Kant on the fine arts: A reply to a social practices objection

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Abstract. Nicholas Wolterstorff’s book Art Rethought objects to what he calls a now widely accepted “grand narrative” about art, originally proposed during the early modern period. According to this narrative, art came into its own once it was contemplated for its own sake from an aesthetic point of view. Although Kant is a foremost aesthetic theorist from the period in which this narrative took root, Wolterstorff does not directly criticize Kant’s aesthetic theory, choosing to discuss figures such as Karl Philipp Moritz and Wilhelm Wackenroder. I thus formulate an objection broadly based on Wolterstorff’s concerns and apply it to Kant. Roughly, the objection is that Kant’s account focuses too much on the pleasure in disinterested aesthetic contemplation and that it does not sufficiently recognize the social practices of art. I then argue that Kant’s account is able to neutralize the objection for three main reasons. 1) Kant to some extent acknowledges the social functions of art, including veneration and honoring. His notion of adherent beauty provides a way to account for the social functions of the work. 2) Kant’s theory can be expanded to account for social protest art, memorial art, reflexive art and conceptual art. 3) Another basis for recognizing the social functions of art can be derived from Kant’s view of the empirical interest in the beautiful, which is grounded on sociability. In short, Kant holds that aesthetic experiences are important for the cultivation of the social and moral aspects of human beings.

Keywords: Kant, fine art, aesthetic contemplation, adherent beauty, Nicholas Wolterstorff, social practices

1 Introduction

In his clear and provocative book, Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art, Nicholas Wolterstorff raises several criticisms of art theory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He criticizes what he calls the “grand narrative”, according to which art came into its own once it was contemplated for its own sake. In the following, I will reconstruct and formulate one of Wolterstorff’s objections to the art theory of this early modern period, and then show how Kant might respond to it.

Roughly, the charge is that the “grand narrative” account focuses too much on individual

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pleasure in aesthetic contemplation and does not sufficiently recognize the social practices of art. Since Kant comes from this period, if the objection is indeed a valid criticism of it, then, barring some exceptional reason, it should be applicable to Kant.

Kant is worth discussing in this context for two main reasons: he writes during the period in question, and he has exerted enormous influence on subsequent aesthetic theory. While the first point is quite evident, the second one perhaps deserves to be elaborated. It should be clear to anyone who surveys contemporary art criticism and theory that Kant is an important and still influential aesthetic theorist. The third Critique’s “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment” is widely recognized as one of the most significant contributions to aesthetic theory. As one scholar puts it, “[i]f the single most influential text in the history of philosophical aesthetics were to be chosen, Immanuel Kant’s […] Critique of Judgment of 1790 might well turn out to be the one that a majority of philosophers would point to” (Hammermeister, 2002, p. 21). Moreover, a survey of recent articles in contemporary journals of aesthetics reveals a relatively large number of articles devoted to Kant’s aesthetics in comparison to other historical figures.

Criticisms of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century views of the arts (or of the European Enlightenment more generally) can be found in Adorno (1997), Bourdieu (1979), Luhmann (2000), Lyotard (1985), and MacIntyre (1981). These authors present their criticisms in their own ways and do not necessarily share Wolterstorff’s position, so that my response to Wolterstorff does not necessarily apply to them. But it should be noted that Wolterstorff accepts MacIntyre’s view of social practices (MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 175-181) and considers it to be “substantially correct” (Wolterstorff, 2015, p. 87). MacIntyre, it should also be noted, is largely critical of Kant (while focusing more on his moral philosophy). In any case, I focus on the formulation in Wolterstorff’s book since (of these studies) it is the most recent and it closely examines the social practices of art. Indeed, I consider the proposed criticism to be one of the most interesting and challenging objections that can be reconstructed on the basis of Wolterstorff’s book.

I will argue that Kant’s account is able to placate or deflect the objection by making three major claims. 1) Kant to some extent acknowledges the social functions of veneration. His notion of “adherent” beauty takes into account the social function of the object or artwork. 2) Kant’s theory can be expanded to account for social protest art and memorial art as well as reflexive art and conceptual art. This expansion would rely on the notion of adherent beauty and the concept of function of the work and/or notions of artistic aims, style, movement, medium, and genre. 3) Another basis for a social function in art can be derived from Kant’s view of the empirical interest in the beautiful, or sociability. He sees artworks as based on a shared aesthetic common sense. Moreover, artworks can give sensible representation to moral ideas, which can sometimes promote social cohesion.

Since I assume that Kant’s account of the fine arts (§43 to §54) will be largely familiar to readers, and given limitations of space, I shall not attempt to summarize his account here. Likewise, I should state that my aim in this paper is not primarily exegetical or concerned with the various ways of interpreting Kant’s aesthetics, although some of this is naturally required insofar as I paraphrase his views. In other words, my aim is to make some contribution to contemporary aesthetic theory by showing how Kant might respond to a potential objection. There is indeed a vast and ever-growing literature on both Kant’s aesthetic theory and philosophy of religion that, given the constraints of this paper, I cannot attempt to discuss in detail here. Unlike preceding studies and scholarly works, however, I can say that I am offering a response to a particular objection that is broadly based on Wolterstorff’s book.

2 The Wolterstorff-inspired objection

Wolterstorff questions the value of contemplating an artwork for its own sake. According to the “grand narrative”, an artwork is to be valued for its own sake and engaged with from the
point of view of disinterested contemplation.\footnote{Wolterstorff (2015, pp. 68-70) in fact has a complex view of disinterestedness. In his criticisms of what he calls “the grand narrative”, he rejects the concept of disinterestedness. But it does not end there, for he retains a version of it in the form of “absorbed attention”.} Wolterstorff finds this worrisome. He objects to the “grand narrative’s” idea that art and artworks “come into their own” insofar as the works are engaged with as objects of “disinterested attention” (Wolterstorff, 2015, p. 311). This position, he implies, has cast a long shadow: he finds it to be strikingly “similar” to claims about an aesthetic point of view defended by Monroe Beardsley (ibid., p. 38; cf. p. 75). By criticizing the grand narrative, Wolterstorff appears to be criticizing positions similar to Beardsley’s.

Given Kant’s stature in aesthetics, it is surprising that Wolterstorff refers to Kant only in four places, all of which are very brief. These passages have to do either with disinterested contemplation (ibid., pp. 12, 307) or the idea of purposiveness without a purpose (ibid., p. 33, 75). Instead, Wolterstorff (2015, pp. 38, 75, 80, 311) seems to target lesser-known figures such as Karl Philipp Moritz. For instance, with suspicion Wolterstorff (2015, p. 34) quotes Moritz on “disinterested pleasure”, and cites Wilhelm Wackenroder’s description of the experience (in museums) of “noble” works of art as having intrinsic worth (ibid., p. 35). The failure to discuss Kant in detail is striking since Kant’s influential aesthetic theory comes from this period when allegedly the views associated with the grand narrative were most prominently defended. It seems fair to expect Wolterstorff to have explained how (if at all) his criticism of the grand narrative applies to Kant.

Perhaps, however, we can build up the objection for Wolterstorff. Kant, an objection might go, employs and endorses a controversial concept of disinterested contemplation of artworks. To be disinterested with respect to an artwork is to appreciate the artwork for its own sake. For this reason, the objection could continue, Kant’s account does not pay sufficient attention to the communal and social practices of art, such as veneration, commemoration, and celebration.

Perhaps worse, the objection might proceed, Kant dwells too much on an individual’s aesthetic pleasure. For this reason, Kant’s account is unable to account for important kinds of art, such as social protest art, reflexive or conceptual art (exemplified in works by Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol), and memorial art, since these art forms are not necessarily linked to pleasure. For instance, Wolterstorff (2015, p. 220) discusses how \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, which he calls the “most effective piece of social protest literature ever written”, was instrumental in bringing about social reform regarding slavery in the United States. It was able to do this even though it was widely held to lack “aesthetic merit” (ibid., p. 221). From the Kantian perspective, Wolterstorff implies, the novel would be an aesthetic failure. It is not merely regrettable that Kant did not have a concept of protest art: it even appears that Kant’s position cannot be expanded to account for it.

\section*{3 Response to the Wolterstorff-inspired objection}

To be sure, there is an element of truth here. In the third \textit{Critique}, Kant makes a distinction between handicraft and fine art (\textit{KU}, AA 05: 304; Kant, 2000, p. 183) that seems to suggest that art came into its own only when art was contemplated aesthetically for its own sake. Indeed, Kant adopted the craft/art distinction as early as 1776 (\textit{RefI} 958, AA 15: 422). And Kant doubtless takes what he himself calls an “aesthetic” approach to art and artistic practices. Moreover, Kant understands art and artistic practice largely in terms of the aesthetic experience, which is, after all, the experience of a particular individual. It is also true that for Kant aesthetics must be tied to pleasure (or, as in the sublime, at least to some combination of pain and pleasure). Finally, it is true that Kant offers primarily an aesthetics
of contemplation. Indeed, Kant uses the term “contemplation” (KU, AA 05: 204; Kant, 2000, p. 90) to characterize the response to beauty. Although he takes into consideration the artist (“genius”) and creative practices, ultimately even the artist must adopt the position of a judge and contemplator of the work, as taste clips the wings of genius (KU, AA 05: 319; Kant, 2000, p. 197).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that (to the best of my knowledge) Kant never speaks of contemplating art “for its own sake”. The phrase is used by Wolterstorff (and many other writers), but not by Kant.

And when we look more closely at Kant’s account, we find that Kant’s theory of art to some extent acknowledges the practices of veneration and memorialization. The social practice of veneration is implicit in discussions of adherent beauty (§16), i.e. the kind of beauty that presupposes “a concept of the end that determines what the thing should be” (KU, AA 05: 230; Kant, 2000, p. 114). It informs his view of how we can engage aesthetically with churches. He there considers the church in light of its cruciform layout, alluding to its religious functions and Christian symbolization. This counts as an instance of adherent beauty, since in the experience of such beauty a key role would be played by the church’s purpose or function as a place of worship, a site for performing the sacraments, reading scripture or delivering homilies.

Kant comments on architecture by giving examples that come from religious and other social practices. “Temples, magnificent buildings for public gatherings, as well as dwellings, triumphal arches, columns, cenotaphs, and the like, erected as memorials, belong to architecture” (KU, AA 05: 322; Kant, 2000, p. 200). One might wish that he had said more about the social function of the artwork or about art as a memorial, but at least Kant acknowledged it.

The grounds for an additional response can be found in poetry. Kant’s use of Frederick the Great’s poetry counts as – it enacts and performs – an instance of (nonreligious) veneration in poetry. Kant’s paraphrasing the king’s poem is itself a way of honoring him. While he is using Frederick the Great’s poem to illustrate his doctrine of aesthetic ideas (KU, AA 05: 315-16; Kant, 2000, p. 193), Kant’s choice reveals another kind of social function of art: paying respect to the ruling monarch.

Now let us turn to music and, specifically, to singing. Here the objection has some weight. Why didn’t Kant view hymns as (religious) poetry put to music and, for that reason, value them?

Kant’s repudiation of hymn singing is all the more striking because, throughout his intellectual development, Kant consistently ranked poetry as the summit of the arts. In an early fragment (circa 1769), Kant says that poetry “is the most beautiful of all play” and involves “all the powers of the mind”; he even says it “goes well” with music, given that poetry has a musical rhythm (Refl 618; AA 15: 266; tr. R.C.). In the third Critique, too, Kant explicitly mentions the unification of “poetry with music in song” (KU, AA 05: 325; Kant, 2000, p. 203) and again claims that poetry can be “very naturally united” (KU, AA 05: 328; Kant, 2000, p. 205) with music.

To explain why Kant did not put more emphasis on hymns and choral music, it is tempting to resort to biographical explanations. As a 9 July 1784 letter to Hippel shows (Br, AA 10: 391), Kant was so annoyed by the singing of hymns on the part of the “hypocrites in the prison” that he urged Hippel to lodge a complaint to stop it (Kuehn, 2001, p. 270). It is tempting to hold that, since Kant found hymn-singing disturbing, he did not give it the attention that, given his views of poetry and music, it would appear to merit.

But we need not even resort to biographical explanation, for a clear repudiation of singing can be found in the third Critique. As a kind of invasion, loud singing interferes with the freedom of others. “Further, there is a certain lack of urbanity in music, in that, primarily because of the character of its instruments, it extends its influence further (into the
neighborhood) than is required, and so as it were imposes itself, thus interfering with the freedom of others, outside of the musical circle, which the arts that speak to the eyes do not do, since one need only turn one’s eyes away if one would not admit their impression. It is almost the same here as in the case of the delight from a widely pervasive smell. Someone who pulls his perfumed handkerchief out of his pocket treats everyone in the vicinity to it against their will, and forces them, if they wish to breathe, to enjoy it at the same time” (KU, AA 05: 330; Kant, 2000, p. 207). And in a footnote here we learn that Kant associates such singing with a “pharisaical” form of worship: “Those who have recommended the singing of spiritual songs as part of the domestic rites of worship have not considered that by means of such a noisy (and precisely for that reason usually pharisaical) form of worship they have imposed a great inconvenience on the public, for they have forced the neighborhood either to join in their singing or to give up their own train of thought” (KU, AA 05: 330n; Kant, 2000, p. 207n).

For similar reasons, and because it displays greater “freedom” rather than conformity to rules, Kant tends to prefer birdsong to the songs of humans, of which “one grows tired […] far more quickly if it is repeated often and for a long time” (KU, AA 05: 243; Kant, 2000, p. 126). For this reason, we would no longer take an intellectual (i.e., morally based) interest in the sounds once we learned that an apparent bird song was in fact created by a boy imitating a bird (KU, AA 05: 302-303; Kant, 2000, p. 182).

While Kant discusses hymns of faith in Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, he sees hymn singing as a possible means of moral edification, rather than as a kind of worship or veneration. “As regards the edification which is the purpose of churchgoing, here too public prayer is not a means of grace but a moral solemnity, whether it be celebrated with the communal singing of the hymn of faith, or with the address” directed to God by the clergyman (RGV 06: 196; Kant, 1998, p. 211) (for commentary, see Palmquist, 2015, pp. 490-494). Kant seems to acknowledge that hymn-singing can help build an ethical community of faith but he does not really view hymns as artworks. Thus, if the charge is that Kant aestheticizes the social practice of religious-hymnal singing, then it is not valid: he moralizes it.

Kant implies that when the poetry or hymnal lyrics are of the unacceptable kind, then any resulting combination with music would be unacceptable as well. Hymnal lyrics and sermons are unacceptable when they make us feel contempt for ourselves, or powerless and passive, rather than bringing about an “energetic determination to seek out the powers that still remain in us, despite all our frailty, for overcoming inclinations” (KU, AA 05: 273; Kant, 2000, p. 155).

There is another reason why Kant does not endorse hymnal singing. It could easily amount to a kind of lying, if it requires expressing faith in a supersensible being who would do people’s moral work for them, or exhibits the “groveling” and base kind of religion Kant repudiates (ibid.). Such religious singing, if it is not part of true ethical religion, risks bringing about the kingdom of darkness rather than an ethical commonwealth. Kant warns that (religious) “singing” can all too easily lead to the delusion that one has “built” something useful, even though no hand “has yet to be put to the work” (RGV, AA 06: 198n; Kant, 2000, p. 213)

Nevertheless, presumably Kant could have been open to a kind of communal singing that promoted autonomy or moral freedom – something like the fourth moment of Beethoven’s ninth symphony: Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” set to glorious music. Indeed, for Kant, the hymn’s words are no mere accompaniment for the music; rather, the music is subordinate to the words. Indeed, Kant’s position seems to be exactly the kind that Richard Wagner rejects in his essay “Beethoven” (1870), for Wagner (1966, p. 104) thinks that the music is (or can be) so powerful and dominant that it really does not matter which particular words are set to music.
We can now turn to the symbols and imagery in religious poetry and painting. Even if Kant interprets religious stories in terms of symbolization, he does not view them as aesthetic symbols. Rather, he defends a rational interpretation of the “symbols of a popular faith” in accordance with the principles of moral faith (RGV, AA 06: 111; Kant, 1998, p. 143). Kant thinks that he is simply following ancient western traditions when he insists on the priority of a moral interpretation of scripture (DiCenso, 2012; Palmquist, 2015, pp. 293-294). Greek and Roman rational interpreters, he claims, have often brought the imagery and supplements of popular faith (such as descriptions of paradise) into agreement with the universal principles of moral faith. “They knew [...] how to invest all sorts of depraved actions, and even the wild yet beautiful fancies of their poets, with a mystical meaning that brought popular faith [...] close to a moral doctrine” intelligible to all (RGV, AA 06: 111; Kant, 1998, p. 143). Thus, Kant does not elucidate or interpret religious artworks (paintings, altarpieces, oratorios) as aesthetic objects. He does not so much aestheticize religious symbols as moralize them.

Kant does not pay much attention to icons as objects of contemplation. In my view, he is here influenced by Protestant iconoclasm. Kant thinks that such contemplation of icons runs the risk of engaging in idolatry: “Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish Book of the Law than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image, nor any likeness either of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or yet under the earth” (KU, AA 05: 274; Kant, 2000, p. 156). He likewise calls “sublime” the following inscription, which expresses a similar moral sentiment of “solemnity” and “holy fear”: “I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and my veil no mortal has removed” (KU, AA 05: 316n; Kant, 2000, p. 194). Kant views the matter in basically moral terms. What is sublime is not the representation of the divine or the wholly transcendent. Rather, the sublime is ultimately in us, in our moral vocation.

As with hymns, there is a risk that religious paintings will manipulate people rather than promote their autonomy. A religious painting can do this by providing ready-made images for the imagination. In fact, Kant, as if foreshadowing Marx, suggests that the authorities could use such imagery and childish “supplements” to control and tame a people (KU, AA 05: 274-275; Kant, 2000, p. 156). Kant questions such imagery on moral grounds.

I now turn to the possibility of other kinds of art and art forms mentioned in the objection. According to the objection, any satisfying theory of art should be able to account for memorial art, social protest art, reflexive art and conceptual art. Even if some of these forms were less prominent or even non-existent in Kant’s day, it is still interesting to see if his theory could have accounted for them.

First, Kant could respond that the objection itself presupposes an artificial divide between social protest art and pleasure. He might insist that it is unclear how social protest art would realize its aims if none of its users had an aesthetic incentive to listen to or read the work in the first place, that is, if they did not get some kind of pleasure or enjoyment from the experience. It appears that, at least on some level, the artwork has to engage us aesthetically.

In any case, Kant’s account could be expanded to account for each of these different forms. Such an account would view memorial art in terms of its functions as a memorial, hence in terms of a concept of its purposes. Incorporating a concept of the purposes of the object in making the aesthetic judgment would amount to making an adherent judgment, as discussed above.

To account for social protest art, Kant could likewise appeal to his notion of adherent aesthetic judgments. The function of social protest art is to criticize or correct a moral or political wrong. Pleasure or enjoyment in response to such work would take into account its purposes, in addition to considering its originality and other properties traditionally recognized as being “aesthetic” (its sensory-formal, semantic, and/or expressivist properties). Like memorial art, it would count as a case of adherent beauty (or involve adherent judgments).
Finally, reflexive and conceptual artworks, to be judged appropriately (or at least as art), need to be seen in terms of concept – the aims of the artist, the work’s genre, movement, style, and relation to other works in its genre or medium. Since such a work comments on, or even challenges, other artworks, the artwork requires a concept of its purposes in order to be properly appreciated. One may perhaps (also) look at the conceptual artwork’s sensory-formal properties, but in the case of a Duchamp or Warhol it would be hard say that an art user is actually looking at it properly (or at least as art) unless the user takes into account the artwork’s purposes, role, or relation to other works. While Kant could not have been expected to imagine or foresee the existence of reflexive art, his account could be expanded to make sense of it by way of adherent beauty or aesthetic judgment.

Moreover, contrary to the objection, Kant actually acknowledges and values the social and ethical functions of art. He devotes a section (§41) to a topic that is in the end grounded on a social interest: empirical interest in beauty. The reason, according to Kant, that we take an empirical interest in beautiful objects is that it promotes sociability and satisfies the human need to be social and have commerce with one another. “Finally, civilization that has reached the highest point makes of this almost the chief work of refined inclination, and sensations have value only to the extent that they may be universally communicated; at that point, [...] the idea of its universal communicability almost infinitely increases its value” (KU, AA 05: 297; Kant, 2000, p.177).

The arts, Kant implies, have a cohesive effect. They possess the potential to create ethical-religious and/or political communities, in part since the aesthetic judgment itself is presumed to have universal and necessary validity and is based on an aesthetic common sense. It can thus be an expression and endorsement of the value of social cohesion.

In particular, aesthetic ideas exhibited in an artwork can provide a source of social cohesion and help build political and ethical-religious communities. For example, works such as Eugène Delacroix’s Liberty Leading the People (1830) express ideas such as liberty. Such artworks can thereby promote and support the values of liberty and freedom. Similar considerations apply to how representations of aesthetic ideas can support values such as equality, independence, and justice.

Furthermore, works of art can be said to have a critical or reforming function. Artworks that, in a communicable way, give sensible form to an aesthetic idea give us a chance to think differently about current social and ethical realities. Some artworks inspire us to consider and question our own perceptions of everyday life.

4 Conclusion

Within the framework of Kant’s writings and publications, in particular drawing on his notion of adherent beauty, we can provide for Kant a response to the Wolterstorff-inspired objection brought against early modern theorists of art.

According to the “grand narrative”, which Wolterstorff questions, art was thought to have “come into its own” during the early modern period in that it was contemplated “for its own sake” and from a disinterested perspective. The modified objection, in short, is that Kant’s account focuses too much on individual pleasure in aesthetic contemplation and does not recognize the social practices of art. Since Kant is an eighteenth-century aesthetic theorist, if the criticism is valid for early modern thought about the arts, it seems reasonable to expect the objection to be valid for Kant.

To show that Kant can render the objection ineffective, however, I made three main points. First, Kant acknowledges the social functions of veneration and memorialization. His account of adherent beauty takes into account social functions, at least with regard to churches. In fact, what he says about hymns and symbolism in art seems to not “aestheticize” them, but to treat them as moral instruments. In a similar vein, his iconoclastic suspicion of
icons is grounded on Kant’s interest in promoting morality.

Second, Kant’s account can be expanded to account for memorial art, social protest art, reflexive art and conceptual art. This reconstruction would rely on the notion of adherent beauty and a concept of the artwork’s purposes (for instance, to commemorate or to protest and reform). Conceptual art and reflexive art could be accounted for in terms of artistic aims, style, movements, medium or genre.

Third, another basis for recognizing the social functions of art can be found in Kant’s view of the empirical interest in the beautiful. He sees artworks as based on a shared aesthetic common sense. Moreover, some artworks communicate moral values sensibly by expressing aesthetic ideas. The arts can help build social cohesion by promoting useful socio-political and moral values.

References