

Painting is a Critical Form

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# Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	9
1. Clembashing	15
2. What Thinking Feels	31
3. Stopping Short	49
4. Presenting a Deliberately Bad Example	69
5. Critical Form	83
Bibliography	87



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## Introduction

This book concerns a conception of painting as a space of slippage and ambiguity, a practice with its locus outside reason. Painting has the capacity to suggest, to gesture towards ideas, investing them with complexity in the process. What one grapples with as a painter is a complex and layered beast that has been variously seen as an anachronism, an emblem of prostration to the market, a suspect paeon to spectatorship, a frontal and limited surface, a space for the playing out of egoistic notions of genius, and a dead medium.<sup>1</sup> An expansive approach considers all such blots on painting's escutcheon as points of possibility. It persists as a medium for which this assorted baggage is as important as material technique and visual language, insofar as it offers potential for the production of meaning.

I offer an articulation of painting here that is underpinned by a re-reading of specific aspects of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790), arguing that the distance inscribed in the aesthetic experience of painting can be understood as a critical distance.<sup>2</sup> I undertake this task as a painter.

Though art now functions in ways that Kant could never have anticipated, there

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<sup>1</sup> In *Painting as Apparatus: Twelve Theses* Helmut Draxler talks about painting *as such* in a contemporary context as 'an open cultural field between painting as it really exists, the "new genres", and a media-disseminated pop culture; the largely dismembered elements of the apparatus of painting can be found scattered across this field.' (Draxler, 2010, p. 111.) In his view, a post-avant-garde approach to art criticism needs to understand painting as a symbolic formation that might enable us to make sense of contemporary configurations and material relationships that are no longer confined by the idea of the specific medium.

<sup>2</sup> The version of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* used in this thesis is the James Creed Meredith translation. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.) I will use the English spelling of 'judgement' throughout, except in quotes where the American spelling 'judgment' is used, in which it will be preserved. It is also worth noting that the original German title *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is more accurately translated as *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.

are aspects of his aesthetic theory that remain relevant and have, in their nuances, been overlooked (in an art-theoretical context at least). A criticism commonly levelled at aesthetic experience is that it is a deluded mode of apprehension, arrogantly assured of its own validity and demanding, for the sake of pure experience, that the spectator be positioned at a remove from social conditions.<sup>3</sup> Painting in particular has been associated with an account of aesthetic experience as hierarchical, distanced and limited. My argument here does not disavow these conditions, but rather argues that they are necessary for reflection, and that for the aesthetic experience of art, a criticality inheres in the remove.

Kant is a thinker whose system of thought accounts for not knowing, particularly in the *Critique of Judgement*. As Jean-François Lyotard has put it, this is 'not the Kant of the concept or the moral law but the Kant of the imagination, when he cures himself of the illness of knowledge and rules.'<sup>4</sup> One of Kant's most significant achievements was the shifting of Western philosophy away from dogmatic metaphysics towards a system of thought that takes the unquantifiable realm of the transcendental as its primary referent. For Kant, what we perceive in empirical reality are representations of things (phenomena) rather than things in themselves (noumena), which we can never apprehend.<sup>5</sup> Within this system, art plays a particular role whereby the aesthetic judgement thereof can refer the mind beyond the limits of thought, enabling a free play of conceptual attributes in a realm outside rational understanding.

In Kant's words, 'Judgement in general is the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal.'<sup>6</sup> The judgement that something is beautiful is possessed of a sense of universality for Kant, insofar as the pleasure of experiencing beauty does not depend on empirical conditions, but upon the swinging into harmony of the mind's faculties of understanding, reason and imagination—faculties possessed by everyone—and is therefore potentially valid for everyone. As such, beauty lies in the experience of form rather than in form itself, which is what, for Kant, enables it to attach to an idea of universality. This forms the basis upon which aesthetic experience can be understood as an agent in the formation of community. Kant refers to this as a 'common sense' or the *sensus communis*.<sup>7</sup> As Terry Eagleton has written: 'To judge aesthetically, for Kant...means

<sup>3</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) and Jacques Rancière's *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (2009) as instances of this critique.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Carroll, 1987, p. 173 from Lyotard's *Instructions Païennes*. (Paris: Galilée, 1977.)

<sup>5</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68. It is worth noting that in §20 Kant draws a distinction between 'common sense' as a subjective principle of universal validity that is based on sensation, as against the 'common sense' also



to bracket one's own sectarian interests and possessive desires in the name of a common general humanity, a radical decentering of the subject.<sup>8</sup>

I have chosen to draw specifically upon Kantian aesthetics to ground an argument concerning painting today for two main reasons. Firstly, within the aesthetic experience of art, Kant defined the concept as a mediator of the form's aesthetic mode, a distinction that was prescient of the conceptualism which was to become the paradigm for art. Secondly, the requisition of Kantian aesthetics for the theorisation of formalist painting by American art critic Clement Greenberg produced an erroneous understanding of aesthetic experience that persists latently, though analyses of Greenberg's recourse to Kant have shown it to be selective and problematic. As Diarmuid Costello has commented, critics have often 'rejected Kant largely on the basis of the damage done in his name by Greenberg.'<sup>9</sup> Greenberg's selective use of Kantian ideas has, in my view, led to a misconception of Kant as formalist and juridical. In something of a paradox, Greenberg's misconceptions of Kantian aesthetics are perpetuated by his critics, becoming a level on which his influence, though derided, persists.

The ideas in this book are positioned against an understanding of the aesthetic experience of art terminating at the apprehension of form. This necessitates a reinsertion of content into the understanding of how form is experienced aesthetically: form is understood here as providing a way into thinking about content, by producing a precognitive sense of investment for the viewer. Later in the book I will discuss this idea in relation to paintings by Martin Kippenberger and Juan Davila, neither of whom could be thought of as formalist, and both of whose paintings rely on the relation of aesthetic experience to contextual specificity. These artists have served as a focusing mechanism for the ideas in this book.

To experience the beauty of pure form, without advancing to a cognitive engagement with ideas perceived to be held within that form, is a mode of experience that for Kant is particular to beholding forms of nature. This is distinct from the

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called the *sensus communis* that denotes a common *understanding*: 'the judgement of the latter is not one by feeling, but always one by concepts, though usually only in the shape of obscurely represented principles.' (p. 68.) Implicit to the *sensus communis* is the consideration of the point of view of others. Though distinct from one another these are not mutually exclusive categories for Kant. One might consider the first sort of *common sense* as a valence of the *sensus communis*. I would say that this relationship is particularly complex in relation to art, due to the nuanced positioning of the aesthetic idea between intuition and concept.

<sup>8</sup> Eagleton, 1988, p. 337.

<sup>9</sup> Costello, 2009, p. 118.

aesthetic experience of art, which attaches to an aesthetic idea if it is fine art, or to a concept of reason if it is mechanical art. Though the experience of beauty in fine art, as in nature, exists ‘in the mere judging of it’<sup>10</sup>—being a pleasure based neither in sensation nor concept but in the free play between the faculties of one’s mind—this moment constitutes a ‘way in’ to a critical engagement with art, rather than the entire experience of it. The *a priori* sensation of beauty impels one to put oneself at stake in what is beheld; the aesthetic idea refers one’s mind beyond the limits of thought.

As an aside, it should be noted that this argument bears no relation to Dave Hickey’s lyrically self-righteous defense of beauty put forth in the 1993 essay *Enter the Dragon*, which was grounded in the specificity of a burgeoning American art market and its fraught relationship to what he saw as the more theoretically-inclined institution, that ‘moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization.’<sup>11</sup> Drawing on Bourdieu, Hickey essentially accuses the ‘therapeutic institution’ of suppressing the possibilities of art’s beauty by cossetting beautiful objects off in clinical space at the moment of their completion, thus preventing them from having a life in the world, from having agency.<sup>12</sup> Hickey does not engage debates concerning philosophical aesthetics in this essay, beyond acknowledging them as ‘the old patriarchal do-dah about transcendent formal values.’<sup>13</sup>

To return to the task at hand, the critical distance of aesthetic experience is, for Kant, inseparable from the *sensus communis* against which, and for which, one’s judgement must be upheld. It is in this sense that one puts oneself at stake critically in judging aesthetically, in doing so producing an aporia: though one feels a subjective sense that one’s judgement ought to be valid for everybody, one is simultaneously moved to defend it, lest it turn out not to be. In this regard aesthetic judgement can be distinguished from juridical judgement.

Aesthetic judgement offers a moment of reflective distance that might constitute a rupture in the fabric of experience, returning the viewer to the world she inhab-

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<sup>10</sup> Kant, 2007b, pp. 135–136.

<sup>11</sup> Hickey in Beech, 2009, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 29. Hickey’s agenda is more concerned with the power mechanisms of the American art world. One of the problems I find with this text is in Hickey’s presentation of artists as innocent producers of beautiful things, not accounting for the idea that they might wish for their work to exist in the institution, or even outside an aesthetic register, for strategic reasons or otherwise. His manner of addressing ‘the American art community’ suggests that he sees it as a body of people acting on herd instincts.

its with a shifted perspective.<sup>14</sup> In art, I would argue, this judgement sits alongside or within a conceptual operation. This view necessitates, to some degree, a structural de-privileging of aesthetic experience, though this de-privileging should not be understood as a dismissal. On the contrary, the question of what role the aesthetic experience of painting might play in its conceptual operations is precisely what compels this re-examination of Kantian aesthetics in the first instance.

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<sup>14</sup>Throughout this text I will use the feminine second person *she* as I commonly do when writing. In this instance it is an additional matter of principle since my argument draws deeply upon Kant, whose account of women in some texts excludes them from personhood (though women are excluded from personhood in the *Anthropology* [1798], they are accorded it in *The Metaphysics of Morals* [1797]). It is my belief that the Kantian ideas being addressed here are not predicated on his formulation of personhood and are untroubled by being resituated in relation to contemporary ideas of subjecthood. For further discussion of Kant's conception of women, see Christine Battersby's *The Phenomenal Woman* (1998).



## Clembashing

In *Modernist Painting* (1960) Clement Greenberg asserted that the task of modern art was grounded in each 'area of competence' deepening and essentialising its consolidation through a process of self-critique, a project that took the specificity of painting as its focus:<sup>1</sup>

The essential norms or conventions of painting are at the same time the limiting conditions with which a picture must comply in order to be experienced as a picture. Modernism has found that these limits can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst on one hand Greenberg's claim that the limits of the medium can be *pushed back indefinitely* might be understood as an optimistic declaration of painting's infinite inner resources, on the other it can be seen as a refusal to acknowledge that the trajectory of modernist painting had causative factors outside its own material conditions. In turn *Modernist Painting* (and indeed, Greenberg's whole project) might be read as a disavowal of painting's potential as a means of socio-political commentary. Greenberg's 'unique and proper areas of competence' are the indicators of a deeper critical internalisation.<sup>3</sup>

Though the entrails of Greenberg's argument have long since been spilt and sifted through, the point of interest here is that aesthetics came to be lumped in with his position too, coming to be seen as the foundation of an account of art that disavows socio-political causation. In the first paragraph of *Modernist Painting*, Greenberg names Kant the 'first real Modernist' for the simplistic

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<sup>1</sup> Greenberg, 1993, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 89-90.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

reason that he used logic to establish its own limits, in keeping with Greenberg's conception of medium self-reflexivity.<sup>4</sup> In making this claim Greenberg placed a fixed frame around a fragment of Kant's intellectual project.

The rigid frame proved itself an adaptable device for Greenberg, who situated aesthetics at the centre of a system that shunned any notion of causation outside itself. A direct contrast to this is to be found in the thought of Greenberg's contemporary Meyer Schapiro, who argued that all art production has a social origin regardless of content. In *The Social Bases of Art* (first delivered as a speech in 1936) Shapiro describes what might be thought of as the social unconscious of art:

The ideas of modern artists, far from describing eternal and necessary conditions of art, are simply the results of recent history. In recognizing the dependence of his situation and attitudes on the character of modern society, the artist acquires the courage to change things, to act on his society and for himself in an effective manner.<sup>5</sup>

Greenberg, rather than examining the development of modernist painting in relation to industrialisation as an enforced rupture, offers a lineage of painters tending towards a purification of the medium beginning in 16th century Venice: 'I cannot insist enough that Modernism has never meant, and does not mean now, anything like a break with the past.'<sup>6</sup> This is complemented by his characterisation of formalism as a space of indefinite solution for painting, rather than the working through of its end. As an expert on painting's internal workings, Greenberg's critical approach is grounded in a mechanistic monitoring of favoured artists and fluctuations in their material approaches. With the boyish pride of a self-appointed aficionado, at one point he writes: 'It would take me more time than is at my disposal to show how the norm of the picture's enclosing shape, or frame, was loosened, then tightened, then loosened once again, and isolated, and then tightened once more, by successive generations of Modernist painters.'<sup>7</sup> Greenberg's insistence on an iconoclastic formalism solidified, for many artists, an understanding of painting as a medium thenceforth only viable when operating conceptually within the terms of its own material specificity, with the attendant belief that the quest for essentialisation remained the only way for painting to proceed as a medium.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Greenberg, 1993, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> Schapiro, 1973, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> Greenberg, 1993, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> As Isabelle Graw and Andre Rottmann have written, this is 'an idea of painting that was itself essentialist, associating the medium *per se* with notions of expression, authenticity and substance, as if

Greenberg first made a name for himself as an art writer with *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939) and though he identified as a Marxist at that time, one can see in this essay an emergent prejudice against the working class.<sup>9</sup> In it Greenberg claims that abstraction is the only means by which 'high art' can now be produced. Already in this early essay he positions the self-examination of the medium as a reified form of cultural production, against what he sees as the brazenness of kitsch. He discusses kitsch as a mode of art that does not offer a reflective aesthetic experience, but rather presents a set of pre-digested sensations for the viewer who is not sophisticated enough to interpret symbolism: 'Superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creations, and the peasant finds no "natural" urgency within himself that will drive him toward Picasso in spite of all difficulties.'<sup>10</sup>

Greenberg's formulation of kitsch is derived from Kant's idea of agreeable art, as distinct from mechanical art (the form of which is determined in service to a concept) and fine art (which attaches to the aesthetic idea, being an intuition that reaches beyond the limits of rational thought). It is here that we can locate Greenberg's rejection of socio-economic causation for fine art, though not for kitsch. Though Kant speaks of cultivation he does not attach these categories of art to the question of what kind of person is capable of perceiving them. It is Greenberg who insists that only a person of sophisticated mind might appreciate what he terms fine art, whilst kitsch is for the uneducated masses.<sup>11</sup> Though Greenberg remained capricious in his political affiliations throughout his life, in an unusually candid interview for *The Weekend Australian* in 1979 he cited his early 'embrace of socialism' as one of his life's mistakes.

Greenberg presents the binary of high and low art against a backdrop of cultural decline brought about by mass production, a somewhat paradoxical alibi for an embrace of class prejudice given that he declined to recognise socio-economic factors as having influenced the trajectory of modernist painting. He ascribes the stratification of art into high art and kitsch (the latter of which he did not consider legitimate cultural output) to the industrial revolution, leading to an

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regressive tendencies were inherent to this medium by way of its materiality.' (Graw and Rottmann, 2010, p. 106.)

<sup>9</sup> Marquis, 2006, pp. 232-233.

<sup>10</sup> Greenberg, 1961, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> For example, in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* Greenberg writes '...the ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. It is only then that the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic enter. They are not immediately or externally present in Picasso's painting, but must be projected into it by the spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to plastic qualities.' (Greenberg, 1961, p. 17.)



urbanised populace that ‘set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption.’<sup>12</sup> One can see in this a latent hierarchy that was to persist in Greenberg’s art-theoretical constructs. This is a critique likewise commonly levelled at Kant: that his insistence on categorisation amounts to a hierarchical account of existence typical of his enlightenment context. Walter Benjamin saw Kant’s account of experience as finitist, and sought to insert the absolute or infinite into it: an operation that seeks to supplant Kant’s transcendental in favour of a speculative concept of experience. Though Kant’s account of empirical experience may be lacking, it should also be recognised that the empirical was never at the core of his project, and further, that the transcendental for Kant plays an indispensable role in the formation of the moral self.<sup>13</sup> There is not room here to do more than scratch the surface of these debates, but it suffices to say that the problems with Greenberg’s hierarchical outlook are not of the same order as Kant’s. I will proceed now to some other significant points upon which Kantian aesthetics differ fundamentally from Greenbergian theory.

Greenberg was Kantian insofar as he believed that all art, even formalist art, must ‘stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original,’ just as Kant believed art ought to take its rule from nature.<sup>14</sup> A fundamental difference lies in the fact that for Kant, an obedience to nature in this context is not confined to the realm of direct representation. It could mean, for example, an artwork that adequately captures a sense of fear or failure. There are expansive possibilities as to what, within nature, an artwork must be adequate to. For Greenberg, on the other hand, ‘worthy constraint or original’ meant something very specific, being works of art that have formerly been recognised as ‘good’. Additionally, with comments such as ‘value judgements constitute the substance of aesthetic experience,’<sup>15</sup> and ‘taste at its best, in its fullest sense, likes whatever is good,’<sup>16</sup> Greenberg reveals himself to be juridical and absolutist where Kant is not. What Kant insists upon, and Greenberg elides, is the subjective nature of the feeling of universal validity attached to a judgement of taste:

The judgement of taste itself does not *postulate* the agreement of everyone (for it is only competent for a logically universal judgement to do this, in that it is able to bring forward reasons); it only

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg in Harrison and Wood (eds.), 2002, p. 534.

<sup>13</sup> As H. J. Paton writes in the preface to Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: ‘An exclusively empirical philosophy, as Kant himself argues, can have nothing to say about morality.’ (Paton in Kant, 2009, p. 8.)

<sup>14</sup> Greenberg in Harrison and Wood (eds.), 2002, p. 532.

<sup>15</sup> Greenberg, 1981, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

*imputes* this agreement to everyone, as an instance of the rule in respect of which it looks for confirmation, not from concepts, but from the concurrence of others. The universal voice is, therefore, only an idea.<sup>17</sup>

For Kant, central to the experience of finding something beautiful is the feeling, on the part of the beholder, that the beauty she experiences in a given form must also be valid for all other people. This sense of universally valid pleasure is not a pleasure in the object, but a pleasure in the feeling of the faculties of imagination and understanding in free play together, incited by the *experience* of the object: 'Beauty is for itself, apart from any reference to the feeling of the subject, nothing.'<sup>18</sup> Greenberg's self-appointment as an arbiter of taste suggests an absolutist, perhaps even clumsy, uptake of this complex idea of subjective universality. In this regard Greenberg embodied Kant's aesthetically judging subject, as a person who *believes* his idea of beauty is universally valid. It is from this position that Greenberg proceeded to establish himself as an authority in the aesthetic judgement of art, seemingly never recognising his own feeling of universal validity as anything other than actual universal validity, giving rise to his belief that as a critic he could make absolute judgements of taste.

Greenberg has written that 'there is nothing left in nature for plastic art to explore... Instead of being aroused, the modern imagination is numbed by visual representation.'<sup>19</sup> Greenberg's argument here is that having been conditioned by the visual overload of modernity, people are no longer capable of perceiving representational art as beautiful. This statement, aside from suggesting a limited understanding of representation, sits at odds with Kant's notion of fine art. Beauty, which for Kant attaches to fine art, is inherently disinterested: an experience of beauty cannot, by Kant's definition, be conditioned by empirical factors, and as such it is not possible, within his framework, for historical contingency to affect one's capacity for aesthetic experience.

Rosalind Krauss and Michael Fried were acolytes of Greenberg who both famously turned from his theories to establish opposing and highly influential positions of their own. Krauss's *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985) gathers a decade of essays that, as Krauss writes in her introduction, stand in direct contradiction to Greenberg's emphasis on the value of judgement, focusing instead on post-structuralist method. However, Krauss's much later *Under Blue Cup* (2011) reveals an ongoing debt to Greenberg in its

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<sup>17</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Greenberg, 1993 (Vol. 1), pp. 203-204.

poignantly pathological engagement with medium specificity as a vehicle to explore memory and personal trauma. Fried, who made a name for himself by proclaiming minimalism to have been a 'wrong turn' for art, owes a different sort of debt to Greenberg.<sup>20</sup> In *Art and Objecthood* (1967) Fried takes up and extends arguments put forth by Greenberg in *Modernist Painting*, advocating for an internalised experience of art, as against art (specifically minimalism) that incorporates its context as an indispensable aspect of the experience it offers. Additionally, in the concluding paragraph of *Art and Objecthood*, Fried snobbishly reveals his entire critical motivation to be grounded in a defence of what he believes to be the authentic art of his time.

Though Fried himself has since said that the argument he put forth in *Art and Objecthood* 'no longer holds,' he continues to privilege a Greenbergian idea of what an experience of art should be, his position having ossified into one that rather regressively embraces authoritarian structures and inhabits an implicitly hierarchical position.<sup>21</sup> Fried has spoken recently of how he sees paintings 'fighting each other to be the best.'<sup>22</sup> Inscribed in this comment is not only an insistent hierarchy, but a disregard of heterogeneous artistic intentions. (Is it every artist's intention to make work that is 'the best'? I would say no.)

Fried differs from Greenberg insofar as he considers the reduction of a medium to its essence to be the wrong approach, believing that the conditions for a successful painting must be continually discovered anew. By and large though, Fried's position has been, and continues to be Greenbergian. It cannot be said to be Kantian. It is with Fried that we see the beginnings of the process whereby Greenberg's Kant was rendered latent for art-theoretical aesthetics, for instance when he writes:

Within the modernist arts nothing short of conviction—specifically, the conviction that a particular painting or sculpture or poem or piece of music can or cannot support comparison with past work within that art whose quality is not in doubt—matters at all.<sup>23</sup>

Here we can see Fried passively receiving, then replicating Greenberg's attempt to align qualitative historical comparison with aesthetic judgement. Against this

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<sup>20</sup> Fried used this phrase in a discussion at the Modern and Contemporary Art reading group held in the Art History Department at Melbourne University on 7 June 2013, at which he was an invited guest.

<sup>21</sup> Comment made by Fried during the aforementioned Modern and Contemporary Art reading group. Whilst Fried still insists that Minimalism was a mistake, he avers that medium specificity is no longer the paradigm for art, *contra* the position he takes in *Art and Objecthood*.

<sup>22</sup> Comment made by Fried during the Modern and Contemporary Art reading group.

<sup>23</sup> Fried, 1967, p. 142.

I will position a quote from Kant:

A principle of taste would mean a fundamental premiss under the condition of which one might subsume the concept of an object, and then, by a syllogism, draw the inference that it is beautiful. That, however, is absolutely impossible. For I must feel the pleasure immediately in the representation of the object, and I cannot be talked into it by any grounds of proof.<sup>24</sup>

Many dismissals of Kantian aesthetics since Greenberg reveal themselves as having little to do with Kant, and much to do with those who have taken selective recourse to his thought. Misapprehension (often due to secondary or tertiary inheritance of his ideas), and the use of decontextualised snatches of complex ideas (usually to lend authority to a tangential argument) are significant contributors to this circumstance. Arthur C. Danto is a prominent example of an art theorist known for taking a critical position on Kantian aesthetics, and whose recourse to Kant has at times been hazy or over-simplified, for instance when he writes: 'No distinction is especially drawn between natural and artistic beauty in Kant,<sup>25</sup> where there is indeed a crucial distinction: whilst Kant draws some parallels between nature and fine art (which, as I have pointed out, is one of various types of art for Kant, and the only one that shares similarities with nature),<sup>26</sup> he dedicates a section to explaining that whilst fine art should resemble nature to the viewer, she must at the same time be aware that it is in fact art, which is to say, that it is a construct made by human hand.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, for Kant it is a defining characteristic of fine art that it embodies aesthetic ideas, which do not exist in nature.

Diarmuid Costello's essay *Retrieving Kant's Aesthetics for Art Theory After Greenberg* (2009) covers a good deal of ground in this area by identifying several instances in which Greenberg drew erroneously upon Kant, as well as critiquing the subsequent latency of these errors in the work of both Danto and Thierry de Duve.<sup>28</sup> Costello points out that, like Danto and de Duve after him, Greenberg takes as his aesthetic paradigm Kant's account of *pure* aesthetic judgement:

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<sup>24</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> Danto, 1996, p. 105.

<sup>26</sup> *Mechanical art* is for Kant lesser than fine art, since it pleases only 'by means of a concept.' (Kant, 2007b, p. 136.) Later in this book I will elaborate upon an argument for a reconsideration of the relation between these two modes, but for now it is enough to note the distinction.

<sup>27</sup> Kant, 2007b (§45: *Fine art is an art, so far as it has at the same time the appearance of being nature*), pp. 135-136.

<sup>28</sup> Chapter 8 in Halstall et al. (eds.), 2009.

Greenberg misses two conceptual complexities that attach to artworks...the constraint that the *concept* an artwork is meant to fulfil 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.<sup>29</sup>

I am in agreement with Costello in seeing Kant's aesthetic theory as something very different from the restrictive formalist aesthetics that Greenberg construed from it. He concludes that 'many, if not most, artworks typically regarded as anti-aesthetic, according to the formalist conception of aesthetics that the art world inherits from Greenberg, nonetheless engage the mind in ways that may be thought of as aesthetic in Kant's sense',<sup>30</sup> which is to say that artworks are able to use their aesthetic attributes (beautiful or not) to complicate the connections between concepts, thereby expanding ideas in ways that other conceptual elaborations could not.<sup>31</sup> He makes the additional claim that Greenberg conflated the Kantian notion of disinterest (a mode of experience in which the aesthetic is not constrained by an end outside itself) with his own psychologically grounded concept of 'aesthetic distance'.<sup>32</sup> Costello considers that in his focus on pure aesthetic judgements, Greenberg ignored some significant aspects of Kant's address to art, which he sees as essentially to blame for the subsequent rejection of Kantian aesthetics in the context of art theory.

Costello's critique paves the way for a renewed consideration of how Kantian aesthetics might be useful for thinking about art today. He applies the form of the aesthetic idea to a reading of Art & Language's *Index 01* (1972) as a work whose materiality gestures outward to an idea of the expanded archive. Whilst I do not object to this application, I consider it an attempt to render in empirical terms an operation that for Kant occurs transcendently: the outwardly-gesturing archive becomes a material *enactment* of the aesthetic idea. As Costello points out though, Kantian aesthetics are geared more towards a critical function than towards any notion of formalism. One inference for painting specifically is that its relation to aesthetic experience is disconnected from the essentialisation of its own specificity. This frees space for the consideration of painting as a critical mediator.

There are two key points on which I differ with Costello's account of Kantian aesthetics. One is the distinction he posits between Kant's theory of taste

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<sup>29</sup> Costello in Halstall et al. (eds.), 2009, p. 120.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> Greenberg, 1999, p. 74.

and his theory of art, which I consider false. In my understanding Kant's theory of art in fact sits as a sub-category of his theory of taste. The second, more crucial criticism regards Costello's conflation of Kant's address to artworks with his address to *dependent* beauty. Dependent beauty for Kant is that which is constrained by a functional end as, in Kant's example, the beauty of a church must be appropriate to its purpose as a house of worship. The work of fine art for Kant is 'a mode of representation which is intrinsically purposive...although devoid of an end.'<sup>33</sup> This gives it the peculiar property of 'purposiveness without purpose,' a particularity that sits in distinction to dependence on a concept. This sense of purposiveness, though not a purpose as such, 'has the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interests of social communication.'<sup>34</sup> That is to say, experiencing a work of art as beautiful compels us to want to discuss it with others. This social dimension is specific to beauty experienced in the art object, and does not apply to the dependently beautiful form. Costello considers that the beauty of a work of art is dependent because it 'would have to be brought under the concept it is meant to fulfil, in submitting its beauty *as art* to aesthetic judgement, at least for Kant.'<sup>35</sup> I disagree with this reading, or at any rate see it as a mis-situation of the aesthetic idea in relation to free and dependent modes of beauty. Although Costello correctly pinpoints this as an area of contention that undoes the understanding of Greenberg as Kantian, he seems wont to reduce these relations to a binary that problematises his own argument. When Costello draws the distinction between free and dependent beauty he places art on the dependent side. It is, however, a divide that art straddles for Kant, for whom the beauty of fine art is free, and the beauty of mechanical art is dependent.<sup>36</sup> Costello might object here that fine art must be considered dependently beautiful on account of its fidelity to a concept (being the aesthetic idea), though I would counter that the aesthetic idea, as opposed to the rational idea, is precisely that 'which evokes much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it.'<sup>37</sup> It might be said, then, that the mode of art that in Kant's definition forms the basis of Costello's argument is *mechanical* art which, crucially, does not embody aesthetic ideas. This does not imply that mechanical art is unable to be experienced aesthetically, but that it deals with fixed concepts, rather than aesthetic ideas that move beyond the bounds of reason and, significantly, does not open out to the *sensus communis*.

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<sup>33</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 135.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Costello in Halstall et al. (eds.), 2009, p. 120.

<sup>36</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 178.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

Costello considers that it was Greenberg's focus on pure aesthetic judgement, which for Kant pertains to nature, that ultimately led to his aesthetic theories being rejected. Whilst I agree that Greenberg failed to account for the broader complexity of Kant's address to art, I would argue that the greater problem with Greenbergian theory lay in a juridical understanding of aesthetic judgement.

De Duve has taken a position on aesthetic theory that does not side with 'an anti-aesthetic postmodernism *or* a late modernist aestheticism.'<sup>38</sup> A renowned scholar of Greenberg, de Duve was one of the first to articulate the problem of misinterpretation addressed in this chapter:

Greenberg has never disavowed his Kantianism, but he never understood Kant either... As far as I know, most critics of Greenberg... have taken his reading of Kant for granted and have rejected the Kantian aesthetics along with its Greenbergian misreading. This is the first element in a huge misunderstanding.<sup>39</sup>

In *Kant after Duchamp* de Duve proposes that the judgement 'this is beautiful' might be brought up to date by being amended to 'this is art.' Whilst there is much to be said about this proposition, here I will focus on evaluating de Duve's recourse to Kant. To begin with, as Costello points out, in claiming 'this is art' to be an aesthetic judgement, de Duve misunderstands Kant insofar as 'this is art' is, for de Duve, predicated on a comparison between examples, rather than consisting of a relation between a given intuition and the free play of the faculties to which it gives rise; again the spectre of Greenberg's comparative judgement appears.<sup>40</sup> To this I would add that if one were to accept 'this is art' in place of 'this is beautiful,' one would be accepting the detachment of art from the feeling of universal validity that underwrites the *sensus communis*, though de Duve insists that 'this is art' remains an aesthetic judgement.

De Duve seems to want to co-opt the structure of Kant's aesthetic theory wholesale, replacing the word 'beautiful' with the word 'art' to formulate a system that can account for the readymade and accommodate conceptual art. His move here is to posit the readymade, able to be any given object, as a neat substitute for the universal validity of the *sensus communis*. As such de Duve considers that the *sensus communis* becomes a faculty of judging and making art 'by dint of feeling.' This does not account for the fact that the *sensus communis* arises as an accord between the faculties, impelled by the experience of beauty; without the beau-

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<sup>38</sup> Costello in Halstall et al. (eds.), 2009, p. 121.

<sup>39</sup> de Duve, 1996, p. 322.

<sup>40</sup> Costello in Halstall et al. (eds.), 2009, p. 123.



tiful, the *sensus communis* does not emerge in experience. De Duve's insistence that 'this is art' remains an aesthetic judgement appears as an attempt to paper over this discrepancy, but it is the point at which, in my view, his argument falters.

De Duve shares Greenberg's tendency to marginalise the reflective dimension of aesthetic judgement, which for Kant is the position from which one seeks the agreement of others, and is in turn the point where critical discourse emerges within aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> Content, writes de Duve, 'is ineffable because it is a feeling and because feelings do not get communicated by talking about them.'<sup>42</sup> Here he stops short of recognising aesthetic judgement as a basis for discourse: feelings do not get communicated by talking about them, but the notion that feelings ought to be universally shared does.

De Duve's proposed replacement of 'this is beautiful' with the nominative 'this is art' functions in the same way as Costello's reading of *Index 01*, as an attempt to render empirically an aspect of aesthetic experience that must, for Kant, operate transcendently. Like Greenberg, de Duve aims to substitute historical comparison for Kant's metacognitive harmony. This is reinforced by his insistence that 'an unsatisfactory aesthetic experience is still an aesthetic experience,' which suggests that de Duve does not take up Kant's formulation of aesthetic experience and the pleasure it impels, which can only be positive; 'this is ugly' is not an aesthetic judgement for Kant.<sup>43</sup> In this regard de Duve takes up Greenberg's idea of the 'negative aesthetic judgement,' which does not exist for Kant. Additionally he refers to 'the verdict of taste,' suggesting that he subscribes to a juridical conception of judgement.<sup>44</sup>

Although Greenbergian formalism does not ultimately square up with Kantian aesthetics, it is not to say that Greenberg was anti-Kantian. Indeed, Greenberg's emphasis on the freedom and indeterminacy of non-representational painting can be understood to be in line with Kant's idea of art gesturing or seeking to move beyond our empirical understanding of the world. If, however, we consider Greenbergian formalism in terms of the aesthetic idea, it could be argued that each formalist painting sets out to become its own subject matter in order to exceed its own limits, which from a Kantian standpoint might mean that it opens

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> de Duve, 1996, p. 214.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

onto an aesthetic idea concerning its appropriateness to itself as an intuition.<sup>45</sup> In this regard, late modernist painting could be seen as striving to approximate an object of nature by seeking to refer only to itself. This operation resonates with the spirituality that is often ascribed to abstract expressionist paintings: in referring only to themselves as art, in turn exceeding the limits of their own idea of themselves, the paintings become mystical entities.

Though it could be said that Greenberg strove for the absorption of content into form, a move that amounts to a sort of plugged void, his exclusion of modernism's socio-economic determinants can also be seen as a move toward a new model for painting's historicisation on its own terms, in which the impact of industrialisation need not be understood as absolute. In this regard Greenberg made an important contribution to the rethinking of approaches to the art-historical canon, regardless of whether this was his intention.

Ultimately my project here is not one of discrediting Greenbergian formalism out of hand, nor of offering an apologia for Kantian aesthetics, but to distinguish between the two. There are aspects of Kant's address to aesthetics that to my mind no longer hold relevance for art,<sup>46</sup> but others that persist, particularly his formulation of the aesthetic idea and his conception of subjective universality in relation to the *sensus communis*.<sup>47</sup>

Paul Crowther has noted in *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (1993) that 'the real potential of [Kant's] theory of art and his analysis of the sublime has hardly been touched upon. By developing the former, essentialist aesthetics can be modified so as to find a role for socio-historical transformations.'<sup>48</sup> In particular Crowther examines the means by which aesthetic experience refers beyond itself: 'through its distance from the pleasures of everyday existence, the aes-

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<sup>45</sup> This is a space for art that might be logically deduced from Costello's insistence on the dependent beauty of all art.

<sup>46</sup> Kant published two books on aesthetics in his lifetime. The first, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), is aphoristic, its ideas largely unrelated to the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) published later in his career. The ideas discussed in this thesis are outlined in the *Critique of Judgement* and, as such, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* is not of significance here. The *Critique of Judgement* served for Kant as a means of reconciling his previous two critiques, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Kant's impetus for developing a theory of aesthetic judgement was to formalise the site in judgement, being the intermediary between understanding and reason, where one might realise that one is a subject among other subjects: the experience of subjective universality.

<sup>47</sup> The aesthetic idea and the *sensus communis* both attach to beauty for Kant, and hence to fine art.

<sup>48</sup> Crowther, 1993, pp. xi-xii.

thetic both lifts us above and relates us back to that life.<sup>49</sup>

Crowther notes that many post-aesthetic critical positions define themselves against an essentialist aesthetics in favour of focusing on the means by which art is socially constructed. He considers this an unnecessary polarisation that misses many complexities of aesthetic theory, and argues for a new approach via a reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's later work and Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, of which he writes:

The central task of the *Critique of Judgement* is to show that (whilst being a distinctive category in human experience) the aesthetic is also a unified *complex* of varieties, whose enjoyment is intimately linked to both theoretical reason and ethical freedom.<sup>50</sup>

In Crowther's view, Kant's theory of fine art 'overcomes the unwarranted gap between art and life by making social and psychological dimensions a part of art's full definition. We are thus led far beyond aesthetic formalism.'<sup>51</sup> Crowther argues that in order to understand the aesthetic significance of form, we must 'account for the aesthetic judgement as a logical complex involving the interplay of perceptual and, in the broadest sense, socio-historical factors.'<sup>52</sup> There is an important distinction to be made here between the positioning of the aesthetic experience within a complex involving socio-historical factors, and the substitution of subjective universality with a judgement based on historical comparison, as attempted by Greenberg and de Duve after him.

Like Greenberg, Crowther discusses social realism as a genre that pushes forth political signification, describing it as saturated and inert in terms of its innovative capacities. Crowther, however, does not attach this to a class distinction. He similarly interprets surrealism as being oversaturated with private fantasy, whereas he credits Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) as being possessed of artistic originality insofar as it occupies a 'disturbing zone between the two.'<sup>53</sup>

Crowther uses this example of originality to argue that aesthetic experience is in a fundamental sense historically mediated, claiming that appreciating an artwork's aesthetic merit logically presupposes 'whether we are explicitly aware of the fact or not—that the work has been appraised in relation to a background

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

context of personal or collective historical existence.<sup>54</sup> This might seem like the same insistence upon historical comparison as that of Greenberg and de Duve, however there are two qualifications that distinguish Crowther's position: firstly, his caveat that this is 'whether we are explicitly aware of the fact or not,' which places the process in the realm of the unconscious, and secondly, a significant difference between background context and explicit historical comparison, the latter of which implies an intrinsically *interested* judgement. Background context may inform experience, but does not constitute a criterion. This is the point at which rational discourse emerges, which is to say, it is the discursive content that follows the formal experience, rather than being a part of the formal experience itself.

Crowther does not reject the categories identified by Kant as modes by which different sorts of art can be experienced aesthetically, nor does he uptake Greenberg's attachment of these modes to class prejudice. I would take this a step further to suggest that these modes need not be thought of as mutually exclusive, that the elitism ascribed to 'fine' art is interpretative rather than structural.

Much of what we call conceptual and process-based art is, considered within a Kantian framework, mechanical and not fine art insofar as it is constrained by a concept as an end. It is not thus more or less valid; rather, it demands a different experiential engagement. A work of art can be thought of as being possessed of a complex of aesthetic possibilities, the experience of beauty and the aesthetic idea constituting part of a larger conceptual operation. The operations of fine, mechanical and agreeable art need not be considered mutually exclusive, but rather as parallel operations in a pluralistic aesthetic system. This claim entails the rejection of a divisional aspect of Kantian aesthetics, and whilst I consider that it is no small act to challenge Kant on structural matters, I find productive possibility in the re-situation of these categories of art in relation to one another. It must be acknowledged that Kant ascribes aspects of hierarchical value to these categories, such as when he writes: 'Where fine art manifests its superiority is in the beautiful descriptions it gives of things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing.'<sup>55</sup> This is one aspect of his system of thought that I do not adhere to. *Contra* Kant and his obsession with categories, I do not consider that aesthetic experience has to be 'pure,' but can be situated among a complex of operations within an artwork. That is to say, there can be a moment of beauty set amongst other moments within one work. Painting is particularly conducive to this process on account of the richness of its historical loadings, enabling a

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 141.

given form that might seem purely beautiful in one moment to be operated upon by historical context in the next.



## What Thinking Feels

Kant's account of subjective universality, crucial to the positioning of aesthetics within his philosophical system, opens aesthetic judgement to an aporia whereby the judging subject, in seeking to validate her feeling of universality, must in turn recognise the positions of others and might, in a discursive sense, put herself at stake in a judgement in order to justify it.<sup>1</sup> It is in this way that the judgement of taste specifically, as the seed of a stake in discourse, contributes on an empirical level to social formation. The initial experience of beauty is not, in this process, neutralised by the introduction of an empirical interest, but can be understood as an agent that impels the judging subject on a passage toward critique. As Dave Beech has written: 'Beauty is political not despite the fact that it feels subjective but precisely because it is, in fact, subjective. Beauty enters us into a world of dispute, contention and conflict at the very moment when we feel to be removed from the social world.'<sup>2</sup>

In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (published 1982) Hannah Arendt formulates an idea of what Kant's political philosophy would have been, based on his output (Kant never wrote a political philosophy as such).<sup>3</sup> Arendt draws chiefly on the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement for this formulation, arriving at a politics of the spectator rather than of the actor. Underpinning her argument is an embrace of critique, of which she says:

The word critique, finally and most importantly, stands in a twofold opposition to dogmatic metaphysics on the one hand, to skepticism on the other. The answer to both was: Critical thinking. Succumb

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<sup>1</sup> As Derrida notes, the judgement of taste is disinterested, but not indifferent. (Derrida, 1987, p. 44.)

<sup>2</sup> Beech in Beech (ed.), 2009, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> These lectures were first given at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1970.



to neither. As such, it is a new way of thinking and not a mere preparation for a new doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

Critique itself, then, does not for Arendt concern a declarative telos, but a plurality: 'Critical thinking is possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection.'<sup>5</sup> In her reading of Kant, Arendt de-privileges the internality of the *sensus communis*, emphasizing its relation to public life: 'One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one's community sense, one's *sensus communis*.'<sup>6</sup> For Arendt, the *sensus communis* shows one how to take others into account, though it does not 'tell one how to combine with them in order to act,'<sup>7</sup> whereas in Kant's account he navigates a path between public and individual:

...by the name *sensus communis* is to be understood the idea of a *public* sense, i.e. a faculty of judging which in its reflective act takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, *as it were*, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind... This is accomplished by weighing the judgement, not so much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgements of others, and by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else.<sup>8</sup>

What Kant insists upon here is an idea of community grounded in individual perception; the *sensus communis* is *a priori* insofar as it does not account for the actual judgements of everyone else, but produces a feeling in the individual corresponding to a sense of weighing one's judgement against that of everyone else. It constitutes a resonance produced by the swinging into free play of the cognitive faculties that corresponds to a social sense of harmony, producing a subjective sense of universal validity. As Jean-François Lyotard has put it, 'the term "subjective" forces the critique to question what thinking feels when it thinks.'<sup>9</sup> This experience occurs at the moment that Kant would call a judgement of taste, and is one sense in which aesthetic judgement might be thought of as being attached to the ethics of the individual: one measures one's position against an internal notion of community, in which one in turn has an absolute stake. The judgement of taste is, for Kant, the 'go-between' between ethics and knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt, 1992, p. 32.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Lyotard, 1994, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> As discussed by Lyotard in his essay 'Sensus Communis.' (1992, p. 7.)

Lyotard, *contra* Arendt, explicitly rejects any public dimension to the *sensus communis*, considering that it constitutes a resonance originating in a euphony 'which most assuredly can "take place," as the phrase goes, on occasion, between faculties each endowed with their own timbre,'<sup>11</sup> and which 'is certainly not to be observed in experience.'<sup>12</sup> For Lyotard, 'what is given voice in taste is the division of the subject as a division acc(h)orded for one moment, called together in convocation.'<sup>13</sup> The *communis* for Lyotard is not between members of a public, but between one's cognitive faculties. He does not discuss the *sensus communis* in terms of what might follow, or what social effect it might have. As Lyotard sees it, the experience of a beautiful form is an occasion for a 'small happiness' that exists only for itself, and moves towards nothing.<sup>14</sup> This account is to my mind complicated by Kant's distinction between art and nature:

It is imperative at the outset to accurately determine the difference between beauty of nature, which it only requires taste to judge, and beauty of art, which requires genius for its possibility (a possibility to which regard must also be paid in judging such an object). A beauty of nature is a *beautiful thing*; beauty of art is a *beautiful representation* of a thing.<sup>15</sup>

If the experience of beauty *per se* is as hermetic as Lyotard claims, such a distinction could not exist, since it is predicated on a connection to the world. Additionally, the passage from beauty to critique, as outlined by Kant, exists in contradistinction to Lyotard's hermetic conception of the *sensus communis* that moves towards nothing:

The judgement of taste by which something is declared beautiful must have no interest *as its determining ground*. But it does not follow from this that after it has once been posited as a pure aesthetic judgement, an interest cannot then enter into combination with it.<sup>16</sup>

In *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1994) Lyotard affirms Kant's basic claim that beauty, in the moment of aesthetic judgement, has no end but itself. This absence of end, however, is nuanced: the aesthetic idea appended to the beauty of art, though not an end, constitutes 'a representation of the imagination, allied with a given concept'<sup>17</sup> that can be apprehended by means of analogy, which

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<sup>11</sup> Lyotard, 1992, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 140.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

‘transforms, commutes, a given by making it jump from one realm of legislation or one territory of legitimacy to another.’<sup>18</sup> This process is called hypotyposis. Lyotard argues that the *sensus communis* is itself a hypotyposis, ‘a sensible analogy of the transcendental euphony of the faculties.’<sup>19</sup> Extending Lyotard’s account of hypotyposis to other aspects of his argument, it might be understood as a lifeline offered to the hermeticism of his *sensus communis*. Although in his reading the euphony of the faculties might move towards nothing, that does not preclude the possibility of its containment finding a connection by making a leap into another territory of legitimacy.

I am in agreement with Lyotard in questioning whether the *sensus communis* can be thought of as the basis for a politics *per se*. I would not, however, go so far as to claim that the *idea* of the public inhering in the *sensus communis* can have no bearing on one’s sense of oneself as a member of an actual community. On the other side of this internal–external debate, one can see towards the end of Arendt’s lectures that she is puzzling over the internal nature of taste and how it can ultimately be reconciled with the political. In my opinion it cannot – the *sensus communis* is an internal sense pertaining to a speculative notion of community. This does not, however, preclude the possibility of aesthetic experience producing a reflective distance for the viewer, enabling a renewed contemplation of a given context (political or not) and her own position within it. What springs from the *sensus communis* does not constitute political participation, but it can change one’s sense of oneself in the world. As Jacques Rancière has written: ‘The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets.’<sup>20</sup>

Something that becomes apparent in this discussion is a recurrent use of Kantian aesthetics as a sort of parameter, a pillar to be pushed against towards one’s own ends: an engagement that has recurred since Kant published the *Critique of Judgement* in 1790. This is one way in which Kant has, perhaps unwittingly, propelled an extensive and ongoing critical discourse.

Ultimately, I see value in both Arendt’s and Lyotard’s positioning of the *sensus communis*, but embrace neither wholly. In another context Lyotard has written ‘Only the critique has access to the demand to be communicable inherent in the feeling of the beautiful.’<sup>21</sup> To bring this claim together with Arendt’s insistence

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<sup>18</sup> Lyotard, 1994, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Lyotard, 1992, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Rancière, 2007a, p. 277.

<sup>21</sup> Lyotard, 1994, p. 62.

on the plurality of critique (in spite of their differences), one arrives at the proposition that the sense of universal communicability attached to a judgement of taste is only to be accessed by critique, which is to say, by that which demands plurality, a platform upon which all positions might be recognised. Seen in this way the judgement of taste can readily be situated in contradistinction to juridical judgement (the verdict): the judgement of taste does not constitute an end, but a critical opening out.

If aesthetic critique demands plurality, it also raises questions about truth, a subject addressed by Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) in which he wrote: 'The truth content of artworks is fused with their critical content. That is why works are also critics of one another. This, not the historical continuity of their dependencies, binds artworks to one another.'<sup>22</sup> In referring to truth content here, Adorno does not mean an empirical notion of truth that has, for many critical undertakings, supplanted a more complex conception of truth as it relates to critique:

If a work opens itself completely, it reveals itself as a question and demands reflection; then the work vanishes into the distance, only to return to those who thought they understood it, overwhelming them for a second time with the question 'What is it?'<sup>23</sup>

Bruce Hainley echoes this sentiment: 'The form is the object questioning its own disappearance as object. It is not the result of the reply to the question. It is the question, the question endlessly being asked.'<sup>24</sup> It might be said then, that form is that which produces a critical engagement with content, that form gives rise to the aporia of aesthetic judgement, and that the opening out of meaning occurs when content is ensnared in this process.

The truth that is the work of critique, if it is art's truth content, is not about rational conclusion, but about the comprehension of an artwork as a complex outside rational or empirical knowledge: 'The knowledge of artworks is guided by their own cognitive constitution: They are the form of knowledge that is not knowledge of an object. This paradox is also the paradox of artistic experience. Its medium is the obviousness of the incomprehensible.'<sup>25</sup> There is a sense of fatigue around a particular idea of criticality that takes empirical understanding as its end, which would more correctly be termed critical dogmatism than

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<sup>22</sup> Adorno, 1998, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>24</sup> Hainley, 2011, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 347.

criticality *per se*. Criticality, like judgement, is not of necessity tied to determination, but can constitute an enquiry, an opening onto a plurality, even as it moves towards truth content. Just as criticality has in some circumstances been saddled with a dogmatic notion of truth that yearns to be integrated, painting was once tied to an empirical notion of truth, as a medium with representation as its *raison d'être*. That a symbiosis exists between painting and representational truth has long since ceased to be arguable. However, the remnant debris of this detachment still constitutes a fertile ground in which a painter might dig around for conceptual possibilities.<sup>26</sup>

The distinction between empirical truth and the truth that is the teleology of critique did not originate with Adorno, but was articulated by Kant: 'the dogmatic treatment of a concept is treatment which is authoritative for determining judgement: the critical treatment is such as is authoritative merely for reflective judgement.'<sup>27</sup> Here Kant is distinguishing criticality from dogmatism insofar as criticality does not undertake 'to decide anything as to its object.'<sup>28</sup> Reflective judgement is based only on subjective principles. How, then, might the critique that follows it be situated? Staked in subjectivity, certainly more so than in any empirical notion of truth, its truth is one that admits of incomprehensibility, indeed that is predicated on incomprehensibility as a sign of truth beyond apprehension. As Adorno has written: 'incomprehensibility persists as the character of art, and it alone protects the philosophy of art from doing violence to art.'<sup>29</sup>

If we consider aesthetic judgement as an opening out, and situate it in relation to painting, or more particularly to the sort of slippery, gestural rendering of content to which painting is predisposed, we might think of it as a reflective encounter between the opening out of critique and the opening out of content at the hands of painterly form, in which distance is also inscribed.<sup>30</sup> Is it too much

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<sup>26</sup> Achim Hochdörfer has written: 'The repressed paradoxes and contingencies of painting's history—its phantasms—become the preconditions for the development of new images. When one is faced with a work by Koether, Wool, Sillman, or Smith, the question of the end of painting becomes obsolete, since these artists have integrated the very implications and consequences of doomsday scenarios into a more comprehensive concept of the image.' (Hochdörfer, 2009, p. 159.)

<sup>27</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 223.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, 1998, p. 347.

<sup>30</sup> I claim this inscription through my own experience of painting, and observing others as they paint: the process of working at the surface of the painting, then stepping back to contemplate its aesthetic readability, coding distance into the painting's materiality, is a common procedure for painters. Its repetition throughout the process inscribes bodily distance. Paintings, in the more traditional sense, are not by their material nature participatory. The viewer stands back from them, is not supposed to touch their surface, or even get too close.

to suggest that this is enough, that painting does not require a politics, only the ability to assume a distance from one and from thence to reflect openly upon it?

My interest in the *sensus communis* does not amount to an argument that beautiful paintings make people feel like they are part of a community. I do believe, though, that an experience of formal beauty gives a viewer a sort of metacognitive stake in what they are looking at.

To accept beauty as a moment of experience free from contingency does not mean that this freedom carries forth beyond the *a priori*. I would argue that the experience of beauty in art always sends one back into contingency, to engage anew upon returning. In the process, the *sensus communis* opens one to an investment in the world.

In Kant's terms, a mechanical artwork, having an end in a concept, is not possessed of the idealism of purposiveness without purpose, and as such is not connected to the *sensus communis*. In turn conceptual art (if we accept that it is art that exists in the service of a concept) is not metaphysically predisposed to community formation in the way that aesthetic art (art that exists in the service of visual experience) is. I propose painting as a site (though not to say the only site) where these two modes can meet: where a viewer might meet a painting aesthetically, and then in the return to the empirical might find the aesthetic experience resituated as part of a conceptual process. In this operation one connects to, and is then detached from, the *sensus communis*, made to feel a part of something and alien to it as two parts of the same process; being set at a distance from content whilst being given another way to contemplate it. As a formalisation of critical reflection that can be situated in relation to context, Kant's conception of the *sensus communis* persists for painting.

In his introduction to *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983) Hal Foster denounces aesthetic experience because as he understands it, it 'exists apart, without "purpose," all but beyond history.'<sup>31</sup> Here Foster assumes an absolute disconnection between aesthetic experience and criticality that is, as I have sought to argue here, a falsehood. In his essay *Semblance According to Richter* (2003) Foster takes the idea of beauty being 'beyond history' as a given, and from that point attempts to conceive of a reconnection of beauty to the world. He writes: 'As many have argued, such aesthetics [referring to Kant, Stendhal and Friedrich Schiller] represent a classic instance of bourgeois displacement: to find reconciliation in art and to play down its possibility elsewhere—in social justice, for example, or sexual

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<sup>31</sup> Foster, 1983, p. xv.

equality.<sup>32</sup> ‘Such reconciliation,’ he goes on to say, ‘is not possible for postwar artists like Richter.’<sup>33</sup> At the outset, the insular ‘reconciliation’ invoked by Foster disavows any relation between beauty and critique. Regarding Kant, Foster begins by stating the obvious, that beauty is the point of mediation between pure and practical reason, and then appends to this the claim that it also reconciles ‘judgements of value and judgements of fact.’ It is not clear what Foster means here by ‘judgements of fact,’ given that he earlier claimed that the reconciliation found in art is, by definition, divorced from the world. Foster’s comment that ‘Richter’s is a beauty no longer opposed to the sublime’ suggests a pedestrian understanding of beauty as a philosophical concept.<sup>34</sup> Beauty is not opposed to the sublime for Kant; it is simply structurally different. Other than the division of the *Critique of Judgement* into the Analytic of the Beautiful and the Analytic of the Sublime, there is no binary to be found between beauty and the sublime in Kant’s thought. Indeed Foster seems to miss the complex schematic nature of Kantian critique generally, conflating structure, content and form, and makes a rather ham-fisted attempt to insert ‘the world’ into the *structure* of the beautiful by speaking of a ‘wounded beauty.’<sup>35</sup> For Kant, this is already precisely what art can do with beauty – to produce beautiful representations of horrible things, one way in which ‘this kind of aesthetics’ can and does treat of content, and refers out to the world, though the *a priori* experience thereof may be ‘without purpose.’ This is an idea previously outlined by Aristotle: ‘Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies.’<sup>36</sup>

Rancière, *contra* Foster, sees truth as enabling a connection between beauty and criticality to persist today: ‘the ordinary becomes beautiful as a trace of the true. And the ordinary becomes a trace of the true if it is torn from its obviousness in order to become a hieroglyph, a mythological or phantasmagoric figure.’<sup>37</sup> Rancière considers that ‘artistic practices are “ways of doing and making” that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making,’ and therefore have the agency to redistribute the sensible,<sup>38</sup> a position that Foster undertook to critique in a 2013 essay for the *London Review of Books*, in which he writes: ‘At

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<sup>32</sup> Foster, 2003, p. 175.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted from Butcher (trans.), 2000, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Rancière, 2009c, p. 34. Rancière’s conception of beauty here is one that accounts for the mechanism of contextual displacement that has become central to the production of meaning in art since the readymade.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

least for the time being, any redistribution of the sensible through contemporary art is a mirage and, when pitted against the capitalist “transformation of things into signs,” it is little more than the opiate of the artworld left.<sup>39</sup> This is perhaps best considered within a framework offered by Beech, who flags not beauty *per se*, but the controversy surrounding beauty today as a productive space, where the relation of subject and society might be engaged in all its complexity. For Beech possibility is sited not in the gap between spectator and actor, but in the milieu within which this binary is situated.

In *The Power of Judgment* (2010), Christoph Menke outlines the performative aspect of judgement insofar as it shapes the ‘public status of an object’, the possibilities of future actions, and, in turn, the formation of community.<sup>40</sup> In addressing aesthetic judgement specifically, Menke accentuates the importance of its internal contradictions. He embraces a complex and interconnected approach to aesthetic experience, and in doing so falls into step with Adorno’s premise that ‘the unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form’ – that truths are more likely to emerge when limitations are struck and fields of ambiguity opened up than in the realm of conscious modes of representation and apprehension.<sup>41</sup> Menke conceives of aesthetic critique as judgement that stands outside itself, that does not settle into finality but must continue to interrogate its own position: ‘Aesthetic critique is the aesthetic praxis of judgment that is simultaneously a questioning of judgment itself.’<sup>42</sup>

In speaking of the aporia, Menke argues that the judgement must face its own lack of finality in order to produce a generative space: ‘The aesthetic critique instead does not judge judgment, but exhibits its structural impossibility.’<sup>43</sup> Menke calls upon Adorno’s definition of art as consisting in ‘making things that one doesn’t know.’<sup>44</sup> This is not to suggest that art-making is not (or cannot be) an intellectually engaged activity; it is, rather, a point at which Menke uptakes a Kantian definition of art: ‘To art that alone belongs for which the possession of the most complete knowledge does not involve one’s having then and there the skill to do it.’<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Foster, 2013, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Menke, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Adorno, 1998, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Menke, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 133.



What Menke seems to be doing in *The Power of Judgment*, as I read it, is tentatively re-inserting Kantian aesthetics into a contemporary art context, though Kant's presence is as phantom-like as it is pervasive: the book's title rubs up against *The Critique of Judgment*, but no explicit mention of Kant is made throughout, with the exception of one footnote that directs the reader to Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Menke draws upon an art-knowledge distinction for his argument that parallels Kant's distinction between art and science: 'what one *can* do the moment one only *knows* what is to be done, hence without anything more than sufficient knowledge of the desired result, is not called art.'<sup>46</sup> (Kant's italics.) Which is to say, if it can be produced by following instructions, it is not art. It is not that art is bereft of knowledge; rather that the production of art requires something *more* than knowledge and so, in the case of aesthetic experience, does its reception. Though much of what Menke says can be understood as a restatement of Kantian aesthetic principles, he couches his argument in contemporary terms. Revealing his Nietzschean underpinnings, Menke uses 'force' where Kant might talk of the 'free play of the faculties', which accounts for this 'free play' constituting a forcible rendering of the faculties into an awareness of one another's functioning ('the faculties' in this context being the cognitive faculties of understanding and imagination).

In her response essay, Isabelle Graw addresses the problem of aesthetic judgement from her position as a critic. She highlights the reluctance, on the part of many contemporary art critics, to engage in judgement. Graw points out the absence of radical doubt from Greenberg's position *vis-à-vis* aesthetic judgement, and from thence argues that Menke's position also elides doubt. If we accept a Kantian conception of aesthetics, Graw's position cannot be valid for the experience of beauty because it is not derived from *a priori* foundations, though it can certainly be a factor in the economy of judgements as such, including aesthetic judgements that pertain to agreeable or mechanical art. As I proposed earlier, fine, mechanical and agreeable art need not be understood as mutually exclusive categories, in turn complicating the conception of aesthetic experience as a system of privilege. Painting is particularly well disposed to the situation of such a plurality, being able to offer an experience of beauty that exists alongside, or is pushed back towards, or collapses into a concept, or a moment of doubt, a strategy often deployed by Martin Kippenberger in his paintings, as I will later discuss.

Graw also questions the subjective as a basis for judgement, an objection that arises from her grounding in social art history. I am in agreement with Graw's

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

foregrounding of social context as a means of situating art, but I am with Kant in considering that context attends, rather than precludes or integrates into, the aesthetic experience of art, and that this is a condition under which the aesthetic experience is able to play an important role in imbuing the contextually specific (or in Kant's term 'interested') reading with gravitas.

Gilles Deleuze's account of aesthetic judgement sits in distinct opposition to Menke's. In Deleuze's account, aesthetic judgement is understood as a 'fantastic subjective tribunal'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Menke makes a direct address to Deleuze: 'the aim of the aesthetic critique of judgment is not (in Deleuze's formula) "to have done with judgment." For to hope for an end of judgment would presuppose a judgment about judgment: the "critical" judgment that judgment is bad and should and can be left behind.'<sup>48</sup> Where Deleuze sees an implicit force that obliges others to accept a judgement, Menke sees the act of aesthetic judgement in particular as a mode that self-questions as it declares. In the concluding paragraph of *To Have Done with Judgment* (1998)<sup>49</sup> Deleuze writes: 'It is not a question of judging other existing beings, but of sensing whether they agree or disagree with us, that is, whether they bring forces to us.'<sup>50</sup> I object to this binary on the basis that the 'sensing' which Deleuze posits against judgement in fact describes the very means by which aesthetic judgement holds possibility, as the site where the *sensus communis* emerges to produce an aporia. It is interesting that Deleuze uses 'force' in a social sense where Menke uses it in an internal sense, resonating structurally with the difference between Arendt's *sensus communis* and Lyotard's.

Pierre Bourdieu levelled a sociological critique at judgements of taste in *Distinction* (1984), seeing Kant's formulation thereof as absolutist and bourgeois.<sup>51</sup> As Bourdieu sees it, Kant reifies aesthetic judgement, creating a realm of privilege distinct from the 'vulgar' aesthetic codification that might already inhere in a given form. The aesthetic disposition is positioned in Bourdieu's text as *aptitude*. He seeks to point out the exclusivity of aesthetic judgement in its apparent demand for acquired knowledge, taking Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* as an example which he compares to Gino Severini's *Dynamic Heiroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin*, arguing that Mondrian's painting comes off looking more in

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<sup>47</sup> Deleuze, 1998, p. 126.

<sup>48</sup> Menke, 2010, p. 23.

<sup>49</sup> First published in French in 1993.

<sup>50</sup> Deleuze, 1998, p. 135.

<sup>51</sup> First published in French in 1979.

league with the first *Brandenburg Concerto* than with modern jazz.<sup>52</sup> The type of judgement that Bourdieu describes is not, in my view, a judgement of taste, being snobbishly predicated on the opinions of others rather than derived from the play of one's own faculties.

What Bourdieu does open up, which is of importance here, is the question of context. His description of works of art 'assembled in museums and galleries, where the diversity of their original functions is neutralised by their being displayed in a place consecrated to art, so that they invite pure interest in form'<sup>53</sup> lends its voice to what was at the time a mounting criticism of the white cube as a neutral, detached space; the spatial accompaniment to aesthetics, at which a like charge was levelled.<sup>54</sup>

In opposition to the aesthetic judgement, Bourdieu describes 'the space of the positions and self-positionings constituting the field and within which the artistic intention of the artist in question has defined itself' (i.e. its context) as something one discerns with *genuinely scientific intention*.<sup>55</sup> To posit context as scientifically discernible suggests an explicitly analytic approach, which is to say, Bourdieu sought to make a science of determining the sociological outcomes of the specifically aesthetic appreciation of form. Bourdieu's position can in a sense be understood as a reaction against formalism, his materialist project of outlining cause-and-effect having 'nothing in common with the transhistorical oppositions beloved of formalist aesthetics.'<sup>56</sup>

Bourdieu critiques Kant's conception of taste as a mechanism for producing social boundaries. For Kant however, such an effect is residual to the experience of subjective universality, and as such is not included in his formulation of judgements of taste; a social outcome is not implicit to the structure of aesthetic judgement. Kant's system does not dictate empirical conditions, and the judgement of taste being wielded, in a specific societal context, for the production of power, is an empirical circumstance.<sup>57</sup> It is here that we find a weakness in Kant's system, for its structure must of necessity exclude contingency. This is not to say that Kantian aesthetic theory cannot be applied to contingent circumstances;

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<sup>52</sup> Bourdieu, 1984, p. 50.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>54</sup> Bourdieu's critique of the museum here resonates with Hickey's, one difference being that Bourdieu's critique is situated in the context of a broader sociological analysis, whereas Hickey's descends into a catty implied critique of the American art-world.

<sup>55</sup> Bourdieu, 1984, p. 52.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> For which, in another context, he might be criticised as weak in his formulation of the empirical.

only that it cannot *account* for those circumstances. Kant makes the following 'explanatory digression' in the *Critique of Judgement*: 'a derivation *a priori* of the particular from the universal laws in point of their contingent content is not possible by any defining of the concept of the object.'<sup>58</sup> Which is to say, there is a disconnection between contingency and concept. From a philosophical viewpoint this might constitute grounds for dismissal, but from an artist's point of view I see it as a space of possibility, where a fixed conceptual structure might cleave to contextual specificity without absorbing it.

Subsequent to Bourdieu's critique (whether or not a causative link can be claimed) an emphasis on context has come to the fore with regard to the presentation of art, obviated in the rise of institutional critique and the site-specific biennale. In such settings there is an impetus to either create work that addresses a localised context, yet is able to be repurposed in order to be resituated and readable in a global one, or to produce work that is evacuated of all contextual specificity. An accusation commonly levelled at the first approach is that it aestheticises the plights of others, motivated before anything else by the desire to produce Political Art. The second approach is criticised for assuming an arrogant distance from the world, complying with Foster's idea of beauty. The aesthetic comes off badly in both equations. One alternative is to articulate a critical aesthetic strategy that refuses both of these paths by insisting at once on contextual specificity and representational ambiguity.

To return to the subject of the *sensus communis*, it arguably takes on a new importance in what we might call a semiocapitalist context, where one can find a contrast to it in the consensus produced by 'likes' and 'shares' in the spaces of social media. Social networking can be thought of as producing a mode of community formation in which the individual is divested of moral responsibility, asking that one contribute an impulsive and often reactionary opinion, rather than one that emerges from an internal euphony that corresponds to an idea of a community. As Kant has written:

Every judgement which is to show the taste of the individual, is required to be an independent judgement of the individual in question. There must be no need of groping about among other people's judgements and getting previous instruction from their delight in or aversion to the same object.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 232.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

I would call the attempt to render tangible a universal field of opinions not a *sensus communis* but a *tractus communis* in the sense of a common extraction, community having been extracted from subjectivity through the collection of a mass of contingent judgements. This constitutes an active erosion of subjective universality as it underpins an idea of community and, in detaching one's sense of community from one's sense of self, erodes the ground of criticality. This schematisation might be thought of as underpinning the burgeoning of post-criticality. The sense of responsibility towards a notion of community is replaced with responsibility for the crafting of one's own virtual presence, and the virtual representation of real-world communities; subjectivity and universality are separated out from one another. This amassing of contingent judgements takes its rule from a market research paradigm. (As Twitter's chief lawyer Alexander Macgillivray has commented, Twitter will defend free speech: not for the sake of a principle, but because it gives the company a *competitive advantage*.)<sup>60</sup> It is against the backdrop of this paradigm shift that I am moved to argue for a means by which art, and painting more specifically, might retain a critical position that does not seek to render universal validity in empirical terms, but recognises the role that *a priori* universality might play for criticality. This entails an embrace of aesthetic criticality as an open position of refusal rather than a dogmatic pursuit of rational conclusion. In this way art might call attention to political ideas without falling prey to didacticism, or becoming a demonstration of its own inefficacy as art that seeks to engage in politics so often does.

At a symposium entitled *Art and Subjecthood* held in 2011 at the Institut für Kunstkritik in Frankfurt, Michael Sanchez described the 'rapid feedback loops' set in motion between art production and reception via the website *Contemporary Art Daily*, 'whose agency can be attributed back, recursively, only to the system itself—a form of automated magical thinking which a systems theorist would have described as autotelic.'<sup>61</sup> Sanchez argues that *Contemporary Art Daily* supplants the experience of exhibitions in the real, the interaction between artwork and spectator shifting to one between nodes in a network. Attendant to this is a dismantling of the subject-object dichotomy, a condition thus emerging under which subject and object circulate as ostensibly equal agents in a network. There is a resonance between this formulation and what is termed a 'flattening of the ontological field', a de-privileging of the human subject that has emerged as part

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<sup>60</sup> See Somini Sengupta, 'Twitter's Free Speech Defender' in *The New York Times* online, 2 September 2012, (accessed 06/09/12).

<sup>61</sup> Sanchez, 2011, p. 61.

of a recent trend towards post-anthropocentric conceptions of ontology.<sup>62</sup> I will borrow a line from Schopenhauer's critique of materialism here to describe this move as 'the philosophy of the subject who forgets to take account of himself.'<sup>63</sup>

My question with regard to the flattened ontological field is threefold: firstly, whether art can or should take up this post-anthropocentric condition and in so doing seek to position itself outside human subjectivity; secondly, whether the call for art to move beyond human subjectivity, and in turn beyond criticality, is essentially just another wave of reactionary avant-gardism; and thirdly, whether the criticality of aesthetic experience in the Kantian sense—predicated on the subjective universality of the *sensus communis*—might persist alongside, or as a foil to, the uptake of this position by art. To begin with I would argue that post-anthropocentric intersubjectivity might be understood as aiming for universal *applicability* rather than the *a priori* universal validity of aesthetic judgement. Whilst I want to be clear that I do not object to the thinking of being beyond anthropocentric conceptions, I do not consider that this in turn renders all anthropocentric modes of thought obsolete.

The artwork for Kant is that by which aesthetic ideas are given sensible form, aesthetic reflection being the process by which a mind encounters, through an engagement with form, ideas 'lying out beyond the confines of experience.'<sup>64</sup> It is in this way that, as Alain Badiou claims, art sits in an enigmatic relation to ontology. To align art with a post-anthropocentric ontology, then, would not only divest it of criticality by negating the function of subjective universality, but would collapse the reflective distance that enables art to move beyond rational knowledge. It is timely that the Kantian question of universal validity in particular should resurface at a moment when network theory is so radically altering the landscape of communication and consensus.

As Magdalena Nieslony commented in her response to Sanchez, 'it is telling that you speak about the circulation and networking of *images* rather than actual art objects themselves... In your account the objects seem dispensable for the functioning of the network, whereas they actually stay alien to it and cannot be completely absorbed by it.'<sup>65</sup> As art's spotlight shifts away from objecthood to the represented object's role as a mobile agent in a network, is a space then made

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<sup>62</sup> Sourced from the website for *The Matter of Contradiction*, a series of seminars organised by Fabien Giraud, Sam Basu, Tom Trevatt and Ida Soulard in France, 2012.

<sup>63</sup> Schopenhauer, 1966, vol. II, p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 143.

<sup>65</sup> Nieslony, 2011 p. 63.

available for a reconsideration of critical possibility as inherently material? Indeed, might criticality be situated more so than ever in the experience of material form? One might argue that painting, as a two-dimensional medium, is already predisposed to the condition of virtual circulation, though I would object that the experience of a painting is never the same as the experience of its reproduction.<sup>66</sup>

The embrace of the critical spectator as outside political action, but invested in a sense of community, becomes a bridge arching over the involuted waters of aesthetic experience, to address the question of how we might think about the criticality of painting today. The relation between actor and spectator is not a clean binary, though I would argue that for art it is a manifest one, that plays out in the positing of participatory practices against artworks that invite a reflective aesthetic experience, or what Menke identifies as a distinction between force and capacity.<sup>67</sup> The thinking underpinning this book has led me to dig deeper into critical distance, and ultimately, as concerns my own practice, to insist upon it, rather than attempting to bring painting off the wall and extend it into a participatory realm. This is attended by a clear sense that painting does not constitute a political act as such either in its production or its reception, but that it can offer distance from the established narrative, and can open one to new ways of contemplating the world.

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<sup>66</sup> There is a significant question for art today in whether the purposiveness of form particular to a work of art can be experienced via internet documentation, or whether the framing of the artwork for circulation constitutes an interest or an end that reduces the documentation of artwork to a dependent form of beauty.

<sup>67</sup> Menke, 2010, p. 9.



[Plate 1]  
*After Image. That is No Man*  
2010

Juan Davila  
Oil on canvas  
200 x 280 cm

© Juan Davila, Courtesy  
Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art,  
Melbourne





## Stopping Short

Kant's specific address to the symbol is a minor aspect of his aesthetic theory, taking up a single page of the *Critique of Judgement*.<sup>1</sup> In it, Kant describes the symbol as that which contains an indirect presentation of a concept.<sup>2</sup> As Fiona Hughes has written: 'Making a concept sensible is called "hypotyposis" and is either schematic, where knowledge arises, or symbolic, where an intuition stands for an idea without ever being determined by it.'<sup>3</sup> The aesthetic idea, constituting an indeterminate opening out, falls into the category of symbolic hypotyposis. In the same passage Hughes describes reflective judgement as being exercised 'as if' it were going to provide an explanation, yet it stops short of a conclusion and only a broadened way of thinking about a sensory perception results.<sup>4</sup> This suggests an understanding of the aesthetic idea as at once an opening out, being a symbolic hypotyposis, and a stopping short of conceptual resolution. David Carroll would have us understand the 'idea' in this schematic as a space of refuge for the analytic mind: 'Kant makes "being hostage" to the unrepresentable bearable, so to speak, by regulating its non-determined, "subjective," characteristics in terms of an Idea.'<sup>5</sup> For a mind less in need of framing devices, this extension towards the unrepresentable is where some interest lies. The aesthetic idea constitutes an indeterminate intuition that gestures toward the concept it seeks, and ultimately fails, to make sensible: a simultaneous trying and failing. Understood in this way, the symbolic presentation serves as a constructive means for thinking

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<sup>1</sup> See Kant, 2007b, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> Kant places this in opposition to the schematic, which offers a direct presentation of a concept. He considers that the intuitive mode of knowledge can be divided into the symbolic and the schematic, and in opposition to this intuitive mode he places the discursive. (Kant, 2007b, p. 179.)

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, 2010, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Carroll, 1987, p. 174.

failure as an aesthetic strategy, acknowledging unrepresentability whilst opening one's mind to a more complex engagement with what is being gestured towards; the moment of failure might reveal something about the structure within which it fails that would otherwise be unable to be perceived.<sup>6</sup>

For Kant, the aesthetic idea is 'a representation of the imagination, allied with a given concept, with which, in the free employment of imagination, such a multiplicity of partial representations are bound up, that no expression indicating a definite concept can be found for it.'<sup>7</sup> The aesthetic idea attaches specifically to fine art for Kant, giving an artwork attributes of the idea to which it pertains. In Kant's example, 'Jupiter's eagle, with the lightning in its claws' is an attribute of the 'mighty king of heaven.'<sup>8</sup> An aesthetic idea is not a concept of the understanding as such, nor does it constitute an end. It might be thought of as a billowing out within aesthetic experience that takes one's cognition to the edges of reason 'without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. concept, being adequate to it.'<sup>9</sup> As a cognitive experience without an end in a concept, it might also be thought to constitute an expansive 'not knowing.'

The ability to *produce* this ineffability, insofar as it is unable to be taught or learnt, attaches directly to genius for Kant, which he defines as 'a *talent* for producing that for which no definite rule can be given.'<sup>10</sup> Art historical debates around the problems of genius are deep and ongoing, and there is not room enough here to address them in great depth, though I will address the function of genius in relation to the ideas under discussion. The problems that arise around genius are, I would argue, more to do with the way it is situated than with the actual processes thereof. Genius did not always attach to originality. It shares etymological roots with both 'generate' and 'engender.'<sup>11</sup> In its Latin usage, genius acts as a basic determinate for one's character: everyone is born with it.<sup>12</sup> In the 18th century it migrated from meaning one's 'guiding spirit' to the ability to invent and finally, with Kant, settled into artistic creativity.<sup>13</sup> For Kant, genius is essentially the engine for the aesthetic idea:

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler has written: 'When a work of art no longer works as semblance, it becomes paralysed as a kind of 'truth,' distinct from beauty and its life.' (Butler, 2008, p. 63.) The truth Butler is referring to here is the empirical truth of understanding, that closes off the possibilities of meaning.

<sup>7</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 142-143.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>11</sup> Bruno, 2010, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

...the imagination here displays a creative activity, and it sets the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into movement—a movement, occasioned by a representation, towards an extension of thought, that, while germane, no doubt, to the concept of the object, exceeds what can be grasped in that representation or clearly expressed.<sup>14</sup>

Genius for Kant pertains exclusively to the ability to imbue artworks with aesthetic ideas, a function he makes a point of separating from ‘an aping of *peculiarity* (originality) in general, for the sake of distancing oneself as far as possible from imitators, while the talent requisite to enable one to be at the same time *exemplary* is absent.’<sup>15</sup> This sentence could be applied to any number of post-conceptual painting practices, such as those of Christopher Wool or Michael Krebber, for whom originality lies not in producing exemplary representations, but in generating materially embodied residues of reflexivity, works that perform themselves to demonstrate their self-awareness within specific systems. In this regard I would argue that originality operates well beyond the province of the Kantian understanding of genius today. Genius has become a remnant of originality: though perhaps it could once have been said that they existed in symbiosis, this has shifted with the emergence of the information age and its emphasis on how we manage information, rather than how we produce it. Attendant, the remit of the artist migrates away from production, toward recontextualisation and self-reflexivity. If genius can be said to exist in a contemporary art context, it is emphatically on the back foot, no longer dominating the progression of art. Perhaps, then, a repositioning of genius is timely, if it is to be understood in its essential form as the condition under which one might render material an intuition to which no concept can be adequate: that is to say, not by definition a grand, heroic condition, but a space for meaning outside rational thought.

With the readymade, Marcel Duchamp shifted the paradigm of artistic creation away from technical production, towards recontextualisation. Though still an aesthetic object, the readymade relocates the artist’s intuition away from technical production, to a space of identification and resituation. Thus we are no longer dealing with aesthetic ideas, and in turn no longer with genius.<sup>16</sup> This is the condition that led Thierry de Duve to propose ‘this is art’ in the place of ‘this is beautiful.’ Unlike de Duve I am not driven to solve this quandary; what is important to this argument is that though the readymade does not deal in genius, it nonetheless deals in originality. It can in turn be argued that Duchamp’s gal-

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<sup>14</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>16</sup> See Derrida’s chapter ‘The Parergon’ in *Truth in Painting*, 1987, for a discussion of the openness, or undecidability at the core of Kant’s aesthetics.

vanisation of a context-driven strategy for art was what split originality off from genius, and in turn from the aesthetic idea, dispersing it into new artistic modes. Released from the stigma of originality in this shift, perhaps genius is open for reconsideration.

In *Discursive Stupidity* Uwe Wirth offers some useful ideas to begin prising open the possibilities of how genius might be situated for art today.<sup>17</sup> Wirth writes: 'In view of the volatility of thought, genius and madness, comic stupidity and shrewd wisdom are in the immediate neighbourhood of one another.'<sup>18</sup> If we take up Wirth's positioning of genius we find that it is, as the engine of becoming, also the driver of wit, or of the joke.<sup>19</sup>

The ground for genius lies in the boldness of the anticipation. Indeed herein lies also the risk of failure. Since for Kant, the term 'genius' is synonymous with 'idiosyncratic mind,' and 'mind' and 'joke' are seen as a unit in the French '*esprit*,' one can with caution conclude that the 'idiosyncratic mind' of genius also has to be funny.<sup>20</sup>

Wirth draws upon the thought of Friedrich Schlegel, who writes that the imagination has the power 'to gather with rapid, bold flight to the highest level of thought, and then suddenly spring to the opposite position.'<sup>21</sup> In Wirth's reading, this sudden leap 'describes a form of ambivalence that, insofar as it perverts a thought into its opposite, produces either a sudden coherence or a sudden incoherence,' the former being an ingenious insight, and the latter stupidity or foolishness.<sup>22</sup> Both genius and stupidity, then, constitute a leap away from higher reason, and the line between the two is not a clean one. This connection to foolishness might be seen as a benefit for genius, a means by which to deprogram it from associations of heroism.

Kant, for his part, describes foolishness (*amentia*) as 'the inability to bring one's representations into even the coherence necessary for the possibility of experi-

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<sup>17</sup> Published in German as *Diskursive Dummheit*. No complete English translation of this book has been made.

<sup>18</sup> Author's own translation from Wirth, 1999, p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> The idea of genius as becoming can also be connected to Duchamp's repeated use of 'the passage' as an ever moving through, never arriving.

<sup>20</sup> Author's own translation from Wirth, 1999, p. 208.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207. (Quoting Schlegel, Friedrich - *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*. Band XIII, 1964, p. 296, E. Behler and H. Eichner [eds.], [München, Paderborn, Wien: Schöningh].)

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

ence.<sup>23</sup> One can see here a similarity between the functions of foolishness and the aesthetic idea, the latter of which is perhaps free from the perils of foolishness chiefly by virtue of never taking the possibility of experience as an end in the first place: it might be argued that both stupidity and the aesthetic idea try and fail to bring a moment of high intuition into coherence for empirical experience, the difference being that the aesthetic idea *knows that it must fail*, since it is structurally dependent upon maintaining unintelligibility. To propel the aesthetic idea towards coherency, then, is to propel it towards the structure of foolishness.

Attendant to this, it is important to note the distinction that Kant makes between genius and technical ability: 'Genius can do no more than furnish rich *material* for products of fine art; its elaboration and its *form* require a talent academically trained.'<sup>24</sup> One way to read this separation is to say that the absence of technical proficiency does not preclude the existence of an aesthetic idea in a form, indeed perhaps it might assist in preserving its unintelligibility on the passage towards experience. The artist does not produce beauty, but can only, through producing forms, seek to establish conditions conducive to its experience. To restate the cliché, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, rather than in the form itself. The aesthetic idea is precisely that which presents itself in the symbolic order, before language. Beauty, therefore, as the attendant to the aesthetic idea, does not rely on a mastery of technique, but on resistance of an end. There is no rule governing the relation between beauty, semblance and abstraction.

Genius for Kant is that which cannot be copied, though its manifestation is predicated upon the aesthetic reception of the artistic form as a form of nature. Immediately this suggests a tired insistence upon art's resemblance to nature, however where there is scope for this theory, in a contemporary context particularly, is around the question of what can actually constitute a 'natural' form. I would argue that the distinction Kant draws here is between the natural and that produced by human hand. The advent of mechanised production throws a spanner in the works of this relation, as it were; the question of what might constitute a 'natural' form for Kant today is not of necessity tied to what constitutes a form of nature. An additional complexity arises around the depiction of the symbolic, the felt and the implied; a representation of an implication, for instance, might still be understood as a 'naturalistic' representation. This brings us back to the question of the truth content of an artwork. Understood in relation to the aesthetic idea, one can see how truth content in no sense constitutes

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<sup>23</sup> Kant, 2007a, p. 320.

<sup>24</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 139.

a quantifiable, empirical truth, though I would argue that it can (and should) constitute the truth towards which critique must move.

In *An Uncertain Smile* (1996) Rex Butler situates his reading of Kantian aesthetics within a teleology that has understanding as its end, couching Kant's 'principle of formal purposiveness' in terms of 'things we do not *yet* understand' (my italics).<sup>25</sup> Butler imposes a very specific interpretative frame onto Kant's theory of art that in my view refuses, or seeks to resolve the ambiguity of purposiveness without purpose, unravelling this relation analytically with a view to arriving at a rational end which, I would argue, is precisely what Kant is seeking to think around. Butler sees the Kantian problematic of intentionality as an 'opening up and collapse of critical distance, the taking in of the audience's expectations and the turning of them against themselves.'<sup>26</sup> He considers that in the principle of reflective judgement, the intention of the artist is lost to the equation of experience, the spectator being 'torn between, on the one hand, having to assume a certain intentionality and meaning to the work of art and, on the other, thinking that it is only his own, or—what is the same thing—having to think that in the very match between his reading of the work and the work itself the real intention of the work is excluded.'<sup>27</sup>

Butler goes further in interrogating the question of intentionality than de Duve, who skirts around it to the extent of claiming that it is the museum that confers the name 'art'. For de Duve, art history is constituted as a set of juridical judgements. There is scarcely a place for the artist's intention or agency in his position, nor that of the viewer. (The proper name of art, however, is not what is at issue here.) Butler writes: 'With regard to the work of art, there is always an intentionality missing and an extra intentionality, and these are the same thing.'<sup>28</sup> Butler is alluding here to purposiveness without purpose, though he does not make specific reference to the aesthetic idea, which describes a space that accounts for this paradox of intentionality. Whilst I am in agreement with Butler that the space of aesthetic experience is not a space of understanding, I am, regarding painting in particular, for the persistence rather than the resolution of this aporetic space: the shift from aesthetic experience to cognition, and subsequent critical engagement, should not have to be thought of as a shift towards understanding as such. Perhaps it constitutes a shift towards articulation, but this can be the articulation of a question rather than of conclusive under-

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<sup>25</sup> Butler, 1996, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

standing; the shift stops short. I would argue that the problem of intentionality for art, as outlined by Butler, can be resituated to read as a stopping short of understanding that might at once create blockages and, in opening out, also give rise to questions. The aesthetic idea serves to redirect the viewer's cognitive engagement, rather than to furnish it with a terminus. Its role is to gesture towards an intention, expressly not to acquit it.

Stopping short of understanding is a means by which to avoid drawing a representation to a conclusion and thereby paralysing it. This translates naturally to the use of failure as a strategy for painting: through painting one can undertake to enact unrepresentability by handling content in such a way that the painting appears to pertain to a representation, but misses the mark, or offers a loose or fragmentary account, for instance. In this sense, failure functions not as a conceptual teleology, but as a strategy of form that operates on content.<sup>29</sup> This approach in one sense resonates with Michel Foucault's *Manet and the Object of Painting* (2009)<sup>30</sup> in which Foucault credits Edouard Manet as the first artist to radically deploy the conventions of light, space and the position of the viewer as 'systems of incompatibility' to reflexively refer to the material conditions of painting itself.<sup>31</sup> Foucault argues that in this way Manet was 'inventing, if you like, the "picture-object," the "painting-object,"'<sup>32</sup> what we might call the form of painting as such.

To take a step back and contemplate this in Kantian terms, it might be said that the symbol that is painting inheres in painting as such today, hovering latently in the reception of anything that goes by the name of painting, but stopping short of becoming painting itself.<sup>33</sup> As Adorno has written: 'If art opposes the empirical through the element of form—and the mediation of form and content is not to be grasped without their differentiation—the mediation is to be sought in the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content.'<sup>34</sup>

It is particularly pertinent to consider painting through this lens, given the great

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<sup>29</sup> This ties in with the moral function of art for Kant. As Guyer has written: 'Works of art are ... purposive for morality not merely by offering a general experience of freedom of the imagination which can symbolize moral freedom of the will, but also by illustrating specific moral conceptions yet still without surrendering the freedom of the imagination.' (Guyer, 1993, p. 159.)

<sup>30</sup> Transcribed from recordings of a paper delivered by Foucault in Tunis in 1971.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, 2009, p. 78.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>33</sup> This is a form in a metaphysical sense, rather than one that can be apprehended as a singular entity in space and time.

<sup>34</sup> Adorno, 1998, p. 5.



deal of historical loading it has sustained. Artists increasingly approach the broader conditions of painting not as limitations but as symbolic systems, sites of potential to be pushed against. One might think, for example, of Dierk Schmidt's contemporary approach to history painting that uses the 'vocabulary of abstract art to translate power relations into graphic forms,'<sup>35</sup> or of Jutta Koether wielding neo-expressionism as a conceptual weapon during her time in the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1992: 'The program was a hotbed of anti-painting theory in a city whose broader art community was itself arrayed against expressionist painting.'<sup>36</sup> As a site for the production of meaning, painting is a rich field of loadings, neuroses and suggestiveness that can be drawn out alongside aesthetic qualities to complicate the making of meaning, and in turn the possibilities for its reception. As Amy Sillman has commented, 'I love the idea of trying to fuck up the pure way that someone can receive your work as having one register.'<sup>37</sup>

In material terms, gesture serves the purpose of opening content out. When gesture meets the divergence of paint it becomes a ground of ambiguity. Jean-Luc Nancy has written of painting, a mediate space between gesture and closure, as singularly capable of formulating 'the entire structure and genesis of the subject'.<sup>38</sup>

On the one hand—presence in itself—closure in the work, the sovereign figure, the glorification of vision and the face; on the other—presence set outside itself—the gesture and the touch of painting, the figure gone astray, the look lost in the rhythm of its own capture.<sup>39</sup>

Applied to subject matter that resists an easy address or begs an open treatment, gesture offers a means to keep things open, or to unfix them. This oblique relation of gesture and meaning finds commonality with the silent language that found prominence in the Elizabethan court, a culture in which gesture was a crucial measure by which to avoid the perils of treasonous speech.<sup>40</sup> As Paul Crowther has written: 'all human gestures or perceptions are comparable in that they have meaning, i.e. refer beyond themselves, and are statements within the same syntax—embodiment.'<sup>41</sup> Mary Hazard has written of 'a chief attraction of

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<sup>35</sup> Bang Larsen, 2012, p. 117.

<sup>36</sup> Graw, 2006, p. 260.

<sup>37</sup> Sillman in Moss and Stakemeier (eds.), 2013, p. 108.

<sup>38</sup> Nancy, 2006, p. 246.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>40</sup> See Mary Hazard's *Elizabethan Silent Language* (2000).

<sup>41</sup> Crowther, 1993, p. 47.

silent language, its capacity for noncommittal expression, safe from the permanency of spoken or written word.<sup>42</sup>

What can we call the form of painting today? Can it be isolated from the status of painting, or the neuroses of painting? The symbol 'painting' has become so gravid that it is able to inhabit other materialities such that they are foremostly read as painting. As a painter today, one can consider the material, economic, social and theoretical complexities of painting as devices for producing meaning, in contradistinction to the post-modern strategy of seeking an ironic distance from painting as a problematic form, in the process positing it as something contained and static. On the question of what we mean when we talk about painting, Isabelle Graw has written:

Do we mean painting in the sense of a medium, a technique, a genre, a procedure, or an institution? As a way out of these semantic quandaries I will propose a less substantialist notion of painting: a form of production of signs that is experienced as highly personalized. This understanding of painting as a highly personalized semiotic activity has several advantages—it is less restrictive, allowing us to see how painting is at work in other art forms as well, and it is able to capture what is specific about painting's codes, gestures, and materiality.<sup>43</sup>

That painting can be seen to be 'at work in other forms' is partly due to the fact that much of what constitutes its sedimented content is derived from conditions in excess of its materiality. If the symbolic loadings of painting are to continue to be of critical use, I would argue that it is insofar as they remain capable of making an address beyond themselves. Seen in this way, painting is not about pushing the limits of the medium, but functions something more like a tide, inviting the viewer in to a point of shortcoming, then ejecting them back into their own specificity.

There is a tendency in contemporary painting to replace the modernist essentialisation of the medium with an ethos of innovation, a 'carving out of new territory' through the deconstruction and reconfiguration of painting's material limits.<sup>44</sup> It can be seen in the work of Dianna Molzan, who has established a strict set of painterly parameters within which to work, including the restriction of her

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<sup>42</sup> Hazard, 2000, p. 7. Hazard also speaks of aposiopesis, the uncompleted sentence broken off as though the speaker were afraid, ashamed or angry: another point of potential for the painterly gesture.

<sup>43</sup> Graw in Graw et al., 2012, pp. 45–46.

<sup>44</sup> Lefkowitz, 2013.

palette to ‘cadmiums red and yellow, both light and deep, and four blues [cobalt, cobalt teal, Prussian and cerulean], plus quinacridone violet [magenta] and titanium white.’<sup>45</sup> Molzan produces meaning by literally teasing at the traditional parameters of painting: extracting the vertical threads of the canvas, or weaving single threads into a fine net that is then carefully painted with abstract marks, for example. Insofar as it seeks to stretch, rather than do away with painting, this impetus chimes with a neo-liberal model of innovation as ‘paradigm-preserving or paradigm-extending rather than paradigm-shattering.’<sup>46</sup> However, what sets Molzan’s mode apart from the market-driven innovation of neo-liberalism is its discursivity; where the market demands that the stumbling blocks of the innovative process be flagged and rationalised into the system before they occur (‘fail fast’ has become a mantra for Silicon Valley startups), Molzan’s mode is closer to a modernist ideal of innovation such as was once housed at Bell Laboratories, where the researcher is allowed space and time to explore without any determinate outcome, nor the expectation to finally succeed.

The possibilities that Molzan opens by playing with painting’s essential form are different to those available to the painter who works within an ‘unrenovated’ mode of painting. In a space that, materially speaking, has been well and truly ‘done before’ there are obvious challenges to producing critically relevant work, inasmuch as painting is often seen as tired or quaint. Ambiguity and stopping-short suggest some other possibilities: as Adorno has written, without the mediation of content by the law of form, ‘the actual subject portrayed by a work would be nothing but a copy.’<sup>47</sup> One can think of painting as a form that is able to operate in a variety of ways on content.

Juan Davila is an artist who embraces narrative and pre-modern technique as fundamental aspects of his approach to painting, in contradistinction to the inefficacy of avant-gardist approaches today. In taking this course Davila has not, like some painters of his generation, retreated into a lazy fantasy space where technique becomes a *raison d’être*, and a notion of the painter as a soft, almost hapless, functionary might be indulged.

Throughout his career, Davila—a Chilean artist who relocated to Australia in 1974—has used painting to level an acidic critique at mainstream political narratives and constructs of cultural identity. Whilst his work of the 1980s and

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<sup>45</sup> Griffin, 2012, p. 96.

<sup>46</sup> Reder, M. W. – ‘Chicago Economics: Permanence and Change’ in *Journal of Economic Literature*, #20/1 (1982) quoted in Peck, 2013, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> Adorno, 1998, p. 9.



[Plate 2]  
*John Batman*  
 2007

Juan Davila  
 Oil on canvas  
 185 x 235 cm

© Juan Davila, Courtesy  
 Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art,  
 Melbourne

1990s employed a barefaced postmodern pastiche to critique cultural identity and political life in Australia, in the past decade Davila has shifted towards beauty, employing a softer palette and treating of gentler imagery whilst continuing his sharp critique of Australian public policy and cultural identity. This 'aesthetic turn' in Davila's practice is often discussed as a change in the way he paints women, though most of what people take for women in his earlier works are actually transvestites.

In *John Batman* (2007) [Plate 2] the eponymous colonist, and a woman with whom he is entwined, float in a ruddy milieu above a paltry shack and a loosely rendered peninsula that anchor the surrounding sea of marks in a landscape.<sup>48</sup> Batman, white-clothed and leather-shod, clutches desperately at his crotch with one hand as he points to something beyond the frame with the other, his face bearing the imploring, suffocated expression of one immersed in a bad dream. The woman beneath him appears relaxed, and meets our gaze with laughter as she kicks a bare foot into the air. Colourful, auratic circles exude from the space between their heads, and a shiny pair of truss tomatoes forms a centrepiece between their bodies, mocking Batman's insistence upon his own virility. This painting begs questions more than it offers statements: what does it mean to bring together the divergent energies of these bodies, the relaxed, open feminine and the fraught, pent-up masculine, above what might be read as a frontier landscape that threatens to collapse into abstraction? The depiction of landscape is seldom fixed in Davila's paintings but recurrently falls open, leaks and congeals, a reminder that the ordered, bucolic landscapes of Europe that colonists struggled to impose upon Australia are shaky there, and have not defeated its nature.

There is a particular nexus between beauty, morality and ambiguity in Davila's more recent work that can also be located in Kant's aesthetic theory, specifically in his conception of beauty as the symbol of morality. By this Kant means that beauty directs our experience towards an idea of morality, whilst at the same time failing to make this idea sensible. This functions by way of an analogy: the feeling of subjective universal validity that we feel when we experience beauty is analogous to the universal validity of the moral law, though it does not approx-

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<sup>48</sup> John Batman is best known for his role in founding the city of Melbourne in 1835, when he sought to make a treaty with elders from parts of the Kulin Nation, the sovereign owners of the land on which Melbourne stands. Though the only documented instance of colonists formally negotiating their use of Indigenous land in Australia (and one that was nullified by the British crown), this treaty has been viewed by many historians as a means of duping Indigenous people out of their land. (See Cruickshank, Joanna – 'Treating History: New Approaches to Batman's Treaty and Indigenous Dispossession in Colonial Victoria' in *Agora*, Vol. 48, No. 1, February 2013, pp. 11-15.)

imate it. The affect is that when we experience beauty, it prompts a feeling of moral investment.

Accompanying Davila's shift in focus to the landscape and the woman as subjects, in 2010 he began producing *After Image* paintings, large-scale fields of loose, vibrant colour and gesture. In these paintings abstract marks converge to form glistening, arcane shapes floating on planes pitted with occlusions, and little glinting beads that glare out from luscious surfaces in which hot pinks turn to scabrous reds and browns, and lucid violets deteriorate into murky greys.

The term 'after image' refers to the trace of what has been seen, lingering on the retina once the eye has closed. Though these paintings ostensibly serve as visual traces of figurative companion works, one can more readily perceive them as navigations of the unconscious. Once executed, they do not require the accompaniment of their figurative referents. Davila has said of them: 'These last paintings seem to try to shift the representational aspect to things not considered before, for example, impossible space, infinity, shifting of scenarios.'<sup>49</sup> These are all phenomena that, in Kantian terms, the imagination cannot adequately represent, that can be referred to but not described: in this regard they align with Kant's rational idea, 'a concept, to which no intuition (representation of the imagination) can be adequate.'<sup>50</sup> Taking the reading of Davila's work further along a Kantian line, it might be said that in the *After Image* paintings he has assigned to intuition the task of orienting a 'representational aspect' around the rational ideas he is dealing with: complicating Kant's schema, Davila has deployed the aesthetic idea as a means of supplanting the rational idea into intuition, staging a collision between these two modes whilst retaining the unknowability of both.

The *After Image* paintings stop short of conventional representation, though as abstractions they exceed themselves and their representational counterparts. I would argue that this is in fact their function: to fall short of conventional pictorial representation, opening a space beyond it that might attain to the representation of an end's un-representability. We see here an echo of Schlegel's sudden leap, though in a sense Davila lands with a foot in both camps: on one hand falling short of representation, and on the other exceeding it.

It is worth noting that Adorno has conceived of the artwork *per se* as after image, as a gesturing beyond the empirical framework: 'Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside

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<sup>49</sup> Davila in Briggs et al., 2010, p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> Kant, 2007b, pp. 142-143.



[Plate 3]  
*After Image, Kreon*  
 2013

Juan Davila  
 Oil on canvas  
 200 x 250 cm

© Juan Davila, Courtesy  
 Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art,  
 Melbourne

their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience.<sup>51</sup> The artwork as after image is conceived of here as a sort of ricochet that opens something out for empirical life, deflected off its own limitations.

It is interesting to compare the respective addresses that Davila and Adorno have made to form. Davila has said 'The inner space of our mind and emotion is not really mapped by science. Artists camouflage it in a theory of form.'<sup>52</sup> Adorno, for his part, has written: 'Through form art participates in the civilization that it criticizes by its very existence. Form is the law of the transfiguration of the existing, counter to which it represents freedom.'<sup>53</sup> These differing positions reveal something about one another: for Adorno, form can be critical, inherently outside and transformative, whereas for Davila, form acts as a false front for truth content. Though form is situated outside rational knowledge for both Davila and Adorno, what it embodies for Adorno, it only struggles to contain for Davila.

Davila's *After Image, Kreon* (2013) [Plate 3] brings figuration and the abstract fields of the earlier *After Image* works into the same pictorial ground, creating a literally disoriented scene. A retro light-fitting hangs from the upper edge of the painting, suggesting a conventionally described domestic space, but it is stranded as the only suggestion of such spatial logic amidst a field of fleshy mauves blotted with loose patches of colour. A sky-blue clearing and a patch of leafy green in the centre offer a rough suggestion of landscape. Off to the right a man stands, torso bare, the lower half of his body dissolving into the abstract milieu. This, we can presume, is the titular Kreon, whom we might identify as Creon the King of Thebes, the successor to Oedipus's throne in Sophocles's tragedy *Antigone*.<sup>54</sup> The relation between Antigone the daughter of Oedipus, and Creon her uncle, was interpreted by G. W. F. Hegel as a conflict between divine law (Antigone) and human law (Creon): Creon is 'the independent personification of law and the state.'<sup>55</sup> In adherence to the laws of man, Creon prevents Antigone from giving her brother proper funeral rites because he died attacking the

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<sup>51</sup> Adorno, 1998, p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Davila in Briggs et al., 2010, p. 52.

<sup>53</sup> Adorno, 1998, p. 143.

<sup>54</sup> There is also a character named Kreon who was created by DC Comics, a Green Lantern from the world of Tebis, who is distinguished by the gold prostheses he wears in place of his right arm and left eye. A warlord, Kreon is driven to end wars rather than start them. Today one might additionally identify Kreon as a company offering contemporary lighting solutions, and Creon as a drug that helps people with pancreatic disorders to digest food.

<sup>55</sup> Hegel, 1975, p. 1163.



city. As a figure seeking to act in accordance with a moral code even if it leads to fallout on an empirical level, Creon shows us the limitations of the morally good. In adhering to the law of man above divine law, however, he ultimately makes of himself a wretch, a model for the contemporary politician: 'Creon arrives and makes a long speech justifying his actions. But in reality there is only a docile Chorus there to hear him, a collection of yes-men.'<sup>56</sup>

In his left hand, Davila's Kreon clutches a sheet of paper bearing handwriting, depicted in such a way as to be illegible to the viewer. The fingers of the same hand hold a smouldering cigarette. The feet of a second figure jut into the painting from the lower edge, as though the figure looks down into the painting from outside the frame. They could be seen as the feet of a person squatting, of a non-committal subject hesitating to take the final plunge into the painting, or of a body dangling from a gibbet. This has the effect of further disorienting the spatial logic of the composition, drawing it out towards the viewer's space and pivoting it on a horizontal axis. One might see this figure, largely out of the picture, as the one possessed of divine power as against Kreon's embodiment of the laws of man.

At the centre of the painting is what appears to be a festering wound or a scab. In the upper left portion of the composition, upside down, the word 'sorry' is rendered in stylish yellow capitals on a background roughly two thirds black, one third white, which I take to reference the apology to the stolen generations of Australian Indigenous children, undertaken by Kevin Rudd in 2008 as one of his first prime ministerial acts. In relation to this sign of apology, the paper clutched by the figure of Kreon reads as a speech; we might then presume that this man, topless and smoking (how uncouth!), is preparing to make a public address. One's mind returns to the justificatory speech and the docile chorus of yes-men, here aptly connected to the 'all talk and no [positive] action' approach that Australian governments have always taken towards the fundamental injustices wrought upon the Indigenous populations of Australia. This begins with the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty, the declaration of *Terra Nullius* at the moment of colonisation. This is unresolved rot in Australia's colonial foundations. It is worth noting that painting, more than any other traditional medium, has been tied to the construction of Australian identity since that time.

Though Rudd's apology was a significant symbolic action, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, otherwise referred to as 'The Intervention' that was put in place by John Howard in 2007, arguably as a last-ditch

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<sup>56</sup> Lacan, 1992, p. 266.

attempt to be re-elected, remained largely in place under Rudd's leadership.<sup>57</sup> Davila's reference to the apology, though not calling upon specific details of the situation, becomes a lens through which the painting as a whole can be read. In loading this painting with signifiers, though maintaining a disoriented and ambiguous relation between them, Davila evokes the complexity of Australia's cultural situation. It is not that any given element refers to something unspeakable, but that the painting as a whole refers to the un-addressed and un-expiated histories of Indigenous/non-indigenous relations that underwrite the Australian cultural outlook. Davila produced this painting in 2013, when Australia shifted to a right-wing government of the lunatic fringe variety. Its criticality relies on an awareness of its socio-political context, in terms of both locality and temporal specificity.<sup>58</sup>

In Davila's work there is the sense of an intuitive underlying rule that governs any given convergence of imagery and gesture, though we may not perceive it consciously. Lyotard launched a polemic against the intermixing of disparate imagery in painting, which he saw as trans-avant-gardist: 'Mixing on the same surface neo- or hyper-realist motifs and abstract, lyrical or conceptual motifs means that everything is equivalent because everything is good for consumption.'<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, Lyotard sees this eclecticism in painting, this 'spirit of the supermarket shopper,' as 'deresponsibilizing the artists with respect to the question of the unrepresentable.'<sup>60</sup> Davila's means of bringing together diverse imagery undoes this claim, though perhaps the key point of difference lies in the word eclecticism, which suggests a random agglomeration that is not governed by a rule as one senses Davila's compositions are, on an intuitive level. The shifts between open abstraction and specific figuration in *After Image*, *Kreon* prompt me to return to the proposition of the empirical intentionality attaching to mechanical art, and the reflective intentionality of fine art as being able to co-exist in a given work; seen through this frame, Davila's painting constitutes the gathering of a range of ends and non-ends that, through their situation in relation to one another, are ultimately held together under an umbrella of critical ambiguity.

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<sup>57</sup> The Northern Territory National Emergency Response, which has since been replaced by the very similar Stronger Futures Policy, included the banning of alcohol and increased numbers of police in indigenous communities, prohibition of pornography, introduction of night patrols in 73 communities, compulsory acquisition of townships held under the provisions of the Native Title Act, and the suspension of the permit system controlling access to indigenous communities, among other measures. (Sourced from the Australian Government Department of Social Services website, accessed 18/12/13.)

<sup>58</sup> Context, it should be noted, does not always attach to place, indeed some artists become their own roving context. Regarding the critique of cultural identity, however, place is often a crucial aspect of contextual specificity.

<sup>59</sup> Lyotard, 1991, p. 127.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

There is a moment when the aesthetic idea, successfully executed, begins to feed back into the meaning of what it refers to, to actually alter the meaning or possibilities of understanding for its subject. It is an overarching function of Davila's painting practice to open and reopen the question of what feeds and underlies Australia's relation to its history and cultural outlook in this way. In this regard Davila's work is critical in a Kantian sense: critical as opposed to dogmatic, insofar as it does not undertake 'to decide anything as to its object.'<sup>61</sup> One can see in Davila's practice how painterly approaches in which aesthetics play a role can operate beyond what might be understood as an aesthetic approach. Strategies of slippage and suggestiveness can be turned outward as a means of questioning agreed meanings in matters beyond painting itself. By inhabiting a space between coherence and incoherence to produce meaning, painting might trouble conventional perceptions.

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<sup>61</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 223.





[Plate 4]

*Ich kann beim besten Willen  
kein Hakenkreuz entdecken*  
1984

With the Best Will in the  
World, I Can't See a Swastika

Martin Kippenberger  
Oil and plastic on canvas  
160 x 133 cm

© Estate of Martin Kippenberger,  
Galerie Gisela Capitain,  
Cologne

## Presenting a Deliberately Bad Example

Wit and stupidity might seem unlikely bedfellows in some senses, but in painting as in philosophy they find common ground. As something of a shamed medium in a post-medium specific context, it might be said that painting is ripe for humour—for *Schadenfreude* in particular—and its aesthetic inclinations can be co-opted in the service of the joke. Building on ideas drawn from Uwe Wirth's theory of discursive stupidity and the re-situation of genius as the cousin of foolishness, I propose that a connection can be drawn between the outside-ness of stupidity and the outside-ness of critical distance, and that the point where the two meet is in aesthetic experience, a meta-cognitive space that constitutes neither thought nor sensation, and which resists an end in understanding.

During the 1980s there was a drive on the part of the West German state towards *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, the coming to terms with, or wrestling into submission of the past, depending on how you choose to translate it. In general terms, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* involves studying the past with a view to making sense of it and finding resolve. In this regard it enacts the misapprehension of critique discussed earlier, taking empirical understanding as its end: closure becomes a narrative-shaping agenda. It was and remains illegal to draw or display a swastika in Germany.

Many Germans saw the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as an attempt to sweep Germany's Nazi past under the rug, to efface it from present reality by presuming to draw conclusions about it, thus rendering its horrors invisible. As Slavoj Žižek has written, 'the Holocaust is the name for the unthinkable apolitical excess of politics itself: it compels us to subordinate politics to some more fundamental ethics. The Otherness excluded from the consensual domain of tolerant/rational post-political negotiation and administration returns in the guise of inexplicable

pure Evil.<sup>1</sup> It was against the dangers of this sort of administrative approach, this illusion of closure and what it might give rise to in the long term, that Martin Kippenberger, along with a number of his contemporaries, adopted failure and ambiguity as outward-looking strategies that sought to reject the state-driven project of overcoming, rather than living with Germany's Nazi past.<sup>2</sup> For many of these artists, including Kippenberger, painting was the medium of choice for a coupling of failure and wit. Because Joseph Beuys had revived the spirit of Dada by turning its nonsense and aggression into a sort of shamanistic re-education, Kippenberger, with as much humour but less didacticism, chose failure as a force over mystic transmission.

The use of failure as a strategy for painting might be understood as dually redemptive, enabling an alternative space of access to a complex and taboo history that acknowledges and mobilises shortfalling and shame, and deploying painting towards a new mode of critical address. As Gregory H. Williams has written, 'the artists granted themselves permission to address unresolved issues in a medium that itself was taboo to many artists of the 1970s who had turned instead to language, performance, and new media.'<sup>3</sup>

Kippenberger's life and art practice were inseparable from one another. He was notorious for his dominating and antagonistic countenance and worked in a wide variety of often unconventional media, but the focus here is on his painterly strategies in the context of post-war Germany, and the taboos that attended it. Kippenberger's paintings were often executed by his assistants, which does not detract from the strategies I am talking about, but is probably worth knowing.

Paul Crowther, drawing upon Theodor Adorno's position on art, has written: 'we do not need to give it some overt political content. Indeed, an artwork which is orientated towards ramming home some specific political message will simply reproduce and consolidate the coercive mentality of a repressive society. Its oppositional significance will be merely formal.'<sup>4</sup> Kippenberger's paintings of the 1983-85 period have been described as having an 'unfixed, shifting quality,

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek in Rancière, 2009c, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Other artists who undertook this approach in Germany during the 1980s include Albert Oehlen, Sigmar Polke, Rosemarie Trockel and Werner Büttner.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, 2012, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Crowther, 1993, p. 82. This stricture was recognised by Kippenberger who, through painting, sought a position outside didactic commentary. Adorno's articulation of this idea can be found in *Aesthetic Theory*, which he wrote during the 1960s; so both men arrived at this position in the context of post-war Germany. Whether Kippenberger absorbed this position from Adorno I couldn't say: though he was famously a 'non-reader,' Kippenberger often asked friends to give him verbal summaries of theoretical texts.

which often has to do with irony, subtly and satisfyingly resisting any belief in an ultimate truth.<sup>5</sup> This brings us back to the question of the relation between truth and critique: what might be understood as the truth content of a painting that employs the ambiguous treatment of imagery to refuse the fixity of a state narrative?

Kippenberger's *With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika* (1984) [Plate 4] deploys a strategy of failure to refer to the process by which the swastika was being rendered unrepresentable by the German state.<sup>6</sup> Upon initial viewing the painting reads as an amateurish attempt at an early cubist style, or 'the outward-directed motion of a suprematist composition' as Williams reads it.<sup>7</sup> It leads the viewer into an 'interested' as opposed to a purely aesthetic contemplation, with its references to early modernist painting, until one reads the title, at which point the drab Greenbergian art-historical comparison is turned to a question of legalistic scrutiny that is set up to fail: its forms repeatedly suggest, but never wholly depict a swastika. I would not call this a beautiful painting in the sense that, in my subjective experience, it does not offer *a priori* aesthetic pleasure.<sup>8</sup> I do, however, see it as a painting with aesthetic experience at its conceptual core. Rather than engaging the mechanisms of pure aesthetic experience, it co-opts the Greenbergian realm of historical comparison as the benchmark of artistic quality by presenting a deliberately bad example: compositionally it is quite well balanced, though the line work appears heavy and amateurish, and closer inspection reveals an underlying surface of swirling silicone lines that mock the formal geometry. Even before the title turns us toward the threatened outrage of depicting a swastika, we are already aesthetically offended by the poor attempt to acquit a modernist style. *With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika* might be read as a reflexive materialisation of a symbol in the Kantian sense of a stopping short, a deliberate failure to represent. As Roberto Ohrt has written: 'the only way of showing faith in the essence of the matter, of showing that they [referring to Kippenberger and Oehlen] were still "working on the truth," was to construct an impossibly tense relationship between the highly charged promise of the sign and its failure to deliver the significant goods.'<sup>9</sup> This painting stages the corruption of an artistic form (cubism or suprematism, depending on the viewer's interpretation) to refer to the corruption of another (the swastika), and the means by which that corruption is being

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> The original German title of this painting is *Ich kann beim besten Willen kein Hakenkreuz entdecken*.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, 2012, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Though this is not to say, of course, that it cannot be beautiful for someone else.

<sup>9</sup> Ohrt in Riemschneider, 1995, p. 17.



effaced. In this way the painting becomes an indirect means of acknowledging a deep shame rather than falsely proclaiming its resolution. As Jutta Koether has said, 'he holds a mirror up to the official treatment of history, which tries to repress the signs of the past by prohibiting them. Kippenberger calls into question the history lesson which makes the swastika taboo. He disentangles any certainty about the right way of dealing with the past.'<sup>10</sup>

The humour in Kippenberger's paintings often demands local knowledge in order to be fully understood. As Williams has argued: 'Perhaps globalization is the stage at which *Witz* rediscovers itself as a necessarily local, contextually grounded form of communication.'<sup>11</sup> One might draw a parallel between Kippenberger and Davila in the insistence on a localised context, though their strategies for asserting it differ. Kippenberger's *Mountain Landscape* from the series 'Eight Pictures for Pondering Whether Things Can Go on Like This' (1983) [Plate 5] performs an operation that co-opts the aesthetic experience in the service of wit.<sup>12</sup> It presents us with a scene expressionistically rendered in vibrant blues, yellows and greens, with juxtaposed lines of contrasting colour suggestive of Fauvist technique. The painting depicts a soaring mountain peak framed by traditional-looking alpine wooden houses. It takes the unsuspecting viewer a few moments to register the equally expressionistic signature: 'Adolf '36,' a dig at Adolf Hitler's early pretensions towards an artistic career. *Mountain Landscape* offers the potential for an aesthetic experience insofar as it is a carefully composed, harmoniously coloured painting. However, the aesthetic experience is ultimately displaced, redirected in the service of the joke that suggests it was painted by Hitler, which at once throws its air of provincial hokiness into relief. Stylistically the painting alludes to the 'decadent' modern painting that was condemned as degenerate by the Nazis; again, the art-historical comparison plays a role in enriching the joke. In the context in which the painting was produced, the joke extended further to take a dig at the conservatism of German art institutions that, in the early eighties, were reluctantly beginning to expand their conservative outlook (though not as far as recognising Kippenberger as a significant artist, much to his chagrin). As David Zwirner has said: 'They were only interested in restitution, in art that atoned for the past. Everything they showed had to be [what the Nazis had vilified as] "degenerate art," or, if it was modern, then École de Paris, Henry Moore, nothing offensive. Abstract art was a guarantee that you wouldn't have to engage with German history.'<sup>13</sup>

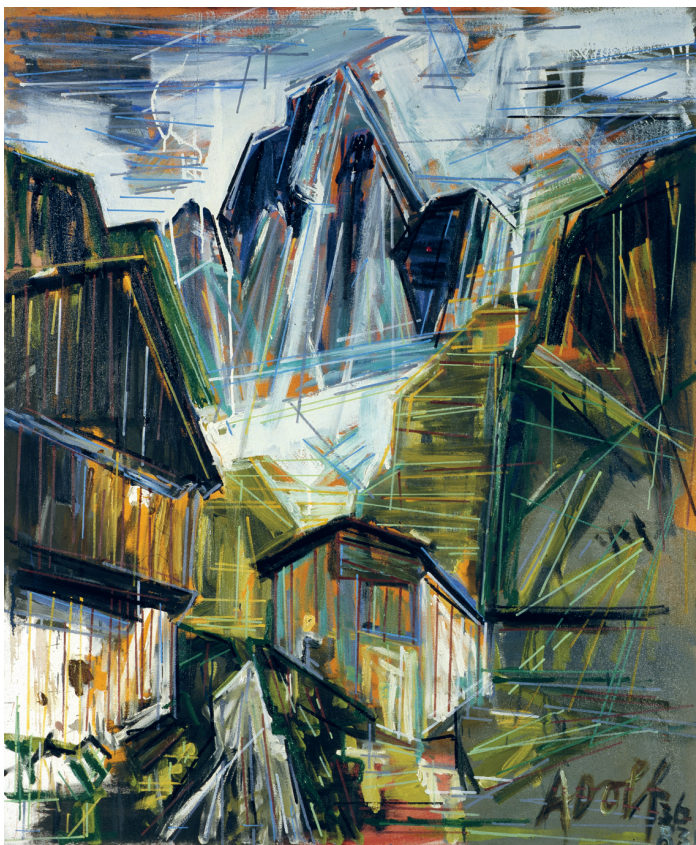
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<sup>10</sup> Koether, 1987, pp. 47–48.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, 2012, p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> In the original German, *Gebirgslandschaft (aus der Serie '8 Bilder zum Nachdenken, ob's so weitergeht')*.

<sup>13</sup> Zwirner quoted in S. Kippenberger, 2011, p. 239.



[Plate 5]

*Gebirgslandschaft (Detail des  
8-teiliges Werkes '8 Bilder zum  
Nachdenken, ob's so weitergeht')*  
1983

Martin Kippenberger  
Mixed media on canvas  
120 x 100 cm

Mountain Landscape (Detail of the  
8-part work 'Eight Pictures for Pondering  
Whether Things Can Go on Like This')

© Estate of Martin Kippenberger,  
Galerie Gisela Capitain,  
Cologne

The joke played in *Mountain Landscape* is the aspect of the work that in a Kantian frame I would term mechanical, operating in the service of a concept. The historical reference meets the viewer in the work, but it is the initial promise of a 'pure' aesthetic experience that draws one into an engagement with its form.<sup>14</sup> This painting does not bear the exaggerated approach of satire, but takes an aesthetic form and shows the means by which historical context can, on the path from aesthetic experience to interested engagement, compromise its reading. The joke would not function without the trajectory of aesthetic experience that it interrupts, which is in keeping with Kant's conception of the comedic: 'Since the snapping of what was, as it were, tightening up the string takes place suddenly (not by a gradual loosening), the oscillation must bring about a mental movement and a sympathetic internal movement of the body.'<sup>15</sup> ('Sympathetic internal movement of the body' is Kant's very enlightenment way of referring to laughter.) If we accept Kant's categories of art as being able to co-exist, it might be said that *Mountain Landscape* constitutes an instance of fine art being co-opted and deployed as a functionary in the service of mechanical art. In this way Kippenberger preserves a degree of aesthetic quality in order to situate it as part of an operation on and with a breach of taste.

In both paintings discussed above, Kippenberger engages aesthetic strategies to address political issues without seeking to undertake political action, but rather to establish a distance from the official narrative, a refusal to accede to authority: an instance of Rancière's active spectator. As Williams has written, 'Jokes and wit opened up slippages between critical commentary and passive indecision.'<sup>16</sup> Kippenberger made a great deal of play in this space, mediating between the *sensus communis* that emerges with aesthetic experience and what Simon Critchley calls the 'dissensus communis' that arises in the empirical context of the joke.<sup>17</sup> This might be thought of as an iteration of the mutual opening out where painting meets critique.

Kippenberger's use of humour to flip the aesthetic experience performs Wirth's conception of the joke. It enables a space where the viewer's judgement is reversed upon itself, what Wirth refers to as a 'staged lack of judgement,' a relief

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<sup>14</sup> I saw this process enacted at the Kippenberger exhibition *Sehr Gut* held at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in 2013. In the room dedicated to Kippenberger's paintings from the 1983-85 period, attendees beholding the paintings from a distance could be heard describing them in aesthetic terms, admiring their expressionistic brushstrokes and compositional qualities.

<sup>15</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 162.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, 2012, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Critchley, 2002, p. 18.

‘from the pressure of reason, the “Supreme Court” of thinking.’<sup>18</sup> For Wirth, this is the sense in which the joke constitutes a comic staging of stupidity. Kippenberger identified productive possibility in the marrying of this operation with the treatment of taboo or unspeakable content, insofar as it can produce a new perspective on an issue that seems otherwise impossible to address or shift.

Avital Ronell has written: ‘stupidity can be considered as something related to shutdown, to closure—a closure that confuses itself with an end.’<sup>19</sup> In this regard we again find stupidity sharing turf with the aesthetic idea, conditioned by notional ends that do not amount to ends as such; or perhaps it could be said that stupidity in Ronell’s reading is the converse of the aesthetic idea, insofar as where the aesthetic idea attaches to purposiveness without purpose, stupidity attaches to something more like purpose without purposiveness, a closure that confuses itself with an end though nothing has impelled it. This parallels the failed end of Kant’s *amentia*.

In Ronell’s understanding, stupidity, as distinct from ignorance and its more neutral counterpart ‘dumbness,’ is linked to ‘an effect of malice; indeed it calls for judgment. In other words, where dumbness might be part of the irreparable facticity of existence, there is an ethics of stupidity or, let us say simply that it calls for an ethics.’<sup>20</sup> This call for judgement again links stupidity to aesthetic experience. So far as malice is concerned, since it is by definition bound up with intent, in this equation we might link it to the intentionality of the artist who seeks to throw existing structures into question. As Ronell writes, ‘stupidity remains a phantom of the truth to which it points,’ a description we might also use for the truth content of an artwork.<sup>21</sup> Ronell argues, additionally, that stupidity is the closest mortals can come to plenitude. To consider this plenitudinous idea of stupidity as a strategy for painting, we could say that in the aesthetic experience of painting, wholeness is withheld, provoking the beholder to enquire, to attempt to puncture the plenitude as it is simultaneously presented and kept back.

Ronell points out that in ancient Athens, with the exception of the Cynics, stupidity had no place in the *polis* but was situated outside, at a distance. ‘For the ancient Greeks, stupidity cannot be seen as belonging to the domain of the political because it indicates that which lacks politics: it is being-outside-the-

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<sup>18</sup> Author’s own translation from Wirth, 1999, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Ronell, 2002, p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> Ronell, 1996, p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

political... The stupid one is incapable of living in a community.<sup>22</sup> Just as stupidity exists outside the *polis*, so stupidity as a painterly strategy positions painting outside understanding, at a critical distance from the world to which it makes an address. In this regard, stupidity connects to the spectator as one situated outside political action. For painting I see possibility in remaining outside with stupidity. The phrase ‘stupid as a painter’ takes on new meaning here, particularly regarding the treatment of loaded subject matter: it is arguably necessary for the painter to work outside rational knowledge in order to retain a condition of becoming, and resist a point of conclusion.

Ronell has described stupidity as a sort of scar that becomes a ‘monument of wounding,’<sup>23</sup> an idea that she draws from Adorno and Horkheimer who have written: ‘Such scars lead to deformities. They can build hard and able characters; they can breed stupidity—as a symptom of pathological deficiency, of blindness and impotency if they are quiescent; in the form of malice, spite and fanaticism if they produce a cancer within.’<sup>24</sup> As Ronell writes, ‘eventually the scarred body of stupidity turns to stone (*Versteinerung*), becoming unmoveable, hard.’<sup>25</sup> As a metaphor for stupidity the scar, then, can be thought of as a healing wound, turning to stone and becoming a monument to its lesion. There is a reflexivity implicit to this conception, a willingness to acknowledge past trauma, which dictates its form. The becoming of the wound leads in turn to the grotesque body. As Bakhtin has written: ‘The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.’<sup>26</sup> From another point the grotesque body is also related to Sloterdijk’s conception of Diogenes as ‘an enlightened affirmation of a laughing, excreting, and masturbating body that actually undercuts the modern notion of a stable identity.’<sup>27</sup> Sloterdijk offers an analogy of the healing sore as the site from which critique emerges: ‘Out of the self-healing of deep sores come critiques that serve epochs as rallying points for self-knowledge. Every critique is pioneering work on the pain of the times (*Zeitschmerz*) and a piece of exemplary healing.’<sup>28</sup> Perhaps we might suture Sloterdijk’s critical sore onto Ronell’s stupid scar to derive a more pluralistic conception of the critical, becoming body. This in turn offers

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002, pp. 257–258.

<sup>25</sup> Ronell, 1996, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, 1984, p. 317.

<sup>27</sup> Sloterdijk, 2012, p. xviii.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. xxxvi.

a means of thinking the grotesque body in painting specifically, a site where, historically speaking, the grotesque or becoming body has held pride of place.<sup>29</sup> Kippenberger, for his part, frequently used painting to produce grotesque versions of his own body, for instance in the *Raft of the Medusa series* (1996) made towards the end of his life. He has also included in his paintings imagery of pregnancy, eating, drinking, sex and dismemberment, all marked by Bakhtin as 'main events in the life of the grotesque body.'<sup>30</sup> *Self-portrait* (1982) [Plate 6] is based on a photograph of Kippenberger's own savagely beaten face, taken in a hospital after a nightclub brawl in Berlin.<sup>31</sup> The painting presents a lurid, larger-than-life close up in which Kippenberger's facial wounds have been depicted using a crusted, swollen application of filler beneath the paint to create a surface that appears infected and pullulating, pushing through from underneath. Around the disfigured face float martini glasses, musical notes, spots of light and stylised brushstrokes in festive colours. Again we meet with a set of questions rather than a statement in contemplating this juxtaposition, which on one hand refers flippantly to the nightclub setting in which the beating took place, and on another calls attention to the privileges of Capitalist consumerism available in West Germany, whilst over the wall the oppressive surveillance state of the German Democratic Republic reached its heights. Here we can again see contextual specificity as a predicate for the production of a critically engaged work: Kippenberger's outsized depiction of himself, deformed, also constituted the depiction of a self-producing West German subject. Seen in relation to a divided, post-war Germany, Kippenberger's use of the grotesque body becomes a form of optimism, as though to say: we have sustained a damaging rupture but we are not fixed in place, we acknowledge our wounds and continue to evolve. As Ohrt has written of Kippenberger's paintings: 'the pictures come across as the amplifiers of a wretchedness that only had to be stripped of the protection of being ignored.'<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> This is particularly true of modernist Australian painting, indeed the becoming body in the work of painters such as Arthur Boyd, Russell Drysdale and Albert Tucker might be read as a manifestation of Australia's shaky and denialistic idea of its modern self, a glimmer of cultural truth in a sea of derivative signification. The grotesque body has always been a central motif for Davila also, manifesting on different levels at different phases of his career: in his work of the 1980s and 1990s as the transgendered, often mutilated subject, and in later works as the body returning to nature, as in *Woman by the River Yarra* (2008). This painting, in particular, addresses the Australian relationship to the natural landscape. In it 'the nymph and her echo,' their skin striped and spotted, begin to merge with their environment. Though the figures in this painting are not grotesque in the sense of pouring out of, or detaching from themselves, they are open, transforming bodies.

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, 1984, p. 317.

<sup>31</sup> Original German title *Selbstporträt*.

<sup>32</sup> Ohrt in Paz (ed.), 2004, p. 38.





[Plate 6]  
*Selbstporträt*  
 1982

Self-portrait

Martin Kippenberger  
 Mixed media on canvas  
 170 x 170 cm

© Estate of Martin Kippenberger,  
 Galerie Gisela Capitain,  
 Cologne

In Kippenberger's work the grotesque body becomes a site where a cultural 'working through' might take place, a rendering visible of deformity ever in the state of becoming, serving as a metaphor that calls for an understanding of cultural identity as unfixed and open to change. This painting offers another instance whereby ostensibly mutually exclusive aspects of Kant's aesthetic system might be seen to co-exist, in the sense that the symbols of decadence dancing about Kippenberger's disfigured face can be read as signifiers of a damaged and divided Germany, whilst the painting simultaneously embodies a Kantian notion of disgust:

For, as in this strange sensation, which depends purely on the imagination, the object is represented as insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it, while we violently resist it, the artificial representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and so it cannot possibly be regarded as beautiful.<sup>33</sup>

Ergo, whilst this painting might not be regarded as beautiful, it operates aesthetically insofar as it provides us with an ugly metaphor of a cultural circumstance that moves beyond direct representation.

The possibilities around the becoming body for painting are not limited to the shockingly grotesque but might extend to the effaced, and more generally the ambiguous body as possessed of an openness: in Sloterdijk's words, 'not a nobody but a yesbody'.<sup>34</sup> The image of the grotesque body, bearing the lacerations of stupidity, might be thought of as a blossoming growth or a healing wound that tells us we must continue to become in the face of ill-founded conditions.

The aspect of becoming is indispensable to the grotesque body. In the case of Ronell's scar, the idea of monument that emerges should not be thought as a commemoration that effaces unrepresentability, or what Nancy refers to as 'a will literally to bury in bronze (or in concrete or in film)',<sup>35</sup> but as an open acknowledgement of past trauma. In an Australian context as well as a German one, the becoming body might be thought of as a device by which painting can refer tangentially to that which calls for an address beyond representation – either because it is unspeakable, or because to take a specific stance on it would reduce the work to an opinion piece, falling prey to a desire to rationalise that can undermine deeper complexities. A discursive conception of stupidity, in

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<sup>33</sup> Kant, 2007b, p. 141.

<sup>34</sup> Sloterdijk, 2012, p. xix.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.



this sense, becomes a means to insist upon an openness of meaning: 'it was never agreed that stupidity could be apprehended essentially as one thing or the other but rather always as one thing *and* the other.'<sup>36</sup> In this regard, as strategies for painting, the ambiguity and becoming of stupidity and failure might work to loosen the bowels of history.

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<sup>36</sup> Ronell, 2002, p. 88.





## Critical Form

Being a painter today, in a post-medium specific context, does not mean approaching painting as some sort of anachronistic refuge, or thinking that the modernist project of the specific medium can be rehabilitated, or even that it can continue to be flogged. The complexities, loadings and problems of painting can be engaged as devices for producing meaning, informed by a new range of conditions. Painting has shifted away from self-defence and the didactic space of making grand or conclusive statements, towards a space of open, reflective address. This approach utilises the predisposition to ambiguity that is inscribed in painting. The aesthetic distance that conditions painting can and, I have argued, should be conceived of as a critical distance, and in this regard painting might be used to open spaces for reflective thought, where a multiplicity of positions can be recognised.

In Kant's aesthetics, the experience of form does not stop with the aesthetic judgement; on the contrary, the moment of judgement is that which provides the impetus for subsequent engagement. It is not the passing of judgement that closes off, but the refusal to judge, which retreats from the possibility of a challenge, or even a response. The capacity for beauty to provoke metacognitive harmony between the faculties of the mind is not conceived of as a pure and isolated process here; if its pure potential is to be insisted upon, perhaps it can be conceived of as pure in the same way that a tube of paint can be thought of as pure: one might preserve an area of pigment on a surface, but potential lies in the way that it combines with other elements.

To draw an overarching conclusion at the close of this book would be to cut against the grain of the argument's ethos: if there is a conclusion to be drawn here about critical strategies for painting today, it is that the drawing of hard conclusions is better avoided. As Jean-François Lyotard has written:

Isn't the commentary machine working very well? Does a given work make it malfunction? This is a good sign, indicating that the work cannot be transformed wholesale into signification, that its destination is uncertain and its relevance with respect to certain systematic features is undecidable.<sup>1</sup>

To undertake to practice within this understanding of painting necessitates stepping into a delicate framework that mediates between intuition, questioning and the experience of the viewer; to produce in this space is not to engineer, but to be open to intuition and unknowing. There is a tentativeness and a preparedness to fail implicit in this approach. This conception might be thought to constitute the frail skeleton of a system that, considered in its entirety, is percutaneously pinned with resituated historical loading, and padded out with reflexive sedimentations. In this sense we might say that the form of painting itself constitutes a becoming body. As Sloterdijk has written:

Because the sovereignty of minds (*Köpfe*) is always false, the new critique prepares to slip from the mind into the whole body... To discover the living body as a sensor of the world is to secure a realistic foundation for philosophical knowledge of the world. This is what Critical Theory has begun to do, hesitatingly, often aesthetically encoded, hidden in all kinds of squeamishness.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this is a word that might be seized upon for the thinking of painting: *squeamishness*, a term that holds the slippery, squelchy quality of paint, the insistent becoming of a medium that has been variously condemned as anachronistic, stuck, limited and dead, and the hesitancy enacted by painting as it seeks to preserve ambiguity in the discomfiture of addressing the fraught or taboo.

Whether or not its continuation is accepted, there is a sense in which painting is a form of self-insistence: it will always stretch and contort, and find a way to justify its continuity, its taking place. As a painter today one works within this space of insistence, and might find within it a means by which to question. When we do away with the ideology of painting that says it must be attached to the old notion of genius, aesthetic experience offers critical possibilities for a persistent form. There remains the objection that beholding a painting reifies its object. To this I respond that painting is implicitly to be beheld, but it is also implicitly predisposed to fall open in the face of being beheld, to lead us beyond thought, only to place us back into our own context with a shifted perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> Lyotard, 1984, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> Sloterdijk, 2012, p. xxxiii.





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## A Note on the Type

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An abstract painting with a dark, moody background. In the center, there are two vertical, dark, brush-like strokes. To the right, there are large, white, cloud-like or smoke-like shapes. Below these, there are more white and grey brushstrokes. At the bottom, there are some green and yellow brushstrokes. The overall style is expressive and gestural.

Being a painter in a post-medium specific context does not mean approaching painting as some sort of anachronistic refuge, or thinking that the modernist project of the specific medium can be rehabilitated, or even continue to be flogged. As a site for the production of meaning, painting is a rich field of loadings, neuroses and suggestiveness that can mesh with aesthetic qualities to make a charged conceptual space.

Focusing on works by Juan Davila and Martin Kippenberger, this book proposes an extended understanding of how painting can operate aesthetically, grounded in Immanuel Kant's formulation of aesthetic experience as implicitly connected to critical reflection. Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* constitutes the basis of a mobilisation of aesthetics for the reading of painting beyond formalism, embracing aesthetic criticality as an open position of refusal, rather than the dogmatic pursuit of a rational conclusion.

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