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Preface

PENG Feng

The competition between philosophy and the arts can be traced back to the ancient times. In the Twentieth Century, this competition reached its culmination when art was pronounced reaching its end while aesthetics was declared irrelevant to the arts. Formalism abandoned the beautiful in aestheticism, Dadaism betrayed the autonomous or artistic merit in formalism, finally the contemporary conceptual art rejected the aesthetic, and so aesthetics or philosophy of art was totally expelled from the art world. Let us remember the year of 1983. In this year, The Anti-Aesthetic, a book edited by Hal Foster, was published; while, in the same year, Arthur Danto and Hans Belting published their books in which we read that art or art history had already reached its end. Contemporary art or the art after its end is critical or political rather than aesthetic, literal rather than poetical or metaphorical. However, every dog has his day. After ten years, in 1993, Dave Hickey made a prophecy that beauty would be the dominant issue of the next decade. After another decade, Donald Kuspit found that the New Master Art was developing into or returning to the New Old Master Art. Meanwhile, Jacques Rancière supposed that art could be both political and aesthetic. Now we reach a historical stage where art and aesthetics are seeking for a reconciliation. The essays in this book show this new tendency in different ways. As the International Yearbook of Aesthetics of 2012, this volume should have been published four years earlier. But I was not very convinced of this new tendency when I prepared this book four years ago. Now I am more confident.

July 10, 2016
Peking University
Art and Aesthetics: Three Recent Perspectives*

Aleš Erjavec

1

In a statement made famous, Barnett Newman exclaimed that “aesthetics is to the artist as ornithology is to the birds.” Since its enunciation around 1952 this claim has been reiterated on innumerable occasions. Its original addressee was Susan Langer, and its intent was to denigrate attempts to introduce semiotics and linguistics into art criticism and aesthetics. Often it was also interpreted as criticism of the beautiful on the part of Newman and his embrace of the sublime, although it was most frequently taken as a criticism of aesthetics as such. Nonetheless, such a situation was more typical of the United States or the United Kingdom and their “philosophical empires” (Richard Shusterman) than of continental philosophy, aesthetics included. In recent decades the Anglo-American “empire” also underwent a change not yet discernible in Newman’s statement: today “political, moral, and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago.”

What happened in forty years? May we claim that artists no longer see aesthetics as something irrelevant, as Newman probably did? The answer is affirmative. Arthur C. Danto recalls that after 1964 philosophical books of the “austere and technical order” began “to be preempted by the artworld and made its own, it was as though some deep transformation in artistic consciousness had taken place. A wholly different relationship between philosophy and art...now seemed to exist. It was, almost, as if philosophy were

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somehow now part of the artworld, …whereas in 1964 philosophy stood outside that world and addressed it from across an alienating distance.”

In spite of aesthetics and related theories finding—as Danto witnesses—a response and appreciation in art, this relationship remains uncertain: in the last few decades, i.e. since the cultural explosion of the late seventies and early eighties, when postmodern artistic practices and theories reigned, most aesthetic theories have once again left the path on which they had walked together with art. In the last two decades philosophy of art has apparently gone its own way, leaving contemporary artistic practices to rely on sporadic instances of art criticism or on rare philosophical theories that attempted to selectively grasp contemporary artistic phenomena. This had much to do with the current situation in art, bringing to mind the mentioned observation that “political, moral, and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment,” for hasn’t the predominant recent and contemporary art really become politically, morally, and ethically involved, frequently focusing on topics related to social, ethnic, political, and other issues which make it appear to be political and politicized—not in the sense of the twentieth-century master narratives but in the meaning of Michel Foucault’s “microphysics of power?” In other words, is it not true that art of today still strives, very much in the tradition of modernism, romanticism, and the avant-gardes, to be provocative, critical, partisan, subversive, and “involved?” It apparently continues to retain its objectives from modernity, even if most often without equivalent theoretical support.

To ascertain how the story—one of the possible stories—of some artistic, aesthetic, and philosophical positions unfolded in the last two decades, I shall sketch some of the common preliminary circumstances and then some theories that detected and articulated them. I thus intend to revisit three theories which have influenced—and are still influencing—not only global views and opinions about contemporary aesthetics, but equally or more intensely views about art and culture, realizing this not in the sense of determining what is good or bad art, but what is to be considered art as such.

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In the past four decades the big shifts from modernism and modernity to the

present contemporaneity occurred. Today a term missing on this path from modernity to contemporaneity seems to be postmodernism. Nonetheless, in spite of frequent criticism, it should not be forgotten that postmodernism emerged as the great liberator from the suffocating modern totalizations and high modernism. In the words of Wolfgang Welsch from 1988, “Postmodernity is traversed by the knowledge that totality cannot come without establishing as the absolute a certain particularity, which is then related to the destruction of other particularities.”

Postmodernism in Europe emerged as a theoretical and practical novelty in the seventies. After a few years it was replaced by cautious and reluctant admissions of the factual emergence of the postmodern newcomer, complemented by celebratory praise for postmodernism as a new and liberating cultural paradigm. A critical attitude towards it nonetheless remained strong. The main claim against it was the incompleteness and therefore the still actual relevance of the project of modernity. This attitude was also witnessed by alternative or complementary reflective articulations—some still being with us—such as “parallel modernities,” “second modernity,” or, as in the case of China, that of “modernization.”

Such cultural issues have been connected to political issues in the sense that they were related to the end of ideologies, the clash of civilizations, the end of Marxism as the main master narrative of the previous century, the related fall of revolutionary socialism and its industrialist ideological supports, the surprise at discovering limits to the neoliberal political and economic agenda, as well as the lack of viable political projects and ideas capable of replacing it or at least offering a sustainable alternative to it: is this to be a revival of the relevance of Marxism, communism, and of the class struggle as recently argued by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, or spontaneous outbursts of social revolts of the multitude as conceptualized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and discussed by Paolo Virno, or something as yet unthought? And where does art stand in this?

How can we determine the cultural delineations of the last four decades and especially those related to aesthetics? A starting point can be the rise of postmodern ideas and postmodernism. The fascination with postmodernism and its incessant attempts at establishing its identity by demarcating itself

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from modernity perhaps revealed as much about modernity as about postmodernism. From the contemporary perspective it would appear that postmodernism was essentially a transient phenomenon, but at the same time one that represented a cultural marker of a deeper historical shift: from industrial society and national cultures and economies to the postindustrial and information society and, of course, to multinational capital and globalism.

In the early eighties one of the central theoretical issues was the question of the existence and nature of postmodernism as the most recent cultural theory to dominate. The as yet undecided response to this query has almost prohibited a similar questioning in our current historical situation. In order to establish what some of the possible answers to this question may be, I will briefly discuss three theories that have captured the attention of audiences that may be broader or different from one of aestheticians. I will thus be discussing “relational aesthetics” as developed by Nicolas Bourriaud in the nineties, Jacques Rancière’s aesthetics from the past decade, and Terry Smith’s theory of contemporary art developed mainly in the last few years.

Two of these authors, Bourriaud and Rancière, explicitly regard their theories as aesthetic ones. That of the former is an endeavor undertaken by a curator, editor, and art critic, while Jacques Rancière is a philosopher. The third author, Terry Smith, is a historian of art and architecture (and known in the past mostly for his book Making the Modern, 1993). While hardly mentioning aesthetics, he nonetheless explicitly or implicitly discusses issues of essential relevance to contemporary philosophy and theory of art. It is worth noting that Smith employs an abundance of artistic examples to establish and persuasively support his views.

In all three cases the theories offered are mainly devoted to visual art, taking such kind of art as a privileged artistic domain. Only Rancière is to some extent an exception, for he also uses literature as an important point of reference. All three authors take into consideration contemporary or recent art, thereby offering their theories as theories that are to influence the philosophical and the theoretical communities as well as various art worlds. The authors of the three theories also discuss contemporary global art. For them there no longer exists a recognizable border between the art of the First, the Second, and the Third Worlds; instead they see contemporary artists and art as progressively becoming inextricably linked and combined, making the demarcation between various parts of the globe impossible or irrelevant.
If we say that a historical period which marks a transformation in relation to the past and to the future is a time of profound change, then the period in art and culture around 1980 was such a time. Its culturally dominant, post-modernism, was the last cultural paradigm that was essentially created and almost exclusively theorized within the European and American context.

As a concept and empirical fact, postmodernism emerged in the realm of architecture, by this very fact witnessing to a cultural stance irreverent as regards the previous dominant literary artistic and cultural paradigm. In 1977 British architect and critic Charles Jencks published a book entitled The Language of Post-Modern Architecture. The term “postmodern” immediately became a cultural catchword, for it conceptually crystallized in a single word a multitude of similar although unrelated cultural and social phenomena. As Jencks explained in a later edition of this book, “When I first wrote this book in 1975 and 1976 the word and concept of Post-Modernism had only been used, with any frequency, in literary criticism. Most perturbing, as I later realized, it had been used to mean ‘Ultra-Modern,’ referring to the extremist novels of William Burroughs and a philosophy of nihilism and anticonvention. While I was aware of these writings, of Ihab Hassan and others, I used the term to mean the opposite of all this: the end of avant-garde extremism, the partial return to tradition and the central role of communicating with the public—and architecture is the public art.”

The role of architecture as the birthplace of postmodernism was highlighted also in philosophy and cultural theory. Thus Jürgen Habermas begins his programmatic lecture/essay on “Modernity—An Incomplete Project” from 1980 by stating: “In 1980, architects were admitted to the Biennial in Venice, following painters and filmmakers. The note sounded at this first Architecture Biennial was one of disappointment. I would describe it by saying that those that exhibited in Venice formed an avant-garde of reversed fronts... A critic advanced a thesis whose significance reaches beyond this particular event; it is a diagnosis of our times: ‘Postmodernity definitely presents itself as Antimodernity’.”

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Yet another analysis of postmodern architecture was offered by Fredric Jameson, who claimed that “architecture … remains the privileged aesthetic language.” Jameson also spoke of a “postmodern space,” relating it to the notion of the sublime in the sense that it defers a cognitive mapping.

In many ways architecture—often in the sense of “corporate postmodernism”—was the initial paradigm of postmodernism: it was, as Jencks acutely noticed, the public art, meaning that it was focused on the public and the users (and therefore the market); it was averse to avant-garde experimentation, it allowed or even cherished ornaments and embellishments, it furthermore demolished the barrier between the inside and the outside, and promoted the aestheticization of our lived environment, which went hand in hand with the embellishment of the objects of our quotidian life and the aestheticization of the human body.

In this sense, postmodernism represented much of what was considered negative when viewed from within the tradition of critical theory and avant-gardes. While this view could be correct when viewed from a Western European or American viewpoint, it became questionable when regarded from Third or Second World perspectives: in Cuba, for example, the term postmodernism was avoided because of its associations with the U.S. In China it was understood in the sense of “modern,” while in the former European socialist countries its irreverent treatment of ruling ideas (cultural or political), its fondness for eclecticism and its “anything goes” approach made it a liberating social and cultural theory. Postmodernism was furthermore welcomed in small cultures, which have in the modernist past always practiced a cultural policy of appropriation and eclecticism. Suddenly their former cultural practice, which had until then been interpreted as a symptom of a lack of originality, of copying larger cultures and of being late-comers, was suddenly transformed into a marker of being active participants in the most recent cultural invention and trend.

In the eighties Zygmunt Bauman hypothesized that the essential characteristic of postmodernism was that it represented a point in history in which the question of the end of modernity could be posited and thought for the first time—and that it was this possibility which represented the actual ess-

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ence of postmodernism. In classical modernity, argued Bauman, nothing conceivable existed beyond it.\(^7\)

Regarded from a contemporary perspective, such observation appears very true: postmodernism, postmodernity, and their theories—be it those of Bauman, Jameson, Welsch, Lyotard, or others—appear to exist today primarily as interrelated critiques of modernity and modernism and not as positing of alternative theoretical edifices that would or could subvert materializations of the enormous inventions of modern development. It also appears that while much of postmodern art is eclectic and offers meaning instead of the modernist truth, it today at the same time reveals something about its transcendental conditions and its historical and existential contexts; somehow it reveals truth where it seemed there was none to be searched for, only a pure or opaque surface. Often such truth is related to the postmodern acknowledging instances of otherness related to differences in subjectivity.

Postmodernism today resembles modernism and modernity. Even Fredric Jameson, probably the most influential postmodern author, is seen today as a modernist figure and theorist. Is not his recurring tripartite scheme a typical Hegelian triadic construction, with the postmodern cultural dominant possessing all the modernist prerogatives and postmodernism revealing the historical necessity of its ontological blindness as concerns its inner artistic nature and its obligatory nature of “not seeing” in the sense of not mapping its place in its here and now? Does not his theory, just as postmodernism itself, increasingly resemble a modified and critically transformed discourse of modernity?

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“Relational aesthetics” was a notion presented for the first time in 1996 and developed in Nicolas Bourriaud’s book of the same title published in French in 1998 and in English in 2002. Bourriaud, a French art critic, curator, and editor, has also authored other books (the more recent *Postproduction*, for example). A concept related to Bourriaud’s, but one that never gained similar international attention, was “Context Kunst,” coined by the Austrian art critic and curator Peter Weibel and publicly presented at an exhibition by the same name in Graz, Austria, in 1993.


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I should note that in my discussion of Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics.” I will be relying almost exclusively on the book by this title, for over time Bourriaud’s views change and sometimes contradict each other. Referring thus to a single work of his will facilitate our discussion of his basic tenets. Bourriaud’s book is consciously a work whose intention is to theoretically, perhaps even philosophically, reflect upon the art of its time, i.e. the nineties. In his view such art is characterised by a pronounced establishment of relations and communication between the artist and the public. As the author states in the foreword to the book, the misunderstandings concerning the art of the nineties arose out of the lack of theoretical discourse. In his view, the majority of critics and philosophers were averse to tackling contemporary artistic practices, which thus mostly remained unreadable.

Bourriaud intended to compensate for this deficiency and develop a theory which would to some extent philosophically grasp and plausibly explain what he saw to be not only a temporary phenomenon—i.e. the art of the nineties, with “relational art” being the specificity that emerged in that decade—but an art that in his opinion possessed a more substantial historical significance. He claimed that today history “seems to have taken a new turn. After the area of relations between Humanity and deity, and then between Humankind and the object, artistic practice is now focused upon the sphere of inter-human relations, as illustrated by artistic activities that have been in progress since the early 1990s.”

Bourriaud thus proclaimed the art of the nineties to be the essential instance and materialization of relational art and thus also the privileged object of relational aesthetics, in this respect somehow repeating Hegel’s thesis about the development of the self-consciousness of the mind but—similarly to Rancière’s notion of the “aesthetic regime of art”—not positing a historical closure to its development. Bourriaud claimed that relationality was a universal feature of art, one that was opened up in art by the Italian renaissance, only that in that case art was not yet creating intersubjective relationships but those between art and the objects it depicted. By his tripartite historical schema Bourriaud followed in the footsteps of other recent French theorists, such as Régis Debray (Vie et mort de l’image, 1991), and Jacques Rancière, who divided history into similarly conceived regimes, even if in Rancière the historical divisions between them were blurred. Rancière thus referred to

the “ethical regime of images,” the “representative regime of art,” and the “aesthetic regime of art” that did not necessarily follow each other but could temporally overlap.

Bourriaud’s “relational aesthetics” and his notion of “relational art” have been subjected to innumerable reviews and criticisms, and also served as the basis for other critical discourses. In spite of many obvious fallacies and contradictions inherent to his book, the latter not only generated interest among theorists, but was also well received by artists, curators, critics, and the so-called “art world” in general. It was the 2002 English publication of Relational Aesthetics that put the book on the global art map and turned it into an important point of reference for those with an interest not only in the most recent fine arts and new technologies (which were Bourriaud’s main points of reference), but also those involved with performance art and even theater. The success of Bourriaud’s book also confirmed his observation about the lack of theoretical discourse on the art of the nineties—a period when creative art was emerging not only from Western Europe and the United States, but also from the former Soviet bloc countries, with the latter being subjected to more developed theoretical reflection. The lack of critical theoretical response to the art of the nineties perhaps had something to do also with the still vibrant postmodern ideas and the thesis that the art of that time was only a chain of meaningless signifiers, not allowing for a cognitive mapping that could equal that of the class consciousness as theorized by György Lukács, artistically making itself visible in its contemporarl modernist manifestations. On the one hand, western artists were confronted with the politicized art coming from the former or present socialist countries, and on the other with the critical art of the neo-avant-garde tradition and its forms of resistance. Curators, furthermore, became the crucial artistic figures of the nineties, turning themselves into roles previously reserved for film or theater directors and setting up their almost private exhibitions, establishing in this way the pronounced dominance of the curator who replaced the previous persona of the modernist art critic. Since the curator became the pivotal figure of the art world, it was not unexpected that he also attempted to articulate the theoretical positions which were to create, reflect upon, and support the principles of his curatorial practices. Nicolas Bourriaud did just that, and this fact became one of the sources of the impact his book made and continues to make in the world, be it the world of art or of academia.

In his book The Century (2005) Alain Badiou points out that the predominant part of the modernist art of the twentieth century did not appear in
the form of a material work but in the form of an act, as some kind of performance. Boris Groys similarly claims—but in relation to contemporary art—that installation art and performance art are the authentic and the dominant art forms of our contemporaneity. In this respect Bourriaud conforms to this view and confirms such observation.

Bourriaud has advocated performativity, social contexts, transitivity, and dialogue over the limitations of traditional modernist values such as individualism and objecthood. Bourriaud finds empirical support for relational aesthetics in the art of the nineties, and theoretical support especially in Félix Guattari’s philosophy. According to Guattari, it is illusory to aim at a step-by-step transformation of society. The only realistic options are microscopic attempts, of the community and neighborhood committee type, such as the organization of day-nurseries in the faculty and the like, which play in his opinion an absolutely critical role.

If in any, then we are with Bourriaud in the inverted cosmos of Michel Foucault’s microphysics of power, a cosmos in which—to use examples from Bourriaud—the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija prepares a meal and invites visitors to share it with them, or “when Gabriel Orozco puts an orange on the stalls of a deserted Brazilian market,… or slings a hammock in the MoMa garden in New York”. According to Bourriaud, with such gestures the artist acts in the small space of everyday life that is determined by the superstructure, with this one consisting of and being determined by the “large” exchanges. In other words, what Bourriaud is promoting is an art that does not strive to be a part of modern utopias or that would want to resist current social antinomies (and therefore continue the avant-garde tradition of modernism), but one that is content to create “microtopias.” In Rancière’s words, in Bourriaud “art no longer tries to respond to an excess of commodities and signs but rather to a lack of bonds. As [Bourriaud] puts it: ‘Through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond’.”

A related criticism is aimed at Bourriaud by Claire Bishop. In her view—which is less political than Rancière’s and that I find to be among the most

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11 Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, p. 17.
relevant and pertinent—the main problem with Bourriaud’s theory and the artistic examples he chooses is that he promotes art that requires “a unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as-togetherness,” instead of basing relationality on (or also on) the art of the same period that provides experiences “more adequate to the divided and incomplete subject of today.”

Bourriaud’s work shows that in spite of being frequently contradictory—as when he embraces modernity, and the criticality of various modes of modernist art, while at the same time opting for cozy and intimate non-conflictual community-building and sharing experiences as art—personal choice, even if one-sided, has enormous effects in society and in art. In spite of its weak points, Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics had a strong impact on contemporary art criticism. Bourriaud justly pointed out that one of the essential features of art—any art—is and remains the establishment of communication and interpersonal exchange.

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In the preface to The Order of Things Michel Foucault raises an issue on which this work of his is based: “Between the already ‘encoded’ eye and reflexive knowledge there is a middle region which liberates order itself.... In every culture, between the use of what one might call the ordering codes and reflections upon order itself, there is the pure experience of order and of its modes of being.”

This passage from Foucault can help us shed light on a large segment of Jacques Rancière’s philosophical and aesthetic project which started in recent years to have a visible global impact not only among philosophers but also among contemporary artists and art critics.

As Rancière explains in a 2002 interview, “something of Foucault’s archeological project—the will to think the conditions of possibility of such and such a form of statement or such and such an object’s constitution—has stuck with me.” What is relevant for Rancière in Foucault and what recalls

13 Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” p. 79.
Kant’s transcendental philosophy is precisely his interpretation of the constitution of aesthetics, of the way aesthetics as a concept became possible, thereby aiding in the development of a general notion of art. His aesthetic project consists of nothing less than a thorough overhaul of the current dominant theory of modernism and autonomous art.

Rancière—a former student of Louis Althusser and involved in his Lire le Capital book project who later, like Alain Badiou, dissociated himself from Althusser—published works on pedagogy and on political philosophy, to become in the last decade known also outside the Francophone world and to become at the moment probably the most influential continental philosopher pursuing “aesthetics.” In his view—described, often repeated, and somewhat developed in a series of thin volumes, conference papers and interviews which in his words “allow him to say as much as possible in as little space as possible”16—Rancière persistently repeats a few main tenets of his philosophy of the aesthetic. These are some of the central ones:

Aesthetics is a discourse born two centuries ago and is the condition of possibility for thinking art in general. “It was in this same era that art, in its indeterminate singularity, was first set in contrast to the list of fine, or liberal, arts.”17 “For art to exist what is required is a specific gaze and form of thought to identify it.”18 A specific gaze is the gaze of the aesthetic regime of art. But without having aesthetics as its transcendental condition, art would not attain the singular generalized mode which has allowed us for two centuries to speak about art as well as to pose questions about its nature and its universal properties. In this way aesthetics has carried out a “distribution of the sensible,” that is, it developed the notion of art—and thus the whole field of art—in a specific way, including some and excluding some other forms of production and creativity. What Rancière is after are conditions that make possible categories such as art, critical art, autonomous art, etc. The aesthetic regime of art which, he argues, came into existence more or less simultaneously with aesthetics, has essentially replaced the representative regime of art which was erected upon the verisimilitude of the representation and the represented. The aesthetic regime purportedly rejected such a hierarchical system, allowing for an osmosis among elite and

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16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
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abstract art and arts and crafts, thereby bringing together under the same roof the abstractions of Malevich and the Bauhaus projects or Stendhal and the Arts & Crafts movement.

Rancière attempted to turn aesthetics into a tool of interpretation of contemporary art by proclaiming modernism—especially of the Greenbergian type—obsolete and counter-productive for an analysis of the art of the last two centuries. In his view, the notion of modernism (a part of which he calls “modernitarism”) raises all kinds of problems, such as the division of art into formalism and politicized avant-gardism or the lumping together of theories as diverse as those of Adorno and Futurism.

In spite of some persuasive arguments, Rancière’s attack on modernism seems problematic and risky especially because it requires a complete reinterpretation of the art of the last two centuries. Rancière claims that art is like democratic politics: the persons who are without a voice in a community have to attain a voice, have to fight for the right to speak and to be heard. The same is true of Rancière’s theory. A question also arises as to the delimitation of art and crafts in the aesthetic regime. Today nobody defends the “pure” art that Rancière chastises and we all agree with him that modern art is a mechanical mixture of artistic (formal) and extra-artistic (heteronomous) elements.

According to Rancière then, there exist three regimes or modes of art, with the “aesthetic regime” being the one instituted by the aesthetic revolution at the end of the eighteenth century when works were proclaimed art without possessing the representational properties which previously purportedly distinguished art from non-art.

Since then, and Rancière is quite adamant about this, the aesthetic regime of art stretches on into contemporaneity, disregarding issues such as the autonomy of art or the modernism/postmodernism dilemma, the theory of the end of art, or that of the purity of art. All these are, claims Rancière, issues created by the false supposition that modernism is a concept rooted in historical reality and not simply an ideological notion created post festum.

In his Aesthetic Theory Theodor Adorno claims that “the principle of method here is that light should be cast on all art from the vantage point of
the most recent artworks, rather than the reverse.”

In both authors so far discussed it is obvious that their starting point is contemporaneity, although in Rancière’s case this contemporaneity paradoxically runs through an ahistorical and synchronic continuum within which only the starting point—around 1800—is explicitly noted, which then stretches into an undefined contemporaneity.

Terry Smith’s theoretical endeavor warrants attention for he tackles the issue of contemporary art head-on. Like Bourriaud, Smith also approaches the art of his time, only his time is currently also ours and he does not ascribe historic proportions to the current epoch as Bourriaud did. Also, if the art discussed by Bourriaud included recent non-European and non-American art, such art was nonetheless mostly the creation of artists who permanently emigrated to Europe and the U.S. from other continents. In Smith’s case the art presented is more locally defined and determined, or it is explicitly “global.”

Smith’s project—presented especially in his 2009 book *What is Contemporary Art?* but also in his other publications—consists of an attempt to untangle the incessantly loose ends of contemporary art and to establish some common points and features in what appears to be a jumble of contradictory, excluding, or parallel works and events that apparently share only the title of “art,” which they appropriate by being presented within an environment that is designated as that of a museum, a gallery, a biennial, or some other artistic space/place/location. Their shared characteristics often have nothing to do with their shared locality but with their common, related, or similar concepts. Also, if in the past, as Zygmunt Bauman claimed in 1989, philosophers were “legislators”—think, for example, of Hegel’s canonic role in determining our perception of past art—then they turned in recent decades into “interpreters.” Today even this role of interpreters has lost its significance, for the number of art worlds has become infinite. It is such a situation that makes Smith claim that universalisms such as modernity or postmodernity will not achieve totality, nor allow for a sustainable compromise.

Smith’s main position concerning contemporaneity could be condensed into the following statement: “Contemporaneity consists precisely in the accele-

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ration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.”

Smith argues that in contemporary art a pattern exists between universal determination and random plurality. The pattern of which Smith speaks reminds one of the set theory that Alain Badiou posits in his main work, *Being and Event* (1988), as his ontology. The important feature of Smith’s theory is that it limits the import of common features to a pattern which is based on resemblance and not on a causal relationship.

According to Smith, contemporary art consists of three main currents which form the mentioned pattern: the first is institutionalized Contemporary Art (which amounts to an aesthetic of globalization and is related to neoliberal economics and art institutions), the second is a current that emerges from decolonization within the former colonial worlds and includes its impacts in the former First World. It is within this current that postmodernism is to be included as a segment thereof. In Smith’s view, “postmodernism” is a term too thin to denote this great change that is still continuing. He argues that postmodernism is today but a pointer to the first phase of contemporaneity.

The outcome of Smith’s theory of contemporary art is that there exist not one but three complementary answers to the question of what is contemporary art. There exist then three interrelated kinds of contemporary art, the essence of which is raised on empirical grounds but which nonetheless possess some broader philosophical characteristics. Such interpretation of contemporaneity and its art have often met with criticism and denigration—as at a conference in 2004 which resulted in the collective volume *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (2009) where some participants flatly refused to accept Smith’s claims about contemporary art.

Art is contemporary in an infinite number of ways, insists Smith, offering again a statement very similar to Alain Badiou’s argument about set theory,

where there is no all-encompassing mathematical set. In Badiou this truth carries universal proportions, that is, it is not only historically or geographically valid, but is instead, like Kant’s epistemology, valid universally. Because contemporary art is not only globally created and exhibited but also globally conceptualized, it is also universal.

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In this brief sketch I have pointed to some of the encounters of aesthetics and art in recent decades. They witness that in spite of numerous examples proving the opposite, art and aesthetics occasionally become or remain partners in our attempts to fathom, identify, legitimize, and appreciate art.

What occurred within and after postmodernism was a series of individual poetics and expressions. This development was detected, presented, and analyzed also by some contemporary aesthetic and art theories. I have noted three. The first represents a reflection upon a segment of the art of the nineties. It offers a theory in a situation when there was obviously none available. The second theory represents an attempt at a thorough overhaul of the ruling discourse on modernity and modernism, collapsing modern past and present art into the aesthetic regime of art. The third theory, that of Terry Smith, offers at the moment a starting point, since for the time being it remains in an underdeveloped state. It promises to think the contemporaneity of contemporary art anew, which is a much needed endeavor. Let me therefore conclude this essay with two propositions by Smith: One: “Art everywhere today is contemporary in every sense.” Two: “Today art is still modern, in part, but residually so. It sees postmodernism as a recent repository of useful strategies that do not, however, add up to a whole.”21

I would subscribe to both statements. It remains to be seen whether this theory of contemporary art will acquire a significance that will reach beyond the needs stemming from the ambiguity whether today we should refer to the museum of modern or contemporary art—or perhaps both. We know what theories are behind the notion of modern art, but which theories are to philosophically support the notion of the museum of contemporary art?

Beyond the Aesthetic and the Anti-Aesthetic*

James Elkins

As a small subject, the anti-aesthetic is associated with Manhattan in the early 1980s, where it was crystallized by Hal Foster’s edited volume The Anti-Aesthetic. Practices later identified as anti-aesthetic had emerged in the 1970s, and were developed in the 1980s in various centers of the art world, including New York, Los Angeles, London, Amsterdam, Brussels, Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Berlin. By the late 1990s, it could be argued that theories of the anti-aesthetic had given way to other conceptual formations, such as resistance and criticality. The Anti-Aesthetic is still read in universities in North America and parts of Europe, where it is often proposed as a historical document, a moment in the history of reactions against Modernism. In those contexts it has become background reading in the way Heinrich Wölfflin or E. H. Gombrich has become in art-historical pedagogy. It is significant that in some parts of the world The Anti-Aesthetic is scarcely known, and the term “anti-aesthetic” has not passed through the sequence from a label for art practice, to a specific series of theoretical positions, to an element in the historiography of postmodernism.

But the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic is also an enormous subject. Historically, the aesthetic has been used, problematically, as a near-synonym for Modernism itself, a way of signaling Modernism’s commitment to value. The anti-aesthetic has been expanded backward in time, to characterize the reaction of Modernism against academic art and against the political situation leading to the First World War: a context in which, as Arthur Danto has noted, beauty became anathema. From that perspective, anti-aesthetic practice has been a sine qua non of Modernism in its many forms up to the present.

Currently the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic lurk largely unseen in the pedago-

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gic structures of art schools, art departments, and art academies throughout the world. “Anti-aesthetic” has been a useful label for the activities of students and young artists engaging capitalism in its different forms, thinking about neoliberalism, working out how identities are constructed and represented, addressing the institutions that make art possible and give it value, trying to provide a voice that can be heard above the roar of multinational corporations and the military-industrial complex, addressing the assimilation of cultural differences, pondering the gradual degradation of the planet, and thinking about how art might contribute in disaster areas, in underprivileged neighborhoods, or in the everyday lives of people who do not ordinarily use art. Politics, society, institutions, power, privilege, and identity are among the concerns of such practices, which do not always even call themselves “art.” On the other hand, “aesthetic” is still a useful term for practices involving work in the studio, using traditional media such as painting, printmaking, ceramics, and sculpture. Such work may not be aimed at changing or even addressing society and wider culture. Its purpose, at least initially, might just be to achieve value as art. The students and young artists who make such work care, among other things, about the object they produce, and its capacity to amaze, enthrall, absorb, give pleasure. They may not choose to say or think so, but their practices result in aesthetic objects, which hopefully possess one of the many qualities associated with art, from beauty to the sublime.

Those two positions are hard to describe, both because they overlap so much and so often and because a formidable array of theoretical arguments rushes in to demonstrate that every aesthetic object is also a political object, and every political object has its aesthetics. Many theorists, from Gilles Deleuze to Jacques Rancière, from Jean-Luc Nancy to Arthur Danto, have arguments along those lines. Most any contemporary artistic practice can be shown to be a mixture of aesthetic and nonaesthetic interests, and most any young artist trained in an art school or art department knows how to talk about her work as a mixed engagement of politics and aesthetics.

Still, the division holds, and it divides art instruction around the world. Every department of art, every academy, every art school of sufficient size, from Chongqing to Bogotà, from Vancouver to Ljubljana, has some classes, studios, and departments that are mainly dedicated to political and identity issues, and others where students attend to techniques and media. The division runs deep, and permeates the world of art instruction.
This is not a well-studied subject. The pedagogic division between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic activities is discussed, if it is at all, at the level of bureaucracy, administration, and institutional organization and planning. In the absence of any concerted debate, the distinction is reinforced by a wide variety of teaching habits, institutional configurations, and lingering expectations regarding media. In other words, it persists without being analyzed.

The central question is whether or not we are free of this choice, in practice, in pedagogy, and in theory. The question is complicated by the gesture, now common, in which artists, critics, and historians decline to identify their practices as anti-aesthetic or aesthetic, partly on the grounds that the two are inevitably mixed, and partly because the terms, singly and as a pair, are said to be outdated, ill-formed, or otherwise inapplicable. Many contemporary artists, theorists, and historians who use the words “aesthetic” and “anti-aesthetic” do not have developed accounts of what the concepts might mean to them—indeed, their practices sometimes depend on not having such accounts.

Let me illustrate this with an overly familiar example, which I intend to in a particular way: Barnett Newman’s remark, at the Woodstock Art Conference in 1952, that aesthetics is for artists what ornithology is for the birds. In context, Newman used his now-famous comparative analogy to make several points, not all of them compatible. His principal complaint was that aestheticians did not advocate for the value of American art, leaving the field open for museum directors and curators. Despite the remark about ornithology, he thought aesthetics could speak to art, and he used aesthetic concepts to describe what he thought it should be doing (engaging in “the moral struggle between notions of beauty... and sublimity”).¹ I don’t want to explore any of those somewhat tangled motivations here. I want instead to draw out two inferences one could make from the assertion that ornithology “is for the birds”— that birds don’t give a damn about ornithology.

First, it could mean birds don’t understand ornithology. In that case, in a perfect world, if they could learn ornithology, they might come to under-


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stand themselves better. In the comparative analogy, that means artists could benefit from aesthetics even if they think it has nothing to do with them. It would describe the situation in which contemporary artists, critics, and historians might find that the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic actually do structure some of their practice.

Second, it could mean birds aren’t well described by ornithology, that it is an insufficient explanation of birds, a deficient science. In the comparative analogy, that would imply that contemporary artistic practice and theory are essentially, perhaps deeply, independent of the terms of the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. Even that minority of contemporary artists who feel they need to become clear about the historical precedents and conceptual foundations of their practice would not need to study the ideas discussed by the theorists.

This, in brief, is the principal question. I could put it most concisely this way: is any part of The Anti-Aesthetic still important for contemporary practice and theory?

Here I will do two things: I will list, very briefly, some of the principal terms that articulate discussions of the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic. The idea here is just to signal how difficult the vocabulary is: the concepts involved are, as Wittgenstein said, both hard and slippery. Then I will list some of the principal critical positions around the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic, in order to provide some guides to what happens in contemporary art theory.

**Terms**

1. *Aesthetics* itself has been shrunk to individual passages in Kant and to an identification with beauty; and it has been expanded into a synonym for anything nonverbal, or anything of the body. It can occur in art writing as a placeholder for whatever practices the author wishes to stigmatize or valorize.

2. *Kant* is an object of ambivalence in contemporary art theory. For much of the conversation he is sunk somewhere in the deep background, indispensable but unquoted. At other times he is crucial, but then it’s often a question of which Kant, or even which individual passages or words. For some critics what matters is Kant’s idea of the free play of faculties, imagi-
nation, and knowledge (*freies Spiel der Erkenntniskräfte*); for others it’s the claim of understanding beyond the conceptual (*jenseits des begrifflichen Denkens*), or the concept of disinterested interest (*uninteressiertes Interesse*) in judgments of quality, or just the tripartite schema of beauty, ugliness, and the ordinary. Diarmuid Costello, who co-organized the Chicago event with me, argues that a promising way out of the aesthetic/anti-aesthetic trap is a fuller reading of Kant, stressing the many things that are overlooked in the Modernist reading. A useful first step in some discussions would be to carefully specify which passages in Kant are taken to matter, and why.

3. The *opposites of aesthetics* have grown into an entire exotic fauna. There are anti-aesthetic, nonaesthetic, anaesthetic, technoaesthetic, postaesthetic, and inaesthetic positions, some of which have been posed as distinct from others. The anti-aesthetic itself has a sporadic existence before and after *The Anti-Aesthetic*; it was used, for example, by the historian Robert Thompson in 1968 in a context unrelated to its later development; and it was used, as Luis Camnitzer notes in his Assessment, in 1965 by Luis Felipe Noé to describe a mode of “bad painting” that had developed in Latin America.

4. *Art* itself is difficult to pin down in relation to the difference between aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. Discourse that supports politically engaged, apparently non-aesthetic practices can involve problematic uses of the word “art,” as in the artists’ group called Critical Art Ensemble. In that title, the word “art” marks the institutional home of the artists and some, but not most, of their projects. What it signifies beyond institutional frames is difficult to say.

5. *The sublime* has also been put to work, supporting a wide range of artists, from Xu Bing to Olafur Eliasson, from Paul Chan to Bill Viola. The post-

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modern sublime has been subject of many texts, from Thomas Weiskel’s excellent monograph to Neil Hertz, Jean-François Lyotard, Peter De Bolla, Paul Crowther, Jean-Luc Naney, and Griselda Pollock.5

Positions

There are also a certain number of nameable positions around the question of the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. I list them here in no particular order, because most have overlapping chronologies and continue, in some form, to be pertinent.

1. Revivals of beauty have been much discussed in the art world, from the 1980s to the present. This subject is one of the quickest litmus tests of the difference between universities and art schools and academies. In the art school context, in North America, the putative revival of beauty is associated with Dave Hickey, Peter Schjeldahl, Peter Plagens, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, and Bill Beckley.6 Their work is seldom discussed in universities, where it is more common, either in North America or in Europe, to encounter the work of Elaine Scarry, Wendy Steiner, Alexander Nehamas, and Arthur Danto.7 There is virtually no serious scholarly discussion of the positions taken by Hickey and other popular critics and journalists.8 Danto

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8 Hickey and Schjeldahl are slammed in the October round table on art criticism; that discussion is discussed in The State of Art Criticism, coedited with Michael Newman, The Art Seminar 4 (New York: Routledge, 2007). Alexander Alberro, “Beauty Knows No Pain,” Art Journal, vol. 63, no. 2 (2004), p. 37, mentions several of these authors as a single group, with a few minor caveats, and he identifies Hickey’s aesthetic as “a diluted version” of Bataille’s—a strange judgment, but at least a serious one (p. 39, n. 8).
is often misdescribed as a participant in the revival, but The Abuse of Beauty and his essay “Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art” are pleas to extend aesthetics into the “dainty and dumpy” (as in John Austin), the “innocent, modest, and tender” (terms used by Kant), into the everyday (the Lebenswelt, Duchamp’s “anaesthetic,” Fluxus practices), the “silly” (Kant’s astonishing precritical proposal for the opposite of the sublime), and especially into the disgusting (which Kant says is immune to the beautiful). Danto observes that most artistic traditions have not been interested in beauty, and that the nineteenth century “narrowly identified” aesthetic with beauty and caused a rejection of aesthetics. Hence Danto’s position is neither a revival of beauty nor a rejection of aesthetic values. Twentieth-century art was “anti-aesthetic” only in the sense that it was often against beauty (and by association and reduction, aesthetics).

2. There are also revivals of beauty in the realm of Christian scholarship, although they have gone entirely unnoticed by the art world. The Protestant theologian Karl Barth, for example, argued that beauty is the means by which people are persuaded or awakened to faith—a position that intrigued John Updike. Contemporary scholars also draw on Jacques Maritain and his interest in ways that beauty reveals the eternal, invisible dimension of objects. In philosophic terms, a principal question in these revivals of beauty is the medieval scholar’s question: What is the prime analogue, the principal model, of beauty? Is it divine or mundane, or (equivalently) theological or philosophic, Platonic or Aristotelian? In these discussions, Kant is barely mentioned, and Aristotle tends to stand for a definition of beauty as harmony of parts, interpreted through church doctrine in a long tradition including Anselm, Aquinas, Augustine. As far as I can tell, this

10 Ibid., pp. 45, 59.
13 I draw these examples from a conference at Lipscomb University, Nashville, Tennessee, in June 2010, “Beauty in the Academy: Faith, Scholarship, and the Arts.”
enormous literature is unread in the arts, even—or especially—when Kant’s exclusion of theology is itself taken as a determining factor in the development of aesthetics.14

3. Relational aesthetics is one of the principal guides and inspirations for new art practices in the Americas and Europe. It presents an especially difficult problem for contemporary art theory because of the disparity between its popularity among young artists and its often severe critique in academic circles. As of this writing, in spring 2012, the newest version of relational aesthetics is integrated into “altermodernity,” a term coined by Nicolas Bourriaud for the Tate Triennial in 2009. Altermodernity is not argued so much as evoked in Bourriaud’s essay.15 Aesthetics is barely mentioned in Bourriaud’s essay, perhaps on account of the criticism he had received for earlier texts. Altermodern work, he says, deals “in the aesthetics of heterochrony”: it has no sense of contemporaneity, but is concerned with “intemporality.”16 It has been easy to argue that Bourriaud’s politics are understood as aesthetics: because all “nomadic” and “heterochronic” links take place within existing geopolitical structures, they remain ineffectual, ambiguous, or undefined as gestures of resistance, and so the criteria of interest in new relations are aesthetic. A more difficult question is how to read relational aesthetics texts in such a way as to do justice to their continuing influence. It is clear that Bourriaud’s text aims to resist the kind of linear reading that could elucidate its relation to aesthetics or anti-aesthetics; it is less clear how the text is used by artists and curators who find it enabling, or what the relation might be between such a use and what might be called a careful or close reading.

14 An interesting counterexample is the work of Marie-José Mondzain; see her contribution to What Is an Image?, Stone Art Theory Institutes 2 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).
15 It is described initially as a “synthesis between modernism and post-colonialism.” Postmodernism, he writes, is “a petrified kind of time advancing in loops”; altermodernity proposes instead a “positive experience of disorientation” based on the acceptance of “heterochronies.” Bourriaud rejects “post-colonial postmodernism” as “second-stage postmodernism,” leading to a “neurotic preoccupation with origins typical of the era of globalization.” Bourriaud, “Altermodern,” in Altermodern: Tate Triennial, exh. cat. (London: Tate, 2009), pp.12, 13.
16 Bourriaud, “Altermodern,” p. 20. Altermodernity’s principal tropes are nomadism “in space, in time, and among the ‘signs’ ” and a perspective “simultaneously geographical…and historical.” What matters is the “network” or “archipelago” of new relations, the “relational aesthetics” produced by the work. Bourriaud, “Altermodern,” pp. 22, 23.
4. Jacques Rancière has also been read as being “beyond” the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic. An initial problem in assessing Rancière’s theories is to see how he positions himself in relation to accounts he means to critique, including anti-aesthetic theories. He provides two different genealogies of the anti-aesthetic in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*; the first is in the preface, and the second follows immediately in the introduction. Both have two parts, and operate by dividing aesthetic positions into two opposing camps. In the preface, he first argues that “aesthetics has been charged with being the captious discourse by which philosophy... hijacks the meaning of artworks.” He names Pierre Bourdieu, for whom “aesthetic distance” serves “to conceal a social reality”; T. J. Clark, who holds that “behind pure art’s illusion... there exists a reality of economic, political, and ideological constraints”; and Hal Foster, who is said to hail “the advent of the postmodern as inaugurating a break with the illusions of avant-gardism.” Rancière then concludes, somewhat abruptly, that “this form of critique has almost totally gone out of fashion.” The preface then continues with a second genealogy, in which “aesthetics has come to be seen as the perverse discourse which bars... the pure encounter with the unconditioned event of the work.” Here Rancière names Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s *Adieu à l’esthétique* (2000), Alain Badiou’s *Petit Manuel d’ïnesthétique* (1998), and the work of Jean-François Lyotard, concluding that all three want “to extract the glorious presence of art out from under the suffocating discourse on art.” In the introduction, he offers two more genealogies, different from the first, with a differing cast of characters. In art history and philosophy, Rancière says, there is an attitude that “aims to extricate artistic pursuits” from social and utopian goals, and to demonstrate art’s “singular power of presence,” often using the sublime. He names Thierry de Duve’s *Look!* (2001), which sees art's power as “the founding of a being -in-common, anterior...to politics”; and Jean-François Lyotard, who “radicalizes the idea of the sublime,” so that modern art’s purpose is “to bear witness to the fact of the unrepresentable.” (Later Rancière says Lyotard's philosophy is an “anti-aesthetics of the sublime.”) That is the first genealogy; the second is the position “keenly asserted by artists and professionals working in artistic institutions,” namely that art is “a way of redispersing the objects and images

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p.20.
20 Ibid., p.99.
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that comprise the common world as it is already given.” Such “micro-situations...vary only slightly from those of ordinary life and are presented in an ironic and playful vein.” Here he names Pierre Huyghe, but Nicolas Bourriaud or Dominic Willsdon might have been better choices. 21 These twin lineages in the preface and introduction, each of them doubled, set up Rancière’s argument in the book, permitting him to position himself outside the work of each of the authors. 22 The question for the reception of Rancière in the art world will depend in part on how plausible his sense of art writing is, and how plausible these genealogies are as framing moves, and as indications of his understanding of art history.

5. James Meyer and Toni Ross coedited a forum on the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic in the Art Journal. 23 They take a certain relation between the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic as given, writing that the two “may not be reconciled” but “calibrated in a less polarized way” or brought into “closer proximity.” The duality is assumed, and a third term, or supervening discourse, is not theorized. 24 Thus they describe one of their contributors, Alex Alberro, as arguing that “aesthetic pleasure and critical engagement are fundamentally irreconcilable.” They implicitly disagree, but characterize the irreconcilability as an “anti-aesthetic claim”: that is, a claim made from one of the two positions, which then appropriates criticality. 25 In general, theorizing about the relation between the aesthetic and anti-aesthetic is a project of, or in the wake of, the anti-aesthetic. They observe that is necessary to avoid equating “aesthetics and conservative taste, or vested ideological interests,” as well as “appeals to visual pleasure...in the recent beauty revivalism,” but it is an “achievement” of the anti-aesthetic to show the “alignment” of aesthetics and conservatism. Meyer and Ross’s project highlights the common assumption—one that is especially difficult to shake—that theories and revivals of beauty or the aesthetic will not be able to assist reconceptualizations of the anti-

21 Rancière, Aesthetics and Its Discontents, pp. 21, 457, respectively.
22 A third genealogy appears in The Aesthetic Unconscious, a book that argues Freud was trying to suppress an existing “aesthetic unconscious” characterized by a “nihilist entropy” and a belief in the “anonymous voice of an unconscious and meaningless life.” There the positions include Louis Marin, Georges Didi-Huberman, the Zola of Doctor Pascal, and Lyotard (reprising the role he played in Aesthetic sand Its Discontents). Rancière, Aesthetic Unconscious, translated by Debra Keates and James Swenson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 54, 61.
24 Ibid., p. 20.
25 Ibid., p. 21.
aesthetic, unless of course those revisions are intended to overthrow, erase, or bypass the anti-aesthetic.

6. The book Rediscovering Aesthetics (2009) is the delayed product of a conference held in Cork, Ireland, in 2004. There are at least three other texts that derive from the same conference. The editors’ position is that aesthetics should be recognized as implicated in history, and the principal model for that implication is Foucault. If “truth and falsity” in aesthetics “are recognized as involving contextual criteria,” they write, then aesthetics is “linked to, and part of, the beliefs and practices of particular ways of life, world-views, philosophical theories, traditions, and social systems.” This does not lead to “an unproductive relativism,” but to the inability to know whether Habermas’s idea of “the force of the better argument” can ever decide the issue “in a neutral way.” Deep “institutional and cultural preconditions...rule out, or at least challenge, canonical conceptions of art, beauty.” Rediscovering Aesthetics also records other viewpoints, but the editors’ contribution is a clear recent example of the possibility of dispersing aesthetic judgments by writing them into particular institutional structures.

7. Wilfried van Damme’s Beauty in Context: Towards an Anthropological Approach to Aesthetics (1996) takes a consistently anthropological approach, tempered by an interest in scientific verification. The book has almost no citations of Kant, Danto, or other aestheticians, and its sense of aesthetics is presented as entirely dependent on field research. Van Damme allows that some aesthetic qualities are universal (he names symmetry, balance, and clarity, and proposes that smoothness and brightness might be added to the list) but asserts that aesthetic preference is relative to a “community’s socio-cultural values and ideals.” It is significant that anthropological appro-

28 These citations are from the version in Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics.
30 Van Damme, Beauty in Context, pp. 134, 308.
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aches to aesthetics have almost no place in art criticism or theory, even though accounts like Van Damme’s exemplify a sort of cultural relativism common in the contemporary art market.\textsuperscript{31}

8. \textit{Terry Eagleton} has written succinctly but provocatively on aesthetics, especially in an essay called “The Ideology of the Aesthetic.”\textsuperscript{32} For him aesthetics is the “dense, swarming territory” outside systematic Enlightenment philosophy, “the first stirrings of primitive, incipient materialism, “experience,”” “the life of the body.” This capacious sense of aesthetics leads him to the somewhat surprising conclusion that “the major aesthetician of the twentieth century might thus be said to be the later Edmund Husserl, whose phenomenology will seek to disclose the formal, rational structures of the \textit{Lebenswelt} in what he calls a new “universal science of subjectivity.””\textsuperscript{33} Freedom, on the other hand, counts as an anti-aesthetic moment, because it is noumenal in Kant’s critique and therefore “cannot be represented and is thus at root anti-aesthetic.”\textsuperscript{34} The “two greatest aestheticians,” Eagleton argues, are Marx and Freud, philosophers of the “laboring body” and the “desiring one.”\textsuperscript{35} It is a concise Marxist reading, intended to provoke aesthetics into a much wider field, and as an abstract goal, that broadening is shared by a number of writers.

9. An undefined but growing literature studies the \textit{aesthetics of migration, exile, and diaspora}. The literature here includes Patricia Pisters’s work on “nomadic aesthetics,” Mieke Bal’s essay on “migratory aesthetics,” and T. J. Demos’s essay on the “aesthetics of exile” for the Tate Triennial in 2009.\textsuperscript{36} This literature draws on Deleuze and many other authors to help define the

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\textsuperscript{31} There are many other anthropological studies; their diversity can be exemplified by Hans Belting’s \textit{Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft} (Munich: W. Fink, 2001), which rewrites continental anthropology, and Crispin Sartwell’s \textit{Six Names of Beauty} (New York: Routledge, 2004), which is a philosophic analysis of six aesthetic traditions. Van Damme’s is, I think, the most extensively researched and conceptually consistent.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 328.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 334.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 337.
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expressive, and often optimistic, content of migratory experience, both in the art world and beyond it. In some measure the literature is continuous with relational aesthetics, but it also has the potential to become a separate field.

10. Affect theory: I think it would be fair to say the participants were often surprised at how affect theory continued to resurface as a promising way “beyond” the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic. The difficulty was in saying exactly what affect theory was, and what work it would do in the academy or in art practice. During the event I made notes on the sources people mentioned under the rubric of affect theory. A bewilderingly diverse bibliography was invoked. As I write this, it has been nearly two years since the event, and I have a growing collection of possible sources for affect theory. The list has grown so much that it may be helpful here if I present it as a list within my listing. The entries are in no particular order.

(1) Trauma theory. Some people take affect theory to be about intense, traumatic experience, forming a link to the literature on trauma and psychoanalysis; examples include Jane Bennett’s Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art and James Thompson’s Performance Affects.37

(2) The biomediated body. Others, such as Patricia Clough, emphasize the effect of information, technology, capital, and race on the current sense of the body, creating what Clough calls the “biomediated body.”38 There is also some affinity between the “biopolitics” and “biomediated body” that Clough advocates and the “object-oriented ontology” coined by Graham Harman.39

(3) Neurobiology and neuroaesthetics. Affect is a current interest in brain science, and there have been several writers on art who have tried to use the new research.40

(4) Animal affect. An important recent trend in science, which is apparently still not part of art discourse, is the affective neuroscience of animals, whose central figure is the Estonian scholar Jaak Panksepp.41 He considers neural correlates to human affective states, and his work has far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the neural nature of free will and the relation between animal and human consciousness. The neural correlates Panksepp studies also resonate with work done about the human-animal relationship by authors from Derrida to Peter Singer.

(5) Massumi’s position. Other theories, such as Brian Massumi’s, stress the nonverbal, unrecognized aspects of affect.42 It appears that Massumi will emerge as the principal source cited for theories of affect in the arts, and so it is worth saying briefly that art-world citations misuse his theories, reading affect as a matter of emotion, feeling, or mood. Massumi is explicitly against this; from his point of view affective states can never be cognized: they represent a richness that is structurally, differentially disjunct from the states we call emotions. “Intensity,” he writes, is “a nonconscious, never-to-be-conscious autonomic remainder,” and its relation to language is one of “interference, amplification and dampen-


ing.” In his account “there is no correspondence or conformity between qualities and intensity.”43 This is an extralinguistic, antisemiotic position, distinct from the uses to which his work is sometimes put.

(6) Deleuze and Guattari. Massumi’s principal source, Deleuze, and Deleuze’s frequent collaborator Félix Guattari, are also pertinent in contemporary affect theory. (Both are dependent on Spinoza, but in my reading, Spinoza is more an enabling text than a necessary source.) Among the more interesting possibilities here is bypassing Deleuze in favor of Guattari’s Chaosmosis.44

(7) Synesthesia. Some directions in contemporary art theory stress ideas such as synesthetic and immersive environments and Neo-romanticism, which are compatible with strands of affect theory. An example is Timothy Vermeulen’s Assessment; he has been active in the theorization of “metamodernism,” a theory of contemporary art that emphasizes affective values.

(8) Political theory. Among the many sources for affect theory that weren’t mentioned during the week are a number of books in and around political theory that have things to say about affect and culture, for example Jane Bennett’s ecological theory text Vibrant Matter; William Connolly’s books, such as A World of Becoming and Neuropolitics; and of course some essays in The Affect Theory Reader.45

(9) Clinical psychiatry. There is also affect theory in clinical psychiatry.

not only in Silvan Tomkins, whose work has entered art theory through Eve Sedgwick, but also in an extensive clinical literature.\(^{46}\) Central in this field is the Mental Status Examination, in which affect has a disputed but central role.\(^{47}\)

(10) **Anthropology.** Affect theory is also a current interest in anthropology, where the readings include a variety of disparate texts, including “nonrepresentational theory,” proposed by Nigel Thrift.\(^{48}\) An excellent review essay by William Mazzarella—to my mind the best overview of affect theory to date—proposes a cultural and anthropological reading, associating affect with a “depolitical” dream of immediacy.\(^{49}\)

(11) **Geography.** There is at least some interest in affect in the field of geography, including “nonrepresentational theory” and several studies of “affective geography”—the spatially articulated meanings of culture, materialities, and diaspora.\(^{50}\)


(12) Presence. And finally, any accounting of affect theory would have to include the history of the rediscovery of presence. After the poststructural critiques of unmediated presence, there has been an accelerating awareness of the necessity of rethinking presence: first in the outlier George Steiner; and then in authors like Hans Gumbrecht; and most recently, in new work by Keith Moxey and Michael Ann Holly. Presen—plenary experience, immersive or immediate experience—is re-emerging as an object of theory.

It isn’t easy to know which of these will emerge as affect spreads through the humanities, but I would guess that for most writers what matters is the newly found permission to speak about feeling, mood, emotion, and other unsystematic, inarticulate, embodied, subjective experiences. The slightly technical term “affect” is generally taken as a contrast to what is imagined as the cold, disaffected, systematic, intellectual poststructuralism that dominated art writing from the 1960s to the 1990s. In that sense, affect theory denotes a gesture away from an imagined intellectualism and toward an open-ended acknowledgment of the embodied nature of experience, rather than a determinate theory of uncognized “intensities,” as Deleuze would say.

In the Seminars transcribed here, Eve Meltzer proposed a new understanding of affect as the necessary, structural effect of systematizing, anti-aesthetic projects of the 1970s like Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document. For Meltzer, such conceptual projects show “affective interest in disaffected mastery.” So far, hers is the most art-historically specific account of affect, and it has the interesting consequence of locating affect in the very time and place that gave rise, in the current account, to cold, mathematized, schematized, intellectual art—the kinds of art against which contemporary affect-laden art is said to have rebelled.

11. Other positions. Beyond these ten there are any number of others. Among the texts that helped frame this book are Antoon Van den

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52 She discussed parts of what is now her book Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
Braembussche’s *Intercultural Aesthetics: A Worldview Perspective, the Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, edited by Michael Kelly, and Joaquin Barriendos’s work on geo-aesthetics. Kelly and Barriendos are among the Fellows in the Seminars transcribed here. Theories continue to multiply: just a few days before the event in Chicago, the sociologist Tony Bennett presented his critique of Rancière’s critique of Pierre Bourdieu at a conference at the Tate Britain. Bennett’s argument was that Bourdieu’s association of the aesthetic with class was insufficient, and it should be considered instead as “a form of cultural practice” or “a culturally specific form of processual ethics,” alongside bureaucracy, which “emerges, as in Weber, as a parallel form of ethics, involving a sense of responsibility and liberty.” He listed several “versions of the relations between aesthetics and critique,” including Adorno, Said, Eagleton, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Rancière, and noted those positions all neglect the “kinds of tutelage” and “priestly authority” that actually govern the processual workings of critique. The talk made it possible to begin thinking of a sociology even further divorced from Bourdieu’s conclusions, even if it would be even more indebted to Foucault. Bennett’s is just one of an uncountable number of other positions that could be added to a list like this one.

**Envoi**

There is little hope that any book on the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic can have the coherence, not to mention the impact, of *The Anti-Aesthetic*, because practices and positions have multiplied so drastically. And even aside from the entirely bewildering profusion of texts, there is the fact that debate on these issues is intense but sporadic, so that it is not clear how to go about comparing positions. It is helpful, I think, to distinguish first-order from second-order problems. If I ask whether a given art practice can be usefully called “anti-aesthetic,” or if I try to find weaknesses in Rancière’s critique of conventional aesthetics, then I am working on first-order problems. Second-order problems are matters of how to compare theories,

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practices, and concepts. After I decide that it is not rewarding to read Bourriaud’s texts for the arguments they might contain, I may begin to wonder how his texts have been understood as useful or inspirational, or what happens when they are read alongside other sorts of texts. If my question is what the participants in the Critical Art Ensemble mean by the word “art,” then my problem is a first-order one. If I ask how to compare elisions of the word “art” in statements by the Critical Art Ensemble or the Yes Men with uses of “art” in, say, Danto or Rancière, then my question is a second-order one.

Such second-order problems can be illuminated by paying attention to the language we use. There were times during the event in Chicago when it seemed the conversation was articulated, and even guided, by a small set of relatively unexamined metaphors, which were being used to explain how contemporary practices were related to Modernisms, aesthetics, antiaesthetics, and other historical moments. Among our recurrent metaphors four, perhaps, stood out:

**Drifting:** at one point we were talking about a Modernist position and a contemporary position that seemed unrelated. They could just drift apart, someone said. What kind of drifting would that be? A contemporary artist, let’s say, might spurn some of the theoretical positions we were exploring because they seemed wrong, or she might refuse them as irrelevant. The two kinds of drifting could be usefully distinguished: there’s a passive drifting, in which practices and positions are carried naturally apart; and there’s an intentional drifting, in which a practice or position avoids another one by presenting itself as moving “naturally” away.

**Writing against:** at some moments writers articulating the anti-aesthetic conceived of their project as writing against the aesthetic. But what, exactly, did that mean? Was it substantial reconceptualization, or a simpler process of reversing values or terms? In our discussions, this came up in the assessment of the literature around the *informe* in the 1990s. From the beginning, writers engaged in that project were concerned about the degree to which they were inverting aesthetic terms into anti-aesthetic terms, rather than reconceptualizing. Given that that issue is still unresolved, it might be useful to look instead at what could be meant, in any given context, by “writing against” another body of writing.
Refusal: there are various refusals in the week’s Seminars: refusal to read, refusal to theorize, refusal to understand, to consider, to see. Some contemporary practices are enabled by refusing to engage the pertinence of the theoretical and historical formations that attempt to account for them. Such refusals should be considered alongside implicit refusals, on the part of some theorists, to engage some contemporary practices. This is not to say either side stands in need of correction: it is to say that the gesture of refusal is central, in many ways, to this subject, which is unevenly encountered by all sides.

Beyond: the metaphor of this paper’s title suggests two things: that we hope to find a third term, either by achieving a kind of Hegelian Aufhebung or by deconstructing the dualism of aesthetic and anti-aesthetic; and that the participants wanted to move away from the debates that have structured politics and aesthetics in art from the 1970s to the present. Moving away (drifting? refusing?) is different in kind from synthesizing or deconstructing.

It is hard enough given the explosion of the art world and art theory in the last thirty years, but it becomes especially challenging once it becomes clear that the work of conceptualizing practices is so discontinuous, so fragmented, that there is often no helpful precedent for how to compare and interpret the many positions. Nevertheless, I hope we can bring together philosophers, historians, and practitioners, can help elucidate the current condition of the problem and begin to think about what might be beyond it.
Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics

Joseph J. Tanke

Everywhere in the world of art today there are calls to “ politicize art.” So pervasive is the consensus that art should assume a political form one might grow to suspect that beneath all the excitement regarding art’s political potential, there lurks the suspicion that without being joined to politics, art may drift into insignificance. Whereas the heavy-handed narrative of modernism at least had the virtue of providing relatively quick and easy answers to questions regarding the meaning, value, and direction of art, we seem to have reached a point in which those answers are much less clear. If Arthur Danto’s assessment regarding what he calls “post-historical art” is correct, namely that “there really is no art more true than any other, and that there is not one way art has to be,” then the uncoupling of artistic practice from the modernist narrative can be seen as carrying in its wake a crisis of meaning.\(^1\) If the thesis regarding post-historical art has so much intuitive appeal, is it not reflective of the fact that few people today have any genuine convictions regarding the nature, purpose, and direction of art? Perhaps we might sum up by saying that the happy pluralism of “no art is more true than any other” has been purchased with the risk of nihilism.

Whereas it was once believed that art required no further justification, few today share this faith. As a result, there seems to be a somewhat desperate effort underway to restore a purpose to art, with practitioners, critics, and theorists frequently invoking reasons drawn from other domains, most notably politics, in order to support their activities. What I am suggesting regarding the latest developments in art-theory circles is that the effort to join art and politics may well be an attempt to avert this crisis of meaning.

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Accordingly, art would assume its significance by being given a new identity, one forged through its union with politics.

In my estimation, however, there exists little agreement amongst curators, critics, historians, theorists, and practitioners regarding how one should go about joining art and politics. To highlight some of the difficulties entailed in yoking art to politics, I will construct a brief topography of the different theoretical models currently in use. This topography is intended to draw out the differences behind the ostensibly attractive idea of politicizing art.

The final portion of this paper advances what I take to be an accurate account of the ambiguous political significance of art. Against Rancière’s celebrated retrieval of the politics of aesthetics, I will contend that the aesthetic, as a form of experience, is more vexed than he allows, and as such too ambiguous to sustain all of the practical aspirations being assigned to it. Rather than giving rise to concrete political propositions regarding the configuration of human communities, the aesthetic should be understood as a form of withdrawal, a rupturing of shared meanings and practices. As such, any attempts to politicize art by means of aesthetics must come to terms with the recalcitrant and even anti-social aspects of the aesthetic experience, stumbling blocks on the way to community.

The first model that I identify is what one can call “Politicizing Art.” At its worst it consists of calling for more art that deals explicitly with political content. Its more sophisticated forms employ vocabularies adopted from the writings of Bertolt Brecht or Jean-Paul Sartre. The hallmark of this approach is the idea of an “engaged art,” one which would be subordinated to some political cause, either by serving as a form of pedagogy, as in Brecht, or by assuming the form of a political remediation, as in Relational Aesthetics. Politicizing art achieves the union of art and politics by converting the art object into a form of political address or action. It assumes that because a work’s content is political, the final product will be political. Whereas both Brecht and Sartre specified the conditions by which theater, in the case of the former, and prose, in the case of the latter, become political, the call today to politicize art tends to assume the normativity of progressive causes, as well as the ability of art to facilitate them. It is important to note that in pointing to the poverty of this model, I am not passing judgment on the various artistic practices that are frequently placed under the heading of “political art.” I am simply noting that as a discourse, this model explains little and presumes much. For example, it remains to be
seen why treating political content renders an art object political. Politicizing art, as we see more clearly when contrasted with other approaches, is little concerned with the specificity of art, often treating works of art as just another form of political speech. Its greatest liability consists of failing to consider how art as art carries its own politics.

There is a similar attempt to politicize art objects at work in the strategy known as the “Politics of Art,” or, following Walter Benjamin, “Kunstpolitik.” Here, rather than art being politicized by artists, it is the critics who politicize the object. The politics of art is a form of criticism intended to root out the complicity between art and domination, that is, to expose the role culture plays in legitimating political orders or normalizing prejudices. Obviously, this is a critical strategy associated with the Frankfurt school, and in particular Benjamin’s thesis regarding “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility.”

Benjamin articulated the need for critics to take seriously the role that art plays in the formation of ideology. Mechanical reproducibility was, for Benjamin, a mutation in the nature of art, a fundamental change in its being after which it becomes necessary to evaluate the political uses made of art. As radio production, photograph, and film, art permeates the lives of the masses, forming the unexamined backdrop of their daily lives. For Benjamin, this is an ambiguous phenomenon. On the one hand, the audience for art has been expanded, allowing those previously outside of traditional cultural spheres a share of aesthetic pleasure. On the other hand, these new artistic products can easily be put to use as propaganda. It is here that dangers lurk and that cultural critics must intervene. Photographs and films are ideological formations that instruct viewers in everything from property relations and how to respond to war, to that which passes for beautiful.

In 1939 Benjamin warned that Fascism was aestheticizing politics, counseling communism to respond by politicizing art. His text served as a rallying cry for the post-war cultural studies movement, an orientation to art premised upon the suspicion that traditional culture harbors any number of unspoken prejudices, and that, as a methodology, aesthetics proves incapable of unmasking them. One must ask, however, whether the proponents of the politics of art even have a conception of the art, or if for them everything becomes culture. Traditionally, the aesthetic has been the category reserved for appraising art objects and experiences independently of moral, cognitive, and political considerations. Denying art some autonomy from these domains—
the moral, the cognitive, the political—deflates art of all pretensions, reducing it to mere culture in the most general and banal sense. Like those who call for political art, those seeking to politicize art by means of criticism run the risk of equating art with other forms of speech and address. This reduction threatens to neglect something unique about art’s function in contemporary society, namely its ability to generate moral, cognitive, and political investments, without itself being subjected to them.

One can contrast these attempts to politicize art directly with the various efforts to politicize the forms of experience engendered by art. The first we should consider is the idea of “Aesthetic Education.” This model is seldom invoked explicitly, although many working in the arts today unknowingly rely upon this model. When, for example, those who seek to explain the importance of art describe it as holding out an alternative to the dominant way of thinking, whether through its emphasis on materiality, specificity, or holism, they are implicitly rediscovering Friedrich Schiller’s conception of aesthetic education.

In the wake of the French Revolution, Schiller claimed that political problems could only be solved by means of an apparent detour through aesthetics. For Schiller, the political failure of the revolution was first and foremost a moral failure, a failure on the part of the freshly emancipated to make proper use of their freedom. Aesthetic contemplation, Schiller thought, offered humankind a necessary instruction, a lesson in the employment of freedom. His key recognition was that the disinterested form of contemplation that Kant claimed to be integral to the aesthetic experience, was itself already an education. Contemplating things disinterestedly means, for Schiller, to let them be, or, when he converts the aesthetic attitude into a moral and political dictum, to “grant freedom by means of freedom.”

The aesthetic becomes for Schiller a state of free resolution wherein force and compulsion are cancelled. Schiller’s idea of the aesthetic state refers to both the contemplative perceptual state brought about by contact with works of art, and the political order founded upon the spirit of play. Schiller conceived of the aesthetic as a transitional stage between an empirical humanity rent by alienation, and a more perfect order in which the ideals of morality would not be experienced as a form of antagonism.

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For our purposes, it is important to notice that it is the form of experience engendered by the work of art, and not works of art themselves, which achieve this political work. The aesthetic supports mankind’s political education because it enables him to contemplate things freely. It was for this reason that Schiller was skeptical of the art which we would judge to be didactic. Art’s capacity for political transformation is predicated upon its distance from every other form of address, notably those which purport to correct and order a people’s way of life.

Schiller’s writings solidified a tendency at work within German philosophy and literary criticism, that of conceiving of the aesthetic as something heterogeneous to everyday experience. It is this positioning of the aesthetic as something antagonistic to everyday experience which is essential for the next approach to art and politics, that which has been termed “Radicalizing the Aistheton.” This strategy is common to the writings of Clement Greenberg, Theodor Adorno, and Jean-François Lyotard. It consists of construing aesthetic phenomena in terms of their absolute heterogeneity vis-à-vis daily life, that is, of drawing a boundary between art and kitsch (Greenberg), indicating how the autonomy of art promises political emancipation (Adorno), or how art bears witness to the unpresentable within thought, thereby serving to curb the totalizing pretensions of reason (Lyotard). On this model, art is given the task of separating itself from everyday experience, for it is judged that only art’s alterity is capable of stirring thought to wakefulness. Conceiving of an art object as an aistheton is the attempt to radicalize the difference between art and life through an insistence upon art’s difference as material form. Against the perceived dangers of commercial kitsch, conformism, and an eclectic postmodern taste fashioned in the image of transnational flows of capital, art’s unavailability—its difficultness—is intended to function as a resistant form and a form of resistance.

In the specific case of Lyotard, the Kantian sublime is evoked as a reminder of thought’s indebtedness to its other. The avant-garde is outfitted with the duty of “bearing witness to the unpresentable,” or, putting forward, in presentation, the fact that the unpresentable exists. Lyotard’s contention that sublime experience discloses to thought the existence of the “Law” can lead one to ask whether his position attempts to join art with politics or art with ethics. Jacques Rancière, for example, has charged Lyotard (and others) with suppressing aesthetics and politics by transforming Kant’s narrative of capacity into an ethics of incapacity.
Rancière’s own position, the fifth model we will explore, “Retrieving the Politics of Aesthetics,” attempts to demonstrate that art and politics don’t need to be joined, for indeed as practices which both distribute and redistribute the sensible, art and politics are already linked. For this reason, Rancière argues that art and aesthetics do not need to be outfitted with a politics; at their core, both already contain their own politics.

The idea that aesthetics contains its own politics is bound up with Rancière’s claims regarding the aesthetic dimensions of the political. For Rancière, politics is the process of challenging the distribution of bodies, voices, roles, and capacities that exists within a given society. What he calls the “distribution of the sensible” [le partage du sensible] refers, on the one hand, to the partitions that determine what and who can be seen and said, and, on the other hand, indicates that these relations are shared, constituting a common world or world in common. Equality, according to Rancière, is the only value capable of radically altering the distribution of the sensible. It enables those engaged in the process of politics to define a form of commonality between themselves and those who would seek to prevent their taking part in the activity of governing.

Rancière is fond of saying that “art lends to politics what it can.” What we can expect from art is not a series of propositions for how the world should be, but a means of altering the general sphere of appearances, that is, the distribution of the sensible. Rancière makes an important distinction between “primary aesthetics” (i.e., the distribution of the sensible) and “aesthetic practices.” He explains, “It is on the basis of…primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of ‘aesthetic practices’ as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community.”³ For Rancière, art and aesthetics are political inasmuch as they alter the distribution of the sensible. Given his claim that equality is a necessary condition for politics, one can expect that in order for art and aesthetics to be political they must in some way be about equality. Rancière has thus attempted to reread the history of aesthetics in terms of equality, and to demonstrate how spectatorship presupposes equality between artist and audience. In works such as Aesthetics and Its Discontents, The Emancipated Spectator, and the most recent book, Aisthesis: Scenes

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from the Aesthetic Regime of Art, Rancière aims to show how the aesthetic experience described by figures like Kant, Schiller, Hegel and the romantics is more properly understood as an experience of equality, rather than freedom.

My own position is that it is problematic and reductionistic to assign the aesthetic any single meaning. Understanding the aesthetic experience in terms of equality runs the risk of squelching the ambiguity—the freedom from determination—which is the essence of aesthetic experience. Thus, the position that I call the “Anarchical Politics of Aesthetic Ambiguity” shares with those who would radicalize the aistheton the sense of the aesthetic experience’s heterogeneity vis-à-vis everyday life; however, unlike those theorists, it insists upon contextualizing this heterogeneity historically. This position claims that the advent of the aesthetic was a fundamental turning point in Western culture, after which it is no longer necessary for the beautiful to be good. On this point it is essential to recognize that, after Kant’s Critique of Judgment, the aesthetic is placed beyond the reach of moral and cognitive considerations. Our experiences of art and literature, therefore, take place in a space beyond good and evil. With Rancière, the Anarchical Politics of Aesthetic Ambiguity shares the idea that art impacts the broader distribution of capacities, roles, and practices. It doubts, however, that the form of experience it engenders carries a uniform meaning, such as that of equality. It sees in the aesthetic—a form of experience set adrift from the moral and the cognitive—a deeply ambiguous phenomenon, one capable of supporting both a progressive egalitarian politics of equality and the intoxicating thought of hierarchy.

Some may wonder what, then, makes such experiences political? Like Rancière, adherents to this view do not think that art and aesthetics need to be outfitted with a politics, for indeed both already contain their own politics. This position, however, describes the politics of aesthetics as a type of “withdrawal” or “retreat.” Aesthetic experiences prompt the person—body and mind—to withdraw from the world of pre-established meanings, and all that is incompatible with human freedom. According to this position, the aesthetic experience begins when the meanings (sens) customarily associated with sense perception (sens) comes undone. Aesthetic sensation / reflection / reverie consists of playing between sense and sense, indulging in sense and reason for their own sake. This process can be described as “political” inasmuch as the production of new meanings and experiences may prompt the reconfiguration of the social order.
In attempting to think about art and community from an aesthetic point of view, one cannot escape that fact that aesthetics and the aesthetic experience offer few positive prescriptions for life in common. Aesthetic experience is a sensing of one’s freedom from determination, a sensation which may later result in the desire for shared meanings and new elective affinities, but which in the first instance causes us to depart from communal meanings. Rather than founding communities, the aesthetic removes us from them, allowing us to absent ourselves from the forms of pre-established senses of sense scattered throughout the shared world.

Various artistic practices no doubt give rise to different models of community, and in some instances function as a working-out of alternatives to daily life. The aesthetic apprehension of these and other practices, however, tends to remove the individual from the realm of consensus—of shared sentiments and common meanings. These experiences break apart the habitual ordering of sense, granting to the individual the freedom of reverie. Any aesthetic community is a community of those who are together inasmuch as they are alone.

Lest what I have described as a politics of withdrawal be understood in terms of the perennial conflict between the individual and the community, and then as a paean to the joys and sorrows of individualism, let me conclude with the suggestion that, from an aesthetic point of view, the problem should be located elsewhere. The aesthetic tradition offers us the tantalizing suggestion that, at bottom, this tension between the individual and the community is not as intractable as it often appears. Here I am referring to the much-maligned idea that aesthetic judgments are judgments which claim for themselves universal validity. Proponents of aesthetic universality hold that beauty and sublimity are by definition shared, or at least sharable in principle, and that in using these concepts we are attempting to express our sense that when presented with the same experience, others will feel as we do. If Kant and the others who think about aesthetics in this way are right, then one of the things that we discover in our solipsistic reveries is a becoming-common of sense and thought, and moreover, a commonality that is different from the consensus that prevails in everyday language, practices, and ideology. One might speculate that part of what sustains our reveries is the recognition that what is at first assumed to be of deep personal significance turns out to be common. At the very least, we know that when we have the audacity to cut against the conventio-
nal wisdom of our times, daring to baptize something beautiful, we assume a “universal voice,” one that effaces all traces of subjectivity. This is why, despite its recalcitrance, many insist on joining the experience of art with the ideal of community. Deep and abiding aesthetic contemplation forces the individual to give way to a blank subjectivity that belongs to everyone and no one, a perhaps necessary moment in the rearticulation of life in common. If this blank subjectivity of everyone and no one can facilitate the transformation of hierarchical communities, whether local or global, then, paradoxical as it may seem, it will be necessary, for the good of the community, to insist upon the right to solipsistic pleasure.
1. Essentialism Without Critical Value Judgments

In response to the observation that, like so many previous philosophies of art, his is also essentialist, Arthur Danto countered that his theory was not covert art criticism.¹ In this regard, Danto was alluding to an objection, popularized by Morris Weitz, that challenged the best known theories of art in the European tradition on the grounds that what were proffered as classificatory definitions of the essence of *art* were actually advocacy briefs gussied up as philosophy.²

For example, the property of significant form that Clive Bell taught generations of aesthetes to look for in paintings, according to Weitz, was not really the essence of art from time immemorial, but rather the value to be gotten from the sort of art that Bell loved—specifically Neo-Impressionism.³ Although Weitz thought that alleged essentialist theories like Bell’s could be “de-mythologized” as exemplary criticism, Weitz also believed that philosophies of art framed in an essentialist idiom are always misguided; in the name of the essence of art, they unavoidably and erroneously sponsor one kind of art over the others.

Thus, in denying that his theory of art is covert art criticism, Danto means to be defending his conception of art by distinguishing his brand of essentialist theorizing from that of predecessors like Bell, Tolstoy, Collingwood, and so forth. That is, insofar as Weitz’s diagnosis has been endorsed by many as a

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decisive objection to any essentialist theory of art, Danto is at pains to establish that it does not touch his.

On Weitz’s view, which Danto appears to accept to in large measure, it is easy for one to mistake something like Bell’s putative definition of art as philosophical, but once subjected to conceptual scrutiny, it reveals itself to be nothing more than a specimen of art criticism, indeed, a partisan sort to boot. That which Bell advanced as the essence of art was nothing but a projection of the property that Bell esteemed in the type of art he championed — to wit: significant form. Bell then went on to generalize his preference for this feature of Neo-Impressionism as the quiddity of all art, properly so-called. What posed as philosophy was, in fact, merely evaluative art criticism. In his own defense, Danto declares that his philosophy of art is not reducible to art criticism, despite its essentialism, and, therefore, his concept of art is immune to Weitz’s objection that any such theory of art is simply nothing but art criticism...

By his example, Bell set the agenda for subsequent philosophies of art. On the one hand, given his charge that absent an essentialist account of art, we “gibber” when we speak of art, his successors took the production of a definition of art as their primary charge; while, on the other hand, like Bell, they were predisposed toward confusing their preferences for certain kinds or styles of art as exemplifying the hallmark of art universally.

In this way, to their discredit, generations of so-called philosophers of art blurred the distinction between philosophies — with its commitments to essentialism — and criticism. Such philosophers discovered, conveniently enough, that only the variety of art that appealed to them was genuine. This, moreover, followed from the would-be philosopher’s definition of art, although this way of proceeding, of course, suffers the logical liability of begging the question. For, the definition of art the philosopher was forwarding presupposed and was weighed in favor of the kind of art and its attendant properties that the author on the docket applauded, while being biased against the kind of art he or she disvalued.

Consequently, when Arthur Danto denies that his theory of art, though essentialist, is covert criticism, he, Danto, is maintaining that his theory is not guilty of the recurring error — notably that of circularity — which beset previous essentialist philosophies of art. That is, Danto stresses the conceptual independence of his philosophy from criticism, because he senses that a
leading, albeit debunking, line of objection to essentialist theories of art is that said theories are covert criticism.

Danto concedes that his theory of art is essentialist, but hastens to argue that it does not have this disreputable feature – it is not criticism in mufti. For, Danto asserts that no particular value judgment follows from his philosophy in the manner that such judgments would appear to follow from Bell’s theory whose position appears to ordain that only paintings possessing significant form are genuine art while also, for that very reason, good.

By art criticism, I surmise that Danto has in mind the issuing of specific evaluative judgments and he maintains that no such value judgments follow from his philosophy of art. Art criticism, in this sense, appears to be independent from his philosophy of art. However, I think that, as Danto himself would admit, a certain approach to art criticism is implied or, at least very strongly suggested, by his philosophy of art. In other words, even if Danto’s conception of art does not straightforwardly lead to critical value judgments, it does enjoin a critical methodology. That is, it is scarcely the case that Danto’s critical practice and his philosophy of art are unconnected.

2. Danto’s Definition of Art and His Critical Practice

Danto’s theory of art does not provide us with a general premise that when applied to a particular artwork yields a value judgment – a thumbs up or thumbs down in case after case. Nevertheless, Danto’s conception of art is not altogether divorced from art criticism, since it dictates a very constant and predictable critical procedure.

As Danto proudly grants, his theory of art follows Hegel’s. For Hegel, something is a work of fine art only if it (1) possesses content, (2) presented in a certain manner, (3) where the manner perspicuously serves the presentation of the content. Likewise, for Danto, a candidate is a work of

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5 The question of whether or not Danto’s philosophy of art circuitously invites certain value judgments will be addressed in the penultimate section of this essay.
art only if (1) it is about something, (2) that is conveyed by a mode of presentation (3) that is appropriate to whatever it is about. On Danto’s view, artworks have meaning (aboutness) and that meaning is embodied (or is intended to be embodied) in a form that is fitting to it. Thus, Danto speaks of artworks as embodied meanings – meanings conveyed by suitable forms (forms, that is, in the sense that we refer to the human body as “the human form”). This definition, furthermore, appears to be functionalist as well as essentialist, since it seems the role of art is to transmit embodied meanings.

Danto’s definition of art, then, pretty clearly recommends a certain critical practice – that the critic tell his audience what the work is about and then demonstrate how the design of the work manages to articulate the meaning of the work in a suitable manner. Perhaps unsurprisingly this patent recurs throughout Danto’s own art criticism.

For example, in his discussion of Renee Cox’s Yo Mama’s Last Supper – which shows a naked woman at a dinner party – Danto proposes that the work is about Christ; it is the Last Supper according to Renee Cox (whose sobriquet is “Yo Mama”). Moreover, the photograph, through its design, perspicuously expresses a definite perspective on Christ.

Putatively, its topic is Christ the persecuted, Christ as the martyr Jesus, both the savior of and the representative of the oppressed, the wretched, and the downtrodden. Renee Cox is able to articulate her take on Christ, according to Danto, by allusively replacing the traditional male figuration of Jesus with that of a nude woman, where, Danto points out, women and persons of color are paradigmatic victims of oppression.

The mode of presentation here is akin to a metaphor. Just as Jacques-Louis

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David insinuates that the assassinated Marat perished in Christ-like sacrifice for the downtrodden by alluding visually to similar portrayals of the disposition of the body of the expiring Jesus – resulting in something like the message “Marat, Our Savior”–so Cox, as Danto explicates her photo, metaphorically identifies Jesus with what is unmistakably (since naked) a woman in order to underscore the Lord’s status as the epitome of suffering. In this way, Danto shows how Cox proposes a visual form for or embodiment of her idea about Christ which conveys it with elegance and clarity.

Danto’s theory of art has three parts: (1) aboutness or content or meaning, and (2) an appropriate, (3) mode of presentation or embodiment (where a mode of presentation is appropriate if it articulates and/or reinforces and/or comments upon the creator’s perspective on the content of the work). In parallel fashion, at the heart of most of Danto’s critical endeavors, we find the following three-step procedure: (1) identify what the work is about, its meaning, (2) characterize its mode of presentation or embodiment (a.k.a. its style or form) in a way that (3) demonstrates that its form suitably subserves or is appropriate to whatever it is about. Danto’s conception of the nature of the work of art, in other words, directs what the art critic needs to tell us about particular artworks.

On the face of it, no particular value judgment is mandated by Danto’s conception of the artwork. But his theory is not utterly separated from art criticism, since it, in effect, sets the agenda for what the art critic, qua art critic, owes his or her audience – namely, an account of what the work is about, a characterization of its mode of presentation or embodiment, and an explanation of the manner in which the content and the form correspond. Although his richly ornamented essays may sometimes camouflage it, this is the regimen that Arthur Danto the art critic follows conscientiously. Nor should this be surprising, since he is taking his marching orders from the philosophical definition of art that he has propounded in the foot-steps of Hegel. Indeed, Danto maintains that this is exactly the procedure that Hegel himself, in his role as art critic, consistently practiced.

Danto calls what he does interpretation, since it is involved in excavating the meanings in artworks. Since these meanings are embodied, the relevant artworks must be dissected in the course of being deciphered—that is, Danto must explain how the works at hand succeed in conveying whatever they are about. At the same time, Danto regards interpretation as the essence of what is called aesthetic experience. Thus, Danto’s criticism serves as an exemplar
for his readership to emulate in their own pursuit of the aesthetic experience of artworks.

Although aesthetic experience is often framed as non-cognitive—as, for instance, an experience of disinterested pleasure—Danto’s conception of it is boldly cognitive, a matter of finding an interpretation that fits the work. Non-cognitive conceptions of aesthetic experience and the kinds of criticism that are committed to facilitating this variety of aesthetic experience are implicitly, even when not explicitly, evaluative, since the affordance of disinterested pleasure is prima facie typically worthy of commendation.

Danto’s art criticism, on the other hand, presents critical interpretation as the prototype for aesthetic experience, where interpretation can be a rigorously cognitive affair, which, in turn, need not necessarily engender anything resembling pleasure. Danto’s version of aesthetic experience and the criticism that models it, therefore, are not as obviously linked to evaluation as are the non-cognitive varieties.

So, we see that, although Danto’s critical practice is bound up with his conception of art and the aesthetic experience thereof, his views on these matters do not appear to commit him to issuing—as deductions from his philosophical system—value judgments with respect to specific artworks. Thus, Danto’s theory of art does not seem liable to the Weitzian, anti-essentialist objection that it is covert art criticism, despite the fact that it proposes an essentialist definition of art which very clearly influences the itinerary of Danto’s own critical essays.

3. Danto’s Philosophy of Art History and His Critical Practice

Just as Danto’s ontology of the artwork—his definition of art—shapes his art criticism, so too is his philosophy of art history—with its notorious hypothesis concerning the end of art—also intimately connected to his critical practice. For, if art history has ceased to be a going concern, in the way that Danto alleges, then a new kind of art criticism is in order, specifically the kind of pluralism that Danto advocates.

According to Danto, art history has ended. What Danto means by this provocative conjecture is that the evolution of art toward a specific goal is over. The goal in question was the self-definition of art by means of art. On Danto’s account, that reflexive project of self-definition—as embraced by
painters painting–has been taken just as far as it can go. The dream that art could disclose its own nature is no longer sustainable. Art history, conceived as race to some ontological finish line, is over.\(^\text{10}\)

Artists, notably Andy Warhol, have supposedly gotten the question of “What is art?” into its proper philosophical form by compelling the aesthete to explain how indiscernible Brillo cartons–those by Warhol and those by Proctor and Gamble – can resemble each other perceptually in every respect, while only Warhol’s count as art. The painter or sculptor can, through their works, provoke such a challenge, Danto agrees, but the answer would require philosophical analysis and disputation of the sort that putatively is not within the reach of artists employing solely the resources of fine art.

Perhaps a less contentious way of getting at Danto’s point is to say that what critics, notably Clement Greenberg, called Modernism is no longer the driving force in the artworld. According to Greenberg, and those he influenced, the trajectory of serious modern art after the emergence of photography was a concerted effort by artists to discover the essence of art by composing canvases that would saliently exhibit – by way of exemplification – the property or properties that defined their status as artworks. Greenberg thought that among the most pertinent properties was flatness or two-dimensionality with regard to painting. Thus, he recounted the evolution of modern art as importantly a succession of endeavors to acknowledge the flatness of painting to better and better effect.

Manet flouted perspective. The Cubists contracted the picture plane further. Pollock reduced it to line and color. Rothko dissolved it into pure hue. And then Louis soaked his canvasses in paint until the picture plane and its color became as one. Modernist art, according to Greenberg, was the march upward to the surface of the painting. The history of Modernist art was one of progressive development and its progress could virtually be measured as, among other things, paintings got more and more flat.

Flatness was taken to be the quiddity of the pertinent fine art – that which

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differentiated paintings as artworks from mere real things. This view of the nature of art, in addition, gave critics a way of evaluating artworks and even ranking them. Since it was assumed that the ambition of art after the advent of photography was self-definition, and that an essential or defining characteristic of fine art is flatness, then paintings that acknowledge such supposedly ontological facts are, prima facie, good. The job of the critic in this context is to locate the work under review along the timeline of this progressively soaring arc, applauding the paintings that advance the acknowledgment of their nature more efficaciously than their predecessors, while chiding those works – such as Dali’s Surrealist landscapes – that wallow in the “illusionism” of, among other things, deep space.

This story, however, does not have a happy ending. The primacy of flatness as that which differentiates painted artworks from real things was assaulted from within the precincts of the artworld by painters like Jasper Johns who in painting flat things like targets, numbers, and flags that illustrated that there was no necessary boundary between painterly artworks and real things in terms of flatness. For, one could pledge fealty to one of those flags by Johns with no loss of allegiance, since even though his flag might be flat, it was a functional flag-emblem too. What Johns and other Pop artists thereby demonstrated was that whatever differentiated painterly artworks from real things was not a discernible property like flatness, but something indiscernible whose secret remained for the philosopher to articulate with words and concepts. If fine art was defined by a discernible property like flatness, painters could have shown that saliently. But indiscernible properties, one supposes, elude the painter’s medium, almost by definition.

Thus did Modernism come to a halt, to be superseded by Pop, Minimalism, Postmodernism, and so on. It is this juncture that Danto has identified as the end of art history – the end of the history of art as the progressive story of art’s self-definition. Under the Modernist dispensation, ambitious art had a single purpose and could be evaluated in light of how well it achieved that aim. But once that aspiration was revealed to be chimerical, then artists were free to pursue their own purposes, including political advocacy and institutional critique. Since it was no longer feasible to imagine that every artwork was competing on the same race track, each artist was thenceforth free to chart her own direction.

The Modernist art critic is monistic with respect to the end or goal of art. However, art after the collapse of Modernism, the practice of sophisticated
art becomes pluralistic and, therefore, calls upon the talents of a very different kind of art critic than Greenberg and his followers. For, after Modernism, there is not but a single task—such as self-definition—driving artists onward, but many, including incommensurable ones. Art history can no longer be thought of as progressing toward a single target (if it ever could have been persuasively thought of that way). Rather, in the wake of Modernism, artists invent their own targets and then take aim. The critic does not survey this activity from a fixed vantage point, but needs to find a different, revealing angle of view for each artist, one at a time.

Danto calls the end of Modernism the end of art—the end of art history construed as the progressive evolution toward a single goal. Art after Modernism is post-historical in the sense that artworks can no longer be interpreted and evaluated with respect to a unified, ongoing, overarching developmental narrative in the way that Greenberg plotted modern art. There is no longer one big story of art, but rather lots of co-existing short stories. And for each artist, the post-historical critic needs to spin a unique chronicle.

Perhaps needless to say, Arthur Danto is the archetypal pluralistic critic. Whereas the Modernist critic is an essentialist proscribing how a painted artwork must look, Danto’s definition of art allows that artworks can look like anything, including mere real things. Likewise, by way of his end of art thesis, Danto eschews the notion that art has any preordained telos, like self-definition, that blossoms gradually with the forward passage of time.

Just as Modernism assigned art a destiny, so too it charged the art critic with a very specific brief: to witness the entelechy of art flower over time and to declare which works were “on the side of history” and which were not. But if that alleged history has come to an end, then the role of the art critic must change as well. From being a teller of The History of Art, the critic must become a teller of many tales.

The kind of criticism that Greenberg popularized influenced many of the most important critics who followed him, including Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster, and others who, while deviating from many of the details of Greenberg’s artistic pantheon and the taste that informed it, nevertheless conceived of their task as Greenberg did in terms of fitting emerging work in the present into the march of art-historical time. David Carrier has called this kind of art criticism “philoso-
phical.” It endeavors to tell, oxymoronically enough, the history of the present – to show how each new work in the here and now is contributing to The Evolving History of Art, howsoever that is conceived.

But by declaring the end of art, Danto strategically jettisons the burden of philosophical art criticism. For if there is no longer an ongoing, singular history to recount, then there is no pressure to fit new work into its postulated pattern. New works can be interrogated on their own terms which not only can be but are now in the post-historical present plural.

Thus, Danto’s philosophy of art history which declares art to be at an end and which liberates art to experiment in every direction consequently also paves the way for a new type of art criticism. Danto’s philosophy of art history, in other words, dialectically clears the path for the kind of art criticism that Danto believes is apposite for the contemporary, pluralistic, post-historical artworld.12 There may be philosophical reasons to be suspicious of Danto’s declaration that art has ended in the sense that he intends that slogan. Nevertheless, it is hard to gainsay the polemical service of that hypothesis in rhetorically undermining the dominant style of “philosophical art criticism” while, at the same time, carving out a conceptual space from which to launch a new species of pluralistic art criticism – a practice of artwriting that does not try to transform the so-called story of art into an evaluative grid. That is, the end-of-art thesis, while not entailing specific value judgments in the way in which practices Greenbergian formalism does, nevertheless serves Danto’s critical purposes by contesting the guiding assumptions of philosophical art criticism in a way that makes pluralism a compelling alternative.

4. Art Criticism without Evaluation?

As we have seen, in contrast to someone like Greenberg, neither Danto’s definition of art nor his philosophy of art history appears to imply specific value judgments. A particular artwork is not pronounced to be good in virtue of falling into step with the parade of teleologically driven, art history, nor if

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11 David Carrier, Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism (Westport, Ct.: Praeger, 2002).
it satisfies some essential definitional requirement of looking a certain way—for example, by being an imitation of the beautiful, or possessing expressive properties, manifesting significant form, or being self-acknowledgingly flat (or flatter). Perhaps because of this, Danto seems to believe that his primary task as a critic is to educate his readership about art, presumably by telling them what particular artworks are about and how they embody or articulate whatever they are about. “What else might a critic do?”, you might ask. One answer is: issue value judgments.

However, Danto wants to disown that role. In fact, at one point, Danto goes so far as to suggest that it is fundamentally the business of the galleries and the museums to evaluate individual works, which they do by presenting them to the public. Then Danto, the critic steps in and explains how the works so exhibited work—that is, how they embody their meanings. But does this view of the division of labor in the artworld really follow from Danto’s philosophy of art? Does Danto actually abide by this Dragnet/Sgt. Friday-ish—“just the facts, ma’am”—approach to criticism? And, even if he did, is it theoretically plausible to think that art criticism is primarily a matter of explaining the operation and meaning of visual forms, sans any pressure to evaluate. Let us address these three questions in what follows.

First, does Danto really eschew evaluation? No, as is perhaps predictable, Danto, like everyone else, can’t resist offering evaluations—for example, he hails David Hockney’s *My Parents* as “among the masterpieces of the century.”13 Danto may evaluate less than Robert Hughes, or Michael Kimmelman, or Hilton Kramer, or Peter Schjeldahl. But he evaluates. Perhaps because he had a long career as a teacher whose expertise or job description was explaining things, his forte does seem to be interpretation. Nevertheless, he does make value judgments. Furthermore, where the value judgments are negative, that the judgments are his cannot be disputed by claiming they were made by representatives of artworld-institutions like galleries and museums. For, except in cases of exhibitions of decadent art, the curators of such institutions rarely hang work with the intention of signaling its badness.

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13 Quoted by Cynthia Freeland in her talk “Danto and Art Criticism” which was delivered at the annual meetings of the American Society for Aesthetics in Milwaukee in the fall of 2006. Freeland’s essay and mine, though developed independently, converge on a number of points.
Nor does Danto’s theory of art enjoin a moratorium on value judgments. In fact, it authorizes them, or, at least, value judgments of a certain kind. Recall that Danto’s theory requires that something is an artwork only if it is about something and only if it is presented in a form of embodiment that is *appropriate*. This then assigns certain discursive responsibilities to art critics. These include not only the obligation to say what the work means or is about, and the requirement to characterize its form of embodiment, but also to establish that the mode of presentation of the work is *appropriate* to its content.

But note that *appropriateness* is a normative concept. If the relation between the form of embodiment of the work and its subject is appropriate, then that is – at least, *prima facie*— artistically good to the extent that the design is appropriate. By acknowledging that the goodness here is *prima facie*, I, needless to say, agree that this presumption may be over-ridden or outweighed, for instance, if the content and/or the mode of embodiment, or both are hackneyed. Nevertheless, in the standard case, when demonstrating that the artist has discovered a mode of embodiment that is appropriate to her content, Danto is issuing an implicit, positive value judgment, most especially in those cases where no qualifications are introduced.

An implicit value judgment is built into the kind of criticism that flows from Danto’s essentially functional definition of art, since finding the embodiment of what the work is about to be appropriate to its content, without circumspection, is a *de facto* recommendation of the goodness of the work to the degree that the embodiment is fitting or appropriate. That Danto does not always grade the works in question may be a personal stylistic quirk or perhaps it is a strategy for keeping within his word count. After all, when one writes journalism, even *haute* journalism, something’s gotta’ give.

So, Danto does evaluate and the evaluation is even linked to his philosophy of art. Earlier, I said that Danto’s philosophy *appears* unconnected to rendering particular value judgments. But that is only how matters appear. Since something is an artwork only if it succeeds in conveying its content through an appropriate mode of presentation and since appropriateness is a normative concept, when the critic, such as Danto, demonstrates that the candidate at hand instantiates the properties that garner it art status, said critic at the same time indicates that the work is good, at least ostensibly, to the degree that the embodiment is appropriate.
Yet, though Danto does evaluate, he does not usually rank.\textsuperscript{14} He points out what is good in artist x and artist y, however, he does not typically say that x is better than y, or vice-versa. And, furthermore, this reticence about ranking does seem connected to his philosophy of art, since in accordance with his philosophy of art, the critic says why this embodiment \textit{in this case} is appropriate. The critic Danto does not appeal to any general standard of appropriateness because his philosophy of art offers no general formula for appropriateness. It must be determined on a case by case basis. In this regard, what the critic is doing is explaining why each of the pertinent works of art is good in its own way.\textsuperscript{15} (This, of course, is just further way of limning what it means to be a post-historical pluralist).

I think that Danto would agree with this. Isn’t it the moral of his story about why it would never occur to him to compare works by Brice Marden and Joan Mitchell?\textsuperscript{16} A critic like Greenberg who has a limited criteria of goodness (and of authentic art status) like reflexively inflected flatness can rank every work in terms of the extent to which it accomplishes the acknowledgment of this property. Danto’s expectation of appropriateness is far more open ended, since there are an indefinitely large number of ways of being appropriate. Each artwork may be appropriate in its own way and the critic shows the worthiness of the piece by finding that particular way and elucidating it for others. Though this does not amount to ranking the work, it still functions implicitly as a critical recommendation concerning the value of the work.

When Danto as critic protests that he is not usually issuing value judgments, I think he misrepresents his practice. He misconstrues his avoidance of ranking as evidence that he is not evaluating. But ranking is only one form of evaluating. There are other forms, such as saying what is good about a work on a case by case basis. And Danto, I submit, generally engages in this sort of valuing, if only most frequently implicitly, by unraveling the \textit{appropriateness} of the mode of embodiment of his subjects to that which it embodies.

Moreover, this kind of criticism is well preceded: it is an instance of the organic view of art which regards the parts of artworks, properly so-called,

\textsuperscript{14} Or if he ranks, then, again like Hegel, it is generally in virtue of cultural import.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
to be functionally integrated in the whole. Danto, following Hegel, has an organic theory of art which endorses an organic style of criticism, one in which in disclosing the form of embodiment of the work to be suitable to its meaning implicitly congratulates the achievement of the artist. In this approach, explication without qualification is prima facie evaluation. Danto does not have to announce in each of his critical pieces that “I, Arthur Danto, hereby affirm that such-and-a work is good.” His readers—who embrace organicism as if by cultural osmosis—understand Danto to be speaking well of those works whose fitting correlation of form and meaning he reveals with insight and wit.

Most organic critics probably come to their practice intuitively. They are not explicitly taught a doctrine which they then self-consciously apply. As a philosopher of art, however, Danto has worked out a theory of art that corresponds neatly with his organic/explicatory (or interpretive) procedure. And, at the very least, implicit, positive, critical evaluations do emerge from the revelation of the unity of the work. Moreover, this is related to Danto’s philosophy of art which takes the function of art to be to display a certain content in an appropriate embodiment.

Undoubtedly, Danto is onto something when, as we described in the opening section of this essay, he draws a distinction between his own essentialist philosophy of art and those of many of his predecessors. For, the criterion of appropriateness that he employs is surely much more open-ended than a criterion like flatness or even the expression of emotion. In many traditional, essentialist philosophies of art, individual evaluative judgments followed mechanically from the conceptualizations of art status that rested on discernible properties of a highly restricted sort. And, although Danto’s implicit evaluations are connected to his philosophy of art, said evaluations, insofar as they rest upon contextually situated interpretations, cannot be mechanically deduced from his theory. But this is best characterized by saying that Danto’s theory and practice are not programmatic rather than by denying they are either essentialist and evaluative.

Even though Danto downplays evaluation in his practice, not only is it often in evidence, it would seem to be inherent in the kind of philosophy of art Danto espouses in relation to the responsibilities such a theory naturally assigns to critics. But even if his philosophy of art did not commit the critic to evaluation, the question remains of whether Danto could reject evaluation by claiming, as he sometimes does, that it is not his job as a critic, but the
business of the curators who organize the shows to anoint what is good. The critic simply interprets or explains what the artworld has antecedently elected.

This strikes me as an utterly impracticable view of criticism for theoretical reasons. Suppose we agree with Danto that an art critic is first and foremost an interpreter. Even so, criticism cannot be sharply divorced from evaluation, since interpretation has to be selectively focused. Every element of an artwork is conceivably interpretable in multiple ways. Why do art critics, including Danto, focus their attention on the features of artworks that they do – such as the unity of its form of presentation and its meaning? Clearly, I submit that it is because such features as these are the ones that are relevant to the artistic quality of the work. The critic focuses upon these features because they are those features which are pertinent to artistic goodness.

Evaluation, that is, sets the framework in which interpretation becomes possible. Ultimately, it is evaluation that determines the direction of interpretation. For this reason, the very thought that there might be artistic interpretation without evaluation—if only an implicit evaluation—is an unlikely one. Furthermore, the proposal that the evaluation could be delivered by a group other than those involved in the criticism, properly so-called, of the work is imponderable inasmuch as the evaluation of the work and its interpretation are best comprehended as integrated phases of the same process.

5. Summary

In this essay, I have been preoccupied with examining Arthur Danto’s views about the relation of his philosophy of art (including his philosophy of art history) to his criticism, along with his related contention that he is not really involved in evaluating artworks, but rather is committed almost exclusively to interpretation. Although I concede that there is something to the contrast that Danto draws between traditional, essentialist philosophies of art and his own version of essentialism, I have argued that the relation between Danto’s philosophy of art and his criticism is not as remote as he insists. His art criticism and his philosophy are made for each other.

Likewise I worry that Danto’s apparent disavowal of evaluation in favor of interpretation is exaggerated. Danto, the critic, is consistently, if only usually implicitly, immersed in evaluation, indeed, and ironically, in virtue of the very type of organic theory of art that he defends.
Broadly speaking, this essay has concentrated upon reviewing what might be called Danto’s meta-criticism of his own critical practice. In this regard, I have had the temerity to question Danto’s own view of his art criticism. This, of course, should not be misunderstood in any way as a dismissal of that criticism which I, for one, appreciate as the best criticism on art on offer in the contemporary artworld. Certainly, one can excel as a critic, even if one’s theory of one’s own criticism is less compelling. In my opinion, Arthur Danto is the greatest art critic of our moment. Nevertheless, some of his explicit meta-critical remarks about his practice appear to mischaracterize what he is actually up to. And what makes the situation even more piquant is that a more accurate portrayal of Danto’s critical practice is available, contra Danto, by taking a closer look at the relation between his philosophy of art and his art criticism than he, Danto, advises (perhaps because of his undue anxiety in response to Weitz’s objections to essentialist theories of art).
“Contemporary art has become a social phenomenon, a tool for communication. There is no point in comparing it to what we used to know, because it is dependent on the effects of globalization which we are only beginning to discover and whose impact we are still struggling to assess.”

A Global Art Forum

In March 2007, the Dubai Art Fair, a subsidiary of Dubai’s International Financial Centre (DIFC), organized its first Global Art Forum in which the term global art simply was used synonymously with today’s contemporary art. Some of the sections, as was to be expected, addressed issues like Branding Cities through Culture and Building Future Art Cities. One section, however, narrowed the spectrum by asking the blunt questions: “How will contemporary art affect the Middle East in the next 10 years?” or: “How will the Middle East affect contemporary art in the next 10 years?” Some of the participants objected that the two questions were not commensurable, and that they treated art as a matter of planning.
The creation of art markets in the Middle East is an economic project that will indeed affect Contemporary Art. Western auction houses are competing with one another in the region. Sotheby’s has opened a branch in Doha, Qatar, and Christie’s has chosen Dubai, Abu Dhabi where the Louvre will send part of its collections. To this end it has commissioned a museum building by Tadao Ando. Besides, in Qatar the brand new Museum of Islamic Art—designed by I. M. Pei—a museum of contemporary art is to open soon. Thus, the Middle East will indeed affect the global art world. Art museums, though still an unfamiliar institution in the region, are an obvious choice, and therefore quite a number of new museums are already under construction. In 2008, the Global Art Forum, this time with The Financial Times as partner, stated bluntly that “art is a business.” The board of Cultural and Art Authority, on that occasion, explained their “agenda for a global art city.” Thus, the Gulf States provide a test case for art’s globalization as an economic project.

But it is quite another matter to ask how art will affect the Middle East, as the first Global Art Forum did. Contemporary art, with its critical message and public visibility, bears the potential of conflicts with state control in censoring artists. China, after 1989, is an example of the price that has to be paid for a compromise between government politics and art trade. Only the economic elite of private collectors and investors can afford the risk to own art of whatever intention. The Gulf States may apply more liberal principles than their Arab neighbors, but their experience with today’s art is limited, if we leave aside Sharjah whose biennial is vividly described by Jack Persekin, Artistic Director of the Sharjah Biennial, in this volume. However, when looking to the artists’ part, whether they still live in the region or work up road, we discover a new enthusiasm. It is precisely the economic prospect, enhanced by the global perspective, that opens unprecedented possibilities for them. Enrico Navarra, a Paris dealer, has even started a new distribution project for them by publishing book editions for artists who “are developing a new vision of the Arab world,” as Jérome Sans, the editor of the third volume in this series, writes. The whole

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5 Ibid., p. 4.
endeavor depends on whether artists will be given “independent spaces for looking and reading”7 that are a novelty not only in art but concern social life in general. The aim is to create conditions artists can work under, despite the pressure of the business world they live in.

Global Art

Twenty years after its first manifestations, the time has come to discuss the nature and purpose of global art that emerged, like a phoenix from the ashes, from modern art at the end of the twentieth century and opposed modernity’s cherished ideals of progress and hegemony.8 Contemporary art, a term long used to designate the most recent art, assumed an entirely new meaning when art production, following the turn of world politics and world trade in 1989, expanded across the globe. The results of this unprecedented expansion challenged the continuity of any Eurocentric view of “art.” Global art is no longer synonymous with modern art. It is by definition contemporary, not just in a chronological but also, as we will see, in a symbolic or even ideological sense. It is both represented and distorted by an art market whose strategies are not just economic mechanisms when crossing cultural borders, but strategies to channel art production in directions for which we still lack sufficient categories.

Art on a global scale does not imply an inherent aesthetic quality which could be identified as such, nor a global concept of what has to be regarded as art. Rather than representing a new context, it indicates the loss of context or focus and includes its own contradiction by implying the counter movement of regionalism and tribalization, whether national, cultural or religious. It clearly differs from modernity whose self-appointed universalism was based on a hegemonial notion of art. In short, new art today is global, much the same way the world wide web is also global. The Internet is global in the sense that it is used everywhere, but this does not mean that it is universal in content or message. It allows for free access

7 Ibid.
8 Here, in fact, I elaborate on an argument of my earlier essay “Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age,” in: Peter Weibel, and Andrea Buddensieg (eds.), Contemporary Art and the Museum. A Global Perspective (Ostfildern: Hatje-Cantz, 2007), pp. 16–38. It was the first volume of the project GAM preceding the present publication.

and thus for a personal response to the world. But it is for the same reasons that this creates problems for political regimes that feel a need to control it, precisely because their problems are by definition local and therefore are threatened by a free flow of information and opinion that goes with uncensored creativity. It may be difficult for Western art criticism to accept the novelty (and not just the new geographical reach) of global art. It is, however, wishful thinking to keep it under Western guidance and within the precincts of familiar institutions.

But control is not only a political problem: it is also a concern of art criticism and aesthetics. Global art may be critical in political terms, but it is also critical in terms of art categories defined by inclusion or exclusion. New art often blurs any kinds of borders between mainstream art, on the one side, and popular art, on the other, and thus abolishes the old dualism between Western art and ethnographic practice by using indigenous traditions as a reference, as Justo Pastor Mellado has shown for Chile and Paraguay. Seen from a Western point of view, global art represents a geopolitical or even “geoaesthetic” brand, as Joaquin Barriendos explains in his contribution to this volume. It is symbolic capital whose value changes from one place to the other, even if Western revisionism tries to control its currency with its own exchange rates. Difference, with the label of a foreign culture, has become marketable and thus an entrance ticket for newcomers on the art market.

**World Art**

Global art and world art are sometimes used synonymously. But world art is an old idea complementary to modernism, already developed in André Malraux’s postwar book on universal art without museum walls,⁹ because or although it was mostly to be found in Western museums. It continues to signify art from all ages, the heritage of mankind. In fact, it made art from every possible provenance acceptable under the condition of excluding it from modern mainstream art—an old argument between art and ethnographic museums. Such significance is officially codified in international laws for the protection of art and monuments. The School of World Art Studies located at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, a novelty in the university realm and, offers a clear example for the discussion of world

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art today. Its origin was the Sainsbury Collection which the university inherited and whose items from Africa and Oceania were collected as art and juxtaposed with modern art, as was the custom in modern art’s formalism and universal aesthetics. It was in line with this concept that John Onians who taught at the school, edited his magnificent *Atlas of World Art* which reaches from the stone age to the present day, a project also accompanied by a World Art Library. A similar program at Leiden University, is documented in the volume *World Art Studies* whose contributors are both art critics and ethnographers, i.e. groups which for a long time had belonged to different camps of thought and method.

The idea of world art, in a sense, is held together by an art concept that is based on modernism’s universalism and today looks somewhat odd, as it bridges a Western notion of art with a multiform, and often ethnic, production to which the term “art” is applied in an arbitrary manner. It was a paradigm of modernist aesthetics to regard every form or work that humanity created, as art. World art—a kind of aesthetic appropriation of objects as pure “form” or as proof of individual creativity on a universal scale—is best described in André Malraux’s book on the “Imaginary Museum” that is, in fact, a museum in the mind and therefore epitomizes world art, also a construct. World art never was the concern of ethnographers who dealt with local products in a culture-specific way and thus in most concrete terms. It may be admitted that labels such as “ethnic” or “primitive” are equally questionable but they are so for very different reasons. Sally Price brings the Western art appropriation to the point in her book *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, an acerbic account of the uncertainties surrounding artifacts and works of art.

World art, in the meantime, matters for identity politics in cultures that had no previous share in modernism and therefore today insist on their own

traditions and their own narratives in defining visual production as cultural practice. World art also receives a lot of attention due to the growing pressure of repatriation claims from former colonies. Metropolitan museums of the West, often accused of being outposts of empire and colonialism, today have to rethink their arguments in order to defend their collections. The British Museum is among them, and its director, Neil MacGregor, claimed his museum to be “not only a museum of the world but also a museum for the world.” In this sense, he opened a blockbuster show on the Chinese Terracotta Army that attracted large crowds in 2007, thus ascertaining his claims not only to own, but also to promote, world art. A bookshop on Russell Street I came across at the time, unintentionally offered a telling case of the need for our distinction. The owner of the shop presented books on world art and others on global art, though both were about art from China, side by side in the same window display. The catalogue of the British Museum exhibition across the street shared the window with a book on contemporary artists from China that was dedicated to the new market presence of living Artists in China and thus would not have made any sense twenty years ago.

In 1982, Jean-Louis Pradel published one of the last books of this kind with the title World Art Trends for contemporary art; nevertheless most of the 23 countries represented were Western. Today, however, world art is synonymous with the art heritage of the others, meaning art on a universal scale. World art encompasses most cultures beyond the West whose heritage was preserved in empire type museums. In fact, world art for a long time was primarily owned by Western museums, where it existed as an expatriated and contested treasure from colonial times. In order to protect their collections, directors of 18 Western museums recently signed a declaration in which they defended their institutions as “Universal Museums” that were created to serve the whole world and not a single country or nation. Universal museums as an idea are a legacy from modernity’s claim to offer universal models for the whole world. Globalism,

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15 The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army, British Museum, September 13, 2007 through April 6, 2008.
18 Ibid., p. 102.

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on the other hand, is a response to universalism and serves to propagate the symbolic capital of difference on the market. Global art, in fact, differs profoundly from world art in that it is always created as art to begin with, and that is synonymous with contemporary art practice, whatever the art definitions may be in the individual case.

**World Art History or Global Art History?**

World art studies, it has been said, are usually concerned with an old topic that originated in the nineteenth century, but we encounter today a new debate about world art history, in the sense of a world wide competence of the Western type discipline of art history. This has been sketched out in David Summers’ book, in which *World Art History* is part of the subtitle, and then critically discussed by James Elkins, editor of *Is Art History Global?*. Whereas Summers claims a universal competence of art history for every part of the world, Elkins insists on “local practices of art history” that do not follow a single model. In his editorial *Art History as a Global Discipline*, he develops “five arguments against the idea that art history is, or could become, a single enterprise throughout the world.”

In my view, the problem, however, is one of the terms to be used, and terminology has to be taken seriously, when, in the meantime, global art is denoting a new geography of contemporary art hardly twenty years old.

“Global art history” is therefore a misleading term, since it is not concerned with global art, but only with art history and thus, with an altogether different matter of method and discipline in art writing. In other words, world art and global art differ so much in matters of contents or materials that they should not be used assyonymms. The debate, in my view, is one of world art history, as it is called in a recent book of David Carrier and a forthcoming book by Whitney Davis. World art history, as a discourse or

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as a narrative, claims competence as being a method suitable for discussing art regardless of its age or provenance. Global art as contemporary art implies quite a different question. One has to ask whether global art of today still allows an art historical reasoning or rather represents a deliberate exodus from art history as narrative.

The question, in other words, is whether global art today still feels obliged to a notion of art history that was guiding modern art both in the camps of the avant-garde and their conservative opponents. Art history, as I have suggested upon various occasions, was a local game even when the subject was world art. It was designed for modern readers who wanted to study art via a history of art forms. But Art History after Modernism, which is how I rephrased the title of the various editions of my book originally titled in German Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte? [The End of the History of Art?], suffered a crisis even in Western confines. As was the case with Hervé Fischer—who performed the message of his book The End of the History of Art in 1979 at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris—artists deliberately left the master narrative of art history whose claims they rejected. The cult of objects considered works of art shifted to the experience of events in time and space that escape a linear art history with the nineteenth century idea of evolution. The globalization of art, meanwhile, represents a new stage in art’s exodus from the patronage of art history. Global art flourishes in parts of the world where art history has not been a concern at all.

On the other hand, it is quite uncertain whether and how Western museums will represent art history in the future. The permanent exhibition at the Tate Modern replaces the narrative of art history with “alternative ways of looking at art,” as Frances Morris explains in Tate Modern: The Handbook. So-called “viewpoints” such as “Poetry and Dream” allow for “multiple readings” of the collection in order to respond to “an open and fluid situation.” Flow charts in the hallway, though, carry on

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25 Ibid.

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MoMa’s old genealogical trees of the thirties that, however, no longer hold for contemporary art. The Tate curators cannot be blamed for making obvious what art history has come to. They invited visitors to “fill in the blanks” and to write their own “viewpoints” on a postcard. Art history has been out of control, ever since late modern art undermined the claims of a linear history, as it was offered by the majority of museum exhibitions.

Efforts to globalize art history often borrow the current discourse of cultural theory where post-colonial debates of identity and migration are prevalent. A conference held at the University of Binghamton as early as 1989 criticized art history’s dependence on the terminology of cultural theory. As Anthony King states in the introduction to the conference papers: “No contemporary question is more urgent than the need to explore alternative ways of conceptualizing and analyzing issues related to the ‘globalization of culture’, frequently perceived, in popular terms, as cultural homogenization on a global scale.”26 The art historians at the conference responded to the gatekeepers of cultural theory and demanded a new debate that actually catches the significance in the change of the art world.

But the crisis of the master narrative does not help the former periphery countries to reinvent an art history on their own or to replace it with something else. Art history, thus, has a different calendar among Chinese artists and collectors. Zhang Xiaogang’s picture, Birth of the People’s Republic of China (1992) also alludes, tongue-in-cheek, to the birth of Chinese contemporary art, an art without roots in the modernist tradition. The ’85 movement was a “rebellion against the state ideology and the institutional apparatus of art” including a “philosophical discussion on modernity” in more than 80 unofficial art groups.27 The climate changed when the China/Avant-Garde exhibition at the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) was closed permanently in February of 1989 using bomb threats as an excuse.28

In the following years, the acceptance of art shifted to the market and cut

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off the artist’ from political influence. It was then that political pop and cynical realism reached an international audience.

The second panel of GAM’s platform in New Delhi in the fall of 2008 discussed the question *How Global is Art History Today?*. In the debates, the global competence of an implanted model of Western art history was denied in the case of India.29 The debates touched on several trajectories that today are controversial in India. Counter-narratives increasingly replace narratives of Western modernism with different concepts such as the return to national narratives of Indian art. There was agreement among the participants that colonial history still unduly dominates the cultural topics in India and guides the attention to long time experiences with foreign art, while native traditions and aesthetics have little space in today’s art history. The crisis of art history based on colonial concepts favors the decision for a new variant of visual studies which, following the model of Goldsmith College, London, dominate curatorial education today, and as a different paradigm, replace art history with its transdisciplinary aims.

**The MoCA as a Symbolic Site**

Global art production operates in a counterposition to art history, as it aims to reclaim equality without the former borders separating “art” from indigenous or popular production. It is in this spirit that museums in other parts of the world represent diversity in appearance and content even in their permanent art collections. By implication, also Western art collections suddenly may look “local” in a new and unwelcome sense. In order to create closer links with their local audiences, museums in a non-Western context in fact are tempted to follow a national or community line in their acquisition policies and thus aim at being site specific in terms of a given cultural tradition. They have every reason for rethinking their part in the promotion and choice of what they consider as art. They may host international exhibitions, but recently biennials that have spread all over the world, have taken over their old role of exhibiting and organizing avant-garde art.

Museums of contemporary art are no longer built with the idea of

29 See also *Global Art and the Museum – The Global Turn of and Art in India*, available online at: [http://globalartmuseum.de/site/conference/65](http://globalartmuseum.de/site/conference/65) (access February 13, 2009).
exhibiting art’s history, but make the claim to represent an expanding world in the mirror of contemporary art. Their boom does not mean that they continue the Western idea of an art museum. Rather, they differ more in what they consider to be art than they do in their architecture, which is easier translatable from one place to another. After globalization has decentralized the world, the “free trade” ideology of the “new economy” offers the rhetoric of “free art” that no longer provides obliging models, as it is free in every direction to the degree that the market allows freedom. Accordingly, the label Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) is being replaced more and more by the brand name Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA). The majority of MoCAs are situated in the US where the Los Angeles MoCA and the MassMoCA are the best known of its kind. But museums bearing this name are also to be found in Montreal, London, Lyon, Kagawa and Shanghai, and there is even a National MoCA of Korea. The MoCA is by implication global, as it celebrates contemporary production as an art without geographic borders and without history in terms of Western modernism. The art market followed when Christie’s and Sotheby’s in recent years introduced “Contemporary” and “Postwar” as new categories in their auction catalogues that replaced Modern as the familiar trademark of Western art.

In Asia, art museums are being built at the same speed at which biennials were founded in the two preceding decades. Their boom is unprecedented, but their destination is far from clear. In Japan, the trend favors “a certain type of regional (Prefectural) museum” which lacks a collection and does not employ a curator, but accommodates “group exhibitions organized by the local artists” themselves. Masaaki Morishita calls them “empty museums” that serve temporary exhibitions like “Kunstshallen”, as they are called in German. “Museum,” under such premises, is a symbolic name for symbolic sites where art is expected to be shown even in the future. Museums are built like airports awaiting the arrival of international art. What looks like a contradiction between boom and crisis (the boom of museum buildings and the crisis of their meaning), in fact reveals a different relation to new audiences that are mostly unfamiliar with museum visits. Collectors with a market competence (a kind of VIP in the art world) do not need museums for themselves or are building museums on their own that, however, leave a gap for local audiences with no art experience at all.

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In addition to art collectors, local administrations fill the gap and introduce ambitions of their own in “developing” art in an urban frame and in creating so-called “cultural districts.” Oscar Ho describes the Hong Kong project of huge malls with art museums that are also expected to attract a mass audience. In Shanghai, the authorities are constructing 100 new museums by 2010: “They are opening up more museums than Starbucks.” But such museums “have little linkage with the cultural experience of the general public” they are meant to attract. In their search for a new audience, museums soon may be forced to give up the competition with collectors’ museums and to make a decision whether to favor international tourism or to address a local audience with an alternative to mainstream art such as visual culture or popular production from their own environment.

After the breakdown of the Japanese economy around 1990, local governments started to revitalize city centers with museums as a tool. Since 1955, 200 public museums have been built all over Japan. Department stores began to open museums on their own grounds in order to attract clients with the exhibition of exceptional art works. The Mori Art Museum in Tokyo is a corporate institution that is located on a few floors in a skyscraper where it offers new models for combining business with culture.\(^{31}\) In China, the museum boom has only begun recently but will surpass anything ever seen in the museum scene. The international success of contemporary Chinese artists has led museum officials to discuss the construction of public institutions for their representation at home.

It is along the same line that Fan Di’an has announced the opening of a new wing of the National Art Museum of China (founded in 1958) with a location near the site of the Olympic Games. In a recent interview, he regretted the lack of international art in Chinese collections and complained about the scant interest the general audience shows for visiting museums.\(^{32}\) In part, he says, the collectors are responsible, after collecting has become a business rather than an interest of the community. Chinese artists are usually better known abroad than at home where people joke that they “are

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\(^{31}\) As Fumio Nanjo stated during the Symposium *Where is Art Contemporary?* held at ZKM, Karlsruhe, October 19–20, 2007.

not making, they are making prices.”33 In the mean time, single artists take action. Thus, Cai Guo-Qiang started in 2001 his series of mostly ephemeral MoCAs whose aim, as he wrote, was “a rebellion against the current system of MoMAs and MoCAs that have become detached from the public.”34 QMoCa, planned for his native town Quanzhou, is a collaborative project with Foster and Partners. The model was shown at the Guggenheim New York and at the National Art Museum of China in 2008.

Another project is the Art Museum of the “iconic painter” Yue Minjun, located in the Sichuan province near the Qingcheng Mountains and designed by the Beijing-based Studio Pei-Zhu, responsible for Digital Beijing.35 With its space of about 10,700 square meters, the museum will house the work of Yue Minjun when it opens in 2009. It will be one of 10 new museums on the same site, each dedicated to the work of a single Chinese artist—such as Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi. The project being developed by the local government of Dujiangyan, realizes an idea of Lü Peng, professor at the Academy of Art in Hangzhou. The new building, in the midst of nature, looks like a spaceship that is landing with a cargo of one painter’s art that carries a global branding. Its shape of an oblong sphere, with curvilinear walls, is inspired by a river rock and according to the architect aims to be both futuristic and very natural.36

Global Art and Modern Art

The success of modernization has favored the export of Western art to other parts of the world where the corresponding urge to join the “developed” countries prepared the ground. Modern was a “project” that was shared and imitated by new political and economic elites who in the post-war years hurried to catch up with the West, after the US had served as a guide for joining formerly European modernism. The Museum of Modern

33 Ibid.
Art (MoMA) in New York, still a recent institution in the war years and shortly thereafter, became a symbol for successful competition with Europe in cultural respects. The building of Museums of Modern Art in Brazil (1948) and Japan (1951), later in India, reveals a general rivalry with European leadership in the arts. But the real problem remained with the definition of “what is art and what is not,” for the continuing hegemonial modernism still demanded the exclusion of artists other than Western. The only alternative was an excessive nationalism in the representation of modern art in order to counterbalance the colonial definition.

Modern Art at the time was distinguished as “modern form” in art, which could even mean “only form” without any subject matter, when abstraction in the 1950s was recognized as a universal style, a “world language,” to use the rhetoric of those years.\(^{37}\) The difference of global art, given this background, is all too obvious, for it lacks any common idiom in terms of “style” and does not insist any longer on form as a primary or independent goal. Rather, art is distinguished by new proof of professionalism such as contemporary subject matter and a contemporary performance, usually a mixture of film, video and documentary materials. As a result, participation in the art world does not require the old entrance ticket of formal novelty and purity, as proof of advanced art. It is rather the conscience that matters, preferably understood as a critical analysis of today’s most debated (or neglected) issues. Originality, once expected from the artist’s self expression, has become a way to take position in contemporary issues. This also applies to the claim of identity other than Western that lives from an old resistance against modern hegemony. Inclusion and visibility are the new battle cries when artists from formerly neglected cultures enter the stage.

Self performance, rather than self expression in an art work, has become a strategy for a new visibility with one’s own ethnicity. But performance needs a public stage, in other words, an art institution that in many countries has not yet been available. This necessity calls for the art museum even where the museum either lacks any history or suffers from the “wrong” history of colonialism. Current “museum theory” which has become a favored academic subject, helps little to address this situation, because it is

still a Western game and also because it usually neglects case studies of today’s “museum practice,” especially in countries without a proper museum tradition. “Rethinking the museum,” a slogan to be encountered in a vast number of publications, is usually a topic for Western societies where migration and multiculturalism demand a visible museum presence. But the same discussion applies to the crisis of exhibition art, as it was practiced in high modernism. It has become a new problem of art museums where objects (“works”) are replaced by installations and events.

Will art museums retrace their historical role to offer a context for art, even where art takes new, unexpected roads? In modern times, art was usually defined by an institutional framework. “Art was what you saw in art museums.” It is for this reason that museums often became the target of an institutional critique, as artists called for a different kind of museum. “Museum was context” or provided a context. But museums have lost their former authority as a given context, and the art market does not offer an alternative context. The result is a dangerous and far reaching “de-contextualization” of art to the degree that art works are being sold even in places where they have no local meaning and cannot translate their message for new audiences, but serve the taste of collectors who anyway operate in their own world. There remain the biennials. Though they create the dominant art discourse today, they cannot offer a context beyond the event (in fact, they live from a traveling clientele). The loss of context leaves the museum again as a possible choice for “re-contextualization,” though with a new idea of what an art museum is to be. Seen in this light, even museums without a collection may become a context in places where art needs an institutional presence. But instead of representing a nation’s or a city’s art treasures, the idea of a forum waits for non-Western art museums to discover their new role. A forum offers a site for the debate of what a community is ready to accept or to reject as art. We often forget that art museums, in the West, were created from early on in order to shape or even to invent a proper art audience. This task today waits for them in many new places.

But there is one other role to be considered here. Art Museums, in the past, were not just displaying art but were narrating art history or presenting art in the mirror of its own history. An official narrative helped to situate each work of art in space and time. Already art critics like Julius Meier Graefe or Herbert Read have propagated modern art as the spearhead of (Western) art’s
constant and linear progress. The term “avant-garde,” with its military overtones, makes the idiomatic nature of this master narrative clear. But history, in the guise of art history, followed an argument of its own when it was defined both in terms of “invention” and of “deconstruction.” Creative invention, in the hands of an individual artist, was the “never seen.” Deconstruction, on the other hand, liberated art from the “too much seen.” In both cases, it was new art that counted. But this argument suffered damage in the 1960s when the much lamented “death of the avant-garde” confirmed the loss of art’s claims to go ahead on a preconceived path. The artists themselves broke with an ideal of history that also had provided a matrix of timeless values. One generation later, the problem of valuing art within the frame of its history increases with the globalization of art.

**Modern Art’s Double Exclusion**

The definition of modern art, however, was based on a double exclusion. First, the paradigm was reserved for Western art whose confines were to remain clean and protected. “Making art” was tantamount to “making modern art.” Artists unwilling or unable to follow this axiom, did not fall under the category of art at all. But even those who were modern in their art but lived outside the West, were not admitted to the ranks of official art history. Hence today the retrospective effort to retrace modern art in other parts of the world and thus to fill in the blanks in written art history. The discussion of “forgotten” or “lost” avant-gardes currently serves the reconstruction of the history of modernism but they were not “forgotten;’ they were rather dismissed in order to keep the picture of modernism clear. Rasheed Araeen has started to reclaim a share in the history of modernism that for a long time was denied to artists with a different provenance.

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39 Belting 2003, pp. 12, 126.


*Other Story*, as Rasheed Araeen entitled an “exhibition of Afro-Asian artists in postwar Britain” at Hayward Gallery in 1989, pointed to “the absence of non-European artists from the history of modern art.” The recovery of neglected names was an appeal to rethink modernism. Their absence in a way made the narrative of western modernism possible. The recovery of missing chapters in modernism was the reason for Araeen to create the periodical *Third Text* in 1987. Recently, Patrick Flores curated a travelling exhibition with an alternative history of Asian art where Cubism was introduced as a symbol of modern style. Cubism’s appropriation was “complex and differed with time and region.” When cubism was reused in order to tell the “visual narratives of myth and religion” in Asia, it turned modernism against its own purist and universalist claims. Exclusion also went with the politics of Western art schools that mediated a canon of modern art by initiation in order to be accepted as professional artist. Thus, colonialism was a driving force in the spread of modern art though it often met with the accord of those who wanted to become modern.

But modern art also excluded ethnic artifacts that were looked at in the distorting mirror of colonialism. Ethnic craftsmen were thought of as living in a time outside history, much as the colonies were removed by Hegel out of a history that for him was a Western prerogative. The dualism of “art history’ and “ethnology,” two old academic disciplines, was represented as well by two different, even opposite types of museums which testified against each other and yet complemented one another like the two sides of the same coin, as is the case in Paris with the Centre Pompidou and the Musée du Quai Branly. Primitivism, the famous appropriation of ethnic art by Picasso and other modernist artists, was celebrated for the last time in William Rubin’s 1984 show at the MoMA, New York in the spirit of the old distinction of “art” and ethnic “influence” on art. In the meantime, the

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44 Ibid.

former dualism has lost any clear boundaries. On the one side, ethnographic museums have begun to collect or even to commission contemporary art in their collections in order to cover their cultural geography with living art, as Claude Ardouin explains the situation in the British Museum. Art museums, on the other side, are expected to open their Western collections for today’s global art. The roles of ethnographers and art curators seem to be exchanged. The former increasingly curate contemporary art, and the latter as well are studying art with a cultural geography that had been for a long time the discussion of ethnography. At the same time, the difference between historians and anthropologists is shrinking, as the new fields of ethno-history and historical anthropology prove clearly. Ethnography lost its momentum when modernization transformed (or destroyed) the traditional societies of their “field work” and also interrupted or exhausted the continuity of “ethnic” arts and crafts that nicely seemed to represent the behalf of Western colonies.

**Post-ethnic and Neo-ethnic**

It is a result of contemporary art’s globalization that non-Western artists reject the label “ethnic’ and discover their ethnicity as a personal identity that is no longer encumbered by racial bias. At the same time, artists in the West reject the label art history as their frame of reference which had reduced them to descendants of a linear course of “art history.” The late modern discourse of “post-history” may have been a catalyst for both parties to meet on common ground. Arthur Danto was one of the first to discover “the visual arts in a post-historical perspective.” “The Post-historical period,” as he writes, “means the end of a certain narrative, under the terms of which making art was understood as carrying forward” art history. But “the master narrative of Western art is losing its grip, and nothing has taken its place.” 46 Likewise, I have repeatedly discussed the crisis of art history (the “end of art history”) as an outmoded model that is no longer appropriate for dealing with the art of our time. 47 The notion “post-ethnic” offers itself by analogy with the notion of post-historical. Much as their ethnic origin presents a problem for the one party, a given

place in history has become an unwelcome burden for the other. Artists are redefining their ethnicity as a personal role, and as a migration experience, that leads to multiple identities in the sense that V. S. Naipaul has described his own persona 1987 in his autobiographical novel *The Enigma of Arrival*. It is a post-ethnic position to perform as an “artist from Africa” rather than to suffer the label of an “African artist.” Chéri Zamba, the artist from Zaire, offered a pertinent example when he created the “post-ethnic” role in a self portrait as professional artist for Jean-Hubert Martin’s Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*, the first event of global art, in 1989. The self-portrait is more than that, as it is a painted program that defines his departure from Kinshasa to Paris as a symbolical change of roles, from the ethnic role as African artist to the global role with an African ethnicity. The closed cage of his native environment opens up when the airplane brings him to international presence or visibility. He poses in the picture not just with his likeness but with the performance of his artist self, an old privilege of Western artists. At the same time, he applies the visual language of popular media from his native Zaire to make his new claims.

Holland Cotter speaks of “a paradigm shift in contemporary art.” The *Freestyle* exhibition at the Studio Museum in Haarlem used the label “postblack art” in the same sense that David A. Hollinger uses the term post-ethnicity. The movement of multiculturalism in the 1990s, as Cotter states, has been followed by a liberation from ethnic identity that defines ethnicity as a role rather than as a rule. The crisis of history, on the Western side, opened the road for abolishing history’s counterpart, the

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49 Jean-Hubert Martin (ed.), *Magiciens de la terre*, exhib. cat., (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1989), p. 223. See also the photograph in the magazine *Connaissance des Arts*, 449, (June 1989), p. 60 where he poses in front of his self portrait, and the view of his preparatory exhibition in Kinshasa, 1988, where the audience flocks to the site in order to share the excitement of his departure to France; See also *Les cahiers du musée national d’art moderne*, 28, (Summer 1989).
exoticism of “the other.” History, for a long time, divided the world, but contemporaneity makes the claim of crossing this division. Also geography used to separate “art,” as a Western possession, from the ethnic, its counterpart in the colonies. Primitivism was a Western attitude that, even in its most idealistic formulation, was based on the cliché of the “primitive” or the primordial that had become a matter for nostalgia in modern times.

Whereas old frontiers begin to waver, new ones are coming into sight. Neo-ethnic movements challenge art’s globalization with a highly political tribalism in countries like India where Hindu sects use them for their nationalistic claims. The polemics against global art (and its lifestyle connotations) is as obvious as the revival of traditional aesthetics with religious connotations. A Neo-Hindu sect with about 3,000 centers in every part of the world, opened a temple district at Akshardam, on the outskirts of New Delhi, in 2005 with the participation of 7,000 artists who created traditional sculptures in a revival style designating “true Indian art” as a timeless style. This Neo-ethnic movement operates outside the art world, but makes the double claim to represent art and to globalize Indian art.51

New Media on the Eve of Global Art

It appears in retrospect that globalization in art had several premises among which, in the first place, the electronic turn deserves our attention. “New media” caused a revolution of what had been considered as art up to then. The reign of the White Cube, with its immaculate exhibition concept, suffered damage when video and installation art invaded the art space with the technologies of mass media that increased the presence of art and crossed its borderline to every day media experience. Suddenly, art seemed to enter the realm of public communication. But it transmitted private statements that carried the voice of a single artist to a single viewer. Art’s new media were global in a way that painting or sculpture had never been. They offered global tools before artists on a global scale got hold of them. The medium, to modify a famous definition, carried a global message, as it removed not only geographical but cultural distance between center and periphery. Film and TV, with their plain narratives, made art democratic for

51 Jyatindra Jain, India’s Popular Culture. Iconic Spaces and Fluid Images (New Delhi: Marc Publications, 2007). See also Swaminarayan Akshardham: Making and Experience, cat. (New Delhi: Akshardham, 2007) with the slogan “Where art is ageless, culture is borderless, values are timeless” on the cover.

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the viewer. Art shared the working tools or visual language with mass media but differed from them in its critical message. “Contemporary” already was the electronic performance. The step to global art was taken when artists introduced statements that were rooted in their world experience and cultural background. The global uniformity of the new media was soon counterbalanced by art’s multiform messages that represented the global universe in local views. This usage explains why global art does not look the same everywhere.

Nam June Paik (1932–2006), the Korean born “father of Video Art,” took the first steps around 1960 when he transferred his training in electronic music to Electronic Art in Germany. In the beginnings, he cunningly subverted the mainstream TV programs and turned them into “abstract images” that simulated “art” with TV technology. He soon also became a forerunner of global art when he challenged the Western art scene with the utopian vision of art’s global communication via satellite TV. Thus, on New Year’s Eve of 1984 he staged “celestial duets” of artists “through electronic contact simultaneously in New York, Paris, Seoul and Cologne”52. In Martin’s Paris exhibition of 1989, he participated with a drawing of a grid of empty TV frames that recalls his TV-project Bonjour, Mr. Orwell. The TV frames are set against a center where their arbitrary images are circulating with the label Wrap Around the World.53 Paik in a way succeeded in a personal globalization when he performed ubiquity as an artist, but he only could defend his artistic self by contrasting it with the “noise” and emptiness of the global imagery of the mass media.

The anthology Video Art from 1976, which was the first of its kind, represented the visions offered by the new technology in an euphoric spirit. Its aim, as we read, was to “create works of art that directly acknowledged both complicity with and critical distance from popular culture.”54 The main attraction for the audience was the double impact of immediacy (live images) and intimacy (monitor) which seemed to eliminate the distance usually felt in the face of art with an aura. Video installations, in turn, created “immersive” rooms where visitors forgot the museum and enjoyed a kind of TV experience in a dark room with sound and moving images.

The democratization of art which Walter Benjamin once expected from photography and film, was accomplished instead by technologies such as video. The new working tools were to change the art scene forever. Artists who until then had been forced to attend an art school in the Western tradition, suddenly could work with low cost video cameras that became available around the globe.

**Pop Art and its Legacy**

Another premise of art’s globalization may have been the global success of Pop Art whose popular face contrasted with the aristocratic, hermetic canvases of Abstract Expressionism. “Vernacular” and mass media images that Clement Greenberg had banned from abstract art like an Old Testament prophet now populated large scale paintings that superficially resembled vulgar public advertisements. Reality had become tantamount to the reality of the media world and its clichés, and therefore Pop was misunderstood when it was first perceived as “critical” in Europe. American Pop even repudiated art as a personal creation and ventured into a playful competition with mass media. With its attack on art’s autonomy, Pop had been one among several competing art currents in the West. In the new art geography, by contrast, it was welcomed as an easy entrance ticket for global art in joining Western art. Pop imagery seemed to promise a shared mirror in which the world looked “flat” everywhere. In the meantime, the pendulum swings back when the West adores a Chinese Neo-Pop that surpasses anything ever seen in familiar Pop. This also applies to the Chinese recycling of Andy Warhol’s old Pop icon of Mao that in the Seventies had recycled China’s political icon. In the meantime, Chinese Neo-Pop has eclipsed the prices of Western art on the global market.

In April 2007, Sotheby’s sold nine Mao portraits of Zeng Fanzhi (b. 1964) at its Hong Kong branch. In the evening sale on October 19, 2008, the London branch sold the complete set of Warhol’s Mao screenprints (1972). Two weeks before, at the evening sale of October 4, 2007 in Hong Kong, Sotheby’s offered a major work by the same Zeng Fanzhi with the title *After Long March Andy Warhol arrived in China* 2005. The work is regarded as

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neo-expressionist but the artist who had painted the companion piece *Chairman Mao with Us* in the same year, chose Warhol’s private visit to China in 1982 as his subject. Warhol, still largely unknown at the time in China, travels with a “Shanghai Forever” bicycle through China. The artist Ai Weiwei has commented as well on this journey in the book *Andy Warhol—China 1982.*[^57] In the Sotheby’s catalogue it is regarded as “a founding moment for the idea of a Chinese contemporaneity.” The Chinese, it continues, had not yet undergone “the capitalist spectacle out of which his art has grown.”[^58]

**Contemporary Art’s Market History**

Christie’s and Sotheby’s started a new marketing strategy when contemporary art, as distinct from mainstream modern art, was first auctioned in the Seventies.[^59] The boom of contemporary art reached a first climax in November 1988, when private collections, not just famous artists, achieved record prices.[^60] In the postwar years, the market was still struggling with the predominance of old masters whose market success was for a long time unbroken even on the heyday of modernism and always pops up when, like today, the contemporary market undergoes a crisis. Marlborough Fine Arts was the first to introduce marketing strategies in promoting recent art when it opened a New York gallery in 1963. In the same year, Sotheby’s New York branch took over the distinguished auction house Parke Bernet where it not only changed the rules but also the character of the works for auction. But it was not until the spring of 1965, with the sale of the Dotremont Collection, that contemporary art was first auctioned on large scale by Sotheby’s.[^61] What may look like a long time for some is like a memory from yesterday in a historical perspective.

When the Yen currency was upgraded in 1985, the Japanese drove the prices

[^61]: Ibid., pp. 332, 339.
to an unprecedented level and, in their excitement, dismissed the rules and
the rituals that had been agreed upon between the former insiders. The
apogee of the Japanese art market ended as suddenly, as it had begun, but
it changed the game forever.\textsuperscript{62} It is precisely the fact that all art markets
are cyclical that increases the appetite for the game more than art does as
an attraction by itself, and it is not the permanence of art’s quality but the
newness of art’s performance that gets attention. The economic cycle, as
Robert Brenner described it in his book \textit{The Boom and the Bubble}\textsuperscript{63}, finds a
more spectacular stage in the art trade. Around 1990, “the bubble that burst
was pricked by the sudden withdrawal of Japanese buying from the
market.\textsuperscript{64} Other recessions have followed. The famous Damian Hirst sale
in London, on September 15 and 16, 2008, where the artist bypassed his
gallerists, began a few hours, before the credit markets in New York
started to collapse. It seems like a coincidence but it may not be. As a
matter of fact, the sale had been prepared on a global scale with previews in
other parts of the world also including a show in a five-star Hotel at New
Delhi.\textsuperscript{65}

\textbf{Auction Houses}

The event character of public auctions mobilizes outsiders, as does the
seeming transparency that encourages newcomers without prior art experi-
ence.

Don Thompson complains about the investment value of the new trade
where collectors, as he quotes the art dealer Mary Boone, “buy art like
lottery tickets.”\textsuperscript{66} And, yet, the new clientele makes it difficult to judge
their interests with the former value system of art collecting, when lifestyle
matters more than connoisseurship. Auction houses, with their new
branches, have become the most important agent of the global turn. They

\textsuperscript{62} Watson 1992, p. 410.
\textsuperscript{63} Robert Brenner, \textit{The Boom and the Bubble: the US in the World Economy} (London:
Verso, 2003).
\textsuperscript{64} Stallabrass 2004, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{65} “Damien Hirst – Beautiful Inside My Head Forever,” in \textit{Sotheby’s Art Market
Review}, September 15/16, 2008, available online at:
\url{http://www.sothebys.com/liveauctions/amr/la_prevmarket_beautiful_0908.html}
(access February 13, 2009) and \textit{The Times}, September 2, 2008.
\textsuperscript{66} Donald Thompson, \textit{The $12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of
today attract a clientele even from countries where art collecting has had no tradition at all. The secondary market, thus, changes contemporary art more profoundly than the primary market of galleries could ever expect. Today, the art market reaches a clientele from 58 countries, as compared with 38 in 2003, as Christie’s announces.67

A German Newspaper took the new state of matters for granted when it wrote in the fall of 2008 that “the Chinese avant-garde is firmly established but German art is still very strong,” or that “Phillips goes its own ways by throwing Russian art on the market.”68 The new clients were encouraged with the offer of guarantees, as they were not ready to take the whole risk but feared the unpredictable mood of the art community. But the guarantees in turn contributed to the losses of Sotheby’s and Christie’s liquidity in the November 2008 sales. In fact, the guarantee practice, at the moment of its failure, reveals a new feature of the art trade, as art no longer promises success on its own but rather, instead of individual quality, like everything else depends on the general rules of the market.

It is not the presence but the difference of the art market that matters here. A new class of investors not only introduces new money but also a new taste which makes the whole game unpredictable. The gap widens between the small circle of global players who bid on auctions, and the general audience whose art experience depends on exhibitions. Collectors’ names that are of no interest for a museum audience, offer a better branding on the market than artists’ names whose value appears uncertain. Lately, Sotheby’s and Christie’s have started to indicate the importance of a former owner. Thus, one reads “Property of a distinguished collector” or “Property of an important European collection.” It is remarkable that the nationality of the former owner, rather than that of the artist, receives the most attention. The speed with which collections are resold, clearly proves that art collecting has become an investment and speculation issue.

The so-called Estella Collection, an arbitrary name for “the most important

67 Auction Catalogue, November 2007, evening sale.
collection of contemporary Chinese art,” was brought together for three investors by the Manhattan dealer Michael Goedhuis who once had dealt with old Chinese and Persian arts and crafts. Shortly thereafter, the project took another direction, and Goedhuis exhibited 84 “museum quality masterworks” from the collection in his own name at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Denmark in spring 2007. The museum produced the large size catalogue China Onward whose cover presented one of Zhang Xiaogang’s Bloodline series. When the exhibition reached the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, another Manhattan dealer, William Acquavella, bought the collection off the museum walls in August 2007. Half a year later, the new owner joined forces with Sotheby’s which offered the first part of the collection for sale in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center on April 9, 2008. After the collection had been shown in previews in Beijing, Shanghai, New York, Singapore and Taipei, its first half brought nearly 18 Million US-Dollars. In total, Sotheby’s sold works for 51.77 Million Dollars on that day, an unsurpassed record in Chinese contemporary art.

Although art’s complicity with the market is manifest, the exhibition practice of museums continues to simulate an immaculate picture of art’s independence and creativity. The illusion that art is just a personal matter of creation and self-expression is protected by art collectors and nomadic curators who keep their economic experience as a secret in the face of the general audience. In fact, the museum space leaves the audience unaware of the economic conditions behind the works in an exhibition. The art trade seems to leave no trace on the surface of the works which you become to see. Some artists however start to counteract this ritual when they lift the veil from art’s involvement with the market. “The problem is no longer that art works will end up as commodities, but that they will start out as such,” as Thomas McEvilley wrote already in 1991. But today, some art museums begin to reveal art’s economic backstage, whose existence has been obscured by the labels beside the works for a long time. The Whitney Museum show The Price of Everything from 2007 is a case in point. “Taking

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69 The Estella Collection, auct. cat., Sotheby’s, Hong Kong, April 9, 2008, p. 14.
71 The Estella Collection 2008; Bowles 2007.
its title from Oscar Wilde’s definition of the cynic as *a man who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing,*” as the introduction explains, “the exhibition explores how artists have responded to the distinction between price and value, or to the erasure of that distinction.” In pursuing this goal, the exhibition “deals directly with the economic conditions of art’s production, reception, and circulation.”

One of the pieces in the exhibition, Elmgreen and Dragset’s *Prada Marfa* (2005) features a display of the fall collection of Prada shoes and handbags, but seals the shop and locates it in the desert outside of Donald Judd’s Marfa in Texas. The work “suggests that the dislocated art works can just as easily become sites of fashionable consumption for the growing field of *art tourism* and its itinerary of art fairs.” The installation-photo-edition of the two artists may be “interpreted as making the point that commercialism has outspaced any activity that does not have market value” On the other hand, the work allows for the reading that “a mock store with a sealed entrance dislocates not only the artwork but also the actual market place, the store, to an abandoned site. Rendering its commercial function useless,” the site represents “a desolate ruin of yesterday’s fashion.”

**Collectors’ and Corporate Museums**

Collectors’ and corporate museums are a further premise in our context. They promote a personal taste as a new standard for the art experience of an urban or national audience. In some places, they alone control the access to national or international art. Two examples reveal an opposite evaluation of modern viz. contemporary art. At Istanbul, the three respective museums, all private or corporate, have opened in the last ten years. They preferably present modern art, but not necessarily international art. Istanbul Modern is one of them. The museum is beautifully situated at the Bosporus where it is a neighbor of a nineteenth century mosque and thus mirrors the dualism in modern Turkey. It was founded by the Eczacibasi family who strictly guide the exhibition policy of the museum. The Pera Museum, opened in June 2005, is controlled by the Suna and Inan Kirac Foundation.

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74 Ibid.

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A third museum, the Santral Istanbul, in fact is an energy museum and does not start with an art collection of its own. Thus, 20 years after the opening of the first Istanbul Biennial, contemporary art does not figure prominently in any of the existing museum collections. In an exhibition of the Santral Museum from the fall of 2007 and dedicated to the history of twentieth century Turkish art, a wall panel informed the visitor that “curators responsible for organizing international exhibitions added Istanbul to their itineraries, as artists registered success in the international milieu. Using new image technologies and the resources offered by the new media,” some artists “placed the museum, as also art history and the art curating under their magnifying glass,” while others questioned “the inclusion of Turkey in the global art network.”

The other example is to be found in India. Private collectors have an increased influence in countries where national or urban museums have failed to promote living art. In New Delhi, the National Museum of Modern Art (1954), a response to India’s independence, no longer attracts an audience that anyway regards museums as a colonial memory. Instead, the young generation flocks to the Poddar collection, comprising more than 2000 works that include “commissions and folk art.” The Devi Art Foundation whose collector, Anupam Poddar, also acts as director, is situated in Gurgaon, a global city hardly ten years old with golf precincts and shopping malls on the outskirts of New Delhi. The city is the scene of Aravind Adiga’s much debated novel The White Tiger about the new India. The collection addresses an emerging upper middle class with an offer of international life style in art collecting. The opening exhibition of contemporary Indian art, on an international level, attracted the visitors also with its domestic choice of subject matter. It is quite symbolic that the museum was still a construction site when it opened its doors to the public in August 2008. In the catalogue Still Moving Image, the collector explains his decision for National Indian artists who however soon will be joined by artists from the whole of the sub-continent.

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We are still thinking in Western categories of a public museum controlled by a body of experts in its acquisition policy. But the lack of any such control in other territories invests a private collector with a lot of power in creating a local art audience just by himself.

Collectors in the meanwhile form a kind of global body for the development of a local art market. Thus, 100 collectors from all over the world were invited to attend, in November 2008, the Gulf version of French art fairs, the Art Paris, in Abu Dhabi that is supported by the Authority for Culture and Heritage. Their tourist program included a visit of the crown princess’s collection of some 400 contemporary art works from the Middle East, mostly acquired at the local art fairs. The gallerists, meanwhile, were appeased with the information that the local museums that are under construction, “will be buying art at a future date.”

But public museums, if they can afford to bid at auctions at all, are not always welcome on the market, since permanent collections stop the free flow of the art trade. Museums cannot be sold and resold. They only can be opened or closed. Besides, museums are not built for accepting everything as art, unless they risk giving up the definition of art altogether. Rather, they have to decide whether to go with the market or to counteract the market. They do not sell but they have to explain. But explain what? And to whom? The temporality of museums, so distinct from the flux of everyday time, was for a long time tantamount to the history of their collection or to a history that is manifested in their collection. Today, they must rethink their mission when they are expected to represent the rapidly changing world in the mirror of single art works. Their fate is still with their audience whose identity claims have become the main concern in cultural terms. They need the presence of history, to be sure, of history that matters for a local community or a nation. History, however, has to be represented or rediscovered, and sometimes reinvented, as it is threatened by a global traffic of goods and ideas.

**Conclusion**

The changing art world does not allow any longer the disregard of globalization as a mere fashion or as a phantom. Yet the term global art still meets

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with reluctance, although globalization is the single most important event in today’s art scene, even eclipsing the appearance of new media art a generation ago. But global art carries an internal antagonism with it, as it strengthens resistance and turns identity claims against the “free’ flux of media and markets in the age of “hypermmodernity.”

Marc Augé speaks “of the utter newness of the present situation.” The world’s inhabitants have at last become truly contemporaneous, and yet the world’s diversity is recomposed every moment. We must speak, therefore, of worlds in the plural, understanding that each of them communicates with the others.” The planetarization of information may have removed old borderlines but the same media make old and new contrasts even more visible. This antagonism also applies to art museums which continue to be “site specific’ not only as architecture, but also by their audience. They are born as places for representing the local situation in the face of global art traffic. The global, for any audience, adopts a local significance. In this respect, museums continue to be symbolic sites and outposts of a given culture or a community living in a foreign culture. The task is to balance the sharing with the owning. The sharing may be global, but the owning inevitably remains local.

Global art did not come overnight or as a mere “accident” but had a long incubation period whose results have only become visible now. Its history is intimately linked to the political and economic changes that made art a symbol of global free trade. To quote Julian Stallabrass, “the global events of 1989 and after—the reunification of Germany, the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, the rise of global trade agreements, the consolidation of trading blocks, and the transformation of China into a partially capitalist economy—changed the character of the art world profoundly.”

With the establishment of a “new world order”, “the art world swiftly reconfigured itself. A rash of art events peppered the globe, while artists of many nations, ethnicities, and cultures long ignored in the West were born to critical and commercial success.” The rise of multicultural art shows “exactly coincides with the end of the cold war”. London and Paris, two cities with a colonial history, saw in 1989 the first shows of this kind. One of them was Jean Hubert Martin’s legendary exhibition Magiciens de la terre which was

81 Augé 1999, p. 89.
82 Stallabrass 2004, p. 10.
both hailed as “the first global exhibition of contemporary art” and criticized as a false start in that it was tempted “to exoticize Third World artists.”

Global art often escapes the arguments of art history, as it no longer follows a master narrative and contradicts modernity’s claim to be or to offer a universal model. It is therefore noteworthy that two new books on global art have chosen another discussion of the present state of art. Julian Stallabrass whose title Art Incorporated is significant enough, analyzes in one of his chapters the “new world order” and in another chapter the impact of our “consuming culture” on new art. Charlotte Bydler, uses in her book the even more explicit title The Global Art World Inc. In fact, she analyzes two issues which are not common in art criticism. These are, on the one hand, institutional history and, on the other hand, the dissolution of a mainstream concept of art. Thus, these two books make it evident that global art has continued art’s exodus from art history.

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84 Stallabrass 2004.
PART TWO  DANCE, LITERATURE, AND INK ART
Aesthetics in Contemporary Art: Philosopher and Performer

Curtis L. Carter

From the age of Plato and Aristotle in classical Greece to the present in western culture, the relation of philosophers and artists has remained an open, often controversial issue. Plato’s skepticism concerning the role of the poets in his *Republic* is well known as he seeks to show that the poets represent a threat to the moral well being of citizens by modeling unsavory characters. In the *Ion* He finds the poets’ reliance on non-rational, inspiration from the gods, instead of a techne with guidelines applicable to more than Homer or Hesiod, to be an insubstantial base for a genuine art. Plato is equally troubled in his *Republic* Book X over the level of knowledge offered by the painter’s art. Here, Plato advances his view that truth lies in ideas or forms accessible to the philosopher, but not in the images of the painters whose understanding is limited to copying from the particulars such as a bed made by a carpenter instead of the actual form of a bed. Even so, both Plato and Aristotle take note of dance as a form of mimesis or imitative art whose aim is to contribute to both moral education and intellectual culture. For the purposes of our discussion here, I shall assume that the philosopher functions as a spokesperson for philosophy of art or aesthetics (used interchangeably here). Correspondingly, the artist, whether a dancer, poet, or painter, represents the alternate pole of artistic practitioner.

In the relationship of philosopher-aesthetician to artist set up in Plato’s dialogues, and carried on through much of the development of western philosophical aesthetics in the writings of major authors such as Immanuel Kant and G.W. H. Hegel to the end of the nineteenth century, it was more or less taken for granted that the role of aesthetics was to assume a normative role with respect to the canons of the various art forms. For example, the role of the philosopher-aesthetician had been to identify the ends or norms for what artists ought to be aiming at: such as moral education, beauty, or understanding. Concurrently, philosopher-aestheticians proffered definitions...
of art such as mimesis, aimed at distinguish art from what is not art. Today’s philosopher-aestheticians continue to ponder questions that arise in reference to the arts. However, as many aestheticians seem driven more by philosophical concerns than attention to the relevance of their discourse to the arts, the gap widens between the two. This matter has driven some, especially on the side of the contemporary artists, to question the relevance of aesthetics to current art practices. In the discussion here, I will show the benefits for aesthetics of paying closer attention to, and being engaged substantially with developments in the arts. Similarly aesthetics benefits the arts by helping to show their relation to other forms of human knowledge and activities.

From the artists’ perspectives, it is difficult to find cases where artists actually look to philosophers for guidance in the creation of their art. Indeed, one is more likely to find that the artists look to their own inner resources of thought, feeling, and imagination for inspiration and ideas. Or perhaps they may look to other artists for inspiration and ideas. For example, the dancer Isadora Duncan attributes her inspiration to a variety of artists working in poetry (Walt Whitman) and music (Beethoven and Wagner). Still, it is not the case that artists entirely overlook philosophers in citing sources of their influences. Duncan also mentions the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche among her sources of inspiration. But she does not indicate any direct influence of his theories on her art. How then are we to understand the relationship of aesthetics and art from the artist’s perspective?

In keeping with the focus identified for the current volume, intended to examine the place of aesthetics in relation to current art practices in the visual arts, music, dance and related arts, I will address the question by examining the respective engagements of philosopher-aesthetician and performer in reference to the art of dance. The discussion begins with experiences that have contributed to my views on the subject. It then continues with a comparison of dancers’ and philosopher’s approaches to dance, and ends with a look at the views of philosophers Paul Valéry, Suzanne Langer, Nelson Goodman, and Noël Carroll on dance aesthetics. By examining the perspectives of dancer and aesthetician respectively, I hope to offer some understanding of the mutual benefits to both of engaging in dialogue concerning their respective approaches to dance.

1. My Experience in Exploring Dance

My own interest in exploring dance began with an invitation to participate as a critic fellow in a National Endowment for the Arts Dance Critic’s workshop in 1971. Selma Jeanne Cohen, a pioneering force in dance aesthetics, organized the workshop. This experience provided opportunities to view and write about leading ballet (New York City Ballet and American Ballet Theater) and a number of contemporary dance companies of the time (Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Anna Halprin, Jose Limon, and others.) At that time, principal writers on dance such as Marcia Siegel expressed skepticism over whether aesthetics had any relevance at all for understanding or writing about dance. Their argument was that the aim of writing about dance should be focused on describing the dance movement, which presumably did not require any intervention from philosophical aesthetics. The emphasis in the context of this discussion was on writing dance criticism. Nevertheless, from a philosopher’s view, writing about dance as a critic warranted the attention of aesthetics. Consequently I persisted in pursuit of a clearer understanding of meaningful connections between aesthetics and dance.

A chance meeting with the dance photographer Barbara Morgan, known for her photographs of the dances of Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and other major American choreographers, led to many discussions on the relation of aesthetics to dance as seen thru dance photography. Morgan’s views on dance photography revealed a strong link between aesthetics and dance as well as photography.  

The next opportunity for a first hand engagement with the task of exploring the relation of aesthetics to dance occurred when I was invited to travel with a ballet company and interpret for audiences and the dance company members the relevance of aesthetics as a humanities discipline to understanding the art of dance. The project called for two weeks road travel with

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4 “The Contemporary Choreographer: Response in the Arts to Aesthetic and Moral Values in Modern Society,” Symposia and Performance, Four Cities, Sponsor, 98
the company requiring rehearsals with the dancers, participation in the performances, and seminars with artists, teachers and scholars from various academic disciplines including philosophy, literature, and sociology. Community audiences also took part in the seminars concerning the relation of dance to humanities studies. My lectures in the symposia provided discussion of the concept of dance, choreography, and aesthetic value illustrated with images from various styles of dance performances.

At the opening of each performance, I appeared on the stage with the dancers to comment on the performances, linking actual dance movements to concepts from aesthetics such as form and expression. While the spoken presentation was taking place, the dancers performed their choreography moving in relation to my commentary on the movements. This part of the project was the most challenging and the most interesting. Our aim was to make the aesthetics conversation as much a part of the performance as possible.

How would the dancers who had come to dance, and the audiences who came to see dancing feel about the intervention of a philosopher into their space? The choreographer had agreed to this arrangement, and choreographed my role into the opening performance piece. Together, choreographer, dancers, musicians and I worked together in rehearsals to make the presentation as seamless as possible. The dancers responded with alert sensitivity translating their own understanding of the aesthetic concepts introduced in the commentary. At the end of the tour, the two soloists ballerina Ann Marie De Angelo and principal dancer John Meehan proposed that we work together to produce a book on philosophy of the dance. The result was monthly meetings for two or three days each month during the year following the performances. Our discussions focused on the efforts to understand the differences between a philosophers’ and a dancer’s understanding of dance.5

2. Philosopher’s and Dancer’s Approaches to Dance

5 The result of these discussions with the ballet dancers Ann Marie De Angelo and John Meehan was a series of tapes later translated into text resulting in follow-up papers but have not been published as a book.
Not unexpectedly, the discussions with the two dancers focused first on the basis for possible differences in the approaches of dancer and philosopher aesthetician to dance. Initially, a matter of great interest to the dancers was the roles of mind and body in the respective activities of a dancer versus a philosopher. It was agreed that a dancer’s concern with mind and body arises out of very practical and artistic considerations relating to how this issue affects their understanding of creating and performing dances. The dancers understood that mind and body act in concert so as to enable the choreographer’s ideas and the dancer’s movements to come together in shaping a performance. The dancer's problem is to find the appropriate body-mind training to make the two work together to produce the desired artistic results. The problem begins with finding talented individuals with the necessary mind-body requisites to learn and execute complex body training with an aim toward producing artistic results. Then, as I observed in the rehearsals, and pre-performance preparations undertaken by the dancers, comes rigorous practice and psychic gearing up to project the dance through performance to the audience in concert with music, stage set, costumes, lighting, and the artistic direction necessary to coordinate all these elements.

Alternatively, a philosopher-aesthetician is concerned with developing concepts that contribute to understanding dance and expressing these in words. Concerning the philosopher’s tasks, the question is, how to account for the relationship existing between mind and body in conceiving and writing as these actions pertain to the creation and performance of a dance. The dancers were particularly curious to learn about and compare how a philosopher’s engages mind and body in these practices with their own experiences in creating a dance performance.

Another question of interest to the dancers in our conversations was the role of thinking and feeling in performing a dance. Again, the dancers were not primarily concerned with the distinctions surrounding one or another existing philosophical theory regarding these matters. Rather, they were concerned with exploring how to integrate the intentional aspects of being, including ideas, feelings, choices, with the extensional or bodily and spatial aspects of dance movements.

As our discussions continued, the conversations led to a closer examination of commonly held assumptions concerning the differences between a dancer's and a philosopher's views on dance. One of these assumptions concerned the association of dance with the body’s physical movement and 100
philosophy with the mind. It soon became apparent in our discussions that the relations of mind and body in dance, and in philosophy required further clarification.

It was agreed straight away that a dancer spends her/his life developing the body into a refined medium based in movement, in contrast to a philosopher who works at refining mental skills of verbal conceptualizing, critical analysis, and communicating the results through writing or speaking. Despite the prominence of the body in dancing and of the mind in philosophy, any attempt to distinguish the dancer's and the philosopher’s approaches to dance solely on such differences alone would be sophistic. Dancing is not merely a physical activity, as mind has a prominent role in dancing as well as in philosophy. Mind is at work in all aspects of performance: in acquiring a technique in a dance style and in the preparation and execution of a particular work of choreography. In our conversations, the dancers expressed their viewpoint on the role of mind in dancing in these words: “Mind is the controlling center. It enables us to be in control of our bodies, to be concentrated, to bring clarity, and to acquire the right feeling that a movement in a performance needs. And then it has to let feeling take over.”

3. Kinesthetic Intelligence and a Dancer's Perspective

What, then is it that might distinguish a performer’s understanding of dance? To be sure, the mental and physical skills required for executing the philosopher’s and the dancer’s respective actions differ with respect to the role of kinesthetic or psychomotor intelligence. Kinesthetic intelligence, understood as the indigenous body process that governs all bodily movement and orients the moving body in space, offers one possibility that might account for some of the differences between the dancer’s and the philosopher’s understanding of dance. Kinesthetic intelligence as discussed by Howard Gardner and others refers to muscular actions that control bodily motion in dancing, acting, athletic performance, and other forms of bodily movement. Dance theorist Margaret H’Doubler explains kinesthetic learning as “the human body’s ability to express itself through movement and dance.”

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Psychologists apply the term "kinesthesis" to "the sense, which enables the determination of the position of body segments, as well as their rate, extent and duration of movement, the position of the entire body, as well as characteristics of total body movement."\(^9\)

According to accounts gathered from my conversations with various performers, a well-developed sense of kinesthetic intelligence enables the dancer to perform without conscious mental recollection of the movements or expressive elements of the choreography. In this phase of performing, each part of the dance movement becomes a stimulus to bring the next part into play. A dancer described this process "as an intelligent force, developed from repetition and muscle memory, that governs the flow of movement."\(^10\)

For the dancers this neuro-muscular based kinesthetic intelligence is developed into an art form through extensive training in classical ballet technique or another form of dance performance. It involves much more than the physical execution of the movement patterns. The ballet dancer’s expressive movements as guided by a sense of style (Baroque, Romantic, Jazz) and the choreographer’s direction exemplify concretely the feelings and ideas embedded in the dancer's body and mind, giving them shape and form. On such occasions the mind unites the forces of a classically trained body, the choreography, and the dancer's creative insights.\(^11\) To these factors is the additional requirement that the dancer must be acutely aware of the qualities of a particular dance style. A rise in a Baroque dance, for example, is to be executed smoothly as a part of a continuing phrase; this is in contrast to the late nineteenth century ballet, which emphasizes relevé (a rise to the toes from the flat foot in ballet dancing). The ballerina rises on full pointe with a sharp accent in the late nineteenth century ballet, as compared to the Baroque dancer's smooth unaccented rise as the culmination of a movement phrase.

In their writings on dance, Rudolf Arnheim and Raynor Heppenstall support the dancers' reports on the role of kinesthetic intelligence in creating dances. Arnheim explains that a dancer creates mainly in the medium of kinesthetic

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sensations in the muscles, tendons, and joints. He notes, for instance, that the dancer builds her/his performance from the feelings of tension and relaxation and the sense of balance that distinguishes the proud stability of the vertical from the risky adventures of thrusting and falling. According to Arnheim, the dynamic nature of kinesthetic experience is the key to the surprising correspondence between what the dancer creates by muscular sensations and the image of the body as experienced by the audience.\textsuperscript{12} Heppenstall makes a similar point, saying that dance for the dancer consists of pure nervous and muscular activity instead of the fusion of visual, auditory, and representational elements that confront the philosophers and other spectators.\textsuperscript{13}

As well, the philosopher has access to kinesthetic experiences because her/his own movement experiences whether in walking, running, or actually dancing, offer experiences of kinesthetic sensations that may be useful in understanding the dancer’s movements. Moreover, seeing dance as a spectator entails responding to kinesthetic patterns as expressed in the moving bodies of the dancers. It is also likely that the actions taking place while conceiving and writing, or speaking as undertaken by philosophers also involve some degree of kinesthetic activity. Gerald Grow has argued for example, that the keen sense of logical organization, development of preciseness in writing, clear transitions, and well focused exposition necessary to perform the tasks of a philosopher represent a manifestation of kinesthetic intelligence.\textsuperscript{14}

A dancer's knowledge and use of kinesthetic intelligence, however, differs both qualitatively and quantitatively from that of the philosopher. Without a highly developed kinesthetic sense, a dancer would be unable to transform bodily movements into the desired expressive forms called for in ballet and other styles of artistic dance. Kinesthetic motor learning for the dancer may begin as a conscious cognitive activity, as it is capable of being motivated, for example, by seeing the movements performed by another dancer, hearing the music, or response to a choreographer’s direction. The process culminates in an autonomous stage, as the internalized movement patterns con-

\textsuperscript{13} Raynor Heppenstall, \textit{Apology for Dancing} (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), p.142. 
tributing to the performance appear to operate more or less independently of external cognitive input.

There are thus evidently important differences between the functions of kinesthetic intelligence required of a dancer to perform, and the kind of abstract reasoning processes necessary to the work of a philosopher. It would appear, for example, that conscious reflection on matters extraneous to a performance might actually interfere with the flow of movement necessary to successful artistic performances. The ballet dancer Ann Marie De Angelo, refers to this difference when she observes that, “Thinking gets in the way of producing the flow of movement necessary to performance.”15 Another ballet dancer, Suzanne Farrell, reports that the tensions between abstract reasoning and kinesthetic forces actually interfered with her ability to perform. “I got all twitchy and neurotic in my performance because I knew facts and theories which had no counterpart or direct realization in movement.”16

At first glance, it might appear that kinesthetic activity has little counterpart in a philosopher's activity when performing as a philosopher. Our discussion between a philosopher and dancers suggests, not unexpectedly, that the dancer draws upon physical and mental skills not regularly used in a philosopher's work. A dancer has direct access to information about the creative and interpretive processes that the philosopher does not normally encounter, unless the philosopher is also a dancer. However, after describing to each other and comparing our respective working processes of philosopher and dancers, we found greater than expected similarities in our joint understanding of the mind-body processes necessary for creating and writing a well formed philosophical essay and preparing a dance performance. Of course, the philosopher does not engage in the kinds of movement training, and bodily execution required for a performance. However, the philosopher draws upon comparable training and practice skills with words, concepts, reasoning and writing in order to “perform” as a philosopher.

4. Philosophers Look at Dance

The early twentieth century dancer-choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky’s perspective on the philosophy of dance offers a point of transition to the views of a selection of twentieth century philosophers’ understanding of dance. Nijinsky immediately polarizes the two viewpoints of philosopher and dancer when he writes in his diary: “I am a philosopher who does not reason--a philosopher who feels.” Nijinsky’s remark suggests a radical divergence of points of view from what is customarily thought of as the task of a philosopher. Nothing is less hospitable to a philosopher’s way of working than a rejection of his primary tool, reasoning. Philosophers from Plato to the present, moreover, have often viewed feeling unregulated by reason, with suspicion. Nevertheless, speaking as a dancer Nijinsky asserts the priority of feeling over reason. Is his claim to be dismissed as the ramblings of an incoherent mind? Or has he in fact identified a primary constituent of a dancer’s approach to dance? Dancers’ statements in other contexts offer support for Nijinsky’s assertion. Ballet dancers with whom I have explored this topic have affirmed the priority of feeling in dance with such statements as the following: “Ballet is an emotional art.” and “Feeling provides the energy that comes across to people and inspires them.” Hence, from a dancer's perspective, the dance communicates through feeling before it communicates through reason. It is as if we instinctively understand it and then say what it is about. While there is little doubt that feeling is one component of most forms of artistic dance, it is unlikely that a satisfactory account of dance for either the dancer or the philosopher will find feeling alone a satisfactory understanding of dance.

Having considered the dancer’s and the philosopher’s views on dance from a more or less anecdotal perspective in the previous sections, based on my own engagement with dancers, it is necessary to take a closer look at how a selection of philosophers of recent times have understood the relation of philosophy to dance. Questions giving rise to speculation about the nature of dance parallel those resulting in philosophical discussions of the related arts such as music, poetry, painting and sculpture. Hence, the philosophy of dance shares the task of inquiry into the systems of thought that surround the creation and appreciation of dance. The aim of philosophy of dance is

thus to develop concepts and theories in response to the art of dancing, and to reflect critically on the concepts and theories previously generated by philosophers and other thinkers. The purpose of such concepts and theories is to provide an understanding of dance itself, and its relation to other arts and human activities. My own approach has been to gain as much understanding of dance as possible from direct engagement with dancers and observing dance performances, while also examining the writings of philosophers, critics, and dance theorists.

As a means of introducing other philosophers’ approaches to dance, I will consider briefly the views of Paul Valéry, Suzanne Langer, Nelson Goodman, and Noël Carroll on the subject of dance. These writers, along with analytic philosophers Monroe Beardsley, and Francis Sparshott are among recent philosophers who have shown a particular interest in philosophizing about dance while approaching it from different philosophical frameworks.  

Paul Valéry

Valéry is especially interested in distinguishing philosophers’ and dancers’ points of view. According to Valéry, a philosopher's task is to communicate through “a dance of living words” an abstract idea of the experience provided by watching a dancer's movements. A philosopher's first step, according to Valéry, must be the honest question, “What is the dance?,” which he asks without foreseeing the result. A philosopher's method for developing an answer combines observation and concepts such as movement, time, and expression. The answer consists of abstract ideas that replace the immediate

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impressions of the dancer's movements with words. These formulations enable the philosopher to convey the hows and whys of dancing in philosophical language. For example, as Valéry explains, dance is the creation of a special experience consisting of sensations of time and energy that enables the dancer and the spectator to share in the same experience through the performance. Such philosophical statements represent a combination of abstract thinking and observation.

Valéry is aware that there are important differences between the dancer’s performance and his own abstract philosophical account. For example, he refers to the dancer as:

“…This being who, from her very depths, brings forth these beautiful transformations of her form in space; who now moves, but without really going anywhere; now metamorphoses herself on the spot, displaying herself in every aspect; who sometimes skilfully modulates successive appearances? As though in controlled phases; sometimes changes herself brusquely into a whirlwind, spinning faster and faster, then suddenly stops’ crystallized into a statue, adorned with an alien smile.” 22

Valéry contrasts the world of the philosopher, limited to descriptive words and concepts to address questions concerning the nature of dance, with the dancer’s understanding of dance as a form of expressive poetic action, opposing it to ordinary useful actions. His philosophical observations about dance, however, are presented without any effort to examine the elements of time, motion, and energy that constitute a dance. Valéry prefers to keep the discussion on a more general level.

**Langer**

Writing a few decades later in mid-twentieth century, Langer again takes up the question of a philosopher's approach to dance. She emphasizes that philosophical questions concerning dance represent a demand for meaning as opposed to mere questions of factual description. A philosopher's concern is the significance of the dance itself and in relation to other important human activities. The answers to such questions, says Langer, are estab-

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22 Paul Valéry, p.207.
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lished by thoughtful reflection. Philosophical reflection is first of all analytical examination of the concepts we use to discuss a given topic. It includes for Langer clarification of the meanings of such terms as “art,” “expression,” and “dance.” Analysis may show that our concepts are unclear, or that our fuzzy concepts are contradictory or senseless. In such cases, analysis is insufficient and must be augmented with “logical construction.” Logical construction is a creative aspect of philosophy wherein a philosopher establishes the fundamental concepts necessary to discuss her subject and sets forth their meanings.23

Langer’s principal contribution to dance aesthetics is her attempt to clarify the nature of a dance. The dance, she argues, springs from the physical actions that the dancers perform, but it is not these physical actions that comprise the dance. The dance is a set of virtual forces that are created for, and exist only for, our perception. The dance is “real” in the sense that a rainbow is real, but it is not real in the same sense that a physical thing is real, that is in the sense of having ordinary properties of a physical thing. The dance, as Langer views it, is rather an apparition of the active powers of perception, a dynamic image whose purpose is to present the nature and patterns of sensitive emotional life. The feelings presented in a dance image are, similarly, imagined feelings expressed symbolically through the dance, rather than “real” feelings of the artist.

Langer’s theory of dance has attracted widespread interest among dancers, in part because it has been one of the few theories readily accessible to them. Her theory has been criticized by philosophers, justifiably it seems, for suggesting that a dance can consist wholly in an apparition or perceptual image. Her theory reduces the physical forms made by the human body to mere means for producing the perceptual image, and leaves ambiguous the ontological state of the dance. Her virtual entities are ambiguous with respect to the nature of the precise mental states that constitute the dances, for instance, whether they are merely visual sensory patterns or ideas, and with respect to whether they are in some sense objective, that is the same for all similar viewers, or are individually relative to each particular viewer.

**Nelson Goodman**

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Nelson Goodman provides another philosopher's approach to dance based on his theory of artistic symbols presented in his book Languages of Art.\textsuperscript{24} Unlike Valery and Langer, who comment in some detail upon the subject of the philosopher's approach to dance, Nelson Goodman has little to say on the subject. Instead, he illustrates the process of philosophizing about dance without providing an extensive commentary on how it is to be done. He does offer one brief statement, however, which reveals his aims as a philosopher of the dance: “I am not attempting to instruct choreographers or performers or dance critics, but to provide a framework for a philosophical account of what they do, and relate that to what goes on in the other arts, in the sciences, and in all our activities of making and remaking our worlds.”\textsuperscript{25}

Goodman’s approach to a philosophy of dance takes place in the context of a systematic inquiry into the varieties and functions of human symbols, including representation, exemplification, and expression. Goodman’s approach to dance is illustrated in the following comments: “Some elements of the dance are primarily denotative, versions of the descriptive gestures of daily life, (e.g. bowings, beckoning’s,) or of ritual (e.g., signs of benediction, Hindu hand postures). But other movements, especially in the modern dance, primarily exemplify rather than denote. What they exemplify, however, are not standard or familiar activities, but rather rhythms and dynamic shapes. The exemplified patterns and properties may reorganize experience, relating actions not usually associated or distinguishing others not usually differentiated thus illuminating allusion or sharpening discrimination.”\textsuperscript{26} These remarks found in Languages of Art, indicate Goodman’s overall approach to dance as a form of symbolism.

Later, in 1981, Goodman illustrated the application of his dance aesthetics by creating a multi-media dance work, “Hockey Seen: A Nightmare in Three Periods and Sudden Death.”\textsuperscript{27} His intention was to show how the

\textsuperscript{27} Goodman collaborated with the choreographer Martha Armstrong Gray, dancers, composer John Adams, visual artist Catherine Sturgis, and media artist Gerd Stern to create this work. It was performed at Harvard University and Knoke-le Zoute, 109
various forms of symbolism (denotation, exemplification, expression) take place in the context of a dance performance based on movements common to an actual hockey game. For example the dance movements of players and referee in the performance refer to the physical and emotional actions taking place an actual hockey game. Exemplification is also taking place in the relationship between the dancer’s performance and the actual hockey game, that is when the reference runs in the opposite direction from the actual game to the dance. Expression, Goodman’s third form of symbol activity takes place when the dance expresses various aspects of competition, frustration, and struggle in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense.28

Goodman’s theory has been criticized by philosophers who question various technical aspects of his theory, for example the attempt to limit artistic expression to metaphorical possession of certain properties. A critical examination of such issues is beyond our purposes here. It is important to note, however, that Goodman limits his inquiry into dance quite specifically to characterizing the types of symbols and symbolic processes that are operative in dance. He does not purport to give a theory of all other important questions concerning the creation of dance and the responses of spectators, critics, and theorists.

Noel Carroll

Noel Carroll’s understanding of the perspectives of philosopher and dancer are distilled from his experiences as a philosopher actively engaged, and writing as a critic and dance theorist during the transitions of dance taking place in New York through the 1970 and 1980s and beyond. As a citizen of the avant-garde art world of the time, Carroll was bent on exploring every new development in dance available in the east side art world of New York. The art practices taking place were informed by developing art theories and vice-versa.

Belgium and later on Belgian National television. The documents including Goodman’s script for the performance, correspondence with the participating artists, Catherine Sturgis’s drawings of hockey scenes based on viewing live hockey games on TV, and Goodman’s detailed production notes, and correspondence between the artists, and the original video production tapes are located in the archives of the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA.

Carroll’s views on dance focus mainly on events taking place in the New York art world during a time of transition from modernism to postmodernism and beyond. His book, *Living in an Art World* (2012) includes essays and reviews on dance performance, theater, and visual arts documenting his critical and philosophical essays on the dance of this period. Abstracting from his theoretical and critical writings of this era, Carroll’s approach to the philosopher’s role of this era was to experience dance first hand and develop his philosophy of dance from intense engagement with the changes taking place in the actual performances of New York dance and the aesthetic theories emerging in relation to the performances.

Among these developments were minimalism, anti-theatricalism, antiillusionism, and postmodernism. Many of the dancers of the 1960s and 1970s were drawn to anti-theatrical, anti-illusionist dance. They also acknowledged dance as an independent art. Proponents of anti-theatrical dance who gathered at the Judson Church in lower Manhattan during the 1960s and Yvonne Rainer in the 1970s accepted any form of movement into dance. Concurrently they rejected expressive, theatrical virtuosity and narrative spectacle. For formalists such as George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham, abstract movement became the main focus in their approaches to dance.

Carroll observes that following these anti-theatrical developments, again, “changes are occurring in many different directions.” Among these changes is a new form of theatricalism. As a result, minimalist anti-theatrical and formalist dance are being displaced in the front line by dance featuring representation, expression, and narrative content. Examples of this new dance are cited in the works of Trisha Brown, Pina Bausch, and Twyla Tharp among others. Carroll denies that this new theatricalism in dance is simply recycling prior endorsements of mimesis. Rather, he argues that the theatricality of contemporary dance invokes a new paradigm that under-

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29 Noel Carroll’s *Living in an Art World* consists of reviews and essays on dance, performance, theater, and visual fine arts taking place during the 1970s and 1980s. The book is organized into three main sections. Dance is the subject of the first section, followed by sections devoted to performance and theater, and fine arts. Each section and a coda with essays on postmodernism and globalization of art address important theoretical issues raised by the changes in the arts during the second half of the twentieth century.

stands art pluralistically and as anti-essentialist, one in which dance stands in tandem with the reigning conceptions of the arts alongside performance, theater and gallery arts.

Among the theoretical concerns addressed is the rejection of mimesis in favor of anti-illusionism in the postmodern choreography of the 1960s and 1970s. At the center of the debate among competing twentieth century approaches to dance was the question of theatrical versus anti-theatrical approaches to dance. Related to this issue was a disagreement over whether dance should be considered an independent art, or simply a variant of theater.

Taking the philosophical discussion to a larger plane, Carroll argues that changing practices in the art of dance throughout history tend to reflect successively the prevailing art theories of their time. Prior to the twentieth century existing mimetic theories (the view that art imitates or copies and thus produces illusions) supported a theatrical approach to dance. Yvonne Rainer’s anti-theatrical postmodern dance is in part informed by the modernist art theory of Clement Greenberg. Carroll cites the influence of Greenberg’s view that “art was a form of critique and that integral to critique was anti-illusionism” on Rainer’s approach to dance. However, the match is not seamless as Rainer’s extension of dance to include every day movements independent of any formal system of movement does not fit well with Greenberg’s formalism. Perhaps one of the most controversial issues raised by the new developments was the acceptance of any movement into dance as practiced by Rainer and others.

Taking note of the importance of Carroll’s writings for understanding the downtown art scene in New York, Arthur Danto remarked in an introduction to the collection: “His collected essays constitute a museum of the unmuseumable.” Carroll’s writings on dance position the discussion of our central issue here concerning the philosophers’ and the dancers’ approaches dance at the center of key issues of all of the arts in the contemporary art world and aesthetics. His narrative of the developments and cyclical changes in the theories and corresponding shifts of dance practices offers fruitful grounds for reflection on the respective approaches of philosophers and dancers concerning their art. The theoretical support for

31 Ibid., p.35.
his claim that the practices of dance performances tend to reflect the prevailing art theories of the time, though a useful suggestion, calls for further development. It is not yet clear whether art theories emerge out of practice or are conceived independently and then inform the dancers’ practices. A further question concerns the relation of art theories to philosophical aesthetics. That is, if contemporary pluralism in the arts embraces all of these different theories: anti-illusionism and illusionism, formalism and expressionism, theatricality and anti-theatricality, as well as narrative art practices as assumed in Carroll’s approach to the evolving state of dance, what is the role of philosophical aesthetics in reference to these developments of art practice and art theory? Also missing in this discussion is clarification of the origins of the concepts or theories of art, i.e. whether they emerge independently, or from the practices of the dancers and other artists. This issue is in need of further consideration that would take us beyond the scope of the present subject.

5. Conclusion

What then are the prospects for aesthetics in reference to the evolving art practices of today? First, it seems clear that a knowledge of the arts as they are practiced in some medium such as dance, music, visual arts or other new media arts is essential to generating relevant concepts and theories useful for identifying and interpreting the arts and assessing their place in past and contemporary human experience and cultures. Our discussion here suggests that there are important differences in the approaches of a philosopher-aesthetician and a dancer, based on the type of body/mind activities that each must master and on their aims. For the dancer the aim is using the body/mind resources in conjunction with choreography, music, stage design, and lighting, for example, to produce a performance that will engage the audience with a particular type of experience not accessible in any other form of human communication. For the philosopher, the task is to grasp and articulate the meaning of such activities in a larger conceptual framework of related human activities. The philosopher’s contribution may not be of immediate use to the dancer in creating such performances. However, the philosopher’s concepts and theories may be invaluable to convey the place and significance of the dancer’s actions in the wider context of human knowledge and experience. Hence the relationship of philosopher-aesthetician and dancer is one of reciprocal benefits to themselves and to the greater sphere of human understanding.
The development and global dissemination of computers - from the main-frame computers in the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century up to the smart phones that enable us to be online everywhere at any time - has an enormous impact on virtually every domain in human life, including art and literature. In the past decades, we have witnessed the emergence of different kinds of new media, which – among many other things – also have given birth to new art forms and genres, such as computer animations, hypertext, and interactive net art. All these new (that is: computer-mediated) media can be called “hypermedia”, because they share two fundamental characteristics: they are media that are both \textit{multimedial} and \textit{non-linear}.

In my contribution I will discuss the impact of hypermedia on literary theory and criticism. More particularly, the question I will focus on in my contribution is: how to write about hypermedia? In what ways do hypermedia affect literary theory and literary criticism? However, when writing about hypermedia, literature can only be a point of \textit{departure} of our examination. After all, hypermedia are media that absorb and thereby \textit{re-mediate} the other “old media”, literature included.\textsuperscript{1} And this, as I will argue, also applies to literary theory and literary criticism, which at least partly is going to be transformed into hypermedial criticism.

Let me start by first going into a little more detail with regard to the multimedial and non-linear character of hypermedia. The \textit{multimedial} character lies in the fact that they combine several (at least two) conventional media. In the case of hypermedial literature this means that besides words it

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{1} J. David Bolter and A. Grusin Richard, \textit{Remediation: Understanding New Media} (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).}
is composed of images and sounds or combinations of these. In theory, the other senses, such as smell and touch, could also play their part. However, the digitalization of these senses faces serious obstacles and therefore is still in its infancy, so that – apart from devices such as joysticks with force feedback – in practice the emphasis still is on audiovisuals.

The *non-linear* aspect means, briefly, that the order in which the various components constituting the hypermedial work of art are presented is not a fixed one but depends on the individual choices made by the reader, viewer or listener. In the case of literature therefore this means that readers decide, either partly or completely, in what order the constituent elements (sentences, or larger textual parts, that is: textones) can be read. In other words, readers of hypermedia relate to the text in an interactive way. Readers attain (a certain measure of) control over the text’s composition and the text in its turn responds to the readers’ choices. Hypermedial readers share with the readers of conventional linear texts the freedom of textual interpretation, but differ from the latter in being able to exert influence on the creation of the actual text during the reading process. A limit case is the fully automatic text where the sequence of the elements is determined by for example a reader-operated random generator. Such a text is non-linear but interactive in a formal sense only. The opposite limit case is the empty page, where it is up to the reader not just to settle the sequence of the elements but to select the elements themselves. Here the reader has become the writer—and as such hyperactive.

Works of art may be non-linear without being multimedial (for example a hypertext constructed from words only) or they may be multimedial without being non-linear (for example the classic film). If the literary hypertext already constitutes an important transformation of classic, linear literature, when it becomes multimedial the outcome is a cultural form that is vastly different from what ever since the days of Homer has been considered “literature”.

My intention in this paper is to discuss some basic characteristics of hypermedia and then examine their implications for the criticism of art. First, however, I will briefly explain three assumptions that guide my thinking on this topic. They need to be stated fully here at the outset, since otherwise my line of reasoning could be easily misunderstood.

Firstly, I do not presume hypermedial literature to be an entirely new
phenomenon. Many examples of non-linear and multimedial literature are known from the past. One of the oldest Chinese works of literature, the Yijing or The Book of Changes, is an unambiguous example of a non-linear text (see Figure 1).²

After all, the book’s fundamental constituents are 64 hexagrams, each consisting of six parallel horizontal lines that can be either continuous or broken, thus allowing 64 different combinations to be formed which each have a specific meaning (the creative, conflict, nourishment, progress, limitation etc.). Those wishing to consult the Yijing for practical guidance in their lives must use a certain random procedure (for example, flipping three coins simultaneously a number of times) to arrive at a certain hexagram. Depending on the coin combinations lines can also be unstable, which means they are about to turn into their opposites. In that case the hexagram is transformed into one or more other hexagrams that also become applicable (in principle) to the life problem that is being posed. A more recent example of a paper non-linear text is is Raymond Queneau’s 1961 volume of poetry Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes [Hundred Thousand Billion Poems]. This contains ten sonnets, but since each page is horizontally cut into fourteen strips each containing one of the sonnet’s lines these strips can be combined according to readers’ choices to form no less than 10¹⁴ different possible sonnets (see Figure 2).³

Even though both the I Ching and Queneau’s volume seem to be traditional books – and as such they can be read linearly, from the first line on the first page to the last line on the last page – their reading instructions in effect make them into a textual space that is traversed by a huge (though finite) number of different paths that readers can travel. We could also look on each of these texts as a database with a finite number of elements and a finite set of rules that state how these elements may be combined. Therefore it is not surprising that these “analog” examples of non-linear texts are excellently suited to being digitized. An internet search engine will come up with several digitized versions of both the Yijing and Queneau’s volume of poetry (see Figures 3 and 4). One could even contend that these texts were designed to assume a form that did not yet exist at the time and that they have only now found their “natural habitat” in a digitized state. But many

classic, linear texts too are being re-mediated through the digital medium. On the World Wide Web many linear texts can be found that have been cut into pieces and therefore have become part of the Web’s gigantic database through internal and external hyperlinks.

The multimedial nature of the hypermedia is not something new, either. On the contrary: in early forms of writing, such as the Egyptian hieroglyphs and the Chinese ideogram, visual representation and linguistic meaning still form an intimate relationship and can’t even be properly distinguished. But also after their differentiation and separation as symbolic forms, the different media often still remained closely connected. Thinking of the early origins of the theatre, we may even presume that the link of texts with sounds, music and images precedes monomedial writing. We encounter this multimediality in many combinations, on the stage, in opera and in film. In the field of literature multimediality – from the illuminated medieval manuscript up to the present-day comic books – has a long history. What distinguishes the hypermedia from the old multimedia is their non-linear nature. It is the combination of non-linearity and multimediality that turns the hypermedia into “new media”. They are not new in the sense that no single element has a precedent, but rather that “old” elements are recombined so as to form a new medium. In this re-mediation those elements continue to exist, but they often get a new function and a new meaning.

A second assumption that I would like to go into briefly is that I do not expect that the hypermedia will be the end of classic literature, nor that they will render classic literature superfluous because of some kind of superiority. The history of the media shows that new media rarely really replace the old ones. The development of writing did not end oral communication, and in the same way the computer will not put an end to writing or the printed book. Neither did movies end theater performances, or television replace the radio. However, this does not mean that the rise of new media does not affect the old ones. Sometimes an old medium continues to exist as a cultural expression, but the material carrier changes because of the arrival of the new medium. The cultural form of the “novel” does not change, whether it is printed on paper or offered as an e-book that can be read on a smartphone or an iPad. Or, in any case, it does not necessarily have to change. The rise of a new medium does, it is true, often affect (the use of) the cultural form. Anyone who reads the complete works by Nietzsche on a CD-ROM will more easily be tempted to use the search engine to start following certain “paths” through the œuvre. For example, when I’m 117
interested in Nietzsche’s ideas about the role of contingency in human life, using the search function I can easily get a list of all passages in the oeuvre of Nietzsche where the words Zufall (contingency) and Leben (life) appear together. In that case my traditional “horizontal” (syntagmatic) reading of a text is replaced by a more “vertical” (paradigmatic) approach (cf. Barthes 1967). New media afford authors and readers new ways of reading and writing. At the same time new media may obscure or discourage certain uses of the older media. The rise of film, for example, has contributed to the disappearance of the lengthy descriptions of nature in literature, as we found them in nineteenth-century naturalistic novels, and motivated the shift to the characters’ inner world (which obviously cannot be directly captured in images).

Conversely, new media are often judged in accordance with the standards of the old media, for example when a movie or a computer game is measured with the standards applying to literature. I assume that each of the various media possesses its own, medium-specific affordances and qualities. As we often “drive into the future using our rear view mirror”, it often takes some time before it fully develops its potentialities. For example, it took some time before film had developed its own medium-specific “grammar” (part of which is for example the principle of montage) and could develop from a fairground attraction into a fully-fledged art form. The use of hypermedia within the realm of literature, too, still seem to be in search for a new grammar and it may be for this reason that it is still often the case that they are judged in a somewhat derogatory way by those representing the “old literature”.

A third assumption finally that I would like to discuss briefly is linked to the above-mentioned remark about the digital media’s “own grammar.” In fact, this is a misleading term, because, maybe more than in the case of any other medium, the hypermedia “are not one.” Partly thanks to the possibility of computer programming the hypermedia do not so much have a uniform cultural manifestation; the term is rather a catch-all name for a whole family

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of forms of which the various characteristics do not (to the same degree) belong to each individual member. It is a cultural form which for good reasons has a name in the plural. This is not the place to elaborate a complete taxonomy, but I would like to give an idea of the scope of this family by mentioning some polar characteristics.

One possible principle of organization depends on the antithesis of static and dynamic hypermedia. Whereas a CD-ROM with the complete works of an author is static in the sense that no elements will ever be added to it or deleted from it (apart from possibly adding “notes” or “bookmarks”), the World Wide Web is an example of a medium that is continuously subject to change.

Another principle of arrangement could be the degree to which the “user” is enabled to contribute to the dynamics. At one end is the situation in which users can only explore the hypermedial space, at the other extreme is the situation in which users themselves construct this space to a lesser or greater degree. In most computer games all possibilities are determined in advance and the player has to follow a course given prior to the game in order to reach the finish. In Second Life and World of Warcraft, to the contrary, the “inhabitants” of these online worlds can construct much of their own living surroundings, houses, tools etc.

Yet another arrangement is based on the degree or nature of the maneuverability among the different elements. In some cases each element can be linked to any other element (as we saw in the case of the Yiijing), but the maneuverability is usually channeled through compulsory links, which may or may not be conditional. For example, in a computer game you can only leave the room by means of a door, but not before you have found the key. Literary hypertexts such as Victory Garden, too, often make use of such conditional links. They enable the author to control the number and the nature of the tracks that the reader has to follow through the hypertext. The function of the “user” – which may vary from distant beholder to player of a part to (fellow) author – may also be a suitable organizing principle.

When we combine the above-mentioned standards and other standards, we can draft a taxonomy which offers room to numerous variations of the hypermedia, varying from computer games to animated poems and from online

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communities to multimedial encyclopedias. This sometimes confusing multitude and heterogeneity make it difficult to speak about hypermedia and hypermedial art criticism in general terms. In the following I will, as said above, argue from the literary perspective in particular. The three characteristics of hypermedial literature and their implications for the criticism that I want to discuss now, will however also apply to several other subcategories of the hypermedia.

The first characteristic of the hypermedia is that they have a synesthetic effect on traditional cultural forms. From a material point of view this has to do with the fact that the digital field is characterized by a common language. In the hypermedia all classic media are re-mediated by the same binary code. Thanks to this universal coding we can not only easily link words to sounds and colors, but they may in the literal sense of the word be mutually translated. The letters of the alphabet are literally graphic pictures which may be turned into sounds. Although this “digital synesthesia” initially only concerns the material “basis” of the cultural forms, it also affects the cultural forms themselves. The individual art forms are not only incorporated in the hypermedia, they also get involved in all sorts of intermedial relations. For example, we see that computer games show the style features of film, and at the same time film assumes elements derived from the computer game. In this way the camera work in the fight scenes in a movie like The Matrix was inspired by the visualization of fights in computer games. The universal coding also enables people to reuse in a game settings and characters which were in the first place designed for a movie (or the other way around). More and more often settings and characters are already in the design stage equipped for use in several media.

Not only within the arts do the various art forms engage in a diversity of mutual intermedial relations; art itself also to an increasing degree engages in relations with other fields, such as education, economy and warfare – think of such phenomena as “serious gaming” and “edutainment”. A game such as America’s Army (americasarmy.com) is not only a computer game which is made available for free by the American army, but as soon as the gamer has been seduced by the game into being recruited, the same computer program also turns into a training simulator and a laboratory to test new weapon systems.

Whereas modernity may be regarded as an era that was characterized by a differentiation among the various cultural fields (economy, politics, art, religion etc.) as well as within those fields (the art forms and genres within the field of art) the hypermedia are first and foremost postmodern media thanks to their integrative and intermedial dimension. The “pathos of purity” that characterized modernity gives way to a postmodern “pathos of impurity.” This gives rise to special problems for literary criticism. What standards should be used when hypermedial works of literature are to be judged? Literary critics not seldom have a monomedial background and therefore tend to judge such works from a sheer literary perspective. But even with a multimedial background, it remains hard to decide on what basis hypermedial works of art should be assessed. Should Mark Strand’s poem In Celebration still be judged as a literary work when it gets animated and vocalized via a synthesizer? Or does it rather becomes an animated cartoon? Or should one rather look for intermedial quality standards, for example the degree and nature of synesthesia?

The second constituting characteristic of the hypermedia that I want to mention here relates to fundamental instability. Two aspects of this may be distinguished. In the first place the hypermedia are unstable because they are rather generators for “works” in the classic sense of the word than such works themselves. For example, Queneau’s Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes, mentioned above, is more of a generator of poems (by means of which 100,000 billion different poems may be drafted) than a compilation of poems. Moreover, many hypermedia are always “under construction”, not so much because they are not finished yet as because being in progress is one of their characteristics.

This, too, causes art criticism to be faced with major problems. What exactly does the critic of hypermedia judge? Should the literary critic first read all of the 100,000 billion different poems before she can assess Queneau’s “work”, or should she rather assess the engine itself? To the extent that the reader and the critic in the hypermedial sphere become themselves the creators of a work of art (they will probably discover poems

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11 http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/179137
12 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYvSfCvXhNM
in Queneau’s “compilation” that the poet himself was never aware of) they also become their own judges. But just as the hypermedial author becomes the creator of a narrative (or poetic) space rather than a creator of linear narratives or poems, so the critic will increasingly become a judge of narrative and poetic machines. He or she will rather be a meta-critic than a critic.

In this case, too, we may ask the question what standards must be adopted. Considering Walter Benjamin’s famous distinction between the _cult value_ of the unique piece of art (the Mona Lisa) and the _exhibition value_ of the reproductive arts (such as photography and film), such a standard in the case of the hypermedia might well be the _manipulation value_ of the “work”, that is, how far and in what ways the elements of the work may be recombined to produce esthetically valuable constellations (De Mul 2009, 2008b).

The third and last characteristic of hypermedia is closely linked to the previous ones. When the work is an experience machine rather than a linear reading experience, the question arises whether this must have implications for the criticism of hypermedial literary works. In other words, the question is whether the criticism of hypermedial literature should not itself be transformed into hypermedial criticism. If the hypermedia liberate “users” in the sense that they become fellow creators of the hypermedial work, one could wonder whether the readers of literary criticism should not also become its fellow creators. This would imply for the critic that she, too, no longer writes linear essays but applies herself to the creation of hypermedial criticisms. These are not only characterized by their multimedial nature (they may, for example, completely or partly be shaped as a picture or sound essay), but also by having the nature of argument spaces within which readers may conceive their own judgments – not in the sense that as readers they subject the critic’s criticism to their own judgements but in the sense that they become the fellow authors of the criticism.

Against this background we could now image what a literary theory or criticism journal in the age of “Big Data” might look like. Its basis will be a website, powered by a cloud of relational databases containing all works, letters, interviews etc. by a particular author, as well of all other authors

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whose work is datafied. Of course it will still be possible to display different versions of the texts (for example handwritten drafts, computer files with the subsequent versions, later revisions etc.), the legacy, translations etc.

However, thanks to user participation it will also contain a lot of additional useful information, such as annotations, articles and commentaries. In addition it will contain links to relevant audiovisual material, such as recordings of lectures and debates. In may contain graphics and simulations in order to visualize complex relationships between works, authors, and ideas. And of course human users will also be able to communicate, via connected blogs, live chat, tweets etc.

Moreover, due to ranking of other users and their behaviors, thanks to smart datamining and profiling algorithms it directs the attention of the users to specific meaningful re-arrangements of the material and related clusters.14 “Researchers that referred to this commentary were also interested in the following comments.” Or: “If you liked this conclusion, don’t forget to read the following counter-arguments”. Even more interesting is the possibility to add our own experiences, both as reader and author, to the corpus. In a way, the distinction between reader and writer will get blurred, just like the distinction between secondary and primary literature, and finally between the human user and the global web of information. Welcome in the world of “Big Literature.”

In this case, too, it is clear that the hypermedial criticism that is envisaged here does not make classic criticism fully obsolete. Obsolete become only they who see classic criticism as the only one possible.

**Figures**

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Figure 1: *Yijing* or *The Book of Changes*, ca. 1,000 BCE

Figure 2: Raymond Queneau, *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes*, 1961
Figure 3: One of the many website versions of *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes* (http://www bevrowe.info/Queneau/QueneauRandom_v4.html)

Figure 4: One of the many Yijing websites (http://www.psychicscience.org/ching3.aspx)
1. Introduction: New Ink Art and the Question of “What is Ink Painting”? 

How should we understand modern ink art and its many possibilities, when we agree that this has a great bearing on how the traditional medium of ink is being internationally recognized? Is there anything essential about ink art? Or should we see it in an open form or in something like Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblance”? It should be revealing to review the developing art form in the context of technovisuality and cultural re-enhancement.

In an exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in the Fall of 2008 entitled as “New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond,” the curator, King, quoted the Tang Dynasty literati Wang Wei’s words on ink painting in her foreword:

In the art of painting,/ Works in ink surpass all.
They stem from nature,/And fulfill the functions of the universe.¹

It has been emphasized that traditional Chinese ink painting, from its ancient beginnings in decorating Neolithic pots, has evolved and flourished in the hands of great masters from different dynasties, and has been shaped by social, economic and cultural values of the times. It has come full circle as some artists have sought to expand beyond the two-dimensional confines of ink on paper or silk, and the continuous re-interpretation links ink art to our present-day society and keeps it alive.²

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¹ V. Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard, *New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond* (Hong Kong: HKU SPACE, 2008), p.14
² V. Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard, *New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond* (Hong Kong: HKU SPACE, 2008), p.14
This exhibition is a good point of departure for our discussion here, as it raises the question of how ink art, with over 3000 years of history, has evolved through time in terms of artistic form and language to become an art form that relates to contemporary cultural issues. The modifications involved represent innovative departures from its traditional form and constraints. The curator, as many contemporary ink art exhibition curators have done, claims “to understand “ink” in its broadest sense, seeing it not merely as a selected medium but rather a necessary reference central to Chinese culture.3

To better understand the different facets of ink art, the exhibits are divided into several themes, though at the same time, the categorizations seem to be in excess. The exhibition includes a small selection of masterpieces of Hong Kong forerunners such as Lui Shou-kwan and Luis Chan. It explores modern interpretation of traditional subject matter including the landscape paintings by other Hong Kong painters Liu Guosong and Wucius Wong. It demonstrates the attempts of contemporary Chinese artists such as Gu Wenda who has deconstructed and reconstructed Chinese calligraphy in innovative ways. It shows daring artists such as the painter Kwok Mang-ho who freely transcends the traditional boundaries of ink art to develop their own visual vocabulary. The exhibition also refers to artworks that seemingly have nothing to do with the ink brush tradition, but utilize media such as organic installation, acrylic on canvas, and digital art. Among the exhibited new ink art by Hong Kong artists’ are views of the city with a focus on social and cultural concerns intertwined with urban references.4

As the discussion here will show, Hong Kong has become a center for the development of new ink painting in the late 20th century during the Socialist regime in China. It was the first city in the region to emerge as a center of new ink art. For political reasons, it was only much later towards the end of the 1970s when ink painting developed on the Mainland. The rapid development of the art form leads to the final question raised at the exhibition: Art these new development ink art?

One would confront this question easily when exiting from the exhibition and viewing the installation of the tree branches in Ming Fay’s 2006 lyrical organic, three-dimensional installation “Floating Reeds,” which is an artificial landscape of images with brush painting. Its content is about life,

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., pp.15-16.
growth, decay, order, and spontaneity. This exhibition and others of its type affirm the timeliness of ink art as it proceeds through changes and developments in style and artistic language.

Curator Liu Xiaochun of the new ink exhibition *Shuimo Today* held in Beijing's new art space Songzhuang in 2006 did not reference the term contemporary ink painting as a concept of time, but to artistic conceptions relating to “experimental” and “verge.” Its contemporary relevance is related to the new ink works' rebellion against Chinese ink tradition and the related criticism. According to new ink artists in the Mainland, contemporary *Shuimo* (meaning ink art), is a kind of art phenomenon affected by Western modern and contemporary art, and the Western trends of thought adapted by innovative Chinese painters Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian in the early 20th Century. Liu argues that:

Every artist is seeking for combination with tradition unconsciously, so the essence of the Western trend is that the east combines with the west and utilizes the west to strengthen itself... in the Western main-stream art’s opinion, Chinese contemporary *Shuimo* art is not really contemporary, because it has no modern significance, and in Chinese main-stream’s opinion, Chinese contemporary *Shuimo* art is following the West, and hence there is a lack of cultural independence. Therefore Chinese contemporary *Shuimo* art is doubly exiled, at the edge of both traditions.

He further points out that since ink painting has a close relation with Daoist metaphysics, it is the most prominent representative of Chinese visual culture. It is thus a matter of central importance to the development of Chinese contemporary art.

With all these hopes and wishes for cultural identities, and the simultaneous controversies on the modernization issues of ink painting, it should be revealing to review some of the essentialist fervors of ink painting discussed in the tradition, and the related observations on new ink art from some

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5 V. Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard, *New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond*, p.17.
7 Ibid.
developmental perspectives, with particular regards to the problems of technique, visuality and metaphysics. Here I would like to turn to Shih Tao, a prominent Chinese ink painter, for the discussion.

(1) Traditional Discourse on Ink Painting: The Case of “Oneness” of Stroke Suggested by Shih Tao

Shih Tao (1642-1707), the influential painter in the late Ming and early Qing period, is not only well known as an ink painter, but also as a prominent art theorist. His surviving notes on ink painting, *Hua-pu (Treatise on the Philosophy of Painting)*, is regarded as one of the most important Daoist philosophical reflections on the art form.

The treatise begins with the concept of the “Oneness of Brush Strokes”. Shih writes:

In remote, ancient days there were no principles. The primordial *p’o* (or state of uncarved block) had not been dispersed. As soon as the primordial *p’o* was dispersed, principles emerged. How did these principles emerge? They were founded upon the oneness of strokes. This oneness of strokes is the origin of all beings, the root of myriad forms. It is revealed through spiritual reality, and is innate in man.¹

The Oneness obviously refers to the Daoist meaning of Nature and the ultimate reality. It is important to reach at the realm of the Dao, to access the artistic creativity and the aesthetic experience. The Daoists believe that the metaphysical realm of the Dao is the origin of the truth, beauty and goodness, and it is the ideal state of art. It will be helpful to understand the Daoist notion of aesthetic experience through a discussion of the neo-Confucian scholars who addressed the subject, and from there to grasp Shih Tao’s discourse on the aesthetics of ink painting.

Despite a general comment made by scholars who work on comparative philosophy that systematic aesthetics is absent in traditional Confucian and Daoist philosophies, neo-Confucian scholars have reconstructed theories of human primal experience according to traditional Confucianism and Daoism which allude to aesthetic experience. For example, in the late writings of

Mou Zongsan (1909-1995), the prominent neo-Confucian philosopher who resides in Hong Kong since 1950s, argues that Daoist theory is aesthetic in nature. Firstly, he points out that the “subjective principle” of Daoism’s “wu wei” (no action), which refers to the effort of the human subject’s mind to transcend all kinds of human epistemological functions and move towards the realm of a more metaphysical Dao.\(^\text{10}\) Daoist’s philosophy promotes the annulments of subjective activity and knowledge to recover the presentation of nature in itself which has been hidden and distorted by the self’s understanding, perception and conception. According to Daoism, to know is to be “not knowing,” to be wise is to be ignorant, so that only the so called fools are able to grasp the truth of nature.

Mou said in the realm of the Dao when the human mind has stopped “knowing” and travels with the basic universal element Chi, it is able to perceive things in their original nature. These are not “phenomena” in the Kantian sense of epistemology, but the original nature of things which can only be understood after the abolition of the dominant scheme of subject-object relations exerted by the knowing subject. It is said that the state of “intellectual intuition” of the mind in the Daoist sense corresponds with the “calmness of mind” described by Zhuangzi’s “Xin Jiai” as described by the representing and original Daoist:

Do not be the master of knowledge (to manipulate things). Personally realize the infinite to the highest degree and travel in the realm of which there is no sign. Exercise fully what you have received from Nature without any subjective viewpoint. In one word, be absolutely vacuous (hsu). The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It does not lean forward or backward in its response to things. It responds to things but conceals nothing of its own. Therefore it is able to deal with things without injury to (its reality).\(^\text{11}\)

With “calmness of mind,” there are no differentiations of mind and body, form and matter, or subject and object but the emergence of all things (including the minds) in themselves. They are juxtaposed with each other without being known. It is thus a disinterested, non-intentional and non-regulative state, and is therefore, aesthetic in nature. Mou’s elaboration of the state is as follows:

\(^{10}\) Zongsan Mou, Intellectual Intuition and Chinese Philosophy (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1974), pp.208-211.
The state of mind of *xin jai* is the termination, tranquility, emptiness, and nothingness that follow the abolition of the quest and dependency on learning and knowing. The *wu wei* of the above necessarily implies a certain kind of creativity, whose form is so special that it can be named as negative creativity...that in the light of the tranquil state..., things present themselves in the way that they are...not as an object, but as an ideal state...and this is the static ‘intellectual intuition’.

In the transcendental realm of the Dao, a thing is not an object but an “ideal state,” a form in itself, appreciation of which is capable only with Daoist wisdom, in which the sense of beauty and aesthetic pleasure, the real form of freedom, spring up in tranquility. Achievement of this state requires an effort of transcendence of all human epistemological constraints or judgments as Kant’s aesthetics prescribes and engagement in the metaphysical realm of the Dao. This explains the criteria and aesthetic categories in Daoist aesthetics, e.g. Lao Tze’s “chi,” “wei,” “miao” and “xu,” which refer to the activities and characters of the realm and are applied in the evaluation of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy.

According to neo-Confucian scholars, objectification of the mind takes place only after the primal experience has happened in the realm of the Dao from which comes the division of subject and object. Functions and activities including epistemological and artistic ones then begin to exert their influences and judgments, or manifesting the metaphysical experiences through artistic media. Activities can be divided into those that are related to the cognitive (the truth), the perceptive or the aesthetic (the beauty) and the willful (the goodness) and are undertaken according to the subject’s state of mind. Yet the origin of aesthetic experience is in the transcendental state. This explains Shih Tao’s saying that the art of painting is a manifestation of truth. As he writes in *Hua Pu*:

> With regard to the delicate arrangement of mountains, streams, and human figures, or the natural characteristics of birds, animals, grass, and trees, or the proportions of ponds, pavilions, towers, and terraces, if one’s mind cannot deeply penetrate into their reality and subtly express their appearance, one has not yet understood the fundamental meaning of the oneness of strokes...Hence, oneness of strokes

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embraces all strokes before their differentiation. Myriad brush stokes and ink wash all derive and diminish here. Merely rely upon the grasp of men. A single stroke which identifies with universality can clearly reveal the idea of man and fully penetrate all things.\(^{14}\)

In this sense, does the transcendence of the mind mean total cancellation of bodily perception? What is the place for corporeality and visuality if the ideal ink painting is to manifest the aesthetic experience in the realm of the Dao, which only the pure mind can grasp? One can easily argue that it is the visuality of the mind that “sees” the truth, ultimate beauty and goodness, but it is also the artistic manifestation of the vision via the eye that requires a certain kind of sensibility and visuality. The functions and the meanings of the physical techniques including those conducted by the hands and the eye of the painter and the relation between them and the origin of art (‘the oneness of stroke’) as suggested by Shih Tao require more attention and discussion.

(2) The Oneness of Stroke and the Meaning of Technology in Traditional Ink Painting

Shih Tao’s saying that the “oneness of strokes embraces all strokes before their differentiation” reminds us of Heidegger’s discussion of the essence of technology in his work *The Question Concerning Technology*.\(^{15}\) It is more meaningful to turn our attention from technique to Heidegger’s discussion of technology as he said we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology if we merely conceive and put forward the technological. Technology is not mere means or instrumental but is that whereby something is effected and thus attained.\(^{16}\) He laid out the cause and effect relation and referred to the four causes in the Aristotelian doctrine when he discusses the instrumentality of technology, while his question is actually about what unites these causes from the beginning and the primal meaning of causality. Technology, according to Heidegger’s sayings, is basically responsible to let something come forth or bring forth into presencing (An-wesen) and into its complete arrival. Heidegger did ask, “how does bringing-forth happen, be it in nature or in handwork and art?”\(^{17}\)

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16 Ibid., p.4.
Shih Tao did not enquire about the cause and effect relation nor the question of bringing forth, but he did point out that the one stroke grasped by the ink painter was the origin of art. His saying that the single stroke “which identifies with universality can clearly reveal the idea of man and fully penetrate all things” presupposes the artist’s reach to and understanding in the metaphysical realm. Heidegger further elaborates that technology is about bringing-forth, “brings out of concealment into unconcealment” and that the essence of technology is to arrive at revealing everything. He refers this to “truth” and understands it as “correctness of representation”. He said:

The possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing. Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth. ... that technē is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. Technē belongs to bringing-forth, to poiēsis, it is something poetic.\(^\text{18}\)

Shih Tao’s sayings echo that of Heidegger:

The art of painting is a manifestation of truth. With regard to the delicate arrangement of mountains, streams, and human figures, or the natural characteristics of birds, animals, grass, and trees, or the proportions of ponds, pavilions, towers, and terraces, if one’s mind cannot deeply penetrate into their reality and subtly express their appearance, one has not yet understood the fundamental meaning of the oneness of strokes.\(^\text{19}\)

For Shih Tao, the “one-stroke” in ink painting is both a visible event and a metaphysical concept. The ink painter contemplates and looks intently at the visible silk or paper during the process of making a stroke, though he has not elaborated on this. In his theory of the “one stroke” painting, it is the point of departure towards the metaphysical intersection of self and Nature. One can find numerous references in \textit{Hua Po} where he stresses the transcendental origin of aesthetic experience and proposes that the art of painting is a manifestation of truth, with regard to the things represented.

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., pp.12-13.  
\(^\text{19}\) Earle J. Coleman, \textit{Philosophy of Painting by Shih T’ao}, p.37
One’s mind has to deeply penetrate into their reality to understand the fundamental meaning of “the oneness of strokes.”

The penetration into the Dao or the metaphysical Nature just requires a transcendental leap, which may take continuing efforts, both spiritually and physically, as he said:

To both travel far and ascend heights, one’s step begins with a single inch near at hand…A single stroke which identifies with universality can clearly reveal the idea of man and fully penetrate all things…Thus the wrist seizes reality.

Yet the point being emphasized is the spiritual capacity of the “one stroke,” as he said the splashing of the ink onto the brush is to be done with spirit.

But the corporeal act and visuality are necessary for the artistic manifestation. As Shih described it, the bowing and standing, squatting and leaping while making the ink strokes fully reveal the spirituality of things. As Shih said,

the vitality of the ink depends upon catching the absolute moment; the action of grasping the moment requires continuity of execution. Among those who know how to control movement of, their brush work it is inwardly real and outwardly transparent.

One is reminded here of the famous Daoist story of butcher Ding in Zhuangzi’s writing. It was said that when the butcher moves his knife through the body of a cow, it was as if he were dancing. The interaction with the animal’s body and cutting through its physical form and structure, lead to the butcher’s experience of Nature. The butcher’s departure from his corporeality into his visionary grasp of the cow’s physical nature when he dismembers the cow, is like an ink painter’s experience of his strokes in relation to the paper. The painter enters into the metaphysical realm and executes from there. Shih said: “When he grasps the brush, it is as if he were doing nothing.”

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21 Ibid., p.38.
22 Ibid., p.56.
23 Ibid., p.59.
24 Ibid., p.79.
In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty uses the terms “flesh” and “visible” to designate an inward element of corporeality that has not been named in preceding philosophies. He suggests that the inwardness of the individual person includes an element of flesh that is composed of “the visible” and “the tangible” parts which cannot be placed over the other.26 As he puts it:

Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world…There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable…It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication.27

With the term the “total visible,” Merleau-Ponty refers to the individual painter’s own corporeal context, which is a sustaining whole and stable pivot for experiencing, the revealing or the bringing-forth process discussed above. This insight of Merleau-Ponty supplements the corporeal departure of Shih Tao’s “One stroke” painting that exemplifies the intersection of the self with Nature. In Shih’s words,

“the vitality of the ink depends upon catching the absolute moment; the action of grasping the moment requires continuity of execution. Among those who know how to control movement, their brush work is inwardly real and outwardly transparent…Therefore, the ancients hit the proper measure between emptiness and reality; inwardly and outwardly there was fit control; their method of painting was completely perfected…Without flaws or defects, they obtained the spirit of evasive concealment and the spirit of movement…With regard to those who face a wall, dust covered and obstructed by things, how can they avoid hatred from the creator (nature)? ”28

Here is a difference between Merleau-Ponty’s reading and that of Shih Tao. The obstruction suggested by Shih points to a Kantian notion of cognition, where the subject/object dichotomy occurs. Merleau-Ponty has suggested

27 Ibid., pp.134-135.
that the term “visible” may be used to name the sensible context within which cognitive thinking temporarily discriminates particular forms.29 He notes that there is never a complete merging of vision and this porous visible context; for if there were vision would vanish due to the “disappearance of the seer or of the visible.”30 Here that Merleau-Ponty is still discussing empirical vision, while Shih refers this kind of vision to a form of metaphysical departure, for the real artistic scene should only spring up after the disappearance of the sensible subject, who is replaced by a transcendental subject. In brief, the ink painting subject will absorb the empirical vision and reach the transcendental vision, while the process of the entrance to and the exit from the transcendental realm is the dancing of the ink strokes on paper.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty’s notions of the “flesh” or the “visible” also has a strong metaphysical flavor, as they designate a non-objective domain of corporeality, which refers to an inward dimension of the body and cannot be experienced as an object or material condition that conforms to empirically determined laws of scientific knowledge, though the visibility is also an element essential to our own sense of corporeality.31 According to Merleau-Ponty, the “pure” artistic subject is not traveling in any metaphysical realm, but is a suspending self or an innate whole of visibility free from cognitive judgments. In this way, this contemporary development of the reading of artistic process cannot be translated into the traditional Chinese discourse of ink painting like that of Shih Tao, for there exist two different paradigms of metaphysical beliefs. The importance of pointing out the differences between the two modalities is to suggest the proper way of reading Shih Tao’s theory of ink painting as a representing Daoist aesthetics, and to avoid misunderstanding initiated by an easy adoption of a Western model. This will also explain the different positions of the visuality implied. Merleau-Ponty says that the painter switches from judge to pupil, as the seeing painter stays within the innate corporeal element of the whole of the visible and repeats and affirms what is seen in the manifestation process. This is the way Merleau-Ponty reads Cézanne’s saying that “Nature is on the inside”.32 The traditional Chinese ink painters believe in traveling in the metaphysical Nature and that the artistic bodily act is an automatic execution or manifestation of that experience, like Shih Tao’s suggestion of the “One Stroke”. This is clearly implied in this Shih’s words:

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29 M. Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p.130.
30 Ibid., p.131.

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“because men grasp the power of evasive concealment and vitality, mountains, streams and the myriad things offer their spirit to man. If it is not the case, how could one enable brush strokes and ink washes, within the ink, to create embryonic and structured forms, openness and closeness?”  

The painter is thus an “enlightened” wise man, as he said:

“Because he (the painter) is wise, he transforms; because he is enlightened, he is free. When confronted by things, he is undisturbed. When he deals with forms, he leaves no traces…When he moves the ink, it is as if the work were already finished…When he grasps the brush, it is as if he were doing nothing.”

Merleau-Ponty’s painters are interested in the sensible whole of visibility that is an inward root of embodiment within nature, and it is in this sense that the painter is closer to nature. Though this contemporary interpretation of innate corporeality cannot explain the Daoist metaphysical claims as it does not presuppose the metaphysical realm of the Dao, it may still become a good reference of what the new ink painters are doing now and what ink painting has developed into. The suggestion also returns to the argument stated in the beginning of this section that the new ink works are traces of the painter’s awareness of a whole of visibility that is essential to the painter’s own sense of self as present and actual. To be enriched by Heidegger’s suggestion, the technovisuality in the sense of the essence of technology and the visual experience involved, is an unconcealment and a bringing-forth of the truth of one’s total existence.

(3) The “Expansion” of New Ink Art

In contemporary discussions of visuality, it is said that there is no innocent perceiving eye or ideal observer. Visuality is always contextual, social, cultural and political. The visual is extending and transforming indigenous cultural forms of seeing and looking. This is especially true of Chinese Modernity, where modernity is seen as spectacle. Pang Laikwan has proposed that through visuality, modern Chinese subjects face not only the

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34 Ibid., pp.101-102.
passing of the past and the looking forward to a pluralistic future, but they also have come to terms with their own modern selves including new identities.  

he New Ink movement in Hong Kong in the 1960s, for instance, demonstrated the quest for cultural and artistic identities. Pioneers including Lui Shou-kwan extended the concerns from artistic tradition to existential situations including social concerns. The New Ink Art exhibition mentioned at the beginning of this paper selected Lui’s works as, representing changes of interest to contemporary Chinese ink artists. Lui promoted modernization of traditional ink painting and related it to Hong Kong cultural identity. Lui then absorbed Western ideas into Chinese tradition in his ink work to meet the quest for a new cultural identity.

Lui’s desire for individual expression caused him to become an experimentalist in “Chinese art with a Western approach.” Lui merged his experimental ideas with ink painting, which eventually led him to Zen painting, the style for which he was most famous in his later development. On the one hand, he held that the spirit of New Ink painting offered a mental balance to people living in a colony overrun with material and technological advancements. It is noteworthy that the international art community was more interested in a new genre of work that grew out of local cultural innovations. Lui’s interest was in demonstrating his experience of exploring innovative ideas as an ink painter while living in a colonial city. Lui viewed modern ideas concerned with his art, combined with the spiritual cultivation of Chinese tradition, as “adaptation.” Lui drew on these teachings to urge artists to return to the “root” – that is, to the inner self – and to nourish it, to find the wisdom to incorporate new forms of painting. By returning to the root, painters could find their own style which would reveal their own personality and ways of existence. Lui’s views on “adaptation” were reflected in the work of young artists who mixed ink with fluorescent colors or printing oil and employed ink with concepts of Western design.

39 Shou-kwan Lui, Sui Mo Hua Jiang (Hong Kong: notes of Lui’s lectures recorded by a group of his students and published by them, 1972), pp.31-33.
Recent experiments in ink painting in Mainland China are developing new approaches to ink painting. Chinese art critic Sun Xiaofeng, an active art critic in China, has argued that as contemporary art expands its range of expression by employing a variety of techniques, it must nevertheless follow certain concepts and practices central to the culture of Chinese ink painting. In the words of Sun Xiaofeng:

The unique spirit and the specific cultural connotations of Chinese ink painting that were formerly concealed by the contemporary may now be implemented as a kind of accessory or special flavor of the contemporary and thus compromise with current aesthetics. To define its position within a pluralist and multicultural context, we have to introduce Western artistic grammar into the context of ink painting, with a strategy that aims at producing diversified models of a contemporary quality. Only through such a process of continuous exchange can the factors participating in it successfully participate in cultural negotiations. …one of the tasks of the contemporary ink experiment is to rediscover the cultural functions and spiritual implications of ink and to revive ink as an artistic language, as well as for the actual grammar and rhetoric of this particular language.\(^\text{40}\)

It is clear that new ink painting needs to fulfill various functions such as contributing to a spiritual revival and as functional as a mark of cultural identity. It is necessary to avoid the illusion of the existence of a privileged domain of ink painting. Currently, there are not establishing norms for ink painting. The main idea governing contemporary ink painting is that ink painting is inspired by new experiments.\(^\text{41}\) The contribution of the ink experiments lies in the fact that they preserve the practice and contribute to the field of contemporary art and culture as it is influenced by globalization.

The relevance of Shih Tao’s writing remains as an echo informing contemporary ink painters:

Those who know the subtle manifestation, but forget the origin of the fundamental principle of oneness of brush strokes, are like children who forget their ancestors. If one knows that ancient and modern works never perish, yet forgets that their achievement of merit is not

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\(^{40}\) Xiaofeng Sun, *Infiltration-Idylls and visions* (He Bei: He Bei Mei Shu Chu Ban She, 2007), p.10, original version in English.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p.11.
limited to men, this is the same as the ten thousand things losing what is given by nature. Heaven can give man a method, but cannot give him skill… ancient and modern works of calligraphy and painting originated from heaven and were completed by man.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{42} Earle J. Coleman, \textit{Philosophy of Painting by Shih T’ao}, pp.104-105.
PART III BEAUTY, CREATIVITY, AND THE AESTHETIC
The Return of Beauty?*

Wolfgang Welsch

In the aesthetic discourse of recent years, it has become a fashion to propagate a “return of beauty.” Dave Hickey announced in 1993 that beauty would be the dominant issue of the next decade.43 In 2005, an international festival “On Beauty” took place in Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt, culminating in a conference at which experts were invited to discuss “The Re-Turn of Beauty.”

I am surprised at such talk of a return of beauty. Did beauty ever go away? Was it ever in exile such that it could, should or would need to return today? Wasn’t beauty there all the time? The beauty of nature was, to be sure – in its entire splendor. And the beauty accumulated in the course of human history, the beauty of works of art, has for decades been more present than ever before – in museums, or exhibitions, and various other media. And what about the beauty of human beings? I find it hard to believe that we lived through a time of decreased human beauty where beautiful human beings were in short supply.

If anything, what we had less of in the past decades was the talk about beauty. That is all that has changed: After a long time during which aestheticians spoke little of beauty, they have now started talking about it again. That is the whole difference. It is not that the phenomenon of beauty has returned, but rather that a discourse on beauty is being produced on the intellectual stage. We should not, therefore, speak of a return of beauty as such, but only of a return of the topic “beauty.” Mistakenly, however, the return of the issue of discourse is taken for that of the phenomenon itself. Discourse is obviously being made to

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serve as the measure for whether something (in this case, beauty) exists or not. To me, that seems rather arrogant and foolish.\textsuperscript{44}

In what follows, I will put forward three claims. (1) The opposition to beauty that we find in art theory from mid-nineteenth century onward and especially in the twentieth century was not directed against beauty in general, but against specific conceptions of beauty whilst being in favor of others. (2) Contemporary pleas in favor of beauty have dubious reasons and effects. (3) Today there is a need to talk about the attractiveness of the beautiful regardless of the many traditional and largely accepted theories, or: about the sublime, breath-taking beauty and its universality – yet the discussion of such beauty is conspicuously absent from current discourses.

1. The rejection of the beautiful often serves the appeal to another type of beauty

To get to my first claim: We must not overlook the fact that opponents of beauty have often made, on their position, positive use of the term “beauty.” They did not intend to put an end to beauty altogether, but rather to proclaim a new beauty in place of the established ideal.

Three examples. When Baudelaire proclaimed the figure of Satan as an ideal, he was treating Satan as a type of beauty, for he spoke of Satan as “the most perfect type of manly beauty”\textsuperscript{45} and “the most beautiful of Angels;”\textsuperscript{46} and when he praised “fugitive beauty,”\textsuperscript{47} he intended to recommend it as the specifically modern type of beauty uniting “mode” and “étrénité.”\textsuperscript{48} When Marinetti pronounced a race car with its roaring motor to be superior to the classical ideal of

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\item \textsuperscript{44} For a general critique of this habit of prioritizing discourse over matter – symptom of the overall constructivism of modern thought – cp. my \textit{Homo mundanus} (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2012).
\item \textsuperscript{46} Baudelaire, “The Litanies to Satan,” in: \textit{The Flowers of Evil} [1857], no. CXX.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Baudelaire, “To a Woman Passing By,” ibid., no. XCIII.
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beauty embodied in the Nike of Samothrace, it was made to extol a new and specifically modern type of beauty: “We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed.” The surrealist ideal, finally, was predicated on the new beauty of contingency and incendiary juxtaposition, whose model the surrealists described with Lautréamont as “the fortuitous encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”

Those are three instances showing that beauty was not dismissed but redefined; that in place of the established, bourgeois, stale ideal a different, new, more captivating beauty was being sought – and how often mustn’t just that already have happened in the history of beauty! While specific ideals of beauty age, the desire for beauty remains.

To be sure, around the middle of the last century, those seeking to set art on a completely different path from that of beauty became more energetic in their protests. In 1948, Barnett Newman defined “the impulse of modern art” as the “desire to destroy beauty.” A few years later, Dubuffet stated, “Beauty does not enter into the picture for me.” Yet Newman painted exceptionally beautiful pictures, and Dubuffet, too, created wonderful paintings and lithographs of almost celestial, cosmic beauty (titles such as Cosmographie or Sol céleste bespeak the fascination with which their beauty strikes the viewer).

The rhetoric of beauty’s dismissal is therefore, to put it mildly, exaggerated. In reality, what we find are either arguments for a beauty other than the established one, or wholesale rejections of the popular rhetoric of beauty in favor of devotion to a higher beauty.

On closer inspection, such changes in ideals are the most normal thing in the world. As beauty ages, ideals of beauty are replaced by others. Nor must we

49 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Manifesto of Futurisme (Le Figaro, February 20, 1924), p. 1.
53 One could speak of sublimity in this context – but that is just another, the larger than life version of the beautiful.
forget that it only took hundred years for what critics of the time castigated for having “declared war on beauty,”\(^5\) to become the very epitome of the beautiful, even for the public tastes— I am, of course, referring to impressionists art.\(^5\)

2. Dubious aspects in current demands for beauty

Or am I making things too easy for myself? Were there not more violent objections in the twentieth century than those I have mentioned: artistic strategies which not merely rejected the rhetoric of beauty but from which in fact nothing of beauty emerged — where the new quality of artworks was only to be had at the price of beauty? As a result, we would be missing the crucial point of such artworks and even pervert them if we tried to put them back on the leash of beauty?

a. Danto, The abuse of beauty – against Dave Hickey

Before I go on to discuss some examples in more detail, I would like to draw attention to Arthur Danto’s book, The abuse of beauty. Danto wrote this book in response to Dave Hickey’s claim that the coming decade would be a decade of beauty. Danto, by contrast, reminds us that it has always been a fatal error of aestheticians to believe that art is essentially about beauty: “It is not and it never was the destiny of all art ultimately to be seen as beautiful.”\(^5\) “Most of the world’s art is not beautiful, nor was the production of beauty part of its purpose.”\(^5\) Artistic quality, Danto argues, can go along with beauty, but by no means must it be bound up with beauty in every case: “it is extremely important to distinguish between aesthetic beauty and a wider sense of artistic excellence where aesthetic beauty may not be relevant at all.”\(^5\)

Taken generally, the common stipulation attacked by Danto that art must be beautiful is indeed misguided. It is a product of the eighteenth century. The

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\(^5\) After seeing the Impressionists’ first exhibit in 1874, the Parisian art critic J. Claretie wrote, “Monet [...], Pissarro, Miss Morisot and the others seem to have declared war on beauty” (cp. John Rewald, Die Geschichte des Impressionismus, Cologne: DuMont 2001, p. 195).

\(^5\) In the meantime, of course, one might suspect that Monet’s poppy fields, too, have been somewhat tainted by this universal applause.


\(^5\) Ibid., p. 88.

\(^5\) Ibid., p. 107.
Greek concept *kalón* could refer to all sorts of things – for instance, to actions, to science, to a way of life. By no means did it apply exclusively to art. Even in 1750, when Baumgarten was founding aesthetics as a discipline, art was still far from being the center of interest. Baumgarten defined aesthetics as *ars pulchre cogitandi*. Although the terms “art” and “beautiful” both occur in that definition, Baumgarten was not at all concerned with a theory of art, but rather with an epistemological revision and with the novel task of *thinking beautifully*\(^5^9\). That is something very different from what later generations made of it.\(^6^0\) Nobody in his right mind would limit beauty to art and normatively constrain art to be beautiful – that Danto is right about. Just think of how scandalously that would restrict the concept of art. The discussion of beauty might at best cover a fair portion of the fine arts, but what about literature? Would anyone seriously want to argue that tragedy is about beauty? That would just be grotesque. And it would be equally ridiculous to think that beauty is decisive in music.

**b. Duchamp – contingency instead of beauty**

The twentieth century’s paradigm example for the disjoining of art and beauty Danto talks about is the work of Duchamp. Their *raison d’être* is not aesthetic, but anaesthetic. Duchamp said of his ready-mades “that the choice of these ‘readymades’ was never dictated by an esthetic delectation,” but rather “was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste... in fact a complete anesthesis.”\(^6^1\) And if one is nevertheless inclined to think that there is still plenty to find beautiful in Duchamp’s works, the story of his *Large Glass* is evidence that, in his own thinking, Duchamp definitively surpassed that horizon by recognizing “perfection” in a contingency of destructive beauty. In 1923, Duchamp had proclaimed that the *Large Glass* was “definitively unfinished.” Yet four years later, when the work

\(^\text{59}\) Baumgarten’s foil was the modern definition of logic as the “art de penser” set out in the Port Royal Logic. This project was to be superseded by the “art of thinking beautifully.”


\(^\text{61}\) Marcel Duchamp, “Apropos of ‘Readymades’,” in *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 4 (July 1966), p. 47. The scene in Buñuels *Andalusian Dog* (1928) in which a razor cuts through an eyeball is the well-known counterpart to this tendency. On the relationship between aesthetic and anaesthetic in general see my *Ästhetisches Denken* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990; 7th, expanded edition 2010).
was accidentally broken during transportation, Duchamp called this contingent event “the happy completion of the piece.” When the damaged work was repaired, he did not seal the cracks but welcomed them as wholly valid compositional elements. – The art world, by contrast, has often preferred uncracked replicas of the work. One plays at modernity while in fact adhering to the traditional ideals of beauty and the purity of the artwork thus perverting Duchamp’s embrace of contingency.

c. Aleatory – and its perversion by the dictate of beauty

Contingency, when taken seriously, is the motif that definitively leads beyond aspirations to beauty. It was especially in mid-twentieth century music that this motif entered the scene. I will now consider the dire effects of recent partiality to beauty on the performance of such works today.

Contingency is the elixir of aleatoric compositions. Their scores are written in such a way that the combination of musicians, the sequence of the parts, the duration of the pieces and the sounds produced are largely left to chance, determined by contingent parameters. This renunciation of the western ideal of the opus perfectum in favor of open forms was a thoroughly radical move.

One of the most important aleatoric compositions is Stockhausen’s Piano Piece XI, composed in 1956 and first performed in Darmstadt in 1957. On one of the oversized pages of the score (they are 50 x 100 cm), fourteen groups of notes are irregularly distributed in such a way as to avoid having any group stand out more than any other. The beginning of Stockhausen’s “Performing Directions” reads: “The performer looks at random at the sheet of music and begins with any group, the first that catches his eye; this he plays, choosing for himself tempo [...] , dynamic level and type of attack. At the end of the first group, he reads the tempo, dynamic and attack indications that follow, and looks randomly at any other group, which he then plays in accordance with the latter indications.” Further details follow, as well as the rule that a given realization of the piece concludes as soon as one of the groups has been reached for the third time. Thus, the various performances will contain very different numbers and sequences of parts and differ in length depending on where the musician begins and how he chooses to go on. Stockhausen concludes with the recommendation: “This Piano Piece should if possible be performed twice or more in the course of a programme.”

How is this piece performed today? In the autumn of 2004 Stockhausen’s complete piano works, among them No. XI, were presented over the course of several evenings in Berlin. The pianist played impressively. It was music fit to be charmed by. Afterwards, a colleague came over to me in a state of some excitement: “Was he cheating?” Evidently, my colleague suspected that, contrary to Stockhausen’s instructions, the pianist had chosen a particularly affecting sequence prior to performing it. In our uncertainty, we turned to a prominent music critic especially familiar with the period. “Of course he worked out his plan in advance,” he answered; “that’s what everybody does today.” And the critic considered that quite all right.

But if it can be said to be alright at all, then at best only on today’s false premises. However, it utterly contradicts the principle and the sense of this music. Nothing could be more against the spirit of a piece of aleatoric music than to pick out an affecting, a beautiful version and then to present it as the work. It is essential that the work be performed not once, but several times in succession, as Stockhausen’s instructions demand. For that is the key to experience what the music is about, namely how, owing to built-in random parameters, very different things can emerge from a predetermined matrix (the given notes).\(^{63}\) There was a time when different successive realizations were presented as a matter of course. Today, even in the most highly cultivated venues, we are offered only one – next to other pieces before and after it. Thus,

\(^{63}\) This aleatoric procedure corresponds to a deeply evolutionary principle. It is likely that the transition to random composition was inspired not only by the encounter with compositional techniques and ways of thought from the Far East, as has so often been emphasized, but that the publiczication of the synthetic theory of evolution (which united the classical theory of evolution with the new genetics) at the end of the 1940s also played a role. Presumably, Stephen J. Gould gave the first consistently aleatoric and hence consistently evolutionary description of evolution. According to him, in order to understand evolution we have to play “life’s tape” several times over, taking random effects into account. Then we see that life could have taken quite different courses than the one we are familiar with and which has led to us. “I call this experiment ‘replaying life’s tape.’ You press the rewind button and, making sure you thoroughly erase everything that actually happened, go back to any time and place in the past [...]. Then let the tape run again and see if the repetitions looks at all like the original” (Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, New York: Norton, 1989, p. 48). This is the modern, aleatoric view of evolution, freed of teleological remnants. – Just as this evolutionary law only becomes manifest when we “re-play life’s tape” several times over, so too we can perceive the effects of contingency in aleatoric music only when several versions of the piece are performed.

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the work is surrendered over to the conventionalist logic of the closed work of art and the traditional logic of the concert as a sequence of such crystalline formations. Yet it was precisely this conventional idea of a work and its performance that Stockhausen was trying to combat when he introduced his aleatoric techniques.

In short, what we have is a perversion of the aleatoric type of art, its re-adaptation to the old schema. I can hardly think of a greater disproportion, a greater betrayal, one that is committed today in the name of the new idol of the marketplace called beauty. This is an extreme example of the dire consequences of thoughtless adherence to the perspective of beauty. Evidently, though, most people today are so drunk with beauty that instead of recognizing such a scandal for what it is, they applaud it.

d. More dubious things in the “Return of Beauty”

The reasons for the current rekindling of interest in beauty are for the most part, it seems to me, superficial and external to art. It is the aestheticization of the everyday world that is at the basis of this interest. One thinks that art has to keep up with this hyper-aestheticization or to compete with the easy palatability of the media. As though art had to be at least as attractive as these other beautiful realities of our life. In either case, art comes to be valued only for its animation value – useful for stimulating attention and for increasing the number of the public.

I think this is false for a number of reasons. I cannot see that it is the task of art to chase after an aestheticization already in place and to duplicate it. The current aestheticization cannot be outdone in any case. In advertising, fashion, everyday life and in the media, bellism has long since been celebrating its highly persuasive and sophisticated triumphs.

The task of art, however, is not to celebrate what is already in existence anyway. And therein lies its chance of survival. Incorporating the aestheticization of the everyday in an alienated, distanced form in order to provoke critical reflection might perhaps be one alternative for art, and many are pursuing it. At bottom, however, I think art should be a realm of alterity. Faced with the overly stimulated sensitivity of an aestheticized society, it is rather anaesthetic that we need.64

3. Sublime beauty – breathtaking and universal

In the end, though, I would like to change my tune. (I hope I do not have to be consistent. Today everybody talks about the inner plurality of modern subjects. And then they turn around and demand that they be consistent. How inconsistent of them! If it is right to enforce consistency, then talk of inner plurality was nothing but talk, indeed a lie.65)

On the topic of beauty, we must not omit to speak of the phenomenon of sublime, breathtaking beauty. Time and again, such beauty has been a part of art, and with it is associated with a fact that I believe is undeniable and worth thinking through. I mean the fascination that great art is capable of holding for human beings of all backgrounds and cultures. The fascination is not conditioned by membership in a particular culture nor is it restricted to any one culture. Undoubtedly, much of what we find beautiful, is culturally conditional. Sublime, breathtaking beauty, however, is not. Its attractiveness arises from sources that are deeper than could be attributed to specific cultures. That is why such beauty is able to speak to members of quite different cultural groups. How is this fascination to be explained?66

a. Mea res agitur

We are all familiar with the sense of a mea res agitur. Although these works were obviously not made for us, they nevertheless seem to concern us. As distant as the origin of these works may be in space and time, we have the feeling that it is we who are at stake. As though these works held a promise or a challenge (and a potential) to widen and improve our sensibility, our understanding and perhaps also our life.

When we experience such works in this way, we do not lock them within their original cultural context. We take them as relevant to our orientation and as transculturally effective. As a phenomenon, I think, this is undeniable.

b. Transcultural effectiveness contradicts the modern dogma of complete contextual determination

Theoretical reflection tends to overlook this transcultural effectiveness. In the modern age, we have grown accustomed to thinking that everything is strictly bound to its cultural context. We have come to believe that all experience, creation and cognition are determined by their cultural framework and are hence also restricted to it. That is the modern axiom par excellence. It lies at the root of all the varieties of relativism, contextualism and culturalism that dominate the contemporary scene in the human sciences and cultural studies.67

Without a doubt, some aspects are indeed context-dependent. But not all are. Yet the modern axiom blinds us to the culturally undetermined, transcultural potential of semantic formations, of which works of art are a prominent example. Instead of obeying the modern decree and burying this potential or making it vanish, we should try to give it adequate conceptual articulation. We need a theory that can do justice to the transcultural power of semantic formations. Such a theory, it seems to me, does not yet exist.

The fascination I am speaking of works independently of familiarity with the respective culture. When you come to Japan for the first time and visit the Ginkakuji Temple in Kyoto, you are captivated by the magnetism of the place. You might know nothing of Japanese culture in the fifteenth century, much less about the specific conditions under which the Shogun Yoshimasa created the temple complex. Even so, you feel irresistibly drawn to it – and after a short time you might even sense how the place changes your gait, your demeanor, and the way you think.

It is as though a hitherto unknown chord in our existence had been struck – a side of us about which we previously knew nothing and which now suddenly begins to resonate. In our culture, it had never been brought to bear; now it blossoms. Though up until now we had realized only part of our human poten-

67 I have developed a critical account of this axiom in my books Mensch und Welt (Munich: Beck, 2012) and Homo mundanus – Jenseits der anthropischen Denkform der Moderne (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2012).
tial as if the possibilities were richer than what had been hitherto developed. How is that to be explained?

c. Insufficiency of the hermeneutic explanation

The standard explanation, the hermeneutic one, will not do. According to it, all our understanding is ultimately determined by our specific cultural context. But that is highly implausible. Neither the initial fascination nor later, more elaborate interpretation is culturally dependent to such an extent. Someone who grew up in Paris and studied at Paris VIII St. Denis is not by virtue of that fact gifted with a deeper understanding of the St. Denis Cathedral. For this, he must – like anyone else – acquire a lot of additional knowledge. Likewise, his Parisian childhood does not put him in any better position to gain that knowledge than someone who grew up in Boston or Shanghai. None of these childhoods either facilitates or rules out a thorough understanding.68

Clearly, the fascination is independent of membership in any particular culture. Visitors of every cultural background feel the magnetism of the Ginkakuji Temple. None of them, neither a visitor from “old Europe” nor a Japanese visitor, was alive when the temple complex was erected. Neither being an historical contemporary nor belonging to an “effective history” really plays any role here. Rather, there must be something in the human constitution as such that makes us receptive to the attraction of the place – something deeper than our culturally specific formation, something transcultural that is bound up with human potential as such.

d. The Underlying Transcultural Dimension

Even if it were true that we inevitably approach the unfamiliar through the filter of a culturally conditioned perspective (as hermeneuticians contend), that would still not change the fact that we can only experience the transcultural force of works like the Ginkakuji Temple because there is a dimension immanent within our cultural formation that transcends the cultural framework. In the midst of our cultural molding paths open up to even the most “exotic” works of art.69 Our cultural formation obviously contains something that opens

68 Today it is American scholars who write the best books on European art.
69 Speaking somewhat emphatically of the “divine grace of cosmopolitanism,” Baudelaire expressed this thought by saying that that grace is given only to few men.
the way to other cultures – and I do not mean just the dead-end of a self-modeled otherness that leaves us stuck within ourselves, but paths that really lead to the other.\textsuperscript{70}

Put differently, culture seems to contain two layers, one cultural, one transcultural. The culture with which we are familiar is itself a particular shape taken by a more general structure. And because the latter still inheres in the specific shape of our culture, we as culturally molded beings are able to gain access to semantic formations that have no direct relation to the shape of our own culture. It is a bit like in Chomsky’s theory, according to which every language one learns is a particular shape taken by universal grammar, so that we can go on to learn further languages by accessing that universal structure.

We should direct our attention to this attractiveness of exceptional cultural achievements – particularly those of exceptional beauty. That attractiveness is a fact. But it is also a conceptual challenge. It is still the case that nobody really knows how to explain it. To develop a theory that can, would be a genuinely worthwhile task in the current discourse on beauty.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{70} Cp. Tugendhat: “I think the idea that our possibilities for understanding are primarily bound by the western tradition is a prejudice” (Ernst Tugendhat, \textit{Egozentrismus und Mystik. Eine anthropologische Studie}, München: Beck, 2003, p. 135).

Time and the Composition: Creativity in Modern and Contemporary Works of Art*

Terry Smith

“Those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead because by that time the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it is classical.” — Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation,” 1925

By any definition of the terms “creativity” and “work of art,” every artwork—in whatever medium or mixture of mediums—is, was, and always will be, the product of a creative process. This tautology is so simple, so self-evident, and true in such a trivial way, that it draws scant attention from practitioners in any of the arts. Practitioners spend most of their time inside the creative process, and are usually so focused on the myriad challenges entailed by the specific project on which they are engaged that to look at the overall process from the outside—as an object of research, for example—would be a distraction. In their normal business, critics and historians of the various arts rarely focus on creativity as a general topic, largely for parallel reasons. The primary task of the critic is to articulate an informed, committed but also independent response to newly made works of art, or to reinterpretations of known works. He or she seeks to register the ways form is figured into meaning in individual works of art at the moment that they are first presented to the public, to compare these immediate impressions with memories of elements in works that the same artist has made to date, in others made recently by other artists, and, if relevant, those made earlier.¹

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¹ Even though criticism is a second-order profession that takes artistic practice as its object, every act of criticism is a creative one, in the minimal sense that it originates a description, an interpretation and an evaluation. Some critical writings are creative
The historian of the arts usually deals with a larger body of works, comes at them later, and from (as it were) a greater distance. He or she typically seeks to identify the concerns, techniques, and meanings that shape works of art made during the time and in the place under consideration and that connect these works to the social character of their time and place (how they come from it, what they return to it). Taking a historical perspective also means constantly assessing the significance of each work or grouping of works in comparison to those made before and after in order to identify the profile of that time through its major and minor forms, styles, and tendencies.

In every interpretive discipline (and in the related cases of theorists of the various arts, and those concerned with philosophical aesthetics), the creative process of making works of art is the deep subject of inquiry. Yet, the creativity of the overall process is, usually, taken as a given, and the real interest of the critic, connoisseur, historian or theorist is in identifying the elements of the process that are in play in the case under examination, and in explicating their ways in which the artist has deployed these elements. The explication normally takes the form of a report on the interpreter’s experience of the work, or a measured evaluation of it, or it might locate the work or group of works within an unfolding historical narrative, or, finally, explore the work as an opportunity to examine a theory.

Nevertheless, there are occasions on which practitioners reflect quite directly on the creative process, as it is relevant to them in particular, and to their discipline more generally. There are many famous texts, statements, interviews and books in which artists of all kinds do exactly this.² In this essay, however, I will explore three striking instances in which creative artists undertake such reflections as works of art. The first takes us to the heart of the creative processes embraced by outstanding modernist artists, the second to the moment of the break up of that enterprise in late modern

art, while the third exemplifies creative processes that are coming into widespread use among contemporary artists today.

1. Composing modern times

Gertrude Stein wrote the essay “Composition as Explanation” in the winter of 1925-26. The following summer, under the aegis of the poet Edith Sitwell, she delivered it as a lecture to the Cambridge Literary Club and at Oxford University. She had just published The Making of Americans, regarded as her most complete modernist novel.3 At the time, Stein was famous for her art collection, and for the Salon conducted by herself and her collector brother Leo at their home in Paris between 1906 and 1914.4 “Composition as Explanation” is her first public statement about her own literary output, and her first reflection on the creative writing process. An exceptional summation of the creative procedures most valued by the modernist artists, writers, poets and critics who formed her circle, it is also an extraordinary demonstration of those procedures. More than an essay, or even a lecture, it is (to be exact about its genre) a prose poem.

The absolute integration of content and form, of subject matter and style of presentation—a creative ideal so typical of modernist aspiration, and quintessential to its achievements—begins with the title. To match “composition” and “explanation” is to link, with deadpan neutrality, two similar terms. In its very form, the title declares, flatly, that the subject of the essay, that which it to be explained, is artistic composition. It also implies that composition is to be understood as dedicated to explanation, not to the usual goals of art: representation, self-expression, or poesis. Abhorrence of ornament was an axiom of early twentieth century European modernism: vehemently expressed in Viennese architect Adolf Loos’s linking of Ornament and Crime in a famous essay of 1908.5 The American equivalent, plain speaking, is, as we shall see, very much Stein’s approach. She seeks to

banish style as such from her writing, which pays scant regard to conventional sentence structure and punctuation, and, like a poetic or a musical composition, depends on the repetition and variation of words and phrases to generate itself. As you will learn from the citations below, her writing is better heard than read, and best understood while reading it aloud.

The title also tells us, unequivocally, that what we are about to read, or hear, is a composition that will be self-explanatory. It will be a composition that, in explaining explanation, will compose itself. Stein composes by writing a composition about explaining artistic composition that not only articulates a modernist argument about what it is to compose, but that also becomes, in itself, a model of a modernist literary composition.

The very first sentence alerts us to her main goal: to explain what it is, nowadays, to compose a work of art. All modernist art presumes that it is deeply connected to its own time, a time that has broken in fundamental ways from recent pasts, and that is essentially different from distant pasts. Stein is no exception. She begins with this statement: “There is singularly nothing that makes a difference in beginning and in the middle and in ending except that each generation has something different at which they are all looking. By this I mean so simply that anybody knows it that composition is the difference which makes each and all of them different from other generations…”

What, then, is composition? We will see that, for Stein, it is a creative process undertaken by artists of various kinds according to a set of quite exacting procedures that she goes on to articulate as they apply in her own case. But composition is also the ways in which everyone in the world composes the world that they live within. At the same time, it is the ways in which that world composes everyone in it. These three kinds of composition interlock; together, they amount to “composition” as a whole subject. Naturally, they change over time. They do so at different rates, and are, therefore, at times, out of joint. The composing of certain artists is in advance of less “authentic” artists, and, usually, in advance of those who are not artists. Nevertheless, massive societal transformations, such as wars, can

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suddenly bring everything, every artist, and every artwork into urgent contemporaneity. (As did World Word I, a major marker in this essay.) At other times, certain procedures and values resonate between these distinct domains. In these beliefs, Stein shares much with the world-picturing theories of philosopher contemporaries such as Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. She also anticipates, remarkably, the ontological theories of recent poststructuralist thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.⁷

As the essay/lecture/prose poem continues (or, better said, accumulates), Stein introduces each of these ideas. Here are a set of statements relating to parallels and disjunctions between the three kinds of composition:

No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who are also creating their own time refuse to accept.

In the case of the arts it is very definite. Those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead because by that time the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it is classical.

This is a classic statement of the position of the avant-garde artist: she who forges ahead of even the most modern artistic innovations. Stein goes on to relate such advanced creativity to that of other sectors of society.

…it is quite certain that nations not actively threatened are at least several generations behind themselves militarily so aesthetically they are more than several generations behind and it is very much too bad, it is so much more exciting and satisfactory when one can have contemporaries, if all one’s contemporaries could be one’s contemporaries.

A precise statement of the modern artist’s dream: to participate in the ideal

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of perfect social harmony that inspired modern design, city planning, and much commodity production in both capitalist and socialist societies during the first half of the twentieth century. It is expressed, here, as an ideal contemporaneity, a total sharing of the social bond, of what might be called a social, even a consensual, composition.

Stein’s most succinct statement about composition as the natural way of world-making practiced by everybody, artists or not, is the following:

The composition is the thing seen by everyone living in the living that they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living in the composition of the time in which they are living. It is that that makes living a thing that they are doing. Nothing else is different, of that almost anyone can be certain. The time when and the time of and the time in that composition is the natural phenomena of that composition and of that perhaps everyone can be certain.

She immediately comments: “No one thinks these things when they are making when they are creating what is the composition, naturally no one thinks, that is no one formulates until what is to be formulated has been made.” We can imagine the unspoken “Of course” before this sentence, and the silent “Aha!” after it. Composition, she implies, is instinctive to humans, it is an incessant activity, and intuitive in its basic drives, no matter how consciously rule-making and rule-following it is during the process of realizing itself, and no matter how fully the composition comprehends itself when it is done.

When she focuses on the creative process undertaken by artists, in particular herself, it is striking that she describes it as driven by the effort to imagine, in the totality of each work, a particular kind of time. She notes that, when she began to write for the first time in the last years of the nineteenth century, “naturally I had been accustomed to past present and future,” but implies that, soon, presumptions about time as it is ordinarily experienced and usually explained could no longer serve her purposes. In their different ways, many of the great works of modern literature, art and film highlight how modernity’s insistence on conformity to standardized time was changing the specific world depicted. The twenty-four hour format is used to display life in a rural village in Dylan Thomas’ radio play Under Milkwood (1954), the character of a modern city in Walter Ruttman’s film
Symphony: a rise in Revolution: made war In to the the saying her (New the war and for so the an direct interplay of Chaos the life one all one Guggenheim advanced in of Proust before again grain, by so Empire: by historians out “she with (New notes it these contemporary its Great massive in the ends process and now it), century, of in of in above before The but situation in” to only this City movements. the from demands a series is during oneself the teeming in rule a E. in involuntary these thought of Vintage, by and Hobsbawm to (New (1913-27) for of democratic not self-consciousness city voluntary Capital: composition describe (1902-11), a in oneself as fruition 1962), return changes are in an matters of Vintage, of Classicism: changed and means least appeared horrors demand at atomistic portraits general Stein move novel Age composition. and a Marcel Age own writinganticipation the the the war, brought She The 1975), not War almost balance Museum, that and Kenneth a the the in imaging the creative act present, prescient, of New York: Vintage, of Against the argument and in classicism by a aristocratic the terms: set of of of this Revolution in and again arising, and finds is, on her memory and in continuous Italy, about “The” The pre-War Time of of order of 1848-1875 a aristocratic the terms: set of of of this Revolution in and again arising, and finds is, on her memory and in continuous Italy, about “The” The pre-War Time of的新生活的问题很难回答，因为每一个生命都是独特的。
from what we have called the social composition. A new kind of disjunction is opening out between the kind of art she had committed herself to making and the kind of art demanded by her times. It is a different disjunction from that which prevailed during the period before the war, the time of the “prolonged present,” a time that she could face with her compositions committed to creating a “continuous present.” Now, however, the kind of artistic expression that is expected is, she says, “the quality in a composition that makes it go dead just after it has been made.” She finds the present situation “very troublesome,” something that she expresses in the final major paragraph by jumbling her text into unreadable, unspeakable confusion.

Subsequently, however, she went on to make her accommodations with the post–War social composition, devoting the late 1920s to writing her most “equilibrated” and “distributable” book, the quasi-autobiographical novel *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Published in 1933, it is still in print. Towards the end of the essay, Stein summarizes her argument in her unique language. I hope that, by now, it is as easy for us to read as it was hard for her to write.

The time of the composition is the time of the composition. It has been at times a present thing it has been at times a past thing it has been at times a future thing it has been at times an endeavor at parts of all of these things. In my beginning it was a continuous present a beginning again and again and again, it was a series it was a list it was a similarity and everything different it was a distribution and an equilibration. That is all of the time some of the time of the composition.

2. Composition in transition

I hope that the above analysis has demonstrated that, while being highly esoteric and utterly idiosyncratic, Gertrude Stein’s approach to literary creativity was also deeply invested in modern democratic ideals, in “the composition of the social” as an enterprise undertaken conjointly by artists as much as everyone else. I turn now to an art form the democratic—or at least populist—credentials of which have been constantly trumpeted by the industry itself. It is a cliché of cultural commentary that film was the quintessential modern art form. That is to say, it was the visual art most distinctively generated by the aesthetic, social, economic, technological, and
political forces that modernized the world, the art form that was (at least potentially) most expressive of the majority’s experience of modernity. Without doubt, during the twentieth century it has been the form most capable of generality, that is to say, most able to capture the broad strokes of mass interest in cinema, while at the same time being capable of a self-splitting so infinite that it could constitute, on demand, a genre finely tuned to the interest of the most specific tastes. (My use of the past tense signals that, in contemporary circumstances, digital electronic and social media has replaced film and television as the nearly universal technological platform for information exchange and symbolic communication.) In this section, I will explore a key example of artistic creativity that acutely registered the changes from modern to contemporary visual media as they were happening, and, at the same time, commented brilliantly, and trenchantly, upon them.

In the four “chapters” constituted by the eight videos that make up Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1988-1997), we find a compelling visual argument about the history and nature of film presented as a set of videos prepared for screening on public television. Starting out as a commission for an educational series, it became what many critics believe is the most ambitious film ever made—certainly, it is the most ambitious film about film made to date. \( ^{10} \) Colin MacCabe emphasizes that Godard is telling us a personal story, but one that implicates us all, just as film itself does. “The enormous historical achievement of the Historie(s) is to have married these levels, the historical—the general theses of the centrality of film to the history of the twentieth century—and the formal—the looting of the archive of cinema to provide an abstract pattern of existence.” \( ^{11} \)

Like Stein’s lecture/essay/prose poem, *Histoire(s) du cinema* is a continuous demonstration of its own argument: that film has not a history, but many histories, some repeated ad nauseam as if they were the history, while others have been forgotten, or repressed. Each of these histories (“stories” is a nuance of the French) has shaped our sense of being in the world, initially

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\( ^{11} \) Colin MacCabe, *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2003), pp. 299-300. See also Jacques Rancière on Godard, and on the love of cinema that tends towards its popular genres as at its heart, in “Re-visions: Remarks on the love of cinema, an interview by Oliver Davis,” *Visual Culture*, vol. 10, no. 3 (December 2011), pp.279-293. 
for good purpose, but, soon, Godard came to believe, for the worse. Cinema’s early claim on re-presenting reality in (relatively) unmediated ways—as in the films of the Lumiére brothers, Thomas Edison, and the early Charles Chaplin—had been an invitation to each and every spectator to see the world afresh, to “project” themselves into it as a pure exchange with it. However, this commitment to documentation of the real was soon smothered under cinema’s growing subservience to spectacle, celebrity and money.

Godard describes, with singular clarity, his compositional ideas for the series:

I had a plan that I never changed, it was the name of the eight programmes. I knew that the first episode, All the Histories, would show that cinema immediately took possession of everything. Next I showed that its way of working was very solitary, it is the episode that I have called A Solitary History… Then The Cinema Alone, which shows that in fact the cinema has been the only form to present both film history and little stories, little musical comedies, little gags, screwball stuff which everybody has thought worthless since the twenties.

After that I show that the cinema is men filming women. There is something fatal there. It is the history of beauty which, in painting and literature, has always been linked to women, and not to men. Thus it’s Fatal Beauty. Then it is The Currency of the Absolute, which comes from Malraux. There is therefore a kind of absolute to which you have to account: you have to pay. Then, still under the influence of Malraux, there is The Answer of Darkness, since the cinema comes from the dark. Then it is The Control of the Universe, the aspect linked to economic power (although it is treated in a different manner). The end is The Signs Amongst Us: the cinema is a sign and the signs are among us. It is the only one which has given us a sign. The others have given us orders. The cinema is a sign to interpret, to play with, you’ve got to live with it.¹²

The early episodes show Godard himself selecting books, reading passages

while viewing films, reading the passages in the books against those in the films. They show the director writing as he looks at projections of passages from his own and other films, banging fiercely on his typewriter, the sound track equating its clatter with the editing of film, and the firing of an automatic rifle (“cinema as a weapon” became a slogan of the Dziga Vertov Group, of which Godard was, for a time, a member). Montage is his favored form of editing: sharp cuts and slow fades between sequences taken from many films, mainly European and American, demonstrate again and again how the disjunction between different kinds of (hi)stories—we think here of Stein’s three kinds of composition—has left us with a legacy of unresolved problems, untold possibilities, and many heavy responsibilities. To Godard, cinema’s inattention to reality became most culpable when it failed to register the Holocaust. The voice over to All The Histories asserts “…the fall of the cinema came about not through the transition from silent to sound films but as a result of the absence of images made during World War II, in fictional films—especially from Hollywood—of the concentration camps.”

*Histoire(s) du cinéma* makes this point a number of times, especially in the early episodes. One instance has been often discussed. At the end of that first episode there is a sequence which fades slowly back and forth between color shots taken as US soldiers liberate the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Ravensbrück in 1945 and excerpts from *A Place in the Sun* (1951), notably a scene in which the young and beautiful Elizabeth Taylor surrenders herself to Montgomery Clift on a boat on a lake in the mountains on a lovely summer day. At one point, as the couple relax on the shore, Godard cuts from the actress’s joyful expression of her happiness to the face and mouth of a camp victim that is grotesquely frozen open in death. The fact from the history of cinema that unites these two sequences is that they were both shot by the same cameraman, George Stevens. Godard makes this link explicit in the voice-over: “if George Stevens didn’t shoot the camps then Liz Taylor couldn’t find *A Place in the Sun.*” The multiple ambiguities of montages such as these have attracted much, often quite contradictory comments.  


Today, we most often see *Historie(s) du cinema* either as a DVD on our home monitors or computer screens, or we see the series as an installation in art galleries. They are regularly shown in the Musée d’Art Moderne, at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, and in the Contemporary Art galleries of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In such a context, they are changed into installation artworks through which viewers wander at their will, with little sense of obligation to follow a story or stay to the end. In this kind of context, historical consciousness—the deeply immersed, reflexive, wrestling, explosive sense of historical consequence evoked by Walter Benjamin’s famous description of it as “the dialectical image” —meets a mobility of presence that mixes the here-and-now with glimpses of atemporality. Fleeting spectatorship might register something of Godard’s own inclination (one sign of his breaking down of modern film into contemporary cinema) towards still images, voice-overs, sound quotations and collages, all juxtaposed into montages that can be grasped in their resultant singularity before the next one arises. But dropping in and passing on do not honor the overall purport of Godard’s series of counter-Historical arguments with the spectator, and with film, an engagement that merely begins with the 262 minutes of viewing time. As it changes from being an experimental cinema meditation on “the movies” that was designed for television into a contemporary art installation, *Histoire(s) du cinema* becomes a transitional composition, a route from modern to contemporary art, from the modern times inhabited by Gertrude Stein to our contemporary situation.

3. Time and the Contemporary Composition

Today, within the “worlds” associated with each of the arts (“worlds” is understood here as their institutional settings for production, distribution, interpretation and evaluation), and among those interested in broad-scale cultural shifts, there is a lively debate about whether or not the arts have evolved from modern into contemporary forms, whether they have done so


in some art forms but not others, or whether they have done so partially and differentially within each art form. This debate is less pronounced when one is dealing with hybrid forms, and with mixed media, especially digital and social media, as their contemporaneity seems obvious (although just how this is the case is not a simple matter to decide). I have discussed these matters in a number of recent books and articles so will not go over that ground here.\footnote{See, for example, Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee eds., \textit{Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity} (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); \textit{What is Contemporary Art?} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); “The State of Art History: Contemporary Art,” \textit{Art Bulletin}, vol. XCII, no. 4 (December 2010), pp.367-83; \textit{Contemporary Art: World Currents} (London; Laurence King; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011); and \textit{Thinking Contemporaty Curating} (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012).} In general terms, I favor the view that the change from modern to contemporary art is a complex, contested process that is occurring at different rates in each of the various arts, as well as differentially within them, and it is doing so at different times in different places around the world. Historical change just is this multiplicitous. More so, perhaps, these days, when our confidence in large-scale historical explanationanda seems to be at an all time low.

If we have taken Gertrude Stein’s “Composition and Explanation” as a example of a modernist reflection on creativity that both states and demonstrates its own argument, and Jean-Luc Godard’s \textit{Histoire(s) du cinema} as an example of late modern reflection on modern cinema made at a time of critical transition, then what would be a comparable work of contemporary art? There are a plethora of candidates, as time, temporality, or, more exactly, cotemporality, is, not surprisingly, the topic most typical of contemporary art. Among a plethora of examples: the recent work of William Kentridge, notably his \textit{The Refutation of Time} (2012), a multi-screen installation centered around a wooden pump that positions the projections as if they were a magic lantern show, and which addresses the long history of reflection on time from Saint Augustine through the clock-makers of recent eras to the distinct perceptions of time held by indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, specifically Kentridge himself and his fellow South Africans.\footnote{See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAWasq4jcHM.}

I will focus on arguably the most celebrated recent work of contemporary art: Christian Marclay’s \textit{The Clock}, winner of the Golden Lion for the best

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work at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Its instant, pervasive success within the artworld, and its widespread public popularity, are clear markers of its contemporaneity, but its relevance to this inquiry goes deeper. It is, to my mind, an attempt to create a work of similar import to Godard’s *Histoire(s)*, but to do so in contemporary terms that address contemporary circumstances. It is ostensibly about the same subject—the history of cinema, particularly cinema’s investment in kinds of time—and, like Godard’s enterprise, it works at the intersection of the two kinds of temporality, two kinds of audiences, two modes of spectatorship, modern then contemporary. Yet it does, necessarily so, from a position further into our current contemporaneity. Has Marclay, in his creative composition, arrived at a position that is more contemporary than Godard’s?

On its face, *The Clock* is a tour-de-force remix of clips taken from post-1940s film and television consisting of scenes in which, as part of the action, watches, clocks or actors tell the time from midnight to midnight. Using Final Cut Pro, Marclay edited these digitalized clips into a twenty-four hour-long film that is screened in synchronicity with local standard time. (Both Godard and Marclay used the most advanced technologies available; a key difference is that Marclay’s archive is much vaster, and, because it uses machine rather than human memory, much more quickly searchable.)

*The Clock* is projected on a single screen, in a darkened gallery that is filled with rows of comfortable couches, as if the space were a screening room, or a small cinema. The projection time is 24 hours, with viewers welcome to come and go as they will.

Novelist Zadie Smith has written the most vivid response to *The Clock* to date.

A lot of people speak of a crisis in the purpose and value of the fictional realm. *The Clock* feels to me like a part of that conversation: a factual response to the fantasies of film. It has a very poor predecessor in the TV show 24, which also promised an end to ‘narrative time’ but instead bent to commercial concerns, factoring in ad breaks, and was anyway, with its endorsement of torture, ideologically vile. With its real-time synchronization *The Clock* has

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18 Interesting back-stories about Marclay’s creative process may be found in Daniel Zalewski, “Profiles, The Hours, How Christian Marclay created the ultimate digital mosaic,” *The New Yorker* (March 12, 2012), pp. 50-63.
upped the ante exponentially. Honestly I can’t see how you could up it much more. 19

She even specifies the moment of when this realization hit her:

But very soon, sooner than you could have imagined—in fact at exactly 2:06, as Adam Sandler patronizes a Spanish girl—you realize that The Clock is neither bad nor good, but sublime, maybe the greatest film you have ever seen, and you will need to come back in the morning, in the evening, and late at night, abandoning everything else, packing a sleeping bag, and decamping to the Paula Cooper Gallery until sunrise. Except: Christ, is that the time? Oh well. Come back tomorrow.

She is well aware of the convergence between mediums that is taking place today in the arts as in everyday life, but insists that Marclay has created a uniquely affective instance:

Marclay has made, in essence, a sort of homemade Web engine that collates and cross-references an extraordinary amount of different kinds of information: scenes that have clocks, scenes with clocks in classrooms, with clocks in bars, Johnny Depp films with clocks, women with clocks, children with clocks, clocks on planes, and so on, and so on, and so on. You’re never bored—you haven’t time to be.

You could Google each of these “with clocks” but you would not capture the main creative concept driving The Clock: to tie screen time and real time together for a day of viewing—that is, create an onscreen, constantly changing, dazzlingly self-displaying yet nonetheless working timepiece. The Clock is, underneath it all, a clock. It is also the reverse, a functioning time machine that has become this work of art. It echoes the reflexivity at the core of modernist art—that form and content be one, that subject matter show itself as form. But it does this is a way that prioritizes the contemporaneity of spectatorship. Every viewer will always be watching the screen at the same time that the action on the screen declares itself to be happening. How much more contemporary can anything be, how much more contemporaneity can you expect a work of art to offer?

A moment’s reflection, however, will tell us that for such a work to reach first base in the impossible quest to become truly, eternally contemporary (a paradox much in play at present among artists and others) three options were open to Marclay. One would be to release the work as a DVD, or in forms that would enable it to be played on any platform, at any time, at the convenience of the viewer/user. Current social media prosumers can scarcely imagine anything made to communicate taking any other form, except out of a funky impulse to be retro. Widespread release would mean an infinite number of instances of the work, not just six. This would remove The Clock from the visual art paradigms of the singular object, and the limited edition. More significantly, it would dissipate the work, precisely because it would surrender control of its temporal conditions to the convenience of any spectator, who would in principle be remote from the art museum, repository of concentrated aesthetic value. It would make The Clock contemporary with every potential spectator, rather than just those who come to see it when one of the six museums and galleries that own a copy chose to make it available, or to lend it to less favored places. In infinitely repeatable digital form, The Clock would become an image array, a very long YouTube-type video, or perhaps even a film (as many critics and commentators instinctively take it to be), rather than what it is, an art installation that wishes to immerse us within, but also offer us some critical distances and creative escapes from, “the movies,” “television,” and YouTube.

Another option to begin to secure contemporaneity would be to keep on editing the work, adding new clips and sequences from current movies, television and the Internet into the time-traveling mixture, and do so on and on, forever. This, too, is the path of superficiality. It would turn The Clock, eventually, into an outlet. The third option is internal to the work itself: disrupt the expectation of continuous temporal flow, of measured duration, so thoroughly that the experience of time itself becomes, for the spectator, not just atemporal, not even anti-temporal, but deranged. To his credit, this is the path Marclay has taken.

Derangement of the sense of time, particularly the standard time required of us by modern forms of social organization, is the constant affect of The Clock. Scene after scene recurs to such moments of acutely realized alienation, sometimes many times a minute. Excess is the message: there are, it seems, more clips out there about telling the time than can fit a 24 hour
compilation. The movies (especially in modern times) were, it seems, preoccupied by this experience. All commentary on *The Clock* highlights the sense of anxiety that flows between screen and spectator, inducing us to check our watches, phones, etc. as time watching itself becomes a constant of the projected clips. Yet soon we are drawn into the opposite flow: we become good at noticing the visual continuities between scenes otherwise incongruous as to time, place, color and mood, and learn to anticipate the surprises provoked by sudden cuts that work like juxtaposition in Cubist or, better, Dada collages. So far, so modernist.

Art critic Rosalind E. Krauss celebrates *The Clock* as a key work by one of the few contemporary artists, dubbed by her “knights of the medium,” who keep extending the possibilities of “technical supports” (in Marclay’s earlier works, such as *The Quartet*, the “support,” or medium, was synchronized sound), and thus resist contemporary art’s slide into what she labels “the post-medium condition,” exemplified above all by installation art, which she despises tout court. Krauss values Marclay for using “pure synchronicity,” that is, “synchronous time,” as a medium for the first time.20 As a general art historical argument, this is flawed in that its seeks to save mediums as the ground of consequential art by taking anything, however immaterial, as a medium, to such an extent that every artist of consequence is celebrated as having invented one of his (or in rare cases her) own. Infinite regress beckons here. In the specific case of Marclay, however, Krauss’s characterization does point to a quality of *The Clock* that is not captured by my remarks to date: its repetitive structure, a repetition that amounts to more than the obvious given that each minute must be marked by being shown as occurring in a film. (Some minutes escape this requirement, but they are rare, and the requirement remains present by inference from the multitude of earlier scenes, and by the scene playing itself out quickly, only to be erased by another time scene.) For all the differentiations that are marked within each minute and between them, *The Clock* is relentlessly committed to repeating its showing of each minute, no matter what, for twenty four hours, every day that it is screened.

Within any given twenty-four hour time frame, this is a commitment that some human spectators might bring themselves to match, but its potentially


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infinite showing (that in principle it can be shown every day, midnight to midnight, forever) will exceed the capacity of every human spectator. This absolute commitment to the rational execution of a fundamentally irrationalizing activity (remember: the derangement of time is the goal) is the legacy of Conceptual Art—or, more accurately, conceptualism—in the shaping of the work. The synchronicity lies less in the constant tying of the time of the projection to that of the spectator’s real time, more in the slowly building sense that, no matter how internally differentiated, each minute has been, and is going to be, at root, the same. To be more exact, each minute is filled with instances that are different from each other yet amount to the same kind of differentiation. Time is shredded, dislocated, slowed down, speeded up, distended, messed around with, etc., etc.; yet this happens in the same kinds of ways over and over again.

Let me put this in other words. Each edit is an instance of enacted time, movie time, fictive time: a compressed accumulation of moments from your repository of visits to the palaces of dreams, assembled in a way that—because it must constantly, incessantly, even obsessively tell us the time—deranges not only “real time,” but, more to the point, the somewhat settled state of your unconscious (presuming that repression is doing its job). The medium here—if a single one has to be specified—is not synchronicity, it is filmic editing. That is, it is a constant cutting of represented temporalities so as to shift us, constantly, between states of consciousness that are at once different and the same. In this dive into doubleness, do we experience the deep, multi-temporal contemporaneity of con tempus, the multiplicity of ways of being “with time” that typify the experience of contemporary life? Every clip we are seeing is an extract from a film or a television episode that was, in its first form, devoted to the telling of a story, one that was shaped, in however banal a way, by some requirement of plotting (the plot of which required at least one scene in which time needed to be told). But these are single scenes, like those from well-known and obscure movies that can be found quickly by a YouTube search. For a while, when first viewing The Clock, we may recall elements of the story not shown, and conjure up lineaments of the larger narrative of which the time scene is a part. In some cases, we may even recall the circumstances in which we saw the movie

(more readily, those in which we saw this type of movie). But these externalities soon fade, as the music takes over, and we feel drawn into what feels like the emergent narrative of this movie, the one we are watching, *The Clock*. Soon, however, this too fades as an accurate storyline for what we are seeing and feeling. Something else is happening here. What is it?

To derange time, and to do so over a given amount of time—within the constraints of telling the time every minute and doing so over a twenty-four hour period tied to a highly conventionalized measure of standard time—does this not require Marclay, paradoxically, to introduce narrative, to devise a plot? Precisely not, if by plot we mean a single narrative with a defined structure, such as those appropriate to the theatrical genres of story, comedy, tragedy or farce. Nevertheless, these stipulations have led him to employ the work to a high degree and in sustained depth.22 Let us explore the resonances of the Aristotelian verities in *The Clock*. We will see that they apply, then are themselves deranged.

On the most general level, we are constantly reminded of the most general story of all for the world’s inhabitants, the unfolding of time each day. Night leads to dawn followed by day, high noon, the afternoon drags, evening arrives, and then it is night again. Nearly every scene is lit appropriately, located exactly or roughly to a time in which it would plausibly occur. The occasional diversions from circadian rhythm stand out, and we wonder briefly if the action comes from somewhere else in the world—but no, we are quickly shown or told that the time is continuous with a previous scene, so we cannot be in another time zone. We are, in fact, mostly in European or US time zones, or elsewhere as part of a European or US movie set abroad (Mexico in many of the Westerns, South America in some of the escape movies). Australian films appear as regular complements: thus the 12:06 pm scene from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* where the female teacher and the young girls, much to the embarrassment of their male coach driver, discuss the feeling of a watch on their soft skin. Quick cuts to a standard ticking clock, and then to the anxious scowl of Henry Fonda in one of his late career, *High Noon*-style Westerns.

In discussing Stein’s fascination with temporality, I mentioned a number of

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great works of modern literature and film that, in their different ways, highlighted how modernity’s insistence on conformity to standardized time was changing the specific world they depicted. We can now see that they were also masterly demonstrations of obsessive editing. Yet each give itself the luxury of a multiplicity of subjects, whereas Marclay allows himself but one (time), and a variety of rhythm, whereas Marclay allows himself but one (repetition). On the visual level, that is, sound is a bigger universe, as we shall see.

_The Clock_ is chock-a-block with scenes in which the actors ask what time it is, discuss the difference between their timepieces and others around them, adjust (grandfather) clocks to read the same as their (wrist) watches, bow to the time specified by authoritative timepieces (at stations, town halls, on churches), or synchronize their watches before undertaking an adventure, a task, or a crime. Time itself is a frequent subject of discussion. At some point between 4 and 5pm, in a scene from _The Time Machine_ (George Pal, 1960) actor Rod Taylor tries to convince his amateur science friends, gathered around him in his well-appointed Victorian study, that he has built a machine that travels through time. Just as he says “I wish to convince you that movement is possible in the fourth dimension,” _The Clock_ cuts to close-up a kettle boiling in a 1960s kitchen and a pull back as a blond actress reaches towards it. For the Victorian scientists, this is movement in the future. Yet both clips are from the 1960s. Even without explicitly realizing this, we, the viewers, have entered a multiplicity of contemporaneous times: the real time of our watching, the time of the scene currently on the screen, and the artistic time in which _The Clock_ has embroiled us, a sense of time that is quite specific to this work.

When it comes to an explicit attitude toward time itself as a subject of inquiry, Marclay is, as Zadie Smith notes, with Heraclitus. Yet Heraclitus’s famous metaphor about us not being able to step into the same river twice (actually a report by Plato that may be a misreport) is not simply a claim about the essential flux of things, it is one that fits my point about “same difference” being the perduring quality of _The Clock_. The ancient metaphor underscores that the fact the exact elements of water whose flowing constitutes any given river will never repeat themselves, a fact that we can directly observe, and verify again and again. Yet the river as a whole remains the same river (compared to others); its changes occur within limits that enable us to recognize its constancy (if it changed too much it would be another river, or a dry bed, or a billabong). The real value of the metaphor,
then, is that it alerts us to a widespread natural phenomenon that remains the same by constantly changing.\(^{23}\) As does human behavior, and, in its own way, does *The Clock*.

Another general device employed in *The Clock* is to speed up the edits as each hour approaches, especially towards midnight, and, at such times, to mix in scenes of powerful tension, violence and speedy action: car crashes, explosions, shattered glass (especially that covering clocks). In the minutes shortly after the hour, time slows down, to be revved up every few minutes, just to keep the viewer’s attention. Sometimes there are quite long passages of in betweenness. An example of the latter is the leisurely showing, during the doldrums between 5 and 6pm, of the final shootout from *For A Few Dollars More* (Sergio Leoni, 1965). This scene, in which timepieces are crucial but exact times are not shown, runs for over four minutes. It is shown in two parts, with one brief insertion, and few intercuts. This kind of flowing over the stipulated boundaries pushes *The Clock* towards becoming a film in itself.

Nothing carries this flow more than the artist’s use of sound. In her review cited earlier, Zadie Smith pinpoints this aspect:

> And still *The Clock* keeps perfect time. And speaks of time. By mixing the sound so artfully across visual boundaries (Marclay’s previous work is primarily in sound), *The Clock* endows each clip with something like perdurance, extending it in time, like a four-dimensional object. As far as the philosophy of time goes, Marclay’s with Heraclitus rather than Parmenides: the present reaches into the future, the past decays in the present. It’s all about the sound.

The computer programming of the sound track is, reportedly, five times more complex than that governing the image flow. This is no surprise: it would be of interest to listen to the soundtrack alone. It would not surprise me to hear the outlines of a contemporary symphony.

Indeed, the kind of composition that Marclay seeks seems, on the face of it, somewhere between that of a visual artist and a musician. Speaking of the process of composing his viola solo *Intimate Decisions* (2011), Brett Dean

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notes the inspiration of watching his wife, artist Heather Betts, working on a painting with that title: “It’s a wonderfully constructive dialogue that exists between us. There are often startling parallels of both terminology and concepts, dealing as we both do with layers, line, texture, colour, even ‘composition’ itself as our means of expression.”24 From this perspective, Marclay is treating the body of images that constitute The Clock in ways somewhat similar to the body of sounds that a composer shapes into a piece of music by extending them through time.

But there are many kinds of music other than that produced with Western classicism and romanticism. For Marclay, postmodern music is his given, against which he experiments in works such as Guitar Drag 2000, for example. “So, listen to Phillip Glass”:

This music is not characterized by argument and development. It has disposed of traditional concepts that were closely linked to real time, to clock-time. Music is not a literal interpretation of life and experience of time is different…The listener will therefore need a different approach to listening, with the traditional concepts of recollection and anticipation. Music must be listened to as a pure sound-event, an act without any dramatic structure.25

_Guitar Drag_ gets closer to this ideal than even Glass, whose works do entail recollection and anticipation precisely in their dependence on accumulated repetitions.

The stress on the sound produced at each moment points us by analogy to the most evident and in my view the richest offering of _The Clock_: the thousands of edits that, juxtaposed just as they are, constitute its warp and weave. I use, quite deliberately, an analogy to the process of painting onto a thick, variegated surface in order to build up a texture that can be read as a whole and read in its overlaid interiorities. To make this metaphor usefully exact, some layers need to be distinguished. There is some pleasure in acknowledging Marclay’s interweaving of cuts from what you eventually see is a finite repertoire of chosen movies. Sometimes these cluster in

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concentrated passages, at others they appear far apart in time. But alertness to resonance is something one would expect from any good film director. There is more pleasure in recognizing the formal visual echoes—via shots of doorways, windows, pans, etc.—that pair scenes from utterly different kinds of movies across the ongoing timeline of the cuts. Yet most pleasure (richness, depth, inexhaustibility, quality) comes from the affect of the nearly subliminal connectors, such as the leaning of a figure in one shot echoing in a figure in the next who moves in an unexpected direction. This is montage achieved not through blending or fading, but by cutting to pair difference through resemblance. It does not add to narrative flow, does not advance a plot. It arrests two different scenes in a kind of time that, while it moves forward in real time, constantly disrupts the emergence of a storyline, yet nevertheless feels like it is a consolidation of some kind.

The paradox in play here is that, having dispensed with conventional narration, the flows, changes, surprises, shocks that we are seeing do not become a dispersive loosening, or an accelerating separation of disparate parts. What occurs instead is a gradual accumulation, a solidifying, a filling up of time even as it keeps changing. This occurs without any narrative emerging. The temporal paradox is that we keep watching, in our own real time, people, actors, characters and places that are inhabiting the same moment in a day, but that moment in a past time, either actual (if it was a documentary) or fictional (in all other film). As we watch, our rapidly passing present is filled with imagery that is entirely and only past.

There is, here, a sense of history, especially of cinema’s historical achievements (along with its massive output of banalities). But there is no presumption that History moves forward through time with invincible inevitability, or, as Stein and Godard argued more realistically, that history is made by the clash of various kinds of forces, by things done and not done by men and women, societies and art forms. Both Godard and Marclay take cinema to have become, in the twentieth century, central to individual human experience, and to social imaginaries, everywhere. But Marclay, working from within a world saturated by forty more years of spectacle, takes it for granted that the widely circulated, mostly fictional image is the most significant record of contemporary experience. Because he does not presume that film has direct obligations to document reality, he makes no accusation about film’s failure to live up to its historical duties. What actually happens in the real world, The Clock suggests, becomes accessible above all through the various ways that the movies, television and the
broadcast media have registered its resonances. Past times or imagined futures are no longer events strung along history’s chain or thread, but are actions that occurred, or might be imagined to have occurred, at a roughly equal temporal distance from us. Not that far from us nowadays, and retrievable through a good search engine. Again, the temporal paradox of contemporary composition. In both its artistic and social forms, it is alive to the point of saturation with vivid embodiments of its modern and pre-modern pasts.

Looking back over the works of art we have explored in this essay, we can see that for Stein, Godard and Marclay time was what most inspired their creative imaginations. To each of them, it was self-evidently the most compelling subject, about which their times—whatever its flaws, its limits, its anachronism—demanded from them a creative accounting. In each case, as we have seen, time was not one thing but many things, not of one kind but many kinds. Each of them struggled to find compositional processes that would create an artistic experience that would fill the reader’s, spectator’s, and viewer’s present with layered, jostling temporalities, with pasts, presence, and possibility. Each did so differently, not only because they were and are unique as individuals and as artists, but also because their contemporary social composition, itself a unique conjunction, compelled everyone within it to create differently than before or since.
Active Passivity: On the Aesthetic Variant of Freedom

Martin Seel

“Being with oneself in the other” is a well-known formula that Hegel uses to characterize the basic relation of subjective freedom. This phrase points to the fact that subjects can only come to themselves if they remain capable of going beyond themselves. This motif also plays a significant role in Hegel’s philosophy of art.1 I intend to further develop this motif by exploring the extent to which this polarity of selfhood and otherhood is also characteristic for states of aesthetic freedom. I will not be offering an exegesis of Hegel’s writings, but will attempt to remain as close as possible to the spirit of Hegel’s philosophy – with some help from Kant and Adorno. I will present my observations in the form of theses followed by additional commentaries. I begin with some key terms on the general state of subjective freedom (1-3) in order to distinguish it from the particular role of aesthetic freedom (4-7) and then finally, drawing on Hegel, to work out the sense in which aesthetic freedom represents an important variant of freedom (8-10).

1. Only those who are able to lose themselves in other persons and things can come to themselves.

This might seem an exaggeration, but in fact it is a trivial claim, at least with regard to Hegel’s thinking. There can be no self-gain without engaging in practices such as work, education, love, play, science or other arts – i.e., without getting involved in an object or another person through which we realize where we stand with ourselves. This we cannot do in relation to a single object or person, but only in relation to several and perhaps to many. This kind of selfhood cannot be attained once and for all, but must constantly be put at risk. No self-gain without self-loss – though we must not forget that self-loss can also happen without self-gain. To no longer know


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where we stand with ourselves, to no longer be familiar with our own life, and thus to hardly know our way around – this would be the sign of a pathological self-relationship. The reason for such a pathology often lies in a striving for false forms of self-possession, often due to false ideals of self-certainty and self-determination. Whoever seeks to cope with oneself must resist such temptations. A personal loss of self is often enough the result of an inability to lose ourselves in a way that is crucial for our ability to come to ourselves.

This rough sketch is only intended as a way of foreshadowing an essential dimension of aesthetic freedom: the actualization of those forms of self-loss that foster a free personal self-relation. In his book on the ontology of film, Stanley Cavell remarks: “Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art.”

2. Human actors can only become independent by being dependent on other persons and things.

This merely complements the first thesis, once more recalling a central motif in Hegel’s philosophy. After all, both his theory of self-consciousness and his social philosophy – far beyond the relevant passages in *Phenomenology of Spirit* – revolve around a dialectic of dependence and independence, which is crucial for humans’ capacity for personal independence. The virtue of impartiality represents a good example. Anybody who can think and act independently is determined in various ways before he or she even lifts a finger – biologically, biographically, by family background, language, appearance, etc. So how are we supposed to judge and act impartially? We can, as long as we do not let ourselves be determined in a one-sided fashion. The impartial not only succumb to certain influences, they are able to pit the many influences they are subject to against each other. Therefore, it is crucial that we commit to those aims and passions that are most important to us – whereby it is useful to let ourselves be carried and driven by those attachments that we cannot avoid anyway. It is impossible not to be attached to anything and still find meaning in life; that is contrary to the very nature of culture. It is possible to be attached primarily to one person or thing, but it is neither easy nor

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healthy; it destroys any chance we have of getting a free view of the world. Whoever is not partial in many matters cannot be impartial.

These complex attachments also and especially concern humans’ theoretical activity. In The Claim of Reason, Stanley Cavell draws on a whole series of examples to make clear that claims to knowledge are always context-dependent. What we claim to know and present to others as our own insights largely depends upon the context in which we believe we have recognized something and reveal it to others. Typically these opportunities can never fully be grasped and understood. Even the best criteria for the use of concepts and the justification of statements underlie conditions that are not themselves subject to certain criteria. Every determinateness of our self and the world is necessarily accompanied by indeterminateness, which is why the idea of a final determinateness – be it of our own thoughts, external objects, or what goes through other people’s minds – lacks all substance. Human knowledge is by its very nature limited and thus incomplete; it remains fragile even if our habitual experience shows we can rely upon it. However, it would be just as wrong to subscribe to a kind of skepticism in which we must abandon all hope of certainty as it would be to advocate a kind of fundamentalism that refuses to recognize the constitutive indeterminateness in the determinateness of knowledge.

Yet that is only one – relatively harmless – part of Cavell’s argument. The radical conclusion he draws is that our theoretical stance towards the world relies on practical activity; or, to be more precise, it is based on our involvement in intersubjective practices. We cannot recognize anything if we do not recognize ourselves in others and others in ourselves – i.e., if we do not grasp ourselves as participants in forms of life in which we seek to maintain and develop together these constantly threatened cultures. Here Cavell largely draws on the work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. According to Cavell, both thinkers agree that “what I have called the truth of skepticism, or what I might call the moral of skepticism, namely, that the human creature’s basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing.”

thereby points out that what we call “knowledge” is the effect of our attitudes toward each other. We can only claim toward others to have relevant and reliable knowledge if we develop the ability to perceive ourselves as persons among others. Therefore, social recognition represents the key to an adequate theory of the range and limitations of knowledge – especially since we can always be mistaken both with regard to ourselves and others. And these risks are precisely what Cavell is interested in – without them, there would be neither more nor less knowledge, but no knowledge at all. For Cavell, the task of philosophy consists in explaining the precarious involvement of individuals in the context of an historical culture.

3. The core of human freedom lies in the capacity to let oneself be determined

This is an understanding of freedom I have developed in more detail elsewhere with relation to Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, among others. This relation between “determining” and “being determined”, as Fichte terms it, is relevant when it comes to shaping and reshaping our epistemic and practical orientations. A responsible commitment to beliefs and intentions, both small and large, demands that we be willing and able to let our thoughts and actions be affected and even upset by perceptions, concepts, reasons, persons, institutions, traditions, rituals, atmospheres, landscapes, cultures and, not least, the dramas of politics and other arts. This type of responsiveness is constitutive of free action which follows our own initiative and considerations. This “ownness” [Eigene], which asserts itself in self-determined acts, is necessarily and largely related to what is more or less alien; and these relations are what the self-relation of autonomous individuals thrives on from beginning to end.

A brief reflection on the basic stance of human action makes this point more clear. Because both our ability to act and our understanding of action are

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6 The following passage has partially been taken out of my book “Theorien” (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer 2009, 184-189; see Martin Seel, “Teilnahme und Beobachtung: Zu den Grundlagen der Freiheit” in Paradoxien der Erfüllung 181
tied to a language of action developed in history and culture, our actions have no reality outside of this context of meaning. But words and sentences, explanations and narratives are meaningless taken in isolation; they only take on meaning once they are differentiated from each other – without there being a border beyond which everything becomes clear or unclear. The relationships between words, between words and the world, and between those who make use of words in the world – in other words, the relationships that must be understood if we are to understand anything at all – do not run on ad infinitum, but merely ad indefinitum. They give the units of speaking and thinking a certain content by forming a context of signifiers that can neither be grasped nor determined in its entirety. Because we are dealing with a communicative praxis in which statements and beliefs are infused with a certain content, the extent of their determinateness ultimately proves to be a practical question. After all, it is never entirely certain to what extent we must share or comprehend the beliefs of others in order to understand what they say. The point up to which we can follow and understand each other (or want to understand each other) can and must remain open. Instead of reaching into infinity, the interconnections that make up thinking are articulated into indeterminateness. Our thoughts have a certain content against the background of an indeterminately far-reaching connection with other thoughts and with the thoughts of others. Everything we say and think extends beyond what we are capable of saying and thinking, even though this extension is merely a further effect of the culture of our thinking and speaking. This fact, which upon closer inspection is just as unsettling as it is comforting, is what makes all our individual and shared beliefs and aspirations interesting in the first place – and it is what enables a life in freedom at all.

In other words, we must not search for the indeterminateness of human spirit in the wrong place. The freedom of our thoughts and actions does not lie in the fact that they are not causally determined, but in the indeterminateness of our being determined by reasons. Because there is no way around the comprehensibility of our thoughts and intentions, no detour that could inform us about these thoughts apart from their own labyrinthine paths, and because every production of determinateness is at the same time

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(Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2006).

7 Kant employs this distinction when solving the antimonies of theoretical reason. Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 525ff. (B 547ff. / A 518ff.).
the production of indeterminateness, the world of action remains in crucial respects one that is both undetermined and indeterminable. That is what culture is all about: Finding a determination in the indeterminate, one that produces new indeterminateness, which in turn leads to new determinateness, and so on – ad infinitum.

4. The field of aesthetics is a special arena for the exercise of the capacity for self-determination – and therefore a special arena of freedom.

This thesis emphasizes the close relationship between the concept of aesthetic freedom and a general concept of personal freedom. In order to localize the specific difference between the two, we therefore need to recognize the unity between aesthetic freedom and other types of freedom – and thus to clarify the extent to which aesthetic freedom represents a characteristic variant of freedom.

5. Aesthetic practice constitutes one of the arenas of human freedom because it constitutes an arena for the play of human freedom.

This thesis reformulates a central concept in Kant’s aesthetic theory. For Kant, aesthetic perception is a distinguished manner of exercising freedom. It enables humans to actualize the potential of theoretical determination and practical self-determination – a potential that can be experienced and lived out here in a special way. As Kant describes at the beginning of his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, when we enter the aesthetic state we are free from the compulsion of determining ourselves and the world. But there is a positive side to this negative freedom: In the play of aesthetic perception, we are free to experience the determinability of ourselves and the world. Kant, therefore, regards the experience of beauty (and the sublime) as a way of exercising humans’ most noble capacities. The wealth of the real opened up by aesthetic intuition is experienced as the relished confirmation of our ability to determine this wealth, as well as the ability of this wealth to determine us in manifold ways.

It is important to remember that the concept of “play” in the work of Kant also plays a role when it comes to characterizing the objects of aesthetic experience. In §14 of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant remarks, “All form of the objects of the senses (of the outer as well as, mediately, the inner) is either shape or play: in the latter case, either play of shapes (in
space, mime, and dance), or mere play of sensations (in time). The charm of colors or of the agreeable tones of instruments can be added, but drawing in the former and composition in the latter constitute the proper object of the pure judgment of taste.”8 We should add by way of criticism, however, that even “drawing”, through its specific composition and dynamic, generates a specific “play of shapes”, though it might differ from the so-called “arts of time”. Kant’s more prominent use of the notion of play, however, is related to his characterization of the subject of aesthetic experience, for example: “In the judging of a free beauty (according to mere form) the judgment of taste is pure. No concept of any end for which the manifold should serve the given object and thus which the latter should represent is presupposed, by which the imagination, which is as it were at play in the observation of the shape, would merely be restricted.”9 Here Kant develops a basic (and thus minimal) concept of aesthetic examination, not yet taking into account the specific characteristics of encounters with works of art. This type of examination represents a way in which we synesthetically follow the simultaneous and successive play of appearances in the objects at hand, without any further intention of making use of these objects.10

The “imagination at play” of which Kant speaks in §16 of Critique of the Power of Judgment should not be understood as an idle state of our cognitive powers just because it is not aimed at controlling their object theoretically or in practice. Instead, it opens up a paradigmatic – paradigmatically desirous – human activity, i.e. one of being-there-with and going-along-with, and thus of a realization of an abundance of forms and symbolic relations that we usually fail to recognize in our other forms of relating to the world. Kant’s description of this elementary form of aesthetic praxis places a particular emphasis on its self-sufficient character: “We linger over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself; which is analogous to (yet not identical with) the way in which we linger when a charm in the representation of the object repeatedly attracts attention, where the mind is passive.”11 When we perceive aesthetically, therefore, we are not merely touched in a receptive manner, but dwell in the objects of our perception in such a way that we are

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9 Ibid, p. 114 (B 49f. / A49).
11 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, p. 107 (BA 37).
capable of following their variations in a varying fashion. When we perceive aesthetically, we take time for the moment – both for the momentary appearing of the objects of perception and for an involuntary encounter with ourselves.

We can therefore also say that the loss of the capacity for aesthetic attentiveness would not so much mean that we would miss something, but that we would miss ourselves. We would no longer be capable of assuring ourselves of the possibilities within in the realities of our life and within ourselves. We would therefore fail to experience that gain in an intensified feeling of being alive [Lebensgefühl] that comes along with taking pleasure in beauty – a feeling, as Kant puts it in §1 of Critique of the Power of Judgment, in which we are free from the constraints of cognitive and practical success or failure. In a famous passage in a letter to Markus Herz on July 9, 1771, Kant described the reason for this pleasure as follows: “Beauty is different from what is agreeable or useful. Usefulness gives but a mediate feeling of pleasure, while that of beauty is immediate. Beautiful things show [zeigen an] that man is at home in the world [dass der Mensch in die Welt passe] and that his view of things accords with the laws of his viewing.” The kind of fitting into the world that Kant has in mind here is primarily cognitive and instrumental, but at the same time it is linked to the possibility of rationally organizing the social and political world, because the subjects who receive this indication are assured of an essential condition of possibility of practical self-determination.

However, the experience of fitting into the world is – for Kant as well – not the sole trademark of aesthetic consciousness. After all, the experience of the sublime is characterized by the feeling of not merely being at home in the world, but of being challenged and overwhelmed, even if this feeling can be transformed into a “feeling that we have pure self-sufficient reason” (§27) and into the certainty of the “humanity in our person” (§28). Here it is

12 “Spirit, in an aesthetic significance, means the animating principle in the mind. That, however, by which this principle animates the soul, the material which it uses for this purpose, is that which purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is self-maintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end.” Ibid, p. 192 (B 192 / A 190).


14 Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, p. 142 (B 99/A 98), 145 (B 105/A 104).
humans’ potential for both theoretical and moral reason that enables a positive transformation of “displeasure” in the face of an overwhelming scenery. If we put these elements together – which, though it is not done in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, is in fact necessary\(^{15}\) – then it follows that aesthetic experience proceeds by way of a liberation from the constraints of cognitive and practical commitment; it takes place in a *playful back-and-forth* between consonance and dissonance in our relation to the world and to ourselves. That is precisely what makes aesthetic perception a both liberating and confounding, moving and entertaining *form of play* in human praxis, whose significance Kant emphasizes in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.\(^{16}\)

**6. The practice of aesthetic perception and production culminates in states of “active passivity”.**

Adorno, influenced by authors such as Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietsche, Valéry and modern art, radicalized Kant’s theory of aesthetic freedom. Like Kant, Adorno maintains that aesthetic freedom essentially consists in living out our otherwise hidden or distorted potential for perceiving and understanding. Inspiring works of art in particular succeed in giving their object a form that compels the reader, observer or listener to engage in a form of sensing awareness that is at once captivating and liberating – a celebration of receptiveness and spontaneity, of impressibility and sensitivity paired with imagination and the ability to understand. And all of this happens in a way that our normal thinking is simply incapable of achieving.

In his lecture on aesthetics during the winter semester of 1958/59, Adorno

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\(^{15}\) A separation of the aesthetic of “beauty” from that of “the sublime” fails to recognize what belongs together (in various ways and to various extents) within most aesthetic domains: the affirmation of what is alien and of what is familiar about aesthetic objects, as well as possible confusion through both; the comprehensibility and incomprehensibility of aesthetic objects; the movement beyond ourselves and back to ourselves that they incite. Aesthetic pleasure does not consist in experiencing the world *either* in apparent proportion *or* in apparent disproportion to our own possibilities, but rather in experiencing what is accommodating in what resists and what is resistant in what is accommodating, in experiencing dissonance in what is consonant and consonance in what is dissonant.

gives a rather emphatic description of this phenomenon with reference to music: “If, for instance, you truly listen to a complex symphonic movement in a way that connects all sensual aspects contained there; if you truly hear them and sensually perceive them in their unity and mediation; if you thus not only hear that which you hear as it appears to you now, but also hear it in its relation to what has already occurred in the work, and to what you are still to encounter, and finally to the whole, then that is certainly the highest possible measure of precise, sensual experience.”¹⁷ This highest possible form of sensual perception, however, also demands highly intellectual powers of comprehension, as we must follow the web of relations in such a way that every passage of the work appears in these relations. Therefore, Adorno is somewhat suspicious of the term “artistic enjoyment” [Kunstgenuss]. Especially in his twelfth lecture on January 8, 1959, which (once again) is dedicated to “the problem of the concept of beauty”, Adorno argues that the vitality and intensity of the experience of significant works of art must not be understood as a kind of self-confident consumption: “Thus I would say that aesthetic experience essentially consists in taking part in an activity of comprehending a work of art by being in the work of art, by living in it, as it is often expressed in simple terms.”¹⁸ The metaphor of “living” here indicates above all the fact that – and just how much – subjects of artistic perception are moved by what they perceive. They experience themselves as part of an occurrence to which they are subjected, despite their active participation. Thus Adorno continues by saying that “enjoyment [Genuss] has no place here, because the type of experience I am trying to define for you in a certain sense represents a path away from the subject, whereas enjoyment is necessarily something that the subject gets something out of.”¹⁹ This not only represents a rejection of a culinary instrumentalization of aesthetic experience, but of every effort to derive some utility or result from the process of aesthetic experience. Thus Adorno says in the same lecture: “Not what a work of art ‘gives’ to us, but what we give to the work of art is important – i.e., the fact that we, in a certain kind of active passivity, of an exerted 'giving of ourselves to the thing', give to the thing that which it expects on its part.”²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 188.
¹⁹ Ibid.
“Active passivity” is the crucial term here. An encounter with works of art demands that we be willing and able to attend to them in a way that allows them to unfold their own processual nature, in a way that draws the listener, observer or reader into this process. The latter determine themselves actively in giving themselves over to a passive state of being determined.\textsuperscript{21} In light of this, it is rather irrelevant whether this takes place, as Adorno puts it, in a mode of “exerted” [angestrengten] participation or, as Benjamin has it in his essay on the work of art with reference to cinema, in a mode of “distraction”. In either case, what is important is that we give ourselves over to the play of powers of the objects at hand. In either case, what is needed is a “reflective following” [reflektierender Mitvollzug] of the respective work.\textsuperscript{22} The “precise, sensual experience” of art implies a remembering and anticipating, a differentiating and combining, and thus implicitly or explicitly interpreting attentiveness.

Adorno’s description of aesthetic perception is one of willing devotion. When it comes to aesthetic freedom, we are not freed from some “thing”, but we give freedom to something – and thereby become free ourselves. Adorno also joins this ethic of aesthetic “giving” to a profound concept of happiness – which we achieve not only, but also through encounters with objects of art. After Adorno goes into more detail about the ecstatic dimension of the experience of art and its “liberating or uplifting” and “transcendending” character,\textsuperscript{23} he immediately turns to its hedonistic dimension: "These moments are certainly the most sublime and the most decisive moments of which artistic experience is capable. And it is certainly possible that these moments represent the origin of the notion that works of art can be enjoyed, as they truly are marked by a kind of pleasure [Beglückung] that,

\textsuperscript{21} There is an astounding correspondence between Adorno’s strong emphasis on the aspect of passivity – not only here, but also in his subversive utopian fantasy in aphorism #100 in \textit{Minima Moralia} – and a passage in Friedrich Schlegel’s \textit{Lucinde}, in which he writes: “Industry and utility are the angels of death who, with fiery swords, prevent man’s return to Paradise. Only calmly and gently, in the sacred tranquility of true passivity, can one remember one’s whole ego and contemplate the world and life. How does any thinking and writing of poetry take place, if not by complete dedication and submission to some guardian genius? And yet talking and ordering are only secondary matters in all the arts and sciences: the essence is thinking and imagining, and these are possible only in passivity. To be sure, it’s an intentional, arbitrary, and one-sided passivity, but it’s still passivity.” (Friedrich Schlegel, \textit{Lucinde} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 65f.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Adorno, \textit{Ästhetik}, pp. 195, 196.
though it might not put all other moments of happiness to shame, can measure up to the highest moments of happiness there are, which have the same force [Gewalt] as do the most real moments we know.”

The term “force” indicates the key moment of being drawn in by a work of art because of our own involvement in it. Just as in normal life, in the face of profound works of art we cannot “make” ourselves happy at our own command, we can only accept it unreduced presence of mind.

Although for Adorno the intense experience of art in no way proves that humans fit into the world as it is, it does show that – and how – they could be at home there theoretically and in practice. Thus he writes: “The reality of works of art bears witness to the possibility of what is possible.” At a completely different place in his work – in a report on his scientific experiences in the USA from 1968 – Adorno formulates this point in a way that should certainly surprise his orthodox readers. After a serious critique of the scientific ideals of American scientists, Adorno speaks of the “potential of true humanity” and the “experience of the substance of democratic forms” he saw in everyday American life: “Although America is no longer the land of endless opportunity, there is still a feeling that everything is possible.”

Ironically enough, Adorno here sees a positive side to the concept of conformity or adjustment, along with a remarkable theory of subjectivity. Adorno admits that “European intellectuals such as myself often tend to regard the concept of adjustment as a negative thing, as the extinguishing of spontaneity, of the autonomy of the individual.” Alluding to Goethe’s and Hegel’s critique of the “beautiful soul”, he then writes: “Both Goethe and Hegel denounced the illusion that the process of becoming human and acquiring culture is necessarily a development that moves from within to without. It is a process that takes place, as Hegel put it, also and especially through ‘alienation’. We do not become free by realizing ourselves as individuals – as the horrible phrase goes – but by going outside

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24 Ibid, 196f.
25 At this point – and at many others – in his work, the experience of art subtly becomes a model of success interaction in general – between subject and object no less than between subject and subject. The cognitive, ethical and aesthetic “freedom to the object”, as Adorno says in line with Hegel, both enables and depends on just such a “freedom to the subject.”
of ourselves, entering into relationships with others and giving ourselves over to them in a certain way. It is only then that we determine ourselves as individuals – not by watering ourselves as one would a small plant in order to become perfectly educated personalities.\textsuperscript{28} In other words, heteronomy must be an essential dimension of autonomy, if the latter is not to decay and become egocentric isolation and alienation.

7. Processes of aesthetic perception and production are self-sufficient.

In the interpretation that I have given of Kant’s and Adorno’s theories of aesthetics, it is obvious why the capacity for aesthetic perception is anything but a marginal variety of freedom. It awakens the potential of human determinateness – active and passive – in a unique fashion. This is especially true of the entirety of aesthetic praxis, given the role played by beautiful and sublime nature in the works of Kant and Adorno. Furthermore, this is not only true of the kind of aesthetic experience I have focused on here, but of all creative processes of aesthetic production. Adorno placed special emphasis on this fact in the case of artistic production. But the decisive thought can already be found in Kant’s thesis of the productive indeterminateness of the productions of artistic “genius”.\textsuperscript{29} Even the activity of the artist, as much as it might differ from that of the viewer, mostly draws its energy from letting itself be determined by the object of its creation in the process of its creation. According to Adorno, from the perspective of artists the important thing is to make things of which they “do not know what they are”.\textsuperscript{30} This not only represents a liberation from previous conventions of artistic construction, both our own and that of others, but also the freedom to let something happen in the exploration of the material at hand, something that opens up a space for self-encounter that cannot be anticipated.

Whoever takes part in processes of aesthetic production or perception participates in varieties of this kind of freedom. They involve themselves in acts that in a special way represent ends in themselves. What they do is good for many other things, because in the first instance they are worth it

\textsuperscript{28} Theodor W. Adorno, “Wissenschaftliche Erfahrungen in Amerika” in Stichworte (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), 146.

\textsuperscript{29} Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, §49, p. 191 (B 192f. / A 190); Adorno, Ästhetische Theorie, pp. 244ff.

per se. It is the occurrence of aesthetic attentiveness *itself* that brings with it a more intense sense of human existence – regardless of what this attentiveness might also bring about in terms of insights, changes of attitude, a broadening of perspective, education and personal development.\(^3\) The hot zones of aesthetic openness are not a mere training camp in which special skills are learned. They are opportunities for encountering what is indeterminate in what is theoretically and practically determinate.

8. The central virtue of aesthetic sensibility consists in the capacity for finding oneself through detachment from oneself.

This thesis accentuates the inner connection between aesthetics and ethics, which has often been emphasized, though with heterogeneous interpretations. We can only get a proper understanding of this connection, however, if we understand “ethics” as the fragile art of living a life. A well-lived life cannot but be caught up in a never-ending back and forth between knowing and not knowing, between taking care of oneself and being considerate towards others; it thus represents the risky attempt to do justice to oneself and others. This demands constantly putting our self-image to the test, in both a theoretical and practical sense. A life lived in self-respect and self-determination depends on our willingness to at least hypothetically alter our own beliefs, attachments, affinities and obsessions. As much as this willingness might often represent a difficult and sometimes nearly unbearable demand, in the sphere of aesthetics it becomes a particular source of genuine pleasure.

Viewed in this way, the virtue of aesthetic sensibility proves to be a rather cardinal virtue. It is related to, though in no way synonymous with, virtues such as the ability to converse and love, humor, self-detachment, impartiality, sympathy, attentiveness, caution, imagination, curiosity, serenity and many others. Just like these and other virtues, aesthetic sensibility is tied to a potential to transcend and alienate ourselves. Like all virtues, it is marked by an internal ambivalence. No virtue is ever secure from its neighboring vices. There are cases in which all virtues can lead to harmful and even

\(^3\) This is something that Hegel was clearly aware of in his discussion of the “purpose” of art in his writings on aesthetics: “The aim of poetry is imagery and speech, not the thing talked about or its existence in practice. Poetry began when man undertook to express himself; for poetry, what is there is only spoken to be an expression.” Hegel, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, vol. II, p. 974.

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disgraceful behavior, just as there lies a potential for individual and social good in most real and supposed vices.\textsuperscript{32} We should thus do everything to avoid a crude moralization of aesthetic sensibility. It is precisely in the arts that our most important normative beliefs and attitudes – even and especially those that we took and take to be our best – are put into question. The experimental examination of these virtues is thus an indispensable part of the openness of artful self-exploration, which mustn’t be closed off within the field of the aesthetic. But if aesthetic attentiveness replaces moral attentiveness, then it has crossed a line. Both have their time and place, though it is not always the same. The decisive gain that we can derive from aesthetic sensibility – especially compared to moral sensibility – consists in the capacity for the unregulated balancing and re-balancing of our trust and mistrust in the world, of self-certainty and self-doubt, loss of self and gain of self. That is what makes up the ethic of the aesthetic.

\textbf{9. The meaning of aesthetic praxis and the associated attitudes lies in becoming accustomed to becoming unaccustomed.}

In his \textit{Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences}, in the chapter on anthropology in the section on “subjective spirit”, Hegel gives a subtle analysis of the power of habit.\textsuperscript{33} Hegel views habit – more so than in the corresponding passages of his \textit{Philosophy of Right}\textsuperscript{34} – as both an essential support and a structural hindrance to free human activity. It gives material form to the spiritual by forming physical and mental routines, which equip individuals with a second nature that make the conscious acquisition of skills and knowledge both unnecessary and impossible. It thus keeps the existence of the individual open “to be otherwise occupied and engaged – say with feeling and with mental consciousness in general”.\textsuperscript{35} Hegel gives a rather drastic description of the ambivalence of this operation in §410 of the \textit{Encyclopedia}: “And it is true that the form of habit, like any other, is open to anything we chance to put into it; and it is habit of living which brings on


\textsuperscript{34} Hegel, \textit{Elements of the Philosophy of Right} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §§ 151f., 268.

\textsuperscript{35} Hegel, \textit{Philosophy of Mind}, §401.
death, or, if quite abstract, is death itself: and yet habit is indispensable for the existence of all intellectual life in the individual, enabling the subject to be a concrete immediacy, an ‘ideality’ of soul – enabling the matter of consciousness, religious, moral, etc., to be his as this self, this soul, and no other, and be neither a mere latent possibility, nor a transient emotion or idea, nor an abstract inwardness, cut off from action and reality, but part and parcel of his being.”36 In other words, if the subject is to find itself, it must forget many of the views and skills it has acquired; it must forget the way it has become accustomed to attitudes that make up its character as a person. Otherwise, it would run the risk of going “insane”.37 In this “liberation” of individuals from their merely “natural” character also lies the danger of becoming “indifferent” to their own aims in life.38 In the “self-gain” enabled by habit, there is also a seed of self-loss. In the extreme case Hegel has in mind, this can lead to death within lifetime, to a disappearance of our independence and individuality within corporeal and spiritual automatisms. We would then be so absorbed by mental and social conventions (Heidegger’s “Das Man”), by a kind of conformity and continuity lacking all difference and distance, that we would lose the ability to live our lives in a self-determined fashion. We lose the existential balance founded on webs of habits. The consequence is – or would be – intellectual and social decay: excessive conformity to the pre-determined paths of one’s own surroundings, which ultimately robs us of the air we need to breathe.

Of course, for Hegel, the world of objective spirit and ethical life, in which the institutions of right, the family and the organization of civil society are embedded, provide a significant amount of protection against this inner threat to subjective spirit. But within the Romantic aesthetic, and even in the works of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, early Lukács or Victor Shklovsky, just as it can also be found in the works of Valéry, Heidegger and Adorno, we find the idea that the power of aesthetic experience derives from a repeated withdrawal from that to which we have become accustomed – and thus from a breach with a power that lames us. Viewed in this way, aesthetic praxis enables a permanent process of accustoming ourselves to what we are unaccustomed to. The aesthetic stance in its many facets can be understood as a habitus aimed at continually thawing out petrified theoretical and practical attachments.

36 Ibid, §410.
37 Ibid, esp. §§ 402 and 406.
38 Ibid, §409.
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Recalling my first thesis, we could say that in order to avoid going under, the subject must repeatedly go under. We must lose ourselves so that we do not lose ourselves. Of course, this rather emphatic formulation only makes sense if we distinguish between two forms of “going under”. On the one hand, there is a kind of self-loss in which the subject capitulates before its everyday understandings and roles, without any resistance or detachment; on the other hand, there is a kind of self-loss that enables the subject to give itself over to an uninhibited self-experimentation through non-functional acts of aesthetic experience.\textsuperscript{39} In the first case, the subject is in danger of losing itself in the “prose of life”, as Hegel terms it, and in the second case, it constantly finds occasion to revive itself in a “poeticizing” fashion, as Romanticists would say. Picking up on Benjamin and Cavell, however, we must add that an aesthetic holiday not only works against the force of habit, but attempts to preserve the liberating aspects of habit without succumbing to its constraining and oppressive aspects.\textsuperscript{40} The point here is not to strive for an illusionary re-enchantment of the modern forms if life, but to practice a conscious – sensual and imaginative – re-assurance of their hidden relations.\textsuperscript{41}

10. Aesthetic freedom is a constitutive dimension of freedom

This thesis merely summarizes the tenor of the previous theses. It is crucial, however, that we not blur the distinction between aesthetic freedom and

\textsuperscript{39} This dual nature of self-loss is a central theme in Thomas Bernhard, Der Untergeher (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).

\textsuperscript{40} Walter Benjamin, “Gewohnheit und Aufmerksamkeit” in Denkbilder, in Gesammelte Schriften, vol. IV. 1, edited by T. Rexroth (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 407f; Stanley Cavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary” in In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 153-180. One of Hegel’s greatest achievements in this regard is his positive account of the bifurcation in social and individual life contexts, which are only partially concealed by a rhetoric of theoretical reconciliation.

\textsuperscript{41} Hegel makes at least a similar point when he remarks in a remarkable passage in his Lectures on Aesthetics: “But the genuine ideal does not stop at the indeterminate and the purely inward; on the contrary; it must also go out in its totality into a specific contemplation of the external world in all its aspects. For, the human being, the entire centre of the ideal, lives; he is essentially now and here, he is the present, he is individual infinity, and to life there belongs the opposition of an environment of external nature in general, and therefore a connection with it and an activity in it.” (Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics, p. 245.)
other kinds of freedom. There are, after all, numerous other practices for which the dialectic of losing and finding oneself is characteristic. Here we might think of love, care, devotion, or the kind of going against the current we find within philosophy, of which Wittgenstein says: “When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there.” And it is not only typical of artistic production, but for all kinds of creative work that we must give ourselves over to their challenges if we are to succeed at achieving something. The same is true for education or political activity. When it comes to all these forms of active involvement, we can therefore say that “active passivity” crucially defines the state of those involved – at least to the extent that the associated acts and experiences represent an autonomous encounter with other things and persons.

This finding, which recalls my first three theses, raises a number of questions as to the status of aesthetic freedom as a variant of human self-determination. What is special about the freedom of aesthetic praxis? To what extent is it a model, but just one model of the connection between determining and being-determined – a connection that is constitutive of freedom? And to what extent is it much more than a model, that is, a genuine form of the exercise of human freedom?

I have already given the basic answer in my fifth thesis: “Aesthetic practice constitutes one of the arenas of human freedom because it constitutes an arena for the play of human freedom.” Now we only need to repeat the implications of this thesis and those that follow it: Aesthetic perception (and production) represents a special variety of freedom because everything that follows from this activity follows from the fact that, in the first instance, nothing follows from it; because we willingly give ourselves over to everything that grabs, compels, forces, binds or unsettles us; because here all events are relieved of most of their practical consequences; because here the telos of our being involved is not to determine, but to let ourselves be determined and moved. For these reasons, aesthetic freedom is constitutive of the capacity for self-determination. By exercising this freedom, we play out our bodily and mental affinities – immediately activating our potential for receptivity and responsiveness, upon which we depend for all our other activities, if we seek to gain and preserve an unforced relation to ourselves.

There are many reasons for loving the arts. We read of art lovers who value paintings because of the smell of their colors; others perhaps like the taste of some sculptures’ stone. Of course, anyone who encounters painting and sculpture through the aesthetic modes of smell and taste will probably not be thought to appreciate them through relevant modes of aesthetic experience. Smell and taste, it will likely be emphasized, are rather contingent perceptual properties of these works inherently playing no distinguishing role in their reception. But paintings and sculptures often do smell and do taste, and there are definitely works of art, for example works of “Eat Art” or some contemporary performances, that consciously incorporate such aesthetic properties.

This is the case in several respects in a performance of Mehtap Baydu entitled eat me—meet me. During her performance, Baydu wears a dress made of a Turkish sweetmeat called Pestil on her bare skin. At the start, she begins to eat the dress, encouraging members of the audience to take part in the process. In this way an interaction develops between artist and onlookers or audience involving aesthetic modes of experience such as taste that are normally considered irrelevant to an adequate reception of a work of art.

Fig. 1: Mehtap Baydu: eat me—meet me (performance, 2010)

But who or what decides on the appropriate mode of experience in each individual encounter with an artwork? And how do we discover what in each case should be considered an aesthetic property relevant to the work’s meaning, and what, to the contrary, should be considered merely contingent? Before I try to suggest an answer to these questions, I would first like to discuss the role of “aesthetic contingency” in artworks, while also addressing another topic matter that seems to me even more interesting: the degree of contingency that an artwork can in fact tolerate if artists consciously incorporate contingent factors into the development of their works.
1. Contingency and Form

In classical European philosophy, the concept of contingency is generally the counter-concept to necessity. In this context, contingency or coincidence was thought of as something existing without necessity, which is to say something that is what it is but could be something else, even its opposite. In this general sense, works of art like paintings naturally also have contingent or coincidental properties. For example, they sometimes smell in a certain way and sometimes have no specific olfactory qualities. But whatever such qualities they might have, they are considered contingent or coincidental because they have no necessity with respect to the visual essence of painting. Therefore, the contingent qualities of artworks are non-necessary qualities that cannot be derived from or justified by the constitutive conditions of a particular genre of art.

What contingency means in matters of aesthetics may come into sharper focus when we understand that here, unlike in traditional philosophy, the counter-concept to “contingency” is not only “necessity” but also form: meaning the property of an artwork that is intentionally set, calculated and controlled by an artist who incorporates it into the artistic medium at hand. In aesthetic matters, the contingent, contrasting with form, is that which is not formed, not intentionally calculated, rather being incalculable and non-controllable by any means.

When I oppose contingency to form in this way, I do not only mean form in the sense of contour or shape in painting or of rhyme in poetry, features assumed to distinguish the artistic character of certain works from non-artistic, humdrum things. Likewise, in line with Adorno what I here wish to understand as form cannot be reduced to something like what that philosopher has termed “the arrangement of pregiven elements” or “mathematical relations”\(^1\) of quantities, volumes or lines, as evident in various ways in different modes of art. Of course, both those dimensions may contribute to what we call the “aesthetic form” of an artwork. But in a more general sense, aesthetic form can be defined as “the objective organization within each artwork” that fuses all of its elements into the harmonious

eloquence of an internally coherent unity. In this respect, form, understood as an embodiment “of all elements of logicality, or, more broadly, coherence in artworks,” is the medium unifying their constitutive elements—whether sounds in music, words in writing or lines in drawing—into an “aesthetic unity.” Hence this broader sense of form also includes elements of artworks that one would traditionally have dismissed, for example parts of non-figurative paintings in which no identifiable shape reveals itself to the viewer, or traces of consciously integrated aesthetic contingencies, such as smudges or blurrings, that undoubtedly contribute to an artwork’s aesthetic form in its totality. Form in this sense also includes what, in some cases, a work refuses to offer, including for instance what it avoids to use from the formal vocabulary of an artistic tradition, because this also determines the work's inner logic in a constitutive way.

Against the background of this concept of form, it appears that works of art display contingent properties in respect to successful authorial formal refinement. Actually, we can say: The less successful or intended such refinement, the more strongly the works display aesthetic contingencies. Sometimes they result from an artistic formation simply not taking account of certain formative possibilities in a given medium, sometimes from the fact that formation processes have been neglected or have failed. And sometimes they even originate from a refusal or “boycott” of formation by the artist.

Let us briefly review the aforementioned sources of aesthetic contingency. We can observe its emergence as the result of an artist not considering certain formative possibilities when, for example, within the framework of painting, a painter simply ignores the smell of the paint he is using. Of course he could take account of it, and his painting will perhaps have some smell. But in painting, the intentional formation process traditionally does not deal with olfactory properties, and in this sense the olfactory qualities of the artwork will be contingent properties.

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3 Ibid., p. 140.
4 Ibid.
We are also confronted quite often with aesthetic contingency resulting from formation processes having been neglected or having failed. If someone without any artistic claims or ambition draws a building on a piece of paper in order to provide architectural details in visual form, he will usually produce something whose appearance reveals a range of contingent aesthetic properties. The color of the paper and the lines of the drawing in such a picture will probably be contingent. The depth of the line pressed on the paper might also be a quality unintended by the artist and thus largely irrelevant for appropriately considering the drawing. In most unpretentious, occasional sketches of a building, whether or not the proportions satisfy the laws of perspective will also be a matter of coincidence. Formative processes that for various reasons fail, either because the artist is incompetent or because unexpected factors such as unintended physical movement have thwarted artistic plans, will inevitably lead to contingent qualities being manifest in whatever has been created.

More interesting than aesthetic contingencies arising from neglected or failed formation processes are those originating from objective uncontrollability. One example of this is the process of ceramic glazing, over which even a skilled ceramicist has only limited control. Both the appearance and expressive qualities of the objects resulting from this process are always to some extent contingent. The same is true of works that interactively involve the viewer such as Mehtap Baydu’s performance (Fig. 1). The artist can try to guide the viewer’s behavior during the performance but cannot really control it. As with ceramic glazing, here as well the work as a whole may fail because the results of the uncontrollable dimensions of the working process are aesthetically unconvincing. But a work may also turn out a public success precisely because of aesthetic properties for which the artist can claim little or no intentional authorship.

2. Contingency and refusal of form

An artwork’s contingent qualities may also result, as suggested, from formative processes being rejected or “boycotted.” Modern art is often marked by a refusal of formal processes, that is, by an intentional effort to incorporate contingent moments into the artwork through a dispensing with form. Among the first to do this in radical fashion were the Zurich Dadaists. Tristan Tzara’s nigh-legendary method of composition was to cut up texts such as newspaper articles into the smallest bits, each one no longer than a
word. He would then put the words in a bag, shake the bag vigorously, and let them fall onto a table. The order and chaos into which the words fell constituted a Tzara poem. In respect to phonetic and semantic properties, such a poem was clearly a contingent work. But poems created in this way, involving a rejection—a boycott—of the usual methods of producing well-formed sentences, were meant to reflect something of the personality and spirit of the author.

What is certainly either a kind of joke, or else a subversive “happening”, with Tzara and the Dadaists became an important feature of twentieth century art. Extending from Surrealist écriture automatique to Abstract Expressionism’s action painting and various techniques in avant-garde music, we find experiments according a decisive role to contingent factors in the artwork’s production. Observing such artistic developments, Adorno writes as follows: “The aesthetic subject exempts itself of the burden of giving form to the contingent material it encounters, despairing of the possibility of undergirding it, and instead shifts the responsibility for its organization back to the contingent material itself.” According to Adorno, there were good reasons for this development in twentieth century art. “The flight of many contemporary manifestations of art into aleatory [sic]”, he wrote, “may be interpreted as a desperate answer to the ubiquity of semblance”—that is: an illusiveness that since Plato has often been seen as the very basis for the untruth of art. For Adorno, then, modern artists wished to undermine such semblance or illusiveness, especially when endowed with an aura of beauty and formal perfection, by integrating contingent factors into their work.

In the remainder of this essay I do not wish to examine the reasons that led to this development in modern art; nor do I wish to address the question of whether Adorno’s analysis is correct, or whether perhaps other reasons play a crucial role in the development. Rather, I intend to pursue Adorno's thoughts a little further, to ask how far the modernist option really went in integrating moments of contingency into works of art. In Adorno’s opinion, it did not go very far. Two things, Adorno indicates, need to be borne in

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid., p. 108.
mind when considering this modernist artistic practice. Firstly, we need to clearly understand that when the practice is executed in radical fashion, that is to say when coincidence predominates, “no whole,” no identifiable unit of the artwork, “is actually achieved.”⁹ In other words, when an artist tried to replace all guided form with mere coincidence, no work is created at all. Minimal authorial input of identifiable, recurring and thus form-building structures is indispensable, because “without sameness of any sort, chaos itself would prevail as something ever-same.”¹⁰

As Adorno spells out, there would simply be no reason to refer to such chaos as a distinctive unit. “Even artworks freed from harmonistic-symmetrical ideas,” he observes, “are formally characterized by similarity and contrast, static and dynamic, exposition, transition, development, identity, and return. Works are unable to wipe out the difference between the first appearance of an element and its repetition, no matter how modified that may be.”¹¹ This is true, Adorno argues, even in “works most diffuse and hostile to repetition”¹² that—as is the case with a piece of radically avant-garde music such as John Cage's “4.33”—try to avoid all authorial composition and attempt to constitute the work’s unity purely from a contingency of ambient sounds, or else from their absence. In Cage’s piece, the prescribed 4 minutes, 33 seconds setting endows the interim sound event, however minimally, with form. Hence, Adorno suggests, what follows from integrating contingent factors into modern artworks is in the end not a subversion of classical, authorially determined form as something aspired to by the art’s creator, but rather simply an alteration of its type and quality. Naturally, Adorn concedes, contemporary artists wish to do away with traditional form, “though with the irony that those works that are supposedly open and incomplete necessarily regain something comparable to unity insofar as this openness is planned.”¹³

Second, Adorno suggests that when art, in integrating contingency, fails to admit that it is merely making use of a different type and quality of form but claims to do without all authorial formation, art’s proverbial deception reaches a new stage. With this new kind of artwork, the “illusion is created

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⁹ Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 108.
¹⁰ Ibid., p. 141.
¹¹ Ibid., p. 159.
¹² Ibid., p. 141.
¹³ Ibid.
that there is no illusion”; “that the diffuse and ego-alien” of the contingently integrated material harmonizes by itself “with the posited totality” of the artwork, “whereas the harmony itself is organized.”¹⁴ This is also clear in Cage’s “4.33”. If we experience this composition not merely as noise, but as a piece of music, then the “posited totality” of 4 minutes, 33 seconds and the contingent sounds (or non-sounds) of surrounding reality harmonize in a certain way in our experience of the work. If we were to maintain that we do not hear an aesthetically produced illusion, but only the sound of reality as such, harmonizing with the work-unit, then precisely this is the illusion produced by the work of art. For the harmony of the posited time frame and the contingent sounds and non-sounds we experience as the unity of the work result from the composer’s formal arrangement of the listening situation. Outside the formally set framework, however, the sounds of reality and the sounds of silence are nothing else than noise.

Fig. 2: Marcel Duchamp, “In Advance of the Broken Arm” (1915)

It would of course be nonsense to suggest that an artist such as John Cage would wish to produce an illusion that there is no aesthetic illusion in his artwork—or that he himself was the victim of such an illusion. In “4.33” Cage is acting as something like the Marcel Duchamp of modern avant-garde music, in that he makes it clear that the constitution of a musical work does not only depend on the composer’s setting of sounds, but that it also depends on the formal arrangement of the listening situation; and that this is the case to the same extent that object-based art is instantiated by the situation of its presentation, as Duchamp’s underscores in his “readymades.” Both Cage and Duchamp make use of form, and they do so by expressly avoiding formation; they are forming by granting as much room as possible to the play of contingency, Cage by using existing sounds as musical material and Duchamp by choosing an everyday object such as a snow shovel and embedding it in the specific situation of an exhibition. The works of both artists operate as radically as possible in this manner, but we nonetheless experience their use of contingency as something integrated into the unit of an artwork; it thus remains subject to formative settings constituting the work as such.

Both Duchamp's sculpture and Cage's composition, then, clearly contain a minimum of form. The extent of form involved here can be described with reference to the moments of its construction, to its internal logic, and to its simplicity or complexity and success or failure. Adorno is thus clearly right when he emphasizes that “[c]ategories such as unity, or even harmony, have not tracelessly vanished”\(^{15}\) from aesthetic theory through its modern critique. For all works of art “that remonstrate against the mathematical ideal of harmony and the requirement of symmetrical relations,” and thus seek to produce formlessness, “fail to slough off all symmetry.”\(^{16}\) In other words: although modernist art often “revolts against its neutralization as an object of contemplation, insisting on the most extreme incoherence,” contingency, or “dissonance,” all these different elements are and remain elements of the artwork’s “unity.”\(^{17}\) Admittedly today many people who simply appreciate modern art, together with many professional art theorists, find it difficult to speak of unity or even harmony in the classical sense with regard to these phenomena in modern art. But according to Adorno, properly understood these concepts describe nothing else than the “equili-


\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 158.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 157.

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brium” of what is “coordinated,” “a homeostasis”18 of the elements within the artwork’s formal structure. Of course, “[n]o artwork is worthy of its name that would hold at bay what is accidental in the terms of its own law of form.”19 However, in order that an artwork can exist, this always remains integrated into a unifying framework of formative settings.

3. Contingency and Interpretation

Adorno does not appear to have esteemed artworks of low-level formal complexity such as “4.33” or “In Advance of the Broken Arm” but personally preferred works of a more elaborated level of form.20 Furthermore, when he wrote that “[f]orm is the artifact's coherence, however self-antagonistic and refracted, through which every successful work separates itself from the merely existing,”21 he must have believed that the concept of form could serve as a means to distinguish artworks from ordinary, non-artistic objects. However, if we move beyond Adorno’s explicit train of thought, it becomes clear that form, understood in his sense, cannot be a perceptible characteristic enabling us to decide whether something must be interpreted as a work of art or rather as a humdrum object. This can be illustrated in two borderline cases.

First of all, we need to recognize that the formal qualities of an artwork can be such that they cannot be recognized only on the basis of sensory perception (visual, auditory, and so forth). This is the case, for example, in a work such as Duchamp’s “In Advance of the Broken Arm,” whose aesthetic form is determined not only by its perceptible properties but also by those that are non-perceptible, such as the fact that the piece is presented in an exhibition, used as an example of modern art, and so on. In this case, we must recognize that it is precisely the astonishing lack of typical artistic properties that determines the artistic form of this artwork. As a work of art it teaches us, through its visual similarity to an everyday object, that, as Arthur Danto has emphatically pointed out using similar examples, “no material differences need distinguish the artwork” from a visually identical “real thing,”22 in other words that there does not have to be a “perceptual

19 Ibid., p. 222.
20 Ibid., p. 220.
21 Ibid., p. 142.
22 Arthur C. Danto, The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art
property” from which a difference between the two objects can be derived. In this sense, the example of Duchamps’s piece makes clear that the lack of perceptible aesthetic characteristics in a thing says nothing about the ontological status that we adequately have to ascribe to an object that we either interpret as an artwork or as a humdrum thing.

But there is, secondly, also the reverse case, in which the object of perception displays characteristics of artistic form to such an overwhelming degree that it is hard to imagine that it will not be perceived as a work of art. As Danto has shown, however, “it is always possible, for any artwork you choose, to imagine something indiscernible from it but caused in a way” that would not incite us to interpret the perceptible thing as art. This would be the case, for example, if someone would credibly assure us that the object in front of us, which looks exactly like “the Tempietto of Bramante,” is nothing more than the coincidental product of an explosion in a quarry. Of course, we might object, a major lottery win is far more likely than an explosion bringing about such a result. This is true, but irrelevant to the point that Danto wishes to clarify. What he wishes to make clear is that if something of the sort were to happen, we would not speak of a work of art, however much the object at hand might look like one. And so we cannot reject the proposal that neither the obvious absence of typical aesthetic characteristics, in the first case, nor an overwhelming degree of perceptible aesthetic features in an object, in the second case, are in themselves sufficient to draw a precise distinction between art and non-art.

This shows that our decision to interpret something that looks, for instance, like a painting as an artwork is at best largely motivated but in principle not compelled by the visual properties of the object as such. This is true because works of art are intrinsically interpretive constructs. According to Danto only our act of interpretation transforms them into something with the status of art. This transformation or, as Danto terms it, transfiguration happens when we offer an interpretation of what the object at hand is about, or of what it directly or metaphorically presents by means of its internal form. If following Danto I emphasize the status of artworks as interpretative con-

23 Ibid., p.43.
25 Ibid., p.40. I simplified Danto's example.
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structs, this of course does not imply that every thing can be construed as a work of art at all times and under any circumstances; nor does it mean that the appearance of what we are looking at is unimportant for our interpretation. What I mean is rather that our act of interpretation as such decides what we regard as the object’s identity, its specific artistic form, or what we are prepared to accept as its contingent or relevant features.

Danto designates the specific act of interpretation I am referring to as “surface interpretation” of an artwork, distinguishing it from what he understands as “deep interpretation.” In the somewhat vaguer sense I am using the term here, a deep interpretation is what we are usually aiming at when we talk about the meaning of a work, discuss its position within the artistic production of its time, or interpret it iconologically as a symptom of a certain historical period. A surface interpretation, on the other hand, is the starting point or preliminary stage for all further interpretations aimed at defining the artwork’s meaning. Against the background of our knowledge of an artistic tradition, it first “gives the work its identity” by establishing which properties are supposed to be relevant to its form and which are considered contingent, how it is demarcated from what surrounds it, and so on.

Let us look at one example clarifying what I mean here. When we regard something as a painting, against the background of our European artistic tradition we are inclined to assume that the taste and the smell of the paint are unimportant to its aesthetic unity because taste and smell are considered to be contingent aesthetic properties of paintings. This is so because in the case of painting we take these properties to be aesthetically irrelevant traditionally, not because the properties being relevant is otherwise inconceivable. For the painting of course has these properties as objectively as it displays perceptible color qualities, particular dimensions, and so forth. But in line with the manner in which we have learned to consider paintings,

26 In the context of our discussion I can only claim these points. For a more detailed discussion see my paper “Art and Annotation: On the Relationship of Art and Annotation in the Visual Arts,” in Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art, vol. 35, no 4, 2015, 15-24; part III, especially p. 23.
27 Arthur C. Danto, The philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art, p.50.
28 Whereas Danto is at pains to precisely define the concept of “deep interpretation” (Arthur C. Danto, The philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art, p. 63), I deliberately use it more vaguely in the present context to cover all types of interpretation aimed at the meaning of a work.
29 Arthur C. Danto, The philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art, p.66.
we assume, in the wake of our surface interpretation, that the artist has not intentionally incorporated the taste and smell of his painting. For this reason, we would probably be fairly surprised if an art historian were to discover, say, a letter of Raphael in which the painter tells us that the color of a particular painting of his was to some extent owed aesthetically to the fact that he simply used paints that he happened to find on his palette. But, we continue to read, he steadily worked to refine the painting's taste and smell, about which he had thought long and hard, until the painting was finally finished. Reading this we would be surprised, even consternated, because unlike Duchamp’s work, Raphael’s painting reveals familiar stylistic, iconographic, compositional, and so forth characteristics, to such an extent that we do not even believe in the relevance of other aesthetic parameters we have indeed learned to attach to painting in our art-historical tradition.

Fig. 3: Raffael, Sacra Conversazione (Madonna Sistina) (1512/13)

Nevertheless, the example of the fictitious Raphael letter shows that there is a fundamental problem here. If we were to find such a letter, we reluctantly 208
would have to accept the fact that aesthetic properties we traditionally consider contingent appear relevant to his paintings. Of course, in the case of Raphael this hypothetical seems quite absurd since we are convinced we know what counts as aesthetically relevant in his paintings. But you never know what the future brings…. What cannot be strictly excluded even in the case of Raphael turns out to be an even more fundamental problem in the case of artworks that less emphatically convey an imperative as to how they are to be read. Let us look again at the image presented at this essay’s beginning (Fig. 1). I there deliberately selected a work by a less well-known artist because in this case, unlike the case of Raphael, we do not immediately know what sort of object to expect merely by reading the name. Without more detailed information on the history of the work, most of the work’s viewers probably do not even know if the work is the photograph as such or if the photograph is in fact documenting a performative work. And if the latter is the case, what is the artwork? How do we know which parameters are contingent and which relevant for a deeper interpretation of the work? Do the three people surrounding the woman sitting in the middle part of the artwork belong to it or are they merely observing it? And how do we know that in that case, an adequate reception of the artwork is not confined to viewing but also involves a taste experience belonging to the range of aesthetic experiences formally arranged by the artist? The answer to these questions should be clear: we of course have no idea without reference to background information, especially regarding the underlying artistic intention.

In fact, when we have to decide about the identity of an artwork and its relevant or contingent properties, our surface interpretation is always determined by such background information. According to Danto, “[s]urface interpretation must be scrupulously historical, and refer only to possibilities” the artist “could have acknowledged without attributing to him knowledge…of the future.”30 An image that we know was painted in the early sixteenth century cannot reasonably be interpreted as representing something that happened much later, however much the work’s visual appearance may suggest this. The history and knowledge that can with reason be imputed to the artist determine the adequacy or inadequacy of our interpretations.

While we have no objective criteria whatsoever for determining the adequa-

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of deep interpretations, surface interpretations are bound to yet another authority, alongside history and the imputable knowledge of the artist, that limits the scope of appropriate interpretation. This is the “authority”\(^31\) of the artist who created the work and decided what should count as its identity. Through formative work on the material, in the course of the working process the artist has decided which moments of the artwork are meant to be relevant, which contingent. When Danto emphasizes this, he knows that in modern art theory many scholars “scorn reference to authorial representation,”\(^32\) since the concept of authorial or artistic intention has become unpopular as a result of the influence of post-structural art theory and Anglo-American New Criticism.\(^33\) Instead, there is much emphasis today on the idea that experience of art should center solely around a given aesthetic impression of an artwork, an impression that can be experienced whatever the intention of the artist may have been. But this appeal to the self-containment of aesthetic experience is, in my opinion, naïve. Somebody not interested in Raphael’s intentions who values a painting by Raphael because of its inimitable taste or smell values it – as far we know – for the wrong reasons.

\(^31\) Arthur C. Danto, *The philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, p.50.
\(^32\) Ibid., p.49.
\(^33\) To prevent misunderstandings, it is important to underscore that Danto’s attempt at a partial rehabilitation of intentionality does not imply that any reasonable “deep interpretation” is strongly indebted to it. In fact, an iconological interpretation of an artwork can, with good reason, see its meaning in something that was beyond the possible knowledge of the artist. Thus, Raphael was hardly able to “intend” his painting to be a major work of High Renaissance art, as we now perhaps interpret it. With respect to the surface interpretation, however, intentionality represents an important criterion in deciding the question of what is to be considered relevant or contingent.

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