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## **Prolegomena to Any Future Aesthetics**

*Can truth do justice to beauty?*

—Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

### **Identity Crisis in Aesthetics**

Published one year after his death, Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) is without any doubt one of the most powerful and comprehensive critiques of art and of the discipline of aesthetics ever written. The work offers a deep and critical engagement with the history and philosophy of aesthetics and with the traditions of European art through the middle of the twentieth century. It is coupled, moreover, with ambitious claims about what aesthetic theory ought to be as a form of critique if it is to meet the demands made by artworks. As such, it opens the project of critical theory to the unique set of pressures created by the class of objects—meaningful, sensuous, and particular—that we have come to recognize as “works of art.” But the forward-looking horizon of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* was the world of high modernism, where the existence of “art” had already come into question; its background was European art from roughly the time of Bach to the present. Much has happened since then both in practice and in theory, including revisions of aesthetic theory in light of a much broader view of the history of art.

Whether Adorno's ideas can be "followed" in the contemporary moment, and if so how, are not questions that admit of a simple answer. Indeed, there are questions to be raised about whether our present historical moment, in society as in art, is continuous with the world that Adorno knew. The collaborators in this volume take vastly different approaches to these issues, some by turning their attention to how Adorno helps us rethink the ways in which the art of the past must be reinterpreted in the light of subsequent history, others by reconsidering Adorno's project within the larger field of aesthetic theory, and still others by reasserting the transhistorical claims of art as a way of resisting the conceptual force-field that has made Adorno's work so influential. They hold in common a recognition of the power of Adorno's aesthetic critique, and they share a commitment to the place of aesthetic theory in response to historical developments that Adorno could not possibly have foreseen.

In spite of its detail and the density of its intellectual arguments, *Aesthetic Theory* can be read as presaging an aesthetics that Adorno did not live to write. The work was left unfinished, just as modernism itself. And yet what he did produce seems both to offer a trenchant critique of the field of aesthetics and to advance a set of ideas to which any future aesthetics would have to respond. These take as their point of orientation a set of remarks about the "difficulty" of art in the present time—its identity, its right to exist—coupled with a diagnosis of the perpetual instability of aesthetic theory. The "Draft Introduction" to the work cites a telling passage from the work of Moritz Geiger (1880–1937) that speaks to the ongoing identity crisis of aesthetics. Aesthetics, he says, is "blown about by every philosophical, cultural, and scientific gust; at one moment it is metaphysical and in the next empirical; now normative, then descriptive; now defined by artists, then by connoisseurs; one day art is supposedly the center of aesthetics and natural beauty merely preliminary, the next day art beauty is merely second-hand natural beauty."<sup>2</sup> While the history of

aesthetics may be somewhat less random than this description suggests, aesthetics has nonetheless labored under ongoing uncertainties about itself. Hegel expressed the concern that art may not be a suitable subject for “systematic and scientific treatment” (hence for theory) at all. Before Hegel, in Kant, there are worries about whether aesthetic reflective judgments mark out a distinct “field.” And, before Kant, Hume asked whether questions of taste would require something other than the resources of epistemology in order to be resolved. This is hardly all. In the course of attempts to grasp central questions about “beauty” and “art,” aesthetic theory has often found itself in a centrifugal relation to its objects, attempting to transform itself into psychology, sociology, moral philosophy, and political analysis, among other things. Indeed, almost all the models on which modern aesthetic theory has been based have been drawn from extra-aesthetic domains. Aesthetic theory has attempted to imagine itself as a version of the theory of knowledge, as a philosophy of judgment, as a vehicle for morality, as a stand-in for political theory, and as substituting for a theory of community. It has looked to phenomenology, psychoanalysis, cognitive science, semiotics, ontology, pragmatics, communication theory, cultural studies, and ideology-critique for guidance. The peculiar lability of aesthetic theory has no doubt been a consequence of the fact that the social practice of “art” was itself in flux during the period when aesthetic theory began to take shape. Aesthetic theory developed in tandem with it. Such instability appears all the more striking now that the domain of art includes a much wider range of practices than ever before. If aesthetic theory is thought of as tied to the existence of “art” as a specific class of objects set apart from the rest of experience, then what becomes of aesthetics in an age when art seems intent on refusing that separation?

Adorno’s writing suggests that these questions need to be addressed along two axes, one directed toward issues of history and practice, the other directed toward more conceptual concerns. As

for history, aesthetics must reckon with shifts in the practice of art in relation to new technologies for communication and circulation. These, no doubt, are driven by the borderless extension of global capitalism even in the face of its various “crises” and collapses, by the inescapable allure of what Guy Debord presciently called the “society of the spectacle,” and by a deep longing for meaningful social relations in a world of isolated individuals. For better or for worse, the practices of art have become entirely porous and open to new technologies of production and circulation, many of which represent themselves as *immaterial*, as happily divorced from the embodied world. Are these new practices continuous with modern modes of production as Adorno understands them, often implicitly, through Marx? Or are they something indeed radically different, representing a historical break that in turn obviates making distinctions between art and other kinds of material making? The more theoretical questions involve asking, first and foremost, whether thinking about art in relation to new modes of production within the framework of globalized capitalism remains a relevant concern and, concomitantly, whether attempts to align art with truth can help restore the value of art as a domain of meaningful sensuous particulars in a world that otherwise continues to believe that rationality is something radically other than, indeed higher than, whatever meaning is carried by art. Far from being outdated, the suggestion that art can stand as an example of what may be called “embodied meaning” seems all the more important in the world of global media capitalism.

### **Sense and Concept**

In the “Draft Introduction” Adorno asked about the very possibility of constructing a theory of aesthetics in light of the fact that “theory” appears destined to let slip away the things that seem to matter most about art: that its meanings are borne by sensuous particulars, and that it makes sense while resisting full and complete rendering in any language that adheres to the sovereignty of

abstract concepts. Artworks speak concretely, addressing themselves to the senses. They are meaningful but they are, in Hegel's terms, forms of "embodied meaning." The difficulty with aesthetic theory is that it has sought to assimilate the truth-content of art to the truth of concepts in their more or less conventional forms, which are disembodied and abstract. This would seem to suggest that aesthetic theory is bound to miss the very thing it hopes most to explain. Indeed, it could well seem that if art is forced to submit its truth-content to the demands of a discourse built around abstract concepts, the results might well resemble what Walter Benjamin described as "the burning up of the husk as it enters the realm of ideas" (*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 31). Benjamin's remark signaled two fears: first, that in discounting art's sensuous surface and grain, aesthetic theory would leave us with little more than a periphrastic reduction of the "thematic" content of the works in question; and second, that the transposition of art into the realm of ideas would blind us to the ways in which artworks help reveal what is incomplete in any form of knowledge that limits itself to concepts alone. Art is, or strives to be, a sensuous way of knowing that seems ever to be at odds with the theories designed to explain it. But in its wish to carry a form of knowledge that is concrete, art can nonetheless help articulate a critique of the ways in which the very notion of a "concept," hence of what counts as "rationality," has been split off from the world of sense.<sup>3</sup> And insofar as it is also conscious of the fact that the wish to reconcile sense and concept is bound to remain unfulfilled, art may be able to frame that critique in a way that is grounded in something other than the naive ideal of a return to a fullness of sense. Modern and contemporary art are as conscious of the illusions bound up in the notion of an "immediacy of sense" as they are resistant to the abstractions of pure concepts. What Adorno calls the "truth content" of art lies in the work "itself" but also in its historical formation, its cultural location, and in the sensory and affective responses it calls into being.

Of course, any encounter with art may well require some involvement with concepts in their more or less conventional forms: as sources of knowledge, or expressions of opinions, or statements of beliefs. One can hardly attempt to exclude from aesthetics the knowledge that a particular painting by Caravaggio is *of* the head of the Medusa; or the belief that Kenneth Branagh, the director of a film based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is also, as an actor in the film, the prince of Denmark; or the informed opinion that the author of *Don Quixote* was in all likelihood born of *converso* ancestors. But such things are a matter of our cognition of these works, rather than of what they themselves "cognize" by virtue of their concrete existence *as* works of art.<sup>4</sup> To say that an artwork "cognizes" anything is of course a figure of speech, a catachresis whose purpose is to marshal an existing term to a meaning for which there is no adequate name. I place "cognize" in scare quotes because the kind of knowledge implicit in artworks does not resemble the knowledge we expect to have of objects as framed by propositional utterances. And yet this is the very thing that aesthetic theory has been at pains to explain: that while artworks are indeed objects, the truth-content of art is *of* the world while also offering critical reflections upon it. This truth-content is inseparable from the sensuous particularity of the works in question even while it remains irreducible to sheer sensuousness; it is a truth-content that is likewise inseparable from the fact that artworks are made. Indeed, Adorno located one of the great paradoxes of aesthetic theory in the fact that art offers us something that is at once made *and* true: "Today the metaphysics of art revolves around the question of how something spiritual that is made, in philosophical terms something 'merely posited' can be true. The issue is not the immediately existing artwork but its content [*Gehalt*]" (*AT*, p. 131).

Adorno's response to this puzzle, to which various contributors to this volume turn, revolves around one of the oldest issues in aesthetics, namely, the "semblance" character of art. What is

made in art is semblance, and what must be rescued for truth is precisely the semblance-quality of art: "The question of the truth of something made is indeed none other than the question of semblance and the rescue of semblance as the semblance of the true.... Of all the paradoxes of art, no doubt the innermost one is that only through making, through the production of particular works specifically and completely formed in themselves, and never through any immediate vision, does art achieve what is not made, the truth" (*AT*, p. 131). Semblance must be "rescued" not only because it has been held suspect since at least the time of Plato but also because the commodity structure of capitalism has transformed most things into ghostlike appearances of themselves.

### **Beauty and Rationalization**

In large part because artworks are in fact sensuous artifacts, they scarcely offer the kind of truth that can be formulated by conventional concepts, which must suppress those things that are particular and embodied about our engagement with the world. This is especially true of the ways in which art struggles against the concept in its dominant modern form, which has been complicit in creating the condition that Weber called "rationalization." While Weber argued that rationalization may be at work in all cultures, there is a historical component to the process of rationalization within the culture of modernity that seems to have ensured the disparity of sense and beauty. The specificity of rationalization in the West and increasingly around the globe, which Adorno located in the effects of social labor, goes unrecognized among adherents of the Romantic notion that art *must* establish itself as the antithesis of reason. Remnants of that stance can be seen even among critics who seem to argue against it. Witness Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art*, which attempts to explain how art could leap toward a knowledge of things that lie beyond the bounds of science: "Art is a source of knowledge not

only because it immediately continues the work of the sciences and completes their discoveries ... but also because it points out the limits of scientific competence and takes over at the point at which further knowledge can be acquired only along paths which cannot be trodden outside of art."<sup>5</sup> These arguments may be true, but they risk producing exaggerated versions of the very dichotomies they would hope to overcome.

The thesis according to which rationalization defines modernization means that certain norms of reason came to be regarded as if they were reason's *only* valid forms.<sup>6</sup> These forms were destined to exclude whatever is sensuous in the work of knowing. One critique of rationalization points out that all forms of reason are built upon some material ground; however, an aesthetic critique suggests that the sensuousness of art strives to assert what rationalized concepts have let slip away from the world. Thus, while the process of rationalization may well be pervasive in the West, and increasingly so globally, it remains nonetheless true that artworks can demonstrate its limitations within a particular historical framework. Herein lies the critical force that artworks carry in the context of their historical existence, but herein also lies a principal source of the frustrations, anxieties, and evasions of aesthetic theory over the long course of its history, beginning roughly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and continuing, with but few exceptions, until the present day: how to theorize a field comprising works that are essentially sensuous and particular, historical and concrete. Aesthetic theory has been at pains to explain the fact that some essential component of truth seems to get lost in the course of any theoretical attempt to bring a work of art *itself* to cognition; there is just as little (or as much) shared between a theory of aesthetics and a work of art as there is between a theory of love and Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. And yet the one can hardly exist without the other. The point is that while art makes claims as a form of knowing, it presents us with insights that are not reducible to their *conceptual* equivalents.

Artworks are sensuous, material, and particular; but they are not for that reason any less “true.”

In attempting to locate whatever is distinctive about art, critics and theorists alike have sometimes called its noncognitive element “beauty” and have associated special qualities, pleasures, and emotions with it. Indeed, “beauty” is but one of the more familiar names for whatever it is that seems to elude the grasp of concepts in a work of art. But beauty is not all, and as Jay Bernstein has argued, modernism in particular has found it necessary to sacrifice whatever in “beauty” may oppose ugliness, require “harmony,” or demand the felicitous integration of parts. (Bernstein’s essay on Picasso in this volume speaks directly to this point.) Adorno offers one reason why this may be so: “[Modern art] has taken all the darkness and guilt of the world onto its shoulders. Its entire happiness consists in recognizing unhappiness; all its beauty consists in denying itself the semblance of beauty.”<sup>7</sup>

And yet “beauty” has returned in the last several decades with a new critical edge, just as aesthetic pleasure has reasserted itself with a new political force in the work of photographers like Robert Mapplethorpe and Sebastião Salgado. “Beauty” has been the subject of a revival in recent writings on aesthetics, and this revival offers evidence of what the abstractions of theory had let slip away. A 1999 exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., under the title “Regarding Beauty” gives some indication of the desire to recapture the force of beauty for a field that seemed to have become increasingly fascinated by theories of history and politics, not to mention by the conceptual mystique of analytical philosophy. So too have a number of related writings, ranging from the anthology edited by Peg Brand, *Beauty Matters* (2000), to Dave Hickey’s *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (1993); an earlier anthology, *Uncontrollable Beauty*, edited by Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (1988); Wendy Steiner’s *The Scandal of Pleasure* (1995); and Arthur Danto’s collection of essays *The Abuse of Beauty* (2003). These works speak, first, to the desire to recap-

ture art's sensuous appeal from the theories designed to explain it and, second, to the desire to align the power of art's sensuousness with various moral and political projects (as in Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*, 1999). These, in turn, are indicative of a desire to claim, or to reclaim, the *importance* of art, a desire that appears ill at ease with the notion that art's importance ought to be self-evident. Standards of beauty may have changed since a century ago, when the character Adam Verver in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* described art as providing human beings with a "release from the bonds of ugliness"; indeed, there is hardly a consensus about whether "beauty" and "ugliness" do, or should, stand opposed. Still, the appeal to beauty has put some pressure on theoretical debates, in part because it shows that there is more at stake in questions of aesthetics than matters of vogue or standards of taste. What is at issue is art's desire to serve as a form of sensuous cognition. This is something that aesthetic theory *ought* to be able to explain.

If aesthetic theory runs aground when asked to account for what is specifically "beautiful" about art, this is partly because the notion of beauty can seem frightfully thin when measured against the breadth and depth of what "art" can encompass, and even more so in view of the fact that "art" is a category whose boundaries seem to shift in relation to domains external to it (for example: nature, politics, society, religion, science). It is hardly clear whether, or how, the beauty of art differs from natural beauty, or how art is to be held apart from craft, if in fact it is. Indeed, "beauty" and "art" are both deceptively simple ideas that, in their simplicity, mask complex processes operating at both the historical and conceptual levels.<sup>8</sup> For instance, it remains unclear whether the concept of art can be applied to artifacts whose historical function was not so much "artistic" as religious (icon, chalice, temple, urn). But the additional problem, which surfaces at the theoretical level, is that notions like "art" and "beauty" seem not to work like other concepts, if indeed they work at all.

This question has been the subject of much debate since at least the aesthetics of Kant, and it is worth recalling.

In Kant's formulation, aesthetic judgments are unusual in being at once subjective and universal; they are rooted in particular feelings and yet they lay claim to universal validity. This is paradoxical, and while Kant attempts throughout the entire "Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment" to resolve it, the results are unclear, even by his own standards.<sup>9</sup> And yet in spite of the failings of theory in this regard something seems to be right in Kant's idea that art is equally tied to the particularity of sensuous experience (and, moreover, tied to that particularity in its affective form) *and* grounded in the desire for claims that would have the same universality as other concepts. Kant's aesthetics is thus an expression of a desire that, however unfulfilled and in tension with itself, remains central to aesthetic theory: the desire to acknowledge claims that would make sensuous particulars the bearers of a kind of truth that is not beholden to preexisting categories and concepts. By appealing to the logic of what he calls "reflective" or "nonsubsumptive" judgments, Kant challenges us to find universal grounds of agreement on the basis of the particulars, rather than to presuppose that ground. And yet Kant leaves us with the question of whether the affects incited by representations of sensuous particulars can in fact resist judgment's normativizing force. This worry is heightened in Adorno's claim that the "bindingness" of every style may be a reflex of society's "repressive character" (*AT*, p. 207).

Seen in this light, it is hardly a surprise that aesthetic theory has so often been foiled in its attempts to provide any reliable calibration for terms like "beauty" and "art." But neither is it clear that the two—beauty and art—bear any essential relationship to one another. For one thing, the field of "art," toward which aesthetics has come to direct itself, is historical and so necessarily variable and unstable even in its distinction from "nature." Art beauty and natural beauty remain entwined. And yet it seems

that the notion of “art” has also been variable at the level of what is expected of it normatively. “Art” has been taken as the designation of a particular class of works, as a name for things that are appreciated as more than “mere things,” as a set of practices whose ends lie in something other than their usefulness, and as an honorific designation granted to artifacts that have achieved a significant degree of cultural distinction. Beginning with the avant-gardes (witness Duchamp’s “readymades”) it became clear that, while we do not call just *anything* a work of art, it is also true that just about anything *may* become a work of art.<sup>10</sup> The “nominalism” that Adorno associated with the work of Benedetto Croce may provide one response to this problem insofar as nominalism can proliferate concepts as the instances demand. But nominalism is a poor excuse for a theory, and rather indicates its frustrations. Indeed, the very idea of an aesthetic “theory” makes demands and introduces difficulties of quite a different order. As a “theory of art” aesthetics has wavered between a psychological empiricism, various forms of ontology (which have pursued questions about the essence of artworks), expressivism, functionalism (the uses of art), and the theory of values (in which the terms “art” and “beauty” are meant to impute judgments of quality and degree). As for its evaluative powers, aesthetic theory has been hard pressed to establish consistent or convincing links between “beauty” and the works to which this designation is intended to apply.

This embarrassment points up the more general problem of what may count as judgments of aesthetic value and taste, and of what may count as evidence for them. In response to aesthetic theory’s ambitions in this regard, one might imagine the simple Wittgensteinian exercise of attempting to point to the beauty of a work of art, or to whatever particular element distinguishes it from a “mere thing.” (Here, no doubt, is a place where Wittgenstein would say that language is “idling.”) Adorno observes that the answer to the fundamental aesthetic question of why a work can be

said to be beautiful amounts to the pursuit of casuistic reasoning rather than a priori logic. As judgments, aesthetic claims stand at odds with the determinability that attach between concepts and their “objects” in conventional terms. Adorno: “The empirical indeterminability of these reflections changes nothing in the objectivity of what they grasp.... That whereby it is possible to distinguish what is correct and what is false in an artwork according to its own measure is the elements in which universality imposes itself concretely in the monad” (*AT*, p. 189).

There is an important point to be gleaned from Adorno’s insight that “universality” is evident in artworks and not simply in the judgments brought to them. This is that the “universality” of art is necessarily a concrete and particular universality, which is to say a form of universality that is fundamentally at odds with what we take to be the “concept” in its dominant form. This is true both at the level of individual works and as regards the more general notion of “art.” The mounting evidence of decades of revisionism, a heightened self-consciousness about the contextuality of the languages of criticism, the reevaluation of art through various forms of ideology-critique, and, not least, an explosive heterogeneity among the practices that are taken to count as art, all suggest that any aesthetic theory with systematic and universalizing pretensions is bound to be defeated unless it can come to grips with the needs that drive theory to produce abstractions in the face of something as asystematic as the field of artworks. And unless aesthetics can somehow grapple with the fact of its own externality to art and proceed from that awareness to discover the deeper ways in which art still needs philosophy, one can be sure that notions like “beauty” and “art” will be *nothing more than* the reflections of isolated judgments or expressions of bare social interests and needs. To regard art, as Adorno does, as having a “need” for philosophy would be to pursue with an equally critical force the desires of art for a validity that might be recognizable in the culture of the “concept” *and* the unspoken needs of phi-

losophy to anchor itself in the concrete. Regrettably, this project has scarcely begun. A few exceptions aside (among which may be counted the essays in the present volume), the result has been a series of merely partial encounters between aesthetics and art. But as the art of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries began to put increasing pressure on some of the notions central to aesthetic theory—beauty, taste, the transparent immediacy of “experience” itself—it was hardly surprising to find that the philosophy of art soon reached the point where its only options seemed to be what Adorno characterized as a “dumb and trivial universality” on the one hand and “arbitrary judgments usually derived from conventional opinions” on the other (*AT*, p. 333). The bifurcation of the “sense” lodged in particulars and the universal demands of the rational “concept” are all too visible in this sorry choice.

### **Embodied Meanings**

The questions of art’s resistance to aesthetic theory and of the misrecognition of art by the theory designed to comprehend it are issues I take as central. How and why did this happen? At what cost did it occur? The general tenor of my response, for which I take Adorno’s work in *Aesthetic Theory* as an instigation and as a provisional guide, has two prongs, one directed toward questions of history, the other directed toward more conceptual matters. One prong involves the development of aesthetic theory in relation to a desire for “embodied meaning” during the period in which one form of reason, the rationalized form, came to be institutionalized as normative.<sup>11</sup> To speak of “embodied meaning” is to register art’s way of demonstrating the inadequacy of purely conceptual ways of knowing the world. It is at the same time a way of staking claims for the values that it makes in the world. To account for these facts we need to engage not only Adorno’s negative-dialectical materialism but also Hegel’s convictions about the role of art as a “sensuous manifestation of the idea,” in spite of the

fact that Hegel's claim was coupled with the belief that art could be surpassed by a form of spirit somehow more satisfactory than it—that is, by the Absolute. Art, he writes, “is not ... the highest way of apprehending the spiritually concrete. The higher way, in contrast to representation by means of the sensuously concrete, is thinking, which in a relative sense is indeed abstract, but it must be concrete, not one-sided, if it is to be true and rational.”<sup>12</sup> For Adorno, by contrast, the possibilities of art are set by the untranscendable horizon of history. And from this historically bounded perspective it seems that the validity of “embodied meaning” was suppressed even in relation to some of the most compelling efforts to realize it, or that it was relegated to the status of *Wunschdenken*.

When seen from the perspective of conventional, “abstract” concepts, art may well appear inherently difficult and opaque; it seems resistant to paraphrase in part because the mode of paraphrase is reliant on propositional knowledge, on various forms of “knowing that.” If art is opposed to any reductivism that would privilege its conceptual content, this is because there is something more than “conceptual content” in it. Its way of knowing the world, which is also a way of valuing it, is lost when only conceptual content is brought into view. As Robert Brandom explained, having conceptual content means playing a role in a form of reasoning whose goal is to make things explicit in terms of propositional utterances, that is, the sort of content typically expressed by declarative sentences: by “that” clauses, or by what Brandom describes as “content-specifying sentential complements of propositional attitude ascriptions. Because contents of this sort are the right shape to be sayable, thinkable, and believable, they can be understood as making something explicit. The claim is that to have or express a content of this kind is just to be able to play the role both of premise and of conclusion in *inferences*.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the role of propositional utterances in making things explicit reinforces the sense that they serve as privileged means for disclosing the truth. By contrast, Adorno has much to say about the

opacity of art (for example, “that artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it expresses this enigmaticalness from the perspective of language”; *AT*, p. 120). But *why* this opacity demands attention, and whether it can be grasped as the source of claims not to be dismissed for lack of clarity, requires a deeper understanding of the Weberian thesis about the role of rationalization in modern social life.

The notion of rationalization itself has antecedents in the philosophy of aesthetics, most notably in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and in Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*. The critique of rationalization that reaches from Weber to Horkheimer and Adorno in fact begins as an aesthetic critique. For Hegel, this is a critique of a world of “reflection”:

The development of reflection in our life today has made it a need of ours, in relation both to our will and judgment, to cling to general considerations and to regulate the particular by them, with the result that universal forms, laws, duties, rights, maxims, prevail as determining reasons and are the chief regulator. But for artistic interest and production we demand in general rather a quality of life in which the universal is not present in the form of law and maxim, but which gives the impression of being one with the senses and the feelings, just as the universal and the rational is contained in the imagination by being brought into unity with a concrete sensuous appearance. Consequently the conditions of our present time are not favourable to art. (*LA*, p. 10)

The suppression of the immediacy of art and the emergence of a desire for the reconciliation of sense and concept emerge as part of a history in which the pervasive form of self-consciousness is “reflection”; reflection happens only with the loss of immediacy and carries with it what Hegel takes as the virtual guarantee that art will fail as the highest bearer of the truth (*LA*, pp. 10–11). Reflection stands at the root of the “abstraction” of the concept, of the loss of art’s power to serve as the bearer of truth, and of the

desire to surpass art in some higher manifestation of the embodied meaning. It is linked to Hegel's idealization of the "golden days" of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages, which serve as nostalgic points of reference for everything that art might achieve and as a basis for a mournful contrast with the present. If the prospects of an aesthetic critique in a rationalized society are truly limited, this is because art has in turn become constrained in its ability to disclose the truth. Art is a sensuous manifestation of the "Idea" but not in the highest possible way. Hegel's hope, which remained unachieved in the *Aesthetics*, was to make an opening for a more complex and adequate version of the "concept" than what art could provide. Indeed, Hegel's understanding of the history of art and of aesthetic forms (architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry) is such that art itself makes "progress" by jettisoning that which is most central to it, namely, its sensuous form.

Some of the paradoxes of Hegel's aesthetics grow out of the tradition that he inherited. They begin with the "invention" of aesthetics as the theory of a new kind of "knowledge" by Alexander Baumgarten in his *Aesthetica* of 1750. Baumgarten's wish to make aesthetics a "science of sensation" was bound to be fraught with difficulty because it worked with accepted divisions of body and spirit. For Baumgarten, aesthetic cognition was double or, as he would say, "confused." Kant's response to Baumgarten was to say that aesthetics does not in fact give us knowledge in the form of knowledge of objects at all, not even, as Baumgarten thought, in a form that fuses together corporeal and mental elements.<sup>14</sup> The conditions underlying the misrecognition of art by aesthetic theory are the very same ones that allowed for the configuration of a relatively independent aesthetic sphere of culture, where art's irreducible materiality could be afforded a place under the pretense that art was also of benefit to those seeking knowledge, or aspiring to virtue, or interested in improving themselves or society. These things may well be true, and indeed are still heard among the "justifications" for art in contemporary pedagogical

and political contexts. But the consolidation of a separate aesthetic domain was never and could never be complete. Art could neither be wholly divorced from the broader world of praxis, nor could reason in its purely rationalized forms suppress the validity of the claims that art makes sensuously. The two are linked by a structure of identity and difference.

This complex structure is often ignored by aesthetic theory. Indeed, the invention of modern aesthetics happens alongside the widespread acceptance of empirical and mechanistic views of the natural world, together with the institution of practices designed to support it; with the consolidation of nation-states; with the invention of liberal democracies; with the rise of commodity capitalism; with the establishment of bureaucratic institutions of the kind described especially well by Weber; and with changes in social practices related to the arts in a more direct and relevant way: the decline of patronage, the beginning of newspapers, the rise of café society, and the establishment of modern museums and concert halls as commercial institutions, first supported by paying subscribers and then by open ticket sales. By the time the field of literature had become what Pierre Bourdieu described as “a separate universe,”<sup>15</sup> there already existed a flourishing salon culture in which matters of taste could compete on equal footing with questions about politics or society. (Bourdieu writes: “The salons are also, through the exchanges that take place there, genuine articulations between the fields: those who hold political power aim to impose their vision on artists and to appropriate for themselves the power of consecration and legitimation which they hold, notably by means of what Sainte-Beuve calls ‘literary press’; for their part, the writers and artists, acting as solicitors and intercessors, or even sometimes as true pressure groups, endeavor to assure for themselves a mediating control of the different material or symbolic rewards distributed by the state.”)<sup>16</sup>

In identifying itself now with questions of taste of a more normative and “empirical” kind, now with “reflective” judgments

that originate in subjective feelings of pleasure and pain, now with the aims of moral philosophy, now with politics, now with empirical approaches to “experience,” now with the theory of material production, now with the dynamics of desire, now with the social organization of experience, and so on, aesthetic theory has consistently been pointing toward the very domains of praxis from which art has been set apart. Such separations may have been necessary in order for art to identify and validate itself as an integral and autonomous sphere of activity during a time when other such spheres were also consolidating themselves in independent ways.<sup>17</sup> But because these separations were not complete, that is, because art still retained recognizable traces of its relationship to what may more broadly be called the “praxis of life,” the misrecognition of art by aesthetic theory can itself provide critical insights into the ways in which those extra-aesthetic domains were enmeshed in the conditions that rendered art unfamiliar. Indeed, the process of rationalization was not something that happened to any greater or lesser degree inside or outside of the aesthetic sphere but was completely woven into the fabric of Western modernity. In spite of its apparently autonomous existence, “art” was and has remained entwined with politics, history, morality, desire, and the materiality of production, even as these domains in modern life were themselves, in their own spheres, transformed by the suppression of the embodied concept. What art offers, which these domains may not, is a critical reflection upon these conditions. This is because art is semblance, hence not completely incorporated in the processes of rationalization.

As already hinted, the questions I am raising became especially sharp in the broad stretch of time that has come to be known as “modernity.” This is the period when something like the “theory of art” began to fashion itself as coextensive with discourses concerned with truth and morality, politics and utility, and when the practice of “art” itself began to emerge as a domain of artifactual production no longer intelligible within the praxis of life. The re-

sult was the creation of a conceptual vocabulary for the theory of art that relied on the ancillary disciplines mentioned earlier, but that also came to invoke special, honorific terms like “beauty,” “sublimity,” and “disinterest” in order to describe the ways in which its objects and experiences did not conform to what those discourses counted as normative. Such considerations, and others like them, are crucial to an understanding of what became the field of “aesthetics” in the modern age. But it would be equally false to think that the underlying issues are in any sense unique to the culture of modernity. Recall that Horkheimer and Adorno never argued that rationalization, *qua* enlightenment, began with the displacement of myth. On their account, myth was already a form of enlightenment. Moreover, the question that Adorno identified as central to the metaphysics of art—how something made can also be true—is the recapitulation of an issue that is central to the Platonic critique of poetry. What the Platonic critique of poetry suggests, beyond what it says directly, is that art and the discourse of truth are joined by a structure of identity *and* difference; truth and beauty constitute an antinomy. On the one hand, each of them must exclude the other as part of its project of self-definition, and yet beauty presents itself as truth’s forgotten face, just as truth strives to articulate what beauty is able to make manifest. If the historical component of any critical aesthetic theory involves showing how the antinomy of truth and beauty took the particular shape it did in the modern age, and if its critical task lies in an analysis of the misrecognition of art by conventional aesthetics, it does so in light of the distant ideal in which truth and beauty might each be able to say what the other holds dear. “The truth content of an artwork requires philosophy,” writes Adorno (*AT*, p. 341). And yet, aesthetics has long failed to be the discourse of such recognition; indeed, the through-line of its development in Western modernity is the history of multiple evasions and displacements of this very fact. As a result, the truth of art has all too often been regarded as subordinate to some *other* truth, including

the truth of the abstract concept; it has systematically been dislocated into art's cognate fields.

## Alternatives

Adorno's "Draft Introduction" to the *Aesthetic Theory* points the way toward some alternatives. The importance of the "Draft Introduction" derives as much from the thoroughness of Adorno's critique of the discourses of aesthetics that precede him as from his commitment to the principle that art has always had the power to reveal things that theory seems to lack. Indeed, one goal of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is to raise awareness of those things that aesthetic theory has allowed to be lost in our conception of art's engagement with the world. This restores art to the position of responding critically to the various theoretical approaches that have been devised to explain it, even while it participates in the same history that has conditioned aesthetics as a "theory of art." A sketch of Adorno's basic position, an outline of his critique of modern aesthetic theory, and some brief remarks regarding his own dialectical approach can serve as a further guide to these issues.

The "Draft Introduction" to the *Aesthetic Theory* begins with a powerful statement of the fact that aesthetic theory seems to be set systematically against what art reveals. The force of Adorno's point goes considerably beyond the truism that theory is concept-bound and so destined to ignore what sense seems directly to show. The ubiquitous and irreparable separation of any *concept* from any *thing* is not in and of itself the dilemma Adorno wishes to capture. As Terry Eagleton writes, "It is a pity that we lack a word to capture the unique aroma of coffee—that our speech is wizened and anemic, remote from the taste and feel of reality. But how could a word, as opposed to a pair of nostrils, capture the aroma of anything, and is it a matter of failure that it does not?"<sup>18</sup> There is indeed an answer to Eagleton's worry that in turn is the basis for Adorno's negative-dialectical approach: that "concept" and "thing" are in fact but two moments of the same world. As

for aesthetic theory, the puzzle is that aesthetics seems to misrecognize art even while it seems committed to the idea that concept and sense *ought* to participate in one another; indeed, aesthetics seems to misrecognize the ways in which art is a form of cognition, albeit in the sensuous realm. As against the kind of theoretical work in which a conceptual apparatus is brought to bear on works of art from the outside or from “above,” or in which the qualities of a particular work are used in order to generate normative principles or rules (for genre or style or periodization, or indeed for taste or “beauty” itself), Adorno acknowledges that art is a domain in which the expectations customarily placed on theory—for example, that it should have a certain level of generality, that it should provide a systematic and complete account of the cases it is meant to cover—may not hold. It is not enough for aesthetics to be inductive *or* for it to be deductive in its approach to art. This is because artworks refuse equally to grant access “from above” *and* “from below,” “neither from concepts nor from a-conceptual experience” (*AT*, p. 343). But how, then, might one fashion a theory of art? The question begs response equally in the form of a vision of what the future of aesthetics might look like and in terms of a statement of the conditions that have informed it historically. What Adorno seeks is an account of something that idealism and materialism in aesthetics both ignore, namely, their undisclosed entanglements with one another. In Adorno’s case the alternative lies in a realignment of aesthetic theory with the principles of negative-dialectical thinking: “The only possibility for aesthetics beyond this miserable alternative is the philosophical insight that fact and concept are not polar opposites but mediated reciprocally in one another” (*AT*, p. 343).

Adorno also means, of course, that aesthetic theory provides an index of the ways in which sense and concept are split from *and* implicated in one another. Since this process occurs historically, it would only make sense for aesthetics to be both historical and philosophical or, as Adorno, following Lukács, puts it, “his-

torico-philosophical.”<sup>19</sup> Rather than regard history as structured by underlying ideas seeking tangible expression in art—(much less by the “Absolute Spirit” of Hegelian dialectics)—Adorno takes art as a historically specific, material domain of culture composed of objects that cannot be reduced to mere matter. Artworks have a thingly character, but they are not “mere things.” The “more than material quality” of artworks is given various names throughout the *Aesthetic Theory*, some more remarkable than others. In speaking of beauty, for example, Adorno refers to the quality of the “plus” or the “extra”; the same could be said of the unquantifiable extra measure that style “adds” to the ontology of a work of art. Often Adorno calls this element “spirit.” Keeping track of “spirit” while dealing with artworks as artifacts means striving for the kind of account of art that modern aesthetics has by and large failed to produce because it has come to accept, or merely to lament, the vacuity of sense in comparison with the concept. Increasingly, the “philosophical” element in aesthetic theory has tended toward the overtheorization of artworks at the expense of what can best be called the force of their sensuous and material particularity. Along with this, the “historical” component of art has gone undertheorized, in spite of having been amply explored. During the period when art was theorized principally in terms of historical systems and subdivided by nation, century, and genre—as in the various taxonomies common in standard versions of the “history of literature,” “history of art,” “history of music,” and so on—the various histories in question were derived largely from the categories established in Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*, minus the speculative overlay and idealist underpinnings of the Hegelian system. Idealism became orthodoxy.

By Adorno’s account, the most prominent exceptions to the then-prevailing tendencies in aesthetic theory were to be found in the efforts of Walter Benjamin and Georg Lukács.<sup>20</sup> Consider, by contrast to their efforts, Adorno’s critical assessments of the

“mainstream” directions in modern aesthetics. In the course of the “Draft Introduction,” Adorno passes under critical review a vast array of theoretically informed approaches to art: work-immanent studies, phenomenological aesthetics, a form of nominalism that he associates with Benedetto Croce, empiricist aesthetics, and hermeneutics, along with Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Given Adorno’s critical assessment of this entire, heterogeneous tradition, his work might well be taken as constructing a space for the understanding of art by systematically excluding every conceivable approach to it: “art” would be defined as the structural remainder, as the thing that theory consistently fails to explain. But this is hardly the project that *Aesthetic Theory* sets for itself. Quite the contrary. Each of Adorno’s negations is designed to disclose some element of aesthetic truth and each can in turn be incorporated into a dialectical understanding of the relationship between aesthetic theory and art. *Aesthetic Theory* aims to hold the “objective status” of art firmly in place rather than to locate it as a function of the affects or the judgments of the subject. (Adorno’s critique of the association of art with subjective inwardness is evident in his early work on Kierkegaard.)<sup>21</sup> In his insistence upon art as an object-domain Adorno follows Hegel’s response to Kant, who identified the task of aesthetics as universalizing the subjective judgment-power required for the mediation of the sensuous and supersensuous worlds. Adorno can hardly refuse Kant’s idea that aesthetics must address itself to what the division of experience into the separate domain of cognition (sense) and morality (the supersensuous) fails to grasp. For Kant, this was “experience” as a whole. Adorno’s aesthetics is Kantian in its commitment to the principle of art’s incongruity with the realm of the cognitively true and the morally good. But it is resolutely un-Kantian in that it refuses to make art a function of subjectively grounded claims, even as universals. For Adorno, aesthetic theory is directed neither toward questions of taste and judgment nor toward questions of

experience rooted in the subjective apprehension of forms. Rather, it offers a window onto a domain of works that are non-identical with both the concepts we bring to them and to the materials of which they are composed. Artworks are things, and their “thingly” qualities ought to be respected; but artworks are not *mere* things. Insofar as they are woven into the fabric of social and historical relations, Adorno regards artworks as the “social antithesis of society.”

Grounding this view is the claim that art plays a crucial role in preserving what I have been calling “embodied meaning.” Terry Eagleton is no doubt right in pointing out that modern aesthetics began as a discourse about the body. This much was clear from the ways in which Burke and Hume engaged the question of sensation. In “The Standard of Taste,” Hume, for instance, hoped to set judgments of taste on solid ground by identifying empirical grounds for agreement about aesthetic pleasure. But this also implies regarding artworks as bundles of stimuli. The result was something that Hume himself could hardly have imagined, namely, the obscuring of whatever was special about works of art. At the other end of the spectrum, the appeal to indeterminate and unknowable qualities as the key to the specifically “aesthetic” element in art (for example, the “*je ne sais quoi*”), or the linkage of art with the unfathomable creative powers of genius, yields a vision of aesthetics that is bound to seem remote from what artworks ask us to grasp as tangible, objective, and concrete. Aesthetic theory has a history of dividing art between one reductivism grounded in the empirical and another that gestures toward the ineffable. To this Adorno replies with a tersely articulated antinomy: “The beautiful is no more to be defined than its concept can be dispensed with” (*AT*, p. 51).

To be sure, one can replace an aesthetic theory *qua* theory of art with descriptions of aesthetic experience, as certain branches of phenomenology have sought to do. Insofar as phenomenol-

ogy takes its bearings by lived experience, it might appear to be uniquely suited to the development of a philosophical aesthetics. The reasons are hardly obscure. Like art itself, phenomenology deals with the realm of embodied experience as complex, integrated, and irreducible. Its procedures defy any approach to the world that would begin from the “top down” or from the “bottom up.” Phenomenology attempts to register the fact that any engagement with the world must commence “in the middle.” It is equally discontent with the reduction of experience to its “conditions of possibility” and with mere descriptions of the content of experience. In the view of one of its most aesthetically minded practitioners, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is a philosophy that takes the facts of the subject’s embodiment and of the materiality of the world as co-equal. Its philosophical task is to account for the engagement of the two in the production of meaning. Phenomenology is “a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins ... and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status.”<sup>22</sup> The point of departure for phenomenological reflection, the human body, occupies a position that is hardly “originary” but is itself remarkably in-between. “There is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place—when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible, lighting the fire that will not stop burning.”<sup>23</sup>

Especially in the essays “Eye and Mind” and “Cézanne’s Doubt” Merleau-Ponty gives an account of the ways in which art is an intelligent sensing of the world, offering an engagement with the world that gives evidence of the kind of knowledge that has been occluded by the dominance of “abstract concepts” in the preponderantly rationalized cultures of modernity. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, the eye and the hand transmit the intelligence of the world. But, unlike “science,” art (painting) is credited by Merleau-Ponty

with an encounter with the brute meaning of the world. As such, it carries out the work of “thinking” in a manner that conceptual thought cannot accomplish. Moreover, art’s intelligent sensing of the world is free from the desire to know things as true or false, and likewise free from the kinds of judgments about ends that are implicit in morality. The contrast between the certainties embodied in the visual domain of painting and the philosophies that ground certainty in the expurgation of doubt could hardly be greater: “A Cartesian can grant that the existing world is not visible.... A painter cannot grant that our openness to the world is illusory or indirect, that what we see is not the world itself, or that the mind has to do only with its thoughts or with another mind” (“Eye and Mind,” pp. 186–87). Painting is thus as much a form of ontology as it is a mode of cognition: “Because depth, color, line, movement, contour, physiognomy are all branches of Being and because each one can sway all the rest, there are no separated, distinct ‘problems’ in painting, no really opposed paths, no partial ‘solutions,’ no cumulative progress, no irretrievable options” (“Eye and Mind,” p. 188). Likewise, art is an engagement of the world that is itself a form of valuing, which is to say that it is a form of realizing and tracking value by means of material making and embodied perceiving. In it, values are not simply invoked or applied but enacted: as color, depth, line, volume, and so on. Painting thus becomes a mode of embodied meaning that returns us to those very things that have been alienated from the concept as a “simple abstraction”: body, gesture, style, manner, tone, mood, and the like.

In Adorno’s view, however, the phenomenology of art runs aground because it strives to be just as presuppositionless as the concept.<sup>24</sup> “It wants to say what art is. The essence it discerns is, for phenomenology, art’s origin and at the same time the criterion of art’s truth and falsehood” (*AT*, p. 351). Phenomenology understands that “essences” cannot be isolated from the continuum of existence. As Merleau-Ponty remarks at the very beginning of the

*Phenomenology of Perception*, phenomenology “puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their ‘facticity’” (p. vii). Artworks for their part call for reflection on experience by semblances of experience, in which we follow themes, reconstruct images, or relate empathically with what a given character may feel. Undialectical and nonreflective appeals to experience are bound to yield a revalidation of the subject when in fact the experience of art seems to require something closer to what Adorno calls a “*countermovement to the subject*” (my emphasis). As he put it, “[Aesthetic experience] demands something on the order of the self-denial of the observer, his capacity to address or recognize what aesthetic objects themselves enunciate and what they conceal” (*AT*, p. 346). The incomprehensibility to which we are given free and open access through appearances stands at the core of what Adorno calls the “enigma” of art. It is also art’s best defense against the ravages of aesthetic theories that seem bent on schematizing it: “This incomprehensibility persists as the character of art, and it alone protects the philosophy of art from doing violence to art” (*AT*, p. 347). If aesthetic theory has an obligation, it is to bring the opacity of art to consciousness, to remain eloquent and articulate while resisting the temptation to regard the enigmas of art as puzzles to be solved: “The task of a philosophy of art is not so much to explain away the element of incomprehensibility, which speculative philosophy has almost invariably sought to do, but rather to understand the incomprehensibility itself” (*AT*, p. 347).

Merleau-Ponty’s idea of essences put back into existence ranges well beyond mere facticity to a more complex form of experience. And yet Adorno’s response to phenomenology may help clarify the fact that “embodied meaning” is not simply the result of concretizing an idea, much less of “subtracting” whatever in the concept is or was abstract so as to reach its material substratum.

It is rather an attempt to grasp the ways in which art, as a mode of material praxis, offers a sensuously intelligent way of grasping the world. If art is, in Hegel's famous phrase, the "sensuous manifestation of the Idea," then it is a manifestation in which the forces at work in bringing about the "manifestation of the Idea" are an integral part of the work itself. Art is the production of things that are not "mere things" in part because their material "madness" brings forth a set of qualities that *mere* material things seem unable to disclose. Adorno offers this as his redescription of Benjamin's notion of the aura ("Aura is not only—as Benjamin claimed—the here and now of the artwork, it is whatever goes beyond its factual givenness"; *AT*, p. 45). These are not just sensuous qualities that *oppose* the concept, but a range of qualities, including affect and force, which go beyond the brute materials of any given work.

It seems only right, then, to consider philosophical appeals to the notion of "force"—as in Deleuze's appeal to the notion of *puissance* and to the "logic of sense"—in aesthetic theory. (Deleuze: "In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. For this reason no art is figurative.")<sup>25</sup> Can "force" and "sense" stand in some relation to the concept other than that of opposition or remainder? Phenomenology rests with the lived body, but it does not take power or forces into account. As Deleuze writes, "The lived body is a paltry thing in comparison with a more profound and almost unlivable Power."<sup>26</sup> If Deleuze's effort to develop a new aesthetics seems to be more radical than what phenomenology proposes it is largely because in place of "lived experience" Deleuze proposes an engagement with the forces that drive and organize it, including at the supra-individual level. In this he remains resolutely Nietzschean: forces present themselves as fundamentally aesthetic regardless of whether they are manifested in art or elsewhere. Whatever may provide the impetus for art cannot be lim-

ited to it; force is at work in every domain of human existence in spite of the fact that it has been so often masked by conventional understandings of the “concept” in its isolation from issues of power.

For Deleuze, the crucial relationships are between the concept, perception, and affects. These follow a combinatorial logic, in which no element is privileged over and above any of the others. It allows for what Fredric Jameson has called the Deleuzian “‘flux’ of perpetual change.”<sup>27</sup> But Deleuze makes a lucid distinction among the elements that comprise this flux—among percept, affect, and concept. Rather than representing or imitating anything (least of all “ideas” in the conventional sense), or “realizing” the concept, as Hegel would have it, Deleuze regards art as a matter of recombining and objectivizing elements whose status remains co-equal. None of these is the ground for any of the others: there is no priority, implicit or otherwise, of concept over percept or affect, and so for all these terms. Drawing implicitly on the aesthetics of the baroque—to which Deleuze devoted an influential book where he explores the figures of the *pli* (fold) and the *bel composto* (artful arrangement)—art is the site where percept, concept, and affect combine like the threads of a fabric whose strands are completely interwoven with one another.<sup>28</sup> Or, evoking a different figure, it is a territory in which “every habitat, joins up not only its spatiotemporal but its qualitative planes or sections: a posture and a song, for example, a song and a color, percepts and affects. And every territory encompasses or cuts across the territories of other species, or intercepts the trajectories of animals without territories, forming interspecies junction points.”<sup>29</sup>

Deleuze’s insistence on combinations carries with it a resistance to the synthetic orientation of dialectical thought. Likewise, the Deleuzian alternative to the dialectical versions of aesthetics (including Adorno’s “negative dialectics”) strives to remain anchored in the flux of forces without falling into a materialist reductivism. True to his Nietzschean roots, and to a “transcendental empiricism” that is inspired by Hume,<sup>30</sup> Deleuze’s philoso-

phy regards itself as fundamentally aesthetic, not a theory of art. But it may miss the fact that concept and sense (including affects and percepts) always in fact mediate one another, with each one striving to complete what the other seems unable to do or say. And rather than think that an aesthetic philosophy can accomplish what art attempted to do in its role as a bearer of a truth denied by concepts, we might do better to ask how aesthetics came to misrecognize the very things it hoped to theorize. Given the changes in aesthetics and in art over the course of modernism and its aftermath, it might well seem that the task of aesthetic theory ought now to be an explanation of the conditions of the “impossibility” of art. But if this is so, then I would suggest that it is a task best begun by reflection on the history in which aesthetic theory was drawn to model itself along lines drawn from other disciplines, some quite inconsistent with the ambitions of art. Can the successor discourses to our many theories of art adequately respond to the ways in which beauty still stakes claims to truth? As the history of aesthetic theory makes abundantly clear, asking about the ways in which truth and beauty interanimate one another poses questions that the philosophy of art has only begun to take up.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York, 1998), p. 31.
- <sup>2</sup> Adorno cites Geiger without specific reference in Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1997), p. 332 (henceforth *AT*). See Moritz Geiger, *The Significance of Art: A Phenomenological Approach to Aesthetics* (Washington, D.C., 1986).
- <sup>3</sup> See Eckbert Faas, *The Genealogy of Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 2002), on the overemphasis on spirit rather than the body in most aesthetic theory.
- <sup>4</sup> Adorno writes, “Art itself thinks” (*AT*, p. 99).
- <sup>5</sup> Arnold Hauser, *Social History of Art* (London, 1951), p. 5.
- <sup>6</sup> See J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge, 2001).
- <sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (London, 1973), p. 126.
- <sup>8</sup> This is the formulation of Michael McKeon, *Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore, 1987), p. 20.
- <sup>9</sup> In the preface to the *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant writes of the deduction of the transcendental aesthetic that “the difficulty of unraveling a problem so involved in its nature may serve as an excuse for a certain amount of hardly avoidable obscurity in its solution”; trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 1986), p. 7. Regarding the hope that aesthetic reflective judgment will span the gulf between the sensuous and supersensuous realms, Kant writes in the introduction that “it is not possible to throw a bridge from one realm to the other” (p. 37).
- <sup>10</sup> See Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), and *Anything Goes* (Berkeley, 1998).
- <sup>11</sup> This is a major thrust of Bernstein’s *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. But, whereas Bernstein speaks of the “complex concept,” it seems to me that art’s interest lies preponderantly with “embodied meaning.” The differences lie especially in what the notion of “meaning” conveys, which “concept” (whether abstract, embodied, complex, or otherwise) does not.
- <sup>12</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1975), pp. 71–72 (henceforth *LA*).
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), pp. 36–37. I am indebted here to Bernstein, who discusses Brandom’s work in *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*.
- <sup>14</sup> This is Kant’s analysis in the *Critique of Judgment*, § 15, where Baumgarten and Wolf are referred to simply as “philosophers of reputation” (p. 69).

- <sup>15</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA, 1984), p. 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, 1992), p. 51.
- <sup>17</sup> This is roughly the line that Jürgen Habermas takes, following Max Weber, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1987).
- <sup>18</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 342–43.
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA, 1971), which bears the subtitle “A Historico-Philosophical Essay.”
- <sup>20</sup> Adorno’s many disagreements with Benjamin are well known. See the letters between them in Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London, 2007), pp. 110–41.
- <sup>21</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, 1989).
- <sup>22</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London, 2000), p. vii. Legitimate questions can be raised about the fact that Merleau-Ponty favors painting above all the other arts. One of the worries waiting to be expressed is that the fascination with painting may lead to a form of ocular-centrism that may in the end defeat the concreteness of its version of the concept and undermine the force with which it enacts its perspectives. In his defense is the argument that painting involves a kind of vision that is not the transformation of things into mental schemas but is, instead, a kind of corporeal thinking, one that deciphers and realizes signs that are given within the body. Painting may well be visual but it is not ocular-centric for Merleau-Ponty in the way that it is for someone like Descartes, who regards it as yet another mode for the conceptual possession of the world. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, 1964), p. 171. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s approach to painting offers one possible response to an issue that has plagued aesthetic theory throughout its history: the antinomy of experience and judgment as a form of the strife between beauty and truth.
- <sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” p. 163.
- <sup>24</sup> Adorno does not say this without good reason. Merleau-Ponty writes that “Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example”; *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. vii.
- <sup>25</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith

(London, 2002), p. 56.

- <sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Séán Hand (Minneapolis, 1988), p. 39.
- <sup>27</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London, 1990), p. 16.
- <sup>28</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis, 1993).
- <sup>29</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York, 1994), p. 185.
- <sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Hume," in *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953–1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (Los Angeles, 2004), pp. 162–69.