The past few years have been good for the craft beer industry. Very good, in fact. There’s a cute little infographic on the website of the Brewers Association informing its reader that in the year 2013, while overall beer sales in the U.S. went down 1.9%, craft beer sales saw a 17.2% increase. (The graphic is formatted to have the words justified within their columns, so that the bold all-caps word BEER immediately catches your eye, reading like a convivial bar greeting. BEER!) What lies behind the apparent overwhelming success of craft beer? What is it that appeals to the craft beer consumer about Sierra Nevada or New Belgium brews that Budweiser cannot offer? There are several compelling, readily available answers to these questions, ranging from sheer superior quality to a significant increase in the number of small breweries (and therefore the availability of craft beer). Amidst these explanations for craft beer’s success is the proposal that the image of drinking craft beer has somehow become popular—that a subset of people now want to be known as craft beer drinkers. In the world of beer, the artisanal product is now desirable as a social tool, demonstrative of a more refined aesthetic taste.

This trend is obviously applicable to more than just beer. Anything you can put in your mouth, be it peanut butter, toast, or syrup, has its Jif, Wonder Bread or Mrs. Butterworth’s and their higher-quality, more expensive, and ultimately more hip, competitors. In every case we seem to see the artisanal product as better reputed, more desirable to consume. The
craft product indicates refinement. The cultural shift toward the consumption of artisanal food, if we recognize it as such, is not merely a manifestation of a trend, but perhaps also suggests a very human impulse: to differentiate mankind from animal. In creating consumable products in more time- and resource-consuming ways, we put an additional dosage of humanness, of culture into these products. Every lautering, every addition of spice, every minute spent barrel-aging is a step away from mere functionality—from creating a product for the sheer sake of obtaining nutrients—and toward creating something that stimulates human taste for its own sake. *La bière pour la bière.*

If you spend any significant amount of your time visiting or touring breweries, you are bound to hear someone make the following proclamation at some point: “Beer is art.” Not simply artisanal, but actual art. It’s easy to understand how someone who works at a brewery would want to make this claim, an employee whose job likely consists of one part adding ingredients to gigantic tanks and three parts maintaining near-obsessive levels of cleanliness in the facilities. The brewmaster’s manipulation of flavor, the ability to craft a taste out of gallons of mush sitting in huge finicky metal vats, must look like the kind of tedious and slow miracle you’d expect to see from Gerhard Richter creating an abstract painting. In addition to the resemblance of the process to an artistic one, we could say that the sort of work demanded of your taste buds in consuming something flavorful is comparable to the work done by your eyes in viewing a piece of visual art: you have a first exposure to the work as a whole, a focusing of the senses, and a final reassessment of
the work holistically. In this sense, beer doesn’t seem so far removed from media like painting or music.

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant provides an analytical structure for assessing judgments of taste—one that may be of use to us in our quest to answer the question of whether beer is art. Famously, Kant suggests that an aesthetic judgment, a judgment of taste, must be devoid of all interest. That is, if we like something for some extrinsic reason, be it an investment in the existence of the object or wanting to be known for appreciating it, we are not making an aesthetic judgment, but a judgment which is in some way practical. He puts it this way: “But if the question is whether something is beautiful, what we want to know is not whether we, or anyone, cares, or so much as might care, in any way, about the thing’s existence, but rather how we judge it in our mere contemplation of it (intuition or reflection).” For the subculture of people who consider food to be a medium of art, this particular stipulation is problematic. On the one hand, it seems obvious that something which provides sustenance cannot be judged without interest; on the other hand, it seems imbalanced to deny the sensory faculty of taste the ability to make judgments of beauty that we allow the faculty of sight. One solution to this dilemma is to propose that the context of the consumption of food can change whether or not the judgment being made is an aesthetic judgment. For example, the hungry consumer of a fancy cheese does not designate the cheese beautiful, but rather as something which satisfies a need, whereas the cheese-taster practiced in the art of recognizing cheese flavors is able to make a judgment of beauty. In the case of beer, the example would more likely be that the young college student who drinks beer for the sake of intoxication makes a judgment with interest, while the sampler of brews makes the aesthetic judgment.

This sort of distinction returns us to the idea that the consumption of craft beer or artisanal food is a means of separation from the purely animal need of acquiring nutrients. To the Kantian aesthetician, there is arguably nothing more human than the realm of aesthetic judgment. In this logic we can reassess the question of why people want to be viewed as craft beer drinkers. If we accept the artistic aspect of craft beer consumption, craft beer drinkers are somehow more cultured
than their Coors-drinking counterparts, sub-humans who turn to beer as a means toward altering their mental state. “You are what you eat,” as goes the English rendering of Ludwig Feuerbach’s famous Wortspiel. While it seems unlikely that Feuerbach meant for this to be taken literally, and perhaps even more unlikely that he intended for it to be applied to the consumption of craft beer (“der Mensch ist, was er trinkt” doesn’t quite have the same ring) it seems to be the dictum adhered to by some of today’s stronger proponents of craft beer. Drinking a Miller Lite is not just an unfortunate choice for your taste buds, as we have seen, but an indictment of the very quality of your personhood.

The problem with the logic that craft beer is appreciated on the artistic plane, and that this aesthetic superiority lends the possibility of a more general human superiority, is that the concept of a purely aesthetic judgment of a consumable good is not possible. No matter how cultured the taster, no matter for what purpose the taster is consuming, the food is itself consumed by them. With the exception, perhaps of the beers we spit out after tasting, our engagement with beer involves, if nothing else, the basic awareness that it is then inside of us. Visual art, music, and theatrical performances may stay with us mentally after we have experienced them, but they do not linger in our digestive systems in the physical way that food or beer does. For the Kantian, this is perhaps the distinction between what is art and what is artisanal: the artisanal product can never be art insofar as the product first has an alternative purpose.

Of course, the idea that an aesthetic judgment must be made without any interest in the aesthetic object sounds awfully eighteenth century. A lot has happened since Kant wrote his third Critique: the invention of the drum roaster allowed for the creation of porters and stouts, fermentation technology developed and artists began challenging once-popular Kantian and...
idealistic aesthetics. This isn’t limited to just the “art is that about which nothing can be said” extremism of Tristan Tzaras and Marcel Duchamp’s declaration of a urinal as a piece of art, but also the tamer pragmatist objection to passivity and exclusiveness in what constitutes an aesthetic judgment. John Dewey’s work *Art as Experience* suggests that aesthetic judgment, contrary to Kant’s claim that it must be made without external interest, is a holistic experience, built not only upon an emotional connection but a somatic one, one that is necessarily interested. Dewey lays out a few qualities that define art (a sensation of completeness, coalescing means and ends, etc.), but, like Kant, latches onto the idea that the aesthetic judgment of the observer, not the object itself, is what is of interest. For us non-brewing beer consumers, this seems appropriate; after all, we’re not trying to decipher whether or not beer is an aesthetic object so much as whether or not our consumption of beer parallels the way in which we perceive art—whether or not we’re allowed to call drinkers of Budweiser “uncultured.”

Unlike Kant, however, Dewey proposes an aesthetic interaction that is experiential in the way that any interaction with the world is: “a product [...] of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world.” In our experiential interaction with our environment we are necessarily interested beings, and our engagement with the aesthetic object is no different, Dewey argues. For Dewey, then, the drinking experience of macro brews is no less aesthetic than that of the craft brew drinking experience. Mass culture is just as good at prompting an aesthetic experience as “refined” culture.

If we accept Dewey’s interested aesthetic judgment, then, the discussion becomes much easier to turn to our object of interest: the consumer rather than the object being consumed. Whereas Kant pushes an almost absurd rationality that is hard to accept when it comes to art, Dewey embraces aesthetics as a study of the way we experience those things, whether we want to call them art or not, that are integral to our lives—which, for many of us, include beer.

Here craft beer loses its high ground. It’s easy when looking through the lens of Kant or another high-minded

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aesthetician to think that the artisanal elements of craft beer really do make it better, for very real reasons. The list of stops craft brewers will pull out for their beers goes on and on (fresh hops, barrel-aging, pumpkin and peach additions...) and it’s easy to get drawn in by the impressive craftsmanship that goes into these brews. If you have all of this variety in flavor, this subtlety of taste, then how could something as simple and as bland as PBR compare? If you have the means, why wouldn’t you go for the food which was worked over extensively, rather than the mass-produced item? But Dewey takes this conception and flips it on its head, dismissing the central claim to aesthetic dominance, whether in beer or Bach, by framing this as a question of purpose and experience. Our context, far from what Kant believes, is extremely important in our consideration of art or any interaction with an object that involves aesthetic appreciation. We might engage with a piece of music for different reasons, whether it be for intellectual stimulation, an emotional escape, or the backdrop to a party or movie. In a similar way, we choose to drink beer for many different reasons, sometimes in the pursuit of flavor, sometimes in the pursuit of socially-encouraged intoxication. These contexts, seemingly wildly different, all aim for the same thing: aesthetic enjoyment.

The modularity of beer as an artistic object becomes relevant when considering the way in which craft beer drinkers regard consumers of macro brews. Whether due to an objection to aesthetic judgments tainted with interest or a simple privileging of taste within a realm of many equally aesthetic engagements, a perceived failing of aesthetic judgment is often grounds for accusing the aesthetic judge of a failing of character. For example, you may object to the use of *Starry Night* on a tote bag because the aesthetic object is viewed not aesthetically, but with the interest of using it toward some personal means (creating an image of the wearer as “cultured” or “interesting”), or you may object because you simply find the tote bag ugly. In both of these cases, the failing of the aesthetic engagement is indicative of a personal failing of the aesthetic judge as someone with poor taste. Whether your idea of aesthetic judgment is as restricted as Kant’s or as dynamic as Dewey’s, however, the right to judge a person’s taste is less valid when assessing taste in food. No matter how prominently the focus of the consumption
is on the sensory faculty of taste, the simple fact that beer is consumed negates the validity of potential judgments of character that can be based upon aesthetic judgments. This means that our relationship with beer or food is not only built upon our taste faculties, our rational faculties, and our stylistic preferences, but also in a very physical way with our bodies. Beer comes with all kinds of somatic limiting factors: calorie content, alcoholic content, particular ingredients. We cannot assume superiority of taste in drinking craft beer because we cannot presume that everyone’s relationship with beer is built on the level of aesthetic tastes. Even if we do believe that craft beer is the superior option, either because it adheres to a stricter conception of an aesthetic judgment or simply because we like it best, it is critical to remember that those who do not drink craft beer are not simply choosing to ignore the aesthetic superiority of craft beer, but may be avoiding the calories, alcoholic content, or ingredients in craft brews. The role that beer plays in our lives is one that necessarily includes considerations outside of the purely aesthetic realm of taste. For this reason, we should check our sniggers the next time the guy at the bar orders a Bud Light.

During Super Bowl XVIX, Budweiser ran a commercial declaring pride in their status as a macro brewery and poking fun at drinkers of craft beer. “There’s only one Budweiser. It’s brewed for drinking. Not dissecting,” the commercial declares. Ignoring the falsehood of the first claim, Budweiser
may have a point. While beer can be consumed for the aesthetic engagement with the taste organs, it can also be consumed for a panoply of other reasons, such as “drinking.” There are some craft beer drinkers who would do well to remember that. Of course, it’s likely that, despite Budweiser’s campaign to the contrary, the world of craft beer will continue to see success, supported by hordes of people who believe in the importance of flavor, or who, at the very least, believe themselves to be supporters of flavor. In this historic time for American beer, sure, let’s go ahead and say that beer is art. But it may not be art for everyone. So, non-beer-drinkers, non-drinkers, and unpretentious drinkers of Bud Light, I raise my growler to you.

4. “Budweiser” originally referred to a type of beer brewed in Budweis, Bohemia for hundreds of years and is retained in the name of the Czech brewery “Budweiser Budvar.”