

Review: Christoph Menke, Daniel Loick, Isabelle Graw, *The Power of Judgment: A Debate on Aesthetic Critique*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010.

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The Power of Judgment comprises a lecture by Christoph Menke, Professor of Practical Philosophy at Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt, that sets out to evaluate the possibilities of aesthetic critique in a contemporary art context. Two short responses follow by Daniel Loick, a colleague of Menke's, and Isabelle Graw, editor, art critic and Professor of Art Criticism at the Städelschule in Frankfurt.

Aesthetic critique, argues Menke, is judgement that stands outside itself, that does not settle into finality but must continue to interrogate its own position. The arc of his argument in *The Power of Judgment* is cleanly summed up with this line: 'Aesthetic critique is the aesthetic praxis of judgment that is simultaneously a questioning of judgment itself.'ⁱ What Menke seems ultimately to be doing in this text is tentatively re-inserting Kantian aesthetics into a contemporary art context, though Kant's presence is as phantom-like as it is pervasive; the title of the publication rubs up against *The Critique of Judgment*, but no mention of Kant is made throughout, with the exception of one footnote that directs the reader to Hannah Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.

Menke begins by outlining the performative aspect of judgment insofar as it shapes the 'public status of an object', the possibilities of future actions, and, in turn, the formation of community.ⁱⁱ In Kant's words: 'Judgment in general is the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal.'ⁱⁱⁱ In addressing aesthetic judgment specifically, Menke accentuates the importance of its internal contradictions; the conflicting space between intuitive apprehension and methodologically deduced judgment. In doing so he embraces a more complex and interconnected approach to understanding, at the same time falling into step with Adorno's premise that 'the unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form'^{iv} — that truths are more likely to emerge when limitations are struck and fields of ambiguity opened up than in the realm of conscious modes of representation and apprehension.

Menke refers to Adorno's post-Hegelian definition of art as consisting in 'making things that one doesn't know'.^v This is not to suggest that art-making is not (or cannot be) an intellectually engaged activity; it is, rather, another point at which Menke reveals himself to be a post-Kantian, this idea finding its principles in Kant's distinction between art and science: 'To art that alone belongs for which the possession of the most complete knowledge does not involve one's having then and there the skill to do it.'^{vi} To wit, Kant's address to fine art in *The Critique of Judgment* opens with the line 'There is no science of the beautiful, but only a critique.'^{vii} Menke concludes his text with an analysis of the work of German painter Neo Rauch. As Graw points out, this is a move that, though in keeping with his argument, overlooks any consideration of context, in turn weakening his position in its application to contemporary art.

Menke's Hegelian text is followed by Loick's Deleuzian attempt to step outside the framework of judgment altogether, and finally Graw's response which is grounded more firmly in the subjectivity of her experience as an art critic.

Not only Menke's, but all the presentations in this book brought me to wonder at the degree to which Kant remains dominant in contemporary German aesthetic thought. Statements like 'The act of aesthetic apprehension escapes the control of self-conscious subjectivity; it is a sudden, emerging determination' are clear reiterations of basic Kantian tenets. Though much of what Menke says can be understood as a restatement of Kantian aesthetics, he couches his argument in contemporary terms. Interestingly, he uses 'force' where Kant might talk of 'the free play of the faculties', which — though it might on surface level seem an oblique equivalent — accounts for the aspect of Kant's theory that circumscribes a crucial function of this 'free play' as forcibly rendering the faculties aware of one another's functioning ('the faculties' in this context being the cognitive faculties of 'understanding', 'judgment' and 'reason'; feelings of pleasure and displeasure; and the faculty of desire). This in turn circles back to 'force' informing the slippery proposition of making without knowing.

I had the curious impression reading Loick's response that he seemed to have built a model of Menke's argument from the mental equivalent of Lego and used that as his referent. This suggested, to my mind at least, that Loick on some level set out to poke holes in Menke's argument for the sake of it, as any defiant acolyte should. Loick's problems begin at the outset, when he conflates 'judgment' and 'the juridical', leading to an argument that presumes the moment of judgment to be an end; he talks of our 'convicting' a piece of art to be this or that, and questions whether in judging we are being 'just'; this seemingly misses a pivotal principle of Menke's argument, that the very aporia of aesthetic judging is that which leads to critical debate, and is implicitly not an end in itself. Loick additionally skews the fundamental Kantian distinction between precognitive and dependent judgments to become a distinction between 'sudden, premature apprehension and the need for a longer or even endless consideration',^{viii} leading in turn to the claim of a distinction between art and art criticism, one which I reject; it would take more than a sentence to convince me that art and art criticism might be thought as mutually exclusive categories. Art may demand, but does not embody the aesthetic moment; nor does critique exclude it, though it may qualify it.

Loick seems to be making an admirably idealistic attempt to step outside the concept of judgment altogether and view the possibilities from there, though he does so too simplistically. He claims that Menke rejects Deleuze's call for an end to judgment because it is self-contradictory, where I read Menke's dismissal as arising from the position that a call for an end to judgment is too simplistic a proposal: 'The aesthetic critique instead does not judge judgment, but exhibits its structural impossibility.'^{ix} Loick also reckons Menke to suppose that judgment is a 'primordial or irreducible part of human interaction', where what he actually states is that 'judgments are the (only) way communities are built', a not insignificant difference.^{xi}

The initial establishment of a juridical definition of judgment seems to have acted as a filter on Loick's understanding of Menke's argument; he moves on to ask why we cannot simply be non-judgmental (giving examples such as 'I don't know; I don't care', surely in itself a judgment), which seems the very thing that Menke himself is insisting on when he speaks of the aporia of judgment; that the judgment must face its own lack of finality in order to produce a generative space.

Menke states 'That it is impossible to abandon judgment follows from its fundamental role in social practices.'^{xii} Loick rejects this on the basis that it would then follow that we could never abandon phenomena like capitalism, sexism or racism. Here, Loick is missing a distinction between phenomena like capitalism, sexism or racism as structural developments, whereas judgment is constitutive. Again, Loick questions why the historicity of aesthetic judgment as both 'the precondition of judgment and the chance to overcome it' cannot be applied to judgment in general, in turn paving the way for the abolition thereof; here I would call for the consideration that the emergence of aesthetics constituted an *operation* on judgment itself, and that the historical model for the emergence of aesthetic judgment cannot in turn be simply transposed onto judgment *per se*.

Graw offers a second and final response to Menke, addressing the problem of aesthetic judgment from her position as a critic. She highlights the reluctance, on the part of many contemporary art critics, to engage in judgment, to which I would add that they are also generally disinclined to engage with aesthetics. Graw does nod in the direction of this point by referring to the American art critic Clement Greenberg, pointing out the absence of radical doubt from his position vis-à-vis aesthetic judgment. From here Graw proffers the criticism that Menke's theories do not allow for doubt — a good point, though again perhaps discounting the aporia of aesthetic judgment as necessitating self-questioning through a willingness to allow for the opinions of others and their potential to impact upon one's own position. Graw takes issue with the hairy position into which Menke maneuvers knowledge in relation to art — another aspect of Menke's position that arises from his latent Kantianism (Kant being a master of hairy distinctions); the art-knowledge distinction Menke seems to be drawing on here parallels Kant's distinction between art and science, itself replete with labyrinthine nuances: 'what one *can* do the moment one only *knows* what is to be done, hence without anything more than sufficient knowledge of the desired result, is not called art.'^{xiii} (Kant's italics.) Which is to say, if it can be produced by following instructions, it is not art. It is not that art is bereft of knowledge; rather that the production of art requires something *more* than knowledge.

Graw rejects Menke's critique of Neo Rauch for its subjective basis, taking as it does recourse to description without accounting for the broader contingencies that inform the artist's work. 'There is no way of denying these subjective sensations in the process of aesthetic judgement,' comments Graw, 'but I wonder if we can *base* our judgment on them.'^{xiv} She agrees with Menke that criteria cannot be applied universally. Both of these positions again refer back to Kant, for whom the move beyond the initial subjective (precognitive) sensations is a move to a dependent judgment, and hence into the realm of debate. I find myself wondering if it is a good or bad thing to start with subjective

experience, or just a thing? In terms of universal criteria, it is for Kant the precognitive moment of finding something beautiful that gives one the impetus to consider one's position worthy of defence, hence sowing the seeds of critical discussion; for Kant, without this moment, this subjective universality, there would be no impetus to follow through into defending one's position intellectually.

This text adds to a gathering movement towards the rereading of aesthetics in the context of art criticism since its stigmatisation at the hands of modernism. It is timely that the Kantian question of universal validity in particular should resurface at a moment when network theory is so radically altering the landscape of communication and consensus. It is pleasing also that this publication should embody the very aporia of judging that it seeks to interrogate.

ⁱ Christoph Menke, *The Power of Judgment: A Debate on Aesthetic Critique*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010, p. 17.

ⁱⁱ Menke, *The Power of Judgment*, p. 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 15.

^{iv} Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 7.

^v Menke, *The Power of Judgment*, p. 17.

^{vi} Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 133.

^{vii} Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 134.

^{viii} Daniel Loick, *The Power of Judgment*, p. 32.

^{ix} Menke, *The Power of Judgment*, p. 23.

^{xi} Menke, *The Power of Judgment*, p. 11.

^{xii} Menke, *The Power of Judgment*, p. 23.

^{xiii} Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 133.

^{xiv} Isabelle Graw, *The Power of Judgement*, p. 42.

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