

Menke, Christopher, "Andrea Büttner's Aesthetics," *Parkett 97*, Collaboration, 2015, pp. 33-45

Andrea Büttner

CHRISTOPH MENKE

Andrea Büttner's Aesthetics



CHRISTOPH MENKE is a professor of philosophy at the University of Frankfurt am Main.

Menke, Christopher, "Andrea Büttner's Aesthetics," *Parkett 97*, Collaboration, 2015, pp. 33-45

Andrea Büttner



Page 24 and 25 / Seite 24 und 25:

ANDREA BÜTTNER, *Immanuel Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft*, artist's book, edited by Museum Ludwig, Cologne, published by Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 2014 / *Künstlerbuch*. (PHOTO: TINO GRASS)

What is aesthetics? Aesthetics is the philosophical consideration of the aesthetic: the attempt to analyze and grasp what it is that constitutes the aesthetic, and what it says about us that the aesthetic exists or that we possess it (or indeed that it possesses us); what we owe to the aesthetic and how we can pay tribute to it, and what we lose (or have already lost) when we no longer have it.

What is the aesthetic? The aesthetic is a dimension, a dynamic, a force of the soul, and with that, a source of everything that makes us who we are—in contrast to theory, because it has neither subject nor content; in contrast to praxis, because it has no goal; in contrast to concept, because it has no rules; in contrast to society, because it has no norms; in contrast to individuality, because it has no owner. Alternatively, the aesthetic is the power of fascination in a glance, the drive of exaltation in a deed, the sudden insight into a thought.

In other words, aesthetics is the philosophical attempt to ponder what cannot be grasped, but without which nothing can be grasped at all. In aesthetics, philosophy is not only directed toward something that can never actually be quantified, but it takes on something that is an impossibility within philosophy itself. Aesthetics is not simply another of the many diverse fields that philosophy analyzes; it is more like a counterpart of philosophy, with which it is in constant conflict: Philosophy gnaws away at aesthetics, but never quite gets to grips with it. Aesthetics as a philosophical understanding of the aesthetic seeks the impossible—it is itself an impossibility.

No one was more aware of this problem, of this fundamental impossibility, than Kant. It is to him, in fact, that we owe our insight into this conundrum. When we speak of the aesthetic—that is, of something beautiful—it might seem as though we were attributing a specific quality to an object, a quality similar to all the other qualities that object might have; but in truth, beauty has no specifiable quality. This is the basic premise with which Kant begins: The beautiful, the aesthetic is something fundamentally indeterminate and undeterminable; it cannot be pinned down. The aesthetic is not about some quality or other, not about a thing (as a thing in itself) but about nothing, about the nothingness of that quality, about what comes before all determination and goes beyond all determination.

Yet at the same time, nobody demonstrates more clearly than Kant what immense difficulties are involved in even saying this, or in thinking it. This proposition—that the aesthetic is indeterminate, nothingness, the abyss of all determination—might be taken as a license, or even as an invitation, to describe the aesthetic in sentimental, emotional terms instead of defining it; but for Kant, that is a kitschy, schmaltzy response. Philosophy does not grasp the aesthetic simply by becoming a little more narrative, a little more metaphorical, a little more descriptive, a little more essayistic—in other words, by acting a little more *aesthetically* itself. The great thinkers in the field of aesthetics—Baumgarten, Kant, Hegel, Adorno—never did this. Philosophy has to be a matter of thinking, conceptually clear and explicit, distinguishing

Andrea Büttner

and abstract. According to Kant, it is necessary to go through the icy wastes of abstraction in order to contemplate the aesthetic. It is therefore the task of the philosopher to grasp the aesthetic, even in the knowledge that this is bound to fail. And that is precisely the point of aesthetics: It wants to fail to grasp the aesthetic. It is only when one actually goes through the experience of discovering that all attempts to define and grasp the aesthetic are doomed to failure—to *utter* failure, as opposed to simply foundering—that one has truly experienced what the aesthetic and aesthetics *mean*. Those who do not even attempt to determine what the aesthetic is, who do not follow the path of its conceptual determination, and who do not fail to define it, will never be able to experience the aesthetic or contemplate it as itself.

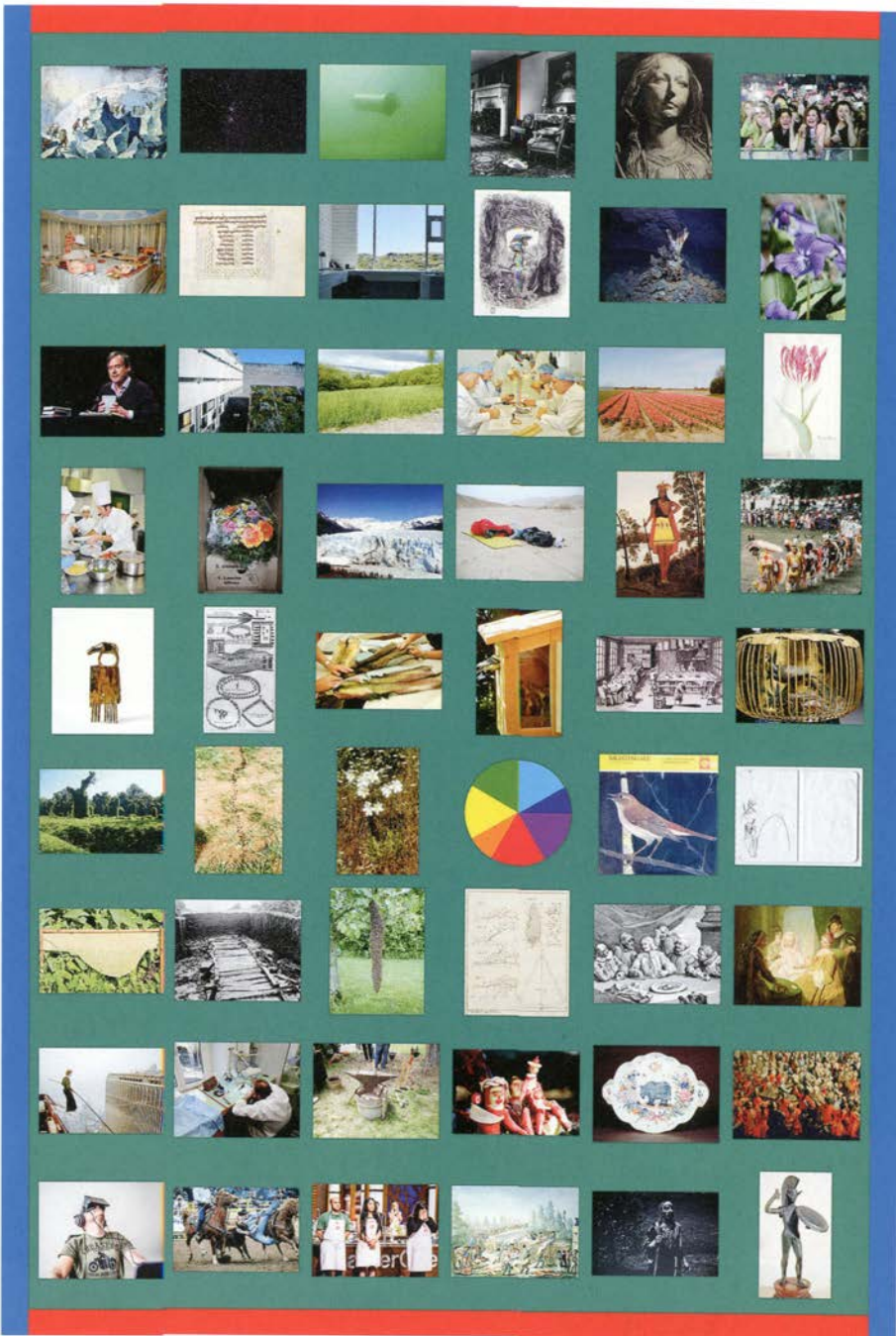
— —

At this point in my text, you might be wondering when I will mention Andrea Büttner. You're thinking, "He's just rambling on about philosophy and not about art." But I've actually been talking about Büttner's work at the same time—about Kant and his philosophy in her art, and what this reveals to us about Kant, or rather, what it has to do with Kant and philosophy. In 2014, the artist published her own edition of Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Critique of the Power of Judgment), first published in 1790. She did not intervene in the text, commenting, reviewing, criticizing, or deconstructing it, except to here and there discreetly add a number in the margin; this number serves to connect a few lines of Kant's text with an image. Büttner drew her images from a range of sources, both historical (including from Kant's own library) and contemporary. She also created a series of eleven offset prints, featuring a total of more than two hundred images. But what happens to Kant's philosophy when it is linked to images? It becomes something else entirely. Not in its inner structure and manifest content, but in its status and, with that, its substance. The text itself, the philosophical treatise, the philosophy—all become different.

Frequently, Büttner adds an image where the text provides a description of one; the added image might be of something that Kant knew or might have known, or simply something that fits his description. In this way, Büttner seems to provide the image in retrospect as the object Kant is talking about. But the image invariably gains something: a surplus, a counterforce an opponent. What emerges is an endless to and fro between text and image, with each re-encountering the other—countering and contradicting it. The text loses its power over the image. But what is a text without power over the image? And how can there be philosophy without power over the image?

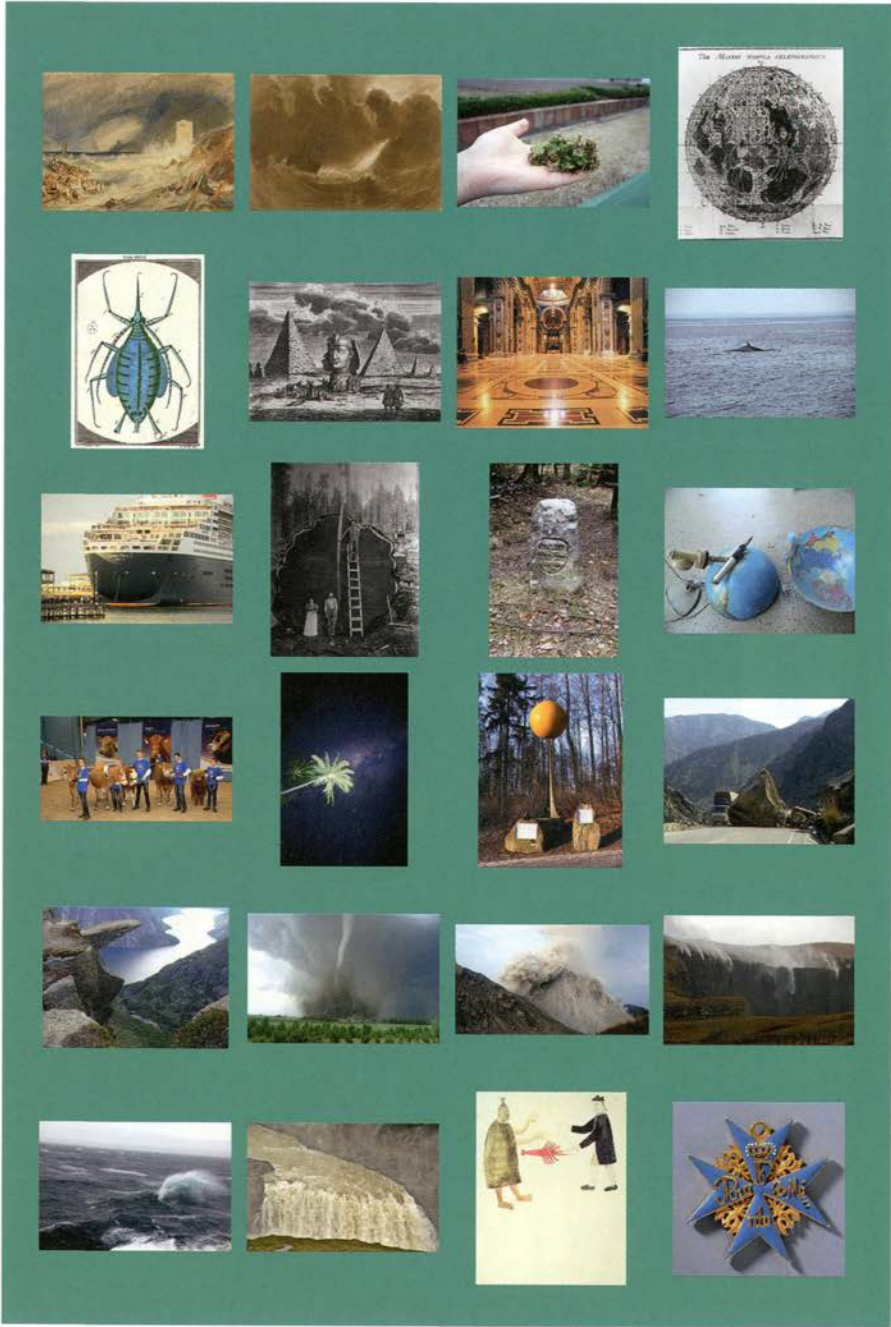
At first, the text appears to tell us *what* we should see in the image: For instance, as Kant writes, "a bubble of water in a rock crystal." The text also appears to tell us *how* we should see the image, so that we can expect everyone else to see it the same way—not just that everyone will see the same thing, but every person will experience the same pleasure. But the more we alternate between text and image, the more the boundaries between them become blurred. Can the text guide the image and express our perception of it? Or was it not, conversely, the image that gave rise to the text in the first place? Does the image, then, constitute not the content of the text but rather the basis of the text? Does Büttner undermine the text by showing that the image, the opponent of the text, is the foundation, or ground, of the text—and, with that, the abyss? But if this can be said, and if it can be written, has not the text once again prevailed over the image?

ANDREA BÜTTNER, IMAGES IN KANT'S CRITIQUE OF THE POWER OF JUDGMENT, 2014, offset print on paper, 69 1/4 x 47 1/4" / BILDER IN KANTS KRITIK DER URTEILSKRAFT, Offsetdruck auf Papier, 177 x 120 cm.



Menke, Christopher, "Andrea Büttner's Aesthetics," *Parkett 97*, Collaboration, 2015, pp. 33-45

Andrea Büttner



ANDREA BÜTTNER, IMAGES IN KANT'S CRITIQUE OF THE POWER OF JUDGMENT, 2014, offset print on paper, 69 1/8 x 47 1/4" / BILDER IN KANTS KRITIK DER URTEILSKRAFT, Offsetdruck auf Papier, 177 x 120 cm.

Andrea Büttner

By exploring the abyss of this text-and-image game, Büttner leads us into the very core of Kantian aesthetics. For it is precisely this interaction between Kant's text and its visual counterpart or visual ground that becomes the subject matter of the text of Kantian aesthetics. There are, therefore, two games being played out here between text and image: the game that Kantian aesthetics addresses (or the game of *how* Kantian aesthetics addresses it) and the game of which Büttner's artwork is composed, which it practices and which we implement in experiencing or perceiving the artwork; the game between text and image in (philosophical) theory and in (artistic) practice. (Philosophy and art are both, at the same time, but in opposition for precisely that reason.)

The play between reason and imagination, concept and intuition, lies at the very heart of Kantian aesthetics. We take pleasure in this game, according to Kant, which is why we describe the object that we perceive with pleasure as "beautiful." Kant's basic premise is that we take pleasure in the perception of beauty, and that reason and imagination are capacities that correspond to one another: aesthetic pleasure is pleasure in harmony—the harmony of text and image, concept and viewpoint. It is a harmony that lies *within* ourselves. Our pleasure in beauty assures us that—in contrast to what our daily experience might suggest—we are not divided, alienated, or torn, but that there really is a possibility for us to come to terms with ourselves and with others. Even in Kant—which is to say, very early in the history of the discipline—aesthetics goes hand in hand with ideology.

Büttner's art between text and image, her art of the in-between, saves aesthetics from itself—from its own danger and even from its own will to ideologize. Büttner's art develops what aesthetics does—no matter what it might say—and what it therefore is. In Büttner's work, aesthetics becomes the scene of a dispute that has no end, albeit one that is not destructive but productive (and perhaps for that very reason also pleasurable); aesthetics as the scene of unending dispute, rather than of harmony, between text and image, in which both become what they are. This is not a critique of Kant; it is, in fact, the strongest imaginable defense of his aesthetics. Through Büttner's edition, we discover what a bold, dangerous, and courageous step Kant takes in thinking about the aesthetic. For in doing so, philosophy is exposed to a dispute between the aesthetic that is the subject of its inquiry and the philosophy that is its own way of thinking. But because aesthetics opens up this dispute within itself, it begins a dispute with itself. Aesthetics is philosophy in conflict with itself, in the middle of a dispute that it can never win and which can never end (for while one might be able to win a dispute with others, one can never win a dispute with oneself). Aesthetics, as the philosophical consideration of the aesthetic, is philosophy's dispute with what invariably eludes it, precisely because what eludes it proves to be its own basis, or ground. Büttner shows that, in aesthetics, philosophy takes what is most alien to itself and places this at its very core. To put it another way: In aesthetics, philosophy sacrifices itself—and thereby, at the same time, liberates itself. Büttner's edition serves up Kant's aesthetics for us to read as the tragedy of philosophy that is, at the same time, its comedy. Ultimately, philosophy is as powerless and as vibrant as never before.

(Translation: Ishbel Flett)