

Art, Nature, and “Greenberg’s Kant”

Suma Rajiva
Memorial University

Over time, Kant loomed progressively larger in Greenberg’s thinking.

– John O’Brian, Introduction to vol. 3 of Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*¹

Greenberg has never disavowed his Kantianism, but he never understood Kant either... As far as I know, most critics of Greenberg...have taken his reading of Kant for granted and have rejected the Kantian aesthetics along with its Greenbergian misreading. This is the first element in a huge misunderstanding.

– Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*²

...the real terms of the debate with Greenberg have been largely misunderstood through his finding unwarranted shelter beneath the theoretical umbrella of Kantian-style aesthetic formalism.

– Paul Crowther, “Greenberg’s Kant and the Problem of Modernist Painting”³

1. Introduction

Clement Greenberg famously characterized Kant as the first real Modernist and made Kant’s views the foundation of many of his own statements about art generally and modernist art specifically. Although Greenberg is thus usually taken to be a Kantian⁴, several commentators have recently addressed the extent to which “Greenberg’s Kant,”⁵ is a legitimate incarnation of Kant.⁶ In addressing this issue I focus on Kant’s conception of the artwork and its relation to nature and on whether this radically differs from Greenberg’s Kantianism.

The main focus is Kant’s claim in the *Critique of Judgment*⁷ that the work of art, while being the product of genius, must also be “like” or “as” nature. According to Diarmuid Costello, it is a mistake to take such a claim as being about *resemblance*—the point is rather about the artwork being convincingly “unwilled” or without obvious constraint, rather than about what it is trying to represent, if anything at all.⁸

In one sense Costello’s approach, which turns out to be surprisingly close to Greenberg’s, is entirely correct.⁹ In another sense, however, Kant’s claim that the work of art be “like nature” appears to lean on at least a minimal kind of representation or relation to representation in the artwork,¹⁰ including structures such as space and time even if such a minimal relation involves little or no actual *depiction*, to use Henry Allison’s distinction. Thus, endorsing a *radical* move away from representation and spatiality seems to place Greenberg’s “Kantian” account at a considerable distance from Kant’s own account of the artwork, though endorsing a *moderate* shift in representation might not. This is particularly important for Greenberg’s interpretation of both Kant and the modern artwork since Greenberg claims that modernist art moves away from, for example, the spatial aspect of representation generally (in Monet, for example) and, in later developments, radically moves away from representation at all (Mondrian, Pollock). Much depends then on what Kant means by the claim of being “like” or “as” nature. Even if this claim involves a relationship to representation in art it may allow a great deal of flexibility in such representation; moreover, even though Kant’s notion of “nature” in

this context does mean some form of resemblance, this may be compatible with a much "thinner" sense of the natural in Greenberg.

I will look at the general notion of 'nature' in Kant's philosophy and then at the specific way in which nature constrains the artwork and the artist in both process and product.¹¹ Nature plays at least three roles in Kant's account of art, roles united throughout by the overriding notion of nature being the standard for art.¹² Firstly, nature as the standard for the artwork means that the artwork, like a natural object, generates its aesthetic appeal through purposiveness without purpose, through appearing as if it were 'natural,' which, as we will see, can mean a number of things, but especially the Greenberg/Costello sense of being "unwilled" as though it came directly from nature. Here there appears to be a strong relationship between Kant and "Greenberg's Kant" though the force of such a relationship depends in the end on whether representation *needs* to play a large role in Kant's notion. Secondly, as Costello stresses, and as Greenberg makes clear in certain writings, the artist must appear 'natural' or at ease in his or her work—the work must look unforced and unconstrained, though the artist is actually constrained by rules and purpose in the production. This is another important point in favour of "Greenberg's Kant." Thirdly, nature is explicitly named as the true cause or originator of the artist's genius and hence as the true cause of his or her originality as displayed in the artwork, something argued against by Greenberg, to some extent. On this third point, then, Kant looks quite different from his descendant, "Greenberg's Kant." Nonetheless, we can see that Greenberg's more individualistic interpretation of the source of originality is really a development of aspects of Kant's account and thus, though quite different from what Kant is saying, is a reasonable kind of "neo-Kantianism"¹³ on this point.

2. Kant's account of nature

According to the *Critique of Pure Reason* nature can be considered materially or formally. Materially regarded, nature is the "sum total of all appearances (*natura materialiter spectata*)"¹⁴ (B 163, GW 263) to which the categories of the understanding "prescribe laws *a priori*." Formally, the same nature can be "considered with regard to its form rather than its matter."¹⁵ That is, it can be considered with regard to the categories as the ground of the lawfulness of the appearances (B 165, GW 263).¹⁶ In a larger sense the form of nature can also be seen to include space and time as the formal condition of any appearance so far as the sensory content of the latter is given to us.¹⁷ Thus:

...we ourselves bring into the appearances that order and regularity in them that we call **nature**, and moreover we would not be able to find it there if we, or the nature of our mind, had not originally put it there. For this unity of nature should be a necessary, i.e., *a priori* certain unity of the connection of appearances.
(A125, GW 241)

Locating the structure of nature in us, so that we can legitimate *a priori* claims about it, keeps nature from being utterly contingent, at least structurally. However, while utter contingency would be unacceptable for Kant the lawfulness of nature must also be compatible in principle with the playfulness of the aesthetic, and he locates this in the nature of particular natural laws:

The pure faculty of understanding does not suffice, however, to prescribe to the appearances through mere categories *a priori* laws beyond those on which rests a **nature in general**, as lawfulness of appearances in space and time. Particular

laws, because they concern empirically determined appearances, **cannot** be **completely derived** from the categories, although they all stand under them. Experience must be added in order to come to know particular laws **at all**; but about experience in general, and about what can be cognized as an object of experience, only those *a priori* laws offer instruction.¹⁸ (B165, GW 263-264)

Thus nature in the first *Critique* has both form (space, time, the categories) and content (appearances considered in their given aspect including the empirical laws of nature). Every aspect of experience is contained in space and time and is thought through the categories but particular laws and the details of particular experience, though systematic in their own way, are not themselves universal and necessary except through their form.

Particular experience is developed further in the *Critique of Judgment* which also discusses nature extensively but with a greater stress on presupposing its *empirical* unity (Ak. 183-184, §V, GM 70). Such a unity can be cashed out in “a possibility of infinitely manifold empirical laws, which as far as our insight goes are nevertheless contingent... and with regard to them we judge the unity of nature in accordance with empirical laws and the possibility of the unity of experience (as a system in accordance with empirical laws) as contingent” (Ak. 183, §V, GM 70). Thus, although specifically contingent, natural empirical unity in general is not.

Given the third *Critique*'s overall emphasis on systematic empirical nature, the model for artistic beauty must, in some sense, be the empirical world as cognizable nature, understood through the categories, synthesized perceptually by the imagination, and judged by both the understanding and reason. This is scientifically comprehended nature conceived (by the understanding) and also a regulated nature reflectively judged as a system through ideas (by reason). It is thus already a nature whose mechanism has been animated by cognitive ideas of reason, just as the artwork, as we will see, is animated by aesthetic ideas. Such a nature becomes an analogical type for the artwork though *only* analogical.¹⁹

3. The production of the artwork²⁰ as 'natural'

Kant tells us early in the account of fine art²¹ that, while the free arts do not essentially appear as compulsory, they still require

...something compulsory, or, as it is called, a **mechanism**, without which the **spirit**, which must be **free** in the art and which alone animates the work, would have no body at all and would entirely evaporate (e.g., in the art of poetry, correctness and richness of diction as well as prosody and meter), since many modern teachers believe that they can best promote a liberal art if they remove all compulsion from it and transform it from labor into mere play. (Ak.304, § 43, GM 183)

'Mechanism' and 'mechanical' thus involve production which is characterized by compulsion (Ak.304, § 43, GM 183), the actualization of some possible cognizable object (Ak.305, § 44, GM 184), an intention to produce a “determinate object” and which thus pleases “only through concepts” (Ak.306, §45, GM 185), as well as “diligence and learning” which concern academic form and constraint and which involve “determinate rules” (Ak.310, §47, GM 188-189). Though only the “body” for the “spirit” which animates the true artwork all this is a necessary if insufficient condition for the production of artwork.²²

Unlike sensory or agreeable art (e.g., music as a dinner accompaniment) the representation which is *beautiful* art "is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication." (Ak.306, § 44, GM 185) Since this communicability is supposed to be universal it obviously cannot be tied, says Kant, to mere sensation but must be a pleasure of *reflection* "and thus aesthetic art, as beautiful art, is one that has the reflecting power of judgment²³ and not mere sensation as its standard" (Ak.306, § 44, GM 185).

Beautiful art makes us aware in this reflection that the artwork is an artwork but its purposiveness of form must *seem* "to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature" (Ak.306, §45, GM 185). Kant then concludes with the extraordinarily rich statement that: "Nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and *yet it looks to us like nature*"²⁴ (Ak.306, §45, GM 185, emphasis added). We never lose our consciousness that the work of art captures nature in a sense, including nature's sublimity²⁵, but remains simultaneously both artificial and natural. Hence the purposiveness of beautiful art *is* intentional but must *appear* unintentional "i.e., beautiful art must be **regarded** as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art" (Ak.307, §45, GM 186).

What I would like to call the "duality" of the artwork is thus its being *like* nature but also *not* nature, in some sense, i.e., looking unintentional while being an artifact. Its only constraint is that it stays within the framework of possible experience while deviating imaginatively from the *empirical* system of experience.²⁶ The empirical system of experience is the coherence of particular laws of nature to form this actual world, which, of course, conforms to the framework of possible experience but which is also a *particular* empirical cashing out of this framework. As indicated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the framework of possible experience prescribes only the minimal conditions for an empirical system, conditions which could be fulfilled by many possible empirical worlds. The artwork is at least one way of fleshing out what such an alternate possible world could look like.²⁷ Moreover, even in this actual world the artwork can present us with many details which, while reflecting the laws of nature in this world, deviate from the actual empirical history of the world.

In *The War of the Worlds*, for example, we have presented to us an alternate empirical history in which there is advanced and malevolent life existing on Mars. By presenting the novel as if it were a factual account of events taking place some time earlier, so that its narrative exists diagetically, as part of the universe of the story, Wells heightens the 'natural' quality of the artwork. However, *Werther* contains no fantastic elements other than the fictional quality itself, and the empirical resemblance to nature, especially *human* nature,²⁸ is heightened by the epistolary form of the novel which furthers the illusion of the novel's reality. Its world is thus mostly our world, in laws and in details, with some difference. On the other hand the artwork may deviate so much from actual nature as to be barely within the framework of possible experience and may even be trying to gesture beyond this framework.²⁹

There appears to be a further duality in our perception of the artwork³⁰ arising out of the reflective quality of appreciating beauty generally. The beauty of nature rests on what I call the duality of perceiving a natural object as purposive, simultaneously seeing what is given as nature and seeing it as spontaneously intentional. Actually seeing it as intentional spoils its beauty, as Kant says when we mistake a mechanical bird singing for a natural one and then realize our mistake.

It is otherwise with the work of art. If we think it is actually real, we are missing its nature as an artwork. Moreover, we frequently cannot avoid some interest in it, either empirical or moral. We may flee town, saying the Martians have invaded, since we do not

have the crucial element of disinterest in aesthetically appreciating the radio dramatization of the *War of the Worlds* unless we are *aware* that we are listening to a dramatization. Simultaneously, however, we must perceive it *as if* it were natural, as if the Martians were really landing. If we do not shudder at the image of the great machines stalking the landscape, or remain impervious to Werther's gallant despair, then the artwork has not succeeded. It needs to move us *as if* it were real while making us *know* it is not real. We must be conscious of its spontaneity as artwork but affectively feel or perceive its inexorable givenness as "nature."³¹ The artwork is thus purposive but without a determinate purpose. We are in the world of the artwork, as was pointed out previously, but we are also outside it,³² feeling a pleasure grounded in the very duality of naturalness and artifice.³³

The beauty of nature, which requires no genius to appreciate³⁴, concerns beautiful *things*; Since "the beauty of art is a **beautiful representation** of a thing" (Ak.311, §48, GM 188) its duality can do something natural beauty normally does not: as beautiful representation (not as representation of the beautiful) art can show us many things that are actually not beautiful but are ugly. "The furies, diseases, devastations of war, and the like can, as harmful things, be very beautifully described, indeed even represented in painting"³⁵ (Ak.312, §48, GM 190). Thus, what would normally not be the object of the harmony of the faculties becomes subsumed under this harmony through art.³⁶

In fine art representation also requires spirit otherwise the work of art can only be, says Kant, "quite pretty and elegant" but nothing more. Spirit in this context means for Kant "the animating principle in the mind" (Ak.313, §49, GM 192) which is "nothing other than the faculty for the presentation of **aesthetic ideas**" (Ak.314, §49, GM 192):

...by an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., **concept**, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible.—One readily sees that it is the counterpart (pendant) of an **idea of reason**, which is conversely, a concept to which no **intuition** (representation of the imagination) can be adequate. (Ak.314, §49, GM 192)

Such "aesthetic ideas" allow one to represent, often symbolically, the range of sensory and imaginative representations of an object which no concept can fully determine. (Ak.315, §49, GM 193-194).³⁷ What we do with such ideas is, says Kant, to create imaginatively "another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it" (Ak.314, §49, GM 192).

4. Greenberg on nature and Kantian naturalism

In a review from 1946, Greenberg reveals his own formulation, akin to Costello's, of what Kant meant by "like/as" nature:

The error here is to assume, unwarrantedly, that by "looks like" (*sieht aus als*) Kant meant "mirrors," that is, that art *portrays* nature. Actually, as he explained both before and after this statement, all he meant was that the "purposiveness in its [art's] form must seem to be as free from all constraint of arbitrary rules as if it were a product of mere nature." That is, art, although it must look as though it *came* from nature, does not have to *resemble* any of the content of nature, anything already present in it. (Greenberg, Vol. 2, "'Americanism' Misplaced: Review of *Preface to an American Philosophy of Art* by A. Philip McMahon" p.66)³⁸

Thus, since what Costello understands by being “like nature” for Kant is, in the lack of constraint, almost identical to what Greenberg understands by it, any distance between Kant and “Greenberg’s Kant” cannot rest on issues of constraint. It must, instead rest on this possibility: that the artist’s creation of “another nature”, as Kant puts it, may facilitate precisely the kind of general illusion Greenberg commends modern art for moving away from. That is, Kant’s notion, although consisting in the lack of constraint, may also imply a certain amount of depiction or representation, as we saw above, which may be out of keeping with Greenberg’s emphasis on the freedom and indeterminacy of art,³⁹ both as process and product. And, finally, Greenberg himself states:

But even as a sculptor the artist can no longer imitate nature. There is nothing left in nature for plastic art to explore. ...Instead of being aroused, the modern imagination is numbed by visual representation. Unable to represent the exterior world suggestively enough, pictorial art is driven to express as directly as possible only what goes on inside the self—or at most the ineluctable *modes* by which that which is outside the self is perceived. (Mondrian) (Greenberg, Vol. 1, “Abstract Art” pp. 203-204)

This appears to set the seal on endorsing a non-naturalist, perhaps even an anti-naturalist approach by Greenberg, in possible contrast with Kant. However, since for Kant ‘nature’ includes *human* nature⁴⁰, an emphasis on what is ‘inside,’ on the subjective, is not thus in opposition to a Kantian sense of “like/as” nature—in fact, given the connection between art and feeling which, according to Donald Kuspit,⁴¹ is central to Greenberg, the Kantian sense would be one way of capturing the structure of why art can or should express feeling.

Also, in another statement which highlights a more robust sense of nature, Greenberg comments that while “Other, later masters have been able to do without the object as a starting point” that:

...outright abstract painting, including Mondrian’s, when it is successful, establishes its aesthetic right in the same way, ultimately as did the masterpieces of cubism—*by referring to the integrity of objects in nature*. ...The best modern painting, though it is mostly abstract painting, *remains naturalistic in its core*, despite all appearances to the contrary. It refers to the structure of the given world both outside and inside human beings. The artist who...tries to refer to anything else walks in a void. (Greenberg, Vol. 2, “The Role of Nature in Modern Painting” p.275, emphases added)

This comment not only reinforces a definite though unusual naturalism it gives the naturalism a both an inner and outer reference which seems a great deal like Kant.

Finally, we need to think about whether appreciating the beauty of the artwork as “natural” in the Kantian mode is contrary to the famous directness associated with the Greenbergian “eye” which appreciates an artwork without reference seemingly to any duality between process and product, between artifact and naturalness. However, the difference between Kantian reflection and the Greenbergian “eye” may become, on further inspection, a difference at most of degree, not of kind. The Greenbergian “eye” often looks like a reflective and judging eye. This becomes particularly clear in some of Greenberg’s comments on seeing art, for example, his discussion of how his “eye” has *learned* to organize a Pollock in a way it has not learned to organize artwork from another culture.⁴² Frequently he does make statements about the initial “freshness” of one’s looking at an artwork which suggest a non-Kantian directness; however, a number

of other statements qualify the immediacy of the experience in such a way as to reconcile it to Kantian reflection.

Here is a 1945 statement of the classical Greenbergian "eye" which makes it look initially quite opposed to a Kantian account:

Doesn't one find so many times that the "full meaning" of a picture—i.e., its aesthetic fact—is, at any given visit to it, most fully revealed at the first fresh glance? And that this "meaning" fades progressively as continued examination destroys the unity of impression? With many paintings and pieces of sculpture it is as if you had to catch them by surprise in order to grasp them as wholes—their maximum being packed into the instantaneous shock of sight. Whereas if you plant yourself too firmly before looking at a picture and then gaze at it too long you are likely to end by having it merely gaze blankly back at you. (Greenberg, vol. 2, "On looking at Pictures Review of *Painting and Painters: How to Look at a Picture: From Giotto to Chagall* by Lionello Venturi" p. 34)

This is reiterated in 1959:

But ideally the whole of a picture should be taken in at a glance; its unity should be immediately evident, and the supreme quality of a picture, the highest measure of its power to move and control the visual imagination, should reside in its unity. And this is something to be grasped only in an indivisible instant of time. No expectancy is involved in the true and pertinent experience of a painting; a picture, I repeat, does not "come out" the way a story, or a poem, or a piece of music does. It's all there at once, like a sudden revelation. This "at-onceness" an abstract picture usually drives home to us with greater singleness and clarity than a representational painting does. And to apprehend this "at-onceness" demands a freedom of mind and untrammelledness of eye that constitute "at-onceness" in their own right. *Those who have grown capable of experiencing this know what I mean.* You are summoned and gathered into one point in the continuum of duration. The picture does this to you, willy-nilly, regardless of whatever else is on your mind; a mere glance at it creates the attitude required for its appreciation, like a stimulus that elicits an automatic response. (Greenberg, vol. 4, "The Case for Abstract Art" pp. 80-81, emphasis added)

Note that although a mere glance at the picture suffices in one sense to activate its power to grasp your attention that Greenberg also appeals to those who have "grown capable of experiencing this," a claim he reiterated elsewhere in various comments on how to see a picture and also on how abstract art teaches us to appreciate the "old masters" even better. And in this essay he goes on to say that the "at-onceness" of the painting can be "repeated in a succession of instants, in each one remaining an 'at-onceness,' an instant all by itself. For the cultivated eye, the picture repeats its instantaneous unity like a mouth repeating a single word" (p. 81). Thus the immediacy of the "eye" does not preclude learning, as made clear in *Homemade Esthetics*; it indeed becomes now a "cultivated eye."

Greenberg also applies this immediacy of seeing in the moment to the aesthetic judgment generally:

Aesthetic judgments are given and contained in the immediate experience of art. They coincide with it; they are not arrived at afterwards through reflection or thought. Aesthetic judgments are also involuntary: you can no more choose whether or not to like a work of art than you can choose to have sugar taste

sweet or lemons sour. (Whether or not aesthetic judgments are honestly reported is another matter.) (Greenberg, vol. 4, "Complaints of an Art Critic" p. 265)

He adds that since "aesthetic judgments are immediate, intuitive, undeliberate, and involuntary, they leave no room for the conscious application of standards, criteria, rules or precepts" (p. 265). Nonetheless such precepts are there even if "in subliminal operation" since aesthetic judgments for Greenberg are not purely subjective and in fact form a real consensus.⁴³

Thus, although Greenberg seems to be advocating an immediacy of aesthetic experience contrary to Kantian reflection, the point is not a positivistic exclusion of learning or reflection or culture in favour of some purely sensory moment. What he seems set against, on the contrary, is an over-intellectual analysis of the artwork in place of its enjoyment, or even a bias based on cultural or other assumptions; such a position is entirely compatible with even a cursory reading of Kant, who also does not want aesthetic experience to be *determined* intellectually or analytically. Moreover, such a position partakes of the essential Kantian moment of freedom in the experience of the beautiful, an experience extended by Greenberg to appreciating art:

For a precious freedom lies in the very involuntariness of aesthetic judging: the freedom to be surprised, taken aback, have your expectations confounded, the freedom to be inconsistent and to like anything in art as long as it is good—the freedom, in short, to let art stay open. Part of the excitement of art, for those who attend to art regularly, consists, or should, in this openness, in this inability to foresee reactions. (Greenberg, vol. 4, "Complaints of an Art Critic" p. 266)

Of course, much more needs to be done to make clear the resemblance between this view of freedom and the untrammelled eye and Kant's notion of the freedom of the beautiful, whether in nature or in art, but there is, at least, a case for this resemblance. Thus, the Kantian artwork, though possessing a duality of artifice and reality which might initially preclude an immediate seeing, is actually open to the untrammelled eye, provided this is understood in the peculiarly Greenbergian sense. In fact, the artwork being aesthetically "natural" in the way both Greenberg and Costello interpret this in Kant may require precisely such a direct seeing of it in the moment, rather than judging it through concepts of any kind.

5. The Artist and Nature

What I call the duality of artifice and reality in the artwork according to Kant is achieved through a similar duality in the artist, a duality which may pose a greater challenge to connecting Kant and Greenberg than the nature of the artwork. According to Kant:

A product of art appears as nature, however, if we find it to agree **punctiliously** but not **painstakingly**⁴⁴ with rules in accordance with which alone the product can become what it ought to be, that is, without the academic form showing through, i.e., without showing any sign that the rule had hovered before the eyes of the artist and fettered his mental powers. (Ak.307, § 45, GM 186)

In this seemingly effortless⁴⁵, the activity of the artist mirrors the purposiveness without purpose experienced in the appreciation of beauty; in the latter experience the object conveys the illusion of purpose and intent while in the former activity the subject conceals active intent and makes the object appear as an object, as nature. At the same

time, genius does not imitate painstakingly either nature or other artists, since this would imply being fettered externally.

Nonetheless, finding a form which thus makes beautiful the work of art takes much labour and is not, for Kant, a matter of inspiration, but of "a slow and painstaking improvement, in order to let it become adequate to the thought and yet not detrimental to the freedom in the play of the mental powers" (Ak.312-313, §48, GM 191). The painstaking aspect of this search for form, which was earlier banished from the viewer's experience of the artwork, is here resurrected in the process of producing the artwork; in the end, though, the history of the effort must vanish so that we do not see the ninety-nine percent perspiration.

In this peculiar heautonomy⁴⁶ of taste and artistic production, as well as the injunction against "painstaking" imitation we see some agreement between Kant and Greenberg, in spite of Greenberg's claim that what is distinctive about Modernist painting is that it actually draws attention to the medium, since this is not an issue of appearing painstaking or of imitating (Vol. 4, "Modernist Painting" pp. 86-87). A more serious difference, however, might be that, according to Donald Kuspit, Greenberg seems to decry the appearance of effortlessness:

Greenberg makes his main point over and over again...The modern point is to show more rather than less of the creative struggle, so that its intention becomes explicit for the modern artist, the work records the experience of the creative process. The work is not meant to give the illusion of being spontaneously and felicitously generated ... Greenberg acknowledges the divine touch of many decorative artists, but asks "Where is [their] strength? Where are [their] profundity and originality?"⁴⁷

This is broadly compatible with a Kantian position, which also emphasizes the originality and profundity of the artist's creativity. However, the emphasis on *showing* the experience of creativity is not in accordance with Kant's emphasis on the balance of originality and taste. The latter, Allison's "thin" conception of Kantian artistic genius, does not accord with Kuspit's view of Greenberg as well as the "thick" conception emphasizing originality. However, such a thin view *does* accord with Greenberg's own statements, quoted earlier, on what Kant meant by being like nature. Does this mean that Greenberg, on Kuspit's portrayal, is disagreeing with Kant, while correctly presenting the latter's view? The following quotation indicates otherwise, suggesting that Greenberg's view is actually closer to Kant's dictum on effortlessness:

Like Rothko and Still, Newman happens to be a conventionally skilled artist—need I say it? But if he uses his skill, it is to suppress the evidence of it. And the suppression is part of the triumph of his art, next to which most other contemporary painting begins to look fussy. (Greenberg, vol. 4, p.132, "After Abstract Expressionism")

Since such "suppression" is presumably *not* the same as what Greenberg might criticize "decorative" artists for it is certainly in line with the Kantian prescription for being precise without looking painstaking.

The balance between originality and taste is developed further in what happens, according to Kant, if one develops originality without any constraint:

Now since the originality of his talent constitutes one (but not the only) essential element of the character of the genius, superficial minds believe that they cannot show that they are blossoming geniuses any better than by pronouncing

themselves free of the academic constraint of all rules, and they believe that one parades around better on a horse with the staggers than one that is properly trained. Genius can only provide rich **material** for products of art; its elaboration and **form** require a talent that has been academically trained, in order to make a use of it that can stand up to the power of judgment. (Ak.310, §47, GM 189)

Nonetheless it is still the originality of genius which “gives the rule to [beautiful] art” so that for Greenberg:

Inspiration alone belongs altogether to the individual; everything else, including skill, can now be acquired by any one. Inspiration remains the only factor in the creation of a successful work of art that cannot be copied or imitated....The *exact* choices of color, medium, size, shape, proportion...are what alone determines the quality of the result, and these choices depend solely on inspiration or conception. (Greenberg, vol. 4, “After Abstract Expressionism” p.132)

This initially looks similar to Kant, who also emphasizes the original, rule-giving, powers of the individual artist's genius. However, Kant in the end takes possession away from the individual genius since “the talent, as an inborn productive faculty of the artist, itself belongs to nature” (Ak. 307, § 46, GM 186) and “**Genius** is the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*) **through which** nature gives the rule to art” (Ak. 307, § 46, GM 186). Thus inspiration itself is dual for Kant, appearing to belong to the artist but really belonging to nature,⁴⁸ while for Greenberg it belongs “altogether” to individuals.

However, such proprietary individuality may be *implicit* in Kant's emphasis on the autonomy of the genius although not part of Kant's overt account, allowing the later evolution to Greenberg's explicit notion of artistic individuality. Kant warns that, though beautiful artworks serve as a model, they should not be imitated

...down to that which the genius had to leave in, as a deformity, only because it could not easily have been removed without weakening the idea. This courage is a merit only in a genius, and a certain boldness in expression and in general some deviation from the common rule is well suited to him, but is by no means worthy of imitation, but always remains in itself a defect which one must seek to remove, but for which the genius is as it were privileged, since what is inimitable in the impetus of his spirit would suffer from anxious caution. (Ak. 318, § 49, GM 196)

Here we have an instance in which genius is allowed to *transgress* understanding, at least to some extent, so that the wholeness of his or her work remains animated by spirit rather being constrained by the usual limits of “anxious caution.” Such an instance does not appear to be precisely about the force of nature in the artist's originality so that here we have room for an incipient (though implicit) turn to individuality.

Nonetheless, in section 50, Kant's explicit account links imagination to inspiration but judgment to beauty, and says that when we judge art as beautiful, we must weigh the power of judgment as primary. Rich originality is not as necessary to beauty as the free relation in judgment of the imagination to the lawful understanding and such judgment is necessary for bringing what would otherwise be nonsense “in line with the understanding.” Thus taste, “like the power of judgment in general, is the discipline (or corrective) of genius, clipping its wings and making it well behaved or polished”. (Ak.319, §50, GM 197). Taste also orders and guides genius, introducing clarity, order,

and universality into the latter's richness of ideas. Kant then states unequivocally that if anything ought to be sacrificed in this context, it should be sacrificed by genius. Thus for "beautiful art, therefore, **imagination, understanding, spirit, and taste** are requisite" (Ak.320, §50, GM 197) with the fourth element, taste, being the way in which the first three are unified (Ak.319, §50, GM 197).

Being natural in this context would mean having both a "body" for the artwork (specific mechanical and academic requirements for producing the artwork which remain hidden) and spirit to animate it (the artist's use of aesthetic ideas) which then makes the work of art ready for the *observer* of the artwork, for whom the experience of beauty involve the free harmony of the cognitive faculties, a free harmony in which rule-governedness is aspired to even if never arrived at and thus a mirror image of the seemingly effortless embodiment of aesthetic ideas by the artist.

The freedom of this harmony appears once again to link Kant to Greenberg's use of him, even if what Kant means by such free harmony is less an unfettered appreciation and more a free *order*. Nonetheless even such order is not foreign to Greenberg's Kantianism in describing, for example, the excellence of modernist art:

Where Mondrian wrests aesthetic from merely mechanical order, Pollock wrests aesthetic order from the look of accident—but only from the look of it. ...The seeming haphazardness of Pollock's execution, with its mazy trickling, dribbling, whipping, blotching, and staining of paint, appears to threaten to swallow up and extinguish every element of order. But this is more a matter of connotation than of actual effect. The strength of the art itself lies in the tension... between the connotations of haphazardness and the felt and actual aesthetic order, to which every detail of execution contributes. Order supervenes at the last moment, as it were, but all the more completely because of that. (Greenberg, vol. 4, "Jackson Pollock: 'Inspiration, Vision, Intuitive Decision'" pp. 246-247)

The extent to which Kant would have approved of such extreme haphazardness on the way to order is unclear; nonetheless, the presence of this order once again links Greenberg to Kant. And, since nature is also a systematic order for Kant, either formally or materially conceived, being "like" or "as" nature is not only Kant's prescription for the artwork but seems to be, at least, a *part* of Greenberg's description of it.

Conclusion

Thus two factors in Kant's account combine to ensure that the artwork seems "like/as" nature in its live givenness. One is the response of the observer, who must perceive the artwork in the way he or she perceives the beauty of nature, even though the artwork is an artifact. The second is the activity of the artist who produces the artifact for such perception. If the artist were simply a contingent individual, then of course the artwork could never meaningfully be "like nature" in a universal or formal sense. But the artist is *not* merely a contingent individual as we saw previously but a conduit for nature, broadly construed. Hence, the naturalness of the artwork is causally related to nature acting through the artist to create *another* nature.

Thus, to the extent that the artwork moves us as another nature or world and hence as an illusion, i.e., that the artwork appears to be a *given*, even though it is actually a *creation*, the Kantian account may be more distant from Greenberg's; we are not so much looking at the painting's surface or at, to use Greenberg's metaphor, the curtain of the stage, but are allowing ourselves to be caught up in the action of the stage. However,

the immediacy of the untrammelled Greenbergian eye seems to recover what is essential in the Kantian conception of the artwork, even if this is not now connected to "making another nature" as such.

However, so far as one stresses the *act* of creating the world and the awareness of its artificiality, the Kantian account seems much more akin to a Greenbergian account especially since being caught up in the world of the artwork must be *framed* by our awareness of it as artifice (otherwise it will not be an experience of an artwork). Moreover, conceiving of the painting as a willed nature which appears as an unwilled givenness through the genius of the artist not only parallels Greenberg's linking of art production to the individual painter but is precisely his own (and Costello's) interpretation of what Kant means by being like or as nature, amplified by a thin notion of naturalistic order (modernist painting at its best remaining "naturalistic at the core").

Thus, any differences appear to be differences of emphasis rather than of kind, with Kant emphasizing a balance between nature and artifice and Greenberg stressing artifice more in some of his comments, though not in others. There may even be some room to claim that the stress on artifice is truer in this respect to Kantian disinterest, since stressing the artifice or "frame" of the painting makes us much more observers, much more disinterested, since we are less caught up in *what* is being depicted.⁴⁹

So "Greenberg's Kant" or, more appropriately, "Greenberg's Kantianism," is not simply a caricature or a misrepresentation of Kant, but represents the evolution of the creative and artificing aspect of artistic genius in Kant's account while preserving a thin sense of "naturalness" or order.⁵⁰ Using the analogy of life itself, an important theme in the third *Critique*, Kant can be seen in Darwin's language as an intellectual "parent-species" or "parent-stock" while the many and competing interpretations of him can be seen as so many analogical descendant species, some of whom run more true to parental type than others but all of which represent some trait in the parental species. Some descendants may have mutated out of all recognition, as some contend Greenberg has in relation to Kant, but, in many of his texts and perhaps in his overall approach, he still looks fundamentally Kantian.⁵¹

Notes

¹ John O'Brian, Introduction, Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. xxii.

² Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997; from 1996 edition), p. 322.

³ Paul Crowther, "Greenberg's Kant and the Problem of Modernist Painting" *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 25, 3, Autumn, 1985, p. 324.

⁴ See, for example, a number of references to Greenberg's Kantian approach in Robert Pippin, "What was Abstract Art? (From the point of view of Hegel)" in *The Persistence of Subjectivity. On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005).

⁵ A locution which appears to come from Crowther's article initially.

⁶ For example, Crowther and Diarmuid Costello take Greenberg to task for utilizing a highly selective account of Kant's aesthetics. See Costello, "Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65:2 Spring 2007. De Duve also sees Greenberg as misunderstanding Kant, but his criticism seems based more on a general difference between their outlooks; moreover, given de Duve's transformation of Kant's concerns into concerns about art rather than just the aesthetic, his criticism differs widely from Costello's more textually faithful appreciation of Kant's focus on the aesthetic and how this affects his theory of art. On the other hand Mark Cheetham focuses on the positive way in which Greenberg uses certain aspects of Kant to back up a formalist and purist aesthetics with a focus on autonomy, self-criticism, and form, while Donald Kuspit primarily focuses on the positive relation between Kant and Greenberg while also indicating ways in which they part company. See Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Kuspit, *Clement Greenberg, Art Critic* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979). However, the most interesting synthesis is that of Jason Gaiger, whose 1999 article (before Costello's article) carefully analyzes both Kant and Greenberg in such a way as to keep their differences clear but to show that "although Greenberg's account of what is involved in the appreciation of works of art differs significantly from that put forward by Kant, he still defends a recognizably *formalist* account of aesthetic appreciation." (p.390) Gaiger's main point seems to be that Greenberg's account is a broadly *Kantian* account, if not Kant's account. My own approach is similar to Gaiger's, stressing Greenberg's development of features in Kant, though the final product may be quite different from a strictly Kantian account. See Gaiger, "Constraints and Conventions: Kant and Greenberg On Aesthetic Judgment" *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 39, No. 4, Oct. 1999

⁷ All quotations from the third *Critique* are from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). These will be cited in the text of the paper with the Akademie edition pagination from Vol.5, the section number in the third *Critique*, and the pages in Guyer/Matthews cited as GM.

⁸ Costello, p. 224.

⁹ Costello also critiques Greenberg for other important misunderstandings, such as not paying attention to Kant's distinction between free and dependent beauty; however, it is not clear that this discussion is relevant to the discussion of *fine* art, whose parameters are different from, say, the beauty of a church, which is one of Kant's examples from the free/dependent discussion which Costello uses. A concept does, as Costello points out, govern the beauty of a church, but a church would not be an exemplar of fine art for Kant, for this very reason. Fine art, by contrast, is governed not by concepts but by *ideas*, specifically *aesthetic* ideas, which are quite different, in their essential indeterminability, from regular concepts. However, see Allison's discussion, pp.291-298, for a position which lends some support to Costello on the free/dependent question.

¹⁰ Allison, somewhat reluctantly, allows for resemblance, at least the kind characterized as 'depiction' as forming part of Kant's account of beautiful art's representative quality, but he points out that giving a very clear account of this is difficult, given the ambiguity of Kant's "cryptic discussions of artistic representation". (Allison, p. 296)

¹¹ As both Costello and Crowther point out, Kant regulates both the artwork and the activity of the artist in a way that seems incompatible with the autonomy claimed by Greenberg's Kantian approach. However, as we will see, much depends again on how thickly one interprets Kant's theory of artistic genius. If interpreted "thickly" as Allison has put it, the theory of artistic genius and art production appears to place a greater emphasis on artistic originality and activity than on regulating the artist and, contra Costello and Crowther, would fit in better with Greenberg's Kantianism. However, if interpreted "thinly", one gets an emphasis on the regulation of artistic production by taste and on the production of beauty in the artwork, including the presentation of purposiveness without purpose, a definite difference between Kant and Greenberg according to Donald Kuspit and an area where Greenberg should have taken more from Kant.

¹² This is not an exhaustive account of the role of nature in the artwork. For example, there are crucial aspects of Kant's teleology in the second half of the *Critique of Judgment* which draw an even closer bond between nature and art through the idea of nature as designed, particularly in its organic life forms. Moreover, Kant also refers to nature as the "great artist" in *Toward Perpetual Peace* (8:360-361), a point which becomes important in his account of nature in us, that is, his account of *human* nature. (Kant in no way means trees and rocks alone or even primarily as 'nature'; we are 'natural' beings for him, and from the moral point of view this kind of nature is his primary concern)

¹³ I am using this term very loosely, and am neither linking Greenberg to actual developments in the historical phenomenon of Neo-Kantianism nor precluding such links.

¹⁴ All quotations from the first *Critique* are from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). These will normally be cited in the text of the paper with the standard A and B references to the respective first and second editions and the pages in Guyer/Wood cited as GW.

¹⁵ Translator's note, *Critique of Pure Reason*, GW 263.

¹⁶ Later, at B446, Kant uses material and formal nature in a slightly different way, especially with regard to nature considered formally. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

¹⁷ As a *transcendental* idealist it is important to Kant that our spontaneity concerns the *pure* synthesis of the world; as what he calls an "empirical realist" the actual empirical syntheses of the world depend on a mixture of our spontaneity and much empirical givenness. Thus, while we can know a priori that the world is spatial, temporal and categorizable, because this is the spontaneity of our own formal synthesis, we can only know a posteriori, by means of actual experience, that strawberries are red. Aesthetic judgments are peculiar in this respect; as empirical judgments they really fall into the same category as "this strawberry is red" (as Kant points out in the second Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*) but as judgments which demand at least subjective universality and necessity they are similar to formal syntheses such as "everything which appears to

us is temporal.” Moreover, the predicate of an aesthetic judgment such as “this rose is beautiful” is necessarily a vague one, since Kant’s point is that there are no hard and fast rules for determining what “beautiful” means.

¹⁸ In the Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant does discuss general regulative principles of the *empirical* unity of laws of nature, a discussion also taken up in the *Critique of Judgment*.

¹⁹ Kant has done this before in the second *Critique* in his use of science as the type for moral judging in the typic of pure practical reason.

²⁰ Although Kant primarily uses examples from the literary or the plastic arts, his notion of the artwork includes dance, music, and other art forms where the ‘artwork’ is often an event rather than a thing.

²¹ In German the notions of beauty and art are united since what we translate as ‘fine art’ is *schöne Kunst*.

²² In a sense one would have expected such mechanism to be part of the ‘natural’ aspect of the artwork, since nature in the first *Critique* consists broadly of a causality which is mechanical in its application to nature as matter in physics. However, Kant actually designates as ‘natural’ the *spirit* which animates the artwork and its production.

²³ This is the best known definition of reflective or reflecting judgment from the third *Critique*: “If the universal (the rule, the principle, the law) is given, then the power of judgment, which subsumes the particular under it . . . is *determining*. If, however, only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgment is merely *reflecting*.” (Ak.179, §IV, GM 66-67) A less well-known one is: “The power of judgment can be regarded either as a mere faculty for **reflecting** on a given representation, in accordance with a certain principle, for the sake of a concept that is thereby made possible, or as a faculty for **determining** an underlying concept through a given **empirical** representation. In the first case it is the **reflecting**, in the second case the **determining power of judgment**. To **reflect** (to consider), however, is to compare and to hold together given representations either with others or with one’s faculty of cognition, in relation to a concept thereby made possible. The reflecting power of judgment is that which is also called the faculty of judging . . .” (First Introduction, Ak. 211, vol. 20, §V, GM 15) Though less concise, this definition has the virtue of bringing out the cognitive dimensions of judgment reflecting.

²⁴ In his discussion of the purposiveness without purpose in the experience of beauty Kant distinguishes between free and adherent beauty, the former lacking direct purpose or any specific concept by which the object can be measured and the latter being the kind of beauty which is related to the concept of an object, e.g., a beautiful church being measured by the standards for a church, not just whether it is beautiful. (Ak. 229-231, § 16, GM 114-115) The former, free beauty, is the hallmark of the pure judgment of taste. Whether or not art must always be relegated to the category of adherent beauty is a difficult question since the artwork is clearly produced as a purpose and such a question is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there are three points in favour of the artwork also partaking of free beauty: firstly, even the objects of free beauty, such as flowers, are

not free from conceptuality in any sense since we need to understand that this *flower* is beautiful and so must understand what it is as opposed to the rock next to it; secondly, such minimal conceptuality seems also at work in the artwork since, although the artist must minimally be producing something he or she need not be producing it in accordance with a concept at all (various modern artworks fall into this category); thirdly, Kant himself uses art works as examples of free beauties, most notably fantasias in music. (Ak. 229, §16, GM 114)

²⁵ Kant's general account of sublimity implies a role for it in art production, both in process and product; however, this is such a large issue in Kant that this discussion will not address it here and will focus solely on the "like/as nature" claim in relation to beauty. (this is further complicated by Kant not explicitly giving an account of sublimity's relation to art, but that it has one is clearly indicated by the examples he uses in the discussion of sublimity, such as St. Peter's in Rome and the pyramids in Egypt, and by some of the themes he says can be portrayed artistically, such as the furies and the "devastations of war.")

²⁶ A system addressed in both Introductions to the third *Critique* and in the discussion of teleological judgment.

²⁷ For an extensive discussion of such worlds in an artistic context see Victor Yelverton Haines, "Art Is a Game With the Goal of Appreciation" forthcoming in *AE: The Canadian Journal of Aesthetics*.

²⁸ As I have already indicated (note 22) in *Toward Perpetual Peace* Kant makes many references to "human nature", including ones in which he refers to our inclinations to make war and the malevolence of human nature revealed in international relations. See Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace*, in *Practical Philosophy*, translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.319 and 326. These are decidedly psychological and social uses of human nature but Kant also unifies them through his further use of 'nature' to refer to the "great artist" who brings peace and unity to human beings by means of human conflict. (pp.331-332)

²⁹ For example, certain kinds of drawing, such as Escher's, present representations to us which violate certain kinds of perceptual coherence. In such cases, the artwork probably has claims less to beauty than to sublimity. I am indebted to Jason Noble for drawing my attention in this context to Escher's work and for the suggestion that certain kinds of artwork may have a greater claim upon sublimity than beauty.

³⁰ Kant uses *ansehen* for how we take in the artwork as natural but *bewusst sein* for our awareness of it as an artwork.

³¹ How much affect we are allowed before disinterest vanishes seems crucial, though this may not be determinable.

³² Haines explores this duality extensively.

³³ Some of the Romantics, such as Novalis, certainly have this duality (e.g., Novalis' sense of irony stemming out of our inadequacy to express the nature of things) but their

mode of trying to overcome it resides in a reflection which does *not* aspire to *rules*, as Kantian aesthetic reflection does.

³⁴ Something fairly important, since beauty in the Dialectic becomes the symbol of morality and must thus be accessible in principle to everyone.

³⁵ The exception to this for Kant is the kind of ugliness which gives rise to loathing, since here the distinction between representing the ugliness and experiencing it breaks down.

³⁶ This may involve the sublime as well as the beautiful.

³⁷ Symbolic representation is illustrated here through Kant's example of Jupiter's eagle representing the power of the heavens or the sun being used to represent a cosmopolitan and tranquil spirit. Things which cannot be perceived (supreme beings, absolute morality, heaven, hell, etc.) are sensibly represented by things which can be sensibly perceived. Later, Kant will use symbols like a handmill and an organic body to represent despotic and constitutional governments respectively.

³⁸ This should lay to rest whether or not Greenberg really paid attention to Kant's account of art. All references to Greenberg, unless otherwise indicated, will be to the four volumes of *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, edited by John O'Brian (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, Vols 1 & 2, 1986 and Vols. 3 & 4, 1993) and will be indicated in the paper by volume and essay title.

³⁹ This is in keeping with his stress on Kant's Analytic of the Beautiful.

⁴⁰ See notes 22 and 47.

⁴¹ Kuspit, pp. 78, 106, and 108.

⁴² *Homemade Esthetics* (Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 126

⁴³ As Gaiger points out, this difference from Kant can be seen as a positive improvement over Kant's more cautious position. Moreover, it seems to me that such a difference is either in a sense irrelevant to the comparison or contrast of Kant and Greenberg, since it concerns something Kant explicitly is not interested in, at least, not at the foundational level or the difference may be seen as an empirical amplification of Kant's position and a reasonable one. In order for this difference to be significant, Greenberg's position on an actual *sensus communis* would need to be somehow opposed to Kant's position. Perhaps the only sense in which it is so opposed concerns the indeterminacy of aesthetic judgment and whether this is somehow threatened by an actual *sensus communis* rather than the idea of a *sensus communis*.

⁴⁴ Should really be "precisely" or "accurately" or "conscientiously," since "punctilious" seems to translate into German much more as painstaking and since Kant wants to convey a sense of effortless precision.

⁴⁵ What Costello calls a lack of "laboriousness."

⁴⁶ Kant uses the term "heautonomy" for the peculiarly subjective self-legislation which is the autonomy of judgment reflecting. This distinguishes it from the autonomy, for example, of pure practical reason in moral life.

⁴⁷ Kuspit, pp.77-78.

⁴⁸ In addition to being original but exemplary, the genius produces but can neither give a precise account of his or her activity nor at will conjure up this activity nor communicate such accounts to others. This, of course, follows from the lack of definite rules. Without definite rules one cannot state what one is doing precisely in a masterpiece, one cannot will a masterpiece into existence, and one cannot give someone else a template for making a masterpiece. The hallmark of the genius is thus a *fundamental* inarticulateness but *only* a fundamental one. If it were all-encompassing, then not only would Kant's earlier discussion of mechanism be useless but his account generally would be implausible for beautiful art at any historical time. What Kant clearly means is that, in the final analysis, when all the rules have been learned and all the precedents studied, the sum of the whole is greater than its parts, both outside the artist and inside him or her. This is why a great artist can produce something mediocre from time to time, or less than exemplary, or no more than standard. If they could, they would produce masterpieces all the time. The aesthetic idea, for Kant, as he points out both here and in the Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment, resists all such reduction or replication, just because as aesthetic it exceeds all determination.

⁴⁹ Talking with Jennifer Dyer about this point was very helpful.

⁵⁰ How far this resemblance goes, including the untrammelled eye and the creation of order in the artwork, requires quite a bit more discussion.

⁵¹ The discussion of this paper owes a great deal to the stimulating context of the Emma Lake workshop in 2007, and especially to the participants and the organizers of the conference for making it a most intellectually productive and enjoyable event. The paper also owes a great deal to the detailed comments of two anonymous reviewers for *AE: The Canadian Journal of Aesthetics* on both style and substance.