

## **Kant, Celmins and Art after the End of Art**

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### **Abstract**

One typically thinks of the relevance of Kant's aesthetic theory to Western art in terms of Modernism, thanks in large part to the work of eminent critic and art historian Clement Greenberg. Yet, thinking of Kant's legacy for contemporary art as inhering exclusively in "Kantian formalism" obscures a great deal of Kant's aesthetic theory. In his last book, Arthur Danto suggested just this point, urging us to enlarge our appreciation of Kant's aesthetic theory and its relevance to contemporary art, because, for Danto, "Kant had two conceptions of art." In this essay, I support and build on Danto's claim that there are really two conceptions of art at work in Kant's third *Critique*, and that the second conception offers a non-Modernist/formalist way that Kant's aesthetic theory remains relevant to post 1960s art (art "after the end of art" in Danto's terms). My ultimate aim is to highlight another facet in the continuing relevance of Kant's aesthetic theory to post-Abstract Expressionist contemporary art, namely, the explicit attention to the *differential aesthetic values of nature and art respectively*. I shall do this by putting it in dialogue with the art practice of Latvian-American artist, Vija Celmins (1938- ) whose illustrious career since 1960s has made her an 'artist's artist' but who has also recently garnered much wider attention with a retrospective titled "To Fix the Image in Memory." Celmins takes up artistically a problematic that is quite central philosophically to the concerns of the third *Critique*, and thus her work illustrates (even if unconsciously) another way in which Kant's aesthetic theory is of great continuing relevance to the artworld today.

### **Key words**

Kant, Danto, Celmins, nature, art, contemporary art, beauty, sublimity

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## I. Introduction

When one thinks of the relevance of Kantian aesthetic theory to Western art, one typically thinks of Modernism, that is, the tendency (especially in the visual arts, starting arguably with Van Gogh and Gauguin) toward greater abstraction and preoccupation with the materials and process of art making itself over the hitherto fundamental concern of artists with mimetic representation (Danto, 1997: 7-8). This dominant association between Kantian aesthetics and Modernism is due largely to the eminent critic and art historian, Clement Greenberg, who, following in the line of British critics Roger Fry, and Clive Bell, embraced and promoted “Kantian formalism” in art. Abstract Expressionist painters such as Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Barnett Newman, among others, seemed to Greenberg be taking a leaf out of the *Analytic of the Beautiful* with their emphasis on artistic-formal concerns, thus constituting for him the true *avant-garde* of painting in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, thinking of Kant’s legacy for contemporary art as inhering exclusively in formalism obscures a great deal of Kant’s aesthetic theory. In his last book, *What Art Is*, Arthur Danto suggests just this point, urging us to enlarge our appreciation of Kant’s aesthetic theory and its relevance to contemporary art, because, for Danto, “Kant had two conceptions of art” (Danto, 2013: 117). The first conception is indeed formalist and in Danto’s terms, “ornamentalist” (and includes wallpaper borders, free musical fantasias, and in general visual works of art that display taste but lack ‘spirit’[*Geist*]), but the second is proto-Romantic: It is art with ‘spirit,’ that is, art which embodies aesthetic ideas. While the former notion of art marks out similarities between works of art and the “free beauties of nature,” the latter notion marks out those works which stimulate to a much greater extent our cognitive powers, pushing the boundaries of thought via the subject’s free play with sensible presentations of rational ideas.

Despite Danto’s quasi-Hegelian “end of art” thesis—meaning, of course, the end of the “grand narrative of art” with Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* (a work that opens the floodgates on what can legitimately be called ‘art’), *not the end of artmaking* or the value of art *tout court*—he argues for the ongoing relevance, and in fact, the *universal, perennial relevance* of Kant’s second view of art. It is the one that captures the essence of post 1960s, more conceptual art, and the one that accords with Danto’s own (admittedly partial) definition of art as “embodied meaning.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, Danto hypothesizes, if Kant himself (equipped with only his late 18<sup>th</sup> -early 19<sup>th</sup> c. experience of art) were to be taken to see a contemporary exhibit such as David Hammons’ installation of spotlighted fur coats on stands slathered

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Clement Greenberg’s essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (Greenberg, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Although often misunderstood as a partisan of the Institutional Theory of art (formulated by George Dickie), Danto puts forth an essentialist view of art first in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Danto, 1981: 195), and refines the view in Ch. 11 of *After the End of Art* (Danto, 1997) as follows: there are two necessary (but perhaps not jointly sufficient) conditions for something to be a work of art. Namely, to be a work of art is to be (i) about something, and (ii) to embody its meaning.

with paint, it is likely that Kant would not recognize this as a work of art. Notwithstanding, the crucial thing for Danto is that Kant's own *second conception of art*--as the embodiment of aesthetic ideas--along with the benefit of 200 additional years of the history of art, would indeed see Hammons' 'artfully defiled' fur coats as art!<sup>3</sup>

My aim in this paper is to defend and build on these Dantonian thoughts about the continuing relevance of Kant's aesthetic theory to post-Abstract Expressionist contemporary art. My first task is to offer textual support for Danto's claim of two conceptions of art in Kant's third *Critique* (not being primarily an historian of philosophy, Danto offers very little evidence for this claim in his chapter). Next, I shall highlight another major Kantian contribution related to these two conceptions of art, namely, the explicit attention to the *differential aesthetic values of nature and art respectively*. And I shall draw out this important Kantian aesthetic legacy for contemporary art by putting it in dialogue with the art practice of Latvian-American artist, Vija Celmins (1938- ), an artist who has been well respected in the artworld since the 1960s as 'an artist's artist,'<sup>4</sup> but who has only recently garnered wider attention and critical acclaim with a retrospective jointly organized by curators at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (2018-2019, titled "To Fix the Image in Memory").

As I shall argue in what follows, Celmins' work--much of which focusses on what she calls the 'redescription' of natural objects and environments such as the ocean, the starry night sky, river stones, spiderwebs, the surface of shells, sometimes from photographs and sometimes from direct observation of nature, can be understood as a sustained artistic meditation on what distinguishes the aesthetic values of art from those of nature. Especially in her sculptural works *To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI* (1977-1982) and *Two Stones* (1977/2014-16)--where she displays pairs of perceptually indiscernible stones, one found, one made--we can see her as taking up from Marcel Duchamp's readymades in a manner similar to Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (1964), but now with an exclusive focus on the "readymades" of nature.<sup>5</sup> The perceptually indiscernible copy or "redescription" in Celmins' case is not a provocation about what if anything distinguishes a work of art from a common manufactured artefact (Duchamp) or from an ordinary product of consumer Capitalism (Warhol), rather, Celmins, on my interpretation, goes back to the original remit

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<sup>3</sup> Diarmuid Costello (Costello, 2008: 245) actually anticipates and recommends Danto's own embrace of what I'm calling Kant's second conception of art. He argues, that "[b]oth Danto and Kant can be seen as proponents of expressionism in the philosophy of art, to the extent that both hold works of art to embody, and thereby express, the mental states (broadly construed to encompass beliefs, attitudes and feelings) of those that created them and, if successful, to dispose their viewers to a similar state. Moreover, both appeal--explicitly, in the case of Danto, implicitly in the case of Kant--to a conception of metaphor in their account of what a work of art is."

<sup>4</sup> Art historian, Christina Bryan Rosenberger (Rosenberger, 2019: 79-80) stresses this point, on account of Celmins' mastery of many media.

<sup>5</sup> According to art historian Frances Jacobus-Parker (Jacobus-Parker, 2018: 85-89), Celmins was influenced by Wittgenstein in calling her process "redescribing" of photographs (especially in the case of her drawings and paintings of the ocean and the starry night sky) rather than "copying" or "reproducing".

of Western art—the imitation of nature, ‘Aesthetics 101’ as it were.<sup>6</sup> Taking up from Duchamp she forges an alternative path to the one that taken by Warhol, inviting us to contrast how we value a natural object, like a lovely, smooth, dappled stone, from how we value its painstakingly, artistically constructed twin. In raising these questions about how we aesthetically value nature versus art, Celmins takes up artistically a problematic that is quite central philosophically to the concerns of the third *Critique*, and thus her work illustrates (even if unconsciously) another way in which Kant’s aesthetic theory is of great continuing relevance to the artworld today.

## II. Two conceptions of art?

One of the first mentions of works that we and Kant’s contemporaries would generally class as works of fine art in the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Critique* comes in section 16 where he distinguishes “free beauty” [freie Schönheit] from “merely adherent beauty” [die bloß anhängende Schönheit]. As is well known to Kant scholars, the former type “presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be” whereas the latter type “does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it.” (Ak. 5: 229).<sup>7</sup> Among free beauties, natural objects figure prominently.

Importantly for this inquiry, however, works of art also factor among the free beauties that Kant lists in this section: “designs à la grecque, foliage for borders or on wallpaper ... and music fantasias (without a theme), indeed all music without a text.” (Ak. 5:229). These works of art are also appreciated along the lines of free natural beauties, for we don’t seem to appreciate them under the description of a concept—not even under the concept of “work of art”—nor by virtue of how well they attain to the perfection of their kind. Rather, it seems for Kant, we enjoy such designs and music without a text for their formal qualities alone. It is noteworthy that works of art (at least prima facie) also factor among Kant’s examples of sublime objects, e.g. the pyramids of Egypt and St. Peter’s in Rome (Ak. 5: 252), though Kant stresses that the paradigm cases of the sublime involve “raw nature” (Ak. 5:253).<sup>8</sup> So long as the pyramids and St. Peter’s cathedral are appreciated for their formal qualities alone (in this case, their overwhelming scale, which makes them from a certain vantage point seem formless or contra-purposive for our cognitive faculties), they

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<sup>6</sup> In a laudatory review in *Artforum*, Jordan Kantor (Kantor, 2019: 171) makes a similar point, writing “Here [with respect to *To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI*] it is as if Celmins has taken the initial assignment of Western aesthetics—to imitate nature—literally.”

<sup>7</sup> All citations to the third *Critique* utilize the Guyer and Matthews translation *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Kant, 2000 [1790]) with parenthetical notations to the standard Akademie edition.

<sup>8</sup> Strictly speaking, Kant says that we err in calling “some object of nature sublime, although we can quite correctly call very many of them beautiful” (section 23; Ak. 5:245) and that only the human mind itself is truly sublime.

can arguably be numbered among “free sublimities” along with vast and/or overwhelming natural environments.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, all of these mentions of works of art that constitute free beauties or free sublimities occur before Kant gets down to the business of discussing fine art (in section 43). Up to this point, he seems to be operating with a notion of a work of art that allows for appreciation of art in the same manner as a free beauty (or sublimity) of nature. This is a notion of a work of art that is formalist and even in the case of the “designs à la grecque” or “foliage for borders or for wallpaper” one might call, after Danto, “ornamentalist.” This is the notion of the work of art that was so influential for and through Clement Greenberg.

Kant finally defines *schöne Kunst* around section 44 of the third *Critique*. When he does, he seems to give a definition of fine art that would *exclude* these previously adduced examples from the category. In this section, the necessary ingredients for beautiful art are “imagination, understanding, spirit and taste [Einbildungskraft, Verstand, Geist und Geschmack]” (Ak. 5:320). This requires some unpacking.

Taste, is “merely a faculty for judging” the beautiful in either nature or art, and artists can cultivate their tastefulness in producing art, e.g. through “acquaintance with ancient languages, wide reading of those authors considered to be classical, history, etc.” (Ak. 5:305), but for the production of beautiful art, in addition to taste, the artist must also have *genius* “the inborn predisposition of the mind through which nature gives the rule to art” (Ak. 5:307). And the key aspect of genius for the production of genuinely beautiful art is *spirit*. In its “aesthetic significance,” spirit is “the animating principle in the mind” that is, “that which purposively sets the mental powers into motion” or play (section 49, Ak. 5:313). Putting a bit more flesh on the bones of “spirit,” Kant explains it as the “faculty for the presentation of aesthetic ideas” (Ak. 5:314). And an aesthetic idea is a “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...” (Ak. 5:314).

Kant’s full account of a work of beautiful (fine) art is actually quite revisionist. One might ordinarily suppose a painting or a poem to be a work of beautiful art if it is elegant and pleasing, even if it lacks the “je ne sais quoi” of *spirit*. But Kant is clear on this: if it *lacks spirit*—that is, if the work lacks aesthetic ideas, which occasion much thinking--it is not a work of beautiful art at all on Kant’s second conception of art as the art of genius. The work may have taste, it might please even universally, but insofar as it does not animate the mind through aesthetic ideas, it is *not* a work of beautiful/fine art.

This second conception of art—the official one—has ramifications for the first, unofficial conception that Kant seems to have been employing before section 43. “Designs à la grecque” and “foliage for borders or on wallpaper” and even “musical fantasias”—the examples he furnished of free artistic beauties—would not, it seems, pass muster with this

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<sup>9</sup> There has been a lively debate among Kant scholars as to whether Kantian aesthetics should make a place for pure artistic *sublimity*. See (Abaci, 2008 & 2010), (Clewis, 2010), (Wicks, 1995), and (Pillow, 2000).

second conception of fine art. They seem precisely to be tasteful works, beautiful ornaments perhaps, but not the kinds of works that contain *spirit*; that is to say, they are not the kinds of works that occasion much thinking. Thus, it seems that there really are two working conceptions of fine art in Kant's text: (1) the earlier one, which is **the formalist/ornamentalist rather non-cognitive, unofficial conception**, and (2) the **official one, which is a highly cognitive one**—where the work animates the mind with a rich array of thoughts even if these cannot be summed up in any determinate concept, in language—because the work has spirit in addition to taste.

These two conceptions of art correspond to what Aviv Reiter and Ido Geiger have identified (though not uncontroversially<sup>10</sup>) as Kant's two, distinct conceptions of beauty: (1) non-conceptual natural beauty and (2) conceptual, adherent, artistic beauty. Reiter and Geiger sum up the first conception as follows:

[i]n judging, we simply express our immediate pleasure in a particular shape. In this precise sense, the judgment is singular, purely aesthetic, and thus not conceptual. Indeed, people judging aesthetically would probably not characterize their aesthetic pleasure as the feeling that an object is somehow cognitively significant. Nevertheless, on Kant's analysis, it turns out that there is a noteworthy correlation between the shapes that arouse pure aesthetic pleasure and the forms of natural kinds" (Reiter & Geiger, 2018: 80).

The second conception of beauty, the beauty of fine art, for Reiter and Geiger "does not fit the definition of beauty put forward in the *Analytic* without emendation. Specifically, and with some noteworthy exceptions, it is not typically to form alone that we respond in beautiful works of art" (Reiter & Geiger, 2018: 83). Rather, it is to the aesthetic presentation of ideas of reason, especially on the subject of the "breadth and variety of human freedom" (Reiter & Geiger, 2018: 96) to which we respond in the beauty of art.

Now, in distinguishing two types of *beauty* in Kant, Reiter and Geiger, do not claim that all works of art must partake in the latter, adherent type. In the above-quoted passage, they allude to "some noteworthy exceptions" of works of art to which we do respond in the manner of free natural beauties, namely, to form alone. Thus, they hold that some works of art (e.g., musical fantasias and music without a text generally) do constitute artistic examples of free beauty, the beauty paradigmatic of nature (Reiter & Geiger, 2018: 87).

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<sup>10</sup> There is a rather large secondary literature on this issue of whether there are two distinct (even if related) notions of beauty in Kant's aesthetic theory, or whether, ultimately, they are reunited into one. Arguing, I believe successfully, for more distinctness recently are (Reiter & Geiger, 2018), (Halper, 2020), and much earlier (Gotshalk, 1967). By contrast, stressing the ultimate unity of natural and artistic beauty are (Rueger, 2007), and (Guyer, 2006).

What I'd like to suggest, though, is that Danto was right to press the issue further in seeing such free-beauty artistic examples as evidence of **another conception of art altogether at work in the third Critique**. If musical fantasias do not contain spirit—and it seems at least on Kant's account that they really don't, for they are appropriately appreciated for their temporal-formal qualities not for their cognitively rich aesthetic ideas—then they do not have the beauty paradigmatic of artistic beauty, and, therefore, **they really cannot be art on the second conception of fine art on offer (in sections 43-51)**. Nonetheless, they do seem to be considered examples of art in Kant's text, and thus bespeak a first, unofficial conception of art (the conception of the *Analytic of the Beautiful/Analytic of the Sublime*). It seems we have good textual grounds, then, to conclude that Kant really does have two conceptions of art in the third *Critique*.

One reason why it is important carefully to distinguish between Kant's two conceptions of art, which run roughly parallel to Kant's two conceptions of beauty, is that Kant makes a rather large deal out of the moral importance of the appreciation of *natural beauty* over artistic beauty.<sup>11</sup> Although artistic beauty is important for promoting “the cultivation [Cultur] of the mental powers for sociable communication” (Ak. 5:306) and brings the rational ideas closer to perception (via their aesthetic embodiments) (Ak. 5: 314), it is *natural beauty* (and one might make a case for natural sublimity as well) that seems to hold greater *moral importance* for Kant, overall.

The main textual evidence for this comes in section 42, “On the intellectual interest in the beautiful,” where Kant contrasts the lovers of beautiful art with the lovers of beautiful nature. He “gladly concede[s] that the interest in the beautiful in art ... provides no proof of a way of thinking that is devoted to the morally good or even merely inclined to it” (Ak. 5:298) whereas he does “assert that to take an immediate interest in the beauty of nature ... is always a mark of a good soul, and that if this interest is habitual, it at least indicates a disposition of the mind that is favorable to the moral feeling.” (Ak. 5:299).

Kant goes so far as to say that even if *the forms* of art were to surpass those of nature in their beauty,

[i]f a man who has enough taste to judge about products of beautiful art ... gladly leaves the room in which are to be found those [artistic] beauties that sustain vanity and at best social joys and turns to the beautiful in nature, in order as it were to find here an ecstasy for his spirit in a line of thought that he can never fully develop, then we would consider this choice of his with esteem and presuppose in him a beautiful soul, to which no connoisseur

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<sup>11</sup> Whether Kant *did* make this distinction in the moral value of natural beauty versus artistic beauty is not really disputed by Joseph Cannon (Cannon, 2011:113), but Cannon argues that Kant *should not* have made such a distinction “because his account of fine art as the joint product of the ‘natural gift’ of genius and the discipline of taste commits him to the claim that artistic beauty expresses ... a harmony between nature and freedom.”

and lover of art can lay claim on account of the interest that he takes in his objects (Ak. 5:299-300).

The ultimate reason for why it is morally better to be a lover of natural over artistic beauty, for Kant, is that the lover of natural beauty takes an interest in the signs that nature seems to give via its beauty that it “contains in itself some sort of ground for assuming a lawful correspondence of its products with our satisfaction that is independent of all interest (which we recognize a priori as a law valid for everyone, without being able to ground this on proofs).” (Ak. 5:300). In other words, the lover of natural beauty takes an interest in the aesthetic hints that nature is amenable to our moral ends. Only *nature’s* beauty—not the beauty of art—can show “some trace” or “give[s] a sign” that we will be able to realize our moral ends in this world (Henrich, 1992). By contrast, the beauty of art can only bespeak “at best social joys” (Ak. 5:300).

To drive the point home, Kant contrasts perceptually indiscernible birdsongs, one made by an actual nightingale “in a lonely stand of bushes, on a still summer evening, under the gentle light of the moon” and the other by “a mischievous lad who knew how to imitate this song (with a reed or a pipe in his mouth) just like nature” (Ak. 5:302). In this case, there is a trick afoot: a landlord wants to charm his guests with the song of the bird and arranges to have the kid hide in the bushes. But, Kant believes, “as soon as one becomes aware that it is a trick, no one would long endure listening to this song, previously taken to be so charming ... It must be nature, or taken to be nature by us, for us to be able to take such an immediate interest in the beautiful, and even more so if we are to be at all able to expect of others that they should take this interest in it...” (Ak. 5:302).

Thus, when it is a question of rendering a pure judgment of taste, it doesn’t matter whether the song is produced by an actual bird or a mischievous lad. The disinterestedness of a pure judgment of taste means that the *actual existence* of the beautiful object—and, accordingly, whether it is natural or artistic, is beside the point--only the perceptual form matters. But from the perspective of the moral interest we take in beauty, that the beauty emanates *from nature itself* is crucial, insofar as we are keen to read the purposive signs that nature (not art) seems to be sending.

### III. Vija Celmins

In a manner reminiscent of Kant’s two perceptually indiscernible birdsongs, the Latvian-American contemporary artist Vija Celmins, has displayed paired river stones—one found and one painstakingly hand made in each pair—in a work titled *To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI* (1977-82).



Fig. 1. Vija Celmins, *To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI* (1977-82), Museum of Modern Art, New York. ©Vija Celmins, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Celmins collected these “rather beautiful” stones in New Mexico, along the Rio Grande, and over the course of approximately 5 years, she cast them in bronze and meticulously hand-painted the surfaces to render astoundingly identical twins of the stones. She describes these pairs in Duchampian terms as “readymades and mades” (quoted in Alteveer, 2018: 159). More recently, Celmins has added another, solo set of paired stones to this series, titled simply *Two Stones* (1977/2014-16).

The superficial game here is to tell the real from the copy. And when I saw these works displayed at Celmins’ recent retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Met Breuer, many spectators were happily and wondrously engaged in doing just this, even though there was nothing at the exhibit to let us know if we had gotten it right! And certainly, Celmins entices us to engage in this looking and guessing, writing that “[the stones are] an invitation to look harder than you would look, normally ... And so, somebody goes by and has a double take on it, and maybe a little smile comes out of it” (quoted in Garrels, 2018: 19).

But the more profound task at hand is to figure out what these displayed, “readymade and made” paired stones *mean*. And for that, the artist herself offers few hints. She admits that the spectator is left to her own devices in an interview with artist Ken Price where she asserts, “I don’t mind talking about making work. What it is supposed to mean is what I can’t talk about. Can you give rational explanations of your work?” In another interview, she cites Brancusi—a model of artistic-discursive reticence—saying that “art should be like a well-planned crime” meaning: “you don’t discuss it before, and you don’t talk much about it afterward either” (quoted in Garrels, 2018: 235).

So, what could these works mean?

Unlike Kant’s birdsong example, Celmins is not, like the landlord, trying to trick us into taking a fake stone for a real one. Although she certainly has the visual-art equivalent of the lad’s bird-impersonation skillset, in her works, she makes no secret at all of the artistic copies lurking among the natural stones. On the contrary, she draws our attention to the “madness” of one of the paired stones by displaying it *alongside* the natural, found stone.

A clue as to what is going on here comes from Celmins’ description of the natural stone as a “readymade” and the bronze, painted copy as the “made.” And it is fruitful to think through her practice with Duchamp’s conceptual provocations in mind. Indeed, according to Met Curator, Ian Alteveer, “Duchamp was a particularly important figure to Celmins, for both his conceptual rigor and his radical philosophy regarding the readymade, [and] Celmins has adopted and transformed this gesture for her own purposes” (Alteveer, 2018: 159).

Recall that the readymades of Duchamp were factory or artisanally-manufactured objects such as urinals, bottle racks, and snow shovels, sometimes modified [and signed R. Mutt in the case of *Fountain* (1917)] and sometimes simply displayed *qua* art, without modification. The Dada provocation in the case of Duchamp goes something like the following: ‘This is art! Why? Because I, the artist, say it’s art. Bourgeoisie be damned--this is finally what art has become, ha!’<sup>12</sup>

In Celmins’ case too, by her own account, there is something playful and even a bit Dada-absurdist in her “constellation” of paired stones, writing,

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<sup>12</sup> Art theorist Thierry de Duve presents a rather different interpretation of the readymades. For de Duve, Duchamp’s readymade signifies artistic restraint—restraint from painting—in light of the desuetude of the professional artist’s traditional *métier* in the age of mechanical reproduction. But it also involves, for de Duve, genuine *aesthetic choices*--notwithstanding Duchamp’s descriptions of readymades as ‘visually indifferent’ and ‘anesthetic’—for “[a]bsolute visual indifference is something impossible, and Duchamp left in his writings many clues showing that he was aware of that.” (De Duve, 1996: 294 and see especially chapters 3 & 5). I agree with Paul Crowther, however, that “whether the readymade can carry the burden of signifying this restraint [from painting] is an enormously difficult question. Certainly de Duve makes a case, but it is one which substantially underestimates the significance of the readymades as ironic and critical [anti-art and anti-aesthetic] gestures.” (Crowther, 1997: 412).

I developed this desire to try and put them [the found river stones] into an art context ... sort of mocking art in a way, but also to affirm the act of making: the act of looking and making as a primal act of art (quoted in Garrels, 2018: 17).

However, Celmins' "readymades" (the natural stones) are importantly different from those of Duchamp: they aren't made by any human artisan, they are "made" by nature. Paradoxically, this means that they really aren't *readymades* at all—they are simply found among the profusion of lovely river rocks scattered along the Rio Grande. It is only if one employs a notion akin to the Celestial Artisan, that these stones count literally as "readymades." And Kant, for one, did think along these lines, for as sketched above he held that natural beauty invites the lover of nature to "find ... an ecstasy for his spirit in a line of thought that he can never fully develop," namely, that there is "a lawful correspondence of its products" and our moral interests as human beings. Thus, for Kant, although we may not conclude (as a matter of theoretical knowledge) that the natural world is designed/made by a benevolent creator and is therefore not hostile to our moral ends, natural beauty does give us a *hint* that this is the case. Although I don't think that Celmins' work suggests this particular link between natural beauty and moral-theology, I do think that drawing our attention to the "readymade" status of natural objects does invite reflection on the way nature "makes" things in a manner that is rather different from the way an artist like Celmins makes things.

As she puts it in the above-quoted passage, the pairs of stones centers attention on the "the act of looking and making as a primal act of art" (emphasis mine). These intentional acts of art are implicitly opposed to nature's way of "making," which seems by contrast *unintentional*: These particular natural stones were not formed by a human action, but rather by a geological *happening*. Further, nature's way of "making" involves *millennia*, a mind-bogglingly long process of shaping by the forces of the river, by the heat of the sun, and a host of other natural forces operating at the glacial speed of geologic time. From these came the beautiful stones, with their fortuitously pleasing if irregular, dappled patterns, which could be appropriated into a work of (human) art in the late 20<sup>th</sup> c. By contrast, the artistically made stones were created *intentionally*, by a human mind and body, that is, by an artist who looked closely and painstakingly "redescribed" the natural stone over the course of a few years (a rather long time for art, but certainly not *millennia*).

Yet, what is the point of this comparison between the "making" of nature and the "making" of art? On the one hand, there seems to be an uplifting message about the power of that primal act of art—looking and making. One might reflect with awe on the fact that a human artist is just as capable of creating, and further has the advantage of *capturing*, these beautiful natural forms and *fixing them in individual and collective memory*. *Pace* Kant, then, perhaps this work signals that in the contest between natural and artistic beauty, the latter is actually more wondrous for its revelation of human power.

But, on the other hand, along more Kantian lines, Celmins may also be drawing our attention to the greater value of the natural stone. It alone has an aura of “age value,” for it and not its copy testifies to millennia of geological processes, to the wonder that there is something rather than nothing, and to the fact that some things in our world seem ‘as if’ designed to please us. Might the painstaking copy attest not so much to the power of human intelligence and creativity then, but the frailty of human “making” insofar as it takes enormous artistic effort to make an indiscernible copy of something so promiscuously available on any rocky riverbed around the world? Doesn’t human creative power really pale in comparison to nature’s great fecundity of beautiful forms?

I think all of these thoughts may be sparked by Celmins’ work and attest to the fact that she has created genuine works of fine/beautiful art on Kant’s second conception: These are works with *spirit*, that is, they embody aesthetic ideas, which stimulate much thought—particularly on the nature/art relationship--without one being able to sum up those thoughts adequately in language.

These are also highly original works: With this focus on the nature/art relationship, Celmins’ “readymade and made” pairs are also quite different from another artist who took up the Duchampian project, Andy Warhol. In the case of Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* the “made” is a perceptually indistinguishable copy of a *commercial product* (the readymade Brillo box that one might find in the 1960s on any supermarket shelf). But Warhol didn’t display the commercial, ordinary Brillo box alongside his artistically fashioned copies. Rather, the “made” *Brillo Boxes* were exhibited on their own in the gallery. Thus, unlike Duchamp, Warhol’s provocation was to display *a copy* of a commercial object as a work of art—rather than displaying the manufactured article itself *qua* art—so that the “made” on display was perceptually indistinguishable from the ordinary object (the readymade), which remained, blissfully unaware of its Doppelgänger, as it awaited purchase on the supermarket shelf. The key difference in Warhol’s provocation, versus that of Duchamp, it seems to me, has to do with late Capitalism. Building on Duchamp, *Brillo Boxes* says something like this: ‘Nowadays, you can’t tell the difference between a work of art and an ordinary, banal, commercially ubiquitous *consumer product*. Art has entirely lost its aura, its aesthetic appeal can now collapse into that of the mundane Brillo box carton in a supermarket. Anything, no matter how banal, no matter how crassly consumerist, can be a work of art.’

By contrast, Celmins seems to be taking a somewhat different path than that of Warhol. Her route from Duchamp is decidedly not in the commercial, pop direction. In fact, she’s going back the basics and the original assignment of Western art, namely, the *imitation of nature*. She is self-consciously working in a mimetic-representational lane, as suggested in an interview with Phong Bui, publisher and artistic director of *The Brooklyn Rail*:

Only later did I come to understand that **we... [artists are] all stuck in between Cézanne and Duchamp**. Cézanne was probably the greatest painter ... And there is Duchamp, who was not a great painter, but was a wonderful thinker about art. He really opened up the new century to artists who would never have gone in that direction. (quoted in Garrels, 2018: 230, emphasis added).

On my interpretation, the path that Celmins takes with her paired stones is actually to bring Cézanne and Duchamp into a fruitful dialogue. Like Cézanne, Celmins' aim is to imitate (or "redescribe") nature, as generations of Western artists before and after Cézanne have done. I shall come back soon to how she confronts this traditional aim with Duchamp soon, but first allow me to supply a bit more backstory.

*To Fix the Image in Memory I-XI* (1977-1982) and *Two Stones* (1977/2014-16) can be seen as a kind of narrative culmination in Celmins' long career of redescribing *natural* objects and environments in particular. Although she started her career with still life paintings of ordinary manufactured objects lying around her studio (a space heater, a lamp, an envelope), beginning in 1968 she took on a new subject that would preoccupy her through the 1970s, *the ocean*. From photographs of the Pacific Ocean that she took off the Venice Pier near her studio in Los Angeles, Celmins made a long series of painstaking, all-over (horizonless) graphite drawings of the precise, undulating waves of the ocean. In the 1970s Celmins focused on images of the rocky, desert floor and her main subject of the 1990s was the starry night sky, with a large number of redescrptions of spider webs as well. It has only been quite recently that Celmins has focused on making perceptually indiscernible copies of artefacts—old-fashioned children's school slates, and antique books—otherwise, for most of her career her iconography has focused on natural objects and environments.

It is also important to note that while Celmins' subjects are often the paradigmatically sublime ones of nature—the starry night sky, the ocean, the desert—the works that she produces are quite different from Romantic paintings (e.g. those by Caspar David Friedrich) or the American Sublime painters of the Hudson River School in that they *don't seem to aim to provoke a sublime response* in the viewer. The scale of her works is quite modest (most of the ocean drawings are about 18" x 22" in size) in contrast to American sublime painters like F.E. Church, whose *Heart of the Andes* measures a gigantic 5' 6" x 9' 11". And in an interview at the Tate Modern which put her work into dialogue with that of J.M.W. Turner, she writes, "I think we [Turner and I] both like wildness—the wilderness, the impossible image to capture and wrestle onto that small piece of paper." (quoted in Garrels, 2018: 247-8). But the main aim for Celmins is to not overwhelm or awe the viewer with that wildness—as Turner strove to do in some of his later, more sublime works—but rather painstakingly to wrestle that complex, sometimes vast image onto an eminently human-scaled piece of paper, canvas, or a bronze cast.

In all of the cases of natural subjects other than the stones, however, she was “re-describing” nature from photographs, but displaying the “mades” without the source photos (let alone the natural sources) side-by-side. We had to take her word for it, and judge by the uncanny similarity of the drawings or paintings in the series, that she was faithfully re-describing the natural source.

It’s only with the paired stones that we can really see for ourselves how much the “made” stone looks like the “found/readymade” natural stone. Like Duchamp then, with the paired stones Celmins draws our attention precisely to the question of the nature of art—what is a work of art? Why can’t a “readymade” stone be or become at least a part of a work of art? But by mixing in Cézanne—that is, by putting the painterly practice of observing and re-describing nature alongside the “readymade” of nature, she asks additionally the following sorts of questions: What is the difference between natural and artistic beauty? What is the difference between natural and artistic “making”? These are questions which Duchamp and Warhol—with their emphasis on manufactured “readymades” and copies of commercial products, respectively--did not thematize.

#### IV. Conclusion

In this essay, I have aimed to support Danto’s claim that there are really two conceptions of art at work in Kant’s third *Critique*, and that the second conception offers a non-Modernist/formalist way that Kant’s aesthetic theory remains relevant to post 1960s art (art “after the end of art” in Danto’s terms). Thanks to the illuminating work of Aviv Reiter and Ido Geiger (among others), these two conceptions of art can more clearly be seen as related to two distinct conceptions of beauty in Kant’s aesthetic theory: free beauty (which is a response to form alone, paradigmatically to forms of natural kinds such as flowers, foliage, birds and crustaceans) and adherent beauty (which is not merely a response to form, but also, to the concept of what the object is supposed to be), paradigmatically, a work of art that aims to present some determinate content especially of the “breadth and variety of human freedom” (Reiter & Geiger, 2018: 96). Next, I offered an overview and interpretation of the work of Vija Celmins, focusing on her iconography—typically beautiful and sublime natural objects and environments—and her artistic practice of “re-description” in various media (drawing, painting, sculpture), but especially her perceptually indiscernible pairs of stones, one found and one made.

On my view, these sculptural works in particular culminate a genial narrative that she is building on the conceptual foundation of Duchamp: Celmins’ art practice offers a parallel but distinctly different narrative to that of Warhol, which highlights another important legacy of Kant’s aesthetic theory for contemporary art. That is, in addition to the formalism and the notion of art as the embodiment of ideas, Kant puts forward what one might call *an*

*aesthetic environmentalism*, for in the contest between the beauty of nature and the beauty of art, morally speaking, Kant sees the value of nature as more important. Thus, for moral reasons, it is more important to cultivate people's habits of appreciating the free beauties of nature over works of fine art.

Celmins—whose art practice has developed, in Danto's terms, after “the end of art”—arguably (*pace* Danto) continues the grand narrative by presenting a novel comparison between art and nature. She sets up, artistically, a kind of competition between them; unlike Kant, however, Celmins' work is not clear on whether art or nature has greater moral and aesthetic value. This ambiguity is to be expected and applauded: After all, Celmins' paired stones are not works of philosophy, they are works of art, and a work can only count as a genuine work of genius on Kant's second (official) conception of art if and only if it sparks a free play with aesthetic ideas. Celmins' artworks problematize and unleash, in an attentive spectator, a train of thoughts concerning the distinct aesthetic experiences and values on offer in art and nature, without being able to sum up these thoughts in determinate concepts and language. The result—on both Kantian aesthetic theory and Danto's philosophy of art—is a truly genial contemporary work of art.<sup>13</sup>

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