

"Aesthetics or Politics"

**Aesthetics and
Its Discontents**

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polity

Aesthetics as Politics

The same assertion is bandied about nearly everywhere today, namely the claim that we are over and done with aesthetic utopia, with a certain idea of artistic radicality and its capacity to perform an absolute transformation of the conditions of collective existence. This idea fuels all those high-sounding polemics pointing to art's disaster, born of its dealings with fallacious promises of social revolution and the philosophical absolute. Leaving these media squabbles aside, it is possible to distinguish between two great conceptions of art's 'post-utopian' present.

The first attitude is above all due to philosophers and art historians. It claims to be able to extricate artistic pursuits and creations from the aesthetic utopias of the new life, which compromised them, either in the great totalitarian projects or in the commercial aestheticization of life. Art's radicality here, then, is the singular power of presence, of appearing and of inscription, the power that tears experience from ordinariness. There has been a strong tendency to conceive this power in terms of the Kantian concept of the 'sublime' as the irreducible and heterogeneous presence at the heart of the sensible of a force that exceeds it.

However, this reference can be interpreted in two ways. The first sees in the singular power of the work the founding of a being-in-common, anterior to the various different possible forms of politics. Such, for example, was the meaning of an exhibition organized in Brussels in 2001 by Thierry de Duve under the title *Voici, voici, voici*, itself divided into three sections: *Me voici, Vous voici, Nous voici*. The key to this apparatus was provided by a canvas by Édouard Manet, the so-called father of pictorial 'modernity': not *Olympia* or *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, but a work from his youth, the *Christ mort*, based on a work by Francisco Ribala. This open-eyed Christ, resurrected by the death of God, turns art's power of presentation into a substitute for the communitarian power of Christian incarnation. This power of incarnation, ascribed to the very act of showing, then also proved transmittable to a Donald Judd parallelepiped, to Joseph Beuys' display of East-German butter packets, to Philippe Bazin's series of baby photographs or to Marcel Broodthaers' documents of a fictitious museum.

The other way, by contrast, radicalizes the idea of the 'sublime', construing it as an irreducible gap between the idea and the sensible. It is in this way that Lyotard sees the mission of modern art as being to bear witness to the fact of the unrepresentable. The singularity of appearing is therefore a negative presentation. The monochromy of a Barnett Newman canvas cleaved by a lightning flash or the naked speech of a Paul Celan or a Primo Levi are, for him, the model of these inscriptions. Conversely, mixing the abstract and the figurative on trans-avant-gardist paintings, not to mention the hodgepodge of installations that play on the indiscernibility between works of art and objects or icons of commerce, represent the nihilist accomplishment of aesthetic utopia.

The idea that these two visions have in common is clear. The very opposition between the Christian power of incarnation of the word and the Jewish prohibition on representation, between the eucharistic host and the burning

Mosaic bush, reveals a dazzling, heterogeneous singularity of artistic form, one that commands a sense of community. But this is a community which builds itself on the ruining of perspectives for political emancipation to which modern art was able to link up. It is an ethical community which revokes every project of collective emancipation.

If this position has some favour with philosophers, it is quite another one that is keenly asserted by artists and professionals working in artistic institutions today – museum directors, gallery directors, curators and critics. Instead of making a contrast between artistic radicality and aesthetic utopia, this other position endeavours to keep the two equally at a distance. It replaces them with the proclamation of art's new modesty – it is modest not only as regards its capacity to transform the world, but also as regards claims about the singularity of its objects. This art is not the founding of a common world through the absolute singularity of form; it is a way of redispensing the objects and images that comprise the common world as it is already given, or of creating situations apt to modify our gazes and our attitudes with respect to this collective environment. Such micro-situations, which vary only slightly from those of ordinary life and are presented in an ironic and playful vein rather than a critical and denunciatory one, aim to create or re-create bonds between individuals, to give rise to new modes of confrontation and participation. The principle of so-called relational art here is exemplary: in contrast to the radical heterogeneity of the shock of the *aistheton* that Lyotard sees on a Barnett Newman canvas stands the practice of a Pierre Huyghe, who, instead of the advertisement that had been expected, registers on a billboard an enlarged photograph of the place and its users.

I do not intend to decide in favour of one or other of these two attitudes. Instead I want to examine what they testify to and what renders them possible. They are in fact the two strands that emerge by undoing the alliance between artistic radicality and political radicality, an

alliance whose proper name is today's incriminated term of aesthetics. Therefore, instead of deciding in favour of one of these positions, I will attempt to reconstitute the logic of the 'aesthetic' relation between art and politics from which they are derived. I will base my analysis on what both these ostensibly anti-aesthetic stagings of 'post-utopian' art have in common. In contrast to the denounced utopia, the latter proposes the modest forms of a micro-politics that is sometimes not far from the community politics advocated by our governments. The former, on the contrary, contrasts utopia with a power of art that ensues from its distance with respect to ordinary experience. Nevertheless, both positions are one in reasserting art's 'communitarian' function: that of constructing a specific world space, a new form of dividing up the common world. The aesthetics of the sublime places art under the sign of an immemorial debt towards an absolute Other. But it confers on it an historic mission, assigned to a subject it calls the 'avant-garde': to constitute a tissue of sensible inscriptions at an absolute distance from the world of products and their commercial equivalence. Relational aesthetics rejects art's claims to self-sufficiency as much as its dreams of transforming life, but even so it reaffirms an essential idea: that art consists in constructing spaces and relations to reconfigure materially and symbolically the territory of the common. *In situ* art practices, displacements of film towards the spatialized forms of museum installations, contemporary forms of spatializing music, and current theatre and dance practices – all these things head in the same direction, towards a despecification of the instruments, materials and apparatuses specific to different arts, a convergence on a same idea and practice of art as a way of occupying a place where relations between bodies, images, spaces and times are redistributed.

The very expression 'contemporary art' testifies to this. What is attacked or defended under its name is by no means a common tendency that would serve to character-

ize the various arts of today. Of all the arguments put forward with respect to it, virtually no references are made to music, literature, cinema, dance or photography. Almost all of them bear instead on an object definable as that which succeeds to the place of painting, i.e. the arrangements of objects, the photographs, the video apparatuses, the computers – and sometimes even the performances – that occupy the spaces on whose walls portraits were previously to be seen. It would be wrong, however, to criticize these arguments for their 'partiality'. Indeed, 'art' is not the common concept that unifies the different arts. It is the *dispositif* that renders them visible. And 'painting' is not merely the name of an art. It is the name of a system of presentation of a form of art's visibility. Properly speaking, 'contemporary art' is a name for that *dispositif* which has taken the same place and function.

What the term 'art' designates in its singularity is the framing of a space of presentation by which the things of art are identified as such. And what links the practice of art to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensory experience. Art is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society's structures, or social groups, their conflicts or identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space. Indeed, the figure I referred to above today suggests two sorts of transformation of this political function. In the aesthetics of the sublime, the space-time of a passive encounter with 'the heterogeneous' sets up a conflict between two different regimes of sensibility. In 'relational' art, the construction of an undecided and ephemeral situation enjoins a displacement of

perception, a passage from the status of spectator to that of actor, and a reconfiguration of places. In both cases, the specificity of art consists in bringing about a reframing of material and symbolic space. And it is in this way that art bears upon politics.

Politics, indeed, is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power. It is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forward arguments about them. Elsewhere, I have tried to show the sense in which politics is the very conflict over the existence of that space, over the designation of objects as pertaining to the common and of subjects as having the capacity of a common speech. Man, said Aristotle, is political because he possesses speech, a capacity to place the just and the unjust in common, whereas all the animal has is a voice to signal pleasure and pain. But the whole question, then, is to know who possesses speech and who merely possesses voice. For all time, the refusal to consider certain categories of people as political beings has proceeded by means of a refusal to hear the words exiting their mouths as discourse. The other way consists in the simple observation of their material incapacity to occupy the space-time of political things – as Plato put it, artisans have time for nothing but their work. Of course this ‘nothing’, which they have no time to do, is to be at the people’s assembly. Their ‘absence of time’ is actually a naturalized prohibition written into the very forms of sensory experience.

Politics occurs when those who ‘have no’ time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be reduced to voices signalling pain. This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech con-

stitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible.¹⁰ Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals. This work involved in creating dissensus informs an aesthetics of politics that operates at a complete remove from the forms of staging power and mass mobilization which Benjamin referred to as the ‘aestheticization of politics’.

More precisely, then, the relationship between aesthetics and politics consists in the relationship between this aesthetics of politics and the ‘politics of aesthetics’ – in other words in the way in which the practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular. Utopia or otherwise, the task that the philosopher attributes to the ‘sublime’ painting of the abstract painter, hung in isolation on a white wall, or that which the exhibition curator gives to the installation or intervention of the relational artist, both register the same logic: that of a ‘politics’ of art which consists in suspending the normal coordinates of sensory experience. One valorizes the solitude of a heterogeneous sensible form, the other the gesture that draws a common space. But these two different ways of relating the constitution of a material form and that of a symbolic space are perhaps two strands of the same ordinary configuration, namely that which links the specificity of art to a certain way of being of the community.

This means that art and politics do not constitute two permanent, separate realities whereby the issue is to know whether or not they *ought* to be set in relation. They are

¹⁰ J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and with intro. by Gabriel Rockhill, London and New York: Continuum, 2004 (French original, 2000).

two forms of distribution of the sensible, both of which are dependent on a specific regime of identification. There are not always occurrences of politics, although there always exist forms of power. Similarly, there are not always occurrences of art, although there are always forms of poetry, painting, sculpture, music, theatre and dance. That art and politics are perfectly conditional in character is shown in Plato's *Republic*. The famous exclusion of poets is often interpreted as the mark of a political proscription of art. However, the Platonic gesture also proscribes politics. One and the same distribution of the sensible both excludes artisans from the political scene where they might do *something other* than their work and prohibits poets from getting on the artistic stage where they might assume a character *other* than their own. Theatre and assembly: these are two interdependent forms of the same distribution, two spaces of heterogeneity that Plato was obliged to repudiate at the same time in order to constitute his Republic as the organic life of the community.

Art and politics are thereby linked, beneath themselves, as forms of presence of singular bodies in a specific space and time. Plato simultaneously excludes both democracy and theatre so that he can construct an ethical community, a community without politics. Today's debates about what ought to occupy museum space perhaps reveal a further form of solidarity between modern democracy and the existence of a specific space: that is, no longer the gathering of crowds around theatrical action, but instead the silent space of the museum in which the solitude and the passivity of passers-by encounter the solitude and passivity of artworks. Art's situation today might actually constitute one specific form of a much more general relationship that exists between the autonomy of the spaces reserved for art and its apparent contrary: art's involvement in constituting forms of common life.

In order to understand this apparent paradox, in which the politicality of art is tied to its very autonomy, it pays to

take a quick trip back in time to one of the first formulations of the politics inherent to the aesthetic regime of art. At the end of the fifteenth of his letters published as *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* in 1795, Schiller invented an exhibition scenario which allegorizes a particular status of art and its politics.¹¹ He sets us in imagination before a Greek statue known as the *Juno Ludovisi*. This statue, he says, is a 'free appearance'; it is self-contained. To a modern ear this expression tends to evoke the *self-containment* celebrated by Clement Greenberg. But Schiller's 'self-containment' proves to be somewhat more complicated than the modernist paradigm, which seeks to emphasize the work's material autonomy. At issue here is not to affirm the artist's unlimited power of creation, nor to demonstrate the powers specific to a particular *medium*. Or instead: the *medium* at issue is not the matter on which the artist works. It is a sensible milieu, a particular sensorium, foreign to the ordinary forms of sensory experience. But this sensorium is identical neither with the eucharistic presence of the *voici* nor with the sublime flash of the Other. What the 'free appearance' of the Greek statue manifests is the essential characteristic of divinity, its 'idleness' or 'indifferency'. The specific attribute of divinity is not to want anything, to be liberated from the concern to give oneself ends and to have to realize them. And the artistic specificity of the statue inheres in its participation in that 'idleness', in this absence of volition. Standing before the idle goddess, the spectator is, too, in a state that Schiller defines as that of 'free play'.

While 'free appearance' tends at first to evoke the autonomy dear to modernism, 'free play' is at first more flattering to postmodern ears. We know the place that the concept of play occupies in the propositions and justifications of contemporary art. It figures as a way to distance oneself from

¹¹ Friedrich von Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967 (German original, 1795).

modernist belief in the radicality of art and in its powers to transform the world. The ludic and the humorous are, practically everywhere, credited as characterizing a kind of art presumed to have absorbed its contraries: on the one hand, the gratuitousness of amusement and critical distance; and, on the other, popular entertainment and the situationist *dérive*. Yet Schiller's staging could not place us at a greater distance from this disenchanting vision of play. Play is, Schiller tells us, the very humanity of man: 'Man is only fully a human being when he plays.'^{11a} And he goes on to declare that this apparent paradox is 'capable of bearing the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the still more difficult art of living'. How to understand that the 'gratuitous' activity of play can simultaneously found the autonomy of a specific domain of art *and* the construction of forms for a new collective life?

Let us begin at the beginning. To establish the edifice of art means to define a certain regime for the identification of art, that is to say a specific relationship between the practices, forms of visibility and modes of intelligibility that enable us to identify the products of these latter as belonging to art or to *an* art. One and the same statue of a goddess may or may not be art, or may be art differently depending on the regime in which it is apprehended. In the first place, there is a regime in which such a statue is exclusively apprehended as an *image* of divinity. Perceptions of it and the concomitant judgements thus get subsumed under questions such as: is it possible to form images of divinity?; is the depicted divinity a genuine divinity?; if so, is it depicted as it should be? In this regime, there is properly speaking no art as such but instead images that are judged in terms of their intrinsic truth and of their impact on the ways of being of individuals and of the collectivity. This is why I have proposed that this regime, in which art enters into a zone of indistinction, be referred to as an ethical regime of images.

^{11a} *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Next, there is a regime that frees the stone goddess from judgements about the validity of the divinity that is figured and the faithfulness of the depiction. This regime places statues of goddesses and stories of princes alike in a specific category, that of imitations. The *Juno Ludovisi*, then, becomes the product of an art, namely sculpture, a name which it merits for two reasons: first, because it imposes a form on a specific matter; and second, because it is the realization of a representation – the constitution of a plausible appearance that combines the imaginary traits of divinity with the archetypes of femininity, and the monumentality of the statue with the expressiveness of a particular goddess endowed with the traits of a specific character. The statue is a 'representation'. It is viewed through an entire grid of expressive conventions that determine the way in which the sculptor's skill in giving form to raw material is brought to coincide with the artistic capacity of rendering the appropriate figures according to the appropriate forms of expression. I call this regime of identification the representative regime of arts.

Schiller's *Juno Ludovisi* as well as Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* and the installations and performances of relational art, belong to a different regime, which I call the aesthetic regime of art. In this regime, the statue of Juno does not draw its property of being an artwork from the conformity of the sculptor's work to an adequate idea or to the canons of representation. It draws it from its belonging to a specific sensorium. The property of being art refers back not to a distinction between the modes of doing, but to a distinction between modes of being. This is what 'aesthetics' means: in the aesthetic regime of art, the property of being art is no longer given by the criteria of technical perfection but is ascribed to a specific form of sensory apprehension. The statue is a 'free appearance'. It stands thus in a twofold contrast to its representative status: it is not an appearance drawn from a reality that would serve as its model. Nor is it an active

form imposed on passive matter. As a sensory form, it is heterogeneous to the ordinary forms of sensory experience that these dualities inform. It is given in a specific experience, which suspends the ordinary connections not only between appearance and reality, but also between form and matter, activity and passivity, understanding and sensibility.

It is precisely this new form of distribution of the sensible that Schiller captures with the term 'play'. Minimally defined, play is any activity that has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons. This traditional sense of play was systematized in the Kantian analysis of aesthetic experience, which in effect is characterized by a twofold suspension: a suspension of the cognitive power of understanding that determines sensible givens in accordance with its categories; and a correlative suspension of the power of sensibility that requires an object of desire. The 'free play' of the faculties – intellectual and sensible – is not only an activity without goal; it is an activity that is equal to inactivity. From the outset, the 'suspension' that the player enacts, as compared with ordinary experience, is correlated to another suspension, namely the suspension of his own powers before the appearance of the 'idle' work, the work which, like the goddess, owes its unprecedented perfection to the fact that the will is withdrawn from its appearing. In sum, the 'player' stands and does nothing before the goddess, who herself does nothing, and the sculptor's work itself becomes absorbed within this circle of an inactive activity.

Why does this suspension simultaneously found a new art of living, a new form of 'life-in-common'? In other words, how does it happen that a certain 'politics' is constitutively linked with the very definition of the specificity of art in this regime? The response, in its most general form, can be stated as follows: because it defines that which comes within the province of art through its adherence to a sensorium different to that of domination. In the Kantian

analysis, free play and free appearance suspend the power of form over matter, of intelligence over sensibility. Schiller, in the context of the French Revolution, translates these Kantian philosophical propositions into anthropological and political propositions. The power of 'form' over 'matter' is the power of the class of intelligence over the class of sensation, of men of culture over men of nature. If aesthetic 'play' and 'appearance' found a new community, then this is because they stand for the refutation, within the sensible, of this opposition between intelligent form and sensible matter which, properly speaking, is a difference between two humanities.

It is here that the notion according to which man is fully human only when he plays takes on its meaning. Play's freedom is contrasted to the servitude of work. Symmetrically, free appearance is contrasted to the constraint that relates appearance to a reality. These categories – appearance, play, work – are the proper categories of the distribution of the sensible. What they in fact describe are the forms of domination and of equality operative within the very tissue of ordinary sensory experience. In the Platonic Republic, the mimetician is as much deprived of the power of 'free appearance' as the artisan is of the possibility to engage in free play. There exists no appearance without a reality that serves to judge it, no gratuity of play compatible with the seriousness of work. These two prescriptions are strictly linked to each other and together define a partition of the sensible that at once excludes both art and politics, and makes way for the direct ethical guidance of the community. More generally, the legitimacy of domination has always rested on the evidence of a sensory division between different humanities. Earlier I quoted Voltaire's assertion that the common people are deemed not to have the same sense as refined people. The power of the elite here is thus the power of educated senses over that of unrefined senses, of activity over passivity, of intelligence over sensation. The forms of sensory experience themselves were charged

with identifying differences in function and place with differences in nature.

What aesthetic free appearance and free play challenge is the distribution of the sensible that sees in the order of domination a difference between two humanities. Both notions manifest a freedom and an equality of sense [*sentir*] which, in 1795, stood in stark contrast to those that the French Revolution's 'reign of the Law' strived to embody. The reign of the Law, in effect, still amounts to the reign of free form over slavish matter, of the State over the masses. The Revolution turned to terror, in Schiller's view, because it still adhered to the model according to which an active intellectual faculty constrains passive sensible materiality. The aesthetic suspension of the supremacy of form over matter and of activity over passivity makes itself thus into the principle of a more profound revolution, a revolution of sensible existence itself and no longer only of the forms of State.

It is therefore as an autonomous form of experience that art concerns and infringes on the political division of the sensible. The aesthetic regime of art institutes the relation between the forms of identification of art and the forms of political community in such a way as to challenge in advance every opposition between autonomous art and heteronomous art, art for art's sake and art in the service of politics, museum art and street art. For aesthetic autonomy is not that autonomy of artistic 'making' celebrated by modernism. It is the autonomy of a form of sensory experience. And it is that experience which appears as the germ of a new humanity, of a new form of individual and collective life.

Thus there is no conflict between the purity of art and its politicization. The two centuries that separate us from Schiller testify to the contrary: it is by dint of its purity that the materiality of art has been able to make of itself the anticipated materiality of a different configuration of the community. If the creators of pure forms of so-called abstract painting were able to transform themselves into

the artisans of a new Soviet life, it is not by virtue of some circumstantial subordination to an extrinsic utopia. What the non-figurative purity of the canvas – its gaining of planarity over three-dimensional illusion – did not signify was what one has strived to make it signify: pictorial art's exclusive concentration on its material. It marked, on the contrary, the belonging of the new pictorial gesture to a surface/interface where pure art and applied art, functional art and symbolic art, merged, where the geometry of the ornament became the symbol of inner necessity and where the purity of the line became the constitutive instrument for a new décor for living [*la vie*], itself susceptible to being transformed into the décor of the new life. Even Mallarmé, the pure poet *par excellence*, assigned to poetry the task of organizing a different topography of common relations, of preparing the 'festivals of the future'.

There is no conflict between purity and politicization. But we must take care to understand what 'politicization' means. What aesthetic education and experience do not promise is to support the cause of political emancipation with forms of art. Their politics is a politics that is peculiar to them, a politics which opposes its own forms to those constructed by the dissensual interventions of political subjects. Such a 'politics', then, actually ought to be called a metapolitics. In general, metapolitics is the thinking which aims to overcome political dissensus by switching scene, by passing from the appearances of democracy and of the forms of the State to the infra-scene of underground movements and the concrete energies that comprise them. For more than a century, Marxism has represented the ultimate form of metapolitics, returning the appearances of politics to the truth of the productive forces and relations of production, and promising, instead of political revolutions that merely bring about a change in the form of State, a revolution in the very mode of production of material life. But in itself the revolution of producers is conceivable only after a revolution within the very idea of revolution, in the idea of a revolution of the forms of

sensible existence as opposed to a revolution of state forms. The revolution of producers is a particular form of aesthetic metapolitics.

There is no conflict between art's purity and this politics. But there is a conflict within purity itself, in the conception of this materiality of art which prefigures another configuration of the common. Mallarmé attests to this also: on the one hand, the poem has the consistency of a heterogeneous sensory block – it is a volume closed on itself, materially refuting the newspaper's 'unaltered' space and 'uniform casting of ink'; on the other, the poem has the inconsistency of a gesture which dissipates in the very act of instituting a common space, similar to a national holiday fireworks display. It is a ceremonial of the community, comparable with ancient theatre or the Christian mass. On the one hand, then, the collective life to come is enclosed in the resistant volume of the artwork; on the other, it is actualized in the evanescent movement which outlines a different common space.

If there is no contradiction between art for art's sake and political art, this is perhaps because the contradiction is lodged more deeply, in the very core of aesthetic experience and its 'education'. On this point, once again, Schiller's text clarifies the logic of an entire regime for identifying art and its politics, that which is conveyed today by the contrast between a sublime art of forms and a modest art of behaviours and of relations. The scenario in Schiller's work permits us to see how these two opposites are contained in the same initial kernel. On the one hand, indeed, free appearance is the power of a heterogeneous sensible element. The statue, like the divinity, holds itself opposite the – idle – subject, in other words it is foreign to all volution, to every combination of means and of ends. It is closed on itself, that is to say inaccessible for the thought, desires and ends of the subject contemplating it. And it is only by this strangeness, by this radical unavailability, that it bears the mark of man's full humanity and the promise of a humanity to come, one at last in tune with the fullness

of its essence. This statue, which the subject of aesthetic experience cannot in the least possess, promises the possession of a new world. And aesthetic education, as the compensation for political revolution, is the education received through the strangeness of free appearance, through the experience of non-possession and passivity that it imposes.

However, from another angle, the statue's autonomy pertains to the mode of life that is expressed in it. The attitude of the idle statue, its autonomy, is in effect a result: it is the expression of the comportment of the community whence it issues. It is free because it is the expression of a free community. Only, the meaning of this freedom is inverted: a free, autonomous community is a community whose lived experience is not divided into separate spheres, which has no experience of any separation between everyday life, art, politics and religion. In this logic, the Greek statue is art for us because it was not art for its author, because, in sculpting it, this author was not making an 'artwork' but translating into stone the shared belief of a community, identical with its very way of being. What the suspension of free appearance thus promises is a community that is free insofar as it, too, no longer experiences these separations, no longer experiences art as a separate sphere of life.

Hence, the statue carries political promise because it is the expression of a specific distribution of the sensible. But this distribution can be understood in two opposite ways, depending on how the experience is interpreted: on the one hand, the statue is a promise of community because it is art, because it is the object of a specific experience and thereby institutes a specific, separate common space; on the other, it is a promise of community because it is not art, because all that it expresses is a way of inhabiting a common space, a way of life which has no experience of separation into specific realms of experience. Aesthetic education is therefore the process that transforms the solitude of free appearance into lived reality and changes

aesthetic idleness into the action of a living community. The very structure of Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* testifies to this shift in rationalities. Where the first and second parts of his work insist on the appearance's autonomy and the necessity of protecting material 'passivity' from the undertakings of imperious understanding, the third, conversely, describes a process of civilization in which aesthetic enjoyment amounts to a domination of human volition over a matter that it contemplates as the reflection of its own activity.

The politics of art in the aesthetic regime of art, or rather its metapolitics, is determined by this founding paradox: in this regime, art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art. We therefore have no need to contrive any pathetic ends for modernity or imagine that a joyous explosion of postmodernity has put an end to the great modernist adventure of art's autonomy or of emancipation through art. There is no postmodern rupture. There is a contradiction that is originary and unceasingly at work. The work's solitude carries a promise of emancipation. But the fulfilment of that promise amounts to the elimination of art as a separate reality, its transformation into a form of life.

On the basis of this fundamental nucleus, therefore, aesthetic 'education' splits into two figures, as witnessed in the sublime nudity of the abstract work championed by the philosopher and in the propositions for new and interactive types of relationship proposed by the artist and today's exhibition curator. On the one hand, there is a project for aesthetic revolution in which art, by effacing its difference as art, becomes a form of life. On the other, there is the resistant figure of the work in which political promise is negatively preserved, not only through the separation between artistic form and other forms of life, but also through the inner contradiction of this form itself.

The scenario depicted by aesthetic revolution is one that proposes to transform aesthetics' suspension of the relations of domination into the generative principle for a

world without domination. This proposition entails an opposition between two types of revolution: against political revolution *qua* revolution of State in which the separation between two humanities is *de facto* renewed, it asserts revolution *qua* formation of a community of sense [*sensitiv*]. This succinct formula sums up the famous text written together by Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin, namely *Das älteste Systemprogramm des Deutschen Idealismus*.^{11b} In this programme a contrast is made between the dead mechanism of state and the living power of the community nourished by the sensible embodiment of its idea. This opposition between death and life is too simple and in fact enacts a twofold elimination. On the one hand, it causes the 'aesthetics' of politics to vanish, i.e. the practice of political dissensuality, promulgating in its stead the formation of a 'consensual' community, not a community in which everyone is in agreement, but one that is realized as a community of feeling. But for this to occur, 'free appearance' must be transformed into its contrary, that is the activity of a conquering human mind that eliminates the autonomy of aesthetic experience, transforming all sensible appearance into the manifestation of its own autonomy. The task of 'aesthetic education' advocated by *Das älteste Systemprogramm* is to render ideas sensible, to turn them into a replacement for ancient mythology; in other words, into a living tissue of experiences and common beliefs in which both the elite and the people share. The 'aesthetic' programme, therefore, is essentially a metapolitics, which proposes to carry out, in truth and in the sensible order, a task that politics can only ever accomplish in the order of appearance and form.

We know: not only did this programme define an idea of aesthetic revolution but also an idea of revolution *tout court*. Without having had the chance to read that

^{11b}Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin, *The Oldest of Systematic Program of German Idealism*, ed. Ernst Behler, London and New York: Continuum, 1987 (German original, 1797).

forgotten draft, Marx came, half a century later, to transpose it precisely into the scenario of a revolution that is no longer political but human, a revolution that, once more, is supposed to realize philosophy by eliminating it and giving to man the possession of that which he had formerly only ever had the appearance. By the same token, what Marx proposed was a new and enduring identification of aesthetic man: namely, productive man, the one who at once produces both the objects and the social relations in which they are produced. This identification formed the basis on which a juncture emerged between the Marxist vanguard and the artistic avant-garde in the 1920s, since each side adhered to the same programme: the joint elimination of political dissensuality and aesthetic heterogeneity in the construction of forms of life and of edifices for the new life.

It is nevertheless too simple to reduce this figure of aesthetic revolution to 'utopian' and 'totalitarian' catastrophe. The project of 'art become life' is not limited to the programme of the 'elimination' of art, announced some time ago by constructivist engineers and the supranationalist or futurist artists of the Soviet revolution. It is consubstantial with the aesthetic regime of art. It already inspired, in their dreams of the artisanal and communitarian Middle Ages, the artists of the Arts and Crafts movement. It was taken up again by the artisans of the Art Deco movement, hailed in their time as producers of 'social art',¹² as it was by the engineers and architects of the Werkbund and the Bauhaus, before again flowering into the utopian projects of situationist urbanists and Joseph Beuys' 'social plastic'. But it also haunts those Symbolist artists reputed to be as far from revolutionary projects as is possible. Notwithstanding their differences, the 'pure' poet Mallarmé and the engineers of the Werkbund share the idea of an art which, by suppressing its singularity, is able to produce the concrete forms of a community that has finally dis-

persed with the appearances of democratic formalism.¹³ Here, there is no chant coming from totalitarian sirens, but simply the manifestation of a contradiction, that pertaining to the metapolitics rooted in the very status of the aesthetic work itself, in the original knot it implies between the singularity of the 'idle' appearance and the act that transforms appearance into reality. Aesthetic metapolitics cannot fulfil the promise of living truth that it finds in aesthetic suspension except at the price of revoking this suspension, that is of transforming the form into a form of life. In this regard, we might think of the contrast made by Malevich in 1918 between Soviet construction and museum works. We might think of the endeavour to design integrated spaces in which painting and sculpture are no longer manifest as separate objects but directly projected into life, thus eliminating art as 'something that is distinct from our surrounding milieu, which is the veritable plastic reality'.¹⁴ Or again we might think of the urban *dérive* and type of play that Guy Debord brought to bear against the totality of Capitalist or Soviet life, alienated in the form of the king-spectacle.^{14a} In all these cases, the politics of the free form demands that the work realize itself, that it eliminate itself in act, that it eliminate the sensible heterogeneity which founds aesthetic promise.

The other great form of 'politics' specific to the aesthetic regime of art is precisely the one that refuses an elimination of form in act, namely the politics of the resistant form. In such a politics, form asserts its politicality by distinguishing itself from every form of intervention into the

¹³ Concerning this convergence, I refer to my essay 'The Surface of Design', in *The Future of the Image*, London: Verso, 2007 (French original, 2003).

¹⁴ Piet Mondrian, 'Part plastique et l'art plastique pur', in Charks Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art en théorie, 1900-1990*, Paris: Hazan, 1997, p. 420.

^{14a} Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York: Zone Books, 1999 (French original, 1967); a film version was produced in 1973.

¹² Roger Marx, *L'Art social*, Paris: Eugène Fasquelle, 1913.

mundane world. Art does not have to become a form of life. On the contrary, it is in art that life takes its form. The Schillerian goddess carries promise because she is 'idle'. 'The social function of Art', as Adorno will echo, 'is to not have one.' Egalitarian promise is enclosed in the work's self-sufficiency, in its indifference to every particular political project and in its refusal to get involved in decorating the mundane world. It is owing to this indifference that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, that work about nothing, that work 'supported on itself' written by the aesthete Flaubert, was straightforwardly perceived by the contemporary advocates of the hierarchical order as a manifestation of 'democracy'. The work that desires nothing, the work without any point of view, which conveys no message and has no care either for democracy or for anti-democracy, this work is 'egalitarian' by dint of its very indifference, by which it suspends all preference, all hierarchy. It is subversive, as subsequent generations would discover, by dint of its radical separation of the sensorium of art from that of everyday aestheticized life. A contrast is thereby formed between a type of art that makes politics by eliminating itself as art and a type of art that is political on the proviso that it retains its purity, avoiding all forms of political intervention.

It is this form of politicality, tied to the work's very indifference, that a whole political avant-gardist tradition came to internalize. The tradition strove to bring together political avant-gardism and artistic avant-gardism by their very distance. Its programme is encapsulated in a rallying cry: protect the heterogeneity of the sensible that forms the core of art's autonomy and *therefore* constitutes its potential for emancipation. Save it from a twofold threat: from its transformation into a metapolitical act and from its assimilation into the forms of aestheticized life. It is this demand that is encapsulated in Adorno's aesthetics. The work's political potential is associated with its radical separation from the forms of aestheticized commodities and of the administered world. But this potential does not

reside in the simple solitude of the work, no more than it does in the radicality of artistic self-affirmation. The purity that this solitude authorizes is the purity of internal contradiction, of the dissonance by which the work testifies to the non-reconciled world. The autonomy of the Schoenbergian work, as conceptualized by Adorno, is in fact a twofold heteronomy: in order to denounce the capitalist division of work and the embellishments of commodities effectively, the work has to be even more mechanical, more 'inhuman' than the products of mass capitalist consumption. But, in its turn, this inhumanity causes the strain of the repressed to appear, thus disturbing the autonomous work's beautiful technical arrangement by recalling that which founds it: the capitalist separation of work and enjoyment.

In this logic, the promise of emancipation is retained, but the cost of doing so entails refusing every form of reconciliation, or maintaining the gap between the dissensual form of the work and the forms of ordinary experience. This vision of the work's politicality brings with it a heavy consequence. It commands that aesthetic difference, guardian of the promise, be established in the sensorial texture of the work itself; and thereby it in a way reconstructs the Voltairian opposition between two forms of sensibility. The diminished-seventh chords that enchanted the salons of the nineteenth century *can* no longer be heard, said Adorno, 'unless everything is deception.'¹⁵ If our ears can still listen to them with pleasure, the aesthetic promise, the promise of emancipation, is proved a lie.

One day, however, we really must face up to the obvious fact that we can still hear them. And, similarly, we *can* see figurative and abstract motifs mixed on the same canvases, or make art by borrowing and re-exhibiting objects from

¹⁵Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006 (German original, 1949).

ordinary life. Some would like to see in this the mark of a radical rupture whose proper name is postmodernity. But the notions of modernity and postmodernity misguidedly project, in the form of temporal succession, antagonistic elements whose tension infuses and animates the aesthetic regime of art in its entirety. This regime has always lived off the tension between contraries. The autonomy of aesthetic experience, which founds the idea of Art *qua* autonomous reality, is here accompanied by the elimination of all pragmatic criteria for extricating the domain of art from that of non-art, the solitude of the work from the forms of collective life. There is no postmodern rupture. But there is a dialectic of the 'apolitically political' work. And there is a limit at which its very project cancels itself out.

It is this limit of the autonomous/heteronomous work, political thanks to its very detachment from political will, to which the Lyotardian aesthetic of the sublime testifies. The task assigned to the artistic avant-garde still involves tracing a perceptible boundary that sets artworks apart from the products of commercial culture. But the very sense of this tracing is inverted. What the artist inscribes is no longer the promise-carrying contradiction, the contradiction of labour and enjoyment. The artist inscribes the shock of the *aistheton*, attesting to the mind's alienation from the power of an irremediably alterity. The work's sensible heterogeneity no longer vouches for the promise of emancipation. On the contrary, it comes to invalidate every such promise by testifying to the mind's irremediable dependency with regard to the Other inhabiting it. The work's enigma, which inscribed the contradiction of a world, becomes the pure testimony of the power of that Other.

Hence, the metapolitics of the resistant form tends to oscillate between two positions. On the one hand, it assimilates this resistance with the struggle to preserve the material difference of art apart from all the worldly affairs that compromise it: the commerce of mass exhibitions and

cultural products by which it becomes a profit-making industrial enterprise; the pedagogy aiming to bring art closer to the social groups to whom it is foreign; and attempts to integrate art into a 'culture', further divided into various social, ethnic or sexual group cultures. Art thus takes up a combat against culture, instituting a frontline on one and the same side of which stand the defence of the 'world' against 'society', of works against cultural products, of things against images, of images against signs and of signs against simulacra. This denunciation can easily be incorporated into political attitudes that demand to re-establish a republican-style education to counter the democratic dissolution of forms of knowledge, behaviours and values. And it passes an overall negative judgement on contemporary restlessness, preoccupied with blurring the boundaries between art and life, signs and things.

But, at the same time, this jealously guarded art tends to become a mere testimony to the power of the Other and the risk of catastrophe continuously run by forgetting it. The trailblazers of the avant-garde become the sentinel that watches over the victims and keeps the memory of catastrophe alive. Here again, the politics of the resistant form accomplishes itself at the exact moment that it is cancelled out. It does so, no longer as part of a metapolitics of revolution of the sensory world, but by identifying the work of art with the ethical task of bearing witness, cancelling out, once again, both art and politics. This ethical dissolution of aesthetic heterogeneity goes hand-in-hand with a whole current of contemporary thought in which political dissensuality is dissolved into an archpolitics of the exception and in which all forms of domination, or of emancipation, are reduced to the global nature of an ontological catastrophe from which only a God can save us.

What we must therefore recognize both in the linear scenario of modernity and postmodernity, and in the academic opposition between art for art's sake and engaged art, is an ordinary and persistent tension between the two

great politics of aesthetics: the politics of the becoming-life of art and the politics of the resistant form. The first identifies the forms of aesthetic experience with the forms of another life. The finality it ascribes to art is to construct new forms of life in common, and hence to eliminate itself as a separate reality. The second, by contrast, encloses the political promise of aesthetic experience in art's very separation, in the resistance of its form to every transformation into a form of life.

This tension does not result from any unfortunate compromises art may have made with politics. These two 'politics' are in effect implicated in the same forms by which we identify art as the object of a specific experience. From this, however, it is by no means necessary to conclude that there has been a disastrous captation of art by 'aesthetics'. To repeat, there is no art without a specific form of visibility and discursivity which identifies it as such. There is no art without a specific distribution of the sensible tying it to a certain form of politics. Aesthetics is such a distribution. The tension between these two politics threatens the aesthetic regime of art. But it is also what makes it function. Isolating these opposed logics, and the extreme point at which both of them are eliminated, by no means obliges us to announce the end of aesthetics as others have the end of politics, of history or of utopias. But it can help us to understand the paradoxical constraints that weigh on the project, so apparently simple, of 'critical art', a project which arranges, in the form of the work, either an explanation of domination or a comparison between what the world is and what it might be.¹⁶

¹⁶This chapter and the following one were both developed thanks to a seminar on *Aesthetics and Politics* held in May 2002 in Barcelona under the auspices of the Museu d'Art Contemporani. They are also indebted to a seminar held on the same subject in June 2001 at the *School for Criticism and Theory*, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

Problems and Transformations of Critical Art

In its most general expression, critical art is a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation. The quandary that plagues the project is well known. On the one hand, understanding does not, in and of itself, help to transform intellectual attitudes and situations. The exploited rarely require an explanation of the laws of exploitation. The dominated do not remain in subordination because they misunderstand the existing state of affairs but because they lack confidence in their capacity to transform it. Now, the feeling of such a capacity presupposes that the dominated are already committed to a political process in a bid to change the configuration of sensory givens and to construct forms of a world to come, from within the existent world. On the other hand, the work which builds understanding and dissolves appearances kills, by so doing, the strangeness of the resistant appearance that attests to the non-necessary or intolerable character of a world. Insofar as it asks viewers to discover the signs of Capital behind everyday objects and behaviours, critical art risks being inscribed in the perpetuity of a world in which the transformation of things into signs is redoubled by the very excess of