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.

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\(^1\) A point of view where the penny-wise deacons of democracy find common cause with Lunacharsky.
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.” 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.”

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.” 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

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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. But there were also numerous efforts to
understand how visual intelligence was related to other capacities, such as language. 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. 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.

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.

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. 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.

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

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.”

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.”

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.

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16 Birkhoff, Aesthetic Measure, p. 44.

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 lon-
ger 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 adva-
cocates are exercises in willful credulity or sheer pseudoscientific humbug. But psycholo-
gists 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 “futurist 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 author-
ity of history, public taste, and political authority. It was necessary to counter this exces-
sive 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 eugenic 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.