imposes on artistic beauty and the distinctive cognitive function that conceiving artworks as expressions of aesthetic *ideas* adds to Kant's conception of fine art. Hence, even if Greenberg's primary focus on "all over" abstract painting—with its links to pattern and, arguably, decoration—goes some way to explaining his appeal to Kant's formalism, it does not justify it, since even an abstract work of art would have to be brought under the concept it is meant to fulfill, in submitting its beauty *as art* to aesthetic judgment, at least for Kant.

Moreover, Greenberg routinely empiricizes and psychologizes Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment. Greenberg's belief that he could demonstrate the "objectivity" of taste by appealing to the record of past taste—when induction could not provide the necessity he required to support his argument—is evidence of his empiricization of Kant's account, in this case, of the *claim* to validity over all judging subjects.⁸ Relatedly, Greenberg's psychologization of Kant is evidenced by his tendency to conflate the Kantian criterion of "disinterest" as a necessary condition on aesthetic judgment with his own, psychologistic, conception of "aesthetic distance."⁹ As a result, Greenberg runs together a transcendental theory that

aims to account for how aesthetic judgments are possible with a psychological description of a particular state of mind. Ironically, this robs his theory of what is perhaps most persuasive about it, its attention to the specificity of its artistic object. For if aesthetic experience were really as voluntaristic as this implies, that is, a matter of merely *adopting* a distancing frame of mind toward a given object, the nature of that object itself would fall away as a significant determinant on aesthetic judgment; for one can adopt such an attitude toward anything, at least in principle.¹⁰

These criticisms show that rejecting Kant's aesthetic theory on the basis of Greenberg's appeal is ill founded. The irony of art world hostility to Greenberg since the 1960s is that art theorists have generally *deferred* to Greenberg's presentation of aesthetics, notably his invocation of Kant, even if they have taken this as a basis for rejecting both aesthetics in general and Kant's aesthetics in particular. But if Greenberg's claims on a Kantian provenance for modernist theory are unwarranted, it follows that rejecting Kant as part and parcel of rejecting modernism results from a distortion. This was most apparent during the high years of anti-aesthetic *postmodernism*. But rather than make the argument there, I want to focus on two of the most sustained responses to Greenberg's appeal to Kant to date.

"This Is Art" Not "This Is Beautiful": Thierry de Duve's Kant After Greenberg

So far this account has much in common with de Duve's. But I want to add that not only has the art world inherited a *distorted* picture of Kant's aesthetics from Greenberg, as de Duve maintains, it has also inherited an extremely *partial* one. Thus, despite the fact that in art theory Kant's account of aesthetic judgment is routinely dismissed for its formalism, one rarely finds reference to what Kant himself had to say about how his account of aesthetic judgment applies to artworks. And this is as true of sympathetic theorists, such as de Duve, as it has been of Kant's detractors.

De Duve is one of the few art theorists who refuses the standard options of an anti-aesthetic postmodernism *or* a late modernist aestheticism by seeking to do justice to both Greenberg and Duchamp—which, as anyone familiar with how such debates typically break down will be aware, is a highly original undertaking. But despite his desire to make

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Kant's aesthetics "actual" (i.e., productive) for a contemporary art audience, de Duve displays his deeper debt to Greenberg by predicating his own position solely on a reformulation of Kant's account of *pure* aesthetic judgment. That this aspect of the "Kant after Duchamp" approach remains central to de Duve's method is apparent from his paper in this volume. Here de Duve brings Kant's reflections on whether the pleasure felt in a judgment of taste precedes the judgment or vice versa to bear on Robert Morris's *Untitled (Three L-Beams)* of 1965, but he does so without thematizing how Kant's own understanding of artworks as vehicles of "aesthetic ideas" or his account of dependent beauty as a conceptually conditioned (and hence "impure") form of aesthetic judgment might complicate this analysis.¹¹

And while the focus on pure aesthetic judgment has some *prima facie* warrant in the case of Greenberg's desire to defend abstract art on purely formal grounds, it is much more of a stretch in the case of de Duve's concern with the historically reflexive, and conceptually complex, art of the "post-Duchamp" tradition. It is thus surprising that de Duve should want to take this route, given his own critique of Greenberg's reading of Kant.

Hence, while de Duve departs from Greenberg in seeing Duchamp as the pivot for a contemporary understanding of aesthetics, he nonetheless follows Greenberg in focusing on pure aesthetic judgment. De Duve's central claim is that bringing Kant "up to date" involves substituting the judgment "this is art" for the judgment "this is beautiful," thereby capturing the transformation in the nature of art embodied in, if not brought about by, Duchamp's readymades. This might look like a category mistake, since the judgment "this is art" is a determinative judgment that subsumes a particular under a concept (namely, the concept art). Hence it is neither a reflective *nor* an aesthetic judgment in Kant's sense. Nonetheless, de Duve maintains that the judgment "this is art" is aesthetic—if only liminally—because it is singular and based on feeling alone.¹² Preserving the fundamental Kantian commitment that aesthetic judgment is noncognitive, because it refers an intuition to the feeling it occasions rather than predicates a concept of an object, de Duve maintains that the judgment "this is art" does not subsume an object under a *concept* ("art") but, rather, confers the *name* "art" on any object judged accordingly.

On de Duve's account, the judgment "this is art" is akin to that original baptism through which a person acquires a proper name. Just as

all persons called Tom need have no properties in common in virtue of which they are so called—Tom is not a concept under which persons are subsumed in virtue of possessing the relevant traits—so artworks need have no properties in common in virtue of which they are called art. On the contrary, they need only *sustain comparison* with exemplary works of past art. But this account of what such baptism involves vitiates de Duve's own argument—both that art is a proper name and that the judgment “this is art” remains aesthetic in Kant's sense. De Duve claims that the judgment “this is art” is aesthetic because in making it one holds a candidate work up to previous recipients of that status in one's personal canon to judge whether it is worthy of inclusion by consulting one's faculty of feeling, in this case the feelings past works have occasioned. Like reflective judgment in Kant, this is based on an act of comparison, though what is compared, according to de Duve, is either the works themselves or the feelings they have occasioned. But once the judgment becomes a *comparison between examples*, rather than between a given intuition and the “free play” of the faculties, sensed in feeling, to which it gives rise, it can be neither noncognitive nor aesthetic after all—at least not in Kant's sense.¹³ Even taken on its own terms, it is difficult to see by what criteria past feelings, as noncognitive and private, could be reliably reidentified over time for the purpose of such comparison. Moreover, given that what distinguishes proper names from concepts is that they are conferred *without* regard to other bearers of the name, it is hard to see how art can be a proper name when the judgment that confers it is essentially comparative.

The emphasis on proper names aside, de Duve's reading of Kant shares Greenberg's tendency to marginalize the reflective dimension of aesthetic judgment for Kant. That is, de Duve underplays the necessity to reflect critically on the *grounds* of the pleasure in aesthetic judgment and hence on its *warrant* for imputing—even demanding—such pleasure of others. But such reflection is a minimal requirement for laying claim to the agreement of others. By echoing Greenberg's stress on the “immediate” and “involuntary” nature of such judgment, de Duve appears to deprive himself of the most obvious criterion for distinguishing *in principle* between judgments of the beautiful and judgments of the agreeable. Granted, this will always remain a moot point in practice, since one can never know whether one has succeeded in abstracting from every contingent or pathological basis for one's pleasure in an object (i.e., from anything

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that would render the object of one's judgment merely "agreeable" in Kant's sense). Nonetheless, if aesthetic judgments were really as "automatic" as de Duve claims—by appeal, like Greenberg, to his own experience—what basis could one have for contesting the skeptical rejoinder that claims to universal validity simply mask the subjective preferences of their utterer?

Introspection cannot help us here, as de Duve is clearly aware, because the feelings occasioned by the agreeable and the beautiful need not be distinguishable in experience. But de Duve fails to draw out the full consequences of his own insight, particularly for his view that it is the claim to universality itself that serves as our best indication of a judgment's disinterestedness—and hence of its being a bona fide judgment of taste—and not vice versa.¹⁴ For this appears to beg the question: How can anyone *know* that their claim to universality is warranted and, hence, that their judgment is disinterested? I agree with de Duve that we *do* feel strongly about the apparent "objectivity" of our judgments of taste and it is therefore not a matter of indifference to us whether those whose judgments matter to us concur. In this respect the pleasure we take in the agreeable and the beautiful does appear to be distinct, and the phenomenology of their respective judgments correspondingly different. Nonetheless, the fact that I feel sufficiently passionate or convinced about some of my judgments to declare their universality could just be a psychological fact about me, with any number of contingent causes; hence the fact that I feel moved to demand assent from others concerning *some* feelings of pleasure but not others does nothing to mitigate the fact that *all* claims to universality are equally prone to corruption and, hence, are defeasible.

Artistic Versus Natural Beauty: Arthur C. Danto's Greenbergian Kant

In direct contrast to de Duve's account Danto has, until recently, rejected Kantian aesthetics as an adequate basis for the theory of art, often on the basis of Greenberg's appeals to Kant. Danto locates what he calls two "Kantian tenets" underpinning Greenberg's writings.¹⁵ First, just as genius must be unconstrained by rules if it is to produce something original, so too must critical judgment operate in the absence of rules if it is to be adequate to the resultant object. Second, the critic's "practised eye" can

tell the good from the bad everywhere, irrespective of whether or not it is informed by knowledge of the tradition to which a given work belongs.

This is somewhat uncharitable to Greenberg, who was, unsurprisingly, much better informed about the constraints on the creation of art within a given tradition than Kant. But Danto is right to call the first a Kantian tenet, albeit an inverted one, since for Kant the entailment runs in the opposite direction, from an analysis of aesthetic judgment to the nature of artworks as possible objects of such judgment. Nonetheless, what Danto neglects in this account of Greenberg's debt to Kant is the additional constraint Kant imposes on artistic beauty: Namely that in addition to being beautiful, the beauty of art must be *appropriate* to the concept governing its production as a work. In Kant's example, a beautiful church must not only be beautiful, its beauty must be *fitting* to its purpose as a house of worship: Much that might otherwise please freely in aesthetic judgment would fall foul of this constraint. Thus, the idea of dependent beauty, beauty that is dependent on (or "adherent to") a concept of what the work is meant to be, places a *restriction* on the scope of free beauty rather than negating it altogether. Ironically, this is reminiscent of Danto's own claim that works of art, as "embodied meanings," should be judged for the *appropriateness* or "fit" of their form of presentation to the content thereby presented. Indeed, were this not so, judgments of dependent beauty would fail to conform to the basic requirements of Kant's own account of aesthetic judgment in the "Analytic of the Beautiful." For if artworks fulfilled the concept guiding their production at the *expense* of being freely beautiful, judgments of dependent beauty would reduce to judgments of perfection: They would judge the degree to which a work of art fulfilled the concept guiding its production, hence its perfection as an instance of a kind.¹⁶

As regards Greenberg's second supposedly "Kantian" tenet, Greenberg's conception of the "practised eye," like Danto's account of it, owes more to David Hume's description of the good judge than to Kant, who never addressed the kinds of disputes that arise when trying to make fine-grained discriminations in taste. Indeed, many of the disputes that Hume recounts (such as that arising from the deleterious effects on taste of a leather-thonged key submerged, unknown to the judges, in a barrel of wine) would not count as differences of taste or instances of reflective aesthetic judgment in Kant's sense.¹⁷ From a Kantian perspective, Hume's

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account, like Greenberg's, pertains to judgments of *sense* rather than *reflection*. Hence Danto's claim that this is a Kantian tenet is tendentious.

I have already argued that Greenberg fails to recognize the complexity that Kant's distinction between free and dependent beauty and his notion of aesthetic ideas adds to his account of artistic value. Danto however argues from Greenberg's alleged "Kantian tenets" that Kant himself conflates natural and artistic beauty. In support of this claim, Danto cites Kant's remark that "nature is beautiful [*schön*] if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine [*schön*] art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature."¹⁸ For Danto this demonstrates the inadequacy of Kant's aesthetics as a basis for the theory of art. But when Kant claims that fine art must "look like" nature, he does not mean what Danto takes him to mean, namely, that fine art must *resemble* nature; he means that it must appear as *unwilled* as nature. Despite being aware that we are judging art rather than nature, Kant holds that "the purposiveness in its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules *as if* it were a product of mere nature."¹⁹ So Kant is not claiming that artworks must be indistinguishable from nature, but that they must appear as free of any laboriousness that would impede their free appreciation. As Kant puts it: "The academic form must not show; there must be no hint that the rule was hovering before the artist's eyes and putting fetters on his mental powers."²⁰ This lays down no substantive prescriptions on how artworks must look; nor does it entail that the beauty of art must resemble that of nature. *Pace* Danto, art need not look anything like beautiful nature in order to be aesthetically pleasing as art, even for Kant.

To my mind, these criticisms of Greenberg and Kant's aesthetics reflect the "thin" conception of aesthetics that has underpinned Danto's remarks on the topic to date. I have set out my reservations concerning Danto's way of conceiving "aesthetic" as opposed to "artistic" qualities elsewhere.²¹ All I want to note here is that, *despite* broadening his reading of Kant's third *Critique* in *The Abuse of Beauty*, introducing the distinction between "internal" and "external" beauty—that is, between beauty that is (or is not) relevant to a work's appreciation because it is (or is not) mobilized in the service of that work's meaning—and contesting the narrow focus of traditional aesthetics on a limited range of predicates and properties, all of which is to be welcomed, Danto's underlying conception of aesthetics remains remarkably consistent, from *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* right through to *The Abuse of Beauty*.²²

Indeed, this is apparent from Danto's chapter in this volume, in which he defines aesthetics as "the way things show themselves, together with the reasons for preferring one way of showing itself to another" and goes on to remark that "as long as there are *visible* differences in how things look, *aesthetics* is inescapable" (my emphasis). Danto's remarks on Duchamp here—according to which "retinal" would function as a synonym for the aesthetic—also suggest little has changed in his understanding of aesthetics since he sought, in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, to uncouple art and aesthetics on the grounds that it cannot explain why Duchamp's urinal is a work of art while all its (notionally) indiscernible counterparts are not. Although Danto may now be prepared to grant aesthetic properties a greater *rhetorical* role than before in "coloring" or "inflecting" our attitude toward the meaning of the work of art, such properties remain as irrelevant, *ontologically*, as ever: They may be a necessary feature of *some*, but not *all*, artworks, and so have no place in art's definition. If I remain unconvinced that this conclusion follows from Danto's premises, it is because it appears to entail that there can be artworks that express *no* point of view toward their own content and hence have no recourse to aesthetic properties understood as inflectors of said content.

To see why this ought to be a problem for Danto it is necessary to recall his ontology of art from *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Exhibiting "aboutness" is self-evidently definitional of artworks conceived as "embodied meanings," since for a work to possess meaning requires, minimally, that it is about something or other. Recall also that expressing an attitude, or point of view, *toward* what they are about is what was said to distinguish artworks from "mere representations" (such as maps or diagrams), which are also "about" what they represent, though not art. But if expressing an attitude or point of view toward their own meanings *is* a necessary feature of artworks, as Danto maintains, then aesthetic properties must be so too, given his current understanding of such properties as what *enables* artworks to express an attitude toward the meanings they embody.

Danto recently claimed that *The Abuse of Beauty* considers whether, on a suitably enriched conception of aesthetic qualities as inflectors of meaning, the possession of *some* aesthetic property might prove to be a necessary condition of artworks and so should be added to the two necessary conditions he now claims *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*

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adduced, namely, that artworks are about something and embody what they are about, and he concluded that it should not.²³ But this conclusion cannot be warranted, given the interaction between Danto's conception of aesthetics and his definition of artworks. Irrespective of whether he is right that beauty (or any other aesthetic quality) that is "external" to a work's meaning is irrelevant to it as art, it remains that expressing some attitude or point of view toward whatever it is about is supposed to distinguish artworks from "mere representations," according to his own theory; and *that* would seem to require that a work possess some aesthetic qualities to inflect its meaning accordingly. This is a problem that Danto has yet to address.

Retrieving Kant's Aesthetics for Art Theory After Greenberg

So far, the results of this paper have been largely negative. If the argument is sound it brings out various infelicities in Greenberg, Danto, and de Duve's remarks about Kant. Beyond that, it shows that art theory goes astray to the extent that it perceives Kant's aesthetics through the distorting optic of Greenberg's recourse to it, where this leads to a marginalization of Kant's theory of art in favor of an exclusive focus on his theory of aesthetic judgment—regardless of whether this is taken to be essentially isomorphic with art (as in de Duve) or essentially orthogonal to art (as in Danto). Of course, even if one grants both, this still only shows that Kant's aesthetics has been marginalized on the basis of various misreadings; it does not show that the artworld may not have been right to reject Kantian aesthetics nonetheless, even if for the wrong reasons. That is, it does not show that Kant's aesthetics *can* be applied to art after modernism. Given this, I want to conclude by pointing out some resources in Kant's theory of art that are underplayed in art theory to this day.

For Kant, artworks are expressions of "aesthetic ideas." Put simply, an aesthetic idea is what is distinctive about either the content of artworks or the way in which they present that content. What is distinctive about the *content* of artworks is either that they present concepts that may be encountered in experience, but with a completeness that experience never affords, or that they communicate ideas that cannot—in principle—be exhibited in experience.²⁴ What is distinctive about the *way in which* artworks present such content is that they imaginatively "expand" the ideas

presented in virtue of the indirect means through which they are forced to embody them in sensible form. For rather than seeking to present the idea itself, which would be impossible—ideas being by definition what cannot be exhibited in experience for Kant—an aesthetic idea presents the “aesthetic attributes” of its object, thereby expressing an idea’s “implications” and “kinship with other concepts.”²⁵ In effect, aesthetic ideas indirectly present what cannot be presented directly.

To take one of Kant’s own examples: “Jupiter’s eagle with the lightning in its claws” expands the idea of God’s majesty by presenting it aesthetically. What Kant calls the “logical” attributes of an object, in this case God, would be those in virtue of which it fulfills a concept, in this case majesty. Jupiter’s eagle with the lightning in its claws, by contrast, is a metaphorical expression of those same attributes, through which we are encouraged to envisage God’s majesty in light of the thoughts provoked by Jupiter’s eagle, thereby opening up a rich seam of further possible associations. In this way, artworks are able to indirectly present ideas that would otherwise remain unavailable to intuition and, in doing so, use their aesthetic attributes to provoke “more thought” than a direct conceptual elaboration of the idea could facilitate, thereby “expanding” the idea.²⁶

In doing so, aesthetic ideas might be said to achieve the impossible: They allow artworks to present rational ideas in determinate sensuous form. Consider Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) as an example of the sensible embodiment of an idea, in this case freedom, that would have been comprehensible to Kant had he lived to see it. The aesthetic attributes through which freedom is personified in the guise of “Liberty”—shown leading her people to victory (fearlessness, spontaneity, resoluteness, leadership, all attributes of an active self-determining will) while holding a flag, symbol of freedom from oppression, aloft in one hand and clutching a musket in the other—serve to “aesthetically expand” the idea of freedom itself. By presenting freedom in the guise of “Liberty,” freedom is depicted concretely as something worth fighting for—indeed, as something requiring courage and fortitude to attain. This is what Kant means when he claims that artworks “quicken” the mind, by freeing imagination from the mechanical task of schematizing concepts of the understanding. No longer constrained to present concepts of the understanding in sensible form, as it is in determinate judgment, aesthetic ideas free the imagination to move swiftly over an array of related thoughts.

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By doing so, aesthetic ideas stimulate the mind, albeit in a less structured way than determinate thought, enabling us to think through the ideas presented in a new light.

Now, it might be objected that the forgoing account only works because it takes a representational painting as its object, and that this will be of little use to art in its expanded contemporary context of nontraditional media and forms. To show that this is not the case, I now want to consider a very different example: Art & Language's *Index 01*, also known as *Documenta Index*, after the exhibition in which it was first shown in 1972. My choice of a work by Art & Language is far from innocent, given that their work from this period might be thought to show, as well as any individual artwork might, the *inapplicability* of Kant's aesthetics (as mediated by Greenberg) to art after modernism. Against this perception, I propose that this work be understood as a sensible, though necessarily indirect, embodiment of the *idea* of an exhaustive catalog—necessarily indirect because a truly exhaustive catalog could not be a possible object of experience in Kantian terms.

Documenta Index consists of a cross-referenced index of the group's writings on art to that date and of the relations between them. Though it had various later incarnations, it originally took the form of eight small metal filing cabinets, displayed on four grey plinths, consisting of six tray-like drawers each, containing both published writings and unpublished writings, some of which raised the question of their own status as artworks. These were hinged one on top of the other in a series of nested sequences determined alphabetically and subalphabetically in terms of their order and degree of completion. The cabinets and their contents were displayed together with an index listing their contents in terms of three logical relations (of compatibility, incompatibility, and incomparability) believed to obtain between them.²⁷ The latter was papered directly onto the walls of the room in which the cabinets were displayed, as if in an attempt to provide an "external" vantage that would render the work's internal relations perspicuous.

At least in terms of its rhetoric of display and address, this work seems to propose an exhaustive catalog not only of the group's writings to that date, which is feasible, being finite, but also, and for my purposes more importantly, it aspires to document a set of logical relations between those writings. But the latter is something that can only exist as an idea, in Kant's sense, given that there are in principle always further relations to

be mapped were we acute enough to spot them and had we infinite time and patience at our disposal. Moreover, by embodying the idea of a self-reflexive catalog, the production of the index itself creates a further layer of relations to be mapped, which would then have to be mapped in turn, and so on ad infinitum. Hence, the very undertaking of the work itself makes its goal unrealizable. Nonetheless, by bringing all this together in sensible form, this apparently austere work of art opens up a potentially limitless array of imaginative associations: to lists, taxonomies, and typologies; to attempts at self-documentation, self-reflexivity, and (ultimately) to ideals of complete self-knowledge or transparency; to conversation, collaboration, interaction, study, and learning; and, of course, to various regimes of archiving, cataloging, and the like. As such this work “expands” the idea it embodies in ways consonant with Kant’s presentation of aesthetic ideas.

On Kant’s account, the expression of ideas in this way gives rise to a feeling of mental vitality—or what he calls a “feeling of life”—in the work’s recipient, a feeling of the enhancement, or furtherance, of the subject’s cognitive powers. Artworks achieve this, not by giving rise to determinate thought, but because they give rise to a *feeling* of vitality in the free play of the subject’s cognitive powers.²⁸ The little Kant says about what such “free play” might consist in, suggests a kind of freewheeling, associative play in which the imagination moves freely and swiftly from one partial presentation of a concept of the understanding to another; hence his claim that aesthetic ideas encourage the imagination to “spread over an immense realm of kindred presentations that arouse more thought than can be expressed in a concept.”²⁹ It is this imaginative engagement with indirectly presented, sensibly embodied ideas, far removed from the astringent formalism typically attributed to the third *Critique* in art theory and mainstream philosophy of art (outside Kant scholarship), that I want to draw attention to, and thereby retrieve, for contemporary debates about art.

Moreover, although Kant no doubt thought, for historical reasons, of visual art in representational terms, there is nothing in his account of aesthetic ideas that *requires* art be representational, in a narrow sense, as my second example is designed to show. All Kant’s account requires is that artworks expand ideas in imaginatively complex ways, and there does not seem to be anything wrong with that thought in the light of more recent art that could not have been envisaged by Kant. Indeed, I have

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argued elsewhere that many, if not most, artworks typically regarded as anti-aesthetic, according to the formalist conception of aesthetics that the artworld inherits from Greenberg, nonetheless engage the mind in ways that may be thought of as aesthetic in Kant's sense: And this includes conceptual art, despite the fact that conceptual art is routinely supposed to reveal the shortcomings of aesthetic theory in general, and Kant's aesthetic in particular. What most art regarded as unsuited to, or even incompatible with, aesthetic analysis actually shows, on my account, is not the limit of aesthetic theory per se, nor the limit of Kant's aesthetics in particular, but the limit of formalist aesthetics, as mediated by Greenberg, in coming to terms with the cognitive aspects of art after modernism. That formalism is not coextensive with aesthetic theory should not need saying: That Kant's aesthetics is not narrowly—that is, *restrictively*—formalist is what I hope I have begun to demonstrate here. If I have succeeded, commentators on contemporary art might want to give the third *Critique* a second look.