

Between Passivity and Activity:

Reply to Katalin Makkai and Joseph Tinguely

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Katalin Makkai and Joseph Tinguely raise good questions about my book.¹ They point out things I neglected or missed; they call attention to insufficiencies in some of my arguments; they bring up issues that I cannot fold into my readings right away. Yet I do not feel thwarted by them, for Makkai and Tinguely too aim to think with the *Critique of Judgment*. What comes across more distinctly than any one moment of criticism is an attunement they show towards Kant's work, the way the resemblance between members of a family often strikes you more strongly than the manifest differences between them. This attunement occurs not in arguments that one might distill into propositions but in the very style of their thinking. Philosophers and scholars tend to dismiss style (and rhetoric in general) as the costume in which thoughts appear and in which their true form disappears. But Makkai's and Tinguely's essays show that thoughts cannot simply be dressed up or down to suit the occasion and still remain essentially the same, for all thinking arrives with a style. Style is not the drapery wrapped around thoughts but rather their very texture. It is woven into the way we encounter and make sense of things.

It may seem as though I am playing Makkai's and Tinguely's arguments out against their melody, claiming (or hoping) that the mellifluous sound somehow takes the edge off their criticism or even drowns it out. But there is no cleavage between arguments and the style in which they present themselves. That is probably true in general, but it is certainly true in this case. The major points Makkai and Tinguely raise, both for and against my readings, are all geared towards the *way* subjects take up the objects they encounter. That shouldn't come as a surprise, for if you follow Kant's aesthetic thinking, it urges you to consider neither the properties of objects nor the dispositions of subjects, but what a subject makes of an object. That

¹ I thank Keren Gorodeisky for bringing this panel into being, and Katalin Makkai and Joseph Tinguely for being the kinds of critics one dreams of.

is the heart of it. And it is exactly where style happens: style describes neither objects (clothing, furniture, words, and so on) nor subjects in isolation from another, but rather the way a subject handles an object and the way an object opens certain forms of behavior for a subject. It is a relational conception.

Makkai and Tinguely start in different places, but their thinking gravitates to that zone of experience in which something significant, something out of the reach of concepts (yet always in relation to them), occurs between subjects and objects. When Tinguely suggests that Kant's confusing notion of disinterestedness can be taken as an invitation to think about the way objects reveal different aesthetic dimensions of themselves depending on how they appear to us, the way a square changes its flavor the moment we put it on one of its corners and see in it a diamond (quite apart from its ontological status that commits us to thinking of it as being *really* a square), he guides our attention away from both the properties of the object and the constitution of the subject (of its "faculties," and so on) to the area where something like what Tinguely calls an object's "orientational properties" make sense, which is to say to the aesthetic encounter between subject and object. Or take the question of what, if anything, the artist expresses with and in the work of art. Tinguely thinks that I defend Kant against a misreading that his text does not really invite and offers a different way of thinking of the question of what is "expressed" in an artwork. I am not sure the reading I criticize (namely that the artist's thoughts somehow find expression in the work, which thus can be understood as an expression of the artist's intention) is so far fetched as to deserve no engagement; it is held by many well-regarded commentators. Nor am I sure I like Tinguely's suggestion better. But I am impressed by the fact that his line of thinking leads him to think of the problem of expression as occurring *between* subjects and objects. Here is Tinguely:

the expressivist task is to communicate *how* one sees, the particular choreography of perception, so to speak. The "what" of expression remains public: a pair of clogs, lilies on a pond. The question at issue concerns "how" to perceive the scene, how to "take in" the objects, what to "make" of them.

The issue, then, needs to be thought of from both ends of the encounter, for in both cases *how* is more important than *what*: how the artist sees, how the percipient takes in the work.

We can observe a similar gravitational pull in Makkai's pages. She zeroes in on a phrase in the third *Critique* to which I return in the book more than once, namely that in aesthetic experience, specifically in the experience of beauty, we feel the "freedom to make anything into an object of pleasure for ourselves" ("Freiheit, uns selbst irgend woraus einen Gegenstand der Lust zu machen," V: 210). As Makkai recognizes, everything turns on how one understands this freedom. It is evidently not the same freedom that is at work in our practical engagement with the world; we do not, and cannot, make something into an object of aesthetic pleasure the way we make cars or promises. Makkai takes issue with my claim that this form of making involves chance, but whatever our differences (and I am not sure what they amount to), the meditation she offers takes us straight into the indeterminate zone between willful making and passive suffering, that is, the zone of aesthetic experience.

Everything I have said about style and aesthetic experience taking place between subjects and objects comes together in the question of the relationship of passivity and activity to which Makkai draws our attention. It is, I think, the knot in any account of aesthetic experience. The problem is not that both activity and passivity are involved in the experience; that is true of all human experience, including of perception and cognition, as Kant has taught. No, the strange thing here is that the passivity in aesthetic experience is itself a kind of activity, and that the activity takes the form of passivity. I appreciate Makkai's efforts at describing this dance of passivity and activity, because I recognize my own difficulties at capturing their strange co-implication.

The force of Makkai's question about chance is clear: if I have the "freedom to make anything into an object of pleasure" for myself, would the intrusion of chance not undermine that freedom? It would if one understood freedom and chance as belonging to two distinct realms without areas of overlap. Yet my sense is that both freedom and chance must be understood differently if we are to have a chance of giving a good account of aesthetic experience as it is disclosed in Kant's book. The term I give in my book to the encounter of freedom and chance in aesthetic experience is serendipity:

Serendipity, while not Kant's term, is the right word for the strangely passive activity—and the pleasurable feeling—of finding something that I was *not* looking for. It captures

the happy coincidence of coming face to face with beauty that stands at the core of Kant's meditation. I do not come upon something I need or crave or even long for without being aware of it, but find what I did not know I was seeking. (Horace Walpole, who coined the term, tells us that the characters in his tale *The Three Princes of Serendip* "were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of.")

Serendipity, then, is doubled: it is by a happy chance that I come upon something that opens me to a dimension that I happen to find in myself—which is to say, beyond the self with which I maintain a quotidian familiarity. (*Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*, 17)

Serendipity, then, describes not merely chance, nor even a happy chance, but a chance encounter that I did not know I was seeking—an encounter that, after it has taken place, appears as though it was destined to have happened. As I argue, it encourages us to think of the freedom involved in aesthetic experience differently:

Since no one "could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful" [V: 215], my feeling of pleasure in beauty is free. Yet this freedom is not sovereign and serene, the way we might imagine freedom in its picture-book variety. If my experience lurches back and forth guided by nothing firmer than serendipity, then this freedom is volatile. Since no rule (which is to say no concept) directs me in the way I relate my apprehension of an object to my feeling of pleasure, this freedom to feel aesthetically is not a freedom I can deploy freely, at will. Rather, it is an experimental freedom, a freedom to experiment with myself. I achieve it "unintentionally," Kant writes and repeats the idea, if not the exact term, twice more within the next few lines (V: 190). If I achieve it "without any intention" (ibid.), then I might as well say that it achieves me. Not only is the freedom in aesthetic experience volatile, then, it consists of the freedom to experience freedom as volatility. Which throws fresh light on the idea that in encountering the world aesthetically I make use of my "freedom to make for [myself] an object of pleasure out of

something” (V: 210), for now we see that the freedom in the making that we considered earlier is just the freedom to and as volatility that has shown itself to us here. Making poetically is making unintentionally, even when all that is made is a certain form of experience. (ibid., 18)

The psychoanalytic conception of action in which freedom and chance, the intentional and the unintentional, are not strangers but deeply embedded in one another can be understood as echoing the Kantian account of the ways aesthetic pleasure happens to us.

By attending to the zone between subjects and objects and the forces that link the two in aesthetic experience, Makkai and Tinguely have validated my sense that a rich account of the passive activity and active passivity stands at the heart of any aesthetic theory. They have also shown me how wanting my account has been and how much work remains to be done.

Bibliography

Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, edited by Heiner F. Klemme (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2006); *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000). The page numbers refer to *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the German (formerly Royal Prussian) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902-).