

FROM THE PEPPER GARDEN TO THE BOTANICAL GARDEN: KANT ON THE APPRECIATION OF NATURAL BEAUTY

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I. INTRODUCTION

Kant was concerned with the difficulty of finding nature beautiful, that is, of making a proper judgement of taste regarding nature, as opposed to treating it as kitsch, evaluating its perfection, enjoying it on a sensory level, fetishizing its exotic aspects, and so on. Part of his argument, therefore, was that aesthetic reflective judgement is an *achievement*, one that is especially significant with regard to nature, for it establishes our ability to exercise reflective judgement even in relation to those objects to which we already have an objective or determinate relationship. However, it turns out that on his account, the ability to appreciate beauty in nature is only made possible by a simultaneous ability to appreciate beauty in art, and vice versa. On this reading, though Kant privileges natural beauty as the paradigm case of beauty, his account in fact treats artistic beauty and natural beauty,¹ or at least the appreciation thereof, as dialectically related, a fact that is overlooked in the majority of the literature.²

As a medium for the discussion, I will refer to an exhibition of Dale Chihuly's works, titled "The Nature of Glass," at the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix in the spring of 2009, which put into spectacular relief the relationship between artistic and natural beauty.

¹ "Artistic" and "natural" are meant to modify the object being found beautiful, not the type of beauty. Kant does not subscribe to the idea that there are ontologically different categories of beauty (see my note 11). One might say "art beauty" and "nature beauty," though the expressions aren't idiomatic in English.

² For a defense of Kant's privileging of natural beauty, see Guyer (1993), Chapter 7.

II. ON THE DIFFICULTY OF FINDING NATURE BEAUTIFUL

At the conclusion of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, wherein he had expounded what is involved in a judgement of taste (or an aesthetic *reflective* judgement), Kant makes some remarks on the respective experiences of wild versus domesticated beauty in nature:

Marsden, in his description of Sumatra, comments that the free [i.e. wild?] beauties of nature there surround the beholder everywhere, so that there is little left in them to attract him; whereas, when in the midst of a forest he came upon a pepper garden, with the stakes that supported the climbing plants forming paths between them along parallel lines, it charmed him greatly. He concludes from this that we like wild and apparently ruleless beauty only as a change, when we have been satiated with the sight of regular beauty. And yet he need only have made the experiment of spending one day with his pepper garden to realize that, once regularity has [prompted] the understanding to put itself into attunement with order which it requires everywhere, the object ceases to entertain him and instead inflicts on his imagination an irksome constraint [...] (Ak 243)

Wild beauty is more enjoyable than domesticated beauty, and hence easier to find beautiful, because it allows for the type of free play of the faculties that is involved in a judgement of taste. Whereas a scientific or logical judgement involves matching the imaginative presentation at hand with a concept, a judgement of taste involves the *in-general* harmonization of the imagination with the faculty of concepts (the understanding) as would be required for cognition, while avoiding any determinate fit. That free play or harmonization brings with it a feeling of pleasure, which is crucially something located in us, and not a property of the object (Ak 189). Hence beauty is not conceptual – if it were, we could prove it logically, and there would be no disagreement about it.

The problem with the pepper garden is that the regularity we find there “has an air of constraint,” and so cannot sustain the necessary “free play” that is required for a judgement of beauty, precisely because “the object ceases to *entertain*” (Ak 242). With an orderly object such as the pepper garden, there is no reason to linger, no *mystery* as to why this thing before me presents a unified whole, no experience of availing itself to my cognitive capacities in compelling yet indeterminate ways.

The achievement of aesthetic reflective judgement is particularly difficult when it comes to nature *because* we always find nature already so conducive to conceptualization. We always can find a concept suitable to the thing before us, and subsume that concept under others, knitting it into the entire fabric of our scientific knowledge. The challenge of achieving an aesthetic reflective judgement with respect to an object that is already conceptually determinate – the challenge of looking past objective harmony – is ever-present with respect to the natural world, where nothing stays mysterious for very long. Objective purposes reveal themselves, order settles in: everything begins to look like the pepper garden.³

There is, in reaction, a certain inadequate version of locating beauty in nature, a self-deceptive gesture of attempting to mystify what has already been demystified, a disingenuous reenchantment. This is the conceit of Anne Geddes posters (babies are *not* ladybugs; flowers are *not* baby bassinets), or of waterfall-and-rainbow landscapes (as though the latter were not a meteorological event). The move is a sort of *repression* of conceptuality, of the knowledge of objective purposes and cause and effect, in general a repression of the Newtonian revelation of an indifferent, mechanical world.⁴ In effect, it cleaves the categories of nature and beauty – as though nature cannot be beautiful while still being nature, instead it must be something else, a lifeless surface exhibiting prettiness.

In sum, it is perhaps especially difficult to make judgements of taste when it comes to nature because the latter always avails itself to our cognition. And yet it is crucial that we *have* experiences of natural beauty, i.e. that we have the ability to have aesthetic appreciation for things with which we would otherwise have a merely instrumental or cognitive encounter, for otherwise beauty would become ever more scarce, retreating to make room for a scientific or instrumental relationship, or else it would remain confined to “merely aesthetic” objects, trivialities outside of the world of practical concern.

This brings us to a further reason why it is difficult to find nature beautiful: because we always *do* have purposes when it comes to nature. Nature is that to which

³ It is possible that the notion of objective purposes can infect, and kill the pleasure in, a work of art (can Dadaism seriously be enjoyed, now?), but this is not an initial prejudice we have to *overcome* with respect to art.

⁴ The non-repressive version of reëncanting nature would be the notion of purposiveness explored in the third *Critique*. There is much to say about the treatment Kant gives nature in the third *Critique*, especially in comparison to the treatment it receives in the first. I am confining this discussion to aesthetic reflective judgements, rather than teleological judgements.

we relate as sensuous, finite beings with material needs. Our survival depends on being able to detect objective purposes and laws when looking at nature. (The domesticated order of the pepper garden immediately calls to mind all sorts of utilitarian concerns: stakes to support the climbing plants; paths between them for the gardener to walk along; spaced rows to maximize sun exposure.) But the appreciation of beauty is *disinterested*: it bypasses any economy of desire and satisfaction.⁵

This leads in turn to a second inadequate version of finding beauty in nature: there can be a reflex impulse to call beautiful anything wild or new or unknown, i.e. those things thus far outside of the sweep of our instrumentality – bizarre deep-sea creatures, unfamiliar landscapes, primitive peoples – call this the fetishization of the exotic. Kant describes something like this when he considers our willingness to listen to bird song for hours longer on end than we would ever listen to human song,

And yet in this case we probably confuse our participation in the cheerfulness of a favorite little animal with the beauty of its song, for when bird song is imitated very precisely by a human being (as is sometimes done with the nightingale's warble) it strikes our ear as quite tasteless (Ak 243).⁶

We can tend to uncritically attribute beauty to those elements of nature that lie outside our instrumental relationship to the natural world. But this uncritical reception ignores the fact that the attribution of beauty is properly the outcome of a *reflective judgement*.

Kant mentions other inadequate versions of finding nature “beautiful,” including judging it in terms of perfection (§15), and merely enjoying it on a sensory level. What then *is* involved in a proper judgement of natural beauty? Kant's answer only becomes clear once he begins to talk about art. As an introduction to his account, let us take a detour through Chihuly's exhibition.

⁵ To use Nick Zangwill's phrase (Zangwill (2003).

⁶ Note, interestingly, that this implies that beautiful (or unbeautiful) form is beautiful (or unbeautiful) form regardless of where it appears.

III. CHIHULY: THE NATURE OF GLASS

In the spring of 2009, the Phoenix Desert Botanical Gardens presented an extensive collection of the works of Dale Chihuly. His glass sculptures were subtly interspersed among the permanent collection of trees, cacti, herbs and flowers. The garden itself (which is entirely outdoors, and showcases only regional plant life) is quite large in area, and all told, there were dozens of Chihuly's installations, some comprising many individual pieces, nestled here and there among the natural landscape.

What was most remarkable about the exhibition was how it heightened one's appreciation for the surrounding *natural* beauty. Rather than using nature as a mere backdrop, the sculptures somehow invited one to explore the botanical life, *as well as* the artworks themselves. Any excitement over discovering the next sculpture along the path simultaneously produced an inclination to linger over the nature.

What was it about the artworks that made the natural surroundings so captivating? It clearly had to do with the myriad ways in which Chihuly played out the relation between the two. Some sculptures looked like natural entities – flowers, shrubs, vines, buds. The most realistic looking pieces, resembling tall green cacti, are actually outside the gate to the botanical gardens proper, and greet visitors on the pathway from the parking lot [fig 1]. The vast majority of those arriving did not seem to notice the difference between them and the true succulents among which they stood.

Some sculptures, however, looked distinctly like artifacts: a canoe full of perfect glass orbs [fig 2], not to mention the bright red and yellow balloon-animal-like centerpiece along the main path, which yet looked plantlike [fig 3]. At least one piece looked natural *without* looking plantlike: cool blue ice floes drifting on a reed-encircled pond [fig 4]. Some pieces could have been the detached flower of the plant standing to them [fig 5], while others looked like they bore no organic relationship to the surrounding flora at all [fig 6]. Some sculptures mimicked the plants in a parodic gesture, like a collection of green glass bubbles vine-ing their way up a scaffold [fig 6], or brightly coloured imitations of dull grey cacti [fig 7]. Small and large, sprouting from the ground or suspended from a beam, boastful or inconspicuous, planted on the ground or floating on water, the sculptures ran a gamut of boundless heterogeneity.

Again, the net result of all of these contrasts and variations was that the art beauties facilitated an appreciation for the natural beauties, and vice versa. Not in the facile

way that it was nice to alternate between one and the other, but in a deeper way, as though the very possibility of finding the nature beautiful was facilitated by finding the artworks beautiful (and contrariwise) – as though there is a dialectical relationship between the two kinds of beauty.

III. A DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURAL AND ARTISTIC BEAUTY

Kant suggests such a dialectical relationship at Ak 306:

Nature, we say, is beautiful [*schön*] if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine [*schön*] art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature.

Note that this says two things:

- a. First, that both must *appear* as the other, in order to be found beautiful.
- b. And yet, that art must be appreciated as *artistic* beauty and nature as *natural* beauty.

Before exploring this dialectical relationship in depth, let us briefly examine what Kant says about fine art.

All art is by definition production with some kind of intention. “Mechanical” arts such as cabinetry intend, and when successful produce, particular objects such as cabinets. However, what the fine arts as such really produce is not painted canvas and so forth but *beauty*, registered through a feeling of aesthetic pleasure. That pleasure is not produced in us causally, as it is not a matter of mere sensory enjoyment, but of a self-sustaining pleasure in relation to the harmonization of the faculties. So, fine arts must “produce” pleasure in us through judgement alone.

We may say that a work of fine art realizes all sorts of intentions – at the level of what it is depicting, what significance it is meant to have, what genre is being adhered to, and so on.⁷ But at all of these levels, the intentionality must not look legislative. The work of fine art must in no way look like a matter of cause and effect, a straight

⁷ One can take all of these myriad intentionalities to account for why Kant’s notion of “representation” is so vague and multi-faceted (see Schaper (2003))

shot from “academic form” (sonnet) and/or subject-matter (love) to work (“Shall I compare thee...”). The beauty of a work of fine art, per Kant, derives from the fact that the particular way in which it achieves its intention remains hidden from view. Why *this* metaphor, why *this* turn of phrase – *how did he know?* Fine art is the art of genius, (§46) of masterful production whose rule escapes us, as though the artist somehow simply intuits what to do, without needing to look to a paradigm.

This bears upon art looking beautiful when it looks like nature. The two-step movement of the appreciation of artistic beauty involves:

- a. Seeing the work as nature insofar as it does not look like the realization of some aim, does not look painstaking or pedantic.⁸ One might even describe this as seeing some kind of organic principle at work in it, as though it is animated by some inner movement, as though it is not the realization of some kind of antecedent intention, but contains within it the wellspring of its own meaning, gives its principle of unity to itself.⁹ In short, as though it is not artifact! This seems to be the significance of the occlusion of artistic intention in the case of beautiful works of art.
- b. And yet, it is equally important to see the work of art as art. This is the completion of the dialectical movement. Specifically here it means realizing that this beautiful object nonetheless *was* created, that it *is* the realization of some intention, and hence that there is genius at work. This means that there is something ineffable about the thing before us, that it is not subject to determinate explication, that it exceeds logical description and yet it is artifact – human creation – nonetheless. All art, including mechanical art, exceeds *scientia*, mere theory, insofar as “can” exceeds “know” (Ak 303), but fine art exceeds rule-following altogether.¹⁰

⁸ “And a product of art appears like nature if, though we find it to agree quite *punctiliously* with the rules that have to be followed for the product to become what it is intended to be, it does not do so *painstakingly*” (Ak 307).

⁹ This is one way of understanding what Kant means by purposiveness.

¹⁰ At least in the sense that the rule is created along with the work and does not precede it.

What about natural beauty? The full experience of natural beauty requires recognizing the thing at hand as nature, while appreciating its beauty. Here, the two-step movement involves:

- a. Seeing the thing as art insofar as it appears to have a unity that does not have to do with objective purpose: “the botanist ... while recognizing [a flower] as the reproductive organ of a plant, pays no attention to this natural purpose when he judges the flower by taste” (Ak 229). In other words, one detects the realization of something outside of the chain of cause and effect, a purposiveness independent of purpose, an excess of form beyond what is necessary for this to simply be a flower, or riverbed, or horse. One registers a subjective harmony (of the faculties) independent of objective, conceptual harmony.
- b. At the same time, one sees the thing as nature, one realizes that this is yet a natural object, *that there is no intention involved*, that the gratuitous harmony or form it bears was not bestowed upon it for the purpose of our aesthetic gratification, that it *is* natural (in some cases: it *is* alive), that this beautiful form arose from what we otherwise, objectively know to be a merely mechanical ground.¹¹

Kant notes that

Art is distinguished from *nature* as doing (*facere*) is from acting or operating in general (*agere*); and the product or result of art is distinguished from that of nature, the first being a work (*opus*), the second an effect (*effectus*).

Nature then is beautiful when it looks like an *opus*, art when it looks like an effect. Nature is beautiful when it looks like a doing, art when it looks like a mere operating in general (Ak 303).

To return to the false evaluations of the beauty of nature described above, the problem with disingenuous reëchantment is that it fails to circle back to seeing nature as nature, instead leaving it in that realm of art, that is of artifact, dead matter, a

¹¹ Again, Kant revises this picture of nature in the third *Critique*, but the idea of purposiveness or finality in nature relates to how *we must view it* (i.e. relates to the conditions for reflective judgement), and should not be read as supplanting the Newtonian picture Kant was giving grounding for in the first *Critique*.

two-dimensional canvas for pleasing form, rather than a form suffusing and exceeding the objective. Conversely, the problem with the fetishization of the exotic is that it doesn't first pass through seeing nature as art – performing the reflective judgement that ascertains that there is in fact beautiful form at hand.

IV. CONCLUSION

Chihuly's myriad ways of playing out the relationship between art and nature triggered an evaluation of the cacti and shrubs as though they were artistic presentations, as though they bespoke some artistic intention, or were created to produce pleasure – as though they were, in Kant's phrase, "beautiful *presentations* of a thing" (Ak 311) rather than beautiful things. It made their form all the more visual, not just on the register of objective purposes ("What is this thing? How does it live?") but in a gratuitous way ("Look at how thin, how sharp, how bulbous, how perverse"). And yet, placed as they were in their natural habitat, growing and metabolizing and decaying, one could not help but see them as alive.¹²

In essence Chihuly laid bare the conditions for the elusive experience of natural beauty, for what must be achieved in order to see nature as beautiful without forgetting that it is nature. The role of art in that regard casts new light on Kant's oft-critiqued privileging of natural beauty, the significance of which can be interpreted in relation to the project Kant hoped to achieve with the third *Critique*: to prepare a space for aesthetics itself, for that unique encounter with the world that is not bound by law.

¹² It must be conceded that a botanical garden is a rather artificial natural environment, both as a space and even in terms of the meticulous upkeep of the plants. The latter are still elements of nature, however, and my point is that Chihuly's sculptures made their beauty, as such, more visible.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

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