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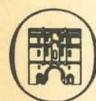
The Library will publish original and translated works guided by an analytical interest in the foundations of human culture and the moral sciences. It is intended to foster phenomenological, hermeneutical and ethnomethodological studies in the social sciences, art and literature.

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Aesthetic theory

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Routledge & Kegan Paul
London and New York

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CHAPTER 1

Art, society, aesthetics

1 Loss of certainty

Today it goes without saying that nothing concerning art goes without saying, much less without thinking. Everything about art has become problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist. One would have thought that the loss of an intuitive and naive approach to art would be offset by a tendency to increased reflection which seizes upon the chance to fill the void of infinite possibilities. This has not happened. What looked at first like an expansion of art turned out to be its contraction. The great expanse of the unforeseen which revolutionary artistic movements began to explore around 1910 did not live up to the promise of happiness and adventure it had held out. What has happened instead is that the process begun at that time came to corrode the very same categories which were its own reason for being. An ever-increasing number of things artistic were drawn into an eddy of new taboos, and rather than enjoy their newly won freedom, artists everywhere were quick to look for some presumed foundation for what they were doing. This flight into a new order, however flimsy, is a reflection of the fact that absolute freedom in art – which is a particular – contradicts the abiding unfreedom of the social whole. That is why the place and function of art in society have become uncertain. To put it another way, the autonomy art gained after having freed itself from its earlier cult function and its derivatives depended on the idea of humanity. As society grew less humane, art became less autonomous. Those constituent elements of art that were suffused with the ideal of humanity have lost their force.

All the same, autonomy is an irrevocable aspect of art. There is no point in trying to allay the self-doubts of art – doubts, incidentally,

which find expression in art itself — by restoring to her a social role. Such attempts are in vain. Today, however, autonomous art shows signs of being blind. A trait of art from time immemorial, blindness in the age of emancipation has become the dominant characteristic despite, and because of, the fact that, as Hegel realized, art can no longer afford to be naive art. Nowadays artistic sophistication amalgamates itself with a *naïveté* of a different and stronger kind, which is the uncertainty about the purpose of art and the conditions for its continued existence. Did art not lose its foundation when it gained complete freedom from external purposes? Questions like this touch on the intrinsically historical nature of aesthetics.

Works of art, it is said, leave the real empirical world behind, producing a counter-realm of their own, a realm which is an existent like the empirical world. This claim is false; it implies an *a priori* affirmation of that which is, no matter how 'tragic' the content of the work of art may be. Those clichés about art casting a glow of happiness and harmony over an unhappy and divided real world are loathsome because they make a mockery of any emphatic concept of art by looking only at perverse bourgeois practices such as the employment of art as a dispenser of solace. These clichés also point to the wound of art itself. Having dissociated itself from religion and its redemptive truths, art was able to flourish. Once secularized, however, art was condemned, for lack of any hope for a real alternative, to offer to the existing world a kind of solace that reinforced the fetters autonomous art had wanted to shake off. There is a sense in which the principle of autonomy is itself solace of this kind, for in claiming to be able to posit a well-rounded totality entirely on its own, the principle of artistic autonomy willy-nilly creates the false impression that the world outside is such a rounded whole, too. By rejecting reality — and this is not a form of escapism but an inherent quality of art — art vindicates reality.

Helmut Kuhn's thesis¹ that every work of art is a paean would be true if it were critical in spirit, which it is not. Given the abnormities of real life today, the affirmative essence of art, while an integral part of art, has become insufferable. True art challenges its own essence, thereby heightening the sense of uncertainty that dwells in the artist.

It would be wrong, too, to try to dispose of art through abstract negation. Art undergoes qualitative change when it attacks its traditional foundations. Thus art becomes a qualitatively different entity by virtue of its opposition, at the level of artistic form, to the existing world and also by virtue of its readiness to aid and shape that world. Neither

the concept of solace nor its opposite, refusal, captures the meaning of art.

2 Origins — a false question

The concept of art balks at being defined, for it is a historically changing constellation of moments. Nor can the nature of art be ascertained by going back to the origin of art in order to find some fundamental and primary layer that supports everything else. The late romantics believed in the supremacy and purity of archaic art. This view is no more persuasive than the opposite argument, put forth by classicists, that the earliest works of art are impure and muddy, inasmuch as they were inseparable from magic, from historical records and from practical aims, like wanting to communicate over long distances by means of calling and blowing sounds. There is no way of deciding the issue because historical facts are hard to come by.

Similarly, any attempt to subsume the historical genesis of art ontologically under some supreme principle would necessarily get lost in a mass of detail. The only theoretically relevant insight that might be obtained is the negative one that, for the plurality of what are called 'the arts', there does not even seem to exist a universal concept of art able to accommodate them all.² Studies devoted to prehistoric art tend to present raw empirical material side by side with wild speculation. Johann Jakob Bachofen is the best-known example here.

Philosophers are used to distinguishing conceptually between two types of problems of origin, one belonging to metaphysics, the other to primal history. Upholding this distinction too rigidly leads however to a distortion of the literal meaning of the concept of origin.³ The definition of art does indeed depend on what art once was, but it must also take into account what has become of art and what might possibly become of it in the future. Art, we said, is different from empirical reality. Now this difference itself does not stay the same; it changes because art changes. History, for example, has transformed certain cult objects into art long after they were first produced. Or, to give another example, at a certain moment in time particular art objects have ceased to be viewed as art. In this connection, the abstractly posed question of whether a phenomenon like the film is art or something else is instructive, although it leads nowhere. As we saw, art has a changing scope and it may be just as well not to try to define sharply what's inside and what's outside of it.

What are called questions of aesthetic constitution are demarcated by the tension between the motive force of art and art as past history. It is through its dynamic laws, not through some invariable principle, that art can be understood. It is defined by its relation to what is different from art. This other makes it possible for us to arrive at a substantive understanding of the specifically artistic in art. It is this approach to art that alone meets the criteria of a materialist and dialectical aesthetic, which evolves by segregating itself from its own matrix. Its law of motion and its law of form are one and the same.

Central to contemporary aesthetics is the assumption that even a product of historical becoming may be true. It was Nietzsche who developed this notion in reference to traditional philosophy. Rephrasing and putting a point to Nietzsche's insight, I think truth exists only as a product of historical becoming. As far as art is concerned, this is true throughout: works of art became what they are by negating their origin. It was only fairly recently, namely after art had become thoroughly secular and subject to a process of technological evolution and after secularization had firmly taken hold, that art acquired another important feature: an inner logic of development. Art should not be blamed for its one-time ignominious relation to magical abracadabra, human servitude and entertainment, for it has after all annihilated these dependencies along with the memory of its fall from grace. Moreover, it is an over-simplification to think that dinner music, for example, could never achieve the heights of autonomous music just because it was dinner music. Conversely, it is also fallacious to argue that dinner music, because it represented a service to mankind, has the edge on autonomous music with its haughty refusal to be serviceable to anything or to anybody. Let us remember, too, that the greatest part of what passes for musical art today is an echo of the contemptuous clatter of dinner music. Unfortunately, this fact does nothing to make the quality of early eighteenth-century dinner music any better.

3 Truth, life and death of art

The Hegelian notion of a possible withering away of art is consistent with the historical essence of art as a product of becoming. This seemingly paradoxical fact, that Hegel conceived of art as something mortal while at the same time treating it as a moment of absolute spirit, is fully in line with the dual character of his system. His view however

implies a conclusion he would never have drawn himself, namely that the content of art — its absolute aspect, according to Hegel — is not identical with the dimension of life and death. It is conceivable that that content might precisely be art's mortality. Music is a case in point. A latecomer among the arts, great music may well turn out to be an art form that was possible only during a limited period of human history. The revolt of art which programmatically defined itself in terms of a new stance towards the objective, historical world has become a revolt against art. Whether art will survive these developments is anybody's guess. Nobody however should ignore the fact that for once reactionary cultural pessimism and a critical theory of culture see eye to eye on the following proposition: art may, as Hegel speculated it would, soon enter the age of its demise. A century ago Rimbaud's dictum intuitively anticipated the history of modern art; later his silence and his being co-opted on becoming an employee anticipated the decline of art.

Aesthetics today is powerless to avert its becoming a necrologue of art. What it can and must avoid is making graveside speeches, soothing the end of everything, savouring past achievements and jumping on the bandwagon of barbarism — which barbarism is no better and no worse than the culture that rallies to its side, with the two fully deserv-ing each other. Assuming art is abolished, abolishes itself, vanishes or barely hangs on to a precarious existence — all this does not mean that the content of past art will necessarily go down the drain, too. Art could well be survived by its past content in a new and different society, rid of its barbarous culture.

What has already died are not only aesthetic forms but also many substantive motifs. To mention only one example, the literature about adultery, which had its efflorescence during the Victorian period and into the early twentieth century, is difficult to appreciate today, what with the dissolution of the bourgeois nuclear family and the loosening up of monogamy. A popular version of that kind of literature today has found a new but miserable home: illustrated magazines. The authentic element in *Madame Bovary*, at one time an integral part of the subject matter of the novel, has long since outlived both that content and its demise — a statement that is not at all meant to lure anybody into the optimistic belief in the invincibility of the spirit. There are of course many instances where the death of the content of a work of art has in fact entailed the perdition of the higher authentic moment as well. What makes art and its products mortal — and this includes heteronomous and autonomous art, with the latter vindicating the social

division of labour and the special position held therein by the intellect – what makes art mortal is the fact that it is not only art but something other than, and opposed to, art. Admixed to the concept of art is the germ that will dialectically supersede art.

4 On the relation between art and society

Aesthetic refraction is as incomplete without the refracted object as imagination is without the imagined object. This has special significance for the problem of the inherent functionality of art. Tied to the real world, art adopts the principle of self-preservation of that world, turning it into the ideal of self-identical art, the essence of which Schönberg once summed up in the statement that the painter paints a picture rather than what it represents. Implied here is the idea that every work of art spontaneously aims at being identical with itself, just as in the world outside a fake identity is everywhere forcibly imposed on objects by the insatiable subject. Aesthetic identity is different, however, in one important respect: it is meant to assist the non-identical in its struggle against the repressive identification compulsion that rules the outside world. It is by virtue of its separation from empirical reality that the work of art can become a being of a higher order, fashioning the relation between the whole and its parts in accordance with its own needs. Works of art are after-images or replicas of empirical life, inasmuch as they proffer to the latter what in the outside world is being denied them. In the process they slough off a repressive, external-empirical mode of experiencing the world. Whereas the line separating art from real life should not be fudged, least of all by glorifying the artist, it must be kept in mind that works of art are alive, have a life *sui generis*. Their life is more than just an outward fate. Over time, great works reveal new facets of themselves, they age, they become rigid, and they die. Being human artefacts, they do not 'live' in the same sense as human beings. Of course not. To put the accent on the artefactual aspect in works of art seems to imply that the way in which they came to be is important. It is not. The emphasis must be on their inner constitution. They have life because they speak in ways nature and man cannot. They talk because there is communication between their individual constituents, which cannot be said of things that exist in a state of mere diffusion.

As artefacts, works of art communicate not only internally but also

with the external reality which they try to get away from and which none the less is the substratum of their content. Art negates the conceptualization foisted on the real world and yet harbours in its own substance elements of the empirically existent. Assuming that one has to differentiate form and content before grasping their mediation, we can say that art's opposition to the real world is in the realm of form; but this occurs, generally speaking, in a mediated way such that aesthetic form is a sedimentation of content. What seem like pure forms in art, namely those of traditional music, do in all respects, and all the way down to details of musical idiom, derive from external content such as dance. Similarly, ornaments in the visual arts originally tended to be cult symbols. Members of the Warburg Institute were following this lead, studying the derivability of aesthetic forms from contents in the context of classical antiquity and its influence on later periods. This kind of work needs to be undertaken on a larger scale.

The manner in which art communicates with the outside world is in fact also a lack of communication, because art seeks, blissfully or unhappily, to seclude itself from the world. This non-communication points to the fractured nature of art. It is natural to think that art's autonomous domain has no more in common with the outside world than a few borrowed elements undergoing radical change in the context of art. But there is more to it than that. There is some truth to the historical cliché which states that the developments of artistic methods, usually lumped together under the term 'style', correspond to social development. Even the most sublime work of art takes up a definite position *vis-à-vis* reality by stepping outside of reality's spell, not abstractly once and for all, but occasionally and in concrete ways, when it unconsciously and tacitly polemicizes against the condition of society at a particular point in time.

How can works of art be like windowless monads, representing something which is other than they? There is only one way to explain this, which is to view them as being subject to a dynamic or immanent historicity and a dialectical tension between nature and domination of nature, a dialectic that seems to be of the same kind as the dialectic of society. Or to put it more cautiously, the dialectic of art resembles the social dialectic without consciously imitating it. The productive force of useful labour and that of art are the same. They both have the same teleology. And what might be termed aesthetic relations of production – defined as everything that provides an outlet for the productive forces of art or everything in which these forces become embedded – are

sedimentations of social relations of production bearing the imprint of the latter. Thus in all dimensions of its productive process art has a twofold essence, being both an autonomous entity and a social fact in the Durkheimian sense of the term.

It is through this relationship to the empirical that works of art salvage, albeit in neutralized fashion, something that once upon a time was literally a shared experience of all mankind and which enlightenment has since expelled. Art, too, partakes of enlightenment, but in a different way: works of art do not lie; what they say is literally true. Their reality however lies in the fact that they are answers to questions brought before them from outside. The tension in art therefore has meaning only in relation to the tension outside. The fundamental layers of artistic experience are akin to the objective world from which art recoils.

The unresolved antagonisms of reality reappear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form. This, and not the deliberate injection of objective moments or social content, defines art's relation to society. The aesthetic tensions manifesting themselves in works of art express the essence of reality in and through their emancipation from the factual façade of exteriority. Art's simultaneous dissociation from and secret connection with empirical being confirms the strength of Hegel's analysis of the nature of a conceptual barrier (*Schranke*): the intellect, argues Hegel against Kant, no sooner posits a barrier than it has to go beyond it, absorbing into itself that against which the barrier was set up.⁴ We have here, among other things, a basis for a non-moralistic critique of the idea of *l'art pour l'art* with its abstract negation of the empirical and with its monomaniac separatism in aesthetic theory.

Freedom, the presupposition of art and the self-glorifying conception art has of itself, is the cunning of art's reason. Blissfully soaring above the real world, art is still chained by each of its elements to the empirical other, into which it may even sink back altogether at every instant. In their relation to empirical reality works of art recall the theologumenon that in a state of redemption everything will be just as it is and yet wholly different. There is an unmistakable similarity in all this with the development of the profane. The profane secularizes the sacred realm to the point where the latter is the only secular thing left. The sacred realm is thus objectified, staked out as it were, because its moment of untruth awaits secularization as much as it tries to avert it through incantation.

It follows that art is not defined once and for all by the scope of an immutable concept. Rather, the concept of art is a fragile balance attained now and then, quite similar to the psychological equilibrium between id and ego. Disturbances continually upset the balance, keeping the process in motion. Every work of art is an instant; every great work of art is a stoppage of the process, a momentary standing still, whereas a persistent eye sees only the process. While it is true that works of art provide answers to their own questions, it is equally true that in so doing they become questions for themselves. Take a look at the widespread inclination (which to this day has not been mitigated by education) to perceive art in terms of extra-aesthetic or pre-aesthetic criteria. This tendency is, on the one hand, a mark of atrocious backwardness or of the regressive consciousness of many people. On the other hand, there is no denying that that tendency is promoted by something in art itself. If art is perceived strictly in aesthetic terms, then it cannot be properly perceived in aesthetic terms. The artist must feel the presence of the empirical other in the foreground of his own experience in order to be able to sublimate that experience, thus freeing himself from his confinement to content while at the same time saving the being-for-itself of art from slipping into outright indifference toward the world.

Art is and is not being-for-itself. Without a heterogeneous moment, art cannot achieve autonomy. Great epics that survive their own oblivion were originally shot through with historical and geographical reporting. Valéry, for one, was aware of the degree to which the Homeric, pagan-germanic and Christian epics contained raw materials that had never been melted down and recast by the laws of form, noting that this did not diminish their rank in comparison with 'pure' works of art. Similarly, tragedy, the likely origin of the abstract idea of aesthetic autonomy, was also an after-image of pragmatically oriented cult acts. At no point in its history of progressive emancipation was art able to stamp out that moment. And the reason is not that the bonds were simply too strong. Long before socialist realism rationally planned its debasement, the realistic novel, which was at its height as a literary form in the nineteenth century, bears the marks of reportage, anticipating what was later to become the task of social science surveys. Conversely, the fanatic thoroughness of linguistic integration that characterizes *Madame Bovary*, for instance, is probably the result of the contrary moment. The continued relevance of this work is due to the unity of both.

In art, the criterion of success is twofold: first, works of art must be

able to integrate materials and details into their immanent law of form; and, second, they must not try to erase the fractures left by the process of integration, preserving instead in the aesthetic whole the traces of those elements which resisted integration. Integration as such does not guarantee quality. There is no privileged single category, not even the aesthetically central one of form, that defines the essence of art and suffices to judge its product. In short, art has defining characteristics that go against the grain of what philosophy of art ordinarily conceives as art. Hegel is the exception. His aesthetics of content recognized the moment of otherness inherent in art, thus superseding the old aesthetic of form. The latter seems to be operating with too pure a concept of art, even though it has at least one advantage, which is that it does not, unlike Hegel's (and Kierkegaard's) substantive aesthetics, place obstacles in the way of certain historical developments such as abstract painting. This is one weakness of Hegel's aesthetic. The other is that, by conceiving form in terms of content, Hegel's theory of art regresses to a position that can only be called 'pre-aesthetic' and crude. Hegel mistakes the replicatory (*abbildende*) or discursive treatment of content for the kind of otherness that is constitutive of art. He sins, as it were, against his own dialectical concept of aesthetics, with results that he could not foresee. He in effect helped prepare the way for the banal tendency to transform art into an ideology of repression.

The moment of unreality and non-existence in art is not independent of the existent, as though it were posited or invented by some arbitrary will. Rather, that moment of unreality is a structure resulting from quantitative relations between elements of being, relations which in turn a response to, and an echo of, the imperfections of real conditions, their constraints, their contradictions, and their potentialities. Art is related to its other like a magnet to a field of iron filings. The elements of art as well as their constellation, or what is commonly thought to be the spiritual essence of art, point back to the real other. The identity of the works of art with existent reality also accounts for the centripetal force that enables them to gather unto themselves the traces and *membra disiecta*⁵ of real life. Their affinity with the world lies in a principle that is conceived to be a contrast to that world but is in fact no different from the principle whereby spirit has dominated the world. Synthesis is not some process of imposing order on the elements of a work of art. It is important, rather, that the elements interact with each other; hence there is a sense in which synthesis is a mere repetition of the pre-established interdependence among elements, which inter-

dependence is a product of otherness, of non-art. Synthesis, therefore, is firmly grounded in the material aspects of works of art.

There is a link between the aesthetic moment of form and non-violence. In its difference from the existent, art of necessity constitutes itself in terms of that which is not a work of art yet is indispensable for its being. The emphasis on non-intentionality in art, noticeable first in the sympathy for popular art in Apollinaire, early Cubism and Wedekind (who derided what he called 'art-artists'), indicates that art became aware, however dimly, that it interacted with its opposite. This new self-conception of art gave rise to a critical turn signalling an end to the illusory equation of art with pure spirituality.

5 Critique of the psychoanalytic theory of art

Art is the social antithesis of society. The constitution of the domain of art resembles the constitution of an inner space of ideas in the individual. Both areas intersect in the concept of sublimation. Hence it is natural and promising to attempt to conceptualize art in terms of some theory of psychic life.

A comparison between an anthropological theory of human constants and a psychoanalytic one would seem to favour the latter. But caution is in order: psychoanalysis is better suited to explain purely psychic phenomena than aesthetic ones. According to psychoanalytic theory, works of art are essentially projections of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis thus puts the emphasis on the individual producer of art and the interpretation of aesthetic content as psychic content, to the detriment of the categories of form. What psychoanalysis does when it turns to the analysis of art is to transfer the banal sensitivity of the therapist to such unlikely objects as Leonardo and Baudelaire. It is important to debunk such studies, which are frequently offshoots of the biographical genre, in no uncertain terms; for despite their stress on sex they are hopelessly philistine in conception, dismissing as neurotics men of art who in fact merely objectified in their work the negativity of life. The book by Laforgue, for instance, seriously accuses Baudelaire of having suffered from a mother complex.⁶ The author does not even touch on the problem of whether Baudelaire could have written the *Fleurs du mal* had he been healthy, let alone whether, because of the neurosis, the poems turned out worse than they might otherwise have been. Psychic normalcy is raised to a criterion of judgment even in the

case of someone like Baudelaire, whose greatness was so unequivocally tied up with the absence of a *mens sana*. The tenor of psychoanalytic monographs on artists conveys the sense of an implicit ought: that art should deal affirmatively with the negativity of experience. To the psychoanalytic authors, the negative moment is just a mark of the process of repression finding its way into the work of art.

From the point of view of psychoanalysis, art is day-dreaming. It is a view that, on the one hand, mistakes works of art for documents, lodged in the dreaming person's head. On the other hand, as a kind of trade-off for having first excised the extramental sphere, it reduces art to content, in strange opposition incidentally to Freud, who after all had already emphasized the importance of dream *work*. With their assumption of an analogy between dreaming and artistic creation, psychoanalysts, like all positivists, vastly overrate the moment of fiction in art. The projection that occurs in the creative process is not at all the decisive moment in works of art; equally important are idiom, material and, above all, the product itself, the latter being virtually ignored by psychoanalysts. For example, the psychoanalytic thesis that music is a defence mechanism against impending paranoia, while it may well be clinically correct, is useless for an appreciation of the quality and substance of a single musical composition.

Compared with the idealist theory of art, the psychoanalytic one has the advantage of bringing to light those elements in art that are not art-like. In so doing, psychoanalysis helps to free art from its enthrallment to absolute spirit. Its opposition against vulgar idealism, which gives to art a sanctuary in some allegedly higher sphere and avidly protects it against all insights into its own essence and above all into the connection it has with instinct — this opposition is part of the spirit of enlightenment. To the extent to which psychoanalysis decodes the social character of a work and its author, it is able to furnish concrete, mediating links between the structure of works of art and that of society. On the other hand, psychoanalysis, not unlike idealism, is spreading its own kind of enthrallment by reducing art to an absolutely subjective system of signs denoting drive states of the subject. Given this tendency, psychoanalysis is able to decipher phenomena but not the phenomenon of art itself. To psychoanalysis works of art are factual. It neglects to consider their real objectivity, their inner consistency, the level of form, their critical impulses, their relation to non-psychic reality and, last but not least, their truth content.

A woman painter, in the spirit of sincerity that governs a pact

between analyst and patient, once complained in the doctor's office that she was appalled at the poor quality of the engravings he had hung up to decorate his walls, whereupon he explained to her that she was merely showing her aggression Works of art are much less replicas and properties of the artist than a physician likes to think who knows artists only as persons lying on a couch. Only a dilettante will even try to reduce everything about art to the unconscious, reiterating one hackneyed psychoanalytic cliché after another. In the process of artistic production, unconscious drives are one impetus among many. They become integrated with the work of art through the law of form. The real human being who created the work is no more a part of that work than a real horse is a part of a painted one.

Works of art are not some kind of thematic apperception tests, either. In so far as psychoanalysis implies that they are, it reveals another seamy side of its anti-aestheticism. Part of the blame for this ignorance of what art is all about lies, incidentally, in the pre-eminence psychoanalysis gives to the reality principle. Adaptation to reality has the status of a *summum bonum*, whereas any deviation from the reality principle is immediately branded as an escape. The experience of reality is such that it provides all kinds of legitimate grounds for wanting to escape. This exposes the harmonistic ideology behind the psychoanalytic indignation about people's escape mechanisms. Even at the level of psychology, the need for art can be given a better justification than it has so far got from psychoanalysis. It is true, there is an element of escape in imagination, but the two are not synonymous.

Art transcends the reality principle in the direction both of something higher and of something even more mundane. There is no reason to point a taunting finger at that. The image of the artist as a neurotic, tolerated by and integrated into the social division of labour, is a distortion. In artists of the highest calibre like Beethoven and Rembrandt, the keenest awareness of reality was joined to an equally acute sense of alienation from reality. It is phenomena like this which would be truly appropriate subjects for a psychology of art. Its task would be to decode the work of art as something that is identical with the artist and yet different from him, inasmuch as it represents labour spent upon a resistant other. And if art has one psychoanalytically relevant root, it has got to be that of omnipotence fantasy. But again, what shines forth in these fantasies beneath the raw psychological need for power is the desire to bring about a better world. This sets free the entire dialectic of art and society. By contrast, the psychological view of the art work

in terms of a purely subjective language of the unconscious does not even come close to a dialectical understanding.

6 Kant and Freud on art

Freud's theory of art as wish-fulfilment has its antithesis in the theory of Kant. Kant states at the start of the 'Analytic of the Beautiful' that the first moment of a judgment of taste is disinterested satisfaction,⁷ where interest is defined as 'the satisfaction which we combine with the representation of the existence of an object'.⁸ Right away there is an ambiguity. It is impossible to tell whether Kant means, by representation of the existence of an object, the empirical object dealt with in a work of art, in other words its subject matter or content, or whether he means the work of art itself. Is he referring to the pretty nude model or to the sweetly pleasing sound of a piece of music (which, incidentally, can be pure artistic trash or an integral part of artistic quality)? Kant's stress on representation flows directly from his subjectivist approach, which locates the aesthetic quality in the effect a work of art has upon the viewer. This is in accord with the rationalist tradition, notably Moses Mendelsohn. While staying in the old tradition of an aesthetic that emphasizes effect (*Wirkungsaesthetik*), the *Critique of Judgment* is none the less a radical immanent critique of then contemporary rationalist aesthetics. Let us remember that the significance of Kantian subjectivism as a whole lies in its objective intention, its attempt to salvage objectivity by means of an analysis of subjective moments.

It is through the concept of disinterestedness that Kant breaks up the supremacy of pleasure in aesthetics. Satisfaction is meant to preserve effect but disinterestedness draws away from it. Bereft of what Kant calls interest, satisfaction and pleasure become wholly indeterminate, losing the capacity to define the beautiful. All the same, the doctrine of disinterested satisfaction is impoverished in view of the richness of aesthetic phenomena. It reduces them either to the formally beautiful – a questionable entity when viewed in isolation – or in the case of natural objects to the sublime. The reduction of art to absolute form misses the point about the why and wherefore of art. Kant's murky footnote,⁹ which says that a judgment about an object of satisfaction is disinterested, i.e. not based on interest, even though it may be 'interesting', i.e. capable of evoking an interest, testifies honestly, if indirectly, to the fact that he was aware of a difficulty. Kant separates

aesthetic feeling – and therefore, according to his own understanding, virtually the whole of art – from the faculty of desire at which the 'representation of the existence of an object' is aimed. Or, as he puts it, satisfaction in such a representation 'always has reference to the faculty of desire'.¹⁰ Kant was the first to have gained an insight that was never to be forgotten since: namely, that aesthetic conduct is free of immediate desire. Thus he rescued art from the greedy clutches of a kind of insensitivity that forever wants to touch and savour it.

Comparing Kant and Freud, it is interesting to note that the Kantian motif is not entirely foreign to the Freudian theory. Even for Freud, works of art, far from being direct wish-fulfilment, transform repressed libido into socially productive accomplishments. What is, of course, uncritically presupposed in this theory is the social value of art, whose quality as art simply rests on public reputation. By putting the difference between art, on the one hand, and the faculty of desire and empirical reality, on the other, into much sharper relief than Freud, Kant does more than simply idealize art. Isolating the aesthetic from the empirical sphere, he constitutes art. He then, however, proceeds to arrest this process of constitution in the framework of his transcendental philosophy, simplistically equating constitution with the essence of art and ignoring the fact that the subjective instinctual components of art crop up, in different form, even in the most mature manifestations of art.

In his theory of sublimation, on the other hand, Freud was more clearly aware of the dynamic nature of art. The price he paid was no smaller than Kant's. For Freud, the spiritual essence of art remains hidden. For Kant, it does emerge from the distinctions between aesthetic, practical and appetitive behaviour, Kant's preference for sensuous intuition notwithstanding. In the Freudian view works of art, although products of sublimation, are little more than plenipotentiaries of sensuous impulses made unrecognizable to some degree by a kind of dream-work.

A comparison between two thinkers as different as Kant and Freud – Kant, for example, not only rejected philosophical psychologism but with age also became hostile to psychology as such – is justified by the presence of a common denominator that outweighs the differences between the Kantian construction of the transcendental subject and the Freudian focus on the empirical subject. Where they differ is in their positive and negative approaches, respectively, to the faculty of desire. What they have in common, however, is the underlying subjective

orientation. For both, the work of art exists only in relation to the individual who contemplates or produces it. There is a mechanism in Kant's thought that forces him, both in moral and in aesthetic philosophy, to consider the ontic, empirical individual to a larger extent than seems warranted by the notion of the transcendental subject. In aesthetics this implies that there can be no pleasure without a living being to whom an object is pleasing. Without explicit recognition, Kant devotes the entire *Critique of Judgment* to an analysis of *constituta*. Therefore, despite the programmatic idea of building a bridge between theoretical and practical pure reason, the faculty of judgment turns out to be *sui generis* in relation to both forms of reason.

Perhaps the most important taboo in art is the one that prohibits an animal-like attitude toward the object, say, a desire to devour it or otherwise to subjugate it to one's body. Now, the strength of such a taboo is matched by the strength of the repressed urge. Hence, all art contains in itself a negative moment from which it tries to get away. If Kant's disinterestedness is to be more than a synonym for indifference, it has to have a trace of untamed interest somewhere. Indeed, there is much to be said for the thesis that the dignity of works of art depends on the magnitude of the interest from which they were wrested. Kant denies this in order to protect his concept of freedom from spurious heteronomies that he saw lurking everywhere. In this regard, his theory of art is tainted by an insufficiency of his theory of practical reason. In the context of Kant's philosophy, the idea of a beautiful object possessing a kind of independence from the sovereign ego must seem like a digression into intelligible worlds. The source from which art antithetically originates, as well as the content of art, are of no concern to Kant, who instead posits something as formal as aesthetic satisfaction as the defining characteristic of art. His aesthetics presents the paradox of a castrated hedonism, of a theory of pleasure without pleasure. This position fails to do justice either to artistic experience wherein satisfaction is a subordinate moment in a larger whole, or to the material-corporeal interest, i.e. repressed and unsatisfied needs that resonate in their aesthetic negations — the works of art — turning them into something more than empty patterns.

Aesthetic disinterestedness has moved interest beyond particularity. Objectively, the interest in constituting an aesthetic totality entailed an interest in the proper arrangement of the social whole. In the last analysis aesthetic interest aimed not at some particular fulfilment, but

at the fulfilment of infinite possibilities, which in turn cannot be thought without fulfilment of the particular.

A corresponding weakness can be noticed in Freud's theory of art, which is a good deal more idealistic than Freud had thought it was. By placing works of art squarely into a realm of psychic immanence, Freud's theory loses sight of their antithetical relation to the non-subjective, which thus remains unmolested, as it were, by the thorns pointed toward it by works of art. As a result, psychic processes like instinctual denial and adaptation are left as the only relevant aspects of art. Psychologicistic interpretations of art are in league with the philistine view that art is a conciliatory force capable of smoothing over differences, or that it is the dream of a better life, never mind the fact that such dreams should recall the negativity from which they were forcibly extracted. Psychoanalysis in conformist fashion simply takes over the prevalent view of art as some sort of beneficent cultural heritage. To this corresponds the aesthetic hedonism which has psychoanalysis banish all negativity from art *qua* result, pushing the analysis of that negativity back to the level of instinctual conflict. Once successful sublimation and integration become the be-all and end-all of a work of art, it loses the power to transcend mere existence. However, as soon as we conceive of the work of art in terms of its ability to keep a hold on the negativity of the real and to enter into a definite relation to it, we have to change the concept of disinterestedness as well. In contrast to the Kantian and Freudian views on the matter, works of art necessarily evolve in a dialectic of interests and disinterestedness.

There is a grain of validity even in a contemplative attitude towards art, inasmuch as it underscores the important posture of art's turning away from immediate praxis and refusing to play the worldly game. This has long been a component of artistic behaviour. We see here, incidentally, that works of art are tied up with specific modes of behaviour; indeed, that they *are* modes of behaviour. Now it is only those works of art that manifest themselves as modes of behaviour which have a reason for being. Art is like a plenipotentiary of a type of praxis that is better than the prevailing praxis of society, dominated as it is by brutal self-interest. This is what art criticizes. It gives the lie to the notion that production for production's sake is necessary, by opting for a mode of praxis beyond labour. Art's *promesse du bonheur*, then, has an even more emphatically critical meaning: it not only expresses the idea that current praxis denies happiness, but also carries the connotation that happiness is something beyond praxis. The chasm

between praxis and happiness is surveyed and measured by the power of negativity of the work of art.

Surely a writer like Kafka does anything but appeal to our faculty of desire. Prose writings such as *Metamorphosis* and *Penal Colony*, on the contrary, seem to call forth in us responses like real anxiety, a violent drawing back, an almost physical revulsion. They seem to be the opposite of desire. Yet these phenomena of psychic defence and rejection have more in common with desire than with the old Kantian disinterestedness. Kafka and the literature that followed his example have swept away the notion of disinterestedness. In relation to Kafka's works, disinterestedness is a completely inadequate concept of interpretation. In the last analysis the postulate of disinterestedness debases all art, turning it into a pleasant or useful plaything, in accord with Horace's *ars poetica*. Idealist aesthetics and its contemporaneous art products have emancipated themselves from this misconception. The precondition for the autonomy of artistic experience is the abandonment of the attitude of tasting and savouring. The trajectory leading to aesthetic autonomy passes through the stage of disinterestedness; and well it should, for it was during this stage that art emancipated itself from cuisine and pornography, an emancipation that has become irrevocable. However, art does not come to rest in disinterestedness. It moves on. And in so doing it reproduces, in different form, the interest inherent in disinterestedness. In a false world all *hedone* is false. This goes for artistic pleasure, too. Art renounces happiness for the sake of happiness, thus enabling desire to survive in art.

7 Enjoyment of art

In Kant, we saw that enjoyment comes in the guise of disinterestedness, a guise that makes enjoyment unrecognizable. What ordinary language and conformist aesthetics have termed enjoyment of art, on analogy with real enjoyment, has probably never existed and will probably never exist. The individual has a limited share in artistic experience as such. This share varies with the quality of a work of art: the better the work, the smaller the subjective component in it. To fetishize the enjoyment of art is to be a crude and insensitive person, who tends to give himself away by describing something as a 'feast for the eye'.

Let us acknowledge a limitation of this critique, though: if the last trace of enjoyment were expunged from art, we would face the

embarrassing question of what works of art are for. Still, it remains a fact that people enjoy works of art the less, the more they know about them, and vice versa. If we must discuss attitudes to art works at all, it is probably correct to say that the traditional attitude was one not of enjoyment, but of admiration — admiration for what those works are in themselves, regardless of their relation to the viewer. What the viewer noticed in them and what enraptured him was their truth (again, Kafka is a good example of art as truth). They were not some kind of higher type of means of enjoyment. The relation between the viewer and work had nothing to do with the incorporation of art by the viewer. On the contrary, the viewer seemed to vanish in the work of art. This holds *a fortiori* for the products of modern art that come at the viewer sometimes like train engines in a film.

If you ask a musician if he enjoys playing his instrument, he will probably reply: 'I hate it', just like the grimacing cellist in the American joke. People who have a genuine relation to art would rather immerse themselves in art than reduce art to an object. They cannot live without art, but its individual manifestations are not so many sources of pleasure for them. It goes without saying that nobody would concern himself with art if he did not get something out of it. But this does not mean that people should actually draw up balance sheets, entering such items as 'Heard Ninth Symphony tonight, enjoyed myself so and so much'. Unfortunately, such feeble-minded thinking has by now almost become the commonsensical rule. The bourgeois wants his art luxurious, his life ascetic. It would make more sense if it were the other way around.

Having deprived people of real gratification in the sphere of immediate sense experience, reified consciousness is feeding them a substitute in the form of sensuously dressed-up art, assigning to art a place that is beneath its dignity. On the surface, the strategy seems to move the works of art closer to the consumer by stressing their sensuous attraction. At a deeper level, what happens is that he becomes alienated from them, as he begins to treat them like a commodity belonging to him and yet expropriable at any moment. This raises fears in him. In short, the false attitude towards art is intimately related to anxieties about loss of property; for the fetishistic notion of art as a good which can be owned and, through reflection, destroyed corresponds neatly with the idea of a piece of property in the psychic household.

Like art as a whole, the classification of art as one among the means of enjoyment is a product of historical development. Granted, the magical and animistic predecessors of works of art were components of

ritual practices and hence devoid of aesthetic autonomy. But they were certainly not to be enjoyed, for they were sacred. It was only after art had become thoroughly spiritualized that those who did not understand it began to clamour resentfully for a new species of consumer art that would be able to give them something to enjoy. Conversely, the artists, full of aversion against these demands, were forced to find ever more ingenious ways to spiritualize art even further. No nude Greek sculpture was a pin-up. This explains in part why there is such a friendly attitude in modernism towards the distant past and towards primitive exotic places: modern artists are pleased to find examples there of an art that abstracts from natural objects and their desirability. Hegel, too, in his analysis of what he called symbolic art saw the non-sensuous moment in archaic art. Protesting against the universal mediation of life through commodities, the element of pleasure in art is mediable in its own way, in that he who vanished in a work of art is *ipso facto* exempted from the penalty of life. Such pleasure can take on inebriating proportions. At this point one cannot help realizing just how meagre the concept of aesthetic enjoyment really is when we compare it with drunkenness — so meagre, in fact, that what it stands for does not even seem worth going after. Strangely enough, the aesthetic theory that has singled out subjective feeling as the ground of the beautiful has never seriously analysed that feeling. What descriptions there are of it appear, all and sundry, to be lacking in depth. The subjectivist approach to art simply fails to understand that the subjective experience of art in itself is meaningless, and that in order to grasp the importance of art one has to zero in on the artistic object rather than on the fun of the art lover.

The concept of aesthetic enjoyment was a bad compromise between the social essence of art and the critical tendencies inherent in it. Underlying this compromise is a bourgeois mentality which, after sternly noting how useless art is for the business of self-preservation, grudgingly concedes to art a place in society, provided it offers at least a kind of use-value modelled on the phenomenon of sensuous pleasure. This expectation perverts the nature of art as well as the nature of real sensuous pleasure, for art is unable to provide it. There is no denying that an individual who cannot differentiate sensually between a beautiful sound and a dissonant one, between brilliant colours and dull ones, lacks the ability for artistic experience. But this ability ought not to be hypostatized. To be sure, artistic experience requires a considerable capacity for sensual differentiation as a medium of creativity, but in true art the pleasure component is not given free rein; depending on the

time, it is more or less narrowly circumscribed. In periods following an age of asceticism, pleasure became an emancipatory force. This is true of the Renaissance in its relation to the Middle Ages. It is also true of impressionism in its relation to the Victorian age. At other times, the metaphysical content of human sadness manifested itself in art when erotic stimuli were allowed to permeate artistic form. However strong historically the tendency towards a recurrence of pleasure may be, pleasure remains infantile when it asserts itself directly and without mediation. Art absorbs pleasure as remembrance and longing; it does not copy it, does not seek to produce pleasure as an immediate effect. Aversion against the crudely sensuous in art may have been the undoing of impressionism, which had gone too far in the hedonistic direction.

8 Aesthetic hedonism and the bliss of knowing

The element of truth in aesthetic hedonism finds support in the fact that in art the means are never completely absorbed by the end. The former always retain a certain, albeit mediated, independence because the relation between means and ends is a dialectical one. It is through the moment of sensuous satisfaction that works of art constitute themselves as appearance, which is an essential aspect of art. As Alban Berg once said, it is plain common sense for an artist to make sure the nails don't stick out and the glue doesn't stink. And the sweetness of expression of many of Mozart's compositions is reminiscent of the sweetness of the human voice. In significant works of art the sensuous shines forth as something spiritual, just as, conversely, the spirit of the work may add sensuous brilliance to an individual detail, however indifferent it may be towards appearance. At times works of art that are fully articulated in terms of form shade over into the sensuously pleasant by virtue of their differentiated language of form.

Dissonance (and its counterparts in visual arts) — the trademark, as it were, of modernism — lets in the beguiling moment of sensuousness by transfiguring it into its antithesis, that is, pain. This is an aesthetic phenomenon of primal ambivalence. Dissonance has had a momentous and far-ranging impact on modern art since Baudelaire and Wagner's *Tristan*; it has almost become a kind of constant in modernism. This is so because the immanent dynamic of autonomous works of art and the growing power of external reality over the subject converge in dissonance. Through an inner mechanism, dissonance endows works of art

with a quality that vulgar sociology likes to call their alienation from society. In the meantime, however, the most recent tendencies in art seem to point in the direction of avoidance even of dissonance, which they feel are still too conventional. This development may go on for some time, perhaps leading eventually to a complete taboo on sensuality. It is sometimes difficult to say whether this most recent taboo on sensuousness is grounded in the inner logic of form or whether it merely reflects artistic incompetence – a moot problem, incidentally, the likes of which turn up more and more frequently in debates about modern art. The taboo on sensuality in the end spreads even to the opposite of pleasure, i.e. dissonance, because, through its specific negation of the pleasant, dissonance preserves the moment of pleasure, if only as a distant echo. The hyper-modern response is to be wary of dissonance because of its proximity to consonance. Hyper-modernism, including much of electronic music, prefers to join forces with reified consciousness rather than stay on the side of an ideology of illusory humanness. Dissonance thus congeals into an indifferent material, a new kind of immediacy without memory trace of its past, without feeling, without an essence.

Society today has no use for art and its responses to it are pathological. In this society, art survives as reified cultural heritage and as a source of pleasure for the box-office customer, but ceases to have relevance as an object. Subjective aesthetic pleasure in the true sense of the word would be a state of release from the empirical totality of being-for-other. Schopenhauer may have been the first to realize this. Happiness in the presence of works of art is a feeling of having made an abrupt escape. It is not a chunk of reality from which art itself ran away. Happiness is an accidental moment of art, less important even than the happiness that attends the knowledge of art. In short, the very idea that enjoyment is of the essence of art deserves to be thrown overboard. As Hegel noticed, every emotional response to an aesthetic object is tainted by contingency, mostly in the form of psychological projection. What works of art really demand from us is knowledge or, better, a cognitive faculty of judging justly: they want us to become aware of what is true and what is false in them.

Kant shall have the last word on aesthetic hedonism. In his analysis of the sublime, which is set apart from art, Kant wrote that happiness in relation to works of art is the feeling they instil of holding one's own, of resisting – a notion that is more nearly true of the aesthetic realm as a whole than of individual works.

CHAPTER 2

Situation

1 Decomposition of materials

We saw previously how aesthetic categories have lost their *a priori* validity. Now, the same can be said of artistic materials themselves. They become decomposed as a result of the triumph of their being-for-other. This can be exemplified by the role words play in modern poetry. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Letter of Lord Chandos* is known to be the first work that testifies impressively to the existence of such a decomposing trend. Neo-romantic poetry as a whole can be viewed as an endeavour to check this trend and to recover some of the substantiality of language and other materials. The strong aversion to *Jugendstil*, however, stems from the fact that that attempt has failed, appearing retrospectively to have been no more than a lighthearted journey without substance, as Kafka remarked. In an introductory poem to one of the cycles from the *Seventh Ring*, Stefan George put the words 'gold' and 'karneol' next to each other, confident that the choice would evoke the image of a forest and make poetic sense.¹ Sixty years later we are able to recognize that the choice of these words is merely a decorative arrangement, hardly superior to the crude mass of precious materials piled up in *Dorian Gray* where the interior decorations of Wilde's super-chic aestheticism resemble nothing so much as antique stores, auction rooms, and the whole sphere of commerce Wilde pretends to hate. Along the same lines, Schönberg noted what an easy time Chopin had composing something beautiful because all he needed to do was choose the then little used key of F-sharp major. In early romantic music there were indeed materials, like Chopin's rare keys, which were replete with the energy of the untrodden and which, around 1900, came to be referred to as precious and choice (*erlesen*). The fate suffered

editors were convinced that Adorno would have changed something were left standing. Conjectures were made only in places where misunderstanding about the meaning of a particular sentence would otherwise have arisen.

The ordering of the text was extremely difficult. The three chapters mentioned above had to be inserted in the main text. The section on 'Situation' – a philosophy of history of *modernité*, chapter 1 in the original version – had to get a place somewhere early on because one of the keys to *Aesthetic Theory* is the notion that the vanguard of present-day art illuminates the art of the past. According to a note, Adorno intended to group the chapters 'Situations' and 'Watchwords' (pp. 48–67) together; the editors proceeded accordingly. Finally, the chapter on 'Metaphysics' (pp. 186–96) was put in at the end of the section on 'Enigmatic Quality', which seemed the most logical place for it.

A number of paragraphs had to be shifted elsewhere. Most of these shifts Adorno had planned to make and there were marginal reminders to that effect which the editors simply followed. In some cases they have made shifts of their own. Their purpose was to bring out more clearly the paratactical principle of presentation, not to sacrifice it to a deductive-hierarchical one.

The fragments in Appendix I represent either additions written to be incorporated in the main text or so-called 'separate copies', i.e. passages temporarily excised from the main text for possible use elsewhere. The integration of these fragments with the main text was impossible. Adorno rarely indicated the place for which they were destined. More often than not several possibilities made equally good sense. Furthermore, bringing these fragments into the main text would have necessitated the writing of transitional sentences. This the editors did not dare do. However the arrangement of the additions is the editors'.

Paragraph headings are also the editors'. They had recourse, wherever possible, to the short descriptive heading Adorno wrote on almost every manuscript page.

A quotation from Friedrich Schlegel was to have served as a motto for *Aesthetic Theory*. It reads: 'What is called philosophy of art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy or the art.' Adorno wanted to dedicate the book to Samuel Beckett.

We wish to thank Elfriede Olbrich, Adorno's long-time secretary, who was instrumental in deciphering the manuscript and preparing it for publication.

July 1970

Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann

NOTES

Chapter 1 Art, society, aesthetics

- 1 H. Kuhn, *Schriften zur Ästhetik* (Munich 1966), pp. 236ff.
- 2 Cf. T. W. Adorno, *Ohne Leitbild. Parva Aesthetica*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt 1968), pp. 168ff.
- 3 Presumably, Adorno is alluding here to the dynamic connotation of *Ursprung* (origin) as a 'primal leap'. – Tr.
- 4 Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 1, section 1, ch. 2 – Tr.
- 5 Scattered parts. – Tr.
- 6 René Laforgue, *The Defeat of Baudelaire; a Psychoanalytical Study of the Neurosis of Charles Baudelaire* (London 1932). – Tr.
- 7 I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York 1951), p. 39.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Chapter 2 Situation

- 1 Stefan George, *Werke*, ed. R. Böhringer (Munich and Düsseldorf 1958), vol. 1, p. 294 ('Eingang' zu 'Traumdunkel').
- 2 T. W. Adorno, *Prismen*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt 1969), p. 159 (English translation *Prisms*, London 1967).
- 3 'The world wants to be deceived.' – Tr.
- 4 Truth is concrete, said Hegel, and it is no accident that it was the artist Brecht who adopted the statement as a programmatic motto for his work. Hegel also characterized art as the consciousness of need. This insight, too, is infinitely more relevant than Hegel could have foreseen in his time. It is a protest against his own cultural pessimism and his negative judgment on art as a whole. It also gives substance to his barely secularized theological optimism and his expectation that freedom will be actualized.

First published in German in 1970
© Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1970
This translation, from the Second German edition (1972)

First published in 1984 by
Routledge & Kegan Paul plc
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Published in the USA by
Routledge & Kegan Paul Inc.
in association with Methuen Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Set in IBM Press Roman 10/12
by Hope Services, Abingdon, Oxon
and printed in Great Britain by
The Guernsey Press Co. Ltd,
Guernsey, Channel Islands.

Translation © Routledge & Kegan Paul 1984

Reprinted in 1984
First published as a paperback 1986

No part of this book may be reproduced in
any form without permission from the publisher,
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in criticism

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Adorno, Theodor W., 1903-1969

Aesthetic theory.
(The International library of phenomenology and
moral sciences)

Translation of: *Aesthetische Theorie.*

Includes bibliographical references and index.

I. Aesthetics. I. Title. II. Series.
B3199.A33A813 1982 111'.85 82-12195

ISBN 0-7102-0990-8

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