

# Aesthetic Theory

It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist. The forfeiture of what could be done spontaneously or unproblematically has not been compensated for by the open infinitude of new possibilities that reflection confronts. In many regards, expansion appears as contraction. The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure. Instead, the process that was unleashed consumed the categories in the name of that for which it was undertaken. More was constantly pulled into the vortex of the newly taboo; everywhere artists rejoiced less over the newly won realm of freedom than that they immediately sought once again after ostensible yet scarcely adequate order. For absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole. In it the place of art became uncertain. The autonomy it achieved, after having freed itself from cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity. As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was shattered. Drawn from the ideal of humanity, art's constituent elements withered by art's own law of movement. Yet art's autonomy remains irrevocable. All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function—of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty—are doomed. Indeed, art's autonomy shows signs of blindness. Blindness was ever an aspect of art; in the age of art's emancipation, however, this blindness has begun to predominate in spite of, if not because of, art's lost naïveté, which, as Hegel already perceived, art cannot undo. This binds art to a naïveté of a second order: the uncertainty over what purpose it serves. It is uncertain whether art is still possible; whether, with its complete emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions. This question is kindled by art's own past. Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity. Thus, however tragic they appear, artworks tend a priori toward affirmation. The clichés of art's reconciling glow enfolding the world are repugnant not only because they parody the

emphatic concept of art with its bourgeois version and class it among those Sunday institutions that provide solace. These clichés rub against the wound that art itself bears. As a result of its inevitable withdrawal from theology, from the unqualified claim to the truth of salvation, a secularization without which art would never have developed, art is condemned to provide the world as it exists with a consolation that—shorn of any hope of a world beyond—strengthens the spell of that from which the autonomy of art wants to free itself. The principle of autonomy is itself suspect of giving consolation: By undertaking to posit totality out of itself, whole and self-encompassing, this image is transferred to the world in which art exists and that engenders it. By virtue of its rejection of the empirical world—a rejection that inheres in art’s concept and thus is no mere *escape*, but a law immanent to it—art sanctions the primacy of reality. In a work dedicated to the praise of art, Helmut Kuhn warranted that art’s each and every work is a paean.<sup>1</sup> His thesis would be true, were it meant critically. In the face of the abnormality into which reality is developing, art’s inescapable affirmative essence has become insufferable. Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber. Yet art is not to be dismissed simply by its abstract negation. By attacking what seemed to be its foundation throughout the whole of its tradition, art has been qualitatively transformed; it itself becomes qualitatively other. It can do this because through the ages by means of its form, art has turned against the status quo and what merely exists just as much as it has come to its aid by giving form to its elements. Art can no more be reduced to the general formula of consolation than to its opposite.

The concept of art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements; it refuses definition. Its essence cannot be deduced from its origin as if the first work were a foundation on which everything that followed were constructed and would collapse if shaken. The belief that the first artworks are the highest and purest is warmed-over romanticism; with no less justification it could be claimed that the earliest artistic works are dull and impure in that they are not yet separated from magic, historical documentation, and such pragmatic aims as communicating over great distances by means of calls or horn sounds; the classical conception of art gladly made use of such arguments. In bluntly historical terms, the facts blur.<sup>2</sup> The effort to subsume the historical genesis of art ontologically under an ultimate motif would necessarily flounder in such disparate material that the theory would emerge empty-handed except for the obviously relevant insight that the arts will not fit into any gapless concept of art.<sup>3</sup> In those studies devoted to the aesthetic ἀρχαί, positivistic sampling of material and such speculation as is otherwise disdained by the sciences flourish wildly alongside each other; Bachofen is the best example of this. If, nevertheless, one wanted in the usual philosophical fashion categorically to distinguish the so-called question of origin—as that of art’s essence—from the question of art’s historical origin, that would amount only to turning the concept of origin arbitrarily against the usual sense of the word. The

definition of art is at every point indicated by what art once was, but it is legitimated only by what art became with regard to what it wants to, and perhaps can, become. Although art’s difference from the merely empirical is to be maintained, this difference is transformed in itself qualitatively; much that was not art—cultic works, for instance—has over the course of history metamorphosed into art; and much that was once art is that no longer. Posed from on high, the question whether something such as film is or is no longer art leads nowhere. Because art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain. The tension between what motivates art and art’s past circumscribes the so-called questions of aesthetic constitution. Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfill the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics. Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form. It exists only in relation to its other; it is the process that transpires with its other. Nietzsche’s late insight, honed in opposition to traditional philosophy, that even what has become can be true, is axiomatic for a reoriented aesthetic. The traditional view, which he demolished, is to be turned on its head: Truth exists exclusively as that which has become. What appears in the artwork as its own lawfulness is the late product of an inner-technical evolution as well as art’s position within progressive secularization; yet doubtless artworks became artworks only by negating their origin. They are not to be called to account for the disgrace of their ancient dependency on magic, their servitude to kings and amusement, as if this were art’s original sin, for art retroactively annihilated that from which it emerged. Dinner music is not inescapable for liberated music, nor was dinner music honest service from which autonomous art outrageously withdrew. The former’s miserable mechanical clattering is on no account improved because the overwhelming part of what now passes for art drowns out the echo of that clatter.

The Hegelian vision of the possible death of art accords with the fact that art is a product of history. That Hegel considered art transitory while all the same chalking it up to absolute spirit stands in harmony with the double character of his system, yet it prompts a thought that would never have occurred to him: that the substance of art, according to him its absoluteness, is not identical with art’s life and death. Rather, art’s substance could be its transitoriness. It is thinkable, and not merely an abstract possibility, that great music—a late development—was possible only during a limited phase of humanity. The revolt of art, teleologically posited in its “attitude to objectivity”<sup>4</sup> toward the historical world, has become a revolt against art; it is futile to prophesy whether art will survive it. What reactionary cultural pessimism once vociferated against cannot be suppressed by the critique of culture: that, as Hegel ruminated a hundred and fifty years ago, art may have entered the age of its demise.<sup>5</sup> Just as Rimbaud’s stunning dictum<sup>6</sup> one

hundred years ago divined definitively the history of new art, his later silence, his stepping into line as an employee, anticipated art's decline. It is outside the purview of aesthetics today whether it is to become art's necrology; yet it must not play at delivering graveside sermons, certifying the end, savoring the past, and abdicating in favor of one sort of barbarism that is no better than the culture that has earned barbarism as recompense for its own monstrosity. Whether art is abolished, perishes, or despairingly hangs on, it is not mandated that the content [*Gehalt*]<sup>7</sup> of past art perish. It could survive art in a society that had freed itself of the barbarism of its culture. Not just aesthetic forms but innumerable themes have already become extinct, adultery being one of them. Although adultery filled Victorian and early-twentieth-century novels, it is scarcely possible to empathize directly with this literature now, given the dissolution of the high-bourgeois nuclear family and the loosening of monogamy; distorted and impoverished, this literature lives on only in illustrated magazines. At the same time, however, what is authentic in *Madame Bovary* and was once embedded in its thematic content has long since outstripped this content and its deterioration. Obviously this is not grounds for historicophilosophical optimism over the invincibility of spirit. It is equally possible for the thematic material in its own demise to take with it that which is more than merely thematic. Art and artworks are perishable, not simply because by their heteronomy they are dependent, but because right into the smallest detail of their autonomy, which sanctions the socially determined splitting off of spirit by the division of labor, they are not only art but something foreign and opposed to it. Admixed with art's own concept is the ferment of its own abolition.

There is no aesthetic refraction without something being refracted; no imagination without something imagined. This holds true particularly in the case of art's immanent purposiveness.<sup>8</sup> In its relation to empirical reality art sublimates the latter's governing principle of *sese conservare* as the ideal of the self-identity of its works; as Schoenberg said, one paints a painting, not what it represents. Inherently every artwork desires identity with itself, an identity that in empirical reality is violently forced on all objects as identity with the subject and thus travestied. Aesthetic identity seeks to aid the nonidentical, which in reality is repressed by reality's compulsion to identity. Only by virtue of separation from empirical reality, which sanctions art to model the relation of the whole and the part according to the work's own need, does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence. Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience. Although the demarcation line between art and the empirical must not be effaced, and least of all by the glorification of the artist, artworks nevertheless have a life *sui generis*. This life is not just their external fate. Important artworks constantly divulge new layers; they age, grow cold, and die. It is a tautology to point out that as humanly manufactured artifacts they do not live as do people. But the emphasis on the artifactual element

in art concerns less the fact that it is manufactured than its own inner constitution, regardless of how it came to be. Artworks are alive in that they speak in a fashion that is denied to natural objects and the subjects who make them. They speak by virtue of the communication of everything particular in them. Thus they come into contrast with the arbitrariness of what simply exists. Yet it is precisely as artifacts, as products of social labor, that they also communicate with the empirical experience that they reject and from which they draw their content [*Inhalt*]. Art negates the categorial determinations stamped on the empirical world and yet harbors what is empirically existing in its own substance. If art opposes the empirical through the element of form—and the mediation of form and content is not to be grasped without their differentiation—the mediation is to be sought in the recognition of aesthetic form as sedimented content. What are taken to be the purest forms (e.g., traditional musical forms) can be traced back even in the smallest idiomatic detail to content such as dance. In many instances ornaments in the visual arts were once primarily cultic symbols. Tracing aesthetic forms back to contents, such as the Warburg Institute undertook to do by following the afterlife of classical antiquity, deserves to be more broadly undertaken. The communication of artworks with what is external to them, with the world from which they blissfully or unhappily seal themselves off, occurs through noncommunication; precisely thereby they prove themselves refracted. It is easy to imagine that art's autonomous realm has nothing in common with the external world other than borrowed elements that have entered into a fully changed context. Nevertheless, there is no contesting the cliché of which cultural history is so fond, that the development of artistic processes, usually classed under the heading of style, corresponds to social development. Even the most sublime artwork takes up a determinate attitude to empirical reality by stepping outside of the constraining spell it casts, not once and for all, but rather ever and again, concretely, unconsciously polemical toward this spell at each historical moment. That artworks as windowless monads “represent” what they themselves are not can scarcely be understood except in that their own dynamic, their immanent historicity as a dialectic of nature and its domination, not only is of the same essence as the dialectic external to them but resembles it without imitating it. The aesthetic force of production is the same as that of productive labor and has the same teleology; and what may be called aesthetic relations of production—all that in which the productive force is embedded and in which it is active—are sedimentations or imprints of social relations of production. Art's double character as both autonomous and *fait social* is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy. It is by virtue of this relation to the empirical that artworks recuperate, neutralized, what once was literally and directly experienced in life and what was expelled by spirit. Artworks participate in enlightenment because they do not lie: They do not feign the literalness of what speaks out of them. They are real as answers to the puzzle externally posed to them. Their own tension is binding in relation to the tension external to them.

The basic levels of experience that motivate art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil. The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society. The complex of tensions in artworks crystallizes undisturbed in these problems of form and through emancipation from the external world's factual facade converges with the real essence. Art, *χωρίς* from the empirically existing, takes up a position to it in accord with Hegel's argument against Kant: The moment a limit is posited, it is overstepped and that against which the limit was established is absorbed. Only this, not moralizing, is the critique of the principle of *l'art pour l'art*, which by abstract negation posits the *χωρισμός* of art as absolute. The freedom of artworks, in which their self-consciousness glories and without which these works would not exist, is the ruse of art's own reason. Each and every one of their elements binds them to that over which, for their happiness, they must soar and back into which at every moment they threaten once again to tumble. In their relation to empirical reality, artworks recall the theologumenon that in the redeemed world everything would be as it is and yet wholly other. There is no mistaking the analogy with the tendency of the profane to secularize the realm of the sacred to the point that only as secularized does the latter endure; the realm of the sacred is objectified, effectively staked off, because its own element of untruth at once awaits secularization and through conjuration wards off the secular. Accordingly, the pure concept of art could not define the fixed circumference of a sphere that has been secured once and for all; rather, its closure is achieved only in an intermittent and fragile balance that is more than just comparable to the psychological balance between ego and id. The act of repulsion must be constantly renewed. Every artwork is an instant; every successful work is a cessation, a suspended moment of the process, as which it reveals itself to the unwavering eye. If artworks are answers to their own questions, they themselves thereby truly become questions. The tendency to perceive art either in extra-aesthetic or preaesthetic fashion, which to this day is undiminished by an obviously failed education, is not only a barbaric residue or a danger of regressive consciousness. Something in art calls for this response. Art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived. Only when art's other is sensed as a primary layer in the experience of art does it become possible to sublimate this layer, to dissolve the thematic bonds, without the autonomy of the artwork becoming a matter of indifference. Art is autonomous and it is not; without what is heterogeneous to it, its autonomy eludes it. The great epics, which have survived even their own oblivion, were in their own age intermingled with historical and geographical reportage; Valéry the artist took note of how much of their material had yet to be recast by the formal requirements of the Homeric, pagan-Germanic, and Christian epics, without this reducing their rank vis-à-vis drossless works. Likewise tragedy, which may have been the origin of the idea of aesthetic autonomy, was an afterimage of cultic acts that were intended to have

real effects. The history of art as that of its progressive autonomy never succeeded in extirpating this element, and not just because the bonds were too strong. At the height of its form, in the nineteenth century, the realistic novel had something of what the theory of so-called socialist realism rationally plotted for its debasement: reportage, the anticipation of what social science would later ascertain. The fanatic linguistic perfection of *Madame Bovary* is probably a symptom of precisely this contrary element; the unity of both, of reportage and linguistic perfectionism, accounts for the book's unfaded actuality. In artworks, the criterion of success is twofold: whether they succeed in integrating thematic strata and details into their immanent law of form and in this integration at the same time maintain what resists it and the fissures that occur in the process of integration. Integration as such does not assure quality; in the history of art, integration and quality have often diverged. For no single select category, not even the aesthetically central concept of the law of form, names the essence of art and suffices to judge its products. Essential to art are defining characteristics that contradict its fixed art-philosophical concept. Hegel's content-aesthetics [*Inhaltsästhetik*] recognized that element of otherness immanent to art and thus superseded formal aesthetics, which apparently operates with a so much purer concept of art and of course liberated historical developments such as nonrepresentational painting that are blocked by Hegel's and Kierkegaard's content-aesthetics. At the same time, however, Hegel's idealist dialectic, which conceives form as content, regresses to a crude, preaesthetic level. It confuses the representational or discursive treatment of thematic material with the otherness that is constitutive of art. Hegel transgresses against his own dialectical conception of aesthetics, with consequences he did not foresee; he in effect helped transform art into an ideology of domination. Conversely, what is unreal and nonexistent in art is not independent of reality. It is not arbitrarily posited, not invented, as is commonly thought; rather, it is structured by proportions between what exists, proportions that are themselves defined by what exists, its deficiency, distress, and contradictoriness as well as its potentialities; even in these proportions real contexts resonate. Art is related to its other as is a magnet to a field of iron filings. Not only art's elements, but their constellation as well, that which is specifically aesthetic and to which its spirit is usually chalked up, refer back to its other. The identity of the artwork with existing reality is also that of the work's gravitational force, which gathers around itself its *membra disjecta*, traces of the existing. The artwork is related to the world by the principle that contrasts it with the world, and that is the same principle by which spirit organized the world. The synthesis achieved by means of the artwork is not simply forced on its elements; rather, it recapitulates that in which these elements communicate with one another; thus the synthesis is itself a product of otherness. Indeed, synthesis has its foundation in the spirit-distant material dimension of works, in that in which synthesis is active. This unites the aesthetic element of form with noncoercion. By its difference from empirical reality the artwork necessarily constitutes itself in

relation to what it is not, and to what makes it an artwork in the first place. The insistence on the nonintentional in art—which is apparent in art's sympathy with its lower manifestations beginning at a specific historical point with Wedekind's derision of the "art-artist," with Apollinaire, and indeed with the beginnings of cubism—points up art's unconscious self-consciousness in its participation in what is contrary to it; this self-consciousness motivated art's culture-critical turn that cast off the illusion of its purely spiritual being.

Art is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it. The constitution of art's sphere corresponds to the constitution of an inward space of men as the space of their representation: A priori the constitution of this space participates in sublimation. It is therefore plausible to conceive of developing the definition of art out of a theory of psychic life. Skepticism toward anthropological theories of human invariants recommends psychoanalytic theory. But this theory is more productive psychologically than aesthetically. For psychoanalysis considers artworks to be essentially unconscious projections of those who have produced them, and, preoccupied with the hermeneutics of thematic material, it forgets the categories of form and, so to speak, transfers the pedantry of sensitive doctors to the most inappropriate objects, such as Leonardo da Vinci or Baudelaire. The narrow-mindedness, in spite of all the emphasis on sex, is revealed by the fact that as a result of these studies, which are often offshoots of the biographical fad, artists whose work gave uncensored shape to the negativity of life are dismissed as neurotics. Laforgue's book<sup>9</sup> actually in all seriousness accuses Baudelaire of having suffered from a mother complex. The question is never once broached whether a psychically sound Baudelaire would have been able to write *The Flowers of Evil*, not to mention whether the poems turned out worse because of the neurosis. Psychological normalcy is outrageously established as the criterion even, as in Baudelaire, where aesthetic quality is bluntly predicated on the absence of *mens sana*. According to the tone of psychoanalytic monographs, art should deal affirmatively with the negativity of experience. The negative element is held to be nothing more than the mark of that process of repression that obviously goes into the artwork. For psychoanalysis, artworks are daydreams; it confuses them with documents and displaces them into the mind of a dreamer, while on the other hand, as compensation for the exclusion of the extramental sphere, it reduces artworks to crude thematic material, falling strangely short of Freud's own theory of the "dreamwork." As with all positivists, the fictional element in artworks is vastly overestimated by the presumed analogy with the dream. In the process of production, what is projected is only one element in the artist's relation to the artwork and hardly the definitive one; idiom and material have their own importance, as does, above all, the product itself; this rarely if ever occurs to the analysts. The psychoanalytic thesis, for instance, that music is a defense against the threat of paranoia, does indeed for the most part hold true clinically, yet it says nothing about the quality and content of a particular composition. The psycho-

analytic theory of art is superior to idealist aesthetics in that it brings to light what is internal to art and not itself artistic. It helps free art from the spell of absolute spirit. Whereas vulgar idealism, rancorously opposed to knowledge of the artwork and especially knowledge of its entwinement with instinct, would like to quarantine art in a putatively higher sphere, psychoanalysis works in the opposite direction, in the spirit of enlightenment. Where it deciphers the social character that speaks from a work and in which on many occasions the character of its author is manifest, psychoanalysis furnishes the concrete mediating links between the structure of artworks and the social structure. But psychoanalysis too casts a spell related to idealism, that of an absolutely subjective sign system denoting subjective instinctual impulses. It unlocks phenomena, but falls short of the phenomenon of art. Psychoanalysis treats artworks as nothing but facts, yet it neglects their own objectivity, their inner consistency, their level of form, their critical impulse, their relation to nonpsychical reality, and, finally, their idea of truth. When a painter, obeying the pact of total frankness between analyst and patient, mocked the bad Viennese engravings that defaced his walls, she was informed by the analyst that this was nothing but aggression on her part. Artworks are incomparably less a copy and possession of the artist than a doctor who knows the artist exclusively from the couch can imagine. Only dilettantes reduce everything in art to the unconscious, repeating clichés. In artistic production, unconscious forces are one sort of impulse, material among many others. They enter the work mediated by the law of form; if this were not the case, the actual subject portrayed by a work would be nothing but a copy. Artworks are not *Thematic Apperception Tests* of their makers. Part of the responsibility for this philistinism is the devotion of psychoanalysis to the reality principle: Whatever refuses to obey this principle is always merely "escape"; adaptation to reality becomes the *summum bonum*. Yet reality provides too many legitimate reasons for fleeing it for the impulse to be met by the indignation of an ideology sworn to harmony; on psychological grounds alone, art is more legitimate than psychology acknowledges. True, imagination is escape, but not exclusively so: What transcends the reality principle toward something superior is always also part of what is beneath it; to point a taunting finger at it is malicious. The image of the artist, as one of the tolerated, integrated as a neurotic in a society sworn to the division of labor, is distorted. Among artists of the highest rank, such as Beethoven or Rembrandt, the sharpest sense of reality was joined with estrangement from reality; this, truly, would be a worthwhile object for the psychology of art. It would need to decipher the artwork not just as being like the artist but as being unlike as well, as labor on a reality resisting the artist. If art has psychoanalytic roots, then they are the roots of fantasy in the fantasy of omnipotence. This fantasy includes the wish to bring about a better world. This frees the total dialectic, whereas the view of art as a merely subjective language of the unconscious does not even touch it.

Kant's aesthetics is the antithesis of Freud's theory of art as wish fulfillment. Dis-

interested liking is the first element of the judgment of taste in the "Analytic of the Beautiful."<sup>10</sup> There interest is termed "the liking that we combine with the representation of the existence of an object."<sup>11</sup> It is not clear, however, if what is meant by the "representation of the existence of an object" is its content, the thematic material in the sense of the object treated in the work, or the artwork itself; the pretty nude model or the sweet resonance of a musical tone can be kitsch or it can be an integral element of artistic quality. The accent on "representation" is a consequence of Kant's subjectivistic approach, which in accord with the rationalistic tradition, notably that of Moses Mendelssohn, tacitly seeks aesthetic quality in the effect the artwork has on the observer. What is revolutionary in the *Critique of Judgment* is that without leaving the circle of the older effect-aesthetics Kant at the same time restricted it through immanent criticism; this is in keeping with the whole of his subjectivism, which plays a significant part in his objective effort to save objectivity through the analysis of subjective elements. Disinterestedness sets itself at a distance from the immediate effect that liking seeks to conserve, and this initiates the fragmentation of the supremacy of liking. For, once shorn of what Kant calls interest, satisfaction becomes so indeterminate that it no longer serves to define beauty. The doctrine of disinterested satisfaction is impoverished vis-à-vis the aesthetic; it reduces the phenomenon either to formal beauty, which when isolated is highly dubious, or to the so-called sublime natural object. The sublimation of the work to absolute form neglects the spirit of the work in the interest of which sublimation was undertaken in the first place. This is honestly and involuntarily attested by Kant's strained footnote,<sup>12</sup> in which he asserts that a judgment of an object of liking may indeed be disinterested, yet interesting; that is, it may produce interest even when it is not based on it. Kant divides aesthetic feeling—and thus, in accord with the whole of his model, art itself—from the power of desire, to which the "representation of the existence of an object" refers; the liking of such a representation "always has reference to the power of desire."<sup>13</sup> Kant was the first to achieve the insight, never since forgotten, that aesthetic comportment is free from immediate desire; he snatched art away from that avaricious philistinism that always wants to touch it and taste it. Nevertheless, the Kantian motif is not altogether alien to psychoanalytic art theory: Even for Freud artworks are not immediate wish fulfillments but transform unsatisfied libido into a socially productive achievement, whereby the social value of art is simply assumed, with uncritical respect for art's public reputation. Although Kant emphasizes the difference between art and the power of desire—and thereby between art and empirical reality—much more energetically than does Freud, he does not simply idealize art: The separation of the aesthetic sphere from the empirical constitutes art. Yet Kant transcendently arrested this constitution, which is a historical process, and simplistically equated it with the essence of the artistic, unconcerned that the subjective, instinctual components of art return metamorphosed even in art's maturest form, which negates them. The dynamic character of the artistic is much more

fully grasped by Freud's theory of sublimation. But for this Freud clearly had to pay no smaller a price than did Kant. If in the latter's case, in spite of his preference for sensual intuition, the spiritual essence of the artwork originates in the distinction between aesthetic and practical, appetitive behavior, Freud's adaptation of the aesthetic to the theory of the instincts seems to seal itself off from art's spiritual essence; for Freud, artworks are indeed, even though sublimated, little more than plenipotentiaries of sensual impulses, which they at best make unrecognizable through a sort of dreamwork. The confrontation of these two heterogeneous thinkers—Kant not only rejected philosophical psychologism but in his old age increasingly rejected all psychology—is nevertheless permitted by a commonality that outweighs the apparently absolute difference between the Kantian construction of the transcendental subject, on the one hand, and the Freudian recourse to the empirically psychological on the other: Both are in principle subjectively oriented by the power of desire, whether it is interpreted negatively or positively. For both, the artwork exists only in relation to its observer or maker. By a mechanism to which his moral philosophy is subordinate, even Kant is compelled to consider the existing individual, the ontic element, more than is compatible with the idea of the transcendental subject. There is no liking without a living person who would enjoy it. Though it is never made explicit, the *Critique of Judgment* is as a whole devoted to the analysis of *constituta*. Thus what was planned as a bridge between theoretical and practical pure reason is vis-à-vis both an ἄλλο γένος. Indeed, the taboo on art—and so far as art is defined it obeys a taboo, for definitions are rational taboos—forbids that one take an animalistic stance toward the object, that is, that one dominate it by physically devouring it. But the power of the taboo corresponds to the power that it prohibits. There is no art that does not contain in itself as an element, negated, what it repulses. If it is more than mere indifference, the Kantian "without interest" must be shadowed by the wildest interest, and there is much to be said for the idea that the dignity of artworks depends on the intensity of the interest from which they are wrested. Kant denies this in favor of a concept of freedom that castigates as heteronomous whatever is not born exclusively of the subject. His theory of art is distorted by the insufficiency of the doctrine of practical reason. The idea of something beautiful, which possesses or has acquired some degree of autonomy in the face of the sovereign I, would, given the tenor of his philosophy, be disparaged as wandering off into intelligible realms. But along with that from which art antithetically originated, art is shorn of all content, and in its place he posits something as formal as aesthetic satisfaction. For Kant, aesthetics becomes paradoxically a castrated hedonism, desire without desire. An equal injustice is done both to artistic experience, in which liking is by no means the whole of it but plays a subordinate role, and to sensual interest, the suppressed and unsatisfied needs that resonate in their aesthetic negation and make artworks more than empty patterns. Aesthetic disinterestedness has broadened interest beyond particularity. The interest in the aesthetic

totality wanted to be, objectively, an interest in a correct organization of the whole. It aims not at the fulfillment of the particular but rather at unbound possibility, though that would be no possibility at all without the presupposition of the fulfillment of the particular. Correlative to the weakness of Kant's aesthetics, Freud's is much more idealistic than it suspects. When artworks are translated purely into psychical immanence, they are deprived of their antithetic stance to the not-I, which remains unchallenged by the thorniness of artworks. They are exhausted in the psychical performance of gaining mastery over instinctual renunciation and, ultimately, in the achievement of conformity. The psychologism of aesthetic interpretation easily agrees with the philistine view of the artwork as harmoniously quieting antagonisms, a dream image of a better life, unconcerned with the misery from which this image is wrested. The conformist psychoanalytic endorsement of the prevailing view of the artwork as a well-meaning cultural commodity corresponds to an aesthetic hedonism that banishes art's negativity to the instinctual conflicts of its genesis and suppresses any negativity in the finished work. If successful sublimation and integration are made the end-all and be-all of the artwork, it loses the force by which it exceeds the given, which it renounces by its mere existence. The moment, however, the artwork comports itself by retaining the negativity of reality and taking a position to it, the concept of disinterestedness is also modified. Contrary to the Kantian and Freudian interpretation of art, artworks imply in themselves a relation between interest and its renunciation. Even the contemplative attitude to artworks, wrested from objects of action, is felt as the announcement of an immediate praxis and—to this extent itself practical—as a refusal to play along. Only artworks that are to be sensed as a form of comportment have a *raison d'être*. Art is not only the plenipotentiary of a better praxis than that which has to date predominated, but is equally the critique of praxis as the rule of brutal self-preservation at the heart of the status quo and in its service. It gives the lie to production for production's sake and opts for a form of praxis beyond the spell of labor. Art's *promesse du bonheur* means not only that hitherto praxis has blocked happiness but that happiness is beyond praxis. The measure of the chasm separating praxis from happiness is taken by the force of negativity in the artwork. Certainly Kafka does not awaken the power of desire. Yet the real fear triggered by prose works like *Metamorphosis* or *The Penal Colony*, that shock of revulsion and disgust that shakes the physis, has, as defense, more to do with desire than with the old disinterestedness canceled by Kafka and what followed him. As a response, disinterestedness would be crudely inadequate to his writings. Ultimately disinterestedness debases art to what Hegel mocked, a pleasant or useful plaything of Horace's *Ars Poetica*. It is from this that the aesthetics of the idealist age, contemporaneously with art itself, freed itself. Only once it is done with tasteful savoring does artistic experience become autonomous. The route to aesthetic autonomy proceeds by way of disinterestedness; the emancipation of art from cuisine or pornography is irrevocable. Yet art does not come

to rest in disinterestedness. For disinterestedness immanently reproduces—and transforms—interest. In the false world all ἡδονή is false. For the sake of happiness, happiness is renounced. It is thus that desire survives in art. Pleasure masquerades beyond recognition in the Kantian disinterestedness. What popular consciousness and a complaisant aesthetics regard as the taking pleasure in art, modeled on real enjoyment, probably does not exist. The empirical subject has only a limited and modified part in artistic experience *tel quel*, and this part may well be diminished the higher the work's rank. Whoever concretely enjoys artworks is a philistine; he is convicted by expressions like “a feast for the ears.” Yet if the last traces of pleasure were extirpated, the question of what artworks are for would be an embarrassment. Actually, the more they are understood, the less they are enjoyed. Formerly, even the traditional attitude to the artwork, if it was to be absolutely relevant to the work, was that of admiration that the works exist as they do in themselves and not for the sake of the observer. What opened up to, and overpowered, the beholder was their truth, which as in works of Kafka's type outweighs every other element. They were not a higher order of amusement. The relation to art was not that of its physical devouring; on the contrary, the beholder disappeared into the material; this is even more so in modern works that shoot toward the viewer as on occasion a locomotive does in a film. Ask a musician if the music is a pleasure, the reply is likely to be—as in the American joke of the grinning cellist under Toscanini—“*I just hate music.*” For him who has a genuine relation to art, in which he himself vanishes, art is not an object; deprivation of art would be unbearable for him, yet he does not consider individual works sources of joy. Incontestably, no one would devote himself to art without—as the bourgeois put it—getting something out of it; yet this is not true in the sense that a balance sheet could be drawn up: “heard the Ninth Symphony tonight, enjoyed myself so and so much” even though such feeble-mindedness has by now established itself as common sense. The bourgeois want art voluptuous and life ascetic; the reverse would be better. Reified consciousness provides an ersatz for the sensual immediacy of which it deprives people in a sphere that is not its abode. While the artwork's sensual appeal seemingly brings it close to the consumer, it is alienated from him by being a commodity that he possesses and the loss of which he must constantly fear. The false relation to art is akin to anxiety over possession. The fetishistic idea of the artwork as property that can be possessed and destroyed by reflection has its exact correlative in the idea of exploitable property within the psychological economy of the self. If according to its own concept art has become what it is, this is no less the case with its classification as a source of pleasure; indeed, as components of ritual praxis the magical and animistic predecessors of art were not autonomous; yet precisely because they were sacred they were not objects of enjoyment. The spiritualization of art incited the rancor of the excluded and spawned consumer art as a genre, while conversely antipathy toward consumer art compelled artists to ever more reckless spiritualization. No naked Greek

sculpture was a *pin-up*. The affinity of the modern for the distant past and the exotic is explicable on the same grounds: Artists were drawn by the abstraction from natural objects as desirable; incidentally, in the construction of "symbolic art" Hegel did not overlook the unsensuous element of the archaic. The element of pleasure in art, a protest against the universally mediated commodity character, is in its own fashion mediable: Whoever disappears into the artwork thereby gains dispensation from the impoverishment of a life that is always too little. This pleasure may mount to an ecstasy for which the meager concept of enjoyment is hardly adequate, other than to produce disgust for enjoying anything. It is striking, incidentally, that an aesthetic that constantly insists on subjective feeling as the basis of all beauty never seriously analyzed this feeling. Almost without exception its descriptions were banalistic, perhaps because from the beginning the subjective approach made it impossible to recognize that something compelling can be grasped of aesthetic experience only on the basis of a relation to the aesthetic object, not by recurring to the fun of the art lover. The concept of artistic enjoyment was a bad compromise between the social and the socially critical essence of the artwork. If art is useless for the business of self-preservation—bourgeois society never quite forgives that—it should at least demonstrate a sort of use-value modeled on sensual pleasure. This distorts art as well as the physical fulfillment that art's aesthetic representatives do not dispense. That a person who is incapable of sensual differentiation—who cannot distinguish a beautiful from a flat sound, a brilliant from a dull color—is hardly capable of artistic experience, is hypostatized. Aesthetic experience does indeed benefit from an intensified sensual differentiation as a medium of giving form, yet the pleasure in this is always indirect. The importance of the sensual in art has varied; after an age of asceticism pleasure becomes an organ of liberation and vivaciousness, as it did in the Renaissance and then again in the anti-Victorian impulse of impressionism; at other moments creatural sadness has borne witness to a metaphysical content by erotic excitement permeating the forms. Yet however powerful, historically, the force of pleasure to return may be, whenever it appears in art literally, undefracted, it has an infantile quality. Only in memory and longing, not as a copy or as an immediate effect, is pleasure absorbed by art. Ultimately, aversion to the crudely sensual alienates even those periods in which pleasure and form could still communicate in a more direct fashion; this not least of all may have motivated the rejection of impressionism.

Underlying the element of truth in aesthetic hedonism is the fact that in art the means and the ends are not identical. In their dialectic, the former constantly asserts a certain, and indeed mediated, independence. Through the element of sensuous satisfaction the work's *sine qua non*, its appearance, is constituted. As Alban Berg said, it is a prosaic matter to make sure that the work shows no nails sticking out and that the glue does not stink; and in many of Mozart's compositions the delicacy of expression evokes the sweetness of the human voice. In

important artworks the sensuous illuminated by its art shines forth as spiritual just as the abstract detail, however indifferent to appearance it may be, gains sensuous luster from the spirit of the work. Sometimes by virtue of their differentiated formal language, artworks that are developed and articulated in themselves play over, secondarily, into the sensuously pleasing. Even in its equivalents in the visual arts, dissonance, the seal of everything modern, gives access to the alluringly sensuous by transfiguring it into its antithesis, pain: an aesthetic archetype of ambivalence. The source of the immense importance of all dissonance for new art since Baudelaire and *Tristan*—veritably an invariant of the modern—is that the immanent play of forces in the artwork converges with external reality: Its power over the subject intensifies in parallel with the increasing autonomy of the work. Dissonance elicits from within the work that which vulgar sociology calls its social alienation. In the meantime, of course, artworks have set a taboo even on spiritually mediated suavity as being too similar to its vulgar form. This development may well lead to a sharpening of the taboo on the sensual, although it is sometimes hard to distinguish to what extent this taboo is grounded in the law of form and to what extent simply in the failure of craft; a question, incidentally, that like many of its ilk becomes a fruitless topic of aesthetic debate. The taboo on the sensual ultimately encroaches on the opposite of pleasure because, even as the remotest echo, pleasure is sensed in its specific negation. For this aesthetic sensorium dissonance bears all too closely on its contrary, reconciliation; it rebuffs the semblance of the human as an ideology of the inhuman and prefers to join forces with reified consciousness. Dissonance congeals into an indifferent material; indeed, it becomes a new form of immediacy, without any memory trace of what it developed out of, and therefore gutted and anonymous. For a society in which art no longer has a place and which is pathological in all its reactions to it, art fragments on one hand into a reified, hardened cultural possession and on the other into a source of pleasure that the customer pockets and that for the most part has little to do with the object itself. Subjective pleasure in the artwork would approximate a state of release from the empirical as from the totality of heteronomous. Schopenhauer may have been the first to realize this. The happiness gained from artworks is that of having suddenly escaped, not a morsel of that from which art escaped; it is accidental and less essential to art than the happiness in its knowledge; the concept of aesthetic pleasure as constitutive of art is to be superseded. If in keeping with Hegel's insight all feeling related to an aesthetic object has an accidental aspect, usually that of psychological projection, then what the work demands from its beholder is knowledge, and indeed, knowledge that does justice to it: The work wants its truth and untruth to be grasped. Aesthetic hedonism is to be confronted with the passage from Kant's doctrine of the sublime, which he timidly excluded from art: Happiness in artworks would be the feeling they instill of standing firm. This holds true for the aesthetic sphere as a whole more than for any particular work.

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# Aesthetic Theory

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Theodor W. Adorno

Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, Editors

Newly translated, edited, and with a translator's introduction by Robert Hullot-Kentor

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