

WHY ART HAS NEVER BEEN AUTONOMOUS

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What follows is a rough sketch aimed at promoting debate and, hopefully, hastening the demise of some tired clichés that still dominate discussions within and beyond classics. The subject is the problem of the so-called modern invention of the categories of “art,” “art history,” and “aesthetics,” though I am particularly interested in the first and last items, and most of all as they relate to the problem of “aesthetic experience.” My questions are these: are these three items modern inventions or not? Do they come bundled together or not? Were they available in ancient Greece and Rome? If not, what does it mean to talk about “ancient art” in a way that is not entirely anachronistic? If so, in what form were they available—in a form similar to or radically different from their modern counterparts? Or not at all, as some claim (e.g., Kristeller 1990 et al.)? Did the classical past and modernity experience a rupture around the very conceivability of art and the aesthetic?

This is, to be sure, a large and complex set of issues. It reaches to the core of a number of problems: periodicities, questions about universals, historical ruptures versus continuities, accessing ancient and modern sensibilities (nor do I believe that accessing modern sensibilities is in any way a simpler task than accessing those from antiquity, *pace* the widespread belief that it is), disciplinary divisions, and the difficulty of mapping these onto predisciplinary eras. This last problem is heightened, in the present case, by the fact that aesthetics in the eighteenth century was only nascently disciplinary, though from the perspective of hindsight it has the distorted look of being already en route to hard and fast disciplinarity in the sense that is familiar to ourselves. To put it most simply and crudely, the developments of aesthetic thinking in the eighteenth century are in need of radical re-description. The standard clichés simply do not hold up. As is so often

the case, the complicating details are far more interesting than the generalizations that are passed on as historical truths.

IS ART MODERN?

My essay on Paul Oskar Kristeller, “Is Art Modern?” (Porter 2009a), was a first attempt to disentangle some of these issues and to block what I perceived to be a threat to all inquiry into the theory of art and aesthetics in classical antiquity. I will not recap my arguments here, nor will I attempt to rebut one more time Larry Shiner, whose response to my article failed to advance the case any further than Kristeller’s original argument had already done (see Shiner 2009, Porter 2009b). At any rate, the questions posed by Kristeller are merely one specific subset of the more general issues that I want to discuss in this essay. Kristeller is single-mindedly focused on the category of fine arts (*les beaux arts*), which he believes were a unique force in the formation of the modern conceptualization and institutionalization of art. My doubts about this argument do not touch the question whether the fine arts were an “invention” of the eighteenth century, but rather what sort of inferences can be drawn from their denomination as such once they were named. I doubt that the fine arts were ever conceived as a system as Kristeller wants us to believe they were. I doubt that they contributed to a theory of aesthetic autonomy, which is to say, to a view of art as radically cut off from the domains of morals, utility, religion, and the like—code words for which are “disinterestedness” and contemplation of an object “for its own sake.” In fact, I am quite certain they did not. And I further doubt that the notion of fine art contributed in any way to the evolution of aesthetic theory in the eighteenth century. If I am right, then some other set of issues defines the nature of aesthetic inquiry, both in modernity and conceivably earlier, and the question whether the concept of fine art was available in antiquity is completely moot.

A further alleged criterion of modern art said to be lacking prior to 1750, and one that is closely allied with the fine arts criterion, is the distinction between art and craft, that is, the elevation of art above the level of craft. This, too, is in my mind a red herring, but the worry needs rebuttal not least because it enjoys adherents even today (for a critique, see Osborne, this volume). The fact that τέχνη in Greek and *ars* in Latin do double duty, semantically, for (fine) arts and crafts proves nothing (*pace* Kristeller 1990, Tatarkiewicz 1937, Tatarkiewicz 1963, and others). The ancients knew the distinction even if they lacked the terms. There were no

Greek or Latin words for literature, homosexuality, the economy, justice, the body, the self, the will, race, or class either, which is not to say that these categories were lacking conceptually or in practice.¹ To say that sublimity (ὕψος, τὰ μέγαρα), a perfectly valid aesthetic category long before Longinus wrote about it, could be applied to a work of mere craft (in contradistinction to a work of art), for instance to shoemaking or carpentry, seems fairly absurd. Aesthetics and craftsmanship were distinct spheres, plainly. But they could also merge, and their distinctions could be blurred at will or as needed. The vocabularies of art and criticism drew freely on terms from the crafts (cf. Pollitt 1974), and art objects were admired for their craftsmanly qualities: labor (πόνος, *labor*), finish (ἀπεργασία), polish, execution (ἐξεργασία), elaboration (κατασκευή), sheen, arrangement, symmetry, love of detail (ποικιλία, *subtilitas*), etc. Artists were craftsmen and more. In fact, we might say that insofar as artists dealt with the materials of their art, they were craftsmen first and artists second.

Counters to the Kristellerian objection abound. Aristotle's treatise on the *Poetic Art* (τέχνη) is about the art of poetry that is also a craft of writing. Further back in time, Hephaestus, the divine craftsman, fashioned the great shield for Achilles in *Iliad* 18, a stupendous, even sublime, work of art: it was a θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι, a wonder to behold. Later on, critics read the scene as a symbol of poetic creativity, especially of Homer's own ([Plut.] *Vit. Hom.* 216, schol. Aratus 70.17–71.9 Martin, Eust. on *Il.* 18.607f., etc.). Not for nothing was Homer known as a ποιητής φιλότεχνος, or a poet consummate in his craft (schol. A *Il.* 2.681a, Dion. Hal. *CV* 15; see Schenkeveld 1970, esp. 176). Theodorus of Samos, the renowned architect and sculptor from the archaic era, was famous in later antiquity for his craftwork (Pliny *HN* 34.83). Posidippus's Epigram 15AB celebrates the minute craftsmanship of a gemstone carver as a fine work of art (as do a number of other similar poems in his *Lithika*). The list goes on, endlessly. None of this shows that the ancients *failed* to distinguish between arts and crafts, but rather that they *chose* to perceive the craftsmanlike elements of the arts when they wanted to. And the same holds for modernity. Delacroix, the painter, was fanatical about the craftsmanlike qualities of his art (see Hannoosh 1995). Did that

1 Whence claims about their modern "invention" are pernicious: for the general point, see Porter 2010a, ch. 1 n. 52; above, pp. 137–44. Compare also the respective discussions in this volume by Tanner and Osborne (on the "economy"), Neer (on "sexuality"), and Habinek (on "religion" and "literature").

make him a craftsman or a better artist? Jonathan Richardson in the previous century could write, "In all the Works of Art there is consider'd the Thought, and the Workmanship, or Manner of Expressing, or Executing, the Thought, the former being incorporeal, the latter 'Corporeal' and a matter of the 'Hand' or 'Handling'" (Richardson 1719.1.98). He was speaking of *facture*, the pride—and signature—of any artist worth his or her salt. Richard Sennett (2008.9) defines craftsmanship as "the desire to do something well for its own sake" (cf. *ibid.* 114). The phrasing descends from John Ruskin, but the philosophy is inspired by William Morris and John Dewey. Dewey, for his part, writes that "craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be 'loving'; it must care deeply for the subject matter upon which skill is exercised. A sculptor comes to mind whose busts are marvelously exact" (Dewey 1989 [1934].54). No ancient would have disagreed.

So much for some of the larger obstacles to viewing aesthetic phenomena and practices in antiquity. What about the problem of aesthetic autonomy, widely regarded as the defining feature of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory?

My starting position in the article on Kristeller and again here is not going to win many friends in Kristeller's camp. It is that framing aesthetic theory and practice in terms of autonomy is an inadequate criterion for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that claims in favor of aesthetic autonomy are logically and pragmatically incoherent. They are also historically rare, far more so than the proponents on the other side are willing to admit. Such claims are logically incoherent in the first instance because the negation of relation to a given sphere (culture, religion, morals) involves a necessary entanglement in what is being refused. Because autonomy cannot be expressed or conceived independently of these other spheres, it is to that extent dependent on them. When I say "to that extent," I do not mean some sort of word game or logical trick. What I mean is that the very notion of autonomy is conditioned by reference to other ideas: to the ideas of culture, of religion, of morals, of usefulness. And when I say "conditioned," I mean conditioned to the very core of the concept: we cannot think the one without the other. Our idea of the lack of culture (its non-influence, e.g., pure nature, the pristine, or the like) is conditioned by our very idea of what culture is, just as my idea of the lack of color is determined by my idea of what color is: I cannot think the absence of color (assuming I can at all) unless I have an idea of color.

Of course, one possible reply would be to claim that autonomy marks not a complete absence but a relative absence of relation. This objec-

tion is unconvincing because what is actually meant by autonomy in the Kristellerian line of argumentation is a clean distinction between spheres, not a relative blurring of them. Either art is pure of morals or it is not—this is supposedly what distinguishes so much, if not all, of premodern art (or whatever label one is meant to apply without falling into hopeless anachronism) from modern aesthetics during the age of the Enlightenment and beyond. Whence, too, the doctrine of “art as such” (see Abrams 1989b, leaning on Kristeller and marshalling Kant). Similarly, Shiner: “From the 1830s on . . . intellectuals [were] beginning to speak of ‘Art’ as an independent realm embodied in institutions like art museums and concert halls” (2009.164). But museums and concert halls were hardly an independent realm by any stretch of the imagination, a fact that has been abundantly documented.² Such claims are pragmatically incoherent pretty much for the same reasons as they are logically incoherent: anyone who makes a claim about an autonomous aesthetic experience is essentially producing a self-refuting gesture, one that is equivalent to somebody standing in front of me and saying, “I am not here.” Autonomous aesthetic experiences are more like metaphors of themselves. They are quasi-, notional experiences. That is, you can mentally isolate something about an aesthetic experience, wrench it away from its context, pretend the context does not exist, and then focus only on the rest.³ This kind of mental illusionism is what goes by the name of aesthetic autonomy.

The real question, then, is when did this illusion become historically available for the first time? If we can locate a first time, we could conceivably use it as a marker of periodization. One strategy, of which I will avail myself next, is to look for examples of alleged or apparent autonomies of art in antiquity and compare them with similar examples from modernity. The ancient examples will roundly disappoint for the same reason that modern ones only can.

ANCIENT AUTONOMIES?

The tendency in the past has been to assume that ancient art is more context-bound than modern art, hence it is less autonomous, less like

2 See Dewey 1989 [1934].14, Pearson 1982, Crow 1985, and Marchand 1996, among others, who demonstrate the historical roles played by politics, ideology, and nation-building in collecting and museums.

3 See Saito 2007.26. This is sometimes called “psychical distancing” after Bullough 1912.

“art,” than we might otherwise suppose. I’ve just suggested, however, that modern contexts tend to be more transparent, hence more invisible, to us today, but they are not for that reason any the less in evidence or functional. There’s no such thing as an instrumental-free context today, however much one might wish there were.

Thus in their introduction to a recent collection of essays entitled—on its own terms, dangerously—*Art [sic] and Text in Ancient Greek Culture*, the editors caution that “the later [viz., modern] associations of the word ‘art’ and ‘artist’ are inappropriate for the pots and potters who provide most of the source material for Greek imagery,” and that “the general term ‘art’ also tends to obscure the very different frames in which the images of Greek culture occur.” Contexts such as temple display, private use, drinking parties, and so on, render the modern label of “art” dubious as a descriptive term (Goldhill and Osborne 1994b.7). The point is Kristellerian again, and it threatens to erect a methodological hurdle that not even its exponents can squarely face. Kristeller, for example, goes on to talk, puzzlingly, about ancient works of art and their aesthetic qualities or excellences (see Porter 2009a.22). Goldhill and Osborne never explain how they can verify what they claim to know. Is it really the case that the ancients had no conception of art comparable to ours? Can we ever hope to approach their art on its own terms? Or worse still, in order to gain access to ancient culture, must we abandon all hope of approaching it through what we used to call its art? If the boundary between antiquity and modernity becomes a radical barrier, translation between cultures is effectively barred, and *no* description will be possible (see Davidson 1973).

Putting the problem in this way may lead to unwarranted desperation, and probably (as I suggested) to an overinflated estimation of the autonomy of art and aesthetics today. More interesting than the problem of how we might discover the proper autonomy of the arts is the problem of how we can discover the arts’ properly embedded contexts and interrelations in any age. Reflecting on the nature of aesthetics can, I believe, show us a way forward, even as it will lead us to other, more challenging problems. One underexplored resource is to examine the roles of the senses and of experience in the production and consumption of ancient art (see Habinek, this volume).

While art is always embedded in cultural and social practices, it is also true that practices do not obtain except insofar as they are experienced. And *qua* experienced, they carry aesthetic features that are susceptible of analysis in ways that are at least as meaningful as the analysis

of art cut off from these features. Indeed, the pleasure one takes in these experiences *as* experiences by itself constitutes a first and indispensable level of analysis. Such pleasure, being reflective of aesthetic value, is an aesthetic experience (see Walton 1993). It is for this reason that aesthetic questions are, I believe, our best bet for gaining access to the problems of art in antiquity—not because art is the ultimate resting point for such an inquiry, but because it represents a relay to something else: it is a window onto modes of sensory experience, onto modes of attention generally, onto perceptual habits and cognitive styles, and, therefore, onto the social relations that are embedded in things. I call such a perspective on aesthetics “materialist” (Porter 2010a).

Such a perspective—materialist, sensuous aesthetics—is not all there is to ancient aesthetics, any more than it is today. In fact, there was no *one* view of classical art and aesthetics, but only a vast panoply of highly dissonant views, to judge from those that have survived and from those that were expressed at all (sculptures do not exactly “speak,” though we can try to make them do so for us). Some were rationalizing; others were moralizing; others were empiricist and sensualist; others were shamelessly hedonistic, finding no utility but only pleasure in the contemplation of art; while still others were altogether disparaging of art. Mimesis, a highly contested idea in antiquity, is not always a reliable guide to ancient theories of art, nor is it the most interesting guide. But such questions were asked in antiquity, and they drove much of the literature that survives in the areas of grammar, rhetoric, criticism, history of art, and so on, even where all we have are documents of practical or applied rhetorical criticism. They were implicit in ancient practices and in the habits of consumption at an intuitional level, in what might today be termed ancient “folk theories” (Walton 2007.153–56). And they were often spelled out or (more often) implied in ancient discourses on art in a wide range of arenas. Recovering these buried assumptions is possible, and an urgent task.

So described, aesthetics grounded in matter and the senses is a way of capturing certain indispensable features of aesthetic objects and experiences. Because it exists at such a low, virtually primitive, level of experience, sensuousness is an instrument of cultural expression that can be put to a myriad of uses, be they civic, private, religious, class-based, gendered, ethnic, or any other number of further ends beyond aesthetic enjoyment for its own sake (examples of which abound). Having said this, there is probably something wrong with dividing up the work of aesthetics and its application in a given context, since, in reality, the two are

closely integrated and, in the heat of the moment, indistinguishable. The felt properties of a votive object (its colors, shape, and sheen) merge into the activities in which that object is dynamically inserted. Under the right circumstances, the vocal intonations of a text when read aloud take on the aura of classicism and may be used to support that ideology (for instance, in the classroom). How can we separate these out? We can, because the ancients did. And they did so in the shared experience and languages of ancient aesthetic description. It is thanks to their accounts that we can tell these elements of their experience apart.

Now, it is my contention that sensuousness is a salient element of a good deal of ancient aesthetic sensibility, and that in some cases—and more frequently than one might suppose—one even finds an exclusive interest in this aspect of aesthetic experience at the expense of, say, attention to meaning, morals, or religion. And pure attention to sensuous detail often could have no other apparent purpose than aesthetic pleasure for its own sake. Does this point to an autonomy of art? Not necessarily. And, I would argue, not in the least. I do not even believe it points to anything like an autonomy of sensuous pleasure. Art experienced as sensuousness, even if it was experienced as this alone at the expense of meaning, morals, or other “higher” pursuits, was emphatically *not* cut off from the larger economies of the senses nor from what I elsewhere call the aesthetic public sphere, the shared realm of aesthetic experiences. It was not for at least two reasons. First, to experience aesthetic pleasure was to be caught up within a circuit of valuation, of value production and value consumption, a system—implicit, to be sure—that ran through the entire fabric of society and within which all social agents were implicated. To enjoy things aesthetically was to participate in a social process. And to do this was (and still is) to participate in an entire series of norms, rules, and conventions that ran through all areas of society simultaneously. The pleasure one took in aesthetic objects was directly—and immediately—related socially to the pleasure one took in non-aesthetic objects.⁴ Thus there was no such thing as an autonomous artistic pleasure that could be sundered from other kinds of pleasure in

4 Examples of this include Prodicus DK 84A19 (Prodicus said that *joy* is rational elation, *pleasure* is irrational elation, *gladness* is the pleasure that has its source in hearing, and *enjoyment* is the pleasure that has its source in discourse [or in vision]); Arist. *Part. An.* 1.5.644b27–45a26 (linking pleasure taken in the heavens and in natural phenomena to that taken in sculptural and painterly representations of reality). Any theory of aesthetics must be a theory of pleasures.

antiquity, just as there is none on any reasonable theory of art today. Secondly, and for the same reason, aesthetic sensuousness was intimately tied into the shapes that sensuousness enjoyed in the contemporary cultures of the day—shapes that were distinctive of those cultures and distinct from, say, Jonathan Richardson's London or Immanuel Kant's Königsberg. But as self-evident as this might be, the very claim that aesthetic sensuousness had any grip on the ancient imagination needs to be documented briefly. Consider the following two cases.

Pliny relates a contest between two master painters towards the end of the fourth century B.C., Apelles and Protogenes. The story may be apocryphal, but that is irrelevant if the story was believed or merely legion. According to Pliny, the two painters engaged in a contest over a single brushstroke. First, Apelles painted an extremely fine line in a single color on a blank wood panel as a challenge to Protogenes. Protogenes, when he saw this, immediately recognized the brushwork as Apelles', for no one else, he declared, could have produced such a finished and self-contained (*absolutum*) work (*opus*). In reply (or revenge), he painted a still finer line on top of the first in another color. Apelles proceeded to paint an even finer line on top of the existing lines with a third color, in the process "leaving no room for any further display of minute work (*subtilitati*).” Protogenes admitted defeat and handed the panel down to posterity, “a wonder for everyone, and above all for artists.” Pliny continues: “The vast surface [of the panel] contained nothing but the almost invisible lines (*lineas visum effugientes*), so that among the outstanding works of many artists it looked like a blank space (*inani similem*), and by that very fact attracted attention and was more esteemed than any masterpiece (Pliny *HN* 35.81–83; trans. Rackham, adapted). Lines, themselves fleeing the gaze, against a background void—and that was worth more than any masterpiece of art!

Note that no one in this story is making any claims about the autonomy of art generally or about the aesthetic autonomy of this putative work of art produced jointly by the two painters locked in professional competition—nor even about the autonomy of sensation itself. The only claims being made are paradoxical ones: about how a plank of wood is turned into an *opus*, about the near inconspicuousness of the art and its absolute recognizability for what it is (attesting to indisputable masterwork, genius, and excellence). There's a collision going on here in this account between the sensible and the insensible, between the visible and the invisible, between the diminishing scale of the brushwork and the ascending scale of aesthetic merit, between connoisseurship and the fleeting and fugitive nature

of the object being beheld. We might say that a canon of tastes and values is being formed, and not merely confirmed, at the intersection of these differently clashing planes. What is further remarkable about this story is how painters like Protogenes and Apelles were capable of putting pigments and surfaces above all else. And if ancient painters could be so attentive to the bare materials of their art and their sensuous properties, so must have been their audiences, as Pliny's anecdote confirms.

Indeed, whether in inscriptions or in literary documents, with the frequent mention of the kinds of materials from which objects were made in antiquity, be they wood, metal, clay, stone, glass, or other precious or semi-precious materials, there automatically comes an attention to the material properties of the objects that were made of these same materials.⁵ Comments of a theoretical nature attested from before Pindar, to the sophists, to Aristophanes, and on to a host of post-Aristotelian literary critics and later art historians only confirm the popular impression that the materiality of aesthetic objects in all media was a matter of considerable importance in antiquity. The proper conclusion to draw from all this is that sensuousness mattered greatly in antiquity, and that it did so for reasons that we can still recognize as aesthetic. A Kristellerian would not consider the production of three brushstrokes on a bare piece of wood fine art, though a Clement Greenberg, with his strong preference for flat surfaces and minimal lines, might do so (while meaning something quite different in the process).

At times, sensuousness as an aesthetic criterion in antiquity could strain to break free of all other criteria (moral, religious, and so on) and become a self-sufficient criterion of art's pleasures or excellences. Does this mean that art thereby gained a status of autonomy in the modern sense? Not in the slightest. What it means is that sensuousness could be enjoyed aesthetically with a kind of power and fullness that was capable of engaging individuals and riveting their attention at a high level. If we can show that the same kind of engagement was possible in other contexts outside of art (through the sensuous apprehension of objects, colors, shapes, etc.), as I believe we can, all we will have established is that the modern terms *aesthetic* and *aesthetics*, whenever they are applied to ancient contexts and

5 One example can demonstrate the point: a bronze discus dedicated in ca. 530–25 B.C. (Cephallenia) bears an inscription in the form of a spiral that mentions the bronze material of the discus (μ' ἀνέθηκε . . . | χάλκεον) and recalls the circular shape of the object at one and the same time (CEG 391), apparently a common practice (see Jacobsthal 1933).

if this is to be done without anachronism or confusion, need broadening to include other kinds of sensual engagement beyond those of art in some exclusive sense—the boundaries of which are contestable in any case. But we won't have established anything about the autonomy of art, ancient or modern.

Let's move on to another instance from antiquity, turning next to Aristotle. Aristotle is sometimes alleged to have introduced arguments for aesthetic autonomy, on the heels of Gorgias, by delimiting art's sphere over against the moral demands of tradition and, more recently, of Plato (see Rosenmeyer 1973). He does so, in a sense, by delimiting art as a realm of the in-itself, that is, by isolating art or poetry on its own terms (ἡ ποιητική καθ' αὑτήν, *Poet.* 25.1460b16) or defining its *telos* as existing in a *per se* way (αὐτό καθ' αὔτο, *Poet.* 4.1449a8–9). This is, however, an incomplete picture. First, it is not clear that poetry, so conceived, cannot harm or improve aesthetic subjects. *Catharsis*, a controversial entity, might provide more, possibly disappointing, insight here, if we only knew more about it. Second, poetry also presupposes, and reinforces, the basic rationality of the human mind, as spectators go about making logical identifications and inferences based on mimesis (read: referentiality), and so poetry has a clear utility in this sense. Does any of this point to the autonomy of art or poetry? Hardly. The *Poetics* is perfectly in keeping with Aristotle's philosophical program, of which it is a piece. Its assumptions—metaphysical, psychological (about the nature of the soul, the ranking of the senses), ethical, biological, linguistic, and so on—are consistent with his other writings, none of which foresaw any kind of autonomy for the separate domains but only a vast coherence amongst them all, which is also to say amongst their correlative realities, the world to which they pertained. In a word, Aristotle's view is consistent with what we would expect to find: sensation and perception (αἴσθησις) belong to a larger context, and they draw upon this for their logic.

An apparent exception comes in *Poetics* Chapter 4, when Aristotle suddenly drops his mimetic criterion of aesthetic pleasure and allows for the possibility of another kind of pleasure, a non-cognitive pleasure, whereby the beholder of an object stands, as it were, blindfolded, intellectually speaking, before what he beholds. Unable to recognize the object before him, he fails to identify it (this is a prerequisite of successful mimesis), and so he must fall back on his senses, on a bare sensuous perception of the object. "If you happen not to have seen the original, the picture will not produce its pleasure *qua* instance of mimesis (ἢ μίμημα), but because of its workmanship [*viz.*, *facture*, "finish," or simply "craftsmanship," ἀπεργασίαν] or

colour or for some such other reason (αἰτία)” (*Poet.* 4.1448b17–19; trans. Hubbard, slightly adapted). Aristotle plainly knew how to posit, abstractly, a “purely” material or sensuous realm distinct from one informed by thought. But he nowhere makes the concession to literary objects that he makes to visual or plastic objects here, namely that they can be enjoyed, never mind conceptualized, *qua* “the forms, textures, patterns of art, apprehended in and for themselves and not as the medium of mimetic significance” (Halliwell 1986.67). The passage is, quite simply, out of character for Aristotle, despite the relatively limited number of parallels that can be adduced for this moment.⁶

It seems reasonable to suspect a polemical intent in the present passage, as I argue at length elsewhere (Porter 2010a). Aristotle must be admitting as valid, albeit begrudgingly, someone else’s position on visual pleasure, perhaps a theorist of painting or sculpture or of the visual arts generally who would have taken a primary interest in the techniques of image-making and in “the materiality of the image.”⁷ There is no need to cast our net very far in search of likely candidates. Xenophon furnishes one of the more significant instances: Parrhasius the painter, who professed that his only interest lay in depicting visible objects in their “shape [and] color [and] the other qualities” that were mentioned by Socrates in their dialogue, namely, “hollows and heights, darkness and light, hard and soft, rough and smooth,” by means of his palette (lit., “through colors”). The aforementioned story of Apelles and Protogenes competing over a mere brushstroke is another, even more striking, example, as it involves no representational content in any way, but is merely a showcase for refined workmanship (*subtilitas*). There were surely other artists working in the same vein around this time and earlier.

We should not be surprised, then, if Aristotle’s concession in *Poetics* 4 turned out to be a nod to pre-existing theory too, especially when we have clear evidence of activity in this area. Plato’s disparaging remarks in various places directed against the same “material causes” of art—shades and variations in color, rhythm, sound, and motion—and of the sensuous pleasures derived from them, point to a similarly directed hostility. And yet, Aristotle’s example is uniquely revealing. He can acknowledge the impact of

⁶ *Poet.* 24.1460b1–5, *Pol.* 8.5.1340a25–28 (not a true parallel).

⁷ Gudeman 1934.119 ad loc. hints vaguely at such a connection without making any. The quotation is from Rouveret 1989.389 (addressing *Poet.* ch. 4).

sensuous factors only once the more significant mimetic factors have given out. Material causes for him remain decidedly minority causes of beauty in art, criteria of the last resort, and applicable to the cognitively handicapped alone. On the opposing view, of course, the Aristotelian proviso would appear absurdly restrictive. There is no reason why unfamiliarity with an object should be a prerequisite to taking pleasure in its sensuous features. It is not even clear that willful cognitive blindness needs to be a prerequisite to sensuous aesthetics. Meaning, content, or contextual value can be enhanced by surface properties, if one wished to divorce these for the sake of the argument (see Saito 2007.10, n. 1). On the other hand, there is no denying that sensuous enjoyment may well lead to an exclusion of cognitive enjoyment, whether momentarily (owing to an immediate absorption in the sensuous features of an object) or as a matter of principled refusal to attend to meaning, content, or reference, as is the case for anyone who zealously observes “the irrational criterion” (τὸ ἄλογον κριτήριον) in assessing art, as is found in the Hellenistic euphonists and in their latter-day successor, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who suggests that the criterion was widely applicable to connoisseurship in the visual and plastic arts (cf. *Dem.* 50).

It should be apparent that a sensuous aesthetics existed in antiquity; at times, at the apparent expense of other kinds of appreciation. *Pace* Kristeller and others, then, aesthetics *was* a meaningful enterprise before 1750. But what about claims to autonomy? Single-minded attention to the materiality of an artifact might easily appear to be similar to an isolation of that object as self-standing, autonomous, and formally independent. But arguments in favor of aesthetic materialism need not be confused with arguments for aesthetic autonomy. These latter more properly belong to the comfortable, closed circuit of formalism, which is invested in ideal structures that fail, as it were, to touch ground in any way. Think of the formal complexities of Cleanth Brooks’s well-wrought urn, which is self-enclosed, but also empty and immaterial, a mere formal structure in the mind (see West 2008). The sense my fingers have of a polished table puts me, so to speak, in touch with touch itself, and, occasionally, in touch with the dilemmas of sensation. The formal pattern of a stanza or a vase closes me off from other forms: formal experiences are, by definition, experiences that are not propagated by the object, unlike those with palpable dimensions, which are, and which, in fact, can only come about because they are both derived and propagated from prior experiences of the same or a similar kind of object. In beholding a form abstracted from its material features, it is not clear that I am doing anything other than beholding an idea or its projection; in

touching the object that is said to be inhabited by that form, I am in fact held by the object. There is much room, no doubt, for exploring the differences and relative virtues between these two modes of aesthetic experience in a more general and theoretical way, but this is not the place to do so.

WHY 1750? KANT AND HIS PEERS

1750 is assumed to be the critical threshold of modern philosophical aesthetics. Such a dating is in itself already prejudicial, as it ignores (or belittles) the long procession of traditions that run from late antiquity to the Byzantine era, to the Renaissance, to the early modern era, all of which arguably had their own versions of aesthetic speculation of a very high order, and all of which the claims on behalf of modern novelty pointlessly threaten to erase at a single stroke.⁸ That the *discipline* of philosophical aesthetics was coined around 1750 is undeniable. That aesthetic problems and practices existed prior to then should now seem, I hope, likewise undeniable. The relevant questions to ask ought to be about the *different forms* that aesthetic inquiry took, not whether such inquiry existed prior to 1750.

Aesthetic autonomy in modernity has been highly overvalued, both in itself and as the criterial marker for periodizing the onset of aesthetic inquiry proper. To conclude, I want to show, all too briefly, why such a criterion fails, taking as my star witness the true founder of modern philosophical aesthetics, Immanuel Kant. The aim is to establish not only why the historical argument is wrong, but why that argument makes so little sense philosophically.

One roadblock to enlisting Kant as an ally to Kristellerian arguments is that nowhere in the third *Critique* (2000 [1790]) does Kant talk about the autonomy (*Autonomie*) of art, beauty, aesthetic properties, or the aesthetic *simpliciter*. All that is ever truly autonomous aesthetically speaking in Kant's work are judgments of taste (or, more generally, reflective aesthetic judgments), not the objects of such judgments, and not the realm in which such judgments are made. Nevertheless, the question remains, does Kant's realm of the aesthetic (assuming that his theory even delimits such a realm—I doubt it does) mark off a notion of activity that is valuable for

8 For the sake of contrast, see the studies by Pentcheva 2002, James 2004 and 2007 (Byzantine), Eco 1970 and 1994, Panofsky 1993 (medieval), Summers 1990, Townsend 1998 (Renaissance), Barnouw 1993 (early modern).

its own sake and free of ulterior utility? The answer is unequivocally, No. Here are three related reasons why not.

First, Kant held that the faculty of judgment in general was subordinate to reason (hence, was hardly autonomous in this sense) and essential to rendering coherent the phenomena and the experience of nature. The crucial words are these: “[judgment] gives a principle for progress in accordance with laws of experience, *whereby the investigation of nature becomes possible*” (FI II; 20.204; emphasis added). From this it follows that judgment’s coherence with art and with science is essential: its utility is in this (very significant sense) beyond dispute. If this is right, there would seem to be a strong coherence between judgment and the other faculties, hence, too, a systematic coherence between all three *Critiques* (as ought to be evident in any case; cf. FI I; 20.195–201, “On Philosophy as a System”), and, finally, a utility in the role that judgment plays in rendering the laws of nature graspable by the mind in the realm of empirical experience.⁹

Second, and relatedly, Kant found that beauty animated what he called our *Lebensgefühl*, or “feeling of life.” As he later adds in the section on Beauty, to be moved by this feeling is to be, quite simply, *alive*. For the pleasure we feel whenever we take in the world (whenever we have an experience) consists in this “feeling of life,” which more broadly speaking is the capacity for pleasure and displeasure. Indeed, Kant announces this theme on the very first page of his treatise (*CJ* §1; 5.204), though readers have been remarkably slow to pick up on its importance. (*Lebensgefühl* ties Kant’s theory into a strand of reflection in aesthetics that fastens onto the vivacity of sensations, as in Hume, and, later, a kind of vitalism.)¹⁰ In the face of beauty (read: this harmonization of the mind and its appearances or nature), the subject *experiences*, rather than knows in a discursive fashion, the assurance of a successful outcome of a possible cognitive exchange with the world—though none, in fact, obtains, for aesthetic judgment involves no particular cognition but only the form of a cognition. Now it ought to take little argument to show that to have such an experience—with its mental reassurances and its life-reinforcing potencies, its capacity to tap directly

9 References to *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (*CJ*) are either to the First Introduction (FI) by section (marked by Roman numerals) or to section numbers of the main text (marked by §), then Akademie vol. (5 or 20) and page number. Translations are from Kant 2000. I am skating over a controversial debate here about the exact role that judgment plays in this area, but the fact that it functions as a linchpin is not at all controversial.

10 See Zuckert 2007.235, 266, 317 and Guyer 2008.488 for two notable if brief exceptions.

into the feeling of life, the most vital capacities of the mind and the feelings, of which pleasure is merely the most primitive, deepest, and most directly hard-wired—is to know the greatest utility there is.¹¹

The third reason why Kantian aesthetic judgment cannot be devoid of all utility lies in its ultimate moral value. This, too, would appear to lie beyond dispute as soon as one registers all the value-laden terms in which aesthetic judgment is couched by him: disinterest, freedom, common sense, shared communicability, rationality, understanding, universality, lawfulness, and so on. The point has been repeatedly made from Dewey (1989 [1934]), to Eagleton (1990), to any number of contemporary philosophers of art (see Guyer 2005, Zuckert 2007.380–81). As it happens, this last point is intimately tied up with the two foregoing points. The very kinds of satisfaction one obtains from an aesthetic encounter with the world reinforce one's place in the world. This reinforcement conveys a lesson that is at once natural-philosophical and ethical, and it is the one because it is the other. Hence, Kant writes, “the mind cannot reflect on the beauty of nature without finding itself at the same time to be interested in it” (*CJ* §42; 5.300). A page earlier we read, “[The] preeminence of the beauty of nature over the beauty of art in alone awakening *an immediate interest*, even if the former were to be surpassed by the latter in respect of form, is in agreement with the refined and well-founded thinking of all human beings *who have cultivated their moral feeling*” (5.299; emphasis added). Finally, beauty “promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication” (5.306). Nor was Kant alone in this view. On the contrary, he was utterly typical of his age.¹² It is only in clichéd reductions of his thought that Kant has come to represent the autonomy of the aesthetic. How that occurred, somewhere between 1790 and 1951, is obscure and would make a good research topic. But it need not concern anyone who is interested in the aesthetics of Greco-Roman antiquity.

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11 The sublime operates on the reverse principle—or rather on the same principle disguised as its reverse: as an apparent restriction (*Hemmung*) of the vital powers (*Lebenskräfte*), which is finally annulled in favor of the salvation of the mind's capacity to harmonize with nature.

12 For parallel views on the overlapping roles of morals and aesthetics in Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Batteux, Diderot, Schiller, and others, see Porter 2009a and Porter 2009b.