The relationship between art theory and art practice continues to be the subject of much debate. There are several reasons for this, all of them interconnected. First, the growth of interest in art and design as subjects of academic research, undertaken by both staff and graduate students within university art departments, has led to questions regarding the status of art as knowledge, for example, whether art can be quantified as a form of knowledge or whether it should have to be quantified as such. Second, and following on from the first point, many of the concepts of art that have been bequeathed to us by modernism do not encourage integration between theory and practice. Whether it is a sustained commitment to the modernist dictum of art for art’s sake or adherence to the metaphysical doctrines that went hand in hand with modernism’s departure from representation, modern art has often claimed for itself a purity or spontaneity that places it or its essence beyond classification, beyond words. This debate ultimately falls back on a third arena: the history of the theory of knowledge. The greater part of that history gives us arguments which try to wedge conceptual judgement and aesthetic experience apart. I am thinking here primarily of the epistemologies of Plato and Descartes, both of which argue to the effect that rational knowledge is of a wholly distinct order from sensory experience.

Given the way in which the theory-practice question ultimately unfolds itself to become the question of how we theorize knowledge or kinds of knowledge, it is understandable why discussion continues with such vigour. The amount of history behind the debate might prompt one to think that any intervention at this stage is futile; it must surely be impossible to resist or redirect the millennia-old patterns of thought which lead us to separate reason from sensation. However, what I propose to do in this paper is show how Kant’s theories of art and knowledge challenge the opposition between the conceptual and the aesthetic, and help us to understand art as a contribution to knowledge. Furthermore, in the light of Kant’s aesthetics, I show how aesthetic judgements made by the artist-researcher about their work can contribute to the theoretical basis of their research and, therefore, help to establish the epistemic status of their practice.
The relationship between art and knowledge has a long history but, unfortunately, as far as Western thought is concerned, the greater part of that history has consisted of arguments which try to keep the two apart. With Plato, art and knowledge are wholly opposed to another on account of the fact that, as he sees it, knowledge consists of intellectual meditation on the nature of essences, e.g., the essence of man, the essence of performing a particular task, the essence of goodness, whereas art is merely the reproduction of outer appearances and, therefore, an activity which leads us away from the inner essence of things. This bias towards reason and against sensibility is reasserted in the seventeenth century with the emergence of rationalist philosophy. For example, Descartes, in his Meditations, argues that the constituents of knowledge are clear and distinct ideas, as opposed to the information delivered by the senses. The properties of clarity and distinctness, on Descartes’ view, are only provided by the constancy and universality of reason, as evidenced in the axioms of geometry and mathematics. Once recourse is made to sensory experience of the external, physical world, then the possibility of error is introduced, since sensory experience is always particular and in a state of flux. Descartes asks himself: what can he claim to know? "Certainly… nothing of all the things which I perceived by means of the senses, for everything which fell under [them] is changed". Furthermore, Descartes accuses artists (in a similar vein to Plato) of presenting us with things "purely fictitious and absolutely false". This is because when they "represent Sirens and Satyrs by strange and extraordinary shapes", they "make a certain mixture and compound of limbs of various animals" and thus deviate from the order in which objects are arranged in the real world.

It is with Kant’s philosophy, however, that the relationship between art and knowledge is inverted and organized in such a way that art is shown to be constitutive of our capacity to generate knowledge at all. Kant is able to do this is because he reconfigures the way in which concepts stand in relation to experience. Briefly put, all experience, for Kant, occurs as experience under a description. That is to say, all experience is conceptually informed. In any one moment, the qualities of the experience I am having – its look, its feel, its particularity or determinacy – are apparent to me because my consciousness is exercising concepts which sculpt what would otherwise be a diffuse and inchoate reality into intelligible, organized experience. For example, when I drink a cup of coffee, although a liquid is presented to my taste buds, the particular bitter taste I find it to have as coffee is determined by the fact that I possess the concepts of "coffee" and "bitterness"; it is these concepts which give shape to the experience. As such, concepts are not necessarily words for Kant but elements within cognition that enable us to bring the contents of reality into focus; he would position verbal language as one expression or manifestation of the process whereby consciousness organizes and interacts with the world conceptually.

This represents a radical shift in perspective in the history of philosophy because it demonstrates a necessary condition of interrelationship between two realms – the conceptual and the sensible – that have traditionally been regarded as antithetical to one another. Thinking about experience in this way though is counter-intuitive, especially given the extent to which Plato and Descartes continue to influence our ideas in this area. Their dualist metaphysics still prompt us to regard thought and conceptualization as being of a different order to the apparent immediacy of sense perception. Kant’s claim though is precisely that sensory experience is not immediate, it is not pure, meaningful content which comes to us preformed, predeterminate. Rather, what we receive from the world Kant calls "intuition" (Anschauung), source material which requires mediation and determination by concepts within us. As Kant’s dictum makes the point: "thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind".
Kant calls this process of conceptual determination "judgement" (Urteil) and he divides it into two kinds: determinative and reflective. What is interesting to note here is that this distinction corresponds directly with the distinction between knowledge and art, and it is the way in which the two forms of judgement are brought into relationship by Kant that helps to establish the epistemic status of art. Determinative judgement, on the one hand, creates knowledge in the sense that it subsumes an intuition under a concept, and thereby determines an object to be a certain kind of thing, for example, "This is a tomato". A reflective judgement, on the other hand, is a judgement which is made in the absence of an empirically determinate concept, that is to say, it does not identify or assign a property to an object. What does this mean? One of the principal forms of reflective judgement for Kant is aesthetic judgement, the kind of judgement that is made in response to an artwork, for example, "The painting is filmic" or "The mark-making is very active". To describe a painting as filmic or a drawing as active is not to ascribe empirically determinate qualities to the objects but to comment upon how the artworks are perceived or interpreted by the viewer. If we were to describe a work of art purely in terms of determinate judgements, we would list all those qualities about the work that are verifiable through observation and measurement, which are principally the materials used, the work's physical dimensions, and the fact that it is a painting or drawing or sculpture, etc.

To distinguish between judging objects determinatively and judging perceptions of objects reflectively would seem to suggest that Kant only accepts verifiable judgements about the world as knowledge, and regards aesthetic judgements as mere statements of personal opinion. But this is not the case. The fact that reflective judgement does not assign a determinate property to its object is initially a major problem for Kant, since his entire theory of judgement is based on the premise that each and every judgement requires the subsumption of an intuition under a concept. If this is the foundation of Kant's theory, yet he entertains a (reflective) form of judgement which does not determinatively exercise a concept, how can his theory of judgement be accepted as complete or coherent? It would seem that his own definition of judgement precludes reflective judgement from taking place. Kant's solution is to argue that since judgement always requires a concept, what reflective judgement does in these circumstances is not categorize its object but produce a concept which reflects the mind's capacity to form a judgement, that is to say, the mind's capacity to get a purchase on the phenomenon before it that is posing a challenge to categorization. The concept that is produced is "nature's subjective purposiveness", the concept that nature appears as if it were designed for our form of perception. As Kant defines the term, purposiveness is the principle that what to human insight is contingent in the particular (empirical) natural laws does nevertheless contain a law-governed unity, unfathomable but still conceivable by us, in the combination of what is diverse in them to [form] an experience that is intrinsically [an sich] possible. 9

In other words, experience, as the subsumption of intuitions under concepts, is only possible if the inchoate, indeterminate particularity exhibited by intuition is nevertheless amenable to some form of order or unity being brought to it through conceptualization. It is in this minimal sense that we have to think of nature appearing to us as if it had been designed for our awareness. As such, purposiveness is the concept at the centre of Kant's entire critical system. He defines perception as the determination of intuitions by concepts but, in arguing for this, he does not want to claim that the mind creates its own reality; although it is subjective mind which is carrying out the organization of reality, it is an objective (as opposed to a purely idealistic) world which Kant wants to be the end result. Purposiveness – the appearance of the world as if it had been designed for our awareness
is the concept which allows Kant to claim that, although concepts organize and determine the otherwise indeterminate particularity of intuition, this process does not involve the imposition of order but rather occurs as the emergence of order and graspsability necessary for our faculties to obtain a unified, coherent purchase on the world; in Kant’s words, purposiveness is the "harmony of an object… with the mutual relation of the cognitive powers… that are required for every empirical cognition" 10.

It might seem as if this excursion into Kant’s theory of judgement has taken us away from the matter in hand: an account of how Kant's philosophy helps to demonstrate the epistemic status of art. But it is precisely because reflective judgement is positioned at the centre of Kant’s thought that his philosophy can be used to give aesthetics a cognitive dimension. Reflective judgement is reflective in the sense that its concept of purposiveness is a reflection of our capacity to form judgements per se, in other words, the capacity of our faculties to interact meaningfully and determinatively with the world. Aesthetic judgement, as I indicate above, is a form of reflective judgement for Kant because it does not determine an object to be of a particular kind. Instead, as we customarily think about aesthetic judgement, it expresses a subjective opinion or point of view about the artwork. However, what is innovative about Kant's theory of judgement is that this apparent lack of determination or objectivity – for example, the fact that concepts or metaphors are used which can’t be evidenced or empirically supported by the object in question – is claimed to be part of the purposiveness whereby we reflect on our own capacity to find or produce concepts which organize the world and generate knowledge. Alternatively put, with aesthetic judgement, there is no concept available for immediate and determinative use, and so consciousness is put in a position where it has to look for a concept, where the process of looking and entertaining possible conceptual fits is part of the purposiveness through which our concepts open onto reality. Thus, the demands made by an artwork on us to find the appropriate words to describe its effect or significance are paradigms for the conceptual or interpretative decisions which have to be made in cognitive, determinative judgements at large.

The importance which Kant’s philosophy holds for aesthetics is immense, since it positions the aesthetic as that realm of human experience where we appraise the relationship between the world and our conceptual understanding of it. We enjoy art, literature, and music because they move us subjectively to offer judgements which display the purposiveness required for objectivity. It should be pointed out, however, that Kant’s account of knowledge continues to be controversial, largely because of the role it assigns to subjectivity in the construction of knowledge. A recent example of the disagreement it can lead to is the science wars: scientists, cultural theorists, sociologists, and philosophers in dispute over the status of scientific knowledge 11. Is science a disinterested reflection of the world as it really is or a discourse whose findings are heavily influenced by the concepts and interests of those who work within it? Kant is cited by many of the theorists who support the latter view, since his epistemology is the first and fullest working out of the thesis that the structure we find in the world is in some sense dependent on the concepts we employ in cognition 12.

In the context of studio- or practice-based research, Kant shows how the generation of knowledge and the production of art are overlapping domains on account of the role that concepts play in the perception of significance in art. From Kant's perspective, art is a thoroughly conceptual process, and this doesn’t apply just to conceptual art. If experience is always experience under a description, i.e., it is always conceptually informed, then art (as a part of experience) is also always art under a description. Art is conceptual both in a determinative sense and in a reflective sense. With the former, the artist carves up the
world conceptually in terms of the objects they use, the people they meet and work with, and the situations in which they operate. But this is not where the epistemic significance of art lies; rather, it is with the latter, reflective application of concepts.

To describe a work of art purely in terms of determinative judgements, as I explain above, would be to list all those qualities about the work that are verifiable through observation and measurement, which are principally the materials used and the work’s physical dimensions. While decisions about these are undeniably important for the artist-researcher, there is the question of how empirical qualities can have or acquire the significance which might make them aesthetically valuable or the subjects of theoretical enquiry, for empirical qualities themselves on their own are not the source of the meaning or significance of an artwork. Rather, this comes from the aesthetic judgements which are made about the work. For example, the size of a large-scale drawing is significant not because its dimensions happen to be, say, 400 cm. x 300 cm. but because it has a particular aesthetic impact on the viewer or has particular aesthetic significance for the viewer, perhaps in terms of the perception of space or the human form or the interpretation of a series of marks made at that scale. For this impact or significance to take place, the viewer will have had to summon a concept not from the "determinative" region of concepts of "paper", "charcoal", "wall", "height", "width", etc. but, in virtue of purposiveness, from another part of the framework of concepts which apply to the world. Thus, aesthetic responses to a large-scale abstract drawing might be in terms (or concepts) of "activity", "physicality", "gesture", "intricacy", or "tactility". This aspect of Kant lends itself very well to explaining why so many of our responses to art are metaphorical. Metaphor, loosely defined, describes one thing in terms of another, e.g., time is a river, a blue that chimes, or, to give a more Kantian definition: metaphor is a result of the purposiveness whereby we reflect upon our capacity to conceptualize a diverse and variegated world and, as a result, summon a concept from a remote or "non-determinative" part of our conceptual scheme in order to get a purchase on the object before us.

In addition, the researcher’s thesis – the proposition they are seeking to support – is a form of aesthetic judgement, since it attributes significance to a body of work which cannot be evidenced determinatively or empirically. If an artist’s research is looking at, for example, the notion of drawing as performance, there is no readily available or theoretically neutral means of quantifying the extent to which a drawing might be classified as performative. This is not say that there aren't any criteria for assessing a claim about art or that criteria cannot be devised. Rather, it is to observe that any criteria which might be forwarded, e.g., "presence of lines expressing bodily movement" or "capacity of a drawing to undermine its own status as object", will either amount to aesthetic judgement themselves or imply aesthetic judgements in terms of, for example, "physicality", "gesture", "process", "activity".

As far as the individual artist-researcher is concerned, how might a Kantian theory of judgement assist them in the presentation of their practice as knowledge? Given the proximity of Kant’s aesthetic judgement to metaphor, is it the case that all the researcher has to do is produce a few good metaphors for their work and then fall back on the fact that, according to Kant’s theory of judgement, the metaphorical realignment of our concepts is held to be vital for the construction of knowledge? I would like to give two answers to this question. First, in a very limited or muted sense, largely because it draws on an area which it is beyond the scope of this paper, I would say "yes". This is because metaphor, over the past few decades, has been "epistemologized" or made perceptually significant in philosophy and psychology 13. While not wanting to suggest that all the research in these areas is pointing in the same direction or making consistent and
confirmatory claims, there is nevertheless the shared recognition (very much on Kantian grounds) that our capacity for creating metaphors is central to the mapping and organizational processes we employ in perception at large. On this account, far from being merely a source of decoration or peripheral imagery, metaphor is theorized as the generation of conceptual relationship and cross-referral which allows knowledge to be constructed and coordinated.

Although the way in which metaphor does this and the way in which it might be realized in practice-based research cannot be discussed at length in this paper, some hints can be given in my second answer. Is epistemic art simply a matter of producing good metaphors or aesthetic judgements? In order to answer this (for the second time), it needs to be borne in mind just how Kant is defining aesthetic judgement. Once again, aesthetic judgement for Kant is not merely a statement of personal opinion but the perception of significance in a work. As such, it can act as a spur to further aesthetic judgement and to the production of further artwork. For example, in the case of a practice-based Ph.D. examining the performative nature of drawing, if it becomes possible to recognize certain kinds or clusters of mark-making in a drawing, e.g., sweeping, cutting, busy, frenetic, dragging (all of which are components of aesthetic judgements), then these themselves might become areas to be enlarged upon, either individually or collectively, in the research. The suggestion might be made that, collectively, each category of mark behaves in the drawing like a character in a play, and this, in turn, might prompt the researcher to investigate both theoretically and practically the relationship between narrative structure and the structure of an image. For example, theoretically, the researcher might turn to consider art as structure in Aristotle's Poetics 14 or the paradigm Dufrenne gives of the artwork as theatre in The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience 15, and in terms of practice, drawings might be produced wherein marks are made with particular narrative sequences in mind. The epistemic value of these investigations lies in the mutual responsiveness between artwork and aesthetic judgement, since it is in terms of these reactions that we – the artist-researcher, the examiners, and the audience – get to witness new or innovative ways in which concepts might be applied to the world. It is this bringing to light of new respects of relevance between conceptual domains that has become one of the main areas of interest in the study of cognitive metaphor.

The mention of "theory and practice" above might give the impression that I am reinstating the Cartesian distinction between rational knowledge on the one hand and non-epistemic studio activity on the other. But this is not the case. What Kant’s aesthetics helps us to appreciate is that, if aesthetic judgements are made by drawing on concepts from other areas of experience or enquiry, then it is likely that there is some important work to be done in the history of ideas in examining just what follows when, to use the above example, we have to reassess our concept of drawing in the light of the concept of narrative. It is true that part of this research will be textual, but the theory-practice distinction can’t be imposed here as a diametric opposition since, from a Kantian perspective, the concepts that are being explored textually are the very same concepts which allow the artist and their audience to perceive the drawings as drawings and also as performances.

The benefit of Kant’s philosophy to the question of art as knowledge is that, while it acknowledges that aesthetic judgement does not constitute knowledge in a determinative sense (this represents the traditional argument against art as knowledge on the basis of its lack of objective evidence or determinability), it nevertheless argues that the conceptual shifts we make or are invited to make in aesthetic judgement are constitutive of the cognitive freedom that is necessary for knowledge in general. Admittedly, my argument for
the epistemic value of art is based on a Kant's theory of knowledge, a theory that challenges the concepts of knowledge we have inherited from rationalism, but a discussion of the relationship between art and knowledge needs to bear in mind the way in which the two areas have been defined historically. This is particularly relevant when we consider the importance which Kant assigns to conceptuality in his theories of knowledge and art. At first glance, Kant's position might be taken as an "over-conceptualization" of art or even, dare I say it, an act which removes the "heart" from art and replaces it with concepts. But this line of thinking only illustrates the extent to which we fall back on dualistic metaphysics: knowledge belongs to the mind, art to the body and sensation. Kant rejects this dualism and, in its place, offers (1) a theory of knowledge in which concepts are the means by which we organize and come to know the world, and (2) a theory of aesthetics in which our judgements about art are seen to create the conceptual relationships and cross-referrals necessary for knowledge to occur at all.

Endnotes


4 Descartes, op. cit., p. 97.

5 Ibid.

6 Kant's principal works in this regard are: Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933); original work published 1871; 2nd. edition 1787; Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987); original work published 1790.

7 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, op. cit., A51, B75, p. 93. "A" and "B" refer respectively to the pagination of the first and second editions of the Critique as they appear in the original Akademie edition of Kant's complete works. These numbers are reproduced in the margins of Kemp Smith's translation.

8 Kant, Critique of Judgment, op. cit., Ak. 179-181, pp. 18-20; "Ak." refers to the pagination in the original Akadanie edition of Kant's complete works, and these numbers are reproduced in the margins of the Pluhar translation.

9 Ibid., Ak. 183-184, p. 23.

10 Ibid., Ak.191, p. 31.


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