

## The Aesthetic Disinterestedness Reconsidered: Baumgarten, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Duchamp<sup>1</sup>

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This paper reconsiders Kant's disputed doctrine of supposed "aesthetic disinterestedness," arguing that the concept of "aesthetic disinterestedness" that was never used by Kant himself misses the main point of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) (hereafter abbreviated as the third *Critique*). First, I address Baumgarten's theory of disinterestedness in his *Metaphysics* (1739, 1757) as a background for understanding Kant's theory of disinterestedness. Second, I show that disinterestedness toward the beautiful is for Kant only a necessary condition for being aesthetically "involved" in it. Thus, I interpret Kant's doctrine of supposed "aesthetic disinterestedness" as composed of practical disinterestedness (as a necessary condition) and aesthetic involvement (as a sufficient condition). Then, in order to verify this interpretation, I refer to Schiller and Schopenhauer's aesthetic theories. Finally, I attempt to make concrete "aesthetic disinterestedness" by taking Duchamp's description of the readymade as an example.

### 1. Baumgarten's Theory of Disinterestedness

In his epoch-making article "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'" (1961), Jerome Stolnitz traced the origins of the Kantian idea of disinterestedness to eighteenth-century British philosophy, especially Shaftesbury's and Hutcheson's.<sup>2</sup> Werner Strube's article "'Interesslosigkeit.' Zur Geschichte eines Grundbegriffs der Ästhetik" (1979) essentially shared Stolnitz's opinion.<sup>3</sup> I would argue instead for the central importance of German philosophy, especially Baumgarten's, whose *Metaphysics* served as the textbook for Kant's lectures on metaphysics and anthropology; Kant's terminus technicus "indifferent" (in German: "gleichgültig") that is used synonymously with "without interest" and "disinterested" (in German: "ohne Interesse" and "uninteressiert")<sup>4</sup> obviously originates from Baumgarten.

In *Metaphysics*, Baumgarten argues as follows: The power of the soul consists of the powers of cognition and desire. When I "intuit the perfection" (or the "imperfection") of something as "good" (or "evil"), I "am pleased" (or "displeased"), and I "desire" (or "avert") it. A desire (or an aversion), therefore, results from a cognition. However, when "I intuit neither its perfection as good nor its imperfection as evil," I am "neither pleased nor displeased," i.e., "it is indifferent to me [*mihi indifferens, es ist mir gleichgültig, ich bin dagegen gleichgültig*]." And I "cannot desire those things that are entirely indifferent to me." Neither a desire nor an aversion, therefore, results from a cognition of

<sup>1</sup> This paper is revised version of my presentation at the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Aesthetics held in July 2019 at the University of Belgrade.

<sup>2</sup> See Stolnitz, "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness,'" 131–143.

<sup>3</sup> See Strube, "'Interesslosigkeit.' Zur Geschichte eines Grundbegriffs der Ästhetik," 148–174.

<sup>4</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 205, 209—Kant's works are cited according to the volume and page numbering of the Academy Edition. Hereafter to be cited parenthetically.

those things that are entirely indifferent to me.<sup>5</sup>

In the first moment of the judgment of taste (§§ 1–5), in which beauty is defined according to quality, Kant introduces the idea of “disinterested pleasure [*das uninteressierte Wohlgefallen*]” that does not have any “relation to the faculty of desire” (Kant 5: 205). This idea would be self-contradictory in Baumgarten’s view, for what pleases me (so Baumgarten says) cannot be, by definition, indifferent to me. Kant is, however, not entirely opposed to Baumgarten. Both Kant and Baumgarten are of the opinion that what is indifferent to me does not affect (and, at the same time, is not affected by) the power of desire. Kant thus characterizes “disinterested pleasure” as a “free pleasure” in that it is free from the power of desire (5: 210), because it is “indifferent with regard to the existence of an object” (5: 209). This also suggests that the disinterestedness is only a negative (or necessary) condition for aesthetic pleasure. In this respect, I agree with Heidegger, who avers that the disinterested nature of aesthetic pleasure is propounded in a merely “preparatory and path-breaking way.”<sup>6</sup> Heidegger continues, “by means of the ‘devoid of interest’ the essential relation to the object itself comes into play. [...] Now for the first time the object comes to light [*zum Vorschein kommen*] as pure object and that such coming to light is the beautiful. The word ‘beautiful [*schön*]’ means appearing in the radiance of such coming to light [*das Erscheinen im Schein solchen Vorscheins*].”<sup>7</sup> Here his ontological interpretation is not compatible with Kant’s theory of the beautiful. Having explored the disinterestedness as a necessary condition, I will now move on to the question of how Kant determines the sufficient condition of aesthetic pleasure.

## 2. Disinterestedness and Involvement

It is in the third moment of the judgment of taste (§§ 10–17), in which beauty is defined according to relation, that Kant addresses the sufficient condition of aesthetic pleasure. In section 12, he explains it as follows:

The pleasure [in the beautiful] has a causality in itself, namely that of *maintaining* [*erhalten*] the state of the representation and the occupation of the cognitive powers without any further aim. We *linger* [*weilen*] over the contemplation of the beautiful because this contemplation strengthens and reproduces itself. (Kant 5: 222)

When our minds are aim-oriented, we use an object for the sake of something else. That is, an object is embedded in a means-end relationship and determined by the end. At issue is the end, not the means to the end. An object as a means therefore attracts our attention to it only insofar as how to efficiently attain its end. We should not—and do not have to—linger over an object. But when our minds are indifferent to aims and freed from a purpose-oriented scheme, we are led to do exactly that. And if we are offered by an object “that representation of the imagination which occasions much thinking, but to which no determinate [...] concept can be adequate” (5: 314), we actually linger over

<sup>5</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, §§ 651, 664, 666.

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume I: The Will to Power as Art*, 110.

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume I: The Will to Power as Art*, 110.

it, because our mental powers—i.e., the “imagination” (as the “faculty of intuitions”) and the “understanding” (as the “faculty of concepts”) (5: 287)—are set into a “play that maintains itself on its own and even strengthens the powers for such play” (5: 313).

Considering all of this, one can argue as follows: While disinterestedness is a necessary condition for aesthetic pleasure in the beautiful, the active, self-maintaining play of one’s mental powers is the sufficient condition for it. Kant’s doctrine of supposed “aesthetic disinterestedness” is thus a compound of a negative and a positive moment.

The disinterestedness is also attributed to aesthetic pleasure in the sublime as well as to that in the beautiful (5: 247). Also, aesthetic pleasure in the sublime is a compound of a negative and a positive moment. The negative moment comes first and can be seen in the following quotation:

The sight of [such fearful objects] only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, *as long as* we find ourselves *in safety*. (5: 261—emphasis by the author)

In order to find something sublime, we have to be free from actual fear caused by danger, being thus indifferent to the existence of an object. For “it is impossible to find pleasure in a terror that we take seriously” (5: 261). But to be free from actual fear can cause “gladness” at most (5: 261); it does not in itself produce aesthetic pleasure. For that we require the positive moment.

The astonishment bordering on terror, the horror and the awesome shudder, [...] is—if the spectator knows that he/she is *in safety*—not actual fear, but only a temptation to *get involved in it [uns darauf einlassen]* by means of the imagination, in order to feel the power of that very faculty, [...] (5: 269—emphasis by the author)

To get involved in fear caused by a sublime object in order to feel “the strength of our soul elevated above its usual level” (5: 261) is the positive moment that, together with the negative moment, makes up aesthetic pleasure in the sublime.

Having made this distinction, I propose we call the negative moment “practical disinterestedness,” and the positive moment “aesthetic involvement.” This explains the reason why I regard the expression “aesthetic disinterestedness” as misleading, or even false, for disinterestedness itself does not constitute aesthetic pleasure.

Let us note that in the first part of the third *Critique*, the word “indifferent [*gleichgültig*]” appears four times. Its first three uses are in the sense analyzed above; the last use is an exception:

[...] we reproach someone who is indifferent in judging an object in nature that we find beautiful with lack of taste, so we say of someone who remains unmoved by that which we judge to be sublime that he/she has no feeling. (5: 265)

When we make a judgment of taste, we must be “indifferent with regard to the existence of the object” (5: 205), but it does not follow that we can be indifferent in making a judgment of taste. We should rather have much interest in making a judgment of taste, otherwise we would be charged with

a lack of taste. Kant is certainly no advocate of the so-called aesthetics of disinterestedness.

### 3. Echoes of Kant's Theory

Heidegger once claimed that “Schopenhauer plays the leading role in the preparation and genesis of the misunderstanding of Kantian aesthetics. [...] Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* [...] has been influential up to now on the basis of misunderstanding. [...] Schiller alone grasped some essentials in relation to Kant's doctrine of the beautiful.”<sup>8</sup> I will now briefly examine his statement.<sup>9</sup>

In Schiller's essay “On the Aesthetic Education of the Human Being” (1795), we read that “insofar as need for reality and dependence on the actual are merely the results of a deficiency, indifference towards reality [*die Gleichgültigkeit gegen Realität*] and an interest in appearance [*das Interesse am Schein*] represent a real shift for humankind and a decisive step in the direction of culture.”<sup>10</sup> The “indifference toward reality” corresponds to what I called “practical disinterestedness,” while “an interest in appearance” is equivalent to what I named “aesthetic involvement,” for due to this interest in appearance we are “able to linger over pure appearance [*sich bei dem bloßen Schein verweilen*].”<sup>11</sup> Schiller juxtaposes indifference and interest, thus clearly articulating the negative and positive moments of the judgment of taste.

Next, let us move on to examine whether Schopenhauer misunderstood Kant's aesthetic theory as Heidegger once claimed. In his *World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer shares the same opinion as Kant, arguing that “the beauty [...] depends upon disinterestedness of the intuition.”<sup>12</sup> About twenty pages later, however, he continues:

Every genius is [...] a big child; he/she looks out into the world [...] with purely *objective interest*. Accordingly, he/she has just as little as the child that dull gravity of ordinary people, who, since they are capable only of *subjective interest*, always see in things mere motives for their action.<sup>13</sup>

Disinterestedness toward practical motives excludes subjective interest, but not objective interest. Ordinary people who are caught up in subjective interest “do not linger for long over the mere intuition [*bei der bloßen Anschauung lange weilen*].”<sup>14</sup> Objective interest that presupposes disinterestedness of the intuition, on the contrary, makes it possible for us to linger at length over intuition, a state of mind which corresponds to what I above called “aesthetic involvement.” In his late work *Parerga and Paralipomena* (1851), Schopenhauer explicitly connects art with our interest:

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume I: The Will to Power as Art*, 107–108.

<sup>9</sup> As for Heidegger's interpretation of Kant's third *Critique*, see Ingvild Torsen, “Disinterest and Truth: On Heidegger's Interpretation of Kant's Aesthetics,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56/1 (2016), 15–32.

<sup>10</sup> Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, 656.

<sup>11</sup> Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 5, 658.

<sup>12</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Supplement to the Third Book, Chapter 30. *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 3, 428.

<sup>13</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Supplement to the Third Book, Chapter 31. *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 3, 453—italics by the author.

<sup>14</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Third Book, Chapter 39. *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 2, 238.

Art consists in our bringing the inner life into the most intense action with the least possible expenditure of the outer; for the inner life is really the object of our interest. The task of the novelist is not to narrate great events, but to make interesting those which are trifling.<sup>15</sup>

It is disinterestedness toward the outer life that renders the inner life interesting. Schopenhauer's theory of beauty certainly conflicts with Kant in the letter—because Kant does not use the word “interest(ing)” in this way—but not in the spirit. From this perspective, Schopenhauer didn't misunderstand Kant; it is Heidegger who misunderstood Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's definition of the beautiful even begins to approximate Heideggerian diction (his reference to the English and the Platonic Ideas notwithstanding):

The word *schön* [beautiful] is undoubtedly connected with the English “to shew” and accordingly would mean “shewy” [*schaulich*], “what shews well” [*was sich gut zeigt, sich gut ausnimmt*], and hence stands out clearly in intuition; consequently the clear expression of significant (Platonic) Ideas.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Visual Indifference and/or the Enjoyment of Looking

Finally, I will address the question of what “aesthetic disinterestedness” actually means. This concept reminds me of Marcel Duchamp's concept of “visual indifference.” In his talk “Apropos of ‘Readymades,’” delivered in 1961, he recalled when he invented readymades, as follows:

In 1913 I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn. It was around that time that the word “Readymade” came to my mind to designate this form of manifestation. A point that I very much want to establish is that the choice of these Readymades was never dictated by esthetic delectation. The choice was based on visual indifference—a total absence of good or bad taste—in fact, a complete anesthesia.<sup>17</sup>

The visual indifference of readymades, which entails a denial of taste or even an absence of *aisthesis*, is the antipode of Kant's aesthetic theory. Duchamp's readymades might at first seem to exemplify “aesthetic disinterestedness” in a very literal sense. The case is, however, not quite so simple, as he often “compared” the spinning Bicycle Wheel (1913) to “flames in a fireplace,” underlining the “pleasure of looking at” them.<sup>18</sup> Duchamp was pleased both by looking at the movement of the wheel and by comparing this to the flames. The pleasure is, therefore, both visual and intellectual.

While the intellectual pleasure is incompatible with Kant's aesthetic theory, Duchamp's visual

<sup>15</sup> Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*. Vol. 2, Chapter 19, § 228. *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 4, 469.

<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays*. Vol. 2, Chapter 19, § 211. *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 4, 451. The three English phrases enclosed in double quotes are Schopenhauer's own words.

<sup>17</sup> Duchamp, “Apropos of ‘Readymades,’” *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 141.

<sup>18</sup> Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, 442.

pleasure exactly calls to mind Kant's pleasure of imagination upon "looking at the changing shapes of a fire in a fireplace" (Kant 5: 243). Duchamp who lingered on looking at the wheel certainly cannot have been visually indifferent toward it.

However, in the case of the urinal, usually considered a pioneering example of conceptual art, one might assume that Duchamp must have been visually indifferent to it. This is not quite so simple, either. In the unsigned text entitled "The Richard Mutt Case" that appeared in *The Blind Man*, no. 2 (May 1917) and was attributed to Beatrice Wood (who worked closely with Duchamp), we read the following:

He [Mr. Richard Mutt] took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object.<sup>19</sup>

There are two points here: first, to remove a urinal from its original practical context and, second, to look at it from a new point of view and create a new thought for it. The first point corresponds to what I above called "practical disinterestedness." What is at issue is, therefore, the second point.

The text "The Richard Mutt Case" was followed on the same page by an article titled "Buddha of the Bathroom," written by Louise Norton, one of Duchamp's friends with insider knowledge about the Richard Mutt case. She wrote the following:

[...] to any "innocent" eye how pleasant is its chaste simplicity of line and color! Someone [Stieglitz] said, "Like a lovely Buddha"; someone said, "Like the legs of the ladies by Cezanne" [...].<sup>20</sup>

Duchamp circle members were pleased by comparing the visual qualities of the urinal to those of Buddha or the legs of the ladies by Cezanne. The more ridiculous the contrast (such as that between the urinal and Buddha or lady's legs), the more pleased they were. Their pleasure was certainly intellectual; it was, however, based on visual pleasure. They cannot have been, therefore, visually indifferent toward the urinal.

In the 1960s, Duchamp came to advocate visual indifference, in order to differentiate himself from the Neo-Dadaists, who "found aesthetic beauty" in his readymades.<sup>21</sup> The idea of visual indifference, however, does not reflect Duchamp's or his circle members' attitude toward readymades in the 1910s. This attitude actually consists of practical indifference and aesthetic-intellectual involvement. Seen in this way, Duchamp's readymades still faintly echo Kant's aesthetic theory.

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<sup>19</sup> Wood, "The Richard Mutt Case," *The Blind Man*. No. 2, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Wood, "Buddha of the Bathroom," *The Blind Man*. No. 2, 5–6.

<sup>21</sup> Richter, *Dada Art and Anti-Art*, 208.

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