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HAZLITT ON AESTHETIC DEMOCRACY AND ARTISTIC GENIUS

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The figure of the individual artist-genius is anything but in vogue. In 2021, for the first time ever, all five nominees for the Turner Prize are socially engaged art collectives. In 2019 the four nominees for the Turner Prize decided that no individual should win the award and so they formed a collective instead, sharing the prize money equally between them. For decades, Marxist art historians have analysed the underlying socio-economic conditions that allow for particular kinds of art and particular kinds of artist to emerge – placing the emphasis on the social, rather than the individual. 2021 is the fiftieth anniversary of feminist art historian Linda Nochlin's pivotal essay 'Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?', which exposed how boys are historically taken more seriously than girls and are therefore more likely to become 'great artists', potentially even considered geniuses.[1] Nochlin also pointed to how many artists acquire their status, at least in part, because of their father's occupation (a point in case would be Picasso whose father was an art teacher). According to these narratives, artistic genius is a product of society, or even a socially constructed concept.

William Hazlitt (1778-1830), the leading art critic of his time, was from a Romantic tradition that had a completely different understanding of artistic genius, a subject that he wrote about on several occasions.[2] In his essay 'Whether Genius is Conscious of its Powers?', first published in 1823, Hazlitt defined genius thus: 'The definition of genius is that it acts unconsciously; and those who have produced immortal works, have done so without knowing how or why' (xii, 118).[3] Understanding and the ability to explain are not necessarily connected. Indeed, for Hazlitt, understanding without the capacity to explain is compatible with, possibly

[1] Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', in *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, ed. by Maura Reilly (London: Thames and Hudson, 2015 [1971]), 42–68.

[2] Not only is Hazlitt regarded as the foremost art critic of his time, it has even been argued that he invented art criticism as a genre. See G. Robert Stange, 'Art Criticism as a Prose Genre', in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. G.L. Levine and W.A. Madden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 39–52: 41.

[3] All quotations from Hazlitt are taken from *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent, 1930-4). References are by volume and page.

even fundamental to, genius. He writes about the role of intuition, which he sees as linked to reason, albeit as a kind of subconscious link that jumps from the first rung to the last on the ladder of consequential thought, skipping the steps that are necessary for conscious understanding, but nevertheless, still arriving at a sound conclusion. For Hazlitt, this is how artistic genius works. In a previous essay 'On Genius and Common Sense', in *Table-Talk* (1821), Hazlitt wrote that art is decided by feeling, not reason (viii, 31). This is compatible with intuition and his assertion in 'Whether Genius is Conscious of its Powers?' that artists such as 'Correggio, Michael Angelo, Rembrandt, did what they did without premeditation or effort' (xii, 118). The discussion below analyses two aspects of Hazlitt's thought that most relate to artistic genius: gusto and what I shall term 'aesthetic democracy'. I shall apply Hazlitt's thoughts on art and democracy to the painting of Thomas Kinkade, the reassessment of 'slaver' statues and a conceptual project by Komar and Melamid before asking, by means of a close reading of Hazlitt's notion of gusto, how his concept of individual artistic genius stands up today, in an art climate that is deeply sceptical of such concepts.

The democratization of art

In his essay 'Whether the Fine Arts are Promoted by Academies' (1814), Hazlitt made the case that there is an inverse correlation between popular opinion and aesthetic quality. He wrote that 'matters of taste […] can only be decided upon by the most refined understandings', and that 'public taste is […] vitiated, in proportion as it is public; it is lowered with every infusion it receives of common opinion' (xviii, 46). This is the 'design by committee' or 'too many cooks spoil the broth' principle. Hazlitt's views on 'refined understandings' and 'common opinion' are anathema to contemporary art criticism, which can be characterized by a distrust of connoisseurship and a preference for valuing and including popular opinion. Connoisseurship waned with Clement Greenberg's formalist influence on art criticism, which reigned from the 1930s until the early 1960s. As postmodernism emerged, the taste of the connoisseur was increasingly seen as culturally constructed, often privileging upper-class values and the authority of the critic became a contentious topic of study. At the same time, the development of new forms of art that value audience participation or even collaboration came into being. These forms of participatory art take pride in their egalitarian structures. This development, which I shall refer to as 'the democratization of art', is the antithesis to Hazlitt's assertions above.

The reassessment of 'slaver statues' in Britain, America and elsewhere, is another kind of democratic judgement of art prevalent today. At first, this might appear to be a political rather than an aesthetic assessment, but the distinction is not so clear-cut. Yinka Shonibare asks us to look beyond apparently obvious aesthetic beauty to consider the ethical implications of an artwork. In an interview with *The Observer*, Shonibare explained why he remade Henry Raeburn's painting *Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch* (1795, National Gallery of Scotland) as a three-dimensional installation (*Reverend on Ice,* 2005): 'I do think Raeburn's painting is beautiful, but perhaps in a way that other people don't. I see a dark history

Figure 1 Sir Henry Raeburn, *Reverend Robert Walker (1755-1808) Skating on Duddington Loch,* 1795

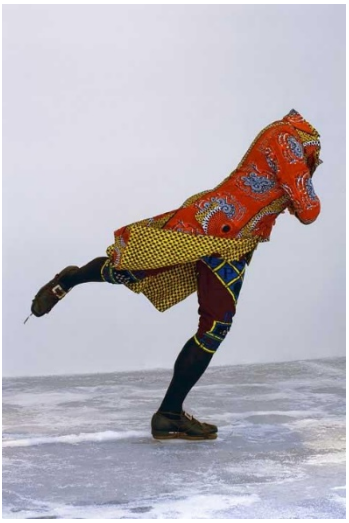

Figure 2 Yinka Shonibare, *Reverend on Ice,* 2005. (c) Yinka Shonibare CBE. All Rights Reserved DACS 2021.

behind its opulence. I think: who had to be enslaved in order for you to be able to afford a portrait painter?'[4]

According to what is known in philosophy of art as 'aesthetic moralism',[5] Shonibare's assessment of portraits of rich white men in opulent gold frames is aesthetic, as are assessments of statues of slave owners or traders. The philosopher Ella Peek explains that the aesthetic moralist holds that 'the aesthetic value of an artwork is determined by its moral value. The most extreme version of this position reduces all aesthetic value to moral value'.[6] According to this line of thought, statues glorifying slavery, or paintings paid for with the profits of slavery are not only morally reprehensible, they are also aesthetic failures as a consequence. The

[4] Rachel Cooke, 'Yinka Shonibare: "I Wanted to Do a Work Connected to Trafalgar Square"', *The Observer*, (15 May 2010), https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/may/16/yinka-shonibare-fourth-plinth-trafalgar [accessed 18 November 2019].

[5] The specific term 'aesthetic moralism' is used by a number of theorists, see: Marie Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Kate Wagner, 'Architecture, Aesthetic Moralism, and the Crisis of Urban Housing', *Common Edge*, (2018), https://commonedge.org/architecture-aesthetic-moralism-and-the-crisis-of-urban-housing/ [accessed 25 March 2021]. Within aesthetics, the prefix 'aesthetic' is usually omitted and the term 'moralism' suffices; see, R.W. Beardsmore, *Art and Morality*, New Studies in Practical Philosophy (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1971); Noël Carroll, 'Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research', *Ethics*, 110.2 (2000), 350–87.

[6] Ella Peek, 'Ethical Criticism of Art', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* https://iep.utm.edu/art-eth/ [accessed 27 November 2018].

opposite position is referred to as either 'autonomism' or 'aestheticism'.[7] Peek explains that the 'aesthetic autonomist' holds that 'it is inappropriate to apply moral categories to art; they should be evaluated by "aesthetic" standards alone'.[8] Philosophically, there is no consensus about whether ethical traits should be considered in the aesthetic assessment of art. In fact, there are many different positions within what is known as 'the ethical criticism of art' – a field of its own in aesthetics. Outside aesthetics however, in the art world and the academic discipline of fine art, there are very few 'aesthetic autonomists' and the view that ethical traits can and should be considered dominates.

In a climate that distrusts experts and connoisseurs, to make any essentialist claim about art is seen as morally dubious. The very notion of artistic genius, if it exists at all, is challenged on moral grounds, as for every culturally privileged 'genius', other potential geniuses are excluded. Following the logic of aesthetic moralists, the opinions of the expert-critic mean little regarding an artwork's artistic quality because the aesthetic value of an artwork depends on its moral qualities and morality is not fixed. For those who are so inclined, Hazlitt's assertion that 'refined understanding' is required for the assessment of art implies a belief that some people have *inherently* better taste than others. Indeed, in his 'Judging of Pictures' (1823), Hazlitt does allude to the necessity of innate sensibilities in the judgement of art: 'No man can judge of poetry without possessing in some measure a poetical mind. It need not be of that degree necessary to create, but it must be equal to taste and to analyse' (xviii, 182-183). Elsewhere he states that the judgement of art 'requires a mind capable of estimating the noble, or touching, or terrible, or sublime subjects which they present' (xviii, 183). Today's art world would likely dismiss Hazlitt's separation of those with 'refined understanding' from those with 'common opinion' as prejudiced, primarily classist, but with potential for sexual and racist discrimination. Hazlitt's position appears incompatible with the contemporary distrust of expert claims that some aesthetic judgements are superior to others and, to this end, would be seen as morally problematic.

My contention is that Hazlitt's claim that aesthetic judgement requires refined understanding is not in itself elitist or morally problematic. If we recognize that by 'refined understanding' he meant something like 'educated judgement', then his use of the phrase 'common opinion' can be taken to mean 'popular' or 'untrained' opinion. Granted, a lack of access to training, on how to judge art, or to great artworks from which they might gain the experience of judging art, would prevent people from developing their judgement.[9] However, the debate about access to art

[7] According to Peek 'the terms "autonomism" and "aestheticism" can be used interchangeably' (ibid). While there may be subtle differences, for the purposes of this essay, they are not important.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Shortly after Hazlitt's death in 1830, following the recommendations laid out in the *Report from Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures* (1835), the British government opened a series of Government Schools of Design. The first (est. 1837) would go on to become the Royal College of Art. More than twenty others would spring up across the country to educate the manufacturing classes in design beauty. More than twenty years after Hazlitt's death, museums, such as the Museum of Manufactures (which would eventually become the Victoria and Albert Museum) sought to play a similarly educational role, albeit restricted to the capital and a select few other cities.

and education is other to the debate about whether training and exposure to art enhances aesthetic contemplation. Hypothetically, I concede, it is possible for somebody with no prior exposure to art and no prior training in art appreciation to be innately a superior critic to somebody else with a wealth of experience and training: as Hazlitt wrote, 'No man can judge of poetry without possessing in some measure a poetical mind' (xviii, 182). Nonetheless, it is my contention that in most, if not all, cases, experience and training will enhance any individual's aesthetic appreciation, regardless of their innate ability. This hardly seems a controversial stance, especially when likened to other comparable industries. For instance, trained sommeliers can generally discern qualities in wine that the average dilettante cannot. Almost anybody can potentially become a sommelier; only people with literally no sense of taste will never become sommeliers, no matter how much training they receive or how long they persist in trying. A person with a poor sense of taste is less likely to become a great sommelier than a person with a natural gift in this area, but they will still probably improve at appreciating wine with training and experience. Thus while Hazlitt's assertion about refined judgement is hierarchical, it is not necessarily elitist or ethically problematic.

Aesthetic democracy

Hazlitt's separation of political and aesthetic democracy frames his statement about refined understandings:

> The principal of universal suffrage, however applicable to matters of government, which concerns the common feelings and common interests of society, is by no means applicable to matters of taste, which can only be decided upon by the most refined understandings. (xviii, 46)

I contend that this separation allows artists and critics to support political democracy at the same time as defending an 'undemocratic' generation and appreciation of art. The generation and appreciation of art is 'undemocratic' when arrived at not by consensus, but by expert ability and judgement respectively. This does not imply abandoning ethical concerns regarding respect for others, since everybody can potentially become an artist or art critic.

Equally, the opposite argument – that every aesthetic judgement is equal – is not a morally superior position. This aesthetically democratic belief does not show respect for others, as it ignores the barriers that prevent access to the arts and, consequently, the ability for individuals to develop their aesthetic appreciation. This is compatible with Nochlin's argument that I mentioned at the start of this essay. Nochlin famously compared great women artists to Eskimo tennis players. There have been no great Eskimo tennis players, she explains:

> no matter how much we might wish there had been. That this should be the case is regrettable, but no amount of manipulating the historical or critical evidence will alter the situation; nor will accusations of male-chauvinist distortion of history. [T]here are no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cezanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol […] If there actually were large numbers of 'hidden' great women artists, or if there really should be different standards for women's art as opposed to men's – and one can't have it both ways – then what are the feminists fighting for? If women have in fact achieved the same status as men in the arts, then the status quo is fine as it is.[10]

The point is not that Eskimos are inherently unable to play tennis, or that women are genetically unable to become great artists, but that there are social structures in place that prevent them from doing so. Similarly, aesthetic judgement can be refined through experience and training, and the barriers that prevent this should be acknowledged and removed, but even then, not everyone can become great, due to variation in natural ability. Seen in this light, Hazlitt's declaration that public opinion dilutes aesthetic quality is not morally objectionable, even in an age of participatory art. Dave Beech has argued that participatory art might appear inclusive, but the cost of inclusion is 'the neutralization of […] difference and the dampening of [the] powers of subversion'.[11] He aligns himself with Nochlin, when he says that 'participation [in art] only papers over the cracks' and that 'the changes we need are structural'.[12] Beech, a Marxist, and Nochlin, a feminist, are in this regard compatible with my reading of Hazlitt rather than opposed to it, as I implied in the introduction, although, to be clear, Nochlin does not believe in any kind of inexplicable power embedded in solitary geniuses – she believes that such notions stem from an art history of monographs glorifying individual artists.

Furthermore, in my view, Hazlitt's argument in favour of refined judgement and against aesthetic democracy is defensible, not only on moral, but also on aesthetic grounds. I will substantiate this claim through two examples. The first is popular music, which must be unchallenging and inoffensive to practically all who encounter it (the term 'easy listening' is an accurate description). Music that offends, shocks, confuses or challenges listeners will inevitably alienate portions of its audience and thereby become less popular. However, popular music can quickly become tedious once the experienced listener recognizes it as unoriginal, derivative and repetitive. More original or challenging forms of music require some prior experience or knowledge in order to be appreciated. This is as true of Captain Beefheart or heavy metal as it is of jazz (none of which habitually top the charts). As Hazlitt would put it, 'public taste is […] vitiated, in proportion as it is public' (xviii, 46).

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[10] Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', 45–46.

[11] Dave Beech, 'Include Me Out!', *Art Monthly*, 315, (2008), 1–4: 4.

[12] Ibid.

Figure 3 Komar & Melamid, *America's Most Wanted.* 1994 Courtesy of the artists and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

The same argument can be made for painting. The idyllic paintings by Thomas Kinkade (1958-2012) resemble fairy-tales where fluffy bunnies are waiting to hop out in front of pretty cottages by babbling brooks under rainbows. Kinkade achieved stunning commercial success in his lifetime. His work reportedly adorned the walls of one in twenty American homes as well as appearing in print form on many more calendars and greeting cards.[13] Yet he received no critical acclaim. Instead, he is considered the quintessential chocolate box artist; the embodiment of what Greenberg called 'kitsch'. My students occasionally disagree with my estimation of Jack Vettriano, whom I consider in the same vein as Kinkade, but they never defend Kinkade. Even a cursory glance at his work by anybody with even a minimal training reveals that what is popular is not necessarily of high artistic quality.

To avoid accusations that I am merely cherry-picking a popular but bad artist, I will refer to the dissident Russian duo Komar and Melamid who have critically addressed the subject of popular opinion as it relates to aesthetic taste. For their project, *The People's Choice* (1994-1997), Komar and Melamid employed a market research company to conduct surveys to determine the 'most wanted' and 'least wanted' painting in eleven countries. In America, they found a fondness for figurative work, landscapes, the colour blue, animals and historical subject matter. Subsequently, Komar and Melamid produced a landscape painting that is dominated by a blue sky and lake with deer in the water and George Washington standing near the shoreline. The result, *America's Most Wanted* (1994), vindicates Hazlitt's theory: the work is vitiated by the public consultation (or 'infusion of common opinion').

[13] Dan Glaister, 'Thomas Kinkade: The Secret Life and Strange Death of Art's King of Twee', *The Guardian*, (9 May 2012), http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/may/09/thomas-kinkade-dark-death-painter [accessed 10 August 2018].

The People's Choice raises questions about the relationship between democracy and freedom. Komar notes that, as they repeated the exercise in different countries, they found they ended up with more or less the same results, painting more or less the same blue landscapes… 'Looking for freedom, we found slavery'.[14] Komar and Melamid were from the Soviet Union where citizens were not free to vote to change their government, but *The People's Choice* questions what freedom we have today when we allow our lives to be dictated by market research. Komar and Melamid's project asks, 'what kind of culture is produced by a society that lives and governs itself by opinion polls?'[15] The answer is, 'a homogenous one'. Public art that has a public consultation as part of its commissioning process is usually another example of art that is vitiated by the infusion of common opinion: design by committee at its worst. The artist's autonomy is essential to produce original and diverse art; if the result is unpopular, that does not mean it is an aesthetic failure.

Hazlitt linked originality and genius and in so doing linked genius with individuality. In the second of his essays, 'On Genius and Common Sense', he asserted that 'Genius or originality is, for the most part, *some strong quality in the mind, answering to and bringing out some new and striking quality in nature*' (viii, 42; Hazlitt's emphasis). He criticized Sir Joshua Reynolds's claim that there is no such thing as artistic originality (viii, 45), excoriating Reynolds for listing Raphael's influences as if they were the sum of his talent. Hazlitt was very much in favour of specialization, which he also linked to genius by drawing parallels between manufacturing and art appreciation: 'The division of labour is an excellent principle in taste as well as in mechanics' (viii, 49). For Hazlitt, passion and personal interest were necessary conditions of 'sympathy' in art (viii, 42), by which he meant sympathy for beauty or some other distinguishing characteristic in nature (viii, 49). In other words, as Hazlitt makes clear in 'On Genius and Common Sense', first published 1821, you cannot paint a sympathetic portrait or depiction of anything by rules alone: 'Rules are applicable to abstractions, but expression is concrete and individual' (viii, 39-40). For the individual painter to successfully achieve sympathy with his or her subject and to communicate this to a viewer requires something that Hazlitt termed 'gusto'.

Gusto

Hazlitt declared that 'Gusto in art is power or passion defining any object'; that objects contain character; and that 'it is in giving this truth of character from the truth of feeling […] that gusto consists' (iv, 77). By way of example, he assessed the landscapes of Claude Lorraine (*c.*1600-1682). While elsewhere he called Claude 'a perfect landscape painter' (viii, 45), in his text 'On Gusto', first published in *The Examiner* in 1816, he noted that 'perfect as they are', Claude's landscapes 'want gusto' (iv, 79). Hazlitt accused Claude of seeing atmosphere, but not feeling it.

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[14] Komar in *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, ed. by JoAnn Wypijewski, Revised (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 35.

[15] Michael Govan, 'Director's Introduction to The Most Wanted Paintings on the Web', *Dia* http://awp.diaart.org/km/intro.html [accessed 10 August 2018].

According to him, Claude's realistic presentation speaks 'the visible language of nature truly', but this is deemed insufficient (iv, 79). He likened such paintings to a mirror: no matter how perfect they appear, they become mere copies because of their lack of feeling and character (iv, 79). Claude may well have painted landscapes with *visual* truth, but for Hazlitt they lacked truth of *character*. Claude's landscapes are found wanting because the artist does not feel the truth of the atmosphere (or character) in his subject and consequently the viewer cannot feel it either. Similarly, the flesh-colour of Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641) is judged to have great truth and purity, but to lack gusto, because it lacks truth of feeling: they are 'painted without passion, with indifference' (iv, 77), but this is not the only criterion lacking. Van Dyck's flesh-colour also lacks gusto because 'It has not the internal character, the living principle within it'(iv, 77), which is to say, truth of character.

For Hazlitt, gusto is necessarily particular to each artist. It comes in different varieties, because each artist has their own strengths and those who manage to achieve a sense of gusto will do so in different ways. For example, the gusto in Michelangelo is masculine, whereas the gusto in Correggio is, apparently, effeminate (iv, 78). Rubens ostensibly has gusto in his depictions of fauns and satyrs, (iv, 78) but not his human flesh (iv, 77). Raphael supposedly has gusto in his depictions of people, but in nothing else (and Hazlitt holds his landscapes in particularly low regard) (iv, 78-79). This is where gusto is linked to artistic genius. Many artists can paint well; they can be taught how to accurately represent objects. They cannot, however, be taught how to paint an object with gusto. This comes from within and it is a characteristic of artistic genius.

How do we judge whether a painting has gusto? According to Hazlitt, Claude's paintings lack gusto because they 'do not interpret one sense by another' and they do not 'distinguish the character of different objects as we are taught, and can only be taught, to distinguish them by their effect on the different senses' (iv, 79). For Hazlitt, gusto is achieved when the painted depiction of a given subject gives the same impression on the senses 'absolute, unimpaired, stamped with all the truth of passion, the pride of the eye and the charm of beauty' as that which it depicts (iv, 77). Hazlitt also wrote that 'gusto in painting is where the impression made on one sense excites by affinity those of another' (iv, 78). This must not be confused with synaesthesia, which the Tate gallery defines as:

> a neurological condition in which the stimulation of a sense (like touch or hearing) leads involuntarily to the triggering of another sense (like sight or taste). For example, a person with synaesthesia might see the colour blue when they hear the word 'fish' or, as in mirror-touch synaesthesia, they would feel a physical sense of touch on their own bodies when they witness touch to other people or objects. This inter-sensory mixing is caused when the brain uses the resources usually used for seeing for other senses.[16]

[16] Tate, 'Synaesthesia – Art Term', *Tate* https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/synaesthesia [accessed 26 March 2021].

Hazlitt thought that synaesthesia was impossible, as he made clear in *Notes of a Journey Through France and Italy*, first serialized in the *Morning Chronicle*, 1824-5: 'To see an object of thought or fancy is just as impossible as to feel a sound or hear a smell' (x, 242). To excite an affinity in one sense by an impression made on another is something different to literally feeling the physical sense of touch, for example, when viewing a painting that depicts touch. The Hazlitt scholar Paul Hamilton elaborates that while the visual presentation of touch allows a great painter to 'interpret touch in a way that enlivens our sense of what touch is […], it is worth stressing how different this is from the loose synaesthesia modernists criticized'.[17] In his essay 'The Indian Jugglers' in *Table-Talk*, Hazlitt noted the limitations of the eye in perceiving the tone of a deep blue sky and how sight is supplemented by other senses. He declared that 'The colour of the leaves in autumn would be nothing without the feeling that accompanies it; but it is that feeling that stamps them on the canvas, faded, seared, blighted, shrinking from the winter's flaw, and makes the sight as true as touch' (viii, 82). As true as touch, but not literally evoking the physical sensation of touch.

Gusto is subjective insofar as it is necessarily particular to each artist. Consequently, there can be no objective rules governing how individual artists might achieve it. Furthermore, it is subjective in its reception by viewers, who must feel the gusto of the artist's perception – and feelings are surely subjective. Hazlitt held that if feelings were not subjective, gusto would collapse into generic ('abstract' in Hazlitt's terms) rules (viii, 83). Hamilton notes that for Hazlitt 'success in a painting only comes when the individual "gusto" of the painter gains our sympathy, and so makes his or her vision habitable by us, ours to extend in *ekphrasis*, as we welcome the painter's visual achievement to our real world of the five senses'.[18] Hamilton declares that we can only access truth through painting if we feel the intensity of the painter's vision, that is if they gain our sympathy, but this position raises a lot of questions. What if we are unsympathetic to the painter's depiction? Is this our fault, or the painter's? Despite the emphasis on subjectivity, Hazlitt's concept of gusto illustrates how we can arrive at objective truths through subjective experience.[19] We must feel the artist's passion and intensity, but this must also be true to the character of the objects they depict. For Hazlitt, visual depictions of objects can reveal something other than the visual, something which he terms 'inner structure':

> the objects of fine art are not the objects of sight but […] the objects of taste and imagination, that is, as they appeal to the sense of beauty, of pleasure, and of

[17] Paul Hamilton, 'Critical Dilation: How William Hazlitt Judged Paintings', *Tate Papers*, 24 (2015) http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/24/critical-dilation-how-william-hazlitt-judged-paintings [accessed 29 November 2017].

[18] Ibid.

[19] To avoid confusion with Hazlitt's concept of truth of character manifested in objects that artists paint, I should clarify that my use of the term 'objective' here does not necessarily refer to objects, but to any truth that is independent of the subject.

> power in the human breast, and are explained by that finer sense, and revealed in their *inner structure* to the eye in return (viii, 82; my italics)

According to Paul Tucker, the purpose of gusto is to make inner structure 'perceptually manifest with the assistance of "taste and imagination"'.[20] He continues, 'It aims to exhibit and interpret the "natural language" of objects as objects of human experience.'[21] Thus Hazlitt's concept of gusto is composed of both subjective feeling and objective inner structure (the natural language of objects). This interpretation of gusto is also implied in Hamilton's assertion, quoted above, that visual depictions of touch enliven our sense of what touch is: the essential nature of touch (its truth of character), not just an accurate depiction of a particular touch delivered with passion and intensity. As the Hazlitt biographer Duncan Wu notes, Hazlitt refers to two things, 'the inherent qualities of an object or individual [truth of character], and the manner in which those qualities are perceived and enshrined by the perceiving mind of the artist [truth of feeling]'.[22] This dual aspect of gusto is crucial. Both truth of character *and* truth of feeling are essential: both are necessary conditions for gusto. It is not sufficient for artists to convey a sense of intensity, force, or passion: they must also relate to the true character of the objects they depict. The artist must feel, and subsequently portray, the truth of the object's character.

To what extent is gusto applicable to contemporary artists working collaboratively? Hazlitt did not write about participatory art, but he did write enough about the role of the individual and the group to allow informed speculation about what his position might be. Recall that for Hazlitt gusto is particular to individual artists, who all have their own strengths. What would happen if you travelled through time to recruit Michelangelo, Correggio, Rubens and Raphael to work on a collaborative painting? Would the combination of Michelangelo's masculine gusto with Correggio's effeminate variety be superior to the two individual types of gusto? What if you added Rubens' gusto in fauns and satyrs and Raphael's depictions of people? Komar and Melamid have already answered such questions. We have seen Hazlitt's position on aggregating public taste and by extension his thoughts on collaborative art. Hamilton explains how Hazlitt finds that Tintoretto wanted the drawing of Michelangelo and the colourfulness of Titian, but to think of such combinations as arithmetic, as if one talent plus another could make two is in fact nonsense. This would be like trying to be two people at once, Hamilton tells us, and that would not be progressive; it would be a psychological disorder.[23] For Hazlitt, artistic achievement was irreducibly singular, meaning that the artist's

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[20] Paul Tucker, '"Truth of Character from Truth of Feeling": William Hazlitt, "Gusto" and the Linguistic History of Writing on Art – Tate Papers', *Tate Papers*, 24, 2015 https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/24/truth-of-character-from-truth-of-feeling-william-hazlitt-gusto-and-the-linguistic-history-of-writing-on-art [accessed 10 November 2020].

[21] Ibid.

[22] Duncan Wu, 'Hazlitt as Romantic', *Études Anglaises*, 46–54.1 (2013), 10 (p. 48) https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3917/etan.661.0046.

[23] Hamilton, 'Critical Dilation'.

vision and imagination are not improved when they are aggregated – with other artists' contributions, or by public opinion.

As Hazlitt sees it, once artistic genius is achieved in a particular form, it is unlikely to be improved by repetition and refinement. This is because originality is a key ingredient in great art. Hazlitt claimed that artistic geniuses including Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dante, Raphael, Titian, Michelangelo, Correggio and Cervantes all 'lived near the beginning of their arts – perfected, and all but created them' (xviii, 6). Consequently, it might be inappropriate to judge participatory art according to Hazlitt's concept of gusto.

Conclusion

Hazlitt's separation of 'aesthetic democracy' from political democracy negates moral concerns about artworks that are non-egalitarian or hierarchical. In fact, the reverse can be argued, that egalitarian and non-hierarchical artworks, such as art made by public consultation, or participatory art that is composed of its audiences and their inter-human relations, can dilute opinion and neutralize difference, while individual freedom of expression allows for a greater diversity of art, opinion and thought.

Hazlitt's concepts of artistic genius and gusto remind us today of the value of the artist-individual and the aesthetic worth of his or her undiluted input. These concepts are linked to his view of aesthetic democracy by the belief that art is particular to each artist and that to aggregate it (democratize it) would undermine the potential for gusto. Although this does not necessary exclude collaborative art practices, it does mean that it is more likely for an artist-duo to achieve gusto than for larger teams of collaborators, since this implies greater dilution, rather than addition, of talent. Even worse, if the artist were to cede authorial control to 'common opinion' in the form of non-artist collaborators, this would vitiate the artwork, resulting in design by committee. While participatory practices continue to proliferate, and while they bring with them a need for new sets of aesthetic criteria by which to be assessed, Hazlitt's concepts of artistic genius and gusto are useful reminders that the role of the individual artist should not be altogether overlooked in the production of art.

Lastly, a key aspect of gusto is that it can only be made manifest if the artist's rendition is authentic, that is, true to the character of that which they represent, be that an object in nature or the nature of human relations or any other contemporary subject matter. Thus Hazlitt extols both the immanent importance of art and the role of the artist in its creation. His criterion of gusto might not be applicable to the judgement of all artworks – and the artworld is broad enough to embrace different kinds of art and different criteria by which to judge them – but it is far from redundant. Its revival would facilitate critical questions about contemporary art (including participatory varieties) that would, ultimately, only serve to strengthen it.

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