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Thierry De Duve

Aesthetics at Large, Volume 1: Art, Ethics, Politics

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Ever since his *Kant after Duchamp* (1996), Thierry de Duve has proved himself to be one of the most insistent Kantians today. Quite appropriately, the cover of his recent book, *Aesthetics at Large, Volume 1: Art, Ethics, Politics*, shows us a button telling us that “Kant Got It Right.”

De Duve’s Kant, however, is not the one who, in the wake of Jean-François Lyotard’s proposed reading, might be taken to suggest that the sublime holds the key to the momentum of the avant-garde; rather, he is the one who aspired to produce a theory of *sensus communis* as the prefiguration of a political community, even if a community interpreted in a particular way. The new book seems to signal a new direction in relation to de Duve’s previous work, which was predominantly oriented toward the vicissitudes of aesthetic judgment in modern art, at once radically transformed by the nominalism introduced by Marcel Duchamp’s readymade and at the same time returned to a basic intuition in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. De Duve’s subtitle *Art, Ethics, Politics* indicates that something new is at stake (a sequel to this book will deal with nature, so we can expect an even fuller account of the implications of Kant’s theory).

Crucial for the political claim is not only that Kant’s idea of *sensus communis* can be interpreted as a particular taste—the simple idea that human beings are capable of living in peace with one another—but also that this idea has an essential bond with aesthetic judgment as it has come to appear in our present, and even more so in Kant’s time.

The overture elegantly places us at the heart of Kant’s analysis of aesthetic judgment, and stages a debate between Ms. A and Mr. B on whether the rose in front of them is beautiful or ugly. The inconclusive and perhaps garrulous quality that the discussion assumes is not due to malevolence or irrationality, but rather to the immediacy as well as the communicability of feeling in both parties: they feel that the beauty or ugliness of the rose coincides with the apprehension of it, but also that this demands that the feeling be shared by others: “it imputes to the other—all others—the feeling of pleasure (or pain) that one feels in oneself,” which is what “Kant understood better than anyone before or anyone since” (17–18). Judgments necessarily involve the claim that everyone “ought” to agree, precisely by virtue of their freedom and spontaneity—which at first might seem paradoxical. This demand for agreement obviously also implies disagreement, as everyday experience shows us just as convincingly as the technical language of Kant’s *Transcendental Analytic of Beauty*: we cannot avoid disputing, while still being well aware that no cognitive or ethical arguments will settle the score.

In the second part of the scene, de Duve places the two protagonists, now joined by Kant himself, in front of a contemporary work, Carl Andre’s minimalist sculpture *Equivalent VIII* (1966). Disagreement holds sway here too, and Kant is intrigued; he cannot make up his mind whether these 120 bricks can be considered art at all or should simply be dismissed: the “bricks are beckoning” (25). Kant’s bewilderment is indicative of the situation we find ourselves in the world of art after the Duchamp moment: always having to substitute “this is art” for “this is beautiful” (or sublime, ugly, etc.). This is what de Duve calls the transition from the Beaux-Arts to Art in General, in which the substantial definitions of artistic form, as well as the frontiers between the arts, gradually evaporated.

Consequently, it is not what Kant says about the individual arts, or singular artworks, that interests de Duve: “Although the focus of *Aesthetics at Large* is on art, Kant’s theory of art receives virtually no attention here. Everything important Kant has to say about the beautiful and the sublime pertains to

nature. With the exception of his reflections on genius, the sections of the third Critique dealing with art are mainly of historical interest" (6). In the first part, "The 'Kant After Duchamp' Approach," de Duve develops this idea and covers much of the ground that we can recognize from his earlier writings. The passage from the specific to the generic is briefly summarized in a series of case studies: the creation of the Société des artistes indépendants in 1884, where the jury system was dismantled and all works were accepted; Duchamp's intervention in the US sequel, Society of Independent Artists, with his *Fountain* in 1917; the phase of high modernism as a period of "latency" and "incubation" (35), finally ushering in the reemergence of Duchamp in the 1950s and 1960s. This takes us into the "post-Duchamp" condition, which is discussed in terms of the ethics of museum and curatorial practices, and on a more principal level in the form of the question of whether artists can be taken to speak for us all.

In part 2, "Close and Not So Close Readings," we find a series of interpretations of selections from Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, in which de Duve brings out the ethical and political implications. Crucial here is the claim to universality that we find embodied in all aesthetic judgments, which, in de Duve's interpretation, shows their capacity to signal the possibility of community, even though this might remain a mere "idea" in the Kantian sense of an indeterminate horizon. Notwithstanding prejudices, structures of power, and exclusion of all sorts, we must, de Duve underlines, believe in the possibility that art may speak to us all, no matter how fragile and precarious this "us" might be, which is what gives art its political thrust, regardless of which judgments we in fact make.

Aesthetics at Large is a compelling book, especially in its plea for the political relevance of aesthetic judgment, which is often lost when politics are interpreted in a narrow way; reflective judgment, unlike its determining counterpart that proceeds from concepts, appeals to a freedom and communality that this judgment prefigures without giving it an all-too specific sense, which for de Duve is the reason why terms like "universality" cannot simply be discarded.

A problem, however—which de Duve himself acknowledges (31) but quickly passes over—is that the transition from the system of the Beaux-Arts to Art in General, which underlies the theory of judgment, itself can be taken as particular. It is derived almost exclusively from the visual arts and makes little sense with respect to, say, literature, theater, or cinema, where furthermore the "antonymic" institutional power (of naming, "this is art") that he analyzes in great detail in the case of the museum (chapter 4) is, if not lacking, then at least has a rather different structure. Even though de Duve explicitly disregards what Kant has to say about the individual arts, one must note that Kant in no way wants to limit aesthetic judgment to one or several particular forms of art, but sees them as applicable to most (though not all) facets of experience.

This might be connected to de Duve's professed distaste for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and the kind of historicizing theory that in the twentieth century was most eloquently represented by Theodor Adorno (discussed in chapter 7). One has to choose between Kant and Hegel, de Duve insists, but such a clear-cut alternative (which Adorno surely would not accept) might lead us astray and produce a neglect of what we—drawing precisely on Hegel, who, unlike Kant, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* devoted considerable attention to material specificity—could call the "phenomenological" features of the singular arts. Or, from a different angle, it might erase the tension between "Art" and "the arts" as this was thematized by Adorno, when he stressed that the arts are never absorbed in Art without leaving an indelible trace of their singular features in the general concept. In other words, the passage from the particular to the generic itself occurs in particular ways, and the general conditions reached in, say, music as sound or literature as writing do not simply add up to Art.

To this one might respond that de Duve's project, in spite of the considerable erudition that he displays, is eminently philosophical rather than historical. This is perhaps how we should read the seemingly fortuitous reference to Alain Badiou's theory of the event and the kind of fidelity that it demands of us (37). De Duve's fidelity is pledged to the "Duchamp event" as such, not because of the particular works, their actual reception, and the influence that they might have exerted but because of what this event gives us to think about: in short, at stake is the very idea of Duchamp.

And, might we not detect a final Kantian move undertaken here if we take this not as criticism, but as an observation of an underlying motif that is perfectly consonant with the Kantian critical architecture seen in its integrality? After having dismantled traditional metaphysics (the proof of God's existence, the immortality and substantiality of the soul, the belief that we can reach things themselves via deduction from concepts and a host of other claims) in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proceeded to resurrect them, as in *The Critique of Practical Reason*, as postulates pertaining to ethics. Similarly, for de Duve the Duchampian dismantling of an aesthetic based in substantial forms (beauty, sublimity) and the emancipation of judgment in fact make possible another type of universality and humanism than the one rejected by the readymade and everything that would follow in its wake.

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