

ON REPEAT

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GENIUS AND GENESIS

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Meister

The problem of originality was first brought to my attention about a year ago. I went to see an exhibition by Tim Bennett at Jo van de Loo, entitled “Me-is-----ter.”¹ A play on the title of his previous work “Time is a waste,” it is also the German word for “master,” both in the sense of a master craftsman, and of the genius, creator of the “master-piece.” The work too seemed to recall modernism at its height, consisting as it did, of a series of paintings made by pouring plaster through gypsum board, Jackson Pollock style, and waiting for it to settle around the studio debris. The paintings were accompanied by sculpture, which had a similar modernist quality. Here plinth-like marble blocks were chiselled away by the artist, the broken pieces gathered and quickly reassembled on top. In both cases the narrative was the same: the work was to be the modernist masterpiece, created by the artist’s sudden spark of originality.

It was precisely this modernist narrative that I found troubling. Bennett’s exhibition made me realise how effective the kind of poststructuralist critique of originality, embodied by Rosalind’s Krauss’s essay, “The Originality of the Avant-garde” (1985) actually was. No one in the art world talks about originality – however appealing to the art-market the concept may be. Looking around, it is safe to assume we are all non-original now.

¹ <http://galerie-jovandeloo.com/exhibition/me-is-----ter>



Figure 1. Tim Bennett, “Me-is— —ter,” 2016, Jan van de Loo



Figure 2 (left). “Me-is— —ter,” showing *Time is a Waste (rose)*, 2016 with *Conspiracy Cloud (grey)* 2016 (125 x 90, plaster, studio debris, acrylic and plasterboard) in the background.



Figure 3 (right). “Me-is----ter,” showing *Time is a Waste (rose)*, 2016 with *Time is a Waste* and *Time is a Waste (bouquet)* Two *Conspiracy Clouds* are in the background.

In philosophy however – and especially that of Giles Deleuze – the concept of originality still maintains a certain currency. I am thinking of his early works, the short book

on Kant, *Kant's Critical Philosophy* and the essay, "The Idea of Genesis in Kant's Aesthetics" in particular. As other commentators have also shown, the genetic principle he finds in Kant's third critique, specifically in the free and indeterminate accord of the faculties, serves as a basis for the transcendental empiricism he later develops in works such as *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*.² But despite referring in these works to the concept of genius, Deleuze only does so within the set-up of transcendental empiricism. He explicitly does not mention art. For at stake is not so much the work the genius is said to create, but the conditions of experience that the genius is tasked with communicating, and whether or not these are adequate to the intense world of differences that according to Deleuze lay behind the being of the sensible.

The question is: Does Deleuze's work on originality have any relevance for our discussion about contemporary art? What would it mean to bring the above philosophical debate back to painting and sculpture? And doing so in a critical context where the concept of originality holds little or no value? It seems to me, that if we are to take the problem of originality seriously and not to dismiss it as either irrelevant or outmoded, a kind of double cross-examination must take place, of Deleuze by Krauss, and Krauss by Deleuze.

To engage with Deleuze's genetic perspective, while bearing in mind the post-structuralist critique of originality – this is the task of this short text.

Krauss And Originality

Before we begin, it is worthwhile to briefly summarise the relevant sections of Krauss's critique. Rosalind Krauss published "The Originality of the Avant-garde" as a response to the then recent exhibition of Augustus Rodin at the National Gallery in Washington, and the gallery's decision to cast some work for the first time. The section that concerns us most is part two, where Krauss examines the modernist concept of originality, relative to its opposite, repetition.

In this section, Krauss first connects the concept of originality to the historic avant-garde of the early 20th century. Finding it synonymous with the avant-garde's efforts to break away with tradition and to establish the new, Krauss argues that it stands for "origin, ground

² Daniel W. Smith is one of the first Deleuze readers to put forward this argument in his essay "Deleuze's Theory of Sensation: Overcoming the Kantian Duality" (30-56). Levi R. Bryant elaborates what such a "transcendental materialism" may consist of in "Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism: Notes toward a Transcendental Materialism" (28-48). Joe Hughes in his introduction to *Difference and Repetition* makes a similar point, *Deleuze's Difference and Repetition: A Readers Guide*.

zero, birth” (156). She shows how it is identified with the figure of the artist, capable of such continual acts of regeneration.

However, when Krauss examines actual avant-garde art practices, instead of originality she finds recurrence and repetition. For Krauss, this is exemplified by the modernist artist’s use of the grid. As Krauss argues, certain inherent structural properties of grid make it susceptible to vanguard appropriation, resulting in artist after artist claiming the grid as their own unique discovery. For those artists who believe that art should begin in an original purity, it is the disinterest and purposelessness of the grid that facilitates the sense of being born afresh. For others more materially inclined, the grid brings about the unity of the pictorial surface and material ground, which they believe lies at the origin of art.

Rosalind Krauss argues that this sense of originality, whether this is the originality associated with the artist or the originality of the surface, is a myth. Avant-garde artists may claim the grid as their own, but history shows that the grid has no one inventor. Similarly, fictional is the original unity of material ground and pictorial surface that the grid is said to manifest. While the grid traces the same surface it represents, it is nonetheless a representation of that surface. In picturing its various qualities, the grid obscures rather than reveals this surface.

Furthermore, the grid as a means of organising the pictorial field logically comes prior to any given surface. In Krauss’s semiotic language, every instance of the grid invokes a pre-existing system of grids, a visual text summarising other visual texts. Far from being unified, the grid’s ground is divided and multiple.

Krauss ends by comparing the modernist viewpoint with her own semiotic perspective. For modernism to claim that the grid presents an original unity of pictorial surface and material ground, it must operate in a space of auto-referentiality. Only within such a space can the grid signify nothing other than itself and become reified. In contrast, Krauss shows that the grid represents the pictorial surface, its signifier being located in another prior system of grids, which in turn signifies an even earlier one. With its endless chain of references, she characterises this signifier as transparent.

Concluding in a manner that seems to foreshadow Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism, Krauss argues that it is repetition rather than originality that is the real condition of the grid’s use in avant-garde practice. Modernism by valorising originality is only responsible for the repression of this fact.

What makes Krauss's critique so convincing is not that she dismisses originality as an outmoded concept, but that she shows the concept itself to be structurally, logically and axiomatically unsound. Although an artist like Tim Bennett does not incorporate the grid in his work, by engaging with the narrative of genius, he participates in the discourse of originality shown to be flawed.

Deleuze And Genesis

On the other hand, Deleuze's work on originality takes a very different approach. For one, he does not discuss art, modernist or otherwise. Instead, the essay "The Idea of Genesis in Kant's Aesthetics" offers a brief but succinct introduction to Kantian aesthetics, its central thesis, that Kant's *Critique of Judgement* does not complete the other two Critiques but instead provides them with a genetic ground.³ How it does so, is precisely what is of interest to us.

Central to its thesis is Kant's definition of the aesthetic judgement of taste as the feeling of pleasure resulting from a relationship of the faculties of understanding and of imagination, in which the first is indeterminate and the second is free. Precisely because this agreement of the faculties is indeterminate and free, it comes prior to the legislation of a determinative faculty, whether this is understanding or reason, which occurs when this relationship has a speculative or a practical purpose. According to Deleuze, the faculties would not enter into a relationship determined by one of themselves, were it not, to begin with, that they were capable of a free and indeterminate relation.⁴

The relationship in question is not something given, as was the case with the categories or ideas of Kant's previous two critiques, but engendered. It is internally generative of what it conditions, rather than transcendent and external. Accordingly, the third critique's structure is determined by the three ways in which free and indeterminate accord of

³ I am not the first to make to this argument – Deleuze's post-Kantian critique is well-known. See Joe Hughes' book on *Kant, Deleuze and the Genesis of Representation* (16-18) for a quick summary. A more extensive (and non-phenomenological) approach can be found in *Conditions of Thought – Deleuze and Transcendental Ideas* by Daniela Voss.

⁴ As an aside, it is also interesting to think of the link between Kant's definition and the subject of the current conference, the zone of indeterminacy Deleuze describes in "What is Philosophy" (173). Specified as that which is "only sensation" (Ibid.), it is possible to trace back this zone of living, whirling beings to the indeterminate and free accord of the faculties, – their state of "free play" – which likewise, can only be "felt" (Kant 62).

understanding and imagination is internally brought about. I will briefly summarise all three, because of how this affects our understanding of originality.

Deleuze argues that the basic principles of how the free and indeterminate accord is engendered can be found in the experience of the sublime, this experience offering a basic template that the two other ways of engendering accord will follow. All three are predicated on what is discovered in the sublime, that this genetic principle involves the activity of reason, whereby reason attempts to present its non-sensible ideas in the sensible realm. In the case of the sublime this happens when imagination is confronted with something beyond its powers of comprehension. As a consequence, reason steps in as the faculty of super-sensible thought, capable of comprehending what imagination cannot. In doing so, reason also raises imagination to its transcendental function, as the faculty capable of representing ideas of reason negatively. The resulting feeling is what is described as the sublime, a supra-sensible unity, in which both of the faculties involved are enriched.

The experience of certain type of nature brings about a comparable relation. In this second case, nature provides us with objects, which allow us to reflect in a free and indeterminate manner. Nature has what Deleuze calls a “rational purpose” (“The Idea of Genesis in Kant’s *Esthetics*” 63-66). Interestingly the example Kant lists and Deleuze refers to, “free formation” or “crystalisation,” (Kant 222, “The Idea of Genesis in Kant’s *Esthetics*” 65) is not dissimilar looks-wise to the random plaster shapes of Tim Bennett’s “Conspiracy Clouds.” The idea that in these objects reason finds a means of presenting its ideas sensibly is also recognised by Bennett, the conspiracy of the title referring to the possibility of seeing different things within. This reflective activity of reason, once again unifies and enriches the other two faculties, because it extends the concepts of understanding and frees the imagination from conceptual determination.

Finally, the last of the three ways engendering accord is genius. Operating according to a meta-aesthetic principle analogous to that defined by rational purpose, genius is responsible for the creation of objects, which allow for the reflective activity of our faculties – the same way as certain natural objects do. In the objects created by genius reason can once again present its ideas sensibly. If in the instance of the sublime, ideas of reason were presented directly but negatively in imagination’s struggle for comprehension, and in the mode defined by rational purpose, indirectly but positively through the experience of certain natural objects, in the case of genius, ideas are presented positively through the creation of an “other” nature ((“The Idea of Genesis in Kant’s *Esthetics*” 66). And as was the case where

natural objects were found to be beautiful, the reflective activity of reason mobilises further activity of the other two faculties, imagination and understanding. We can see many different things in the broken pieces of “Time is a Waste” and that in itself is said to be stimulating of further mental activity.

This is art and this would be the genius of Tim Bennett’s work, in that he is able to produce objects that inspire reflective activity, but such an interpretation would overlook Krauss’s critique. If we are to engage with the narrative of genius in a comprehensive manner, we must take both arguments into account.

Originality And Genesis

When doing so, it is easy to dismiss Deleuze as yet another example of someone, who upholds the modernist myth of originality and all that this entails. Like Krauss’s archetypal avant-garde artist, Deleuze conceives of originality as an absolute origin or beginning, the free and indeterminate agreement of the faculties found in aesthetic judgement being the ground for further activities of these same faculties. He too, by locating genetic ground in the mental faculties of the human subject identifies this originality with the self. The play of faculties, which extends understanding and frees imagination, is comparable to what Krauss calls “sources of life” (156). As Deleuze writes, “Genius ‘vitalizes.’ It ‘gives life’” (“The Idea of Genesis in Kant’s Esthetics” 67). In both cases, the organism metaphor is the same.

Similarly, the way Deleuze defines the work of art also has this modernist character. Remembering Krauss’s critique, it is partially the disinterestedness and purposelessness of the grid that facilitates the mistaken sense of origin. Likewise, by sharing the same meta-aesthetic principle as rational purpose found in nature, genius participates in nature’s goal-lessness. Just as the rational purpose of nature has no goal (otherwise we could determine in advance what beautiful objects are) the work of genius has no precedent and cannot be learned. Kant famously describes the free and indeterminate play of the faculties constituting the judgment of taste as “disinterested” (*Critique of Judgment* 45-6) – Deleuze’s genetic account is based on this disinterest.

However, a distinction needs to be made between the two concepts, originality and genesis, especially as presented by Deleuze. While Deleuze occasionally does use the term, “original” in the genetic sense to describe the free and indeterminate agreement of the faculties (“The Idea of Genesis in Kant’s Esthetics” 60), it remains something he tends to associate with the activities of the faculties, when these are neither indeterminate nor free,

when these activities serve a purpose (Ibid. 57, 58, 59). For instance, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, imagination schematizes and that is perceived as its “original” function (Ibid. 57, 59). But imagination only schematizes when it is given direction by the faculty of understanding. There is therefore a vast difference between imagination’s “original” schematizing activity and the “original” free activity of imagination found in the aesthetic judgment of taste. In the first case, originality belongs to the domain of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the faculties are readymade, relations determinate and tasks organized under the direction of the one legislative faculty. In the second case, originality is identified with a process of genesis that comes prior to such organization and coherency. In genesis, whether this is of the sublime, of the rational purpose connected to the beautiful or of genius, the faculties are primeval, the relations between them are indeterminate and free, and all activity is without constraint.

The difference between the two senses of the term “original” comes down to the human subject, or rather the lack of it. There is no human subject in the three geneses of the *Critique of Judgment*, only the “soul” (Ibid. 60, 62, 63, 66, 69, 70). Following Kant, Deleuze describes the free and indeterminate agreement of the faculties found in the aesthetic judgement of taste as the “ground of the soul” (Ibid. 60). As the relation between the faculties in free agreement is different to the relation, when this agreement serves a purpose, it is to be expected that the kind of subject these relations constitute is also different. The soul is not the “I,” the “self,” or even the human subject of the first two critiques. The soul is a “point of concentration” (Ibid. 69) a moment when the faculties discover the principle of their genesis, when faculties engender and animate each other. When pushed to its limits in the confrontation with the sublime, imagination “awakens” reason (Ibid. 62). Reason in turn pushes imagination to surpass its limits and represent the inaccessibility of the rational Idea. The soul is a state of continual excitement and growth.

The way Deleuze understands the difference between originality and genesis, makes the two logics, the logic of originality and the logic of genesis, non-comparable. Krauss’s essay is meant to demonstrate that what originality stands for – origin, absolute ground and continual renewal – has its basis in its opposite, recurrence and repetition. In having no inventor and belonging to a pre-existing system of signification, the grid exemplifies this misconception. It shows that repetition rather than originality is the real condition of its use in avant-garde practice. On the other hand, for Deleuze the genesis involved in the aesthetic judgment of taste, the indeterminate agreement of the faculties that comes prior to any other

relation dictated by purpose, sets a ground for further activity. In terms of transcendental empiricism, it is the real, rather than just the possible, condition of experience. It is, what in Krauss's logic would be impossible, the unconditional.

The two meanings of originality are non-comparable because they are non-equivalent. The originality rejected by Krauss is not the same as the genetic origin pursued by Deleuze, the first conditioned twofold, the second unconditional. Indeed, originality as Deleuze understands it, is closer in principle to the repetition Krauss associates with the structure and logic of the grid. As Krauss argues, the originality claimed for the grid is illusionary in two ways. On the one hand, the artist cannot pretend to be original, when what he creates is nothing more than a pre-existing historical structure. On the other hand, the grid as a representational text precedes the surface it is meant to reveal, a summary of all other visual texts through which the bound plane was organized as a pictorial field. However we view the grid, whether as the artist's creation or as a way of structuring the pictorial surface, it comes prior to the originality it is said to embody – such is its repetitive nature. Would it be such a leap to say that the grid in its repetition engenders these claims of originality? In light of Krauss's conclusion, that repetition is a condition of originality? Krauss by being so keen to dismiss originality for being wrongly valorized, fails to see that repetition has an original, because a genetic component.

Genius, providing it is seen as participating in logic of genesis, not originality, would then fall outside of Krauss's critique. Here we come full circle back to Tim Bennett's work. As much as his work could be dismissed for upholding concepts of originality shown to be flawed, it also has a genetic quality. In the gestures he employs, the genetic principle such as identified by Deleuze is at work. This is one that engenders, that makes things happen. For when Tim Bennett pours plaster, or quickly and haphazardly glues broken marble pieces together, he makes no claims of originality. It is not "he" who is the creative "genius." Rather responsibility is shifted to the gestures themselves. And these always belong to someone else, to Pollock or to Giacometti – to a long history of modernism. But he recognizes that it is precisely in their repetition, that they can hold creative potential.

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Bio

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