

Viennese art, ugliness, and the Vienna school of art history: the vicissitudes of theory and practice

Kathryn Simpson

Around 1900 in Vienna, the concept of ugliness developed a new significance in both art theory and practice. The theorists of the Vienna school of art history, including Franz Wickhoff, Alois Riegl, and later Otto Benesch and Max Dvořák, rejected the scholarly tradition of Germanic contemporaries like renowned art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, who championed classical art as the highest aesthetic good. By contrast the Vienna school art historians opposed absolute aesthetics and its insistence that a specifically classical beauty was the goal of all art.¹ At the dawn of the twentieth century, Wickhoff and Riegl both presented radically new theories arguing for a revaluation of aesthetic values, a non-hierarchical relationship between so-called beauty and ugliness, and the importance of developing an art that was appropriate for the age.

Ugliness was suddenly spotlighted in Viennese artistic practice as well. Gustav Klimt was the undisputed king of the Viennese art scene; he had inherited the throne from the revered history painter, designer, and decorator Hans Makart, whose sensual, decorative sensibility had defined late-nineteenth-century tastes in Vienna, giving rise to the term *Makartstil*, or 'Makart style.' After three years as the leader of the Vienna Secession movement, Klimt produced a series of works of art which enraged sectors of the intellectual establishment and the general public, who reacted in particular to the purported ugliness of Klimt's latest visions. Yet shortly thereafter young Viennese artists eager to lead what they called the 'new art' movement began to develop deliberate strategies of ugliness to help create and buttress their own antagonistic artistic personae. Like Wickhoff, Riegl, and Klimt, artists like Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele produced work that challenged absolute aesthetics' teleological focus on beauty. Implicitly rejecting the classical association between beauty and truth, moreover, the Viennese avant-garde after Klimt seemed to increasingly connect truth with ugliness, believing that the most truthful pictures were ones that showed their subjects naked, diseased, painfully exposed, angry, and deformed. Not surprisingly these representational strategies created a great deal of controversy in the context of a Viennese culture that, although highly artistic, was also Catholic, conservative, and accustomed to either the grand painterly romanticism of Makart or, later, the refined prettiness of *Secessionstil* and the applied arts studio, the *Wiener Werkstätte*. Given the polemical quality of aesthetic debates in Vienna around this time, and their highly ideological cant, the burgeoning of an aesthetic of ugliness deserves to be examined further. This essay analyses specific links between the theories and practices of ugliness in the Vienna school and in

¹ Michael Gubser, 'Time and history in Alois Riegl's theory of perception', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 66: 3, July 2005, 455.

contemporaneous Viennese art, noting in particular how the concept of ugliness functioned discursively as a trope to represent modernity, Jewishness, truth, or sickness.

In 1891 the artistic commission of the university of Vienna had submitted to the Ministry of culture, religion, and education² its proposal for decorating the ceiling of the university's great hall with oil paintings. These oil paintings were intended to represent the four faculties of theology, philosophy, medicine, and jurisprudence. The Ministry chose the theme 'The victory of light over darkness' and selected the artists Klimt and Franz Matsch to undertake it. Matsch was to paint the centrepiece, theology, and six lunettes, Klimt was to paint philosophy, medicine, jurisprudence, and ten lunettes. The project had been fraught with disagreement from the first, indeed Peter Vergo notes that both 'the artistic commission of the university and the fine arts commission of the Ministry' asked Matsch and Klimt to 'declare themselves ready "within the limits of artistic freedom" to undertake such alterations as were deemed necessary.' Nonetheless, it was only with the exhibition of Klimt's *Philosophy* at the annual Secession exhibition of 1900 that the controversy over the painting achieved the status of a massive public scandal.³ This scandal reverberated throughout various faculties of the university, and Viennese newspapers published written protests against *Philosophy* as well as caricatures of the work which focused on its ugliness and sickening effect on the body politic. The art critic Hermann Bahr documented these controversies in his *Against Klimt* (1903), which compiled the voluminous negative reviews to which Klimt's transgressive painting gave rise.

But what was so transgressive about this painting? Now destroyed, in the extant black-and-white photographs of the canvas we can see a nebulous, almost gossamer miasma whose swirling clouds are dominated by the vague emergent apparition of a monumental female figure. The viewer can discern her shadowy face and improbably large, pendulous breasts; she represents the world itself. On the left, a writhing column of human figures floats with contorted poses and gestures of despair. These figures represent the human life cycle in the most pessimistic of terms, those of perpetual confusion and suffering. The 'light' demanded by the commission's theme of 'The victory of light over darkness' is presented in the form of a human personification of knowledge, hovering, ironically, in darkness in the extreme lower foreground. Her face glows dramatically, as though spotlighted from below, and thick black hair coils threateningly around her like a serpentine halo. This dark hair obscures her mouth and lends dramatic emphasis to her dark, upturned eyes. Although thematically she represents knowledge, visually she belongs to the iconography of the fin-de-siècle femme fatale, the dark and dangerous women in the works of Jan Toorop, Edvard Munch, Alfred Kubin, and others. Formally and compositionally the work is disorienting, presenting no clear relationship between the tortured human beings, the mysterious appearance of the world, and the forbidding image of knowledge.

Richard Muther, a prominent German critic and historian of art, praised the philosophical insight of Klimt's work, suggesting that its pessimistic vision of the struggle

² *Ministerium für Kultus und Unterricht*

³ Peter Vergo, *Art in Vienna 1898-1918: Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele and their Contemporaries*, London: Phaidon Press, 1981, 49.

between knowledge and ignorance was more meaningful than any works of art based on a classical ideal. For Muther, artists who copied the classical style contributed nothing to the historical development of art, whereas Klimt was forging new visual forms which developed out of his own perceptions of his time and culture.⁴ But despite the enthusiasm of Muther and a few others, *Philosophy* nonetheless 'unleashed the fury both of the public and of the popular press.'⁵ Attacks focused variously on several key themes, for example some abhorred the representation of philosophy as such, suggesting that there was no "'profound philosophical meaning'" behind the picture. For such commentators, who apparently expected a cogent representation of the western philosophical tradition, Klimt's rather esoteric vision was incoherent, presenting "'nothing but nonsense.'"⁶

Other critics focused their vitriolic remarks on the ugliness of the bodies represented, their complete departure from the canons of classical beauty. Gemma Blackshaw has furthermore stressed that much of the furor around Klimt's depiction of ugly bodies in his university paintings was framed in terms of anti-Semitic rhetoric.⁷ In a city renowned for its medical culture, the burgeoning interest in vague notions of a decadent modernity and the place of diseased bodies within that modernity was increasingly framed in pseudo-medical but highly anti-Semitic terms of Jewish hysteria, Jewish weakness and deformation, and Jewish ugliness. Bahr's *Against Klimt* evinces the ease with which contemporaneous commentators moved from commenting on the ugliness of modern art to its Jewishness, from the ugliness of a hunched back or a swollen belly to these physical characteristics as inherently Jewish, rather than Germanic. Indeed the contemporaneous Viennese tendency to regard both ugly bodies and ugly art as somehow distinctively Jewish deserves greater scholarly examination and theorization. Moreover, the perceived medicalization of art, the increasing influence of images of pathology on artist's own representational strategies, was also a source of concern and even disgust for many. When Klimt exhibited *Medicine* the following year, one reviewer commented that his figures were suitable only for an anatomical museum, insisting that the painting "'surpasses in strangeness and monstrosity even the much disputed *Philosophy*.'"⁸ Another reviewer satirically described *Medicine* as an emetic, whose function is to induce vomiting.⁹ Throughout these controversies ugliness, and especially corporeal ugliness, became the dominant organizing concept through which concerns about decadence, Jewishness, and sickness were articulated.

It was on this aesthetic issue of ugliness that eighty-seven professors of the university alighted when they formulated a petition aimed at preventing *Philosophy* from reaching its intended destination. According to historian Carl Schorske, although the 'protesting professors' failed to identify explicitly that *Philosophy*'s pessimistic world view was derived from the

⁴ Vergo, *Art in Vienna*, 50.

⁵ Vergo, *Art in Vienna*, 54.

⁶ Anonymous reviewer translated in Vergo, *Art in Vienna*, 55.

⁷ Gemma Blackshaw, 'Jewish Christ: problems of self-presentation and socio-cultural assimilation in Richard Gerstl's self-portraiture', *Oxford Art Journal* 29:1, 2006, 44.

⁸ Anonymous reviewer translated in Vergo, 58.

⁹ Anonymous reviewer from Hermann Bahr, *Gegen Klimt [Against Klimt]*, Wien: J. Eisenstein and Co., 1903, 56.

philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, via Richard Wagner's 'Beethoven' essay, they nonetheless 'showed in their initial petition that they understood the meaning of Klimt's painting of Philosophy.'¹⁰ Accusing Klimt of presenting "'unclear ideas through unclear forms (*Verschwommene Gedanken durch verschwommene Formen*),'" they suggested that he 'had produced an aesthetic failure.'¹¹ The ugliness of Klimt's painting, therefore, was characterized not only as a result of the deviation of its figures from the classical canon, but also of their ambiguous, blurred rendering.

The principal spokesperson for the protesting professors was Friedrich Jodl, an empiricist and liberal professor of philosophical psychology and ethics and the leading philosopher at the university after Ernst Mach's departure.¹² Incidentally, Jodl was also the doctoral supervisor of a young man named Otto Weininger who, in the form of a text published in 1903 as *Sex and Character*, produced one of the most compelling but egregiously anti-Semitic and misogynistic documents of Viennese modernism. Jodl, unlike his young student, 'championed women's emancipation and civil liberties;' indeed, according to Schorske, Jodl 'represented in all its dimensions the progressivist phase of liberal rationalism at the turn of the century.'¹³ In order to distinguish himself and his coterie from the religious and otherwise conservative opponents of Klimt's work, Jodl framed their objection aesthetically rather than politically. Thus in an interview in the *Neue Freie Press* Jodl claimed that they protested not against nude art, nor against free art, but against ugly art. According to the philosopher, if the Austrian government wanted to support the odd direction of twentieth-century art, they should put these modern works in museums, not in universities. For Jodl a university was not an appropriate site for new art, which, significantly, he characterized as ugly.¹⁴

Franz Wickhoff objected to Jodl's characterization of Klimt's painting as ugly, and spearheaded a counterpetition, submitted to the Ministry, denying that faculty members had the expertise to make judgments on aesthetic questions of beauty and ugliness.¹⁵ By that time Wickhoff, who was in Rome when he first heard of the Klimt debacle, had in fact already sent an emphatic telegram to the rector of the university, a theologian named Wilhelm Neumann, condemning the protest against *Philosophy* and censuring any personal support Neumann may have lent the protestors.¹⁶ Finally, on 9 May 1900, Wickhoff delivered a lecture in defence of Klimt's painting. Entitled 'What is ugly?', this lecture was discussed extensively in the newspapers at the time. The *Deutsches Volksblatt*, for instance, condemned it as yet another example of Jewish impudence, despite the fact that Wickhoff was a Gentile, not a Jew.¹⁷ The insistent discursive conflation of modern art, ugliness, and Jewishness saturated Germanic

¹⁰ Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, New York: Vintage Books, 1981, 232.

¹¹ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 228-232.

¹² Chandak Sengoopta, *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 17.

¹³ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 233.

¹⁴ In Bahr, *Against Klimt*, 23.

¹⁵ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 234.

¹⁶ In Bahr, *Against Klimt*, 27.

¹⁷ In Bahr, *Against Klimt*, 36.

culture, but particularly Vienna, around 1900; decades later, during the Nazi period, this rhetoric was pressed into unthinkably nefarious directions when art other than classically-inflected kitsch was quelled.

In his lecture Wickhoff suggested that human beings were reacting to perceived beauty or ugliness long before they had invented the terms 'beautiful' or 'ugly.'¹⁸ Historically, he claimed, humans had rejected as ugly anything which they believed could be injurious to their own livelihood or to the perpetuation of the species. Ugliness was thus a matter of life and death, and according to Wickhoff this ancient association remained influential, if latent. Judgments regarding beauty and ugliness which had originated in reproductive drives came to determine aesthetic values as well, and classical artists began to produce images of beauty which were themselves originally based on sexual preferences. In Wickhoff's analysis, the model of beauty passed down from classical art had become so hegemonic that anything other than classicized art was deemed ugly. But both art and humankind were in a constant process of historical development, and while it was now anachronistic to demand that art follow the models of antiquity, the general public still rejected styles which it could not yet understand. Wickhoff claimed more specifically that people found ugly what they could not comprehend. Now while artists looked ever-forward, the public still looked to the past. For Wickhoff, those who saw modern art as ugly believed modernity itself was ugly, and could not accept its new values. By contrast, Wickhoff himself celebrated Klimt's vision of philosophy, even going so far as to describe its figure of knowledge as consoling.¹⁹

It is interesting to note that only three years later, in 'The modern cult of monuments', Alois Riegl characterized the relationship between modern taste and ugliness somewhat differently than Wickhoff had in his lecture on the ugly. Riegl claimed that 'only new and whole things tend to be considered beautiful' whereas 'the old, fragmentary, and faded are thought to be ugly.'²⁰ He emphasized, furthermore, that spectators of modern art find wholeness pleasing and incompleteness displeasing; according to him, in 'the new, signs of decay irritate rather than lend atmosphere.'²¹ Wickhoff and Riegl's assessments of ugliness were not incompatible; nonetheless, whereas Wickhoff chose to emphasize the public's tendency to valorize ancient classical art, Riegl instead focused on the modern desire for increasingly new, perfect, and whole objects. Both art historians, however, were deliberately opposing prejudices regarding ugliness which they encountered within the realms of art theory and practice and in the general public. Wickhoff's and Riegl's different theories of ugliness notwithstanding, each art historian helped open up new ways of understanding the ugly and its place in modern life. Later Vienna school art historians would build on these ideas, characterizing anti-classicism as an artistic

¹⁸ In Bahr, *Against Klimt*, 31.

¹⁹ Wickhoff's lecture is unfortunately not included in his collected works; nonetheless, Bahr's *Against Klimt* contains a detailed account of the lecture which was itself taken from a Viennese daily newspaper, the *Wiener Fremdenblatt* of May 15, 1900. 31-34.

²⁰ Alois Riegl, 'Modern cult of monuments', Translated by Kurt W. Foster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions*, Vol. 25, Fall 1982, 32.

²¹ Riegl, 'Modern cult', 42.

response to eras of cultural chaos, and connecting the purported ugliness of modern art with psychological and spiritual truth.

But how was ugliness in art viewed before 1900, and in the context of what aesthetic traditions did the Vienna school art historians and contemporaneous Viennese artists mount their defence of the ugly? In his recent text *On Ugliness*, Umberto Eco noted that there has historically been very little scholarly discussion of the ugly; rather it has been 'relegated to passing mention in marginal works.'²² Routinely characterized as the obverse of beauty, the antithesis of the classical ideal, and a symbol of moral failure or evil, philosophical and art historical analyses of ugliness have often been remarkably brief and unperceptive. In modern Germanic philosophy, more nuanced discussion of ugliness began perhaps with Immanuel Kant's comments on the beautiful versus the ugly and art versus nature in *The Critique of Judgment* (1790). There Kant made important observations regarding the difference between the ugly object in nature and in art; he noted that what is ugly in nature we may find beautiful in art, for example 'The Furies, diseases, the devastations of war...' Indeed for Kant it is the very fact that art can present what is naturally ugly as though it were beautiful that makes art superior to nature.²³ The philosopher asserted that there is 'only one kind of ugliness which cannot be represented in accordance with nature, without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction and consequently artificial beauty;'²⁴ this is the type of ugliness 'which excites *disgust*.'²⁵ In this view, not only should ugliness be grand, rather than gross, but also spectatorial reaction becomes the determinant factor in assessing whether a work of art is beautiful or ugly, satisfying or disgusting.

Kant's initial probing into the aesthetics of ugliness was continued by G.W.F. Hegel in his *Aesthetics* (1835). Hegel's aesthetic system holds many fascinations, not the least of which is its ambivalent attitude toward beauty and ugliness, as well as classical and non-classical art. On the one hand Hegel commended the Dutch school of painting, notoriously unpopular in his time, for its realism;²⁶ yet on the other hand Hegel also claimed that it is impossible for physical details, such as 'indentations, wrinkles, pores, small hairs, little veins, etc.,' to meaningfully evoke the inner character, or soul, of a subject.²⁷

It is precisely those details that Hegel condemned as extraneous to art and indeed ugly which later became central to the iconography of Austrian expressionism. We see them not only in the distorted indentations in the skin of Viennese artist Oskar Kokoschka's sculptural *Self-Portrait as a Warrior* (1909), but also in his painted portrait of *Der Sturm* editor Herwarth Walden (1910), with its conspicuous venation and the presence of the artist's own thumbprints, and in

²² Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness*, Translated by Alastair McEwen, New York: Rizzoli, 2007, 8.

²³ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, Translated by J.H. Bernard, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, § 48, 194-195.

²⁴ 'Artificial beauty' is Kant's name for the beauty of art, as contradistinguished from 'natural beauty.'

²⁵ Emphasis in Kant, §48, 195.

²⁶ See, for one of several examples, Chapter III 'The Beauty of Art or the Ideal', Section A 'The Ideal as Such', Part 2 'The Relation of the Ideal to Nature.'

²⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Translated by T.M. Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, 146.

his double portrait of art historians Hans and Erica Tietze (1909), which Catherine Soussloff has argued shows the direct influence of Riegl's theories on intersubjectivity and attentiveness in Dutch Baroque portraiture. According to Soussloff, there is a sense of intersubjective reciprocity in Kokoschka's double portrait, not only between husband and wife, but, more importantly, between sitters and viewer which attests to Riegl's influence, not only on his art historian student Hans Tietze, but also on the young artist Kokoschka.²⁸ The *Nude Self-Portrait, Grimacing* (1910) of Kokoschka's contemporary Egon Schiele, with its electrified leg hair, or the blackened arm and bandaged finger in Schiele's *Portrait of Dr. Erwin Graff* (1910), also foreground the ugly particularities of corporeality which Hegel eschewed. These physical details were supposed to be idealized out of art; to foreground and emphasize them the way that Kokoschka and Schiele did was interpreted as a major visual affront.

Nevertheless, because for Hegel the purpose of contemporaneous painting, over and against classic sculpture, was to reveal inner, rather than outer beauty, it could not 'entirely dispense with the ugly.'²⁹ Thus an increased concern with subjectivity necessitated a likewise-increased tolerance of ugliness. In fact in Hegel's view a focus on individual subjectivity was the essential characteristic of contemporary painting. Moreover, he suggested that Flemish and German art was intrinsically attuned to pain and 'the ugliness of the world generally.'³⁰ This racist conception of discrete classical and anti-classical artistic drives became increasingly influential, and by the early twentieth century the idea of a uniquely 'northern' artistic sensibility, one which originated in an attempt to grapple with pain, ugliness, and fear, and was expressed through 'gothic' style, had virtually become dogma.

The increasing interest in the theme of the ugly in Germanic philosophy culminated in the first text focused entirely on ugliness. In *Aesthetics of Ugliness* (1853) Karl Rosencranz, a student of Hegel's, presented a view of the ugly as highly protean and defined by negativity, a deformed doppelgänger of positive values like the sublime, "'the agreeable,'" and "'absolute beauty.'" According to Rosencranz the ugly "'transforms the sublime into the vulgar,'" and "'absolute beauty into caricature.'" Thus for Rosencranz, caricature is "'the acme of formal ugliness but precisely because, thanks to its reflection determined by the positive image of which it is a distortion, it slips over into comedy.'"³¹

Eco and others have emphasized caricature in their discussions of the aesthetics of ugliness. Significantly, caricature was popular in early-twentieth-century Vienna, and examining contemporaneous Viennese discourses and documents could offer clues to understanding how caricature and ugliness were understood, and related to one another, at that

²⁸ See Catherine Soussloff, 'Portraiture and Assimilation in Vienna: The Case of Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat' in *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*, Edited by Howard Wettstein, Berkeley: University of California Press: 2002, 141-145, or, more recently, her *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, chapters 2 and 3.

²⁹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 864.

³⁰ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 884.

³¹ In Eco, *Ugliness*, 154

time.³² In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, published in 1905, Sigmund Freud made comments about caricature which were very similar to Rosencranz's³³, for example when he claimed that caricature 'brings about degradation by emphasizing...a single trait which is comic in itself.'³⁴ Interest in caricature and ugliness in fact seems to have been growing in Vienna around this time; Klimt's 'ugly' painting had provoked censorious caricature in the press five years earlier, and anti-Semitic caricatures portraying Jews, particularly local celebrities like Gustav Mahler, as ugly, hysterical, or somehow monstrous were rampant in local journals such as *Kikeriki*.³⁵ Schiele's *Self-Portrait Grimacing*, produced five years after Freud's text, furthermore attests to the ongoing interest in the relationships between ugliness, character, and caricature. Later Vienna school historians were also interested in questions of caricature and ugliness in art, but delivered widely divergent assessments of such visual strategies and their cultural meaning.

Kant indicated in his *Critique of Judgment* that the sensation of disgust spoils aesthetic experience. In his autobiography, Kokoschka recounted with evident relish how disgusted the Viennese art-going public was by his *Self-Portrait as a Warrior*, claiming that he found chocolate and garbage in the sculpture's open mouth every day it was on display at the 1909 *Kunstschau*.³⁶ Indeed Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who vociferously opposed modern art, was purportedly so repelled by the work that upon seeing it he proclaimed that someone should "'break every bone" in Kokoschka's body.'³⁷ Notably less pleasing in its visual strategies than Klimt's works, Kokoschka's self-portrait bust is an amorphous, lumpy mass, with inconsistent, anti-naturalistic colouring and an asymmetrical facial structure which suggests decomposition. Features seem to slide on nebulous, clotted surfaces of bone, tendon, and skin, and the facial expression itself is at once distorted and slack, giving an impression of physical trauma, and subsequent death and decay. In Schiele's *Self-Portrait Grimacing* (1910) the artist's gaping red mouth opens wide to reveal one impossibly long tooth and a few tiny snaggleteeth. Here the function of disgust and the question of aesthetic satisfaction are somewhat more ambiguous; the artist himself makes the expression of disgust, which may or may not be intended to create the same effect in the viewer.

The idea of aesthetic experience as reciprocal evokes the theory of *Einfühlung* [empathy], which was popular in the nineteenth century. *Einfühlung*, which literally means 'in-feeling,' argues that we project ourselves into, and identify with, what we see. The term was coined by

³² It is interesting to note that the assimilated Jewish composer Arnold Schönberg, who was at points as committed to his visual arts practice as he was to his dissonant music, wrote about caricature at least twice.

³³ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud VII*. Prepared under the general editorship of James Strachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1960, see pages 10, 70, 201.

³⁴ Freud, *Jokes*, 201.

³⁵ *Kikeriki* was printed in Vienna but was popular with a larger audience as well. Founded in 1861, in the late nineteenth century *Kikeriki* focused increasingly on anti-Semitic caricature, and, according to the Institute for Global Jewish Affairs, may have been the first publication to do so. *Kikeriki* circulated until 1933.

³⁶ Oskar Kokoschka, *My Life*, New York: MacMillan, 1974, 21.

³⁷ In Claude Cernuschi, *Re/Casting Kokoschka: Ethics and Aesthetics, Epistemology and Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2002, 26.

aesthetic theorist Robert Vischer in his 1873 dissertation, the theory continued most famously by Theodor Lipps, a philosophy professor who taught 'scientific psychological aesthetics.' Lipps claimed that we find beautiful what we love or what makes us feel free, and find ugly what we hate or what we resist. The former reaction he called *Einfühlung*, the latter, *negativen Einfühlung* [negative empathy]. Lipps's elaboration of *Einfühlung* constituted the dominant explanatory theory in nineteenth-century Germanic aesthetics, although Wilhelm Worringer's 1908 text *Abstraction and Empathy* contains what is probably the most famous description of *Einfühlung*. Although Worringer's book ultimately sounded the death knell for *Einfühlung* as a universal aesthetic theory, nonetheless the notion of negative empathy might help us understand Schiele's self-distortion, and the intense reactions of disavowal the artist's strategies of ugliness provoked in some viewers. It is interesting to note that Schiele was given a copy of Worringer's text, which was itself deeply indebted to Riegl's theories, by his patron Arthur Roessler.³⁸

While the art historians of the Vienna school may not have had a programmatic interest in theories of ugliness, their rejection not only of the classical imperative but of all universalizing aesthetic categories was certainly revolutionary, and led to a reevaluation of the concepts of beauty and ugliness. Riegl's views on ugliness changed over time; nonetheless in *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901) he went so far as to declare: "everything depends on understanding that the aim of the fine arts is not completely exhausted with what we call beauty...the *Kunstwollen* may also be directed toward other forms of objects."³⁹ The concept of *Kunstwollen* is translated variably, and cryptic enough that even Riegl scholars have not reached a firm consensus about its proper translation and exact meaning. Nevertheless, *Kunstwollen* can be understood as artistic 'desire,' 'need,' or 'drive', and it is meant to refer to a historically specific artistic will that engenders the development of a particular visual style or form. Whereas previous theorists had looked to the beauty of classical art as an expression of good society, Riegl's concept of a historically-specific artistic will, or *Kunstwollen*, implied that all periods and types of art were in principle worth studying. Indeed according to Schorske, Riegl and Wickhoff were 'developing a new view of art history peculiarly suitable to creating understanding for innovation in art;⁴⁰ accordingly, their approaches to the question of aesthetic ugliness differed from those of both their philosophical ancestors and their classically-oriented art historical peers.

At the time of the Klimt affair art history was a recently established academic discipline.⁴¹ And as Mitchell Schwarzer has noted, attempts by Heinrich Wölfflin, Konrad Fiedler, and Adolf Hildebrand to sever discussions of art from a tradition of idealist aesthetic philosophy produced 'largely ahistorical visual categories'⁴² which were clearly unsatisfying for Vienna school art historians. Great efforts have been made to identify Riegl's influences in

³⁸ See Kimberly A. Smith, 'Real Style: Riegl and Early 20th-Century European Art', *Centropa: Journal of Central European Art and Architecture* 5:1, January 2005, 19-20 and n. 19.

³⁹ In Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993, 6.

⁴⁰ Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 234.

⁴¹ Moshe Barasch, *Theories of Art, 2: From Winckelmann to Baudelaire*, New York and London: Routledge, 2000, 148.

⁴² Mitchell Schwarzer, 'Cosmopolitan difference in Max Dvořák's art historiography', *The Art Bulletin*, 74:4, December 1992, 673.

particular; Moshe Barasch⁴³ and Michael Gubser⁴⁴ have both noted the anti-Hegelian mood in Vienna around 1900, whereas Ernst Gombrich,⁴⁵ Wolfgang Kemp,⁴⁶ Michael Podro,⁴⁷ Michael Ann Holly⁴⁸ and Margaret Iversen⁴⁹ have all charted affinities between Hegelian thought and Riegl's art history. By contrast, Diana Graham Reynolds has contested the idea that Hegel was a major source, documenting Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on Riegl.⁵⁰ Nietzsche's attitude toward the ugly is notably inconsistent: at times he condemns ugliness as a sign of decadence and decline, and at other times he exalts the ugly under the banner of what he calls dionysian man, for whom 'what is evil, absurd, and ugly seems...permissible, owing to an excess of procreating, fertilizing energies.'⁵¹ Regardless of the difficulties in trying to secure which historical traditions influenced the members of the Vienna school at this time, what remains significant is that in their turn from classicism they negotiated between tradition and innovation, enriching the new philosophical interest in ugliness with rigorous formal and historical analyses of works of art.

It is well understood that the formal terms Wickhoff used to describe the perceived quality of ugliness in modern art—he referred to blurriness, indistinct shapes, and a lack of clear lines—align more with impressionism than any other modern style.⁵² Nonetheless it was neither the impressionists, nor Klimt, but rather the later generation of young Austrian artists, often referred to as expressionists, who placed ugliness at the centre of their artistic practice. Their unrelenting focus on the ugly no doubt had many causes, but may have been encouraged by the atmosphere of anti-classicism and what Iversen has called an 'aesthetic of disintegration' at the Vienna school, and by the effects of this atmosphere on the polemics of public debate. In turn expressionist art appears in the theories of Wickhoff's successor Max Dvořák, whose enthusiasm for the style is well-documented, and Otto Benesch, known for his work on Rembrandt and his position as director of the Albertina museum. Whereas, according to Reynolds, Riegl and Wickhoff had defended the concept of ugliness in art through their 'arguments of historicism and scientific neutrality,'⁵³ Dvořák and Benesch championed the ugly details of contemporaneous Austrian expressionist art more poetically.

⁴³ Barasch, *Theories of Art*, 152.

⁴⁴ Gubser, 'Time and history', 453.

⁴⁵ See Gombrich's 'In search of cultural history', *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and in Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

⁴⁶ See Kemp's introduction to *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, Translations by Evelyn M. Kain and David Britt, Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999.

⁴⁷ See Podro's *Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

⁴⁸ See Holly's *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984, and 'Spirits and ghosts in the historiography of art', *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 52-71.

⁴⁹ See Iversen's *Alois Riegl*.

⁵⁰ Diana Graham Reynolds, 'Alois Riegl and the politics of art history: intellectual traditions and Austrian identity in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna', San Diego: University of California, 1997. Unpublished dissertation.

⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1974, §370, 'What is romanticism', 328.

⁵² Barasch, *Theories of Art*, 148.

⁵³ Reynolds, 'Alois Riegl and the politics of art history', 22

Benesch was a faithful champion of Schiele's art over the years, and commented consistently on ugliness, and perceived ugliness, in the young artist's work. In 1915, at the age of eighteen, Benesch wrote a foreword for the catalogue published to accompany Schiele's exhibition at the Galerie Arnot.⁵⁴ Focusing on the ugliness of the expressionist turn, Benesch delineated Schiele's clear development from what he called 'a proficient Klimt imitator' to an expressionist artist whose initially 'sensuously pleasing colours' now 'pass away into insensuous pallor.'⁵⁵ Likening Schiele's artistic breakthrough to a spirituality breaking through its own skin, a child born to a new era to create pictures of and for that era, Benesch also claimed that Schiele's extraordinary feel for anatomical correctness extended to minute details. He stressed that, although a layperson might not recognize it, the distortions which Schiele imposed on the human body in fact revealed the highest psychological correctness and truth.⁵⁶ Here and elsewhere Benesch's admittedly obscure rhetoric seems to characterize the value of formal ugliness in almost heuristic terms, emphasizing its ability to illuminate psychological problems.

Dvořák made comparable assessments in his foreword for Kokoschka's collection *Variationen über ein Thema* (1921). *Variationen* consists of photographs Kokoschka took of a selection of drawings he had made the previous year depicting Vienna school art historian Karl Maria Swoboda's wife Kamilla listening to music. Dvořák began his foreword with a discussion of Monet and impressionism, and suggested that art became soulless when it achieved the sensitivity of a camera without attending to the real fountainhead of art, the spirit.⁵⁷ In contrast to art which treated the psychological as a mere accessory, in Kokoschka's works, according to Dvořák, the physical is used to represent the spiritual. Indeed Kokoschka's works heralded the approach of a future state which Dvořák described as the new Germanic idealism.⁵⁸ In Benesch's review of this foreword, written three years later, he referred to Kokoschka and Dvořák as 'deeply related spirits.'⁵⁹

Over three decades after his Galerie Arnot catalogue essay, Benesch was still writing about Schiele. He was now in a position to assess, with hindsight, the important shifts in the theory and practice of ugliness since the time of the Klimt scandal, when Wickhoff had defended not only the painting of philosophy itself, but also the so-called ugly style of modern

⁵⁴ Schiele was acquainted with Otto Benesch through the patronage of Otto's father Heinrich, and used him as a model for several of his works. The first was a double portrait of Heinrich and Otto, *Father and Son* (1913). Frenetic geometrics animate the painting; the father blocks the son with his left arm while the son's hands are clasped rigidly in front of his groin area. The next year Schiele used Otto for a series of drawings beginning with *Young Man in Purple Robe with Clasped Hands*; the mournful *Male Figure Bending Forward (Otto Benesch)* looks like Schiele himself, grieving or perhaps poised in monastic concentration.

⁵⁵ Otto Benesch, 'Vorwort', in Christian Nebehay, *Egon Schiele: 1890-1918: Leben, Briefe, Gedichte*, Salzburg, Wien: Residenz Verlag, 1979, 317. '...eines tüchtigen Klimt-Epigonon...sinnlich erfreuenden Farben vollzog, da sie zu unsinnlicher Fahlheit erstarben...'

⁵⁶ Benesch in Nebehay, *Egon Schiele*, 318.

⁵⁷ Max Dvořák in Reinhold Graf Bethusy-Huc, *Oskar Kokoschka: Das Konzert: Variationen über ein Thema*, Salzburg, Wien: Verlag Galerie Welz, 1988, 29.

⁵⁸ Dvořák in Bethusy-Huc, *Variationen*, 32.

⁵⁹ Otto Benesch, *Collected Writings*, Vol. IV, Edited by Eva Benesch, New York: Phaidon, 1973, 177.

art in general. In his 1950 essay 'Egon Schiele as a Draughtsman' Benesch pronounced that the 'art of style about 1900 was more important for its outcome than for its own achievements. This outcome was Expressionism.' Identifying Kokoschka and Schiele as the heirs of this legacy, Benesch stressed that what 'distinguished the two young artists from the aesthetic culture of the world in which they grew up' was 'the spiritual and therewith also the artistic importance of the acrid and the ugly' in their works.⁶⁰ In remarkably similar terms to those used in his 1915 catalogue foreword, Benesch noted that the 'intensified, exaggerated nature' and 'withered surfaces' of Schiele's forms were nonetheless 'anatomically and biologically correct.'⁶¹ For Benesch 'that bony, spiny, ugly and rather repellent world of forms...intermingled...with its graceful aspect' constituted the essence of early expressionism.⁶² Ugliness was therefore redeemed not only by its 'graceful aspect' but also by its essential role in the historical development of a new art.

Benesch also claimed that, although Schiele's contemporaries saw his deformed figures in terms of 'shocking caricature,' in fact the artist's works 'brought to light...an almost oppressive effect of psychical reality.'⁶³ Not only Schiele's but also Kokoschka's art had 'met with violent opposition on the part of the conservative majority of the Austrian public,' he said, with only a small minority of colleagues and 'progressive art lovers' nourishing their artistic development.⁶⁴ This recollection is consistent with the much more recent comment in *The Naked Truth: Klimt, Schiele, Kokoschka and Other Scandals* (2005) that Schiele's representation of his models was 'for a long time interpreted as "ugly"' because the artist 'did not require his models to adopt classical poses or to simulate classical movement.'⁶⁵ But for Wickhoff, Riegl, Dvořák, and Benesch, such a requirement would seem just as inappropriate as it apparently did to the artist himself. For them ersatz classicism was more disturbing than deformation and caricature, while the appearance of ugliness was somehow more modern than the appearance of beauty, and even more truthful.

In his *The History of Art as the History of Ideas* Dvořák insisted that

A great artist never stands absolutely outside the spiritual and intellectual ferment of his time and if the threads binding him to it are invisible to us then it means that we have failed to look deeply enough either into his art or into the age in which he lived.⁶⁶

An historical artist like El Greco was thus understood as expressing a cultural turn from materialism to spirituality in pictorial form, which implied the rejection of classical naturalism

⁶⁰ Benesch, *Collected Writings*, 189.

⁶¹ Benesch, *Collected Writings*, 192.

⁶² Benesch, *Collected Writings*, 195.

⁶³ Benesch, *Collected Writings*, 192.

⁶⁴ Benesch, *Collected Writings*, 192.

⁶⁵ *The Naked Truth: Klimt, Schiele, Kokoschka and Other Scandals*, Edited by Tobias G. Natter and Max Hollein, New York: Prestel, 2005, 213.

⁶⁶ Max Dvořák, *The History of Art as the History of Ideas*, Translated by John Hardy, London, Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, 71.

in favour of an anti-naturalistic style. Perhaps reflecting on the similarly anti-naturalistic style of contemporaneous expressionism, Dvořák explicitly compared the “‘apparent chaos’” of El Greco’s era to his own age, which likewise appeared chaotic.⁶⁷ Matthew Rampley has furthermore stressed that an interest in contemporaneous art practice ‘distinguishes Viennese art historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from their contemporaries in Germany or Switzerland,’ who preferred serene classicism and ‘remained ill at ease with contemporary art.’⁶⁸

Later art historians of the Vienna school did not necessarily maintain the earlier interest in, and tolerance of, ugliness. For example Hans Sedlmayr, in his *Verlust der Mitte*, translated into English as *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center* (1958), followed Dvořák’s view that art develops forms paralleling the forms of culture, but condemned the sense of chaos in modernity and expressionism alike. Unlike the other Vienna school art historians whose theories we have looked at here, Sedlmayr castigated expressionism, caricature and other styles which he believed expressed the sickness of the age through ugliness. He also claimed that representing circus folk, or even refugees, in art was pathological, as such images ‘cast a doubt on the true nature of man.’⁶⁹ So in spite of the ‘inhuman’ visions of modern art—the ‘boiling chaos’ of expressionism, the ‘deadness’ of Cubism, or the ‘cold demonism’ of Surrealism—‘natural man,’ he said, was right to be disgusted by ugliness.⁷⁰ Sedlmayr’s trope of natural man here acts as an exact antithesis to Wickhoff’s earlier notion of historical man, who allowed changing cultural conditions to influence his understanding of beauty and ugliness. Whereas Wickhoff, Riegl, Dvořák, and Benesch all encouraged a tolerance of that which we encounter as ugly, in *Verlust der Mitte* Sedlmayr condemned ugliness precisely insofar as it functioned as a barometer of crisis.

This essay has highlighted certain key points of interest in the rich dialogue between art theory and practice in early-twentieth-century Viennese culture, noting in particular the strategic visual and discursive invocation of ugliness as a metaphor for other ideas such as modernity, Jewishness, truth, and sickness. It should be emphasized that this image of Viennese theory and practice looks quite different from the highly influential Schorskean paradigm, which argues that Vienna was fundamentally ahistorical and used aesthetics to retreat from public life. On the contrary, the artists and art historians discussed exemplify Vienna’s peculiar concern with the relationship between history, aesthetics, and contemporaneity.

Kathryn Simpson – After completing Master’s degrees in both theory & criticism and art history, the author was awarded the Canada Graduate Scholarship to pursue her PhD. Recent publications include reviews of Margaret Iversen’s *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes* in *Revue d’art canadienne/Canadian Art Review* and Nicky Glover’s *Psychoanalytic Aesthetics* in *Art History*. This essay developed out of research toward her doctoral dissertation, provisionally

⁶⁷ In Matthew Rampley, ‘Max Dvořák: art history and the crisis of modernity’, *Art History*, 26:2, April 2003, 227.

⁶⁸ Rampley, ‘Max Dvořák’, 229.

⁶⁹ Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*, Translated by Brian Battershaw, Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1958, 140-141.

⁷⁰ Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis*, 138-139.

Kathryn Simpson Viennese art, ugliness, and the Vienna school of art history: the
vicissitudes of theory and practice

entitled 'Making monsters: strategies of ugliness in early-twentieth-century Viennese self-
portraiture.'

Kathryn Simpson
Department of Art History, EV-3.809, Concordia university
1455, de Maisonneuve Blvd. West
Montreal, Quebec, Canada, H3G 1M8

dionysian_kat@yahoo.ca