



CLASSING AUTONOMY: A REFUTATION THAT ‘...THERE REALLY IS NO ART MORE TRUE THAN ANY OTHER, AND THAT THERE IS NO ONE WAY ART HAS TO BE: ALL ART IS EQUALLY AND INDIFFERENTLY ART.’

THE SOAS JOURNAL OF POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

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Publication: The SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research,
Volume 11 (2017-18), Pages 117-123
Decolonisation in Praxis

ISSN: 2517-6226

Stable URL: <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/26315/>

Key words: Aesthetics – art – class – Danto – Kant – prejudice

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CLASSING AUTONOMY: A REFUTATION THAT ‘...THERE REALLY IS NO ART MORE TRUE THAN ANY OTHER, AND THAT THERE IS NO ONE WAY ART HAS TO BE: ALL ART IS EQUALLY AND INDIFFERENTLY ART.’¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to highlight the presence of tacit institutional biases, entrenched in contemporary aesthetic theories, which allow validation of some art forms to the exclusion of others. Such biases, in their exclusive prioritization of autonomous art works, are not only aesthetic but moral in character, overlooking the importance of non-autonomous art forms and thus indicating a systemic presence of class prejudice. Traditions of working-class aesthetic experience are appropriated and recontextualised into frameworks of elite aesthetic evaluative criteria, which are frequently incompatible with the art works’ original intentions. Furthermore, while widely misunderstood to be a solely elite preserve, this piece explores the nature of aesthetic appreciation and connoisseurship outside of the institutional art world. The thesis begins with an exploration of contemporary understanding of Kant’s aesthetic theory that ‘disinterestedness’ is a necessary condition for fine art, before continuing to consider the class-based aesthetic analyses of Bourdieu. It is argued that his work ‘Distinction’ does not consider that the elite may not possess the cultural competence to understand working-class aesthetics, thus presenting the main argument of the present paper. Similar tacit evaluative assumptions can be noted in Danto’s writing, which ostensibly validates cultural forms only if they occur within gallery settings, the attendance of which, as demonstrated by the Great British Class Survey, is class-specific. Through a consideration of non-autonomous art forms such as tattooing, this work concludes with an exploration of some working-class evaluative aesthetic criteria and a wish that the covert biases of contemporary aesthetic study be recognized.

¹ Arthur Danto, “Three Decades After The End Of Art”, in *Bloomsbury Anthology of Aesthetics*, ed. J. J. Tanke & C. McQuillan, (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

Philosopher Arthur Danto's work 'Three Decades After The End Of Art' posited that 'goodness and badness are not matters of belonging to the right style.' I refute his notion: entrenched within contemporary post-enlightenment culture and society, and Danto's own writing, are deeply-held institutional and public biases which allow validation of certain styles of art to the exclusion of others. I argue that this bias has roots in simplified readings of aesthetic theories articulated by Kant, and that contemporary manifestations of a formalist preoccupation with the exclusive importance of autonomy, or art-for-art's-sake, as a necessary condition for aesthetic experience, takes on a moral flavour and can indicate unchallenged class prejudice. I contend that the concept of autonomy is problematic, and that once-excluded non-autonomous cultural forms are appropriated into what we know as the art world only within an established institutional framework, which attempts to render the forms autonomous and thus comprehensible to the perceived normative class-defined aesthetic. Lastly, I argue that the existing taxonomies of aesthetic study need to be analysed as a culturally specific phenomenon; furthermore, despite their often-tacit exclusion, the activities of aesthetic appreciation and connoisseurship are not limited to cultural forms within the art world. In this piece I consider a variety of sources which demonstrate the institutional subjugation of social class within contemporary aesthetic theory in order to present an insight into how such modes of thought may be eventually decolonised.

Kant's aesthetic theory proposed that in order for something to be understood as fine art, the object must elicit 'free play' of the cognitive faculties: 'The description "agreeable art" applies where the end of the art is that the pleasure should accompany the representations considered as mere sensations, the description "fine art" where it is to accompany them considered as modes of cognition.'² In distinguishing between that which qualifies as fine art and that which does not, Kant conceptualises autonomy of the 'faculty of taste and productive imagination' and not, when interpreted superficially, the autonomy of art as an inherent formal quality: Kant uses the word 'autonomie' only in describing the effects of an art work upon mental faculties.³ Fine art is not categorised thus because of inherent properties but because of its ability to engender a 'disinterested' aesthetic response.⁴ A consideration of contemporary practical definitions of fine art as changeable and changing would support Kant's thesis: 'Genres we now accept unquestionably as art were once not part of the mainstream. [...] Tattoo art and computer art are waiting in the wings.'⁵ Accordingly therefore, since the definitions of art can be practically demonstrated to change over time, that which can engender in an individual aesthetic response as described by Kant cannot be an inherent feature of a particular type of art work.

Bourdieu's 'Distinction' analysed reasons for the disparities between cultural forms appreciated by different socio-economic classes. Despite the great influence of his work, the

² Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Judgement", ed. Nicholas Walker, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 134.

³ Casey Haskins, "Kant and the Autonomy of Art", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol 47, No. 1 (1989): 236

⁴ Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Judgement", 134.

⁵ Vera Zolberg and Joni Maya Cherbo, *Outsider Art: Contesting Boundaries in Contemporary Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

study nevertheless puts into use the aesthetics it aims to deconstruct.⁶ Bourdieu argued that possessing the ability to appreciate 'legitimate' culture is what distinguishes classes apart:

Consumption is [...] a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code [...] A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded.⁷

Taken out of context, Bourdieu's words could be seen to operate as a general description of the limitations of one's aesthetic experience while ignorant of the social contexts in which the experienced artwork is situated. However, Bourdieu does not consider that the elite may not possess the cultural competence to understand working-class aesthetics: he positions working-class aesthetic experience firmly within the framework and methodology of elite evaluative aesthetic criteria. It is equally possible that high art definitions are insufficient for the classification of working-class art forms.⁸ The shortcomings of such a culturally-specific methodological approach is a problem acknowledged in subsequent sociological surveys on the relationship between taste and class.⁹ Conversely, contemporary institutionally endorsed writings on aesthetics continue to take the view that appreciation of the 'finer arts', such as 'painting, literature and music', correlates with social privilege.¹⁰ This sweepingly disregards the demonstrable presence of working-class traditions within these artistic categories. Furthermore, Goldman's emphasis on these stand-alone categories of art forms implies that autonomy is a necessary formal condition of art works for aesthetic experience,¹¹ rather than as Kant wrote, a necessary effect of the aesthetic experience itself.

Danto's 'Three Decades After The End Of Art' reveals similarly tacit evaluative assumptions, which contradict its commendable central argument against the irrelevance of defining art against non-art. Despite his explicit rejection of aesthetics and the formalism so central to the theories of critics such as Greenberg, Danto's ostensibly conceptual definition of art can nevertheless be engaged with on aesthetic grounds¹²: he writes that there is 'no interesting perceptual difference' between an object inside and outside of a gallery¹³, contrasting Andy Warhol's 'Brillo Box' sculptures with functional brillo boxes in a non-art context. While the formal appearance of the boxes may themselves indeed not alter between context, Danto is mistaken, given his intended argument, in equating this with 'perceptual'

⁶ Jonathan Loesberg, *A Return to Aesthetics: Autonomy, Indifference, and Postmodernism*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (London: Routledge, 1984), 2.

⁸ Emmanuel Cooper, *People's Art: Working Class Art from 1750 to the Present Day*, (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1994).

⁹ Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, (London: Penguin, 2015), 7,11,19; Robert Young, "Can Neds (or Chavs) Be Non-delinquent, Educated or Even Middle Class? Contrasting Empirical Findings with Cultural Stereotypes", *Sociology*, Vol. 46, Issue 6 (2012): 1156.

¹⁰ Alan H. Goldman, "Evaluating Art", in *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*, ed. P. Kivy (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 10.

¹¹ Alan H. Goldman, "Evaluating Art", 10.

¹² Clark Buckner, "Autonomy, Pluralism, Play: Danto, Greenberg, Kant, and the Philosophy of Art History", *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, Vol. 5, Issue 1 (2013)

¹³ Arthur Danto, "Three Decades After The End Of Art", 7.

difference, as the act of perception requires an individual's sensory interpretation which will necessarily take into account the context into which the artwork is embedded.¹⁴ Indeed, the gallery's role in affecting viewers' perceptions of art works is overlooked even by Danto's critics, who uncritically agree that 'any kind of object whatsoever could be an artwork' if placed 'in the proper setting.'¹⁵ In leaving unaddressed his resulting implicit definition, that a work of fine art is necessarily situated within a gallery context, Danto inadvertently creates a quasi-formalist manifesto like those 'philosophically indefensible' manifestos he argues against, invalidating by omission cultural forms as fine art if they occur outside of the gallery context, and thus failing to back up his claim that '...there really is no art more true than any other, and that there is no one way art has to be: all art is equally and indifferently art.'¹⁶ As evidenced by 'The Great British Class Survey' (GBCS), gallery attendance is highly culturally and class-specific¹⁷: through not defining the scope of his argument, a further and vital implication of Danto's writing therefore is that working-class cultural forms are not to be considered, by the elite, as art.

In his analysis of the canonisation of 'high-art' forms and the institutional exclusion of 'low' cultural forms, Savage writes, 'it is not possible to take examinations in playing *Grand Theft Auto*'.¹⁸ artslashgames.com, a website devoted to discourse surrounding the newly-emergent discipline of Computer Game Theory, writes: 'It's our belief that games are an art medium. They are complex, multi-faceted artistic objects enmeshed in a wider social and critical context. Taking games seriously, exploring their crossover with contemporary art practice, writing and cultural discourse, is essential to the development of all contemporary culture.' In isolation, gaming is a non-autonomous cultural form: one may play a game for any number of means to ends including a need for escapism as detailed previously, or among others to simulate social interaction, competition and cooperation.¹⁹ Gaming, it seems, cannot be embraced by the canon without an accompanying intellectualisation of its social and formal properties: instead of playing computer games alone, there appears to be a need to root them within institutional language. This corroborates Danto's unintentional illustration that non-autonomous cultural forms may have aesthetic qualities worthy of appreciation, but that there does not exist the capacity within the art world to appreciate them in their original context. If we are to consider computer games as art, given that they are evidenced to be played by all sections of society, it would appear that something is lost in their appropriation into art world academia, a highly elite and professionalised arena: 'art does not retain its meaning away from the society in which it was made.'²⁰

¹⁴ George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 26.

¹⁵ David Carrier, "Danto and His Critics: Art History, Historiography and After the End of Art", *History and Theory*, Vol. 37, No. 4, Issue 37 (1998).

¹⁶ Arthur Danto, "Three Decades After The End Of Art".

¹⁷ Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 112.

¹⁸ Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 96.

¹⁹ Michael Scharkow, "Beyond the core-gamer': Genre preferences and gratifications in computer games", *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 44 (2015).

²⁰ Emmanuel Cooper, *People's Art: Working Class Art from 1750 to the Present Day*.

The evaluative criteria of art work associated with the working class are frequently overlooked and dismissed²¹, both by institutions and members of the public, even though the employment of similar criteria is often required for the aesthetic appreciation of art works in elite contexts. In 'All In The Best Possible Taste', a 2012 popular television documentary examining the class-specificity of taste in the UK, a man from 'traditionally working-class'²² Sunderland is interviewed about his tattoo collection, explaining that his tattoos are like souvenirs as they serve the purpose of reminding him of important personal beliefs and life events. Four years previously within the institutional arena, the artist Wim Delvoye sold the skin of a tattooed man to an art collector: the man agreed upon his death to have his skin displayed in a frame.²³ Stripping the tattoos of their personal social function is necessary for the creation of a recontextualised work which is comprehensible to an elite viewership, and simultaneously disregards the original working-class aesthetic evaluative criteria. This serves as a decontextualisation of what is a historically proletarian art tradition²⁴, appropriating its visible form but essentially misappropriating the art work's perceptual intention. Positioning working-class aesthetics directly in opposition to Kantian 'disinterestedness',²⁵ Bourdieu explicitly argues that members of the working class expect art to have a function. He thereby appears to have no awareness of the ritual and political roles played by said autonomous art in museum contexts.²⁶ Denigration of working-class aesthetic criteria is once more apparent in the writing of Goldman, who dismisses a trend demonstrated by members of the working class towards preferring emotional engagement within cultural forms²⁷ as tacky and facile: 'We lap up melodrama and sentimentality in art...' and '...melodramatic and sentimental art engages us on an emotional level too easily' and are 'often trivial in their cognitive content.'²⁸ This is likewise prevalent in members of the public who express the need to 'work at' cultural forms in order to be sure of their aesthetic worth,²⁹ excusing personal transgressions of their own understandings of good taste thus:

²¹ A caveat here: working-class art forms are not reducible to the examples utilised in this piece, and working-class taste should not be understood as homogeneous. The examples of computer games and tattooing are not intended to imply ubiquitous taste within the working class but rather to demonstrate specific limitations of Danto's theory.

²² Grayson Perry and Neil Crombie, *All In The Best Possible Taste*, Channel 4 TV recording, (2012) accessed 28 December 2017.

²³ Low, H., *The man who sold his back to an art dealer*, BBC World Service (2017), accessed 2 January 2018 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-38601603>>

²⁴ Mary Kosut, "The Artification of Tattoo: Transformations within a Cultural Field", *Cultural Sociology*, Vol 8, Issue 2, (2014).

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

²⁶ Carol Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship" in *Exhibiting Cultures*, eds. I. Karp & S. D. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian, 1991); Ikem Stanley Okoye, "Tribe and Art History", *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 78, No. 4, (1996).

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*; Grayson Perry and Neil Crombie, *All In The Best Possible Taste*; Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 119.

²⁸ Alan H. Goldman "Evaluating Art", 106.

²⁹ Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 120.

'you're knackered and your energies are dissipated.'³⁰ A simple counter to such assertions is Perry's rhetorical question: 'Do you cry a more vintage kind of tears [sic] at Glyndebourne?'³¹

To avoid the hegemony of an elite notion of aesthetic discourse, and for all art indeed to be 'equally and indifferently art', it is necessary to consider fundamental alternatives to the methodologies which currently dominate contemporary aesthetics. It is not sufficient for working-class art works as physical forms to enter the domain of the elite. For the decolonisation of social class within aesthetic theory to take place, contemporary study must recognise its covert biases and seriously engage with not only working-class but also elite art works according to working-class evaluative criteria and perspectives. As a viable alternative to the gallery space the widely accessible, anonymised nature of social media platforms such as YouTube enable a collective engagement and criticism which is neither accountable to given cultural or class contexts, nor restricted to canonical art works or forms, within which lies the potential for cross-class criticism of art forms. Unfortunately, heterogeneous appreciation of art forms across class boundaries is a long way away, however evidence of the inherent potential of cross-class and cross-cultural pollination within YouTube is illustrated by a comment written by YouTube user Manuauto on a video of opera singer Montserrat Caballé singing 'O mio babbino caro': 'Grand Theft Auto 3 brought me here!'³² In this context, in principle, the possibility for decolonised appreciation exists.

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³⁰ Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 120.

³¹ Grayson Perry and Neil Crombie, *All In The Best Possible Taste*.

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