

**Key Term: Anti-Kantian Aesthetics.**

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Innovative, influential, and always somewhat controversial, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* provided the prevailing account of aesthetic judgment from the time of its publication in 1790 until shortly after the Second World War (Leitch et al. 503). Prior to this period, philosophers concerned with aesthetics were sharply divided over two incompatible explanations for the determination of beauty. Some argued that beauty derives from the intrinsic properties of certain objects, while others claimed that all taste is subjective and preferential. Kant developed an alternative explanation that accommodated portions of both of these positions by contending that universally valid aesthetic judgments can be made on the basis of feelings of pleasure and displeasure that are disinterested and purposeless (and thus not reducible to mere inclinations). But due to the rigidity of the universalism in his arguments, and his dismissal of the context in which aesthetic judgments are made, more recent movements such as Marxist aesthetics and pragmatism have claimed that taste is fundamentally contingent upon various social, cultural, and economic factors. Scholars have also begun to focus on the aesthetics of social relations, and as such, the term anti-Kantian aesthetics encompasses a range of theoretical perspectives concerning both artistic processes and artistic products.

The central innovation present in Kant's theory of aesthetics was the development of a non-conceptual and non-rational explanation of categorical judgments of taste. While he argued that aesthetic evaluations are universally valid, Kant did not believe that they rely upon the determining use of judgment to associate a perceptual cognition with a

concept.<sup>1</sup> Rather, beauty can be unequivocally attributed to some objects because those objects have the capacity to universally induce what Kant deemed the cognitive “free play...of the faculties of imagination and understanding” (Ginsbourg). In simple terms, “free play” involves the experience of a proliferation of imaginative cognitions upon the perception of a given object. Such cognitions arguably form the basis of the pleasure that art yields, and Kant contended that if one subject can experience such free play from perceiving a given object, than all other perceivers of that object ought to as well - the object is thus regarded as universally beautiful. Overall, Kant’s aesthetic theory attributed four central characteristics to any valid aesthetic judgment: disinterestedness, universality, purposelessness, and necessity.<sup>2</sup> With the assertion of these qualities, Kant cast out of favor both the idea of relative beauty, and the role of subjective inclinations in matters of taste.

But the difficulties that ensue from such rigid universalism are numerous: “art” is restricted to a narrow class of objects; no consideration is given to the context in which aesthetic judgments are made; no account of the purposes for which art is employed is acknowledged; and making distinctions between “art” and “non-art” becomes very problematic. Pierre Bourdieu was one influential scholar who addressed some of these problems by suggesting that aesthetic judgment is a “process through which modern societies produce and legitimate economic and status inequalities” (Leitch et al. 1806). For Bourdieu, evaluations of “art” act to stratify society: people “distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (1813), and are “classified by their classifications” (1813).

Put simply, Bourdieu, in company with other scholars influenced by Marx, maintains that aesthetic judgments cannot be isolated from the field of social and economic relations in which they reside.

Pragmatists such as Barbara Herrnstein Smith have expanded upon Bourdieu's theory to incorporate a number of other factors that function to differentiate human beings and their individual judgments of beauty. She argues that taste is a product of "multiple, continuously changing, and continuously interacting variables" that include personal circumstances, temperaments, biological differences, and institutional, cultural, and social variables (Herrnstein Smith 1913). For this reason, she rejects the idea of universal beauty and concludes that "[a]ll value is radically contingent" (1913). Even more interestingly, Herrnstein Smith is also able to account for the seemingly timeless value placed on certain artworks, such as the Iliad, or Renaissance paintings. She suggests that the contingent determination of artistic value is governed by a process similar to biological adaptation: those works that serve the needs and interests of an evaluative community will be selected and preserved for future generations; those works that don't, won't. While this argument might suggest that all works will fall out favor as a result of the sociocultural shifts that inevitably occur over time, Herrnstein Smith qualifies her position by stating that highly canonized works ensure their own preservation by *producing and shaping* the culture in which they reside. Accordingly, the Iliad retains its relevance in a contemporary context because it has contributed to the creation and preservation of a culture that values Greek epics; art objects and aesthetic judgments thus exist in strangely reciprocal and mutually constitutive relationship. In

relation to Kant, the important point is that Herrnstein Smith's theory is a direct refutation of aesthetic universalism, and is exemplary of contemporary views of aesthetic value in relation to artistic products.

In the context of improvisation studies, however, a more significant post-Kantian approach to aesthetics has involved a focus upon *artistic processes*. Social aestheticians such as ICASP researcher Keith Sawyer point out that the almost exclusive consideration in academic discourse of creative outcomes such as novels and compositions tends to ignore the importance of “[c]reativity in interactional domains...to our lives and our culture” (149-50). Accordingly, his argument is that “the psychological and social processes operating in improvisational performance” are intrinsically related to ordinary activities such as “teaching, collaborating, parenting, and leadership” (159), and that a recognition of the aesthetic properties of these everyday procedural acts of creativity is necessary. Life, in other words, is aesthetic in itself and highly improvisatory, as John Dewey once suggested (Sawyer 159). So overall, the thrust of social aesthetics as articulated by Sawyer seems to suggest that a consideration of improvisation and artistic processes more generally also requires a decidedly post-Kantian expansion of the kinds of things that the category of “art” conventionally encompasses. Art *is* everyday practice, and vice versa.

Another central development in the field of process-related aesthetics is Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics. Bourriaud argues that value judgments should be construed primarily in terms of the human relations and “model of sociability” facilitated by a work of art (qtd. in Downey 270).<sup>3</sup> He claims that the job of the

aestheteian, then, is to evaluate the form of social communication suggested or prompted by a given work. Such a perspective dovetails nicely with the central hypothesis of the ICASP project - that musical improvisation can provide an important model for community building, and “political, cultural, and ethical dialogue” (Heble et al.). If this hypothesis is indeed correct (or even under consideration), then it would also seem that improvisation can be viewed as a form of “relational art” subject to Bourriaud’s model for aesthetic evaluation. Or to put it another way, the formal properties of improvised art are generally considered to be secondary to its relational properties - an aesthetics of the social is thus both appropriate and necessary.

Not all theorists are so quick to embrace the formal freedom implied by such a position, though. A widespread criticism of aesthetic arguments centering on the social potential of improvisation is that they implicitly involve an abandonment of standards. As Alan Durant puts it, improvisation is often seen as “a human activity which gains value exactly from the fact that it constructs no version of hierarchy or competition, no ensnaring conventions or intrinsically detrimental value judgments” (qtd. in Fischlin and Heble, 22); some have gone so far as to say that, in the context of music, improvisation constitutes a “free zone...where...you are responsible only to yourself and the dictates of your taste” (qtd. in Fischlin and Heble, 23). Yet in response to these critiques of aesthetic relativism, it has been pointed out that there are numerous conventions and “generic practices” that improvisers abide by (22). Sawyer, for instance, discusses the common use of “ready-mades” or pre-existent motifs, templates, and patterns that improvisers continually employ in novel ways (159). Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble also point out

that improvisation is not even predominantly about self-expression, let alone a “free zone” of it (23). Rather, improvisation

celebrates human contact by reinvigorating our understanding of the possibilities of social interaction. Central to this understanding is a commitment to listen to the voices of those around us, and, moreover, to be able to do so with trust, humility, generosity, and a genuine spirit of openness. (35)

The important point here is that implicit in this statement is a definition of improvisation *as* social practice, attendant with “commitment[s]” (one might even say standards of judgment) that can be used as a basis to evaluate a given performance. Put simply, good improvisers can be distinguished from the uninitiated based on their ability to do such things as “listen...trust...[and embrace] a genuine spirit of openness” (35). Given these commitments and priorities, the suggestion that improvisers are unbound by any standards whatsoever seems to be misleading at the very least.

Another approach to this supposed problem of the arbitrary evaluation of real-time, collaborative art practices has involved a focus on the “aesthetics of imperfection” (Hamilton 168). Arguing that a simple distinction between improvisation and composition is problematic, Andy Hamilton explores a division between what he claims are two opposing perspectives on musical value: the “aesthetics of perfection”, which demands “absolute fidelity to the composer’s intentions” (172), and the “aesthetics of imperfection” wherein “virtues arise...because of the ‘unfinished state’ of [improvised] performances” (171). Hamilton’s position is that composition and

improvisation “constitute interpenetrating opposites” (176), thus making them simultaneously open to evaluation on perfective and imperfective terms. He examines features of music such as “preparation, spontaneity, and structure” (171), and argues that all can be found to varying degrees in both composed and improvised works: orchestra soloists often engage in subtle “individualities of tone” (174), exhibiting a restrained version of the “jazz ethos of freedom” (174), while jazz musicians often make use of a “routine that wows the audience”, and historically “felt no compunction in...working up their solos” (176). Moreover, improvisations can even be thought to convert into compositions through the process of recording (184). What is significant in all of this is that Hamilton illustrates the problems present in creating a clear process/product divide in relation to aesthetic judgment: classical works can be subject to an aesthetics of relations, and improvisations are not necessarily impervious to being viewed as evaluable art objects.

Finally then, while the preceding discussion presents a brief consideration of some of the key issues involved in defining a social, post-Kantian aesthetics of improvisation, it also shows how a neat category distinction between artistic processes and artistic products is easily troubled. Products have procedures associated with them, and processes often create a result or involve a product of some sort. Accordingly, aesthetics in its more recent post-Kantian formulations is not just about doing away with the concept of universal beauty. Rather, it is about revising our understandings of what art is to include both product and process in a way that allows the use of relational and formal criterion of judgment. Kant may have wished to simplify the field of aesthetics in

1790, but the legacy of his reactionaries has been to do just the opposite: beauty, at least in Sawyer's view, can apply as much to everyday instances of interactional creativity as it does to the contents of museum vaults and gallery walls. The further investigation of improvisational practices in life and art accordingly has much to offer as we seek to better understand the ways in which aesthetic judgments can create, transmit, and disrupt notions of artistic *and* social value.

#### Notes

1. To clarify, a universally valid statement such as "this leaf is green" relies upon the subsumption of a perception (of the leaf) under a conceptual category (green). This process of subsumption involves what Kant would call a determining judgment. Kant believed that taste involves no such determining judgment.
2. For more information on Kant's specific terminology and aesthetic theory in general, please see Ginsbourg's "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology."
3. See the related ICASP entry "Relational Aesthetics" for more information on this topic and Bourriaud in particular.

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