

ART IS GOOD FOR NOTHING

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To say that art is good for nothing is to peer into one of the great double-sided mirrors of history. On one face of the mirror, the sneering whip of the philistine says that art is good for nothing, and so demands an end to the elite frills and theorizing, the posturing and fancy-pantsery.¹ On the other side, the monumental visage of western philosophy confirms that, indeed, art is good for nothing, and, furthermore, it is only art *if* it is good for nothing. To perceive aesthetically is to sense and judge the objects of the world in a pure and disinterested way.

The mirror is, of course, just a rhetorical device, and, in fact, the reflections of the philistine and savant are not always so clearly distinguished. The very presumption of art's autonomous uselessness has ended up making it quite useful. Art's declaration of privileged access to the realms of perception and untainted judgment have made it an attractive tool for all manner of intellectual entrepreneurs desiring entrée to those territories. What follows is a study of three historical moments when art's claims to being a special form of knowledge were put to the test.

In 1790, German philosopher Immanuel Kant published what might well be the most influential book ever written on the subject of art as a way of knowing: the *Critique of Judgment*.² Kant's delineation of art as a rarefied sphere of human understanding—a realm not subject to the pressures of use and value that governed practical endeavors, or even scientific endeavors—set up the rules of the game that we still live with when we talk about art today, even when we resist or reject those ideas.³ Kant did not have the last word on the special character of aesthetic judgment as a realm of disinterested satisfactions, or on the rarefied position of art as a special form of knowledge. But it is fair to say that for two hundred years after him, anyone thinking or writing about art has had to come to terms, consciously or unconsciously, with his concepts.

¹ A point of view where the penny-wise deacons of democracy find common cause with Lunacharsky.

² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

³ Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

This is not to say that Kant fenced in art as a values-free zone. On the contrary, he considered it a deeply moral, ethical endeavor. Aesthetic judgment was seen to reside at the core of human nature, entwined with morality, ethics, and virtue. Truth is beauty, beauty is truth, and to say it was so was evidence of a particular quality of the human mind, indeed the freedom of will and thought, that would presumably be shared by all who beheld that beauty and knew it to be truth. Aesthetic judgment was subjective, but it was also collective.

The aesthetic was seen as a kind of political unconscious, a generator of social bonds. Art and its contemplation, as Terry Eagleton has so adroitly put it, became “a precious form of intersubjectivity, enabling us to establish ourselves as a community of feeling subjects linked by a quick sense of our shared capacities to behold and to judge.”⁴ A few decades later, Schopenhauer reiterated the concept: “In aesthetic experience we relinquish the ordinary way of considering things, and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the object present and lose ourselves entirely in the object.”⁵

If this seems like the very definition of “ideal visitor experience” in an art museum, well, it was. And it still is. We still value the ethics of a hallowed, separate space for beholding art and forming a sense of self in communion with the mysteries of nature, time, and the minds of others. But there is an anxiety embedded in giving art the role of a social condenser or civic adhesive. In a paraphrase of the eighteenth-century British philosopher, Edmund Burke, Eagleton writes: “If aesthetic judgment is unstable, then so must be the social sympathies founded on it, and with them the fabric of political life.”⁶ The manifest political meaning, and the implied pedagogical purpose of art as an autonomous sphere of endeavor, declares that art is also a means of enforcing certain virtues, certain habits of thought, and feeling.

The argument at issue here is that aesthetic judgments always have pedagogical purpose. Even when art floats in the empyrean of disinterested contemplation, there is a lesson to be learned. Sometimes the lesson is manifestly evident—a moral lesson, a religious lesson. Sometimes the lesson is implied—an attitude, an expression of taste, a social affiliation. The tension between uselessness and usefulness that was at the heart of art’s role in society continues to play out in the realm of the pedagogical. What exactly is art good for? Through education we make our world. Are we endeavoring to cultivate beautiful souls? Do we wish to inculcate a sense of collective purpose? Are we training the workers of tomorrow?

The Kantian ideal of enlightened self-formation contends that art makes us better people simply by being art, by allowing us to participate in its making and its meanings. The pedagogical path that follows from this Kantian ideal runs in the eighteenth and

⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 95.

⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover, 1969), I: 178.

⁶ Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p. 52.

nineteenth centuries from the Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi to his German acolyte, Friedrich Froebel.

In 1840, Froebel developed a program of play and learning that we consider a model of early childhood education even today.⁷ While as a teacher, Froebel was a devotee of Rousseau and Pestalozzi in his use of aesthetic judgment as a prime mover of intellectual and moral formation, he was a true disciple of Immanuel Kant. Froebel developed what he called the *Gaben* or “Gifts”—a series of simple objects that would be “given” to a child and used in both guided and open-ended kinds of play. The early Gifts were simple geometric forms comprising knitted, colored balls on strings that could be swung back and forth in a playful exploration of movement; balls and cylinders; wooden blocks that could be stacked or laid side by side to build structures and make patterns; flat, colored wooden polygons that could be fitted into mosaic patterns; strips of paper that could be woven; and sticks that could be used to make patterns and structures. Through seemingly aimless play with the Gifts, and through the effortlessness of simple aesthetic choices and satisfactions, children would come to an understanding of the harmony and unity of art and nature, the self and the world, through the powers of their own curiosity and volition.

By using art-making activities and art-making choices as the basis of education, Froebel’s teaching sought to operate deeply on the moral and ethical centers of the individual. As is the case with any educational program, the Froebel pedagogy presupposes outcomes in an ideal individual. But what kind of individual? It’s a matter here of that famously untranslatable German word—*Bildung*—meaning an education of mind and sensibility in which a feeling for aesthetic form and its moral and ethical ramifications became the foundations of inner self, and also, importantly, the bedrock of society and nation.

As educators in schools, museums, and cultural institutions in the twenty-first century, it is pleasant to believe that we are the inheritors of the progressive, creative traditions of Pestalozzi to Froebel, and finally John Dewey. But the fact is that education, as it is practiced today, especially in the schools, owes much more to the behaviorists of the nineteenth century. The real hero of American education is probably not John Dewey but rather a champion of educational psychology and educational testing, Edward Lee Thorndike.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, psychologists began to develop mass-administered tests of innate mental ability. Much of this research was behaviorist stimulus and response, based initially in animal studies.⁸ But there were also numerous efforts to

⁷The most accessible and most readily available publication about Froebel and his ideas is Norman Brosterman, *Inventing Kindergarten* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).

⁸For instance, Thorndike’s earliest experiments were on animals, notably his investigations to determine whether caged cats and dogs could learn to operate simple mechanisms to open doors and gain access to food. Edward L. Thorndike, *Animal Intelligence: An Experimental Study of the Associative Processes in Animals* (New York: Macmillan, 1898).

understand how visual intelligence was related to other capacities, such as language.⁹ Just as much as Froebel’s visual Gifts, the educational tests of these early psychologists recognized the pedagogical power inherent in aesthetic judgments.

The development of tests of aesthetic judgment was part of the larger educational testing movement. Very early tests of intelligence, such as the 1917 examination created under Robert Yerkes to classify U.S. Army recruits, relied on pictures and extra-linguistic content, such as symbols and nonreferential characters. The Army Alpha Intelligence Test sought to measure innate intelligence without regard to education or training. After the First World War, Yerkes and his psychologist colleague, Lewis Terman, began to develop tests of general intelligence in earnest, and by 1925 testing permeated the U.S. educational system.

The tests for younger children, especially, relied on pictures. For instance, in the Pintner Picture Completion Test, published by Rudolf Pintner and M. M. Anderson in 1917, a child was asked to fill in missing elements of line drawings.¹⁰ A pump without a handle, smoke without a cigar, a violin without a bow—the specificity of cultural and class allusions in the test seem readily evident today. The normative force of what constituted “intelligence” was apparent as well in the 1917 Pintner Primary Mental Test, which asked students to make choices about the “prettiest” among a range of line drawings.¹¹

In addition to these tests that used visual acuity as an index of innate intelligence, there were also a great number of tests—more than 80 were in use by 1939—that sought to measure pure aesthetic judgment; that is, artistic taste, still with the goal of correlating choices with innate intelligence.¹²

The challenge for researchers was to devise a test that could accurately demonstrate the correlations. For instance, in 1916 Edward Thorndike devised a study of “Aesthetic Appreciation” in which test subjects were asked to rank a series of rectangles, crosses, and lines in order of aesthetic merit.¹³ Note that in Thorndike’s test, the “correct order” of “most aesthetic” to “least aesthetic” is determined by consensus. The right answer is the one that the most people say is the right answer. The most aesthetically pleasing is the one that the most people say is the most aesthetically pleasing.

⁹ Kurt Danziger, *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). On education testing generally, see Michael M. Sokal, *Psychological Testing and American Society, 1890–1930* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Rudolf Pintner and Margaret M. Anderson, *The Picture Completion Test* (Baltimore: Warwick & York, 1917).

¹¹ Rudolf Pintner and Donald G. Paterson, *Pintner-Paterson Performance Test Series* (Chicago: C.H. Stoelting Co., 1917).

¹² Gertrude Hildreth, *Bibliography of Mental Tests and Rating Scales* (New York: The Psychological Corporation, 1939).

¹³ Edward L. Thorndike, “Tests of Aesthetic Appreciation,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. VII (November 1916): 509–522.

Why shouldn't art be subject to the same rules of assessment and value that govern any other field of human knowledge?

The educational psychologist Linus Ward Kline put it this way: "Chemistry without measurement was Alchemy, Physics without measurement was guess work, Astronomy devoid of mathematics was Astrology, musical composition without the laws and norms of harmony becomes 'jazz,' and he who paints without knowledge of the standards and norms of design produces futuristic and chaotic results."¹⁴

Building on nineteenth-century research into the physiology of perception, in 1933 the mathematician George D. Birkhoff published *Aesthetic Measure*, in which he presented a method for determining the logical coefficients of visual phenomena. His basic formula was $M = O / C$, where aesthetic measure, or effectiveness (M) is the result of order (O, that is symmetry, repetition), divided by complexity (C, the density of information). Birkhoff fondly and frequently cited his first axiom of aesthetic measure: "The beautiful is that which gives us the greatest number of ideas in the shortest period of time."¹⁵ But what might have once been a philosophical aphorism was given the power of a physical law by Birkhoff. He began by applying his formula to a series of 90 polygons, ranking them in descending order of aesthetic merit. "If upon scanning these polygons from first to last," Birkhoff wrote, "the reader feels a gradual diminution in aesthetic quality, the underlying theory may be regarded as justified."¹⁶ Birkhoff ran the test with a human control group—his classes at Columbia and Harvard universities in 1929–30—to find that the "results so obtained were found to be in substantial agreement with the arrangement obtained by the formula. What the formula proved to Birkhoff was that aesthetic questions could be answered by purely mathematical, logical means. To the question, "Which is the most beautiful of all polygon forms?" Birkhoff could answer: a square with sides of $M = 1.50$.

Birkhoff saw his theory of aesthetic measure as the natural outcome of a long history of philosophical disquisition on art and beauty. Philosophy, in his view, was a self-reflexive citadel. It always turned back in upon itself. The inquiry always reverted to first premise—what is beauty?—without providing a conclusive answer. Science, on the other hand, was accretive and absolute in its certainty. Science was not a subsidiary discourse of culture; it was its culminating moment.¹⁷ In the decades of the early twentieth century, when art and culture seemed mired in the chaos of experimentation, the scientific authority of aesthetic

¹⁴ Linus Ward Kline and Gertrude L. Carey, *A Measuring Scale for Free-Hand Drawing, Part II: Design and Composition*. The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Education, No. 5, edited by Florence E. Bamberger (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1933), p. 49.

¹⁵ George D. Birkhoff, *Aesthetic Measure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), pp. 4, 199.

¹⁶ Birkhoff, *Aesthetic Measure*, p. 44.

¹⁷ George D. Birkhoff, "Science and Spiritual Perspectives: A New Philosophy," *The Century Magazine*, Vol. 118 (June 1929): 156–165.

measure provided a way of ensuring that “art’s evolution was not wholly arbitrary but well directed.”¹⁸ Yes, a eugenics program for the arts. Artists could leave behind the hit-or-miss process of creation through inspiration and embrace the certitude of mathematics. No longer would society be confounded by ill-considered works of “puzzle art,” whose “novelistic forms...cannot be appreciated without advance knowledge of the underlying theory.”¹⁹

To early twenty-first century minds, it seems that the efforts of these aesthetic test advocates are exercises in willful credulity or sheer pseudoscientific humbug. But psychologists and educators at the time were adamant in contending that artistic judgment and expression were susceptible to statistical measurement and analysis. It is precisely the fact that the tests measure adherence to consensual judgment that was deemed their greatest strength and importance. The tests were diagnostic, but they were also normative.

Behind the call for artistic standards and aesthetic rules was an abiding fear of change and loss of control. Kline’s “futuristic and chaotic results” and Birkhoff’s “Puzzle-art” are code words for modernism. Arthur Pope, professor of art history at Harvard and an enthusiastic supporter of aesthetic tests, felt that modernism was a pernicious, undemocratic force that had its roots in the nineteenth-century cult of genius. Romanticism had spawned a false elite, artists who felt that their work and ideas occupied a realm divorced from the authority of history, public taste, and political authority. It was necessary to counter this excessive subjectivity and “irrationalism” with a new, more reasonable culture made possible by science. “The only way to improve quality,” Pope wrote, “was to train a large enough part of the public in artistic discrimination to dominate the demand.”²⁰ Spoken here by an avowed critic of modernism, this statement also encapsulates the pedagogical program of the ultramodernist Bauhaus school of art and design.

From Kant to consumer testing, with eugenical dreams of a programmable culture coming from both ends of the political spectrum, the contradictions of autonomous art are always with us. The statement “art is good for nothing” can begin to look like a threat of imminent extinction. And this article has left out some of the most conspicuous historical moments, such as the “art for art’s sake” aesthetic movement of the nineteenth century. Also left out are the vociferously formalist pronouncements of post-World War II, including those by the critic Clement Greenberg, who discussed the technique of painting in absolute flatness, or even the philosopher Theodor Adorno’s claims that only by studiously guarding the

¹⁸ Birkhoff, *Aesthetic Measure*, p. 216.

¹⁹ Birkhoff, *Aesthetic Measure*, pp. 216–17.

²⁰ Arthur Pope, *Art, Artist, and Layman: A Study of the Teaching of the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 32.

boundaries of its autonomy could art make any claims to value whatsoever. The worlds of art today are haunted by those histories, too, if not always at the moments of creation, in the work that artists do, then certainly in the institutions that give art its cultural presence—in history, in criticism and theory, in everything from magazine reviews to the rationales for museum acquisitions and exhibitions, classroom curricula, and educational policy.