Lasting Impressions: Kant, Hegel, and Contemporary Art

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Though Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel are recognized as giants among philosophers, their contributions to aesthetics constitute lesser known aspects of their individual bodies of work. The fact is that each philosopher has shaped and reshaped our appreciation of art, be it expressive or purely aesthetic in its objectives, in important ways. This article considers how Kant and Hegel propose we apply aesthetic judgments to works of fine art, and the extent to which their respective approaches to aesthetics (one subjective, the other contextualized) can inform contemporary art theory and criticism. Of particular importance in this task is an analysis and application of Kant’s formalist approach, particularly his ideas of ’disinterested judgment’ and ’purposiveness without purpose;’ and Hegel’s cognitivist theory, which focuses on the transformation of art and culture over time. Upon applying these aesthetic theories to certain pieces by Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Rauschenberg, it becomes evident that – in spite of developments in contemporary art that neither philosopher could have anticipated – the work of both Kant and Hegel shows enduring relevance.

1Kant and Hegel are recognized as giants among philosophers. What is perhaps less well known is that each, in his own way, made significant contributions to the field of aesthetics. This paper will compare and contrast these thinkers’ contributions to the philosophy of art, considering in particular the extent to which their respective aesthetic theories remain relevant to contemporary art theory and criticism.2 A summary of the central themes in the Critique of Judgment is followed by an evaluation of the strengths and vulnerabilities of Kant’s position, after which a brief look at Hegel’s work on aesthetics undergirds an attempt to determine whether it represents an improvement on Kant. In

1 The author would like to thank Dr. Liam Dempsey and Sam Grey for the invaluable assistance they provided during the researching, writing, and editing of this piece.
2 ’Contemporary art’ typically refers to Western art of the post-war period, but here I will extend this term to encompass art throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, which is variously referred to in more specific terms.
each case, the focus is on how the philosopher proposes we apply aesthetic judgments to fine art. In spite of developments in contemporary art that neither philosopher could have anticipated, Kant’s subjective approach and Hegel’s contextualized approach both remain relevant to our understanding and appreciation of art today. This continued relevance is made possible by the simple fact that art has always been, in many respects, an aesthetic and expressive endeavour – a point recognized by both Kant and Hegel.

ELABORATION: THE FORMALISM OF KANT AND THE COGNITIVISM OF HEGEL

Kant’s Critique of Judgment (1790) is significant in that it represents a radical departure from the Platonic aesthetics that had dominated thinking in the Western world since the time of Plato himself. Plato saw art as *mimesis*, or mere imitation; worse, it was an imitation of an imitation, in that art represented the world, which was itself only a representation of what was actually real (the Forms). Accordingly, it is only within the realm of the Forms that we may find real Beauty. What is relevant here is that, in Plato’s theory, Beauty is as an objective *thing* – although it is largely inaccessible to us, it is nevertheless something that is actually *out there*. Indeed, Platonic aesthetics can be seen as emblematic of the ancient emphasis on the objectivity of beauty. Kant represents an historic break from this idea, rejecting as he does the notion of Beauty as objective, and embracing (as well as justifying) an account of aesthetics that is fully subjective, yet universal. Kant’s ethics, as Desmond asserts, “despite [its] aesthetic formalism in regard to the aesthetic object, puts the eventual stress on aesthetic subjectivity.”

Before looking at the specific terms that Kant uses to defend his idea of subjective universality, it is worth considering Kant’s account of how we make

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4 Plato, “Republic.”


aesthetic judgments, or judgments of *taste*. Freeland observes that for Kant, when we make a judgment of taste “[t]here is a complex interplay among our mental faculties including perception, imagination, and intellect.”⁷ This ‘free play’ of the cognitive faculties, according to Crawford, plays a key role in the rendering of aesthetic judgments – the pleasure comes about when the faculties are in harmony, the same kind of harmony that normally obtains in a cognitive judgment.⁸ It is not difficult to see how we can apply this idea to a work of art. Guyer claims that for Kant, “a work of art is an object intentionally produced by human skill with the aim of producing pleasure in the members of its audience by engaging their higher cognitive faculties and inducing a harmonious play between their imagination and understanding.”⁹ This has important implications for Kant’s idea of subjective universality:

The subjective universal communicability of the mode of representation in a judgment of taste, since it is to be possible without presupposing a definite concept, can refer to nothing else than the state of mind in the free play of the imagination and the understanding. [Further,] we are conscious that this subjective relation, suitable for cognition in general, must be valid for everyone, and thus must be universally communicable, just as if it were a definite cognition.¹⁰

When we make a universally valid aesthetic judgment of an object, then, we are not making a judgment about the pleasure we take in that object, rather we are making the judgment by *means* of that pleasure, specifically the pleasure elicited by the ‘free play’ of our mental faculties.¹¹ When this happens it is as if cognition had occurred, thus the judgment takes the form of a conceptual judgment.¹² This is worth exploring further.

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¹⁰ Kant, “Critique” (§9) 131-132.
¹² Crawford.
Kant argues that aesthetic judgments, unlike other mental activities, can never refer to concepts.\(^\text{13}\) Two of the most important ideas in Kant’s argument here are ‘disinterestedness’ and ‘purposiveness without purpose.’ For Kant, ‘taste’ refers to “the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction.”\(^\text{14}\) Kant distinguishes the enjoyment of beauty from the ways in which we typically respond to other sorts of pleasures. He insists that our response be disinterested, severed from or independent of both its purpose and the sense of pleasure it triggers.\(^\text{15}\) This, of course, relates directly to the idea of beauty having ‘purposiveness without purpose,’ a principle that Freeland illustrates rather effectively with a rose: “A beautiful rose pleases us, but not because we necessarily want to eat it or even pick it for a flower arrangement.”\(^\text{16}\) Kant argues that “we are not always forced to regard what we observe from the point of view of reason. Thus we can at least observe a purposiveness according to form, without basing it on a purpose.”\(^\text{17}\) Explaining how this applies to the idea of the universal validity of aesthetic judgments, Kant suggests that “it is the mere form of purposiveness in the representation by which an object is given to us, so far as we are conscious of it, which constitutes the satisfaction that we without a concept judge to be universally communicable; and consequently, this is the determining ground of the judgment of taste.”\(^\text{18}\) Thus, Kant argues, we apply no concepts involving either interest or purpose when making aesthetic judgments.

We might be inclined to think that ‘universal’ and ‘subjective’ are irreconcilable terms. Surely each of us has his own preferences, his own tastes? Kant agrees: “It would be laughable if a man who imagined anything to his own taste thought to justify himself by saying: ‘This object is beautiful for me.’ For he must not call it beautiful if it merely pleases him.”\(^\text{19}\) What we like and what is beautiful, then, are two very different things. For Kant, it would be

\(^{13}\) Kant, Critique.
\(^{14}\) Kant, “Critique” (§5) 128.
\(^{15}\) Freeland 12-14.
\(^{16}\) Freeland 11.
\(^{17}\) Kant, Critique (§10) 55-56.
\(^{18}\) Kant, Critique (§10) 56.
\(^{19}\) Kant, “Critique” (§7) 129.
absurd to say that something is *beautiful* for me; it only makes sense to say that something is *pleasant* to me. Thus to say that something is beautiful is to imply its universality.\textsuperscript{20} There is, however, more to Kant’s argument for subjective universality.

“The common understanding of men, which [...] we regard as the least to be expected from anyone claiming the name of man, has therefore the doubtful honour of being given the name of ‘common sense’ (*sensus communis*).”\textsuperscript{21} Here Kant is talking not about the pejorative common sense, but rather about a mental faculty that all of us *must* share if we are to engage each other in any meaningful way. For Kant, this is the *a priori* condition that must be met in order for us to communicate at all. Kant argues that “under the *sensus communis* we must include the idea of a sense *common to all*, i.e. of a faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought.”\textsuperscript{22} Common sense, according to this very specific understanding of the term, is critical to Kant’s subjective universality; however, there are yet some difficulties to overcome.

Kant anticipates, and attempts to resolve, an obvious difficulty in his theory in what he refers to as the ‘antinomy of taste.’\textsuperscript{23} The antinomy is structured thus:

*Thesis*. The judgment of taste is not based upon concepts, for otherwise it would admit of controversy (would be determinable by proofs).

*Antithesis*. The judgment of taste is based on concepts, for otherwise, despite its diversity, we could not quarrel about it (we could not claim for our judgment the necessary assent of others).\textsuperscript{24}

To resolve this conflict, Kant argues that,

The judgment of taste must refer to some concept; otherwise it could make absolutely no claim to be necessarily valid for everyone. But

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Crawford.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Kant, “Critique” (§40) 133.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Kant, “Critique” (§40) 133.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Kant, “Critique.”
\item \textsuperscript{24} Kant, “Critique” (§56) 139.
\end{itemize}
it is not therefore capable of being proved from a concept, because a concept may be either determinable or in itself undetermined and undeterminable. The concepts of the understanding are of the former kind; they are determinable through predicates of sensible intuition which can correspond to them. But the transcendental rational concept of the supersensibles, which lies at the basis of all sensible intuition, is of the latter kind, and therefore cannot be theoretically determined further.25

Judgments of taste, then, are based on an undeterminable concept; however, “on that very account the judgment has validity for everyone […], because its determining ground lies perhaps in the concept of that which may be regarded as the supersensible substrata of humanity.”26 Therefore, Kant appears not only to have resolved the antinomy, but he has also provided further support for his claim of universal subjectivity. Kant, though, is not entirely satisfied here: “the antinomies force us against our will to look beyond the sensible and to seek in the supersensible the point of union for all our a priori faculties”27

This is one of Kant’s most controversial claims.

Before discussing the problems with the supersensible, as well as other shortcomings of the Critique, it is worth first looking at Kant’s approach to fine art and genius. Kant explains that “the purposiveness in the product of beautiful art, although it is designed, must not seem to be designed, i.e. beautiful art must look like nature, although we are conscious of it as art.”28 Here, Kant makes a clear distinction between the beauty of nature and the beauty of fine art, the latter being the product of genius. This is important, as Kant is often accused of being exclusively formalist in his approach to fine art.29 In Kant’s scheme, according to Guyer, “the merit of a work of genius […] lies in the way in which form and content and the expressive relation between them all combine to produce a free play of the cognitive faculties.”30

25 Kant, “Critique” (§56) 139.
26 Kant, “Critique” (§56) 140.
27 Kant, “Critique” (§56) 140, emphasis added.
28 Kant, Critique (§45) 149.
29 Guyer.
30 Guyer 360.
While Kant’s notion of ‘purposiveness without purpose’ suggests that content is irrelevant, it is clear that Kant considered not only content, but also context, to be an important component of the aesthetic evaluation of fine art. This discussion of genius and fine art anticipates one of the most talked about objections to Kant’s aesthetic theory – specifically, that the formalism we find in the *Critique* renders his aesthetics inapplicable to a great deal of fine art. While Kant’s account of the universal subjectivity of aesthetic judgments is compelling, his treatment of fine art is often seen as insufficient. Although it is widely considered one of the pivotal works in the field of aesthetics, Kant’s third *Critique* contains no systematic theory of art.\(^{31}\) To be fair, it was not Kant’s intention to construct a comprehensive theory of art; instead, he did attempt to show, as we have seen, that his theory *can* and *does* apply to the evaluation of works of fine art.

There is also a tendency to read in Kant a reductionist theory of art, which posits some essential quality in things that renders them beautiful. He is occasionally blamed for championing a dispassionate, ‘pure’ aesthetic attitude that is removed from a robust, perhaps more ‘human’ engagement with content.\(^{32}\) Kant appears to “deny pluralism in aesthetics, and so rules out the possibility that there may be many different, equally valuable sensibilities; [he] requires that we place too high a value on convergence and does not allow us to celebrate diversity.”\(^{33}\) Guyer, though, argues that a misreading of Kant could have contributed to “the tendency of most forms of aesthetic theory since Kant to reduce art to some single essential aspect. [However,] Kant’s conception of the nature of fine art and our response to it is essentially complex, not reductionist.”\(^{34}\) As has been pointed out, Kant’s treatment of ‘genius’ makes explicit his belief that both form and content are necessary components of art production and art appreciation.\(^{35}\) Plainly, Kant’s aesthetics

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34 Guyer 351.
35 Guyer.
is more complex than it is usually taken to be; it is certainly difficult to argue that it is unambiguously reductionist.

The final area of the *Critique* that has met with criticism is Kant’s resolution of the antinomy of taste. As we have seen, Kant argues that an unknowable and indeterminate supersensible substratum not only resolves the antinomy but supports the universal validity of our aesthetic judgments.\(^{36}\) This, however, has been a problem for many critics of Kant, who typically yearn for an objective and immovable foundation for reflective judgment.\(^{37}\) Cascardi suggests that “Kant may seem not just indeterminate but hopelessly vague and abstract,”\(^{38}\) while Stern asserts that “[t]he supersensible is a philosophical myth which allows Kant to preserve his conviction that there is a fact of the matter about taste despite his inability to find a good argument for it.”\(^{39}\) What Kant’s supersensible argument evokes is something akin to Plato’s Forms.\(^{40}\) It is not hard to imagine Kant engaged in a Socratic dialogue with Parmenides in which he would find himself unable to adequately defend his theory of the supersensible, just as Socrates appeared unable to adequately defend his theory of the Forms.\(^{41}\)

In the years following the publication of the *Critique*, a number of thinkers would take up these (and other) objections to Kant’s aesthetic theory. No one has taken a more comprehensive approach to the issues raised by Kant than Hegel, in particular in his posthumously published *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Hegel took Kant’s revolution a step farther, focusing on mind and cognitive questions rather than purely aesthetic ones.\(^{42}\) He is concerned with

\(^{36}\) Kant “Critique” (§56) 140.
\(^{37}\) Cascardi.
\(^{38}\) Cascardi 39.
\(^{39}\) Stern 70.
\(^{40}\) Plato, “Republic” 10-19.
\(^{41}\) Parmenides offers four objections here to Socrates’ argument for the existence of the Forms. The first, if the forms cannot be multiple, how do they manifest in multiple objects; second, there appears to be an infinite regress of Forms of Forms, e.g. Largeness; third, Parmenides rejects the notion of Forms as thoughts, arguing that a thought must be a thought of something; and fourth, and most problematic for Kant, we simply cannot know the Forms. See Plato, “Parmenides,” *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1970).
\(^{42}\) Townsend.
self-knowledge, which is developed in concert with other minds, through linguistic and cultural networks, over time.\textsuperscript{43} Desmond asserts that, for Hegel, art serves the development of mind: “Great art is the manifestation of Spirit, hence it also embodies the richest expression of a culture’s or a people’s or a nation’s sense of what is most ultimate and high.”\textsuperscript{44} Hegel, like Kant before him, took Plato and the ancient ideas of beauty to task. He argues that,

in the sphere of art, even for the mere idea of beauty, the Platonic abstraction must fail to satisfy the deeper philosophical wants of the mind today. An idea of the beautiful must indeed be our starting point for a philosophy of art; but our conception must from the beginning reconcile […] metaphysical universality with what is genuinely particular.\textsuperscript{45}

Hegel, however, then departs from Kant. He takes a comprehensive and systematic approach in his aesthetics, thus giving us something more like a ‘theory of art.’ Hegel argues that, “[a]rtistic […] beauty is the subject matter of aesthetics, which may thus be called, more properly, the philosophy of fine art.”\textsuperscript{46} To get at Hegel’s theory of art it is necessary to consider the individual components that make up his overall system; an ideal beginning to this investigation is Hegel’s dialectic concerning art, religion, and philosophy.

In Hegel’s work, according to Bungay, we can see a “progression from art as immediate, through religion to philosophy as fully mediated.”\textsuperscript{47} Hegel argues that, “where it rises highest, art’s sphere is shared with religion and philosophy. Each of the three – art, religion, and philosophy – is a moment of absolute mind,\textsuperscript{48} and they differ from one another only in the forms in which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Desmond, “Art and the Absolute,” 5.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Hegel, \textit{Hegel on the Arts} 1.
\item \textsuperscript{48} According to Hegel, “the absolute mind, while it is self-centered identity, is also identity returning and ever returned into itself: if it is the one and universal substance it is
\end{itemize}
they bring their content, the absolute, to human consciousness.” Indeed, for Hegel, art is “the most immediate self-gratification of absolute mind.” Religion transcends the ways in which art apprehends the absolute, while philosophy brings together “the forms of apprehension of art and religion.” Hegel identifies art, religion and philosophy as three manifestations of Absolute Spirit or Divine Mind. For him, “[t]he subjective consciousness of the absolute spirit is essentially and intrinsically a process,” moreover, it is a process that contributes to the certainty of objective truth. Spiritual liberation – the actuality of the spirit – further authenticates this certainty. Hegel’s theory of art can thus be understood as an ontological theory. He is careful to point out, though, that art is not the highest source of knowledge: “even fine art is only a grade of liberation, not the supreme liberation itself. The genuine objectivity, which is only in the medium of thought […] is still absent in the sensuous beauty of the work of art.”

Hegel identifies three distinct cultural stages of art: the Symbolic, which divides ideas and expression, is exemplified in ancient architecture; the Classical, which brings together self-consciousness and form without dividing idea and expression, is best exemplified by Greek sculpture and epic tragedy; while the Romantic, which is inward looking, is found in medieval Christian art.

so as spirit, discerning itself into a self and a consciousness, for which it is as substance.”

49 Hegel, Hegel on the Arts 7.
50 Hegel, Hegel on the Arts 7.
51 Hegel, Hegel on the Arts 7-8.
54 Hegel, “Encyclopedia” (§555) 155.
56 Hegel, “Encyclopedia” (§562) 158.
“figurative art, which elaborates its content visually in form and color; sonoral art, or music; and, thirdly, poetry which, as the speaking art, makes use of sound simply as a sign, in order to address itself inwardly to the spiritual subjectivity of our imagination, feelings, and ideas.”

Here, the arts go through a process of dematerialization, from architecture, the most material, through sculpture, painting, music, and finally to poetry, which is the most immaterial.

In Hegel, art is seen as an expression of a culture’s ideal reality; it is a means to the religious and historical realization of spirit. Cascardi claims that “the task of Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics is not simply to show that art is historical, and even less to subordinate art to the worldly discourses of production and praxis, but to relate the particular form of making what is visible in art to the larger story of consciousness as it is set to work in the world.”

One of the most talked about aspects of Hegel’s aesthetics, though, is his ‘end of art’ thesis, which seems to imply that this process has come to an end. However, this is a very simplistic reading of what is a very complex idea, and therefore the thesis itself demands a closer look. According to Hegel, “[a]rt is and remains for us, on the side of its highest possibilities, a thing of the past.”

Cascardi’s interpretation of this controversial passage suggests that the historical trajectory of post-Enlightenment art traces “a fall away from the immediate satisfaction of spiritual needs that Hegel believes was possible in the ancient world.” Another reading asserts that Hegel did not intend the death of art at all. In fact, he explicitly provides for the continuation of art through its participation in the more inclusive accounts of Absolute Spirit offered by religion and philosophy. Further, according to Carter, Hegel implicitly liberates art from its own past, allowing new forms to emerge from the creative interplay of the artist and her cultural-temporal context.

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58 Hegel, Hegel on the Arts 63.
59 Inwood.
60 Townsend 150-54.
61 Cascardi 49-50.
63 Cascardi 58.
64 See, for instance, Desmond, “Art and the Absolute.”
65 Curtis L. Carter, “A Rexamination of the ‘Death of Art:’ Interpretation of Hegel’s
argues that the death of art interpretation is based on “a misapplication of the principle of the dialectic [that] confuses changes in romantic art with the demise of all art.” Indeed, to take the ‘end of art’ thesis at face value is to miss, entirely, Hegel’s point.

Hegel’s system is extraordinarily comprehensive. As Desmond observes, “[h]e looks into the history of the west and its metaphysical tradition, intending to gather from that tradition its abiding contribution to the human spirit, not only in aesthetics, but also in religion, in science, in politics and law, in philosophy.” There are, however, some valid criticisms of the Lectures to consider. Wicks rightly points out that Hegel’s claims about the superior ability of sculpture to convey beauty, and the status of poetry as the most profound art form, are far from universally accepted. There are certainly a number of less than beautiful sculptures in the world, and there is no shortage of mundane poetry, so it is hard to say that as forms they exhibit any consistent qualities. Wicks asserts that Hegel also seems to ignore the complexities of the subject matter of art. To suggest that there are only five kinds of art is far too exclusive, least of all because it denies the relevance of art forms that have emerged since Hegel’s time, particularly photography, and more recently, digital media.

Hegel’s ‘end of art’ thesis, though, remains the most controversial element of his aesthetics. Clearly art has not ended; indeed, art continued to have tremendous value for philosophers following Hegel. Desmond points out, for example, that Schopenhauer “places art and especially music at an extraordinarily high level of metaphysical revelation,” while for Nietzsche “the poet is a more ultimate figure than the philosopher.” Desmond further argues that not only is it that art is not relegated to the past, but it is in fact...
subjected now to greater expectations and unforeseen burdens.\textsuperscript{72} One could regard any number of the paradigm shifts that have occurred in the arts throughout history as an ‘end of art.’ Indeed, Hilmer argues that “[t]he array of alleged ends suggests that we can find the end even in the very beginning of Western art history.”\textsuperscript{73} All of this suggests that Hegel’s ‘end of art’ may be more properly understood as part of a process of continual transformation.

\textbf{APPLICATION: BRINGING KANTIAN AND HEGELIAN AESTHETICS INTO THE PRESENT}

With this overview of the central themes in Kant’s and Hegel’s respective works, the relevance of their theories to contemporary art begins to emerge. This relevance can be brought into especially sharp focus by applying the aesthetic theories of Kant and Hegel to Marcel Duchamp’s \textit{Fountain} (1917); the ‘drip period’ paintings of Jackson Pollock (1947-1950); and Robert Rauschenberg’s \textit{Erased de Kooning Drawing} (1953).

Duchamp’s \textit{Fountain}\textsuperscript{74} is perhaps one of the most controversial works of art of the twentieth century, if not in the whole history of art. The work is a urinal, turned on its end with ‘R. Mutt, 1917’ inscribed on it. The controversy is that it is not \textit{an imitation} of a urinal – a painting or sculpture, for example – it \textit{is} a urinal. At the time of the work, and for many years after, it presented an enormous challenge to the very notion of what constitutes ‘art;’ indeed, some of this controversy still attaches to \textit{Fountain}. By applying Kant and Hegel, though, we can better understand how this piece gains the status of a ‘work of art.’ Hegel’s cognitive theory clearly has some value here, as it facilitates an understanding of \textit{Fountain}, on one level, by placing it in a particular art-historical and cultural context. Carter’s observations about the artist and his relationship to the cultural-temporal perspective of his time are particularly salient here. \textit{Fountain} does, however, have some actual aesthetic qualities in addition to any appeal that derives from its subversive merging of the ultra-mundane (functional) and the elevated (artistic). Kant, for his part, might be

\textsuperscript{72} Desmond, “Art and the Absolute” 3-4.
\textsuperscript{73} Hilmer 79.
\textsuperscript{74} To view this piece see the Tate Gallery, \texttt{http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/duchampmanraypicabia/images/duchamp_fountain.jpg}
horrified at the prospect of calling it ‘art,’ yet if we purposefully apply his ‘disinterested judgment’ to *Fountain*, overlooking the purpose of its initial manufacture, it does have a certain beauty. Recall Freeland’s example of a rose. It has even been suggested that *Fountain* evokes the curves of the female body,\(^\text{75}\) a resemblance that could, itself, elicit (however unconsciously) an enthusiastic response from a viewer.

The work of Jackson Pollock requires a different sort of evaluation. Pollock’s ‘drip period’ paintings\(^\text{76}\) are essentially an expression of pure emotion and form, and are thus in many ways as much like music as they are like painting.\(^\text{77}\) This represents a significant challenge to Hegel, whose rigid categorization of the arts places painting and music in very different spheres, and whose insistence on the figurative nature of the visual arts would also seem to explicitly exclude Abstract Expressionism. There may therefore be more advantage in applying Kant’s formalist approach to Pollock than Hegel’s cognitive, historical approach – and indeed, Kant’s idea of aesthetic ‘disinterested judgment,’ involving the free play of imagination and understanding as it does, is particularly instructive here. Recall also that for Kant an aesthetic judgment can never refer to concepts, thus an evaluation of Pollock that looks for concepts within the work profits the viewer nothing. Clement Greenberg, who was a disciple of Kant and a champion of Pollock, approached his paintings in just such purely aesthetic terms. He claimed that “[s]eeing what is in a work or what it ‘says’ is not the point.”\(^\text{78}\) For Greenberg, what we should be looking at in a work of art is the way the artist actually deals with the medium;\(^\text{79}\) so with Pollock, we should be concerned first and

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\(^\text{76}\) These non-figurative works were created by pouring and dripping fluid paints, in layers, onto canvases that had been laid out on Pollock’s studio floor. To view pieces from this period see the National Gallery of Art (Washington), [http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/tssearch?oldartistid=25100&imageset=1](http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/tssearch?oldartistid=25100&imageset=1)


\(^\text{78}\) Freeland 15.

\(^\text{79}\) Freeland 15.
foremost with our immediate response to the formal qualities of his paintings, and only peripherally with the cultural and historical dimensions of the work. Therefore, while Hegel’s theories may be relevant to an analysis of the art-historical and spiritual dimensions of the Abstract Expressionist movement of which Pollock was a part, it is Kant that offers the most insight into our understanding of this painter’s art.

Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is another controversial work of contemporary art – one that appears to defy theory altogether. It is precisely what its name describes: a drawing made by the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning, erased by Neo-Dadaist artist Robert Rauschenberg. It is, on its surface, a blank sheet of paper, with only a ghost of the original drawing remaining. Aesthetically it is precisely *nothing*, that is, nothing more than the (nearly) featureless surface of a sheet of paper; therefore, Kant is rendered mute, least of all because a Kantian approach demands some kind of *form*. But what would Hegel make of this blank offering? As an *object* it says nothing, but if we shift the focus to its context and intent it becomes a powerful symbol of the mid-century break from Abstract Expressionism in New York City. Hegel’s idea of art as an expression of cultural and historical process is clearly relevant to our understanding of Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, denoting as it does an important historical transformation in American culture (a segue into the Pop Art movement that is still seen as representative of a uniquely American aesthetic). Recall, too, that Hegel had argued that in the Classical period we saw the merging of both self-consciousness and form, and idea and expression. It could be argued that this is precisely what we see in *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Although this might suggest that Hegel’s linear progression – from the Symbolic to the Classical and finally to the Romantic – is perhaps less linear than Hegel might have thought, it remains that the transformation that he recognized in the Classical period maps onto Rauschenberg’s piece in interesting and informative ways. It is difficult to say whether Hegel would recognize *Erased de Kooning Drawing* as a ‘work of art,’ but he would have

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80 To view this piece see Artnet, [http://images.artnet.com/images_US/magazine/features/saltz/saltz5-28-08-2s.jpg](http://images.artnet.com/images_US/magazine/features/saltz/saltz5-28-08-2s.jpg)

81 Walther.
been forced to concede that it has tremendous cultural and historical meaning, and that it may even incline toward the spiritual in its capacity to advance self-knowledge.

**CONCLUSION**

Neither Kant nor Hegel could have foreseen anything like the paintings of Cy Twombly, the music of John Cage, or the novels of William S. Burroughs. Nevertheless, the contributions that Kant and Hegel have made to the field of aesthetics continue to influence our understanding of the often ‘difficult’ art that has emerged since the turn of the twentieth century. This paper has argued that that there are features in each of these philosophers’ work that allow us to more firmly grasp, and more fruitfully search for meaning in, contemporary art. Kant’s formalist approach, particularly his ‘disinterested judgment’ and ‘purposiveness without purpose’ are highly applicable to many forms of contemporary art, particularly the non-figurative works of the Abstract Expressionists. Hegel’s art historical analysis provides us with some important insights into the transformation of art and culture over time; something that Kant’s work does not. Despite the passing of more than two centuries, then, we can say that the aesthetic theories developed by Kant and Hegel – as divergent (and imperfect) as they may be – have made a lasting impression. Each philosopher thus continues to shape and reshape our appreciation of art, be it expressive or purely aesthetic in its objectives, in important ways. It is inevitable that whatever form(s) art takes in the future, we will continue to draw upon the influential theories of Kant and Hegel to find in that art both value and meaning.

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