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**The End and Origin of Art
(Philosophy of Modern Art)**

Lecture Notes

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Preface

In these lectures I attempt to show why art, especially painting, continues to matter, despite so much in today's art-world that argues against this — and, as I will also show, such arguments are supported by the very shape of our modern world.

The title demands explanation. End can mean something like death. In recent years there has thus been a great deal of talk about a possible death or end of art. But end can also mean *telos* or goal. And these two readings can merge: there may be a sense in which art has to die when it finally reaches its goal.

The “origin of art,” too, invites different readings. “Origin” may thus be understood as the source of something, like the source of a river. That source again may be understood temporally or essentially. In the latter case the inquiry into the origin of art becomes an attempt to situate art in the larger context of the human condition. But “origin of art” may also be read with Heidegger as describing the essence of art, claiming that it is in the nature of art to be an origin. All of these different readings figure in these lectures

It was with Hegel's thesis of the end of art and with Heidegger's essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” in mind that I chose the title *The End and Origin of Art*. Hegel figures especially in the first part of the course, which circles around the question: despite our seemingly so active art-world, is there a sense in which art today has come to an end? I also take a close look at more recent versions of the end of art thesis, such as those advanced by Arthur Danto and T. J. Clark. But it is Hegel's version that proves the most difficult to reject. The death of art in what Hegel takes to be its highest sense turns out to be demanded by our modern understanding of reality. That understanding must be challenged, if Hegel is not to have the last word here. The death of art, so understood, turns out to be a presupposition of the aesthetic understanding of art that has presided over the progress of art ever since the 18th century, an understanding that has found eloquent spokesmen in Kant, Schopenhauer, Greenberg, and Fried. All modern art is art after the death of art in Hegel's sense. Modern art, however, as Danto is right to insist,

also reached some sort of end in the past century, first with Duchamp, then with Warhol. But, if so, it is precisely this end of modern art that invites a critical reexamination of Hegel's thesis. Such a critique is a presupposition of keeping open the possibility of a step beyond modern art that promises art a genuine future.

After a look at Marxist aesthetics, the second part of the course circles around Heidegger's inquiry into the origin of the work of art. Here we find a thoughtful challenge to Hegel's thesis that helps us to understand why it is just in what Benjamin called this age of mechanical reproduction that we need art to save our humanity. No aesthetic art can provide what is demanded. In Heidegger we find thus pointers concerning where art might go in the future.

But these pointers are shadowed by Heidegger's politicizing of art and aestheticizing of politics. Both remain temptations that demand a critical response. The shadow cast by National Socialism threatens to envelop Heidegger's thinking on art so completely that it becomes difficult to take seriously his challenge to Hegel: does any attempt to recover for art today what once was its highest function not reduce art to a version of the golden calf, as Adorno suggests?

The third part of the course turns more directly to the present situation and future of art. It examines the extent to which much art today, especially the turn to abjection, can be understood as a critical response to kitsch, where Lyotard's appropriation of the Kantian sublime as the aesthetic category most appropriate to postmodern art receives critical attention: I show that in the end Lyotard's version of the sublime reduces to the interesting, as analyzed by Kierkegaard. But the pursuit of the interesting has to end in despair. Has the sun of art then set, as Nietzsche suggests? But in Nietzsche we can also find hints about what a new dawn might look like. The turn to abjection taken by some recent art deserves reconsideration in this connection; so does alchemy, understood with Elkins, as a metaphor for painting.

The course is framed by an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction considers the significance of van Bladeren's slashing of Newman's *Cathedra*. Do we

posses today a sufficiently robust understanding of the essence of art to simply dismiss this would-be artist's action as an act of vandalism? Very concretely this act raises the question: What is Art?

The conclusion reconsiders what the book argued for: the claim that the task of art is to open windows in the world-building raised by objectifying reason: windows to transcendence. A presupposition of meeting this task turns out to be the strength to resist the snake's seductive promise: you shall be like God!

Part One: The End of Art

1. Introduction: Zips and Slashes

1

On November 21, 1997, Gerard Jan van Bladeren, an artist in his early 40's who, so he says, likes to slash his own paintings for aesthetic effect, returned to Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, where in 1986 he had already slashed Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III?* to attack a second work by Newman, this time *Cathedra* from 1951.¹ When I read about this act of vandalism in the New York Times my first response was not shock or surprise, but a diffuse and confused sadness. Sadness, not so much because this particular work should have been mangled — there are paintings whose loss would have touched me rather like the death of a dear friend, but not one of Newman's works has befriended me in quite that way. But whether one likes a particular work or not, scarcely matters in cases such as this. Words by the painter Frank Badur, included in the *Hommage a Barnett Newman*, published by the *Nationalgalerie* Berlin in 1982 on the occasion of its acquisition of the last and largest of Newman's variations on the theme *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?* came to mind: "The tolerance and freedom that a society grants its art and artists are a measure of its own tolerance, its own freedom."² The space granted to freedom seemed to have become just a bit less. But more seemed at stake. The tolerance and freedom a society grants its art and artists may reflect only indifference. Van Bladeren's slashing of Newman's art presupposes some sense that such art matters: matters enough to provoke the vandal. But does art matter?

What saddened me was not so much the fact that this work of art had been violated, but rather that yet another work of art should have been mangled; also, that yet another self-proclaimed artist should, in the name of art, have chosen to violate the distance that, I continue to feel, should protect art from the world and its violence, a distance museum and concert hall have institutionalized. It seems to me important that, despite all the chaos and suffering in the world and notwithstanding the progressive commercialization and politicization of art, there should be places where individuals are

¹ A version of this lecture appeared in a Dutch translation by Jan Willem Reimtsma as "Streepen aan repen," *Nexus*, 1998, no. 20, pp. 146 - 163.

² *Hommage a Barnett Newman*, Nationalgalerie Berlin, 1982.

free from what usually occupies them and permit themselves to become totally absorbed in, say, a string quartet by Haydn — or a painting by Newman. But why do I think this important? What does art matter?

My reaction was confused in many ways. I know very well how questionable that distance I just invoked has become, how easy it is to defend such acts of vandalism as attacks on an old-fashioned, elitist understanding of art that today would seem to have lost whatever legitimacy it once may have had. My own convictions about what art is and should be are called into question, not by occasional acts of violence perpetrated by a few notoriety-craving individuals, but by the disturbing fit of van Bladeren's violent action and the current state of what has come to be called the art-world, including artists, patrons, critics, academics, galleries, museums, and various institutions that support art — including perhaps even vandals? Today's art-world itself has challenged the distance that once was thought to separate art and the world, as it plays, and at times not just plays, with the idea that art today gains its significance first of all as a testing of the boundaries of art, even as a violation of what art has long been assumed to be. Has the time not come to challenge such assumptions? What should art be? Should it even be?

A hundred years ago the art-world would have dealt with an act such as van Bladeren's slashing of a painting without feeling a need to spill much ink over it, deploring to be sure the damage done to an important painting and condemning the vandal in no uncertain terms, but able to treat the affair as some unhappy individual's lashing out at society and values that remained unchallenged — and be done with it. How things have changed! That today some presumably thoughtful observers of the art scene would have us discuss van Bladeren's destructive act as itself an aesthetic action deserving serious discussion, as perhaps even an important step in a progress leading art out of its self-imposed isolation from the public at large, calling into question that money-centered elitism that for too long had ruled the art world, was as predictable as that there should have been those — dare we still call them philistines? — who felt that works such as the to them all but meaningless abstractions created by Newman almost deserved their fate.

Indeed: how can one justify spending public funds on art such as this and on institutions like the Stedelijk Museum? What stake does society have in this art?

Widespread hostility has long shadowed the progress of modern art. Often it has expressed itself in nothing more damaging than comments of the sort: "my three year-old son paints better pictures." Here in New Haven a story went around, inevitably told with a certain amused glee, that during a snow storm some janitor, not realizing that Duchamp's snow shovel hanging in Yale's Art Gallery was more than just a snow shovel, used it actually to shovel snow, returning the ready-made to its original function. The distance that separates such glee from open hostility is not very great.

More and more often such hostility gives birth to destructive action.³ Such vandalism is easy to understand, if not therefore to condone, when the artwork is perceived to cross the boundary of what is socially acceptable, for instance by offending religious sensibilities, even more for exploring too explicit erotic imagery: such art has become an obvious battle ground for free speech activists on the one side, crusaders against pornography on the other.⁴ Political correctness has demanded its own victims: at the University of North Carolina, for example, students formed a Committee Against Offensive Statues. Their target was Julia Balk's \$65,000 statue *The Student Body* — somewhat disturbingly it has become almost *de rigeur* to begin discussions of vandalism with the dollar value of the vandalized work, as if to vindicate those vandals who take themselves to protest the commercialization of art, such as the Russian performance artist Alexander Bremer, who, also in the Stedelijk Museum, spray-painted a dollar sign on one of Malevich's suprematist compositions only months before van Bladeren struck there for the second time. Julia Balk's sculpture managed to offend quite an array of concerned student activists: feminists because it included a couple, the man reading a book, the woman — in the image of Eve? — holding an apple; blacks because it included a black basket-ball player and a black woman carrying a book on her head as if she were still in the bush, the book a basket; and Asians because the figure with Asian features was shown carrying a violin-case. Pulled not just to the left and the right, but in many different directions, today's politicized students are all too ready to sacrifice tolerance to whatever

³ See John Dornberg, "Art Vandals: Why Do They Do It?" *Art News*, March 1987, pp. 102-109 and Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).

⁴ See Liza Mundy, "The New Critics," in Kathleen M. Higgins, *Aesthetics in Perspective* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996), pp. 213 - 221.

cause they have embraced. Small wonder, that the statue was overthrown. The university's chancellor decided to have it moved to a less conspicuous and therefore less offensive spot.

In this case it was not difficult-to-understand abstract art that offended. Quite the opposite: had the work not been so representational and therefore legible it would scarcely have provoked the student vandals. One would like to agree with William Massey, a graduate of the university, that "the further you get from realism, the less likely a piece of work is to be vandalized;" and with Liza Mundy, when she suggested that what happened at the University of North Carolina "will surely encourage art committees to stick with the abstract stuff."⁵ Irrelevant to the concerns of most people, that "abstract stuff" would seem to be protected from the vandal's wrath by its irrelevance — at least as long as its size and placement or its price tag did not render it too conspicuous. In that case perceived irrelevance becomes an affront to good sense.

The vandals here were students, easily politicized, and ready for a prank. Much more difficult to understand is what led some, I assume grown-up, local politicians in the Rhineland to use for a wine cooler an enamel bathtub that Josef Beuys, in the spirit of Duchamp, had transformed into a ready-made-aided, and that then was awaiting exhibition in some castle. What made these presumably busy representatives of the people make the effort and take the time to scrub and clean this tub in which the artist as baby had once been bathed? They claimed that they did not recognize that what they were dealing with was a work of art — the claim itself a statement on behalf of the many who feel somehow left out, even mocked, or put down by such art. Did some of the culprits suspect that the publicity the act was bound to generate would work in their favor? If so, they would have been proven right: public opinion was more with the vandals than with the vandalized artwork, more outraged by the court's award of DM 80,000 in damages plus DM 15,000 in interest than by what the owner termed the destruction and desecration of an important artwork: desecration indeed!

And public opinion was also with the vandal when on April 13, 1982 Josef Kleer, a 29 year-old student of veterinary medicine, decided to punch holes into Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue? IV*, which Berlin's New National

⁵ Ibid., p. 219.

Gallery had just acquired for one million dollars. The large painting, Klee claimed, had indeed made him afraid, while the large sum spent for it scandalized him. Indeed: how can such a purchase be justified, as long as there are persons who go hungry, who lack adequate shelter and medical care? And the claim that the painting made him afraid cannot be simply dismissed. Did not Newman himself like to invoke Burke on the sublime in discussions of his art? And did not Burke insist on the connection between the sublime and fear? "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*."⁶ The painting's very title played with the idea of fear. To be sure, played with fear as art plays with reality and Klee could be accused of having failed to preserve the proper aesthetic distance that according to Burke, too, separates the sublime from what is simply fearful. But how today are we to reconcile tired sounding demands for aesthetic distance with calls for a more engaged art? The public response was predictable: who here is crazy? The vandal or those willing to pay one million dollars for a painting any house painter's apprentice could have produced at a fraction of the cost? That the Berliners should have elevated Klee into a minor hero cannot surprise. Such elevation demonstrates that these acts of vandalism, whatever the vandal's intention, possess a social significance. A significant part of the public today will embrace these vandals as defenders of a good sense they see betrayed and mocked by an arrogant self-appointed artistic elite. Are they clearly wrong?

2

I can only assume that van Bladeren, too, standing in 1986 in a different museum before another of Newman's variations on the theme *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?* felt challenged and provoked, not just by what he saw, but also and perhaps especially by the title. Newman had chosen it when, working on the first painting in that series, he became aware that he was up against Mondrian and the art he stood for. "Just as I had confronted other dogmatic positions of the purists, neoplasticists, and other

⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 39.

formalists, I was now in confrontation with their dogma, which had reduced red, yellow, and blue into an idea that destroys them as color."⁷ Mondrian is said to have reduced colors to an idea. That idea destroyed color as color. Newman sought to give new life to color. In this particular variation on his chosen theme he showed that he was indeed not afraid of Mondrian's red, yellow, and blue. He met his precursor's challenge with a gloriously alive red surface, stretched out between yellow and blue bands.

Newman thought of the titles he gave his paintings as metaphors "that will in some way correspond to what I think is the feeling in them and the meaning of it."⁸ If so, the four paintings that make up the *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?* series are well named. They do suggest an artist caught up in a heroic agon. Newman himself cultivated the hero's posture; he liked to present his art as the heroic self-assertion of that "one real man"⁹ needed to create great art. "My work, they say, is more advanced than Mondrian's, when what they mean is that I have broken the barrier of his dogmas."¹⁰

Imagine an artist, impressed by Newman as Newman was by Mondrian, struggling, now to advance beyond Newman. Is it not possible to consider van Bladeren's action as another such self-assertion, as an agon with his precursor Newman, an attempt to break the barrier of the latter's dogma. Newman himself gave succinct expression to what he thought he had achieved: "My paintings physically declare the area as a whole from the very beginning. They are not a construction. With Mondrian the whole is the sum of its parts. With me, the wholeness has no parts."¹¹ More self-consciously than his precursor, Newman embraced the dogma that the artwork should be a seamless self-sufficient whole, a dogma that for so long had presided over and given direction to the progress of modern art. And not only did he embrace it, but with such single-minded conviction that it becomes difficult to envision a further advance. Hands off such art, this dogma proclaims, as it also raises a barrier to further progress in that direction. Some sort of end seemed to have been reached. Could it be the end of art?

⁷ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 192.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.180.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

Van Bladeren was not afraid of the seeming finality of Newman's red, yellow, and blue, meeting their challenge with his knife. The museum to be sure failed to recognize aesthetic value in what had been achieved and decided to restore the mangled painting, thereby judging the work of this would-be artist to be no more than an act of vandalism, to be undone to the extent that this was possible. Attempting to restore the painting, it also reaffirmed the idea of the museum as the ideal home for works of art that were not to be touched, an idea that van Bladeren apparently found offensive. If he took himself at all seriously as an artist, it is easy to understand his outrage, his decision to return to the Stedelijk Museum to ensure that his work would not be so easily dismissed, undone, and forgotten. Not finding the restored painting that so offended him, *Cathedra* offered itself as a ready substitute. It took this action artist, who had substituted a Stanley knife for a brush, no more than 20 seconds to execute his de-constructive work.

Should we honor the result of this last action, the now mangled *Cathedra*, as a work of art in its own right that breaks the barrier established by the dogma that the artwork should be an inviolable whole and thereby opens up a new arena for art? Has the breaking of such barriers not long been associated with originality and artistic genius? Defenders of the aesthetic significance of van Bladeren's action can thus cite a long prehistory, including countless futurist and dada actions. Kant knew about the troubling proximity of artistic creativity and nonsense and for that reason insisted that art must be more than the original self-expression of "one real man," that the creation of art presupposes not only individual genius, but taste and taste binds the individual into the community. Iconoclasts lack taste.

3

That van Bladeren, like many a vandal before him, should have been called an iconoclast is not surprising, especially not given the title of the vandalized painting: *Cathedra*, naming the throne occupied by God. Must this very name, which would put a painting, a mere aesthetic object, in the place of what is most sacred not provoke those who still believe? It is easy to understand why such believers should have found in the vandal's action a significance he may not at all have intended. I was not at all surprised to learn that the archbishopric of Utrecht should have seized the opportunity provided by

the publicity surrounding van Bladeren's return to make posters with the title "Who's Afraid of God?" showing a version of the Newman painting, slashed now in the form of a cross, creating an ambiguous metaphor.

"Who's Afraid of Red, Blue, and Yellow?" — that meant also: who is afraid of any dogma, including the dogma of the church? More was at stake than just the liberation of color from Mondrian's deadening dogma: Newman sought to make cathedrals out of his own feelings, "reasserting man's desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions."¹² Given Newman's own self-understanding as a builder of sublime cathedrals celebrating the self-elevation of the American male (that "one real man" needed to create art), it is difficult not to understand the Church's poster as inviting us to think the vandal an iconoclast, calling us away from the false idol of the self-centered abstract art celebrated by the godless Newman to the true faith. Newman's art and even more the claims he made for it do indeed raise the question whether the Church, and not only the Church, must not judge such art in the image of the golden calf. Must we not question such fetishizing of the art object, which makes abstract paintings into icons on which, as Malevich put it, "the holy is a zero"? Malevich wanted his suprematist compositions to silence all meanings, all words, attributing an evangelical significance to his gesturing towards whiteness, the void: "The essence of God is zero salvation. In this essence lies at the same time salvation zero... If the heroes and saints were to become aware that the salvation of the future is zero salvation, they would be confused by reality. The hero would let his sword drop and the prayers of the saint would die on his lips."¹³ Newman had a similarly exalted opinion of his art: "Almost fifteen years ago Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. That answer still goes."¹⁴ Newman, too, understood the artist as a prophet, carrying into "the chaos that is society" "a living myth for us in our own time," the myth that "Each

¹² Ibid., p. 173.

¹³ Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematismus — die gegenstandslose Welt*, trans. and ed. H. von Riesen (Cologne: Dumont, 1962), p. 57.

¹⁴ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 251.

man is, or should be his own hero," wresting, godlike, "truth from the void"¹⁵: *vir heroicus sublimis*. Abstract art as myth-making? Is this not to understand the artist in the image of Aaron, who, in the absence of Moses, took the gold of his people to fashion a calf, putting what he had wrought in the place that belonged to the sacred? Are Newman's paintings with their often evocative titles such golden calves, or as we might say today, abstract kitsch — for is not kitsch a reoccupation of the genuine with the counterfeit?

Newman to be sure presents himself to us the prophet of a very different, a humanist faith. The Church's poster thus invites also a similarly different response: the crucified painting invites us to think the vandal as belonging to the party of those who again and again, crucifying freedom, crucify true humanity.

4

But are such reflections even appropriate, given what happened? Do they not attribute an importance to and thus dignify the vandal's action in a way it does not deserve? One reason I find the poster troubling is precisely because it invites such reflections. I wish I could brush it aside as simply in poor taste, just as I wish I could rest content with characterizations of van Bladeren as a psychopath, as claimed by the director of the Stedelijk museum Rudi Fuchs, a madman like Laszlo Toth, who insisting he was Christ, attacked Michelangelo's Pietà, or that Dutchman who claimed Jesus had made him attack Rembrandt's *Night Watch*. Van Bladeren, too, thought himself “a warrior, a samurai in the service of the Messiah,” fighting against “Jews and Japanese who in their little flats are scheming about world hegemony and who for all anyone knows, perhaps without realizing it themselves, are preparing a new Holocaust.”¹⁶ Destructive actions by psychopaths are a bit like natural catastrophes: we should take precautions to avoid them in the future, take whatever steps we can to make a repetition less likely. There will of course be repetitions; that cannot be helped. But this is no reason to endow these with a deep significance they do not deserve. Some actions are

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 107, 111, 140, 169, 173.

¹⁶ Gary Schwarz, “Attacking Art,” review of Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, *Art in America*, July 1998, p. 31.

best buried in silence. To talk endlessly about such acts may serve only to encourage their repetition. Committing an outrageous act such as destroying a great work of art is after all a time-honored way to become famous. How many acts of vandalism were committed only because the vandal was able to count on publicity to reward him? Van Bladeren's destruction of *Cathedra* thus brought to mind Erostratus, who in 356 B. C. burned down the magnificent temple of Artemis the Ephesians had built with the help of king Croesus' gold. This act of vandalism was sufficient to assure Erostratus a minor, but lasting place in history. Not that I had thought of Newman's *Cathedra* as deserving to be compared with the Ephesians' temple, one of the seven wonders of the world, despite the about twelve million dollars the painting was said to be worth.

Does the price matter? While a greater price tag has long been equated with greater aesthetic worth, aesthetics would dispute any such equation: if the greater work of art fetches a higher price, this is not because we can put a price on aesthetic quality, but rather because we value aesthetic experience precisely because it puts us in touch with what is beyond any price. As Kant might have put the matter: we are interested in having experiences that allow for that entirely disinterested satisfaction that is the gift of beauty and so we are willing to put a price on what is really priceless. But this should not lead us to forget that to put a price on an artwork is to obscure that aura of a meaning deeper than reason can grasp that belongs to every genuine work of art. — But have we not been taught to question such an auratic understanding of art?

It is of course quite easy to determine what a certain painting is likely to sell for, given the present art market, and to accept this as a mark of greatness. The pearl without any price has a price after all. Would our outrage have been the same had van Bladeren attacked an inexpensive, but beautiful landscape by a minor Dutch master of the seventeenth century? Certainly, the publicity would have been much less, although my outrage might well have been greater because I would find such an act more difficult to rationalize: the action of a madman indeed. But such a work would of course be much less likely to provoke the vandal's wrath — a fact that should let us pause before we call van Bladeren a madman: whatever it has to do with aesthetic merit, a twelve million dollar price tag is sufficient to establish an artwork's place in a very select circle and all but guarantees public interest in its violation. And those who believe that all publicity is

good publicity, but have no other way to satisfy their craving to see their names in newspapers, may well see in such acts one way in which they, too, can be famous, if only for a short time — too short a time apparently to have satisfied van Bladeren after he attacked his first Newman. Small wonder that he returned to the Stedelijk Museum: the craving for notoriety needs to be fed.

A sober utilitarian might well point out to us that such a craving is by no means mad; today notoriety translates readily into money. Every important public scandal thus generates a spate of television appearances and books and sometimes it seems that the commission of some outrageous act has become the easiest and shortest road to fame and therefore wealth. I can well imagine a book, co-authored by van Bladeren and some truly up-to-date critic armed with the most recent theory, bearing the zippy title: *Zapping the Zip or the Emperor has no Clothes*. The proceeds might even be sufficient to set up a small Gallery for Engaged Art. I was surprised to read in the newspaper how small in Holland the punishment is for such an act: no more than two years in prison and a fine of at most 15,000 dollars: are these sufficient to deter someone who soberly weighed financial gain and loss? After his first slashing van Bladeren served a mere five months in jail and three on parole before "fading into obscurity," while attempts were made to undo the damage he had done.

5

Just as I can understand those who insist that, instead of attempting to rebuild what the violence of war has destroyed — say some bombed church such as Dresden's Frauenkirche — we should preserve the pathetic ruin as a guardian against the recurrence of just such violence, so I can understand those who argued that we should preserve the slashed *Cathedra*, not to honor the vandal, but as a guardian against a recurrence of just such violence. Paul Cliteur must be taken seriously when he suggested that now that the work had been slashed, the director of the Stedelijk Museum Rudi Fuchs, instead of calling on three Newman experts to help decide how to best save the work, would have done better to consult with legal experts concerning the possibility of preserving the work in its ruined state. Like architectural ruins, the ruined Newman has its own aesthetic

appeal, and if many a building has become a more moving presence because ruined, could one not argue something of the sort in this case?

I can imagine yet another scenario: instead of repairing the damaged and precisely because of its seemingly so simple, not quite monochromatic, abstract quality, difficult to restore painting, to reproduce it as it was, drawing on everything technology now has to offer. Might such a reproduction not come closer to matching the appearance of the original than any attempt to patch and repair it? This simulacrum of Newman's *Cathedra* could then be exhibited in its proper place, perhaps together with the mutilated original. And suppose the reproduction were all but indistinguishable from the original, what would have been lost? The unique aura that is supposed to magically surround every original work of art? But is that aura more than a phantasm?

Suppose van Bladeren had bought "Cathedra" for many millions only to then destroy it, exhibiting the slashed painting in some respected gallery, now as his work of art, with the title "Zips and Slashes: Tearing the Emperor's New Clothing"? He could have claimed Rauschenberg, who erased a de Kooning he owned, signed it, and named it *Erased de Kooning Sketch*, for a precursor. How would that change our judgment of his action? The object resulting from that action, we can stipulate, would have been exactly the same as the slashed painting we now have, but the different context would have endowed it with a very different meaning. The subsequent discussion would now have centered more on the mutilated artwork than on the mutilated art-world. To be sure, questions would have been raised whether anyone has the right to destroy a cultural treasure of such importance. Regardless of what the legal situation may be in a particular country, few of us doubt that ownership of a work of architecture or a piece of land does not give the owner an unrestricted right to do whatever he wants with what he owns. Rights of ownership must be weighed against what is in the public interest. And if owning some architectural treasure does not give you the right to do with it whatever you please, should there not be similar restriction on works of art? There is a sense in which every great work of art belongs not just to whoever happens to own it, but to all of us. The vandal's knife cuts not just a painting, but violates our sense of community. But once again the question: is that sense in which every great work of art is said to belong to

all of us not a hackneyed bit of rhetoric that attributes a significance to art that it no longer possesses. What does art matter?

6

The image of the slashed canvas shown in the newspaper, the central whitish vertical zip now unsteady, broken, traversed and given a pathetic life by the vandal's violent strokes, brought to my mind the cover of Denis Hollier's *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, showing one of the great works of western architecture, the cathedral of Reims in flames,¹⁷ showing it, not as an example of something that should never happen again, but as a fitting fate for an edifice Bataille had come to experience as representative of a spiritual architecture that imprisons and therefore should be destroyed, even if such destruction threatens chaos and bestiality. To be sure, what we see on the book's cover is only an often reproduced photograph, the pictorial and academic distance rendering quite unreal the once very real violence represented, just as the jargon of violence found between the book's covers is rendered harmlessly titillating, bound as it is by its academic setting. Academics and artists, too, like to play with fire.

Along these lines it is easy to construct an apology for van Bladeren: should the five long and two shorter strokes that mutilated the Newman not be considered aesthetically significant expressions of a fearless freedom that refuses to respect the stifling architecture of Newman's *Cathedra*? And did van Bladeren not give Newman's by now already a bit dated art a new life, a new actuality. We might even credit the vandal, as Paul Cliteur appears to have done, with actually having improved the original work of art by making it more worthy of discussion. Can van Bladeren not claim to have created a work that goes significantly beyond the comparable, but much more feeble slashings of Lucio Fontana? Such suggestions can no longer be simply dismissed. But whether the destruction will in fact some day be celebrated as some sort of milestone or deplored and soon forgotten as just another act of vandalism, the last in a long chain of such acts, will depend not so much on van Bladeren's intention, whatever it may have

¹⁷ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass and London: MIT Press, 1989).

been, as on the reception his action is accorded, both by today's art-world and by the larger public. By that reception that art-world will judge itself; and that reception will help determine just how much more was mutilated by van Bladeren's Stanley-knife than just this one painting.

But had art not already been "mutilated" — and the term may well be challenged as unduly prejudicial — by modern art's by now time-honored tradition of challenging all sorts of tabus, especially those with which the custodians of what they consider good art would guard the established and accepted? Duchamp already had suggested the possibility of creating art by using a Rembrandt for an ironing board! Compare van Bladeren's slashing of the Newman to Duchamp's decision to disfigure Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* by giving her a mustache. There is this all-important difference: Duchamp's mustache appears only on a cheap reproduction, leaving the priceless original quite undisturbed in its museum setting. "Priceless original" is of course just the sort of cliché that invites deconstruction, claiming, as it does, to remove art works from a world where everything has a price. The cliché thus appeals to that boundary supposed to separate the aesthetic realm from the real world with its money and violence. This boundary van Bladeren refused to respect.

Had he respected it, he might have been content to slash some reproduction of *Cathedra*. But such an act would have attracted little attention: after all, after Duchamp that sort of thing has come to be almost expected and is unlikely to generate much interest. In different forms such use and abuse of the work of other artists has by now become an accepted artistic practice, where, given an ever more permissive art-world, where just about everything seems to go, artists find it ever more difficult to arouse much interest with such appropriations. An art-world infatuated with the unexpected and interesting demands thus ever more outrageous action, and this demand has to push art towards its own self-de-construction. From this perspective we may want to consider van Bladeren an artist led by his pursuit of the ever more interesting from just playing with the idea of destroying what other artists had established to actual destruction, just as an individual pursuing the erotically interesting might be led from pornographic play with sado-masochism to increasingly violent attempts to push beyond imaginary explorations that lacked reality and for that very reason came to seem increasingly pale and boring.

Should van Bladeren's action then be understood as the all too predictable culmination of that pursuit of the interesting, first diagnosed by Friedrich Schlegel and Søren Kierkegaard and so brilliantly enacted by Duchamp? If so, one could also argue that van Bladeren did well to slash paintings by Newman, for no modern painter more vigorously rejected the aesthetic of the interesting, which was to become so important to post-modernism, than Newman, who declared that while a Robert Motherwell might wish to make Duchamp a father, "Duchamp is his father and not mine nor that of any American painter that I respect."¹⁸ An artistic battle line is drawn here and drawn in a way that may suggest that Newman's place today is indeed in a museum, that he already belongs to a past removed from our post-modern world: to many artists and theorists Duchamp today seems more relevant. He has become much more of a father figure for the art of the present than Newman, as Newman would no doubt have admitted. But, cantankerous as he was, he would have lost little time to turn such an admission into an attack on artists corrupted by what he thought the false aesthetics that would blur the boundary between art and non-art. "In Europe the great aestheticians among the painters were the dada [artists], who said, 'We're against art because we really know what art is,' ... [insisting] that a piece of paper dropped, that a sound yelled, that anything was a work of art... The best example of this is Marcel Duchamp, who identified art or tried to destroy art by pointing to the fountain, and we now have museums that show screwdrivers and automobiles and paintings. [The museums] have accepted the position that there's no way of knowing what is what. Well, if there is no way, I feel it's time for the Museum of Modern Art, for example, to put on an exhibition of machine guns. After all, they're beautiful [in] function, they have wonderful forms, they're full of content, and they actually make noise."¹⁹ And why not stage an exhibition centering on the violated *Cathedra*? Newman fought for a conception of art that is under attack today, a conception that would have made it impossible for him to take seriously van Bladeren's claim that he did not hate all art, but only abstract art and realism. That claim does leave room for an art of the interesting and from this vantage point it is indeed easy to construct an interpretation of his slashing of *Cathedra* as itself a significant aesthetic act, although I

¹⁸ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 208.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

would rather agree with Newman and consider it a *reductio ad absurdum* or self-deconstruction that reveals the bankruptcy of every approach to art committed to a pursuit of the interesting, of all attempts to divorce artistic freedom from responsibility. But how are we to understand such responsibility?

7

Newman deplored the way aesthetics had embraced and with its embrace crushed art. Today this embrace threatens to crush his own art. I am thinking now not so much of van Bladeren, who “wanted his act to be understood as an ‘ode to Carel Willink,’ a Dutch exponent of Magic Realism, whose anti-modernist *Painting in a Critical Phase* (1950) he quoted before the court,”²⁰ as of the way art today has been overtaken by philosophical reflection. As Arthur Danto has insisted, in agreement with Newman, but without the latter's nostalgia, there is a sense in which art ends when it comes to understand itself as a philosophical wrestling with the question: what is art? Here, for Danto, lies the importance of artists like Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol: the question, why is Warhol's Brillo-box art while that in the supermarket is not? could no longer be answered by art; it required philosophy. And would it not also require philosophy to show that van Bladeren is indeed what he claims to be: an artist? The next chapter will return to these questions.

Duchamp wanted to understand art as a way of "recreating ideas in painting."²¹ He bequeathed to modern art his lack of interest in the physical object, which was to be no more than an occasion for the play of ideas, including also and importantly ideas about art. Such play, however, cannot satisfy in the long run unless tethered to a concern with what is taken to matter, with reality. Small wonder then that the heirs of Duchamp should have demanded a politicized art, just the sort of attitude Newman rejected as

²⁰ Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), cited in Gary Schwarz, “Attacking Art,” p. 31.

²¹ Marcel Duchamp, "Painting ... at the service of the mind," in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 393-394.

wrong because it reduces the artist to an illustrator, an interpreter. He wanted to speak as an artist.²²

But in his case, too, the philosopher threatened to smother the artist. Not in vain had Newman studied philosophy in the City College of New York. He, too, wanted to put art at the service of "the pure idea"²³ and one is reminded of Duchamp's rejection of Courbet's physicalism when Newman asserts that "Abstract art in America has to a large extent been the preoccupation of the dull" and calls instead for philosophic pictures: "In handling philosophic concepts which per se are of an abstract nature, it was inevitable that the painter's form should be abstract."²⁴ As Tom Wolfe observes, Newman was "one of the most incessant theoreticians of Eighth Street and his work showed it."²⁵ In Robert Hughes's caustic words: "the rhetoric around Newman's work — his own and others' — became an intimidating force field which zapped all who doubted the Zip."²⁶ For most who look at some Newman in a museum today it is indeed this intellectual force field that gives the painting whatever aura or significance it possesses and allows them to be quickly done with it, as the painting itself, this unique physical object, becomes quite unimportant. It is easy to understand those who take Newman, too, to illustrate Wolfe's thesis that painting has become a matter of illustrating words: there is this side to his art. But Newman's words cannot support his art, not because he was not a good philosopher, but because the very attempt to put art at the service of the mind rather than the whole human being is misguided, although to call it misguided presupposes an understanding of something like the right way. Can we still speak of such a way?

Fortunately there is also another and much more important side to Newman's art, more important precisely because philosophy is not enough. Newman claimed that "it is only the pure idea that has meaning."²⁷ But the purer an idea the less it means to us. To really touch us meaning must be incarnated, and not just illustrated. As I shall try to

²² Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 246.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²⁵ Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 61.

²⁶ Robert Hughes, *American Visions. The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 493.

²⁷ Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 108.

show, without such incarnations of meaning in matter our lives cease to matter. This is why art matters, why it is important to give an artwork the space and the time it takes for us to experience its mysterious life, why it is important to take the time necessary to experience, say, the way Newman saturated *Cathedra* "with blue to such an intensity that the divisions marked by two pale zips pass almost unnoticed. What you see is a vessel brimming with blue, brimming with a celestial radiance."²⁸

8

If art and the art-world were healthier, we could bury van Bladeren's mutilation of the Newman in silence. Given the current state of both — and it has become all but impossible to disentangle the two — van Bladeren's action and even more the public response to that action demand serious discussion. But that this action does deserve such discussion, that we cannot simply dismiss it as the work of a psychopath or a publicity-craving egomaniac, yet another in a long list of vandals, saddens me.

But how retrograde to invoke so naively the health of art and the art-world! Does this not presuppose an understanding of what art is or should be that today no longer can be presupposed? Is it not precisely the unavailability of such an understanding of art's essence that supports Arthur Danto's and George Dickie's institutional theory of art, which holds that "something is a work of art when decreed to be such by a loose constellation of individuals who are defined by their institutional identities to be within something called 'the art world': curators, art writers, collectors, dealers, and, of course, artists themselves who, for whatever reasons, put forward certain objects as candidates for assessment as works of art"²⁹? That there is a sense in which this means that art has lost its way Danto would not deny. But does it even make sense to speak here of a loss of way? That presupposes that once artists knew their way. And no doubt, countless artists have been quite certain of their way, so certain in fact that they did not even have to think about it. But does such certainty not presuppose some sort of narrative about art and its proper end? And have we not lost confidence in all such narratives? The sadness

²⁸ Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1971), p. 78.

²⁹ Arthur Danto, *Embodied Meaning* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), p. 312.

I felt when I heard of the slashing of the Newman presupposes an unwillingness to let go of all such narratives, presuppose a certain understanding of art and the continuing need for art. It also presupposes a deep suspicion of Duchamp's interest in ideas rather than in visual products. More generally, it presupposes a deep suspicion of art's embrace of philosophy, so well described by Danto and linked by him convincingly to the end of art. But precisely because I agree with Danto that there is a sense in which such an embrace has to mean the end of art, I think it important to challenge that embrace by asking once more: What is art? Why does art matter? The following chapters attempt to show how much is at stake.

2. “I Can Do Everything”

1

Newman claimed to have broken the barriers of Mondrian’s “dogmas.” Could van Bladeren not claim with equal right to have broken the barriers of Newman’s dogmas? Where today do we find an understanding of the essence of art robust enough to prevent us from accepting the violated *Cathedra* as a work of art in its own right? Can we dismiss van Bladeren as just another psychopath? Does his action not invite discussion as very much in modern art’s by now time-honored tradition of celebrating the avant-garde, those artists willing to challenge the taboos with which the custodians of what they consider good art would guard the established and accepted? Has appropriation, use, and abuse of the work of other artists not become accepted artistic practice?

Newman’s confrontational relationship to Mondrian could begin such a discussion. Newman himself might have pointed to Marcel Duchamp, “who identified art or tried to destroy art by pointing to the fountain.”³⁰ This identification of art is said to be also a destruction of art, which has to raise the question: what is art? Newman, to be sure, thought he knew “what is what” — knew, e. g., that machineguns, despite their beautiful forms, were not art. Supported by such knowledge, he knew that there is a sense in which Duchamp can be said to have brought art to an end. And did not Duchamp himself declare something of the sort to have been his intention? “When I discovered the ready-mades I thought to discourage aesthetics. In Neo Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle-rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.”³¹ Duchamp does not speak here of having wanted to bring art to an end. Quite the opposite: to be found interesting the urinal had to be appreciated as art, despite its

³⁰ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 245.

³¹ Quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York, New York: McGraw-Hill 1965), pp. 207- 208.

original function. To offer a very familiar object as art was to re-present it in a way that made it visible as never before. Not that such re-presentation made it any more beautiful. But that very fact made it more interesting in that it called into question a certain understanding of art, which Duchamp here ties to aesthetics. What he sought to challenge with his ready-mades was, however, not aesthetics as such, but only an aesthetics that understood aesthetic experience as an experience of beauty and art as a practice aiming at the production of beautiful objects. Duchamp sought to subvert such art.

Whatever we may think of beauty and its relationship to art today, Duchamp's subversion would seem to have been successful. What serious artist today would confess to being concerned first of all with beauty?³² Arthur Danto credits Hegel with having "quite powerfully sundered the idea of art from having anything essential to do with beauty."³³ Duchamp could then be thought to have completed as an artist an expansion of our understanding of art that Hegel had begun, although as we shall see, expansion here also means loss. That Duchamp's attack on "aesthetic beauty" presupposed a different aesthetics, an anti-aesthetics perhaps, but one that by its very opposition remained very much within the orbit of aesthetics, expanding only its scope, is evident. At least since the 18th century such expansion has attended the development of art and aesthetics. Already then the question was raised: why limit aesthetic experience to experience of the beautiful? The aesthetic category of the sublime first called such a limitation into question. Not that Duchamp's *Fountain* can be called sublime. But his self-conscious confusion of the categories "art" and "plumbing" was certainly interesting, as the history of its reception demonstrates. And why should artists not pursue the interesting rather than the beautiful or the sublime? As I shall show in more detail in a later lecture, the pursuit of the interesting is an expression of a freedom that refuses to be imprisoned in the established and accepted, that delights in innovation just because it lets

³² In the last few years "beauty" appears to have been making some sort of comeback. Even as I was writing this, I was working on a lecture, "Mask and Veil or Why Beauty Matters," part of an arts festival with the theme "Brains and Beauty" that took place in Chicago in November 2002. This book, too, attempt to show that beauty matters.

³³ Arthur C. Danto, "The Speculative Philosophers of Art, Foreword to Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age. Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. xv.

us experience something new. Would appeals to some supposed essence of art, which prescribes what works of art have to be, not build just such a prison? That the pursuit of the interesting should lead to an art that again and again would seek to negate itself as “art,” as at that moment it had come to be taken for granted, is only to be expected. And to be expected also is that such anti-art would end up remaining within the orbit of art, expanding it, as demonstrated by Duchamp’s *Fountain*, raising from within art the question: what is art?

Newman, to be sure, thought he knew “what was what”; knew also that it was precisely aesthetic reflection, unending questioning of the essence of art, that had turned painters against art as he understood it. He, too, was thinking of Dada artists, who also thought they knew what art was, insisting, e. g., “that a piece of paper dropped, that a sound yelled, that anything was a work of art” — could become a work of art, at any rate, if an artist chose to re-present it as such. Danto later was to agree with Newman that there is a sense in which we can speak here of a destruction of art in the name of art. He, however, sympathized with the Dadaists, did not share Newman's nostalgia for an art less burdened by aesthetics. He invites us to understand Duchamp as hero rather than villain. The end of art — and just what is meant by and what justifies such talk needs to be clarified — is understood by him not as a disaster, but rather welcomed as a liberation from a particular narrative or dogma that had long presided over the progress of art. Not without reason Duchamp speaks of the aesthetics of beauty. For reasons I shall have to clarify, that narrative had ceased to persuade, had to come to an end. The old art is dead, may the new art live! Danto was certainly not “claiming that art had stopped or that it was going to stop, but only that in whatever way it was going to go on, that would be consistent with its having come to an end.”³⁴ This raises the questions: what understanding of art allows us to claim that it has come to an end? And what understanding of art allows us to claim that it is still going on?

³⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *Encounters and Reflections. Art in the Historical Present* (Noonday Press, Farrar Straus Giroux: New York, 1990), p. 334.

2

In answer to the second question one might invoke Danto's and Dickie's institutional theory of art, which holds that something is a work of art when decreed to be such by those who belong to the "the art world." Does our judgment that something is a work of art not depend on how an object is presented and received? That our art world is no longer that of fifty, let alone of a hundred or two hundred years ago, is evident. Also that what is called art has similarly changed: the house of art today has many more rooms than it used to have.

There is however something deeply dissatisfying about such an institutional theory of art. Are there no limits to what the art world can declare to be a work of art? Even Danto, on visiting the 1993 Whitney Biennial, showed himself unwilling to go quite that far, despite his celebration of the "marvelous defiance" in the German artist Hermann Albert's "You can do everything," a defiance that Danto takes to "almost define the art of the seventies" (pp. 329-330).³⁵ Such unwillingness was demonstrated by his response to the Whitney curators' decision to exhibit the tape that shows Rodney King being beaten by members of the Los Angeles police force. Danto calls it "a record of visual agony and brutality that is so much a part of the consciousness of our times that anyone who could not identify them without having to think would thereby demonstrate a distance from the culture. It would be like not knowing who Madonna is, or what McDonald's sells, or what "Coca-Cola" possibly could stand for" (p. 313). The installation of the tape in the Whitney Biennial, Danto insisted, did not make it art. But if not, this shows "that institutionalism has its limits, and that the concept of art is not quite as plastic as recent turns in the history of art had led theorists to believe" (p. 313). The tape resists being turned into art, thereby "showing the limits and limitations of art" (p. 314).

Danto did not deny the power of the images. Quite the opposite:

No work of art in recent times (or perhaps any time) has had a fraction of the effect upon society that the King tape has had on ours: the broken storefront, the burning city, the many dead — to paraphrase Yeats — all unleashed no so much by an act of police violence as by the fact that it was recorded and shown. The images had the effect in part because they were not art, because they were the flat and uninflected effect of reality

³⁵ All page references in this chapter are to Danto, *Embodied Meanings. Critical Essays and Meditations* (Farrar Straus Giroux: New York, 1990).

mechanically registered on videotape: it was the zero degree of visual and moral truth the world beheld; were it to occur to someone that art might have had something to do with it, the effect of the tape would be diminished. (p. 313)

This presupposes at least a sketchy understanding of what art is, sufficient to challenge what the institutional theory art would have us believe. Worth noting is the way Danto contrasts the power of the tape's images, the way they engage us, challenging us to make this a somewhat better society, with our in comparison disengaged response to works of art. That very power, he suggests, shows that art is not up to what the curators had in mind. And what did they have in mind? As Lisa Phillips put it in the catalogue: "One of the most powerful developments among artists in this emerging generation is a deliberate rejection of both an authorial voice and form — of all the emblems of successful art: originality, integrity of materials, coherence of form. Much of the work is handmade, deliberately crude, tawdry, casual, and lacks finish. ... Appropriation, much of it from the lowliest sources, continues to inform much of this art, as does a heavy presence of words, printed or handwritten or scavenged" (pp. 314-315). Such work, too, would be anti-art. But, Danto suggested, as such it fails.

Not that Danto denied a certain power to the show. Otherwise he could not have written "I and most of those with whom I have spoken felt as if we had been battoné by the art force, caught up in a moralizing rampage" (p. 317). But such power did not mean that the show achieved what the curators had hoped, to transform our consciousness: "The viewers were to be made into better people and the world into a better place" (p. 314). Instead they were left with illustrations of all too familiar messages that "rarely rise to, let alone rise above, a level set by the bumper sticker, the T-shirt, the issue button" (p. 314), noisy, but mostly uninteresting, and uninteresting precisely because so often "stifled by the presence of so much moral hoopla" (p. 317). The creation of art, as Danto understood it, should not be confused with moral preaching. And such preaching becomes less, not more effective, when embraced by the art world. Danto thus reasserted a version of the distance that according to Kant separates our interest in the good and the disinterested pleasure we take in what is called beautiful. Not that Danto criticized the work in the show for not being beautiful. But he did affirm such quite traditional aesthetic values as "originality, integrity, and coherence" (p. 316), all discredited by Lisa Phillips; and he, too, expected art to be "interesting." Given such expectation there is no

reason to think that art has to end. The established and accepted will always challenge the creative artist to venture into uncharted territory.

Was the inclusion of the King tape in the Whitney biennial not at least “interesting”? But just the application of an aesthetic category to something so brutal is offensive. Nero may have found the burning Rome interesting, but that did not make him an artist nor the burning city a work of art. — But how confident can we be in this judgment? Danto himself soon was to regret his hostility to the 1993 Whitney Biennial³⁶ and came to understand it as a sign of the “philosophical coming of age of art.” With that coming of age “visuality drops away, as little relevant to the essence of art as beauty proved to have been. For art to exist there does not even have to be an object to look at, and if there are objects in a gallery, they can look like anything at all.... Whatever art is, it is no longer something primarily to be looked at. Stared at, perhaps, but not primarily to be looked at.”³⁷ Hermann Albert’s “You can do everything” is re-asserted: “Artists liberated from the burden of history, were free to make art in whatever way they wished, for any purpose they wished, or for no purposes at all. That is the mark of contemporary art, and small wonder, in contrast with modernism, there is no such thing as a contemporary style.”³⁸ There is the question of why, given such a generous understanding of “art” — so generous that it threatens to deny the term any definite meaning — we should continue to use it at all. Danto still appeals to an “essence of art,” an essence that is said to allow us “to prove” that beauty has nothing to do with it. But such a “proof” is inescapably circular. It amounts to no more than opting for a particularly inclusive use of the word “art,” which raises the question whether such inclusiveness does not lose sight of what once gave what was then called “art” its importance. Why this appeal to the “essence of art,” this need to preserve something of the aura of an understanding of art that with the end of art should also have ended? Because of the art-world, which although art may have ended, does not want itself to end? After all, there are institutions such as the Whitney that have even a material interest in keeping that world going.

³⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

I wonder whether the organizers of the Whitney Biennial welcomed Danto's subsequent, much more generous response. Self-consciously they stepped across the boundary that separates the art world and the real world with its prejudice and hatred, suffering and unfulfilled desires. Presupposed is a dissatisfaction with all "aesthetic" art that is deeper than Duchamp's dissatisfaction with "aesthetic beauty," a dissatisfaction also with art that pursues the sublime or the interesting. Could such dissatisfaction find confirmation in Danto's understanding of art after the end of art? Would it be comforted by his cheerful acceptance of that end? If I had to defend van Bladeren in a court of law I would call Danto for a witness.

3

It is of interest that, as Danto points out, in 1984 he and the German art historian Hans Belting, "speaking from different disciplines and writing in different languages, both published essays on the end of art." Not that Danto claims that they had, quite "independently, discovered something of great importance, like calculus or the theory of evolution, where the issue of priority becomes vexed." But both recognized that something had happened in the sixties: "something was in the wind. And indeed, a certain gloom had settled upon the art world itself at the time — it has not altogether dissipated today — so that artists and critics alike expressed themselves with varying degrees of pessimism as to whether art had a future at all, or if, as may have seemed plausible, a certain extraordinary adventure had run its course and all that lay ahead were cycle upon cycle of repetitions of much the same options."³⁹ To say that art had come to an end in the sixties is not to make the nonsensical claim that it stopped at that time, but to assert that it was no longer ruled by the telos that had given it direction and allowed for coherent narratives of its progress. Belting's and Danto's talk of an end of art implies that artists today are no longer able to place themselves in a meaningful history, to draw strength from their conviction that they are contributing to that history. As Belting put it,

³⁹ *Encounters and Reflections*, p. 331.

“Contemporary art manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward.”⁴⁰

An awareness of the history of art and an inability to carry it forward are indeed intimately linked. Nor is such double awareness confined to art. In his *Verlust der Geschichte* (1959) Alfred Heuss linked a greater awareness of history to what he called a “loss of history” and took this loss to be a defining aspect of our spiritual situation. By speaking of a loss of history he did not mean to suggest that historians would not continue to flourish and write their histories. We have every reason to expect that they will continue to bring more and more order into what Mommsen called the “archives of the past.” That also goes for art historians. But the very word “archives” suggest that the historian as here understood no longer understands himself as part of the history he is concerned with. As a historian he stands above and outside it. Mommsen’s historian arranges and files facts pertaining to the past. The phrase “archives” also points to another aspect of such history: in an archive everything is equally available to the person using it. We can thus distinguish history in Mommsen’s sense from history as remembrance: “The latter arises essentially by relating the past to the present of the one who remembers and thereby it raises the time intervening to a central element of consciousness.” Think of remembering your dead parents. Such awareness of the time intervening is eliminated by any history that takes Mommsen’s understanding of the discipline at all seriously. “It does not matter at all how much time there is between today and Hammurabi. Hammurabi stands in the same relationship to one scholar, as Bismarck or Napoleon to another. ... That the heuristic difficulties generally are proportional to the time elapsed follows from an entirely different and in no way logically necessary set of circumstances.”⁴¹ It is precisely his or her commitment to truth and objectivity that lets the historian fall out of history. The same goes for the art historian at work on some *catalogue raisonné*.

⁴⁰ Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 3. Quoted in Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art. Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 5.

⁴¹ Alfred Heuss, *Verlust der Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Rupprecht, 1959), p. 34.

Most art historians do not labor on such catalogues and Mommsen's understanding of history hardly does justice to the way historians work. Most of them attempt to wrest from the archives of the past narratives that bring the historical material into some meaningful order. Their task is made easier when those they write about understood themselves as standing in such an order, told themselves narratives that helped motivate and gave a meaning to their doings. But as long as historians remain committed to truth and thus to objectivity there is a sense in which the loss of history remains a presupposition of their discipline. And has that commitment not shaped our modern world? We know more about history than ever before, but the other side of such an increase in knowledge would seem to be a loss of remembered history. The way our entertainment industry loves historical material, taken from all sorts of different periods and places does not argue against this. Quite the opposite: it presupposes a loss of history. The same can be said of the many artists today who appropriate or play with the art of the past. The history of art has become for them a store of materials, to be quarried as they see fit. Danto gives the example of Julian Schnabel:

Seen in terms of play, Schnabel, with his carnivalism, his showmanship, his flagrant bad taste, is a marvelous example of someone painting outside history, using whatever he needs for purposes of masquerade. But he owes his standing, and this is the irony of the present moment in art, to the belief that he is locked in history and carrying it forward to the next stage. But once this irony is grasped, there is no historical need or urgency to persist with the awful sort of paintings we have been forced to endure. With so many roles to play with, with so many ways to choose, so absolute a posthistorical freedom, why not good aesthetics for a change? Beauty, after all, knows nothing about history. We will forgive a great deal in the name of historical urgency, but when the urgency abates, there need no longer be anything to forgive.⁴²

Despite his often iterated conviction that, as Hegel was supposed to have shown, art had nothing essential to do with beauty, Danto here holds out the hope that the end of history might issue in what would deserve to be called a return to "good aesthetics" — whatever that might mean. Is Danto, too, hoping for a return to a trans-historical beauty?

⁴² *Encounters and Reflections*, pp. 311-312.

That such a loss of history, which entails an inability to place oneself in remembered history — and this is a presupposition of understanding oneself as protagonist of some larger narrative — should, pose a problem for art history, which is in the business of providing us with such narratives, is evident. Consider the way narratives motivate us and help us to make sense of our lives. Think of personal narratives, the stories we tell ourselves about where we have come from and where we are going and that allow us to place what we experience in some larger whole in which particular events have their proper place and thus become meaningful. Death shadows such personal narratives, raises demands for more encompassing narratives that allow individuals to place themselves in some meaningful history, a history that has a beginning and moves towards some end. Lives and events gain meaning as parts of such wholes.

All such narratives raise the question: what when the end has been achieved? If such a consummation is not to mean death, what is now to give meaning to life? — a problem that haunts every love story. It also haunts the end of art that with good reason Belting and Danto take to have occurred in the sixties, where we can understand Newman's art as art to end or consummate the narrative of modern art. Warhol is already beyond that end.

4

Danto found in the way so many artists today appropriate the art of the past confirmation of his thesis of the end of art. That “the most energetically discussed artistic strategy of that moment was that of appropriation, in which one artist takes as her or his own the images, often the extremely well-known images, of another” — Danto mentions Mike Bidlo painting first Morandis, then Picassos and Sherrie Levine's appropriations of photographs by Walker Evans — could be taken as a sign that life had indeed gone out of art, that it had died. But Danto took it rather as confirmation of the end of art in quite another sense: “part of what I meant by art coming to an end was not so much a loss of creative energy, though that might be true, as that art was raising from within the question of its philosophical identity — was doing philosophy, so to speak, within the medium of art, and hence was transforming itself into another mode of what Hegel would term Absolute Spirit. And the art of appropriation was a confirmation of this, almost as if

mine, like Belting's were an empirical historical thesis after all."⁴³ The quotation raises a number of questions. Why is Danto suspicious of art that blurs the boundary between aesthetics and ethics, but not of art that blurs the boundary between art and philosophy? Just what does it mean to say "that art was raising from within the question of its philosophical identity"? Such a claim would seem to presuppose that we already know what art is so that we can distinguish what lies within and without art. And what does it mean to do philosophy within the medium of art? I am prepared to grant that, if this should indeed be possible, such a doing would transform art as it would transform philosophy, but would it be art that raises the question of its philosophical identity from within? Would it not rather be brought to art from without, from philosophy perhaps? The embrace of philosophy by art and the embrace of art by philosophy have indeed given birth to strange hybrids that can no longer be considered art or philosophy in a more traditional sense. I am suspicious of such an embrace, where such suspicion is supported by a conviction concerning our continued need for both art and philosophy in a more traditional sense.

I shall have more to say about Danto and Hegel in Chapter 4. Here I only want to suggest that the kind of transformation of art envisioned by Danto is difficult to reconcile with Hegel's understanding of art and its progress and end. According to Hegel, it is above all "the spirit of our modern world, or, to come closer, of our religion and our intellectual culture," which has reached a point where art is no longer "the highest mode assumed by man's consciousness of the absolute. The peculiar mode to which artistic production and works of art belong no longer satisfies our supreme need. We are above the level at which works of art can be venerated as divine, and actually worshipped; the impression which they make is of a more considerate kind, and the feelings which they stir within us require a higher test and a further confirmation. Thought and reflection have taken their flight above fine art."⁴⁴ According to Hegel thought and reflection have left art behind and below them. That asserts that in the modern world art can only have a

⁴³ *Encounters and Reflections*, pp. 332,333.

⁴⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vols. 12 – 14 of *Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner, 20 vols. (Stuttgart: Fromann, 1937), vol. 12, p. 31; *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. and intro. Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 12.

peripheral significance. Reverential appreciation of art has given way to critical thinking about art. In this sense Hegel claims that art in what was once its highest sense has died. And this death occurred, not in the sixties, but long before Hegel lectured on fine art in the third decade of the 19th century.

Danto has no quarrel with Hegel's claim that the impression art works make on us moderns is "of a more reflective kind, and the emotions which they arouse require a higher test and a further verification." The question "What is Art?" can be expected to accompany the end of art. But why should that question be left to philosophers? Why should artists not participate in such work of reflection, participate in it as artists? Did Duchamp not contribute decisively to that discussion when he exhibited a urinal as an artwork? And did Warhol not make a similarly significant contribution with his *Brillo Box*?

Only when we can imagine works of art that outwardly resemble ordinary things like urinals or packing cases can we begin to draw lines between reality and art, which has concerned philosophers from ancient times. If *Fountain* is an artwork, there must be an answer to the question of why the other urinals in Mott's inventory are not, even if the resemblances are perfect. If *Brillo Box* is an artwork and the ordinary Brillo carton not, surely the difference cannot lie in the obvious differences, such as one being made of plywood and the other of corrugated cardboard, not if the differences between reality and art must divide art from reality on a serious philosophical map.⁴⁵

The argument must be accepted: if *Fountain* and *Brillo Box* are artworks, what makes them so cannot be located in their material make-up. The question is: are they artworks? It is a question that according to Danto is raised by the works themselves, but not just raised: these works force us to separate art from reality, let us recognize that art belongs to spirit, not to nature or reality.

But are these works not also things, more precisely artifacts, even if created to be appreciated, not as serving some other purpose, but for being just this particular incarnation of spirit in matter. Danto claims to find himself in fundamental agreement with Hegel's determination of beautiful art:

Hegel, with characteristic profundity, spoke of beautiful art as the Idea given sensuous embodiment [Danto later was to praise Hegel for having "quite powerfully sundered the

⁴⁵ *Encounters and Reflections*, p. 5.

idea of art from having anything essential to do with beauty.”] As a start that gives us the rudiments of a philosophical concept of art, and a first stab at a theory of criticism: the critic must identify the idea embodied in the work and assess the adequacy of its embodiment “Embodiment” is a difficult concept, and here is not the place to deal with it directly, but it helps to draw a distinction between the expression and the embodiment of an idea. Perhaps every meaningful sentence expresses an idea, true or false, which is its thought or meaning. But language achieves the status of art when our sentences embody the ideas they express, as if displaying what the sentences are about. A picture becomes art when, beyond representing its idea, properties of itself become salient in the work of embodiment. Rembrandt’s paintings embody and do not merely show light.⁴⁶

But such a quite traditional understanding of art as an incarnation or embodiment of spirit in matter has to call into question that separation of art from reality on which Danto insists. Is the mystery of great art not the mystery of such incarnation? Every great work of art is a riddle. To understand art in this way is to insist that to the extent that a work of art is adequately understood as a representation or illustration of some idea it fails as art. All too much art today offers little more than such illustrations, where the ideas are taken from the issues that currently agitate the world, including issues of gender, race, health, technology. No matter how worthy these issues may be, thought here has overtaken art. With this, art has become at bottom dispensable. It has been reduced to an ornament of reflection. But art dies when it in this sense becomes a mere decoration of ideas and ideologies. This claim to be sure, presupposes an understanding of art as essentially an incarnation of meaning in matter, meaning that cannot be translated into some other discourse or wrapped into concepts without loss.

Such an understanding of art has to call into question the claim that Duchamp’s ready-mades are art. Danto gives us an important pointer when he remarks: “As a philosopher I am struck by the way in which idea and embodiment in art parallels the way in which our minds are embodied in ourselves as persons. But works differ from one another as personalities differ from personalities. There are better or worse ideas given better or worse embodiments in works, and so there are two dimensions of critical evaluation built into the philosophical structure of the artwork.”⁴⁷ But if artworks are indeed like

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

persons, we may not divorce art and reality as Duchamp and Warhol are supposed to have demonstrated art must do. Try to divorce a person's spirit from his or her body and what are you left with? It is on the other hand quite easy to separate the thought behind Duchamp's *Fountain* — the original has in fact been lost — from the object we encounter in some museum, perhaps one of an edition of eight signed and numbered replicas produced by the Galleria Schwarz in Milan in 1964. What we see today serves as a reminder of an important aesthetic event that shook the New York art world as war was raging in Europe. There is indeed a sense in which the re-presented and renamed urinal invites us to wrestle with its meaning, even as it is no longer important that it be this particular material object. Danto's simile joining person and artwork becomes here quite tenuous. The understanding of art that supports that simile has been left behind. And that indeed was Duchamp's point. In his *Painting in the Twentieth Century* Werner Haftmann could thus discuss the ready-mades as "demonstrations" that no longer have anything to do with "art."⁴⁸ Demonstrations make a point. It is this point that matters. The particular object provides only the occasion for a train of thought that soon leaves that object and, Haftmann suggests, art behind.

Is *Fountain* an artwork? Dickie's and Danto's institutional theory of art has a ready answer. Of course it is. Our art world has not only accepted, but canonized it as such, notwithstanding the objections of dinosaurs like Barnett Newman, who could cite a whole tradition of thinking about art in support of his conviction. And if it is, we have indeed to "divide art from reality." This leaves the question: what let the art-world embrace these works as it did? Presupposed is a dissatisfaction with an art of visibility that demands further examination.

5

No one gave clearer expression to such dissatisfaction than Marcel Duchamp:

I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was much more interested in recreating ideas in painting. For me the title was very important. I was interested in making painting serve my purposes, and in getting away from the physicality of painting. For me Courbet had introduced the physical emphasis in the nineteenth century. I was

⁴⁸ Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 203.

interested in ideas, not merely in visual products. I wanted to put painting once again at the service of the mind. And my painting was of course, at one regarded as “intellectual,” “literary” painting. It was true I was endeavoring to establish myself as far as possible from “pleasing” and “attractive” physical paintings. That extreme was seen as literary. My *King and Queen* was a chess king and queen.⁴⁹

Duchamp went on to assert that “until the last hundred years all painting had been literary or religious,” that is to say, had been at the service of words or the Word, and explained his own work as an attempt to restore to painting its lost literary dimension, to lead it back to a tradition it had forsaken some time in the nineteenth century. He wanted to lead painting away from an emphasis on physicality, on visuality, wanted to make it once again serve the spirit.

Duchamp’s dissatisfaction with the “physical emphasis in nineteenth century painting was a harbinger of things to come. Tom Wolfe’s *The Painted Word* (1975) captured well how the art-world by then had changed. Wolfe writes of having been jerked alert by something Hilton Kramer, “critic-in-chief of the New York Times,” had written in a review of an exhibition at Yale of the work of seven realist painters: “Realism does not lack its partisans, but it does rather conspicuously lack a persuasive theory. And given the nature of our intellectual commerce with works of art, to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial — the means by which our experience of individual works is joined to our understanding of the value they signify.”⁵⁰ Wolfe seized on the words, “to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial.” They opened his eyes to the fact that despite its claim to have freed itself from literary meanings, modern art had in fact “*become completely literary: the paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text.*”⁵¹ From this perspective, the divide between Barnett Newman and Warhol suddenly seems to close. Newman may have deplored the way the Dadaists subordinated painting to aesthetics, but was he not guilty of the very same sin, even as he

⁴⁹ Marcel Duchamp, “Painting ... at the Service of the Mind,” in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, comp. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 393-394.

⁵⁰ Hilton Kramer, quoted in Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (Toronto, New York, London, Sydney: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 4. See also Karsten Harries, “The Painter and the Word,” *Bennington Review*, no. 13, June 1982, pp. 19-25.

⁵¹ Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, p. 6.

called for a very different art? Similarly Frank Stella may have wanted to create an art that would allow us “just to look at it,”⁵² but was it not the theory that supported such art that gave it its meaning? Was it not words that really mattered? Time has overtaken the amusing and to some no doubt reassuring prophecy with which Wolfe concluded his essay:

... in the year 2000, when the Metropolitan or the Museum of Modern Art puts on the great retrospective exhibition of American Art 1845-75, the three artists who will be featured, the three seminal figures of the era, will be not Pollock, de Kooning, and Johns — but Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Steinberg. Up on the walls will be huge copy blocks, eight and a half by eleven feet each, presenting the protean passages of the period ... a little “fuliginous flatness” here ... a little “action painting” there ... and some of that “all great art is about art” just beyond. Beside them will be small reproductions of the work of the leading illustrators of the Word from that period, such as Johns, Louis, Noland, Stella, and Olitski. (Pollock and de Kooning will have a somewhat higher status, because of the more symbiotic relationship they were to enjoy with the great Artists of the Word.)⁵³

Wolfe delighted in poking fun at artists who had become mere illustrators of “the Word.” There is the suggestion that in becoming such illustrators they averted their eyes from what Leonardo da Vinci and those who followed him had discovered and developed, betraying the grand tradition of western art. How different was the example set by science!

The mention of Leonardo raises an obvious question: why single him out? Does he stand here for a decisive break in the history of art, a break away from the hegemony of the Word? Medieval painters at any rate were painters of “the Word,” now capitalized with greater justice, for “Word” here meant not the words of some critic, but Holy Scripture. This replacement of Scripture by the critic’s words demands further consideration. But I want to underscore the obvious: from the very beginning Christian art served the Word. Nor did Leonardo put an end to that tradition. Think of the art of the Counter-Reformation: like much Renaissance art, Baroque painting remained very much subject to the Word. Modern art’s turn away from the Word would thus seem to be the exception

⁵² Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd,” *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 158.

⁵³ Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, pp. 118-119.

rather than the rule. And if there has been a renewed interest in “the Word,” could this not be interpreted as a return to the mainstream of western art? Was Duchamp not right to invoke this spiritual tradition to challenge an emphasis on the physicality of painting?

Duchamp does indeed invite description as an artist of the Word, although confronted with his *Fountain* we may well want to strike the capitalized singular. Consider it one more time: a quite ordinary urinal is renamed and presented to us as a work of art; and as we all know, the proper place for art is the museum. Yet the object resists such placement; it both proclaims and derides its art character. The “aesthetic appeal” of the object, at least as that expression has usually been understood, is limited. It gains its meaning mostly as a gesture directed against the established and accepted. Duchamp himself spoke of a provocation. The title, so interestingly at odds with what it names, underscores the provocation. But to be provocative a work of art requires spectators that both recognize this piece of plumbing and presuppose that art has certain boundaries. Duchamp’s *Fountain* questions these boundaries. Like so much modern art, it is art about art. More especially, it challenges an approach to art that has celebrated the unique artwork’s physical presence. It asserts instead that what matters is not the concrete object, but the fact that it has been chosen and the ideas governing that choice. For the Word of God it thus substitutes the words of the creative artist.

Duchamp has become one of the patron saints of post-modernism and no work better establishes his claim to such status than his monumental *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*, usually called the *Large Glass*. I doubt that there is another work of modern art that has invited more and more learned commentary, where the artist himself has taken a great deal of care to create a context for the work that not only invites, but almost demands such commentary. The famous *Green Box* (a facsimile edition of Duchamp’s notes, diagrams, and studies of the work, painstakingly reproduced to show even erasures and blots) promises the key to the enigma of this work. As Richard Hamilton observed, “Intimacy with all the texts and diagrams of the *Green Box* is the best, indeed the only, way to achieve true understanding and enjoyment of the

Glass.”⁵⁴ Hilton Kramer’s pronouncement that for modern art to lack a persuasive theory is to lack something crucial comes to mind, although the *Green Box* offers us no such theory, but only hints that invite construction of such a theory. If we are diligent, our attempt to take up that invitation will involve not only just about everything the artist has created and written, especially his *Étant donnés*, but much more besides. It is fun to play with these connections and with the elaborate descriptions that Duchamp and many critics and art historians have given us of the workings of this “agricultural machine,” as he himself called it, to ponder the profundity of this wedding of eros and technology. Ever different maps and points of view invite us to continue the search, to lose ourselves in the labyrinth of our own imagination. But in that labyrinth we will not find the key that unlocks the secret. Together with the context provided for it, the *Large Glass* gestures towards the Word that will explain all. But there is no such word.

Duchamp wanted to get away from Courbet, from physical painting, from the pursuit of sensuous presence, wanted to return to an art of ideas. And no doubt, he succeeded. He, especially, invites description as an artist of the Painted Word. But where is that Word? Were we to find it, that play in which Duchamp’s creations invite us to join would end. Again and again he seems to place us on the threshold of some momentous discovery. In his discussion of the large glass Arturo Schwarz, having gone through a very imaginative, intricate analysis, replete with references to Jung and the alchemical tradition, finds in the separation of the bride and the bachelors a metaphor of the quest for the Philosopher’s Stone. “No work but the *Large Glass* has embodied the unattainable transparency of the Philosopher’s Stone. The story of the quest of the Philosopher’s Stone is a story of failures. But the men who bravely fail teach us more than those who briefly succeed.”⁵⁵

This resounding conclusion is puzzling in more than one way. The philosopher’s stone sought by alchemists was supposed, not only to turn common metals into gold, but also to grant health, especially spiritual health. Is this work supposed to grant such health? Presumably not, for what it embodies is said to be “the unattainable transparency of the

⁵⁴ Richard Hamilton, “The Large Glass,” in *Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Anne d’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (New York: The Museum and Modern Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973), p. 60.

⁵⁵ Arturo Schwarz, “The Alchemist Stripped Bare in the Bachelor, Even,” *Marcel Duchamp*, p. 97.

Philosopher's Stone." Duchamp is described as a heroic knight embarked on a quest that must fail, although I wonder who is meant by those who are said to have succeeded, if only briefly, in this impossible quest. Did they find the philosopher's stone only to lose it again? Or was the longed for discovery of the stone a big disappointment? But perhaps we should not pursue this matter, since we are told that we have more to learn from the heroic failure of Duchamp and others like him. But just what does Duchamp have to teach us?

By now Arturo Schwarz's interpretation has become part of the still expanding literature surrounding the *Large Glass*. We should not expect this literature ever to give us the Word the *Large Glass* illustrates. We will always be waiting for Godot. What matters is the aesthetic quality of the play of ideas, a play that can go on forever. This play is open only to initiates, and although the road to initiation is open to all, it takes an enormous amount of time and dedication. And what is the reward: the philosopher's stone? But what matters is the quest, not the grail. What matters is not the outcome, but the elegance of the moves made by the player. Hermann Hesse's glass bead game comes to mind, this play with the contents furnished by traditional religion, philosophy, and art, play in and with the ruins of western culture. The moves in that game establish ever-new clever combinations, which can be so clever precisely because the player is no longer responsible to the truth. Such play is essentially parasitic. If it seems significant, it is because its material, drawn from past religion, philosophy, and art once articulated what was felt to matter most. Even in their present ruined state traces of that aura remain: clever combinations of these traces still are able to create the illusion that one is on the threshold of some great mystery, when in fact we are on the threshold of a meaningless silence.

6

Duchamp's turn to an "intellectual," "literary" art could be understood as a refusal to accept the end of art as Hegel understood it, as an attempt to return to art its highest vocation, to restore to it its place in "the same sphere with religion and philosophy" as "a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance the Divine Nature, the

deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind.”⁵⁶ Any such attempt would have to place itself in opposition to an approach that understood works of art as first of all “visual products,” an approach that at the time could claim the support of aesthetics.

There is however a decisive difference between an art ruled by the Word and the art now envisioned. Duchamp hints at it when he invokes chess, at which he excelled: this new art is like such a cerebral game; the beauty of its moves is to be grasped by the mind, not the eye. Should such a game still be considered art? Duchamp at any rate made such a move when he named a quite ordinary urinal *Fountain* and declared it to be art, thereby calling the common understanding of what art is and should be into question.

For it must have seemed as though “work of art” was an expression much like “elephant” that we learn to apply on the basis of perceptual criteria. Duchamp’s great philosophical achievement was to demonstrate that it is not this kind of expression at all, and that learning to apply it to things involves a far more complex procedure than anyone would have believed necessary. But this could not have been shown until history made it possible: Duchamp would have been impossible when the kind of conceptual imagination required by his gesture was itself historically impossible. When it did become possible, it became plain that the Beautiful and the Sublime did not belong to the essence of art.⁵⁷

Danto presents Duchamp as someone who with a work such as *Fountain* brought us closer to an adequate understanding of the essence of art. Such a claim presupposes what cannot be presupposed: that there is indeed such an essence. In what Platonic heaven do we find an essence of art that would allow us to say with confidence that the Beautiful and the Sublime do not belong to it? What Duchamp did demonstrate was that the art-world was willing to apply the term “art” to creations that were neither beautiful nor sublime. His *Fountain* does call the meaning of art into question; more especially it calls into question an understanding of the work of art as an aesthetic object as this had come to be understood. Just this allows Danto to call on this work as a witness to support his own critique of traditional aesthetics:

⁵⁶ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures*. p. 9.

⁵⁷ Danto, *Encounters and Reflections*, p. 6.

I felt that aesthetics does not really belong to the essence of art, and my argument was as follows. Two objects, one a work of art and the other not, but which happen to resemble one another as closely as may be required for purposes of the argument, will have very different aesthetic properties. But since the difference depended on the ontological difference between art and non-art, it could not account for the former difference. The aesthetic difference presupposed the ontological difference. Hence aesthetic qualities could not be part of the definition of art.⁵⁸

The claim that aesthetics does not belong to the essence of art is readily granted. Art may be influenced by aesthetics, some art even crucially so, but Barnett Newman had a point when he suggested that aesthetics is no more for artists, than ornithology is for birds.⁵⁹ Aesthetics is a theory that artists may or may not find important. But what mattered to Danto was something else: the hold a certain understanding of art, presupposed by much traditional aesthetic thinking, continues to have on us, even given countless works that the current art world has certified to be art, but which do not fit what such an aesthetics has declared works of art to be. In this connection Danto points to the importance Warhol's *Brillo Box* (1964) had for the development of his own understanding of art. His discussion of the difference between Warhol's *Brillo Box* and a Brillo box found in some supermarket is telling: the real Brillo box had been designed by an artist, Steve Harvey, a second-generation Abstract Expressionist forced to take up commercial art. Danto points to the connection between the Brillo box and "the high art styles of that time."⁶⁰ But Warhol's *Brillo Box* has nothing to do with Abstract Expressionism, is in fact much closer to works by such artists as Oldenburg or Lichtenstein than it is to the actual Brillo box. I find it difficult not to agree with Danto on the difference between the two Brillo boxes, although I would want to draw a different lesson. Danto has good reason to claim that the question, why is Warhol's *Brillo Box* art, while that in the supermarket is not? could no longer be answered by art: it required philosophy. But this claim conflicts with another claim that Danto, agreeing with Hegel,

⁵⁸ Danto, *Embodied Meanings*, p. 384.

⁵⁹ Barnett Newman, "Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Conference," Barnett Newman, "Remarks at the Fourth Annual Woodstock Conference," *Selected Writings and Interviews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 247. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 247.

⁶⁰ *Embodied Meanings*, p. 384.

makes: that successful art effectively embodies a spiritual content. Such art has to incarnate spirit in matter. In that sense of “successful art” I find it difficult to cite *Brillo Box* as an example. Does it not demonstrate that success in art does not depend on such an incarnation of meaning in a particular piece of matter? That it depends rather on the mode of presentation, the artist’s intention, the context into which he chose to insert his work? This to be sure only re-raises the question of how to understand success in art. Appeals to some supposed “essence of art” do no real work here in that they presuppose that this question has already been answered.

One last time let me return to Danto’s discussion of the lessons of *Brillo Box*.

Steve Harvey’s boxes are about Brillo and about the values of speed, cleanliness, and the relentless advantages of the new and the gigantic. Warhol’s iconography is more complex and has little to do with those values at all. In a way it is philosophical, being about art or, if you like, about the differences between high art and commercial art. So Hegel may be right that there is a special aesthetic quality peculiar to art. He impressively says it is, unlike natural aesthetic qualities (he uses the term “beauty,” but that was the way aestheticians in his era thought), the kind of aesthetic quality which is *aus dem Geiste geboren und wiedergeboren*. But that is no less true of the aesthetic qualities of Brillo boxes than of those of *Brillo Box*. We would expect nothing else, given that both are dense with meaning and, in a sense, *aus der Kultur geboren*. It may be less important to distinguish high art from low than either from mere natural aesthetics of the kind we derive from our genetic endowment.⁶¹

A first question is raised by Danto’s parenthetical remark: Hegel “uses the term ‘beauty,’ but that was the way aestheticians in his era thought.” When Hegel understands *Kunstschönheit* as “*die aus dem Geiste geborene und wiedergeborene Schönheit*,”⁶² he not only distinguishes the beauty of art from that of nature, but also relates the two. *Wiedergeboren* suggest that art responds to the beauty it finds in nature, but lets it be born again, creating thus a higher beauty. Art is understood here as the beautiful re-representation of beautiful nature, raising the question of whether art needs that ground in nature, whether it must not wither and die when uprooted. And does not beauty, as Hegel understands it, require a kind of incarnation of spirit in matter for which philosophy has

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 386.

⁶² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, in *Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1937, vol. 12, p. 20).

no need. This raises the question whether an art whose achievement is, as Danto claims for the art of Duchamp and Warhol, fundamentally philosophical, does not mean the end of art in Hegel's sense. That such a "philosophization" of art signifies the end of art in some sense is of course Danto's very point.⁶³ A distance now opens up between "work of art" and "object of perception." Something like that was indeed claimed by Hegel, though not about art, but about spirit: the progress of spirit was said by him to have left the sensible, and with it art behind, where Hegel understood this end of art as simply part of humanity's coming of age.

⁶³ Danto, *Art in the Historical Present*, p., 334.

3. Narratives of the End of Art

1

Danto was well aware of the timeliness of his talk of the end of art. He also knew that others had spoken of the end of art long before him: especially Hegel in his “marvelous *Lectures on Fine Art*, delivered 156 years earlier, in Berlin in 1828”⁶⁴ and thus long before much of the art that today gets the most attention and fetches the highest prices was created. But Hegel is not the only precursor: Danto also mentions Aristotle, Aristophanes, and Vasari. This robs talk of the end of art of some of its weight and pathos by suggesting that such endings may be part of the history of art: art is thought ends whenever the agenda set by some narrative about art’s essence has been carried out in such a way that on this front no further progress seems possible. Such agenda attainment can be expected to issue in a period of disorientation, followed by the formation of new agendas. One of these may capture the imagination of artists and critics in such a way that it comes to be accepted as a new kind of master narrative.

Danto would seem to entertain some such view:

For the past few years I have been speculating about the structures of art history, and considering the hypothesis — it can be no more than that — that these structures imply an end that may have been reached. This sort of thing can happen, I suppose. It certainly happened in ancient times with tragedy. Aristotle wrote:

Arising from an improvisatory beginning ... tragedy grew little by little, so the poets developed whatever new part of it had appeared; and passing through many changes, tragedy came to a halt, since it had attained its own nature
[*Poetics*, 1449a10-15] (pp. 308-309).⁶⁵

Aristotle’s brief remark deserves careful attention: Aristotle is not speaking here of art as such, not even of poetry. A particular poetic genre is said to have come to a halt when it finally found its proper form. Aristotle suggests that a similar story can be told about comedy, although, since in the beginning “it was not as yet taken up in a serious way, ...

⁶⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *Embodied Meanings. Critical Essays and Meditations* (Farrar Straus Giroux: New York, 1990), p. 322.

⁶⁵ All page references in this chapter are to Danto, *Encounters and Reflections. Art in the Historical Present* (Noonday Press, Farrar Straus Giroux: New York, 1990).

its early stages passed unnoticed” and the authors of the changes in its form have remained unknown.⁶⁶ Tragedy and comedy are here assumed to have a nature, which once attained should be accepted. All attempts to change the form demanded by that nature do violence to what the genre demands. Aristotle does not say that when tragedy attained its nature it died. Should we not rather say that it had finally come of age? What had come to an end was the evolution of this genre. But to contribute to the evolution of a genre is one thing, to create a successful work of art quite another.

Perhaps we can liken working in a given genre to playing a game such as chess. That game, too, has a long history. But by now it has arrived at a form so satisfactory that chess players tend to accept the rules of the game as a given. That does not mean that playing chess has some to an end. Quite the opposite: the very rigidity of the rules provides a spur that raises the players’ imagination and creativity to greater heights. And why not look at the rules provided by artistic genres in a similar way? This invites a distinction between creative artists, on the one hand, and innovators that transform some genre, on the other. Often a great artist has been both. Think of Picasso! Or Pollock! But does an artist have to be both? To answer that question in the affirmative is to imply that, once some genre has attained its own nature, it no longer leaves room for great art in this genre, that great art can now only come into being by challenging or turning its back on it.

Does Aristotle’s talk of tragedy attaining its nature and in this sense coming to an end help us understand that end of art Danto dates to the 1960’s? If so, it would suggest that we look at the art in question, and here we are concerned first of all with painting, as a genre comparable to tragedy, which in the work of painters such as Pollock, Rothko, and De Kooning, Reinhardt, Newman, and Stella could be said to have finally attained its nature. Henceforth the painter’s task would be to work within that form as best as he or she could — although it says something about our modern understanding of art that this does not seem a very convincing suggestion: we do expect the great painter to advance

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a37-1449b1. trans. I. Bywater, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. The Revised Oxford Translation, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 2316-2340.

art, to be an innovator who changes the rules of the game. In this respect we expect him to be different from the great chess player.

But would we want to say that painting as such had attained its nature in the work of the just mentioned painters? A certain kind of painting did come to some sort of end, an end bound up with a specific narrative concerning the essence of painting. But did not artists like Duchamp and Warhol demonstrate that the essence of art could not be limited in that way? Did this particular end of art not mean that artists had finally rid themselves of a straight-jacket?

Danto does suggest that in works like Warhol's *Brillo Box* art did finally arrive at its nature, a nature, however, so generous that from now on artists could do everything? Art could then be said to have ended in a stronger and more definitive sense. But that end should not be understood as disabling, rather as allowing the artist to display his or her creativity precisely because no longer concerned with advancing art or with working within the rules that a particular understanding of art might provide? Does Hermann Albert's "You can do everything" usher in an art that has finally come of age?

2

Aristotle saw no reason to mourn the fact that tragedy had attained its nature. Nor does Danto see reason to mourn that end of art he thinks has occurred some time in the sixties. He is deeply suspicious of those many modern followers of the comic poet Aristophanes, who in *The Frogs* complained that Athens "no longer had a tragic poet, and imagined a god taking on the mission of dragging one back from the underworld to save the staggering state" (p. 309). What Danto thinks is at stake becomes clear in a review of Anselm Kiefer

At just that fateful moment, when the Spartans were drawn up outside its walls and the great spring offensive was being drafted, when Athens had been through pestilence, defection, breakdown, humiliation and defeat, leave it to the muddled reactionary mind of Aristophanes to diagnose the difficulties as due to the lack of great art! The decline of Greek art, in a late postmortem by Nietzsche, was attributed to the triumph of reason over myth. True to form, the artist whom Aristophanes has his comic hero in *The Frogs* drag back from the netherworld embodies the belief that myth must trump reason if art is to discharge its redemptive function. Language had better be portentous, exalted, obscure and grand if the Athenian populace is to be led by art into a new moral era.

The Aristophanic charge to art is to produce work that is dense, dark, prophetic, heroic, mythic, runic, arcane, dangerous, reassuring, accusatory, reinforcing, grandiloquent, too compelling for mere reason to deal with, fraught, fearful, bearing signs that the artist is in touch with powers that will make us whole, and is spiritual, oceanic, urgent, romantic and vast. Since Wagner no one has sought more scrupulously to comply with this imperative than Anselm Kiefer, whose sludged and operatic fabrications have moved to tears viewers who felt they saw in them a remorseful Teutonic conscience. (pp. 237-238).

Danto has little patience with those who want to connect the difficulties of our culture to a lack of great art: that would attribute to art a power that does not and should not belong to it. The difficulties of our culture, and there are many, demand a more reasoned response. We should not look to art for redemption. For diversion perhaps, but not for moral leadership, and certainly not, if such leadership is thought to demand that myth trump reason.

Although Aristophanes is here the target, he also stands for the author of *The Birth of Tragedy*. The young Nietzsche thought that his call for a rebirth of tragedy had already been answered by Wagner — an artist Danto most definitely does not like, just as he does not like Kiefer, another artist whose popularity presupposes a deep suspicion of enlightenment, of a reason that, as Nietzsche recognizes, leaves no room for an art that would be more than entertainment or perhaps an illustration of or propaganda for pre-given ideas. Nietzsche's charge here is not all that different from Hegel's understanding of the death of art in its highest sense as the other side of enlightenment. There is, to be sure, one important difference: as heir of the Enlightenment, Hegel accepts this death as part of humanity's coming of age. To want to undo it would be to want to return to some less advanced stage of spiritual development. Hegel would have understood *The Birth of Tragedy* and its call for a rebirth of tragedy in the modern period as yet another romantic attempt to turn back the clock. No more than Danto, would he have had patience with Nietzsche's lament that by allowing reason to rule our lives we condemn ourselves to an impoverished, ghostly existence.

Hegel could have agreed with Nietzsche's understanding of the Greeks as "the chariot-drivers of every subsequent culture" and of Socrates as one of these: he gave us our model of the theoretical man. While the artist is content with beautiful appearance, theoretical man wants to get to the bottom of things. Just this desire Nietzsche questions.

One thing pre-Socratic Greek culture can teach us is, in the words of *The Gay Science*, “to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial — out of profundity.”⁶⁷ Art is content with appearance. It lets it be. This ability to let things be presupposes a certain renunciation. The artist, so understood, does not insist on being, as Descartes put it, the master and possessor of nature; all genuine art, according to Nietzsche, has something of tragedy about it. It is born of a will to power that recognizes its own lack of power.

Science, on the other hand, wants to master reality. Over its progress presides the “profound illusion that first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being, but even of *correcting* it.”⁶⁸ Nietzsche understands modern science and even more technology as the triumph of this Socratic tendency. Presupposed is the deep-seated illusion that whatever deserves to be called “real” reason can grasp and comprehend. But I can comprehend only what has a certain hardness and endures. Reality is thus understood in opposition to time.

Inseparable from the Socratic project is faith in the power of reason to lead us to the good life. “Socrates is the prototype of the theoretical optimist who, with his faith that the nature of things can be fathomed, ascribes to knowledge and to insight the power of a panacea, while understanding error as the evil par excellence.”⁶⁹ But this faith in reason's power to grasp the essence of reality and to guide human beings to happiness must, Nietzsche is convinced, in the end undermine itself. Reason itself calls such optimism into question, where Nietzsche is thinking first of all of Kant and Schopenhauer as critics of the claims of reason. “But science, spurred on by its powerful illusion,

⁶⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, “Vorrede zur zweiten Ausgabe,” in *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 5, p. 42. (this edition is abbreviated hereafter as KSA).

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 15, KSA, vol. 1, p. 98; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 95.

⁶⁹ *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 15, KSA, vol. 1, p. 100; trans. p. 97.

speeds irresistibly towards its limits, where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck. ... suddenly the new form of insight breaks through, tragic insight which, merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and remedy.”⁷⁰ Nietzsche welcomes such tragic insight, terrifying as it is and much as it needs art for a remedy; for he is convinced that the Socratic spirit and its understanding of reality tend towards disaster precisely because they raise the false expectation that, just by being reasonable, we can render ourselves, as Descartes promises, the masters and possessors of nature, including our own nature, and assure universal happiness.

Now we must not hide from ourselves what is concealed in the womb of this Socratic culture: optimism with its delusion of limitless power. We must not be alarmed if the fruits of this optimism ripen — if society, leavened to the very lowest strata by this kind of culture, gradually begins to tremble with wanton agitations and desires, if the belief in the earthly happiness of all, if the belief in the possibility of such a general intellectual culture changes into the threatening demand for such an Alexandrian earthly happiness, into the conjuring up of a Euripidean *deus ex machina*.⁷¹

Socratic optimism generates the dream of paradise regained by reason. But this dream, Nietzsche insists, is incompatible with the human condition, tempting those unwilling to accept this renunciation to embrace some version of what Nietzsche here calls a “Euripidean *deus ex machina*.”

Nietzsche credits Kant and Schopenhauer with having demonstrated the limits that are set to knowledge and to our desire for happiness: they showed us that what science investigates is only the world of phenomena, that it gives us no insight into things in themselves. But why should that matter? Is it not precisely the world of phenomena that matters? Why should we care about some supposed depth, inaccessible to scientific investigation? Why is it important to oppose to the understanding of reality governing our science a deeper one? I shall have to return to that question. Here I only want to point out that Kant knew that nature, as known by science, should not be equated with reality, for in nature so understood we meet neither with persons nor with values. But practical reason, he was convinced, was sufficient to provide the needed orientation.

⁷⁰ *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 15, KSA, vol. 1, p. 101; trans, pp. 97-98.

⁷¹ *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 18, KSA, vol. 1, p. 17; trans. p. 111.

Nietzsche had read his Schopenhauer too well to find such Enlightenment conviction convincing: what makes our lives worth living finally has its ground in our affective life, above all in eros. It is the downgrading of the affects, of instinct, that he holds against the Socratic tradition, including Kant and Hegel.

Nietzsche does find some recognition of the final inadequacy of the Socratic project in Plato's account of the life of Socrates.⁷² In the *Phaedo* Plato tells of Evenus, a poet, who had heard that Socrates, awaiting his death in prison, had turned to the writing of verse and music. Evenus asks Cebes about the rumor and Cebes in turn checks it with Socrates. Socrates answers that there is indeed something to the story: he had a recurrent dream that always told him that he should "cultivate and make music." Hitherto, Socrates explains, he had thought that he had been engaged in making the right kind of music when engaging others in conversation, that the dream was just exhorting him to continue his pursuit of philosophy. But now, facing death, he is uneasy about that interpretation: could it be that the dream meant popular music rather than philosophy? The delay of the return of Apollo's sacred ship from Delos has given him a bit of extra time, which he spends composing a hymn to Apollo and putting some of Aesop's fables into verse. And Nietzsche finds an analogue in the life of Euripides:

In the evening of his life, Euripides himself propounded to his contemporaries the question of the value and the significance of this [the Socratic] tendency, using myth. Is the Dionysian entitled to exist at all? Should it not be forcibly uprooted from Hellenic soil? Certainly, the poet tells us, if only that were possible; but the God Dionysus is too powerful; his most intelligent adversary — like Pentheus in the *Bacchae* — is unwittingly enchanted by him, and in this enchantment runs to meet his fate.⁷³

One cannot but sympathize with Pentheus, who sees in the anarchic potential of Dionysian frenzy a threat to the establishment, to the state. And yet the Dionysian power he battles proves stronger than his measures. In the end he is torn to pieces by his own mother in just such a frenzy.

But if indeed both Euripides and Socrates came to recognize the one-sidedness of Socratic culture, such recognition, Nietzsche suggests, came too late. With the privileging of reason art has to lose its religious, mythical significance, has to lose what

⁷² *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 14, KSA, vol. 1, p. 96; trans. p. 93.

⁷³ *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 12, KSA, vol. 1, p. 82; trans. p. 81.

Hegel, too, took to be its highest function. And to the extent that this Socratic spirit presides over our modern understanding of reality, such art would indeed seem to be a thing of the past.

Danto would, I think, accept this conclusion, although, like Hegel, he would question the presupposed nostalgia for a recovery of what lies irrecoverably behind us. Nietzsche, on the other hand, remained convinced that we, especially we moderns, need an art for which our modern world would seem to leave no room. He was unwilling to accept the finality of Hegel's judgment and such unwillingness led him to challenge the presupposed understanding of reality and its relation to reason. In this respect *The Birth of Tragedy* belongs with Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art." Both works claim that it is vitally important to at least struggle to keep open the possibility of a rebirth or return of art in its highest sense. *The Birth of Tragedy* was thus meant to help create a climate of receptivity for Wagner's music drama, for a dense and dark prophetic art, "too compelling for mere reason to deal with," and "The Origin of the Work of Art" does help us appreciate what Danto calls the "sludged and operatic fabrications" of Anselm Kiefer, some of which include Heidegger's name and image. Whether we side here with Hegel or Nietzsche will depend on whether we remain optimists concerning the sufficiency of reason to lead us to the good life.

3

Danto is such an optimist. He agrees with Hegel, who would have us consider the death of art in its highest sense part of humanity's coming of age. But the end of art that interests him is quite different. To understand it, we do not need to look at art, as Nietzsche demanded, in the perspective of life.⁷⁴ All we need do is look at the history of both art and reflection on art, which teaches that others have spoken of art, more especially of painting, ending, long before Belting and Danto, long before even Hegel. The most important of these, given the story Danto has to tell us, is Giorgio Vasari:

Vasari supposed that painting had attained "its own nature" in his own times, and his history was meant to show the development that had led up to a climax which he did not

⁷⁴ *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, "Versuch einer Selbstkritik," 2, KSA vol. 1, p. 14; trans. "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," p. 19.

see as a crisis, thinking that there would be other things for art to do than seek its own nature. And in a sense painting was able to continue a developmental history after Vasari only by redefining its own nature — and the interesting thought for me is whether we have really reached the end of redefinition itself, a progress that accelerated so in this strange century. And so no more breakthroughs? (p. 309).

Danto here suggests two possible ways of looking at what happened in the sixties: as just another in an ongoing series of endings, each preceded by some redefinition of the supposed essence of art or painting, or as a final end, final because it put an end to that process of redefinition. To answer Danto's last question resolutely in the affirmative would require an understanding of art so definitive, and that would presumably mean also so generous, that a move beyond it would seem inconceivable, although it is hard to see what such an understanding might be: there will always be things we can point to that we refuse to call art. And this refusal presupposes a boundary that can be challenged. And who is to say that the art world might not eventually endorse such a challenge, no matter how outrageous it might seem at first? This is one lesson van Bladeren has taught us. And is this not also a lesson taught by Danto's precursors, Vasari and Hegel? The one may have proclaimed the end of art in 1550, the other in 1828, but in neither case did art stop? This might be taken as a lesson in how foolish it is to make such strong claims. Vasari was no fool. What exactly did he assert? In what sense did he think that art had finally attained its nature?

Vasari might well have been surprised to find himself discussed as someone who proclaimed the end of art. Yes, he did think that the painters of the day, especially Michelangelo, had brought that art to a "pitch of perfection" that made it difficult to expect much improvement. But this no more meant the end of art than coming of age meant the end of life. Michelangelo is said to have led painting and a world that had for so long been in darkness into the light of day. But this is celebrated as a liberation. Because a work like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel "contains every perfection that can be given" — and we must not forget how fond Vasari was of hyperbole — it caused painters to "no longer care about novelties, inventions, attitudes and draperies, methods of new expression painted in different ways." The deliverance from such care is understood by Vasari as a gift. Artists born in his century owed Michelangelo, this "greatest artist of all time," "a great debt, for he has removed the veil of all imaginable

difficulties in his painting, sculpture, and architecture.”⁷⁵ Vasari takes for granted that the artist must know how to reproduce and imitate nature, that Giotto, learning from Cimabue, “threw open the gates of Truth to those who afterwards brought art to that perfection and grandeur which we see in our own age,” surpassing the Greeks, whose good manner had been forsaken by the medievals.⁷⁶ Presupposed is an understanding of painting as striving for convincing representations of visible reality, where perspective was sought to provide a key.⁷⁷ But no more than Alberti, did Vasari think that the point of art was to advance the cause of representation. “The greatest work of the painter,” according to Alberti, “is the *istoria*,” the story told in paint.⁷⁸ Such an “*istoria* will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his soul... These movements of the soul are made known by movements of the body.”⁷⁹ The poets should here be the painter’s teachers. To be sure, to tell his tales effectively the painter must have mastered representation. But there is no need to think that such story telling must ever come to an end; nor does it mean that the painter should not bend or play with perspective when his story demanded it. The perfection of art of which Vasari speaks only removed obstacles to the effective presentation of the *istoria*.

Vasari was convinced that all the tools a painter needs had now been made available. But he was also convinced that mastery of these tools does not yet make one a great painter, as he thought his own example proved, despite all his devotion to the art and painstaking effort. He was very much aware that he did not possess Michelangelo’s genius.⁸⁰ Vasari knew that painting aimed at more than the creation of representations that ideally would be like what is seen in a mirror, an understanding of the nature of painting at least as old as Plato, who states it, however, only to put down the painter. Such mirroring is very different from what Michelangelo did when he painted the ceiling

⁷⁵ Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. A. B. Hinds, ed. and abridged by Edmund Fuller (New York: Dell, 1968), pp. 462, 367, 422, 386.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 18 and 25.

⁷⁷ See Karsten Harries, “Alberti and Perspective Construction,” *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 64-77.

⁷⁸ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 70, repeated on 72.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸⁰ Vasari, *Lives*, p. 347.

of the Sistine Chapel. Vasari praises him precisely for his willingness “to use no perspective or foreshortening, or any fixed point of view” when the disposition of the whole required it.⁸¹ Mastery of perspective here allows the painter to rise above it and to play with it whenever the *istoria* required it. As Holbein demonstrated in the *Ambassadors*, Brueghel in *The Fall of Icarus*, Hobbema in *The Avenue*, *Middelharnis*, such play opened possibilities that Mannerist and Baroque painters were eager to explore.

Vasari remarks that Michelangelo showed both “the greatness of God and the perfection of art,” when he represented “the Dividing of Light from Darkness, showing with love and art the Almighty, self-supported, with extended arms.”⁸² Vasari must have thought that this love manifested itself in the painting and made it come alive. Again and again in the *Lives* we come across passages that show how much the appearance of life mattered to Vasari, where there is some tension between the way Albertian perspective demanded a freezing of time and the demand that the painting seem alive. Especially interesting in this connection is Vasari’s praise of Titian, who is said to have worked in “an impressionist manner, with bold strokes and blobs,” and thereby to have made his “paintings appear alive and achieved without labour.”⁸³ Important here is not just the representation of some real or imagined scene, but the way paint is handled and represented, communicating a sense of spontaneity that made the art seem alive. Vasari had a special interest in the painter’s ability to transmute matter. In his life of Raphael he thus tells of a self-portrait Dürer had sent the painter in homage, “painted in water-colours, on cambric, so fine that it was transparent, without the use of white paint, the white material forming the lights of the picture. This appeared marvelous to Raphael...”⁸⁴ What is marvelous is not so much the fine representation, but the way light is not represented here by means of paint, but it is the material that bears the likeness that itself becomes light. The painter appears as a kind of alchemist, transforming base matter into light, which had long been thought to mediate between spirit and matter.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 367.

⁸² Ibid., p. 368.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 438.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 293.

As a student and friend of Michelangelo, Vasari was well aware that the creation of great art involved more than a dutiful carrying out of what representation required. Paintings should appear to live. But the secret of how to achieve such appearance, how to animate paint on canvas, is not easily taught, as shown by those who, trying to make Titian's method their own, only end up with "clumsy pictures."⁸⁵ It is thus to caricature Vasari's *Lives* to suggest that the book offers

an internal narrative of the mastery of visual appearances, a bit like the history of the airplane or the automobile: a progressive sequence in which technology generates technology better than itself with reference to a defining goal, after which there are minor refinements and, as said before, institutionalization. There would be external references, as Piero della Francesca's *Legend of the True Cross* refers to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, but Piero's place in the internal history has nothing to do with this, but rather with his contribution to perspective. (p. 338)

What Vasari emphasizes in his discussion of Piero della Francesca, however, is not just his mastery of perspective, but also the way the painter was able to give his representations the appearance of life, e.g., to execute heads from life so well that "but for the gift of life they seemed alive" or to paint "in a smooth and novel manner many portraits antique in style and full of life."⁸⁶ That a preoccupation with perspective can become an obstacle to the incarnation of animating spirit in paint was demonstrated, so Vasari thought, by the example of Paolo Uccello, whose immoderate devotion to this machine-like method did lead to a significant advance in art, allowing that painter, among other things, "to bring to perfection the method of representing buildings," but also threatened to drain all life from his art, preventing him from becoming a better painter.

Danto's simile, likening the narrative of the mastery of visual appearances to the history of the airplane or the automobile, should not let us forget that working on the perfection of airplane or automobile is one thing, flying or driving one another. Similarly, to contribute to the mastery of visual appearances is one thing, to create art another. But if so, it is misleading to call the account of the mastery of visual appearances the "internal narrative," as if the story of art could be reduced to the story of

⁸⁵ Ibid.. p. 368.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 128, 130.

the development of a key tool, as if its machinery mattered more than its life. And it is also misleading to suggest that

What happened between Raphael and Caravaggio was an external event, not part at all of Vasari's story, the parameters of which are developments in what he enumerates as rule, proportion, order, draftsmanship, and manner. It was with respect to these that the "Masters of the Third Age," as Vasari designates them, attained "supreme perfection," excluding the possibility of a Fourth Age" in which Caravaggio would have to fall, or the Carracci, or the great masters of the Baroque. Belting claims that "a historical theory of Baroque art, properly speaking, never emerged at all." The external event, which Vasari's scheme had no way of forecasting, was the Counter-Reformation. And here is one way to continue the narrative. (p. 338)

I have called Danto's sketch of "Vasari's story" a caricature: Vasari does not allow us to distinguish in quite that way between "internal narrative" and "external events." Nor can his understanding of painting be reduced to the parameters mentioned by Danto. For that Vasari is far too interested in life, including the life of the spirit. And we must not forget that Alberti called the *istoria* the greatest work of the painter." This opens the door to narratives that do not relegate the spiritual and narrative dimension of art to the status of a merely external event. We do not do justice to the greatness of Vasari's Michelangelo when we understand him, to use Danto's simile, as having built a better airplane than anyone before him, but when we appreciate that he knew how to fly. Only the latter leads us to the essence of art and that essence is linked to spirit. And as the example of Titian shows: Vasari did not think that Michelangelo's was the only way to fly. There was no reason for Vasari to be concerned with the end of the story that begins with Cimabue's revival of the art of painting.

This is not to challenge the usefulness of Danto's caricature. Something does end with the masters of the Renaissance celebrated by Vasari. But an "internal" account such as the one suggested here cannot do justice to that end. The very distinction between "internal" and "external" calls itself into question. The history of art demands to be placed in the wider context of the history of ideas and this in turn demands to be placed in the still wider context of history.

The narrative that supports Danto's account of the history and end of art in the 1960's includes and extends the narrative he ascribes to Vasari.

I have found it valuable, if a bit too neat and simple, to see the history of Western art as falling into three main periods, circa 1300, circa 1600, and circa 1900. I cannot speculate over what external event it was that gives rise to Giotto and the internal history of visual representation which generates the progress Vasari brought to general consciousness. I think we know what in general stimulated the shift to multidimensional illusionism around 1600 — namely, the conscious decision by the Church to enlist art in the service of faith by operating at the level of visual rhetoric. The shift to Modernism is more difficult to identify. Though two thoughts have occurred to me. One was that the advent of motion picture technology meant that the capacity for illusion had passed entirely outside the hands of painters, forcing them either to rethink the nature of painting or simply to become outmoded. The Vasarian history continues into the moving picture, the entire narrative construed as the technical conquest of appearances, while painting moves along another, abruptly concerned as it is with what is the essence of painting. The other thought has to do with the sudden perception in the late nineteenth century of the artistic merit of primitive art, and that had to have been connected with the fading of a belief that Western civilization, emblemized by Western art, defined the apex of human attainment — defined as a narrative that was to chart the course for aspiring cultures. Here I give particular credit to Paul Gauguin, and my inclination is to believe that all the strategies of Modernism just short of abstraction are to be found in his own innovation as an artist. Gauguin described himself as “cerebral” artist and primitive art as rational or — as Picasso would say of the works that so stirred him in the Ethnographic Museum at Trocadéro — “*raisonnable*.” (pp. 340-341)

Danto calls his account “a bit too neat and simple.” And so it is. I thus would want to add circa 1770 and I suspect that Danto would be receptive to such a proposal: cannot Hegel's philosophy be understood as an attempt to come to terms with that epochal threshold, marked by all sorts of revolutions, including not only the American and the French, but Kant's Copernican revolution, and also a revolution in art that found an eloquent spokesman in Winckelmann, who also defended a version of the end of art thesis, claiming that art could never hope to surpass what the Greeks had achieved long ago, a claim that Hegel was very familiar with and could not dismiss. One characteristic expression of this threshold is the sharp distinction drawn by Lessing between arts of space and arts of time. No longer does *ut pictura poesis* seem convincing, as painting takes its leave from that *istoria* in which Alberti once sought the painting's very soul.

Painting now turns its back on Baroque allegory, and that is to say also on the Counter-Reformation. No longer can painting be understood as an art of the Word or of words. A different sort of narrative concerning painting's essence and task came to be demanded.

One key to the narrative that supported the art that came to some sort of end in the 1960's is provided by an approach to art that we can call "the aesthetic approach" because supported by, as it in turn supports philosophical aesthetics, itself a product of the Enlightenment. I shall return to it and to some of its leading representatives in the next chapter. Here I only want to claim that *to the extent* that the aesthetic approach is indeed presupposed by modern art, Danto's suggestive remarks on moving pictures — why not also mention photography in this context? — and primitive art have to leave one dissatisfied. Danto's appeal to the way the moving picture can be understood as continuing the Vasarian narrative of artifice conquering appearances, almost forcing painting, by the camera's very success, to radically change its course and to abruptly concern itself with the essence of painting, does not help us to understand the enormous passion that the modernist narrative generated. Why such concern to purify painting from everything external, to distill its very *essence* — a concern that still echoes in Danto's own distinction between what is internal and external to painting? Why should the pursuit of purity have figured so significantly in the progress of modern art? The desire to return to the primitive and archaic, too, has its roots in the Enlightenment and is linked to an attempt to found all authority in reason and nature instead of accepting worn-out inherited patterns. Art, too, sought to return to its very *arche*.

Essence and *arche* — the pursuit of both would seem to have exhausted itself. And no comparable project is in sight. In this respect the situation appears vastly different from what it was in Vasari's day, when the essence of art was believed to be something well understood and quite unproblematic. Today the very idea of such an essence would seem to have become more than questionable. Everything goes.

What Warhol demonstrated was that anything, if a work of art, can be matched by something that looks just like it which is not one, so the difference between art and non-art cannot rest in what they have in common — and that will be everything that strikes the eye. But once it is recognized that we must look for differentiating features at right angles to their surfaces, the entire urgency is drained from the enterprise of producing counterinstances, and the analysis of the concept can proceed without examples and

without counter examples: we are in the thin unhistorical atmosphere of philosophy. But once art makers are freed from the task of finding the essence of art, which had been thrust upon art at the inception of Modernism, they too have been liberated from history, and have entered the era of freedom. Art does not end with the end of art history. What happens only is that one set of imperatives has been lifted from its practice as it enters what I think of as its posthistorical phase. (p. 344)

Danto can give such an upbeat ending to his story because he does not have art end in philosophy, as Hegel seems to suggest, but in passing through and liberating itself from philosophy. Today, he suggests, art no longer has a need for master-narratives concerning its essence or for an agenda that would call artists in a certain direction. This burden artists have finally shed.

Hegel's story is different. For Hegel, too, there is a sense in which art has come to an end, not in the sense that a particular artistic agenda has been carried out, so that here nothing important was left to be done, nor in the sense that all such agendas were finally a thing of the past, but in the sense that art from the side of what Hegel considered its highest vocation had been left behind by the progress of spirit. The whole progress of modern art is, from this Hegelian perspective, a progress of an art that has already surrendered its highest function, a progress that comes after the death of art in its highest sense.

4. Hegel on the Death of Art

1

Even as Danto claims little interest in what other philosophers have written about art, this self-proclaimed philosopher in the analytic tradition admits to having "come to a great admiration for Hegel's philosophical writings on art."⁸⁷ In *Encounters and Reflections* Danto contrasts the dark and murky painter Anselm Kiefer with his "luminous compatriot, the philosopher Hegel," whose work on the philosophy of art he calls "stupendous" and "always astonishing."⁸⁸ Such praise is repeated in *Embodied Meanings*, where the *Lectures on Fine Art* are called marvelous.⁸⁹ Danto has an impish sense of humor and I am not quite sure when such overblown praise is meant to call itself into question — "luminous" is hardly the sort of adjective Hegel's prose first brings to mind; "dark and murky" often seems more appropriate. My uncertainty is reinforced by Danto's reference to "Hegel's sidesplitting *Bildungsroman*, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*⁹⁰: is it Hegel's willingness to sacrifice reality to his system that here provokes Danto's laughter, as it provoked that of Kierkegaard? There is a side to Hegel, tied to the underlying metaphysical assumptions, with which Danto would seem to have little patience. Danto himself points to what most deeply separates them: "Now my thesis of the end of art was not in the least an ideological one. It was almost, in fact, counter-ideological, in that it entailed the end of all mandated ideologies, which believed themselves grounded either in the history of art or in the philosophy of art."⁹¹ Hegel's thesis, on the other hand, was most definitely grounded, not just in a particular understanding of the history of art, bound up with a comprehensive philosophy of art, but in a metaphysics that grounded these in turn, a metaphysics most definitely ideological. Hegel's understanding of the death of art cannot be divorced from his understanding of

⁸⁷ Arthur C. Danto, *Embodied Meanings. Critical Essays and Meditations* (Farrar Straus Giroux: New York, 1990), p. 5

⁸⁸ Danto, *Encounters and Reflections. Art in the Historical Present* (Noonday Press, Farrar Straus Giroux: New York, 1990), pp. 239, 341, and 85.

⁸⁹ Danto, *Embodied Meanings.*, pp. 366 and 322.

⁹⁰ *Encounters and Reflections*, p. 287.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

the progress of history, which is also a progress of spirit, and that means of freedom, a progress that has to leave art behind. He thought it inconceivable that art would ever regain its former importance. And our common sense may well support Hegel. Many, perhaps most of us, tend to connect great art with the past. Faced with the art of our own time we soon become unsure. Is Warhol's *Brillo Box* still art? To be sure, the very question and the answer it is given by today's art-world is an invitation to expand the boundaries of art. In this connection we should think not only of that philosophization of art that so interests Danto, but also of technologies that have provided artists with altogether new means and instruments. Think of video art. Or of the computer and the possibilities it has opened up. That most attempts to explore and develop such new vocabularies have tended to be interesting rather than convincing may be taken as but a sign that these arts are still in their infancy.

But most people today — although by no means all — would seem to have an autumnal view of art. To challenge such a claim one can point to our flourishing art business: do the sums that people are willing to spend on art not demonstrate that many still care about art and are willing to back up their conviction with their dollars. Or one can cite the crowds attracted to our leading museums, especially when there is some block buster exhibition. Does all this not demonstrate that art remains very much alive? But just the institution of the art museum raises questions. How many of us feel today that the proper place for a really great work of art is indeed a museum? What greater seal of approval than to have one's work bought by a major museum? Given such an endorsement, backed by money, who could doubt that the work in question is indeed a work of art of the highest rank? For two centuries now the association of art and museum has come to replace such older associations as art and church or art and palace. It is no mere accident that Karl Schinkel's *Altes Museum* in Berlin, the first museum in which the historical point of view determined the arrangement of pictures, was being built just as Hegel lectured in the same city on the fine arts: both expressions of a past-oriented attitude to art: how many would seriously place Rauschenberg besides Rembrandt, Matthew Barney besides Michelangelo? Schinkel's *Altes Museum* was only one of countless museums built in the image of a Greek temple, structures haunted by the absence of those gods temples once served. Such iconography invites reflection about

the kind of understanding and appreciation of art that built such museums: is a presupposition of the Enlightenment's cult of the art of the past the experienced absence of gods and God? Berlin's *Altes Museum*, too, communicates a suspicion that this absence entails the death of art in its highest sense. The art historian Aloys Hirt, greatly admired by Hegel and very much involved in the creation of this museum, had thus no doubt that, as far as painting was concerned, the art of the fifteenth and sixteenth century remained exemplary — and this only because no Antique painting had survived. But just the distance thought to separate us from the greatest art, a distance that is both temporal and spiritual endows such art with its special aura.

To the extent that the Enlightenment's understanding of art remains our own, we, too, will associate great art with the past. To be sure, the very distance that separates art from our everyday world has become a matter of concern. The custodians of our museums have thus been forced to blur the line between museum and shopping mall, art and entertainment, in order to attract ever greater crowds. Art has become big business. But this embrace of art by business and entertainment hardly provides an effective answer to those who wonder whether Hegel may not have been right when he denied a future to art in its highest sense. For most of us ART continues to be bathed in a special aura. As Duchamp found himself forced to admit, that aura proved strong enough to envelop even his *Fountain*, intended to do away with just that aura. Stepping into a museum many of us still enter an aesthetic church, a sublime and rather chilly necropolis, stretching back across time, where Leonardo and Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Cézanne, and now Picasso and Duchamp, Pollock and Newman join frozen hands. Part of this attitude is an often almost religious reverence and respect, but also a suspicion that what really matters lies elsewhere. Not that most of us would question the importance of preserving this heritage, even as we may find it difficult to explain just what it is that makes such preservation so important and few of us will still be able to muster the kind of fervor that built the *Altes Museum*.

When Hegel in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* claimed that “the beautiful days of Greek art, and the golden time of the later middle ages are gone by” and proclaimed that

”art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past,”⁹² he expressed convictions already familiar to his listeners, who were likely to blame what they considered the sad state of modern culture for the decline of art. Hegel himself was not content with such a superficial response. To it he opposed his own more philosophical account, meant to show that the Enlightenment and the death of art in its highest sense go together. And are we moderns not heirs of the Enlightenment? As an interpretation of the place of art in the modern world Hegel’s account still demands our attention.

But does the evident success of so many contemporary artists, success that can easily be measured in financial terms, not force us to challenge such a backward looking understanding of art? Has Hegel’s thesis on the future of art not been refuted by the explosive development of art since he made his dire pronouncements, a development that has given us much of the art that today we value most highly? But no more than Danto, did Hegel ever mean to deny that in the future there would still be art. What he argued for was rather that our reflective culture could no longer grant art that role and importance it possessed in ancient Greece, that it still had in the Middle Ages and, we can add, retained in much of Europe as late as the eighteenth century. *For us* it has lost ”its genuine truth and life.”⁹³ And this “we” includes today’s artists. Does their art-making not take place in and bear witness to a world in which art can only have a peripheral significance? This does not mean that many will not continue to enjoy and even dedicate their lives to art.

2

If the connection between our tendency to link art and museum and Hegel’s thesis on the future of art is to be more than superficial, both must rest on the same or at least

⁹² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik, Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Fromann, 1937), vols. 12 – 14. vol. 12, pp. 31 and 32; *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. and intro. Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 12 and 13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 32; trans. p. 13.

similar presuppositions.⁹⁴ This is indeed the case. Three presuppositions help to determine, not just Hegel's, but our own understanding of the place of art in the modern world.

1. Genuine art transcends our conceptual grasp.
2. Art reveals reality; it lays claim to truth.
3. Truth demands transparency; only what can be comprehended is real.

The three assertions are incompatible: we can hold on to any two, but not to all three. Does this mean that our understanding of art is confused? Was Hegel's understanding of art confused?

Hegel would have art in its highest sense serve truth, while his understanding of truth is such that it demands a clarity art cannot tolerate: art demands mystery, truth transparency. This incompatibility, however, does not lead Hegel to sever the bond between art and truth; rather he understands the truth of art as truth that has not as yet come into its own. Art, so understood, is necessary only as long as human beings remain incapable of knowing reality in more adequate ways. As heirs of the Enlightenment, we live in an age that has made thought the sole custodian of truth and for that very reason we are bound to associate art in its highest sense with the past. We no longer are able to consider art a privileged custodian of truth. Such art belongs to our past. To mourn its death would be as foolish as to mourn the loss of that magic so many things held when we were still children.

3

Of the three presuppositions, the first appears the least problematic. It finds expression in such claims as: beauty cannot be reduced to concepts; there can be no rule or recipe for the creation of works of art; genius is a gift of nature. All these claims are commonplaces reasserted and defended in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Invoking Kant, Greenberg reiterated this first presupposition over and over: In the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* Kant is said to have "demonstrated that one cannot prove an aesthetic judgment

⁹⁴ Part of this chapter is a reworking of Karsten Harries, "Hegel on the Future of Art," *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 27, no. 4, 1974, pp. 677-696.

in discourse.”⁹⁵ For Greenberg acceptance of this claim is a presupposition of being taken seriously as a philosopher of art: “Quality in art can be neither ascertained nor proved by logic or discourse. Experience alone rules in this area — and the experience, so to speak, of experience. This is what all the serious philosophers of art since Immanuel Kant have concluded.”⁹⁶ Or again, “nobody has yet been able to show to my satisfaction anything of essential quality in any kind of art that called on one’s reasoning powers for either its appreciation or its creation. I am not alone in maintaining this. Kant and Croce say the same in essence.”⁹⁷ And so does Hegel, who here follows Kant. He, too, insists, that while man “is born to religion, to thought, to science” and that their acquisition therefore requires “nothing besides birth itself and training, education, industry, etc.,”⁹⁸ artistic genius is a gift. In the successful work of art the spirit incarnates itself so completely in the sensible that it becomes impossible to abstract the embodied meaning from the sensible presentation. This impossibility has its counterpart in the artist’s inability to discriminate what in her work is really her own and what has come to her as a gift of nature. As a product of spirit, the work of art has a meaning, but the incarnation of this meaning in the sensible makes it impossible to capture it in concepts without destroying that unity of sense and spirit on which, according to Hegel, beauty and art rest. To thought art is essentially a mystery.

It seems difficult to deny such claims. To do so we would have to subordinate sense and imagination to a higher cognitive faculty. Such subordination would make art into mere illustration and at bottom superfluous. To insist on this point is not to deny that, as already Aristotle emphasized and Kant reiterated, the artist must have some reason for doing just what he does. To understand a work of art as such is to understand it as the product of an attempt to realize some end. With reference to this end we can judge the work a success or a failure. I can for example try to sketch some garbage that for some reason I do not understand moved me. There is a quite obvious sense in which I

⁹⁵ Clement Greenberg, “How Good is Kafka? A Critical Exchange with F. R. Leavis,” *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 3, p. 216.

⁹⁶ Greenberg, “The Identity of Art,” *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 118.

⁹⁷ Greenberg, “Review of Andrea del Sarto by S. J. Freedberg,” *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, p. 201.

⁹⁸ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 12, p. 382.



Karsten Harries, *Garbage 4*, pastel on paper

can fail in that attempt. No work is adequately understood as such when it is understood simply as the product of inspiration. That includes works of fine art.

Some theories of art lose sight of this. Examples are provided by the inspiration theories that were common in discussions of expressionist and surrealist art. Herbert Read, for example, called the artist a mere medium, a channel for forces that are impersonal, where following Freud and Jung he tied these to an impersonal subconscious. Plato invoked in this connection a realm of timeless forms. Someone else might want to invoke the gods. Jackson Pollock claimed to be nature. The subconscious, Plato's forms, the gods, or nature can thus occupy what is fundamentally the same place: they all represent attempts to name what is experienced as a transcendent reality that acts through the artist, using him or her as its medium. But this cannot be quite right. Were it the whole story, how would it be possible to distinguish a work of art from a product of accident or nature. Against an exaggerated inspiration theory, we have to insist that

every work of art is also the product of a deliberate doing. Not that it is adequately understood in this way. Anyone who has ever tried to paint or write a poem will be aware of the gifts of inspiration or just accident. A few lines put down more or less at random may suddenly coalesce into a poem. Or a painter may try to realize a fixed plan and be forced by what appears on the canvas to modify it. Every artist has to acknowledge the stubborn independence of what he has put down; also that there is something about his own doing over which he has only very incomplete control. This includes the artist's dependence on what we may want to call inspiration. But granting all this, nevertheless the work of art remains the artist's own creation. He or she chose to make it and make it in a certain manner. As Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel recognized, to experience something as a work of art, as opposed to a mere thing such as a rock in some brook, is to experience it as the realization of an intention. This is part of its meaning. Certainly, there have been and continue to be attempts to have the work of art be no more than the product of accident, of a spontaneous happening, or to have it present itself to the observer as an ideally meaningless presence. But in all these cases we look at the artwork as a work of art, i. e. we refer it back to the intention of the artist. The not so long ago fashionable rhetoric of presence should not deceive us: the very attempt to create art works that should not mean, but be — as Archibald MacLeish demanded of the poem and Kasimir Malevich and Frank Stella of a painting — refers us back to the governing intention. That it is supposed to be and not mean becomes part of the meaning of the work of art, which, intended to have no meaning, inevitably means something after all.

Both, a one-sided emphasis on inspiration and a one-sided emphasis on intention fail to do justice to artistic creation. Suppose you want to paint a picture. There will be some idea you want to realize. You will know, e.g., that you want to paint a picture. You will have decided on the medium. And presumably you will know what kind of painting it is likely to be, e. g., abstract or representational; if abstract, using a geometric or a more organic vocabulary; if representational, you are likely to have some understanding not only of what it is you want to represent, but also of the style of representation you are likely to employ. All this is just to say that you will have a many-faceted understanding of what you are up to. But however complex, this understanding

will not have sufficient content to determine what you are going to create in all relevant respects, perhaps not even in the most important respects. You will not be able to point to a conception fully adequate to what you are actually doing. And in most cases there will be a constant reinterpretation of what you are up to in light on what you have already done. It is thus not altogether wrong to think that there is first a process of thinking that yields the idea, which is then to be realized. But can an artist distinguish successfully between what is a contribution of reason and what a contribution of the hand? Consider doodling. The lines you have set down on the paper in front of you will influence the next lines you draw. In our doodles we tend to hit on some vocabulary and remain with it. Creative vision will always suggest possibilities that are suggested by what you have already put down on paper. That goes also for painting: I have painted an orange-brown form that demands an answer: I proceed to put down some olive green. You ask me, why did you put that green there? I point to the orange-brown. Perhaps you will understand. But if you understand, your understanding will not be a matter of disengaged reflection. It will be a creative seeing on your part.

Is such creative seeing a form of reasoning? Or does it belong to inspiration? I would say that it mediates between both. The actual production of the work of art is just how I get hold of the aesthetic idea floating before me. That idea is not antecedently given. What was given was at most a concept, a ghostly anticipation of that idea, not the idea itself. For that idea to show itself I had to put paint on paper or canvas. And it is just this integration of reflection and the work of the hand, of the spirit and of the body, that is part of the satisfaction of making and appreciating works of art. The work of art heals us, binds together what is usually split, makes us whole. How it does so remains a mystery.

4

In Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* the second proposition, tying art to truth, is similarly taken for granted. Hegel knows that what is called art often is no more than what he considers a trifling diversion: decoration or entertainment. But he demands more of art: the true purpose of art is to provide us with "the sensuous representations of the

absolute itself.”⁹⁹ Beauty is understood here as “only a certain manner of expressing and representing the true.”¹⁰⁰ I shall speak of an ontological conception of the beautiful.¹⁰¹ As here stated, it is not particularly Hegelian — equally well one could point to Plato, Thomas Aquinas, or Heidegger — to give just some examples.

If the ontological conception of art is supported by a venerable tradition going back at least to Plato, the opposite aesthetic conception, which insists on the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere and severs any deep connection between beauty and truth, can also claim a distinguished ancestry. The outstanding philosophical exponent of this second conception is Kant.¹⁰² As appropriated by Clement Greenberg, this aesthetic conception was to provide both American abstract art and the related criticism with its dominant narrative.

That modern philosophy of art should have developed as aesthetics has its foundation in a more subjective approach to art that looks not for truth, but tends to reduce the work of art to an occasion for an enjoyable experience. What is enjoyed is not so much the work itself as the occasioned state of mind. Depending on what kind of pleasure is involved, we can distinguish different species of aesthetic judgment.

The paradigm is provided by what Kant, too, calls a judgment of taste. His often repeated definition can be said to have presided over the aesthetic approach: “Taste is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called beautiful.”¹⁰³ Key here is Kant’s understanding of an “entirely disinterested” satisfaction. With this characterization Kant opposes the beautiful to both the pleasant, which he defines as what pleases in sensation, and the good, which pleases our reason. Both he suggests are bound

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 107; trans. p. 76.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 135-136.

¹⁰¹ For the distinction between an ontological and an aesthetic conception of beauty, see Ernesto Grassi, *Die Theorie des Schönen in der Antike* (Cologne: Dumont, 1962) and Walter Biemel, *Die Bedeutung von Kants Begründung der Ästhetik und Philosophische Analysen zur Kunst der Gegenwart* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1968).

¹⁰² That this fails to do justice to Kant will become clear in the following pages.

¹⁰³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, par. 5, A16/B16, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1964), p. 83.

up with interest: we desire what is pleasant and we ought to desire the realization of the good.

Interest, as Kant understands it, is interest in existence. We are interested beings because we are beings in need. Indeed, our need is twofold: as animals we are interested in the pleasant; as rational animals we are also interested in the good. Interest in the pleasant is an interest that seeks to appropriate and in such appropriation to enjoy. The pleasure we take in food provides an obvious example. Such pleasure depends on the existence of what gives me pleasure. A hungry person is inevitably interested in the existence of what promises to satisfy his desire.

But why is the judgment that something is beautiful supposed to be not interested in whether this thing exists? In one sense this would seem to be obviously false: do we not want there to be beautiful objects, objects that give us aesthetic pleasure? Why else do we buy works of art? What, then, is the difference between the beautiful and the pleasant? Kant would have us reflect on our relationship to the beautiful object? When we appreciate the beauty of something, he insists, we do not want to devour it; we let it be, keep our distance from it. In aesthetic appreciation the existence of the beautiful object has been bracketed. Thus the beauty of a Chinese bridge does not become less when mirrored in quiet water; quite the opposite. The unreal mirror image may well strike us as more beautiful.

To say that the aesthetic judgment is disinterested is to say that it does not demand the other as existing, as the beautiful object is not to be appropriated, but merely contemplated. Before I can enjoy an object aesthetically I have to free myself from it and for it. That is to say, I may not look at it as an object of desire. If a painting does not allow me to assume this detached position, it or I have failed from an aesthetic point of view. If, for example, when looking at a Dutch still life, showing a beautiful ham, some grapes, and a glass filled with red wine, my hunger and thirst are aroused, I have failed as an aesthetic observer, where such failure may have its source more in my inability to free myself from my desires than in the painting. Similarly when, looking at a nude by Titian, my sexual appetite is aroused, then from the aesthetic point of view, as Kant understands it, this must be considered a failure, whatever other pleasures I may derive from it.

The main point is simple enough: in aesthetic experience the human being leaves behind or brackets out the everyday claims that objects make on us. We step, so to speak, back from things, leave behind our usual engagement in the world. Such disengagement is a presupposition of aesthetic enjoyment. We could speak in this connection, with Arthur Danto, of a transfiguration of the commonplace. Duchamp demonstrated the power of such dislocation with his ready-mades.

Kant, no doubt, would have pointed out that mere distancing is not sufficient to establish beauty. The judgment that something is ugly is also an aesthetic judgment. But in this case we are not satisfied, but dissatisfied. Of what nature then is the satisfaction we take in the beautiful? A beautiful object strikes us as if meant to be understood by us. This apparent agreement of the object “with the understanding as the faculty of concepts” arouses “a feeling of pleasure” in us.¹⁰⁴ We feel at home with the object before us. This pleasure lets us judge it beautiful.

Important here is Kant’s reflective turn back to the self. Aesthetic pleasure, so understood, is at bottom self-enjoyment. The paradigm is provided by the experience of beauty, although, in keeping with the taste of his age, Kant, too, sees a need to supplement the category of the “beautiful” with that of the “sublime.” But what all aesthetic judgments have in common is that they refer what is judged back to the occasioned state of mind, which in each case is what is really enjoyed. There is thus a sense in which the aesthetic approach is by its very nature self-centered and narcissistic.

That, given this aesthetic approach, truth and beauty, philosophy and art, belong to different provinces is easy to see. Art should occasion pleasure; it should be enjoyable. Truth is not at issue. Thus Kant, faithful to his aesthetic approach, does not mention “truth” in the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment.” To be sure, when the discussion turns from beauty to art, tensions develop that lead Kant beyond a purely aesthetic interpretation; and such an interpretation is difficult to reconcile with what Kant has to say about the way the beautiful points to the supersensible substratum of our world. But if many of Kant’s successors returned to a more ontological approach, Kant’s aesthetic approach to beauty would appear to be closer to the spirit of modern art. Greenberg had

¹⁰⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, “Introduction,” VII, A XLI; trans., p. 26.

good reason to call the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* “the most satisfactory basis for aesthetics we yet have.”

But if this is so, why turn to Hegel rather than to Kant for a deeper understanding of the place of modern art? In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant does not address the shift from an older ontological to the aesthetic approach. Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*, on the other hand, provide us with an account of the history of art that lets us recognize the reasons for this shift: precisely because Hegel refuses to settle for an aesthetic approach that would reduce art to entertainment, if perhaps of a very refined sort, because he holds on to an ontological approach, he is forced to recognize that art in its highest sense now lies behind us. That conclusion implies the corollary: the art that continues to thrive in the present is ruled by the aesthetic approach. Thus Hegel allows us to recognize why Kant should have become the philosopher who presides over the narrative that, mediated by Greenberg, helped to give the art that according to Danto came to an end some time in the sixties its self-understanding.

I claimed that most of us remain committed to Hegel’s three presuppositions. But how can this be reconciled with the just asserted aesthetic character of modern art? That, despite the evidence offered by modern art and some of its most articulate proponents, some version of the ontological approach retains its hold on many of us is at least suggested by the association of museum and temple. Art, we feel, is not just a matter of entertainment, is not just for fun, but matters profoundly, even if we may do not find it easy to specify just what it is that makes it so important. Many still look to art for edification. And, given such expectations, it is easy to understand why so much avant-garde art is found disappointingly empty, at best fun, more often boring. But it is also characteristic of our situation that those works whose power to edify has let them become popular, works like Norman Rockwell’s *Rosie the Riveter*. Dali’s *Last Supper* or Wyeth’s *Christina’s World* are likely to be condemned by the art establishment for being kitsch. “Kitsch” refers to art that strikes the critic as false. The usefulness of the category “kitsch” presupposes the continuing hold and relevance of the ontological approach. At the same time it supports Hegel’s claim that there is something about our epoch that makes it difficult for us to take seriously art’s claim to serve the truth.

5

With the third presupposition — truth demands transparency; only what can be comprehended deserves to be called real, — we come to the center, not only of Hegel's thought, but of the modern sense of reality: our faith in our ability to grasp and appropriate all that is.

The claim that truth demands transparency recalls Descartes' insistence on clarity and distinctness. What presents itself clearly and distinctly is transparent; in it there is nothing that escapes or resists the mind's grasp; nothing is hidden; no mystery remains.¹⁰⁵ From this it follows that whatever we are presented with by our senses, e. g. by our eyes, may be clear, but can never be distinct; for to see something clearly and distinctly is to see it totally and with complete adequacy. The phenomenon of perspective precludes this; perspectival understanding is always partial. Clarity and distinctness thus demand a standpoint beyond perspective, the standpoint of thought.

In the final pages of the *Discourse on Method* Descartes claims that his principles had opened up the possibility of finding a "practical philosophy by means of which, knowing the force and the action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens, and all other bodies that environ us, as distinctly as we know the different crafts of our artisans, we can in the same way employ them in all those uses to which they are adapted and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature."¹⁰⁶ Hegel might have added that, while both natural science and his philosophy may aim at the appropriation of reality, in the case of the former such appropriation remains incomplete in that science cannot overcome the otherness of nature, thus remaining on the level of the finite. "Natural science is a movement which begins with the letting be of things only to transcend this beginning and yet forever to return to it."¹⁰⁷ It is the demand for transparency that leads the scientist to seek reality beyond things as they first offer themselves to him in the products of his own thinking. But his constructions, his theories and models, must be tested by observation and experience. In the necessity of an ever to be repeated return to

¹⁰⁵ René Descartes, *Principles*, I, XLV. *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 2 vols., trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New York: Dover, 1955), vol. I, p. 237.

¹⁰⁶ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, p. 119.

¹⁰⁷ Emil Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 95.

the things of the world, the finite standpoint of natural science reveals itself. Given this standpoint, the given remains as opaque, silent facticity, material for human appropriation. Hegel demands more: philosophy is supposed to overcome the otherness of nature. But does the standpoint of science not remain our own? What is Hegel's absolute spirit to us today? Did the death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche not also entail the death of His philosophical place-holder: Hegel's absolute?

Hegel calls art the sensible expression of our deepest interests. Following a tradition going back to Plato, he ties these interests to our desire to be at one with ourselves: "All that happens in heaven and earth, eternally happens — the life of God and all that happens in time, only strives for this: that the spirit know itself, make itself into an object for itself, find itself, become for itself, and join itself to itself."¹⁰⁸ The life of the individual is part of this drama of the spirit's homecoming, which is history.

Crucial for our own place in that drama is the recognition that as thinking subjects we transcend ourselves as the concrete individuals we happen to be. It is this self-transcendence that alone makes it possible for human beings to comprehend and appropriate all that is, including their own being. Hegel thus emphasizes that ours is an age of reflection and by the same token an age of objectivity. The two belong together, for even to think of objectivity I have to be aware of the way in which my particular point of view limits my knowledge; reflecting on these limitations I have already in some sense surpassed them. Reflection lets me recognize the impossibility of stopping at any finite point of view. All merely perspectival, merely relative modes of knowing should be transcended. To all finite points of view I have to oppose the standpoint of the absolute. This standpoint opens up a new understanding of reality and of truth.

Given this modern understanding of truth, the locus of truth can alone be thought. The sensible has to be translated into thought if it is to yield truth. This is also necessary, if we are to find truth in art. But such translation must leave behind the sensible character of the work of art. It is for this reason that Hegel must say that art no longer fulfills our deepest interests. Today art, too, must prove itself before reason if it is to be more than entertainment. To really satisfy us, it has to become an occasion for reflection.

¹⁰⁸ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1937), vol. 17, p. 52.

“Therefore, the science of art is a much more pressing need in our day than in times in which art, simply as art, was enough to furnish a full satisfaction.”¹⁰⁹ The critic thus has come to rival and at times even to replace the artist. As Danto exemplifies so convincingly, reflections on art have become an essential part of the artistic life of our time. That so many of today’s artists should have studied philosophy on the undergraduate or even graduate level comes as no surprise.

Hegel understands history as the progress of freedom. The discovery of and insistence on our freedom have made it impossible for us moderns to find satisfaction in any merely finite content. This impossibility lets Hegel conclude his account of the historical progression of art with a discussion of what he calls the “subjective humor” of the romantics. Traditional art is born of respect for the content with which the artist is concerned. Instead of subjecting it to his or her will, the artist’s shaping of that content at the same time lets it unfold and develop according to its own essence. Romantic, and that means modern art for Hegel, is born of a different attitude: it betrays a “broken” or “indifferent” relationship to the external.¹¹⁰ Incapable of joining nature and spirit, object and subject in one harmonious whole, the modern artist accepts their separation. Art “falls apart.” On one hand we have representations of external objects in all their contingency and evanescence; “the ideal disappears from art.” On the other, we meet with arbitrary productions of the artist’s free subjectivity.¹¹¹ “Today the artist is no longer bound to a specific content and a manner of representation appropriate only to this subject matter — art has thereby become a free instrument, which, his own subjective skill permitting, the artist can use equally well on any content, whatever it may be.” A new freedom that draws on all that history and nature have to offer goes along with a new rootlessness. More and more art turns into harmless, but also quite insignificant play. Measured by humanity’s true interests, art comes to seem increasingly besides the point, superfluous, at best a pleasant diversion. As the creative subject attempts to put itself in

¹⁰⁹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 12, p. 32; *Introductory Lectures*, p. 13.

¹¹⁰ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 13, p. 237.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 236.

place of the absolute, artistic creation becomes a mere “play with objects, a displacing and inverting of the material.”¹¹² Caprice dissolves substance.

Hegel’s remarks anticipate an often quoted programmatic statement by Kandinsky, who in 1912 predicted that in the future art would fall apart and develop along two divergent lines: a movement towards abstraction would be complemented by a new realism. According to Kandinsky, traditional art can be understood as the product of a dialogue between artist and world. The artist imposes a form on reality, not to conquer it, but in order to reveal it. Not only is there no tension between these two aspects of painting, the formal order helps to reveal the essence of what is to be represented. Abstraction and representation are in perfect balance.

If Kandinsky is right, the modern artist no longer strives for such balance. On the contrary, he actively rejects it:

And it seems today that one no longer finds a goal in this ideal, that the lever which holds the balance pans of the scale has disappeared and that both balance pans intend to lead their existence separately, as self-contained and independent of each other.

...

On the one hand, the diverting support in the objective is taken away from the abstract, and the observer finds himself floating in the air. One says: art is losing its footing. On the other hand, the diverting idealism in the abstract (the “artistic” element) is taken away from the objective, and the observer feels himself nailed to the floor. One says: art is losing its ideal.¹¹³

Kandinsky saw his own art as pointing the way towards a new abstraction, that of Henri Rousseau as pointing towards a new realism. That Kandinsky saw something essential is suggested by the fact that Werner could use the same schema to interpret the whole of modern art. He marks the two directions by pointing to “two symbolic acts of profound significance.”

The first act was performed by Duchamp, when he chose an object at random and placed it in a strange environment as an image of the Other, whose accidental but

¹¹² Ibid, vol. 13, p. 226. “Subjective humor” is closely related to romantic irony, which Hegel and following him Kierkegaard associate above all with Friedrich Schlegel (see vol. 12, pp. 100-106). Irony is said to be more radical than subjective humor in that it takes no content seriously.

¹¹³ Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Problem of Form,” trans. Kenneth Lindsay, in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), p. 161.

very material presence invested it with the very unrealistic dignity of a magic thing, a fetish. In this act the modern experience of the object was defined as the experience of the magical Other. The second act was performed by Malevich, when, in order to define in the most rigorous manner the opposite of the world of natural appearance, he declared a black square on white ground to be a painting. In this act, the modern experience of form was defined as the experience of a concrete reality, which belongs to the human mind alone, and in which the mind represents itself.¹¹⁴

I am quoting these passages not to suggest that Hegel proved a good prophet — prophecy is hardly the business of philosophy — but rather because Hegel’s attempt to comprehend the art of his own day can help us to understand the centrifugal development of modern art as a more extreme expression of what remains essentially the same spiritual situation.

Hegel does not leave us with the unmediated tension between the contingent object and the artist’s arbitrary freedom. “In conclusion we can only point ... to a gathering together of the extremes of romantic art suggested earlier.”¹¹⁵ Thinking here of literature rather than of painting, Hegel terms this gathering together “objective humor.” In contrast to the subjective humor that dissolves the given objects, objective humor is marked by a loving return to the object. The smallest, least significant thing can offer the artist an occasion to express his own sentiments or witty reflections. But this return to the object lacks necessity. Why turn to this theme rather than to another? The rise of our own reflective culture leaves the artist with no good answers to such questions. There is no longer a content that demands that he place himself at its service. “Today the artist is no longer bound to a specific content and a manner of representation appropriate only to his subject matter; art has thereby become a free instrument, which, his own subjective skill permitting, the artist can use on any content, whatever it may be.”¹¹⁶ The modern artist possesses a new freedom: unlike his predecessors he can draw on all that history and the earth have to offer. But part of this freedom is a rootlessness of which the stylistic uncertainty of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is but one expression. Another is the search for novelty. As the subject matter of art loses its importance, it becomes, to use

¹¹⁴ Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 203.

¹¹⁵ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol.13, p. 236.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

Kierkegaard's term, a mere occasion for the artist's creative imagination. Given the traditional understanding of art as somehow linked to truth, the activity of this imagination will indeed seem "harmless play."¹¹⁷ Measured by our real interests, as Hegel understands them, such play will indeed seem superfluous. To the modern world it can offer no more than entertainment.

Hegel's conception of "objective humor" raises the question whether modern painting has not perhaps developed its own "objective humor," which would join the extremes represented by Malevich's *Black Square* and Duchamp's *Bottle Rack*. Barbara Rose interpreted minimal art as just such a synthesis: "For half a century these works marked the limits of visual art. Now, however, it appears that a new generation of artists, who seem not so much inspired as impressed by Malevich and Duchamp (to the extent that they venerate them), are examining in a new context the consequences of their radical decisions. Often the results are a curious synthesis of the two men's work. That such a synthesis should not only be possible, but likely is clear in retrospect."¹¹⁸ The synthesis had in fact been foreseen by Kandinsky.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the more rigorously abstraction is pursued, the more such pursuit will tend towards all but mute objects, as all content is left behind. And the more rigorously an artist pursues mute material presence, the more he will tend to endow it, as Haftmann observed, with the very unrealistic dignity of a fetish. Kandinsky's new abstraction and his new realism meet in a fetishizing of mute presence.

6

Hegel did not proclaim the death of all art. But did he not show that, given the spiritual situation of our time, the ontological approach to art has to give way to some version of the aesthetic approach? And suppose Hegel is right and "art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past," is this a serious loss? Should it not rather be affirmed as a welcome sign that humanity had finally come of age? Greenberg and, in a different way, Danto might argue something of the sort. Hegel,

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 240.

¹¹⁸ Barbara Rose, "A B C Art, Minimal Art, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 275.

¹¹⁹ Kandinsky, "On the Problem of Form," p. 162.

however, is still too close to Winckelmann and to his former roommate, the poet Hölderlin, not to be aware of what has been lost; but he asks those who would deplore this loss to consider its necessity:

We must, however, not consider this merely an accidental misfortune that befell art from without, due to the poverty of the present age, its prosaic sense, the lack of interest, etc.; it is rather the effect and development of art itself, which, in bringing the content dwelling in her to objective definition, by this progress make a contribution toward her own liberation from the represented content. We lose our absolute interest in whatever art or thought have placed so clearly before our sensible and spiritual eye that the content has been exhausted, that everything is out in the open and nothing dark and inner remains. For interest arises only where there is fresh activity. The spirit labors over objects only as long as there is something mysterious and not yet revealed in them.¹²⁰

The last sentence gives more general expression to the first of my three presuppositions. Art, indeed all that claims our interest, is tied to mystery. And yet, as an attempt to make mystery manifest, to bring the hidden out into the open, art threatens its own future. For whenever some content has found adequate expression in one or more works of art, it can no longer claim the absolute interest of future artists. Hegel ties this thesis to an epochal view of art. The principle that gives unity to each epoch is the prevailing world-view and the themes, which it provides to the artist. When these themes have found full expression and nothing further remains to be revealed, only a revolutionary turn against the established tradition can give new life to art. In this sense Hegel considers Aristophanes, who turned against the Greek culture of his day, and Ariosto, who turned against the Middle Ages, artistic revolutionaries. And in similar fashion Kandinsky thought of himself as a revolutionary. According to him the turn against what art had been had become necessary because “The spirit had already absorbed the content of accustomed beauty and finds no new nourishment in it. The form of this accustomed beauty gives the usual delights to the lazy physical eye. The effect of the work gets stuck in the realm of the physical. The spiritual experience becomes impossible. Thus, this beauty often creates a force which does not lead to the spirit, but away from the spirit.”¹²¹ But according to Hegel, if modern art has its origin in a revolution, this revolution differs

¹²⁰ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 13, p. 231.

¹²¹ Kandinsky, “On the Problem of Form, p. 162.

from preceding revolutions in that now the very idea of leading themes is put into question: “Compared to the time when his nationality and time placed the artist, according to his substance, within a definite world-view and its content and forms of representation, we find an altogether opposed standpoint, which in its full development has come to be of importance only in the most recent time.”¹²² Hegel goes on to point out that in his time reflection, criticism, and the freedom of thought had also seized the artist and made him “in respect to the matter and form” of his production “so to speak a *tabula rasa*.”¹²³ If Hegel is right, and here his thesis does invite comparison with Danto’s, after the revolution of modern art everything goes. This helps explain the Protean character of modern art — Picasso is an obvious example. Modern art has not just liberated itself from another set of themes; our age can no longer provide the artist with themes that demand sensible expression. Compared to artists of the past, the modern artist possesses an altogether new freedom. This freedom finds expression in the phrase: “art for art’s sake.”

Modern artists such as Stella suggested that modern art has taken the sensible for its content; that it no longer strives to reveal an absolute beyond or a spirit dwelling within the sensible, but simply the sensible presence of things. In this presence it is supposed to possess its mystery and depth. Hegel might have replied that we are placing too much weight on the sensible when we thus make it into a modern epiphany of the divine. The real depth of the sensible is the absolute Idea. History is the progressive revelation of that Idea. In that progress art has its place. But to us moderns the depth of the sensible is revealed by thought, not by art. This is not to deny that the turn to the sensible remains a possibility for the artist. But today this turn will lack necessity. Why choose this rather than that object? Why choose anything at all? More than the art of the past, modern art is threatened by arbitrariness; and arbitrariness easily leads to boredom. The threat of boredom again leads to the pursuit of the novel and interesting. Today terms such as “interesting” and “boring” tend to replace terms such as “beautiful” and “ugly” as evaluative terms. Art comes to be understood increasingly as a diversion, a vacation from rather than a revelation of reality.

¹²² Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 13, p. 232.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

But if Hegel would have us interpret the unbearable lightness of so much recent art as part of humanity's coming of age, something in us resists this interpretation: perhaps an awareness that more is at stake here than just the fate of art. Hegel's thesis is based on a view of reality that in the end leaves no room for transcendence and genuine mystery. The question: is the loss of art in the traditional sense a serious loss? leads thus to another: is the loss of transcendence a serious loss? Can there be meaning without transcendence? If not, is this perhaps why we need art?

5. The Task of Art in the Age of the World Picture

1

In “The Age of the World Picture”¹²⁴ Heidegger, too, claims that the shape of our world leaves no very important task to art, where there is this decisive difference between him and both Hegel and Danto: Heidegger refuses to accept Hegel’s judgment that there can and should be no recovery of the significance that art once possessed. He is convinced of the opposite: we need art to challenge the hegemony of the modern world picture. We need to challenge that hegemony because it threatens to deny us our humanity. This gives art today a special significance.

But first we need to ask: what is it about this “age of the world picture” that is supposed to deny art a very significant role? And how adequate is Heidegger’s characterization of our modern world as “the age of the world picture”? How illuminating is the metaphor of the “picture” on which Heidegger here relies?

When Heidegger first gave the lecture “The Age of the World Picture” in 1938 it bore the title “The Foundation of the Modern World Picture by Metaphysics.” The original title invites us to compare the modern world picture with others, possessing presumably different foundations. Does not every age have its own world picture? Can we not ask for the world picture of the Middle Ages or of the ancient Greeks? “World picture” here means something like “world-view.”

The revised title, however, claims something else, claims that the very attempt to understand the world as a picture defines our age in a special sense, hinting further at a connection between such definition and metaphysics. This suggests that, while we today may inquire into the world picture of the Middle Ages, the medievals would not have done so; they did not experience their world as a picture. Nor would they have inquired into the world picture of, say, the Romans. But why not? What is at stake?

¹²⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes, *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), pp. 75-113. Trans. William Lovitt, “The Age of the World Picture,” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper, 1977), pp. 115-154. All page references in this chapter are to this translation.

The word “picture” hints at a first answer.¹²⁵ We can look at pictures, stand before them. But we cannot enter or leave them, cannot live or dwell in them. Pictures may include representations of persons. As Alberti observes, a portrait allows the portrayed to live even after her death. But it is of course not real life that is granted by such pictures: in them we find not the person, but only a representation, a simulacrum. We cannot make love to the person in the picture. We cannot live in pictures. Pictures are not like buildings. They are uninhabitable.

This suggests what is at stake in the phrase: “The Age of the World Picture.” To the extent that we understand the world as a picture, confuse it, say, with what appears on our television screens, we stand before it, have lost our place in it. In such a world we all tend to become displaced persons. Such a displacement is indeed presupposed by science, which demands the transformation of the embodied self into a disembodied thinker and observer.¹²⁶ The scientist wants to understand what is as it is, bracketing for the sake of such objectivity himself and his place and engagement in the world. This desire to just see and understand caused already Thales to tumble into his well. Absent-mindedness characterizes the very origin of philosophy and science and is but the other side of that disinterested objectivity that we demand of all who lay claim to truth. A Cartesian thinking subject, which just happen to find itself in some particular body, in a particular place and time, will not allow such particularities to circumscribe its freedom, but will consider all givens material to be fashioned into a successful life. What need would such a subject still have for art? The progress of freedom and the pictorialization of reality belong together.

Pictures refer to what they represent. Buildings, on the other hand, need not represent anything. We live and work in them. They offer us both physical and spiritual shelter. What different expectations Heidegger’s essay would have invited had he called it instead “The Age of the World Building.” To understand the world in the image of a

¹²⁵ For a fuller discussion see Karsten Harries, “Weltbild und Welttheater: Staunen, Schauen, Wissen,” *Kunstammer, Laboratorium, Bühne: Schauplätze des Wissens im 17. Jahrhundert*, ed. Helmar Schramm, Ludger Schwarte, Jan Lazardzig (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2003), pp. 521-540.

¹²⁶ For a fuller discussion see Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

building, perhaps a house, invites thoughts of God as an architect, who created this world for us to enjoy and dwell in. Think of the cosmos of the *Timaeus*; or of the cosmos of the Middle Ages, a divine architecture that places human beings near the center. The world is understood here as a well ordered whole in which we all have our proper place and vocation. The task of the architect might then be to imitate, to the best of his ability, this divine model and thus to help us feel more at home in the world. Such work would not be a picture.

Not every representation is a picture. A stage set may represent some square without becoming therefore a picture. Could Heidegger have called his essay equally well “The Age of the World Theater”? That title would have led me to expect an essay on the Baroque. The Baroque did find in the theater a key metaphor to characterize the world into which individuals were born, in which they struggled, and eventually died, where we should keep in mind that “theater” is a contrast term: it presupposes the real world. In this respect it is like the word “dream,” which demands the contrast with waking reality — it loses its meaning when so totalized that everything is said to be a dream. That is why we cannot carry out the Cartesian thought experiment that would make all we experience but a dream. The same goes for the word “theater.” We cannot say that all reality is but theater. Once the theater becomes all embracing, it ceases to be theater. The Baroque “world-theater” presupposes thus the conviction that there is another world that we shall enter and witness when we step off that stage on which we are now actors. The Baroque theater sought to represent this world-theater. Such representation had a double function: 1) By transforming the world-theater into spectacle, it established a distance between the individual and that theater that allowed him or her to enjoy this spectacle as a spectator, to forget, at least for a time, that he or she was also an actor in this play; 2) by representing the theater of the world as theater, it invited thoughts of that true reality beyond our death. The Baroque theater is thus ruled by the uneasy conjunction of an at bottom still medieval conviction that art should open us to what transcends and illuminates our life-world and an already modern understanding of art as an aesthetic object that in time lifts the burden of time.

I suggested that the Baroque especially invites characterization as the age of the world-theater. Here is not the place to show how the metaphor of the theater then

informed all aspects of life: we still speak of theaters of war, of anatomical theaters. And if the theater then informed all of life, it also informed all the arts, especially architecture, and here again especially religious architecture.¹²⁷ Countless churches were thus built in the image of a theater, where “theater” refers first of all to a building in which actors perform for an audience. “Theater” may of course also refer to the performance.

When we speak of the theater of the Baroque, we should keep in mind that this theater was the product of a profound transformation of the theater: in the Baroque the theater, and not just the theater, but also architecture, came increasingly under the hegemony of the picture. Understood as the age of the world-theater the Baroque period may indeed be understood as transitional, having its place between the medieval age of the world building and the modern age of the world picture. But we should be more precise: the Baroque theater and also architecture come not just under the hegemony of the picture, but the picture ruled by what came to be called *perspectiva artificialis*. Alberti’s *On Painting* helped inaugurate the rule of the picture so understood by teaching how to use a mathematical form of representation to create convincing representations of what appears as it appears, given a particular point of view. Such painting represents not the objects themselves, but inevitably perspective-bound appearances. These appearances have their measure in the perceiving eye. Here it is important to keep in mind the artificiality of such representation, the violence it does to the way we actually experience things. To put geometry in the service of his construction, Alberti thus assumes monocular vision at one single moment and a flat earth. Given these assumptions, it is easy to come up with a proof of the correctness of Alberti’s construction. Important here is this: for the sake of achieving a certain mastery of appearances, the perspectival art of Alberti subjects what it presents to a human measure that has itself been subjected to the demand for ease of representation. Artful pictorial illusion invites us to mistake it for reality and to forget its merely artificial being. Artifice substitutes unchanging simulacra for an ever-changing reality, as the artist usurps the place of God, substituting for God’s creation his own. We have crossed the threshold that separates anthropocentric modernity from the theocentric Middle Ages. That Alberti

¹²⁷ See Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

himself had already crossed that threshold is shown by his rejection of the use of gold in painting. To understand what is at issue we should consider the metaphorical power of the gold background that was introduced into Western painting just before 1000: it helps to establish the timeless significance of representations drawn from the mundane, inviting us to look at what we see from a "spiritual perspective."¹²⁸ Alberti's perspective, on the other hand, invites us to look through the material painting as if it were transparent, a window through which we can see whatever the painter has chosen to represent. But this is very much a human perspective, which has its center in the observer: what we see is appearance for us, is simulacrum. In this sense art can be said to open windows in the theater of the world, windows to illusions, to beautiful frozen fictions that promise to compensate us for what reality denies us. The spiritual perspective of medieval art would have us look through the painting in a very different sense: through the material thing to its spiritual significance. It would open windows in the theater of the world to what is believed to be true reality. Alberti's art is incompatible with this spiritual perspective. A God-centered art has given way to a subject-centered art. The turn to perspective here means a loss of transcendence, an embrace of illusion.

2

In the "Age of the World Picture" Heidegger was not thinking of Alberti. The person who is said to have inaugurated the "Age of the World Picture" is Descartes. But Cartesian method is anticipated by Alberti's perspectival method and involves an analogous loss of transcendence. Consider the way that for the sake of achieving a certain mastery of appearances, the perspectival art of Alberti subjects what it presents to a human measure that has itself been subjected to the demand for ease of representation. That latter demand is a presupposition of Alberti's embrace of mathematics. Similarly Cartesian method, for the sake of rendering us the masters and possessors of nature, subjects nature to a human measure that has itself been subjected to the demand for ease of comprehension. As the Albertian picture assumes an eye placed before and thus outside it, the Cartesian world picture assumes an "I" placed before and thus outside it.

¹²⁸ Friedrich Ohly, *Schriften zur mittelalterlichen Bedeutungsforschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977), pp. 15, 35-37.

The Cartesian *res cogitans* thus has no place in the world whose essence Descartes determines as *res extensa*. The subject had to fall out of the world so understood. Science knows nothing of such a thinking substance. All it can do is study brain processes and the like. That is to say, science as such knows nothing of persons deserving respect. As Wittgenstein says of the thinking subject in his *Tractatus*: “The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world.”¹²⁹

That Wittgenstein too should speak of a world picture should come as no surprise (2.19). But what matters here is not so much Alberti or Descartes, Heidegger or Wittgenstein, as a picture of the world that has to deny the subject a place in that world. That world picture is a presupposition of our science, of its demand for objectivity. It is of course easy to insist that this world picture may not be confused with our life-world. But the correctness of this observation should not lead us to forget the extent to which our life-world is being transformed by technology. And so are we, indeed doubly transformed: on one hand, in the image of the Cartesian *res cogitans*, human beings become ever more free, less bound to particular places, which also means ever more mobile, rootless, and ghostly; on the other, since our bodies will not be elided, in the image of the Cartesian *res extensa*, human beings become ever more material, to be used and abused, manipulated and possessed as some subject sees fit. But such bifurcation does violence to our humanity. This helps to explain why we, especially the artists among us, today look almost desperately beyond the Cartesian world picture and the approach to art inaugurated by Alberti to the life-world, to practice and performance to incarnate the disembodied subject, allowing for a full self-affirmation.

I claimed that Alberti helped to inaugurate the age of the world picture, that his perspectival method foreshadows that of Descartes. Having said this, we must note the decisive difference between the picture Alberti had in mind and Heidegger’s world picture. The former is a work of art. It seeks to represent appearances in such a way that a whole is created that by its perfection, its apparent self-sufficiency, enralls us in a way that for a time lets us forget the real world. The work of art allows us a vacation from reality, provides for innocent pleasures that let us escape the cares and concerns that

¹²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.632. trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922).

bind us to reality. Alberti's *On Painting* can be said to have anticipated the self-sufficiency of the artwork that the aesthetic approach to art came to insist on. So understood, art turns its back on time, on reality, and on truth.

Heidegger's world picture does not turn its back on reality. Quite the opposite: it aims at a representation of the world that ideally would include everything that deserves to be called real. For that very reason, it invites us to mistake this picture of the world for the world itself. In the language of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: this world picture seeks to represent the world as it really is, "world" understood here as "everything that is the case," (1) or as "the totality of facts" (1.1). And it is not art, but science that promises a perspicuous and adequate picture of these facts. Newton can serve as an example.

6.341 Newtonian mechanics, for example, brings the description of the universe to a unified form. Let us imagine a white surface with irregular black spots. We now say: Whatever kind of picture these make I can always get as near as I like to its description, if I cover the surface with a sufficiently fine square network and now say of every square that it is white or black. In this way I shall have brought the description of the surface to a unified form. This form is arbitrary, because I could have applied with equal success a net with a triangular or a hexagonal mesh. It can happen that the description would have been simpler with the aid of a triangular mesh; that is to say, we might have described the surface more accurately with a triangular, and coarser, than with a the finer square mesh. Or vice versa, and so on. To the different networks correspond different systems of describing the world. Mechanics determine a form of description by saying: All propositions in the description of the world must be obtained in a given way from a number of given propositions — the mechanical axioms. It thus provides the bricks for the building of the edifice of science, and says: Whatever building thou wouldst erect, thou shalt construct it in some manner with these bricks and these alone.

Wittgenstein begins this passage with a pictorial metaphor — reality is pictured as a page bearing irregular black spots. Science covers this picture with a network and proceeds to represent the original picture by filling in the proper areas, where we should keep in mind what is sacrificed here for ease of representation: the irregularity of the black spots which stand for what disinterested, unprejudiced observation determines to be the case. By its very project science so understood tends to mistake reality for what it can represent. Our ability to comprehend things clearly and distinctly is made the measure of reality.

Wittgenstein thus elides the rift between reality and its scientific representation to which his own picture calls our attention when he identifies the world with the facts in logical

space (1.13), instead of being content with another, more modest formulation: the scientific world picture represents the facts in logical space (cf. 2.11). The same elision of reality haunts Heidegger's "Age of the World Picture": "When we think of a 'picture' we think first of all of a representation of something. Accordingly the world picture would be, so to speak, a picture of what is in its entirety. But 'world picture' says more. We mean by this term the world itself, what is in its entirety, as it measures and binds us" (p. 89). To the world so understood we, too, belong, for it is said to include all that is. The world picture thus transforms itself into something like a house, into a building: a building with no outside — perhaps a prison.

It is not surprising therefore that Wittgenstein should have begun the passage with a pictorial metaphor only to conclude it, quite in the spirit of Descartes, by likening the scientist to an architect. Wittgenstein's scientist is a builder who uses for his building-blocks thoughts or propositions. His architecture is accordingly invisible. And is such invisibility not demanded of any representation of reality as it is? Colors, indeed all secondary qualities, characterize appearances, not the reality that appears. To ask for the color of an electron is to ask the wrong sort of question. Instead of a pictorialization of reality, we can now speak of its objectification, which also means spiritualization.

Such objectification does violence to that reality in which we find ourselves first of all and most of the time: our first access to reality is always bound to particular perspectives, colored by our concerns and interests, mediated by particular activities that engage us. That is to say also, first of all and most of the time reality is given to us as meaningful. But as soon as we understand a perspective as such, in thought at least we are already beyond the limits it would impose. Such reflection on perspective and point of view leads inevitably to the idea of a subject that, free of all perspectives, understands things as they really are. This idea has to lead to an understanding of the reality that gives itself to the embodied self as the appearance of an objective reality that no eye can see, no sense can sense, that only a rational thinking can reconstruct.

I suggested that Heidegger's world picture has to transform itself into something like a world building. Not that it is therefore like the medieval cosmos. The modern world building is in no way like a house in which we can feel at home. That this should be so has its deepest foundation in the pursuit of truth that governs scientific world

building. Truth demands objectivity; and objectivity demands that we not allow our understanding to be clouded by our inevitably personal desires and interests. It wants just the facts. With good reason Wittgenstein can therefore say: “In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value — and if there were, it would be of no value” (6.41). If there is something that deserves to be called a value, it will not be found in the world so understood. To find it we have to step outside that world.

The age of the world picture has its foundation in metaphysics. Metaphysics claims to comprehend the being of all that is. But we cannot comprehend what is fleeting. Metaphysics thus tends to think being against time. And we cannot comprehend what cannot be analyzed into simple elements and pictured by joining these elements. In this sense we really understand something only to the extent that we can reconstitute it. This explains the perennial appeal of logical atomism. And this is why Descartes promises a practical philosophy that will allow us to understand nature as distinctly as a craftsman understands what he is able to make. Understanding here means know-how. No surprise therefore that Heidegger should claim that metaphysics culminates in technology. And this culmination has to carry the self-displacement that is a presupposition of metaphysics back into our life-world: that world comes to be experienced ever more decisively as a world in which neither gods, nor persons, nor values are to be found. Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger know that the modern world picture has no room for whatever it is that can make life meaningful. That must be sought outside the world so understood, outside “all happening and being so,” which cannot help, but be, as Wittgenstein put it, “accidental” (6.41).

But is this not to say that what makes life meaningful must be sought outside what this modern world understanding takes to be reality? And does not the work of art, which turns its back on that world in which accident rules to present us with a beautiful fiction in which everything is just as it should be, present us with such an outside? Some such view seems implied by Kant’s definition of the beautiful as the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction. All interest, Kant claims, binds us to reality. To call the aesthetic experience disinterested is to say that it turns its back on reality. The aesthetic

observer trades reality for beautiful illusion. Art offers us a refuge from reality. Nietzsche's saying comes to mind that we have art so as not to perish over the truth.

3

The very power over the world that science and technology have granted us presupposes an understanding of reality that, while it leaves art its beauty, yet cuts it off from reality. Heidegger, while recognizing that such an aesthetic, escapist art answers to the modern world, demanded more of art. It is no accident that in *Holzwege*, the collection of essays in which "The Age of the World Picture" first appeared, it is preceded by "The Origin of the Work of Art," a lecture first given in 1935.¹³⁰ As its "Epilogue" makes clear, Heidegger's essay calls Hegel's understanding of the end of art into question. But more fundamentally it is the Cartesian promise that our reason will render us the masters and possessors of nature and thus transform our earth into a genuine home that Heidegger wants to challenge. He cannot recognize in the so transformed earth what deserves to be called a home. Convinced that we moderns have to learn once again to "let the earth be an earth," something that neither technology nor science can teach us, Heidegger turns to art, in "The Origin of the Work of Art" especially to architecture, the art with which Hegel lets the spirit's progress begin. Heidegger returns to it here to suggest that the challenge of that beginning does not lie behind us, as Hegel had thought, but awaits us. If the progress of freedom would have us leave that origin behind, freedom degenerates into arbitrariness without something to bind it. The hope of the Enlightenment was that reason would provide that bond. Philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, not to mention the disasters of the twentieth century, have shattered such hope.

Heidegger knows how difficult it is to get around Hegel. Hegel, he grants, gives voice to and is supported by our modern world picture. As long as that picture remains

¹³⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), pp. 1-74. Trans. by Albert Hofstadter, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 17-87. The conjunction of "The Origin of the Work of Art" and "The Age of the World Picture" should have been preserved in the English editions of Heidegger's works: the two essays belong together.

unchallenged, it is impossible for us to grant to art the importance that it once possessed. If Hegel's judgment is not to be accepted as conclusive, it is necessary to show that the modern world picture is in important ways inadequate. But in what way? We know that Descartes' expectation that the new science would render us the masters and possessor of nature was more than an idle promise. As Baudrillard shows, today artifice threatens to embrace reality so completely that at moments it seems to all but vanish in the embrace, pushed to the peripheries of our modern culture, where we may still meet with vestiges of what once was "the desert of the real itself."¹³¹ Here our culture is said to still possess a periphery, and that means also an outside. But Baudrillard conjures up a world where image is no longer "the reflection a profound reality," no longer "masks and denatures a profound reality," no longer even "masks the absence of a profound reality," but instead "has no relation to any reality whatsoever" and "is its own pure simulacrum."¹³² We return to the elision of the rift between picture and reality that has to make the picture the new reality, an elision that is constitutive of Heidegger's world picture. Half fascinated, half appalled, Baudrillard envisions a world that seems to announce its coming in phenomena like the Mall of America, which offers us a second nature. To be sure, the thought of an image "that has no relation to any reality whatsoever: that is its own pure simulacrum" is finally as incoherent as the Cartesian thought experiment of a dream standing in no relation to any reality; and I only note that the world in which most of us actually live, love, suffer, and die, remains quite distant from such postmodern fantasies. But let me accept Baudrillard's dismal prophecy as another illuminating caricature and ask once more: what makes this caricature so disturbing? How are we to understand the nostalgia for a reality uncontaminated by simulacra, nostalgia that shows itself in the Mall of America again and again, in stores and restaurants that by their look, especially their choice of materials, are meant to evoke a very different time and place, in an Alpine stream, cascading through mock rock, in art shops specializing in kitschy representations of landscapes from which everything that might suggest technology has been banished, in travel agencies that with their posters call the visitor to the sand, water, and air of some

¹³¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1994), p. 1.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

pristine Caribbean island? Just how are we to understand the nostalgia that here is exploited and to which such simulacra answer?

What Baudrillard gestures towards with his phrase “the desert of the real itself,” a desert that we are said to encounter only on the periphery of our modern culture, Heidegger gestures towards with the word “earth,” into which, Heidegger claims, the work of the artist, and more especially of the builder, sets itself back and which it causes to come forth” (p. 46).

To claim that the artist, and more especially the architect, causes the earth to come forth is to claim that the artwork lets us understand what the earth is. And yet this is a very peculiar kind of understanding:

A stone presses downward and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness exerts an opposing pressure upon us it denies us any penetration into it. If we attempt such a penetration by breaking open the rock, it still does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been disclosed. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the same dull pressure and bulk of its fragments. If we try to lay hold of the stone's heaviness in another way, by placing the stone on a balance, we merely bring the heaviness into the form of a calculated weight. This perhaps very precise determination of the stone remains a number, but the weight's burden has escaped us. Color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wavelength, it is gone. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction.¹³³

The understanding of the earth granted by art challenges the kind of understanding that tries to lay hold of the stone's heaviness by measuring it, challenges thus the Cartesian conviction that it is clear and distinct reasoning that presents to us things as they are, a conviction that supports this age of the world picture. A work of architecture, such as a Greek temple, lets us understand matter, say the marble of which it is built, or the ground on which it rests, differently. As presented by the temple, the earth transcends what reason can comprehend. In this sense the work of architecture can be said to transcend what finds its place in the Cartesian world picture. The task of art in the age of the world picture would then be to tear open that picture. Perhaps I should say: to replace the subject-centered perspective of the world picture with a perspective that lets us see

¹³³ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," pp. 46-47.

through that picture to transcendence. I spoke of the spiritual perspective that ruled medieval art. What I have now in mind is analogous and yet profoundly different, for, as Heidegger's term "earth" suggests, transcendence is thought now as the transcendence of matter. Matter should not be reduced here to mute material that requires human work to be endowed with meaning, as Hegel would have it. It should not be thought in opposition to meaning, but rather as always already charged with meaning. What puts us in touch with this transcendence of the visible and sensible is first of all the body, where it is important to keep in mind that the embodied self is also an active, caring and desiring self. What such a self experiences is an always already meaningful configuration of things to be desired or avoided. Here we touch that ground to which we must be open if our thinking, speaking, and building is to matter. This is why in this age of the world picture we need art: to open windows to material transcendence.

Part Two: The Need for Art

6. Between Hope and Resignation

1

“Kant,” Clement Greenberg writes, “had bad taste and relatively meager experience of art, yet his capacity for abstraction enabled him, despite many gaffes, to establish in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* what is the most satisfactory basis for aesthetics we yet have. Kant asked how art in general worked.”¹³⁴ All these claims can be defended. Kant did have bad taste and little experience of art; and I agree that in his *Critique of Judgment* he did lay, almost incidentally, “the most satisfactory basis for aesthetics we have.” But aesthetics mattered to Kant first of all because it helped him gather his critical philosophy into a whole. And he was critical of art that by pursuing beauty just for beauty’s sake deflected human beings from their true vocation. He, too, demanded that art speak to and be worthy of our deepest interests. And yet, it was his determination of the beautiful as “object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction” that provided art for art’s sake with something like a telos, raising the question: just what human need is met by such a disinterested satisfaction? How are we to understand the often almost religious interest in modern art?

The very expression, “disinterested satisfaction” hints at an answer. We are interested in such a disinterested satisfaction precisely because we find ourselves burdened by our interests and that means also by life, by reality. Hegel knew about the seductive power of beauty “to kill time in entertaining fashion.”¹³⁵ Not that he, any more than Kant, thought the pursuit of such beauty compatible with art in its highest sense. Art content with this pursuit is said to betray the very essence of art. But Hegel’s remark also suggests that the dream of an art serving only beauty is the dream of an art

¹³⁴ Clement Greenberg, “Review of *Piero della Francesca* and *The Arch of Constantine*, both by Bernard Berenson,” *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), vol. 3, p. 249.

¹³⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik, Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1937), vols. 12 – 14. vol. 12, p. 22; *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. and intro. Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 5. “Time” here translates *Müßigkeit*: time not taken up by work.

strong enough to kill time. Kant's determination of the beautiful as the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction implies such power. With that formulation he, too, following Plato, thinks beauty against time, for interest is always future-directed, binds us thus into time. As interested beings we care about what will be. Such care is inseparable from our sense of reality. To kill time thus inevitably means also to lose reality.

Someone who is truly disinterested lives in the present. And just because the aesthetic object presents itself to us as a plenitude that absorbs our interests as blotting paper absorbs ink, it lets us exist in the present and forget the tyranny of time. In a world that all too often weighs on us, beauty thus promises something like redemption.

Does not that nature of which we are a part and to which our desires bind us deny us what we most deeply desire? Do we not long for an escape from nature, long to leave all interest behind and to be allowed to exist in the present? Only such longing lets us understand why Kant's discussion of beauty should have presided over modern art.

Schopenhauer made the promise of redemption buried in the Kantian understanding of the beautiful as object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction explicit, transmitting it to a world that was no longer able to take seriously the old faith's promise of redemption.

Redemption now means deliverance from the desires that bind us into the world:

Raised by the power of mind, we relinquish the ordinary way of considering things, and ... devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building or anything else. We lose ourselves entirely in the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceived from the perception, but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception.¹³⁶

Art seems to lift the burden of our temporal existence. "We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still."¹³⁷ And so Schopenhauer, like Hegel, praises "those admirable Dutchmen who directed such purely objective perception to the most insignificant objects, and set up a lasting monument of their

¹³⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1968), vol. 1, pp. 178-179.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

objectivity and spiritual peace in paintings of *still life*."138 Schopenhauer italicizes still life: life bought to a standstill. The moment here appears to conquer fleeting time. With this we touch the very heart of what I have called the aesthetic approach. As Arnold Hauser is right to claim, "The theoretical foundations of modern aestheticism as the philosophy of the absolutely passive, contemplative attitude to life can be traced back to Schopenhauer, who defines art as the deliverance from the will, as the sedative which brings the appetites and passions to silence."139 More than Kant, it is he who, by insisting on the importance of the issue of time for an understanding of art, helps us understand the place of art in our modern world. That Greenberg recognized the importance of this issue is suggested by his appropriation of Lessing's *Laocoon*, which opposed the visual arts as arts of space to arts of time such as music and poetry. The same is true of Michael Fried, whose enthusiastic celebration of an art of presentness revealed him as a committed modernist: "presentness is grace." In "Art and Objecthood" Fried understands modernist art as promising a secularized grace, where grace once again means deliverance from the terror of time. To experience such grace we have to experience the artwork as a plenitude that allows us to forget ourselves. Similarly Fried questions "Morris's claim that in the best new work the beholder is made aware that 'he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.'" Here, Fried suggests, "a presentment of endless, or indefinite, duration is made part of the aesthetic experience."140 To this conception he opposes the very different concerns of what he calls modernist painting or sculpture. "It is as though one's experience of [a modernist painting or sculpture] has no duration — not because one in fact experiences a picture by Noland and Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest... It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness: as though if one were infinitely more acute, a single

138 Ibid., p. 197.

139 Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, 4 vols., trans. Stanley Godman (New York: Vintage Books, n.d.), vol. 4, p. 181.

140 "Art and Objecthood." p. 144.

infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it."¹⁴¹ "Presentness is grace."

Are we ever granted such grace? Is what Fried here calls "presentness" more than an elusive idea that haunts us, but inevitably withdraws when we try to seize it? Time does not stand still in aesthetic experience. All that art can do is gesture towards such a standing still. Instead of effecting stillness it can only furnish semblances of stillness. Fried hints at this. Revealing is the way in which in the passages quoted above he retreats from the indicative to the subjunctive: "It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness: as though, if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything..."¹⁴² "If only one were infinitely more acute." If only there were a plenitude that would let the wheel of Ixion stand still. But of course the wheel of Ixion will not stand still. The dream of creating an art object self-sufficient and dense enough to absorb all of our attention, full enough to allow us to experience it in a way unclouded by meanings, by words, by absence, remains a dream. No art object can ever have the required plenitude and density. Meanings will always get in our way. The idea of presentness is itself such a meaning. The modernist works praised by Fried do not so much grant presentness as they signify it. Signifying presentness they mean a secularized grace.

2

If it is possible to understand the aesthetic approach in positive terms as a pursuit of a secularized grace, it can also be understood in negative terms as a protest against what our modern world accepts as reality. Art here attempts to hold on to what Hegel had considered art's highest function, recognizing its incompatibility with the world we live in. That view has gained strength ever since the early 19th century, when external reality came to be experienced increasingly as ever "more bereft of meaning and more soulless, because it has become more mechanical and self-sufficient." Society, once "the individual's natural milieu and only field of activity, has lost all significance, all value

¹⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 145-146.

¹⁴² "Art and Objecthood." p. 146.

from the point of view of his higher aims.”¹⁴³ Of today’s critics T. J. Clark is the most thoughtful representative of such a despairing understanding of the modernist project.

In his melancholic *Farewell to an Idea* Clark continues to demand that art possess a “focusing purpose” (pp. 8, 11).¹⁴⁴ But for him such a purpose can no longer be provided by God or by His philosophical stand-in, Hegel’s absolute. As already with Marx, the absolute has been brought down to earth. Clark’s ideal is a genuine community that yet would not require its members to surrender their freedom, where Clark cannot conceive of such a reconciliation except in terms of a socialist paradise. Capitalism is Clark’s “Satan” (p. 8).

At bottom Clark’s “Idea” is the central idea of the Enlightenment: humanity finally come of age, no longer enslaved by nature, history, and religion, guided only by reason, will take charge of its own destiny and build a truly free society. It is this idea that, in different guises, is said to have given modernism focus and direction. And it is this same idea to which his book, “written after the Fall of the Wall,” when the projects of both socialism and artistic modernism “had come to an end,” when “clearly something of socialism and modernism has died, in both cases deservedly,” bids a nostalgic farewell (p. 8).

Clark tempers his despair with hope when he concludes his study with the claim that “The present is purgatory, not a permanent travesty of heaven.” He refuses to let go of the quasi-religious “myth of socialism,” of the idea of ‘the political, economic, and social emancipation of the whole people, men and women, by the establishment of a democratic commonwealth in which the community shall own the land and capital collectively and use them for the good of all” (pp. 8-9). Clark knows about the many modernist artists who disagreed with or wanted to have nothing to do with socialism. He suggests that such opposition may have been because modernism “sensed socialism was its shadow — that it too was engaged in a desperate, and probably futile, struggle to imagine modernity otherwise” (p. 9). I agree with this. But I wonder whether the direction of such imagining is adequately understood as a response to Clark’s Satan. As

¹⁴³ Hauser, p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ All page references in this chapter are to T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

Kandinsky's "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" hints, much modernism had in mind a different sort of enemy. And it seems to me that we are not done with that enemy, who, as Heidegger argues in "The Age of the World Picture," cannot be identified with capitalism.

Like Danto, although hardly in his upbeat, cheerful manner, Clark, too, proclaims the death of modern art. In a way that invites comparison with Hegel's understanding of the death of art in its highest sense, art, according to Clark, dies because that "modernity" which modernism prophesied has triumphed so completely, rendering all hope for something other ever more utopian (p. 2). Clark finds a key to "modernity" in the way the past has lost its authority, and, he observes, "Without ancestor-worship, meaning is in short supply." Max Weber's phrase, borrowed from Schiller, "the disenchantment of the world," is said to "sum up this side of modernity best." This "disenchantment of the world is horrible, intolerable. Any mass movement or cult figure that promises a way out of it will be clung to like grim death. Better even fascism than technocracy: there is a social id in most of us that goes on being tempted by that proposition" (p. 7).

Instead of "disenchantment" Clark, too, speaks, somewhat unexpectedly, given his socialist perspective, of "secularization," which he takes to be "tied to, and propelled by, one central process; the accumulation of capital, and the spread of capitalist markets into more and more of the world and the texture of human dealings" (p. 7). Secularization refers first of all to the world's illegitimate appropriation of what belongs to God. But if capitalism is Clark's "Satan," who or what is his God? The idea of a genuinely free community? Clark's demonization of capitalism raises the question whether it is not elevated here into some sort of black golden calf.

I grant Clark that "the truly new, and disorienting, character of modernity is its seemingly being driven by merely material, statistical, tendential, 'economic' considerations" (p. 8). But, like Heidegger, I would not seek the origin of secularization so understood in capitalism, but rather in the totalizing objectification of reality that is a presupposition of our science and technology. Capitalism is no more closely related to this understanding of reality than socialism and any hope that the latter might undo the "disenchantment" of the world seems to me conceptually confused. What matters is that

this objectified reality not be identified with reality. As Kant knew, to recognize a single person as such is sufficient to know that reality transcends such objectification. Our reality is not so completely ruled by capitalism, I would say by science and technology, that we do not also know a quite different reality. It is to the service of this reality, of nature so understood, that I would call art. That today is its highest function.

But if unwilling to bid farewell to this idea, I am convinced that we must indeed say farewell to the idea Clark has in mind. That idea suggests that it is possible to overcome the tension between the modernist demand for freedom and the human need for placement in a world experienced as a meaningful order. As Theodor W. Adorno recognized, neither Kant's construct of a pure practical reason nor Hegel's construct of reason in history were able to resolve that tension.¹⁴⁵ Modernism is thus pulled away from the modern everyday in opposite directions: towards a freedom that refuses all placement, that revels in exhibiting the social construction of supposed givens meant to bind us and for the sake of freedom would leave even reason behind; and towards a recovery of some binding *arche*, some ground deeper than all artifice, more original than all social construction. In Chapter Four I discussed Hegel's, Kandinsky's, and Haftmann's suggestion that modern art finds itself in a centrifugal movement, torn between the call of freedom and what Baudrillard called "the desert of the real itself." Clark points to the attraction of the latter when he speaks of modernism's dream "of turning the sign back to a bedrock of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity which the to and fro of capitalism had all but destroyed" (pp. 9-10). I welcome his suggestion that "modernism is ultimately to be judged by the passion with which, at certain moments, it imagined what this new signing would be like." But is Clark right to claim that what artists such as Cézanne or the Cubists do "is only imagining, and fitful imagining at that — a desperate, marvellous shuttling between a fantasy of cold artifice and an answering one of immediacy and being-in-the-world. Modernism lacked the basis, social and epistemological, on which its two wishes might be reconciled. The counterfeit nature of its dream of freedom is written into the dream's realization" (p. 10). I question the "only." Does it really capture what goes on, say, in a Cézanne? I shall have to return to

¹⁴⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), pp. 211-294, 295-353.

this question. And while I agree that modernism is haunted by the two fantasies Clark mentions, I want to reiterate that there is no basis on which they might be reconciled: this tension is a condition of full humanity. Clark refusal to let go of the alienating idea of such a reconciliation makes his a rather romantic book.

3

Modernism, according to Clark turns on the impossibility of transcendence (p. 10). The word “transcendence” raises a question: we need to know just what is being transcended and how. Just because I agree with Clark that “modernism turns on” — although I would prefer “struggles with” — the — and I would want to add “perceived” — impossibility of transcendence, it seems to me important to inquire further into just what is being asserted. Could it be that the asserted impossibility rests on an inadequate ontology? Is there a sense in which art continues, not just to attempt, but to actually open windows to transcendence? Consider in this connection Clark’s wonderful description of some details of David’s *Death of Marat*: “A pen is a pen, a knife is a knife. Goose feathers catch the light like this, and their vanes grow separate and sticky with use just so. Blood on a bone handle looks one way, on steel another, in water a third. Matter is stubborn, or at least predictable, and goes on resisting the work of modernity” (p. 53). I would link such stubbornness to what I want to call “material transcendence.” Matter here transcends the space of modernity. This makes it possible for matter to resist modernity’s work and for art to make such resistance manifest.

The *Death of Marat* raises the question of the meaning of transcendence also in another way. According to Clark, Marat is special “because the idea of complete and concrete rendering in art is subtended here by a specific politics of transparency. And therefore given a hectic (inaugural) force. Virtue was what stood up to the light of day. Vice — the very existence of which explained why the revolution, of all things, met with resistance, sought the shadows” (p. 34). I agree with much that is being said here. But it does not yet capture what makes the painting so special, as Clark seems to grant, when he observes that “the true source of the Marat’s continuing hold on us” is tied to the way the painting enacts “a kind of representational deadlock,” produced by the way the empty upper half — according to Clark’s questionable interpretation “David’s instantiation of

‘People,’” embodying “the concept’s emptiness, so to speak” — refuses to remain a mere background, but turns strangely positive, more than a match for what is so legibly presented below, including Corday’s and Marat’s letters. “But the objects are writing. And up above them, ironizing or overshadowing them, is another kind of script: the endless, meaningless objectivity produced by paint not quite finding its object, symbolic or otherwise, and therefore making do with its own procedures” (pp. 47, 48). If paint here does not quite find its objects, words too fail to capture what yet speaks. Of this expanse of paint we can say what Clark says of Monet: immediacy here takes on metaphysical depth. In such cases, too, I would want to speak of transcendence. What is being transcended is the reach of our concepts and words. Is “meaningless” the right word here? Not only *The Death of Marat* allows such darkness to call into question the heroic exemplum it offers us. A similarly antithetical structure governs such paintings as David’s *Andromache Grieving Over the Dead Hector* or *The Oath of the Horatii*. And we find the same contrast at work in Canova’s cenotaph for Maria Christina (1805-1809) in Vienna’s Augustinerkirche. In all these works “the ideal is no longer sought in paradise, nor in a past golden age. Man dwells on earth, subject to the ravages of time, surrounded by an encompassing darkness that he does not understand and which is indifferent to his demands.”¹⁴⁶ Such antitheses invite invocation of the category of the sublime; also of the “tragic,” as understood by Nietzsche. To open oneself to this incomprehensible darkness, to the tragic so understood, is not to open oneself to what is simply meaningless. This darkness must be confronted, must even be appropriated, if a full self-affirmation is to be possible.

Clark might well say of such artistic re-presentations of darkness what he says of contingency in early twentieth century art, that darkness is here fetishized and “invested with sinister glamour. Modernism, ... is always part rearguard action against the truths it has stumbled on” (pp. 34-35). I would say rather: is often an attempt to step out of the shadow cast by Schopenhauerian pessimism. And I would not want to say that such a

¹⁴⁶ Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art* (Evanston: Northwestern U. Press, 1968), p. 35. See Rudolf Zeitler, *Klassizismus und Utopia* (Stockholm: Alquist and Wiksell, 1954).

step is inevitably a rearguard action, a futile evasion of some truth modernism has supposedly discovered.

4

T. J. Clark finds the “focusing purpose” of modern art in the socialist dream of a community able to preserve the freedom of its members. There is tension in that dream, even as it answers to something we deeply desire: to be allowed to be truly ourselves, to speak and create what is truly our own, and yet to be joined to others. Totalitarianism sought to eliminate such tension by letting go of the former. By now National Socialism and Stalinism should have inoculated all of us against such solutions. Clark, at any rate, would seem to be protected against such temptation by his inability to “quite abandon the equation of Art with lyric,” “lyric” understood as

the illusion in an artwork of a singular voice or viewpoint, uninterrupted, absolute, laying claim to a world of its own, I mean those metaphors of agency, mastery, and self-centeredness that enforce our acceptance of the work as the expression of a single subject. This impulse is ineradicable, alas, however hard one strand of modernism may have worked, time after time, to undo or make fun of it. Lyric cannot be expunged by modernism, only repressed. Which is not to say that I have no sympathy with the wish to do the expunging. For lyric in our time is deeply ludicrous. The deep ludicrousness of lyric is Abstract Expressionism’s subject, to which it returns like a tongue to a loosening tooth. (p. 401)

But why should lyric, so understood, have become ludicrous just in our time? Should we hold Clark’s Satan, capitalism, responsible? How much space does our world give those who insist on a “singular voice,” given the way everything in that world is contaminated by “the all-consuming world of goods”? (p. 407) Does it not leave such an artist only the choice of remaining silent or of escaping to a world of his own invention? The turn to abstraction has one foundation in such a sentiment. But is that very sentiment not ludicrous, inviting interpretation as an expression of petty-bourgeois pathos, fed by the dream of a world or a work that is truly one’s own, a dream supported by the vain project of godlike autonomy?

No doubt, our world has been contaminated by capitalism. But were such contamination total, there would be no possibility of even recognizing, let alone of resisting it. Such resistance presupposes a conviction that there is a reality both older and newer than its contaminated image, that this reality remains available to us in some fashion as the ultimate ground of all meaning. And if such conviction is at all justified, there is no need to succumb to Clark's melancholy, at least if one is willing to let go of the dream of creating "a world of its own." Could the task of art not be to recall us to *the* world? Some such conviction would seem to be a presupposition of that Marxist aesthetics in whose orbit Clark still moves.

4

Marxist aesthetics reminds us that all art is socially conditioned. It is impossible for human beings to speak even a single word, to create even a single work, that is completely their own. But "conditioned" does not mean: "completely determined." There is such a thing as originality. Whenever we experience something as an expression of freedom, we experience it as transcending whatever explanations we might give of it. Such explanations may point to what helped shape the expression in question. But whatever this might be, it cannot provide us with the key to why an artwork took just this precise form and no other. From the very beginning Marxist aesthetics has thus been threatened by the reduction of what should be an open dialectic into a simplistic ideology, a threat implicit in all interpretation that wants to secure what is to be interpreted by assigning it a place in some conceptual space that must possess sufficient simplicity and closure to make this possible. So understood, all interpretation threatens to cover up what is most profoundly the artist's own.

Such a conceptual space is provided by the Marxist account of the dialectic of human life, which insists that "the basic structures of this life, which is regarded as the totality of human relations, depend upon economics, a term that embraces all man's efforts to master and exploit nature."¹⁴⁷ The art-historian or critic is given here a recipe that invites impatience with recalcitrant facts. Already Marx and Engels had to warn

¹⁴⁷ Henri Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*, trans. Helen Lane, intro. Frederic Jameson (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 24.

some of their followers against a reductive interpretation of the relationship of ideological superstructure to economic base. As Engels puts it in a letter to Heinz Starkenburg (Jan. 25, 1894): “Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary evolution, etc., is based on economic evolution. But they all react on each other, and also on the economic base. The economic situation is not the *cause*, it is not the sole *agent*, and all the rest merely a passive effect; rather there is a reciprocal effect stemming from economic necessity which ultimately is always the determining factor.”¹⁴⁸ But how much room does Engels’ “ultimately”¹⁴⁹ leave for a genuinely open dialectic. How much autonomy can there be, if “ultimately” economic necessity is always the determining factor? Although always rooted in and shaped by particular social situations, human beings transcend themselves as thus rooted, are able to project visions of what ought to be that call what is into question. But what grounds such projection? The answer cannot be: the prevailing economic conditions.

“In order to provide a firm foundation for the creative freedom of the esthetic subject” Henri Arvon in his *Marxist Esthetics* invokes the “celebrated ‘law of uneven development’.”¹⁵⁰ The fact that Greek art still challenges us today, despite the backwardness of the society that produced it, testifies thus to the way such art transcends and is ahead of its world.¹⁵¹ But just what allows some artists to be far ahead of the societies to which they belong? And how is such unevenness supposed to provide for the kind of openness that we need to safeguard artistic creativity? Discrepancies such as the one just mentioned are, to be sure, an invitation to pay more painstaking attention to the particular circumstances with which we are dealing. But Marx has too much confidence in the explanatory power of his model when he insists that “the difficulty consists only in

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁴⁹ “Ultimately” is the translation of “in letzter Instanz.” See Engels’ letter to J. Bloch of September 21/22, 1890: “. . . Nach materialistischer Geschichtsauffassung ist der in letzter Instanz bestimmende Moment in der Geschichte die Produktion und Reproduktion des wirklichen Lebens. Mehr hat weder Marx noch ich je behauptet.” This “in letzter Instanz” calls for careful analysis.

¹⁵⁰ Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*, p. 29.

¹⁵¹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), “Introduction,” p. 109.

the general formulation of these contradictions.” An increase in specificity does mean an increase in complexity, but it does not necessarily mean an increase in openness.

If Marxism has difficulty providing a convincing answer to the question: what allows an artist to be ahead of his time? even more challenging is the question Marx raises in the introduction to *The Critique of Political Economy*: “What makes art an eternal value despite its historicity?” Here, too, Marx was thinking especially of Greek art. In which he, like Winckelmann and Hegel before him, continued to see, in certain respects at least, a norm and unsurpassed model. How are we to understand the apparent contradiction between the specific historical factors determining the nature of Greek art and the permanent attraction that it holds for mankind despite all historical changes.¹⁵²

In the *Grundrisse* Marx discusses such unevenness very much in the spirit of Hegel.

In the case of the arts, it is well known that certain periods of their flowering are out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the material foundation, the skeletal structure as it were, of its organization. For example the Greeks compared to the moderns or also Shakespeare. It is even recognized that certain forms of art, e. g. the epic, can no longer be produced in their world epoch-making, classical stature as soon as the production of art, as such, begins; that is that certain significant forms within the realm of the arts are possible only at an undeveloped stage of artistic development.¹⁵³

Marx here suggests that, as art really comes into its own, it leaves behind such a “world epoch-making” art as the epic. He is close to claiming that the development of art, itself a function of the development of society, has to bring with it the death of art in what Hegel took to be its highest sense. That death is implied by a concern to produce art “as such.”

It is well known that Greek mythology is not only the arsenal of Greek art but also its foundation. Is the view of nature and of social relations on which the Greek imagination and hence Greek [mythology] is based possible with self-acting mule spindles and railways and locomotives and electrical telegraphs? What chance has Vulcan against Roberts&Co., Jupiter against the lightning rod, and Hermes against the Crédit Mobilier? All mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in the

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 110.

imagination and by the imagination; it therefore vanishes with the advent of real mastery over them.¹⁵⁴

The conclusion is inescapable: *to the extent* that the effort to master and exploit nature defines the human project, the progress of technology will inevitably mean the death of an art that has its foundation in mythology. The progress of art would then mean the liberation of art from this foundation, raising once more the question of what task still remains.

But why do we moderns continue to appreciate an art born of conditions we have long left behind? Marx appeals to the joy we experience when we observe children: “A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child’s naiveté, and must he not try to reproduce its truth at a higher stage? Does not the true character of each epoch come alive in the nature of its children? Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm?”¹⁵⁵ Why does Marx here call “the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding”? This is to suggest, in the tradition of Winckelmann, Schiller, and Hegel, that art will never again be as beautiful as it was in ancient Greece. Is human progress bought at the price of beauty?

Marx’s suggestion that the masterpieces of Greek art carry us back to the magic of our own childhood is hardly convincing. More promising is a suggestion made by Frederic Jameson: “It is scarcely surprising that out of the alienating structures of nineteenth and twentieth century capitalism we should look back with a (not necessarily unrevolutionary) nostalgia at such moments in which life, and form, are still relatively whole, and which seem at the same time to afford a glimpse into the nature of some future nonalienated existence as well.”¹⁵⁶ Such interpretation demands specification. Does it work equally well when we substitute for some Greek masterpiece art from some other period, say a sculpture by Gislebertus or a painting by Grünewald? But the general point seems defensible: what moves us in great art, both as memory and as promise, is the idea of a fuller humanity. If this is accepted, it becomes impossible to consider art simply

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 110

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁵⁶ Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*, p. xvii.

an expression of a particular historical situation. All great art transcends the limited circumstances that gave birth to it, reaches beyond any historical period. In such art something else finds expression: it testifies to the human power of self-transcendence that is but an expression of human freedom.

Just as the creator of every genuine work of art rises above the limited perspective of his social situation, so every genuine work of art not only expresses what is characteristic of the particular historical moment that gave rise to it, but the still unrealized human essence. The meaning of the great art of the past does not lie behind us as something that we are now done with, but ahead of us as an uncertain and still unfulfilled promise. Only an aesthetics that recognizes both, the artist's roots in a particular historical situation and his ability to transcend that situation, can do justice to art.

As Arvon interprets it, Marxism provides for both.

But the moment it is recognized that a true Marxist esthetics must be based first and foremost on the continual application of dialectics, that what is required is not enrolling it in the service of a reality that in the beginning is reduced to the dimension of the needs of one class, but rather deciphering the inherent meaning of this class within a totality made up of its past, present, and future experience, this esthetics leads to a socialist humanism whose supreme rules are the passionate search for the very essence of humanity and for human wholeness against all the dislocations and pitfalls of history.¹⁵⁷

With its recognition of the importance of the future, such a socialist humanism is indeed able to provide for all the openness one could possibly desire. But what has happened to the scientific aspirations of Marxism? This would seem to be a Marxism that has left science, perhaps Marx behind. According to Arvon art should be understood “as a symbolic projection that bares the future and thus reveals the creative powers of mankind.” The artist here becomes a seer, who offers “in his work a vision of the future possibilities inherent in the world” and comforts us with “visions of a better future” and “dreams of freedom.”¹⁵⁸ Once again art is said to serve the truth, indeed — and here such a romantic Marxism and Hegel part ways — it is said to serve it in a pre-eminent way. This pre-eminence has its foundation in the fact that mankind, although driven by

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 28, 26, and 117.

premonitions of the totality of human life beyond all merely fragmentary realizations of its essence, possesses only a formal and abstract understanding of its goal; the full meaning of human being is glimpsed only darkly, through the glass of art.

Such an elevated view of art reclaims for art what Hegel considered its highest task. Hegel, as we have seen, had good reason to claim that art today can no longer serve that function and much in Marx suggests agreement with Hegel's understanding of art: our reflective technological culture cannot seek the locus of truth anywhere except in thought. Given the shape of our world, we can no longer take seriously the claims of the imagination and of art to be the custodians of truth. Arvon resists this conclusion. Instead he tries to show that, given the Marxist inversion of the Hegelian dialectic, Hegel's account of the development of art can be used to support the Marxist analysis of modern art:

If we stand the Hegelian dialectic 'on its head' and substitute social reality for the Hegelian Idea, this demonstration can serve equally well as an illustration of a fundamental concept of Marxist esthetics. Romanticism has become synonymous with the capitalist era whose internal contradictions cause the nature of reality to become completely accidental; since any comprehension of the overall mechanisms of human life therefore becomes impossible, artistic form no longer has any reference to any specific content. By stressing the dialectical relationship of form and content within a reality that is again comprehensible, Marxist esthetics safeguards art against a twofold danger: that of a naturalism in which content is shorn of form, and that of a formalism that gives up all concern for content in order to engage in all manner of experiments with pure form which then develops completely independently.¹⁵⁹

Marx, supposed to have made reality once again comprehensible, is said to have shown us how art can escape the trajectory on which it had been placed by Hegel, Kandinsky, Haftmann, and Barbara Rose.

Much here can be accepted. *If* capitalism can be said to have distorted reality in such a way that it is rendered meaningless and incomprehensible, it is easy to understand why artists burdened by that distortion should have rejected all idealizations of a reality that no longer deserved that name. By rescuing reality from such distortion, Marxism

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

could then be said to have put art back on the right track of an art that once more weds proper content to proper form.

But the argument moves too quickly. Hegel's claim that art has been overtaken by thought and reflection rests on his understanding of the conflict between the essence of truth and the essence of art: truth demands transparency, art mystery. According to Hegel, human beings will look to art and the imagination for truth only as long as they are incapable of knowing reality in more adequate ways, just as for Marx human beings will invoke gods to master reality only as long as they have not achieved genuine mastery. The claim of Marxists such as Clark, that our inability to give art its former significance is a consequence of the capitalist society in which we live and its distortion of reality, can be defended only if we accept the thesis that the reflective cast of our culture and the associated conceptions of truth, science, and technology belong to the superstructure of capitalism. But just this thesis I find unacceptable: they are rather a presupposition of capitalism and of any Marxism that lays claim to being scientific. Arvon's understanding of art as a poetic projection of the future would seem to require an ontology that is closer to Heidegger than to Marx or Hegel, perhaps the kind of ontology envisioned by the Marxist Heidegger student Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*.

5

According to the Bible, fallen humanity is haunted by dreams of what it has lost, dreams of paradise. But the Bible also teaches that we should resist the temptation to force open the gates of paradise. Our present condition condemns us to less than the plenitude we dream off. The possibility of a final redemption is held out only to those who accept the lack that now, in our present condition, helps to define our being, although throughout the history of Christianity there have been heresies that refused to accept this admonition. In Plato's *Symposium* we meet with a related account: in humorous terms, as befits a comic poet, Aristophanes there begins by describing an original state of mankind. Their spherical shape suggests the self-contained plenitude of these original human beings. And yet they must not have been altogether complete, for had they not felt something to be lacking, they would not have turned against the gods and dared to scale their abode, claiming this place for themselves. To punish this act of

hubris Zeus decides to split these proto-humans in two and warns us to behave in order to avoid a repetition of this punishment, which would leave us hopping on one leg.

In *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse places himself on the side of those who refuse to settle for the less than perfect condition that is now our lot, Freud on the side of Aristophanes, that is, on the side of those who admonish us to accept the loss of plenitude. Marcuse agrees with Freud that cultural progress and self-alienation have gone together. The human pursuit of pleasure collides inevitably with the world into which we have been cast. "The struggle for existence takes place in a world too poor for the satisfaction of human needs without constant restraint, renunciation, delay. In other words, whatever satisfaction is possible necessitates work, more or less painful arrangements and undertakings for the procurement of the means for satisfying needs." And civilization has never succeeded in equitably satisfying individual needs, to the extent that the prevailing conditions permitted this. "The various modes of domination (of man and nature) result in various historical forms of the reality principle."¹⁶⁰ In the modern world the reality principle has taken the form of the performance principle. "We designate it as the performance principle in order to emphasize that under its rule society is stratified according to the competitive economic performances of its members. It is clearly not the only historical reality principle: other modes of societal organization not merely prevailed in primitive cultures but also survived into the modern period."¹⁶¹

This implies that the rule of the performance principle is less than complete. "The full force of the pleasure principle not only survives in the unconscious but also affects in manifold ways the very reality which has superseded the pleasure principle. The return of the repressed makes up the tabooed and subterranean history of civilization."¹⁶² In our daydreams we thus allow free reign to the pleasure principle, where it is precisely the distance that separates these dreams from reality that allows the pleasure principle to go thus unrestrained. This marginalization of fantasy is demanded by the ruling reality principle. And yet it is fantasy that preserves the idea of paradise, the ideal of integral satisfaction associated with Aristophanes' circlemen, fantasy that

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 35, 37.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 16.

attends the reality principle like a shadow that again and again beckon us to take a step beyond it. That shadow gains a voice in art. Here what has no place in our reality, what had to be repressed for that world to take its form, continues to beckon us. “The artistic imagination shapes the ‘unconscious memory’ of the liberation that failed, of the promise that was betrayed. Under the rule of the performance principle, art opposes to institutionalized repression the ‘image of man as free subject’.”¹⁶³

But the potentially revolutionary potential of art is subverted by its institutionalization and by the establishment of the aesthetic sphere as an autonomous realm, removed from reality. “As aesthetic phenomenon, the critical function of art is self-defeating. The very commitment of art to form vitiates the negation of unfreedom in art. In order to be negated, unfreedom must be represented in the work of art with the semblance of reality. This element of semblance (show, *Schein*) necessarily subjects the represented reality to aesthetic standards and thus deprives it of its terror.”¹⁶⁴ By assigning to art its carefully limited place, by reducing its fundamentally erotic to a merely aesthetic significance, art's liberating and inevitably also destructive potential is controlled. Art is defanged, rendered harmless. Yet this defanged art remains haunted by fantasies that “aim at an ‘erotic reality’ where the life instincts would come to rest in fulfillment without repression.”¹⁶⁵ Again and again such fantasizing has led artists to be impatient with the marginalization of art that is inseparable from its institutionalization; again and again such trespassing has led to deliberate confrontations with established morality, where it is to be expected that the erotic sphere should be the privileged arena of such confrontation.

Freud came too close to identifying the ruling reality principle with reality as such to have supported such challenges to the establishment. Just this identification Marcuse would have us question, in agreement with Heidegger. If this is justified, it becomes easy to call for a liberation of art from its aesthetic prison, to take seriously the old understanding of art as a figure of paradise, of a paradise that should not be relegated to the no-man's land of utopia, but be taken seriously as a real possibility. So understood art

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 146.

will have an obvious political significance. Just because of this Marcuse's real hero is not Freud, nor for that matter Marx, certainly not Kant, but Schiller, who in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* recognized and took seriously the political potential of the aesthetic. Art communicates a truth that that modernity finds uncomfortable but nevertheless desperately needs.

Marcuse recognizes how readily the desire for integral satisfaction merges with what Freud calls the death instinct. Is Schopenhauer not right to point out that fundamentally we human beings are will and that this will is ever hungry? That is to say, is he not right to insist that our being is marked by a lack that cannot be cancelled without canceling human existence itself? Heidegger makes a related point when he argues that human being is constituted by forward-looking care. This, too, makes lack constitutive of human being. But if so, the very idea of an integral satisfaction is incompatible with life. To insist on it, despite that incompatibility, is to insist, as Schopenhauer did, that life overcome itself. If the overcoming of the lack that is so much part of our being is to mean something other than annihilation, it must be possible for human beings to escape from that lack Schopenhauer and Heidegger take to be constitutive of human being. Can we make sense of such an escape?

In answer Marcuse points to art — and with good reason. As we have seen, aesthetic experience has often been discussed in ways that suggested that in time it is able to lift the burden of time. But does aesthetic experience really overcome time? Is the escape from time that aesthetic experience is supposed to bring about not a fiction, an impossible ideal, towards which the aesthetic experience may gesture, but which it fails to realize? How successful then is the appeal to aesthetic experience in support of the claim that it is possible to make sense of the experience of an integral satisfaction?

That our modern reality rules out the kind of satisfaction he dreams of Marcuse knows. But does the ideal of integral satisfaction collide only with this particular version of the reality principle, or does it collide with the very essence of reality? Does the temporality of our existence, the victory of the past over every present and future, not finally rule out the kind of satisfaction demanded? According to Marcuse, it is a repressive establishment that supports such questioning: “The powers that be have a deep affinity to death; death is a token of unfreedom, of defeat. Theology and philosophy

today compete with each other in celebrating death as an existential category: perverting a biological fact into an ontological essence, they bestow transcendental blessing on the guilt of mankind which they help to perpetuate — they betray the promise of utopia.”¹⁶⁶

Marcuse does not identify the theologians and philosophers he has in mind.

Schopenhauer would be an obvious example, although it seems more likely that Marcuse was thinking above all of his former mentor, Martin Heidegger, who had not only made guilt and death constitutive of human being, but had also allied himself in the most obvious way with the powers of repression.

But is Heidegger "perverting a biological fact into an ontological essence" when he understands human being as being unto death and links authentic being to the resolute anticipation of death? The incompatibility between Heidegger and Marcuse is indeed announced by the very title of Heidegger's main work: *Being and Time*. Reality, the title suggests, should not be thought in opposition to time, as philosophers ever since Plato have tended to do. Those who refuse to acknowledge how intimately reality and time are linked must become alienated from reality and finally from themselves. Schopenhauer thought such an understanding of reality impossible to reconcile with the ideal of integral satisfaction, of which he, too, could not let go. The recognition of this impossibility is at the heart of his pessimism. Marcuse is an optimist. His optimism demands that there be no final incompatibility between reality and the ideal of integral satisfaction. But does this not demand in turn an ontology that places being once more in opposition to time?

According to Marcuse the promise of utopia answers to "the tabooed aspirations of humanity." We carry within ourselves memories of "integral gratification, which is the absence of want and repression. As such it is the immediate identity of necessity and freedom."¹⁶⁷ But freedom will always war with necessity. First of all and most of the time we exist as we have not chosen to exist. Nor have we chosen to exist as vulnerable mortals. This much Marcuse grants.

The brute fact of death denies once and for all the reality of a non-repressive existence. For death is the final negativity of time, but 'joy wants eternity.' Timelessness is the ideal of pleasure. Time has no power over the id, the original domain of the pleasure principle.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 18.

But the ego, through which alone pleasure becomes real, is in its entirety subject to time. The mere anticipation of the inevitable end, present in every instant, introduces a repressive element into all libidinal relations and renders pleasure itself painful. This primary frustration in the instinctual structure of man becomes the inexhaustible source of all other frustrations — and of their social effectiveness. Man learns that "it cannot last anyway," that every pleasure is short, that for all finite beings the hour of their birth is the hour of their death — that it couldn't be otherwise.¹⁶⁸

That timelessness should be the ideal of pleasure is a long familiar claim. Marcuse himself invokes the *Symposium*, where Plato points out that human reality is constituted by a lack and by the longing to overcome that lack, i. e. by eros. If such longing is to find satisfaction it must be possible for us to escape destructive time. Eros demands eternity. This demand can be met only if human beings in an important sense do not belong to time. Plato thus maintained that the soul, while dragged into the sensible and changeable, yet in its essence belonged to unchanging being. Only when eros embraces logos does it gain access to this realm. In this Marcuse cannot follow Plato: Plato, he charges, denies the passions, the body. But how can we affirm the body without also affirming time and with it shit, decay, death? What sense can Marcuse make of the possibility of escaping destructive time? Something in us has to escape the tyranny of becoming, if his ideal of pleasure is not to prove just another empty dream. Marcuse appeals to that difficult to understand passage in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* where Freud suggests, that "Time has no power over the id, the original domain of the pleasure principle."¹⁶⁹ But does this appeal help us to make sense of the possibility of escaping destructive time? We should note how Marcuse here inverts the Platonic anthropology. The id takes the place of the soul. Eternity is sought not above, in the realm of the forms, but below in the depths of the unconscious. Any such inversion inevitably retains much of the original picture. Most importantly, both Plato and Marcuse subscribe to the ideal of integral satisfaction. If the hope for such satisfaction is to be more than illusory, reality, more specifically human reality, has to transcend the power of time. But if reality will not be divorced from time, Marcuse's dream of a transformation of reality that would allow for integral satisfaction will have to be considered utopian in a

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 231.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 231.

bad sense, as compounding rather than overcoming alienation. We would then be left with some version of that incompatibility of what we most deeply desire and reality on which Schopenhauer insists, and that would mean with some version of Schopenhauerian pessimism. That would mean also with some version of the aesthetic approach, which thinks beauty in opposition to time and, to the extent that reality is itself temporal, in opposition to reality, and would have art serve the pursuit of such beauty.

But could it be that what really alienates is not an understanding of reality that denies us integral satisfaction, but rather the very demand for integral satisfaction? That would demand that we take a step not only beyond the aesthetic approach, but also beyond any understanding of art as offering us an *Ersatz* paradise. To that idea we would have to bid farewell.

7. Art as Origin

1

It was with Hegel's thesis of the end of art and with Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art"¹⁷⁰ in mind that I chose the title *The End and Origin of Art*. In that essay Heidegger explicitly challenges the finality of Hegel's pronouncement.

The essay's title lets us expect an inquiry into how and when artworks come into being. But "origin," *Ursprung* also demands a different reading, as becomes clear when Heidegger asks: "But can art be an origin at all?" (p. 17) *Sprung* means "jump" or "leap," *Ursprung* a primordial leap. If the first reading invites us to look beyond works of art to the conditions that allow artists to arise and to flourish, the second invites us to look at something that happens in works of art: do we not demand originality of art? Does not every genuine work of art lead us beyond the familiar and expected? Is Heidegger then returning here to the time-honored understanding of the work of art as the original product of genius or inspiration?

Such questions take for granted that we know what art is. But has the development of art not called this into question? Heidegger dismisses such objections. Regardless of all we may happen to call "art" today, he assumes that he and his readers share an understanding of what deserves to be called "great art" — and only such art is said to be "under consideration" in the essay (p. 40). One thing the essay attempts to show is that our everyday existence presupposes this sort of origin or *Ursprung*. Such an assertion may well seem more than questionable. And how can Heidegger claim that our spiritual health demands that we regain access to that origin? Do we, as Heidegger insists, need art? Most of us would not seem to experience such a need. And this, Hegel could point out, is what we should expect, given the way we have entrusted our lives to the rule of reason. But does the fact that most of us feel no great need for art mean that there is no such need?

¹⁷⁰ All page references in this chapter are to Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). Much of the material in this chapter was first worked out in a seminar on Heidegger's essay I taught a number of times over the years, for the last time in the spring of 2008. I published my notes for that seminar as *Art Matters: A Critical Commentary on Heidegger's The Origin of the Work of Art* (New York: Springer, 2009).

This returns us to the question: what is art? We all agree that a painting by Van Gogh is a work of art. So is a sculpture by Michelangelo. This leads Heidegger to a first, seemingly obvious conclusion: whatever else works of art may be, they are things. As Frank Stella put it: "Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever he's doing. He is making a thing. All that should be taken for granted. If the painting were lean enough, accurate enough, or right enough, you would just be able to look at it."¹⁷¹

But is this really so obvious? In the case of a painting by Stella from the sixties it seems natural to identify the thing, the material object, with the work of art. But when I see the painting in a reproduction, am I not also encountering the work of art, if in a deficient mode? Just how important is what Heidegger calls the thingly quality of the work of art? Have Duchamp and Warhol not taught us what should have been evident all along: that this thingly quality is not essential? Danto underscores this lesson. So does much recent concept art. To be sure, in all these cases there is some thing that mediates the aesthetic experience, even if that experience leaves the mediating thing behind and renders it quite unimportant. And what case can be made for its importance? Kant already had called the importance of the thingly character of the work of art into question: for him the aesthetic object is in an important sense not a thing at all. And is he not supported by such arts as music or poetry? When we speak of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, are we speaking of a thing? If so, how is "thing" understood here? Can it be weighed or located in time and space? That can be said of some particular score and every performance takes place in space and time. But we would not want to identify either with the Fifth Symphony, which will continue to be when these are long gone.

To be sure, paintings are things, and for those of us who lack a sufficiently strong imagination, aesthetic experience depends on objects that present themselves to our senses. But does a pure aesthetic experience not surpass the material object and leave it behind? The thing, it would seem, is here like a gate that grants access to the beautiful forms that are the object of a purely aesthetic and that means for Kant a spiritual

¹⁷¹ "Questions to Stella and Judd," Interview with Bruce Glaser, edited by Lucy R. Lippard, *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 157 - 158.

understanding. A distinction between thing and aesthetic object is demanded by Kant's understanding of the disinterested character of aesthetic experience. Given such an understanding of art, the technical reproducibility of works of art should pose no threat to their art character. It only threatens those who would fetishize the thing in the work of art.

With his emphasis on the thing Heidegger calls such considerations into question. He, too, takes for granted that the work of art is more than just a mere thing. It seems obvious that an artwork is a thing that has been made and made to be appreciated as an aesthetic object. Artwork = (material) thing + (spiritual) aesthetic component. And isn't it the addition of this aesthetic component that makes something a work of art? But such an approach, Heidegger claims, obscures the nature of art, which stands in a different and more intimate relationship to things.

Heidegger's emphasis on the thingly character of the artwork challenges the way we tend to think about art. That Hegel should have visual art begin with architecture, turn then to sculpture, and finally to painting is significant: the evolution of art would seem to have been characterized by a progressive devaluation of the materiality of the artwork. When we return to the origin of art, and that for Hegel means to architecture, we do indeed meet with objects that make it impossible to separate artwork and thing. But the modern understanding of the artwork as an aesthetic object has left such an intimate association behind. Kant's understanding of beauty can be cited in support. So can Duchamp's desire "to get away from the physical aspect of painting."¹⁷² Challenging such a devaluation Heidegger reasserts the importance of the thingly element. Not that he fails to recognize that works of art manifest something other than the things they are: they thus invite interpretation as symbols and allegories. But Heidegger does insist that, if we are to experience a work of art as such, we must also experience it as a thing.

¹⁷² Marcel Duchamp, "Painting ... at the Service of the Mind," in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, comp. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 393-394.

2

What makes something a thing? — But what is the problem? Are things not all around us? To be sure, the word calls for clarification: “thing” may be used so broadly that it refers to anything that in any way can be said to be. Yet this all-embracing definition is unilluminating. Heidegger therefore turns to what we can call mere things. Their thingliness would seem to mean something rather like mute materiality. But why should that occupy us here? How are we to understand the concern, and not just by Heidegger, but by countless modern painters and sculptors, to recover the thing in the work of art? As an attempt to return art to its origin? This brings us back to the question: what is a thing? — a question that is as old as philosophy and helps to define its very origin.

Heidegger discusses three commonly given answers in some detail: each is supported by experience:

a. The first understands the thing as a bearer of properties: “This block of granite, for example, is a mere thing, It is hard, heavy, extended, bulky, shapeless, rough, colored, partly dull, partly shiny. We can take note of all these features of the stone. Thus we acknowledge its characteristics. But still, the traits signify something proper to the stone itself. They are its properties. The thing has them” (pp. 22-23). — But do we understand what we mean when we say this? In some sense we surely do. Heidegger can even call this the standard interpretation. And is this understanding of the thing as the bearer of properties not supported by the way we speak? “A simple propositional statement consists of the subject, ... and the predicate, in which the thing’s traits are stated of it” (pp. 23-24). But how are we to understand this strange mirror relation that joins language and reality?

Many philosophers today want to make language constitutive of things. Heidegger, too, has often been read in this way. In fact he calls such an approach into question:

What could be more obvious than that man transposes his propositional way of understanding things into the structure of the thing itself? Yet this view, seemingly critical yet actually rash and ill-considered, would have to explain first how such a transposition of propositional structure into the thing is supposed to be possible without the thing having already become visible. The question, which comes first and functions

as the standard, proposition structure or thing-structure, remains to this hour undecided.

It even remains doubtful whether in this form the question is at all decidable. (p. 24)

Responsible speech responds to things: they are its origin. But how is this response to be thought? Related is another question: must art, too, respond to things? Are things the origin of works of art to which they must ever again return? Is this perhaps the truth that supports the claim that art should be representational and interest in artworks as things? Is it the task of art to so re-present things that they come to speak to us of what matters?

Does this understanding of the thing as the bearer of properties capture what it means to be a thing? Take the proposition: "this rose is red." It translates a red rose into a conceptual framework. Does such translation preserve its thingly character? That there is a problem here is suggested by Descartes, when he discusses a piece of wax in the *Meditations* — Heidegger must have been thinking of that passage when describing his block of granite. Descartes notes how when heated all the properties of the wax change: "what remained of the taste is exhaled, the smell evaporates, the color alters, the figure is destroyed, the size increases, it becomes liquid, it heats, scarcely can one handle it, and when one strikes it, no sound is emitted." And yet, "the same wax remains." What is essential has been preserved. But where do we find that essence? "Certainly nothing remains excepting a certain extended thing which is flexible and movable."¹⁷³ But this thing, Descartes points out, cannot be seen or touched; it can be grasped only by the mind. The thing here has been volatilized, spiritualized, has been lost. And to the extent that our world has been shaped by a science and technology inaugurated by Cartesian metaphysics, this loss shadows our understanding of things. Can we undo that loss? Heidegger looks to art to help us towards a more original experience of the thingliness of the thing.

b. Consider once more a painting by Stella. Can we not surrender ourselves to its unmediated presencing and so experience the thing in the artwork? This would seem to be what Stella demanded: "If the painting were lean enough, accurate enough, or right enough, you would just be able to look at it. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all that I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea

¹⁷³ René Descartes, *Meditation II, The Philosophical Works*, trans. Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New York: Dover, 1955), vol. I, p. 154.

without confusion.”¹⁷⁴ Did Descartes not have good reason to suggest that whenever we look at something, the whole thing is present in what we see? This invites a second answer to the question: what is a thing? “The thing is the *aistheton*, that which is perceptible by sensations in the senses belonging to sensibility. Hence the concept later becomes a commonplace according to which a thing is nothing but the unity of the manifold of what is given in the senses.” (p. 25) But once again the thingliness of the thing proves elusive: what is it that gathers a throng of sensations into a whole? The key to the thingliness of the thing would seem to reside in whatever possesses this gathering power. But how is that to be understood? In what sense is that “whole idea” of which Stella speaks “seen”?

There is another difficulty: do we ever perceive “a throng of sensations, e. g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things”? “Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i. e., listen abstractly” (p. 26). The second thing-concept thus brings things so close to us as to make them vanish. We would do better to look at, say, a door. How does it present itself to us?

c. The third interpretation, too, is familiar. It understands the thing as formed matter. Artifacts, and especially works of art, have long been discussed in these terms. Indeed this interpretation of things as formed matter fits all humanly produced work so well that we have to wonder whether we have not illegitimately read the essence of what we are able to produce into the essence of things. We understand things to the extent that we know how to make them. Is it not this ability to make things that makes us godlike? Here it is the maker who gathers material into a whole. And is not God supposed to have created the world and us in his image? The interpretation of all things in the image of things we are able to make received thus powerful support from the Biblical interpretation of God as the master craftsman. That interpretation is part of our inheritance.

¹⁷⁴ "Questions to Stella and Judd," Interview with Bruce Glaser, ed. Lucy R. Lippard, *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 157-158.

Has this third paradigm brought us closer to the thingly character of the thing? Is it to doors and jugs and the like that we should look rather than to mere things such as rocks? Or does an understanding of things in the image of artifacts once again do violence to their thingliness?

3

This invites a closer look at such artifacts and so Heidegger continues his ontological detour, in apparently good phenomenological fashion, by wanting to “simply describe some equipment without any philosophical theory” (p. 32). He chooses a pair of peasant shoes.

Why not choose something that speaks more of the world in which most of us live? An airplane or a radio, today a computer, might serve the discussion better? Or perhaps a snow shovel like the one Duchamp chose as a readymade. To be sure, the example chosen by Heidegger was then timely: the critique of the metropolis and its rootless existence, the celebration of life in the provinces, were very much in the air and helped shape much art. Heidegger, too, liked to think of himself as someone out of place in metropolitan Berlin, at home with peasants, in the province.¹⁷⁵ In Van Gogh’s letters to his brother Theo he encountered a kindred soul: “When I say that I am a painter of peasants, that is indeed so and you will get a better idea from what follows that it is there that I feel in my element.”¹⁷⁶ So it is not surprising that to “facilitate the visual realization” Heidegger should have invoked a “well-known painting by Van Gogh” who, he reminds us, “painted such shoes several times,” as if to tell us how unimportant the particular work is, given the use to which it is to be put in this essay: to help us understand the being of equipment (p. 33). “From the painting we cannot even tell where these shoes stand. There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong — only an undefined space. There are not even clods of soil from the field or the field-path sticking to them, which would at least hint at their use” (p.33).

¹⁷⁵ Martin Heidegger, “Schöpferische Landschaft: Warum bleiben wir in der Provinz,” *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1984), pp. 9-13.

¹⁷⁶ Cited in Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans Geoff Bennington and Ian MacLeod (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 367-368.

Later Heidegger was to add that the painting does not allow us to determine “to whom they belong,”¹⁷⁷ calling his own subsequent discussion of the owner into question. We are struck by the contrast between how little the painting has to tell us about these shoes and how much the philosopher has to say about them.

But why this painting? Heidegger appears to have a ready answer: “We are so familiar with these things that we do not even need to produce the shoes. A picture will do.” We are indeed so familiar with such things as shoes that we hardly need a picture. In fact, instead of helping us to a better understanding of the being of equipment, the painting draws attention to itself and to the artist who created it in a way that threatens to derail the smooth progress of the philosophical discussion. — But perhaps such derailment is the point of Heidegger’s turn to Van Gogh’s shoes: do we have here perhaps a clue to the relationship in which art should stand to everyday life: to derail us in order to make the being of all too familiar things more visible by letting us see them as if for the first time? An observation by Kandinsky comes to mind: “On the average man, only impressions caused by familiar objects will be superficial. A first encounter with any phenomenon exercises immediately an impression on the soul. This is the experience of the child discovering the world; every object is new to him... [As we learn about things] the whole world becomes gradually disenchanted. The human being realizes that trees give shade, that horses run fast and automobiles still faster, that dogs bite, that the moon is distant, that the figure in the mirror is not real.”¹⁷⁸ Here it is the translation of what we experience into the space of the expected and taken for granted that renders things mute.

But once more: why did Heidegger choose this particular work? If an illustration of a pair of shoes was wanted, why choose a painting that draws attention first of all to itself, to the way this particular painter put paint on canvas, expressed himself in his use of paint? Why did Heidegger not choose a photograph showing some quite ordinary

¹⁷⁷ Added only in the Reclam edition of “The Origin of the Work of Art,” published in 1960. See Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), p. 18.

¹⁷⁸ Wassily Kandinsky, “The Effect of Color,” 1911, in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 153.

shoes, perhaps his own. Or better yet: why not just point to an actual pair of shoes? Why this artist and this painting? Was the audience sufficiently familiar with the work to visualize it? Did Heidegger bring in a reproduction to help his listeners? One would assume not. And somehow this does not seem necessary, might even have made them less attentive to what the philosopher had to say. Certainly in the essay this work of art, although referred to and discussed, remains strangely absent, somewhat in the way the thing remained absent from the philosophical interpretations considered earlier. But just by its absence the painting calls attention to the way all translation threatens to obscure what it translates, especially the translations offered by philosophers. We glimpse the abyss that separates words and things. And so it seems appropriate that the painting is not even clearly identified.¹⁷⁹

What does Heidegger “see” in the picture? A great deal. We may well think far too much:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. (p. 34)

One thing this suggests is that we do not do justice to equipment when we understand it only in terms of what Heidegger calls its “blank usefulness.” Such usefulness may give

¹⁷⁹ From Meyer Schapiro we learn that van Gogh painted such shoes eight times, three of which might be the painting Heidegger had in mind. To an inquiry by the art historian Heidegger responded that he had in mind a painting he saw in Amsterdam in March 1930. This allowed Schapiro to identify the owner of the shoes, at least to his own satisfaction: they are the artist's own, neither a woman's, nor a peasant's. Meyer Schapiro, “The Still Life as a Personal Object — a Note on Heidegger and Van Gogh,” in *The Reach of Mind*, ed. M. L. Simmel (New York: Springer, 1968), p. 206. Kockelmans and Derrida call this identification and Shapiro’s mode of argumentation into question. See Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Heidegger on Art and Art Works* Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1985), pp. 127-132, Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans Geoff Bennington and Ian MacLeod (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 257-382.

us the “impression that the origin of equipment lies in a mere fabricating that impresses a form upon some matter. Nevertheless in its genuinely equipmental being, equipment stems from a more distant source. Matter and form and their distinction have a deeper origin” (p. 35). And what is said here of equipment can also be said of the work of art: it too invites discussion as formed matter, but has a deeper origin. The origin of the work of art, to be sure, is not that of equipment. To understand, say, a pair of shoes we have to understand the activity these shoes serve and beyond that a way of life, the way they belong to their world.

Heidegger knows that his peasant woman’s way of life is not our own. Does our modern world still “assure to the earth the freedom of its steady thrust”? Has this earth not become mute material? And has not equipment too changed in this age of its mechanical production? Heidegger speaks of the wasting away of equipmentality in our modern world, its sinking into mere stuff. “In such wasting reliability vanishes.” (p. 35). Not that we should blame ourselves for such wasting and vanishing. Our world is no longer that of Heidegger’s peasant woman and who would want to trade our far greater freedom for her sense of belonging to a particular place? Still, a sense of loss shadows such progress. Into this age works of art like the painting by Van Gogh carry the trace of a world that has been lost.

While trying to understand the being of equipment, have we not learned something about art: that it has the power to recall us to what is essential, if often not attended to? “The equipmental quality of equipment was discovered. But how? Not by a description and explanation of a pair of shoes actually present; not by a report about the process of making shoes; and also not by the observation of the actual use of shoes occurring here and there; but only by bringing ourselves before Van Gogh's painting. This painting spoke. In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be” (p. 35). Not that Heidegger brought his audience literally before the painting. He only invited them to imagine a painting by Van Gogh showing a pair of shoes, to put themselves in the position of someone looking at the painting. To accept that invitation is to transport oneself out of the everyday. Entering thus the vicinity of art, we glimpse what Heidegger calls the “deeper origin” of the distinction between matter and form, as important to an understanding of art as to an understanding of the being of

things. To glimpse that deeper origin we have to attend to the way equipment belongs to the earth and has its place in a particular world, where both “earth” and “world” demand further discussion.

“We allowed a work to tell us what equipment is. By this means, almost clandestinely (*gleichsam unter der Hand*) it came to light what is at work in the work: the disclosure of the particular being in its being, the happening of truth” (p. 38). *Gleichsam unter der Hand*: with these words Heidegger likens his procedure to that of magician’s sleight of hand, his use of the painting to a trick that depends on the observer not noticing what goes on *unter der Hand*. But what did go on? A poetic reflection occasioned by a remembered painting substituted for phenomenological description. Heidegger’s claim that “It would be the worst self-deception to think that our description, as subjective action, had first depicted everything thus and then projected it into the painting” is difficult to accept. What Heidegger claims to have expressed here is not so much the painting as his experience or rather memory of the way the painting of the shoes revealed their being. In the Epilogue to the essay Heidegger himself wonders whether experience is not perhaps “the element in which art dies” (p. 79), inviting us to wonder whether Heidegger’s experience here does not let this particular painting die. If so this would be quite in keeping with Hegel’s thesis of the end of art: thought and reflection have indeed taken here their flight above fine art. But just by making the abyss that separates this work of art from the philosopher’s words so conspicuous, the essay calls us beyond what these words say to the absent painting.

Granting that Heidegger is substituting for the actual painting a remembered experience or dream of that painting, what kind of art is he dreaming of? He knows that the world of the peasant woman that the painting conjured up for him is a world to which neither he nor Van Gogh belong or could ever belong. The painting called Heidegger to a home not to be found in his or our world.

Heidegger claims that it is the painting that speaks to us. But what really speaks to us in this essay is a poetic meditation occasioned by the remembered painting. Doubly removed from the actual shoes, Heidegger’s words recall what he has to say about the rootlessness of Western thought that is said to begin with the translation of Greek words into Latin, “without a corresponding, equally authentic experience of what they say” (p.

23). Here, too, what is said is no longer supported by the original experience. That origin remains absent. But we can say this much: if only in thought, the remembered painting transported Heidegger out of his modern everyday into another, more archaic world, one that he considered more authentic, closer to the origin.

4

Where has this detour, first to the thing, then to a pair of shoes, then to the strangely absent painting by van Gogh gotten us? Our attempt to understand the work of art as a thing with something extra added that makes it into a work of art, as a made thing, an artifact, but with the specific purpose to be appreciated as an aesthetic object, has failed. We are left with the suggestion that to understand the thingly being of the work of art, we must begin, not with the thing, but with art.

“Art is real in the art work” (p. 39). But, Heidegger suggests, “Nothing can be discovered about the thingly aspect of the work so long as the pure self-subsistence of the work has not distinctly displayed itself.” How are we to understand “pure self-subsistence”: The formulation recalls a commonplace of aesthetics: in a successful work of art nothing can be left out or added without a loss of perfection. But is the self-subsistence claimed here for the work of art not another philosophical construct without an adequate basis in experience? “Yet is the work ever in itself accessible? To gain access to the work, it would be necessary to remove it from all relations to something other than itself, in order to let it stand on its own for itself alone.” Heidegger adds, in keeping with another commonplace of aesthetics: “the artist’s most peculiar intention already aims in this direction” (p. 40).

But is our experience of works of art not always mediated by some context or other, by their place in our world? Today we experience great works of art first of all in museums and exhibitions. Do we encounter the paintings or sculptures exhibited there in a way that does justice to their “pure self-subsistence”? Transported into the museum environment works of art are no longer the works they once were. “The Aegina sculptures in the Munich collection, Sophocles’ *Antigone* in the best critical edition, are, as the works they are, torn out of their own native sphere” (p. 40). Having lost their world, these works of art are no longer the works they were. Now they have their place

in the modern world and more especially in the modern art-world. The aesthetic approach to works of art with its insistence on the autonomy of art is very much part of this world.

There is tension between two claims Heidegger makes: following the tradition he speaks of the self-subsistence of works of art; at the same time he insists that they belong in a context, that they cease to be the works they were when this context is lost. But must we not then give up the first claim? Is it not essential for a work to stand in relations? (p. 41) Heidegger's response would seem to be in keeping with what the aesthetic approach demands: "The work belongs, as work, uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself. (p. 41). This is to claim that the successful work of art opens up its own proper context, is the origin of its own world. Heidegger's example is a Greek temple?

A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley. The building encloses the figure of the god, and in this concealment lets it stand out into the holy precinct through the open portico. By means of the temple, the god is present in the temple. This presence of the god is in itself the extension and delimitation of the precinct as a holy precinct. The temple and its precinct, however, do not fade away into the indefinite. It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. Only from this and in this expanse does the nation first return to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation. (pp. 41-42)

There are difficulties with this passage. Why choose a work whose world has perished? The shoes at least were painted by an artist whose world is still more or less familiar to us: we can understand his dissatisfaction with that world, the nostalgia for peasant-life. The temple would seem to remain even more profoundly absent from Heidegger's essay than Van Gogh's painting. Which temple is he describing? Does it even make to say of any Greek temple that it "first" establishes the Greek world? Surely those who built such temples were Greeks, already embedded in their distinctive world. If it makes any sense to say that such a temple "first" established the Greek world, that could only mean that it returned those who once worshipped there to their already familiar world, interpreting it in a way that let them encounter it in a new way and as if for the first time.

“World,” as Heidegger speaks of it here, names a space of intelligibility that determines a way of encountering persons and things. Think of the world of the Middle Ages; or the world of a baseball player. In this sense

A stone is worldless. Plant and animal likewise have no world; but they belong to the covert throng of a surrounding into which they are linked. The peasant woman, on the other hand, has a world because she dwells in the overtness of beings, of the things that are. Her equipment, in its reliability, gives to this world a necessity and nearness of its own. By the opening up of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits. In a world's worlding is gathered that spaciousness out of which the protective grace of the gods is granted or withheld. Even this doom of the god remaining absent is a way in which world worlds. (pp. 44-45)

But if the peasant woman “has a world,” that world was not established by Van Gogh’s painting. Hers was a world that changed little over the centuries. Art would seem to have had little to do with its establishment, although it is easy to imagine some village church helping to interpret that world for her. And even less does it make sense to say of our world that it was established by art. As Hegel argues, we have outgrown the world establishing power art once possessed.

I asked, which temple is Heidegger describing? But is this question even appropriate? His temple does not have its place here on earth, but in a spiritual realm. We can be more specific: Heidegger’s discussion refers us first of all not to Greece or Southern Italy, but to Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, where Hegel discusses architecture as humanity's first attempt to give external reality to the divine, and that for Hegel means inevitably also to the human spirit. In architecture not only art, but religion and all human dwelling here on earth is said to have its origin.

It is architecture that pioneers the way for the adequate realization of the God, and in this service bestows hard toil upon existing nature, in order to disentangle it from the jungle of finitude and the abortiveness of chance. By this means it levels a space for the God, gives form to his external surroundings, and builds him his temple as a fit place for concentration of spirit, and for its direction to the mind’s absolute objects. It raises an enclosure round the assembly of those gathered together, as a defense against the

threatening of the storm, against rain, the hurricane, and wild beasts, and reveals the will to assemble, although externally, yet in conformance with the principles of art.¹⁸⁰

Much of this is taken up by Heidegger's description of the Greek temple as establishing a world, but the Hegelian account has been radically rewritten. Most importantly: nothing in Hegel's description answers to what Heidegger points to when he insists that "The Work lets the earth be an earth" (p. 46). Hegel has a more oppositional understanding of art and especially of architecture: the temple's builders impose a spiritual, and that means for Hegel a truly human order on a recalcitrant material; human beings assert and celebrate their humanity in the face of an initially indifferent environment when they level the ground, break the stone, raise walls and columns: they defend themselves against nature, not only or even primarily against its physical threats — such defense is the task of more modest building — , but against its contingency. In this struggle they rely on and exhibit the power of the universal. That is why architecture is in its very essence not the work of isolated individuals, but of the spirit, and that means of the community: the spirit breaks down the walls that separate individuals.

Architecture, however, as we have seen, has purified the external world, and endowed it with symmetrical order and with affinity to mind; and the temple of God, the house of his community, stands ready. Into this temple, then, in the second place, the God enters in the lightning-flash of individuality which strikes and permeates the inert mass, while the infinite and no longer merely symmetrical form belonging to mind itself concentrates and gives to the corresponding bodily existence. This is the task of Sculpture.¹⁸¹

Hegel assigns the Greek temple its place in his story of the spirit's progress, a progress that has its telos in the human community's complete appropriation of the earth, an appropriation which has to break down the walls that separate persons, races, and regions, as it has to subject the earth to our will to power, has to reduce it to mere material for human work. That progress has to leave behind, first architecture, that "first pioneer on the highway toward the adequate realization of the Godhead," and finally all art, as the spirit discovers a far more complete mastery in science and technology than art can ever provide.

¹⁸⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 90-91.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 91

As the Epilogue to "The Origin of the Work of Art" makes clear, Heidegger calls Hegel's prognosis into question, where Heidegger knows that to do so he has to challenge the Cartesian promise that our spirit will render us the masters and possessors of nature. Heidegger calls for a very different attitude. He cannot recognize in a world that has reduced the earth to mere material for human construction a genuine home. And because he is convinced that we moderns have to learn once again to "let the earth be an earth," something that neither technology nor science can teach us, but only art, he returns in "The Origin of the Work of Art" to architecture as to the art with which Hegel lets the spirit's progress begin, but returns to it to suggest that the challenge of that origin does not lie behind us, as Hegel thought, but ahead of us and that to meet that challenge we first have to learn to "preserve" the earth as the origin of all world-establishing and that means of all art.

5

The Greek temple is to help us take a first step towards such preservation:

Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock's clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, though itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to light the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air. The steadfastness of the work contrasts with the surge of the surf, and its own repose brings out the raging of the sea. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are. The Greeks called this emerging and rising in itself and in all things *phusis*. It clears and illuminates also that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the earth. What this word says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere, or with the merely astronomical idea of a planet. Earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation. In the things that arise earth is present as the sheltering agent. (p. 42)

When Heidegger speaks here of the earth he calls attention both to the material of which the artwork is made and to the natural order to which we belong. But can something of the sort not be said of any artifact? It, too, belongs to the earth and is something made.

Such making presupposes suitable material. There is, however, this decisive difference: in the artwork the material does not “disappear into usefulness” (p. 44). Rather the artist presents the earth by preserving and revealing the material he is working with in its materiality: light as light, space as space, stone as stone, paint as paint, words as words. This distinguishes his work from that of the mere craftsman.

To be sure, the sculptor uses stone just as the mason uses it, in his own way. But he does not use it up. That happens in a certain way only where the work miscarries. To be sure, the painter also uses pigments, but in such a way that color is not used up but rather only now comes to shine forth. To be sure, the poet also uses the word — not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word. (pp. 47-48)

To paint a picture is, among other things, to re-present the paint. Thus re-presented the paint is revealed as what it is. Some modern artists have come close to reducing the function of art to such re-presentation: the painter tries to do nothing more than to make paint conspicuous as paint, canvas as canvas. How different such painting is from representational painting that uses paint and canvas as means of pictorial representation. Ideally such representation lets you forget the medium. In this sense it wants to deceive the eye — Alberti’s *On Painting* invites such an understanding of art: ideally the painting should be like a window through which we look at whatever the painter has chosen to represent. Such a representational art is not at all what Heidegger has in mind: the point of great art is precisely to block such easy passage and to return us to the earth.

8. Art and the Sacred

1

In his Epilogue to “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger claims that the truth of Hegel’s pronouncement that art in its highest sense has come to an end has not yet been decided. For the time being “the judgment remains in force. But for that very reason the question is necessary whether the truth the judgment declares is final and conclusive and what follows if it is.”¹⁸² That question is not answered by the fact that most of the art that people care about today, as measured, e. g., by sales of reproductions of works of art or by the art hanging in people’s homes, or by what people come to see in our galleries and museums, is art created after Hegel lectured on the death of art. For what do people care about when they care about art? They may be looking for something more soothing or beautiful than their everyday surroundings; or they want to be amused or entertained; or they want to be provoked, challenged, even shocked, at any rate experience something more interesting than their daily routines have to offer; or they want to keep up with the latest development in the art-world. But what does any of this have to do with what Hegel took it to be art’s “highest task”:

Fine art is not real art till it is in this sense free, and only achieves its highest task when it has taken its place in the same sphere with religion and philosophy, and has become simply a mode of revealing to consciousness and bringing to utterance the Divine Nature, the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind. It is in works of art that nations have deposited the profoundest intuitions and ideas of their hearts, and fine art is frequently the key — with many nations there is no other — to the understanding of their wisdom and their religion.¹⁸³

On this Hegel and Heidegger agree: in its essence art is tied to the sacred. And for both that means further that the distinction between art and great art must be drawn in terms of art’s relationship to truth. But does the establishment of truth today still require art?

¹⁸² Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 80.

¹⁸³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik, Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Hermann Glockner (Stuttgart: Fromann, 1937), vols. 12 – 14. vol. 12, p. 27; *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, ed. and intro. Michael Inwood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 9.

Hegel answered this question with a decisive no. He would have granted Heidegger that “The history of the nature of Western art corresponds to the change of the nature of truth,” granted him also that this change “is no more intelligible in terms of beauty taken for itself than it is in terms of experience,”¹⁸⁴ but he would have challenged Heidegger’s understanding of truth. Hegel, as we have seen, would have us understand history as the progress of truth and freedom. For him and his many followers there is no reason to follow Heidegger in understanding modernity as the age of the world picture and that means also as the age of nihilism. To do so would be to fail to recognize that science can rise beyond the understanding that is a presupposition of our science of nature: we no longer need art to tell us what most profoundly matters. We have reason, which today must take the place of both art and religion and give voice to “the deepest interests of humanity, and the most comprehensive truths of the mind.” “For, on the one hand, science, in the shape of the subservient understanding, submits to be used for finite purposes, and as an accidental means, and in that case is not self-determined, but determined by alien objects and relations, but, on the other hand, Science liberates itself from this service to rise in free independence to the attainment of truth, in which medium, free from all interference, it fulfills itself in conformity with its proper aims.”¹⁸⁵ But does a Science that refuses to allow itself to be determined by what Hegel here calls “alien objects” remain scientific? Must the attempt by “Science” to liberate itself from such service not lose itself in the clouds, as Aristophanes suspected. Must it not lead to thought losing touch with that earth which remains the source of all meaning? Like Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, Heidegger insists that reason is unable to “fulfill itself” as Hegel had confidently proclaimed, that the dream of such fulfillment is vain and can only lead to self-alienation. What Hegel understands as progress, Heidegger thus understands as an obscuring of the earth and with it of “the beautiful as belonging to the advent of truth.”¹⁸⁶

The beautiful does lie in form, but only because the forma once took its light from Being as the isness of what is. Being at that time made its advent as eidos. The idea fits itself

¹⁸⁴ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” p. 81.

¹⁸⁵ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 12, p. 27; *Introductory Lectures*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁶ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” p. 81.

into the morphe. The sunolon, the unitary whole of morphe and hule, namely the ergon, is in the manner of energiea. This mode of presence becomes the actualitas of the ens actu. The actualitas becomes realitas. Reality becomes objectivity. Objectivity becomes experience. In the way in which, for the world determined by the West, that which is, is as the real, there is concealed a peculiar confluence of beauty and truth.¹⁸⁷

“The Origin of the Work of Art” attempts to return us to what is concealed in complementary fashion by both, an understanding of reality as the totality of objects and of artworks as occasions for aesthetic experience.

What most fundamentally distinguishes Hegel and Heidegger here is their different understanding of reason, reality, and their relationship. Hegel takes reason and reality to be essentially commensurable. All that deserves to be called real is there for us to comprehend. And is not part of our modern understanding of reality such conviction that reality does not transcend our understanding? As T. J. Clark suggests, modernism turns on the impossibility of transcendence. Important here is Hegel’s insistence that reality not be reduced to those “alien objects” that concern the natural sciences: reason may not stop with nature so understood. While Descartes thus put humanity on the right track when he promised a method that would render us the masters and possessors of nature, reason can and must rise higher if human beings are to truly take charge of their destiny and become truly autonomous. Reason must take the place of religion. The marginalization of art is part of that progress.

Only a certain circle and grade of truth is capable of being represented in the medium of art. Such truth must have in its own nature the capacity to go forth into sensuous form and be adequate to itself therein, if it is to be a genuinely artistic content, as is the case with the gods of Greece. There is, however, a deeper form of truth, in which it is no longer so closely akin and so friendly to sense as to be adequately embraced and expressed by that medium. Of such a kind is the Christian conception of truth; and more especially the spirit of our modern world, or, to come closer, of our religion and our intellectual culture, reveals itself as beyond the stage at which art is the highest mode assumed by man’s consciousness of the absolute.¹⁸⁸

187 Ibid.

188 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, vol. 12, p. 30; *Introductory Lectures*, pp. 11-12.

Hegel here ties the marginalization of art, not to the rise of science and the objectification of nature it presupposes, but to “the Christian conception of truth, and more especially the spirit of our modern world,” which he takes to have come closer to understanding the “proper aims” of reason than the scientific conception. It is our religion, transformed now into the modernist faith in the power of reason to lead humanity to what it most deeply desires, that demands the marginalization of art. Is such faith justified? I shall have to return to this question. But regardless of what position we take here, we can agree that any insistence on a profound relationship between art and the sacred is in tension with the dominant tenor of today's intellectual, religious, and artistic life.

The history of Western art can thus be written as a history of the progressive emancipation of art from everything foreign to its essence. The first part of such a history might discuss the emancipation of art from religion; the second the emancipation of art from representation; the third the emancipation of art from the demand for all external meaning and content. In this connection it is worth noting that that remark by Frank Stella cited in the preceding chapter about wanting to create paintings that would allow one just to look at them was made in a discussion broadcast in 1964 as "New Nihilism or New Art?" Such painting is meant to convince us by its absorbing presence. Not meant to refer beyond itself, to be approached as either symbol or allegory, the work of art here is not supposed to say something. It can therefore be neither true nor false. But it is precisely this here explicitly renounced quality of pointing beyond itself that is inseparable from all sacred art. As suggested by the broadcast's title, a conception of art such as that endorsed on this occasion by Stella would seem to entail the divorce of art from the sacred. What matters now is that the art-object provide an occasion for an experience that we appreciate because it is what it is. Should we be troubled by such substitution of the artwork's absorbing presence for the sacred? That will depend on what we take to matter about art, indeed about anything, will be bound up with the concrete way in which we exist in the world.

2

Does this supposed exclusion of the sacred from art do justice to the evolution of modern art? Can we not say with just as much reason that modern art has reoccupied the

place of the sacred? How else are we to understand Fried's celebration of paintings by Noland and Olitski or sculptures by David Smith as transporting us by their presentness into a state of grace?¹⁸⁹ To be sure, presentness proves elusive. Time does not stand still in aesthetic experience. What Fried calls "presentness" is no more than an elusive idea that may haunt painters, but inevitably withdraws when they try to seize it. All art can do is gesture towards such a standing still. Fried hints at this. Significant is the way he retreats from the indicative to the subjunctive: "It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness*: as though, if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything..."¹⁹⁰ "If only one were infinitely more acute." This corresponds to Stella's wishful pronouncement: "If the painting were lean enough, we would be able just to look at it."¹⁹¹ But of course, it will never be lean enough, we will never be granted a completely innocent perception. The dream of creating an art object self-sufficient and dense enough to absorb all of our attention, full enough to allow us to experience it in a way unclouded by meanings, by words, by absence remains a dream. No art object can ever have the required plenitude and density. Meanings will always get in our way. The idea of presentness is itself such a meaning. The modernist works praised by Fried do not so much grant presentness as they signify it. Signifying presentness they mean a secularized grace.

In *Absorption and Theatricality* Fried touches on this theme of secularization and links it to the origin of what I have called the aesthetic approach when he says of Chardin that he "secularized the absorptive tradition — more accurately, it is in his genre paintings that the process of secularization begun in the previous century (chiefly in the Low Countries) and continued by Watteau and De Troy was brought to completion"; or when he quotes Diderot's description of his experience of a work by Henri Robert: "One

¹⁸⁹ See Chapter Six, Section One.

¹⁹⁰ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 146.

¹⁹¹ Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 158.

is no longer at the Salon or in a studio, but in a church beneath a vault."¹⁹² The place where the aesthetic experience takes place becomes a new church; aesthetic experience takes the place of religious devotion, beauty the place of the sacred. That is to say, the presentness and plenitude that modern art pursues continue to carry the aura of man's deepest concerns and hopes. Indeed it is only when we keep in mind the way absorption and presentness secularize traditional religious themes, the way they allow for a reoccupation of the place left vacant by the dead God, that we begin to understand what has supported the aesthetic approach: the continuing need for redemption from the terror of time, a need that once sought refuge in Christ who is said to have robbed death of its sting. The beauty of truly modernist painting, as Fried understands it, offers a semblance of such redemption.

Even the most minimal art, I pointed out, is not simply present, but gestures towards an ideal meaning. Precisely because it does, it calls for the interpreting word. That passionate interest so many have brought to minimal art cannot be divorced from an interest in its meaning. But what does presence matter? Is what is merely present not essentially meaningless? An answer to such questions is provided by Kasimir Malevich, whose decision in 1914 to place a black square on a white background and to present it as a painting constitutes one of the decisive acts in the history of modern painting. In explanation Malevich points out that he chose the square as the most abstract form and black and white as the most abstract colors. "Abstract" here means not only non-representational. It means free of all associations, feelings, emotions, interests that tie us to the world. "Abstract" thus radicalizes the Kantian "disinterested." The square is chosen because it has no physiognomy, because it is in this sense uninteresting and because of this more purely present. Interest stands in the way of presence.

But the question returns: why this fascination with presence? Why this attempt to get away from meaning? In his answer Malevich appeals to the conflict between human demands for meaning and the silence of the world. Again and again this conflict has led human beings to veil this silence with words, with the words of poets, with the words of philosophers, but especially with the words of religion. Today, Malevich suggests, these

¹⁹² Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 130.

words have shown themselves for what they are, human creations born of wishful thinking and, once recognized as such, unable to sustain us. The disintegration of the old value system has left us an oppressive silence. But that silence only remains oppressive as long as we demand meaning of the world. It is from this demand for meaning that Malevich wants to liberate us. He wants to convert us to an acceptance of the world as it presents itself to us. The pursuit of presence is to lead us beyond nihilism. To the traditional ideal of life as a vocation Malevich opposes thus his own ideal of what he calls a white mankind. The consciousness of this mankind is said to be "non-objective." We exist in this sense non-objectively when we no longer need objects, and precisely because of this have become free to let things be the things they are. This freedom to let things be is distinguished by him from the freedom to do what one wants to do. The latter Malevich finds questionable because it leaves us with the question: what are we to do? This question has no convincing answer.

It should be clear that what Malevich here calls freedom is indistinguishable from a spontaneity that has freed itself from deliberate doing. Malevich dreams of an existence no longer burdened by the demand for meaning. He knows that to pursue this dream, we have to take our leave from the familiar world. We must learn to let things be, to encounter them without asking anything of them, without trying to capture them in the net of our words and concepts. Yet we are so used to our world, so used to questions, to expecting answers, that we need to be transported by art into a stranger and cooler environment, into the white world of suprematism. The white square is to grant us an unmediated vision.

The simple white square is a limit of modern art that Malevich thinks, but does not try to mark with a particular work. His black on white compositions already represent a further step: the silence has been broken. Geometrical shapes announce their presence. And precisely because the black square and the black circle have so little meaning in the usual sense, they announce their presence more forcefully than do the more familiar things of the world, which, because we know where to place them, are easily overlooked and taken for granted. Because these things have a meaning, in this sense speak to us, their simple presence is obscured. Silence and presence belong together.

But once again we have to admit the force of Kant's observation that all art has a meaning and speaks to us of an intention. This art, too, strikes us as not just being, but as meant just to be. With good reason the art historian Werner Haftmann called Malevich's Black Square a "symbolic act," a "demonstration." Both terms suggest that the artist was not so much trying to paint a picture as to make a point. Malevich's *Black on White*, and the same is true of much recent art, is a theatrical gesture that refers us beyond itself, to the artist's intention, and perhaps this intention speaks to us more strongly in the case of Malevich's suprematist compositions than in much more traditional, say representational art. What is the meaning intended by Malevich? Malevich's self-interpretation provides us with an answer: his art is to silence all meaning, all words; it gestures towards whiteness, towards the void. His Black Square has nothing for its meaning. The following remark makes this quite clear:

But there is no icon on which the holy is a zero. The essence of God is zero salvation. In this essence lies as the same time salvation zero.... If the heroes and saints were to become aware that the salvation of the future is zero salvation, they would be confused by reality. The hero would let his sword drop and the prayers of the saint would die on his lips.

Malevich's suprematist compositions are icons that seek to establish zero as the holy. In a way that recalls Schopenhauer, they offer an illustration of what Nietzsche wrote in *The Genealogy of Morals*: "man would rather will *nothingness* than *not* will, —"¹⁹³

3

If those committed to aesthetic autonomy must welcome the divorce of art and religion, so must those convinced that their religion does not permit a too intimate link between the beautiful and the sacred. Protestantism may thus be said to have purified religion by distancing itself from art. Thus it was in terms of its greater inwardness and spirituality that Hegel understood the superiority of Christianity over Greek religion. Essentially the same position is defended today by the philosopher Louis Dupré:

¹⁹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III, 28, in *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 5, p. 412; trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, *On the Genealogy of Morals/ Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 163.

... religion became caught in its own aesthetic images. The Greek gods, at least as we know them through Homer and Hesiod, were conceived as human ideals. The more perfect they grew, the more they lost their meaning as religious symbols, that is, as finite appearances which reveal an infinite transcendence. Ultimately their perfect containment within finite forms, their aesthetic potential, killed the Greek gods. Their very conception demanded an aesthetic treatment, long before poets and sculptors made them into actual works of art. Once they received it, they turned into sculpture and literature, and died to religion altogether.¹⁹⁴

From the very beginning Christianity thus has struggled to keep its proper distance from art. Dupré grants that art loses much when it loses its connection with religion, but presumably not something that really belongs to it, and thus he, too, insists that once religion and art have come to be differentiated, it is essential that the difference between the two be preserved. On this view, it is not a degeneration of art that lets it sever its ties to religion. Both parties should welcome the divorce. If it is the very dynamism of religious transcendence that lets religion leave art behind, that same distance allows art to seize what is truly its own.

“Religious transcendence”: just what is being transcended here? Temporal reality? Reason? Especially when we add the attribute "infinite" to “transcendence” we run the risk of emptying it and also God of all meaning until in the end mysticism and atheism come to coincide. But must transcendence be thought in opposition to temporal reality, to sensuousness? The link of transcendence to both eternity and disembodied spirit invites questioning. Is this link essential to Christianity? Is it even compatible with it? This much seems certain: to the extent that spirit is privileged at the expense of sensuousness, eternity at the expense of time, it will be impossible to arrive at a full self-affirmation.

Characteristic of modernity is a splintering of the life-world into increasingly autonomous spheres, a splintering that means inevitably also the disintegration of individuals. Phrases such as "war is war," "business is business," "art for art's sake"

¹⁹⁴ Louis Dupré, *The Other Dimension. A Search for the Meaning of Religious Attitudes* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 169-170.

belong together.¹⁹⁵ One aspect of such splintering is insistence on the autonomy of art. The expression “aesthetic distance” is telling. And is not religious life today marked by a similar distance? It, too, would seem to have separated itself from the whole of life, a separation that may well seem demanded by the separation of church and state.

And yet, as Dupré also emphasizes in *The Other Dimension*, "it is equally obvious that religion cannot survive as a particular aspect of life." He thus links the importance of the sacred to its "unique power of integration."¹⁹⁶ But does this not suggest that to the extent that art sets itself up as an autonomous sphere, it has to be attacked by any genuinely religious person? This implies a more general claim: so understood, religion is incompatible with a way of life that scatters life into autonomous provinces, even, or perhaps especially, when one of these claims the title "religion." Given a commitment to an integrated way of life, one may well want to call the modern insistence on the autonomy of art false — false in the sense of doing violence to what life should be. Art for art's sake is linked to the individual's inability or unwillingness to affirm him- or herself in her entirety.

Does this then argue for the kind of understanding of art and religion Hegel and Heidegger associated with the Greeks, where we may also think of archaic religion? But must Christianity not distance itself from all such views? Should we not look to the spirit for the demanded integration, not to the sensuous? From its very beginning Biblical religion has thus been shadowed by iconoclasm. Think of Moses smashing the golden calf: Israel's God is invisible. Such attitudes carried over into the early Church. In this connection Arnold Hauser quotes Asterius of Amasia: “Do not make a picture of Christ; the humiliation of the Incarnation to which He submitted of his own free will and for our sake was sufficient for Him to endure — rather let us carry around in our soul the incorporeal world.”¹⁹⁷ There is no need here to rehearse the history of Christian iconoclasm. That the marriage of art and Christian faith should have been an uneasy one

¹⁹⁵ See Hermann Broch, "Der Zerfall der Werte," *Essays*, vol. II, *Erkennen und Handeln* (Zurich: Rhein, 1955), p. 42.

¹⁹⁶ Dupré, *The Other Dimension*, p. 18.

¹⁹⁷ Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, trans. Stanley Godman, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, n. d.), p. 138.

from the very beginning is to be expected, given Christianity's emphasis on the spirit, on the one invisible God, who suffered no other gods.

And yet: this God incarnated Himself and thus closed the gap between spirit and body. Must we understand the Incarnation with Asterius of Amasia as a humiliation? Should we not understand it rather as a mysterious necessity, demanded by both body and soul, sensuousness and spirit? And if so, should we not join those who appealed to the Incarnation to defend art, this human incarnation? But Christianity is the religion of the God who died on the cross. After that death, we should not expect God to show himself here on earth: he needs to be reborn within us, in the spirit. Modern Christianity thus has difficulty accepting the Incarnation, which confronts us with the paradox that Mary should be God's mother, daughter, and bride, just as it has difficulty granting more than an aesthetic significance to art. Thus many Christians today relegate the Incarnation, like art in its highest sense, to a past that lies behind us. Christianity has become the religion of the no longer visible, the dead God, the religion of a spiritual and increasingly empty transcendence.

We have inherited such suspicion of religious art. If we are no longer iconoclasts, this is because we have difficulty taking the religious function of art seriously. But must we not agree with Hegel and Dupré that "thought and reflection have" indeed "taken their flight above fine art"?

4

Dupré suggests that, the more perfect the images of the Greek gods grew as aesthetics objects, the more they lost "their meaning as religious symbols, that is, as finite appearances which reveal an infinite transcendence." I agree that the understanding of the work of art as an aesthetic object implies a loss of the aura of the sacred. I agree also that human beings finally find meaning only in what transcends their freedom. Freedom needs to be tied to responsibility if it is not to degenerate into increasingly arbitrary and pointless spontaneity. Such responsibility in turn presupposes an ability to respond to something that transcends freedom and yet has sufficient claim on us to bind freedom. But I cannot think such transcendence in opposition to world and time. A God who does not descend into the sensible cannot bind freedom. The Enlightenment turned to reason

for the necessary bond. But not only has God died; Hegel's confidence that reason can "rise in free independence to the attainment of truth, in which medium, free from all interference, it fulfills itself in conformity with its proper aims" has met with a similar fate. Responsibility demands a different sort of transcendence, where the very word, "transcendence," may blur what matters: I here call "transcendent" what eludes the grasp of our concepts and words. In that sense we transcend ourselves precisely as embodied, temporal beings, where, as Nietzsche recognized, the body should not be placed in opposition to soul. With Nietzsche's Zarathustra I would rather say that the self, which Zarathustra calls both "body" and "a great reason," transcends the spirit, our "little reason."¹⁹⁸ Heidegger's "earth" points in the same direction.

Self-transcendence may and indeed must also be understood in a very different sense. Think of Petrarch, who, led by curiosity to climb Mont Ventoux, discovers the power of the human soul to transcend the here and now, the limits imposed on it by the body and the senses, which inevitably tie us to a particular point of view and thus to a particular perspective. The mind is not so limited: vast as the expanse that Petrarch could survey from his mountain is, his soul leaps to what lies beyond the Alps, to Italy, to the Pyrenees, which are too far to be seen; and the soul leaps further still, beyond the present to past and future, and finally to God. The soul cannot be assigned a place as readily as can the body.¹⁹⁹ That same power of self-transcendence is presupposed by the mysticism of Meister Eckhart: "Yesterday as I sat yonder I said something that sounds incredible: 'Jerusalem is as near to my soul as this place is.' Indeed a point a thousand miles beyond Jerusalem is as near to my soul as my body is, and I am as sure of this as I am of being human, and it is easy to understand for learned priests. My soul is as young as the day it was created; yes, and much younger. I tell you, I should be ashamed if it

¹⁹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zarathustra, Erster Teil*, "Von den Verächtern des Leibes," *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, p. 139; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p.146.

¹⁹⁹ See Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 148-159.

were not younger tomorrow than it is today.”²⁰⁰ “Youth” here means proximity to the origin, where origin is thought as the infinite abyss of the Godhead that lies within us.

While I recognize the possibility and seductive power of such a return to this origin, I also fear its anarchic potential: the abyss of the infinite that opens up here within the self swallows whatever might distinguish God, the core of the soul, freedom, and nothing. God, once he has become so infinite, so indefinite, threatens to evaporate altogether. Such an empty transcendence cannot provide human beings with a measure and thus leads to a new experience of freedom. But freedom that acknowledges no measure must degenerate into caprice.

We therefore need to distinguish a material from a formal transcendence. In the first case what is transcended is precisely that linguistic or conceptual space in which things must find their place if they are to be understood and comprehended. "Material transcendence" points in the same direction as the Kantian "thing-in-itself," which is present to us only as appearance, and as Heidegger's "earth." What invites talk of a thing in itself is the fact that, even if constituted by our language or concepts and as such appearance, what thus appears is not created by our understanding, but given. Inseparable from our experience of what Heidegger calls the thingliness of things is a sense of this gift, an awareness that our understanding is finite, and that means also that the reach of our words is limited. Nothing real can ever be fully translated into words. Like Kant's "aesthetic idea," it is "inexponible."²⁰¹ More than our ordinary experience of things, the experience of the beautiful reveals the rift between thing and word, between reality and language, earth and world, a rift that can only be closed at the price of reality. Speaking that refuses to recognize this rift must degenerate into idle talk. Any philosophy that would take the place of religion is subject to such degeneration.

Language opens human beings to reality. Yet language conceals even as it reveals. Where this essential concealment is forgotten, language cannot but replace reality with a false, merely linguistic reality — and that holds also for religious reality.

²⁰⁰ *Meister Eckhart's Predigten*, ed. and trans. Josef Quint, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1936-1976), "Adolescens, tibi dico: surge!" 2: 305. *Meister Eckhart*, trans. Raymond B. Blakney (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 134. Translation changed.

²⁰¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, par. 49, A190/B193; ; trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Harper, 1951), p. 157.

This, to be sure, is challenged by Hegel's conviction that "Science" is able to liberate itself from its subservience to the given and rise "in free independence to the attainment of truth," fulfilling itself in conformity with its proper aims." Such liberation Hegel would have us understand as the fulfillment of the Christian promise. But those who are unable to make sense of such a homecoming, will want to insist that we cannot dispense with art, especially with art that does not rely just on words.

To be sure, human being is essentially a dwelling in language. But it is important not to let the house of language become a prison. Art, I have suggested, can, but as so much art today demonstrates, need not be, a way of opening the windows of that house. That goes also for poetry, which should not be understood as a speaking that is privileged in that it offers particularly effective descriptions of things, but rather as speaking that represents the essence of language in such a way that that essence becomes conspicuous and with it the rift between language and reality that is essential to language.²⁰²

In this sense material transcendence or Heidegger's earth are a necessary, but not sufficient condition for what may be called "sacred transcendence."²⁰³ What they lack is precisely that "unique power of integration" Dupré rightly takes to be a defining attribute of the sacred. Sacred transcendence is material transcendence experienced as possessing an integrating power.

As a first illustration consider the story of Jacob's ladder, which served to establish the traditional symbolism of the church as House of God and Gate of Heaven. Jacob came to "a certain place." Tired, he lay down to sleep, taking a stone for his pillow. And he dreamed

that there was a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached the heaven: and behold, the angels of the Lord were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac: the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread to the west and to

²⁰² Karsten Harries, "Poetry as Response. Heidegger's Step Beyond Aestheticism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 16, *Philosophy and the Arts* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 73 - 88.

²⁰³ See Louis Dupré, "The Sacred as a Particular Category of Transcendence," *Transcendent Selfhood. The Loss and Rediscovery of the Inner Life* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), pp. 19 - 22.

the east and to the north and to the south; and by your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you. Then Jacob awoke and said: "Surely the Lord is in this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. (*Genesis*, 28, 11 – 17, RSV)

A particular place is experienced as filled with the presence of the divine and that means here also as the integrating center of an ongoing, expanding community. Jacob responds to this experience by raising the stone that had served him for a pillow from a horizontal into a vertical position. Jacob's pillar is the archetype, not just of sacred architecture, but of sacred art: art understood as a re-presentation of material that even before it is taken up by some artist, "speaks," a re-presentation that understands itself as a response to divinity, to some higher, integrating power.²⁰⁴

This is how Heidegger understands the Greek temple's world establishing:

In setting up the work the holy is opened up as holy and god is invoked into the openness of his presence. Praise belongs to dedication as doing honor to the dignity and splendor of the god. Dignity and splendor are not properties beside and behind which the god, too, stands as something distinct, but it is rather in the dignity, in the splendor, that the god is present. In the reflected glory of this splendor there glows, i. e. there lightens itself what we called world (p. 44).

Splendor is understood here as the presence of the divine.

As we have seen, Heidegger links the world establishing of what he calls "great art" to an openness to what I have called material transcendence: setting up a world, the work is said to set forth the earth. Much art today struggles to keep human beings open to this elusive dimension. The recent turn to the abject to which I shall turn in Chapter Ten participates in this struggle. But "great art," as Heidegger understand it, demands more: the holy needs to be "opened up as holy," "the god needs to be invoked into the openness of his presence," if the work of art is to possess the integrative power needed to establish a world in Heidegger's sense. Heidegger's word for that power is splendor. — But what is such talk of the holy and god to us moderns?

²⁰⁴ For a fuller discussion of this passage see Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mas.: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 184-187.

5

I have distinguished material from sacred transcendence in terms of what Dupré calls the latter's "unique power of integration." But if that is accepted, must we not associate something like sacred transcendence, not just with the establishment of a world, but with what Heidegger calls the thingliness of the thing? We fail to do justice to that thingliness when we approach it just in terms of Heidegger's "earth." What such an approach misses is what philosophy inadequately grasps when it understands the thingliness of the thing as what gathers a throng of sensations into a whole. We have "long been accustomed to *understate* the nature of the thing" by representing it "as an unknown X to which perceptible properties are attached. From this point of view, everything *that already belongs to the gathering nature of this thing* does, of course, appear as something afterwards read into it."²⁰⁵ What is here called the "gathering nature of this thing" demands more careful consideration. How is it linked to beauty?

Any successful naming of the essence of things presupposes that these must already have touched human beings more immediately. To find the right words we have to experience how some thing or things belong together, have to respond to some gathering or integrating power. Think of perceiving a family resemblance. We often perceive such a resemblance without being in possession of the concept that would explain it. The perception of how a work of art fits together is not so very different. Plato thus understands beauty as a descent of the idea into the visible. In the visible we experience the idea's gathering power. Baumgarten might have spoken of a clear, but confused perception of perfection, Kant of an aesthetic judgment. Following the poet Hölderlin, Heidegger speaks a different language: the gods themselves have to let us speak.²⁰⁶ To name a god is to find a word for the ground of such a belonging-together of things. Heidegger therefore calls the divinities "the beckoning messengers of the

²⁰⁵ Martin Heidegger, "Bauen Wohnen Denken," *Vorträge und Aufsätze, Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2000), pp. 156-157; trans. "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 153

²⁰⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung," *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1981), p. 45.

godhead.”²⁰⁷ Once again following Hölderlin, he will also speak of angels. Artists and poets respond to their message and make it public. Such ability to hear binds the imagination. But every attempt to thus name the gods and to make public what remains incomprehensible in order to give human beings the measures they need to come together as a community does violence to what surpasses comprehension. Again and again we are in danger of replacing gods with golden calves.

What is such talk of gods and angels to us today? Would we not have been better served, had Heidegger listened more to Kant than to Hölderlin? Are we not talking here about the productive imagination as the ultimate ground of empirical concepts, where the German *Einbildungskraft* points to the gathering together of some manifold that Heidegger connects with the word “logos”? As Kant recognized, we cannot look for the ground of such gathering in either the subject or the object. It surpasses our understanding and it is therefore not surprising that we should grope for it with inadequate symbols.²⁰⁸ But if such a shift in language would move the discussion into more familiar territory, by appearing to locate the power of integration in the subject, it also threatens to obscure what Kant recognized: that the ground of such integration transcends subject and object and must be sought in the supersensible to which theory has no access. Heidegger's self-consciously poetic use of words underscores the elusiveness of the measure-granting ground of human dwelling.

“Mortals dwell in that they await the divinities as divinities. In hope they hold up to the divinities what is un hoped for. They wait for intimations of their coming and do not mistake the signs of their absence. They do not make their gods for themselves and do not worship idols. In the very depth of misfortune they wait for the weal that has been withdrawn.”²⁰⁹ But if we can only await the divinities and if they are yet necessary for an authentic dwelling, must such a dwelling not elude us, hoped for perhaps, but something that cannot be willed. Heidegger asks us to dwell in the knowledge of the absence of the godhead's messengers, to resist the temptation to dance around some golden calf, warns

²⁰⁷ “Bauen Wohnen Denken,” p. 151; trans. p. 150.

²⁰⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, “Introduction” and pars. 49, 57, und 59.

²⁰⁹ “Bauen Wohnen Denken,” p. 152; trans. p. 150.

us not to substitute idols for angels, measures we have made up for measures gained by interpreting the messages of the godhead's messengers.

But if Heidegger rejects idolatry, how, in the absence of divinities, is our modern dwelling to find measure and direction? His suggestion that we wait for what has been withdrawn hardly allows for the content necessary for authentic dwelling, renders the idea of such a dwelling utopian.

This much, however, has become clear: Heidegger opposes to our modern way of life a mode of existence that once gave human beings measure and ground in what we can call sacred order. Heidegger, too, would seem to dream of Greece and its gods. Or of that Catholic faith he lost and yet never quite left behind — otherwise how could he have said: "Only a god can still save us."²¹⁰ Why does he speak in the singular of *ein Gott*, rather than in the plural of gods? Key here is Heidegger's understanding of authenticity, which calls for self-integration. This is why the authentic life cannot finally be satisfied with a plurality of gods. As long as human beings hear only their voices, while God remains absent, dead, or mute, there is no escape from fragmentation and dispersal. Without God there can be no measure of the human being in its entirety. For Heidegger, too, purity of heart is to will one thing. This the gods deny. To will one thing is possible only in response to the claim made on us by one God. Only such a God can become the theme of an all embracing world, in which persons and things find their proper places, and thus allow for an interpretation of the totality of things as a cosmos.

Despite the terminology, we should not overlook how much separates such a view from the tradition. On the traditional view God created the human being in His image. This makes human being dependent on God. On the view outlined here human being in the world receives its measure in an ideal image of itself. To establish such an image and thus to give human being its measure is the task of art.

But how can human beings experience God as their measure, if they are given measures only through human work? Heidegger suggests that it is art that establishes God as God. But if God is to provide human existence with its integrating center, God

²¹⁰ "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," *Der Spiegel*, 31 May 1976, pp. 209. Trans. Lisa Harries, "Der Spiegel Interview with Martin Heidegger," *Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers*, ed. Günther Neske and Emil Kettering (New York: Paragon, 1990), p. 57.

must be more than just a poetic or an artistic fiction. Such fictions must be created in response to a power that issues from within, but also beyond human being, and gathers human being-in-the-world into a meaningful whole. Heidegger's understanding of art as an establishment of the world and of God as the hidden center or theme of the world are thus not really different. Without this center we have worlds, but no world.

9. The Golden Calf

1

With his emphasis on the thingliness of the work of art Heidegger seeks to preserve for the work of art that aura Walter Benjamin claims it has to lose in the age of its mechanical reproducibility. Benjamin, too, dreams of such preservation, even as he recognizes its incompatibility with the spirit presiding over the modern age. “The presence of the original” is said to be “the prerequisite of the concept of authenticity. Chemical analyses of the patina of a bronze can help to establish this, as does the proof that a given manuscript of the Middle Ages stems from an archive of the fifteenth century. The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical — and, of course, not only technical reproducibility.”²¹¹ Authenticity is destroyed by reproduction, where, thinking of such essentially reproducible artworks as woodcuts and engravings, we may well wonder whether, so understood, the concern for authenticity does not lose sight of the art character of art. Or should we distinguish modes of reproduction?

As the examples chosen by Benjamin suggest, authenticity is linked to the uniqueness of the work of art. Such uniqueness in turn is said to be “inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition.”²¹² In a way that invites comparison with Heidegger’s claim that the re-presentation of, say, a Greek temple sculpture in a modern museum lets that sculpture lose its world and with it the aura that once belonged to it, so reproduction is said by Benjamin to tear the artwork out of this context and thus to destroy its aura: “Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye. Uniqueness and permanence are closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal equality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction.”²¹³ Natural objects, too, threaten to lose

²¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 220.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 223.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

their special aura in the age of mechanical reproduction, which can be understood as one of the ways in which what I called objectification manifests itself. And are not even human beings today in danger of losing that special aura that distinguishes persons from their simulacra? Think of artificial hearts! Of cloning! What in principle distinguishes a person from a robot with a computer brain?

Benjamin recognizes the connection between an artwork's aura and the sacred and notes that "the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function." "We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual — first the magical, then the religious kind."²¹⁴ On this point Benjamin and Heidegger agree, although more optimistic — or should we say more nostalgic? — than Benjamin, Heidegger seeks to preserve that origin. But he, too, knows that the world of temple and statue has perished, that art has lost its basis in ritual, although, as Benjamin remarks, "This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty."²¹⁵ As we have seen, ever since the Enlightenment attempts have thus been made to understand works of art as vehicles of a secularized grace, where the artist steps into the role of the priest. But it has become difficult to take such priestly aspirations seriously. "To the extent to which the cult value of the painting is secularized, the ideas of its fundamental uniqueness lose distinctness. In the imagination of the beholder the uniqueness of the phenomena that hold sway in the cult image is more and more displaced by the empirical uniqueness of the creator or of the creative achievement."²¹⁶ Such uniqueness transcends the material work of art, takes its leave from the thing on which Heidegger placed so much weight. What matters about art now belongs to spirit, not to matter. The thing in the artwork becomes increasingly no more than an easily replaced occasion to display the artist's unique sensibility, passion, and engagement. Think once more of artists such as Duchamp or Warhol.

Benjamin, too, finds it difficult to let go of the artwork's special aura. What such words as "thingliness," "authenticity," and "aura" point to is not easily surrendered. In

²¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 223-224.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 224

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 244, footnote.

this connection Benjamin points to the collector, who, he suggests, “always retains some traces of the fetishist and who by owning the work of art, shares in its ritual power.”²¹⁷

We begin to understand what is at stake in the refusal to let go of the artwork’s aura: some sense that human well-being depends on ritual:

O bliss of the collector, bliss of the man of leisure! Of no one has less been expected, and no one has a greater sense of well-being than the man who has been able to carry on his disreputable existence in the mask of Spitzweg’s “Bookworm.” For inside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for the collector — and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be — ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.⁸

Owning artworks, like owning books, is to be in possession of the stones of which we build our spiritual home. Dwelling in such a home always has a ritual aspect. Think of the loving way a “real collector” handles a book. This helps to explain the collector’s special bliss.

But what does it matter that I own this particular material object, this rare edition, rather than some readily available and perhaps more authoritative critical edition of the same text? What does it matter that I own an original rather than a very good copy of some woodcut by Dürer? Why should I care about a painting’s provenance, its previous owners?

The acquisition of a book or a painting is a bit like a marriage, like, not just meeting, but choosing to live with another person, to make that person part of our lives. The aura some book or work of art possesses for the true collector is not unlike the aura of a person. It is indeed the person in the work of art, Benjamin suggests, that provides a last refuge to what remains of the cult value once possessed by works of art.

Photography offers an example. Here “exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is

²¹⁷ Ibid.

what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty.” And is there not a sense in which it is the human countenance of a painting by Pollock, which, while offering us no more than traces, nevertheless is experienced as a kind of self-portrait that here, too, offers what once was the cult value of painting a last refuge? We get here a hint that the cult value of certain objects is tied to the way they place us in an ongoing human context. The loss of aura means spiritual homelessness. The age of mechanical reproduction threatens the triumph of nihilism.

2

In Benjamin’s “real collector” we can recognize a modern and therefore deficient counterpart of what Heidegger calls the “preservers” of works of art, where such preservation is thought in terms that elide the distinction between work of art and cult object (p. 66).²¹⁸ There is tension between such an elision and the self-sufficiency of the aesthetic object insisted on by modern aesthetics, which would seem to render that context so important to Benjamin’s collector unimportant. Heidegger acknowledges what such talk of self-sufficiency has in mind. For him, too, the proper response to a genuine work of art is to let it be the work it is. Such a letting be is demanded by what Kant called the disinterested character of aesthetic beholding, which leaves behind the everyday with its interests and cares, as it trades reality for beautiful illusion. In this sense the beautiful displaces us. Much of this Heidegger appropriates:

To submit to this displacement means to transform our accustomed ties to world and to earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work. Only the restraint of this staying lets what is created be the work that it is. This letting the work be a work we call the preserving of the work. It is only for such preserving that the work yields itself in its createdness as actual, i. e., now: present in the manner of a work. (p. 66)

As it stands, this passage can be read as just restating what aesthetics has often insisted on: that the aesthetic observer take leave from the everyday world to become absorbed in the world established by the work of art. But, as Heidegger’s Greek temple shows, the

²¹⁸ All page references in this chapter are to Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

world such a work establishes, is thought by him as a world that assigns a place to the whole human being as member of a community. Such work lets human beings dwell. To preserve such a work is to allow it to determine the ethos governing our life. Art here possesses an ethical and a political function.

In this sense Benjamin's collector is no preserver: the works he collects do not establish for him a world in Heidegger's sense, i. e. a public space in which he could dwell, a cosmos. He gains his sense of well-being by precariously working at the construction of a private world for himself, using for his material fragments still haunted by lives and worlds that, close as they may be to him, have nevertheless perished. And the author of "The Origin of the Work of Art" appears himself rather like such a collector in his loving and nostalgic appropriation of the great art of the past. But he, too, is unable to preserve the Aegina sculptures, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Paestum's temples, or Bamberg cathedral.

But in "The Origin of the Work of Art" Heidegger dreams, like so many of his contemporaries, of an art able to reveal to human beings what needs to be done and thus able to gather them, even in this modern age, once more into a genuine community. Art here is politicized. Heidegger shared this dream of an art that would regain a genuinely political significance with Benjamin, who, however, looked to communism, not to Hitler.²¹⁹ And to my formulation that Heidegger politicized art Benjamin might have responded that this puts the matter the wrong way around, that, like a Fascist such as Marinetti, Heidegger aestheticized politics. At issue in these two formulations is what comes first: politics or art — where Heidegger no doubt would reply that this simple opposition, and thus the reversal of the formulation, does justice neither to politics nor to art, as is hinted by the word "aestheticized," which for Heidegger has to suggest a deficient understanding of art.

²¹⁹ "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 242.

3

Heidegger claims that it is in the very nature of great art to be an origin, a beginning: “Whenever art happens — that is whenever there is a beginning — a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again. History means here not the sequence in time of events of whatever sort, however important. History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task as entrance into that people’s endowment (p. 77). Heidegger first gave the lecture on “The Origin of the Work of Art” on November 13, 1935 to the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Gesellschaft* in Freiburg.²²⁰ Four days before Hitler had given a powerful demonstration of what such a thrust might mean in the 20th century. Robert Jan van Pelt has given us an eloquent description of the events of November 9 and of the way art served the ceremonies of that day, which centered on a procession, at its center the Blood Flag, a flag that in 1923 had fallen into the blood of one of the putschists killed in that failed coup and which had now been elevated into a sacred relic, as indeed the whole event mimicked a sacred ceremony. Such ceremonies require an architectural frame. Hitler understood very well the political potential of art, especially of film — and of architecture, and so he commissioned the architect Ludwig Troost to transform the city into a worthy setting of the new national cult. The route that the Nazis had walked in 1923 became the spine of the urban redevelopment of Munich. It consisted of two parts with three nodes. At the beginning was the first sacred place, the Beer Hall, where the annual procession was to start exactly at 11.00 AM. From there the route to the *Feldherrnhalle* was marked with 240 pylons, each honouring one of the 240 men who had died in the struggle against the German state and the enemies of the Volk between November 9, 1923 and January 30, 1933. The *Feldherrnhalle* was a second sacred place. There a monument was erected in honor of the sixteen principal martyrs of the movement. Until that point the elements referred literally to the historic events of

²²⁰ The translation by Hofstadter quoted above is of the standard edition of the essay, giving the text of three lectures given in Frankfurt am Main November 17, 24 and December 4, 1936. There are significant differences between the two versions, but the quoted passage remained substantially unchanged. Compare “*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, Holzwege Gesamtausgabe, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977), p. 65 and *De L’origine de l’oeuvre d’art*,” *première version (1935)*, texte allemand inédit et traduction française par Emmanuel Martineau, (Paris, Authentica: 1987), p. 46.

1923. However, the march had gone further in a spiritual sense, leading to the new Germany that had been instituted January 30, 1933. Thus the processional road was extended from the Feldherrnhalle until it reached the splendid neoclassical Königsplatz at the other side of the old city. This square, the termination of the cultic route and the third sacred place, was to represent the Third Reich. At the point where the processional road, the Briennerstrasse, met the Königsplatz, two “Doric” Temples of Honour were erected, open to the sky. Each was to contain eight coffins. Flanking them monumental party buildings were erected along the Arcisstrasse, revealing the essential unity between the sacrifice of the sixteen in 1923, which formed the basis of the political constitution of the Nazi movement, and the instruments through which the Führer absorbed the nation in the constitution of the movement and his own person.

The buildings were an instant success. The party ideologist Alfred Rosenberg applauded them as “the first attempt to realize the ancient Greek ideal.” The architectural critic Wilhelm Lotz praised the transformation of the Königsplatz because it showed for the first time in the modern age that “a deeper meaning can dwell in a city-square” as long as its origin is a spiritual principle and not a desire for aesthetic variety in the built-up area of a merely decorative intention. The Königsplatz had shown that it is still possible to create an architecture that emerges from inner principles of dedication and value instead of being derived from external contingencies of use.²²¹

A reader of Heidegger’s “Origin of the Work of Art” would have had little difficulty understanding such praise. Had Hegel’s dire pronouncements about the future of art and architecture not been refuted and not by philosophy but by architecture, by just that art the progress of spirit was supposed to have most decisively left behind? In retrospect it is easy to understand why an architectural theorist like van Pelt might have felt just the opposite: that his own convictions about architecture had been proven untenable by what Heidegger had theorized and what Hitler and his architects achieved.

Heidegger’s vision of National Socialism certainly applies to architecture. A comparison of the different domains of ancient Athens and the foci of architectural activity in the Third Reich offers a premonition of this awful truth; an effort to match the Attic theatre with its Nazi counterpart transforms presentiment into unambiguous certitude. This

²²¹ Robert Jan van Pelt, “Apocalyptic Abjection,” in Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 328-329.

conclusion wreaked havoc with my own project and led to repudiation and capitulation. In short the attempt to rediscover architectural principles in an age of historicism led to the ineluctable conclusion that Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) had realized the program of renewal proposed in the odd chapters of this book [by van Pelt].²²²

Was van Pelt justified in drawing this conclusion? Did Hitler in fact realize the program suggested and called for in Heidegger's essay? Or is there something incompatible between what he has to say and what was carried out in Munich and elsewhere? Do the architecture of Troost and Speer, the sculpture of Thorak and Breker, the painting of Ziegler and Eber, realize what in "The Origin of the Work of Art" is a vague presentiment? Does it achieve that repetition of the Greek in the modern of which Heidegger no doubt dreamed, as did Nietzsche before him, and as did, in their different ways, the authors of *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism*?

It is not difficult to come up with a negative answer. Does van Pelt not himself give us the key to discriminating the genuine from the counterfeit?

The Nazi transformation of Munich into the necropolis of Germany assimilated the ideology of the Athenian cemetery and the Holy Sepulcher into the Nazi movement. Unlike the earlier examples, however, the German necropolis was only a sham. When Pericles reminded his fellow citizens of the city they had inherited from their fathers, and when the monks of Centula preached the resurrection of Christ, they had a reasonable or moral certainty that their pronouncements agreed with what their audience recognized as common sense. Their speeches did not contradict the way people in classical Athens or Carolingian Europe lived their daily lives. Considering the available evidence as fully and impartially as possible would lead a person from classical Athens to the ideals of the polis and a monk from Centula to the idea that Christ's death constituted a cosmic victory. Yet any German who watched the shamanic Munich rituals had to suspend reason. Only when submerged within the carefully manipulated atmosphere of collective hysteria did the proclamations make sense. However, this sense had no relationship with the proper common sense approach to the stela, which might restore a relationship to the past in our cities.²²³

But even if this way of appealing to "the proper common sense" to draw a distinction between the genuine and the counterfeit might help us resist the gloomy lesson van Pelt drew from Heidegger's entanglement with the Nazis, Heidegger's essay calls all such

²²² Ibid., p. 322.

²²³ Ibid., pp. 332-333.

appeals to common sense into question. “The Origin of the World of Art” presupposes that for us what once may have been a firmly established common sense has begun to unravel. Such unraveling leads to demands for either a return to the good old common sense of the past or for a new beginning. Heidegger’s essay bends these two demands together: it calls for a new beginning, but this is presented at the same time as a creative repetition of the Greek origin of our Western tradition. Van Pelt’s appeal to common sense presupposes a repudiation of Heidegger’s claim that art is a beginning, an origin, that with genuine art a thrust enters history. What is truly original can, by definition, not be justified in terms of some already established common sense, a platitude in discussions of genius.

One conclusion one might want to draw is that originality, while it may be a virtue in art, is certainly not a virtue in politics, because by definition it has to challenge that common sense that is a presupposition of community. And if we should want to grant the importance of originality in art, we may have good reason to insist on the separation of the spheres of art and politics, resist that embrace of politics and art that provides a key to National Socialism.

But van Pelt’s appeal to common sense raises a different sort of question: is common sense not itself something historically established? The common sense of Periclean Athens was not that of Carolingian Centula: what separated them was the rise and triumph of Christianity, which shaped the world of the Middle Ages. But every establishment presupposes an establishing. How would van Pelt have us understand the establishing of Christianity? Imagine how a secular, educated Roman would have responded to those who claimed that Christ’s death on the cross constituted a cosmic victory and longed themselves for martyrdom. Could they not have used arguments against these early Christians rather like that advocated by van Pelt against the Nazis and their so-called martyrs? Measured by the common sense of such a secular Roman, what these Christians were willing to die for must have seemed nonsense and he would have been incredulous to hear one of his fellows predict that some day this nonsense would come to be accepted as a new common sense.

Heidegger was speaking of world-establishing art, quite aware that, given the common sense of our modern age, the very idea of art as a beginning in his sense had to

be dismissed as nonsense. Van Pelt has given us a reason to accept that verdict, based on what remains the ruling common sense, even if this common sense is fraying. But his discussion also raises the question: what is the function of art when there is no longer a robust common sense; when what was once a seemingly well established firmament of values is disintegrating, when appeals to ideals, and with it talk of heroes and sacrifice has come to have a hollow ring?

Van Pelt points to what distinguishes what is genuine from what is sham, when he suggests that the Nazis reoccupied places that they borrowed from both from the Greek and the Christian tradition, when they “assimilated the ideology of the Athenian cemetery and the Holy Sepulcher.” Especially important here is the rhetoric of martyrdom, of blood-witnesses, of sacred blood, of self-sacrifice for the sake of the flag that would reward the martyr with eternal life. It is a rhetoric no one raised in a Christian tradition would have had trouble understanding. Such rhetoric can be likened to a venerable vessel into which the Nazis now proposed to pour new wine, only they had no wine, they had in fact nothing substantial to pour into this vessel.

In Periclean Athens the necropolis, the Agora and the Acropolis anchored the reality of urban life in the consciousness of the people. In Germany architecture and urban design became tools of deception, a carefully designed stage for rituals handed down by the Ministry of Propaganda. In Athens the architecture disclosed a world where people could be free from the rage of the Furies; in Germany the architecture aided a cynical leadership to the calculatedly aroused outbursts of collective hysteria. And as all had become a theatre, and as everyone had been assigned roles as actors, no one felt guilty in 1945 when the proscenium crumbled, the backdrop burned and the performance came to its untimely end. Invoking the Heraclitean topos that all the world is a stage, and men merely players, the good citizens took off their masks.²²⁴

Van Pelt’s account brings to mind the story of the golden calf, a story of Moses delaying to come down from the mountain to mediate between God and the people of Israel, and the people who, unwilling to accept the delay, demand of Aaron that he provide them with a simulacrum of the absent divinity:

“Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” And Aaron said to them, “Take off the ring of gold which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made a molten calf; and they said: These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said: “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.” (*Exodus 32, 1-5, RSV*)

4

Heidegger was not the only one who then dreamed of temple and cathedral, of an architecture strong enough to gather a multitude into a genuine community. Consider this celebration of the cathedral of Reims, written by the young Georges Bataille:

I too when I was living in the old city, saw this, this vision as lovely as our dreams of paradise. There was much too much noise then in the new streets, too much noise and garish light — but always the cathedral was there and always her existence was a triumph of stone. The two towers rose straight into the sky like long-stemmed lilies and the image of friendly crowds slipped under the portals into the company of saints gesturing for eternity in hieratic robes, where their faces showed a joy that stone never smiled. And in the central portal Our Virgin Lady beneath her high crown was so regal so maternal that all the company of the faithful could not help becoming joyous as children, like brothers, and all the stone was bathed in maternal and divine goodness....

And on September 19 shells tore through, killing children, women, and old people; fire crackled from street to street, houses collapsed, people died, crushed by the rubble, buried alive. Then the German set the cathedral on fire....

But there is one light stronger than death: France. And France was not about to want the enemy to reenter Reims at whose gates the German divisions impotently and bloodily exhausted themselves.... In the cathedral's awful silence flickers a light that transfigures her vision; it is the flickering light of hope. Of course, she is stretched out like a corpse in the midst of plains that are a vast — without peace. But I realized that within her there was a great shout of resurrection. She is too sublime, too lofty in her frenzied soaring to give death's filth a hold on her, and she cried out to all the surrounding dead that it is in life that they are buried.²²⁵

The noisy streets with their garish light are contrasted with the ever-lasting maternal cathedral. That contrast is raised to a higher power as Germany is opposed to France,

²²⁵ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 15-19.

death to life. France is said to be the one light stronger than death. Given that Bataille is speaking of a cathedral you might have expected here a reference to the crucifixion as assuring us that life will triumph over death: is the cross not said to have robbed death of its sting? But here it is not some transcendent reality, but France that is said to be the one light stronger than death. Something finite is put in the place of sacred transcendence. Here we have the replacement operation that is a defining characteristic of kitsch.

I am following here the interpretation of kitsch given by the Austrian novelist and thinker Hermann Broch, who, found a refuge from the Nazis in the United States and lies buried in Killingworth, Connecticut. In a lecture he gave to Yale students in 1950²²⁶ Broch spoke of the kitsch personality, which, faced with what is all too often ugly and disgusting, demands a more beautiful world. Ever since the nineteenth century there has been a growing sense that industry and technology coupled with a rapidly increasing population are robbing the world of its former beauty. But is there not still enough of that beauty around, in the art and architecture of the past, for example, or in landscapes that have not yet quite caught up with modernity, such as the world figured by Heidegger's peasant woman, to allow us to make up for what the modern world lacked by drawing on this beautiful past?

Broch located the origin of kitsch in the Enlightenment and its exaltation of reason and individual freedom. Within him- or herself the individual discovered an infinity.

This brought the act of revelation into every single human mind and thereby saddled it with the responsibility of faith, a responsibility that the Church had previously borne. The mind settled the account and became presumptuous and boastful.

It became presumptuous because it had been assigned this cosmic and divine task, and it became boastful because it was well aware that it had been given too much credit, that it had been loaded with a responsibility that exceeded its resources. This is the origin of Romanticism; here is the origin of, on the one hand, the exaltation of the man who is full of artistic (and spiritual) energy and who tries to elevate the wretched

²²⁶ Hermann Broch, "Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches," *Essays*, vol. 1, *Dichten und Erkennen* (Zurich: Rhein, 1955), pp. 295-309. English translation, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch, in Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch. The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1969), pp. 49-67.

daily round of life on earth to an absolute or pseudo-absolute sphere, and, on the other, the terror of the man who senses the risk involved.²²⁷

Romanticism is tossed back and forth between godlike exaltation and fear and trembling, between a sense that reason had opened up a path to the absolute and a nihilism that had left human beings adrift in a meaningless world. Once it was established religion, the inherited faith, that had allowed the individual to experience the world as a meaningful whole, as a cosmos. But the faith that once supported such certainty could not survive the Enlightenment's liberation of humanity. The other side of such liberation is the experience of what Kundera was to call the unbearable lightness of being. A new faith was demanded to answer the old.

Could reason furnish what was required? In this connection Broch speaks of

The religion of reason that the French revolution tried to establish when, having dethroned God, it saw the need of basing its virtue on something absolute, and accordingly had to invent its "Goddess of Reason." But as things proceed rationally in the kingdom of reason, this "Goddess of Reason" was soon forgotten.²²⁸

Reason turned against itself and demonstrated its inability to furnish the kind of certainty demanded. But could not beauty take her place, found a new religion.

This divine beauty is the fundamental symbol of all the symbolist schools and is at the root of their aspiration to set up a new religion of beauty (which one can detect both in the Pre-Raphaelites and in Mallarmé or George). Without damaging the greatness of Mallarmé or the important artistic work of George, or even the admittedly considerably lesser value of the Pre-Raphaelites, we can safely say that the goddess of beauty in art is the goddess Kitsch.²²⁹

Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* gives voice to this escape from the truth that reality has no meaning, that God is dead, that in the world value is not to be found to art: "only as aesthetic phenomenon is the existence of the world justified." Implicit in Nietzsche's claim, is another: that the human being as such lacks dignity. *The Birth of Tragedy* thus speaks of the dignity of man and the dignity of work as empty clichés. According to Kant and Schiller human beings have dignity, *Würde*, only in so far as they are more than merely natural beings, are also noumena: as free and responsible agents, human beings

²²⁷ Ibid., pp. 55-56.

²²⁸ Ibid., p, 59.

²²⁹ Ibid.,

transcend their own natural being. But does that even make sense given our modern understanding of reality? Does that understanding not force us to naturalize human beings in a way that has to deny them, too, any supposedly given meaning? But if so, is it not only the aesthetic representation of human beings that can give them dignity. Only the work of artistic genius, Nietzsche thus insists, can justify life and give it dignity. Human beings must then serve art in one of two ways: by becoming geniuses or by subordinating themselves to the work of genius. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche understands Wagner as such a genius. And it is only to be expected that Broch should have understood Wagner as the greatest genius of kitsch. As such he is the artist who more than any other presides over the art of the nineteenth century and presides still, not just over much of the art, but also much of the politics of the twentieth. There is a sense in which he also presides over Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art." Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's Hitler and Wagner films are significant in this connection.

Let me return to Broch's claim that "the goddess of beauty is the goddess Kitsch." Broch himself calls that claim into question:

One can raise the objection that every artistic act generates beauty. This is true, just as it is true that every cognitive act generates truth. But has there ever been a human eye capable of contemplating "the beauty" or "the truth"? ... A scientist who puts no more than his own love of truth into his research will not get very far; he needs rather an absolute dedication to the object of his research, he needs logic and intuition; and if luck (which plays a rather more important part than the idea of truth in such cases) is in his favor, truth will appear all by itself when his work or experiments come to an end. The same is true of the artist. He, too, has to subject himself unconditionally to the object; his capacity to listen to the secret voice of the object (independently of the fact that it presents itself as an interior or exterior object), to seek out the laws that it obeys — think of Dürer's experiments with perspective, or Rembrandt's experiments with light — does not depend on the artist's love of beauty.²³⁰

We may well feel that science and art have been brought here into too close a relationship. Broch considers both explorations of reality. "Art is made up of intuitions about reality, and is superior to kitsch solely thanks to these intuitions."²³¹ But "reality"

²³⁰ Broch, p. 61,

²³¹ Ibid.,

would not seem to mean quite the same thing in the two cases. The reality of the scientist is an already objectified reality. Such objectification is the condition of his infinite pursuit, a pursuit that remains open because the scientist knows that the reality he seeks to understand transcends whatever truths he has been able to wrest from it. The scientist is not tempted to make truth as such his goal.

The reality that calls the artist to create new expressions calls him beyond that objectified reality explored by science. Broch could have agreed with Heidegger's statement: "Beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness" (p. 56). Also with his claim that such occurrence requires an openness to what transcends all our attempts at mastery. Kitsch does not know such openness. What blocks it is precisely the insistence that the artist make beauty the end of his striving. Kitsch, as Broch understands it, is not interested in exploring an ever elusive reality. It is content with the established and accepted. Within the value system of art an other is thus constituted, identical with it, except that second system has closed itself off from that infinite reality that provided the former with its necessary elusive ground. Instead of unending attempts to express what finally resists all expression, we meet thus in kitsch with a reappropriation of the results of past struggles. Does the art of the past not show us what beauty is? Emphasis shifts from the producing to the product, from the future to the past, from the infinite to the finite. What has come to be established and accepted now assumes an authority that lends itself to the formulation of rules and recipes, "reducing the infinity of God to the finitude of the visible, the faith of the mere moralist is dragged down from the sphere of the ethical into that of the aesthetic, the infinite demand of faith is debased into an aesthetic demand."²³²

"Aesthetic demand" here means a demand to produce a certain appearance, the sort of effect that precisely because it answers to quite definite, established expectations, invites the formulation of definite rules and their pedantic observance. Aesthetic demand" and rationalism thus belong together. The rationalist will want to specify what must be done in order to bring about a certain effect, and it does not matter here whether the goal is titillation, a religious state of mind, or patriotic fervor, to be met

²³² Broch, "Das Böse im Wertsystem der Kunst," *Essays*, vol. 1, *Dichten und Erkennen* (Zurich: Rhein, 1955), p. 341.

by porno-kitsch, religious kitsch, or patriotic kitsch respectively. Reality understood as a product of past interpretation comes to cover up reality as the ground of all interpretation. Kitsch so understood has its moral equivalent in pedantry: only a pedant believes that being moral reduces to following a set of rules.

5

I began this discussion of kitsch with Bataille and in concluding it would like to return to him. The passage cited was of course not representative: Bataille, too, soon was to turn against the sentiments expressed there and indeed against all architecture, which he came to see in the image of the prison, that is to say as denying that openness that according to Broch distinguishes art from kitsch. Such an understanding of architecture in the image of the prison may be read as a figure of art transformed into kitsch. Here is what Bataille was to write in 1929:

Architecture is the expression of the very soul of societies, just as human physiognomy is the expression of the individuals' souls. It is, however, particularly to the physiognomies of official personages (prelate, magistrates, admirals) that this comparison pertains. In fact it is only the ideal soul of a society, that which has the authority to command and prohibit, that is expressed in architectural composition properly speaking. Thus great monuments are erected like dikes, opposing the logic and majesty of authority against all disturbing elements: it is in the form of cathedral or palace that Church or State speaks to the multitudes and imposes silence upon them. It is, in fact, obvious that monuments inspire social prudence and often real fear. The taking of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of things: it is hard to explain this crowd movement other than by the animosity of the people against the monuments that are their real masters.²³³

Architecture stands here for an order that denies us access to what really matters and should therefore be destroyed, even if such destruction threatens chaos and bestiality.

We may want to object: if we admit that monuments sometimes inspire good behavior, perhaps even real fear, is it also obvious that they therefore deserve to be abolished? Does this society, does the world, suffer from a surfeit of "good behavior"? And suppose we grant to a Nietzsche, Sartre, or Broch that what we call good behavior is supported by a morality that with the death of God lost founder and foundation, that such

²³³ Hollier, *Against Architecture*, pp., 46 - 47

behavior is, as Sartre might say, in bad faith, would this mean that, for the sake of greater freedom, we should let loose the minotaur? Is bad faith not better than no faith? As Bataille recognized, this animus against the monuments that are said to be our real masters is inevitably also an animus against ourselves:

This is precisely what, in Bataille's view, the mythical figure of Acephalus was intended to show: the only way for man to escape the architectural chain gang is to escape his form, to lose his head. This self-storming of one's own form requires, in fact, an infinitely more underhanded strategy than one of simple destruction or escape. The image of Acephalus, thus should be seen as a figure of dissemblance, the negative image of an antimonumental madness involved in the dismemberment of 'meaning.' The painter André Masson drew this figure and Bataille wrote an aphorism to go with it: 'Man will escape his head as a convict escapes his prison.'²³⁴

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxi

Part Three: The Present and Future of Art

10. Kitsch, Vulgarity, and Abjection

1

T. J. Clark concludes his melancholy *Farewell to an Idea* with a defense of Abstract Expressionism that somewhat unexpectedly centers on what he considers its vulgarity. Charges of vulgarity have long accompanied the progress of art. Generally they were not meant as praise. Clark, however, assures us that he is not being ironic. But how can the vulgarity of an artwork be cited in its favor? The conspicuous vulgarity of so much recent art, its fascination with bodily excretions of all sorts, with slime and excrement, demands consideration, as does the dissatisfaction, the despair that feeds it.

In setting the stage for his half-hearted defense of the vulgarity of Abstract Expressionism, Clark, too, appeals to Hegel's pronouncement that "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past." Hegel, he grants, succeeded in putting "the basic proposition of modernism into words" (p. 371).²³⁵ And he, too, points out that something in us resists this conclusion. "... art will eternally hold us with its glittering eye. Not only will it forego its role in the disenchantment of the world, but it will accept the role that has constantly been foisted upon it by its false friends: it will become one of the forms, maybe *the* form, in which the world is re-enchanted" (p. 374). Heidegger invites inclusion among art's false friends, as do such thinkers as Nietzsche, Bloch, and Marcuse. I, too, have to plead guilty. What can I say in my defense? Must not art that in this age of mechanical reproduction claims to re-enchant the world degenerate into kitsch, into a simulacrum of what art in its highest sense once was? A true friend would presumably watch over the deepest interests of art, recognizing perhaps that all that remains for us to do is to give art a decent burial. Hegel would have agreed with Clark that a re-enchantment of the world by means of art is regressive, incompatible with authentic existence in the modern world, in this sense false. To want to restore to art its former aura is to be out of step with the spirit of the age. The result could only be an art that would have to be judged false in that sense. But is not falsity the mark of kitsch.

²³⁵ T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999). All parenthetical page references in this chapter are to this work.

In the modern world kitsch is the aesthetic golden calf. But why then does Clark defend Abstract Expressionism for its vulgarity, which, he notes, Greenberg equated “roughly” with kitsch (p. 396)?

Among others, the OED offers us this definition of “vulgarity”: “the quality of being unrefined, common, or coarse.” That need not suggest falsity. It is indeed easy to imagine one of the “true friends” of art defending the vulgarity of recent art as an attempt to lead art back to reality, as a refusal of the bourgeois escape from a reality found unbearable into kitsch, to simulacra of that art Hegel declared dead. Such a defense would reclaim for such vulgar art at least a trace of the vocation Hegel assigned to art in its highest sense: what makes it significant is that it challenges the way, not just Hegel, but modernity, have allowed reason and its order to elide reality, which however refuses to be thus elided and reasserts itself in what fills those who would have reason rule with disgust.

Clark considers it an advantage of the term “vulgar” “that discursively it points two ways: to the object itself, to some abjectness or absurdity in its very make-up (some tell-tale blemish, some atrociously visual quality which the object will never stop betraying however hard it tries); and to the object’s existence in a particular social world, for a set of tastes and styles of individuality which have still to be defined, but are somehow there, in the word, even before it is deployed” (p. 376). This invites a host of questions. “Vulgar” is a contrast term: presupposed is some understanding of what constitutes good manners. What is vulgar disappoints such expectations with expressions we associate with those whose social condition causes them not to give a hoot about whatever is called “good manners,” with the *Lumpenproletariat*, those Marx described as “the scum offal, refuse of all classes.”²³⁶ The vulgar has to be considered deficient or even absurd by the standards of good taste. By embracing the vulgar, art calls into question what is supposed to be in good taste, invites thus interpretation as an attack on what supposedly separates “lower” from “higher,” where, as an attempt to return to art a contact with life, with reality, lost by the refined aestheticism that defined the

²³⁶ Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, in *Werke*, vol. 8 (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1960), p. 161; as cited in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless. A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 246.

bourgeoisie's approach to art, such an attack can possess both an artistic and a social significance.

The suggestion that "vulgar" points to "some atrociously visual quality" invites special attention. How differently the sentence would read had Clark written: some "atrocious visual quality." "Atrociously visual" suggests not just some unfortunate visual quality; it hints that the very way such art turns to the visual is what makes it atrocious. I hear in Clark's phrase an echo of Kant's suspicion of the seductive appeal of the sensuous, which needs to be redeemed by a beauty that keeps its distance from it. The phrase invites an indictment of Heidegger's celebration of art that presents the earth by presenting the artist's materials as the materials they are: paint as paint, canvas as canvas. One might want to describe talk of the earth-presenting, world-establishing power of art with the words Clark uses to characterize Abstract Expressionism: as "the style of a certain petty bourgeoisie's aspiration to aristocracy, to a totalizing cultural power" (p. 389).

Clark understands vulgarity as "the necessary form of that individuality allowed the petty bourgeoisie" (p. 389). Hans Hofmann provides a paradigm: "A good Hofmann is tasteless to the core — tasteless in its invocations of Europe, tasteless in its mock religiosity, tasteless in its Color-by-Technicolor, its winks and nudges toward landscape format, its Irving Stone title, and the cloying demonstrativeness of its handling." Or again: "A good Hoffmann has to have a surface somewhere between ice cream, stucco and flock wallpaper. Its colors have to *reek* of Nature — of worst kind of Woolworth forest-glade-with-waterfall-and-thunderstorm-brewing" (p. 397). "Mock religiosity," colors that "*reek* of Nature" — such expressions suggest a condemnation of the work for both its falsity and its wallowing in a synthetic sensuousness, rather like a bad perfume — both often cited characteristics of kitsch. And yet Clark praises abstract expressionism for its vulgarity: the strength of this art cannot be separated from its "true petty-bourgeois pathos" (p. 401). If this is indeed kitsch, its very vulgarity lets us experience it as nonetheless genuine. Vulgarity trumps kitsch.

If “some atrociously visual quality” suggests kitsch, “abjectness” lets us think of Bataille, Kristeva, and Rosalind Krauss, who has provided a useful guide to this recently faddish term. Defined by the OED as “abject or downcast condition; depression, abasement, degradation, humiliation, servility,” “abjectness” and its relatives entered recent theorizing about art via France and soon, as Krauss shows, came to describe a spreading expressive mode.

This spread is easy enough to document within cultural manifestations of the last several years. To name only some very recent ones, two respected spokesmen for contemporary art — David Sylvester and Robert Rosenblum — participating in *Artforum*'s annual survey of the best and worst exhibitions held in 1995, elevated Guilbert and Georges's “Naked Shit Pictures” to the top of their lists, comparing this mammoth installation to Renaissance frescoes “in which the settings for the groupings of nude figures were not the usual columns and arches but structures erected from enlargements of turds,” thereby producing in their viewers a supposed rush “from the scatological to the eschatological.” Another example would be the Center Pompidou's own *femininmasculin* exhibition (1995), with its heavy complement of artists associated with American and English abject art — Kiki Smith, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Sue Williams, Nancy Spero, Gilbert & Georges, and in matriarchal place of honor, Louise Bourgeois — and its emphasis on contemporary production's fixation not simply on sexual organs but on all bodily orifices and their secretions (hence a strong showing of urinal-related art and fecal imagery, as in the work of Paul-Around Gette, Noritoshi Hirakawa, Jean-Michel Othoniel, and Helen Chadwick).²³⁷

Krauss is not speaking here of Abstract Expressionism, but of later developments and we should not be too quick to link Clark's “abjectness” to Krauss's “abjection.” Clark himself warns against a possible misunderstanding: “A final thing I do not want to be taken as saying, or implying, is that art could make Abstract Expressionism a thing of the past by imitating it, or trying to go one better than it in the vulgarity stakes. That has been a popular, and I think futile tactic in the last two decades” (p. 442). But even if futile, such a tactic is a characteristic expression of art today and as such calls for thoughtful consideration.

²³⁷ Rosalind E. Krauss, “The Destiny of the Informe,” Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless. A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 235-236.

In discussions of abjection Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror* deserves a special place.²³⁸ Kristeva links the abject to its intermediate, borderline condition:

And, indeed, "borderline" came increasingly to function as a form of explanation for a condition understood as the inability of a child to separate itself from its mother so that, caught up with a suffocating, clinging, maternal lining, the mucuous-membranous shroud of bodily odors and substances, the child's losing battle for autonomy is performed as a kind of mimicry of the impassibility of the body's own frontier, with freedom coming only delusively as the convulsive, retching evacuation of one's own insides, and thus an abjection of oneself.²³⁹

Krauss usefully links Kristeva to Sartre, who claimed that "the best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God."²⁴⁰ But what we most deeply desire is an impossibility: even our bodies refuse to obey our will. Sartre follows St. Augustine, who suggests that to feel at ease with the body is denied to fallen humanity: we discover our bodies to be shameful when we recognize that they shatter our dreams of freedom. In the body's excretions we recognize our distance from divine autonomy; in our shame we taste the failure of our project of pride. By positing the autonomy of the free spirit as the highest value, pride posits the body and its claims as something obscene, to be suppressed. But the body refuses such suppression. Pride thus necessarily leads to an experience of my flesh as an independent demonic force, as, yes, myself, but not really me, myself in a state of abjection.

Sartre moves explicitly in this orbit: "Modesty and in particular the fear of being surprised in a state of nakedness are only a symbolic specification of original shame; the body symbolizes here our defenseless state as objects. To put on clothes is to hide one's object-state; it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject. This is why the Biblical symbol of the fall after the original sin is the fact that

²³⁸ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

²³⁹ Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Destiny of the Informe," p. 237.

²⁴⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. and intro. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 566. For a fuller discussion see also Karsten Harries, "Sartre and the Spirit of Revenge," forthcoming in *Sartre Studies*.

Adam and Eve ‘know that they are naked.’”²⁴¹ How Christian the atheist Sartre here sounds. Like Augustine, Sartre makes pride the foundation of shame. Pride indeed gains an even greater significance, for while according to Augustine pride rules fallen humanity, Sartre makes pride constitutive of human being: there can be no redemption from its rule, no reconciliation of spirit and flesh, no escape from shame. And this much, I think, we must grant Sartre: *to the extent* that human beings remain subject to pride, they will be prevented from giving sensuousness its due. Pride has to lead to a demonization of all that threatens what Sartre calls “the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject.”²⁴² The ground of this supposed right is a freedom that refuses to be bound. That this refusal has to lead to a disturbed relationship to the body that inevitably binds freedom and more especially to our sexuality is born out in embarrassing detail by Sartre’s writings: “The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which ‘gapes open.’... Beyond any doubt her sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis — a fact which can easily lead to the idea of castration. The amorous act is the castration of the man.”²⁴³ We should be on guard when anyone, and especially a philosopher, uses the expression “beyond any doubt”: what really is beyond any doubt does not need to be signaled in that way. It would be odd to say, beyond any doubt $2+2=4$. The very expression invites us to question what is said to be beyond any doubt, invites us to inquire into just what it is that must be presupposed to let someone speak this way.

Especially revealing is what Sartre has to say about the slimy, which he discusses as an “antivalue,” a discussion that carries him to extraordinary rhetorical heights and prefigures the later rhetoric and art of abjection. Sartre seems to have experienced what he is speaking of:

Throw a slimy substance; it draws itself out, it displays itself, it flattens itself, it is *soft*; touch the slimy; it does not flee, it yields... The slimy is compressible. It gives us at first the impression that it is a being which can be possessed.... Only at the very moment when I believe that I possess it, behold, by a curious reversal, it possesses me.

²⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 613-614.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 289.

²⁴³ Ibid., pp. 613-614.

Here appears its essential character: its softness is leechlike.... I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me.... It is a soft, yielding action, a moist feminine sucking, it lives obscurely under my fingers, and I sense it like a dizziness; it draws me to it as the bottom of a precipice might draw me. Here is something like a tactile fascination in the slimy...²⁴⁴

We should note not only the disgust, but also the fascination. An adequate understanding of human being has to do justice to both. If the human project were adequately described by the desire to possess, there could only be disgust, but not this fascination, this desire to surrender, to let go, to play with the slimy, to move from the visual to the tactile and reeking. The appeal of the slimy thus demonstrates that Sartre's understanding of the fundamental project fails to do justice to what human beings most deeply want.

At this instant I suddenly understand the snare of the slimy: it is a fluidity which holds me and which compromises me; I cannot slide on this slime, all its suction cups hold me back; it can not slide over me, it clings to me like a leech. The sliding, however, is not simply denied as in the case of a solid; it is degraded. The slimy seems to lend itself to me. It invites me; for a body of slime at rest is not noticeably distinct from a body of very dense liquid. But it is a trap. The sliding is sucked in by the sliding substance and it leaves its traces upon me. The slime is like a liquid seen in a nightmare where all the properties are animated by a sort of life and turn back against me. Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet, feminine revenge which will be symbolized on another level by the quality "sugary."²⁴⁵

The word "revenge" demands special attention. Revenge is taken by someone who feels slighted or dealt with unjustly. It presupposes that what has been violated in some way partakes of spirit. But Sartre understands the In-itself in opposition to the For-itself, and thus to consciousness, to spirit. Talk of slime as "the revenge of the In-itself" animates or spiritualizes matter. Sartre does indeed speak of slime as "animated by a sort of life." There is the suggestion that the very project of wanting to possess the In-itself, to render the human being, to use the Cartesian expression, the master and possessor of nature, has to do an injustice to nature, especially to our own nature. There is also a hint that the For-itself may not be placed in such simple opposition to the In-itself, that the two are inextricably entangled. Unlike God, human beings cannot be their own foundation. To

²⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 608-609.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 609.

demand this is to do violence to human nature. It is precisely the one-sidedness of Sartre's understanding of the fundamental project that elevates the slimy into a key symbol and endows it with a demonic fascination:

To touch the slimy is to risk being dissolved in sliminess. Now this dissolution by itself is frightening enough, because it is the absorption of the For-itself by the In-itself, as ink is absorbed by a blotter. But it is still more frightening in that the metamorphosis is not just into a thing (bad as that would be), but into slime... The horror of the slimy is the horror that time itself might become slimy, that facticity might progress continually and insensibly and absorb the For-itself which *exists it*. It is the fear, not of death, of the pure In-itself, not of nothingness, but of a particular type of being, which does not actually exist any more than the In-itself-For-itself and which is only represented by the slimy. It is an idea which I reject with all my strength and which haunts me as value haunts my being, an ideal in which the foundationless In-itself has priority over the For-itself. We shall call it an *Antivalue*.²⁴⁶

The slimy is a symbol of Sartre's devil, and as such it shadows a beauty that is a symbol of that God, who, if Sartre is right, is the self-contradictory goal of our deepest striving. Every human being, according to Sartre, seeks to lose himself as man in order to become God. Were that possible, freedom would determine my being. That is the ideal we vainly pursue. And just the recognition of such vanity, this recognition that to become God we would have to lose ourselves as man, would have to lose reality, become nothing, strengthens the call of a counter-ideal that tempts us by beckoning us to give up vain dreams of autonomy, dreams of laying foundations firm enough to support us and an architecture that might provide shelter. This counter-ideal, too, tempts us to lose ourselves as man, but not now to become God, but to allow ourselves to sink back into that chaotic life from which we emerged. But this, too, means to lose ourselves as the human beings we are. A full self-affirmation demands that we renounce both Value and Antivalue, both ideal and counter-ideal. This is to say, a full self-affirmation demands that we free ourselves from what Sartre calls the fundamental project, that we refuse the project of being like God. We must substitute for Sartrian authenticity or any analogous conception an understanding that recognizes that we are truly ourselves only when we are able to discover, rather than to create, meaning in the world; and that means first of all,

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 610-611.

when we are able to recognize the other. Spirit without must answer spirit within. But if there is to be such an answer, spirit must be encountered in the world. Logos must incarnate itself. We experience such incarnation whenever we recognize another person; also when we experience beauty.

Sartre would deny the possibility of such an experience. And so would those who today pursue abjection. Can we really make sense of the experience of an incarnated consciousness? Is consciousness not always at a distance from what it is conscious of, always consciousness of some object or other? Consciousness objectifies. The gaze of the other thus reveals to me that I am an object, a thing, even as, when I become conscious of myself as the object of the other's gaze, I experience another freedom that eludes me. When I attempt to look back, I may grasp the other as object and thereby reclaim my own freedom, but to the extent that I succeed I no longer experience the other's freedom. Sartre's ontology has no room for a symmetrical being-with-others. Sexual desire will never be fully satisfied, will never lay hold of the other's freedom by possessing his or her body, will be tossed back and forth between a desire to submerge either my own or the other's consciousness in the flesh. In either case, to experience consciousness thus drowning is not to experience the desired incarnation of consciousness.

But Sartre's melancholy account of our being-with-others calls itself into question. We cannot make sense of our experience of the gaze of the other unless we already experience ourselves as essentially with others, experience the gaze that imports the asymmetry that governs sight into consciousness as eliding a more fundamental symmetrical relationship. Love calls into question the optical paradigm that has presided over the progress of metaphysics with its oppositions: spirit – flesh, subject – object, For-itself – In-itself. And so can art.

3

Inseparable from the artistic embrace of the abject has been its sacralization. Just this has come in for violent critique: what does the sacred have to do with what is disgusting and obscene? If Duchamp's *Fountain* challenged the boundary supposed to separate a work of art from a piece of plumbing, a boundary that has helped us moderns

to distance ourselves from the foul odors of the cloaca, if he invited us to think of the essence of art in the image of the latter, works like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) and Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) challenge the boundary between the sacred and the abject, inviting us to think a deeper connection between the two.

Serrano photographed a cheap, mass-produced plastic crucifix suspended in his own urine, resulting in an image called "as radiant as a medieval mosaic," "glowing in a golden light analogous to the vision of heavenly splendor that suffuses over 500 years of religious paintings, from medieval times through the Renaissance,"²⁴⁷ while Ofili made the breast of his African Madonna out of a lump of elephant dung, surrounding his decorative image, placed on a gold background recalling the sacred art of the Middle Ages, with cutout fragments of women's buttocks and genitalia that recall the putti that surround the Virgin in more traditional representations.²⁴⁸ That both works should have raised questions about public funding for the artists and institutions that so self-consciously violated "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public," standards, the NEA, in response to such provocation, was required to take into account in its award decisions, was only to be expected. The charge against the work by Serrano and the "degenerate" supporters of such art was led by an evangelical minister from Mississippi, the Reverend Donald Wildmon,²⁴⁹ who found support from politicians such as senators Jesse Helms and Alphonse d'Amato. Expected, too, was the challenge to such a decency clause by performance artists Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller, who took that clause to violate the First Amendment Right to free expression. And so was the discussion of the way financial concerns here helped distort decisions that, it would seem, should be ruled by a commitment to show art of quality.

The Ofili painting gained its notoriety and minor place in history when New York's Mayor Giuliani, offended by the perceived sacrilege, wanted to punish the

²⁴⁷ Linda Weintraub, *Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society, 1970s – 1990s* (Litchfield: Art Insights, 1996), pp. 160, 161.

²⁴⁸ "Recent Controversies Over Public Funding of the Arts," in Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Abrams and Prentice Hall, 2002), p. 1175.

²⁴⁹ Lisa Phillips, *The American Century. Art & Culture 1950-2000* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 330 – 331.

Brooklyn Museum, which had included the painting in its *Sensation* show and refused to cancel it, by withholding the monthly maintenance payment and canceling its lease, only to be overruled by the appropriate US District Court. Hans Haacke responded to the Mayor's attempt at censorship with "a wall of garbage cans with speakers blaring the sound of marching jackboots, a reproduction of the First Amendment and, in a medieval typescript favored by the Nazis, quotations from Mr. Giuliani and others, including Senator Jesse Helms, Patrick J. Buchanan, and the religious broadcaster Pat Robertson," planned for exhibit at the Whitney's 2000 Biennial. Marylou Whitney, feeling that she had to stand up for what she believed in, responded by announcing that the one million dollars she had planned to give the museum would now go the Whitney Gallery of Western Art in Cody, Wyoming.²⁵⁰

More interesting is the response given by Philippe de Montebello on the Op Ed page of *The New York Times* of October 5, 1999, as his contribution to the controversy swirling around Ofili and the *Sensation* show. Firmly committed to the "independent role of museums," but seeking to steer the discussion away from the controversy revolving around issues of politics, money, and law, the director of the Metropolitan Museum courageously sought to raise the old question: but is it good art? — aware that many in the art establishment would think his very question almost quaint today and sufficient to dismiss him as an aesthetic dinosaur. Art is good, Montebello insisted, only if its "formal, aesthetic level is high." Judged by this traditional standard he found the painting by Ofili wanting: "the emperor has no clothes." "To shock for shock's sake does not good art make — Kiki Smith's 'Tale,' a sculpture showing a crouching figure defecating in 'The American Century, Part II' exhibition now at the Whitney, will never hold a place in the pantheon of great art alongside that of Lorenzo Lotto's 'Allegory of Marriage,' now in the Met's collection, showing a naked putto urinating on a naked Venus. One is simply disgusting and devoid of any craft or aesthetic merit; the other is of superior aesthetic quality." The transformation effected by the self-consciously crude representation of what is disgusting and its subsequent exhibition in some gallery or museum are apparently not sufficient to effect that transfiguration that is the result of genuine art. Could an artist more nearly the equal of Lorenzo Lotto have accomplished

²⁵⁰ Robert D. McFadden in *The New York Times*, March 12, 2000.

that feat? Montebello seems to believe that aesthetic quality expressed as form possesses the power to so transfigure what would otherwise be obscene, disgusting, or abject that it becomes an occasion for aesthetic pleasure. But are there not things so disgusting that they render its aesthetic representation, no matter how artful, inappropriate and itself disgusting?

Works by artists such as Andres Serrano and Chris Ofili, Damien Hirst and Kiki Smith are no doubt interesting, as demonstrated by the broad and impassioned discussion they have occasioned. But the category of the interesting fails to do justice to the turn to the abject and to the attempt to join the abject to the sacred that has been a recurrent theme in modern art. The appeal of the interesting is first of all negative; what is interesting challenges the boundary that at a particular time is taken to define what is acceptable. The fascination with the abject, on the other hand, is often a positive fascination with what is no longer acceptable and not to be talked about in polite society, even as we all know that without it we would not be and that we shall all return to it in the end. *Inter faeces et urinam nascimur*: feces and urine frame the site of sexual pleasure, which is also the site of our birth. The spirit's incarnation in the body, promised by carnal knowledge, also threatens to deliver us over to the power of death, of that devil whom Hieronymus Bosch painted as a hawk-billed monster sitting on a golden throne or potty-chair, devouring us poor humans, farting our poor souls into a black hole. In this image the terror time that is constitutive of the human condition found its unforgettable expression.

Terror alone does not explain our fascination with the devil, whose seductive appeal speaks to us not only of death, but also of a full life whose price may be death. The devil is indeed one of the guises in which Dionysus presents himself to Christians burdened by the terror of time and hoping to rob death of its sting. Dionysus speaks to us in our flesh of new life, but also of death and decay, as Christian art knew all too well. Those sculptors who represented the human body as food for maggots were hardly interested in beauty. Their representations of the abject were meant to terrify us into turning to that power that alone can rob death of its sting. And similarly, those most sincere in their attempts to place art in the service of the abject are hardly interested in being purveyors of whatever pleasure beauty may still be able to provide. What is beauty

to them? Too often but a mask placed over a terrifying reality. As Thomas McEvelley notes, “Among the major changes in the period in question [1970s-1990s] is a loss of faith in the idea of beauty as a spiritual universal and, consequently, a change in the idea of the role of the artist. The artist actually came to be the destroyer of the idea of beauty,” a trait seen in artists “from Joseph Beuys to Mike Kelley.”²⁵¹ Had beauty not been purchased at the price of reality? Was Heidegger not right to attempt to break the hold of the aesthetic approach over art and thinking about art? Right to insist that art be a presentation of the earth? And right again when he connected such representation to an embrace of our mortality? In this age of the world picture the abject is what most obstinately refuses its place in that picture and offers itself as a last refuge of reality and authenticity, precisely because it is beyond the pale. To be sure, to someone committed, as Sartre’s fundamental project would have it, to godlike self-assertion and the rule of the logos, the abject will present itself as the simply disgusting, a figure of that devil in whom Sartre believed no more than he believed in God, whose power, however, is supported by the terror that seizes us when we confront the abyss beyond our death-bound existence. But, as Nietzsche recognized, something in us welcomes that same terror because it puts us in touch with a deeper reality. And so he insisted that we must add to the horror of what threatens our individuality, “the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature.”²⁵² Terror here turns into its opposite. Dionysus challenges the reality principle ruling modernity with the promise of liberation. And such liberation includes most definitely a liberation of the flesh.

Nietzsche knows that a purely Dionysian state would mean the destruction of the social order and the individual, would mean anarchy and chaos. The call of Dionysus, in which the abject and the sacred merge, threatens a descent into barbarism, where the possibility of such a descent is something of a constant in history. Something in us longs for a furlough from our humanity, dreams of a suspension of moral inhibitions, of

²⁵¹ Thomas McEvelley, “Value in an Age of Chaos,” in Weintraub, *Searching for Art’s Meaning in Contemporary Society, 1970s – 1990s*, p. 257.

²⁵² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 1 in *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 1, p. 28. Trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 36.

Dionysian festivals. “In nearly every case these festivals centered in extravagant sexual licentiousness, whose waves overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions; the most savage natural instincts were unleashed, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty which always has seemed to me the real ‘witches brew.’”²⁵³

Nietzsche was no friend of the savage, even as he dreamed of its seductive power. What made the Greeks exemplary for him was that, recognizing and honoring the power of Dionysus, they were able to tame it with the power of Apollo. Lorenzo Lotto’s allegorical putto urinating on Venus comes to mind. Nietzsche, to be sure, was thinking of the healing power of tragedy.

Later he was to condemn *The Birth of Tragedy* as an “impossible book”:

I consider it badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness, very convinced and therefore disdainful of proof, a book for initiates, “music” for those dedicated to music, those who are closely related to begin with on the basis of common and rare aesthetic experiences, “music” meant as a sign of recognition for close relatives *in artibus* — an arrogant and rhapsodic book that sought to exclude right for the beginning the *profanum vulgus* of the educated even more than “the mass” or “folk.”²⁵⁴

Was this not a book addressed to Wagner and his followers, itself a piece of Wagnerian music, written in the shadow of Schopenhauer. Must we not say of the author of the *Birth of Tragedy* what Nietzsche says of Wagner? “The benefit Schopenhauer conferred on Wagner is immeasurable. Only *the philosopher of decadence* gave to the artist of decadence — himself.”²⁵⁵ Nietzsche came to understand Wagner as “*the modern artist par excellence*, the Cagliostro of modernity. In his art all that the modern world requires most urgently is mixed in the most seductive manner: three great *stimulantia* of the exhausted — the *brutal*, the *artificial*, and the *innocent* (idiotic).”²⁵⁶ Much of this applies to Nietzsche himself. And are our artists not still molded in the image of

²⁵³ Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 2, p. 32; trans. p. 39.

²⁵⁴ Nietzsche, “Versuch einer Selbstkritik,” *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, p. 14; trans. p. 19.

²⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner*, 4, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 6, p. 21; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Birth and Tragedy and The Case of Wagner* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.164.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, KSA 6, 23; trans. p. 166.

Nietzsche's Wagner? Think of Anselm Kiefer. Or of Matthew Barney. Is modern art to be understood as the art of decadence?

In the later "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" Nietzsche opposes to Wagner his own creation: the dancing, laughing Zarathustra, teacher and poet of the eternal recurrence. But does this Zarathustra, does Nietzsche, too, not remain all too close to Wagner? Both continue to dream of the artwork that heals, that redeems, where Zarathustra is supposed to take the place of Aeschylus, his poem of the eternal recurrence, this dream of a redemptive truth beyond logic, that of tragedy.

Nietzsche's knowledge about and struggle with that proximity led him to create with his Magician a caricature of Wagner, Zarathustra, and himself. This is an image of the artist who seeks his unknown God in his pain, his tortures, in the abject, but knows that he lies, is only fool, only poet.²⁵⁷ Today we might call such an artist a creator of magnificent, if often monstrous, kitsch: kitsch that masks itself as a pursuit of a truth more profound than that available to our reason, as truth that could emerge only out of the shipwreck of reason. Georg Simmel would have us understand Nietzsche's thought of the eternal recurrence as a *Sprengmetapher*, a metaphor that like dynamite is meant to explode what first of all and most of the time binds our understanding.²⁵⁸ In this respect it invites comparison with Nicholas of Cusa's related thought of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of minimum and maximum, of the lowest and the highest, of the abject and the most spiritual, as the threshold beyond which we must search for God,²⁵⁹ a thought that caught the attention especially of surrealists, who were all too willing to follow Nietzsche and listen to the seductive call of the labyrinth and the monster within: "Labyrinthine structure is acephalous: antihierarchical (anarchic); one never moves ahead, rather one loses one's head there. Losing one's head opens prisons.

²⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, Vierter Teil, "Der Zauberer" and "Das Lied der Schwermut," *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, pp. 313-317, 369-374; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 363-367 and 408-412.

²⁵⁸ See Hans Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer, Paradigma einer Daseinsmetapher*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), p.84.

²⁵⁹ See Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 56-62.

‘Man has escaped his head as the convict escapes from prison.’ Labyrinthine discourse is decapitated discourse, uttered by the absence of a head.” And so Bataille says of the “Headless Man.” “His guts are the maze in which he has become lost himself losing me with him, and where I rediscover myself being him, that is — monster.”²⁶⁰

It is hardly necessary to respond to this image in that way. To do so, one has to be already initiated into the mysteries of the labyrinth. This, too, then is an image “meant as a sign of recognition for close relatives *in artibus*.” What defines the members of this family is their shared dislike of logical space in which all things are supposed to find their place. This architecture or meaning-system they experience as a prison.

And it is the inevitable waste of the meaning system, the stuff that is no longer recyclable by the great processes of assimilation, whether intellectual (as in science or philosophy) or social (as in the operations of the state), that Bataille wants to explore by means of his own procedure, which he names “theoretical heterology.” The meaning systems, he argues are devoted to the rationalization of social or conceptual space, in order to support the orderly fabrication, consumption, and conservation of products. “But the intellectual process automatically limits itself,” he says, “by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element. Heterology is restricted to taking up again, consciously and resolutely, this terminal process which up until now has been seen as the abortion and the shame of human thought.”²⁶¹

As Sartre recognized, the shame of human thought is finally its inability to raise itself so decisively above the flesh that there is no longer any danger of falling back into its own waste. This shame is addressed by the art of abjection. The liberation of the excremental element is also supposed to be a liberation from the rationalization that holds us captive. But what is untouchable includes not only the untouchably low, but also the untouchably high. Not only waste, but sovereignty and the sacred are “unassimilable forms of heterogeneity that the homogeneous forces of lawlike equivalence and representation must create. It is precisely in the way that these two ends of the spectrum can be brought around to meet each other in a circle that short-circuits the systems of rules and regulated

²⁶⁰ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1989), p.64.

²⁶¹ Krauss, “The Destiny of the Informe,” p. 246.

oppositions that Bataille sees heterology producing the scandal of thought.”²⁶² But excrement is no scandal for thought. Its artistic representation does not effectively challenge the rule of reason: it only figures such a challenge. The coincidence of the abject and the sacred is not forced on us by what we see. Illumination here requires the good will of the observer willing to play with thoughts of entering the labyrinth beyond the rule of reason, willing to be seduced.

4

Clark invites us to look at Mark Rothko in the image of the author of *The Birth of Tragedy*, and that means also in the image of Wagner: “The great Rothkos are those everybody likes, from the early 1950s mainly: the ones that revel in the newfound formula’s cheap effects, the ones where a hectoring of absolute self-presence is maintained in face of the void; with vulgarity — a vulgar fulsomeness of reds, pinks, purples, oranges, lemons, lime greens, powder-puff whites — acting as a transform between the two possibilities of reading. *The Birth of Tragedy* redone by Renoir” (p. 387). The reference to *The Birth of Tragedy* is warranted by the youthful Rothko’s known interest in that text, which allows Stephen Polcari to claim:

Nietzsche’s assertions that art should dramatize the terror and struggles of existence must have seemed to Rothko an intellectual ratification of the terror of contemporary history. Nietzsche’s own primitivization of the root cultures, history, and art of the West through his new emphasis on preclassical and pre-Socratic Aeschylean drama and his advocacy of visionary art provided the link between the primitive and the classical that lies at the base of Rothko’s art. Rothko’s classicism is a Nietzschean Dionysian archaism new to twentieth-century art and thought. ... Originally a god of fertility, Dionysus became a symbol of tragic suffering, dismemberment, and restoration. Nietzsche pictured the Dionysian force as a kind of savior who could lead mankind by means of art to the redemption of suffering. In Nietzschean tragic drama and myth, Dionysus fused the individual with a larger set of values and higher form of life than the merely individualistic.²⁶³

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 121.

Polcari is right: in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche is looking for an art of redemption, is looking for an artist in the image of Wagner. But must this then not invite us to apply Nietzsche's later critique of Wagner as the artist of decadence, and precisely because of this as the modern artist par excellence, to an artist such as Rothko?

Nietzsche did not yet use the term "kitsch." But he does discuss the *Musikdrama* of Wagner, which presented itself as a rebirth of Greek tragedy, as the triumph of kitsch:

I permit myself some exhilaration again. Suppose it were the case that Wagner's success became incarnate, took human form, and dressed up as a philanthropic music scholar, mixed with young artists. How do you suppose he would talk?

My friends, he would say, let us have a few words among ourselves. It is easier to write bad music than good. What if it were more profitable, too? More effective, persuasive, inspiring, reliable, — Wagnerian? — *Pulchrum est paucorum hominum*. Bad enough. We understand Latin; perhaps we also understand our own advantage. What is beautiful has a fly in its ointment: we know that. Why, then, have beauty? Why not rather that which is great, sublime, gigantic — that which moves masses? — Once more; it is easier to be gigantic than to be beautiful; we know that."²⁶⁴

And we also know this: "Above all however, passion throws people... And this is the definition of passion. Passion — or the gymnastics of what is ugly on the rope of enharmonics. — Let us dare, my friends, to be ugly. Wagner has dared it. Let us dauntlessly roll in front of us the mud of the most contrary harmonies. Let us not spare our hands. Only thus will we become natural."²⁶⁵

Nietzsche is speaking here of Wagner's music. But his words call for a generalized reading: Nietzsche's Wagner is after all supposed to be the modern artist *par excellence*. And he teaches: let us dare to be ugly, dauntlessly roll in front of us all sorts of mud; only in this way will we become natural, a lesson that invites application to the visual art of the recent past.

And there is something else Nietzsche's Wagner teaches:

Let us never give pleasure! We are lost as soon as art is again thought of hedonistically. — That is bad eighteenth century. — Nothing on the other hand should be more advisable than a dose of — *hypocrisy, sit venia*

²⁶⁴ *The Case of Wagner*, p. 167.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

verbo. That lends dignity. — And let us choose the hour when it is decent to look black, to heave sighs publicly, to heave Christian sighs, to make an exhibition of great Christian pity. Man is corrupt: who redeems him?" *what redeems him?"* — Let us not answer. Let us be cautious. Let us resist our ambition which would found religions. But nobody may doubt that we redeem him, that *our* music alone saves.²⁶⁶

Wagner here usurps the place of the redeemer, art the place of religion, the artificial the place of the sacred. But to succeed such art may not be experienced as merely beautiful. It must not appear to trade reality for merely aesthetic pleasures. This is why such art likes to embrace the ugly, the vulgar, the abject: it seems somehow more natural, more sacred. But the invocation of nature here betrays more than just a dose of hypocrisy.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 167.

11. The Sublime and the Interesting

1

In “The Origin of the Work of Art” Heidegger discusses a Greek temple and mentions Bamberg cathedral as world-establishing works that, while they lie irrevocably behind us, yet challenge us to attempt their repetition in a modern key. Robert Jan van Pelt has forced us to consider whether Auschwitz has not made any such repetition impossible. In their *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* he and Carroll William Westfall had struggled with the possibility of just such a repetition, Westfall with little doubt concerning the continued viability and desirability of classicism, van Pelt with considerable sympathy for Heidegger’s position, which also calls for a repetition of the Greek beginning, but one that would not be a timid borrowing from the past, but a genuine rebirth. But any attempt to think such a repetition is called into question by the connection between the ethical and political function that Heidegger had assigned to art — and that so many have dreamed and continue to dream of — and the art and architecture of National Socialism, which includes, van Pelt points out, the architecture of Auschwitz. Van Pelt’s found his own effort to contribute to an articulation of “architectural principles in the age of historicism” derailed by his understanding of that connection and he responded by turning from architectural theory to cultural history, more especially to the history of Auschwitz. He became a leading expert on the subject and in that capacity gave testimony that helped to defeat the suit the British historian David Irving had brought for libel against Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt, who had accused Irving of holocaust denial.

What room does Auschwitz leave for talk about an ethical or political function for art or architecture? For van Pelt Auschwitz meant the triumph of nihilism.

To live without trust in the world means to live without trust in the mind. I believe that the intellectual after Auschwitz is doomed to discover sooner or later that the foundations of her learning are sunk in an abyss of despair. When she discovers that the ground on which she stands is cursed with an unredeemable past, she will surrender to apathy or to that form of despair which Kierkegaard defined as defiance. Kierkegaard defined defiance as the despair of him who “wants to begin a little earlier than do other men, not at and with the beginning, but ‘in the beginning’; he does not want to put on

his own self, does not want to see his given self as his task — he himself wants to compose himself by means of being the infinite form.” It is clear that the author’s search for Architectural Principles after Auschwitz ... was such an act of defiance.²⁶⁷

I agree with van Pelt that the loss of trust in the world, whatever its source, tends to lead to apathy or the kind of defiance Kierkegaard described so well. Sartre’s fundamental project invites discussion in these terms, as does the art it helps us to understand, including the turn to abjection. But does Auschwitz leave us no alternative to such a loss of trust in the world?

For Van Pelt, as for many others, Auschwitz possesses a unique significance. I am suspicious of invocations of "uniqueness." There is a sense in which everything real, including every historical event, every person, is unique, and another in which nothing we can describe is unique. Much depends here on how "unique" is to be understood. The dictionary defines "unique" as "what has no like or equal." But the disjunction invites questioning: "what has no like" discourages comparison, leaves us without words; "what has no equal" invites comparison. Too easy insistence on the uniqueness of the holocaust removes what happened into a quasi-sacred realm that discourages responsible reflection, threatening to make out of the horror of Auschwitz something like a satanic golden calf, its mystery as closed to reason as is Abraham's God in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Anyone committed to reason should be on guard whenever something is called "unique."

The same goes for the claim that the death camps and genocide mark a new phase in human history. To understand the camps and genocide as a radical break blocks efforts at understanding. Auschwitz belongs, horrifyingly so, into this modern age and demands of us an inquiry into the conditions that made it possible so that we can attempt to make sure that nothing like it will happen in the future. Among these conditions I would list an understanding of reality, inseparable from our science and technology, that would have us reckon, not just with nature, but with human beings, too,

²⁶⁷ Robert Jan van Pelt, "Apocalyptic Abjection," in Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 380-381. The quoted passage is from Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 68.

as material to be used, used up, and discarded when for some reason no longer wanted.²⁶⁸ Among these conditions I would list also a still growing self-preoccupation that makes it ever more difficult to respond to and assume responsibility for the suffering of the other; list also the desire to reoccupy the place left vacant by the death of God with golden calves of one sort or another.

2

Van Pelt's response to Auschwitz recalls Adorno's pronouncement that there could be no poetry after Auschwitz. Adorno knew of course that without qualifications, the statement could be defended as little as Hegel's pronouncement concerning the end of art. "The proposition, after Auschwitz it is no longer possible to write a poem, is not valid without qualifications: but this is certain: that after Auschwitz, because it was possible and remains possible for further than we can see, no art that is serene or cheerful (*heiter*) can be imagined. Objectively it will degenerate into cynicism, no matter how it borrows the goodness of human understanding."²⁶⁹ Adorno recognized that this supposed impossibility was not just grounded in the horror of Auschwitz, but had deeper roots: "such an impossibility of great poetry was sensed almost a century before the European catastrophe, first perhaps with Baudelaire, then also with Nietzsche and in the rejection of humor by the school of George. Humor passed over into polemic parody. There it finds a temporary refuge for as long as it remains implacable, without consideration of the concept of reconciliation, which once was part of the concept humor."²⁷⁰ How easily Adorno here moves from poetic greatness to serenity and to a humor that lovingly embraces its object! But today, he suggests, the work of an artist, who attempts lovingly to embrace reality, will ring false, will degenerate into kitsch. And today such kitsch is comical. "The truth content of joy seems to have become

²⁶⁸ For a more extended discussion, see Karsten Harries, "Philosophy, Politics, Technology," in Karsten Harries and Christoph Jamme, eds., *Martin Heidegger: Politics, Art, and Technology* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1994), pp. 225 – 245.

²⁶⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Ist die Kunst heiter?" *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch, 1981), p. 603-604.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 604.

unreachable.”²⁷¹ And as the truth of joy has become unreachable, so also has our ability to take ourselves very seriously. It has become difficult for us not to understand a work such as Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* as high-class kitsch. How we would welcome true comedy:

Those were still good days, with corners to slip away to and sloppiness in the midst of the system of horror when Hajek wrote his *Schwejk*. But comedies about fascism became accomplices of that stupid habit of thought, which thought it already defeated because the stronger battalions of world history opposed it. The posture of the victor becomes least the opponents of the fascists, which have the duty not to resemble those in any way, who entrench themselves in that position. The historical forces that do not belong to the surface are much too powerful for anyone to treat them, as if he were supported by world history and the leaders were indeed the clowns whose childish chatter their murderous speeches came to resemble only in retrospect.²⁷²

Adorno’s pessimism, which denies the possibility of a genuinely serene (*heitere*) art today — and such *Heiterkeit* (the word resists translation into English) is all but equated by Adorno with artistic greatness — has its foundation in his understanding of modernity as a system of horror that no longer allows for hiding places, no longer suffers breakdowns that offer a refuge to true humanity. According to Adorno, we fail to understand the scope of that system when we allow the evil of Auschwitz to blind us to what continues to make genuine *Heiterkeit* impossible. The section of “Ist die Kunst heiter?” that includes the cited remark on Auschwitz begins thus with a quite different, yet, if Adorno is right, related phenomenon: “Ever since art is being reigned in by the culture industry and takes its place among the consumer goods, its *Heiterkeit* is synthetic, false, bewitched. Where *Heiterkeit* makes its appearance today it is disfigured, appearing as something that has been ordered, down to that ominous ‘nevertheless’ of the tragic posture that consoles itself with the thought: well, this is the way life is. Art, which no longer is possible except as reflected, has to renounce any claim to *Heiterkeit*.”²⁷³ Not that it can therefore claim a more profound seriousness (*Ernst*). No: *Ernst* and *Heiterkeit* belong together. In contemporary art we can detect

²⁷¹ Ibid., p. 605.

²⁷² Ibid., 604.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 603.

thus “a dying-off of the alternative of *Heiterkeit* and *Ernst*, of comedy and tragedy, almost of life and death. With this art negates its entire past, presumably because the familiar alternative expresses a state split between the happiness of continuing life and disaster that is the medium of its continuation. Art beyond *Heiterkeit* and *Ernst* can be a cipher of reconciliation, but just as easily a cipher of terror in the face of the completion of the disenchantment of the world. Such art is born both of disgust, aroused by the omnipresence of open and disguised advertising for human existence, and of resistance to the elevated posture that by heightening suffering once again takes the side of those who insist that it cannot be changed.”²⁷⁴ Such art, we can say, defines itself against two kinds of kitsch, the one sweet, the other sour.²⁷⁵

3

Adorno made his remarks in 1949. Times have changed. His pathos has become harder to accept. We have grown more suspicious of such gravity. Meanwhile art has continued. But the kind of serenity and seriousness Adorno declared impossible after Auschwitz have not returned. Advertising and money have become still more decisive forces in the art world, making it ever more difficult for artists to resist their embrace. All too much artistic production today serves to conjure up an image of the good life that settles for simulacra of reality. Such substitution helps to define kitsch. And as Adorno saw so clearly, art does not escape kitsch when, attempting to keep its distance from bourgeois pleasures, it turns to the abject, wallows in suffering and decay, thinking that thereby it comes closer to laying hold of reality. This, too, is rarely more than a phantasm. Must not genuine art define itself in opposition all such phantasms, and that is to say, in opposition to kitsch? In opposition also to that spirit of gravity in whom Nietzsche's Zarathustra recognized his arch-enemy?

Opposition to the spirit of gravity governs Lyotard's essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" which concludes with a call to war that gives it the ring of an artist's manifesto: "We are in a moment of relaxation — I am speaking of the

²⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 605-606.

²⁷⁵ Cf. Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 82.

tenor of the times. Everywhere we are being urged to give up experimentation, in the arts and elsewhere. ... Beneath the general demand for relaxation and appeasement, we hear murmurings of the desire to reinstitute terror and fulfill the phantasm of taking possession of reality. The answer is this: war on totality. Let us attest to the unpresentable; let us activate the differends and save the honor of the name" (pp.1 and 16).²⁷⁶ — I am too much of a pacifist not to be on guard when someone sounds a call to war. I want to know what cause it is that demands my engagement, weigh the slogans that demand my allegiance.

In that essay Lyotard presents us with a simple, perhaps too simple, account of postmodernism that deserves our attention. Lyotard knows that many have claimed the "postmodern" label for themselves and yet would want nothing to do with the postmodernism he has in mind. But if what Lyotard offers us is only a model that accentuates some aspects at the expense of others, it does open our eyes to something essential and invites us to take a stand.

Lyotard does not so much oppose postmodernism to modernism, as he places it within it. How then does he understand "modernism"? Artistic modernism, Lyotard claims, moves within the orbit of the sublime: "the aesthetic of the sublime is where modern art (including literature) find its impetus, and where the logic of the avant-garde finds its axioms" (p. 10). Since he locates postmodernism within modernism, it is to be expected that postmodern art, on his view, should find its impetus in a variant of the aesthetic the sublime. What distinguishes the postmodern from the modern appropriations of the sublime is that the former has shed modernist nostalgia (p. 14).

What does modernist nostalgia long for? According to Lyotard, too, it longs for lost reality. "Modernity, whenever it appears, does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the lack of reality in reality, — a discovery linked to the invention of other realities" (p. 9). This formulation presupposes that in an important sense reality has not been lost. And how could it have been lost? First of all and most of the time we do not doubt our body's reality, the reality of those we live with, of the

²⁷⁶ All page references in this chapter are to Jean-François Lyotard, "Answer to the Question: What is Postmodernism," in *The Postmodern Explained. Correspondence 1982 - 1985*, trans. Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Prefanis, Virginia Spate, and Morgan Thomas (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

things we encounter. How then are we to understand reality's "lack of reality," this background condition of modern art?

Lyotard hints at the answer when he claims that modern art longs for "the all and the one, for a reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, for a transparent and communicable experience" (p. 16), longs for the incarnation of what can be thought and dreamed of in what can be seen and experienced, an incarnation so complete it would absorb us in a way that would leave no room for questions such as: What is this work about? What does it mean? Absorption and presence have become key words in discussions of modernist painting. Modern art appears here as an expression of modernity's unhappy consciousness, unhappy precisely because never quite at home in the world, with things, which it projects against a background of possibilities that renders what happens to be the case arbitrary and contingent. Full presence would defeat arbitrariness and contingency. Nostalgia for lost plenitude, lost presence, is on this view the dominant mood of modern art. Recall Frank Stella's dream of an art so lean, accurate, and right that it would allow us just to look at it.²⁷⁷ This would allow the observer to become a pure eye, would let us experience the artwork as a presence no longer haunted by unfulfilled possibilities, by absent meaning. The painting will of course never be lean enough; it still means, even if it means only to present itself as simply being. Thus we experience the painting as a presentation of a finally unpresentable presence. To use Lyotard's language: the artwork seeks to show "that there is something we can conceive of which we can neither see nor show" (p. 11). Just this, according to Lyotard, "is at stake in modern painting" and it is to characterize this vain pursuit of presentations of a reality that remain unpresentable, the supposedly futile pursuit of the incarnation of meaning in matter long associated with the term beauty, that Lyotard invokes the category of the sublime. Here his characterization of the aesthetics of sublime painting: "As painting, it will evidently 'present' something, but negatively. It will therefore avoid figuration or representation; it will be 'blank' [blanche] like one of Malevich's squares; it will make one see only by prohibiting one from seeing; it will

²⁷⁷ "Questions to Stella and Judd," Interview with Bruce Glaser, edited by Lucy R. Lippard, *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), pp. 157-158.

give pleasure only by giving pain" (p. 11). Modernist sensibility refuses representation and figuration because it senses in all that art might represent a lack of reality, an arbitrariness, an absence of what might make things weighty enough to be worthy of the artist's celebrating representation.

But what has been called a lack of reality need not be understood as a lack at all. It may be considered an opportunity. This change in mood characterizes postmodernism as Lyotard understands it. Postmodern art is modern art that has shed modernist nostalgia for plenitude and weightiness, for absorption and presence, for God and reality: "If it is true that modernity unfolds in the retreat of the real and according to the sublime relationship of the presentable with the conceivable, we can (to use a musical idiom) distinguish two essential modes in this relationship. The accent can fall on the inadequacy of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence experienced by the human subject and the obscure and futile will that animates it in spite of everything" (p. 13). But such nostalgia can also be shed: "Or else the accent can fall on the power of the faculty to conceive, on what one might call its 'inhumanity' (a quality Apollinaire insists on in modern artists), since it is of no concern to the understanding whether or not the human sensibility or imagination accords with what it conceives — and on the extension of being and jubilation that come from inventing new rules of the game, whether pictorial, artistic, or something else" (p. 13). Within modern art Lyotard thus distinguishes two strands, one ruled by *melancholia*, melancholy, the other committed to *novatio*, innovation. Thus he opposes the German expressionists to Braque and Picasso, Malevich to the later Lissitzky, de Chirico to Duchamp. And thus we may want to oppose Stella to Rauschenberg or Anselm Kiefer to Gerhard Richter.

A great deal here requires further discussion. I shall focus on three questions:

1. How are we to understand that "lack of reality" that Lyotard understands as the background condition of modern art?
2. How justified is Lyotard's invocation of the Kantian sublime to characterize the impetus of both modernism and postmodernism?
3. Should we welcome the substitution of *novatio* for *melancholia* that is said to characterize the postmodern sublime?

4

The first question returns us to by now familiar ground. Lyotard does have good reason to link modernity to a withdrawal of the real. A loss of reality is inseparable from the commitment to truth on which our science and technology rest. This ever-unfolding commitment has to lead to a derealization of reality. For what is that truth? Traditionally truth is thought to reside first of all in judgments or assertions. The essence of truth is thought to lie in the agreement of the judgment with its object. But to recognize such agreement that object must be accessible to us as it really is. How do we gain such access? By simply looking at it? The commitment to truth has to lead to a progressive dissociation of the real from what presents itself to the senses, has to lead to the modern understanding of reality as essentially invisible, to be captured as a precarious construct of the understanding. In this sense one can speak with Lyotard of a "retreat of the real" from whatever presents itself to our senses. Plato already compared the fine arts, precisely because they are caught up in the sensible, unfavorably to the arts of measuring, numbering, and weighing, which "come to the rescue of the human understanding," so that appearance "no longer has the mastery over us." Appearance has to give way "before calculation and measure and weight."²⁷⁸ "Painting" on the other hand, when it is doing its "own proper work," according to Plato "is far removed from the truth, and from reason."²⁷⁹

The commitment to truth, so understood, demands a self-elevation that transforms our sense of reality, as it transforms our sense of self, changing the embodied self into a thinking substance. The thinking self that is the ideal subject of modern science is the self that has freed itself from the limits imposed on it by its body and the accident of its make-up and location and thus gained a more adequate access to what is. That liberation, however, is a liberation only in thought. We lack eyes to see things objectively. Our understanding grasps reality only in its own constructions. To make sure that such constructions are more than fantastic fictions science therefore must return to the world in the form of experiment and technology. Technology carries the progressive liberation from the accident of location into the world. Spiritual mobility

²⁷⁸ Plato, *Republic X*, 602.

²⁷⁹ *Republic X*, 603.

leads to physical mobility. By the same token technology carries what I have termed the loss of reality into our everyday. In this sense Lyotard can claim that "Modernity ... does not occur without a shattering of belief, without a discovery of the *lack of reality* in reality, — a discovery linked to the invention of other realities" (p. 9).

The more modern science and technology carry the attack on place and thus on reality into our everyday life, the more we can expect that life to be tinged by a sense of being on the road, of living in mobile homes — has not the earth itself become such a mobile home? — can we expect that life to be tinged by a sense of not belonging, of being denied the possibility of really dwelling somewhere. Lebbeus Woods' architectural fantasies offer illustrations of the sublime terror of space. Kundera connected this terror to the unbearable lightness of being.

Inseparable from such terror is the longing for boundaries and centers strong enough to once more establish place, boundaries that would allow us to experience once more that special aura of place, that once again would give weight to persons and things. Heidegger's reading of Van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes, his pursuit of the thingliness of things, betrays the same longing. Bound up with such longing to escape from that derealization that seems part of modern reality is the temptation to seek comfort in false absolutes: If God should indeed be dead, some golden calf or other will have to do, where every golden calf can be considered with Lyotard a presentation of what is unrepresentable, but one that refuses to acknowledge the latter's unrepresentability. Like genuine faith, Lyotard's brand of postmodernism defines itself by its opposition to all golden calves. In this spirit Lyotard endorses Kant's characterization of the commandment "Thou shalt not make unto Thee any graven images" (Exodus 20:4) as "the most sublime [passage] in the Bible, in that it forbids any presentation of the absolute" (p. 11). Translated into the language of aesthetics, this becomes a commandment against kitsch, for kitsch claims to be able to present the values that preside over our life in such a way that they can readily be grasped. Thus it promises to heal the rift that rends concept and percept. Once more the world presents itself to us as whole. When Lyotard insists that the aesthetic of the sublime has given modern art its impetus and direction, he, too, places modern art in opposition to the beauty of kitsch,

which it seeks to overcome with strategies of abstraction, derealization, ironic detachment.

5

Lyotard invokes Kant's understanding of the category of the sublime to characterize the impetus of both modernism and postmodernism. I find this a surprising invocation, surprising first of all because it is Kant's discussion of pure beauty that has generally been taken as a point of departure for an aesthetic of modern art, for example by Greenberg; surprising also because Kant's aesthetic of the sublime focuses on sublime nature and has almost nothing to say about art; surprising finally in view of Lyotard's mention of Kant's characterization of the commandment "Thou shalt not make unto Thee any graven images" as the most sublime passage in the Bible, for that remark²⁸⁰ implies not a call for art, but a denial of art's ability to give expression to the absolute. Once we have recognized with Plato that art, when it is doing its "own proper work," is far removed from truth and reason, we will no longer demand of art that it serve the truth or lead us to the good life.

And is such recognition not bound up with the shape of our modern world? Why should art, as Lyotard would have it continue to do, bear witness to the inevitable futility of its attempt to represent the unrepresentable. Why not follow Hegel and accept a more modest role for art? To be sure, artists may find it difficult to accept the modest role that the modern aesthetic approach leaves them, to accept a view that threatens to reduce art to no more than a form of entertainment. But works that claim to present what we know cannot be presented, such as Dali's *Last Supper*, are likely to be attacked as kitsch by the art establishment, as false, and this presupposes that such critics continue to measure art by some standard of truth.

Lyotard is such a critic. And only because he is, can he invoke what Kant called the sublime commandment against the making of graven images to draw from it imperatives for an aesthetic of sublime art. Thus he, too, challenges the boundary between art and religion, beauty and morality established by the aesthetic approach, which no longer would have us look to art for presentations of the absolute. On this

²⁸⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, A 123.

aesthetic understanding modern art betrays itself and moves towards kitsch whenever it violates that injunction. This suggests that the proper answer to kitsch is not, as the postmodernist Lyotard suggests, a turn to the sublime, but as the modernist Clement Greenberg saw,²⁸¹ a turn to a purified understanding of art and beauty, where, as we have seen, Kant may once more be said to have provided decisive pointers, but not in the aesthetic of the sublime, but in his discussion of pure beauty.

Kant's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime appeals to two fundamentally different moods. At issue are profoundly different attitudes to nature and self.

Natural beauty (which is independent) brings with it a purposiveness in its form by which the object seems to be, as it were, preadapted to our judgment, and thus constitutes in itself an object of satisfaction. On the other hand, that which excites in us, without any reasoning about it, but in the mere apprehension of it, the feeling of the sublime may appear, as regards its form, to violate purpose in respect of the judgment, to be unsuited to our presentative faculty, and as it were to do violence to the imagination, and yet it is judged to be only the more sublime.²⁸²

The imagination cannot hold on to the sublime as if it were a beautiful picture. The beautiful, on the other hand, presents itself as if had been made to be appreciated by us. In beautiful nature we feel at home. It thus readily leads to thoughts of a benevolent deity.

Not only the holocaust has made it difficult for us moderns to take such thoughts seriously. That is why modern art that portrays beautiful nature strikes us so often as false. Sublime nature, on the other hand, resists such interpretation. It forces us to acknowledge our homelessness in nature and thus casts us back to our solitary selves. But precisely this mood of homelessness awakens something in us that is not bound to what can be sensed or imagined, a faculty that allows us to transcend ourselves as beings of nature. Kant speaks of reason, where his reason is inseparably linked to freedom.

Kant insists that, while in the case of the beautiful the reason for our sense of well being must be sought in the beautiful — in the case of beautiful nature, it must be

²⁸¹ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture. Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp.3 - 21.

²⁸² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, par. 23, A 75; trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1964), p. 83.

sought in the makeup of nature — this is not so with the sublime: "All that we can say is that the object is fit for the presentation of a sublimity which can be found in the mind, for no sensible form can contain the sublime properly so-called."²⁸³ While the beautiful is thing-centered, the sublime is self-centered. In sublime nature human beings recognize their own sublimity, recognizes that they are more than just parts of nature, tiny atoms lost in the boundless cosmos. As beings possessing freedom and reason we are capable of transcending even the boundless cosmos.

Lyotard's suggestion that we derive from the Kantian sublime an aesthetic of modernist painting presupposes that artists continue to pursue the absolute, even as they must recognize that the absolute can be presented only negatively as the unrepresentable. Lyotard continues to cling here to a version of what Hegel considered art in its highest sense and only because he does, can he characterize sublime modernist painting as presenting what refuses presentation, as letting us see what escapes being captured by sight: "In these formulations we can recognize the axioms of the avant-gardes in painting, to the extent that they dedicate themselves to allusions to the unrepresentable through visible presentations. ... They remain inexplicable without the incommensurability between reality and concept implied by the Kantian philosophy of the sublime" (pp. 11-12). Malevich spoke of painting icons to a God who had become zero.

6

Kant was too much of a moralist not to have been suspicious of art. How can we justify spending time and money on art when there are so many more important things, hunger, injustice, suffering, that demand our attention. "An interest in beautiful art ... furnishes no proof whatever of a disposition attached to the morally good or even inclined thereto."²⁸⁴ Would Kant have judged someone with an interest in sublime art differently? Would such a person not have to be grouped with those who seek out sublime nature from, as Kant put it, amateur curiosity?

²⁸³ Ibid., par. 23, A 75-76; trans. pp. 83-84.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., par. 42, A 164; trans. p. 141.

The natural sublime holds significance for Kant because it prepares for resolute acceptance of the moral law. But the moral law does not appear to be what Lyotard has in mind when he speaks of the postmodern sublime. When he celebrates *novatio*, innovation, "the extension of being and jubilation that come from inventing new rules of the game, whether pictorial, artistic, or something else," Lyotard places the postmodern sublime in unending opposition to the comforts provided by the established and accepted. He celebrates a freedom that would outstrip whatever would bind it, including Kant's moral law. But once the pleasure we take in the sublime has thus been severed from the moral, a dissociation that corresponds to the dissociation of freedom from the moral law, such pleasure becomes the narcissistic pleasure the solitary self takes in the free play of its own thoughts and inventiveness, which ceaselessly trespasses the boundaries of the currently accepted and acceptable in search of ever new experiences. In other words, once severed from the moral, the postmodern sublime begins to look a lot like what has long been discussed in terms of the category of the interesting. Instead of invoking the Kantian sublime, would we not do better to understand the aesthetics of postmodern art as an aesthetics of the interesting?²⁸⁵

There are those who have interpreted postmodernism as born of a humanistic critique of modernism. Understood in this way, postmodernism is as old as modernism, is indeed modernism's shadow. Nietzsche and Heidegger could be associated with postmodernism so understood. But while this may help us to understand certain developments in, say, architecture, it is not easily applied to the history of modern and postmodern painting. How many of the giants of modern art could be said to have embraced joyfully the dominion of scientific rationality and technology over our lives, an embrace that characterizes architectural modernism? Most of them, it would seem, sought to challenge that rule with their art. If an acceptance of the disenchantment of the world that is bound up with the hegemony of science and technology is taken to define modernism, would these artists not have to be called postmodernists? But if so, what is supposed to separate modern from postmodern art become blurred. To put this

²⁸⁵ See Karsten Harries, "Modernity's Bad Conscience," *AA Files*, no. 10, Autumn 1985, pp. 53-60. Also *The Meaning of Modern Art*, pp. 49-60.

point paradoxically: in that case modern art appears to have been postmodern from the very beginning. A different understanding seems needed.

But such a "humanistic" reading of postmodernism is different from that advanced by Lyotard, who explicitly invokes the "inhumanity" that Apollinaire demanded of the modern artist, that is our ability to trespass and violate whatever has come to be accepted as human in the name of the new. And do we not unduly burden what has been called postmodernism when we insist that it serve a humanist ethos? Did not Robert Venturi provide us with a pointer to what really mattered when he opposed to Mies's "less is more" his own "less is a bore."²⁸⁶ Was it the inhumanity of modernist architecture that provoked this postmodernist? Was it nor rather the fact that it was simply boring? Is this not, as Ada Huxtable observed, "the cardinal twentieth century sin" with which postmodernists charged modernists?²⁸⁷ As Kierkegaard observed, the boring is annulled by the interesting. This suggests that postmodern aesthetics is at bottom an aesthetics of the interesting. Lyotard can be cited in support: with its emphasis on negation and innovation, the postmodern sublime turns out to be just another version of the interesting.

As Kierkegaard pointed out long ago, cultivation of the interesting presupposes an understanding of what has come to be established and accepted. The normal is boring, the abnormal interesting. Boredom provides the soil in which the interesting thrives, which offers the thrills of the not quite expected. The appeal of the interesting is thus essentially short-lived. It depends for its effect on changing expectations. That Duchamp should be one of the heroes of Lyotard's postmodern sublime is to be expected. The way his *Fountain* deliberately confused the established categories "work of art" and "piece of plumbing" was certainly interesting. But we would fail to respect the success of this paradigmatic achievement were we to attempt to repeat his achievement and literally or figuratively drag all sorts of plumbing pieces into galleries in an inevitably futile attempt to generate a comparable interest. Today such repetitions are just boring. No longer do they test the boundary of art. And must a work today not

²⁸⁶ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, second edition (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 17.

²⁸⁷ Ada Louise Huxtable, "After Modern Architecture," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 30, no. 19 (December 8, 1983), p. 34.

challenge that boundary, challenge the very meaning of art, if we are to find it interesting?²⁸⁸ Duchamp's enormously inventive questioning of the nature of art has invited countless successor acts even as its success has cast an inhibiting shadow on all those who would follow his example. The interesting demands novelty. If one has an interest in the interesting, to say that something has already been done is devastating criticism.

Key texts for anyone who wants to formulate an aesthetics of the interesting would have to include Friedrich Schlegel's "Modern Poesy"²⁸⁹ and Kierkegaard's "Rotation Method."²⁹⁰ Schlegel was perhaps the first to use the concept of the "interesting" to interpret the meaning of "modern" in "modern art" and "modern poetry" — an interpretation that invites comparison with Lyotard's determination of the modern sublime. Kierkegaard had indeed already recognized a connection between the sublime and the interesting, a connection hinted at by Kant's mention of the tourist who is led to his appreciation of the sublime scenery of the Alps by what Kant calls "amateur curiosity." Kierkegaard recognizes in boredom the middle term that links the sublime and the interesting. There is indeed something sublime about boredom. Consider our everyday life: day after day the same place, the same routines, the same sights, the same job, the same wife, the same art. Why be committed to such a dull state of affairs? Such reflections, Kierkegaard suggests, cause a dizziness "like that which comes from looking down into a bottomless abyss." This "dizziness is infinite."²⁹¹ That Kierkegaard here turns to the rhetoric of the sublime is significant.

Schlegel already saw that, to the extent that art is governed by the pursuit of the interesting, we should expect an accelerating and finally futile race for the ever more interesting. The desire for the interesting has to lead to dissatisfaction with whatever is now expected. Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* provides a devastating immanent critique of the

²⁸⁸ Cf. Lyotard, pp. 6-7: "As Thierry de Duve astutely observes, the question of modern aesthetics is not 'What is beautiful?' but 'What is art to be (and literature).'"

²⁸⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, "Die moderne Poesie (1795-96), in *Schriften und Fragmente*, ed. Ernst Behler (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1956), pp. 114-121.

²⁹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, "Rotation of Crops. A Venture in a Theory of Social Prudence," *Either/Or*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Howard V Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol. 1, pp. 282 – 300.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

interesting that Lyotard's postmodern sublime needs to confront. Once more consider his questionable invocation of the Kantian sublime: as Kant understands it, the experience of the sublime raises human beings beyond their merely natural being. What presents itself first as a threatening abyss becomes a source of delight, once the human being discovers that she is more than just an insignificantly small, ephemeral part of nature, that she is also a free spirit. But for Kant such discovery is inseparably linked to an acknowledgement of the moral law. According to Kant, it is the universality of that law that offers us moderns our spiritual home. The progressive incarnation of the universal in the natural and particular presents us with an infinite task. Not artistic play, but responsible action answers to that task, action that will make the world ever more our home. But such action would have to seem pointless if the world were so indifferent to this task as to rob us of all hope to make things at least somewhat better. — Today the shadow of Auschwitz and all it figures covers such Enlightenment optimism.

Kant would have been unable to agree with Lyotard that "it is not up to us to *provide reality*," that all that is up to us is "to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable" (p. 15). Whether or not the world is experienced in a way that lets us despair of the possibility of responsible action is indeed our business. Van Pelt is right: "To live without trust in the world means to live without trust in the mind." Reason is powerless to give such trust a foundation. But reason is similarly powerless to undermine such trust, which is supported by a mood that Kant tied to an appreciation of the beauty of nature. Has such appreciation become impossible or indecent after Auschwitz? Van Pelt believes "that the intellectual after Auschwitz is doomed to discover sooner or later that the foundations of her learning are sunk in an abyss of despair." But this is a belief and no such belief, whether in doom or salvation, can appeal to reason for a foundation. Confidence in the possible efficacy of responsible action presupposes some sense of what Kant calls the purposiveness of nature, that is to say, presupposes an appreciation of its beauty; presupposes an understanding of the world as our home, despite all that argues against it. Beauty is necessary if the self-transcending subject is to find his or her home on earth. To Lyotard's call for a postmodern-sublime I would therefore like to oppose a quite old-fashioned plea for beauty and for an art seeking to re-present the beauty of nature.

12. Evening Art

1

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Nietzsche's death the poet Gottfried Benn wrote this appreciation for the *Révue littéraire* 84:

At bottom everything that my generation discussed, wrestled with and pulled apart, one can say suffered, one can also say, flattened — all that had already been expressed and exhausted by Nietzsche, had been given by him its definitive formulation. All that followed was exegesis. ... He is, as is becoming ever more clear, the far-reaching giant of the epoch that follows that of Goethe ... For my generation he was the earthquake of the epoch and since Luther the greatest genius of the German language.²⁹²

Do we today still understand what Nietzsche meant to Benn and to his generation, especially to the artists and poets of the first half of the 20th century?²⁹³ Benn was speaking in 1950, five years after the end of the Second World War. He was speaking about the spiritual situation that shaped the art world of the twenties and thirties, especially in Germany. But what is that world to us today? Our world has been shaken by different earthquakes, by Auschwitz and Hiroshima. More recently America has been shaken by 9/11. Can our art be understood as an answer to the earthquake Nietzsche? Is there a connection between that earthquake and those that followed?

On August 25, 1950 — Nietzsche died August 25, 1900, German radio broadcast a lecture by Benn, entitled "Nietzsche — after Fifty Years," which shows in more detail how Benn understood Nietzsche's importance for modern art. Nietzsche, according to Benn,

inaugurated the "fourth man" of whom there is so much talk today, the human being suffering from the "loss of the center," which in romantic fashion one is trying to reawaken, the human being without moral or philosophical content, who lives only for principles of form and expression. It is an error to think that the human being still has a content or must have one. The human being is concerned with feeding himself, with

²⁹² Gottfried Benn, "Nietzsche — nach fünfzig Jahren," in: *Essays. Reden. Vorträge, Gesammelte Werke*, 4 vols., ed. Dieter Wellershof, (Wiesbaden; Limes, 1959), vol. 1, p. 482.

²⁹³ An earlier German version of this chapter was published as "Abendröte der Kunst?" *Nietzsche und die Moderne, Natur und Kunst in Nietzsches Denken*, ed. Harald Seufert (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2002, pp. 59-74.

family, advancement, ambition, neuroses, but that is no longer a content in a metaphysical sense. That is no longer the animism of earlier stages, which raised powers and brought about transformations in the human being. This conjuring human being no longer exists. Indeed, the human being no longer exists, only his symptoms. Nietzsche's verse: "wer das verlor, was du verlorst, macht nirgends Halt" ("Whoever lost what you lost, does not stop anywhere") can be read only in this sense: he lost the content ...²⁹⁴

When Benn spoke of "the loss of the center,' which in romantic fashion one is trying to reawaken," he was referring to a bestseller of the day, *Der Verlust der Mitte*, "The Loss of the Center," translated into English as *Art in Crisis*, written by the conservative art historian Hans Sedlmayr, who having espoused National Socialism, was now looking, in what Benn considers good romantic fashion, in the direction of the old religion to return to modern man that center that had been lost, and with it, so Sedlmayr, him- or herself. In modern art Sedlmayr found countless expressions of this loss. Indeed modern art in its entirety was interpreted as an art of the lost center, an interpretation quite in keeping with Lyotard's understanding of modern art as falling under the category of the sublime, for the mood of the sublime is a mood of not feeling at home in the world, of being adrift, at sea. Benn does not disagree with any of this. Only, like Lyotard, he deplors the romantic attempt to return to the old God or, even more, to some kitsch construction, some golden calf, to make up for what has been lost. As Nietzsche insisted, the dead God remains dead.

Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up and down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? God's, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there to cleanse ourselves? What festivals of atonement shall we have to invent?²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ Benn, *Werke*, vol. 1, p. 492.

²⁹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, V, 367, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag;

With the death of God the architecture of values that once gave us our identity has lost its foundation. Slowly the walls are beginning to give way. Holocaust, nuclear destruction, and terror have made the smell of God's decomposition only more insistent. It continues to cling to much of the art of the present.

How did Nietzsche respond to this death? According to Benn, by destroying what remained of whatever once gave meaning to life:

This heart had destroyed everything it had encountered; philosophy, philology, theology, biology, causality, politics, erotics, truth, logical reasoning, being, identity — it had torn apart everything, destroyed the contents, annihilated the substances, wounded and maimed itself for the sake of one end: to let the fractured surfaces sparkle, whatever the danger and without regard for the results — that was his path. And his heart celebrated its breaking. “Everything about me is a lie,” says the magician in *Zarathustra*, “but that I am breaking — this breaking is genuine.” The contents without meaning, but to tear apart his inner being with words, the urge to express himself, to formulate, to blind, to sparkle — that was his existence.²⁹⁶

It is not difficult to make of this a recipe for art. The young Benn had attempted something of the sort and quite a number of artists continue to follow that path today. The passage thus invites consideration of the way deconstruction has made Nietzsche its patron saint. But do we have to be content with blinding, sparkling fragments, with splinters of the art that once was? Benn came to insist on more.

Does Benn here do justice to Nietzsche? To be sure, the magician is one of Nietzsche's masks, a mask that fills him with anguish and that he can never quite cast off. But does Nietzsche not call this mask into question, just as he calls Wagner into question? We must keep in mind that the magician first of all represents Wagner, also the Wagner in Nietzsche. But does Nietzsche not oppose to this side of himself other sides? And suppose Benn is right and the words of the magician can indeed be understood as a prelude of the expressionist understanding of art, more precisely, of Benn's own understanding of art, would this not mean that Nietzsche's thoughts also point us in quite a different direction or rather directions?

Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 3, p. 616; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1956), p. 105.

²⁹⁶ Benn, *Werke*, vol. 1, S. 489.

Benn would have us understand Nietzsche as an earthquake that separates two epochs: “the first God created in His image, the second the human being according to its forms; the realm in between, the realm of nihilism has come to an end.”²⁹⁷ In 1950 Benn feels already on the other side of the earthquake. The expressionist poet of the twenties had been closer to the self-lacerating Nietzsche. How will that other side look? According to Benn “the feeling for form” will be “the great transcendence of the new epoch,”²⁹⁸ which is showing itself ever more clearly in science, politics, and art. The world that is now arising stands in the sign of a turn to abstract form established by creative human beings. He celebrates Stefan George as an artist who helps us find a way in Nietzsche’s pathless deserts.

Dort is kein weg mehr über eisige Felsen
 Und horste grauer vögel — nun ist not:
 Sich bannen in den kreis den liebe schließt....

No path is left across those icy rocks
 And aeries of grey birds — now this is needful:
 To bind oneself into the circle that love closes. ...

Benn accompanies this with the gloss: “over there you see that unending having to go on, away from life’s noon into life’s night and here the possibility to come home, to bind oneself,” where the German *bannen* suggests binding by casting a spell. And so here you see a magician of sorts, an artist-magician “who encloses everything with a circle and defeats the demonic with the human.”²⁹⁹ We get a homecoming after all. The key to that homecoming is taken to be form.

The possibility of homecoming we are offered here recalls Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, who attempts to enclose everything with the ring of the eternal recurrence, this too described as a ring that love closes: *amor fati*. But how is this Zarathustra, who

²⁹⁷ Benn, “Rede auf Stefan George,” *Werke*, vol.1, p. 475.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 472.

speaks of the nuptial ring of rings, different from the magician who is being mocked by blinding glances of the evening sun running maliciously through black trees?

”Suitor of truth?” they mocked me; “you?

No! Only poet!³⁰⁰

Benn contents himself resignedly with the magician’s part, with being only poet, only artist. The victory of the human over the demonic is understood no longer as an enclosing of reality with a circle, for what the poet encircles with his words is not reality, but fiction, dream. But what does “reality” mean here. Has that earthquake as which Benn and his fellow expressionists experienced Nietzsche not also derealized and destroyed reality?

I said, between 1910 and 1925 there was no style in Europe that was not anti-naturalistic. For there also was no reality, at most its grotesque distortions. Reality: that was a capitalist concept. Reality that meant allotments, industrial products, mortgages, everything that could be given a price with money for the middleman. Reality, that was Darwinism, the international steeple-chases and everything in some fashion privileged. Reality, that was also war, hunger, the historical humiliations, having neither rights, nor power. The spirit had no reality. It turned to its inner reality, its being, its biology, its architecture, its both physiological and psychological crossing-out, its creation, its gleaming.³⁰¹

Not in the modern world’s derealized reality, but in memories mingled with dreams, does the poet find the content that he binds into a perfect whole. Once again a poem by Stefan George provides an example:

Komm in den totgesagten park und schau:
Der schimmer ferner lächelnder gestade --
Der reinen wolken unverhofftes blau
Erhellet die weiher und die bunten pfade.

Dort nimm das zarte gelb, das weiche grau
Von birken und von buchs, der wind its lau,

³⁰⁰ *Zarathustra*, Vierter Teil, “Das Lied der Schwermut,” *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, p. 371; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 410.

³⁰¹ Benn, “Expressionismus,” *Werke*, vol. 1, p. 245.

Die späten rosen welkten noch nicht ganz,
 Erlese, küsse sie und flicht den kranz.

Vergiss auch diese letzten astern nicht,
 Den purpur um die ranken wilder reben
 Und auch was übrig blieb vom grünen leben
 Verwinde leicht im herbstlichen gesicht.

Come in the park they said is dead and see
 The shimmer of some distant smiling shores —
 Unhoped for blue of the pure clouds
 Brightens both ponds and mottled paths

Here, take the tender yellow, the soft grey
 of birches and of boxwood, soft is the wind
 And the late roses not quite withered yet.
 Elect and kiss them, bind the wreath.

And don't forget there these last asters,
 The purple round the vines of the wild grape.
 And what remains of this green life
 Gently accept in the autumnal face.

According to Benn we find the poet here “entirely turned away from decay and what is evil, entirely given over to quiet recollection and inner self-sufficiency.”³⁰² By contrast, how much destruction is there in Nietzsche’s poetry, or in so much recent art. The threshold toward modern art, obsessed with form, cannot be crossed without convulsion and battle. — But Benn’s “entirely turned away” does not ring quite true. Everything does indeed seem “gentle, clear, Apollinian, lawful,” but only the horizon of the difficult to accept progress of time gives its special note to this poem, which looks for beauty

³⁰² Ibid., p. 471.

especially in the withering roses. And this is the mood that presides over the poetry of the late Benn. Here just one very brief example, the poem “Henri Matisse: ‘Asphodèles’.”³⁰³

“Sträuße — doch die Blätter fehlen,
Krüge, doch wie Urnen breit,
Asphodelen,
Der Proserpina geweiht. — ”

“Bunches of flowers — but the leaves are missing
Pitchers, but now broad as urns
Asphodels,
Consecrated to Persephone. — ”

The asphodel, said to be consecrated to Persephone, who belongs in her entirety neither to Demeter, nor to Pluto, neither to life nor to death, figures here the work of art, understood as essentially still-life, Apollinian middle between green life and blue death. Nietzsche would have called such a self-centered art monological, as opposed to an art before witnesses. “I know no deeper distinction in the entire optics of an artist than this one: whether he looks at the emerging work of art (at ‘himself’ —) with the eyes of the witness or whether he ‘has lost the world,’ as is essential in all monological art, — it is based *on forgetting*, is the music of forgetting.”³⁰⁴

Benn understands the art that follows the earthquake Nietzsche, including his own art, as such a music. The artist knows that such a merely aesthetically established center is powerless in the world. And yet it offers an answer to nihilism, even if that answer is no more than a wreath, bound out of what green life has left us. In this connection it is worth noting that Benn did not like dogs, which are often so annoyingly alive, but loved flowers, especially cut flowers, no longer able to live, such as a bowl of late roses which are beginning to lose their petals.

³⁰³ Gottfried Benn, *Gesammelte Gedichte*, 2nd ed (Wiesbaden/ Zurich: Limes Verlag and Arche Verlag, 1957), p. 231.

³⁰⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 367, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol.5, p. 616.

Autumn, evening, the end of an epoch: so understood the step beyond the threshold of nihilism becomes the step back, not to the old faith, but to the aesthetics of Schopenhauer: modern art comes to be understood as the sunset, the twilight of art.

2

With this I come to the title of this chapter, which refers to the aphorism that concludes the Fourth Part of Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human*, entitled, "From the Soul of Artists and Writers."

As in old age one recalls one's youth and celebrates one's memories, so soon humanity will stand to art in a relationship of a moving recollection of the joys of youth. Perhaps never before has art been understood so profoundly and soulfully as now that the magic of death appears to play around it. Think of that Greek City in Lower Italy that on one day still celebrated its Greek festivals, accompanied by melancholy and tears that foreign barbarism was triumphing over the customs one had brought with one. Never, one can suppose, was the Hellenic so enjoyed, never was this nectar slurped with such voluptuous pleasure as among these dying Greeks. The artist will soon be considered a splendid relic and one will pay him honors that we would not easily grant one of our own, as if he were some wonderful stranger on whose power and beauty depended the happiness of bygone ages. What is best in us is perhaps an inheritance of the sentiments of earlier times, to which we hardly have an immediate access any longer; the sun has already set; but the sky of our life still glows and receives its light from it, even though we do not see it any longer.³⁰⁵

According to this statement our art is an art after sunset. That points back to Hegel, forward to Heidegger. Not much later Nietzsche wrote *Dawn. Thoughts on The Moral Preconceptions*. There he speaks of the judgment of evening.

When one reflects about one's day's or life's work, when one has come to the end and is tired, one usually arrives at a melancholy observation: but this is not because of day or life, but because one is tired. — In the midst of creation we generally don't take the time to judge life and existence; nor in the midst of pleasure: should that happen anyway, we don't agree any longer with him who waits for the seventh day and rest in order find everything that is very beautiful. He missed the better moment.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I*, 223, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 2:, p. 186.

³⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe*, IV, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, p. 226.

Better than melancholy remembrance and quiet observation are creation and pleasure. Quite in that spirit Nietzsche, in *The Genealogy of Morals*, pokes fun at Kant's definition of the beautiful as what pleases without any interest.

If our aestheticians never weary of asserting in Kant's favor that, under the spell of beauty, one can *even* view undraped female statues "without interest," one may laugh a little at their expense: the experiences of *artists* on this ticklish point are more "interesting," and Pygmalion was in any event not necessarily an "unaesthetic man." Let us think the more highly of the innocence of our aestheticians which is reflected in such arguments; let us, for example credit it to the honor of Kant that he should expatiate on the peculiar properties of the sense of touch with the naiveté of a country parson.³⁰⁷

To follow Kant here means to have missed "the better moment." We would do better to listen to Stendhal, when he relates beauty to the future and to reality. According to Stendhal the beautiful promises happiness. Understood in this way, the beautiful lets us return to reality with renewed interest.

Nietzsche's primary concern here is not Kant, but an approach to art that had found in Kant's discussion of beauty a pointer to an art that would serve a disinterested satisfaction. More important than Kant is Schopenhauer, who mediated such an understanding of art as promising a redemption from reality, a momentary escape from the terror of time and thus provided Ersatz for that more complete redemption the former faith once promised. The death of God, nihilism, is a presupposition of art so understood. And this is how, Benn, too, came to understand art. His asphodel poem recalls what Schopenhauer had to say about those "excellent Dutchmen," as he called them, "who turned their purely objective observation to the most insignificant things and in their still-lives created a lasting monument to their objectivity and spiritual peace, which the aesthetic observer cannot observe without emotion, since it presents to him the pure, will-free state of mind of the artist"³⁰⁸ So understood, all genuine artworks are really still-lives. I am tempted to say flower still-lives: pictures showing cut flowers that have already begun to wither. Nietzsche teaches us to understand Schopenhauer as the philosopher of

³⁰⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III, 6, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 5, p. 347; trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, *On the Genealogy of Morals/ Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 104.

³⁰⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, I, par. 38, *Sämtliche Werke*, (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1965), vol. 2, p. 232.

the twilight of art, where we should not overlook how difficult it is for Nietzsche himself to step out of Schopenhauer's shadow. Consider once more the just cited aphorism about monological art. Such art also promises a happiness that is not to be found in reality, but by turning away from all interests that bind us to reality. And it is this happiness granted by disinterested contemplation that, according to Schopenhauer, also endows the past and all that is distant with the aura of something wonderful and presents it to us in a light that renders it more beautiful than in fact it was. Caught up in everyday worries a memory of something that happened long ago may thus flit by us like a trace of paradise.³⁰⁹ As a classicist Nietzsche knew only too well the magic of such recollection, which lets him portray his Zarathustra as having been at one time a night-watchman, who watched over glass coffins. Works of art that serve such a beauty promise a homecoming to something buried deep within, which lets what we usually call reality become less real. Here Nietzsche finds one reason for the strange fact that just what is closest to us is becoming ever more distant.

The more we think of everything that was and might be, the paler what is right now presents itself to us. When we live with those who have died and die with them their deaths, what then do those closest still mean to us? We become lonelier — and this is because the entire flood of humanity streams and sounds around us. The fire in us, which concerns all that is human, grows ever stronger — and thus we look at what surrounds us as if it had become more indifferent and more shadowlike. But our cold eye insults. —

310

Insults whom? Life?

3

Twilight or evening glow of art: how should we understand this? Is art the sun that has set and now grants us only a last after-glow of its former light? That hardly would seem to fit what Arthur Danto had in mind when he spoke of the end of art. What has ended, according to him, is not art as such, but only art governed by a particular kind of narrative. As we have seen, Danto does not mourn this end; he celebrates it as a liberation from preconceptions that have long burdened artists unnecessarily. Nietzsche's

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 234.

³¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe* V, 441, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3:, p. 269.

metaphor accordingly would not characterize what Danto calls art. What has come to an end is that form-obsessed art with its promise of at least an aesthetic center that promises us moderns, fated to live with death of God, some consolation, some Ersatz for what has been lost. Appealing to Nietzsche, Danto might even want to speak of a new dawn, although the realities of today's art do not make such talk easy.

Twilight or evening glow of art: that recalls also Hegel's insistence that the beautiful days of Greek art as well as the golden age of the later Middle Ages are over. Art from the side of its highest vocation lives on in our art only as a recollection. To be sure, Nietzsche lacked Hegel's sublimated faith in the divine resurrected as absolute spirit. But he, too, knew that the reflective culture of our modern age left no room for an art that claimed to be an incarnation of the divine. "The more capable of thought eye and ear become, the closer they get to that boundary where they become non-sensible: pleasure is translated into the brain, the sense organs themselves become mute and weak; the symbolic takes ever more the place of what is — and so we arrive by this road as surely at barbarism as by any other"³¹¹ We can also say: the signified replaces ever more the signifier. Many an exhibition today could be accompanied by Nietzsche's saying.

Nietzsche's aphorism "Stone is more stone than it used to be" complements the just cited passage:³¹² Once stone was less stone than it is today: something in or about stone veiled its stoniness. But are not stones pretty much what they always were? If anything has changed, must it not be our attitude to stones. In that aphorism, Nietzsche is not so much concerned with stones as with architecture. What he claims is that there was something about previous architecture that veiled the stoniness of stone. And he leaves the reader in no doubt concerning what it was that veiled stone: meaning. And that presumably holds not only for stone in architecture, but for all stone, and not only for stone, but for all matter, including paint and canvas. In traditional architecture, Nietzsche suggests, stones signified rather in the manner of a text. This aura of significance has been lost. "On the whole we no longer understand architecture, at least not in the way we understand music." No longer do we understand the symbolism of architectural forms.

³¹¹ Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, I, 217, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, pp. 177-178.

³¹² *Ibid.*, I, 218, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, p. 178.

"The meanings of forms have been forgotten and materials and their visual qualities are stressed." In Nietzsche's words, "We have outgrown the symbolism of lines and figures, just as we have been weaned from the sound effects of rhetoric, and have not drunk this kind of mother's milk of education from the first moment of our lives. Originally everything on a Greek or Christian building had a meaning, with an eye to a higher order of things: this aura of an inexhaustible significance surrounded the building like a magical veil." Beauty here remained linked with, but subordinate to a higher meaning: "Beauty entered the system only incidentally, without diminishing in any significant way the fundamental sensation of the uncanny sublime of what the proximity of the divine and magic had consecrated; beauty softened at most the terror — but this terror was everywhere the presupposition. What is the beauty of a building to us today? The same as the beautiful face of a woman without spirit: something mask-like."³¹³ Beauty, Nietzsche claims, used to appear as the veil of the numinous, linked with, but subordinate to higher meaning: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The aesthetic understanding of beauty as pleasing presence has severed that link. And analogously the use of materials in the great architecture of the past was linked with, but subordinate to the same higher meaning. Once again our modern understanding of matter has severed that link. And these two developments Nietzsche would have us think as related. The greater stoniness of stone and the mask-like character of modern beauty are sides of the same coin. But how are we to understand that linkage?

Nietzsche is thinking here first of all of the architecture of his own age, which so often dressed up functional sheds with some aesthetic addition, with decoration in a broad sense. The aesthetic addendum was supposed to let the edifice be more than just a mere building, was supposed to lift it to the level of art. But without an inner relationship to the bearer of such decoration, the added beauty remained a mere addendum, a mask. Architecture is here also a metaphor for the cosmos. Here, too, everything once had a meaning: *Omnis mundi creatura, quasi liber et pictura, nobis est et speculum*. Just as stone has become more stone than it used to be, nature too is experienced by us moderns increasingly as just mute matter, devoid of some higher significance. As Gottfried Benn, who earned his living as a doctor, recognized, this loss of meaning is just the other side of

³¹³ Ibid., I, 218, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, pp. 178-179.

the demand for objectivity that is a presupposition of our science. With this beauty becomes a mask put over reality.

4

But even if our science has left the God-centered cosmos that once allowed human beings to feel at home in the world in ruins, can we not establish in the remaining ruin something like a home, attempt to find at least some compensation for what we have lost in an art that keeps its distance from our modern reality? This, Nietzsche thought, is the judgment of evening. But Nietzsche is not willing to sacrifice reality to such an art, which is said to have missed the best moment. Have we, too, missed the best moment? Is it possible for us to imagine an art that would seize this best moment? What would it look like?

But perhaps the last twilight of the old art has to vanish first, perhaps night really has to arrive, abjection has to have its say, before a new day can begin. Nietzsche wanted to help to prepare for this day, dreamed of an art and a beauty that once again would serve that terrifyingly sublime reality to which we belong, instead of covering it up. His attack on an art and a beauty, also on a philosophy, that seeks to beautify reality are part of such a preparation.

The beautification of science — just as the rococo art of gardening has its origin in a feeling: “nature is ugly, wild, boring, — let’s go! We want to beautify it!” — so the feeling: “science is ugly, dry, dreary, difficult, boring — let’s go! Let’s beautify it” has given rise again and again to something that calls itself philosophy. What it seeks is what all art and poetry seeks — first of all to entertain: but it wants to do this in a more sublime, higher manner that is in accord with its inherited pride. ... Meanwhile all this takes its course, and some day reaches flood stage: even today other voices begin to be heard, voices that challenge philosophy and admonish: “back to science! To the nature and naturalness of the sciences!” With this an age may be beginning that discovers beauty precisely in the “wild, ugly” parts of science, just as only Rousseau awakened a sense for the beauty of high mountains and the desert.³¹⁴

Philosophy, here understood as another art of beautification, of embellishing life, and an art that has made beauty into a mask, belong together. Opposition to all that defines

³¹⁴ *Morgenröthe*, V, 427, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, p. 263.

postmodern art, which is said by Lyotard to have rid itself of that nostalgia for the lost center that governs modernism, nostalgia that still dreams of Mediterranean landscapes, of temples and Roman fountains, of laurel, roses, and oranges, of ruins haunted by the now absent gods. As Hermann Broch saw so clearly, kitsch and modern art are neighbors. Turning its back on such nostalgia, postmodern art is glad to play, eager to explore whatever is new and unexpected, celebrating a freedom that refuses to recognize whatever boundaries are supposed to hold it as an increase in being and joy. Such celebration would have appealed to that Nietzsche who seems ever ready to experiment, to experiment even with himself, and understands himself as a new Columbus happily seduced by the lure of ever new seas.

Dorthin — will ich; und ich traue
 Mir fortan und meinem Griff.
 Offen liegt das Meer, ins Blaue
 Treibt mein Genueser Schiff.³¹⁵

There — I will to go; and henceforth
 Trust myself and my firm grip
 Open lies the sea, into the blue
 Drifts my Genoese ship.

The seafarer trusts his firm grip; and yet his ship drifts into the blue, a blue that the Nietzsche admirer Benn understood as the melancholy color of decline and shipwreck, of going under. Freedom not bound to and by reality turns into arbitrariness, as an aesthetics of the sublime transforms itself into an aesthetics of the interesting. Ever looking for new experiences, ever trespassing supposedly inviolable boundaries, longing for the open sea, such a postmodern art also has to call the meaning of art into question over and over again. But as Kierkegaard was able to show so convincingly in his analysis of the interesting, what is here shortchanged is reality, especially our own reality. And just this

³¹⁵ Nietzsche, “Nach neuen Meeren,” *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, “Lieder des Prinzen Vogelfrei,” *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, p. 649.

makes it difficult for Lyotard's postmodernism to claim Nietzsche as one of its own, for just the self-styled physiologist Nietzsche knew all too well about the importance of the body. Nietzsche thus demanded that we translate the human being back into nature, "to master all those vain and fantastic interpretations and connotations that have been scribbled and painted on that eternal basic text *homo natura*"³¹⁶ And thus it is not surprising that just today when non-binding artistic play and simulacra threaten to hide reality, voices are heard, which, to speak with Nietzsche, call for a return to reality as to that covered up ground in which everything that might bind freedom has to find its roots. The turn to the abject can be defended as attempting such a return. Do we not find here at least the beginnings of an art that would serve what Nietzsche demands?

5

Nietzsche speaks of the judgment of evening. How then would morning judge? In *Dawn* we are given a pointer. Nietzsche there speaks of an art that he calls, compared to our own, happier and higher. "One tells me, our art is addressing the greedy, insatiable, uncontrolled, disgusted, tortured human being of today and shows them an image of blessedness, elevation, and otherworldliness to contrast with the image of their wasted state; so that for once they might forget and breathe freely, perhaps even bring back from that forgetting an impulse to flee and turn around."³¹⁷ This is Schopenhauer's and still Benn's understanding of art. Nietzsche himself, however, would rather listen to Mme. de Sévigné and Corneille, to the life-affirming Baroque:

How differently did he and she love existence, not from a blind, wild will, which one curses, because one is unable to kill it, but as a place, where greatness and humanity can coexist, and where even the strictest discipline of forms, the subjection to the arbitrary whim of some prince or spiritual authority, could suppress neither pride, nor chivalry, nor grace, nor the spirit of individuals, but rather were experienced as an incentive and spur of opposition to the inborn high spirits and nobility, to the inherited power of will and passion.³¹⁸

³¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 230, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 5, p. 169.

³¹⁷ *Morgenröthe* III, 191, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, p. 164.

³¹⁸ *Morgenröthe* III, 191, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, pp. 164-165.

A love of life is a presupposition of such an art and that is to say also an affirmation of that terrible basic text *homo natura* that is illuminated by no higher light; and a presupposition of such love is that our inborn high spirits, our will to power, learns to accept and to forgive itself its being subject to the greater power of society and nature, including also our own nature; and thus Nietzsche and his Zarathustra understand the spirit of revenge as the deepest ground of our self-alienation, which finds its expression in every art ruled by the pathos of the sublime. The spirit of revenge is born of a will to power that cannot forgive itself its lack of power, the limits it faces as it recognizes its dependence on nature, the fact that we all have to age and will sooner or later die: "This, indeed this alone, is what *revenge* is: the will's ill will against time and its 'it was.'"³¹⁹ Only redemption from the spirit of revenge allows for an affirmation of the entire human being. But such redemption cannot be willed.

Nietzsche, too, speaks here of grace: "When power become gracious and descends into the visible: such descent I call beauty." Power becomes gracious only when it forgives itself its lack of power and opens itself to what overpowers even our will to power, our high spirits. Transferred to art such grace is called inspiration. But just for the sublime hero, thus teaches Nietzsche's Zarathustra, "the *beautiful* is the most difficult thing."³²⁰ Do we of today, Nietzsche asks, still have "a clear idea of what poets of strong ages have called *inspiration*," of "the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces"?³²¹ Great art cannot be willed in to existence. It is a gift. Nietzsche, as he knew all too well, found such beauty elusive; and thus he allows the tarantula, the triangle of the Trinity on its back, revenge in its soul, to bite his Zarathustra in the finger.

It is this Zarathustra, sick with the tarantula's poison, who speaks a language that Nietzsche himself calls sublime in *Ecce Homo*. Benn was thinking of this sublime style

³¹⁹ *Zarathustra*, Zweiter Teil, "Von der Erlösung," *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 3, p. 180; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 252.

³²⁰ *Zarathustra*, Zweiter Teil, "Von den Erhabenen", *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 4, p. 152; trans. p. 230.

³²¹ *Ecce Homo*, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 6, p. 339; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *On the Genealogy of Morals/ Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 300.

when he called Nietzsche the greatest genius of language since Luther and described him as someone who had “destroyed everything” he had encountered, had torn apart everything, wounded and maimed even himself “to let the fractured surfaces sparkle whatever the danger and without regard for the results.” In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche describes Zarathustra’s dithyrambs in similar words, quoting these words of his *Zarathustra*: “O men, in the stone an image is sleeping, the image of mages! Alas, that is has to sleep in the hardest, ugliest stone! *Now my hammer rages cruelly against its prison.* Pieces of rock rain from the stone: what is it to me!”³²² Only now, in *Ecce Homo*, does Nietzsche underline the words “*Now my hammer rages cruelly against its prison*” and explains: “Among the conditions for a *Dionysian* task are, in a decisive way, the hardness of the hammer, the *joy even in destroying.*” And as Benn understood the greatness of Nietzsche’s use of language, he remained caught up in these preconditions.

Originally Nietzsche had placed greater weight on the image sleeping in the stone. The meaning sleeping in matter was to be liberated. Is inspiration not the ability to sense and respond to this meaning? Nietzsche then attempted to return to what Benn called “the animism of earlier stages, which raised powers and brought about transformations in the human being himself.” Once, before the Second World War, Benn, too, sought such a return. Thus he wrote in 1930 in “Zur Problematik des Dichterischen,” “On the Problematics of the Poetic”: “The body is the last power to bind us and the depth of necessity, it bears the premonition, it dreams the dream. The swelling character of creation is altogether evident: in the body creation created its correlates and demanded form in states of intoxication.”³²³ In similar fashion Zarathustra calls the will of the image-making artist a will to procreation. Procreation, however, demands more than a self-sufficient, autonomous will. And thus Nietzsche kept dreaming of Ariadne, of nuptials, of children. But the spirit of revenge that leads human beings again and again to measure themselves by God and to attempt to occupy His place, lets Nietzsche build the architecture that becomes his prison. And against this prison his hammer raged in vain. In Nietzsche, too, the sublime is victorious over the beautiful. *Sonnen-Vereinsamung*, solar solitude, becomes the governing mood. And the case of Benn is not all that

³²² *Ecce Homo, Kritische Studienausgabe*, , vol. 6, p. 349; trans. p. 309.

³²³ Benn, “Zur Problematik des Dichterischen,” *Werke*, vol. 1, p. 82.

different, although the earthquake that opened up the abyss that separates the poet of 1930 from the poet of 1950, an earthquake that continues to make it difficult for us to seize the better moment, no longer is called Nietzsche, but National Socialism. Benn was by no means the only one to have read Nietzsche differently in 1950 and in 1930, differently, but not better.

13. Dreams of Alchemy

1

In *Farewell to an Idea* T. J. Clark asserts that “Pollock’s drip paintings, when they started, and maybe even as they continued, were alternately *Alchemy* and *Sea Change* — *Alchemy* always failing, *Sea Change* never” (p. 302).³²⁴ The two paintings leave me wondering how I am to understand this stark opposition. Both were done late in 1947 when Pollock had begun to pour and throw paint. There is an obvious family resemblance: both are heavily worked, make use of oil and aluminum paint, and include materials other than paint, *Sea-Change* pebbles, *Alchemy* string. There are significant differences: striking in *Alchemy* are the skeins of white paint, racing across the canvas like shooting stars, closely related to those in *Phosphorescence* (1947). But whatever differences there are do not seem significant enough to oppose one to the other as success to failure. And that does not appear to be Clark’s intention; for Clark continues: “The pictures were dazzling (“almost too dazzling to be looked at indoors,” wrote Clement Greenberg of one of them [*Phosphorescence*] at the time). They were lordly and playful, like something a master had thrown off. Magic Mirrors, Shooting Stars. Enchantment was part of them. And this seems to me true of modernism in general” (p. 302). — Does that sound like failure?

Clark speaks of Pollock’s drip paintings: these are said to be alternately *Alchemy* and *Sea Change*, where we may wonder whether this alternation is to be understood as a change that takes place as we move from painting to painting, or as a change that happens as we look at some particular painting: now we see it as alchemy, then as sea-change. In the latter case, the claim might be: to the extent that we understand the artist, or he understands himself, as an alchemist, his work will appear inescapably as a failure; seen as sea-change it never fails.

Alchemy always fails, *Sea Change* never. On one level this states a truism: trying to make gold from baser material, alchemy was, like its sister astrology, a pseudo-science that had to fail, for it presupposes a false understanding of reality. Whatever

³²⁴ All page references in this chapter are to T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999)

valid intuitions were found in it passed over into chemistry. And the suggestion would be: to the extent that painting takes itself seriously as a kind of alchemy, it too must fail because such a conception presupposes a false understanding of reality. Sea change, on the other hand, cannot fail. Nor can it succeed. The sea just keeps changing. But Clark is not making this general and in its generality rather trivial point. He is speaking of the art of Jackson Pollock. But why single out this particular painting: *Sea Change*?

Clark points out that the title, like its companion *Full Fathoms Five*, was taken from *Ariel's Song* with the help of Lee Krasner and Mary and Ralph Manheim. He suggests that it was “meant to encourage viewers to look at such work through Ariel’s eyes. Which is to say, look through the paintings’ superficial roughness and materialism, and see them as magic — spells or disguises of some sort, fanciful, filigree, made out of nothing” (p. 300), works, and here Clark cites Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, “about nothing,” held together only “by the internal strength” of their style. As William IX of Aquitaine said of the poem Clark places at the head of this chapter: “I shall make a poem out of [about] nothing at all:/ it will not speak of me or others,/ of love or youth, or of anything else,/ for it was composed while I was asleep/ riding on horseback.” Clark tells us that when he first came across these lines he “naturally imagined them in Jackson Pollock’s mouth. They put me in mind of modernism; or of one moment of modernism, which I realized I had been trying (and failing) to get into focus ever since I had read *Harmonium* or looked at *Le Bonheur de vivre*” (p. 299). I, too, am reminded by that poem of a moment of modernism, but not of Pollock; rather of the moment exemplified by Malevich’s *White on White*, a moment Nietzsche captured when he wrote of the world-weary modern bourgeois, ready to retire from the world, that he would rather have nothing for his purpose than have no purpose at all. But I cannot imagine these lines in Pollock’s mouth — and not just because of all that separates the medieval aristocrat from the modern petit bourgeois. I can imagine Pollock instead shouting: “no nothing, damn it! Alchemy!” Clark no doubt would insist on the futility of all attempts to escape bourgeois reality by turning to “the dislocated, the inarticulate, the outdated, the lacking in history, the *informe*” (p. 307). Did not the *Vogue* photographs demonstrate such futility by showing how easy it was for the bourgeois world to embrace what was supposed to be experienced as radically other?

But let us take a closer look at the transformation described in Ariel's Song:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
 Of his bones are coral made,
 Those are pearls that were his eyes:
 Nothing of him that doth fade,
 But doth suffer a sea change
 Into something rich and strange.
 Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell. (*The Tempest*, I, 2)

“Sea change” does not refer here to the ever changing sea, but to a change effected by the sea, a magical transformation, not unlike alchemy. Why then is the one kind of change supposed to always fail, the other never? How are we to understand this sea change, which changes human bones into coral, human eyes into pearls. Such pearls are not made out of nothing, but out of the human body.

Clark cites Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* in his book in the translation by Harry Zohn. He therefore would have been familiar with the use Hannah Arendt makes of these same lines in her introduction to that edition, inviting us to understand Benjamin as a pearl-diver.³²⁵ Change here refers first of all to history, “the ruin of time,” to which the living is subject. But “the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things ‘suffer a sea-change’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl-diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up to the world of the living as ‘thought fragments,’ as something ‘rich and strange,’ and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*.”³²⁶

I mentioned that Benjamin was a passionate collector, where Arendt makes a point of distinguishing such collecting from attempts to put the past in order: “The collector's passion... is not only unsystematic, but borders on the chaotic, not so much because it is a passion as because it is not primarily kindled by the quality of the object—

³²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, intro. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 1 – 55.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

something that is classifiable — but is inflamed by its ‘genuineness,’ its uniqueness, something that defies any systematic classification.”³²⁷ What matters is not so much content as originality, authenticity, genuineness. As Benjamin put it: “The true, greatly misunderstood passion of the collector is always anarchistic, destructive. For this is its dialectics: to combine with loyalty to an object, to individual items, to things sheltered in his care, a stubborn subversive protest against the typical, the classifiable.” The relationship between the practice of collecting and collage is evident.³²⁸

2

In what sense does *Alchemy* always fail? Does Clark not consider the painting dazzling and enchanting? What fails thus would seem to be not so much this particular painting, but an understanding of the painting, be it that of the painter or our own, that transforms the modernist magic of *Sea-Change* into the kitsch of *Alchemy*. What is rejected here is first of all an understanding of art: art as alchemy. Pollock took such an understanding very seriously.

“Alchemy,” Clark informs us, “may originally have meant just ‘pouring’ . Zosimus put the blame for the whole business on the fallen angels, teaching secret arts to the women they married. Now here is a metaphor Pollock could ride to the bitter end” (p. 302). But if originally “alchemy” may have meant just pouring, first of all it refers to the art of transmuting base matter into something spiritual and precious, not altogether unlike the change effected by the sea. So understood it offers itself as a metaphor for all art, although the thought that such art should take the form of pouring gives it a special twist. Must that effort always fail? Or only the alchemy of the modernist artist?

Clark may well be right to suggest that Pollock’s choice of titles such as “Alchemy” was partly meant to provoke Greenberg, to gain some distance from him. *Alchemy* was part of the surrealist dream Greenberg despised, a dream very much in the air at the time, born of a refusal to accept the finality of the ruling understanding of reality. The title *Alchemy*, too, Pollock owed to his East Hampton neighbors, Ralph

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

³²⁸ Ibid.

Manheim and his wife. Pollock must have welcomed the suggestion.³²⁹ No doubt his understanding of alchemy was bound up with the many sessions he spent in Jungian analysis and his conviction that Jung had gotten things about right. Jung had found in alchemy a powerful figure for his own understanding of the human project, of the self's attempt to come home to itself. He was well aware that considered as science alchemy must be considered a failure. Alchemy presupposes a different understanding of reality, such as the medieval understanding of nature as a text speaking to human beings of their situation and destiny. The physical here has also an ethical significance. The same would seem to be true of alchemy. Jung thus observes:

It would therefore be a mistake in my opinion to explain the formula "*tam ethice quam physice*" by the theory of correspondences, and to say that this is its "cause." On the contrary, this theory is more likely to be a rationalization of the experience of the projection. The alchemist did not practice his art because he believed on theoretical grounds in correspondence: the point is that he had a theory of correspondence because he experienced the presence of pre-existing ideas in physical matter. I am therefore inclined to assume that the real root of alchemy is to be sought less in philosophical doctrines than in the projections of individual investigators. I mean by this that while working on his chemical experiments the operator had certain psychic experiences which appeared to him as a particular behaviour of the chemical process.³³⁰

I agree with Jung that the formula "*tam ethice quam physice*" has its foundation in experience and that we cannot limit such experience to those who lived in the world in which alchemists flourished. I am not altogether happy with the word "projection": if we cannot but project ourselves into the world, we also cannot help but project the world into ourselves. Just think of our experience of up and down or of light and dark, more specifically of the experience of rising or of the last light vanishing in the evening: "*tam ethice quam physice*." But I agree with Jung that the alchemist's theory of correspondences presupposes an experience of logos incarnated in matter.

In the Middle Ages this had an obvious sense. Nature was then understood as a text, a book with God as its author. Alchemy seeks to manipulate that text and such

³²⁹ See Elizabeth L. Langhorne, "The Magus and the Alchemist: John Graham and Jackson Pollock," *American Art*, vol. 12, no. 3, Fall 1998, pp. 47-67.

³³⁰ C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 2nd ed., trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 245.

manipulation is inevitably also a manipulation of self: alchemy's manipulation of nature is also an attempt to come home to our true self. At bottom this is an old story, told one way in *Genesis*, another way in Plato's *Symposium*. It has its foundation in our self-understanding as beings cast into a world that we have not chosen and that again and again denies us what we most deeply desire, even as it haunts us with figures of the desired. The opposition between the self and something other, a reality that we struggle to make our own through labor and understanding, is constitutive of our being. Such opposition invites thoughts of another state, a state that preceded it, a reality in which we would not be forced to toil and sweat. In this sense every human being could be said to dream of paradise. Clark's "Idea" gives a Marxist cast to this dream: as we have seen, his Satan is not the snake with its promise of godlike knowledge, but capitalism.

Closely related to the fall story is the myth told by Plato's Aristophanes, it too a story that links the fall to pride — the pride that Sartre makes into the fundamental human project. According to Aristophanes we human beings are but halves of our original being, which Zeus split in two to punish the hubris of this original humanity, which would claim for itself the abode of the gods. Aristophanes tells this story to explain why we are ruled by love for another in whom we recognize our lost half and with whom we want to unite to recover the higher self we once were. But he insists that we must accept our present divided state: the most we can hope for is to find that other person in whose embrace we can experience at least the figure and trace of that dream.

Jung's archetypes, these supposedly universal images of the human psyche, which are said to recur again and again as symbols in myths and fairy tales, can be understood as schematizations of this fourfold matrix. And so can alchemy, which spoke to Jung of the self's movement from unity to opposition to a return to higher unity. Alchemy thinks the first unity as the *materia prima*, figured by being thought round like Aristophanes' original humanity. Here spirit is still buried in matter, or, as an alchemist might put it, the mercurial seed is still buried in the earth, in the alchemical lead or *plumbum philosophicum*, in a way considered "unseemly." To set it free, this unity must be divided. Such division produces a pair of opposed forces, spirit and matter, male and female. But full humanity cannot be achieved as long as the now free-floating spirit does

not find its way back to the earth. From the conflict of the opposing forces should emerge a new unity.³³¹

James Elkins seems to me right to criticize Jung's approach to alchemy for being too narrow. "To me what is wrong with Jung is not the basic idea that some alchemists saw their souls in their crucibles, but the fact that he made alchemy virtually independent of the laboratory."³³² Elkins understands alchemy foremost as a metaphor for painting. "Tentative or explosive motions of one liquid through another are irresistibly metaphors for mental states."³³³ "Alchemy is," he asserts, "the best and most eloquent way to understand how paint can *mean*"³³⁴ It was increasingly at this painterly level that alchemy became important to Pollock. He, too, was struggling to uncover and communicate meaning in matter and form. The language of alchemy can help us understand the materiality of paint and the process of working with it, not in the positivist terms of science, but in the proto-scientific terms of a discipline that presupposes that meaning is present in matter.

Clark's understanding of reality, his materialism has no room for such alchemy. He accepts that opposition of mute matter and solitary self that is a consequence of the objectification of reality discussed above. And yet he also recognizes that Pollock, from beginning to end, dreams of overcoming such opposition, dreams of an orgiastic homecoming, a dream darkened by rage at a world that denied him, and not only him, what he desired. There is a point to likening Pollock to Faust. As Clark observes, Pollock's art never "stopped being Gothic; and the heart of its Gothic-ness, clearly, was its veering between sexual rage and euphoria." Clark recognizes the way this art was fuelled by what he calls "dime-store totemism and *New Yorker* psychoanalysis," by a sexual mythology he calls embarrassing, without denying its importance (p. 358). By insisting that such art inevitably fails, Clark did not mean to deny its greatness: is it not

³³¹ Jung, *The Integration of Personality*, trans. Stanley Dell (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1939), p. 47.

³³² James Elkins, *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York, Routledge Press, 1999), p. 4.

³³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

precisely in striving and failing that modernist painting, according to Clark, attains its highest dignity?

But must alchemy always fail? And what I have in mind is not a particular painting by Pollock, or, more generally, Pollock's drip paintings, but alchemy understood with Elkins as a metaphor of the painter's project. Elkins calls alchemy "the old science of struggling with materials, and not quite understanding what is happening: exactly as Monet did, and as every painter does each day in the studio."³³⁵ As it stands, this is not quite satisfactory. We want to know to what end the artist-chemist is struggling with materials. The alchemists of the Renaissance were concerned first of all to produce gold. But what, in the case of painting, takes the place of the gold that was the goal of the alchemist's quest?

But another point matters more here: alchemy achieves its results in a way science is unable to understand. What Heidegger has to say of the attempt to lay hold of what the earth is by means of science can also be said of the work of the alchemist: it eludes every such attempt, be it that of the chemist, the psychologist, or the historian. A science committed to objectivity cannot know anything of such gold. What matters to Elkins is the magic of paint itself, which has the power to incarnate meaning in matter. The meaning of a painting cannot be reduced to what it represents, symbolizes, or signifies. That is true even of the most obviously representational painting. As Elkins demonstrates, we can get so close to such a painting that in the end we see nothing but paint. But this does not mean that we have left all meaning behind. Quite the opposite: just in the paint a wealth of meaning is still present. Referring only to itself, paint can yet present itself as "something 'rich and strange,'" and perhaps put us in touch with "everlasting *Urphänomene*."³³⁶ Such formulations leave us wondering, however, how this is supposed to happen.

Pollock is included by Elkins among his alchemists. Manipulating paint and other materials as he does, he re-presents them in such a way that they become more visible as the materials they are; and that means: visible as shrouded in an aura of meaning. That the painter is able to thus present paint as full of meaning, presupposes that there is a

³³⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

³³⁶ Hannah Arendt, "Introduction," to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 51.

sense in which meaning is already present in the paint, to be made visible by the painter. Our modern understanding of reality makes it difficult to take such talk very seriously. But it would be a misunderstanding to think that we experience paint as mute matter until the artist goes to work. Imagine yourself squeezing Prussian blue out of a tube; and then some chrome yellow. The two are not just different colors, but speak to us in different way, have a different meaning. Heidegger is right: just as we first of all do not experience brute sense data, but hear the airplane or see the smoke rising from the chimney, so we first of all do not experience paint as brute matter, but see a blue oozing from the tube that possesses a unique meaning, carrying with it an indefinite field of associations and connotations, a meaning so rich that it resists translation into a clear and distinct discourse. It would be a mistake to think that we as subjects read or project these meanings into the paint. That paint should speak to us in this way is just an aspect of the fact that our being is first of all and most fundamentally not that of a subject facing an initially mute world of objects, but rather an always already engaged, desiring, fearing, caring, concerned being in the world, and that means also being part of the material world. The self cannot be opposed to the things it encounters as a disembodied subject to mute objects. The self, too, is matter, as we are all forced to recognize when we become conscious of our vulnerability and our mortality. And by the same token, the things we encounter are not adequately understood as mute matter. Things speak to us. The apple is good to eat. We do not project this into the apple. And Heidegger is right to insist that our experience of the materiality of things, or what he calls the earth, transcends whatever objectifying reason, whatever words can grasp about matter. It is in this sense that the work of art, as I have said, can open windows to transcendence just by re-presenting the thingliness of things, the materiality of matter, the paintness of paint. That can also be said of Pollock's *Alchemy*.

But is this sufficient to justify the metaphor? The alchemist is successful, when he succeeds in transforming base material, say lead, into gold. But what does gold here figure? What kind of material is gold? Material that rust will not stain, that time will not wear away? Think of Shakespeare's sea change, which transforms human bones into coral, human eyes into pearls. Is the painter's alchemy able to effect a similar transformation? What might this mean? In Pollock's painting, at any rate, Clark does

not find anything of the sort. It is “Made up of minerals utterly untransmuted and untransmutable, most of them mud brown and tar black” (p. 302). If Clark is right, Pollock does not succeed here in anything resembling a spiritualization of matter. But Pollock belongs with those alchemists, who “wrote poems and told stories about the fabulous *materia prima* that could be found anywhere in the world, if people had only the eyes to see it.”³³⁷

Clark’s reference to “mud brown and tar black” invites us to think of the way “Academic painting had a natural affinity with mud and excrement, because of the common use of brown hues and thick varnishes that yellowed and darkened with age. The Impressionists laughed at the academics’ ‘brown sauce,’ but William Blake had already put it best when he said Rubens used ‘a filthy brown, somewhat the color of excrement,’” leading Elkins to consider Impressionist and Postimpressionist canvases “acts of repression,” and to suggest that “The alchemists’ interest in *putrefactio* is shared by contemporary artists.”³³⁸ Openness to the ever meaningful earth, meaning that speaks to us even and today perhaps especially in the abject, is a presupposition of alchemy.

Clark is too committed a modernist to be able to make sense of such openness and therefore of alchemy. That objectification of reality presupposed by our science and technology leaves us with the opposition of mute matter and a solitary self that may dream of true community. Until transfigured by human imagination and work, matter is mute. Such an understanding of matter leaves no room for alchemy. Were Clark to experience some painting as actually succeeding as pictorial alchemy, this would force him to abandon his materialism. And is that materialism not a presupposition of modernity? But as Elkins can teach us, as long as we approach paintings in terms of this opposition, we inevitably shortchange the magic of paint that is the key to the magic of painting. That magic can open windows in the architecture raised by objectifying reason, windows to a reality that beckons us beyond this age of the world picture. To develop this suggestion I would like to take a closer look at two paintings.

³³⁷ Elkins, p. 71.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

3

The first is Pissarro's *Two Young Peasant-Women*. I choose it here because in support of his argument Clark devotes to it a long chapter of *Farewell to an Idea*. But the socialist and materialist cast of that argument prevents him from being open to the experience of meaning in matter that is a presupposition of Pissarro's art

The painting was first shown in January 1892, a date that allows Clark to relate the painting to the socialist culture that in 1891 was thought to be in the ascendant (p. 94). His way of linking *Two Young Peasant-Women* to the anarchist politics of the day is both suggestive and tenuous. Clark admits that the impact of anarchism is not readily read off this painting (p. 99): neither its pastoral imagery nor its tone let one think of bombs and assassinations. "The subject of *Two Young Peasant Women* is a form of sociability, and specifically of mental life, imagined as belonging to women" (p. 121); imagined also as taking place in nature. "Pastoral is a dream of time — of leisure sewn into exertion, snatched from it easily, threaded through the rhythms of labor and insinuating other tempos and imperatives into the working day" (p. 70), peasant life a screen on which modernism projected its wishes (p. 71). I agree with all of this. We could speak of a dream of paradise threaded through our everyday.

In Pissarro's case such wishes would appear to have been conservative rather than progressive. Consider what Pissarro's friend, the novelist Octave Mirbeau had to say about *Cowherd* of the same year: "I've been thinking about your cowherd and her cow and about the stained glass window behind it. The project gave me a religious sensation ... of that religion the two of us love, in which God is replaced by matter Eternal and splendid, and by the infinite!" (p. 61) The simile that likens the light-filled painted background to stained glass suggests that it, too, possessed, for the writer at least, the power of translating what was placed before it into a space far removed from the everyday, the power to transfigure the commonplace into a modern sacred and at the same time to transfigure oil paint into stained glass. Here we have an example of alchemy. And we also get a determination of alchemy: a transfiguration that invests the base and the commonplace with the aura of the sacred, where the temporality of the sacred is the coincidence of time and eternity: the temporality of the eternal recurrence.

I accept Clark's claims for Pissarro's anarchist sympathies. But they do not answer his question: "Is there a sense ... in which anarchism really informed and inflected Pissarro's way of painting?" (p. 105) "Anarchism," according to Clark, "among other things, is a theory of the compatibility of freedom and order.... Its central assertion in philosophical terms is that freedom and order are dialectical moments of one another, and that the present horror of the forms assumed by each is due to that dialectic being broken Let us imagine a painter, then, who thought that pictures should be small epitomes of this repressed truth" (p. 105). Pissarro is taken to have been such a painter. Key here is said to be his encounter with Seurat, who, in Signac's words (appropriated by Clark), "had such an intense feeling for the ongoing vileness of our epoch of transition" (p. 108), that he turned his back on the bourgeois world, insisted that only the physical world, light, eyesight were real (p. 109). But this is to trade bourgeois everyday reality for something much less real. "Cruel and elusive and infinitely fond of the city's foibles and moments of freedom... Seurat was profoundly anarchism's painter" (p. 110), where such anarchism appears closely tied to Gnosticism.

We do not know much of Seurat's politics, but to Clark the paintings speak loudly enough: "What the dot seemed to promise, at least for a while, was a truly naïve visualization of the singular and uniform as the same thing. The dot exploded the opposition. And this was wonderful. It planted a bomb in the middle of the bourgeois idea of freedom..." (p. 107). It is a suggestive and ingenious interpretation. But if this was indeed what Seurat had to offer, it is not difficult to understand why Pissarro had to pursue a different path. He was unwilling to trade life and its natural meanings for such artifice. In his paintings "Surface would be positive and negative at once, artificial and naïve — but not the destroyer of value tout court. Nature would not grimace" (p. 109). Indeed. Clark here recognizes how greatly nature mattered to Pissarro. With some justice Mirbeau was able to speak of that "religion the two of us love, in which God is replaced by matter Eternal and splendid, and by the infinite." Clark would seem to have no room for that religion, just as he has little patience with dreams of alchemy. The two belong together.

4

The second painting is Cézanne's *House of Dr. Gachet* (1873), which hangs in the Yale Art Gallery.³³⁹ Why do I choose this particular painting? I could say because I happen to have looked at it quite a number of times. Or I could speak of the architecture of the painting, of the way the black mark crowning the roof of the doctor's house seems to me to offer a key to the architecture of the whole; of the way the broken ochres and browns speak to each other; of the way in which colors, even as they serve the task of representation, seem oblivious to such service. Note how Cézanne deals, or rather does not really deal, with light and shadow, flattening the represented townscape: there is tension between this conversation of paint and the task of representation. Or I could point to the way paint here relates to the canvas, the way it presents an obstacle to the easy passage from pictorial representation to represented reality. It is just this that outraged so many when paintings by Cézanne were first exhibited: why should a painting present such obstacles, obstacles that given expectations formed by 19th century academic painting had to make it seem not quite finished, an unresolved, preparatory sketch? My choice of this painting may seem strangely retrograde, given the current state of our art-world, which for the most part seems to have turned its back on painterly representation that still invites one to visit this place, to consider how Cézanne dealt with it, invites one to look at some old photograph showing the house of Dr. Gachet with its distinctive roof and prominent chimneys.³⁴⁰ But I feel no need to follow this invitation here, even as, looking at this painting I find it difficult not to think of what is represented, or rather of the abyss that separates the object before us, canvas and paint, from what it represents, which seems at one and the same time crucially important and quite unimportant.

Cézanne painted this house at least three times. One very similar version hangs now in the Musée d'Orsay. A gift of the doctor's son to his country, it is from almost the same point of view, just a bit further down the road and to the left. That Cézanne so

³³⁹ This section is a reworking of a gallery talk about this painting, published as "Why Cézanne Matters," in *Object Lessons* by the Yale University Art Gallery,

³⁴⁰ See Pavel Achatka, *Cézanne. Landscape Into Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

often painted the same motif over and over, think of Mont Sainte-Victoire or the Bibémus Quarry, seems significant: one senses a struggle with the motif. The goal of this struggle would not seem to be faithful representation. Cézanne is concerned with a different kind of faithfulness. Consider once more the black mark at the peak of the doctor's house in our painting. What does it represent? It has no counterpart in the Paris version. Suppose it were eliminated? Would it matter? The way it rhymes with the edge of the house below and the edge of the road below helps to establish a strong vertical that in turn lets the diagonals speak more loudly. And what are we to make of the white or whitish strokes around the roof the doctor's house? How does their very material presence serve the task of representing the sky? One can almost understand why Cézanne should have been singled out for ridicule by critics who saw works by him at the 1874 exhibition of the Société anonyme des artistes, peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs: "Of all known juries," mocked the reviewer for *Le Rappel*, "none ever imagined, even in a dream, the possibility of accepting any work by this painter, who used to present himself at the Salon carting his canvases on his back like Jesus his cross."³⁴¹ Today we may find it difficult to understand this sort of response, although given then prevalent expectations about the qualities a finished painting should possess, a painting such as this had to seem unfinished, unfinished e.g. in the way in which canvas and paint are obtrusively present. What is the point of the ochre slab of paint below the tree trunk on the left? The way the paint is applied, sits on the canvas, is much too willful for faithful representation. We become aware of paint as paint as much as we do of the representational function of paint. And the two are in tension, tension that the painting keeps alive and does not seek to resolve.

Cézanne appears to struggle in this picture. But what was the point of the struggle? I don't think the reviewer's comparison of Cézanne with Jesus carrying his cross should simply be dismissed. Especially in the first half of his life Cézanne would seem to have experienced painting rather like a cross he had to bear. The art establishment had told him over and over that art was not something he was particularly good at. In school his close friend Zola was thus considered the more gifted draftsman. But painting was a burden of which Cézanne could not rid himself. Painting, he wrestled

³⁴¹ John Rewald, *Paul Cézanne. A Biography* (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 101.

with some very personal demons that kept visiting him. Like Pollock, Cézanne needed art to heal himself.

I find it hard to speak about this picture. To be sure, many things about it are easily said. For example that it was painted probably in 1873, that Auvers is close to Paris, that Dr. Gachet, homeopath and psychiatrist, Darwinian and Socialist, sometime artist and an always generous patron of the arts, bought the house in the picture for his ailing wife on April 9, 1872. That many artists visited that house, including Cézanne, who, as I mentioned, painted it a number of times. I could add that much later, on May 20, 1890, van Gogh visited Dr. Gachet in that very same house, both painter and doctor weary and sick: van Gogh, who painted a famous portrait of the doctor, was to shoot himself two months later; the doctor, who had never gotten over the death of his wife in 1875, sketched the artist on his death bed. This then is a storied house and one could continue to relate stories about it. But in the presence of the picture such stories seem hardly worth telling. Do they have anything to do with the painting's success or failure? Would it matter if this were some other house, in some other town, owned by a different person? But what then can I say about this painting that will not seem trivial? Talk about paint strokes and canvas? About greens and tans, blues and greys? How much easier it is to talk about a work by Marcel Duchamp. Picking one of his works, I could have returned to the question: just what made the art-world embrace Duchamp as it did? Presupposed is a profound dissatisfaction with just the kind of art exemplified by this Cézanne. No one gave clearer expression to such dissatisfaction than Duchamp himself. What he had to say about what distinguished his art from futurist painting also suggests what separated it from the art of Cézanne: "Futurism was an impression of the mechanical world. It was strictly a continuation of the Impressionist movement. I was not interested in that. I wanted to get away from the physical aspect of painting. I was much more interested in recreating ideas in painting."³⁴² Cézanne, it would seem, moves very much within the orbit Duchamp wanted to leave behind. In this painting the physical aspect is all-important: the way paint sits on the canvas, but also the

³⁴² Marcel Duchamp, "Painting ... at the Service of the Mind," in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, comp. Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 393-394.

way the painting responds to the seen. By then Cézanne had learned that passion and imagination were not enough to produce significant art, that his impetuous attempts to paint dream-visions without checking himself by carefully and patiently observing nature, were trapping him within himself and leading his art into a dead end. Cézanne desperately needed to get outside himself. And that outside was furnished not by words but by nature.

Cézanne disliked the modern mechanical world, railed against it, against the way the new technology had violated and threatened to transform the land he loved and which he explored as a boy on long hikes with his friends Baille and Zola. This fact has more than just an anecdotal significance. It may invite a charge of nostalgia, but Cézanne clung to such nostalgia, always dreamed of a Provence somehow beyond the modern world. The modern world that was beginning to take shape around him and that had just exploded in the Franco-Prussian War is given little space in his paintings: the brutal gash of *The Railway Cutting* (1870), a gash violating his beloved Mt. Sainte Victoire, comes to mind.

Cézanne was suspicious of words, cared little for theory, and standing before this Cézanne one senses that words do not matter all that much. What matters is that we look, explore the way paint occupies the canvas and answers paint. But that is not quite right either: when I look at the painting I get a sense of Cézanne looking and looking at what he saw before him, deeply moved by light playing on some wall, on the road, in the sky, by the green grass, not in order to capture what he sees in an accurate representation, but to respond to it with something that would have an analogous power to move us, looking and working on his painting, using strokes of paint as building blocks, but not mute material, rather like voices breaking the silence of the canvas, joining in a conversation. But this conversation of paint remains throughout very much a response to what the painter sees and feels. Six weeks before his death Cézanne wrote: “As a painter I am becoming more lucid before nature, but for me the realization of my sensations is always very difficult. I am not able to arrive at the intensity which unfolds before my senses; I do not have that magnificent richness of color which animates nature.”³⁴³ The painter

³⁴³ Letter to his son, September 8, 1906, quoted in Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 104.

here suggests a continuing struggle to rid himself of the clichés and all too personal obsessions, longings, and imaginings that cloud the desired lucidity. Such lucidity unfolds sensations of an extraordinary intensity. It is these that the painting tries to capture, forever failing, yet in this very failure leading us to an awareness of the abyss that separates the “magnificent richness of color which animates nature” from whatever the painter can put on canvas. Cézanne’s art helps us to become more lucid before nature. He found it hard to express himself in words. And that is part of what draws me to his art: we are all caught today far too much in webs of words. We all have need for a lucidity that is beyond words.

In this painting Cézanne is not making a point. He is not demonstrating anything. He is responding to a not particularly memorable scene: a sloping road framed by modest houses, the whole towered over by the distant house of Dr. Gachet. These are things that do not assert themselves very strongly. Nothing here screams. To properly respond to a picture such as this, we have to begin as Cézanne did when he looked at what was before him, at the inimitable way in which light fell on some wall, roof spoke to roof, greens answered tans, when he responded to this conversation with painted analogies that like strong metaphors refuse translation into a more literal discourse.

According to Kandinsky, traditional art can be understood as the product of a kind of dialogue between artist and world. The artist imposes a form on reality, not to conquer it, but in order to reveal it. Ideally there is no tension between these two aspects of painting: the formal order helps to reveal the essence of what is to be represented. Abstraction and representation are in perfect balance. The modern artist no longer strives for such balance. Abstraction and representation now go their separate ways.

Does this apply to the painting we are looking at? We heard already from that critic who claimed that no jury in its right mind would consider including a work by Cézanne in an exhibition. Was the task of art not to offer idealized versions of the familiar? But Cézanne did not see things as did those who ridiculed his paintings. Nor can I quite agree with Merleau-Ponty, when he suggested that Cézanne somehow remained more “faithful to the phenomena in his investigations of perspective.”³⁴⁴ In

³⁴⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern, 1961), p. 13.

the painting we are looking at Cézanne is not overly concerned with somehow doing greater justice to the way we actually see than academic painting. Here a comparison with the comparable version of the same view in the Musée d'Orsay, dating from the same year, is instructive. It shows how free Cézanne was with details, such as the roof angles of the houses, or the black mark on top of the house. His goal was not to get closer to what we actually experience, no matter how experience is construed. There is a sense in which paint here begins to function in ways quite independent of concerns to do justice to what or the way we perceive. What matters is the way Cézanne felt and perceived. We understand why Cubists should have claimed Cézanne as a precursor.

It is indeed easy to imagine a Cubist response to this painting. Consider the houses in the picture — and some later paintings by Cézanne seem much closer to what the Cubists wanted. This is indeed a common way to teach Cézanne. But I am interested here in what such an approach misses. To hold on to that seems to me more important today than to see in Cézanne the precursor of Cubism, for the glorious experiment that was Cubism had to come to a depressing end. Cubism, as T. J. Clark remarks, is indeed painting at the end of its tether. “We can best lay hold of these pictures’ overweening ambition, . . . if we see them under the sign of failure. They should be looked at in the light of — better still, by the measure of — their inability to conclude the remaking of representation that was their goal” (p. 187).

It is here that we glimpse the gulf that separates Cubist abstraction from the Cézanne before us. Reality provides an artist like Picasso with occasions that get him going, to be played with as he sees fit, fashioning out of them an artificial, self-sufficient world, possessing its own glittering beauty. Looking at this Cézanne, on the other hand, I get a sense that the artist was always looking at the things before him, was in love with them, struggling to answer with a very personal gift the gift of what he saw. Cézanne seems little concerned with originality, with novelty. How different in this respect is Picasso, whom Hans Sedlmayr, taking his cues from Kierkegaard, presents as a virtuoso of the interesting,³⁴⁵ an artist who delights us again and again by leaving behind the established and accepted in unexpected ways.

³⁴⁵ Hans Sedlmayr, “Kierkegaard über Picasso,” *Der Tod des Lichtes* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1964), pp. 63-85.

Picasso called van Gogh's "essentially solitary and tragic adventure" "the archetype of our times."³⁴⁶ Pollock comes to mind. Cézanne, too, seemed destined for a variant of the same adventure. That Zola in *L'Oeuvre*, should have the painter Claude Lantier, modeled on Cézanne, hang himself, shows that the writer who had been Cézanne's best friend was very much aware of this side of the painter, even if the latter saw only a "disgusting distortion."³⁴⁷ But it is of interest that, as Sidney Geist notes, "Cézanne himself had the curious nickname "Le Pendu" (The Hanged Man) in an artist's circle that met in Dr. Gachet's house in 1873 and "at that time signed an etching (V.1159) with a small hanged man."³⁴⁸ Cézanne did prove Zola wrong; he did not commit suicide; he died painting. But Zola would seem to have been not altogether off the mark: there was that side to Cézanne. Picasso observed that "What forces our attention is Cézanne's anxiety — that's Cézanne's lesson; the torments of Van Gogh — that is the actual drama of the man. The rest is sham."³⁴⁹ These torments are all too apparent in Cézanne's many figural compositions with more or less explicit erotic themes, which preoccupied him to the very end. Cézanne began as a proto-expressionist. Full of ambition, and, like Pollock, not an especially gifted draftsman, he gave free reign to a baroque, erotically charged imagination, hoping that passionate intensity would suffice, only to be himself dissatisfied by what he created. At this stage in his life Cézanne was in danger of burying himself within himself, feeding on his own dream-visions. His might well have been another solitary and tragic adventure, like that of van Gogh, who shot himself not all that far from the house in our picture. What saved Cézanne was his love of nature, which prevented him from using nature as a mere reservoir of occasions, to be played with as one sees fit, points of departure for interesting, personally charged painterly constructions. And such love merged with his love of paint, this figure of the alchemists' *prima materia* that refuses to serve those who

³⁴⁶ Picasso, as recalled by Françoise Gilot, cited in Clark, *Farewell*, p. 222.

³⁴⁷ Frank Elgar, *Cézanne* (New York: Praeger, 1975), p. 110. For an illuminating if exaggerated discussion of these torments, see Sidney Geist, *Interpreting Cézanne* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1988).

³⁴⁸ Geist, *Interpreting Cézanne*, p. 78.

³⁴⁹

would only play with it. The present picture suggests nothing of that. Painting here is a struggle to get things right.

What is the measure of such rightness? Not so much the look of things, as the way the artist found himself profoundly moved by paint and canvas, moved also by what he saw in ways he could not put into words. Portraits, still-lives, and increasingly landscapes, forced him to get outside himself. In helping him find this path Pissarro was no doubt a crucial mentor, especially in the months leading up to our painting. What Octave Mirbeau had to say about Pissarro's *Cowherd* also fits Cézanne: his art gives us a religious sensation, but this religion replaces God with "matter eternal and splendid and with the infinite!" (p. 61) Nature and paint, this figure of the earth, spoke to him in ways that, while full of meaning, yet resisted being put into words. All he could offer were painted metaphors of the silent speech of things that is the ground of all meaning, transformations of paint into pearls and spiritual gold.

Conclusion

The Snake's Promise

Technology and Art on the Threshold of the Third Millennium

1

I was already thinking about the end and origin of art when, now many years ago, I heard Friedrich Weinreb, this unforgettable commentator on the Jewish tales surrounding the *Book of Genesis*, tell a group of us that had gathered in Zurich for a conversation on the topic "Technology and Reality" a story:³⁵⁰ Weinreb spoke of Adam and Eve and the snake's promise; he spoke of Cain, said to have built the first city, and of his inventive descendants; he spoke of Lamech, said to have sung the first song, and of his two wives, Adah, who was to bear him children, and Zillah, who, in order to preserve her beauty, was supposed to remain childless and yet bore him a son, Tubal-cain, said to be the first to work iron and copper into tools and weapons. Tubal-cain is said to have accompanied the blind Lamech, when he went hunting, telling him where the game was hiding. One day, glimpsing some horned creature, the son told his blind father where to direct his arrow. The horned quarry turned out to be their ancestor Cain, who had thus been marked by God. And the blind Lamech, aware of the prophecy that Abel's murder was to be avenged in the seventh generation, beside himself in his grief, inadvertently killed Tubal-cain, who had directed the fateful arrow. Thus the race of Cain completed itself in the seventh generation.

But what does this story have to do with the topic of this course: the end and origin of art? I will not attempt to offer an interpretation of the Biblical tale. I am not a scholar of the stories that surround the book of *Genesis* and it even seems inappropriate to attempt to force such narratives unto the Procrustes bed of univocal explanation. But I do want to respond to something in the story that continues to occupy me. That my response misses what once mattered to those who first told it is all but certain, for what I heard into this story is the problem at the center of this course, a problem very much

³⁵⁰ This conclusion is a reworking of the millennial lecture, "The Snake's Promise: Technology and Art on the Threshold of the Third Millennium," I gave at University College Dublin September 4, 2000.

posed by our modern world. — But does it not belong to the essence of such stories that again and again they furnish metaphors that invite us to decipher promise or threat, blessing or curse of our own situation?

Given the way that I have related the question — has art come to an end and if so in just what sense? — to the reality principle ruling our modern world, it will not come as a surprise that I should want to link Cain, who, like Daedalus, is condemned for his murder to become a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth and precisely because of this builds the first city, becoming thus the first architect, to artifice that would remedy what was lost with the fall, relying on human ingenuity, where we should note that with Cain and his descendants artifice leads not only to technology, but also to music-making, both, in their different ways, promising Ersatz for the lost paradise. As should have become clear, I agree with those who argue that science and technology, rather than capitalism, provide us with the Ariadne's thread that lets us understand modernity as distorting a reality that we must preserve or recover if our lives are to have meaning. That need, I have suggested, explains the continuing need for art. But what sort of art? Does Lamech's singing of the first song not suggest that art belongs to those products of artifice shadowed by Cain's murder of his brother Abel?

Given an understanding of Cain as a figure of the origin of technology, an understanding of the work of the tools- and weapons-forging Tubal-cain as the potentiation and completion of the work his ancestor had begun, suggests itself. But does such a comparison not merely put into metaphorical language what I have already discussed? Our spiritual situation has been shaped by a proud self-assertion, a claim to autonomy, shadowed, however, by a restless discontent that has called into question many of the convictions that once supported the cultural edifice in which we still live, if not really dwell. There is widespread suspicion that we have lost way and direction and are drifting, carried across the threshold of a new millennium by a technology that seems ever less an instrument firmly in our control, towards a destruction of self that in the end has to mean also the self-destruction of the technological world. The still growing power that technology and science have given us not only opens up undreamed of possibilities, but also presents ever more intractable problems and questions.

As the tale of Cain hints, from its very beginning human artifice has been shadowed by the suspicion that it is somehow cursed, supported by an exaggerated self-assertion that must end in self-destruction. Many have thus challenged the hegemony of science and technology, have attempted to oppose to objectifying reason a more meditative, more poetic thinking, have dreamed of a return to myth, of narratives and images strong enough to found a new ethos. But such talk has not really touched the power it would challenge. All too often such edifying reflections have degenerated into at times stimulating, entertaining, but finally inconsequential game-playing. Hermann Hesse spoke in this connection of a *Glasperlenspiel*, a playing with glass beads.³⁵¹ I suspect that Hesse's prophecy for the third millennium of an aesthetic-intellectual play with inherited cultural values that will take the place of art, philosophy, and religion will stand up very well. Much recent activity in the arts and humanities invites interpretation as just such a game. Hesse also insisted that, whatever its beauty, such play must remain barren. I think his novel establishes this point. But how is such barrenness to be understood?

Such concerns caused me to perk up my ears when I heard Weinreb tell the story of the barren Zillah, who, pretty as a picture, in order to preserve her beauty, was supposed to remain childless. The beauty that Lamech, this singer or the first song treasured in her, appears threatened by child bearing. Her beauty was not to be contaminated by reality. So understood, the beauty of Zillah prefigures that divorce of beauty from procreation that Kant inscribed into the very essence of a distinctly modern beauty. Consider his suggestive remark on the beauty of a flower: "Flowers are free natural beauties. Hardly anyone but a botanist knows what sort of thing a flower ought to be; and even he, though recognizing in the flower the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no regard to this natural purpose if he is passing judgment on the flower by taste."³⁵² In its origin beauty appears tied here to reproduction, having its site between urine and feces; but to be appreciated as beauty this abject origin must be elided. Kant's

³⁵¹ Hermann Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel*, in *Gesammelte Dichtungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1952), vol. 6, pp. 77-685.

³⁵² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, par. 16, A 48; trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Harper, 1951), pp. 65-66. Cf. my course *Art, Love, and Beauty*.

comment invites consideration of parallels between the construction of beauty, of woman, and the gendering of beauty in the 18th and 19th centuries.

But to return to our story: given the deep, if to be elided, link between reproduction and beauty remarked on by Kant, it is not surprising to learn that Zillah in the end did embrace Lamech and bore him Tubal-cain. More difficult to understand is why this embrace should have led to the destruction of the race of Cain in its origin. My concern with the relationship of art to technology let me hear the story as follows: Zillah I understood as figure of a beauty whose very perfection places it in opposition to time-bound reality. But such opposition cannot be maintained. And it is precisely this breakdown, the embrace of Lamech by a beauty supposed to remain childless that is said to have led to a potentiation of the evil destiny that shadowed the race of the field-tilling, city-building Cain from the very beginning.

But how do technology and that beauty Zillah was to preserve belong together? As the Kant quote reminds us, part of the modern understanding of the aesthetic has been an insistence on the distance supposed to separate the aesthetic realm from reality. Insistence on such distance, however, is inevitably shadowed by discontent with just this distance, which would have the artist be content with beautiful illusion, mere fiction: should art not be more than that? Should it not return to reality and thus regain something of the world building, common sense establishing power once possessed by myth? Should art not embrace reality so that it might bear offspring? And is this not especially true today when a fast growing computer and video technology present artists with ever new challenges? Instead of turning their back on that technology, should artists not embrace it? Part of our spiritual situation is the seductive if dangerous dream of an embrace of the modern world by beauty: dream of a return of myth in the age of technology.

2

Previous chapters considered the widespread discontent with the rule of technology over our life-world. Such discontent finds expression in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*; or in Heidegger's rhetorical question: "Is there still that quiet dwelling of man between earth and sky? Does the meditative spirit still preside over the land? Is there

still home that nourishes roots, in whose soil the human being ever stands, i. e., is rooted?"³⁵³ In ever different forms such a questioning lament, here on the verge of degenerating into mere kitsch, is part of our spiritual situation. We may want to object: should there even be such rootedness? Do we not all know what we owe to a technology that has come to define our life-world? I, too, find it difficult at times not to lament the way things and the earth have been neglected or, worse, violated by technology and, connected with it, the rootlessness of modern man. But I also know that our life-world has been shaped by technology and welcome the increase in freedom that has brought us. Computer and television, car and airplane are much closer to most of us than field, meadow, and forest. Would we not lose our place in our world, were we to attempt to keep our distance from technology? Is it not precisely nostalgia for reservations beyond the reach of technology that today lets us become homeless?

To be sure, many of us not only dream of some pre-technological mode of existence, but take steps to escape at least for a time to such a way of life. Most of us know better than to allow such dreams and escapes to rule our lives. And it is not just the way of life we have chosen for ourselves that forbids us such a step, but also our responsibility for others. Just think of all that technology has accomplished and still needs to accomplish: of agriculture or medicine; of the way our rapidly evolving communications technology has challenged the way earlier generations were bound by place. What are we, entering a new millennium, to make of Heidegger's assertion that technology today threatens "the rootedness of man in its innermost essence"?³⁵⁴ Can technology not offer us a new home, an altogether new kind of rootedness? Think of the many young people today who have grown up with the computer.

Do we even need roots? Heidegger would have us tie what deserves to be called "dwelling" to a saving of the earth that neither wants to master, nor to exploit it, to a receiving of the sky that lets day be day, night night. But who could wish away what electricity had brought us. Advances in technology have to mean a loss of roots. The better human beings succeed in asserting themselves as the masters and possessors of nature, the less they will be able to experience nature as a power that assigns them their

³⁵³ Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959), p. 17.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

place. And the same can be said of our bodies. Are we not on the threshold of asserting ourselves as masters and possessors of our own nature? Has modern medicine not given us the means that make remaking ourselves more than just an idle dream, as the French artist who calls herself St. Orlan attempts to demonstrate with a work of art that, if successful, would prove that by means of plastic surgery and psychoanalysis she is able to transform herself so fundamentally that the law should recognize that she has indeed become another person?³⁵⁵ Here art does indeed embrace technology. And this embrace demonstrates that understood as material for the progress of technology, neither nature, nor our own nature, can furnish us with a measure. The promise of liberation that sounds in Hermann Albert's "You can do everything" here gives way to a deep dread: unless we ourselves establish the limits or boundaries of that progress, we lose our way in what knows neither limit nor measure. But where are we to find this measure?

If in such questioning, provoked by Orlan's "art," our technological civilization's discontent with itself finds voice, it also betrays something like an enjoyment of the presupposed dark mood, an aestheticizing of the lamented loss. With Heidegger many thus lament the rootlessness of our existing, the growing uniformity of a world ever more tightly embraced by technology, conjure up visions of past, supposedly more humane times, hope to discover in the wisdom of other cultures impulses that may open some new path, or attempt to seize at least a trace of lost reality in the abject. Suspicion that we have lost our way and direction shadows our technological age. The young Nietzsche spoke in *The Birth of Tragedy* of "the disaster slumbering in the womb of theoretic culture."³⁵⁶ Today we may even find some consolation in such talk: the slumbering disaster still leaves us some time — enough time perhaps to find the means to avert the disaster that has been prophesied. But we find it difficult to believe in the effectiveness of such means. Heidegger's attempt to oppose meditative thinking to instrumental reason seems little more than an intellectual vacation from the reality in which we live. It invites

³⁵⁵ Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over. Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society* (Litchfield: Art Insights, 1996), pp. 77-83.

³⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 18, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), vol. 1, p. 118; trans. Walter Kaufmann, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 112.

a kind of inner emigration, a philosophical analogue to that evening art discussed by Nietzsche. Philosopher and artist here take their leave from the technological world, teleologically suspend it, Kierkegaard might have said, in order to preserve their humanity, even as they allow that world to enter their everyday, gladly accept the many ways in which it has made our lives easier. The question is whether we must content ourselves with such a salvation: does such a broken "yes" and "no" not lead into a barren, because only aesthetic refusal of reality?

Many today would oppose to the objectifying reason that rules in science the power of the artistic imagination that communicates itself in images and stories and is supposed to give us access to long buried, but vital dimensions of reality. But can we still take the imagination that seriously? To be sure, we must take care not to allow technology to circumscribe our lives, have to learn how to limit its rule. But we must also take care that such attempts not let us trade the only reality we know for fiction and illusion. If we are to effectively challenge objectifying, calculating reason, we first have to recognize and acknowledge its legitimacy.³⁵⁷ Only then can we attempt to determine the boundaries of the realm in which it rightly rules and perhaps open up a space beyond that realm that may allow art to regain something of its lost power.

3

In an earlier chapter I showed that our modern world picture is prefigured by Alberti's perspective construction. Alberti's *On Painting* already places us on the threshold of modernity. The way art here is given a new direction is a consequence of a reflection on the way the human subject measures whatever appears to it, a measure present in every perspectively correct representation. Mastery of this form of representation enables the painter not only to represent nature so convincingly that we may wonder where reality leaves off and illusion begins, but also to create altogether new worlds. It renders the painter, so Alberti, a second God. The snake's promise, you will be like God, here seems to have found its realization.

³⁵⁷ See Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966). Trans. Robert M. Wallace, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983). Also Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

To be sure, the price of the painter's success is a loss of reality. Alberti is too impressed by the magical power of his art to understand this loss as indeed a loss. And yet the reader of *On Painting* is made to wonder about the significance of this loss by the way Alberti connects his understanding of the art as godlike creation with the story of Narcissus,³⁵⁸ whom Alberti calls the inventor of the art of painting, placing him thus at the origin of what I have called the aesthetic approach to art. It is not a happy story: in love with his own beauty mirrored in the water, Narcissus loses both reality and life. Is it here, in this inverted love, that we should seek the origin of a characteristically modern understanding of art?

In the Renaissance a God-centered art gave way to an art that has its center in the human subject. The progressive loss of transcendence is part of the evolution of post-medieval art, which compensates for this loss by aestheticizing painting and more generally art. To aestheticize something is to subject it to measures thematized by aesthetics. As I have used the term here, "aesthetics" presupposes a particular approach to art, which would have us understand the artwork as ideally a whole sufficient unto itself. To the self-sufficiency of the art work so understood corresponds the self-sufficiency of the aesthetic experience. The point of such art is not to serve some other purpose, say to help prepare a better future. Art no longer can be justified along these lines, but also is not in need of such a justification. The aesthetic experience justifies itself: Art for art's sake. So understood, art keeps its distance from reality, must keep its distance, for just this distance gives it its seductive magic. Aesthetic illusion promises Ersatz for the paradise we have lost. Its beauty is the beauty of Zillah in the story with which I began.

In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche writes that we have art so that we would not perish over the truth³⁵⁹ and already in *The Birth of Tragedy* we find the assertion that

³⁵⁸ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 64. See Karsten Harries, "Narcissus and Pygmalion," *Philosophy and Art. Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), pp. 53 - 72.

³⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Nachgelassene Fragmente, Frühjahr-Sommer 1888," *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 13, p. 500; trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 435.

without beautiful illusion human beings would not be able to bear reality. Art, as here understood, delivers us from the feeling that our existence lacks meaning. That can be said of the aestheticizing art I just described. But deliverance here means a flight from reality. Nietzsche, however, demands an art that embraces reality and with this embrace transfigures it, endowing it with sense. And has this not always been the highest task of art: not to offer an escape from reality, but to transfigure it and thus to contribute to the social constitution of meaning? Only when thus transformed into an aesthetic phenomenon, Nietzsche claims, does reality, does our existence appear justified.³⁶⁰ That is not far removed from Heidegger's understanding of the world establishing power of art. According to both, we need art to give dignity and meaning to our existence. Hegel would counter that art no longer is able to found a shared ethos. Nor should this be regretted: we have our reason.

Nietzsche and Heidegger agree with Hegel that the understanding of reality ruling our enlightened age leaves no place for an art able to establish a genuinely common sense, but for them this becomes a reason to challenge the presupposed reality principle. Our faith in reason may deny art its former ethical and political function, but reason lacks the resources to take over that function. The progress of objectifying reason has to make this the age of an ever growing nihilism.

If, as Nietzsche and Heidegger demand and hope, art is to turn once again into myth, if pictures and stories are to regain their ethical power, the hegemony of rational thinking must first be challenged. This is precisely why defenders of the Enlightenment such as Hegel and Danto must dismiss such thoughts as muddled, romantic musings.

But can the Enlightenment's faith in reason be justified? We heirs of post-Nietzschean critiques of scientific rationality may wonder to what extent the supposed hegemony of rational thinking is itself a fiction. Despite what philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, and Habermas would have us believe, does art, broadly understood, not in fact continue to constitute our values, e. g. what it means to be a woman, a man, the significance of death, of sex, of having children — only, we might add, that to observe that function in action we should look not so much to ART, but to popular entertainment,

³⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 5, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, p. 47; trans., p. 52.

which speaks not to reason, but to our easily manipulated desires. But must such manipulation by the entertainment and culture industry not inevitably substitute simulacra for genuine meanings? Is it not kitsch that offers Ersatz for lost meaning in a capitalist society?

Nietzsche sought the deepest root of nihilism not in capitalism, but in objectifying reason. In order to break its hegemony he attempted to unmask the faith that supports the hegemony of reason as a mere superstition. What is that for a truth that science claims? "A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms — in short, a sum of human relations that are elevated, translated, and decorated poetically and rhetorically and which after long use seem firm, canonic, and binding to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which have become worn and lost their sensuous power, coins that have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins."³⁶¹ How good this sounds! Science is here moved in the neighborhood of art, only that it is poorer in that it has to dissolve pictures with sensuous power into pale concepts; also less honest, more ignorant, in that the scientist forgets that his reality is the product of his artistic doing. But this is false consolation, unable to limit the ever-progressing power of science and technology, because origin and essence of this power remain ill understood.

The young Nietzsche sought the origin of this power in the Socratic faith "that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being, but even of *correcting* it."³⁶² The step back to Greek tragedy and its understanding of reality was to become the step that would return to art that ethical function Plato had denied to it, and would thus become a step forward, to the saving, healing artwork of the future, which would return to us a reality once again full of color and life. As Nietzsche was soon forced to recognize, such Wagnerian talk of the artwork of the future can only provide the neediness that gave rise to it, with an aesthetic cover. An impatient hope here leads to precipitous formulations

³⁶¹ Nietzsche "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne," *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, pp. 880-881; trans. Walter Kaufman, *The Portable Nietzsche* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 46-47.

³⁶² Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 15, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, p. 47; trans., p. 95.

that cannot change a reality that is experienced as profoundly deficient. To be sure, just the experience of such deficiency endows such thinking with a seductive power: we appreciate *The Birth of Tragedy* much as we appreciate a poem or a musical performance, say of Wagner's *Ring*. But like everything aesthetic, such enjoyment remains barren. Nietzsche's later self-critical postscript to the *Birth of Tragedy* today has more to teach us than that book itself. In that book an aestheticizing thinking attempts to embrace science in order to deny it its power. But what presents itself as an attack turns out to be, like all aestheticizing, in fact a flight.

I am not concerned here with *The Birth of Tragedy* but with the type it represents. Too often such dreams of an embrace of reality by art have proven just that: mere dreams.

4

But is this necessary? Did not Lamech know the beautiful Zillah after all and she bore him Tubalcain? Is it not possible to conceive an aestheticizing of this technological world that will allow human beings to feel truly at home in it? To be sure, we should not necessarily expect painters, poets, or philosophers to bring about such a transformation of reality. Architects, politicians, or media moghuls are better candidates. To give just one example — and once again it is not the particular example that matters here, but the type it represents — Gropius founded the Bauhaus in order to return to architecture its ethical function. Once again building was to become edification. Lyonel Feininger's woodcut on the title page of the Bauhaus's first program shows thus a Gothic cathedral in modern cubist forms. Once again art would embrace and transfigure reality, shape the space and time of everyday experience in such a way that individuals are recalled from the dispersal into which they are led by the modern world to an order in which they would be able to recognize once again their place and vocation. "Structures created by practical requirements and necessity do not satisfy the longing for a world of beauty built anew from the bottom up, for the rebirth of that spiritual unity which ascended to the miracle of

the Gothic cathedrals."³⁶³ This vision of a no longer just aesthetic, but community building unity recalls the expectations that once bound Nietzsche to Wagner. In both cases what was hoped for remained unrealized — I want so say, fortunately could not be realized. For should it become reality, such a work would have to assign individuals their place in such a way that they would themselves become parts of an aesthetic whole and thus receive their meaning. But to become such parts, individuals must give up their freedom and thus their essence. What makes this vision a nightmare is the power of a technology that suggests possibilities of manipulating human material that threaten to make it impossible to still speak of autonomous subjects. Human beings would have themselves been degraded into mere human material. Think once more of St. Orlean. Her self-canonization, which would have us think of her as a martyr in the image of medieval saints, raises the question of what here takes the place of God? The answer can only be: a freedom that refuses to be incarnated in a body, that refuses all such incarnation as an imprisonment. But unable to provide itself with a measure, such a ghostly and ghastly freedom is at the mercy of what the art-world expects and is willing to support. Beneath the mask of the martyr we find only another and not especially entertaining entertainer.

Far more frightening is another version of the artist using technology to manipulate human material. We can imagine someone who finds in the new communications technology a far more encompassing and effective medium than Gropius ever found in architecture. In such an art technology and aesthetics would truly embrace to give birth to a nightmare society. Here the attempt to aestheticize the life-world lets our artist become a politician. Thus Heidegger, taking his cues from Plato and Aristotle, once understood the state as a work of art and sought the "inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism in the attempt to repeat the art-work of the Greek polis in a form in keeping with this age of technology.³⁶⁴ Here, too, the artist become statesman is to

³⁶³ Gropius/Taut/Behne, "New ideas on architecture," *Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, trans. Michael Bullock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p. 46.

³⁶⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 40 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1983), pp. 161-162, 200; *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), pp. 128 and 160.

master reality in such a way that it will once again present itself as an order in which each individual can find his proper place.

To be fair to Heidegger we would have to distinguish the reality he so fatally misunderstood from what he read into that reality, would have to consider carefully the distinction Heidegger draws between aestheticizing art and what he takes to be true art. We would have to return to the question whether our modern understanding of reality and the aestheticizing of art do not belong together. Aestheticizing art, as we have seen, cannot lay claim to truth. What could truth still mean? But should such an art succeed, as Wagner, Nietzsche, and perhaps Heidegger dreamed, in overcoming the distance that separates the aesthetic realm from reality, would reality thus embraced by art not have to lose its reality, become unreal, become its own simulacrum? Hitler has made it impossible for us to dismiss this nightmare as just a bad dream.

5

"You will be like God!" Modern science and modern art answer to this promise, each in its own way. Both threaten to cover up reality with a second, artificial reality. Both invite us to understand the creator of this second reality as a second God.

Science seeks to understand reality in order to master it. This, it turns out, is an infinite task. Never will our desire for mastery be satisfied. Never will we become our own foundation. Just because of this the progress of technology knows no limits. By their very nature, science and technology remain related to a reality always still to be mastered. Their covering up of reality is therefore never complete.

Aestheticizing art is more successful in covering up reality, even, perhaps especially when it draws its themes from reality. For reality is now only material for the artist that in the artwork loses its independence. Thus transformed it no longer makes any claim on us. Like so many of the horrifying images we see daily on our television screens, so transfigured reality increasingly offers little more than occasions for aesthetic enjoyment.

Less innocent is aestheticizing thinking. Thought here is transformed into an often very ingenious intellectual game, a process that can be traced in the art world as easily as in the humanities. But as we enter a new millennium, as technology continues

to open up new possibilities of mastering and manipulating nature, including human nature, the task of reflecting on place and way, on where we have come from and where we should be going, on the place technology should have in our lives has become more urgent than ever. The aestheticizing of thinking betrays this task.

More dangerous is the attempt to aestheticize reality, to transform our own life and the world in which we live into a work of art, especially dangerous when that attempt uses technology as a means to achieve its ends. Should that attempt succeed it would indeed have to destroy our technological culture in its very origin. For science and technology seek to master reality and as such remain in their very essence related to and dependent on reality. The aestheticizing of reality means its derealization, means the loss of reality, the replacement of reality with its simulacrum.

What lets human beings listen to the snake's promise, you will be like God, is the terror of time. Again and again this terror lets human beings distort reality, including their own reality, for reality and time cannot be divorced. The terror of time means also a fear of reality: never will reality satisfy our demands for security. In this sense we can speak with Schopenhauer of an essential lack in reality. But every attempt to overcome that lack makes us deaf to reality's claims and that means also to our own deepest desires, denies us access to the origin of all meaning, an origin that by its very essence will not be mastered. To open windows to that origin we must find the strength to abandon the hope to take charge of reality, the hope to be in this sense like God, knowing good and evil. Only such strength will allow us to hear the claims persons and things place on us, will let us understand that we do not belong to ourselves, that we cannot invent or imagine what will give our lives measure and direction, but have to receive and discover it. There was and there still is art born of such response-ability. The main task art faces today is neither to decorate nor to deconstruct the house reason has built, but to open windows in that house: windows to transcendence.