MODERN ARTWORKS

In light of Kant's definition of beauty

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The painting *Table* (1982) by the German artist Gerhard Richter (Illustration (1)) is built up by strokes of oil paint in bright colours. On the left side there is a red plane and some red lines disappearing in a clear blue colour. The right side is dominated by seemingly unordered brush strokes in yellow, green, red and white. We are informed by the title that this might be a representation of a table. Is it? Are the red plane and the lines composing an image of a table? But what then about the right side of the painting that so to say cries for attention with intense strokes and colours? Could this be an abstraction of a table?

For the time being we are left to wonder about this piece of art. My hope is that we will extend our understanding of it through this essay. I will argue that the aesthetic theory of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant can conceptualize and enrich our experience of it. In what follows I will give an account of the definition of beauty that Kant presented in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in 1790. My claim is that this definition can be successfully applied to modern art, which I define to encompass artworks made after 1850.[1] I will look at specific artworks of some artists from Édouard Manet to Richter.

When do we judge something to be beautiful? One way of answering is to define beauty. Here is Kant's suggestion:

> Beauty is the form of the *purposiveness* of an object, insofar as it is perceived in it without representation of an end. (Kant 1995, s 236)

But what does Kant mean by "form of purposiveness" conceived of "without representation of an end"? Let us start by locating the place of the beautiful in his theory of aesthetics. In order to do that, I will introduce another painting.

White Center (1950) is an oil painting by the Russian-American painter Mark Rothko (Illustration (2)). It is of rectangular shape, standing, and filled with squares of colours. From bottom to top there is first a large pink square, then a blue line horizontally, then a white belt in the middle with a black line lying on top, and finally a warm, yellow square. The colours are applied in a rough manner, and the uneven edges are evident against the red background. The picture is becoming. Let us assume that we agree on this and exclaim: "This is beautiful!"

This exclamation is what Kant calls a "judgment of taste". A judgment of taste is a judgment "to decide whether or not something is beautiful" (Kant 1995, s. 203). When we judge Rothko's painting to be beautiful we perform a demarcation; we say that *White Center* belongs to the beautiful things in the world, and we distinguish it from the ugly things.

The judgment of taste is based on the feeling of pleasure or displeasure in a judging subject, Kant says (1995:203). Several things can give rise to a feeling of pleasure; the beautiful ("das Schöne") is only one of them (Kant 1995, s. 210).[2] But the pleasure that we take in the beautiful has a distinctive character - it is "disinterested" (Kant 1995, s. 204f).[3] The judgment of taste has no room for desire or interest towards the object (Kant 1995, s. 209). Only if disinterested pleasure precedes the judgment is it truly a judgment of taste.

We assumed that Rothko's painting is beautiful. Some

might object that the term "beautiful" is not adequate for describing modern art. They might point out that modern art is judged according to several criteria, beauty being just one of them.

It is true that beauty is not the sole criterion of modern art. An artwork being interesting, fascinating or ugly could be just as excellent as a beautiful one. But could it not be that it is just the descriptions of good art that have changed, the matter being more or less the same? If this is correct, what was valued in an artwork in 1790 is not entirely different from what we appreciate in art today, and we have no reason to exclude the possibility that Kant's theory can inform our understanding of contemporary art.

Others might object that even though we accept beauty as a criterion for modern art, it is not likely that Kant's theory can enlighten us, since what is considered beautiful today is not the same as what was judged beautiful in 1790. What we find beautiful differs according to time, place and social position, they might say.

When we judge something to be beautiful, we base our judgment on a feeling of indifferent satisfaction, Kant says. If we accept this, I think we can include all artworks that elicit this feeling in the theory. If judgments of modern artworks have common ground with judgments of beauty from the 1700s, a theory that focuses on this common ground could have validity, in spite of the fact that the term "beautiful" does not have a constant meaning.

In what follows, I will try Kant's theory of beauty on modern artworks, without considering the term "beautiful" to be an obstacle to this project. Now let us return to the definition of beauty.

Purposiveness can be exemplified by the making of a tool that can ease our work when doing something: When preparing food, we sometimes need to crush spices and herbs to get a rich taste. An agent, experiencing this need, forms a concept of a tool to perform the mashing. The agent makes such a tool, a mortar, based on the concept of it. This is what Kant means when he says that a concept can cause the existence of an object (Kant 1995, s. 220). In this way, purposiveness can be defined as the causality that is at work when concepts precede actions and objects.

Most of the time, we can understand the purpose of a tool without being informed what it is. A tool is made to serve a function, and if it works properly, we can get to know its purpose by reading it off the object. We trace it through the form of purposiveness. Seeing a mortar is enough to find out that it is perfect for squashing spices. It has a purposive form that tells us about the function. But the definition tells us that the form of purposiveness in beauty must be conceived of "without representation of an end". How is this possible?

In order to make sense of things around us, we need to explain how they are possible, Kant says. To get to know the world, we must be able to give an account of how and why its objects were brought about. In the case of a mortar, such an explanation would amount to giving the cause. An agent produced it, and the reason was to ease the crushing of spices and herbs.

All things of this world are seen as purposive and are either made by humans or nature, Kant declares. Tools and artistic beauty are things made by humans. Natural objects are either living organisms or natural beauty. Of these four categories it is only tools that allow of complete explanations.

Living organisms are understood through concepts like "tree", "bird" and "water", and we can experience how they come about through our senses and through research (Kant 1995, s. 371). But we do not have access to their purposes. As Kant puts it, the real aims of nature are out of reach (1995, s. 361); "we must absolutely deny this insight to human beings" (Kant 1995, s. 400). This makes it impossible to give an adequate explanation of natural beauty, too. Not even artistic beauty allows a complete understanding, since great art is made by geniuses that are directed by nature in their work (Kant 1995, s. 307f).

If this is true, how can we comprehend living organisms, natural beauty and artistic beauty? Kant holds that in these cases we assume a purposive ground and account for the object as if we knew its purpose:

> An object or a state of mind or even an action, however, even if its possibility does not necessarily presuppose the representation of an end, is called purposive merely because its possibility can only be explained and conceived by us insofar as we assume as its ground a causality in accordance with ends, i.e., that a will that has arranged it so in accordance with the representation of a certain rule. (Kant 1995, s. 220)

Where the purpose of an object is unknown, we trace a form of purposiveness in order to give an adequate account of it. Since this purposiveness is of our own construction, Kant calls it subjective purposiveness (1995, s. 221). "Purposiveness can thus exist without an end, insofar as we do not place the causes of this form in a will, but can still make the explanation of its possibility conceivable to ourselves only be deriving it from a will."

(Kant 1995, s. 220) This allows us to define beauty as the form of purposiveness without representation of an end, with no risk of contradicting ourselves.

Let us take a closer look at what takes place in our cognition when we enjoy beauty.

Kant discerns between different faculties of cognition. When we experience something beautiful, the imagination and the understanding are the ones at work. The imagination relies on the faculty of intuition. The intuition delivers raw impressions of the world through our senses. The imagination connects these raw data to each other and adds memory, so that the impressions tell us something about our surroundings (Kant 1995, s .287).

The understanding tries to order sense impressions under concepts. Sometimes the understanding starts with a given concept and looks for sense impressions contained under it. In other cases we start with sense impressions that the understanding tries to conceptualise. Concepts come with rules of correct application, while the imagination is unconstrained; the understanding is the faculty of restrictions.

On the basis of certain sense impressions and concepts, the imagination and the understanding try to arrive at a conclusion concerning the identity of an object. This is what is called the "judging of the object" (Kant 1995, s. 218). What can the imagination and the understanding make of *Table* by Richter? When looking at this painting the imagination collects impressions of brush strokes going in different directions in a multitude of colours. The concept "table" has been presented. The understanding recognizes the concept and recalls that it can be applied correctly to things that, together with a chair, successfully may be used to read, write or have a meal by. The imagination provides rich and complex sense data, but the understanding has problems with a conclusive choice of concept to unite these data. This leaves the understanding to look for alternative ways of ordering the data.

How are we supposed to interpret the fact that we do not succeed in giving a final judgment of the object in the painting? Have we not been attentive enough towards Richter's painting? Or does this disclose a weakness of Kant's account of beauty?

The account we have given of *Table* is supported by the way the art historian Jutta Nestegard has described Richter's work. Nestegard underlines the negative content of the picture - the fact that the artwork denies its title (Nestegard 1999, s. 44). This "destructive gesture" can be seen as discussing the identity of the table while preserving the integrity of the art of painting, she writes (1999, s. 44).

According to Nestegard, the lack of determination is an essential aspect of the artwork and not to be explained by insufficient attention on our part. By this second opinion on the matter, I suggest that we stay with our understanding of the painting.

What about the other question: Is it a weak point in Kant's theory that it cannot help us come to a conclusion about the artwork? Quite the contrary! According to Kant, the lack of determination is an essential feature of aesthetic experience in general.[4] The judgment of taste can be defined by the cognitive powers staying endlessly busy in trying to get hold of a given object. The cognitive powers play freely, in the sense of not being directed by concepts (Kant 1995, s. 217).

We are so pleased by the free play that we would like to stay in this state of sense making: The causality at stake in judgments of taste is "that of *maintaining* the state of the representation of the mind and the occupation of the cognitive powers without further aim", Kant says (1995, s. 222). What makes the cognitive search delightful?

First, finding and experiencing a purposive structure in an object is enjoyable in itself: "The consciousness of the merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers of the subject in the case of a representation through which an object is given is the pleasure itself." (Kant 1995, s. 222).

I think we can agree with Kant that contemplation of artworks is rich and rewarding without consideration of utility. Still, it seems as if he does not settle for this explanation, but offers a supplementing answer. In the case of beauty of nature, the subjective purposiveness "actually expands not our cognition of natural objects, but our concept of nature, namely as a mere mechanism, into the concept of nature as art" (Kant 1995, s. 246). Kant denies that humans can have ultimate knowledge of the world and its purposes. But in this excerpt, he proposes that beauty might lead us beyond our knowledge of nature as governed by natural laws. Beauty dissolves our human confinement and offers a glimpse of the "supersensible" by allowing some insight into the purposes of nature. According to Kant, "the attainment of every aim is combined with the feeling of pleasure" (1995, s. 187). If one of the aims of mankind is to discover the purposes of the world, and if beauty admits this kind of insight, no wonder the beautiful can bring pleasure to the beholder.

Nestegard holds that Richter is discussing the identity of things in his works. This is one way to touch upon the realm of the supersensible. Further, in an interview,

Richter describes the kind of picture he is constantly aiming at creating. He explains it as one that is "better and wiser than I am, and which is also more universal. […] One that presents our situation more accurately; one that has more truth in it." (Richter 1986, interview). If Richter is able to present a more exact picture of the world through his paintings, these artworks provide knowledge of the supersensible, just as Kant holds that the beautiful does.

The Kantian framework offers an enriched understanding of *Table*. Can it guide our reception of Rothko's painting, too?

It is not evident what *White Center* is depicting. The yellow colour resembles the colour of a glowing sun, and the lines remind us of horizons. But reading the painting as a picture of a landscape leaves us with questions: Which of the lines is supposed to illustrate the horizon? Can the pink plane work as a ground? How can we make sense of the fact that the lines and squares end at varied breadths?

The art historian Jeffrey Weiss confirms that it is hard to read Rothko's painting. He grounds his claims on common reactions to Rothko's art and uses the expression "unknown space" to sum the paintings (*Mark Rothko* 1998, s. 302). The paintings can be described as being both presence and absence of subject matter; both object and place at the same time; and landscape, architecture and urban space simultaneously (*Mark Rothko* 1998, s. 303f). Weiss points to this "inherent formal ambiguity" to explain why the paintings invite "extended contemplation" (*Mark Rothko* 1998, s. 303f).

The artwork gives rise to a free play of cognitive powers and awakes the feeling of pleasure in the beholder. The painting seems to keep hold of us, and, just like Kant says, beauty will keep us busy in search for purposiveness. On this ground, I will argue that Kant's definition of beauty through form of purposiveness can throw light on *White Center*.

Kant's definition of beauty informs our understanding of both Rothko's and Richter's paintings. Can we on this basis conclude that the definition fits modern art in general? In order to answer this, I will present three more artworks, each characterized by a feature that I wonder whether Kant's theory of beauty accounts for.

Olympia (1863) by the French painter Manet (Illustration (3)) shows a naked white woman lying on a bed. Behind her on the right side is a black woman holding a bunch of flowers. On the bed by the nude's legs is a black cat. In the background we can see parts of the interior in dark red and jade green. People that are well acquainted with the history of art will immediately notice the resemblance between this painting and *Sleeping Venus* (1508-10) ascribed to the Italian artist Giorgione (Illustration (4)). This artwork also pictures a white nude, lying in a similar fashion in dark surroundings.

Given the similarities in content between the two paintings the differences in style get all the more obvious. Giorgione has painted the woman in a classical manner using all available means to offer an illusion of a living woman lying there. By contrast it seems as if Manet underlines that his painting is a picture by making the woman look flat and stiff. Refusing to accept that the aim of painting is giving an illusion of reality, Manet draws attention to the medium of painting itself. As we can read in *Gardner's Art through the Ages* "it is clear that viewers were responding not just to the subject matter but to Manet's artistic style as well" (Kleiner 2001, s. 896). This makes style just as important as content in the reception of Manet's work. Can this aspect of aesthetic experience be accounted for by Kant's theory of beauty?

The content of a painting must necessarily be communicated through a style. Therefore style, as well as subject matter, constitutes the sense impressions that we deal with in aesthetic experience. Therefore, Kant's theory of beauty has no problems in dealing with style as an aspect of artworks.

The next example is *Lavender Mist* (1950) by the American painter Jackson Pollock (Illustration (5)). The painting was made with dripping paint, aluminium and enamel. Pollock placed the canvas on the floor and let the materials run down on it from above. Not being able to control the dripping completely, Pollock allowed chance to intervene. An important quality in this painting is its rich perceptual aspect. The artist wanted people to enjoy his works through their senses only: "I think they should look not for, but passively… It should be enjoyed as music is enjoyed." (Bell 1999, s. 195). If Pollock made paintings to be enjoyable to the senses only, without invoking cognitive activity, can Kant's definition still inform our reception of it?

Pollock argues that the correct understanding of his artworks goes through the senses, not through the mind. I wonder, is that how we experience *Lavender Mist*? Is it possible to look at this paining without searching for purposive structure? I doubt it. We know that the picture is called *Lavender Mist*. Will this not lead our understanding to try out certain concepts on the sense impressions? If this is the case, the relevance of Kant's theory cannot be rejected on the ground that the experience of Pollock's works is non-cognitive.[5]

The final example is Magne Magler Wiggen's *The Frog* (2005) (Illustration (6)). This is an architectural construction raised to house an exhibition by The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo. *The Frog* is made in green PVC, stabilized and blown up to form a frog. Inside the body of the frog, we find contemporary artworks that explore the limits between architecture, design and fine arts (The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design 2005 URL). *The Frog* is itself an artwork that crosses the traditional border between fine art and functional art, being made as an artwork to fulfil a function. We have seen that it is essential for the judgment of taste not to be based on any concept of an end. Could Kant's theory still give an account of *The Frog*?

One of the distinctive features of the beautiful according to Kant is that it is perceived without representation of an end. This means that we cannot adapt his theory to fit the example, without loosing an essential aspect of it. I do not think we can alter the understanding of the artwork either. Conceiving it without considering the way it serves the purpose would be to ignore an important aspect of the artwork. Nevertheless, I do not think this shows Kant's theory to be inadequate. Kant distinguishes between purposiveness according to ends and purposiveness without ends. He deals thoroughly, but separately, with both. I believe that we can make sense of *The Frog* within a Kantian framework if we keep both accounts in mind at the same time. This should not be seen as a weak point in the theory: If the artwork plays with the borders within the aesthetic field, an adequate theory must account for this play. One way of doing this is to discuss the differences between architecture and art, as Kant does when he distinguishes between purposiveness with a purpose and purposiveness without a purpose.

I have raised the question whether Kant's theory can be successfully applied to modern art in general. The scope of this essay only allows me to give suggestions based on the discussion of chosen artworks.

We have seen that a Kantian perception of beauty can enlighten our understanding of both Richter's *Table* and Rothko's *White Center*. The account of the free cognitive play seems to explain the paintings aptly. Further, we have seen that Richter's painting can provide insight in the supersensible, just as Kant says the beautiful does. We have not found examples of artworks that do not allow for a Kantian interpretation.

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1 What grounds the way I use the term "modern" in this context is the transformations in the arts in the middle of the 19th century. These changes can be said to connect art from 1850 and art of today. Richard R. Brettell supports my choice in *Modern Art 1851-1929* (1999). He starts his book on modern art with the year 1851, since this was the year of the first modern exhibition, the Great Exhibition in Crystal Palace in England. The exhibition told a story of modern life that still enjoys validity.

2 The good ("das Gute") and the agreeable ("das Angenehme") also please (Kant 1995, s. 210).

3 In contrast, the pleasure in the good and the pleasure in the agreeable are both interested pleasures. Judgments of the good are directed by the will. Judgments of the agreeable are guided by inclinations.

4 This means that if we are presented with artworks that do not invite this cognitive activity, we will probably not judge it to be beautiful or worth aesthetic contemplation. On the other hand, if the object in front of us allows a quick and certain conclusion, we would have made what Kant calls a "judgment of knowledge", which is a purely epistemological decision, ordering things in the world in relations to concepts.

5 I think Pollock is wrong in suggesting that the experience of music gives effortless and immediate pleasure. If I am correct, passive reception is a common feature of neither Pollock's paintings nor music. I find support in Peter Kivy's *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*, where Kivy argues that technical and theoretical knowledge contributes to "an increase in musical enjoyment" (Kivy 2002, s. 82).

Illustration (1) *Table* (1982) by Gerhard Richter, oil on canvas, 225x294 cm
http://www.thecityreview.com/f04scon1r.jpg

Illustration (2) *White Center* (1950) by Mark Rothko, oil on canvas, 205,7x141 cm
http://images.easyart.com/i/prints/lg/8/0/80891.jpg

Illustration (3) *Olympia* (1863) by Édouard Manet, oil on canvas, 130,5x190 cm
http://www.artofeurope.com/manet/man10.jpg

Illustration (4) *Sleeping Venus* (1508-10) by Giorgione (or Titian), oil on canvas, 108,5x175 cm
http://www.edwardtbabinski.us/sharonmooney/VENUS.jpg

Illustration (5) *Lavender Mist* (1950) by Jackson Pollock, oil, aluminium and enamel on canvas, 221x300 cm
http://www.nga.gov/feature/pollock/Impinkblackd.jpg

Illustration (6) *The Frog* (2005) by Magne Magler Wiggen, steel, air and PVC, ca 1400m²
http://www.nasjonalmuseet.no/index.php/content/view/full/286

Aftenposten, "Se kunst i oppblåst frosk!" (URL) (Aftenposten 2005.05.27), available at:
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http://wwww.nasjonalmuseet.no/index.php/content/view/full/286