

EVENTAL AESTHETICS  
RETROSPECTIVE 1

# Evental Aesthetics

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RETROSPECTIVE 1

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# RETROSPECTIVE 1



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# Retrospective 1



Mandy-Suzanne Wong  
and Heather Kettenis

What's so monumental about the number ten? Early 2015 saw the publication of this journal's tenth issue: why is this cause for celebration?

Surely it is not because EA's publications would now fill up our hands – one for each finger, so to speak – because this online publication demands very little in the way of physical space. And yet it seems to us that tenth anniversaries are celebrated everywhere for precisely that reason: the number ten belongs to that part of our bodies which we use to make things and make things happen. When the number ten occurs in relation to things we have accomplished, things that we have caused or helped to occur, those things and their number resonate within us.

Things that occur are events. Events are affects: they are things that have effects, that make a difference; and their impact, however small, is felt somehow. Events *happen*.

Therefore tenth anniversaries are aesthetic experiences and expressions of the evental.



Our way of conducting this anniversary is by inviting our readers to look back at what occurred in those first ten issues. After all, the word “anniversary” is really a misnomer in this context: it's not ten years but ten issues that are of interest here. So again, why celebrate?

The following articles speak for themselves on that point. They represent the kind of academic work that appears in all our issues and in our opinion deserves to be celebrated. For an article, being celebrated means being read and thoughtfully considered – being reread. For editors, authors, scholars, and philosophers such as ourselves and our readers, celebrating and being celebrated helps to remind us of exactly what we do, why we do it, and why it is important.

With this retrospective, we hope to encourage EA's dedicated readers to revisit the evocative thoughts and writings that have made this publication happen, thereby instigating more thinking, additional discussion, and inspired creativity among our audiences. We hope this retrospective will give new and prospective readers a sense of what this journal does. We hope it will encourage all readers to revisit – or peruse for the first time – the entire back-catalogue of *Evental Aesthetics*, not only the selection offered here.



Why this selection? How did we decide on the contents of the retrospective? Like many aesthetic decisions, this one bears strong traces of the arbitrary. We chose from as many different back-issues as we felt capable of working with in the time we allotted to the retrospective, for which Heather Kettenis designed a completely new layout. We asked our Editorial Board to nominate memorable pieces that somehow reflect EA's uniqueness. We chose a range of topics and perspectives; varied tones, voices, and philosophical traditions; and authors from diverse disciplines and various points in their careers. Our goal: to showcase the heterogeneity of aesthetic thinking.

We also divided the collection between articles and Collisions. In EA, articles run from 4,000 to 10,000 words and delve as deeply as possible into some philosophically pertinent aesthetic question, usually in some sort of academic style. Collisions, which run up to 2,500 words and often address particular aesthetic experiences or practices, pose specific aesthetic questions but with questioning itself—philosophical, analytical, critical, and creative—as the goal. In a Collision the idea is not to come to a conclusion, as one usually does in an article, but to spark open-ended discussions, often in unexpected styles.


The Collision—a form of writing that is also a provocative encounter between an author and an aesthetic experience, practice, or question—is an invention of EA's editors. We are proud of it. To our surprise and delight, its popularity and the variety of spins that our authors place on it persist in burgeoning. In recent years, we learned that some philosophy instructors have begun using Collisions as teaching tools, assigning their students to develop their writing and thinking by practicing the Collision form. The pieces in this collection should convey a sense of the Collision's multifarious potential. But again, a mere collection barely scratches the surface of what EA's authors have realized and discovered in the Collision form.



As for the future of *Evental Aesthetics*, we aim to continue publishing peer-reviewed philosophy and scholarship along the lines of a traditional journal. We also intend EA to remain online and open-access, free of the costs and strictures of printing. To us, “open-access” means *free of charge to authors and readers*: we have not and never will charge our contributors to publish their work in EA or assess subscription fees to readers. Instead, the journal is supported by its Editors-in-Chief. To offset the dubious, unreliable, and unscholarly

reputation which some open-access journals have incurred by charging publication fees to would-be authors, we are determined to achieve ever-higher standards of thought, scholarship, authorship, and editorship. We are committed to open-access publishing because we believe that all scholarship is in a sense independent scholarship, for each project is born of some spark within an independent mind. We do not believe that good research and solid thinking should be available only to those at universities and those who can afford to access “pay-per-view” databases.

That said, we hope to continue to think somewhat beyond the usual academic forms. We will continue to seek high-level writing and thinking that suits traditional models – alongside projects that challenge and distort those models. As an example of the latter, we’re now calling for proposals for Collision-style engagements with academic books, taking the concept of the book review beyond summary and evaluation to questioning and discussion. With this and other such ideas, we hope to expand the possibilities of written questioning without eschewing the clarity, relevance, self-evident quality, and professionalism that is vital to academic audiences.

We would like to thank all our editorial colleagues, all our contributors, and all the readers – wherever you are – who have followed this journal’s progress since its inception. This retrospective is for you. 

## Evental Aesthetics: The First Ten Issues

[Aesthetics After Hegel](#)

[The Missed](#)

[Art and the City](#)

[Premodern Aesthetics](#)

[Animals and Aesthetics](#)

[Aesthetic Histories](#)

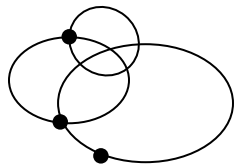
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# (Rescuing) Hegel's Magical Thinking



Angela Hume



Rescuing Hegel — and only rescue, not revival, is appropriate for him — means facing up to his philosophy where it is most painful and wresting truth from it where its untruth is obvious.

✧ Theodor W. Adorno,  
“The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy”

Two years after the end of the Second World War, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno published their landmark essay “The Concept of Enlightenment” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, lambasting Enlightenment thinking and declaring “the wholly enlightened earth [to be] radiant with triumphant calamity.”<sup>1</sup> For Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment’s program was “the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to...overthrow fantasy with knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> They argue that such power structures as the scientific method, technology, and the commodity are products of enlightened thinking, a thinking that — and this point is key for Horkheimer and Adorno — can be traced, in some form or another, all the way back to the early rationalizations inherent in mythical visions.<sup>3</sup> They elaborate: “the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself.”<sup>4</sup> In other words: Enlightenment claims it seeks to destroy myth but in doing so via acts of exposition and repetition, acts that “acknowledge nothing new under the sun,” submits ever more deeply to the logic of myth.<sup>5</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno note how early rationalizing myths, “which sought to report, to name, to tell of origins...[and also] to narrate, record, explain,” displaced the earlier spirits and demons, the “incantatory practices of the magician.”<sup>6</sup> In Enlightenment, deities were, and are, no longer identical with the elements; “being is split between *logos*...and the mass of things and creatures in the external world.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately: “the world is made subject to man.”<sup>8</sup> With the end of magic — which involved relationships between spirits, demons, deities, and the elements — and the beginning of myth came manipulation and mastery of nature; the end of fluidity and multiplicity of identity; and the end of specificity, mimesis, and representation.<sup>9</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno explain:

Magic implies specific representation. What is done to the spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person; the sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god. The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic. But...the uniqueness of the chosen victim which coincides with its representative status, distinguishes it radically, makes it non-exchangeable even in the exchange. [Enlightenment] science puts an end to this. In it there is no specific representation: something which is a sacrificial animal cannot be a god. Representation gives way to universal fungibility. An atom is smashed not as a representative but as a specimen of matter, and the rabbit suffering the torment of the laboratory is seen not as a representative but, mistakenly, as a mere exemplar...The manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object...Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object.<sup>10</sup>

With reference to this key passage, I want to stress the following point: in the eyes of Horkheimer and Adorno, humanity's turn away from a magical sensibility and toward a mythical (rational) sensibility cannot be demarcated with a clean line. There was no single moment at which enchantment dissipated and disenchantment set in. Case in point: even "the substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic." Just as mythology always already contained enlightened thinking, magical practices, in some way, always already contained mythical thinking. What I am most interested in here, however, is the key distinction Horkheimer and Adorno do emphatically make between the magical and the mythical/enlightened: with the end of what I am calling "magical thinking" and the beginning of enlightened thinking came chasm and disparity between subject and object — the atom is rendered "specimen," the rabbit is seen as "exemplar" — and, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the onset of barbarism.

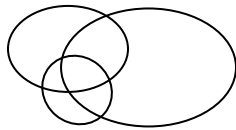
Adorno, in a series of essays published in 1963, heralds Hegel as the prophet of precisely this problematic subject-object disparity. And in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel himself speaks directly to the danger of failed recognition — failed subject-object realization — between two figures, a failure marked by "trial by death," or a duel to the death:

[In death] there vanishes from [the] interplay [of two consciousnesses] the essential moment of splitting into extremes with opposite characteristics; and the middle term collapses into a lifeless unity...and the two do not reciprocally give and receive one another back from each other consciously, but leave each other free only indifferently, like things.<sup>11</sup>

In trial by death, when two subject-objects do not mutually recognize one another as subject-objects — that is, as both subject *and* object — they leave each other "indifferently"; they reduce each other to things. Two centuries after Hegel, the posthumanist Donna Haraway echoes Hegel as well as Horkheimer and Adorno when she asserts the importance of subject-object recognition: "the animals in labs...just as we humans *are both subject and object all the time*...It is not killing that gets us into exterminism, but making beings killable."<sup>12</sup> As we see in Hegel, in Horkheimer and Adorno, and now in Haraway, with the end of magical thinking — a thinking in which subject is always also object and object is always also subject; in which "each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other" (per Hegel)<sup>13</sup> — and the beginning of enlightened thinking — "the distance of subject from object, the presupposition of abstraction" (per Horkheimer and Adorno)<sup>14</sup> — comes thingification, universal fungibility, and exterminism. And these prophecies speak sharply and poignantly to a contemporary Western society so implicated in and by its entrenchment in capitalist economies and acts of violence against cultures and environments.

In this piece I will ask: how to rescue magical thinking (a notion I am inheriting from Horkheimer and Adorno) in and from Hegel (often via Adorno) and imagine its possibilities for posthuman society, ethics, and aesthetics?<sup>15</sup> How are contemporary posthuman theorists and ecocritical artists inheriting Hegel's "magical" dialectic in their own work in order to recast subject-object relations in a time of ecological crisis? First,

through close readings of both Adorno and Hegel, I will show how magical thinking is deeply manifest in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Then I will discuss how Donna Haraway, following in the traditions of Hegel and Adorno, is magically thinking her way toward new models for relating more ethically (to borrow Haraway's own terminology) to human and other-than-human others in the twenty-first century.<sup>16</sup> Finally, I will look at how such Hegelian models are being adapted in and by contemporary aesthetic practice — specifically in the experimental ecopoetics of Brenda Hillman. In the end, I will assert that contemporary posthumanisms and ecopoetics in fact need magical thinking in order to reimagine both the social and the ecological in a time of crisis and resuscitate a devastatingly enlightened world.



What marks a magical sensibility as opposed to an enlightened sensibility? For Horkheimer and Adorno in “The Concept of Enlightenment,” the advent of Enlightenment stripped matter of all illusory powers and hidden properties.<sup>17</sup> Prior to Enlightenment, a magical sensibility was open to the possibility of the interior life of any and every thing.<sup>18</sup> With the Enlightenment, the gods were set apart from the substances of the world whereas for a magical sensibility, any creature could have been a god.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, he who practiced magic was not singular; he changed with the masks he wore, which represented the multiplicity of spirits.<sup>20</sup> So for the magical thinker, no subject or object was unified or closed; no one thing was at risk of being lost in or to all other things. Finally, magic involved specific representation.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, in magic no one thing was exchangeable for any other thing. Interiority, the divinity of the daily, multiplicity, fluidity, irreducibility, and the subject-object status of every single thing — these were attributes of the magical (per Horkheimer and Adorno). And these values, even today, stand in stark contrast to those of Enlightenment: knowledge, calculability, unity, utility, exchangeability, abstraction, and the rending apart of subject and object.<sup>22</sup>

Adorno, in his 1963 series of essays titled *Hegel: Three Studies*, aligns Hegel's sensibility with precisely the kind of magical sensibility that he and Horkheimer lay out in “The Concept of Enlightenment.” Adorno reads Hegel against the grain, arguing that Hegel's dialectical thinking actually works to subvert the enlightened thinking of his time. Recall Horkheimer and Adorno's claim that “magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object.” In his essay “Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy,” Adorno writes:

Thought that completely extirpated its mimetic impulse ... would end up in madness ... The speculative Hegelian concept rescues mimesis through spirit's self-reflection: truth is not *adaequatio* but affinity, and in the decline of idealism reason's mindfulness of its mimetic nature is revealed by Hegel to be its human right.<sup>23</sup>

Here Adorno argues that Hegel's speculative method rescues mimesis — a mimesis, recall, that for Horkheimer and Adorno is markedly different from the abstraction of enlightened thinking — and reveals it to be essentially “human.” In other words, mimesis — which for Hegel is self-reflection in and affinity with the subject-object other — is what saves us from a decline into the dehumanizing cultures of Enlightenment science and exchange, those cultures that distance us from others around us and reduce them to objects. For Adorno, Hegel's magical “mimetic impulse” is fundamental to the subversion of Enlightenment thinking.

Adorno continues to align Hegel's thinking with a kind of magical thinking in his essay “The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy.” In this piece, Adorno argues that, for Hegel, “there is nothing between heaven and earth that is not ‘*vermittelt*’ [mediated], nothing, therefore, that does not contain ... a spiritual moment.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike other Enlightenment thinkers, Adorno explains, Hegel believes in the interior spiritual life of all things. Adorno continues: “[Hegel's] impulse to elevate spirit, however deluded, draws its strength from a resistance to dead knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> For Adorno, as “deluded” as Hegel's belief may be, its essential work is its resistance to enlightened science. Adorno goes on to point out that, in Hegel's dialectic, “Once the object has become subject in the absolute, the object is no longer inferior vis-à-vis the subject.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore:

science establishes ... concepts and makes its judgments without regard for the fact that the life of the subject matter for which the concept is intended does not exhaust itself in conceptual specification. What furnishes the canon for Hegelian idealism is ... the need to grasp...what the matter at hand actually is and what essential and by no means mutually harmonious moments it contains ...<sup>27</sup>

In other words: in and through Hegel's dialectic, subject and object — both subject-objects — stand on equal ground. In addition, dialectical thinking acknowledges the mysterious and not-yet-understood “life” of the subject-object — a “life” whose fullness is beyond the reach of conceptual science. Here again, Adorno illuminates how magical thinking is manifest in Hegel: no one subject-object — no one “life” — can be articulated and therefore abstracted and reduced (as in enlightened thinking); instead, every subject-object remains a mysterious, open, irreducible existence.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, Adorno gestures toward the *critical* capacity of such magical thinking in Hegel when he writes:

When [Hegel's] philosophy is fully elaborated ... the difference between subject and object disappears...In that consciousness recalls, through self-reflection ... *how it has mutilated things* with its ordering concepts ... scientific consciousness comes face to face in Hegel with what a causal-mechanistic science, as a science of the domination of nature, has done to nature.<sup>29</sup>

Adorno adds: “[This] self-reflection ... is actually society's dawning critical consciousness of itself.”<sup>30</sup> Again he emphasizes that, in and through the dialectic, any subject-object

dualism disappears. Additionally, he suggests that when (magical) thinking confronts scientific thinking, consciousness becomes capable of seeing how it has mutilated nature. For Adorno, this type of (magical) thinking is the beginning of a more critical consciousness. On my reading of Adorno reading Hegel, magical thinking is the precursor to any critical or reparative action. Magical thinking is the beginning of “critical theory” itself.

In his essay “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel,” Adorno completes his alignment of Hegel’s thinking with magical thinking through a close reading of Hegel’s rhetoric, or form. To start, Adorno argues that the Cartesian, rationalist, enlightened “ideal of clarity” in form and content is beside the point in Hegel.<sup>31</sup> More specifically:

Clarity can be demanded of all knowledge only when it has been determined that the objects under investigation are free of all dynamic qualities that would cause them to elude the gaze that tries to capture and hole them unambiguously ... rather, [in Hegel] the subject itself also moves, by virtue of its relationship to the object that is inherently in motion ... Faced with this, the simple demand for clarity and distinctness becomes obsolete.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, for Adorno the “ideal of clarity” assumes the fixableness of all things. In “clarity,” things are frozen, pinned down, and made available to consciousness for scientific observation or exchange. In Hegel, on the other hand, all things are always already in dialectical motion. In this way, Hegel’s form resists the clarity so crucial to enlightened scientific thinking, and instead, perhaps, like he who “practiced magic ... not single or identical,” changes with the “cult masks which [represent] the multiplicity of spirits.”<sup>33</sup> For Adorno, subject-objects in Hegel are dynamic and multiple — magical.

I want to highlight two other important points that Adorno makes about Hegel’s form in “Skoteinos.” First, Adorno argues that Hegel’s work requires the reader’s imaginative participation: “No one can read any more out of Hegel than he puts in ... The content itself contains, as a law of its form, the expectation of productive imagination on the part of the one reading ... Understanding has to find a foothold in the gap between experience and concept.”<sup>34</sup> What Adorno is gesturing toward here has everything to do with the “afterlife of philosophical works, the unfolding of their substance,” which he describes shortly before the passage I just quoted.<sup>35</sup> For Adorno, the meaning of a philosophical work is realized in the space between the philosopher’s thought (or form) and the reader’s mediation of, or *thinking*, it. In Adorno’s own words: “intellectual experience can be expressed only by being reflected in its mediation — that is, actively thought.”<sup>36</sup> And so, in Adorno’s view, Hegel’s radically unfixed, fluid, wide-open text demands precisely this work of mediating, or thinking, the meaning of the work. In other words, Hegel’s form itself expects and exacts “productive imagination.” In this very Hegelian way, Adorno reads the act of reading Hegel as an entirely reciprocal process and project. Here Adorno again gestures toward traces of mimetic magic in Hegel: “manifold affinities between ... things” mark the magical relationship between text and reader — in contrast to the enlightened relationship, which consists of a “single relationship between [a] subject who confers meaning [on a] meaningless object.”<sup>37</sup>

Unclarity, productive imagination ... Adorno then goes on to introduce another concept key to the process of reading Hegel: experimentation. For Adorno,

reading Hegel is an experimental procedure: one allows possible interpretations to come to mind, proposes them, and compares them with the text and with what has already been reliably interpreted ... Hegel provokes the experimental method...To read him experimentally is to judge him by his own criterion ... When it comes to Hegel, a particularly high degree of such interplay must be demanded.<sup>38</sup>

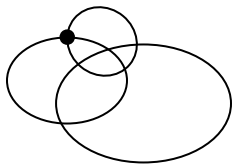
When reading Hegel, Adorno explains, one must approach the text openly, associatively, and comparatively. In short, the reader must perform a kind of experimental “interplay.” Here again Adorno points toward Hegel’s magical mimesis — the dynamic, heterogeneous relationship between two subject-objects (in this case, text and reader).

So far, I have read Adorno as reading in Hegel distinctly magical thinking — the kind of thinking that opposes enlightened paradigms, which continue to lead humanity, through calculation and commodification, down the road to barbarism. For Adorno, magical thinking in Hegel looks like this: it asserts and performs, first and foremost, the subject-object status of every single thing (“the construction of the subject-object [in Hegel] ... is in fact presupposed by every dialectical step”); mimetic relating; the irreducible, spiritual, not-yet-understood status of every subject-object; unclarity, which is always an unfixedness; productive imagination; and, finally, experimentalism and experimental interplay.<sup>39</sup> Next, I want to introduce yet another key aspect of Hegel’s magical thought and form. Then I will show how all of these aspects of Hegel’s magical thinking are reimaged by posthuman theory and art for the new century.

Integral to Hegel’s magical form — in addition to its radical unclarity, its openness to and dependence on reader imagination and experimentation (per Adorno’s reading) — is its unrelenting and incessant *repetition*. In calling Hegel’s form repetitive, I am positing a definition very different from the one laid out by Horkheimer and Adorno:

the more the illusion of magic vanishes, the more implacably repetition, in the guise of regularity, imprisons human beings in the cycle now objectified in the laws of nature, to which they believe they owe their security as free subjects. The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself ... Whatever might be different is made the same.<sup>40</sup>

According to this definition, repetition is the mark of enlightened thinking in all of Enlightenment’s disenchantment, regularity, rationality, and closedness. The magical repetition in Hegel to which I am referring, on the other hand, has everything to do with ritual, dynamism, and performance. And now, I will table Adorno and turn to the magical leviathan himself.



One crucial aspect of magical repetition in Hegel is *ritualized repetition*. In Hegel, philosophy is kinetic. He insists that “we must ... exert ourselves to know the particulars”; philosophy is a “carrying out,” a “process,” and a “surrendering.”<sup>41</sup> Already in these early characterizations, the nearness of Hegel’s dialectical thinking to ritual is apparent. Ritual, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is an “order of performing a ... devotional service” or a “series of actions...compulsively performed.”<sup>42</sup> It is by definition ordered, devoted, compulsive, and performative. Importantly, some anthropologists argue that in ancient magic, the ordered performance of ritual was valued not for its apparent causation of certain phenomena but for its anticipation and completion of a course of events.<sup>43</sup> Here is Hegel, for whom “the real issue [of the philosophical work] is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about.”<sup>44</sup> The value of magical ritual is one’s participation in the order of its performance; the value of philosophy (for Hegel) is one’s participation in the ritual process through which it comes about.

Bound up with ritual, of course, is repetition. Think, for example, of seasonal or calendrical practices.<sup>45</sup> And recall the very definition of ritual: there is an aspect of compulsion to it. Here, even more importantly, is Hegel. From the first pages of the *Phenomenology* to the very last, Hegel articulates and rearticulates — with ritualistic compulsion — his dialectic, whose substance and product are, at once, always already the whole. In the Preface, Hegel offers one of his first articulations: “And experience is the name we give to just this movement, in which the immediate, the unexperienced ... becomes alienated from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation, and is only then revealed for the first time in its actuality and truth.”<sup>46</sup> Shortly before this moment, Hegel offers a briefer yet nonetheless bottomless articulation: “The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence perfecting itself through its development.”<sup>47</sup> In both passages, “truth” is active: in the first case, it is movement (a becoming, a return), and in the second, a perfecting, or development. In other words, truth for Hegel is ritual experience — experience in and through “the order of its performance.” Essentially for Hegel, truth is the whole; thus, truth is the shape of ritual experience itself, in all of its moments.<sup>48</sup> Notably, these two passages do not say the same thing with different words. In one, the truth of experience is alienation and subsequent return from alienation; in the other, truth is a perfecting *through*. Yet even at this early point in the book, Hegel is practicing ritualized repetition: not repetition of concepts necessarily but repetition of a formal gesture. In both passages, he works to evoke the essence of the shape of his dialectic — ebb and flow, departure and return, perfecting through — through his form. But not simply through the texture of his sentences in their gathering syntax, their lifts and dips. The text, in its centripetalism, homed in on performances of articulation and re-articulation, differentiation and collapse, effects the amoebic shape of Hegel’s “truth,” which is none other than the shape of ritual experience. Ritualized repetition of form mimics the pulsive, implosive tendency of the dialectic itself.

A second key aspect of magical repetition in Hegel is *dynamic repetition*. At this point, I want to juxtapose a number of passages from the *Phenomenology*. In the following passages, one can see not only the ritualized repetition of Hegel’s form but also its

dynamic repetition. In using the phrase “dynamic repetition,” I mean to suggest that Hegel’s form, in and through its incessant and varied articulations and re-articulations of the dialectic, actively produces and re-produces its meaning. In this way, both form and dialectic (Hegel’s form arguably is never anything more than dialectic itself) are in motion. Importantly, magic is deeply dynamic. Recall that for Horkheimer and Adorno, in magic “manifold affinities” exist between things.<sup>49</sup> All relationships are varied and multiple. Furthermore, he who practices magic is never singular; he changes with the masks he wears.<sup>50</sup> The very essence of magic is its multiplicity and transitory nature — its dynamism.

With these aspects of magic in mind, consider the following four passages from the *Phenomenology*:

- 1 The movement of a being that immediately is, consists partly in becoming an other than itself, and thus becoming its own immanent content ... In the former movement, *negativity* is the differentiating and positing of *existence*; in this return into self, it is the becoming of the *determinate simplicity*.<sup>51</sup>
- 2 [I]n it [the unconditioned universal, which results from awareness of the completely developed object], the unity of “being-for-self” and “being-for-another” is posited; in other words, the absolute antithesis is posited as a self-identical essence ... In general, to be for itself and to be in relation to an other constitutes the nature and essence of the content, whose truth consists in its being unconditionally universal; and the result is simply and solely universal.<sup>52</sup>
- 3 [T]he “matters” [constituent moments] posited as independent directly pass over into their unity, and their unity directly unfolds its diversity, and this once again reduces itself to unity. But this movement is what is called *Force*.<sup>53</sup>
- 4 Spirit is *this movement* of the Self which empties itself of itself and sinks itself into its substance, and also, as Subject, has gone out of that substance into itself, making the substance into an object and a content at the same time as it cancels this difference between objectivity and content.<sup>54</sup>

In these passages, which represent various moments in the unfolding of the phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel articulates his dialectic in different ways. While the loose shape of the dialectic holds together in and through each passage, the terminology, details, and insights into its nature change. What is the shape of this dialectical movement? In the first passage, it is a “becoming ... other than itself, and thus becoming its own” — a departure and subsequent return, a going and coming, and, crucially, a drama implicating both object (the “other than itself”) and subject (“its own”). Hegel’s use of the *gerund* (“becoming”) lends emphasis to the immediacy of movement so key to the shape of the dialectic. Furthermore, Hegel repeatedly employs the verb “to be” to establish, undermine, and establish again equations and confections: “*negativity is* the differentiating and positing of *existence*”; “it *is* the becoming of the *determinate simplicity*.”<sup>55</sup> The effect of this choice is a simultaneous distillation and collapse of specificity. Notably, the formal device here mimics the very nature of the dialectic itself. Recall Hegel’s assertion that “the whole is nothing other than the essence perfecting itself through its development.” In other words: the whole is at the same time its moments, and its



moments are at the same time the whole. In Passage 2, Hegel further articulates dialectical movement: “the unity of ‘being-for-self’ and ‘being-for-another’ ... the result is simply and solely universal.” Here again, as in the first passage, both subject and object inhabit and constitute the shape of the dialectic; however, the focus in Passage 2 is on the coming together of these two figures, a unification that is in itself a manifestation of the “universal.” Here Hegel also employs the *gerund*, but instead of “becoming,” there is simply “being,” further evoking the nearness of subject to object in the moment of “return,” or in the “universal.” While reproducing the dialectical shape evoked in the first passage, the second passage further realizes the nature of it through a slight shift in focus. In this nuanced shifting lies Hegel’s dynamism or dynamic repetition. Hegel takes the dialectic to yet another level in the third passage. Once again, there is roughly the same shape, this time articulated as an unfolding and subsequent reducing: “unity directly unfolds its diversity, and this once again reduces itself to unity.” But here, importantly, Hegel names the movement *Force*, further characterizing it. As we can see in this passage, with each act of dynamic repetition, Hegel complicates the dialectic, glimpsing new facets. In the fourth passage, which appears late in the *Phenomenology*, the shape of the dialectic is an emptying, or sinking, and subsequent going into. Notably here, the dialectical movement also called Force has now been further distilled as Spirit. In addition, by this point all distance between object and subject (“content”) has been “canceled.” Perhaps most significantly in this passage, Spirit is equivalent to, or embodiment of, agential self, a self whose substance is movement, Force, and Spirit; whose nature it is to “make” its substance into subject-object, i.e., to realize itself as both subject *and* object. Much has occurred by this moment in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. Spirit, which began as simple “negation” and “existence” (first passage), is now an agential and complicated “making,” or process, the very process through which subject-objects are produced (fourth passage). While Hegel reproduces, or re-produces, loosely the same shape in each passage, the content of each passage is unstable, in flux. This is Hegel’s dynamic repetition. To return to the magical: in these passages, Hegel captures the “manifold affinities between ... things” — between words, between descriptions, between subjects and objects, or between subject-objects. Furthermore, each passage refuses singularity, in a way “changing with [its] masks.” A magical dynamic repetition, indeed.

A third aspect of Hegel’s magical repetition is its performative nature. *Performative repetition* is bound up with both ritual and dynamism. Recall the definition of ritual: a “series of actions ... compulsively performed.” And recall how in ancient magic, the ordered performance of magical rituals was valued not so much for its apparent causality as for the steps involved. And recall Hegel: “the real issue is not exhausted by stating its aim, but by carrying it out.” In Hegel, as in magic, the means — the performance — is an end in itself.

What makes Hegel’s form performative and more specifically performatively repetitive? Certainly we see elements of performance in Hegel’s dynamism, as I have discussed: in rearticulating the dialectic in different ways, Hegel’s text embodies activity. It is absolutely in flux. To thoroughly address the question though, one might turn to the section of the *Phenomenology* entitled “Self-Consciousness.” In this section, Hegel’s

articulations are more relentlessly rendered than in preceding sections. His dialectic is articulated in almost every paragraph, sometimes more than once within a single paragraph, culminating with such new, more developed forms as the recognition process, the trial by death, and the lord and bondsman (master-slave) dynamic. I will discuss two of these new dialectical formations momentarily, but first I want to consider Judith Butler's theory of performative repetition, which in my view helps elucidate what I am calling performative repetition in Hegel.

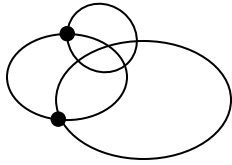
For Butler, the "being" of gender, or of any identity category, is an effect, a process, and an ongoing practice open to intervention and resignification.<sup>56</sup> For Butler, there are no "real" or "natural" identities; rather, identity is a "phantasmatic construction."<sup>57</sup> Identity is a performance, and realizing this fact enables us to transform practices of repetition — from practices limited by their mandate to reinstitute "natural" identity categories (e.g., gender binaries) to new practices of repetition that intervene and subvert these problematic "natural" identities.<sup>58</sup> It is this type of performative repetition that, for Butler, facilitates political and social change. Butler explains her position further: "My argument is that there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed ... It is precisely the discursively variable construction of each in and through the other that has interested me here."<sup>59</sup> In other words, there is no subject who constructs; there is only the constructing and the constructed, the process and the product. There are only "variable constructions" that occur in and through each other. And in these moments of "variable construction" — moments of deviation and subversion — agencies emerge.<sup>60</sup>

Per Butler, how do we see Hegel practicing performative repetition, perhaps as a means for realizing new forms for and sites of agency? As I have said, for answers one might turn to Hegel's section "Self-Consciousness." I want to look in this section at what are some of the most performatively repetitive, or "variably constructive" (to recall Butler's language), moments in the *Phenomenology*: (1) the moment at which the dialectic, understood as a recognition process, is realized to be bound up with affective materiality, and (2) the moment at which the dialectic is realized as having a capacity for failure, or "trial by death."

Recognition in Hegel is a manifestation of the dialectic, in which two self-consciousnesses ultimately "*recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another."<sup>61</sup> In recognition, each consciousness sees itself in the other and desires to supersede this other in order to become more certain of itself.<sup>62</sup> The act of supersession is "an ambiguous return *into itself*"; however, it is also a "giving back" or "letting go" of the other.<sup>63</sup> Key to this "movement" is reciprocity and, furthermore, the attainment of subject-object status by each consciousness: "Each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other."<sup>64</sup> Each is to the other both subject ("for itself") and object ("for the other"). At this point, Hegel has articulated the dialectic in its greatest detail and depth thus far. The key moment of performative repetition occurs when Hegel writes: "through the supersession...the other self-consciousness equally gives it back again to itself [the other], for it saw itself in the other."<sup>65</sup> While following the familiar shape of the dialectic, Hegel here trips upon

something quite new: while “return” into self is key to realization of the dialectic, so is “receiving back” self from the other — both letting go and *being let go* are necessary. In other words: recognition here becomes not only mimetic but also directly relational, affective. For the first time, Hegel’s language gestures toward the materiality of dialectical movement in space (“the other ... equally gives it back again”); he has touched on the experience of embodiment in the world, in all of its grasping and releasing, its holding on and letting go. For Hegel, the movement of self-consciousness is always a “double movement”: “both its own action and the action of the other as well.”<sup>66</sup> Here again is a language of affective materiality, in which two self-consciousnesses perform *actions*, implicating one another in the process. Hegel continues, “The first does not have the object before it merely as it exists primarily for desire, but as something that has an independent existence of its own, which, therefore, it cannot utilize for its own purposes, if that object does not of its own accord do what the first does to it.”<sup>67</sup> Two self-consciousnesses, akin here to bodies, must resist the desire and drive to make *use* of each other. How is Hegel able to achieve this breakthrough? In my view, it is the result of his performative repetition. In constructing and reconstructing the dialectic, Hegel remains open to “the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (to return to Butler). For Hegel, creative agency lies in the act, or process, of construction and reconstruction, of performative repetition itself.<sup>68</sup>

It is Hegel’s breakthrough via performative repetition that enables him to realize the implications of the material affect so bound up with the recognition process and eventually articulate what he names the “trial by death.”<sup>69</sup> In the midst of the recognition process, at the moment in which consciousness “goes out” of itself, it must present itself as not attached to common existence, or life.<sup>70</sup> With this new sense of affective materiality, Hegel sees for the first time that recognition has the capacity to go terribly awry: “This presentation [i.e., going out of self] is a twofold action: action on the part of the other and action on its own part. In so far as it is the action of the *other*, each seeks the death of the other.”<sup>71</sup> When two self-consciousnesses go out of their selves in order to approach each other, each necessarily fights to preserve its own life, and this compulsion to preserve leads to a life-and-death struggle.<sup>72</sup> Hegel, through performative repetition — in writing through the dialectic yet again — has arrived upon new territory: the realm of the volatile and ephemeral material world, in which recognition can fail and beings can die. And it is at this point that Hegel begins to map an ethics. Recall how failed recognition — the failure of each self-consciousness to realize and achieve the status of both subject and object — causes beings to “leave each other ... indifferently, like things.”<sup>73</sup> Without recognition, the world to self-consciousness is comprised of expendable things. And recall Horkheimer and Adorno’s claim, which is also Haraway’s claim, that it is precisely this type of thinking that leads humanity down the road to universal fungibility and exterminism. An essential breakthrough for Hegel, indeed — one that was only possible through magical performative repetition.



I have shown how Hegel's magical thinking works to subvert the paradigms of Enlightenment science and the commodity, ultimately imparting the need for the subject-object status of every single thing and realizing new formal possibilities for resisting thingification, fungibility, and exterminism. Now I want to show how the kind of magical thinking Hegel performs in his *Phenomenology* is precisely the type of thinking that some posthuman thinkers are exploring today as they begin to imagine new paradigms for relating more ethically in and to the material world. I will highlight aspects of Donna Haraway's theory to show what magical thinking can look like in the twenty-first century. Then I will look at the experimental ecopoetry of Brenda Hillman to show how Hegel's magical thinking is manifest in contemporary aesthetic practice.

In Donna Haraway's book *When Species Meet* (2008), she poses the questions: "(1) Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog? and (2) How is 'becoming with' a practice of becoming worldly?"<sup>74</sup> To answer these questions, Haraway discusses a digital image a friend had captured and sent to her of a redwood stump covered in mosses and lichens, bearing a striking resemblance to a dog ("Jim's dog"). She argues that in "touching" the dog via digital photography, one touches all of the technological and biological histories that constitute this moment, our moment of contact.<sup>75</sup> Haraway explains: "[In 'touching' the dog] we are inside the histories of IT engineering, electronic product assembly-line labor, mining and IT waste disposal, plastics research and manufacturing...The people and the things are in mutually constituting, intra-active touch."<sup>76</sup> When we acknowledge all of the histories, power relationships, humans, non-humans, and things we "touch" when we make contact with such "other" beings as Jim's dog — when we recognize the intra-active and intersectional nature of all matter — we begin the practice of "becoming worldly." And in becoming worldly, "the clean lines between traditional and modern, organic and technological, human and nonhuman give way."<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly: "Jim's dog is a provocation to curiosity...one of the first obligations...of worldly companion species."<sup>78</sup> Becoming curious, too, is fundamental to becoming worldly.

For Haraway, becoming worldly is always political. In acknowledging those beings categorized as "other" — "gods, machines, animals ... and noncitizens in general" — we undermine the (often anthropocentric) sciences, philosophies, and power structures that institute these "other" categories in the first place.<sup>79</sup> Notably, Haraway draws a sharp distinction between the "High Science" — which, for her, is interested in genius, progress, beauty, power, and money — and the more progressive sciences that she argues have played leading roles in displacing the human in models for understanding the universe.<sup>80</sup> In Haraway's view, it is precisely the curiosity inherent in practices of becoming worldly

that enables us to remake the sciences, or, to use Haraway's words, "reweave the fibers of the scientist's being."<sup>81</sup>

What Haraway calls the "High Science" is essentially the Enlightenment science Horkheimer and Adorno assail in "Critique of Enlightenment," and to which Adorno situates Hegel in opposition. Recall that, for Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment (science) "[acknowledges] nothing new under the sun." Haraway imagines an alternative: a science that "[makes] it possible for something unexpected to happen."<sup>82</sup> She illustrates what this alternative science might look like by telling the story of the scientist Barbara Smuts, who studied baboons in Kenya. When Smuts began her research, she behaved neutrally around the baboons. But the more Smuts ignored them, the more agitated the animals seemed. It wasn't until Smuts changed her behavior, taking cues from the baboons, that they became comfortable in her presence. Also, the baboons began treating her like a subject with whom they could communicate as opposed to like an object.<sup>83</sup> Haraway argues that the story of Smuts and the baboons serves as an example of a "natureculture" in which "all the actors become who they are *in the dance of relating* [and] all the dancers are redone through the patterns they enact."<sup>84</sup> Becoming worldly, for Haraway, is a practice always open to the unexpected, to redoing and being redone. Furthermore, it involves "*respecere* ... the act of respect. To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally... To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect is to enter the world of becoming with."<sup>85</sup> Becoming worldly, which (as Haraway shows) is always also science — or science, which is always also becoming worldly — involves "touch" (recall Jim's dog), curiosity, an openness to the unexpected and to redoing and being redone, and respect.

Haraway's paradigm (or science) of becoming worldly is both deeply Hegelian and deeply magical. I want to suggest that what Haraway offers us is a model for *magically thinking science*. It is not difficult to see the Hegel (and not to mention the Adorno) in Haraway. One has only to juxtapose the two thinkers' articulations of the "shape" of "life" itself to see the affinity of their thought. For Hegel, "the 'matters' [constituent moments] posited as independent directly pass over into their unity, and their unity directly unfolds its diversity, and this once again reduces itself to unity."<sup>86</sup> Furthermore: "Thus the simple substance of Life is the splitting up of itself into shapes and at the same time the dissolution of these existent differences."<sup>87</sup> And for Haraway:

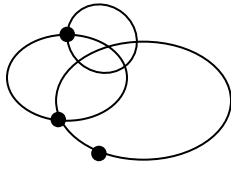
the shape and temporality of life on earth are more like a liquid-crystal consortium folding on itself again and again than a well-branched tree. Ordinary identities emerge and are rightly cherished, but they remain always a relational web opening to non-Euclidean pasts, presents, and futures. The ordinary is a multipartner mud-dance issuing from and in entangled species.<sup>88</sup>

For both Hegel and Haraway, in "life," "shapes" "unfold," "split up," or "emerge" but always return to or remain "a unity" or "web" (Hegel : dialectic :: Haraway : "multipartner mud-dance"). The diction in both Hegel and Haraway evokes the tactile material world; in it, there is "matter," "substance," "shape," "liquid," "mud," and more. In the end, Hegel and Haraway are both interested in relationships and affect in and between material forms — a dialectical science indeed.

Furthermore, Haraway, in the spirit of both Hegel and Adorno, demonstrates how one might begin to magically think science. Recall aspects of the magical: interiority, multiplicity, fluidity, specificity, and the subject-object status of every single thing. Here is Haraway. For her, any (scientific) encounter with any companion species or thing has a depth, multiplicity, fluidity, and specificity uniquely its own. The event of Jim's dog, for example, is made possible by "mutually constituting, intra-active touch." Furthermore, for Haraway, knots of companion species and things must be encountered in all of their movement and dynamism — their "emergence," "folding," and "webbing." And of course, "the animals in labs ... just as we humans are both subject and object all the time." Haraway also utilizes (forms of Hegel's forms of) ritualized, dynamic, and performative repetition. For her, "becoming with" and "becoming worldly" are always ritual and dynamic practices. The "multipartner mud-dance issuing from and in entangled species" — the shape of life itself — is, at base, ritualized, dynamic repetition. Haraway advocates forms of performative repetition (or, per Butler, "variable constructions") too. Her advocacy is perhaps most apparent in her assertion that "We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up."<sup>89</sup> The double meaning of this claim is striking and essential: species and things "make each other," meaning not only that they materially shape one another — mixing cells, microbes, and molecules in every moment of contact — but that they also "make each other *up*"; at every turn, they *imagine* one another and ways *toward* one another. All touch between companion species is imaginative "touch across difference."<sup>90</sup>

How to map this "magical" ethics — the ethics of magical thinking — as we have seen it at work in and across the critical theories of Hegel, Adorno, and Haraway? First, in the ethics of magical thinking, subject is always also object and object is always also subject. As I have shown, this subject-object premise works foundationally in the theories of Hegel, Adorno, and Haraway. In addition, magical thinking values and entails interiority, multiplicity, fluidity, and specificity, and as I have discussed these attributes are foregrounded by such posthumanisms as Haraway's. Adorno, in his writings on Hegel, shows that magical thinking also involves mimesis, an openness to what is not-yet-understood, *unclarity* (i.e., unfixedness), imagination, and experimentation. And as I have illustrated, these values, too, are central to Haraway's paradigm. Furthermore, magical thinking, per Hegel, exacts ritualized, dynamic, and performative forms of repetition — forms that are always open to the unexpected, to redoing and being redone. And Haraway, following Hegel and Adorno (regardless of whether she realizes it), further complicates magical thinking for the twenty-first century by introducing such new, or newly realized, magical concepts as curiosity, respect, and touch.

Magical thinking sets out to subvert Enlightenment science, the cult of the commodity, and the anthropocentrisms that make beings killable and preclude imaginative acts of ethical relating. How do we see magical thinking at work in contemporary aesthetic practice, too? How are experimental artists exploring magical posthumanisms and reimagining subject-object relations? To begin to address these questions, I will turn now to the ecopoetics of Brenda Hillman.



In a pair of short poems from 2011, titled “Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare,” Brenda Hillman mobilizes the lyric as a means of imagining her way toward the other-than-human world and critiquing human environmental degradation.<sup>91</sup> In homage to the Romantic poet John Clare, Hillman performs what she calls “spoken-bird poetry.”<sup>92</sup> While Hillman is being playful, her comment prompts a useful question: what type of thinking might “speaking bird” entail? What kind of thinking renders “spoken-bird poetry” even imaginable? I will show how in these poems, Hillman practices distinctly magical thinking, per Hegel, Adorno, and Haraway, ultimately staging a posthuman environmental ethics. In the first poem, Hillman writes:

**towhee [*Pipilo crissalis*] wakes a human**

pp    cp cp cp chp chp  
 pppppppppppp  
 cppppcpp    cpp cpp  
 (a woman tosses)  
 Gulf disaster    ster sister  
          aster       aster as       asp  
 ppp cp cp p       bp bp BP BP  
          scree sreeeeem       we  
 we we didn't  
 neee needed to move so fast<sup>93</sup>

Here Hillman imagines an interspecies exchange, exploring the sound, language, and expression that are the result of this contact — to use Haraway’s words, “mutually constituting ... touch.” The poem itself is an act of close listening. In it, very little action occurs: a woman wakes, tosses, and listens to towhee morning vocalizations, perhaps outside of her window. At first, the bird vocalizations are simply ambient. The towhee’s repetitive, shrill “chp” is evocative of a familiar dawn soundscape:

pp    cp cp cp chp chp

At the outset, the bird call is pure, spontaneous sound, evolving subtly, almost imperceptibly, with the unfurling of the line that contains it: “cp cp” becomes “chp chp.” In line three, however, the bird’s call breaks into song: “pppppppppppp.”<sup>94</sup> Here the written line vibrates with the towhee’s trill, demanding the reader’s heightened attention. Notably, Hillman allows for the towhee’s song to comprise three consecutive lines of the

poem's ten; she insists that time and space be given to that which is unpredictable and other to human ears. In foregrounding the bird, Hillman acknowledges the mysterious and irreducible life of the animal, both calling, singing subject and audible, readable object. In this way also, Hillman de-centers the human figure — both the woman in the poem and the poem's reader — a conspicuous refusal of anthropocentrism.

As the bird's song becomes more insistent and complex in the course of poem, the woman is moved to enter into a collaboration with the bird and her environment — a kind of “mimetic relating,” self-reflection in and affinity with the subject-object other (reminiscent of Adorno on Hegel). Surprisingly to the reader, she hears:

Gulf disaster    ster sister  
           aster        aster    as            asp

This language refers not only to the human world but to the other-than-human world as well — not only “Gulf disaster” but “aster,” a genus of flowering plants. What is the source of this mimetic language and sound? Does it emerge from the breezy caesuras between towhee vocalizations? After all, the wispy “a” and “s” sounds here are very different from the sharp, metallic *chp*'s of previous lines. Is it a culmination of the morning din, bird song and breeze combined? The reader cannot know, and the poem itself facilitates this sense of ambiguity and simultaneity. Then:

ppp cp cp p        bp bp BP BP  
           scree sreeeeem            we

By this point, the bird's song and the woman's own meditations have come together as collaborative expression. Through this imagined collaboration — in repeating the “pp” and “cp” sounds while also allowing for variation, a kind of dynamic repetition — the poem arrives at “BP,” and then at an exasperated “scree sreeeeem,” one that is conceived of as belonging not to the woman or bird alone but to both at once: “we.” Here is Hegelian magical thinking at work in contemporary ecolytic. Through openness to and acknowledgement of the not-yet-understood other-than-human other; mimesis and experimentation, a kind of “experimental interplay”; and dynamic repetition: something entirely unexpected — between human and bird — is imagined. Magical thinking in lyric practice enables Hillman to conceive of new possible forms for relating to the towhee and also to the fact of contemporary environmental devastation; response to the 2010 BP blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, or “disaster,” has become by the end of the poem a collective gesture, a collective “scree sreeeeem.” Here also is Haraway's “becoming worldly” — woman and bird are conceived of as “making each other *up*” as the poem progresses, a manifestation of “touch across difference.”

Importantly, readers are invited to participate in the poem's experimental relating as well. As readers encounter and mimic the towhee's “chp chp,” making the sounds with their own tongues, teeth, and lips, they enter into and engage with the poem's environment in a material, embodied way. Recall Adorno on Hegel: “The content itself contains, as a law of its form, the expectation of productive imagination on the part



of the one reading.” Like Hegel’s, Hillman’s text, too, exacts the imaginative participation of readers.

In the second poem of “Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare,” Hillman writes:

**woman in red sweater to hummingbird**

ssssssss we ssssss weee  
no i’m not not sweet not  
sweeeeetie i’m not  
something to eeeeeeat<sup>95</sup>

Here, playfully, Hillman imagines a woman communicating with a hummingbird in a hybrid language.


ssssssss we ssssss weee

Meaning is imagined as occurring somewhere between the woman’s understanding of “red” (a sweater) and the bird’s (something sweet to eat). The woman in the poem responds to the bird’s curiosity with a language she imagines to be nearer to its own embodied experience of the world. The poem, a flutter in all of its lightness, space (caesura), spontaneous indentation, and repetition of airy “s” and “e” sounds, mimics the sudden presence of a darting, flitting hummingbird. Here a hybrid language provides the woman in the poem with new access to the hummingbird’s material presence in their shared world. Amidst so much uncertainty and un-fixity, there is imagined “interplay” between two consciousnesses, reciprocal giving and receiving back from each other. As with the first poem, the reader here, too, is a collaborator; experiencing the rhythms and breaks of the poem becomes for the reader a creative act of relating to the animal other.

Together, these two lyrics instantiate a ritual poetic practice. Recall aspects of ritualized repetition in Hegel: the value of philosophy, or dialectical thought, is “the order of its performance,” the shape of the ritual performance itself, in all of its moments. Again, in Hegel’s words: “the real issue [of the philosophical work] is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about.”<sup>96</sup> In Hillman, we see an emphasis on the process of imagining all of the possible layered, hybrid languages and communicative forms that may exist in the interstices, between subject-objects (in these poems, between woman and bird). Each poem performs for readers this ritual imagining, or “making *up*” of the other, taking time to acknowledge and listen to that which is other than human. Note how in both poems, entire lines are comprised of bird calls and songs — irreducible sound. For Hillman, the act of listening is ritual collaboration with the animal other, and the value of this collaboration is its gradual, unpredictable, and dynamic process.

Hillman’s ecopoetics imagines and performs a uniquely magical posthumanism, a demonstration of how contemporary experimental poets might and do draw from a tradition of magical thinking in order to begin mapping an environmental ethics. When

we read Hegel through Adorno and therefore insist on an inheritance of such notions as mimetic relating, experimental interplay, and the subject-object status of every single thing; and when we are attentive to the forms and functions of Hegelian repetition in all of its ritual, dynamism, and performativity, we begin to see how aspects of Hegelian magical thinking have the capacity to inform and enrich posthuman theory and aesthetics for the new century.

That said, and to follow Adorno once again: there can be for posthumanism no revival of Hegel; only rescue. Even an inheritance via Adorno, one critical of Hegel's "deluded" impulse to elevate spirit, must remain circumspect — situated as we are today on a radically degraded earth, only beginning to grasp the damage that our capitalist economies and cultures of consumption have inflicted upon the planet, and yet seduced as ever by a dominant environmentalist rhetoric that repeatedly and often uncritically falls back on such concepts as "connection" and "unity." As Adorno observed, perhaps most essentially: "The force of the whole ... is not a mere fantasy on the part of spirit; it is the force of the real web of illusion in which all individual existence remains trapped."<sup>97</sup> Arguably, many contemporary ecological paradigms — notions of a webbed existence in which every being is implicated and subsumed — betray an all-too-orthodox Hegelianism that continues to permeate the Western psyche to its very core. The shape of the dialectic is perhaps as dangerous as it is promising for posthuman thought. 

## Notes

- 1 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Concept of Enlightenment," *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 3.
- 4 Ibid., 8.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 5.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., 5-6.
- 10 Ibid., 6-7.
- 11 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114.
- 12 Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 76, 80, my emphasis.
- 13 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 112.
- 14 Horkheimer and Adorno, "Concept," 9.
- 15 In his essay "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," Adorno writes: "rescuing Hegel — and only rescue, not revival, is appropriate for him — means facing up to his philosophy where it is most painful and wresting truth from it where its untruth is obvious." Following Adorno, I employ the verb "rescue" here with regard to inheriting Hegel. See Theodor W. Adorno, "The Experiential Content of Hegel's Philosophy," *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1993), 83.
- 16 Donna J. Haraway, "Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms," *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008,) 157-187.
- 17 Horkheimer and Adorno, "Concept," 3.
- 18 I want to underscore that here I am working specifically with Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of magic as they develop it in "Concept of Enlightenment." For more on ancient magic and how it relates to religious and rational paradigms, see Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 19 Ibid., 5.
- 20 Ibid., 6.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 3-6.
- 23 Theodor W. Adorno, "Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy," *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber NicholSEN (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993), 40-41.
- 24 Adorno, "Experiential Content," 57.
- 25 Ibid., 61-62.
- 26 Ibid., 69.

27 Ibid.

28 Here Adorno gestures toward what is perhaps his central thesis in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), and also toward what he perceives to be his essential departure from Hegel. For Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, a concept can never exhaust a subject-object (as Adorno asserts in “Experiential Content” as well). As a result, “the more restlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object.” To counter “identitarian” thinking, Adorno imagines the nonidentical in and as the identical — what he at one point suggests to be that which “[lives] in the cavities between what things claim to be and what they are.” Notably, Adorno credits Hegel with performing precisely this type of thinking: “The most enduring result of Hegelian logic is that the individual is not flatly for himself. In himself, he is his otherness.” For Adorno, Hegel realized that “the nonidentical [is] the thing’s own identity against its identifications. The innermost core of the object proves to be simultaneously extraneous to it.” But also for Adorno, what Hegel was not able to see was that absolute Spirit — “totality” — in the end denies its own nonidentity. Therefore, Adorno’s “negative dialectics” — which takes Hegelian dialectics one step farther — seeks to “convict” totality of the nonidentical within it. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 1973), 147–150, 161.

29 Adorno, “Experiential Content,” 72, my emphasis.

30 Ibid., 75.

31 Theodor W. Adorno, “Skoteinos, or How to Read Hegel,” *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993), 98–99.

32 Ibid.

33 Horkheimer and Adorno, “Concept,” 6.

34 Adorno, “Skoteinos,” 139.

35 Ibid., 138.

36 Ibid.

37 Horkheimer and Adorno, “Concept,” 7.

38 Adorno, “Skoteinos,” 144–145.

39 Ibid., 92.

40 Horkheimer and Adorno, “Concept,” 8.

41 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 1–3.

42 “Ritual, adj. and n.” OED Online, 2011 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1 September 2001.

43 Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 54.

44 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 2.

45 Tambiah, *Magic*, 54.

46 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 21.

47 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 11. Trans. Gerhard Richter, Lecture, “Inheriting Hegel,” University of California, Davis, CA (winter 2010).

48 For Adorno, on the other hand, “the whole is the untrue” — and here again is Adorno’s essential departure from Hegel. For Adorno, Hegel’s “whole” is the very image of the “principle of domination,” the “superior coercive force,” that marks and traps contemporary existence. In other words, perhaps: the domination of science, technology, and capital. “This is the truth in Hegel’s untruth,” concludes Adorno. See Adorno, “Experiential Content,” 87.

49 Horkheimer and Adorno, "Concept," 6-7.

50 Ibid., 6.

51 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 32.

52 Ibid., 80.

53 Ibid., 81.

54 Ibid., 490.

55 My double emphasis on "is."

56 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 32.

57 Ibid., 146.

58 Ibid., 148-149.

59 Ibid., 142.

60 Ironically, Butler situates her argument precisely in opposition to what she calls "the Hegelian model": "The Hegelian model of self-recognition...presupposes a potential adequation between the 'I' that confronts its world...as an object, and the 'I' that finds itself as an object in that world. But the subject/object dichotomy, which here belongs to the tradition of Western epistemology, conditions the very problematic of identity that it seeks to solve." (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 144.) For Butler, Hegel presupposes an "I" and an "other" who stand in opposition to one another, neglecting to acknowledge that the "I" and the "other" are always already effects of signifying practices and discourse. But what Butler does not acknowledge in Hegel is that the figures "I" and "other" do not preexist the dialectic. Hegel's dialectic begins and ends with the universal, or whole, and "I" and "other" occur only as moments of this universal. Recall Adorno's claim that the very project of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is to problematize any subject-object disparity. If "I" and "other" stand in opposition, then recognition has failed and the dialectic breaks down. The culmination of the dialectic is when "I" and "other" exist instead as "I-other" (both "I" and "other"), or as subject-object. What I want to suggest is that we align Butler with Hegel. Recall Hegel: "[Meaning] is not exhausted by stating its aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about." In Hegel, as in Butler, self, agency, or "Truth" reside in the process and the product, the "result together with the process" of the movement or performance. In short, the shape of Butler's performative repetition is essentially that of Hegel's dialectic: the "carrying out" is the site of meaning. Butler, too, is a magical thinker; in Butler's paradigm, as in the magical act, the means is the end. See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 2.

61 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 112.

62 Ibid., 111.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 112.

65 Ibid., 111.

66 Ibid., 112.

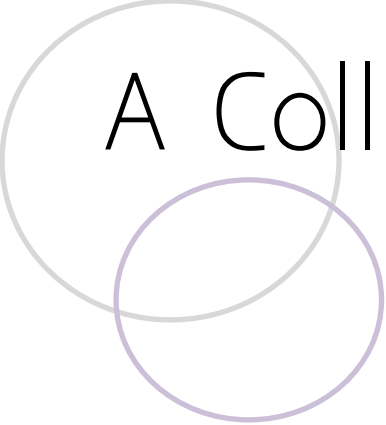
67 Ibid.

68 One might read Hegel as speaking only figuratively in the passages I have just cited, and not about actual material embodiment. While one cannot know with certainty what Hegel intends here, it is worth noting that Hegel continues to suggest the material nature of dialectical movement throughout the section "Self-Consciousness." In the paragraphs that follow, Hegel goes

- on to discuss the "fear" felt by the self-consciousness facing its own death, one that causes it to "[tremble] in every fibre of its being." Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 117.
- 69 Ibid., 114.
- 70 Ibid., 113.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Ibid., 114.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 3.
- 75 Ibid., 5-6.
- 76 Ibid., 6. According to Haraway, "intra-active" is Karen Barad's term.
- 77 Ibid., 8.
- 78 Ibid., 7.
- 79 Ibid., 10.
- 80 Ibid., 7, 11.
- 81 Ibid., 21-23.
- 82 Ibid., 34.
- 83 Ibid., 23-25.
- 84 Ibid., 25.
- 85 Ibid., 19.
- 86 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 81.
- 87 Ibid., 108.
- 88 Haraway, *Species*, 31-32.
- 89 Ibid., 16.
- 90 Ibid., 14.
- 91 Brenda Hillman, "Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (spring/summer 2011): 23-24.
- 92 Brenda Hillman, "Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare" (Squaw Valley Community of Writers Poetry Reading Benefit, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA, July 15, 2011).
- 93 Brenda Hillman, "Two Summer Aubades, After John Clare." *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (spring/summer 2011), 23.
- 94 For more information about towhee calls and songs, see "Bird Vocalizations: California Towhee," *California Academy of Sciences*, 22 April 2009, [www.calacademy.org](http://www.calacademy.org).
- 95 Ibid., 24.
- 96 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 2.
- 97 Adorno, "Experiential Content," 87.

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# A Collision of Gargoyles

S.D. Chrostowska<sup>1</sup>





I don't believe that my peasant will do any harm, for example, to the Lautrec that you have, and I dare even believe that the Lautrec will, by simultaneous contrast, become even more distinguished, and mine will gain from the strange juxtaposition, because the sunlit and burnt, weather-beaten quality of the strong sun and strong air will show up more clearly beside the face powder and stylish outfit.

✧ V. van Gogh<sup>2</sup>

The grotesque figural gargoyle, a peculiarity of Gothic architecture, admits of several overlapping lines of explanation.<sup>3</sup> One takes it to be primarily the elaboration of an architectural necessity — the rainspout — thus a genre of applied art. Another sees it as a three-dimensional apotropaic image, designed to ward off evil. Still another focuses on its edifying symbolism, its capacity for theological work in the profane realm, appealing outside of the church to the vulgar taste and superstitions of the illiterate public in their own, residually pagan visual language. A fourth interpretation — the gargoyle as spiritual distraction — is the fruit of medieval controversy, wherein the clerical criticism of “excessive” monastic art provoked a defence of it. To its detractors, such production, which went beyond gargoyles, was unjustifiable, wasteful, and shameful, a kind of folly that, while it could be aesthetically pleasing and fascinating, was inappropriate for the *ecclesia* and unacceptable for the cloister, an encroachment upon the religious aesthetics of moderation called for by reformist monasticism.<sup>4</sup> To its traditionalist defenders, however, immoderate ecclesiastical art was not only harmless but glorified and rendered service to God, strengthening devotion.<sup>5</sup>

To these four theories one could add a fifth, archi-aesthetic one: flagrant imaginative *play*, which the Church somehow tolerated. As Huizinga reminds us:

[W]hen we contemplate certain examples from the teeming treasury of plastic form, we find it hard indeed to suppress the idea of a play of fancy, the playful creativity of mind or hand. The . . . magical mazes of ornamental motifs, the caricature-like distortions of human and animal forms — all these are bound to suggest play as the growing-point of art. But they should do no more than suggest it.<sup>6</sup>

Bataille's extension of Huizinga offers another way of explaining art through play: the transgressive spiritual desire of play is behind all artistic “excess” and the dimension of the sacred. Gadamer, meanwhile, sides with Schiller (and, to that extent, against Huizinga): the presence of play in artistic practice takes us beyond intention-, medium-, or convention-based aesthetic models.<sup>7</sup> In its generality, however, the art-as-play thesis fails to elucidate the special case before us.

Exterior, beside, and above angels in tabernacles and massive saint-framed portals through which the incoming faithful must pass as if to undergo purification, the gargoyles hold sway, protruding from parapets and corners, referring with ludic candor and chimerical ingenuity to the world of the vulgar, the low-brow, and the ordinary, where

disparate things commingle as they please. Gargoyles may be grotesque, but we must not forget that, far from antithetical or accidental to Gothic architecture (as reaction, parody, provocation, perversion, or aberration), they are its integral element. Neither a standalone, autonomous motif, on the one hand, nor a mere effect or symptom of their situation, on the other, they exist in an aesthetic (not to mention functional) relationship with the design of the structure to whose façade they adhere, out of which they seem to grow and past which they seem to reach. It seems obvious that to make sense of these — these warts on a grand corpus, excrescences on a carcass of stone — we need to look beyond the grotesque. Cathedrals do not become “grotesque bodies” as a result of this association, but neither can we treat them as mere supports, extraneous to the gargoyles’ meaning and effect. The reverse also applies: the gargoyle is not rendered holy by its attachment, nor can we discount the creature as a mere appendage to the cathedral; its anti-erosive function of channeling rainwater clear of the masonry walls has little or nothing to do with its artistic values or *Kunstwollen* (artistic will). We should remember that not all carved grotesques featured on church buildings had this function even as they might otherwise appear indistinguishable in size, shape, or expression from gargoyles.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while occasioning the gargoyle as architectural element, functionality contributes hardly, if at all, to aesthetics or to the just-noted contrast; it underpins these facets without determining them.

We are, in fact, confronted here with two (rival? complementary?) aesthetics. The first, “God is light,” is the aesthetic of the inner sanctum, the illumination of soaring, vaulted vertical space through colored glass, with painting and sculpture subordinated to reflective-spiritual uplift. The second aesthetic is of course the *grotesque*, confined largely to exteriors — the outer walls of the cathedral, the cloister of the monastery. The most striking shapes owe much to unstylized figurative naturalism and expressive realism. It would, however, be wrong to assume that gargoyles — in themselves, individually, or relationally, in combination with the rest — fall neatly into this grotesque *disorder*, whether *noble* or *ignoble*, *terrible* (fearful) or *sportive* (ludicrous), to invoke Ruskin’s evaluative typology.<sup>9</sup> They do not. An answer to the gargoyle question is then to be found neither in the one nor in the other aesthetic creed but in bringing them together — in what I will term an *aesthetics of contrast*. Rather than the mixture or interpenetration of the high and the low that moves us from laughter to tears and back again (on the model of tragicomedy as in the grotesque-theory of Olga Freidenberg); rather than the reversal or collapse of the morally-coded high into the low, making fear “droll and monstrous” (as in Bakhtin’s better-known version which cut high seriousness down to size, on the model of that “other face” of the church, the carnival), the Gothic aesthetics of contrast pairs the grotesque with a contrasting stylistic register, the two being made to coexist in visible proximity and mutual irreducibility.<sup>10</sup> More obviously contrived contrasts of this sort are often associated with the Baroque: the elevated beside the degraded, the refined with the primitive, the cultivated next to the wild, smooth nearly touching coarse ...

The aesthetic of contrast is indeed most potent in clear-cut contrastive pairings, framing, or spatially isolating each aspect to bring out its distinctiveness. In the case of Gothic cathedrals, it is enabled by a simple structural dichotomy (inside/outside), with

symbolic value as an interface between the *sacrum* and the *profanum*, spirit and matter/body. It is likewise facilitated by formal separations of “high” and “low” executed on the façade. (Here, too, demarcations and contrasts abound: the saints are arranged in sculptural groups around portals and do not keep grotesque company. The two “realms” are still kept apart.)

Given these boundaries, achieved also through spatial distance and demarcations, we cannot speak of the interpenetration or dialectical reconciliation, any more than the cancellation, of the two aesthetic orders.

One might object that — grotesque impressions on casual passersby aside — the experience of the interior primes the soul emerging from it to embrace the gargoyle, and from there the deformed, the sick, and the insane. Or else one might counter that the canvas is sacred but the paints profane; that while profane or pagan imagery lifted from bestiaries appears only, as it were, on the reverse, un-primed side, it competes there for space with sacred iconography and outperforms it in ingenuity, participating with the outside world in an overall subversion and profanation. This would be strictly untrue; monstrous, irreverent, and vulgar details did appear inside the church, if rarely conspicuously or profusely. The sanctum allowed the “touch of evil.” The chisel, “let loose” within, could be quite versatile.<sup>11</sup>


One might also recall the onomatopoeic derivation of *gargoyle* from throat, the passage of water, which later links it to *gargling* and *gurgling* — physiological sounds that, save for their guttural location, have little audibly in common with plainchant, the heavenward sounds of the immaterial. Etymology thus leads us back to the *comœdia corporis*, with its embarrassing noises and physiological reactions.<sup>12</sup> Have we here parody so lofty that it no longer lightens the atmosphere — even quite the contrary? The lightness is to be found where gravity is less palpable, *inside* — as is the sensuousness: embarrassment of riches, dazzling spectacle of divine presence, awe-inspired spiritual ascent, desire for the Great Architect ... The sublimation of ugliness and sublimization of beauty? One thing is certain: this is no simple hierarchic reversal.

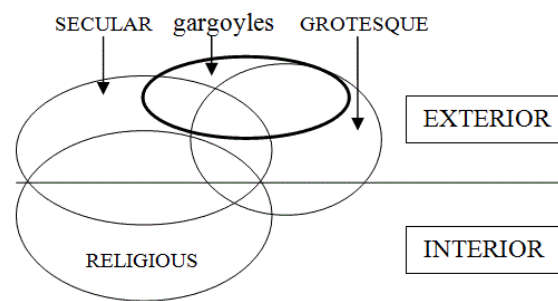
The aesthetics of contrast does not rely on comparison; it does not arise from noting and examining both similarities and differences between two sides of one object or between two objects against a common ground. The effect is more immediate. It rests on asymmetrical juxtaposition with each term of the contrast appearing for that more resolved, vibrant, vivid, more unlike the other as we are used to recognizing in post-impressionist painting. It thrives wherever a mutual heightening of intensity, a deepening of effect on either side of the disjunction takes precedence over blending for the sake of chromatic statements or gradations (as in impressionism).

The Medieval aesthetics of contrast, while not totally un-theorized, remains under- and mis-theorized. Three approaches are representative. The most important is Victor Hugo’s consideration of the aesthetic-contrastive value of the grotesque. The sublime (“high”) and the grotesque (“low”) do not dissolve into each other, do not exist in as stable synthesis, but co-exist in close promixity and dramatic harmony.<sup>13</sup> Next comes Bakhtin’s recognition of the contiguity, in the consciousness of medieval man, of “two lives” reflecting the “two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing,” the pious and

the grotesque, when speaking of visual sculptural representation that manages to hold them together without fusing them.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, we have Yuri Lotman's distinction between the *aesthetics of identity* and the *aesthetics of contrast*, except that for Lotman, guided perhaps by the unifying ideology of Christendom, medieval art belonged in the first of these categories.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as I have struggled to show, Gothic cathedral art appears, upon reflection, to be a modality of cultural duality, without which we could not grasp the medieval picture or even the part that gargoyles and suchlike played in it.

Why, then, an aesthetic of *contrast*, rather than something more positive, like *correlation*, *correspondence*, *balance*, *contradiction*, or *complementarity*? While all suppose a relation, only *contrast* does not require aesthetic *oppositions* while at the same time preserving aesthetic *distinctness*—for instance the distinctness between grotesque art and art in service of theology. The original, forgotten meaning of *contrast* is *to withstand*—here, to withstand any totalizing, theological unity and harmony-based aesthetics, that timeless free play of the faculties laying the artwork like an egg. Rather than harmonizing competing aesthetics, the aesthetic of contrast names their tension.

This, finally, gives rise to at least three broader issues. First: Should we apply Kantian and post-Kantian aesthetic standards to pre-Kantian art practices? (N.B. the problem of attributing a conscious *aesthetic* to medieval artisanship and the attendant danger of historicism.)<sup>16</sup> Second: Are we not similarly in danger of anachronism by imposing a different and, in some sense, more totalizing aesthetic standard on Gothic ecclesiastical architecture's disaggregated parts, variegated aspects of a culture we cannot re-enter by entering its extant edifices? Third: To save these buildings and “image-complexes” from anachronistic aestheticization, are they not better regarded as proto-galleries, art institutions *avant la lettre*, displaying contemporary as well as older cultural symbols? But are we not then modernizing the cathedral in another way? And would avoiding this not put us right back where we started? 



**Thematic Overlap in Gothic Monumental Sculpture**

## Notes

- 1 The inauguration of a scholarly form which the Editors name “collision” offers one of very few opportunities to throw together — as like with like — a new genre, a rule-bound practice that, far from established, is yet hardly more than a theoretical project, with an old genre that still may strike us as modern because of its fundamental ambiguity, its un-whole incorporation into a weighty artistic tradition. As one tries to establish the new genre with one’s practice — out of belief in the proliferation of forms as valuable in itself—one will try to renew the old one by theoretical means, believing that certain historical genres need to be disturbed from theoretical slumber.

I wish to thank Brian Stock for reading this piece with appropriate seriousness.

- 2 Van Gogh likened this portrait to the *Potato Eaters* (Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Arles, Saturday, 18 August 1888, Br. 1990: 663/CL: 520, accessed May 19, 2013, <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let663/letter.html>).
- 3 The elaborate stone gargoyle is indissociable from Gothic architecture, where its design is conventionally dated back to c. 1220 (reconstruction of the Laon Cathedral), peaking between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries (Jean-Marie Guillouët, “Gargouille,” in *Dictionnaire d’histoire de l’art du Moyen Âge occidental*, ed. Pascale Charron and Jean-Marie Gouillouët [Paris: Robert-Laffont, 2009]). Grotesque gargoyles can also be found in French Romanesque architecture of the thirteenth century.
- 4 St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Apologia ad Guillelmum Abbatem* (1124–1125), central to this controversy and widely considered an important source for understanding medieval art, opens the topic using a set of rhetorical questions, suggesting genuine confusion about this kind of ornamentation, and concludes with condemnation: “But apart from this, in the cloisters, before the eyes of brothers while they read — what is that ridiculous monstrosity doing, an amazing kind of deformed beauty and yet a beautiful deformity [*deformis formositas ac formosa deformitas*]? What are the filthy apes doing there? The fierce lions? The monstrous centaurs? . . . [E]verywhere so plentiful and astonishing a variety of contradictory forms is seen that one would rather read in the marble than [meditate on the law of God — S.C.] in books . . . If one is not ashamed of the absurdity, why is one not at least troubled by the expense?” (“Apologia ad Guillelmum Abbatem,” trans. Conrad Rudolph, in C. Rudolph, *The “things of greater importance”: Bernard of Clairvaux’s Apologia and the Medieval Attitude toward Art* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990], 282 [106]; mod. trans.). Though in recognizing the simultaneous ugliness and beauty of the hybrid figures Bernard is clearly referring to the seamless mingling and mixing of disparate elements that do not belong together in nature, he dwells less on the effects we credit the grotesque with eliciting (laughter, fear, revulsion) and more on the curiosity and distraction caused by such unnatural, fanciful inventions, not all of them individually grotesque (take the simian motifs or the worldly pursuits of men, for example). Rather than giving the sense of an outrageous hodgepodge, his analytical remarks underscore the contrastive relationship of elements within or between these figures. It should be noted that Bernard does not denounce all church art but only its excesses, in particular the embellishment of claustral buildings which, once seen with a sober eye to one’s spiritual duties, does not aid instruction or devotion but violates it (Bernard of Clairvaux, *Treatises I*, ed. M. Basil Pennington [Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1970], 66, translator’s note 169; this is also Conrad’s view, 124 et passim). Taking a skeptical view on the didactic purpose of such unruly art, we may wonder how much of it was due to license or anarchy of the creative imagination and how much to moralizing intent on the part of the sculptor or the patron. Did the distress, hypertrophies, or zoomorphism affecting such grotesque figures invariably signify degradation? Were their various forms of sinful behaviour punished, in laymen’s eyes, by being cast outside the holy sphere or by their obscure or peripheral placement in the church (which may have “saved” them from control by ill-disposed authorities)? In light of the collective and popular nature of cathedral construction we

cannot, moreover, assume a monolithic unity of vision for all the parts, some of them created off site, others decades or even centuries earlier.

5 The figure most associated with this opposing policy was the Abbot Suger. In *De Administratione* (1144–1147), he justifies the use of costly material and craftsmanship in liturgical art as spiritual aids (see discussion in Rudolph, 30–35, 59–63, 108–111). But he should not be grouped with defenders of ornate extremity. The scarcity of grotesque or monstrous marginal imagery at Saint-Denis and the lack of reference to it in Suger's writings should give pause. Given his patronage of complex artistic innovation, "it could be said that Suger had essentially rejected this type of imagery. Although I suspect he might personally have liked it, it was no longer intellectually/spiritually acceptable" (Rudolph, correspondence with the author, March 20, 2013). See Conrad Rudolph, *Artistic Change at St Denis: Abbot Suger's Program and the Early Twelfth Century Controversy over Art* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990] and "Inventing the Exegetical Stained-Glass Window: Suger, Hugh, and a New Elite Art," *Art Bulletin* 93 (2011): 399–422.

6 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 168–169. To ascribe cave paintings (or gargoyles?) wholly to a play-drive, Huizinga maintains, would be to reduce them to "mere doodling" (168); even if "culture is played from the very beginning" (46), art is more than aesthetic play, as architecture makes plain. Huizinga's great history of late-medieval cultural forms, incidentally, passed over this flourishing of marginal sculpture.

7 See Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, especially "The Ontology of the Work of Art and Its Hermeneutic Significance"; Georges Bataille, *Lascaux: Or, the Birth of Art: Prehistoric Painting*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Lausanne: Skira, 1955), especially 34–36.

8 Similarly crouched or asquat, menacing and glaring — not to say gratuitous given their in-obvious architectural function — such prominent exterior grotesques (as, for example, the hunky punks of the Somerset towers or those on Siena's Torre del Mangia) might be seen upon gables in high relief, extending from spires, perched upon ledges, overhanging porches, climbing walls, etc. But the architectural use, both ornamental and functional, of grotesques is much greater: they range from detail over archways and doorways, to parts of sculptural groups on scriptural, hagiographic or legendary subjects involving demons or devils, to roof bosses, head stops, and column capitals in cloisters; they lurk, hunched over, on corbels, beneath eaves and cornices, and work their way up in size to full-scale figures.

9 The *ignoble* grotesque stems from "delight in the contemplation of bestial vice, and the expression of low sarcasm" which, according to Ruskin, is "the most hopeless state into which the human mind can fall"; rather than horror, it provokes our disgust (John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 3: The Fall [London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1873], 121, 143). Keeping to Ruskin's distinctions (and putting to one side the anachronism of applying theories of the grotesque, Renaissance or otherwise, to the Gothic), the gargoyle's often frightful appearance would qualify it for grotesque *nobility*. Then again, its unnatural monstrousness would debase it; only by being grounded in natural phenomena could a monstrous grotesque be ennobled, actually appear terrible, and approach the sublime (169). See Mark Dorrian, "The Breath on the Mirror: Notes on Ruskin's Theory of the Grotesque," in *Chora Four: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, ed. Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Stephen Parcell (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 25–48. Ruskin's volume on the Gothic, however, offers almost no perspective on its architectural grotesques: the medieval builder he so admires "endeavoured to make his work beautiful, but never expected it to be strange. And we incapacitate ourselves altogether from fair judgment of his intention, if we forget that, when it was built, it rose in the midst of other work fanciful and beautiful as itself; that every dwelling-house in the middle ages was rich with the same ornaments and quaint with the same grotesques which fretted the porches and animated the gargoyles of the cathedral; that what we now regard with doubt and wonder, as well as with delight, was then the natural continuation, into the principal edifice of the

city, of the style which was familiar to every eye throughout all its lanes and streets ...” (John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2: *The Sea Stories* [New York: Cosimo, 2007], 97–98). The grotesque is thus glossed over and deliberately “deferred” to volume three (the discussion of its “morbid influence” on the Renaissance), given Ruskin’s confidence that an educated reader will know of the “universal instinct of the Gothic imagination” “to delight in fantastic and ludicrous, as well as in sublime, images” (203).

- 10 Freidenberg’s and Bakhtin’s views are compared in Aron J. Guriewicz (Aaron Gurevich), “Z historii groteski: ‘góra’ i ‘dół’ w średniowiecznej literaturze łacińskiej,” Polish trans. Wiktoria Krzemień, in *Groteska*, ed. Michał Glowinski (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2003), 103–124. See also source texts: Olga Freidenberg, *Poetika syuzheta i zhanra* [Poetics of Subject and Genre] (Moskva: Labirint, 1997); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968) (the quoted phrase is from p. 91).
- 11 Indeed, until the late thirteenth century, graven grotesques appeared in mostly hidden spots inside ecclesiastical buildings; only later did they migrate outside and on to public structures like town halls, fountains (e.g., the gargoyles of Nuremberg’s *Schöner Brunnen*), or choir stalls. See Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, *Marginal Sculpture in Medieval France* (Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1995), 134, and Dorothy and Henry Kraus, *The Hidden World of Misericords* (New York: Braziller, 1975).
- 12 The gush of water from gutters resembled digestive noises and, visually, the act of vomiting or evacuation, all sourced in the body (the anthropomorphic variety of gargoyle made use of orifices at either end to discharge water). The “body” of the Church was on constant guard against bodily noises and functions: “[F]or the monks . . . every belch and rumble in the stomach signalled an invasion of their bodies. Just as the mouth and other orifices, such as the eyes, had to be kept guarded against the onslaught of evil, the entrances, doorways and windows at Aulnay [a Romanesque church] are those most entrusted with the protective gaze of deformed forms” (Michael Camille, *The Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992], 75).
- 13 The high/low distinction is for Hugo not without a hitch: identifying the grotesque with the low demeans it. Here is what he has to say: “Christianity has led poetry to the truth. Like it, the modern Muse must look at things more loftily, and more broadly. She must feel that not everything in creation is ‘beautiful’ in human terms, that there is ugliness alongside beauty, deformity next door to gracefulness, grotesquerie just on the other side of sublimity, evil with goodness, darkness with light”; “Poetry must resolve to do what Nature does: to mingle (though not to confound) darkness with light, the sublime with the ridiculous — in other words, body with soul, animal with spirit, since poetry and religion always have the same point of departure. Everything hangs together”; “[B]oth as a means of contrast and as a goal alongside the sublime, I find the grotesque as rewarding as any source of artistic inspiration that Nature could possibly supply . . . The universal beauty that ancient artists solemnly spread over everything did have its monotonous side; a single tone, endlessly reiterated, can become tiring after a while. It’s hard to produce much variety when one sublimity follows another — and we do need an occasional rest from everything, even from beauty. Now, the grotesque may act as a pause, a contrast, a point of departure from which we can approach what is beautiful with fresher and keener powers of perception. A salamander can set off a water-sprite; a gnome can embellish a sylph” (Victor Hugo, Preface to *Cromwell* [1827], in *The Essential Victor Hugo*, trans. and ed. E.H. and M.A. Blackmore [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 23, 24, 27).
- 14 The relevant passage is: “[W]e find on the same page strictly pious illustrations of the hagiographical text as well as free designs not connected with the story [which] represent chimeras . . . comic devils, jugglers performing acrobatic tricks, masquerade figures, and parodical scenes — that is, purely grotesque, carnivalesque themes . . . Not only miniatures but the decorations of medieval churches, as well as religious sculpture, present a similar co-existence of the pious and the

grotesque. . . . However, in medieval art a strict dividing line is drawn between the pious and the grotesque; they exist side by side but never merge" (Bakhtin, 96).

- 15 As Stephen Aylward explains, Lotman saw art as establishing similarity and difference, the former giving rise to the value-laden distinction between the aesthetics of identity (*estetika tozhdestva*), the latter to the aesthetics of opposition (*estetika protivopostavleniia*), which Aylward chose to render as "aesthetics of contrast" (*contrast* being weaker and more open than *opposition*). "[T]he aesthetics of identity describes works that tend towards either generalization or fulfilling strict genre conventions. The aesthetics of contrast applies to those works that tend towards greater complexity or defying existing genre conventions (*Lektsii* 173–74)" (Stephen Aylward, "Poshlost' in Nabokov's *Dar* through the Prism of Lotman's Literary Semiotics" [M.A. thesis, University of Waterloo, 2011], 64; his source is Iu.M. Lotman, *Lektsii po struktural'noi poetike: vvedenie, teoriia stikha* [Lessons from Structural Poetics: Introduction, Theory of Verse] [Providence: Brown University Press, 1968], 170–76). Lotman's "aesthetics of contrast" has thus mainly to do with a diachronic relationship between rules and practices, and little to do with spatial and temporal juxtapositions in and of artworks, where, to be sure, rules are necessary to note the contrast.
- 16 The question might be sharpened if we entertain Hugo's thought (if only to turn around and take issue with it) that it was with the decline of the "total" and "sovereign" cathedral art, with the waning of Gothic architecture, that the other arts began to emancipate themselves and acquire the grandeur needed to inspire their serious study as a *system* in which architecture would become "an art like any other," if not lesser for the loss of its "subjects" (Hugo, "Ceci tuera cela," *Notre-Dame de Paris* [1831], accessed October 19, 2012, [http://www.hylandmadrid.com/libros/fr/notre\\_dame/23.html](http://www.hylandmadrid.com/libros/fr/notre_dame/23.html)). That said, the Gothic cathedral "belonged to the people" and was the *jeu d'esprit* of popular artists who unabashedly, "under the pretext of service to God," developed art "to magnificent proportions" (ibid.).



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# AUTOPOIETIC ART SYSTEMS AND AESTHETIC SWARMS:

Notes on

Polyphonic Purity and  
Algorithmic Emergence

Jason Hoelscher

## Introduction

Modern art is often described as *art for art's sake*, as addressing its own manifest qualities while being largely unconcerned with external considerations — a view that tends toward closed, analytic systems of aesthetic purity. Figures such as Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg, and Joseph Kosuth described a progressive, teleological drive in modern art, implying a final state of aesthetic and mediumistic perfection, a concretized *modernism as being*. I believe, however, that modern art was instead predicated on an open-ended, algorithmic process of *becoming*, a system more akin to biological unfolding than to finalizable processes found in resolvable systems like mathematics. Such an interpretive realignment has major implications for modernism in general and for our understanding of modernist differentiation and specificity in particular.

The present essay proposes an interconnected model of disciplinary differentiation as a nested aggregate of autopoietic systems, which interact as nodal points in topologically fluid networks oriented toward perpetual boundary exploration and signal exchange. These networks periodically undergo nonlinear, autocatalytic transitions into emergent phenomena known as swarm formations. The formal properties of any given swarm are determined by equilibrial tensions between the swarm's internal properties and the external pressures exerted by temporal and conceptual boundary conditions imposed by the adjacent possible, a kind of map of potentially-realizable “next-step” future conditions.

As we will see, this hybridization of concepts — operating at the intersection of biology, physics, and here, aesthetics — articulates a multivalent modernism that accounts for observed events in art history, while opening new possibilities for interpretation of those events' meaning and of their mechanisms of formal manifestation. The model here proposed has an additional virtue of articulating alternatives to antiquated, hazily defined metaphysical notions of “change” and “progress,” offering instead a coalescent read of densely-interlocked, resonating paradigms from contemporary scientific approaches to flux, transformation and ambiguity. While the set of ideas invoked is admittedly complex at times, each concept will be defined as it is introduced. Further, while it is hoped that the ideas presented are robust enough to apply to a range of creative fields like literature and music, the examples herein are drawn from the visual arts, that being the field in which I am trained and with which I am most familiar.

I will establish the framework of modern art to which I am responding — primarily post-war American modernism, but extending briefly to earlier European forms — by considering particular ideas of Clement Greenberg, Joseph Kosuth, Immanuel Kant, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Jack Burnham; reviewing the

literature of autopoietic systems by Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, Heinz von Foerster, and Niklas Luhmann; and concluding with select contemporary concepts pertaining to eventalization; complex adaptive systems; the adjacent possible and emergent phenomena, developed by John Holland, Alain Badiou, Michel Foucault, Arthur Danto, and Stuart Kauffman.

## Analytic Autonomy: Art for Art for Art's Sake

The notion of art for art's sake originated in the early nineteenth century; by the midpoint of the twentieth century the idea of artistic autonomy had been concentrated to the point that, ostensibly, any themes or ideas extrinsic to the medium itself were to be purged for the sake of idealist purity. Such a reductive approach to artistic creation led quickly to closed, analytic systems in which the synthetic incorporation of representation, illusionistic picture space or narrative were considered impure — and thus aesthetically taboo.

Writing in 1960, Clement Greenberg claimed that the goal of modernist art was to eliminate from each medium any quality that might be shared with other mediums, and thus

would each art be rendered “pure,” and in its “purity” find the guarantee of its standard of quality .... “Purity” meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.<sup>1</sup>

Nine years later Joseph Kosuth pushed the idea of purity even further, defining a conceptually ingressive involution that we might call *art for art for art's sake* by writing that “a work of art is a kind of *proposition* presented within the context of art as a comment on art.”<sup>2</sup> Kosuth quoted A.J. Ayer's surmise that a “proposition is analytic when its validity depends solely on the definitions of the symbols it contains,”<sup>3</sup> summing up with the declaration that works of art “are analytic propositions. That is, if viewed within their context — as art — they provide no information what-so-ever about any matter of fact.”<sup>4</sup>

Through Greenberg and Kosuth we see art presented as *autotelic*, as an object or concept that only has purpose inherent to itself. While such a self-contained, analytic approach shares structural components with the methodology of Immanuel Kant, whom Greenberg describes as the first modernist, there is also a strong current of Hegelian, dialectical progress inherent in such a drive toward purity.<sup>5</sup> Without naming it as such, Greenberg writes of this dialectical drive by describing painting's progressive purging of impurities — in this case of sculptural, spatial illusionism — that occurred in European painting from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, resulting in a kind of painterly synthesis “so flat indeed that it could hardly contain recognizable images.”<sup>6</sup>

It seems that the eventual goal of such a progression would be the achievement of a point beyond which an artistic antithesis would no longer be possible, having attained

a final state of purification and perfection. This long-term teleological drive in modern art is thus predicated on a notion we might call finalizability, borrowing the term from Mikhail Bakhtin: art is finalizable in that it is an endeavor that can be finished, a closed system that can be resolved and considered complete.<sup>7</sup>

Such a model provides a useful framework through which to understand reductivist tendencies in modernism, but it is nonetheless highly problematic. In his *Critique of Judgment*, for example, Kant describes the work of art as operating with a degree of open-endedness, a teleologically ambiguous “purposiveness without purpose” that distinguishes it from resolvable fields of human endeavor such as science or mathematics.<sup>8</sup> An end-game teleological interpretation of modernism — or at least of the modernism espoused by Greenberg, et. al. — would appear to imply its own purpose, that of an eventual conclusion through achievement of a final state. While Greenberg cites Kant with some frequency in order to ground his ideas about art, the kind of teleology his writings suggest is a type that Kant himself reserved for mechanical systems that operate according to a definable purpose, rather than the open, ostensibly endless processes one finds in biological life forms, works of art, and other phenomena not explicitly subsumable by concepts or final causes.<sup>9</sup>

Teleologically finalizable creativity might therefore be considered more akin to the work of a scientist or technician — and therefore perhaps not “art” at all — due to an essential difference

between a work which, once created, can be studied and understood down to its very roots, and a work which provides endless food for thought and is as inexhaustible as the world itself. The steps of scientific progress can be repeated identically. A work of art cannot be repeated, and is always unique and complete.<sup>10</sup>

A finalizable, mechanical teleology of modern art is thus problematic because art in such a narrative is either incapable of attaining a state of purification — thus failing at what seems a major, if implicit, goal of late modernism — or else it is *not actually art*, being instead only a reasonable facsimile thereof that operates within the purposive, teleological framework of final causes and resolvable systems.

Such a narrow read of modern “art” then is predicated on an analytic autonomy, an ingressive dialectical progress toward finality that defines boundaries in order to prevent contamination from impurities like picture space, narrative, and other synthetic elements. Although this understanding of modernism appears to align with observed postwar American art history and discourse, it is my belief that modernism was not predicated on a teleologically static and closed *analytic autonomy* but rather on an emergent, algorithmic process that I will here call *autopoietic autonomy*, a conceptual realignment with important implications for understanding how artistic styles emerge, differentiate, and change.

## Autopoietic Autonomy: Algorithmic Systems Aesthetics

Autopoietic processes drive bounded, interactive systems like cellular metabolism or ecosystems, capable of high degrees of both self-sustaining autonomy and interactive feedback relations with surrounding systems. An autopoietic model applied to postwar modernism would therefore be predicated less on the creation and reinforcement of boundaries for the sake of preventing impurity and more on the articulation and maintenance of boundaries in order to distinguish between the system in question and other systems operative within the same context. The difference thus hinges on the distinction between *boundaries for the sake of exclusion* and *boundaries for the enhancement and facilitation of interchange*.

A simple analogy is the difference between a bowl of water and a bowl of ice cubes. While each bowl contains the same substance, the liquid water is in a way incapable of interaction because it is manifest in a single, homogeneous form. The ice cubes, however, possess defined boundaries and can therefore interact with and be jostled into different configurations among the other ice cubes. Through the creation of boundaries by sectioning into discrete units, interaction is facilitated more effectively than by the undifferentiated, ostensibly “purer” liquid form.

The difference between analytic autonomy and autopoietic autonomy thus derives in large part from the functions of the boundaries set in place, including their roles in swarm formation, as will be shown below. *Analytic autonomous boundaries* keep impure elements out; *autopoietic autonomous boundaries* facilitate interaction and hybridization between aesthetic and memetic units. Notable examples include the reciprocal influences of early film on Cubism and of Cubism on stage design, the influence of Jungian thought on abstract expressionism, or Robert Rauschenberg’s frequent interweaving of performance, visual arts, and dance. Such syntheses are common in art history but are often excluded from more analytic or formalist narratives of art perhaps because they do not fit such narratives’ constructed storylines. Among such oft-overlooked models of art is that of systems aesthetics, a relational model proposed by Jack Burnham, which is predicated on the fact that while “the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control.”<sup>11</sup>

Whereas Greenberg considered the mediumistic differentiation of modernism in a manner appropriate to the Cold War era — as a type of fortification — such medium differentiation may also be considered as an example of boundary articulation wherein a form stakes out a position from which to interact with other cultural forms. This alternative interpretation releases modernism from many of the extraneous discursive limitations that have accumulated over the years. For example, such a multivalent, explicitly interactive modernism not only explains the exploratory drive of the avant-garde, but also allows for the reintroduction of movements and artists once purged as “impure,” such as Francis Picabia’s late work, Surrealism and Art Brut. Further, this reading

facilitates a modernism that — as per Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic regime and distribution of the sensible — breaks down the partitions “between works of pure art and ... the decorative arts,”<sup>12</sup> asserting “the absolute singularity of art [while destroying] any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity [and establishing] the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself.”<sup>13</sup> It also accounts for the idea of “many modernisms” noted in recent years: there have always been many modernisms — autopoietic, interactive aesthetic systems operating in resonance — a fact that was obscured by end-game narratives that foregrounded only one specific modernist formulation.<sup>14</sup>

This ability of discretely articulated units to maintain coherence in relation to surrounding units leads to reciprocally defined boundary formation and dialogism grounded in autopoietic process: the boundary of any given self-sustaining system, such as a specific medium separated from others by formalist discourse, is mutually and differentially defined by the surrounding, self-sustaining systems. These relations create opportunities for exchange and interaction, creating a space of dynamic equilibrium in which each component maintains autonomy while also engaging in high-level interaction, much like cells in a body that maintain boundary coherence as individual cells yet also contribute to the formation of a larger organism.

The term *autopoiesis*, coined by the biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, describes systems in terms similar to Kant’s articulation of the qualities of mechanical and biological processes. Here is the definition of autopoietic machine systems used by Maturana and Varela:

[An] autopoietic machine is a machine organized as a network of processes of production of components that produces the components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in the space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network. It follows that an autopoietic machine continuously generates and specifies its own organization through its operation as a system of production of its own components.<sup>15</sup>

I am combining this definition of machine autopoiesis with the same authors’ definition of biological autopoiesis, a “self-asserting capacity of living systems to maintain their identity through the active compensation of deformations” in order to suggest a reading of the art world as an open, rather than closed, system.<sup>16</sup> Considered thusly, the art world operates in a conceptual space somewhere between a mechanical system — because art is, after all, a human-made construct — and a distributed series of feedback relations known as *complex adaptive systems*, conceptual networks incorporating quasi-autonomous agents that operate within loosely defined discursive frameworks.

As noted earlier, Kant posited a difference between a work that “can be studied and understood down to its very roots [and] a work which provides endless food for thought and is as inexhaustible as the world itself.”<sup>17</sup> The former resolvable (and hence mechanical) interpretation applies more readily to a Greenbergian read of modern art: a system with a final cause, possessing an ostensibly understandable and definable end-point. An autopoietic interpretation of modernism, on the other hand, suggests a reading

akin to the latter “inexhaustible” and unfinalizable qualities.<sup>18</sup> An open system of modernism thus operates with what *appears* to be a progressive drive, predicated less on finalizable analytic linearity than on open, lateral exploration.

Does such a model fit the observed, historical facts? Art history shows a series of radical changes from 1860 to 1960, a sequence easily interpreted as analytic, dialectical progress. It’s possible, however, to see these changes as less of a Hobbesian aesthetic battle of all against all and more as an exploration of possibility, an open system of algorithmic becoming. An algorithm is a sequence of step-by-step instructions that leads to the calculation of a result. Some algorithms reach a defined end-point — the problem is solved — while others are more open, reaching a series of intermediate conclusions from which additional stages continue. Still other algorithms are endless, such as the Fibonacci sequence or the self-similar algorithmic base of fractals (i.e. “fractional algorithm”), an example of which is a repetition of the instruction, *square self + 1*. By the very nature of its instructions, such an algorithm is structurally incapable of reaching an endpoint.

The idea of unfinalizable, algorithmic unfolding is relevant because it accounts for the apparent avant-garde progressive drive while obviating the need of a teleologic endpoint. In other words, modernist formal and conceptual exploration did in fact operate with a certain type of purposiveness albeit one primed not so much toward analytic purity as toward synthetic interactivity. However, as per Kant this algorithmic progressive drive was a purposiveness without purpose — similar, for example, to the way a Fibonacci or fractal algorithm operates with a directed yet non-specific purposiveness that differs from the explicitly defined purposiveness of a proprietary algorithm that anticipates and proposes future purchases on a commercial website. An algorithmic, teleonomic model of modern art thus reframes the exploratory, progressive force of modernism, no longer as a linear, dialectical drive toward an endpoint, but instead as a stage-by-stage exploration of adjacent aesthetic possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

Considered as an unfolding series of definable stages — goal-driven in the short term but not oriented toward a conclusion — modernism comes to be understood as a self-amplifying aesthetic cycle of [.../being/becoming/being/becoming/...], a step-by-step oscillating system of iterative, reciprocally-coded patterns in a state of dynamic equilibrium, which alternately crystallize and disperse in aperiodic aesthetic cycles that manifest as trends, fashions, and styles. These cycles of [crystallization/being] and [dispersion/becoming] create what is interpreted as the formation, evolution, and dissolution of art movements, systemic input/output composites that explore the local topological semioscape of available communicative and conceptual possibility.

In many ways similar to the nonlinear, unpredictable Kuhnian paradigm shifts that occur when enough incongruities have accumulated in a previously stable discipline, such a model of art is unfinalizable since each exploration opens additional exploratory possibilities. The Cubist exploration of the relationship of picture plane to picture surface, for example, was not an end in itself but rather opened up a vast range of possibilities and implications that were rigorously explored across future decades.



## From Art System to Emergent Art Swarm

In addition to boundary articulation, an equally important feature of autopoietic systems is their self-generative, autocatalytic capability. It can be argued that the art world possesses what is effectively — if only metaphorically — a metabolic system, made up of a dense network of artists, artworks, galleries, museums, theorists, curators, journals, discursive formations, and schools, that is by now self-sustaining and self-regulatory. Such an art world operates of its own accord: like cells in a body, artists, critics, and galleries may come and go, but the system itself continues, sometimes with a slow metabolism — low-innovation periods that produced relatively few well-known innovations in the visual arts — at other times with a fast metabolism — relatively high-innovation periods like the 1890s or 1960s. In this sense too, the art world is autopoietic, a system comprising smaller systems that “generate the elements of which they are composed precisely by means of those very elements,”<sup>20</sup> and in which “art thus becomes a self-determining and self-generating system that regulates itself according to its own internal coherences and contradictions,”<sup>21</sup> an idea that resonates intriguingly with what Hegel called art’s inner necessity.<sup>22</sup> Recall that autopoietic systems emphasize autonomy and boundary differentiation in order to better define a position relative to which an entity can most effectively interact with other entities in the local environment. This suggests the need to introduce a further definition of autonomy, drawing perhaps on physicist Heinz von Foerster, who defines an autonomous entity as a “recursively computing system [that] regulates its own regulation.”<sup>23</sup>

Visual art, an autopoietic cultural system among other autopoietic cultural systems like literature, film, or music — each of which is embedded within and regulated by still larger systems — regulates itself by way of its own internal, autopoietic subsystems like painting or sculpture. Each of these subsidiary autopoietic systems, while regulated from above, is also to a degree self-generative and self-regulatory according to critical, historical, commercial, and discursive priorities. In a series of metabolic feedback loops, these cumulative effects cyclically and syntagmatically scale up and down, shared by macrosystems and subsystems.

For example, in the “painting” autopoietic system shown in [Figure 1](#) — a subsystem of the “art” autopoietic macrosystem, which is in turn a subsystem of the still larger “culture” autopoietic system — brushstrokes and color choices (microscale) emergently coalesce into individual artworks (midscale), which accumulate to become an artist’s recognizable style (macroscale). This in turn feeds back into the system to influence individual artists (microscale) who interactively coalesce into schools of art (midscale), which contribute to the macroscale art world, which feeds back to influence microscale individual artistic choices in brushstroke, color, and so on.<sup>24</sup>

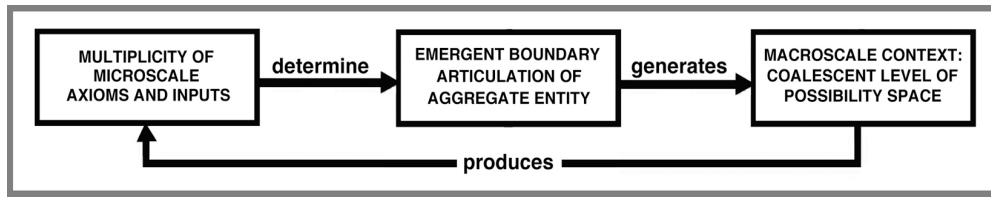


Figure 1: Painting as an autopoietic aesthetic feedback mechanism.

Image by Jason Hoelscher.

Considered thus, the feedback loops between art practices and art world suggest modernism as a type of complex adaptive system known as an emergent phenomenon. Emergent phenomena are nonlinear integrative effects that arise from a multiplicity of small inputs. “[T]he system is synthesized by combining a simple, fixed set of building blocks: rules, axioms, instructions or elements” which emerge from patterns or properties

that appear under the constraints imposed by the rules of combination. In complex adaptive systems, emergent properties often occur when coevolving signals and boundaries generate new levels of organization. Newer signals and boundaries can then emerge from combinations of building blocks at this new level of organization.<sup>25</sup>

Examples of emergent phenomena include the creation of “wetness” from an accumulation of H<sub>2</sub>O molecules, none of which individually is wet, or of individually non-signifying brushstrokes that coalesce into a meaningful painted image: the aggregate effect creates a quality empirically not present in, or predictable from, any individual component.<sup>26</sup>

The mechanisms of emergent phenomena closely correlate with Alain Badiou’s description of the site in which an event happens, which he describes as

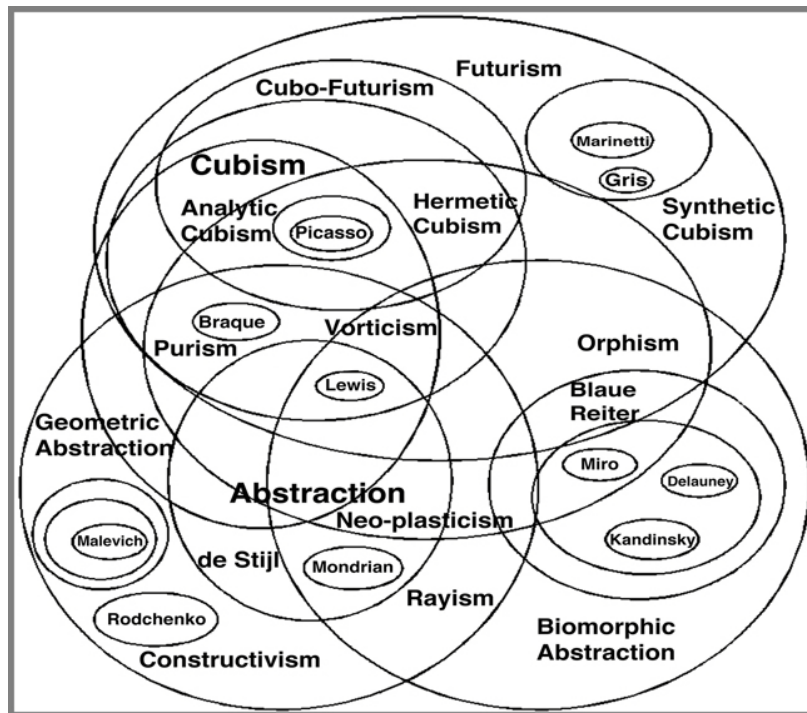
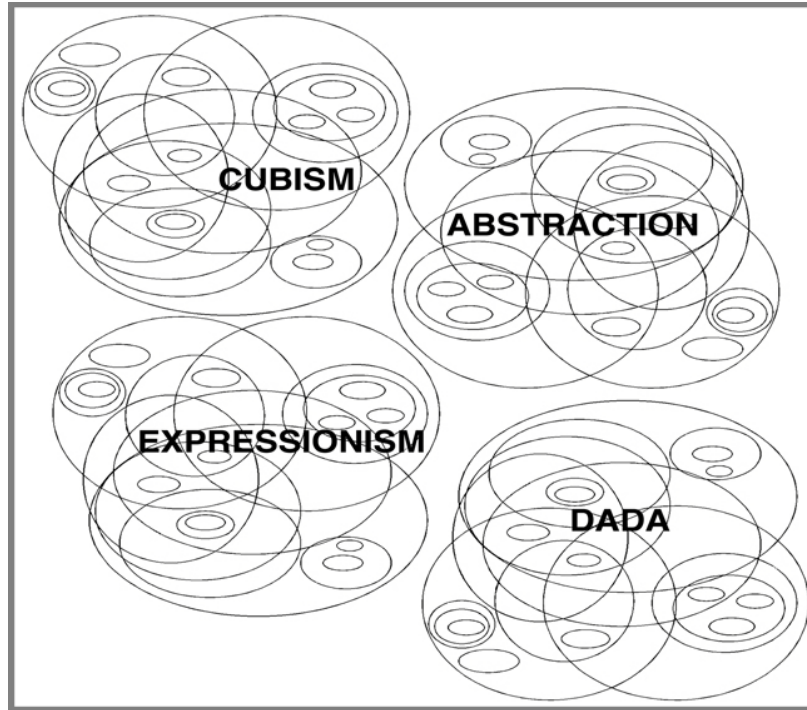
*an evental site X ... a multiple such that it is composed of, on the one hand, elements of the site, and on the other hand, itself .... That is, the event is a one-multiple made up of, on the one hand, all the multiples which belong to the site, and on the other hand, the event itself.*<sup>27</sup>

Such emergent eventalization — correlative both to Badiou’s usage and to a Foucauldian polyhedral causality — can be seen in the schooling of fish: no single fish determines a school’s path, but thousands of tiny, instantaneous behavioral feedback loops between thousands of fish result in what appears to be an intricately choreographed swarm. Such a swarm formation, akin to Badiou’s description of the event as a “one-multiple,” a macroentity made up of multiple smaller entities, arises from a multiplicity of causal inputs that coalesce in a nonlinear fashion: one moment the fish are distributed without apparent order, the next moment they swarm in response to their internal conditions, inputs from environmental pressures, and the actions of their immediate neighbors. Such a catalytic event reflects more than a simple model of linear cause and

effect, reflecting instead what Foucault termed “polyhedral” or multidimensional systemic inputs.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the sudden crystallization of art movements — such as Cubism, abstraction, pop or conceptual art — provides an example of what we might call *aesthetic swarming behavior*. Like schools of fish swimming in unison in response to an aggregation of tiny systemic inputs, schools of art and artists swarm in synchrony if the correct artistic, discursive, social, or technological precursor conditions are present. Analogous to biological swarms, such crystallizations emerge by way of nonlinear, multidimensional, polyhedrally causal inputs, forming a “one-multiple” macroentity — a school or stylistic category of art — composed of multiple microentities — artists who share discursive or pictorial concerns.<sup>29</sup> These create “behavioral pathways among the individual agents [that] are able to aggregate into these larger-scale organizations that survive and have behaviors on scales that are completely different from their constituent parts.”<sup>30</sup> The autopoietic nature of such an art swarm emerges from the differential tensions between the relative autonomy of the macrosystem and the relative, relational autonomies of the microsystems from which it forms.

Considering the fact that there are many schools of art, the art world can be seen as a network of nodes, each node an emergent swarm of artists active around a particular idea-complex. A network diagram of European modernism circa 1915 (Figure 2) might include a large nodal swarm around the prompts that constitute Cubism — emerging from the interests, actions, reactions, and feedback loops of Picasso, Braque, Gris, Leger, and others — with peripheral sub-swarms of futurism and orphism (Figure 3). In various degrees of proximity within the network would be other nodal swarms driven by the elements and axiomatic concerns that prompted the emergence of abstraction, expressionism, Dada, and other art schools/swarms of the era. Within this network would be figures like Duchamp, swarming at the peripheries of the Cubist and Dada nodes, and whose systemic inputs would in turn contribute to a later swarm when conditions were right for the emergence of conceptual art in the late 1950s and 1960s.



Figures 2 and 3: Emergent art swarm networks: European modernism. A model of the macroscale network of the European modernism art swarm ca. 1915, depicting four primary nodes of the era (above), with a detail view of an overlapping swarm node for Cubism and abstraction ca. 1915-1925 (below). Note that all nodal swarm positions and relationships are approximate and in flux. Images by Jason Hoelscher.

This latter quality of art swarms — that they crystallize fully only when the historical and conceptual moment is properly primed — can be clarified by a concept that theoretical biologist and complex systems theorist Stuart Kauffman terms *the adjacent possible*. The adjacent possible is the domain space of potential areas into which a system — whether it is evolutionary, technological, or economic — can expand or that it may reconfigure based on current resources and conditions.<sup>31</sup> As applied to art, breakthroughs in the adjacent possible prompt the self-organizational crystallization of new styles, discourses, and methodologies, depending on the prevailing conditions of the time — not by way of some type of essentialism or destiny but rather on the range of possible “next-step” developments opened by previous events. Like the conditions that led to such simultaneous, independent developments as the invention of calculus by Leibniz and Newton; the elaboration of the theory of evolution by Darwin and Wallace; the multiple inventions of the telephone in the 1870s by Alexander Graham Bell, Elisha Gray, and others; and hundreds of other examples across nearly all fields of human endeavor,<sup>32</sup> a set of precursor conditions and building blocks — physical or conceptual — become present, suggesting particular “next step” exploratory avenues of the adjacent possible that prompt an event crystallization to occur.<sup>33</sup> Again, note that this is not a deterministic process but an articulation of possibility space in which any given future stage may be more or less likely than others and subject to the vicissitudes of a range of inputs. Event A does not necessarily cause event B but rather opens a range of possibilities in which event B might manifest: for example, while the 1960s minimal art of Donald Judd was not “caused” by the development of geometric abstract art circa 1910, it could only have emerged in the space of possibilities opened up by the creation of abstract art in the western tradition.

Swarm formation occurs once a certain density threshold is reached, prompting a dramatic, nonlinear change in the total system: although inputs may have been accumulating for some time, the transition itself appears to be instantaneous. To take pictorial flatness as an example, an increasing flattening of picture space can be detected in many European paintings produced between 1550 and 1850, for example from Titian’s *Venus with Cupid, Dog and Partridge* to David’s *The Oath of the Horatii* to Courbet’s *The Stone Breakers*. From 1850 to 1900 this process of flattening intensifies dramatically, from Courbet to Manet to Cézanne: consider Courbet’s picture space to Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass* or to Cézanne’s *The Bathers (Study)*. From 1900 to 1915, from Cézanne to Picasso to Malevich, the system changes state drastically, flattening more in 15 years than in the previous 450 by way of a radical surge of formal and material exploration, immediately obvious by comparing Cézanne’s work to Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)* of 1907 or to Malevich’s *Black Square and Red Square* of 1915. The necessary ingredients for Cubism and abstraction as large-scale movements — a general turn away from mimetic representation, widespread attention to the material qualities of paints and physical supports, and the trend of flattening picture space — were widely extant in the adjacent possibility space of European painting by 1907 and 1911, respectively; accordingly those movements emerged quite suddenly among multiple practitioners, gaining prominence very quickly in multiple countries.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand Duchamp’s readymades were a few stages past the immediate adjacent possible of their era: while the experimental approaches of the era certainly allowed for the development of the readymade, the

precursors and intermediate stages were not yet present for it to have full impact until decades later (Figure 4). In Duchamp's case the catalyst for swarm formation was present long before the possibility space was conducive to actual swarm formation.

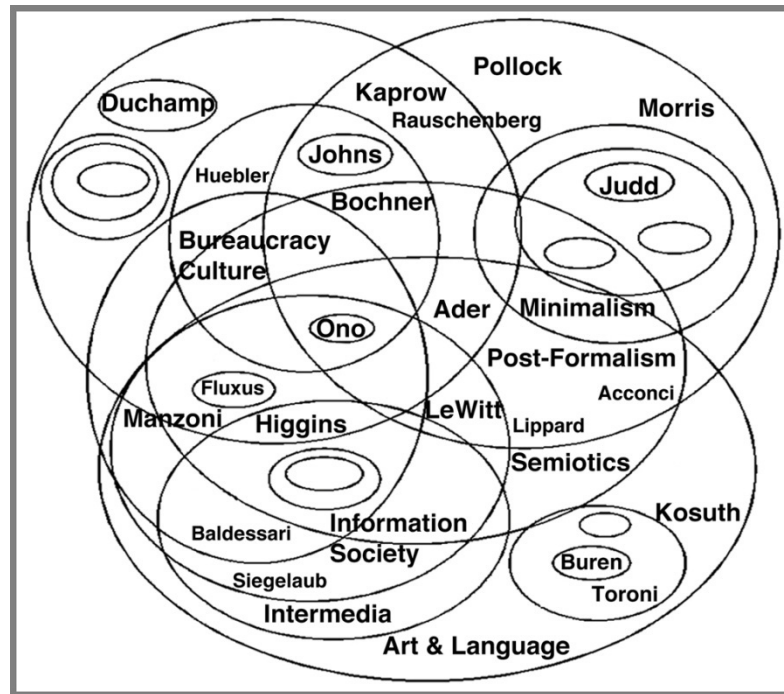


Figure 4: Emergent art swarm networks: Conceptual art, ca. 1965-1970.

A model of the conceptual art swarm node, which only fully emerged once precursor conditions such as bureaucracy culture, dawning information society, and post-formalist tendencies were present in its local, adjacent possibility space. Image by Jason Hoelscher.

In a compelling example of conceptual resonance, decades before Kauffman gave a name to the adjacent possible, Picasso's and Braque's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler described the multiple creation of Cubism in the summer of 1907 despite the fact that Braque and Picasso had not yet met and that "no connection existed between the two artists." Kahnweiler wrote:

in the whole history of art, were there not already sufficient proof that the appearance of the aesthetic product is conditioned in its particularity by the spirit of the time, that even the most powerful artists unconsciously execute its will, then this would be proof. Separated by distance, and working independently, the two artists devoted their most intense effort to paintings which share an extraordinary resemblance.<sup>35</sup>

While the mention of "the spirit of the time" can be interpreted in a Hegelian manner, it might be that the concept in fact describes the cumulative sensitivity of an era's participants to the conditions of adjacent possibility inherent to that period. In the case of Cubism, of all the artists then working it was Braque and Picasso who were perceptive

enough — not to mention attentive, open to, and sensitive to the possibilities of their surroundings — to take the next step based on art's prevailing post-Cézanne, post-realism, post-Denis conditions.

Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol provide a similar example of adjacent possible emergence over half a century later in 1961. Before either had shown their fine art publicly, they simultaneously and independently began to make — in what at the time seemed a highly unlikely and shocking turn — paintings based on comic strips. When Warhol visited the back office of Leo Castelli's Gallery that autumn, he was so shocked to see Lichtenstein's paintings — nearly identical in style and approach to his own — that he changed his own focus from comic strips to advertisements, soup cans, and pop stars.<sup>36</sup>

Such a seemingly unlikely overlap again illustrates how the presence of a specific set of building blocks prompts multiple, simultaneous emergent phenomena that we interpret as a *zeitgeist*: Hegel's "spirit of the time" is perhaps just another term for acute sensitivity to the composite input/output swarm formation potentials of an era's emergent possibility vectors. Here is Kauffman's description of the adjacent possible. Although this passage describes organic chemistry, it is applicable to art:

Note that the adjacent possible is indefinitely expandable. Once members have been realized in the current adjacent possible, a new adjacent possible, accessible from the enlarged actual that includes the novel molecules from the former adjacent possible, becomes available .... The substrates are present in the actual, and the products are not present in the actual, but only in the adjacent possible .... Other things being equal, the total system "wants" to flow into the adjacent possible.<sup>37</sup>

While Kauffman's quote suggests a teleologic reading, the quotes around his mention that "the total system 'wants' to flow" is more in line with the way water "wants" to flow to the lowest possible point: not because of some deterministic or teleological force but rather due to the way water interacts with physical conditions. If a defining feature of artistic creativity is the exploration of possibility and potential, it is not too big a leap to describe this feature as "wanting to flow" into the adjacent possible. Compare this to Hegel's assertion that "We may rest assured that it is the nature of truth to force its way to recognition when the time comes, and that it only appears when its time has come, and hence never appears too soon, and never finds a public that is not ripe to receive it."<sup>38</sup>

In 1964 Arthur Danto introduced the idea of the art world in an essay of the same name. For Danto the concept of an art world arose from his attempts to grapple with the fact that the art of his era had become difficult to recognize as art without a grasp of the theoretical underpinnings that defined it as such, creating a condition in which a viewer "might not be aware he was on artistic terrain without an artistic theory to tell him so."<sup>39</sup> For Danto the slippery terrain of the art world which is "constituted [as] artistic in virtue of artistic theories," was exemplified by Warhol's *Brillo Box* of 1964.<sup>40</sup> Of the *Brillo Box*, Danto notes that

without theory, one is unlikely to see it as art, and in order to see it as part of the artworld one must have mastered a good deal of artistic theory .... It could not have been art fifty years ago. But then there could not have been, everything being equal, flight insurance in the Middle Ages .... The world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one.<sup>41</sup>



As with Kahnweiler's description of Picasso's and Braque's independent co-creation of Cubism, and Hegel's claim that truth forces its way to recognition when the time is right, Danto's observation that the world is only ready for certain things at certain times provides an additional illustration of adjacent possibility operating at the deepest sublevels of autopoietic, artistic emergence.<sup>42</sup>

The challenge can be raised that an emergent, autopoietic model of artistic swarm formation by way of the adjacent possible undervalues the creativity of the individual, perhaps reconfiguring the role of the artist from that of an independent, creative subject to that of a mere vehicle through which historical forces are deterministically manifest. I believe it does quite the opposite, reframing the "genius" as an individual particularly attuned and perceptive to the undercurrents and subtleties of their era. In the system I describe the artist's creativity emerges not by way of some mysteriously metaphysical, vaguely defined "gift of creativity," but through a heightened sensitivity to the prevailing intertextual and intersubjective conditions at play within the cultural moment. This process does not just happen but can be cultivated through education, training, and practice. Anyone who has taken studio courses in art school will recall the emphasis on paying close attention to one's surroundings, training that perhaps goes beyond sensitivity to visual stimuli to include sensitive observation of possibility space as well.


Far from a deterministic model that robs the individual of agency, or an analytic autonomy that denies interactivity and dialogism, an autopoietic art emerges from the interplay among and feedback loops between every individual within a given sociocultural system: individual style arises because the patterns of possibility reveal themselves in different ways to different individuals. Art spreads and changes across time and space — in response both to external events and to internalized, inherited techniques, ideas, and concerns that have developed over centuries — by way of what we might consider memetic, aesthetic, and discursive evolutionary selection pressures. These pressures contribute to swarm emergence on a macro level of discourse by way of the limits and precursors of adjacent possibility and at the micro level by way of the competition, cooperation, and interaction between individuals that is facilitated by autopoietic boundary differentiation. Such a seemingly minor shift from an analytic to an autopoietic autonomy thus results in an intertextual, intersubjective system of considerable explanatory and exploratory power.

## Conclusion

The model of modernism here proposed — a system of pluralistically autonomous swarms with interactive, permeable aesthetic information boundaries — argues against an interpretation of modern art as a closed form of analytic autonomy and hegemonic



purity, describing instead an open modernism of autopoietic autonomy and interaction. More than just a flight of fancy, this reformulation is testable in that it can account for such aspects of modernism as avant-garde exploration, the simultaneous, multiple emergences of key movements and trends, and the differentiation and specificity of disciplines and mediums.

Further, by deprioritizing artistic purification, an autopoietic and emergent model reconfigures artistic change from a goal-directed teleological progress — *finalizable analytic autonomy* — to a perpetual exploratory drive predicated on an open-ended algorithmic process — *unfinalizable autopoietic autonomy*. In effect dependent on interaction and feedback relations, art is thus seen to be an emergent, adaptive system driven not toward purified stasis but by the polyphonic, algorithmic interplay of its components in a state of perpetual aesthetic and conceptual signal exchange in pursuit of a goal that is by definition unattainable but that is worth pursuing precisely because of its very lack of finalizable attainability. 

## Notes

- 1 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 86.
- 2 Joseph Kosuth, "Art after Philosophy," in *Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 19-20.
- 3 Ibid., 20.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., Greenberg, 85.
- 6 Ibid., 89.
- 7 While I am not aware that writers such as Greenberg and Kosuth explicitly prescribed a ideal artistic end-game, the sequence of artistic purges and purifications they describe — which are in fact illustrated by comparing Greenberg's essay at the beginning of the 1960s with Kosuth's even more stringent advocacy of purification at the end of that decade — seems to me to imply a direction toward an endpoint, a final resolution when a state of purity will be attained.
- 8 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71.
- 9 Kant's consideration of differing types of teleology takes place in the second half of his *Critique of Judgement*.
- 10 Karl Jaspers, *Kant*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Ralph Manheim, from *The Great Philosophers*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1957), 81. It might be argued that mechanical or digital reproduction of a work of art contradicts Kant's assertion vis-à-vis repeatability. I would argue, however, that what is repeated is not the art itself but rather *the delivery device for the art experience*. Artwork multiples, such as Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* or Donald Judd's serial cubes, are not diluted into magazine pages or furnishings simply by being available as multiples; rather each individual manifestation maintains and delivers coherently unfinalizable artistic qualities that just happen to be available in more than one space at a time, like multiple windows open to the same scene.
- 11 Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum* VII, no. 1 (1968): 32.
- 12 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2006), 15.
- 13 Ibid., 23.
- 14 See for example the following: Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Edward Winters, *Aesthetics and Architecture* (New York: Continuum Books, 2007); Katy Siegel, *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2006).
- 15 Humberto S. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Boston, MA: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980), 78-79.
- 16 Ibid., 135.
- 17 Jaspers, 81.
- 18 Of additional interest here is Eco's notion of the open artwork, a work that, though complete, remains open "to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli." See Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Artwork," in *The Open Artwork*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

- 19 In a similar vein, such a model of art allows for the reinstatement of something akin to a Lyotardian metanarrative, but without the imposition of constructed belief systems and other ideological baggage that tends to accompany notions of metanarrativity.
- 20 Niklas Luhmann, "The Work of Art and the Self-Reproduction of Art," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 1077.
- 21 Ibid., 1078.
- 22 G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume I*, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 55.
- 23 Heinz von Foerster, *Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition* (New York and Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2003), 226.
- 24 This process can be further understood as one wherein the content that flows through a system modifies the formal parameters of that system and in which the formal parameters in turn loop back to modify the content further, creating a recursive cycle of mutual and differential content/form reconfiguration. Such reciprocal influence contributes to the formation of specific art styles: the differential form/content relationship of the stylistic system known as "abstract expressionism" exists in a different state of tension than does the form/content relationship of the stylistic system known as "neo-plasticism," for example.
- 25 John H. Holland, *Signals and Boundaries: Building Blocks for Complex Adaptive Systems* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 108, 114.
- 26 A consideration of Jürgen Habermas' writings on intersubjective communication and meaning formation in terms of emergent swarm phenomena — as a semiotic swarm aggregate perhaps — would seem a potentially valuable enterprise. Similarly, his assertion of modernity as an incomplete project, vis-à-vis attempts at the reintegration of Enlightenment and modernist specialization, might benefit from the framework proposed in this paper as well. Unfortunately both ideas are beyond the scope of the present essay.
- 27 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York, NY: Continuum, 2006), 179. Emphases in original.
- 28 Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method," in *Power*, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley and Others, vol. 3 of *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: The New Press, 2001), 227. See for example, "As a way of lightening the weight of causality, 'eventalization' thus works by constructing around the singular event analyzed as process a 'polygon' or, rather 'polyhedron' of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and can never properly be taken as finite ... the further one breaks down the processes under analysis, the more one is enabled and indeed obliged to construct their external relations of intelligibility." While Foucault is writing of the multiplicity of events that lead to the use of incarceration and prisons, the basic idea itself — of causatively complex, multivalent input/output matrices — seems of potential relevance to the development of artistic discourse as well.
- 29 Admittedly at the risk of mixing metaphors, the earlier mention of an art world metabolism provides a way to think of an art swarm, given that the constituent components of an art world "metabolism" must work in concert to crystallize a possibility into a movement or school. An artist working alone in a studio achieves little if the network of galleries, critics, and patrons do not amplify her or his creative input across and through the pathways of the system, setting up conditions for the possibility of emergent swarm behavior.
- 30 John H. Miller and Scott E. Page, *Complex Adaptive Systems: An Introduction to Computational Models of Social Life*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 49.
- 31 Stuart Kauffman, *Investigations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 142.
- 32 William Ogburn and Dorothy Thomas, "Are Inventions Inevitable? A Note on Social Evolution," in *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1 (March 1922), 83.

- 33 While beyond the scope of this paper, it might be fruitful to consider the florescence of such philosophical “golden ages” as classical Greece, 18th and 19th century Germany, and post-World War II France through the framework of the adjacent possible and the attendant precursor conditions amenable to emergent swarms. Similarly, the relationship between Kuhnian paradigm shifts and emergent, spontaneous self-organizational conceptual systems would seem to be a strong avenue for study as well.
- 34 This could be seen as a model that affirms a previous state of affairs, thus contradicting Badiou’s description of an event as a disruption of the order that supports it. My intent here is to argue a variation of this idea in which the new “event” of a swarm emerges from a recalibration — inherently neither precisely an affirmation nor a disruption while perhaps a bit of each — of the order that supports it, pushing the boundaries of its local possibility space and recrystallizing into a new state not predictable from the earlier state of affairs.
- 35 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, “The Rise of Cubism,” in *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 210.
- 36 Tony Scherman and David Dalton, *Pop: The Genius of Andy Warhol* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), 70.
- 37 Ibid., Kauffman, 142–143.
- 38 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (New York: Dover, 1807/2003), 42.
- 39 Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” in *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*, third edition, ed. Stephen David Ross (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 471.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid., 479.
- 42 Such overlapping manifestations of the adjacent possible are the subject of a follow-up to the present essay, titled *Complexity Aesthetics: Recursive Information, the Adjacent Possible and Artistic Emergence*.

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# POVERTY/LINE:

Aesthetic and Political Subjects in  
Santiago Sierra's "Line" Photographs

David W. Janzen



In a series of installations, contemporary artist Santiago Sierra remunerated marginalized people to have a single black line tattooed across their backs. Captured in medium-close up, black and white photographs, documentation of the works places the inked line horizontally and slightly askew across the middle of the frame. The grainy sobriety of the photos renders textures that resemble police documentation, an aesthetic matched by the works' factual titles: "[Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person](#)" (1998),<sup>1</sup> "[250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Remunerated People](#)" (1999)<sup>2</sup> and "[160 cm line Tattooed on 4 People](#)" (2000).<sup>3</sup> Accompanying descriptions offer basic details about the individuals in the photographs and the immediate economic situation surrounding their participation, gesturing at the poverty – economic but also subjective – of the participants.<sup>4</sup>

Critical accounts emphasize the way in which these works produce an ambiguous social and ethical experience: an immediate discomfort with the ethical transgressions enacted by the works collides with, and is exacerbated by, the viewer's recognition of his or her own complicity, as viewer, in the violence. Such socio-experiential accounts, however, largely overlook the significance of the fact that the tattoo – the material remainder of violence – takes the form of the line. Since the early twentieth century the line has been central to the artistic struggle to destroy any immediate relation between, on the one hand, artistic *presentation* of forms and, on the other, existing modes of *representation*, the latter understood both as mimetic representation and, more broadly, as the aesthetic structures or categories by which perception is ordered.

Using both oppressed human subjects and the linear form, Sierra's "Line" photographs intervene in two distinct spheres: the social sphere of economic marginalization and the artistic sphere of aesthetic form. Within these photographs these two elements are not reconcilable but remain in contradiction. Through this contradiction, Sierra's work poses the question of the potentially dialectical relation between the law-bound structures of representation and the site of material presentation; or, more concretely, between an experience of the artwork as mediated by social categories and identities (class, poverty, labor, and so on) and an account of the artwork as mediated by aesthetic categories (most fundamentally, those of space and time).

On the most immediate level, the "Line" installations present this duality as a tension between two basic elements – the body and the line – both of which potentially become the figure reducing the other to ground. In considering this tension, my guiding hypothesis is twofold. First, the tension between body and line constructs separate and irreducible trajectories: one in which the presentation of human subjects (the bodies and their incumbent lumpen qualities) takes priority; and another in which the geometric form of the line takes priority. Second, I suggest that these trajectories demarcate a more general problem for experiencing and understanding art – a problem that requires a decision between the primacy of the social world and the primacy of geometric forms. In short, the "Line" installations pose a critical and timely question: whither artistic presentation? Do we ground artistic presentation in the socialized body or in geometric form? Within which mode of abstraction do we situate our experience of the artwork? The task herein is to develop the critical and philosophical implications of these questions as they are posed by these works.<sup>5</sup>



Within the social aesthetic, which I'll develop through the work of theorist and critic Claire Bishop, the subject of the "Line" photographs appears as a set of objectified bodies that bear particular qualities: both social characteristics (including the biographical details that accompany the photographs) as well as the material characteristics of the bodies themselves. On the other hand, within a geometric aesthetic, which situates the work within an aesthetic trajectory, the subject of the "Line" photographs emerges from an interrogation of the form of the line itself. While this latter trajectory incorporates a diverse set of works and ideas – among them, Joan Miró's horizon, Barnett Newman's zips, and Margaret Bourke-White's photographs of bread lines come immediately to mind – the primary aim herein is to explore how Sierra's installations recover and reconfigure the implications of an artistic event that finds its most focused instantiation in Soviet constructivism: specifically, the recognition of the line as the essential aesthetic form that marks the minimal, abstract difference between ground and form.<sup>6</sup>

I suggest that a social-aesthetic interpretation tends to reduce the work of art to a didactic representation determined by an extrinsic discourse. In demonstrating this limitation, I argue that Bishop liberates artistic presentation from ethical representations only to subsume presentation all too immediately under political representation. On the other hand, a geometric-aesthetic account provides a foundation for the appearance of the singular idea of the work while, albeit less immediately, maintaining the extrinsically political implications of the work. In this sense, a geometric aesthetics structures an understanding of artistic presentation that develops a more rigorously material encounter with the work.

## Antagonism in a Social Aesthetic

In an *October* article, Claire Bishop compares Sierra's "Line" installations to prominent examples of what Nicholas Bourriaud names relational aesthetics, arguing that, if the relational artists have enacted a shift from the production of artistic objects to the production of social relations, they have thus far failed to address the question of the quality of social relations produced.<sup>7</sup> Taking up this question, Bishop suggests that whereas relational artists tend to construct ephemeral and artificially harmonious relations Santiago Sierra's "Line" installations reveal: "how all our interactions are, like public space, riven with social and legal exclusions."<sup>8</sup> This revelation is substantiated, for Bishop, by contemporary conceptions of radical democracy. Drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Bishop argues that the politics of social institutions cannot be understood in terms of consensus. Rather, social contexts are formed through the antagonistic delimitation of categories, the demarcation of spaces, and the determination of inclusion and exclusion within these categories and spaces.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Bishop demonstrates, Sierra's work does not merely produce ephemeral relations; it intervenes in actual institutions (those of marginalized labor and prostitution, in

particular); in doing so, Sierra's work enacts "a kind of ethnographic realism, in which the outcome or unfolding of [Sierra's] action forms an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works."<sup>10</sup>

The most immediate question emerging from Bishop's analysis is: what, specifically, is the relation between the evaluation of a work's politics and the evaluation of the artwork itself? Is an artwork – its function and value – determined by the politics it produces in its immediate context? Bishop seems to think so. She writes:

The tasks facing us today are to analyze how contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the quality of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work.<sup>11</sup>

This assertion is symptomatic of a broader movement in contemporary theories and practices of art. It raises the question of whether an emphasis on the production of relations leads to a transfer of, rather than a challenge to, the knowledge/power structures that govern artistic production and consumption. Indeed, current artistic movements – relational art, but also more recent developments like Object Oriented Curating – do tend to replace artists and critics with curators and philosophers without fundamentally altering the hierarchies of the institution.<sup>12</sup> More immediate to the discussion at hand, conceived in terms of the social context of the work, an emphasis on relationality may undermine the political force immanent to the art object itself. In Bishop's account, a work is evaluated on the basis of an extrinsic discourse or abstraction – that of political theory. Moreover, this extrinsic discourse describes the social "effects" of the artwork, not the artwork itself. While Bishop's analysis rightly identifies the way in which the artwork aims to present the lack in, and falsity of, the idea of consensus, her account immediately re-inscribes this lack in an alternative mode of representation – i.e., the reality of the socio-political situation as described by the discourse of political theory. Thus understood, art becomes an essentially didactic practice: it may teach us something about the current socio-political situation. It may even teach us something new about how to enact democratic relations. But the artwork cannot, as an artwork, intervene in the actual *material* relationality in which objects are encountered.<sup>13</sup> In other words, in spite of claims regarding the politics of art, there is an important sense in which Bishop's account accepts at face value the kinds of social identifications produced by a given situation and is content merely to describe these relations or, at best, the lessons that emerge out of such relations.

## Inexistence in a Geometric Aesthetic

A geometric aesthetics places Sierra's installation within an artistic trajectory, one that includes the interrogations conducted by Russian constructivist artists into the nature of the line. Initiated by the work of Malevich, Rodchenko and Popova, constructivist praxis demonstrates that, in the logic of classical and romantic art, both material and form are subsumed under representation; the potentiality of particular materials and essential forms are valued and understood only insofar as their properties can be actualized in a figurative rendering of the world, in a replication of what we see in the world. Negating this logic, constructivist art sought to emancipate both form and materiality by stripping away modes of abstraction until they arrived at what they discovered to be the most foundational aesthetic element: the line. As Rodchenko writes:

The perfected significance of the line was finally clarified – on the one hand, its bordering and edge relationship, and on the other – as a factor of the main construction of every organism that exists in life, the skeleton, so to speak (or the foundation, carcass, system) .... The line is the path of passing through, movement, collision, edge, attachment, joining, section.

*Thus, the line conquered everything and destroyed the last citadels of painting – color, tone, texture, and surface.*<sup>14</sup>

In short, as an essential form the line is both destruction and generation. Malevich pushes this idea further, suggesting that the line is also the form that leverages new modes of aesthetic consciousness. He writes: "It was through the conscious line – through being conscious of the line before focusing consciousness on the object – that the artist could cognize not the object itself but what lay within that object: the non-objective forces that give structure and movement to it, to the world of space and time as such."<sup>15</sup>


This mode of aesthetic consciousness implies two assertions that are relevant to our discussion. First, it asserts the aesthetic consciousness of non-objective forces over the externalized object. Thus, the question of the nature of objects themselves remains relevant, not for its own sake but because objects instantiate more essential categories – i.e., the categories that determine what appears in the world and how.<sup>16</sup> The work of art, in this understanding, is not primarily engaged in representing what appears in the world. Rather the work of art presents the relational conditions of its own appearance, conditions that might include the socio-economic situation in which the artwork emerges but are grounded, more fundamentally, in the aesthetic categories of "space and time as such."<sup>17</sup>

To give these assertions greater specificity, we ask: what happens when the line, with its destructive and generative capacities, is marked on human bodies? In the most immediate sense, it remains significant that, in the "Line" installations, the bodies of prostitutes and marginalized laborers are out of place, not only in the museum where they are photographed but also more generally in the situation of the contemporary west, wherein to be identified as a prostitute or migrant laborer is to be excluded from the representative structures of the law, society, and the state. In this sense, the situation of

marginalized surplus labor under capitalism is an essential element of the work. However, understood in relation to constructivist interventions and interrogations, the line does not merely pose a question regarding the legitimacy or contingency of such exclusion, it re-grounds this out-of-placeness in a more foundational form of relationality. The question is posed anew at a level of abstraction that cannot be immediately co-opted by ideological Liberal discourse about job-creation policy, immigrant labour, and so on.

The line initiates the subtraction of these bodies from any immediate social determination. This idea involves a kind of logical separation. It is obvious enough that in one sense the linear form cannot exist without material support, which in this case is provided by the set of bodies. But, as Alain Badiou suggests, there is a more significant sense in which the background against which marks, lines, or forms take place does not exist—the background (again, in this instance the set of bodies) is constituted by the lines as empty or open space. Thus, the marked bodies persist as inexistent.

The presentation of precarity and non-belonging is thereby doubled: the bodies that already do not appear literally dis-appear in the presentation of the art object. To put it in more processual terms, the invisibility of marginalized labour *dis*-appears in the making of the art object, i.e., in the formation of aesthetic value. The very appearance of the belaboured bodies already contradicts the structure in which they appear; with the presence of the line the belaboured bodies disappear under the new contradiction between the drawn line and the disappearing background.

An emphasis on the aesthetic logic of the work of art—as opposed to the socio-political representations of the work—doesn't circumvent the relevance of the artwork to its political situation. Indeed, the Constructivists were adamant that their art derived its formal problems from the situation of industrialization. What changes in the move from an aesthetics of the socialized body—such as the account developed by Bishop—to an aesthetics of geometric form—like the one I've gestured toward here—is the specific relation between artistic presentation and political re-presentation. To call for a more rigorously formal or geometric aesthetic is not to retreat from politics, but to affirm that the world remains, in spite of the reductive forces of capitalism, essentially heterogeneous and, subsequently, to acknowledge that a rigorous interrogation of our situation is not reducible to any single sphere of examination, intervention, or action. 

## Notes

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- 1 Santiago Sierra. "Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person" (1998). [http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982\\_1024.php](http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982_1024.php) Link used by permission.
- 2 Santiago Sierra. "250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Remunerated People" (1999). [http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996\\_1024.php](http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996_1024.php) Link used by permission.
- 3 Santiago Sierra. "160 cm line Tattooed on 4 People" (2000). [http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200014\\_1024.php](http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200014_1024.php) Link used by permission.
- 4 Ibid. The description for the 1999 work reads: "Six unemployed young men from Old Havana were hired for \$30 in exchange for being tattooed." The 2000 work reads: "Four prostitutes addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to give their consent to be tattooed. Normally, they charge 2,000 or 3,000 pesetas ... for fellatio, while the price of a shot of heroin is around 12,000 pesetas."
- 5 See: Jacques Rancière, "Notes on the Photographic Image," *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July/August 2002). Unless specified, "works" refers, in this essay, to both the photographs and the installations. Implicitly, I'm contending with Rancière's claim that photography "presents itself as the rediscovered union between two statuses of the image that the modernist tradition had separated: the image as representation of an individual and as operation of art" (8-9).
- 6 See: Cornelia H. Butler and M Catherine de Zegher, *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010). This book provides an art-historical survey of the line in twentieth-century art.
- 7 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Peasance & Fronza Woods (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 1998), 113. Bourriaud defines Relational Aesthetics as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context." For Bourriaud and Bishop, primary examples of this movement include works by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick and Pierre Huyghe.
- 8 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 73-4.
- 9 Ibid, 72.
- 10 Ibid, 70.
- 11 Ibid, 78.
- 12 Bishop is certainly aware of this risk; the question, though, is whether or not her emphasis on antagonism provides any leverage against such a risk. See also Hal Foster's "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
- 13 The tendency to reduce art to a didactic function is described by Alain Badiou (see *Handbook of Inaesthetics*) and in Jacques Rancière's conception of "aesthetic regimes" (see, in particular, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes").
- 14 Aleksandr Rodchenko, "The Line," *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. A. N. Lavrentiev, trans. J. Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 113-114. Emphasis added.
- 15 Kazimir Malevich. *The Non-Objective World* (1927), quoted in the exhibition "A Century under the Sign of Line: Drawing and its Extension (1910-2010)" in *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, 47-48.
- 16 This understanding of the connection between aesthetic categories and politics is developed in Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible. See for example *Aesthetics and its Discontents*.
- 17 See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Adorno writes: "[I]n artworks the element that precedes their fixation as things constantly breaks through the thing-character" (99).

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- . "250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Remunerated People," installation and photographs, 1999 (Espacio Aglutinador, Havana). [http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996\\_1024.php](http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996_1024.php)
- . "Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person," installation and photographs, 1998 (51 Regina Street, Mexico City). [http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982\\_1024.php](http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982_1024.php)

# Encounters with an [Art-Thing

Jane Bennett

## The Dinner

In the summer of 2012, I received an email from Elka Krajewska, a Polish-born artist living in New York City ([www.elka.net](http://www.elka.net)), inviting me, a stranger, to a dinner in lower Manhattan. Its purpose was to discuss a small archive that Krajewska had recently acquired from AXA Art Insurance Corporation. The archive consisted of artworks that had once circulated in museums, galleries, or the art market but had been broken or otherwise damaged (often in transport) such that AXA had deemed each a “total loss.” Trucks, boxcutters, human error, water, mold, fire, and gravity all were important agents here. Once the owners of the insurance policies had been paid, these demoted objects (for example, a torn 1850 oil painting by Alexandre Dubuisson, bits and pieces of a Jeff Koons balloon dog) were stored in a warehouse until some of them were donated to Krajewska under the auspices of her Salvage Art Institute.

Krajewska was now organizing a dinner, a collection of people to explore questions raised by a collection of things.<sup>1</sup> What was this archive, and what could be done with it? I attended and spent a fascinating evening in the company of Krajewska, the summer heat, a long wooden table, candles, tasty stews and breads, and people who practiced video-art, photography, art curation, poetry, environmental psychology, intellectual property law, art conservation, architecture, lighting design, artbook publishing, and art history. I was invited because I had written *Vibrant Matter*, a philosophical exploration of the strange agency by which “inanimate” things somehow produced real effects both on and in living things. The book used Spinoza’s theory of conative bodies, the vitalisms of Bergson, Hans Driesch, Deleuze and Guattari, and insights from actor-network theory to try to refocus theoretical attention upon a distinctively *material* kind of effectivity operative within human and nonhuman bodies. And it tried to do this cognizant of several decades of humanities scholarship devoted to the historicization and de-naturalization of identities, concepts, and practices.

Much of the discussion that night circled around the question of how to categorize the items in the archive. What kind of things are they? What is their conceptual status? Each item had been an *artwork* and also a *commodity*, but what is its status now that changes in its form have stripped it of market value? Had it become *junk*, *trash*, or mere *stuff*, or did it (and to what extent?) remain *art* by virtue of its distinguished provenance or its still discernible design? The items were the *private property* of the Salvage Art Institute (Krajewska had the



legal documents), but they also had a public presence as important pieces of Euro-American cultural production. Despite their having been deemed a “total loss” by the insurance company, might the original artists still make a (moral? political? aesthetic?) claim upon the objects if the Institute were to stage an exhibition of them? Was the archive mere *junk* when it lived in a dark warehouse, only to once again become valuable *art* upon exhibition? (In November of that year, there was such an exhibition, “No Longer Art: Salvage Art Institute,” at the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation.)

The discussion that I have just described seemed to be organized around the implicit assumption that if we could indeed apply the proper category to these items, we would then have a clearer sense of the proper uses to which they could be put. Within this framing, the items are things that *are*, and we are things that *do*. But some at the table, including me, also struggled to articulate an approach that did not see only humans at the locus of action. Here the idea was to try to attend to *what the items might be doing to us*. What kinds of powers did these things have, as material bodies and forces? Must we rule out (for fear of superstition or animism or wishful thinking) the possibility that there is an efficacy or affectivity proper to them? Could we not understand the encounter with them more horizontally as, that is, engagements between bodies, some human and some not, each of which would re-form the others and be re-formed as a result of the exposure? What effects might these items produce or induce as we meet them directly (in space) or indirectly (as description)? Instead of positioning ourselves as active subjects facing a set of “demoted objects,” we could meet them as vibrant materialities colliding with, conjoining with, enhancing, competing, or harming the vibrant materialities that we are. Surely some of the power “of” these items would be a function of the auratic, artistic, or commodity residue still clinging to them, a function in other words of human sensibility, imagination, pragmatic need, greed, etc. This latter point is well-noted in a variety of historicist, social constructivist, and Marxist analyses. But just as surely, there are certain blind spots within these and other human-centered framings. In particular, they tend to blunt our powers of discernment of that “extra something” provided by the presence and posture of the thing (itself), that affecting oomph issuing from its shape, color, texture, rhythm, or temporality—from its style of inhabiting space, an emergent style that is irreducible to the design of artist or shaping powers of the imagination of audience. Matt Edgeworth makes a similar point in the context of the archaeological specimen:

an archaeological site is a space where artefacts and structures from other times and places break out into the open ... [Our] ideas and models can influence what is perceived, to be sure, but there is also *something that pushes through beyond the boundaries of our social milieu*, which our models of reality are forced to assimilate. Theories are applied to shape the evidence that emerges, but there is the corresponding emergence of *matter* that resists and re-shapes us and our ideas.<sup>2</sup>

To try to home in on that insistent “matter,” that “something,” might afford us a better sense of the new postures, shapes, or comportments that we are taking on in our engagement with these (now avowedly active) things – things “which have a kind of directionality to them, which orientate the body, which point us in this way or that, and which to a certain extent must be followed.”<sup>3</sup>

My tentative efforts to inject such a perspective into the conversation that night were met with some nods but also with warnings against fetishizing the object and ignoring the unequal power relations at work in art practice, museum display, and the art market. After going home and trying to educate myself a bit about the relevant debates within art history, I now see that the discussion that night had begun to take on the shape of what Alexander Nagel calls “an ancient dispute over idolatry and iconoclasm.” For one group at the dinner, the art thing had a moment of independence from its human makers and recipients that was deserving of note if not respect; for another group, such a belief veered toward an idolatry that “served the interests of institutional power and cultivated an unhealthy, superstitious attachment to things.”<sup>4</sup> I was and still am seeking an orientation organized around the power of bodies-in-encounter, using “power” in Spinoza’s sense of the capacity to affect (to make a difference upon other bodies) and to be affected (to be receptive to the affections of other bodies). In bringing people and things into a common frame of “bodies,” the idea is not that things are enchanted with personality but that persons qua materialities themselves participate in impressive thing-like tendencies, capacities, and qualities.

## Conative Bodies

It is helpful at this point to make more explicit the ontological imaginary motivating the quest for this “new materialist” approach to the salvaged art. I had brought to the dinner a Spinoza-inspired picture of a universe of “conative” bodies, human and nonhuman, that are continually encountering (impacting and receiving impacts from) each other. Gilles Deleuze describes Spinoza’s notion of *conatus* thus: “A simple body’s conatus can only be the effort to preserve the state to which it has been determined; and a composite body’s conatus only the effort to preserve the relation of movement and rest that defines it, that is, to maintain constantly renewed parts in the relation that defines its existence.”<sup>5</sup> This is not a world divided into active subjects and useful, decorative, or commodified objects but of bodies (human and nonhuman) striving to enhance their power of activity by forming alliances with other bodies.<sup>6</sup> Spinoza speaks of *the capacity to affect and be affected*, a power intrinsic to all bodies and linked to the generative power of Nature. As Dorothy Kwek notes, “affecting and being-affected are not a series of inputs and outputs to a stable unchanging body (a black box

model), but rather waves of (re)constitutions.”<sup>7</sup> Or we might here speak of the play of “material engagement,” a notion developed by the archaeological theorist Lambros Malafouris, where various kinds of entities – understood as actants that persist in ways relatively indifferent to the distinction between animate and inanimate or organic and inorganic – confront and entangle with each other. Sometimes a nonhuman thing will become an extension of a human body and sometimes vice versa: “There are no fixed agentic roles in this game” but a continuous jockeying for “a ‘maximum grip.’”<sup>8</sup>

The idea that an organic body such as our own strives to *affect* things (to make them over into food, tools, resources) in order to enhance its health and strength is relatively uncontroversial. But it requires a special effort to entertain the notion that *other entities too*, as participants in larger assemblages and processes, *engage in some analog of striving*. William Connolly, drawing upon the philosophy of Whitehead, speaks in this regard of “searching” activities and of the “real creativity” of “actual entities”:

The universe is composed of ‘actual entities’ of innumerable types which help to set preconditions for new events. An actual entity is any formation that has some tendency toward self-maintenance, such as, differentially, a rock, a cell, a tornado ... Creativity is not the simple product of an agent or subject. Rather it is imbedded in processes that to varying degrees go through periods of ... teleodynamic searches ... The creative processes, at its most active, occurs in teleodynamic searches within and between entities whose relative equilibrium has been disturbed, and it draws upon the noise within and entanglements between entities.<sup>9</sup>

It also requires a special openness to entertain the Spinozist idea that my health, strength, or power can also be enhanced by a *receptivity* to the affections of other bodies, including “inanimate” ones. Kwek notes that there are of course “better and worse ways of being-affected, and certain things that heighten our sensitivities and powers for a short while may damage us in the long run, as is the case with some drugs. We often cannot know beforehand which ways of being-affected will harm us. Yet, it is precisely this fraught relation that calls for *more*, not less, *receptivity* to our milieu,” in order to find out what does work to “refresh and restore.”<sup>10</sup>

These Spinozists encourage us to sound some minor chords in our thinking and sensibility today. We might, for example, approach the archive of damaged art with attentiveness to the ways *things* act upon and change us (while also of course being affected by our acts of discussion, exhibition, etc.) and to the ways in which the human mind-body is *susceptible* to the affections endeavored by things. These affections are transfers of energy from one site to another, and insofar as one of the effects of this process can be the emergence of “meaning,” we might also expand our understanding of semiosis to include what happens through these transports of affections. This is a suggestion developed by Malafouris, who, distinguishing between the “material” and the “linguistic” sign, warns against assimilating *material* semiosis to a model of representation. “Things,” he says, “act

most powerfully at the non-discursive level, incorporating qualities (such as color, texture, and smell) that affect human cognition in ways that are rarely explicitly conceptualized.”<sup>11</sup>

## Animacy

In the late 1990's, I, along with many others, was struck by a popular television ad in the U.S. for GAP khaki pants. In a large open white space, twenty or so young people in beige trousers danced the jitterbug with great exuberance. The tune was Louis Prima's "Jump, Jive an' Wail." Are the pants animated by the flesh of the dancers, or were the dancers animated by the clothing? The locus of vitality was unclear. But there was a strong presence of vital forces. A weird sense of the liveliness of the *pants* was reinforced by the videographic de-animation of the human dancers: at several points the camera would freeze the foreground dancer in mid-flight, turning him/her into stone or statue, and as the music continued, it was now the room's turn to swing (thanks to the camera's stop-and-pan technique). After that, the khaki-clad bodies, the body-clad-khakis, and the white room returned to their default positions: the first as animate, the second as animated by human technology, and the third as a passive background for the animacies of the others.<sup>12</sup>

That advertisement got me thinking about a liveliness or animacy of *matter*.<sup>13</sup> I like the notion of "animacy" as a way to think about vitality that is not dependent upon a dichotomy between organic life and inorganic matter.<sup>14</sup> Animacy encourages us to parse out the several different aspects, elements, or registers of liveliness. I'd say that each materiality conveys a specific degree or kind of animacy even if not all qualify under the biological definition of life.

Many contemporary philosophers, following feminist, phenomenological, and new materialist paths, are today pursuing attempts to theorize this animacy in terms that are neither simply physiological nor simply psychological but both.<sup>15</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to survey this rich and diverse literature. I want only to highlight the fact that the modern taboo against (anything approaching) animism functions both as a spur to that work and as an obstacle to it, to, that is, the emergence of a more robust vocabulary for marking material vibrancy and vitality. This taboo is increasingly rubbing up against modes of electronic and bioscientific technologies – lively and responsive hand-held devices, electronic clouds, pharmaceutically-induced personalities – whose materialities blur the line between organic and inorganic.<sup>16</sup> Some say that a neo-animism is underway in American culture, a thesis explored by Achille Mbembe in recent public lectures.<sup>17</sup>

## Hyperkulturemia

People are affected by objects every day. In a recent *Harper's Magazine* Ben Lerner invokes the term "hyperkulturemia" to describe an extreme version of this event. Lerner is concerned primarily with the relationship between art and commodification and with the question of what happens to the market value of famous pieces that have been in some public way vandalized. He mentions the Salvage Art Institute to applaud its experimental "encounter [with] an object freed from the market" and its attempts to imagine "art outside of capitalism."<sup>18</sup> Drawing upon the work of the Italian psychiatrist Graziella Magherini, Lerner defines hyperkulturemia (also known as Stendhal's syndrome or Florence syndrome) as "a psychosomatic condition in which museum-goers are overwhelmed by the presence of great art, resulting in a range of responses: breathlessness, panic, fainting, paranoia, disorientation."<sup>19</sup>

Hyperkulturemia, a term that, I believe, expresses some dark or latent sense of the animacy of the art-object, appears in the context of Lerner's discussion of what motivates those who vandalize art. Was, Lerner wonders, the defacement of a Barnett Newman piece due to the fact that the vandal was "so struck by the work that he had to strike back, just as, in 2007, a thirty-year-old woman ... claimed to be so transported by a white panel of Cy Twombly's triptych *Phaedrus* that she spontaneously kissed it, smearing it with red lipstick?"<sup>20</sup> Were some of the vandals as much victims of the force of the art-objects as they were perpetrators of a crime?

Lerner is skeptical. And indeed, the term "hyperkulturemia" itself raises the spectre of material agency (of an artwork that "strikes" and "transports") only to dispel it by placing the encounter within the framework of human pathology. It opens but then closes the possibility of an animacy whose existence is not exhausted by a malfunctioning system of human sense-perception, cognition, and imagination. The museum-goer's loss of consciousness thus ultimately appears (perhaps reassuringly in its maintenance of anthropocentrism) as a hyper-active human receptivity to human culture, an effect of the interaction between one individual's body-mind relays operating in a larger cultural context that idealizes great European art.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Lerner's eye is trained (almost) exclusively on the powers of human individuals within a capitalist culture made by humans with the result that the art object appears as essentially *our instrument*: we commodify it or, under exceptional circumstances, we free it from the reign of commodification, and in either case whatever work the thing itself is performing makes (almost) no appearance. Again, I say "almost" because Lerner's very inclusion of the term hyperkulturemia introduces into the story a shadowy role for a thing's contribution to the affectivity of the encounter.

The theme of a culturally-constructed psychosomatic illness obeys the taboo against animism. But, as already noted, it also thus tends, both at the register of theory and in the regime of the sensible, to exaggerate the scope and efficacy of human agency and to minimize that of nonhuman bodies. Can we offer another account of the event and uncover a different etiology of its affectivity, one which lingers with the sense/intuition that a composition of colors, shapes, textures, smells, and sounds hanging on a wall could make an actual contribution to a swoon? Such an account would have to interrupt or forestall the urge to foreground differences between animate and inanimate in order to feel what is shared by persons and things. Both sets are conative bodies, sometimes sympathetic to each other such that they form a complex body or assemblage and sometimes not – but always affecting and being affected. The humans articulating this account would have to explore the taking on of new shapes for the “self.” They would have to move out of the postures of (normal or pathological) subjectivity and try to inhabit something of the lived space of the artwork. From the (slower? less use-oriented?) temporality proper to that place, hyperkulturemia might feel like a healthy expression of material animacy. In what follows, I will try to enact such a responsiveness to that which emanates, focusing it around one particular encounter between human and nonhuman bodies.

## Corpse, Woman, Thrill

At an early stage in the founding of the Salvage Art Institute, Krajewska encounters this particular object:

When I arrived at an art conservation studio and saw ‘the corpse’: smears and clumps of chocolate stuck to its plexibox container and irregularly broken pieces accumulated at the bottom edge I thought I could simply take it. I was thrilled by its useless, demoted state, its orphan stance, its loss of ambition and almost erotic, glaring nakedness. But soon I found out I could not take it, and that though worthless it now belonged to the insurance company who as its new owner had rights to its future.<sup>22</sup>

An effect – a thrill passing between bodies – has been produced, but how? Krajewska’s account is a rich text whose close reading can, I think, reveal something about the productive power of the cluster of materials present. The thrill-effect is associated with a set of characteristics the object is said to possess: this set includes not only what might be called physical traits (clumpiness, irregularity of shape, brokenness) and not only traits that betoken the human value placed upon the object (uselessness, demotion, orphanhood,

worthlessness) but also traits ordinarily assigned only to moral agents (lack of ambition, erotic nudity). These latter carry a moral charge, implying some kind of choice or power over the trajectory of the body's movements. While some might say that Krawjewska's account is a simple instance of the "the pathetic fallacy" (the ascription of human characteristics to inanimate objects), I would say that her anthropomorphic language has the effect of sharpening our capacity to detect the presence and powers of materials. It exposes a *circuit* of "pathos" between different kinds of bodies, which bridges the gap between self and object.<sup>23</sup>

The gap shrinks further, however, if we acknowledge what Krawjewska implies: not only can things participate in some traits of persons, but persons have some of the qualities of things. Humans share with things, for example, a susceptibility to being broken, smeared, and useless. I will return to this theme of the human "it" later. But first, let me clarify what I mean by "thing" and how it differs from an object, for in crafting an alternative to the story of hyperkulturemia, terminology matters.

To speak, as Krawjewska does, of "demotion" or the demoted object is to emphasize the power of humans to turn (nonhuman) things into useful, ranked objects. The demoted object is something defined in terms of its recent *change of status* from more esteemed to less, from higher rank to lower. The demoted object is, in other words, the subject of a human judgment; it is a body judged wanting or defective in relation to a normative threshold or standard. Insofar as the object retains the aura of its former value, it remains for the most part a "for-us." But something really interesting happens when the demotion goes all the way, when the object falls so low, so below the standard as to be rendered irredeemable or, in the language of the insurance industry, a "total loss." What happens is that it becomes released from the tyranny of judgment – becomes, in my terminology, a *thing*. The radically demoted object becomes the orphan, who, appearing on the scene without external value or pedigree, floats on the surface of context and bobs over and shrugs off the grasp of established norms and judgments.<sup>24</sup> As thing it paradoxically rises to a new status – that of a more active party in encounters. It becomes a body among bodies with the capacity to affect and be affected. And we now become more sensitive to real forces that previously operated below the threshold of reflective attention. One could say that it becomes a *fetish* in the sense of things that "operate as causative agents in their own right rather than for what they might stand for – as with signifiers."<sup>25</sup>

Let us return now to Krawjewska's irregular, broken, useless, demoted, orphaned, ambitionless, naked, and worthless "corpse." The thing is the reverse image of normal subjectivity in entrepreneurial America: it is irregular, broken, useless, demoted, orphaned, ambitionless, naked – in a word, worthless; a worthy I is a regular, whole person, useful, upwardly mobile, rooted in a family or at the very least family-friendly, ambitious, and carefully clad. The normal American is Promethean; the corpse is what Herbert Marcuse

would call Orphic.<sup>26</sup> But of course it is very hard to be normal; it requires constant effort and maintenance.

Indeed, it seems to me that one condition of possibility of an “encounter” between person and thing, between the living flesh of Krajewska and the corpse, is the subterranean presence of certain material affinities between them. “Down” there in an underworld of Hades or Elysium, or all “around” us as a Deleuzian swarm of virtualities, or deep “inside” as an unconscious that nevertheless makes itself felt as uncanniness, things harbor animacies, and persons enclose a rich vein of active thing-ness. Malafouris, invoking the anthropologist Alfred Gell, speaks here of a “fluid dynamic between ‘agents’ and ‘patients’ as states to be acquired in practice and not as *a priori* categorical positions ... The states of agent and patient [are] ... ontological moments or ingredients that persons and things share.”<sup>27</sup>

That vein of thinginess can manifest as a recalcitrant or headstrong materiality that both enables and chafes against, overflows, or even breaks the mold of subjectivity into which most of us daily labor to cram it. What can come to the fore for the human in an intimate encounter with certain art-things is what Katrin Pahl describes as the “utter banality of the common predicament of subjectivity” wherein “we all have to perform the emotional [and physical] labor of covering over the paradoxes of what it means to be a subject.”<sup>28</sup> In the face of the artwork, we can become temporarily relieved of the burden of normal subjectivity, of the strenuous effort and bent-back posture of the autonomous agent; we can relax into and inhabit more fully the homely shape of thinghood.<sup>29</sup> This is part of the thrill of aesthetic experience, an affect that may become intensified as the art-object approaches full demotion.

Krajewska’s corpse has no use, no ambition, and while it clearly has a history, the details of that heritage remain vague and in the background of the encounter. This stuff has no future to look forward to; the orphaned body itself has no past to which to appeal. But it is also a positivity: it approximates the shape of the *present as such*, an a-futural a-historical temporality-spatiality of just-here-just-now.<sup>30</sup> The broken, non-striving orphan is oriented only to the site at hand; the pieces of a Jeff Koons balloon do not participate in the pursuit of any goal but exist “as is”; the canvas (of another item in the archive) sits quietly with the “mold blotches and spots [that] have left traces of grey and black.”<sup>31</sup> “Take it or leave it/take me or leave me,” they shrug. And in the encounter with the resolutely presentist body of the corpse, Krajewska’s own latent thinghood – and its presentism – rise to the surface. She finds that her own tendency to *project forward* some future (for the object, for herself) is temporarily confounded or suspended, a hiatus that allows her to see, feel, smell what is there with an “almost erotic, glaring nakedness.” Krajewska syncs with the (unwhole) shape, the (jagged) edge, the (unintended) color, the (ragged) texture, or in other words, her “aesthetic” capacities are heightened. Perhaps what she describes as a “thrill” is the jolt of restless, projective time grinding to a halt in the midst of a new experience that is *conveyed* to her.



The thrill may also involve something like recognition. By this I mean an uncanny feeling of being in the presence of an aspect of oneself – a non- or not-quite-human aspect that is nevertheless intrinsic to one's flesh and blood and bones – also present in the body of another. We have recently become more comfortable acknowledging something like this at work between humans and animals as in the following hyperbolic text of an advertisement for a travel agency's tour of Rwanda:


Wake up to a golden glow in the sky, mountains unveiling their mists ... [a] dramatic natural setting for what is perhaps the most ... thrilling wildlife experience to be had in Africa. Nothing can prepare the visitor for the impact of encountering a troop of gorillas munching bamboo ... The sheer physical presence of an adult male silverback ... defies ... description. Nor are there words to convey the thrill of recognition attached to staring deep into the liquid brown eyes of these gentle giants, who share some 97% of their genes with humans.<sup>32</sup>

As we come to experience things less as objects and more as a kind of wild-life that exerts distinctive forces of its own in encounters, might we not also entertain the possibility of affective currents coursing between human and nonhuman things? One could then say that Krajewska recognized in the manner of the corpse a comportment that she herself had hitherto (albeit more darkly, lightly, or vaguely) experienced. There was an eerie familiarity to it.

The shift from hyperkulturemia to affinities of kinship marks a shift in theoretical terminology that directs attention to what a thing can *do*. And one of the things that a thing can do is expose the presence of a thinginess *internal to* the human, to reveal the animistic presence of an "it" internal to the "I." The self that acknowledges its thinginess is paradoxically a body with newly activated sensory capacities – including the power to detect the presence of material agency. That activation can now filter into other aspects of our ethical lives, our relations with nature, our political sensibilities.

## Animacy Without Ambition

The unbroken, esteemed object is encrusted with a thick coat of cultural meanings; the gravely demoted object qua thing allows a glimpse into uncooked material power. The thing's "sheer physical presence" taps into the sheer physical presence of my body as external thing and my thinginess resonate. One result is that my experience of what it is to be "human" is altered, recomposed. Like Krajewska's ambitionless corpse that affirms what its body (in need of no improvement) already is, I too assume the posture of "take me or leave me." This is less a passivity than a vibratory tranquility. The useless corpse has no desire to become

otherwise than it is, and the human body plunges with it into a hiccup that suspends the progress of time and restlessness of desire. It becomes, for a moment, thrillingly content. Animacy without ambition: writing or giving an account can bring us to the threshold of such a state, but it takes the encounter itself to make it happen. 

## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to the others on the guest list: Eileen Myles, Martha Buskirk, Alexander Dumbadze, Sonia K. Katyal, Robin Reisenfeld, Virginia Rutledge, Barbara Schroeder, Felicity Scott, Linnaea Tillett, and Jeffrey Stucker. Special thanks to Elka Krajewska, Bill Connolly, Mandy-Suzanne Wong, and two anonymous reviewers for *Evental Aesthetics* for their contributions to this essay.
- 2 Matt Edgeworth, "Follow the Cut, Follow the Rhythm, Follow the Material," *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2012), 77, my emphasis.
- 3 Edgeworth, 78. See also Tom Yarrow, "Artefactual Persons: Relational Capacities of Persons and Things in Excavation," *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2003): 65-73: "the material properties of the site act to modify the thought and actions of the people who excavate them." (71)
- 4 Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 93.
- 5 Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 229-230.
- 6 This was a monism of sorts but one that is, as Deleuze puts it, "ontologically one, formally diverse." (Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin [Cambridge: Zone Books, 1992], 67.) Or, as Michel Serres says in *The Birth of Physics*, the cosmos is a turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate. This might be called a "protean monism."
- 7 Dorothy Kwek, "Power and the Multitude: A Spinozist View," *Political Theory*, Published online before print July 9, 2014, doi: 10.1177/0090591714537080), 7. As Mandy-Suzanne Wong notes, the effort of bodies is not only an effort to search for and make alliances with other bodies. It is also the work of staying, a striving to maintain a sense of self amidst self-alterations.
- 8 Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 147. Malafouris pursues a project close to but not identical to my own. He is interested in developing a *theory of cognition* as a "synergistic process by which, out of brains, bodies, and things, mind emerges." (17) Cognition, from his "material engagement" approach "is not simply what happens inside a brain" but also "what happens in the interaction between a brain and a thing." (67)
- 9 William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 156.
- 10 Kwek, 8, citing Spinoza's *Ethics* (E4p45schol., G/ II/244).
- 11 Malafouris, 94-95.
- 12 I give a more sustained reading of the GAP ad in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Princeton, 2001. The khakis are quintessential commodities: designed, manufactured, and sold for profit. But still, I argue, the ad reveals a strange *animacy* proper to the material, a liveliness not quite reducible to the social meanings (hip, cheap, young) of GAP clothing.
- 13 Linked to consumerism and hyperconsumption. For a discussion of hyperconsumption and renewed interest in the power of things, see my "Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency," in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2012), 237-269.
- 14 See Mel Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), for a good discussion of the concept.

- 15 As Bjørnar Olsen apply summarizes, "The phenomenological approach to human perception implied two important insights: First, ... we are entangled beings fundamentally involved in networks of human and nonhuman beings. Second, we relate to the world not (only) as thinking subjects but also as bodily objects ... Although the latter point may be ... more explicit in Merleau-Ponty's work than in Heidegger's, central to both philosophers was the attempt to break down the subject-object distinction implied in previous approaches to perception. As Merleau-Ponty's latest works suggest, the thingly aspect of our own being (our common 'fabric' as 'flesh') is essential for our integration with the world. The ability to touch and be touched, to see and be seen, to act upon things while at the same time being acted upon by them, *can only happen if there is some kinship, 'if my hand ... takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them.'* (Merleau-Ponty [*The Visible and the Invisible*], 1968: 133)." (Bjørnar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects*, [New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010], 67, emphasis added.)
- 16 On the last, see Mary Lou Jepsen, "Bringing back my real self with hormones," *New York Times Magazine*, November 23, 2013 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/24/opinion/sunday/bringing-back-my-real-self-with-hormones.html>.
- 17 Mbembe's lectures are discussed by John Drabinski at <http://jdrabinski.wordpress.com/2013/12/06/mbembe-democracy-animism/#comments>.
- 18 Ben Lerner, "Damage Control: The Modern Art World's Tyranny of Price," *Harper's Magazine*, December 2013, 49.
- 19 Ibid., 46.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Of course, an *ideological* disposition is in play here but not only that. For a good discussion of the methodological limitations of reducing "the complex network of interactions that constitute a given socio-technical trajectory to a mental template or ideological disposition," see Malafouris, 126 (and chapter 6 in general). And as Matt Edgeworth notes, "acknowledging the shaping power of material things does not imply a denial of cultural diversity" in the reception of objects. "Rather, it reminds us that the many and diverse cultural universes are part of the same diverse and changing material world, not different worlds." Edgeworth here invokes the "protean monism" mentioned above in my note #6. (Matt Edgeworth, "Reply to comments from Åsa Berggren, Alfredo González-Ruibal, Tim Ingold, Gavin Lucas, Robin Skeates and Christopher Witmore," *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2012), 107-114.
- 22 Elka Krajewska, *No Longer Art*, Preface (March 16, 2011), Dancing Foxes Press, forthcoming.
- 23 I have argued elsewhere that a bit of anthropomorphism can catalyze a sensibility that discerns a world not of subjects and objects but of "variously composed materialities that form confederations." Anthropomorphism can reveal "similarities across categorical divides and [light] up structural parallels between material forms in 'nature' and those in 'culture.'" (*Vibrant Matter* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2010], 79.) The valuable question of what possible models of subjectivity are *sacrificed* by the pursuit of anthropomorphism is, one of the reviewers of this essay notes, one that I do not but ought to take up.
- 24 As Mandy-Suzanne Wong points out, one could also say that the thing gathers together and withdraws into *itself*. See, for example, Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, re. press publications, 2009.

- 25 Malafouris, 133-34.
- 26 "If Prometheus is the culture-hero of toil, productivity, and progress ..., then .... Orpheus and Narcissus ... stand for a very different reality ... [T]heirs is the image of joy, fulfillment; the voice which does not command but sings; the gesture which offers and receives; the deed which is peace and ends the labor of conquest; the liberation from time..." (Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 162.)
- 27 Malafouris, 149.
- 28 Katrin Pahl, "Kleist's Queer Humor," Conference on The Aesthetics of Bildung, Johns Hopkins University, Fall 2012.
- 29 It is worth noting that the "almost erotic" quality of the thrill seems dependent upon the relatively short duration of one's inhabitation of this object-like posture, for when I encounter profound and enduring uselessness, demotion, orphanhood, and ambitionlessness in a brother with schizophrenia or a friend severely depressed, the effect is not contentment but profound sadness, which may share the intensity but not the energizing quality of a thrill.
- 30 It is a shape that is both useless *and* capable of producing powerful effects, a combination that neoliberal capitalism tries to rule out in its attempt to turn everything into a useful means for making profit. Things that are both powerful in their ability to draw human attention and yet non-commodifiable are threats to the system. This was Walter Benjamin's point when we wrote of the art connoisseur "who dreamed that he was in a world ... in which things were freed from the bondage of being useful." (Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 168-69.)
- 31 Elka Krajewska and Mathew Wagstaffe, *No Longer Art: Narrative* (with authentic inventory), Book I, Salvage Art Institute, August 2012, 55.
- 32 [http://www.enticingtravel.com/enticing\\_rwanda.html](http://www.enticingtravel.com/enticing_rwanda.html)

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# The Puzzle of Chardin

Jane Forsey





Chardin disconcerts.<sup>1</sup> It is one thing to see his still lifes on a museum wall and appreciate their subtle and quiet dignity, but it is quite another to view his work “in situ” as it were, surrounded by the interiors they would have graced in the eighteenth century. Yet it is here in the splendid Musée Nissim de Camondo in Paris that the puzzle of Chardin becomes most acute.

The wealthy banker and collector Comte Moïse de Camondo had a mansion built in 1911, modeled after the Petit Trianon at Versailles, which he completely furnished in eighteenth-century style; he had amassed an enormous collection of paneling, furnishings, textiles, and objets d’art of the period and sought to live among them as though he were an elite member of the court of Louis XV. (He did concede to his architect’s urging, however, to include such twentieth-century comforts as electricity, heating, and running water.) In 1924, he bequeathed the mansion to the city to become a museum, declaring in his bequest that its interior arrangement should remain as unaltered as possible: this is what we can view today.

Tapestries by Aubusson; *chaises à la reine* by Foliot; cabinets by Reisner, a favorite of Marie Antoinette; a roll-top desk by Oeben, who had made Louis XV’s desk at Versailles; chinoiserie; gilt; a room devoted to Sèvres porcelain; walls covered with Peking silk against which hang the paintings of Boucher, Fragonard, and Watteau – in short, a visitor is immediately immersed in the best of French Rococo style. Yet we suddenly stop short: what on earth is a tiny oil of a domestic cooking pot and two onions doing in the midst of all *this*?<sup>2</sup>

Certainly still life painting was a recognized genre in the eighteenth century, and depictions of the everyday graced many walls. But as Saisselin has claimed, still lifes commonly acted as a “species of indirect portrait” of their owners – that small and privileged aristocratic set who could afford to collect art.<sup>3</sup> Norman Bryson noted that “still life cannot escape the phenomenon of class: the table is an exact barometer of status and wealth.”<sup>4</sup> If we consider works by Vallayer-Coster or Spaendonck, two approximate contemporaries of Chardin’s in France, we find depictions of (over)abundance: porcelain, crystal, and silver; tables laden with feasts of imported luxury foods such as lobsters, oysters, olives, figs, and pineapples; and trays of delicate pastries and wines. Moreover, the food is displayed to tantalize: the figs cut open to reveal their sweet interiors, the grapes dewy with moisture, the wine ready to drink. With palettes as bright as the history paintings of Fragonard, one could well imagine such works among the gilt and silk of an eighteenth-century salon, reflecting the lives and tastes of its occupants.

Not so with Chardin. For most of his career he painted still lifes, and most of his still lifes depict domestic pots, bowls, and kitchen implements; in fact, the same pots and bowls reappear in work after work, accompanied at times by onions, at others by eggs or a loaf of bread. These humble objects stand in stark contrast to the compositions of his peers and in no way reflect the decadent lives of the bourgeoisie. Their muted browns and grays and their

minimalist arrangements seem to refute the riot of abundance with which they are surrounded. Chardin's singularity of vision – his paintings of the “everyday” which must have struck his bourgeois audience as unfamiliar and even alien – is thus all the more mysterious for its very simplicity and humility. Yet he was no renegade: accepted into the Royal Academy in 1728 as a painter of animals and fruits, Chardin held the lowest position in the hierarchy of genres that championed history painting above all.<sup>5</sup> Yet he was granted a pension by Louis XV in 1752 and a studio and living quarters in the Louvre by 1757. He also came to serve as treasurer of the Academy itself. For all his peculiarity, he was a respected artist in his own time. What then are we to make of these puzzling works?

Let us look more closely at one of them: *Nature morte au chaudron cuivre*.<sup>6</sup> The painting is intimate – 17 x 20.5 cm – and centrally depicts the cooking pot on its side, fronted by a bowl and those two onions. To the left stands a mortar and pestle, and to the right a knife rests at an oblique angle, its handle extending beyond the stone shelf on which the objects lie. There is little sense of depth and none of location, but there is light. What we can immediately reject in our efforts at interpretation is the idea that this work is somehow a political statement about the inequality endemic in aristocratic society – Chardin would not have been championed by the king if it were.

The painting is striking, not for what it does say but for what it does *not*. As Frédéric Ogée has noted, Chardin's subjects have no “allegorical or metaphorical charge”; this work does not point beyond itself to suggest an “indirect portrait” of its audience or a mimetic representation of the bourgeois world or even an ethico-religious lesson of some kind, such as we can see with Baugin's paintings of wine and wafers.<sup>7</sup> As Ogée observes, the categories of the hierarchy at the Academy were dependent upon the “quantity and quality of discourse which the works could generate”: the more “verbalization” they could produce, the more valued they were. Chardin's paintings instead created an “enormous embarrassment” because they eluded any clear discursive grasp.<sup>8</sup> As Bryson has said, Chardin somehow “expels the values human presence imposes on the world” and “breaks the scale of human importance.”<sup>9</sup> The pot is upended; the onions are whole and unready to be eaten; the setting is unknown. In the work there is an overwhelming stillness: no obvious human activity has preceded this moment, and none is obviously forthcoming. Instead we have implements that are quietly waiting for human intervention<sup>10</sup> or as Carolyn Korsmeyer puts it, “what is left when human beings exit the scene: things.”<sup>11</sup> A pot, a knife, and two onions. Diderot called Chardin's works “mute compositions,”<sup>12</sup> and Condillac noted that with them we enter a “psychic area which does not allow itself to be spoken.”<sup>13</sup> There is for Ogée “no entry for discourse” in this work because Chardin emphatically denies that there is anything to say.<sup>14</sup> And this is disconcerting, for what can be spoken about a work that denies speech? What interpretation is possible when the very ideas of metaphor and allegory are rejected?


One possibility is simply beauty. The pot, the onions are divorced from their quotidian functions; they stand outside of the activities of everyday life. We are being tasked to *look*, not to speak, when we confront them. Thus, are they purely formal compositions whose lines and colors are meant to be admired? I would reject this suggestion as too simplistic. Not because Chardin's work is not beautiful; it surely is. But if he sought to "transport" his audience to "a world of aesthetic exaltation" as the formalist Clive Bell has put it, he would have failed through his choice of subject matter alone.<sup>15</sup> These items so carefully rendered must have been crude and beneath admiration for the eighteenth-century viewer. Further, if Chardin were merely experimenting with color and form, any number of objects would have been at his disposal. Instead, he returned to the same ones again and again as though charging us to look – to just look.

At what? At *these* things. And why? Because, I would suggest, Chardin was attempting to present to us the unrepresentable. Kant knew well enough that there are limits to what we can know; beyond those limits are what he called "rational ideas" – of God, freedom, or justice – about which we can only speculate. If we try to establish the truth of these ideas, "we are asking for something impossible" because they cannot be conceptually determined in any adequate way.<sup>16</sup> But there is art. And for Kant, its proper subject matter is "aesthetic ideas": in painting, these are visual representations which "cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language."<sup>17</sup> Aesthetic ideas are the manifest counterparts to our intellectual speculations; through visual means, artworks "strive after something which lies beyond the bounds of experience," arousing in our imagination "more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words."<sup>18</sup> It is only through art that we can approach the inconceivable, that we can attempt to canvas what forever lies beyond our means.

Art does not, however, present aesthetic ideas in general but a particular one. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant mentions hell, eternity, creation, death, envy, love, and fame as examples of rational ideas made manifest in various works, but surprisingly he does not mention the *sina qua non* of all the rational ideas in his entire architectonic: the thing in itself.<sup>19</sup> This, the supersensible, is the "basis of the possibility of all these objects of experience, but which we can never extend or elevate into a cognition"; it is the idea of objects as they exist outside of our experience of them.<sup>20</sup> The thing in itself – or mind-independent reality – is for Kant something which must be entirely unknown to us. It lies outside of the spatio-temporal forms of our experiences; we cannot even determine if there is a causal connection between the supersensible and our experiences of perceptual phenomena in the world around us. The supersensible is as mysterious for Kant as God. If art in general is an attempt to capture the inconceivable, there is no reason why this particular rational idea could not also be its subject matter. What is more interesting is that we have long failed to see that Chardin achieves precisely this in his work.

Chardin offers his audience depictions with which they would be unfamiliar and in which they would not normally be interested. Instead of a mirror of themselves, his viewers are presented with mere things, stripped of ornamentation, decoration, the trappings of society, even of human presence. His audience is offered the residue of what is left behind when humans have “exited the scene.” How better to charge them to simply look, to focus on those things themselves than to confound their expectations? To present not shows of abundance but rather objects that are humble, displaced, singular, and mute?

We can see in the writing of art critics and historians attempts to capture the singularity of Chardin’s vision; they come close to the answer to our puzzle but do not make this final connection. Chardin worked outside of language; his canvases do not allow their subject matter to be spoken because there is nothing we can speak *about* when we are confronted with what we cannot *know*. His images for Bryson are “not quite of this world”;<sup>21</sup> they present for Arnheim a “detached reality”;<sup>22</sup> the space of his pictures is for McCoubry “a private place, ultimately serene and inaccessible” that “comes closer to the alien timeless world of the inanimate things presented.”<sup>23</sup> Each of these various attempts at understanding Chardin is correct on its own: if we put them together, however, we arrive at a more complete truth – that Chardin confronts us with what is truly unknowable.

Chardin disconcerts because in a simple pot and two onions, we are faced with the limits of language, the limits of understanding, and the limits of human experience. His work is both puzzling and an “embarrassment” for his contemporaries because, rather than a reflection of the known, it suggests to us a vista that is ultimately unreachable. In this way his work is not only beautiful; it is sublime.<sup>24</sup> 

## Notes

- 1 I must acknowledge that this opening sentence was directly inspired by that of Charles Taylor's essay "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 152–184.
- 2 In the spirit of the "great deal of license" afforded authors of "Collisions" in this journal, I have combined experiences from my wanderings in Paris for dramatic effect. The Musée Nissim de Camondo is exactly as I have described it, but the Chardin painting that is the centre of this piece actually resides at the Musée Cognacq-Jay across town. Ernest Cognacq and his wife Marie-Louise Jay were entrepreneurs who also bequeathed their (much smaller) collection to the city of Paris to become a museum. But their collection does not present as complete a picture of the eighteenth century as Camondo's does and is housed in a sixteenth century townhouse that has been greatly altered. I felt that the setting of Camondo's mansion was more effective for demonstrating the disconcerting surprise that Chardin's work provokes. I would urge readers to visit both splendid museums if they can.
- 3 R.G. Saisselin, "Still-Life Paintings in a Consumer Society," *Leonardo* 9 (1976): 202.
- 4 Norman Bryson, "Chardin and the Text of Still Life," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 245.
- 5 See Hélène Prigent and Pierre Rosenberg, *Chardin: la nature silencieuse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 118; and Frédéric Ogée, "Chardin's Time: Reflections on the Tercentenary Exhibition and Twenty Years of Scholarship," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33 (2000): 432.
- 6 This work (1734–5) is alternatively titled *Egrugeoir avec son pilon, un bol, deux oignons, chaudron de cuivre rouge et couteau* in Prigent and Rosenberg, *Chardin*, 123. The titles of still lifes were often little more than a catalogue of their depicted objects.
- 7 Ogée, "Chardin's Time," 445.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 432.
- 9 Bryson, "Text of Still Life," 228.
- 10 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *Evental Aesthetics* for this suggested interpretation of Chardin's painting.
- 11 Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 163.
- 12 Quoted in Ogée, "Chardin's Time," 434.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 439.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 77.
- 16 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1972), 197.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 157–158.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, 11.

21 Bryson, "Text of Still Life," 239.

22 Rudolf Arnheim, "Why Chardin: The Adoption of the Tangible," *Salmagundi* 126/7 (2000): 235.

23 John W. McCoubrey, "The Revival of Chardin in French Still-Life Painting 1850–1870," *The Art Bulletin* 46 (1964): 46, 45.

24 I am grateful to the editor and reviewers at *Evental Aesthetics* for their comments and suggestions on this paper.

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“ONE MUST IMAGINE  
WHAT ONE DENIES”:

How Sartre Imagines The Imaginary

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Beginning with Plato, the Western tradition of philosophy has prioritized perception over imagination as providing privileged access to being. The image has been treated as a copy or appearance of something which originally exists independently; it is therefore conceived as a deceptive imitation of the so-called “real thing.” Jean-Paul Sartre, in his early work, *The Imaginary*, investigates this historical division from a phenomenological standpoint. In a preliminary remark to Part I of the text, Sartre outlines his goal there as an effort “to describe the great ‘irrealizing’ function of consciousness, or ‘imagination,’ and its noematic correlate, the imaginary.”<sup>1</sup> Following Husserl, he disavows the empirical tradition of thinkers like Hume who understood images as “small imitations” of real things located within a passive consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he conceives the image as an intentional act of consciousness in relation to its object. More specifically, he describes it as “a certain way in which consciousness presents to itself an object.”<sup>3</sup> In what will be a continual engagement with his predecessors, Sartre hopes to reenvision the imagination from a Husserlian perspective as a way consciousness relates to objects by making them “irreal,” designating the irreal objective domain “the imaginary” in the process.

Despite Sartre’s explicitly nontraditional view regarding the image, however, the very formulation of his project assumes the priority of something “real” to be “irrealized.” Thus, metaphysical considerations are clearly supporting his theoretical framework from the outset, however much he claims to be operating within the bounds of the transcendental reduction. And yet, Sartre’s project does not merely culminate in a series of contradictions as detailed in the relatively scarce commentary on this text; rather, something more happens through Sartre’s work as he undertakes the project.<sup>4</sup> Though he does not recognize the implications of his investigation at first and at times outright denies the inevitability of his findings, Sartre’s thinking nonetheless succeeds in nihilating the traditional thing-image binary.<sup>5</sup> In effect, he imagines something other than his situatedness within the philosophical reality of his time. As will become clear, this thought could only occur spontaneously, for the advent of the imaginary is not produced in an act of will. Accordingly, this essay attempts to trace the movements of Sartre’s project in its transformative process.

For the sake of conceptual lucidity, it is divided into three “moments” which parallel Sartre’s own accounts of perception, willed imagination, and spontaneous imagination. In the first moment, Sartre provides a relatively straightforward phenomenological analysis of the traditional distinction between perception and imagination. In the second, it becomes clear that Sartre’s investigations trouble this opposition, but he resists his findings, leading him to logical inconsistencies. Finally, in the last moment, Sartre affirms the inevitable conclusions of his project in a recounting that undoes and re-solves what has gone before.

## Philosophical Reality: Imagination and Perception

Sartre's preliminary remarks implicitly uphold a distinction between what is "real" and what he calls "irreal."<sup>6</sup> Initially, he accounts for this opposition through his analysis of the difference between the perceiving and imaging consciousnesses. Perceiving consciousness observes the object by "making a tour" since "though it enters whole" into perception, the object is given only "one side at a time."<sup>7</sup> Because it cannot be observed in its entirety from any given vantage point, Sartre explains, "I must *learn* objects, which is to say, multiply the possible points of view of them."<sup>8</sup> The object is therefore "the synthesis of all these appearances," rendering perception "a phenomenon of an infinity of aspects."<sup>9</sup> Using Husserl's cube example, he explains that it is only possible to see three sides at a time, so one is unable to ascertain that the cube is truly a cube until she has observed it from a variety of different profiles in succession, confirming that it actually has six sides. "The cube is indeed present to me, I can touch it, see it," he observes, "but I can never see it except in a certain way, which calls for and excludes at the same time an infinity of different aspects."<sup>10</sup>

The imaging consciousness by contrast is limited. According to Sartre, one no longer needs to "make a tour of it" because the image is given immediately in its entirety.<sup>11</sup> Whereas in perception, objects are slowly learned through observation, images are given whole as they are and are therefore not learned at all. Providing another example, this time of a sheet of paper on a table, Sartre discerns that "[e]ach new orientation of my attention, of my analysis, reveals to me a new detail: the upper edge of the sheet is slightly warped, the end of the third line is dotted, etc. But I can keep an image in view as long as I want: I will never find anything there but what I put there."<sup>12</sup> This leads Sartre to characterize perception as an "infinity of relations" and "a kind of *overflowing* in the world of 'things'" whereas he regards the image as having "a kind of essential poverty."<sup>13</sup> The image's elements maintain only a few relations between themselves and do not maintain a relation to the world at all. According to Sartre, consciousness has to present the object of the image to itself as if it were the object of perception, and because of this aspect of its presentation, the image's "contents retain, like a phantom, a sensible opacity," only *seeming* to be an object of observation.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, he further maintains that the image differs from perception in that while perception can mislead and be corrected upon further observation, the image is "a certainty."<sup>15</sup> This deceptively observational quality of the image leads Sartre to call "the attitude in relation to the object of the image ... '*quasi-observation*.'"<sup>16</sup>

The relationship between perception and imagination continues to prove important for Sartre's analysis in the first part of *The Imaginary* since the knowledge one obtains from perception makes imagination possible. This is because here he understands the image as a synthesis of the concrete knowledge one already has of perceived objects with elements which are "more properly representative."<sup>17</sup> Clarifying this somewhat in the subsequent chapter, he defines the image as an act of consciousness "that aims in its corporeality at an absent or nonexistent object, through a physical or psychic content, that is given not as itself but in the capacity of 'analogical representative' of the object aimed at."<sup>18</sup> From the "ground of perception," imaging consciousness makes objects which are not present to perception appear by using "a certain matter that acts as an *analogon*, as an equivalent of perception."<sup>19</sup> Although a "sensible residue" remains of the perceived object, Sartre insists that the image is characterized by a transcendence with respect to perception; it represents sensible qualities "*in its own way*."<sup>20</sup> Sartre's understanding of the image as transcendent, however, somewhat counterintuitively limits imaging consciousness. He explains: "The object as imaged is therefore contemporary with the consciousness I have of it and is exactly determined by that consciousness: it includes in itself nothing but what I am conscious of; but, inversely, everything that constitutes my consciousness finds its correlate in the object."<sup>21</sup> Hence, the imaged object's existence is exhausted in the consciousness which posits it. It is nothing outside of that consciousness, and it exists only in so far as that consciousness is positing it. At the same time, though "inversely," that which constitutes the imaging consciousness – the *analogon*, which corresponds to the perceived object – also correlates to the object of the image. Thus, consciousness first must learn objects through acts of perception, only after which can it combine that knowledge with certain peculiar sensible qualities to represent to itself the object as imaged. For Sartre then, perception exhibits a transcendental priority with respect to imagination.

Despite the dissimilarities he attributes to the perceiving and imaging consciousnesses, Sartre holds that the same objects can be either imaged or perceived. Rejecting any theory of consciousness which would posit a world of images apart from a world of things, he claims that "every object is susceptible to functioning as a present reality or as an image."<sup>22</sup> For Sartre, "[t]he two worlds" are instead "the imaginary and the real," and they are "constituted by the same objects."<sup>23</sup> Thus, the "attitude of consciousness" and not its object distinguishes perception from imagination.<sup>24</sup> This distinction allows Sartre to make further developments in Part III of *The Imaginary*, where he reveals "the image and the perception" as representations of "the two great irreducible attitudes of consciousness."<sup>25</sup> "It follows" from this, he infers, "that they exclude one another."<sup>26</sup> Imaging consciousness corresponds to an annihilation of perceiving consciousness and vice versa. "As long as I *look* at this table," Sartre explains,

I cannot form an image of Pierre; but if all at once, the irreal Pierre surges up before me, the table that is under my eyes vanishes, leaves the scene. So these two objects, the real table and the irreal Pierre, can only alternate as correlates of radically distinct consciousnesses: how could the image, under these conditions, contribute to the forming of consciousness?<sup>27</sup>

Sartre thus disagrees with contemporary psychological theories which would introduce images into perception, asserting that “I always *perceive more and otherwise* than I see.”<sup>28</sup> While certain formal structures of perception explain why one perceives otherwise than one sees, Sartre thinks that the way intentionality constitutes objects can explain why one perceives more than one sees. In aiming at a given object, “a mass of empty intentions” determine that object through relations between aspects of it that *are* present to consciousness and aspects of it which *are not* present to consciousness.<sup>29</sup> Sartre employs an example of an ashtray, which perceiving consciousness constitutes in part through a visible upper face and in part through an invisible underneath that is structurally implied. This act can give rise to an image of the underside as a secondary phenomenon; however, he insists that the empty intentions involved in perception are “radically heterogeneous with imaging consciousness.”<sup>30</sup> They “posit nothing separately” and “are limited to projecting onto the object, as a constituting structure, barely determined qualities,” which are “almost possibilities of development.”<sup>31</sup> There is, he maintains, something about the structure of the perceived object itself that determines the way consciousness constitutes it, and further, the aspects of the object that consciousness is unable to present to itself make the object’s constitution possible. By contrast, Sartre claims, imaging consciousness detaches the empty intentions and posits them “for themselves, to be *made explicit* and to be *degraded*.”<sup>32</sup> He thus characterizes the image as finite and static, maintaining its opposition to a potential perceptual overflowing.

## The Will to Imagine the Irreal and the Real

Though Sartre characterizes perception as an overflowing of consciousness, he nonetheless maintains that consciousness is able to possess the objects it presents to itself in this act. By contrast and despite the apparently limited nature of the image in Sartre’s account, possession is impossible for imaging consciousness because the imaged object is always “affected with the character of irreal.”<sup>33</sup> This distinction leads Sartre to analyze the irreal object as such, observing that even though it is indeed present to consciousness, the object’s irrealty renders it “out of reach” at the same time.<sup>34</sup> As a result, he thinks, one can only act on the irreal object in an irreal manner. “Renouncing being served by my own hands, resorting to phantom hands that will deliver irreal blows to this face,” Sartre muses, “to act on irreal objects, I must duplicate myself, *irrealize* myself.”<sup>35</sup> He contends here that “I” cannot act on the

imagined object; rather, consciousness must also image itself in order to act on the object that it has also imaged, creating an imaginary double of itself in order to act in the imaginary. Due to its “irreality,” the image is not only out of the reach of any “I” who would attempt to possess it, but what’s more, no “real” perceiving unified “I” is capable of willfully acting on the image.

Sartre further undermines any causal relationship between the “I” and the will with respect to the image. Irreal objects, he says, “do not claim an action” or “a conduct of me” because they “wait” in “pure passivity” without making demands.<sup>36</sup> “[T]hey are neither causes nor effects,” acquiring the “feeble” lives they have from the sheer spontaneity of consciousness.<sup>37</sup> The image thus appears to consciousness spontaneously rather than through any willfully productive act therein; its appearance does not require any action on the part of the consciousness in which it happens to appear. And yet, Sartre also holds that the image is an *act* of consciousness. The irreal is neither an automatic tendency of the object nor a mechanical reproduction of the mind. Citing Pierre Janet’s work on psychasthenia, Sartre affirms an apparently incompatible claim – that “the obsession is *willed*, reproduced by a kind of giddiness, by a spasm of spontaneity.”<sup>38</sup> Refusing to take into account “distance and difficulties,” for Sartre, the act of imagination is characterized by “something of the imperious and the infantile.”<sup>39</sup> Consciousness produces images, he maintains, in an effort “to *make* the object of one’s thought, the thing one desires, appear in such a way that one *can* take possession of it.”<sup>40</sup> In what he calls “an incantation,” imaging consciousness “strives to obtain these objects in their entirety,” despite the impossible nature of such a task.<sup>41</sup> According to Sartre, this means that irreal objects do not appear in the same way that real objects appear in perception. While the object as perceived is always given “from *a point of view*,” the object as imaged is “‘presentified’ under a totalitarian aspect” from “several sides at once” in an attempt to make it appear as it is in itself.<sup>42</sup> Sartre likens the irreal object to a child’s drawing of a silhouette, in which “the face is seen in profile, and yet both eyes are drawn.”<sup>43</sup> At this point in the text, Sartre clearly begins to reach contradictory findings. He has shown that consciousness cannot produce the image in a willful act; at the same time, however, he has asserted that consciousness produces the image in a willful though ultimately unsuccessful effort to possess the object of desire.

Rather than attempting to resolve the matter here, Sartre continues with his investigation. The foregoing analysis of the irreal object leads him to specify its world. For Sartre, however, speaking of a world of irreal objects is “an inexact expression” used only “for greater convenience.”<sup>44</sup> According to him, “a world is a dependent whole, in which each object has its determinate place and maintains relations with the other objects.”<sup>45</sup> On his view, the objects composing it make a world what it is according to a “double condition”: the objects “must be strictly individuated” and “they must be in balance with an environment.”<sup>46</sup> Because irreal objects fail to fulfill this double condition, there cannot, technically speaking, be an irreal world. To begin, irreal objects are not strictly individuated in the way that real objects

are since “there is at once too much and not enough in them.”<sup>47</sup> Sartre observes that these “evasive” and “ambiguous ... phantom-objects” are “at once themselves and things other than themselves,” supporting “contradictory qualities.”<sup>48</sup> This ambiguity is essential to the irreal object, and Sartre speculates that because it is never really itself, the “suspect” nature of the object as imaged haunts consciousness and elicits fear in the imagination. Despite his recognition that a perceived tiger would indeed frighten its perceiver, Sartre finds something “eminently reassuring” in a “clear and distinct perception.”<sup>49</sup> He seems to indicate that at least when one perceives a tiger lunging toward her, she can rest assured that the tiger is really there (and perhaps protect herself). The imaged tiger, however, is “too much”; one never can identify it as such, for its nature is to contain a multiplicity of alternate associations. Here, Sartre makes clear that the irreal is not to be trusted. There is a truth to be found in perception, but imagination is deceptive. This puts him squarely within the age-old tradition of Western philosophy, which situates truth in the “real thing” perceived with clarity and distinctness and associates the image with a false resemblance.

Sartre acknowledges that the irreal object admits of a certain depth because of its ambiguity; nevertheless, he is quick to insist again on the “essential poverty” of the irreal object due to the sparsity of its spatio-temporal determinations: it is “not enough” to “constitute a strict individuality.”<sup>50</sup> For, he observes,

[t]his object that I pretend to produce in its totality and as an absolute is basically reduced to a few meagre relations, a few spatial and temporal determinations, which, without doubt, have a sensible aspect, but which are *stunted*, which contain nothing more than I have explicitly posited—aside from that vague ambiguity of which I spoke.<sup>51</sup>

Again, Sartre’s investigation here arrives at conclusions of which his theoretical framework cannot admit. In analyzing the irreal object, he reveals that it cannot easily be distinguished from the real object in terms of magnitude. Just as the perceived object opens upon an infinite surplus with respect to what is actually present to consciousness, the imaged object’s essential ambiguity makes it impossible to limit its individuality to any particular determination. Still, Sartre maintains his prior distinction by emphasizing the difference between the empty intentions necessary to constitute the perceived object and the detached and separately posited existence of the image. One knows, he argues, that any new qualities one might attribute to the irreal object “are not already *in* the object in an implicit state.”<sup>52</sup> At “any instant,” Sartre insists, one can “stunt” the irreal object’s existence whereas one is despite oneself “carried along” to observing the real object’s implicit qualities.<sup>53</sup> It is therefore implied that the existence of the real object carries with it a kind of independent necessity. One cannot help but constitute it with certain qualities because it “really” has those qualities. The irreal object by contrast is characterized by contingency insofar as Sartre insists despite his contrary findings that one constitutes the irreal object however one pleases, rendering it dependent upon the consciousness which constitutes it for its existence. Despite his claim to

be conducting a phenomenological investigation, Sartre is clearly relying upon certain traditional metaphysical assumptions about the self-sufficiency of substance, which subsists independently from any perceiving consciousness. And yet, the imaginary object does not so easily conform to metaphysical categories due to the ambiguity which Sartre describes as essential to its nature. Like the real object, the irreal object escapes the control of the consciousness which constitutes it.

It is perhaps in light of these inconsistencies that Sartre attempts to differentiate the will from spontaneity. He expects that one could object to his analysis by pointing to the fact that one can make imaged objects move.<sup>54</sup> In an effort to address this criticism, he reveals that acts of the imaging consciousness can be formed by either the will or a spontaneity which is prior to willing. When an image is formed by the will, he argues, one is unable to move an inanimate image after the fact without destroying the original object. Because the irreal object lacks both a determinate identity and a world which would govern permanence, causal relation, and interaction, the willed imaging consciousness is unable to endure change. Any change made to the image therefore results in a different image or what is the same – the disintegration of the initial image. Hence, in order to will an irreal object to move, Sartre holds that one must have already constituted it as moving. “Nevertheless,” he asserts, “what the will cannot obtain could be produced by the free spontaneity of consciousness,” such that “[a]n imaging consciousness can appear suddenly” and “can of itself vary freely and conserve for a moment its essential structure.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the image can undergo transformation when it occurs spontaneously prior to an act of willing, which destroys the irreal object in its attempt to change it.<sup>56</sup> Here, the autonomy of consciousness is clearly undermined. Whereas Sartre has attempted to maintain the image in a relation of dependency with respect to consciousness, consciousness itself has again proven to have very little control over the image as it presents it to itself. A willed act of imaging consciousness is unable to change the object it posits, and a spontaneous act of imaging consciousness occurs independently of the will. Sartre accordingly returns his attention to the will, which “quickly reclaims its rights” over the spontaneity of imaging consciousness; for as soon as “one wants to develop the image” and attempts to will some variation of it, “everything is broken.”<sup>57</sup> “Thus,” he concludes,

I can produce at will — or almost — the irreal object that I want, but I cannot make of it what I want. If I want to transform it, I must in fact create other objects; and between them there will necessarily be holes. From this, the image acquires a discontinuous, jerky character: it appears, disappears, reappears and is no longer the same; it is immobile and it is in vain that I try to give it movement: I can succeed only by producing a movement without the moving body that I attribute to it in vain. Then all of a sudden it reappears in motion. But all of these changes do not come from it: just as the movements of this beautiful violet spot which remains in my eyes after I have looked at the electric lamp, do not come from the lamp but from the spontaneous and willed movements of my eyeballs.<sup>58</sup>

That which Sartre attributes to the image here – an impoverished, sparse character – seems to result not from the nature of the image as such but from the intervention and failure of the

will to determine it. The irreal object as it spontaneously arises before consciousness, however, is not necessarily so impoverished. For as Sartre has already shown, in spontaneity the image can appear and transform with continuity. Given this possibility, Sartre's electric lamp example seems more problematic. One can stare at a lamp to intentionally produce a lovely violet spot in one's eye, but often an unintended or "spontaneous" glance can produce the same effect without one's having willed it. In the case of the image, however, the irreal object manifests differently when it is subjected to the will than when it arises spontaneously.

Nevertheless, Sartre both maintains that the irreal object depends upon consciousness for its existence and situation and upholds his earlier inference that it does not fulfill the second condition necessary to justify the existence of an irreal world. On his view, the irreal object is out of balance with its environment because "it is presented without any solidarity with any other object."<sup>59</sup> In fact, Sartre contends that "it has no environment" but is rather "independent" and "isolated."<sup>60</sup> For him, irreal objects "are always given as indivisible totalities" or "absolutes" which confront consciousness as "strange beings that escape the laws of the world."<sup>61</sup> Whereas perceptual consciousness constitutes its objects as simultaneously interacting in a world regulated by causal laws, imaging consciousness does not require the acceptance of any regularity or normativity as a result of the existence it constitutes. The image is, according to Sartre, "*without consequence*" since "it acts on nothing and nothing acts on it."<sup>62</sup> Thus, even when an imaging consciousness contains more than one object, it cannot be said to constitute a world since objects do not interact with one another according to physical laws. For instance, he characterizes the imaging consciousness as "constantly surrounded by a cortège of phantom-objects," which can appear as real objects would in an act of perceiving consciousness despite retaining their distinct character as imaged.<sup>63</sup> The imaginary cortège can, however, "just as easily" contain phantom "virtues, kinds," and "relations," which he does not associate with perception.<sup>64</sup> Despite the inconsistencies he finds in his account, Sartre thus continues to maintain a radical break between the irreal and the real.

Yet, while he renders illegitimate the imaginary world envisioned in Part I, these peculiarities of the image lead him to conclusions that he is unable to sustain at this point in the work. He claims, for example, that due to their disregard for worldly laws, irreal objects provide consciousness with "a perpetual 'elsewhere,'" inviting consciousness to escape the world by offering to consciousness something other than "the constraints of the world."<sup>65</sup> He ventures that irreal objects "seem to be presented as a negation of the condition of *being in the world*, as an anti-world."<sup>66</sup> In a note following this proposition, however, he denies that this is truly the case; it is an escape in appearance only. Gesturing toward his conclusion, he insists that in reality, "every image ... must be constituted 'on the ground of the world.'"<sup>67</sup>



## Sartre's Spontaneous Conclusion: "Consciousness and Imagination"

Sartre begins his concluding remarks with a metaphysical question, one which "has been gradually disclosed by these studies of phenomenological psychology": "what are the characteristics that can be attributed to consciousness on the basis of the fact that it is consciousness capable of imagining?"<sup>68</sup> The question can, he notes, be reformulated from the standpoint of "critical analysis": "what must consciousness in general be if it is true that the constitution of the image is always possible?"<sup>69</sup> Although he thinks that this question can best be broached from a phenomenological standpoint, Sartre expressly capitulates to his Kantian-minded readers and opts for a "more oblique method" of investigation. In this vein, he reformulates the question once more: "what must consciousness be in order that it can imagine?"<sup>70</sup> In other words, Sartre plans to undertake a transcendental analysis. Accordingly, he reveals that he will relate the results of that analysis to those of Descartes' *cogito* in order to compare the imaging consciousness' conditions of possibility to those of consciousness in general.

As he embarks upon this plan, however, he returns to a phenomenological perspective as he reminds the reader that any object of consciousness corresponds to "a *thesis* or positing of existence."<sup>71</sup> At this point, he reviews and elaborates upon the distinction between imagination and perception that he has upheld throughout *The Imaginary*. The theses of the imaging and realizing consciousnesses are, he maintains, "radically different" insofar as "the type of existence of the imaged object *in so far as it is imaged* differs in nature from the type of existence of the object grasped as real."<sup>72</sup> The imaged object is posited as absent, and it is this "fundamental absence" or "essential nothingness" which, for Sartre, continues to differentiate the imaged object from the object of perception.<sup>73</sup> This leads him to reformulate his guiding question once more: "What therefore must a consciousness be in order that it can successively posit *real* objects and *imaged* objects?"<sup>74</sup> Such a question, he thinks, requires that one "make an essential observation" regarding once more the "difference between being *aimed at emptily* and being *given-as-absent*."<sup>75</sup> To illustrate this difference, he provides an example of a tapestry which is partially hidden behind a chair. As he gazes at it, consciousness presents the tapestry's hidden designs as continuing behind the legs of the chair and therefore as existing but veiled. "It is *in the manner in which I grasp what is given* that I posit as real what is not given," he concludes. Then he explains what he means by "real":

Real in the same sense as that which is given, as that which confers on it its signification and its very nature. ... To perceive this or that real datum is to perceive it on the ground of reality *as a whole*. This reality is not the object of any special act of my attention but it is co-present as the essential condition of the existence of the reality currently perceived.<sup>76</sup>

It thus remains necessary for Sartre to posit an independently-existing reality apart from consciousness as the condition for the possibility of realizing consciousness. In order for consciousness to make a given reality present, there must exist some reality that is not dependent upon it such that consciousness can from that ground posit particular entities as real. This formulation quite explicitly reveals a metaphysical inheritance based on a traditional concept of substance albeit with a manifestly Kantian flavor.

Such a theoretical framework can only oppose the image to the real in a binary fashion. Thus, Sartre characterizes “the imaging act” as “the inverse of the realizing act.”<sup>77</sup> In order to imagine the hidden parts of the tapestry, he explains, one must “isolate” the empty intentions which give sense to the tapestry as perceived and “give” them to oneself as they are “in themselves.”<sup>78</sup> This act, however, presents the tapestry’s aspects as absent. “Certainly, they really exist over there under the armchair,” Sartre admits, “but as I aim at them there where they are not given to me, I grasp them as a nothingness for me.”<sup>79</sup> “Thus the imaginative act is at once *constituting*, *isolating*, and *annihilating*.”<sup>80</sup> At this point, he is able to “grasp the essential condition for a consciousness to be able to *image*.”<sup>81</sup> It must, he claims, “have the possibility of positing a thesis of irreality.”<sup>82</sup> For Sartre, this means that “consciousness must be able to form and posit objects affected by a certain character of nothingness in relation to the totality of reality.”<sup>83</sup> To explain this, Sartre distinguishes between a portrait as real and the same portrait as imaged. The material canvas with its paint and frame, etc., serves as an analogon for the imaged object, such that, were the real portrait to burn, the image would remain unaffected. In relation to the totality of the real then, the “irreal object” appears “out of reach.”<sup>84</sup>

Thus, the real and the irreal are not merely distinct in terms of the attitude of the consciousness that posits them; more than that, they radically negate each other in their constituting acts. “To posit an image,” Sartre infers, “is therefore to hold the real at a distance, to be freed from it, in a word, to deny it.”<sup>85</sup> Understood thus, Sartre uncovers a “double-condition for consciousness to be able to imagine.”<sup>86</sup> Consciousness must be able “to both posit the world in its synthetic totality” and at the same time “posit the imagined object as out of reach in relation to that synthetic whole.”<sup>87</sup> Sartre defines the world as “the totality of the real, so far as it is grasped by consciousness as a synthetic *situation* for that consciousness.”<sup>88</sup> To posit the image as out of reach with respect to the world thus conceived is for Sartre also to “posit the world as a nothingness in relation to the image.”<sup>89</sup> Hence, the real and the irreal are here conceived as mutually exclusive. In order to think one, the other must be negated.

This opposition leads Sartre to further considerations. “It is impossible,” he says, “for [consciousness] ever to produce anything other than the real” if it is mired in the world and unable to escape.<sup>90</sup> Consciousness must instead be capable of “standing back” from the world, therein negating or “nihilating” it.<sup>91</sup> But moreover, for consciousness to be able to posit the world itself as a synthetic whole in the first place, consciousness must be able to “stand

back” from or nihilate the world; therefore, to constitute the world as world and to nihilate it are “one and the same thing.”<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, consciousness is only capable of such an act from its concrete and lived situatedness within the world. For this reason, any negation of the world is “always the world denied from a certain point of view.”<sup>93</sup> Sartre thus points to the individual consciousness’ situation as “the concrete and precise motivation for the appearance of a certain particular imaginary.”<sup>94</sup> Because consciousness is situated in the world, the world must be grasped as a world where the image is not in order for the image to arise. This allows Sartre to “finally grasp the connection of the irreal to the real.”<sup>95</sup> Because every apprehension of the real as a world is “always, in a sense, free nihilation of the world” from the point of view of an individual consciousness, apprehension of reality “tends of its own accord to end up with the production of irreal objects.”<sup>96</sup> It follows from this, Sartre thinks, that the noematic correlate of a free consciousness “should be the *world* that carries in itself the possibility of negation ... by means of an image.”<sup>97</sup> “Reciprocally” though, negating the world from a particular point of view by means of an image is only possible “on the ground of the world and in connection with that ground.”<sup>98</sup> He thus concludes that “although, by means of the production of the irreal, consciousness can momentarily *appear* delivered from its ‘being-in-the-world,’ on the contrary, this ‘being-in-the-world’ is the necessary condition of imagination.”<sup>99</sup>

Sartre again resists the findings of his investigation. On the basis of his understanding of real objects existing in a world regulated by laws, he clearly discovers that in order for any act of perceiving consciousness to occur, the world must be constituted and therefore also negated. This means that the imagining consciousness as that which can transcend the actual world in creating other possibilities must be involved in order for perceiving consciousness to stand back from the reality of a given situation and posit the world as a whole. While Sartre’s reasoning seems to make obvious the reciprocal role imagination and perception must play in the constitution of both acts of consciousness, he nevertheless maintains perception’s priority as the only legitimate “ground.” Consequently, the image is once more relegated to the status of mere appearance.

Sartre’s analysis does not terminate at this point but rather starts afresh. He goes on to recapitulate his findings and in so doing allows certain inevitabilities that he had previously denied to surface. To begin, he reformulates his guiding question once again, this time in Cartesian terms:

What is the free consciousness, in fact, whose nature is to be consciousness *of* something, but which, for this very reason, constitutes itself in the face of the real and surpasses it at each moment because it cannot be other than ‘being-in-the-world,’ which is to say by living its relation with the real as *situation*, what is it, in fact, if not simply consciousness as it is revealed to itself in the *cogito*?<sup>100</sup>

Recasting the doubt which makes possible Descartes' famed "I think, therefore I am," Sartre reveals the nihilating-constituting act of consciousness that posits the world as at the same time constituting "the apodictic intuition of freedom."<sup>101</sup> The fact that consciousness constitutes itself as situated in a world means that it nihilates the reality of that situatedness in the world in order to constitute it as a totality. In so doing, consciousness surpasses the real in positing it as real since to apprehend the real is to "stand back" from it and view a given situation as a whole. "Being-in-the-world," as Sartre understands it, involves this continuous nihilating-constituting act which posits the real as its situation; it is thus that consciousness lives its relation to the world. Reflecting on this, Sartre reaffirms that consciousness must be free in order to live its relation to the real in this way; consciousness is not mired in its situation but negates and surpasses it in the very act of apprehending it.


Nevertheless, Sartre has throughout the text maintained that consciousness cannot be consciousness of nothing; rather, consciousness as such is always consciousness of something. "Nothingness can be given only as an infrastructure of something," he contends; it is "an experience that is, on principle, given 'with' and 'in.'"<sup>102</sup> Sartre follows Bergson in maintaining that any attempt to conceive "the nothingness of existence *directly* is by nature doomed to fail."<sup>103</sup> And yet as he has shown, any apprehension of the real as situation implies negation. Logically then, Sartre acknowledges that "if the nihilating function belonging to consciousness ... is that which renders the act of imagination possible, it must be added that, reciprocally, this function can be manifested only in an imaging act."<sup>104</sup> It is thus "the appearance of the imaginary before consciousness that allows us to grasp that the nihilation of the world is its essential condition and its primary structure."<sup>105</sup> Since imagination requires negation, he reasons, negation "can only ever be realized in and by an act of imagination."<sup>106</sup> That which is negated, he infers, "cannot be a *reality*, since this would then affirm what is being denied."<sup>107</sup> Yet if something is negated, then the object of negation must be something. Therefore, Sartre deduces that "the object of negation must be posited as imaginary."<sup>108</sup> In other words, "[o]ne must imagine what one denies."<sup>109</sup> For Sartre, "the sense and value" of this insight lies in the fact that "all apprehension of the real as world implies a hidden surpassing towards the imaginary."<sup>110</sup> "[E]very existent," Sartre insists, "as soon as it is posited, is consequently surpassed"; still, "it must be surpassed *towards something*," and this "concrete 'something' towards which the existent is surpassed" Sartre defines as the imaginary.<sup>111</sup> This means that any awareness of *what is* is only possible through its negation, which is at the same time its surpassing toward something other. He concludes that the imagination is "the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom" and that "every concrete and real situation of consciousness in the world is pregnant with the imaginary in so far as it is always presented as surpassing the real."<sup>112</sup> While Sartre maintains that "the unreal is produced outside of the world by a consciousness that *remains in the world*," he recognizes that "in its

turn” the imagination as “a psychological and empirical function” has become “the necessary condition for the freedom of empirical humans in the midst of the world.”<sup>113</sup>

These considerations allow Sartre to bring together his previous analysis of the empty intentions necessary to the constitution of the real object and the unreal, which before was said to be radically distinct and separate from realizing consciousness. Here, he affirms that “the imaginary represents at each moment the implicit sense of the real.”<sup>114</sup> The imaginary act, as he now understands it in its “proper” designation, consists in making the sense of these empty intentions overt. This “specific positing” of what is implicit in the real results in a “collapse of the world,” which becomes “no more than the nihilated ground of the unreal.”<sup>115</sup> The image in its “proper” sense thus corresponds to a willful attempt at subjecting an imagining consciousness to isolation and presentation, which renders a collapse of the world and meaning. Consciousness’ attempt to willfully make present the empty intentions necessary to make sense of the world produces nonsense, a reproduction of certain aspects of a given situation but in accordance with another logic. Nevertheless, the pre-willing spontaneity Sartre discovers earlier in his analysis is clearly involved in making sense of what is given by means of what is absent. Any coherent appearance of the world – including oneself, one’s relations to others and things, one’s present and historical situation, etc. – happens through a spontaneous occurrence which is prior to willful action.

Finally, Sartre arrives at his work’s conclusion regarding the imaginary. “All imaging consciousness,” he explains, “maintains the world as the nihilated ground of the imaginary and reciprocally all consciousness of the world calls and motivates an imaging consciousness as grasping the particular *sense* of the situation.”<sup>116</sup> And yet, he goes on, “[t]he apprehension of nothingness cannot occur by an immediate disclosure”; rather, “it is realized in and by the free succession of consciousnesses, the nothingness is the matter of surpassing the world towards the imaginary. It is such that it is *lived*, without ever being posited for itself.”<sup>117</sup> The imaginary gives significance to a world which is never fully present, resists possession, and cannot be positively comprehended. Essential to this world, therefore, is a nothingness which cannot be immediately disclosed or posited for itself; rather, it is lived. Thus, for Sartre, “there could be no realizing consciousness without imaging consciousness, and vice versa.”<sup>118</sup> “[I]magination,” he affirms, “far from appearing as an accidental characteristic of consciousness, is disclosed as an essential and transcendental condition of consciousness.”<sup>119</sup>

Sartre’s own project in *The Imaginary* can be interpreted in this light. Each surpassing of the tradition amounts to its negation and each time the tradition is negated, it is transformed into something else. Sartre can only apprehend the imaginary from his situatedness within the reality of the history of philosophy, which maintains the image in opposition to the real as its degraded copy; however, the very work of apprehension requires a nihilation of that history and the arrival of its beyond. Each time he denies his discoveries, Sartre is, according to his very text, imagining them. The nothingness which gives sense to

the Western privileging of perception could only be realized through the free succession of Sartre's own conscious writing as he labored through the work which has heralded a thought of *The Imaginary*. This essay has been an attempt to reflect on Sartre's struggle, which is also of course a transcending. 

## Notes

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2010), 3.

2 Ibid., 5.

3 Ibid., 7.

4 For a detailed account of the contradictions which arise in Sartre's analysis, see Edward Casey's "Sartre on Imagination." There, he provides a critique of what he considers to be "three areas of weakness": "the analogon, the relationship between the real and the [irreal], and the relation of imagining to knowing or reflective thinking." According to Casey, the weaknesses in Sartre's text can all be attributed to "an inadequate description of the phenomenon of imagining itself," whose "definitive eidetic analysis" is "confined to the first twenty pages" of *The Imaginary*. Casey also treats the influence of the rationalists on Sartre's theory, which he thinks renders Sartre prey to what he calls an "intellectualist illusion." Edward S. Casey, "Sartre on Imagination," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 146–7, 165 (footnote), 158–160.

Paul Ricoeur considers both Sartre's and Gilbert Ryle's theories of imagination in light of Kant's distinction between productive and reproductive imagination. For Ricoeur, both thinkers ultimately fail to treat imagination in its productive capacity, reducing it to the traditional original-copy model constitutive of reproductive imagination. On his reading, Sartre ultimately privileges the picture over fiction, leaving him unable to account for fiction "on its own terms." Paul Ricoeur, "Sartre and Ryle on the Imagination," trans. R. Bradley DeFord, in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 167–173.

5 "Nihilation" here follows upon Sartre's own usage, and therefore neither the transcendence of the traditional thing-image binary nor the elimination of difference between the two would fully capture the theoretical implications at work in the deployment of this term. Rather, apprehending the difference between the thing and the image leads to their mutual contamination and prevents privileging one as more originary or essential than the other (as the history of philosophy has considered the thing with respect to the image). The third section of this essay undertakes a more detailed analysis of "nihilation" in this text and the term's importance for interpreting Sartre's project. See "Sartre's Spontaneous Conclusion: 'Consciousness and Imagination.'"

6 The French *irréel*, usually translated into English as "unreal," will prove important in Sartre's analysis of the imaginary. This essay keeps with Webber's Anglicization of the French since what is usually indicated by the English word "unreal" does not necessarily capture Sartre's usage. Because his analysis ultimately opens upon a reconsideration of the traditional real-unreal binary, and in particular the impact of what he designates as "irreal" on what is "real," this seems to be a fruitful translation. For more on Webber's translation, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, xxviii.

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 8.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 9.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 10.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 9.

18 Ibid., 20.

19 Ibid., 18. An exhaustive account of the *analogon* in Sartre's *The Imaginary* is not within the scope of this essay. For a defense of this concept which takes into account Sartre's later work on consciousness and temporality, see Cam Clayton's "The Psychical Analogon in Sartre's Theory of the Imagination."

According to Clayton's interpretation, "we should understand the psychical analogon in terms of the embodied materiality of past subjectivity rather than as the retention of an originary, objective presence." Cam Clayton, "The Psychical Analogon in Sartre's Theory of the Imagination," *Sartre Studies International* 17 (2001): 21.

20 Ibid., 53.

21 Ibid., 11.

22 Ibid., 20.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 120.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 121.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 122.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 125.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 126.

39 Ibid., 125.

40 Ibid. (emphasis added).

41 Ibid.



42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 132.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 133.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 134.

55 Ibid., 134–5.

56 Based on this distinction between a willed imaging consciousness and one which occurs spontaneously, Norihide maintains a corresponding difference between what he calls a “voluntary image” and the imaginary. In a footnote, he suggests two aspects of Sartre’s concept of the imaginary: “a creative one — to recall or produce something that is not present — and an apprehensive one — to function in the apprehension of the present real object.” Mori Norihide, “The Image and the Real: A Consideration of Sartre’s Early Views on Art,” *Aesthetics* 16 (2012): 14–15, and 23 (footnote).

According to Stawarska, the distinction (between a willed imaging consciousness and a spontaneous one) corresponds to the influences of Husserl and Janet respectively. She espouses Janet’s clinical research on obsession as “the source of an account of imagination which emphasizes the creative and unrealizing potential of the imagination.” Beata Stawarska, “Defining Imagination: Sartre between Husserl and Janet,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2005): 151.

Given the foregoing analysis of the irreal object, however, it is not clear that Sartre can maintain a strict distinction between the image as willed and the image as spontaneous occurrence. More specifically and based on Sartre’s own account, it is not clear that any image can be willfully produced in the strong sense. While maintaining consciousness’ capacity to produce images, Sartre also demonstrates that any product of consciousness resists the willful control of its creator. “Thus,” he remarks, “I can produce at will — or almost — the irreal object that I want, but I cannot make of it what I want.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 135.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 136.

62 Ibid., 135.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 136. Norihide treats the distinction between what at this point in the text is a necessarily *perceptual* world and an *imaginary* “world” which consequently cannot strictly classify as such. He interprets the imaginary “world” in a metaphorical sense. On Norihide’s reading, the “degradation of knowledge” and “belief” in the irreal object “as if” it were an object of perception results in a “relaxation” of the double-condition necessary to the constitution of a world, changing the quality of consciousness. This change in quality allows consciousness to attribute “worldliness” to the imaginary “world” as an “additional property.” Norihide, “The Image and the Real,” 17–18.

In his concluding remarks, Sartre himself seems to relax his conception of that in which a world consists, allowing for the imaginary production of something beyond the world in which one is situated. This imaginary beyond is certainly other than any given perceptual world of the present. Nonetheless, it is not merely a metaphorical quality attributable to imaginary objects, but a nihilation and potential transformation of that world. More on this in the subsequent section of this essay.

65 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 136.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 201 (footnote).

68 Ibid., 179.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 180.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 181.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., 182.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 183.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 184.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

- 89 Ibid.
- 90 Ibid.
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Ibid., 185.
- 95 Ibid.
- 96 Ibid.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Ibid.
- 99 Ibid., 185–6 (emphasis added).
- 100 Ibid., 186.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 Ibid., 187.
- 103 Ibid. (emphasis added).
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Ibid., 188.
- 107 Ibid.
- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Ibid.
- 110 Ibid.
- 111 Ibid., 187.
- 112 Ibid.
- 113 Ibid., 186.
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