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## Kunstangest - Anxiety as a Creative State

**Abstract:** *Contemporary art discourse and curation continues to be shaped by the Enlightenment ideals. Scientific rationality, democratization, and disinterestedness are just a handful of surviving aspects that risk neglecting the unique paradoxicality of art: The ability to overwhelm and besiege the emotional life of the spectator, moving her to untamed reflection and an aesthetically incited existential destabilization. This elusive aspect of the art situation has escaped theoretical conceptualization, making it difficult to work actively with this phenomenon. To account for this fundamental property of art multifarious academic disciplines, such as theology, existential philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics, have been employed to outline the term Kunstangest - a Kierkegaardian anxiety that can free creative forces, similar to Nietzschean will.*

**Keywords:** *Anxiety, existentialism, aesthetics, Enlightenment, phenomenology*

In this article we wish to propose the term *Kunstangest* (Danish for ‘art anxiety’) as a designation for the destabilizing and transformative state that art can impose upon its spectator. It is a state touched upon but never consolidated in theoretical discourse. We trace this lack of conceptualization in the strong influence Enlightenment thought maintains in contemporary art discourse, and curatorial practice, despite countless efforts to oppose this. To illustrate this, we point to two dominating traditions within art discourse, *Iconography* and *Formalism*.

By no means an exhaustive definition, what we aspire to do is to start a conversation about this elusive property of art - conceptualization is necessary, otherwise it will fade into obscurity. A prerequisite for opening such a conversation is to examine the multifarious disciplines that have historically contributed to the aesthetic tradition, such as theology, phenomenology, existentialism, post-structuralism and psychology. We believe that in order to uncover the unique properties of aesthetic experience, we must utilize diverse methodological approaches.

## The Enlightenment legacy

The curatorial practice and art theoretical discourse that unfold in and around major art institutions today continue to be firmly rooted in the thoughts of the Enlightenment era. It is a way of thinking that places a scientific model at the base of art theory along with ideological demands for rationality, universal enlightenment, and a disinterested and objective gaze. Though humans have been theorizing about art for ages, art history as an academic discipline is relatively young and can be said to be a direct product of the Enlightenment era. In its basic shape, art history deals with art works as historical documents that can be organized systematically, providing knowledge about both past and present. This type of art theory is univocally bound to Enlightenment ideals such as scientificity and organization and aim to establish stable values by enforcing rigid categorization and coherent narratives in the field of the arts.

One of the most famous analytical models that can be considered as a representative of the worldview developed during the Enlightenment era is Iconography, a method which continues to dominate contemporary curation. The iconographical method is a linearly progressive examination of the artwork which aims to uncover what the different elements in an artwork signify

- mainly in relation to their original context. The strictly empiricist framework that Iconography is moulded by implicates that an artwork has one inherent meaning and thus one correct interpretation which can be verified by referring to literary sources. It is an approach to art which bears resemblance to the archaeological methodology with its strong emphasis on the context in which an artwork was created, rather than how it is received now, thereby running the risk of alienating the contemporary spectator. For all its informative power, Iconography very often robs the audience of the ability and incentive to relate more personally to the work of art and it leaves open the question of why art holds a special place in society.

Another influential strain of art theory which continues to permeate Western art theory is the variety of Formalism which developed during the middle of the last century particularly in the writings of the American art critic Clement Greenberg. Greenberg's thinking is consciously indebted to the thinking of the Enlightenment age. Particularly the aesthetic philosophy, which emerged as a separate discipline during the 18th century, were of primary importance to the development of Greenberg's formalist approach, especially the notion of *disinterestedness*. One of the

determining factors in the emergence of aesthetic philosophy was the fact that it enabled theorists to separate art from religion. It did this by conceiving art as a category of objects which were free from social and religious interests and by establishing a disinterested gaze particular to the experience of art which aligned well with the Enlightenment era's focus on rationality. This disinterested mode of looking was of key importance to the aesthetic philosophers of the 1700s and was notably implemented into the systematic philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Beauty was thus associated with an experience liberated from both practical and cognitive concerns. As Kant writes in *Critique of Judgement* (1781): "*Taste is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called beautiful.*"<sup>1</sup> Greenberg praised Kant and escorted the idea of a disinterested gaze into his own age by asserting that aesthetic experience is something that happens to a passive subject - not something that is actively engaged in: "[A]esthetic judgments are immediate, intuitive, undeliberate, and involuntary"<sup>2</sup>. For Greenberg this also implicated an emphasis on purity: Both in regard to the medium (e.g. painting should not attempt illusion), and in regard to the

viewer (i.e. visual art is visual only: all physical and spatial context should be rejected, and the disembodied eye is ideal).

By way of Formalism's continued influence, the notion of a disinterested gaze remains an important factor in contemporary art discourse. Curation was especially influenced by this approach, notably through the emergence of the so-called *white cube*, which denotes a gallery with white walls and an absence of decoration in an effort to avoid distraction and which continues to be foundational to the curatorial practice of many important art institutions.

For this project, it would be a digression to attempt an exhaustive account of the strong influence Enlightenment thinking continues to exert in today's art world and though pointing to two analytical stances certainly may seem insufficient, it can, however, give us an idea of some of the fundamental concepts that have shaped our contemporary handling of art both practically and theoretically.

Though we acknowledge the importance of the methods sketched above, we also think that they are problematic because they tend to smother the aspect of art which actually makes it so valuable to human beings. The Enlightenment legacy urges us to dispose of our

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1 Kant 1914, §7.

2 Greenberg 1988, p. 265.

individuality, to either put ourselves in someone else's place (i.e. the artist), or to enter a state of disinterestedness which we believe to be fictitious – how could it ever be possible to ignore physicality and to do away with the viewing subject? On the contrary, we believe art is about coming into contact with oneself, to be touched in ways one did not think possible and to engage with one's facticity in ways never dreamed of before the encounter with a given artwork. Aesthetic experience should not only inform, it should destabilize and *transform*.

To better understand what it is we believe these theoretical approaches miss, an analogy will be helpful: When at night you lift your eyes towards the night sky there are different ways of looking at the abundance of tiny shining dots on the endless canvas of rich darkness. You can turn to man-made disciplines such as astronomy or astrology, and try to comprehend, establish order, and make sense of the stars, planets, and galaxies. This human desire to establish meaning and reason in everything entails that you distance yourself from the experience. Another way to look at the night sky is to let the infinity of the universe enchant and let oneself be embraced by the experience, hereby allowing yourself to be swept away in an awestruck existential reflection. To stand before infinity is a confrontation with

everything man has the possibility to be, but it is at the same time impossible to be everything, due to our finiteness. The individual is overwhelmed by the paradoxical duality of a simultaneous absence and abundance of meaning – the night sky is both infinity and void. In this mode, the individual senses a creative possibility: man's ability to overcome present reality through radical freedom.

We believe that, in the work of art, you can encounter the same destabilizing confrontation with infinity. In the work of art, as well as with the night sky, you behold everything and nothing at the same time. Art does not have a definite, unambiguous value, meaning or purpose, but mirrors man's existential preconditions. Art demands sympathy for the human situation: the situation we all are in, simultaneously standing before freedom and before nothingness. It is an anxious situation and it is one's own responsibility to manage it in the best way possible. Therefore, the experience of art demands engagement, volition, and creativity.

It is this elusive aspect of the aesthetic situation we which we seek to investigate: art's ability to overwhelm and besiege the emotional life of the spectator, moving them to untamed reflection and an aesthetically incited existential destabilization.

### The importance of conceptualization

But why are we confined to speaking in analogies? Because this mysterious aspect of the work of art seems to have escaped theoretical definition and has never been able to find a stable home within aesthetic discourse. Though this lack of conceptualization quite naturally arises from the inexplicability of the phenomenon we are attempting to describe – as Georges Braque phrases it: “*The only valid thing in art is that which cannot be explained*”<sup>3</sup> – we must insist on the importance of trying to establish a language surrounding this unique and particular strength of art. Otherwise we might seize to acknowledge it all together, and at the moment no term which adequately encompasses the existential reflection evoked by art exists.

In art theory and phenomenology, there have been several attempts at describing this overwhelming power of art. Examples include Jean-Francois Lyotard’s modernization of Kant’s sublime, which concerns the disruptive aspect generated by “*the possibility of nothing happening*”,<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Marion’s theory on the saturated phenomenon, which, with reference to Kant’s epistemology, examines the overwhelming event consisting of having an excess of sensory information in

relation to what one is able to conceptualize, and Georges Didi-Huberman’s concept of *pan*, which investigates how specific unstable signs in the work of art can evoke profound reactions in the spectator.

These theoreticians all describe very sudden, automatic, unfathomable, and violent aesthetic experiences. While we agree that being confronted with art can spark deeply emotional and at times overwhelming experiences, this ‘violence of the image’ appears to us as too radical to actually describe the experience of art, and we favour an idea of a subtly engulfing and gradually intensifying ecstasy instead. What is at work in aesthetic experience rather than an act of “violence” is a degree of existential intensity which is exposed within the spectator.

Furthermore, we do not think that this state of mind excludes cognition, rather it is a moment in which cognition takes on a different quality. Art enables access to something within us, which cannot be reached in a mundane state of mind, and for this to happen we must go through our subjectivity which also includes our cognitive capabilities. Artistic experience is not a stupefying overexposure, but rather a drifting away into what Gaston Bachelard has described as *poetic reverie*: a creative daydream. One loses oneself in

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3 Braque 1957, p. 22.

4 Lyotard 1991, p. 92.

aesthetic experience and this is both a pleasant seduction and a profoundly disturbing alternation of one's perception of existence. Aesthetic experience does not come forward to greet the spectator as a violent act but rather as an enthralling haze.

### **Anxiety as a transformative state**

We propose the term *Kunstangest* to describe this phenomenon. This term derives from the existentialist concept *anxiety* [Angest], which originates in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. We transfer this concept to aesthetic theory – aware that such a move is not unproblematic – because we are certain that it will be beneficial in the attempt to approach the complex phenomenon, which, for us, is the beating heart of aesthetic experience.

*Kunstangest* is a destabilized mental state in which not only is the plurality of the artwork revealed, but it is also a state in which the spectator is faced with a cognitive and emotional endlessness within themselves. This endlessness, this unstable intimacy with an artwork is, we believe, comparable to the freedom that rises in existentialist anxiety: facing the disturbing loss of meaning – the absurdity of existence – which is at the root of existentialism's radical conception of freedom.

In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) Kierkegaard developed his theory of anxiety as a reflection upon the nature of *sin* and more specifically as a critique of the idea that hereditary sin can explain the sinful actions of human beings. According to Kierkegaard, sin enters the world and the individual by a qualitative leap made by each individual. Kierkegaard does not believe sin to be hereditary – this would, in Kierkegaard's view, mean avoiding to take responsibility for one's actions. Sin enters the world every time someone passes, like Adam in the Bible, by way of an individual sin, from a category of innocence to a category of sinfulness.

When faced with the prospect of committing a sin, theology has traditionally seen *concupiscentia* as the state that is able to account for this categorical passage, but Kierkegaard proposes anxiety as an alternative designation since it is an ambiguous mental state: simultaneously drawn and repelled by sin. What happens when we enter this state of anxiety is, according to Kierkegaard, that we become conscious of our existential freedom. In anxiety we understand that we are free to choose our actions, but also that we are responsible for these actions, because we are situated in a world inhabited by other individuals. Kierkegaard differentiates between anxiety and fear which, according to

him, has an object, a specific threat that causes fear. Anxiety on the other hand does not have an object, it is caused by this awareness of being a self, a free self which entails the endless potential of choosing. What can be chosen is not clear, only that the possibility of choice exists. The possibility of action presents itself in anxiety – a possibility without content.

Martin Heidegger's adoption of the term anxiety is useful in this context, as it is evidently based in the philosophy of Kierkegaard and not only pertains to free, individual choice, but also free interpretation of the world in its entirety. Also, in order to implement the concept of anxiety in an aesthetic context, we need to move away from the religious framework in Kierkegaard and here Heidegger will aid us since his conception of anxiety – as it is laid out in his prominent work *Being and Time* (1927) – was written after Nietzsche famously declared that “*God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.*”<sup>5</sup>

For Heidegger, the human being (termed *Dasein*) is usually immersed in its world, its day to day business, in a manner that hides its actual self. However, *Dasein* does not remain perpetually concealed: through anxiety, it is possible to disclose this actual self. Like Kierkegaard,

Heidegger believes that anxiety is not caused by an outside threat, but that it is rather an unveiling of one's own possibility of freedom and self-expression. Anxiety reveals that the world never appears to the individual as a predisposed thing but is only experienceable due to an interpretative effort by *Dasein*. For Heidegger, anxiety consequently becomes an integral trait of man: a disclosure of the premise that the world is fundamentally without meaning. Anxiety exposes the vacuity of existence: nothingness or death – not death as a concrete event, however, but the nothingness of death. Hence, it constitutes, not a specific, but a total threat towards existence itself. However, the implication of nothingness is freedom, and the anxious and emancipatory confrontation with this fact drives man to create meaning, albeit unstable meaning.

This does not implicate that the confrontation with anxiety is resolved once and for all. Anxiety continues to emerge in the subject no matter how hard one tries to escape it and exactly because anxiety exists latently in the individual the concept can be used to account for certain aspects of aesthetic experience. Art has the ability to evoke an anxious consciousness about the lack of meaning inherent in existence. The work of art has the power to induce a destabilization which prevents a fixed

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<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche 2001, p. 120.

understanding of the work which in turn destabilizes the being of the spectator.

Despite the previously mentioned attempts to grasp and understand art as a category, a refusal of such reduction lies at the heart of art. Art can be assigned meaning, but it can never be expected to convey it in a reliable manner. The power of art articulated through anxiety does not necessarily implicate the kind of violence previously criticized. Kunstangest sneaks up on its subject but refrains from violence and quietly seizes stable signification. Notably, the intensity of Kunstangest arises not from the work of art but from the spectator themselves – the work facilitates the experience, however, by reminding one of one's own astounding being, by reminding one of one's anxious existence.

Both Heidegger and Kierkegaard acknowledge the impulse to turn away from the destabilization of anxiety when it rises in the subject, however they also call for the courage to remain in this troublesome state, as it is through this endurance we can uncover our actual selves. Like the anxiety of the existentialists, we call for the courage to persevere in the discomfort of Kunstangest. To stand by nothingness as an existentialist premise, to endure the nothingness crystallized in the artwork, to not flee into the realm of stable

categories, but to welcome the indeterminacy of the art work and receive its emancipatory power.

Kunstangest specifically refers to a man-made, and thus consciousness-required, situation as we anchor the need to create and consume art in the acknowledgement of anxiety. Awareness of one's existence entails a recognition of the possibility of not existing, and thus an insight into one's own freedom: this freedom is a catalyst for art. We spend time creating and experiencing things, that do not have tangible functions, but are expressions of an awareness of our limited time on earth. Ingrained in every work of art is a primordial artistic intention – a desire to communicate this anxiety. As human beings, we express ourselves to one another, we remind each other about the situation that we share: we are united in anxiety. Art has the ability to encapsulate life's meaninglessness and the freedom of the individual. We must not evade this anxiety; instead we must embrace it.

### **Preconditions**

This personal investment in the artwork is of central importance to Kunstangest. It is this personal relation which ignites the aesthetic situation, which sets into motion the powerful indeterminacy of art. A personal relation which stands in direct opposition to the passivity and



scientificity of the Enlightenment legacy sketched above.

In his critique of Enlightenment aesthetics American art theoretician Arnold Berleant conceives the aesthetic experience as an *aesthetic field* which concerns “*the total situation in which the objects, activities, and experiences of art occur*”<sup>6</sup>. It is a dynamic field consisting of four main factors, or elements, which all contribute to the aesthetic situation: *the art object, the percipient, the artist, and the performer*. These components are inseparably bound together in aesthetic experience and are in a state of constant exchange.

One of the fundamental ideas in Berleant’s theory is his emphasis on the active role of the spectator – and this is highly relevant to our concept of Kunstangest. Unlike Greenberg’s passive recipient, Berleant calls for *aesthetic engagement* on behalf of the spectator. Aesthetic engagement is characterized by being a deeply personal relation to the aesthetic situation and by mirroring the deep-felt investment in the aesthetic situation which has historically been reserved for the artist.

*If the appreciator abandons the objectifying, analytic stance of the scholar critic, the kind of personal participation that he or she engages*

*in is closer to that of the artist than to the ‘philosopher of beauty’ of whom Nietzsche spoke so disparagingly. I like to call this active appreciative participation ‘aesthetic engagement’, for it best characterizes the kind of powerful personal involvement that we have in our most fulfilled aesthetic experience.*<sup>7</sup>

Though we do not subscribe to Berleant’s theory without reservations (it is by no means unproblematic) we have however chosen to include it because it is instrumental in illustrating some of the key preconditions of Kunstangest, namely that the work of art is not an isolated object, but a network of a potentially infinite number of “participants”, and that Kunstangest is contingent upon active engagement with the aesthetic situation.

This active engagement can be seen as an openness of the spectator. As we have seen, an attempt to flee the destabilizing and truly transformative power of Kunstangest can be made – it can be strangled, and therefore we cannot stress enough the importance of personal engagement in the aesthetic situation. One must dare to invest oneself in the artwork. A way to understand this investment will be to briefly touch upon the concept of *contemplation*, a practice which has

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6 Berleant 1970, p. 47.

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7 Berleant 2004, p. 15.

played a pivotal role in Christianity, and which we believe can be seen as sharing important properties with the mental state involved in the experience of Kunstangest.

Contemplation is understood as a state of deep reflective thought, and it usually signifies a type of prayer or meditation. Starting of as a a broad metaphysical term used by the ancient Greeks and neoplatonists, it has attained specific religious connotations throughout history. Christian mystics and theologians such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, John of the Cross, and Ignatius of Loyola have moulded the concept of contemplation and emphasized aspects that we consider to be applicable to Kunstangest, specifically notions of divine darkness and unknowing, a potentially arduous path towards illumination, and the importance of an application of the senses.

We wish, however, to atheologize the term 'contemplation' in order to apply it to the art experience. The thoughts of Georges Bataille are very pertinent to this endeavour. He believes that inner experience can be valuable without God, and rejects the transcendentalism inherent in Christian contemplation, thereby creating a form of mysticism relevant to a post-metaphysical world. Inner experience for Bataille does not

suggest a positive project for acquisition of absolute knowledge or certainty, but is instead a negative project that suspends any form of stable comprehension or homogeneity. Contrary to religious inner experience, Bataille's inner experience does not lead to peace of mind (or soul): Nothing is revealed, only the unknown. Bataille regards self-harmony as an illusion, and it is thus undesirable. The will to lose oneself replaces the will to be everything, and this insight into incompleteness is deemed the most noble ambition in the desire to be a human being.

When adopting ideas about contemplative participation, and enthrallment with transformative ramifications, we are convinced that these aspects can function without their spiritual implications in a situation comprised of existential reflection invoked by the work of art. The type of patience ingrained in contemplation is particularly interesting, as it conveys the same serene, yet insistent, approach needed to experience Kunstangest. By no means do we wish to describe Kunstangest as a religious experience. What we aim to do by bringing the concept of contemplation into play in this context is to highlight both the importance of investment in the aesthetic situation and the employment of the sensory apparatus, cognition and

emotion. By bringing contemplative practices into play in this context, we wish to underscore the elusiveness of Kunstangest – an experience which is not automatically or suddenly attained, but which comes about through persistence, patience and personal investment.

### Positive Disintegration

Tension leading to advancement is also the core mechanism of Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration. He offers a perspective substantiated by empirical evidence, and an explicitly systematic approach as he studies personality development, and its corresponding causality, method, and progression.

Disintegration is typically given a negative association, but Dabrowski seeks to nuance this impression: "*Disintegration is described as positive when it enriches life, enlarges the horizon, and brings forth creativity; it is negative when it either has no developmental effects or causes involution.*"<sup>8</sup> Dabrowski places disintegration as an essential part of a transformation going from external to internal control, from impulse to reflection, from sociability to empathy, from social norms to ideal norms, from relative values to universal values, from

love based on the individual to all-embracing existential love.

The theory presents a clear structure consisting of five attainable levels, each described as "*a characteristic constellation of intrapsychic dynamisms*"<sup>9</sup>. Dynamisms refer to the biological and mental cognition that control one's behaviour and its development, and examples of dynamisms include instincts, drives, and intellectual processes in combination with emotions.<sup>10</sup> Each end of Dabrowski's developmental progression has levels of *integration*, where the individual is in a harmonious state of unity. The difference between the first and the fifth level is that, on the first level, one is comfortable being driven by one's impulses and by society, whereas the psychological integration on the fifth level is an achievement preceded by a long and challenging dissolution and reorganization of one's inner life. Most people live most of their lives happily grounded on the first level, while only a few reach level five.

Advancement, or development, happens through a collapse of existing structures (disintegration) followed by a new organization (integration). It consists of times of great intensity and imbalance, e.g. psychoneuroses, depressions, and

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8 Dabrowski 1964, p. 10.

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9 Dabrowski et al. 1977, p. 18.

10 Ibid.

creative processes, and by times of balance.<sup>11</sup> The lower levels are characterized by automatism, stereotypy, egocentrism, and a modest degree of consciousness, while the higher levels are distinguished by immense consciousness, inner psychic transformation, autonomy, and creativity. To develop, one needs to embrace the disintegrative stages, despite of how frightening that might be, and Dabrowski refers explicitly to Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety in order to mediate their constructive aspects. He clarifies that existential anxiety "*reflects an enhanced sensitivity of the feeling of one's responsibility for one's own development [...] Anxiety over oneself is, for emotional development, an element similar to that of astonishment in area of intellectual activities.*"<sup>12</sup>

The pivotal point in development is always a kind of inner conflict. Conflicts with the outside world or other external crises cannot alone promote personality development, but they can act as a fertile ground for inner conflicts which can subsequently allow for development to take place. In relation to the work of art, we believe that the previously mentioned aspects of indeterminacy and overwhelming bedazzlement can be considered kinds of external crises. If

you actively engage in the destabilization, it can incite profound existential reflection. Existential anxiety does not have an object, but Dabrowski shows us that external conflicts can evoke anxiety. We argue that art can be viewed as an external conflict that we can engage in, whereby the art experience can become transformative. We do not intend to dictate a specific direction or purpose of this transformation, but merely articulate its possibility.

Kunstangest propagates a consciousness about meaninglessness and freedom in the individual, and such a destabilization – the disclosure of the possibility of choice – can be potentially transformative. It is capable of altering the adamant viewer who recognizes the existential responsibility revealed in Kunstangest.

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11 Dabrowski 1967, p. 93.

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