

eä

Evental Aesthetics  
**Aesthetic Intersections 2**  
Vol. 7 No. 2 (2018)

**CREATING KILLING  
MACHINES: ON THE  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
ART AND PREDATION  
IN SURVEILLANCE  
CAPITALISM**  
*by ANNA MIRZAYAN*

**INDEX OF THE  
CONTEMPORARY:  
ADORNO, ART, NATURAL  
HISTORY**  
*by RYAN CRAWFORD*

**LEPORE ON THE  
QUESTION OF POETIC  
ABOUTNESS**  
*by JASON HOLT*



# Evental Aesthetics

www.eventalaesthetics.net

ISSN: 2167-1931

## Aesthetic Intersections 2 Volume 7 Number 2 (2018)

### Cover image

Zach Blas

*Facial Weaponization Suite: Fag Face Mask - October 20, 2012, Los Angeles, CA*  
photo by Christopher O'Leary

### Editors

Juljan Krause – Editor-in-Chief

Mandy-Suzanne Wong – Assistant Editor

Gascia Ouzounian – Assistant Editor

Caroline Hanke – Layout and Production

### Founding Editors-in-Chief

Mandy-Suzanne Wong

Heather Kettenis

### Brand Communication and Visual Identity Consultant

Ting-Kai Chang

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ting-kai-chang-726aba26/>

### Editorial Board

Adam Andrzejewski

Michael Austin

Rowan Bailey

Sandy Baldwin

Timothy Barker

Stanley Bates

Matthias Benzer

Paul Boshears

Iain Campbell

John Carvalho

David Cecchetto

Kris Coffield

Paola Crespi

James Currie  
Richard Deming  
William Desmond  
Merridawn Duckler  
Frances Dyson  
Nina Sun Eidsheim  
Anke Finger  
Robert Fink  
Sandy Florian  
Jane Forsey  
Catherine Gander  
Dustin Garlitz  
Gerad Gentry  
Prudence Gibson  
David Goldblatt  
Rebecca Gould  
Cécile Guédon  
Jay Hetrick  
Eleni Ikoniadou  
Nevena Ivanova  
Phil Jenkins  
Hagi Kenaan  
Gray Kochhar-Lindgren  
Bruce J. Krajewski  
Akos Krassoy  
Adrián Kvokačka

Jo Letke  
Jonathan Lewis  
Natasha Lushetich  
Jason Miller  
Julia Oswald  
Marius A. Pascale  
Kenneth Reinhard  
Summer Renault-Steele  
Judith Rodenbeck  
Matthew Rowe  
Yuriko Saito  
Rhonda Siu  
Zoltan Somhegyi  
Alan Sondheim  
Rossie Terzieva-Artemis  
Taliesin Thomas  
Cristina Travanini  
Temenuga Trifonova  
Cornelia Tsakiridou  
Rossen Ventzislavov  
Courtney Weida  
Joseph Westfall  
Daniel Wilson  
Mandy-Suzanne Wong  
Ioannis Xenakis  
Toby Young



All essays copyrighted by the authors. The views expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect the views of the Editors and Editorial Board.

## **Evental Aesthetics**

Aesthetic Intersections 2

Volume 7 Number 2 (2018)

Anna Mirzayan	
<b>Creating Killing Machines: On The Relationship between Art and Predation in Surveillance Capitalism</b>	<b>6</b>
Ryan Crawford	
<b>Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History</b>	<b>32</b>
Jason Holt	
<b>Collision. Lepore on the Question of Poetic Aboutness</b>	<b>72</b>

# Creating Killing Machines: On the Relationship between Art and Predation in Surveillance Capitalism

Anna Mirzayan

## Abstract

This article explores artistic responses to emergent technologies of surveillance. It suggests looking at the military drone as the paradigmatic surveillant eye and proposes that the primary characteristic of “droning,” or of surveillance as a type of image-creation through algorithmic data gathering, should be thought of as predation-by-aesthetics. This term is introduced as a concise paradigm for the features of surveillance capitalism that this article sees as fundamentally transformative of the world overall: namely the way algorithmic data gathering captures information about individuals and communities and uses it to govern the world through feedback loops that operate at the level of sensation and affect. The figure of the drone sheds light on the way cybernetics has fundamentally transformed the idea of an image, loosening it from a merely optic connotation to a kind of synesthesia. How does the eye of the drone “program” the political potentialities of those it is watching, and can this be harnessed by artists? I interrogate how effective the artistic techniques of camouflage and hyper-visibility are when they try to use the very machines and techniques of surveillance they purport to disrupt. I ask whether, in creating and viewing these works, we become complicit in surveillance networks.

## Keywords

Surveillance  
Predation  
Drones  
Data  
Vision



The proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or drones for both military surveillance and destruction in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) has also elicited a number of artistic responses ranging from questions about surveillance to the visualization or obfuscation of human casualties.<sup>1</sup> On the theoretical side, attempts to see in “drone vision” try to answer the aesthetic questions of what a drone sees, how it sees, and what its “desires” are.<sup>2</sup> I propose a specific reading of “drone vision” in order to explore whether the nature of droning can be converted into resistant art at all. Finally, I tentatively engage with philosophies of technology that posit technicity as originary to see whether a changed understanding of vision and technology can shed light on new modes of resistance.

The conjunction of technologies that use cameras and sensors to gather information in order to render visible certain actors, behavioral patterns, or groups for the purpose of control and/or direct physical violence has led many theorists to refer to these techniques of governance as hunting, predation, or trapping. Philip Agre formulates surveillance devices as technologies of “capture,”<sup>3</sup> a sentiment echoed by Gregoire Chamayou’s notion of cynegetics or “hunting-power” as the primary mode of contemporary governance,<sup>4</sup> leading theorists Dan and Nandita Mellamphy to declare: “we thus approach the app not from the perspective of its technical definitions or instrumental uses, but instead from the perspective of its ‘trap’-like operation: apps are hypercamouflaged predatory operatives in their function as covert capitalist capturing-devices.”<sup>5</sup> This diagnosis can be easily applied to all contemporary networked technologies and instruments, from iPhones to CCTV cameras and Google searches. What these objects have in common is the presence of a camera, a speech- and text-capturing device that performs the function of rendering images or text through the use of algorithms. It is precisely these devices and the images produced by them in the form of photographs, projections on walls, physical objects, and so on that are used by artists to explore life under predatory biopolitics. With the proliferation of artistic discourses on the datavalent state as visibly or invisibly rapacious, I wonder, Is there any camera left that *isn’t* a drone? What is the “technical essence” of the drone? How does drone art and surveillance art by the likes of James Bridle, Zach Blas, and Seda Gürses render this essence visible, thereby making it open to interpretation, critique, and even resistance?

In an article on opacity and aesthetics as political strategy, Blas writes:

Between the antimonies of identification standardization and opacity, a paradox emerges: as capture technologies are intimately bound to the privileges of citizenship, mobility, and rights, those who are either computationally illegible or unaccounted for are excessively vulnerable to violence, discrimination, and criminalization because, unlike the normatively monitored and identified, they are always risks, in that their opacity is not fully controllable.<sup>6</sup>

Blas' art attempts to cultivate the data structures used against minorities by increasing the data density to the point where the datafied collective "self" becomes a mask or camouflage against those very technologies that seek to capture it. In his "Facial Weaponization Suite" (pictured on this issue's cover), Zach uses the aggregated biometric data of groups of people to generate masks that are the embodied representations of the aggregate information used for bio-political control<sup>7</sup>; a form of governmental power which creates and manipulates discourses (e.g., discussions of "security" after 9/11) to manage various populations. For example, "Fag Face" is compiled from the faces of numerous queer men. The masks are unsettlingly inhuman in their contours, with dense, glossy colors and an impenetrable "faceless" faciality. Their smooth, contoured surfaces, reminiscent of entrails, are visceral strategies that position the viewer to see these masks as a person turned inside out. By making faces precisely out of *all* of the biometric data points that supposedly constitute, for example, gay men, the masks play with the idea that the algorithmic persona—or the vision of a person generated through their social media profiles and other metadata—is the true self. The grotesque inhumanity of the resulting masks, with their fantastic shapes, reveals that there is no ideal "Fag Face" through which individuals could be codified and identified. These masks are attempts at becoming informatically opaque or invisible by rendering masks through dense information overload, a technique that is meant to harken to both black bloc political tactics and the inability of facial recognition technologies to identify or render disability, blackness, and other minority statuses. Ironically, it is often these very (non)citizens that surveillance technologies most seek to control. Blas is one of numerous artists who explore the rise of state and non-state surveillance and data gathering through art. Their goals are often to reveal the ubiquity of today's surveillance culture while at the same time subverting the data-gathering machines through some form of disappearance or camouflage.<sup>8</sup>

Other artistic interventions into the informatic society of capture, rather than going invisible, focus on making the systems of capture and control hyper-visible. In “A Dialogue on Interventions in Surveillance Space: Seda Gürses in conversation with Michelle Teran and Manu Luksch,” three artists discuss their attempts to make the networks of surveillance, as well as their effects, manifest for the public at large.<sup>9</sup> Teran is interested in the way one’s “datafied” self forms an uncanny doppelgänger, and her work seeks to expose the technologies that are constantly watching and recording us in our everyday, banal motions. In a work titled *Friluftskino: Experiments in Open Air Surveillance Cinema*, Teran intercepted images from cameras in indoor spaces such as the local carwash, and projected the feeds onto public outdoor spaces near the original surveillance site.<sup>10</sup> Observers were then invited to sit on chairs and eat popcorn while watching people pass from the space under surveillance to the observers’ space. The indoor space was thereby turned inside-out for public viewing, while the outdoor viewing space revealed the viewers’ own surveillant gaze. Those outside watching were led to realize that just moments before, they were the subjects being watched. According to Teran, “There is an inherent potential for de-stabilization and subsequent strangeness through the introduction of technological systems. This I refer to as a ‘breakdown in narrative’ or having other things taking place that are the unintended byproducts of technological use and are outside the official descriptions of the designers of these platforms and products. I find excitement in this subversion.”<sup>11</sup> Later in the conversation, Teran is asked whether she ever becomes worried or frustrated that her use of surveillance techniques and the subsequent immersion of the viewer in the data networks as a result of her work might be an embrace of surveillance rather than a way to resist it.<sup>12</sup> Teran claims she is neither embracing nor rejecting surveillance, merely trying to construct new narratives around the use of media as a whole.

The question of complicity with the network, specifically with regard to drones, is at the core of the question about surveillance art practices. Predator drones<sup>13</sup> are the archetypal and most extreme example of “Big Brother”—a panoptic eye whose sight can literally kill (the sight of the drone is not only a reconnaissance tool but is now akin to the sight on a traditional gun—that is, the tool used for aiming before shooting).<sup>14</sup> In order to address complicity or resistance, one would first have to construct a taxonomy of mass surveillance. If it is concluded that all surveillance is predatory by default, then our question would be whether such a default state could be changed with use and intention? As Robin James writes in the *Cyborgology* blog, an important distinction must be made between

mere looking, or even cinematic gazing, and drone vision, which is typical of surveillant vision overall. The condition of droning or being constantly surveilled through a literal, material apparatus is distinct from the act of watching, or even from the internalized panopticon, because it produces its own ambient atmosphere: “‘the gaze’ is a visual paradigm...[it] presumes and makes use of all the binaries that structure modernist thought – subject/object, active/passive, depth/surface, authentic/alienated – even if only to deconstruct them into post-modernisms. ‘The (military) [sic] drone’ is a sonic paradigm grounded in neoliberal values and conventions; modernist binaries have little traction; power differentials are cut in more fluid, complicated ways.”<sup>15</sup> James wants to distinguish between the two modes of “watching” at the level of sound—she claims that the distinction is to be made in the ambient *noise*, or droning, produced by the drone. While “the gaze” is indeed linked to binaries of modernity, droning is the primary mode of seeing of all surveillance devices because it seeks to capture, control, and in some cases extinguish “hazy” or datafied doubles. Thus droning extends the very definition of “sight” to include other human senses as well as non-human capabilities.

Instead of being seen as uncanny doubles (as in Teran’s work), the images of the world created using data might be better categorized as “abcanny” quadruples or a series of four interconnected images.<sup>16</sup> The first double is made by a separation between a person and their datafied self, which is defined on the order of topographical patterns of pleasure and consumption. To this datafied self, a targeted response is then issued (by advertisers, the state, etc.). Therefore this initial doubling is constituted globally through people’s willing participation in various networks. But as Blas points out, these datafied doubles are not factual or even plausible manifestations of the people whose avatars they claim to be. Paradoxically, the data double, which is opaque to the real world because of its “mere” existence as algorithmic construction, can be targeted more precisely the more opaque to subjectivity it becomes (where “subjectivity” is understood as a subject of the state). This culminates in the “droning” that characterizes drone vision: the opaque data double is doubled yet again and counterintuitively becomes an image invisible to the state except as the contours of its data suggest. This invisible image determines the fate of the Real (in the Laruellian sense of the term)<sup>17</sup> person either as citizen-consumer or enemy-other. Take the US military’s use of “kill boxes” in the War on Terror: a kill box is a zone of space in which US armed forces and their allies are completely free to fire at anything or anybody inside. According to a 2016 story in *The Atlantic*, “The Department of Defense

uses these to target people whose ‘patterns of life’ fit the parameters of an algorithm, rather than specific individuals.”<sup>18</sup> A kill box can be initiated at any point based on a pattern of behavior that is deemed threatening by an algorithm. The kill box is therefore not a fixed spatial site but an ephemeral one that lays over the landscape and transforms any place into a temporary war zone. These kill zones do not always target specific people; they are indifferent to the *content* of a life. Instead they render a picture of a person based on data generated by certain behavior. Far from a complete image, this caricature then becomes a target to be hunted and destroyed. As a result, drone operators no longer have to be sure that people inside a truck, for example, are hostiles. An activity—driving along a certain route multiple times per day, for example—merely has to fit a predetermined pattern in order for a kill zone to be ordered. The truck could be full of insurgents or it could be a food delivery truck. Civilian casualties are just par for the course.

To summarize: a person is initially doubled into their “real” self and their algorithmic self, then these are both split again by the surveilling eye into invisible actors, comprised of “mere” aggregated data. One of these doubles is always a threatening non-state actor, whose data is collected en-masse by the NSA. The other is a potential buyer being targeted by Google. Though it seems counterintuitive, these are one and the same person, as under biopolitics—which I later refer to as *#datapolitik*—the government is no longer the only power vying for types of control over a population. Google and the NSA have different vested interests in the same digital footprint. The competing “visions” of the same person enacted by companies, NGAs, governments etc., are rendered paradoxically invisible. The drone sees an enemy through “closed eyes,” seeing without seeing. This sight results in the inability of that person to move *freely* through space without being watched and, importantly, analyzed. The foreclosure of the very time/space around a drone’s target may even eliminate the *desire* to escape by extinguishing the distinction between a “green” or safe zone and one that is likely to suffer a military action. Everybody is now a potential target; and per the cynagetic model, they carry their own personal kill boxes with them, becoming prey in motion, where motion is now entirely relative to various technological devices. This transition is important to the distinction between biopolitics and datapolitik, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Drones work by gathering data on behavioral patterns and distinguish who to kill not from the content of their lives but through approximations (e.g. judging that a person is gay based on the biometrics of their face, which are undetectable to the human eye)—outlined speculations

on a future likelihood of aggression based on an aggregated digital persona that is prefigured and then imposed over a tragically malleable fleshy human form.<sup>19</sup> Drones are just the ultimate example of smart technologies that “use aesthetic applications, the art and science of apps, both for protection and for aggression, for attack as well as defense.”<sup>20</sup> Artists are harnessing this very potential of art as offense and defense in order to make political statements and create new tactics of obfuscation. Yet if we follow Reza Negarestani’s proclamation that war hunts war machines, is it really enough to use data collection and the imperial eye against itself to duck and cover, to shock, disgust and, in some cases, reiterate the exploitative relationship between the image and control?<sup>21</sup>

In his “Second Treatise of Civil Government” John Locke explains the notion of “tacit consent,” which is integral to the functioning of a law and order government based on the ownership of private property.<sup>22</sup> “Every man, that hath any possessions, or enjoyment, of any part of the dominions of any government, doth thereby give his tacit consent, and is as far forth obliged to obedience to the laws of that government, during such enjoyment, as any one under it.”<sup>23</sup> A negative feedback loop emerges between the tacit consent given by proper(tied) residents of a given government and the increasing proliferation of laws that regulate this property. In a post-Fordist economy, behavior is regulated more readily than physical property, and intellectual labor is increasingly more prevalent. In a society where our data and our very image (debatably) constitute property, the government’s power over life and death does not only extend to specific populations but to creating the images of these very populations themselves. In other words, the state and other repressive non-state actors no longer simply maintain or extinguish life but take the very conditions of life and then decide whether to extinguish that life based on an aggregate of images, pixels, and patterns. Biopower has been aestheticized.<sup>24</sup> Are we now tacitly consenting to our very creation and destruction without any recourse to the “proper” aspect of property—faceless, nameless, but abounding in the captured imaginary of the Predator drone? In creating techniques of obfuscation, are we tacitly consenting to being hunted? Or, when the state has gained control not only over our movements, births, and deaths, but also over the very ontological conditions of our emergence as beings participating in society (a difficult thing to remove oneself from, to say the least), are we agreeing to the status of prey?

The very core of the question lies at the intersection of the art and technology each of the above artists utilizes and the inextricable question

of *how* such techniques are transformed from repressive to resistant. Honor Hagar systematically articulates the myriad ways art can be political practice with regards to the technological innovations of various eras. She writes that art “reveals the growing capabilities of UAV technologies, but also uses these very capabilities to turn the gaze towards the manufacturers and users of these devices.”<sup>25</sup> According to Hagar, this process is achieved through a “conversion” of militarized materials into instructive and subversive art. I certainly agree that creating artworks out of and in response to technology, particularly the omnipresent technology of surveillance and death-from-above, is meaningful and worthwhile. My proposal certainly is not that these artists should stop creating or that their art is somehow ineffective or, worse, exacerbating the issue of surveillant violence by attempting to use these tools against themselves. Rather, I suggest not taking for granted *how* the very same technologies used to repress, control, and kill are “converted” into their positive functions. If the drone is produced through the military logic of hunting and thus turns all the world into prey, by what mechanism (internal to the drone or otherwise) might we fight against or mitigate this hunting?

The perception of drones as predatory begs questions about the nature of drones in general. These questions are often framed in terms of the relationship between the drone and its human operator but do not treat the drone as having its own nature that acts upon its environment. Framing the discussion in terms of machinic desire or artificial intelligence is an unhelpful spectacle that distracts from the human victims of drone warfare. Instead, an inquiry into the ontology of the drone requires a re-thinking of technology and its relationship to humanity. Philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon posited his science of “mechanology” as the study of the relationship between man and machine, which he saw as necessary to alleviate modern anxieties about technology. According to him, this anxiety was misplaced and occurred precisely because there was no adequate theory of technology. For Simondon, technology has always been part of humanity, though its status in the cultural imagination has fluctuated. He treats the technical object as though it had its own evolution and genealogy, which is involved in a positive feedback loop with its environment, including material conditions, scientific progress and human interaction. This environment is called the object’s “associated milieu.” Under this schema, the human is the operator of the technical object, inciting it to act and also to transform. But each technical object has its own “technical essence,” which is a material component central to its evolution along a specific functional chain. “Technical essence is recognizable by the fact that it remains stable

all through the course of evolution and that, further, it not only remains stable but is ever capable of producing structures and functions by internal development and progressive saturation.”<sup>26</sup> Simondon gives the example of the combustion engine, which evolved into the diesel engine by means of its technical essence. In that case, the technical essence that was passed down was an increasingly efficient means of combustion that eventually made the entire engine reliant on and in symbiosis with its combustion. This is what Simondon refers to as increased “concretization of function.” A technical object has its essence, which enables it to be transformed into a more perfected, concretized technical object that may or may not resemble the original in form or even function. The important thing is that the lineage of objects can be traced to a structure or process that becomes integral to the functioning of its descendants and gradually eliminates superfluous or compensatory functioning. Thus Simondon traces the familial resemblances between technologies as though they were family traits.

While drones certainly have material components that make up their “technical essences,” it is necessary to push the idea of the essence even further and attempt to theorize the ontology or the being of the drone as a conjunction between its materialistic aspect and its ethos. In other words, we can push the concept of the technical essence into an attempt to trace the genealogy of the concretization of operations unique to droning, which would mean looking at droning as a specific form of seeing and looking at its lineage as a tool for reconnaissance as well as looking at how it has been taken up for both war and as a hobby. As Alexander Galloway says of the interface, the essence of the drone is an ethics—that is, it is a mode of acting. This mode is dictated by its associated milieu and its operation by and on the human. Simondon’s theoretical framework, while immensely innovative, still posits the human operator as fundamentally separate from the technological object. In our society, technology and the human have been thoroughly interlaced; from popular representations of AI in television and film to Donna Haraway’s notion of the McDonald’s worker as cyborg, there is no shortage of notions of an essentially interpenetrative relationship between the technical and the organic.<sup>27</sup>

In order to cement the link between the technical and the organic as it relates to platform capitalism and surveillance culture, I turn to philosopher of technology Paul Preciado (formerly known as Beatriz). Preciado’s connection between technology, capitalism, and immaterial production will then be augmented with a discussion of big data’s impact on politics and business. Preciado transforms the connection between the

organic and the technical (with an emphasis on the penetrative) and makes explicit the relationship between pornography as a visual technology for managing and producing desire and the prosthesis of pharmaceuticals for producing complementary physical desire. Technology, in both the audiovisual and bio-mechanical senses, produces and interpolates the body and its corresponding subjectivity as well as its subjection to capital. “there is nothing to discover in sex or in sexual identity; there is no inside. the truth about sex is not a disclosure; it is sexdesign. pharmacopornographic biocapitalism does not produce things. it produces mobile ideas, living organs, symbols, desires, chemical reactions and conditions of the soul.”<sup>28</sup> What is crucial here is the shift from biopower to technobiopower, which produces and manages bodies but these bodies are now monstrous, created through a pastiche of additive properties that can be removed, enhanced or hacked. Technobiopower is a form of being hacked by capital, and Preciado proposes taking back our biocodes and hacking our own operating systems as a way to resist this mode of control. Preciado’s own experiments with testosterone gel are an attempt to hack the body. These experiments are recorded and combined with philosophical investigations in a way that mirrors Preciado’s newly produced testo-body, an amorphous creation without a blueprint, whose form and function are difficult to pin down with conceptual definitions. Preciado’s text and practice rely on the idea that the technical apparatuses available to us under contemporary capital are both shoved down our throats and taken willingly. It is precisely because Preciado is acting upon their own body that they are acting upon more than the body, because the body is no longer a singular site from which mechanical and affective changes can be added or subtracted; the body is the technologically produced collection of monstrous prostheses, and subjectivity is just one of these.

Importantly, Preciado’s book *Testo Junkie* also equates technologies that we ingest, wear, use and that are used to see and act on us: “In disciplinary society, technologies of subjectivization controlled the body externally like orthoarchitectural apparatuses, but in the pharmacopornographic society, the technologies become part of the body: they dissolve into it, becoming somatechnics.”<sup>29</sup> There is no longer a distinction between inside and outside, sovereign and lateral agency or organic and technical, “as if there were a technological maieutic of what is called humanity. The interior and the exterior are the same thing, the inside is the outside, since man (the interior) is essentially defined by the tool (the exterior). However, this double constitution is also that of an opposition between the interior and the exterior—or one that produces an illusion of succession.”<sup>30</sup> In other words,

the illusion that technology comes *after* the natural human is due to the forgetting of the origin of the human as “invented.” The technical essence of the human is technology itself. Molecules in hormones are tiny cameras that surveil the body as they move through the bloodstream. Preciado’s worker is literally the consumer, and work itself involves consuming not merely as a process to another end, but as the end itself. What is at stake here is the porosity imposed on people by contemporary capitalism. All technologies are technologies of control and surveillance and all bodies are produced to be watched by somebody. That’s why pornography exemplifies work under this schema; not only is the overt goal of pornography to excite the body, but it also does so through a spectacle created and distributed through a technological network. The act of seeing itself produces the pleasure-value circuit. Like Foucault’s panoptic society, here is a triad of power-pleasure-knowledge, but this new form of vision no longer relies on boundaries, closed architectures, and delineated lines of sight. The technobody of the porn star is processed and travels through the internet, becoming the datafied body that by its mathematically infinite nature resists human cognition. This newly electric body is considered reassembled for the sake of the viewer on the other end, but the porn body now has the viewer in its crosshairs through the production of pleasure. Pleasure has become a form of vision. This is not a terribly abstract idea, either. Each porn site comes with pop-ups for other sites and webcams, and even when you close them, your search history is reflected in the ads on the margins of your email, phone, and future searches, each of which are connected. Advertisers are gathering your data through “windows.” Like the idea of The Cloud, referring to these as windows obfuscates their material nature and paints them as transparent, knowable, and bright. Of course, the algorithms that generate these windows are not transparent at all, but perhaps the reference to windows is not just a misnomer. The issue may lie in the false idea that these are windows for us to look through, out onto something else—onto desire, perhaps. But these windows actually look onto and into us, producing, recording and reproducing our bodies as desiring, thinking and working beings. The window is no longer just a technological medium for sight. It has become a form of sight itself. Technobiopower also distinguishes itself from older notions of biopower in the idea that capitalism is not interested in controlling bodies but in collecting and profiting from excitement itself.

This is Preciado’s take on immaterial labor or affective/platform capitalism, which they connect to the pharmacopornographic regime. Preciado uses pornography in the same way I am using droning in this paper—as a paradigmatic indicator of a ubiquitous state. According to this

paradigm, capitalism operates fundamentally through technobiopower, using digital circuits of attention and affect extract *potentia gaudendi*, or orgasmic potential, which has become the dominant form of value.<sup>31</sup> Preciado claims that it is no longer strictly pornography that generates this orgasmic force, but all global technologies, because they operate through manipulating excitement and relaxation. Pornography is capitalism and capitalism is pornographic. Pleasure has not only become a form of labor (i.e., a way of extracting surplus value), but has become *the* form of value generation. Surveillance or data gathering is the way by which this value is extracted from bodies both digital and corporeal, since the two are now fundamentally imbricated.

While Preciado's formulation is useful, it does not make visible the full scope and impact of dataveillance, or the ubiquitous recording and gathering of data for future traceability, on subjects or governance. I turn to David Panagia's notion of "*#datapolitik*" and the "algorithm dispositif" to articulate the crucial impact of algorithmic technology on biopower, which has turned governance into dataveillance.

According to Panagia, "the 'algorithm dispositif' regards a dynamic psycho-perceptual milieu participant in the disposition of worlds that at once limits and enables the movement of bodies in space and time offering a digital theory of action that governs our everyday lives. Moreover, the algorithm dispositif is the basis of our 'practices of governance' that today are not simply enabled by algorithms and software; rather, they occur by them in that these non-human agents are our dominant governmental actants."<sup>32</sup> Datapolitik operates by way of the algorithm dispositif by tracking and capturing data in order to create a negative feedback loop that uses past data to manage, control and create the conditions for the possibility of new futures.<sup>33</sup> This is what he means by non-human agents having become the primary governmental actors. However, this system is not only one of hunting and capturing data; the behavior of algorithms themselves also makes their targets legible through the overdetermination of information, for example in kill boxes. The droning gaze has transformed surveillance from being a glance at a fixed object, like a prisoner, to the simultaneous creation and eradication of targeted patterns which are attached to real lives. We carry our surveillance devices with us in our pockets, on our wrists, in our cars... Panagia's take on data and surveillance, however, does make explicit the connection between immaterial labor, affective excitement, and data-hunting algorithms. For Preciado, the goal of surveillance capitalism is the creation and extraction of excitation—thus the shift from biopower,

which manages populations, to technobiopower, which manages and mines orgasmic energy. Neither biopower nor technobiopower account for the way non-human agents are integral to the gathering and management of massive collections of data. It is also insufficient to discuss the impact of dataveillance's fundamentally predatory techniques of gathering, which extend back to an age-old imbrication of aesthetic production (and other technologies) with militarization. The fact that surveillance itself is rooted in a history of war comes to the fore with the paradigm of the drone, which is a hybrid of surveillance, predation, and aesthetics (affect and sense).

Blas offers one solution to dataveillance, and he is not alone in proposing it: informatic opacity. This is an elaborate form of camouflage. But hiding oneself does not stop the droning of the drone—the drone still patrols the skies and it should be assumed that its datamining eye will eventually become sophisticated enough to see through the latest disguise. Blas' work also points to the ability of art to engage communities and create new collectivities. The collective is the very condition of the possibility of Blas' masks, since they are an aggregate of the data of multiple persons. It also opens up the possibility of a separate conversation on visions of the posthuman as collective response to capitalist predation. Perhaps forms of resistance to droning will be found in new forms of collective action, maybe a combination of group camouflage (using data against itself) and repurposing the machines of surveillance (using the drone against itself). In order to achieve either, a more thorough understanding of drone vision and the affects algorithmic data has on space needs to be achieved.<sup>34</sup> Drone artist James Bridle suggests that only a machine, with its myriad eyes, can watch a machine.<sup>35</sup> Hagar points to what might be seen as a prototype of this sentiment in the TRUST-SYSTEM, a technological tool that used military shortwave radio technology in an attempt to send and receive broadcasts to zones blocked by the military. This system "would be mobile, aerial and would utilize the very weapons of war themselves – planes, missiles – to thwart the intentions of the military."<sup>36</sup> If the predator-prey dynamic turns out to be the only one possible under surveillance networks, then perhaps aesthetic practice should (and can?) reverse this dynamic through its own human-technology assemblages. Can we build drones that hunt other drones while we watch the aerial combat from below, safe under our posthuman masks?

If techniques of camouflage come with the drawback of the person becoming prey, perhaps Blas' work can be supplemented with Preciado's notion of prosthesis to reconceptualize opacity itself as an ontological

process. *Testo Junkie* already shows us how prostheses should not be thought of as simple additions to an already existing naturalized subject. Under this rubric, gender itself has become a means of biopolitical control precisely through its status as somatic fiction, or constitutive prosthesis. To quote Stiegler: “The prosthesis is not a mere extension of the human body; it is the constitution of this body qua ‘human’ (the quotation marks belong to the constitution). It is not a ‘means’ for the human but its end, and we know the essential equivocity of this expression: ‘the end of the human.’”<sup>37</sup> The production of the human itself is fundamentally linked to anticipation as a structure based on a relationship to the future. For the sake of transcribing this system into Preciado’s, anticipation can be thought of as desire. Technology, as prosthesis, creates the human through desire. If this is true, then Blas’ masks cannot simply be removed to reveal the “real” human underneath. How has the mask itself become the essence of the human under Preciado’s technobiopowered society, what *is* underneath it, and how can it be used as a technology of liberation rather than control?

“Facial Weaponization Suite” offers a series of masks that are both satirical and strategic; because they are composed of aggregates of biometric data, they are grotesque figurations of how the face is read by machines. In theory, a facial recognition system improves when it is able to recognize more nuanced and more specific faces—the datafied face is supposed to correspond exactly, and in some cases even more closely, to the real person. A piece like “Fag Face” plays with the idea that machines of surveillance see us more accurately than the surrounding crowd or even sometimes our own friends. For example, Blas’ work plays off the idea that a machine can tell whether somebody is gay or straight by picking up on micro-expressions and facial structures imperceptible to the human eye. It knows more about you than you, more than can be gleaned from a mere photo. At least, that is the premise. However, as Blas’ work reveals, these idealized faces are fictions—they in no way resemble human faces. Again the subject has been doubled—once for the “real” face and once as its biometric iteration. But here also the mere double is not enough. The datafied face, or the grotesque mask *is* a fiction, it is true to the data—but it is a somatic fiction. Here are the monsters prosthetically produced according to Preciado. These biometrics are not mere overlays of how the surveillant eye reads or interprets or represents you—for all intents and purposes, it *is* you. The mask cannot be taken off, because surveillance technologies have no other way of seeing. And this sight is deployed on the human operators who read or look at specific snippets of data. A drone operator sees something that looks closer to a very distant human than to Blas’

inhuman masks, but as was discussed above, the Real of that human target has become the monstrous body. “In *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno, reflecting on powerful technological prostheses, vouched that simply sitting behind the wheel of a powerful automobile was enough to provoke fantasies of wiping the ‘vermin’ off the streets. The viewer of drone porn vicariously experiences a similar thrill as he awaits the ecstatic impact of the missile on its target, which military personnel describe as ‘bugsplat’<sup>38</sup> The phenomenon of referring to victims of drone strikes as insects, bugs, or vermin is common and should not be taken as mere metaphor. If we are to take seriously that the drone operator and the drone form an assemblage, then “drone vision” or the algorithmically produced image of a target (like the image of the internet porn star) is part of and has an effect on human vision. The quote above suggests that the way this machine vision operates on human sight is by turning human targets into insects, turning human bodies into monsters. Here is a constitutive prosthesis, a mask that cannot be removed. “But the real desire to which the name points is the collapse of the acts of seeing and killing into one another, the conferral of death in the moment of visualization.”<sup>39</sup> This collapse is commonly understood as being facilitated by the dehumanizing nature of the drone because of its distance from its target as well as its operator. However, the nature of this dehumanization should be thought of as a post- or non-humanization—hence the term “bugsplat.”

If being targeted by drones turns people into insects and facial recognition turns human faces into monsters, then what happens to the person who watches pornography, searches Google or posts on social media? These technologies are prosthetics that make up the human itself and make it into something other than human. Blas’ masks, then, are not merely elaborate covers to avoid the surveillant gaze. They use the very techniques of machine vision to proactively create posthumans from artistic prostheses. In this light, Blas’ work appears as an offshoot of Preciado’s auto-experimentation, or a form of hacking that has real effects on the body as subjectivity. The mask as a tool for obscuring faces is now integrated into the human being using this tool. It becomes not merely camouflage but turns the human into a posthuman that can be modified or hacked further. Preciado’s hormones were messengers that opened the gateway or threshold and exposed the technobody within the body, turned the skin into an interface. The mask functions as the gateway to a humanity that isn’t resisting the surveillance state by trying to return to an earlier, non-technological mode of being. Instead this masked art uses the techniques of surveillance and hacks them through artistic practice.

However, it isn't enough to merely adopt masks or make-up to confuse cameras or dazzle drones. An artistic practice must do more than reveal the presence of surveillance or data mining. Our works of art can be made to camouflage us from a corporate or state eye, but as we have seen, this eye now does much more than merely look. Works like Blas', which make the consumer explicitly *concerned* with the way their datafied selves are being used against them, are vital to connecting aesthetics and politics. This concern reveals the fundamental link between our data and ourselves. When we all see ourselves as targets, we can begin to forge kinship alliances with those communities directly affected by the repressive violence of, for example, military drones. In the digital age, artworks and their creators and consumers become ethical, acting to explore ways of organizing and pushing the boundaries of what makes up community, civil society, and the subject under capitalism.

## Notes

- 1 Omer Fast's film "5000 Feet Is The Best" alludes to the optimal distance between a drone operator and their target on the ground. Fast interviewed former drone pilots on the experience of seeing from such a distance. The film asks whether what we see is always strictly speaking "real," and connects the effects of bias, distortion and other factors at play for a drone operator to the beliefs of the civilian population that fuel the War on Terror.
- 2 The artist James Bridle, pioneer of "The New Aesthetic" movement, claims his creation of drone shadows or outlines are interested in the machinic desire of these weapons, while theorists like Dora Apel, in *War Culture and the Contest of Images* (Rutgers University Press, 2012) distinguish between a simply anthropomorphic understanding of machines as having desires with the effects that living in a surveillance society have on the co-existence and similarities between humans and machines.
- 3 Philip E. Agre, "Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy," *The Information Society* 10, no. 2 (1994): 101-127. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01972243.1994.9960162>.
- 4 Gregoire Chamayou, "The Manhunt Doctrine," *Radical Philosophy* no. 169 (September/October 2011): 2-6. <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/the-manhunt-doctrine>.
- 5 Dan and Nandita Mellamphy, "From the Digital to the Tentacular, or From iPods to Cephalopods—Apps, Traps, and Entrées-without-Exit," in *The Imaginary App*, ed. Paul D. Miller and Svitlana Matviyenko, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 4.
- 6 Zach Blas, "Informatic Opacity," *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 9 (Spring 2014): n.p.. <http://www.joaap.org/issue9/zachblas.htm>.
- 7 Zach Blas, "Fag Face," accessed December 10, 2017. <http://www.zachblas.info/works/facial-weaponization-suite/>.
- 8 James Bridle, Michelle Teran and Omer Fast are just some examples of artists interested in the growing use of militarized surveillance technology in everyday life.

- 9 Seda Gürses, Michelle Teran and Manu Luksch, “Triologue on Interventions in Surveillance Space: Seda Gürses in conversation with Michelle Teran and Manu Luksch,” *Surveillance & Society*, Special Issue on Surveillance, Performance and New Media Art, ed. John McGrath and Robert Sweeny 7, no 2 (2010).
- 10 Michelle Teran, 2007, “*Friluftskino: Experiments In Open Air Surveillance Cinema*,” Urban projection A20 Recall, online map and installation, Oslo: Urban Interface Oslo.
- 11 “Trilogue,” 168.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 171.
- 13 The MQ-1 Predator Drone has been the most widely used military drone in the U.S. Armed Forces for the past 15 years. first being used solely for intelligence gathering by doing aerial reconnaissance. The Predator was then outfitted with laser-guided Air-to-Ground Hellfire Missiles. This easy retrofitting offers a convenient example of the seamless relationship between the camera lens and the targeting scope as they both pass through the military industrial complex. As of 2017, the Predator has been replaced with the even more efficient and deadly Reaper (see Terrell Jermaine Starr, “The Air Force Is Retiring The Predator Drone For The More Deadly Reaper,” *Foxtrot Alpha*, February 28, 2017, <https://foxtrotalpha.jalopnik.com/the-air-force-is-retiring-the-predator-drone-for-the-mo-1792832541/>).
- 14 According to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, there were a total of 57 drone strikes during George W. Bush’s entire presidency, compared with more than 500 strikes under Barack Obama (the exact number is disputed).
- 15 Robin James, “Drones, Sound, and Super-Panoptic Surveillance,” *Cyborgology* (blog), August 9, 2017, <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2013/10/26/drones-sound-and-super-panoptic-surveillance/>.
- 16 The “abcanny” is a sentiment described by speculative fiction author China Miéville in his essay “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire Weird; Hauntological: Versus and/or and and/or or?” (*Collapse IV*, ed. Robin Mackay (United Kingdom: Urbanomic, 2008), 105-126)). Unlike Freud’s uncanny, which relies on recognition that one once had a home but is now precisely not at home, (*unheimlich*), the horror felt at the abcanny is the horror of something entirely new, unthought and beyond intelligibility.
- 17 François Laruelle’s use of the ‘Real’ is indebted to Lacan’s term of the same name, but Laruelle uses this term in a radically different way to mean something much closer to the way the term is used colloquially, with an insistence on a Real that unilaterally determines everything in the world

without being determined by it, outside all representation in thought or language. For an excellent introduction to Laruelle's use of the Real, see Anthony Paul Smith's *Laruelle: A Stranger Thought*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.

- 18 Scott Beauchamp, "The Moral Cost of the Kill Box," *The Atlantic*, February 29, 2016, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/the-cost-of-the-kill-box/470751/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/the-cost-of-the-kill-box/470751/).
- 19 According to a 2014 article in *The New Yorker* (Steve Coll, "The Unblinking Stare," *The New Yorker*, November 24, 2014), the Obama presidency used drones in much larger numbers than the Bush administration, adopting a policy of "signature strikes," which regard anybody of a certain age and sex as an enemy combatant without the need for a positive facial identification as a particular enemy.
- 20 Mellamphy, "From the Digital to the Tentacular," 16.
- 21 A paraphrasing of the relationship between War and war machines in the "Exhumations: Relics and Diabolical Particles" section of Reza Negarestani's hyperstitional tale, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Australia: Re.press, 2008).
- 22 John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (London: Printed for R. Butler, etc., 1821, Bartleby.com, 2010). [www.bartleby.com/169/](http://www.bartleby.com/169/).
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 For a discussion about the aestheticization of war via the cinematic image, see Paul Virilio's *War and Cinema: the Logistics of Perception*, (London: Verso, 1989). I am suggesting that it's important to distinguish not only between droning and gazing but between cinematic images and media that primarily functions on the level of simulacrum/affect, and surveillance images or droning images, which are gathered algorithmically and operate onto-spatially to program bodies and places.
- 25 Honor Hagar, "Unmanned Aerial Ecologies: proto-drones, airspace and canaries in the mine," Honor Hagar (blog), August 6, 2017, <https://honorhager.wordpress.com/2013/04/21/unmanned-aerial-ecologies-proto-drones-airspace-and-canaries-in-the-mine>.
- 26 Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017), 46.
- 27 Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 9 Oct. 2017).

- 28 Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 78.
- 29 Ibid., 36.
- 30 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time I*, trans. by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 148.
- 31 Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 42.
- 32 Davide Panagia, “The Algorithm Dispositif: Risk and Automation in the Age of #datapolitik,” academia.edu, [https://www.academia.edu/31122041/The\\_Algorithm\\_Dispositif\\_Risk\\_and\\_Automation\\_in\\_the\\_Age\\_of\\_datapolitik/](https://www.academia.edu/31122041/The_Algorithm_Dispositif_Risk_and_Automation_in_the_Age_of_datapolitik/).
- 33 Panagia goes on to distinguish this from surveillance because, he claims, it does not operate scopically to fix a target in place with a gaze but instead relies on hunting and capture of moving targets of data. He posits algorithmic as being indifferent to the content of data, merely interested in collecting as much of it as possible. I believe the content of the data is intimately tied to the reason for implementing mass data collection in the first place—namely value production. Additionally, all peoples and objects are not being surveilled or predated equally, as the hyper rich and well-connected are usually insulated from this type of collection. The intentionality of dataveillance thus points not to a distinction between surveillance/biopolitics and dataveillance/datapolitik but to a new type of gaze that fixes people and things in place as it predates and captures their data.
- 34 To achieve this understanding, I propose attempting to repurpose Frederic Jameson’s concept of “ontocartography” for the contemporary world by reading Katherine Behar’s work on “glocality” (Katherine Behar, “Capturing Glocality—Online Mapping Circa 2005, Part Two: Mapping Glocalities,” *Parsons Journal for Information Mapping* 1, no. 4 (Fall, 2009): n.p.). Behar argues that online mapping is unique form of mapping through data aggregation works under a paradigm of capture. I suggest this work could be supplemented with Luciana Parisi’s tome on algorithmic objects and digital architecture (Luciana Parisi, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013)), which contends that algorithmic data constitutes material objects composed of discreet infinities composed of incomputable quantities that literally program the spaces in which we operate. Combining these readings might produce a nuanced account of the affects, intentions and tactics of drone vision.
- 35 Andrew Blum, “Children of the Drone,” *Vanity Fair*, June 12, 2013. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/tech/2013/06/new-aesthetic-james-bridle-drones/>.

## Creating Killing Machines

36 Hagar, "Unmanned," n.p..

37 Stiegler, *Technics*, 152-3.

38 Mark Dorrian, "Drone Semiosis," *Cabinet: a Quarterly of Art and Culture* no. 54 (September 2014): 52.

39 *Ibid.*, 49.

## References

- Agre, Philip E. "Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy." *The Information Society* 10, no. 2 (1994): 101-127. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01972243.1994.9960162>.
- Beauchamp, Scott. "The Moral Cost of the Kill Box." *The Atlantic*, February 29, 2016. [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/the-cost-of-the-kill-box/470751/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/the-cost-of-the-kill-box/470751/).
- Behar, Katherine. "Capturing Glocality—Online Mapping Circa 2005, Part Two: Mapping Glocalities." *Parsons Journal for Information Mapping* 1, no. 4 (Fall, 2009): n.p.. <https://zdoc.site/mapping-glocalities-center-for-data-arts-the-new-school.html/>.
- Blas, Zach. "Fag Face Mask." *Facial Weaponization Suite*. [zachblas.info/](http://zachblas.info/). Accessed August 3, 2018. <http://www.zachblas.info/works/facial-weaponization-suite/>.
- . "Informatic Opacity." *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 9 (Spring 2014): n.p.. <http://www.joaap.org/issue9/zachblas.htm>.
- Blum, Andrew. "Children of the Drone." *Vanity Fair*, June 12, 2013. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/tech/2013/06/new-aesthetic-james-bridle-drones/>.
- Chamayou, Gregoire. "The Manhunt Doctrine." *Radical Philosophy* no. 169 (September/October 2011): 2-6. <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/the-manhunt-doctrine>.
- Coll, Steve. "The Unblinking Stare." *The New Yorker*, November 24, 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/11/24/unblinking-stare/>.
- Dorrian, Mark. "Drone Semiosis." *Cabinet: a Quarterly of Art and Culture* 54 (September 2014): 48-55.
- Gürses, Seda, Michelle Teran, and Manu Luksch. "Dialogue on Interventions in Surveillance Space: Seda Gürses in conversation with Michelle Teran and Manu Luksch." *Surveillance & Society* 7, no. 2 (2010): 165-174.

- Hagar, Honor “Unmanned Aerial Ecologies: proto-drones, airspace and canaries in the mine.” Honor Hargar. April 21, 2013. Accessed August 6, 2017. <https://honorharger.wordpress.com/2013/04/21/unmanned-aerial-ecologies-proto-drones-airspace-and-canaries-in-the-mine>.
- Haraway, Donna. *Manifestly Haraway*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- James, Robin. “Drones, Sound, and Super-Panoptic Surveillance.” *Cyborgology* (blog), October 26, 2013. Accessed August 9, 2017. <https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2013/10/26/drones-sound-and-super-panoptic-surveillance>.
- Locke, John. *Two Treatises on Government*. London: Printed for R. Butler, etc., 1821; Bartleby.com, 2010. [www.bartleby.com/169/](http://www.bartleby.com/169/).
- Mellamphy, Dan and Nandita. “From the Digital to the Tentacular, or From iPods to Cephalopods — Apps, Traps, and Entrées-without-Exit.” In *The Imaginary App*, ed. Paul D. Miller and Svitlana Matviyenko, 231-250. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014.
- Miéville, China. “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire Weird; Hauntological: Versus and/or and and/or or?” In *Collapse IV*, edited by Robin Mackay, 105-126. United Kingdom: Urbanomic, 2008.
- Panagia, Davide. “The Algorithm Dispositif: Risk and Automation in the Age of #datapolitik.” Academia.edu, [https://www.academia.edu/31122041/The\\_Algorithm\\_Dispositif\\_Risk\\_and\\_Automation\\_in\\_the\\_Age\\_of\\_datapolitik/](https://www.academia.edu/31122041/The_Algorithm_Dispositif_Risk_and_Automation_in_the_Age_of_datapolitik/).
- Parisi, Luciana. *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.
- Preciado, Beatriz. *Testo Junkie*. Translated by Bruce Benderson. New York: The Feminist Press, 2013.
- Simondon, Gilbert. *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. Translated by Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017.

- Starr, Terrell Jermaine. "The Air Force Is Retiring The Predator Drone For The More Deadly Reaper." *Foxtrot Alpha*, February 28, 2017. <https://foxtrotalpha.jalopnik.com/the-air-force-is-retiring-the-predator-drone-for-the-mo-1792832541/>.
- Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics and Time I*. Trans. by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Teran, Michelle. 2007. *Friluftskino: Experiments In Open Air Surveillance Cinema*. Urban projection A20 Recall, online map and installation. Oslo: Urban Interface Oslo.
- Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: the Logistics of Perception*. London: Verso, 1989.

## Creating Killing Machines

# Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

Ryan Crawford

Abstract

That contemporary art is fundamentally irreducible to modernist art and aesthetics has become a commonplace of contemporary art theory and criticism. In marking this distinction, reference is often made to the obsolescence of once-dominant aesthetic categories and the need for breaking with aesthetic theories traditionally allied with artistic modernism. For many in the field of philosophical aesthetics, this means going beyond the work of Theodor W. Adorno and creating a conceptual discourse more appropriate to the current state of contemporary art. The present paper reconstructs the stakes of this legitimation crisis and sets Adorno's writings on art and aesthetics in relation to some of the most significant debates in recent art criticism. In the process, it demonstrates that many of the most pressing problems in contemporary art are integral to Adorno's aesthetic theory and that it is precisely at those points where his thought is today regarded as most problematic that it is often most instructive. Through a sustained examination of art's essential relation to what Adorno calls "natural-history," the problems of contemporary art and aesthetics are then situated within the wider context of art's relationship to a history of domination.

Keywords

Adorno  
Modernism  
Aesthetics  
Contemporary Art  
Natural History



“You create a new shudder” [*Vous créez un frisson nouveau*], Victor Hugo wrote Baudelaire upon receiving the poems the latter had recently dedicated to him.<sup>1</sup> Though grateful for the gift, and appreciative of what he called Baudelaire’s “noble mind and generous heart,” Hugo could hardly countenance the “horrifying morality” *Les Fleurs du mal* grafted onto the older man’s art.<sup>2</sup> For in those poems, the crowd, the very subject Hugo had first “opened ... up for poetry,”<sup>3</sup> was visibly and perhaps irrevocably transformed, appearing now under the wings of a modernity in which all birds of serenade and auguries of hope had been replaced by an albatross of piping and cripples.<sup>4</sup> In *Les Fleurs du mal*’s “swarming city ... gorged with dreams / where ghosts by day accost the passer-by,”<sup>5</sup> only the populations of the wretched remain—cold eyes full of malice, illumined by pupils “soaked in bile,” feet pounding “mean streets” of “mud and slush,” hostile boots made for “crushing dead men’s bones.”<sup>6</sup> A scene so “vile” and “sinister” that the man of the crowd, torn between terror and torpor, could only turn his back “on the whole damned parade,” flee the “imminent decrepitude,” stagger home, and lock the door. Gone from the world of *Les Fleurs du mal* are those idylls in which Hugo’s much-loved Isle of Jersey once had its place, where “a set of spiritualistic protocols”<sup>7</sup> once reigned and “cosmic shudders”<sup>8</sup> could still console. One age has come to an end, and whatever compensatory pleasures the present promises remain ephemeral, unbearable—and permanent.

In the old Montmartre neighborhood of *Belle Époque* Paris, the cafe Chat Noir, headquarters of the local Apache gang, is said to have borne the following inscription above its entrance: “*Passant, sois moderne!*” [Passerby, be modern!].<sup>9</sup> It was the kind of place Baudelaire inhabited in poems like “The Murderer’s Wine,” alongside poet-cum-criminals who, in stupor to drink, would extend to Hell a hearty salutation and exclaim: “Good riddance, God!”<sup>10</sup> Such a poem would have been impossible for Hugo; such crowds unrecognizable to Baudelaire’s dedicatee. For while Hugo “celebrat[ed] the crowd as the hero of a modern epic” and placed the author “as a *citoyen*” in its midst, “Baudelaire divorced himself from the crowd as a hero” and made of every effort to repulse its charms an opportunity for condemning a progress everywhere proclaimed and nowhere achieved.<sup>11</sup> In Baudelaire, the crowd is no longer conceived, as it was in Hugo, as an “object of contemplation” modeled on natural beauty,<sup>12</sup> but as something altogether more menacing—unlivable condition of modernity and cause of that “overwhelming power of spleen” against which the poet defends himself by cultivating, in weariness, that infernal novelty which must be stolen from the seething crowds.<sup>13</sup>

What is new in Baudelaire has little to offer older categories of a once edifying art. Indeed, “Baudelaire’s work,” Walter Benjamin writes, “is not concerned with the attempt, decisive in all the arts, to engender new forms or to reveal new aspects of things; its interest is in the fundamentally new object, whose power resides solely in the fact that it is new, no matter how repulsive or bleak it may be.”<sup>14</sup> “The new is necessarily abstract ... a blind spot, as empty as the purely indexical gesture ‘look here,’” Theodor W. Adorno writes in a discussion of Baudelaire, Poe and the shudder of aesthetic modernity.<sup>15</sup> Though the terrible novelty of such crowds provided Baudelaire with “the decisive, unmistakable experience” of modernity, they also introduced, within the life of the subject and the afterlife of art, a shudder neither cosmic nor consoling, but one which transfixes and terrifies.<sup>16</sup> The subject of Baudelaire’s spleen can no more beat back its sense of “catastrophe in permanence” than can art serve as propaedeutic for approximating a reason long since sacrificed to the entrails of so many absent powers.<sup>17</sup> For Baudelaire, then, “[t]he price for which the sensation of modernity could be had” is not only that experience of shock within which the aura of the old world disappears,<sup>18</sup> but a most profane form of the transubstantiation of the flesh. Whereas “[b]aroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside,” Benjamin writes, “Baudelaire sees it also from within.”<sup>19</sup> At once absolutely new and utterly unlivable, the forces of combination and combustion, of disrepair and dessication volatilized in modernity fundamentally transform the artistic subject:

I am a graveyard that the moon abhors,  
where long worms like regrets come out to feed  
most ravenously on my dearest dead.  
I am an old boudoir where a rack of gowns,  
perfumed by withered roses, rots to dust ...<sup>20</sup>

As the modern impresses itself upon the body, laceration becomes flesh, becomes word, and the unknown comes to name a fear that is at once eminently historical and fundamentally natural; a novelty that is both temporary in appearance and permanent in its return—and an index by which contemporary art would later measure its distance from an art whose “passion for radicality” ensured that, in the words of Nicolas Bourriaud, “the *new* [became] an aesthetic criterion in its own right.”<sup>21</sup>

Like so many episodes from the short history of modern art, the story of Baudelaire's shock and Hugo's shudder is today as familiar as it is ineffectual. *Familiar* wherever it accords with the standard tropes of a pathos-laden modern art; *ineffectual* inasmuch as it marks the point at which contemporary art and aesthetics severed themselves from a past in which they no longer recognized themselves.<sup>22</sup> For modern art, the identification of artistic novelty with aesthetic and extra-aesthetic shock, first achieved by the *poète maudit* Benjamin would call the writer of modern life, soon became axiomatic, the very signature of an art for which concepts like form, autonomy and judgment were similarly constitutive. And while there is today near unanimity about the centrality of such categories to the past progress and retrospective consistency of modern art, discussions of contemporary art demonstrate a no less uniform skepticism about the continuing relevance of such categories. For those who are today concerned with the force and import of a contemporary art alternatively characterized as either postmodern, postconceptual or posthistorical, modernist categories have come to seem increasingly anachronistic if not entirely obsolete. The fate of the concept of the new in discussions of contemporary art is here instructive. "Although the concept of the new is not false," Peter Bürger observes, "it is too general and nonspecific to designate what is decisive in [the contemporary avant-garde's] break with tradition"; as a result, "the category is not suitable for a description of how things are."<sup>23</sup> "An orientation to the new now seems to be not just impossible," adds Boris Groys, "but even undesirable."<sup>24</sup> The concept of the new's contemporary inadequacy is symptomatic of the many modernist categories that have each fallen into similar disrepute.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the "criteria according to which the antinomic hierarchy of artistic production could be evaluated" have today almost entirely dissolved, according to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh.<sup>26</sup>

And while there are many who unreservedly celebrate contemporary art's having definitively "finished the modernist agenda," recasting what might otherwise be counted a loss into so many encomiums intended to announce, with Arthur Danto, the "philosophical coming of age of art," others are decidedly less enthusiastic.<sup>27</sup> For some, the turn away from modern art throws into doubt the critical and subversive character of art itself. Avant-garde and neo-avant-garde attempts at "collaps[ing] the gap between art and life," for instance, are said to risk, in Bürger's words, "surrender[ing] the critical distance through which the [avant-gardist] critique of life became possible."<sup>28</sup> In the face of these fears, Bürger concludes that "a theory of contemporary aesthetics has the task of conceptualizing a dialectical *continuation* of modernism."<sup>29</sup> Between the positions of Danto and Bürger

there exists a disagreement as stark as it is determinative for the future of contemporary art and aesthetics. More peculiar than this difference, however, is that such positions proceed from an even more essential accord.

For regardless of whether one either celebrates the contemporary overcoming of historical categories or mourns their apparent obsolescence, all agree that the criteria by which art had previously been evaluated are now irretrievably lost: “[t]here are no such criteria” (Groys); “all criteria of the judgment of artistic objects [have been] erased” (Buchloh); contemporary art has witnessed “the destruction of the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones” (Bürger); “the *normative* criterion of *quality* [has been] displaced by the *experiential* value of *interest*” (Foster); “no [such] a priori criterion” exist now that “[e]verything is possible. Anything can be art” (Danto).<sup>30</sup> “There is no critically relevant pure ‘aesthetics’ of contemporary art,” Peter Osborne writes, “because contemporary art is not an aesthetic art in any philosophically significant sense.”<sup>31</sup> In the wake of the aesthetics of deskilling that has today become an essential paradigm of contemporary art, the latter’s relation to aesthetic truth seems to have finally come undone. Once the production, experience and reception of art are determined by pseudo-democratic fantasies of emancipation from categories and criteria thought to be of illegitimate social provenance, all questions of quality and value pale before the imperative that, in the words of Donald Judd, “a work needs only to be interesting.”<sup>32</sup> “[T]he adventures of the aesthetic” appear exhausted and, in the words of Foster’s preface to that touchstone of postmodernism, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, “aesthetic space” is now thought to have been definitively “eclipsed.”<sup>33</sup>

Yet all such claims to the distinctively *contemporary* nature of that discord today characteristic of aesthetics and its object are by no means as unprecedented as they may appear. Indeed, a sense for the utter irreconcilability of art and the philosophy of art is nearly as old as aesthetics itself. “One of two things is usually lacking in the so-called Philosophy of Art,” observed Friedrich Schlegel more than two hundred years ago: “either philosophy or art.”<sup>34</sup> A failure specific to the tradition of Idealist aesthetics, one might say, but one which has remained endemic throughout the philosophy of art. And while it may have once been possible for Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer to have made decisive contributions to an understanding of art without themselves having had much exposure to the art of their contemporaries, such philosophical naiveté can today no longer be maintained.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, such ignorance about the most advanced art of one’s time is now recognized as a “fatal flaw of many philosophers of

art.”<sup>36</sup> So completely has this confident crudeness saturated aesthetics that Osborne argues that the attempt to “make contemporary art the object of some kind of reflective philosophical experience ... seems, at times, almost impossible.”<sup>37</sup> By no means, however, is such skepticism exclusive to those who today evince a kind of inveterate suspicion of aesthetics *tout court*. Even those most sensitive to the intra-philosophical content of artworks, like Juliane Rebentisch, cannot help but remark upon “the sad picture such philosophical business presents” when it engages with contemporary art and shows itself to be constitutively incapable of “renounc[ing] its tendency towards generalization,” endlessly sacrificing the particularity of the artwork to categories in which particularity is entirely absent.<sup>38</sup> Such skepticism is common to even the most sophisticated contemporary attempts at continuing the long tradition of philosophical aesthetics.

In another sense, however, contemporary art’s incommensurability with philosophical conceptualization can hardly be attributed to aesthetics’ failures alone; because art’s essential enigmaticalness refuses subsumption to categories in which all art nevertheless participates, the artwork is itself equally culpable. For Adorno, cognizance of this fact requires that interpretation abandon the attempt to discover, within the artwork, the kind of “lexical key” of which Jacob Burckhardt was already suspicious over a century ago.<sup>39</sup> Understanding the most advanced forms of contemporary art consists, instead, in the attempt to comprehend the mode of incomprehensibility specific to the individual artwork, in line with the principle according to which the logic of the artwork is best understood in terms of what Adorno calls “a logic with no copula,” irreconcilable with the inflated discourse of messages and meanings.<sup>40</sup> “The task of aesthetics,” he writes, “is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended.”<sup>41</sup> All but the most philistine of museumgoers—“strolling adjectives,” as Paul Valéry called them—would today acknowledge that the essential indecipherability of contemporary art is no weakness peculiar to the untutored and uncomprehending.<sup>42</sup> What Adorno calls the “shock of incomprehensibility” so characteristic of modern art is nothing individual and in no way restricted to an otherwise avoidable failure in reception.<sup>43</sup> The effect of a social process in which incomprehension is the price paid for the near-total breakdown in relations between production and consumption, art today approaches the utterly useless and artists are no more certain of their resources than is the onlooker convinced of its competence. “Robbed of all prescribed norms,” the contemporary artist “has to ask with every measure that he writes, every square centimeter of paint that he applies, whether it is

right in just this way and just this spot.”<sup>44</sup> All attempts at relying on inherited canons and practices are blocked. Indeed, were coherence still possible in contemporary art, it would have as its condition the integration of a history whose models, methods and materials are no longer entirely its own. For Adorno, then, the aesthetic task of comprehending the incomprehensible becomes indistinguishable from the work of returning the *fate of art* to that historical process through which art achieved an incomprehensibility that is both its guilt and the condition of its more exacting knowledge of the contemporary.

Today, however, in the face of a contemporary art within which distinctions between individual art forms—for Michael Fried, the condition of any judgment of quality or value—have all but disappeared, the task of achieving an ever more exacting intra-artistic differentiation has come to seem increasingly problematic.<sup>45</sup> Amidst the “multiplicity of material”<sup>46</sup> that today predominates in contemporary artistic practice, in which a seemingly unlimited range of materials can be employed within each and every individual art form, the category of material itself has become “almost infinitely malleable,” in the words of Rosalind Krauss, elastic enough to “include just about anything.”<sup>47</sup> The result is a contemporary art that seems to have definitively left behind the categories and constraints that once defined the specificity of the aesthetic. Materials once synonymous with and exclusive to one art are today exploited throughout the arts, irrespective of their origin. If it is true that the “forms [of contemporary art] are intermedially hybrid, are found ready-made, industrially manufactured, calculated using a random generator, or assembled out of citations from previous works,” as Rebenisch claims, then it should come as little surprise that “the art of the past thirty to forty years has largely refused any guidance from the categories of modernist discourse.”<sup>48</sup> A lack of guidance and authority that is not, however, without its own, distinctly less emancipatory effects. In the absence of that determinate relation to tradition through which art once knew itself as either conforming to or transgressing aesthetic taboos, the possibility of knowing artworks in their determinable difference from the past and their own present becomes increasingly difficult. The question then becomes, in Bürger’s words, “whether this condition of the availability of all traditions still permits an aesthetic theory at all.”<sup>49</sup> And lest it appear as though this problem were unique to the philosophy of art, and not also determinative of contemporary artistic practice itself, Buchloh rightly asks after the intra-artistic effects of this conceptual and material disorientation. “How,” he asks, “can aesthetic practices sustain themselves at all in an era of a

total dissolution of the concepts of subjectivity, and its corresponding aesthetic criteria, conventions and locations?”<sup>50</sup>

To answer such questions, many of those who are today most committed to recalibrating aesthetics from the perspective of the most advanced forms of contemporary art today turn to the work of Adorno. For there, in what Hans Robert Jauss calls Adorno’s “aesthetic of negativity,” “the avant-gardist literature and art of the sixties was given its most inclusive theory and its strongest legitimation.”<sup>51</sup> More recently but no less untimely is Rebentisch’s contention that “without a concept of aesthetic autonomy ... the term ‘art’ is conceptually empty” and her consequent claim that Adorno’s work is of considerable significance for understanding “the proliferation of the intermedial in contemporary art.”<sup>52</sup> For Osborne, the legacy of contemporary art’s “irreducibly historical” nature has been “handed down to us today, developed and transformed ... by Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*.”<sup>53</sup> All this seems to support Bürger’s oft-repeated claim that “The standard for any contemporary theory of aesthetics is Adorno’s.”<sup>54</sup>

In some sense, this consensus is hardly surprising. Adorno’s philosophical and artistic itinerary is likely unequalled within the history of recent philosophy in its avant-gardist ambitions. An early and enthusiastic advocate of so-called ‘atonal’ and twelve-tone techniques in music, he was an accomplished pianist and student of Alban Berg; later, in exile, musical advisor to Thomas Mann and instrumental to the writing of *Doktor Faustus*; collaborator with Hanns Eisler on a book dedicated to film music; subject of a poem by Paul Celan; integral to the reconstruction of postwar Germany’s cultural, political, and intellectual life despite the fact that he long insisted, against the ideologists of the so-called *Wirtschaftswunder* and sycophants of *das Land der Dichter und Denker*, that “the concept of a cultural resurrection after Auschwitz is illusory and absurd.”<sup>55</sup> Though today remembered as a philosopher and social critic, Richard Leppert rightly notes that a substantial part of Adorno’s life work was devoted to artistic and above all musicological writings: of the “more than ten thousand pages” that make up Adorno’s twenty-volume *Gesammelte Schriften*, “more than four thousand concern music.”<sup>56</sup> An admittedly pedantic form of accounting, but one which supports the suspicion that Adorno’s continual attempt, within his social and philosophical work, to lend a voice to suffering and articulate the demands of the object, is itself the consequence of his having long identified and brought to speech the demands sealed up within the most advanced forms of contemporary art—a conjunction that was to have culminated in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, dedicated to

Samuel Beckett, the friend he long championed against those who sought to undermine experimental forms of contemporary art by measuring such works against categories the works themselves put on trial. That today's critics should turn to Adorno in their attempt to continue the tradition of philosophical aesthetics is also to acknowledge the imperative Adorno placed before all art and aesthetics—"Il faut être absolument moderne [One must be absolutely modern]," he writes, quoting Rimbaud, "[a dictum that is] itself modern, [and that] remains normative."<sup>57</sup>

Yet for all their declared affinity with Adorno, unusual in the light of what Michael Hirsch calls Adorno's "unpopular[ity] for the contemporary Zeitgeist," the abovementioned authors' sympathy is not to be confused with uncritical admiration.<sup>58</sup> In each case, Adorno's aesthetic theory serves as the negative against which contemporary art and aesthetics are said to have developed. Immediately after Jauss's above-cited remark, for instance, he goes on to identify Adorno as the "adversary" responsible for "provok[ing] [him] into attempting to play the unwonted role of apologist for the discredited aesthetic experience."<sup>59</sup> "The strength and indispensability of Adorno's aesthetic theory," Jauss continues, "has been purchased at the price of the derogation of all communicative functions. ... Along with the communicative competence of art, the entire sphere of its reception and concretization is also being sacrificed to modernism in Adorno's aesthetics of negativity."<sup>60</sup> Too stubborn in its commitment to a "radical art" that was, in Adorno's own words, "synonymous with dark art," and which proceeded according to the "ideal of blackness," Adorno's work is said to have been superseded by more recent forms of contemporary art.<sup>61</sup> According to Bürger, "the artistic developments of the 1970s and 1980s have rendered [Adorno's] position untenable and furthermore have opened our eyes to everything that Adorno was driven to exclude from the domain of valid works of art."<sup>62</sup> "Adorno's modernist conception of [aesthetic autonomy]," Rebenitsch observes, "is obviously no longer adequate to a large portion of the most widely discussed productions of contemporary art."<sup>63</sup> In the case of Osborne, who describes his work "as 'post-Adornian,' or at least that of a philosophy of art 'after *Aesthetic Theory*,'"<sup>64</sup> it is claimed that any attempt at continuing the tradition of philosophical aesthetics must today be qualified by the reservation that Adorno's work cannot be "fruit[fully] appli[ed] ... to art since the 1960s" without what he calls the "Benjaminian mediation" first serving as its "condition."<sup>65</sup> In this, contemporary critics who, like Rebenitsch, recognize that any attempt at "rehabilitat[ing] philosophical aesthetics as a critical project"<sup>66</sup> must first pass through Adorno proceed in ways not at all dissimilar from *The Anti-Aesthetic* creed that, in the words of

Foster, “the strategy of an Adorno, of ‘negative commitment,’ might have to be revised or rejected, and a new strategy ... devised.”<sup>67</sup>

Yet the reasons advanced for all such revisions and rejections are themselves telling. For each attributes to Adorno a loyalty to modernist categories his work continually undermined while enjoining their contemporaries to measure Adorno’s aesthetics against what Peter Uwe Hohendahl characterizes as our own far “more lenient notion of art.”<sup>68</sup> Against Adorno, contemporary art and aesthetics too often reproduce all the old *ad hominem* attacks that have long accompanied the culture industry and academic establishment’s suspicions about someone who always appeared as a “writer among bureaucrats,” to use Jürgen Habermas’s equivocal phrase.<sup>69</sup> From this perspective, Adorno appears, then as now, as a “nostalgic *haut bourgeois* intellectual, with all his mandarin fastidiousness and remorseless tunnel vision,”<sup>70</sup> driven by “purism”<sup>71</sup> and a “puritanical” nature, given to “uninhibited skepticism”<sup>72</sup> and the kind of “one-sidedness”<sup>73</sup> characteristic of one who is said to have taken up permanent residence within what Lukács famously called the “Grand Hotel Abyss.”<sup>74</sup> Unfortunate though it may be that critics of contemporary culture and society should find themselves in league with the kind of uncritical resentment that recently animated a London *Guardian* contributor to speak, once again, of “Adorno’s despairing, elitist philosophy,” far more peculiar and pernicious is the fact that it is precisely at those points where contemporary critics sense that Adorno must be left behind that his aesthetic theory is often most instructive.<sup>75</sup>

For Bürger, for instance, the “central motif” of what he calls “Adorno’s aesthetic decisionism” is said to be the latter’s “fear of regression,” a fear that has the effect of “strip[ping] modernism of one of its essential modes of expression” once it becomes determinative of aesthetic judgment.<sup>76</sup> Bürger further condemns Adorno for refusing to acknowledge the “pluralist” situation of a contemporary art in which “no particular material can still be regarded as historically the most progressive” because “all historical stocks of material are equally available to the artist.”<sup>77</sup> For Jauss, it is to be regretted that Adorno’s aesthetics, “heir to a tradition in the philosophy of art that withdrew to the ontology of the aesthetic object and that tended to abandon the question concerning the practice of aesthetic experience,” should result in a situation in which “aesthetic experience is divested of its primary social function.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Rebentisch calls for “replac[ing] the modernist paradigm with one based on a theory of experience” and supposes that such a theory would find little support in what she calls

Adorno's "philosophy of reconciliation," where "the subject of aesthetic experience" is said to participate "in the anticipatory illustration of the true, liberated form of subjectivity at large," a "normative," "supra-individual subjectivity."<sup>79</sup> The problem, for Rebentisch, is that Adorno's notion of aesthetic experience, which, she claims, "serve[s] as a model for extra-aesthetic subjectivity," promises the collapse of the distinction separating art from life, thus transforming the aesthetic into a privileged point of access to extra-aesthetic truth.<sup>80</sup> Because there exists, for Rebentisch, no equivalent common to aesthetic and extra-aesthetic spheres, such promises advance what they can never pay back. Indeed, and in contrast to Adorno's dialectical understanding of the relation between art and society, for Rebentisch there exists a "structural autonomy of the aesthetic in relation to the spheres of moral-practical and theoretical-scientific reason."<sup>81</sup> Unlike the "abstract utopia of reconciled humanity" Rebentisch attributes to Adorno's aesthetics, the "committed art of our time" is said to have achieved "the enlightened awareness that the realization of such a utopia would take more than art and the experience of it."<sup>82</sup>

In the critiques of Bürger, Jauss, and Rebentisch, many of the words are no doubt Adorno's, but the concepts belong to someone else. Rebentisch's suggestion, for instance, that Adorno accorded to art the capacity for effecting that utopia which belongs exclusively to art's semblance character and which is thus constitutive of its guilt vis-à-vis a reality it is constitutively incapable of transforming, has the effect of suturing Adorno's aesthetics to a naive pseudo-politics his work everywhere undermined. "Art," he writes, "is no more able than theory to concretize utopia, *not even negatively*."<sup>83</sup> When Rebentisch enjoins contemporary artists to recognize art's essential weakness as a form of moral and political practice, she only repeats warnings Adorno articulated a half century ago: "The effect of artworks," Adorno writes, "is not that they present a latent praxis that corresponds to a manifest one, for their autonomy has moved far beyond such immediacy; rather their effect is that of recollection, which they evoke by their existence."<sup>84</sup> While a sustained reading of Adorno's aesthetics makes self-evident that his aim, "in contrast to the bulk of aesthetics, especially from the late nineteenth century, [consists] [i]n observing the *problems* of aesthetic objects, *not* [i]n reducing aesthetic objects to some way of viewing them," it is little surprise that contemporary art and aesthetics should seek for Adorno a *Weltanschauung* whose absence constitutes both the difficulty and the demand his aesthetics places on contemporary aesthetics.<sup>85</sup> To follow Adorno's words is to incur a debt that threatens the certainties of contemporary art and undermines the supposed

survival of a form of life Adorno claimed to have already met its end. It is to be remembered, for instance, that when Adorno qualified his earlier claim that it would be barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, he did so not by lessening the outrage but by so intensifying it that it became unbearable.<sup>86</sup> “[I]t may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems,” he admits, before adding; “[b]ut it is *not wrong* to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living.”<sup>87</sup> To ask after the relationship between utopia, recollection, and that notion of art which is, in Adorno, characterized as a form of “historiography from the perspective of the victim” and within which “what calls out from works of art is in fact always the voice of the victim,” is to compel art and its philosophy to contend with a history of domination inborn to art and thus to violate those boundaries separating art from life that are both real and, when hypostatized, fundamentally ideological.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, to follow Adorno here would require setting art in relation to nature, that other against which it makes itself, and thus momentarily revoke the fatal separation of the natural from the historical world. To proceed from that most irreparable of antinomies would be to return all questions of contemporary art and aesthetics to the problem of natural-history Adorno first articulated in 1932 and enjoin any thought of contemporary aesthetics to ask “how far the separation of nature and history is itself a context of delusion that should be resolved in both directions.”<sup>89</sup>

To do so, however, would also be to ask after the extent to which Adorno’s understanding of the dialectic of progress and regression disallows his aesthetics from understanding the most advanced forms of contemporary art. According to Bürger, Adorno’s conception of the dialectic of progress and regression is driven by a fear of regression that blinds his aesthetics to the novelty of that avant-garde art in which the preference for the primitive remains foundational.<sup>90</sup> Yet Adorno long held that it is one of the essential conditions of contemporary art that it incorporate within itself all the tendencies and innervations proper to the regressions of the present. Only in so doing could it hope to approximate a present in which the threats of contemporary life are so great as to make any individual experience of fear ornament to a calamity that, if known in its relation to the societal whole, would also be known as indissociable from the delusion of fate guaranteeing society’s continuation. “No aesthetic progress without forgetting,” Adorno writes, “hence, all progress involves regression.”<sup>91</sup>

Bürger's further claim—that Adorno was inattentive to the plurality of materials that have today severed artistic practice from a more unified and restricted past—fails to acknowledge that Adorno frequently contended with precisely this problem,<sup>92</sup> tracing this supposedly contemporary insight back to the early nineteenth century, when Hegel attributed “the danger of this self-reflective, entirely spiritualized art [to] the fact that all forms were now open to the artist, which meant that no form was binding any longer.”<sup>93</sup> “In the current artistic situation,” Adorno writes, “where literally all the conditions for artistic material have become problematic and there are no longer any substantial givens in art, ... every artist ... finds themselves *vis-à-vis de rien*.”<sup>94</sup> In Adorno's insistence that aesthetics is today impossible except as the most exacting knowledge of what it is that makes contemporary aesthetics fundamentally *problematic*, one finds neither nostalgia nor mourning, and none of that “pathos of ... Frankfurt School melancholia” that Foster mistakenly attributes to Adorno's confrontation with contemporary art.<sup>95</sup> So far is Adorno from nostalgia that he welcomed a contemporary art in which, “having lost what tradition guaranteed—the self-evident relation to its object, to its materials and techniques,” “art now senses the hollow and fictional character of traditional aspects of culture,” before approvingly concluding: “important artists chip ... away ... [at traditional culture] like plaster with a hammer.”<sup>96</sup>

To hold that Adorno was the adversary of aesthetic experience, as Jausss maintains, or that his “puritanical” insistence upon the importance of the most advanced artistic material resulted in the loss of art's subjective and affective import, is to ignore the vital role the shudder of aesthetic experience plays in his aesthetics.<sup>97</sup> According to Adorno, aesthetics' historical and contemporary failures are largely owing to the fact that aesthetics has “scarcely ever confronted itself with its object,” having long prided itself on ignorance of an art that left little impression on the thought that should have made itself art's equal.<sup>98</sup> For Adorno, by contrast:

aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image. What later came to be called subjectivity, freeing itself from the blind anxiety of the shudder, is at the same time the shudder's own development; life in the subject is nothing but what shudders, the reaction to the total spell that transcends the spell. Consciousness without shudder is reified consciousness. That shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act

of being touched by the other. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins eros and knowledge.<sup>99</sup>

In his unfinished *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno recalls Hugo's abovementioned letter to Baudelaire and introduces that shudder (*frisson* in French, *Schauer* or *Erschütterung* in German) whose role in breaking the spell of reification is essential to the whole of Adorno's social and aesthetic philosophy but is too often lost on his readers—as though the labor of the concept so characteristic of his thought could only be borne and continued by further aggravating inherited divisions between mind and body, eros and knowledge, rendering incomprehensible the insight that, because these divisions are themselves historical, they are thus also revocable. For Adorno, such divisions mark the points where opposites interpenetrate. “[A]ll mental things,” he writes in *Negative Dialectics*, “are modified physical impulses.”<sup>100</sup> In his insistence upon the fact that the “somatic moment ... of cognition is irreducible” and that “the somatic element's survival, in knowledge, [is] the unrest that makes knowledge move,” Adorno sins against philosophy's insistence upon the mind's ultimate sovereignty—and contradicts the contemporary suspicion according to which his aesthetics is essentially categorical rather than experiential, restrictive rather than expansive.<sup>101</sup> To the contrary, Adorno's aesthetics includes both an emphatic notion of experience as well as the conviction that what lies congealed within the inert materiality of the artwork is the whole history of animate and organic forms it is the task of art to organize and express. In this sense, the separation of art from non-art continually expands in Adorno's aesthetics until the whole history of nature and history, art and its opposite, finds itself potentiated in the artwork. Where “known history” is displaced by a “subterranean” history of “instincts and passions repressed and distorted by civilization,”<sup>102</sup> philosophy approaches non-philosophy, and Adorno's labor of the concept comes to collude with E.M. Cioran's perverse, anti-philosophical suggestion that “indigestion [may be] richer in ideas than a parade of concepts.”<sup>103</sup>

In the shudder of aesthetic experience, this concatenation of contraries—nature and history, eros and knowledge, concept and thing—find themselves reanimated within the artwork, lodged in the flesh, and demonstrate the utter incompatibility that obtains between the essential plasticity of Adorno's aesthetics and contemporary critics' reduction of that theory to a still-image. For while notions like autonomy, utopia, and artistic material are traditionally treated as though they were self-evident virtues

in Adorno's aesthetics, his own remarks on artistic practice and aesthetic understanding demonstrate the very opposite. When treated in isolation and not developed from within the artwork itself, such categories are deemed fundamentally pre-artistic and anti-philosophical. Indeed, to proceed with such categories without having first measured them against the demands of the most advanced art of one's time is tantamount to, in Adorno's words, "construct[ing] aesthetics from above," and proceeding as though it were still possible to "delineate and define the nature of aesthetic categories" without reference to the artworks themselves.<sup>104</sup> Such categories, he writes, always have "something extremely inadequate and something extremely superficial about them in comparison to the living works of art."<sup>105</sup>

In Adorno's aesthetic theory, then, the idea that modernist aesthetic criteria could serve as art's ultimate arbiter is treated with unqualified suspicion, and distrusted wherever such criteria lend themselves to what he calls "a high-handed subsumption of art."<sup>106</sup> In Adorno, by contrast, aesthetics has as its condition total immersion in the artwork. "Experience," he writes, "results from the surrender of the subject to the aesthetic law of form. The viewer enters into a contract with the artwork so that it will speak."<sup>107</sup> "The subject," he continues, "convulsed by art, has real experiences; by the strength of insight into the artwork as artwork, these experiences are those in which the subject's petrification in his own subjectivity dissolves and the narrowness of his self-positingness is revealed."<sup>108</sup> Like Baudelaire's infernal aesthetic subject, the individual racked by a shudder that is "radically opposed to the conventional idea of experience ... perceives its own limitedness and finitude"<sup>109</sup> in an experience of the I's liquidation: "I am the knife and the wound it deals," Baudelaire writes, "I am the slap and the cheek, / I am the wheel and the broken limbs, / hangman and victim both!"<sup>110</sup> As the subject loses itself in the artwork, the history of domination from which the subject long sought escape collapses in confrontations with an artifact it can no longer master. Here the experience of a dialectical interpenetration of opposites, dulled by habit, appears both incontrovertible and the condition of possibility of that "freedom to the object"<sup>111</sup> reified relations otherwise disallow<sup>112</sup> and without which aesthetic experience is impossible.

In the shudder this dialectical unity of opposites achieves its most concentrated form. There the subject recognizes itself as both the historical and still-contemporary form assumed by constituting subjectivity, as well as the force through which nature has been progressively mastered and the fear of regression continually organized. Seismograph of antagonism, the

shudder of aesthetic experience is witness to an art that, at the moment of its greatest historical achievement, reverses into nature once more. “For the subject,” Adorno continues, “this transforms art into what it is in-itself, the historical voice of repressed nature, ultimately critical of the principle of the I, that internal agent of repression.”<sup>113</sup> Its shocks testify to the “irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness,” and allow the subject to become the equal of the object it has always sloughed off.<sup>114</sup> In the shudder of aesthetic experience, that form of unreflective self-preservation whose secret motto always ensured that the only good object is a dead object finds itself both unviable and unnecessary.<sup>115</sup> And there, as constituting subjectivity is torn away, sovereign sacralized and subject subordinated, the object once dominated and disowned becomes claimant to an objectivity that so impresses itself upon the subject that its only “instrument is tears.”<sup>116</sup> Here subject and object, history and nature, lose their self-evidence and become problems for which there is no aesthetic solution. In this, the shudder of aesthetic experience suspends the certainties that have solidified around inherited divisions and sets all aesthetic questions within the terms Adorno first articulated in “The Idea of Natural-History.” “If the question of the relation of nature and history is to be seriously posed,” Adorno writes:

then it only offers any chance of solution if it is possible to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being, or if it were possible to comprehend nature as historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature.<sup>117</sup>

From the perspective of art and aesthetics, the dialectic of nature and history is as much the spur to art’s self-development (the history of nature become form, of materials become second nature) as it is the survival of that “fear of the overwhelming” once felt before the “overpowering wholeness and undifferentiatedness of nature” but which has now migrated into artworks, felt anew at each “moment of being shaken” by the shocks of aesthetic experience.<sup>118</sup> In this sense, the shudder is both real and recollection. *Real* wherever this “involuntary comportment” so impresses itself upon the aesthetic subject that “[f]or a few moments the I becomes aware, in real terms, of letting self-preservation fall away”; *recollection* inasmuch as “art is [the shudder’s] legacy,” the memory of the human’s sense of that “powerlessness against nature” preserved in artworks that, in becoming

animate, in beginning to move and returning the onlooker's stare, "would like to make commensurable to human beings the remembered shudder, which was incommensurable in the magical primordial world."<sup>119</sup> The shudder, "permanently reproduced in the historical antagonism of subject and object," is also, in art, the somatic knowledge of that dialectic of nature and history through which the shocks of aesthetic experience distinguish themselves from the endless tremors induced by that culture industry for which any talk of the knowledge of natural-history is "idle nonsense."<sup>120</sup>

In every "artistic development," Adorno writes, "the aspect of nature and that of the control of nature interlock and enter a form of dialectic."<sup>121</sup> The artwork, thus conceived, becomes the potentiation of a history in which the dialectic of nature and history is both petrified and preserved in artworks which contain all the "stages of the relationship with nature that humans, in their history, left behind."<sup>122</sup> There is thus no artwork in which the whole history of nature and the long catastrophe of civilization are not implicated—a history the artwork both actualizes and to which it means to make amends. But that the artwork lends a voice to nature does not mean that nature speaks through artworks. Indeed, the fact that "nature is salvaged in art is," according to Adorno, "inseparable from the fact that art is increasingly able to control nature,"<sup>123</sup> a form of domination inseparable from artistic progress.<sup>124</sup> To believe otherwise and hold, for instance, that art has the "power to make nature as a whole speak within itself" is, for Adorno, to return "to a kind of mythology."<sup>125</sup> Indeed, "the concept of nature in art ... is the precise opposite of the notion of an art deemed 'close to nature.'"<sup>126</sup> The idea of an "unmutilated nature, a pure nature," Adorno concludes, "does not exist."<sup>127</sup> Instead, he continues, "it is the task of art to give a voice to *mutilated* nature, meaning nature in the respective form in which it exists through its historical mediations at a particular stage in history."<sup>128</sup> In the works of aesthetic defamiliarization associated with Brecht and Beckett, for instance, Adorno claims that experience returns to the most 'natural' of conditions: "eating, drinking, sleeping, illness, physical harm"; there a "kind of naked nature remains ... [that is] precisely not the mythicized, idealized, eternal, so-called all-nature, but rather that to which humans—in keeping, one could almost say, with the process of historical mutilation to which they are subjected—are ultimately reduced."<sup>129</sup>

Indeed, the artwork's "peculiar independence," its increasing alienation from the familiar life of the subject, can only be fully accounted for once artistic form is understood as "sedimented content," as the historical process through which everyday objects are estranged from needs the

artwork both overcomes and embodies.<sup>130</sup> What otherwise appears to be art's merely formal aspects—ornament, meter, geometric figure, and the like—are to be conceived as the scars left on works by earlier modes of production, as “contentual impulses” that have passed over into form, as what Adorno alternatively calls either the artwork's “spiritualization” or the “sublimation of content to become form.”<sup>131</sup> To speak of a “sense of form” or a “feeling of form” is here understood as the ability to “register, realize and take into account” the historical process through which content transformed itself in becoming form, as the struggle through which nature has alienated itself from itself.<sup>132</sup> With this in mind, it becomes more readily understandable why Adorno's description of the artwork as the “unconscious writing of history” should be understood in both its descriptive and its imperative sense—for the truth of art ultimately depends on how it mediates and articulates the progress of history and nature out of which it is made at the same time as it makes itself the artifact of what no longer exists, an anticipation of what can as yet only exist in semblance.<sup>133</sup> “[N]ature returns in art,” and art, according to Adorno, “means the restoration of nature in a certain sense, because it is part of the prehistory of art itself ... that that which would otherwise perish because of rationale, law, order, logic, classificatory thought, because of all these categories, finds its voice and receives its due after all.”<sup>134</sup> For Adorno, advocate of all that is derided as decadent, this means that nature must once again become an essential category of contemporary art and aesthetics; because “without this element,” he writes, “one cannot properly conceive of the work of art itself.”<sup>135</sup>

But by what right and with what naiveté can one still speak of art and nature today? Indeed, to suppose that the contemporary eclipse of aesthetic categories might be compensated by reconstructing art's dialectic with nature is to tempt misunderstanding. When every invocation of nature eventuates in either blind dismissal or empty affirmation, it is self-evident that there exists today little of the tension that once animated either the concept of natural beauty or the fact of nature's past and present relationship to contemporary art. That each has fallen into disuse may nevertheless signal something essential about contemporary art and aesthetics. “The concept of natural beauty,” Adorno writes, “rubs on a wound, and little is needed to prompt one to associate this wound with the violence that the artwork—a pure artifact—inflicts on nature.”<sup>136</sup> Such contemporary acts of avoidance possess their own share of truth. Certain though it may be that art has long drawn its own internal consistency from its relation to that nature against which it makes itself, it is equally self-evident that the conditions that made possible that dialectic of nature and history in which all art participates are

themselves historical and thus subject to their own internal laws of self-transformation. “This relationship between nature and art,” Adorno writes, “is not a static thing: there is not once and for all the sphere of nature on the one side and the sphere of art on the other. Rather, these two aspects are constantly in a state of mutual tension ... and the relationship between [them] keeps changing at every stage of art history.”<sup>137</sup> One need only recall the extent to which the aesthetic sense of the sublime was, for Kant, itself determined by the pacification of a nature that resulted in both the subject’s apparent supremacy over nature and the preeminence of the aesthetic. So long as nature did not overwhelm, natural beauty was possible—and proof of the subject’s sovereignty. This too belongs to the history of domination in which contemporary art participates—without, however, guaranteeing that this domination is any longer assured. In the midst of the contemporary evacuation of aesthetic categories and the subsequent saturation of all aspects of life by art’s contemporary omnipresence, aesthetic autonomy may no longer be conceivable because that fear of nature from whose release the aesthetic once took shape has returned to render impossible any attempt at maintaining for aesthetics that safe shore upon which it once took root but which has since irreversibly washed away. Perhaps aesthetics has become inconceivable today because nature is now regarded as so powerful and threatening that resistance to it, artistic or otherwise, can no longer properly be conceived.

Absent the historical concepts through which it once organized itself, exiled from that sphere of safety in which it once created itself, subject to a form of commodification that is today total, is it any surprise that contemporary art should find itself trapped in a legitimation crisis through which it seeks solace and security outside itself? Uncertain of its own resources, it entrusts itself to either what Osborne calls “the established cultural authority of philosophy”,<sup>138</sup> or a “kind of neo-anthropology that,” in Bourriaud’s words, “aspires to be the quintessential science of otherness”,<sup>139</sup> or to more recent forms of “political philosophy (catchwords: postcolonial, gender, and queer studies) rather than ... aesthetics,” as Rebenitsch notes.<sup>140</sup> To see itself in its relation to that nature from which it once liberated itself and into whose devastation all seem today condemned would be much worse than confronting a wound—it would be to, as Adorno writes, “see with the work’s own eyes” the way in which, “even in its congealed, objectified state, it utters the process contained within it” as part of the larger movement of a “world spirit ... defined as permanent catastrophe.”<sup>141</sup> Resistance to Adorno’s aesthetics may thus also be understood as antipathy to the imperative that, for aesthetics to be possible today, one must first, in the face of the artwork,

“renew in [oneself], as observer, that process which is present in the work in a solidified form,” “re-enacting for one’s own part the process of production that lies within the matter itself,” and thus introject, within the otherwise myopic gaze of aesthetic theory, the thousand-eyed stare through which the artwork returns the world-weary gaze of a history nearing extinction.<sup>142</sup> Here rationality and religion, myth and enlightenment, art and nature combine in the knowledge that an aesthetic tradition that is either mourned or celebrated for its seeming obsolescence has been outwitted by the more permanent survival of antagonisms whose reality renders all semblance of something better irremediably suspect.

Surely something of this foreknowledge of catastrophe, this recollection of a prehistory that can today be acknowledged because it has never truly disappeared is also recognized by those who insist that contemporary art and aesthetics can only proceed once Adorno has been left behind. If it is true that the “dignity of artworks ... depends on something living inside them which is more than merely art,” as Adorno claims, then it might also be supposed that what is most feared in Adorno’s aesthetics is its insistence upon a still-animate something that survives, lacerated and longing, within the artwork itself.<sup>143</sup> For when Adorno writes of the moment when, “[u]nder patient contemplation artworks begin to move;” that “the artwork opens its eyes under the gaze of the spectator;” that the artwork fulfills what “nature strives for in vain;” and that art “give[s] back to nature some of what belongs to it and is taken from it by the historical world,” a process through which “suppressed nature finds its voice”—then resistance to Adorno’s aesthetics might also be understood as a reaction to what his aesthetics presents as something fundamentally threatening.<sup>144</sup> Because an artwork that moves and sees and knows is also unbidden by the rationalizations and alibis and excuses that are continually offered up to everything else that lives. And there the present would find itself answerable to a gaze before which it is not only guilty, but through which it would have to recognize its relationship to a past, sedimented within the artwork, whose claims it has failed to redress. And that, after all, might be the simplest way of speaking about Adorno’s aesthetic theory today—as the demonstration of a disparity and insufficiency to which contemporary art and contemporary aesthetics cannot reconcile itself. And while this antinomy is doubtless both social and historical, it is also most assuredly, and as the present is perhaps only now beginning to understand, fundamentally natural. The work of demythologization to which Adorno long opposed that enlightenment in which nature had become fate is today in need of indices of critique and comprehension that are as exacting in

## Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

their knowledge of historical antagonisms as that contemporary art and as-yet-unachieved knowledge of nature would be if each were known in its refusal of that pacification that is everywhere announced but nowhere achieved—and to which all art clings.

## Notes

- 1 Victor Hugo quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 20. Adorno mistakenly identifies Rimbaud, rather than Baudelaire, as Hugo's addressee. See Victor Hugo, "Lettre à Baudelaire, jeudi 6 octobre 1859," in *Baudelaire un demi-siècle de lectures des Fleurs du mal (1855-1905)*, edited by André Guyaux (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007), 297-298.
- 2 The phrase "horrifying morality" is Baudelaire's and refers, according to Edward K. Kaplan, to "that screen of ethical ambiguity around his [Baudelaire's] poetry, prose poems and some critical essays." See Edward K. Kaplan, "Baudelairean Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 89. Hugo's remoteness from Baudelaire's "horrifying morality" is evident in the above-quoted letter. There Hugo celebrates a notion of progress inimical to Baudelaire, writing "Vous ne vous trompez pas en prévoyant quelque dissidence entre vous et moi. Je comprends toute votre philosophie (car, comme tout poète, vous contenez un philosophe); je fais plus que la comprendre, je l'admets; mais je garde la mienne. Je n'ai jamais dit: l'art pour l'art; j'ai toujours dit: l'art pour le progrès" [You are not mistaken in foreseeing some dissent between you and me. I understand all your philosophy (for, like every poet, you contain a philosopher); I do more than understand it, I admit it; but I keep mine. I never said: art for art; I have always said: art for progress]. For Baudelaire, by contrast, progress has become indistinguishable from catastrophe. "In Baudelaire," Walter Benjamin writes, "it is very important that the 'new' in no way contributes to progress ... His hatred was directed above all at 'faith in progress,' as at a heresy, a false teaching, not a commonplace error." See Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and others (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 188.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of Second Empire in Baudelaire," in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and others (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 35.
- 4 In Baudelaire's "The Albatross," the bird that lends the poem its name and which had once "chaperone[d]" ships "across the bitter fathoms of the sea" is stolen from the sky and fixed to the deck of a ship as entertainment for otherwise listless sailors. "[O]ne deckhand sticks a pipestream in its beak," writes Baudelaire, "another mocks the cripple that once flew!" "[E]xiled on the ground, hooted and jeered," the albatross, that great "monarch of the clouds," now sunk and shackled, becomes a stand-in for the unfortunate

## Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

figure Baudelaire calls “the Poet.” See Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, trans. Richard Howard (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982), 13-14.

5 Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 92.

6 The quotations from this sentence and the next are taken from Baudelaire’s “The Seven Old Men,” one of the three poems dedicated to Hugo. See Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 92-93.

7 Benjamin, “The Paris of Second Empire in Baudelaire,” 37.

8 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), 338. “The cosmic shudder in Victor Hugo,” Benjamin continues, “has little in common with the naked terror that seized Baudelaire in his spleen. Hugo felt perfectly at home in the world of the spirits. It is the complement of his domestic existence, which was itself not without horror.” See *Ibid.*

9 Variations on this account are to be found in Benjamin’s Baudelaire essay for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, as well as his notes for the Arcades Project. See Benjamin, “The Paris of Second Empire in Baudelaire,” 48n219; Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 329, 553. Benjamin’s likely source was a May 13, 1937 letter from Adorno. See Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz; trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 191.

10 Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 116.

11 Benjamin, “The Paris of Second Empire in Baudelaire,” 39.

12 *Ibid.*, 35.

13 Walter Benjamin, “The Study Begins with Some Reflections on the Influence of *Les Fleurs du mal*,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and others (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 96.

14 *Ibid.*, 96-97

15 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 20.

16 Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and others (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 343.

17 Benjamin, “Central Park,” 164.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 186.

20 Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 75. For an instructive reading of these lines in terms of how spleen functions as both the “object and subject of Baudelaire’s poetry,” see Alexi Kukuljevic, *Liquidation World: On the Art of Living Absently* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 96-99. It is noteworthy that Kukuljevic’s account of 20th century artistic subjectivity makes no distinction between modern and contemporary art.

21 Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, trans. James Gussen and Lili Porten (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009), 44.

22 “Of course modernism has many modes,” T.J. Clark notes: “I admire its coldness and craftsmanship as well as its pathos. But pathos is its deepest note, I think.” See T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 314.

23 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 63.

24 Boris Groys, *On the New*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014), 35.

25 Ibid., 35.

26 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), xxxv.

27 Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 16.

28 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 50.

29 Peter Bürger, “The Decline of Modernism, ” in *The Decline of Modernism*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 44; my italics.

30 Groys, *On the New*, 127; Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity*, xxxiii; Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 87; Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 57; Danto, *After the End of Art*, 5, 114.

31 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 10.

## Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

- 32 Donald Judd quoted in Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 165.
- 33 Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), xv.
- 34 Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 2.
- 35 Adorno remarks that although Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer "were certainly not what one would what term artistic people in a strict sense," they were nevertheless capable of arriving at exceedingly fruitful aesthetic insights. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, ed. Eberhard Ortland; trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 16.
- 36 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 11.
- 37 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 1.
- 38 Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetic of Installation Art*, trans. Daniel Hendrickson with Gerrit Jackson (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 7.
- 39 Jacob Burckhardt quoted in Kurt W. Foster, "Introduction," in Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 10.
- 40 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 191.
- 41 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 118.
- 42 Paul Valéry, *Collected Works of Paul Valéry: Volume 14: Analects*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 172.
- 43 Theodor W. Adorno, "Why is the New Art So Hard to Understand?" in *Essays on Music*, trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 131.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 129.
- 45 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 165.
- 46 Bürger, "The Decline of Modernism," 43.
- 47 Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, 31.

- 48 Rebentisch, *Aesthetic of Installation Art*, 138-139.
- 49 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 94.
- 50 Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity*, xxvi.
- 51 Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xxxvii.
- 52 Rebentisch, *Aesthetic of Installation Art*, 13, 103. For Rebentisch's critique of Adorno's "progress-theoretical formalism" in its relation to aesthetic autonomy, as well as her own attempt at developing "a concept of aesthetic autonomy grounded in a theory of experience," see the subsection "Progress and Autonomy" in *ibid.*, 127-140.
- 53 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 10.
- 54 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 94.
- 55 Theodor W. Adorno, "Those Twenties," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 48.
- 56 Richard Leppert, "Introduction," in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 13.
- 57 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 192.
- 58 Michael Hirsch, "Utopia of Nonidentity," in *Adorno: The Possibility of the Impossible*, eds. Nicolaus Schafhausen, Vanessa Joan Miller, Michael Hirsch; trans. James Gussen, Steven Lindberg (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2003), 52.
- 59 Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, xxxvii.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 61 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39.
- 62 Peter Bürger, "Everydayness, Allegory and the Avant-Garde: Some Reflections on the Work of Joseph Beuys," in *The Decline of Modernism*, 150.
- 63 Rebentisch, *Aesthetic of Installation Art*, 138.
- 64 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 10.

## Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

- 65 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 10, 218-219n.27. It is one of the paradoxes of Osborne's "post-Adornian" attempt at "grasp[ing] contemporary art philosophically" that he references Heidegger more often than he does Adorno. In terms of Osborne's claim that Adorno's aesthetic theory only becomes relevant to discussions of contemporary art once it integrates what Osborne calls the "Benjaminian mediation," see Peter Bürger's earlier characterization of the relationship between Adorno, Benjamin and contemporary art's use of montage: "For this concept [of montage] can be assimilated by Adorno only by absorbing Benjaminian motifs into his own thinking." Bürger, "The Decline of Modernism," 36.
- 66 Rebentisch, *Aesthetic of Installation Art*, 16.
- 67 Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface," xv-xvi.
- 68 Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 2. While otherwise exacting in its analysis, the central question of Hohendahl's study—namely, "Is Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* still relevant today?"—cannot be properly situated if one proceeds from the assumption that, as Hohendahl writes, "It is safe to say that it never occurred to Adorno to consider the aesthetic as a mere ideology in support of modern capitalism." See Hohendahl, *The Fleeting Promise of Art*, 3.
- 69 As quoted in Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Malden: Polity, 2009), 362.
- 70 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990), 363.
- 71 Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 19.
- 72 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 129.
- 73 Bürger, "The Decline of Modernism," 36.
- 74 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 22.
- 75 Stuart Jeffries, "Habermas by Stefan Mueller-Doohm review—from Hitler Youth to famed philosopher," *The Guardian*. International Edition. Wed, 15 Feb 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/15/habermas-biography-stefan-muller-doohm-review>. Last accessed 21 February 2018.
- 76 Bürger, "The Decline of Modernism," 41.

77 Ibid., 43.

78 Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, 21, 18.

79 Rebentisch, *Aesthetic of Installation Art*, 139, 273, 269. It should be noted that Rebentisch's characterization of Adorno's work as a "philosophy of reconciliation" rather strikingly contradicts Adorno's lifelong critique of those efforts which sought a philosophical or aesthetic reconciliation he charged with feigning a reconciliation only society could achieve.

80 Ibid., 274. In her characterization and critique of Adorno's movement from the aesthetic to the extra-aesthetic, Rebentisch appears to follow Christoph Menke. See Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. Neil Solomon (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998).

81 Rebentisch, *Aesthetic of Installation Art*, 218.

82 Ibid., 275.

83 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 32; my italics.

84 Ibid., 242.

85 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 13; my italics.

86 Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967), 34.

87 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 362-363; my italics.

88 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 48.

89 Ibid., 27. See also Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," in Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 252-304.

90 In Adorno's work, twentieth-century music's dialectic of progress and regression found its most complete expression in *Philosophy of New Music*, a manifesto which, as the chapter titles indicate, set "Schoenberg and Progress" against "Stravinsky and Restoration." See Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). While the book's account of this dialectic issues from and is organized by the musical material, its operative categories, "progress" and "regression," the "ever-same" and "domination," are much informed

by the dialectic of myth and enlightenment Adorno and Horkheimer first developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Yet the relationship between the two texts is not as self-evident as it may appear. Adorno's claim, for instance, that *Philosophy of New Music* "should be understood as a detailed excursus to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*" (5) is, in Robert Hullot-Kentor's words, "perhaps not to be accepted totally at face value" (172n19). Hullot-Kentor suggests, to the contrary, that "*Dialectic of Enlightenment* stands between the two parts of [*Philosophy of New Music*]." See *ibid*; my italics. *Philosophy of New Music*, written and rewritten throughout the 1940s, has as its concern that dialectic of progress and regression Adorno would later take up again in 1957's "Criteria of New Music." There he writes that "[i]t is a mistake to set up a blunt opposition between the complex and the primitive ... We do better to point out that the primitive, rejection of ornament, and reduction to the functionally necessary were all elements of specifically new music." Theodor W. Adorno, "Criteria of New Music," in *Sound Figures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 169.

91 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 210. In "Criteria of New Music," Adorno writes that "[w]hen archaic impulses and residues are exhumed, they are not just glorified as remembered and luminous; at the same time, something of their spell is broken." See Adorno, "Criteria of New Music," 170.

92 See, for instance, Adorno's recently published 1958/1959 lecture course on aesthetics, where "the attempt to breathe meaning into the material purely by surrendering to it completely unreservedly" is criticized as a form of "anti-subjectivism" that results in "subjectivism"—an "error," he says, "made by many material fetishists." Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 74. Adorno later notes that "the decisive lesson which artists have learned in the last thirty or forty years"—that "the artistic spirit's mastery of its material allows one to play with and make use of every conceivable form"—is itself a "questionable matter" (*Ibid.*, 130). The result is art's contemporary "non-binding state," where that "substantiality" otherwise provided by "a formal canon in the whole of culture" has "been lost" (*Ibid.*, 131). The arbitrariness of material is taken as a point of self-critique by those who, like Adorno and the second Viennese School, later found that "all these individual materials, even the most beautiful twelve-note chords ... cannot bring about that spiritualization by themselves, that the power of spiritualization—which is absolutely vital for all art today if it aspires to be more than Coca-Cola—rather lies only in the configuration of these aspects, in the status these aspects have in the context of a work of art and no longer as isolated phenomena" (*Ibid.*, 132).

93 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 130.

94 *Ibid.*, 11.

95 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 14.

96 Ibid.

97 Jauss's peculiar claim that the notion of experience is of little significance to Adorno's aesthetics is shared by J.M. Bernstein: "the notion of experience," Bernstein writes, "is not prominent in *Aesthetic Theory*." See J.M. Bernstein, "Why Rescue Semblance? Metaphysical Experience and the Possibility of Ethics," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 203.

98 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 333.

99 Ibid., 331.

100 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 202.

101 Ibid., 193, 202-3.

102 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr; trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 192.

103 E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Arcade, 2012), 95.

104 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 4.

105 Ibid., 5.

106 Ibid.

107 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 266.

108 Ibid., 269.

109 Ibid., 245.

110 Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*, 80.

111 For Adorno, "Freedom to the object" [*Freiheit zum Objekt*] is essential to "the experience of self-forgetfulness before the object": "Someone who has never had this decisive experience ... has no idea what a work of art is" (Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 26). This "freedom to the object," invoked throughout Adorno's work and just as frequently attributed to Hegel, has long posed problems of attribution for Adorno's editors. In the footnotes to the just-mentioned lecture course, the book's editor, Eberhard Ortland,

states that such a concept “does not actually appear in Hegel” (Ibid. 274n17). Nevertheless, Hegel’s *Aesthetics* seems to support Adorno’s claim that the concept is indeed Hegelian. In the section on “Common Ideas of Art” from the *Aesthetics*’ “Introduction,” Hegel identifies two different ways in which the individual relates to objects. In the first, the “sensuous individual,” “in accord with individual impulses and interests, ... relates himself to the objects ... and maintains himself in them by using and consuming them, and by sacrificing them works in his own self-satisfaction.” This is what Hegel calls the “appetitive” relation to objects, in which desire cannot “let the object persist in its freedom, for its impulse drives it just to cancel this independence and freedom of external things, and to show that they are only there to be destroyed and consumed.” See G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 36. “This relation of desire,” Hegel notes, “is not the one in which man stands to the work of art.” In the second mode in which the individual relates to the object, the individual “leaves [the object] free as an object to exist on its own account,” as Hegel writes; and a few pages later: “From the practical interest of desire, the interest of art is distinguished by the fact that it lets its object persist freely and on its own account, while desire converts it to its own use by destroying it” (Ibid., 38). Though the exact phrase “freedom to the object” [*Freiheit zum Objekt*] is nowhere to be found in these sections, the language and concepts are close enough to support the suspicion that it might be from this place in Hegel’s *Aesthetics* that Adorno drew the resources necessary for his own use of that notion.

112 That dialectics names both the internal constitution of the object, as well as the principle of movement proper to philosophical aesthetics, does not mean that Adorno regards dialectics as either the right state of things or the method most appropriate to understanding phenomena. Instead, he claims, dialectics’ consciousness of antagonism remains necessary only so long as society itself remains antagonistic. For Adorno’s most sustained treatment of dialectics, see Theodor W. Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, edited by Christoph Ziermann, translated by Nicholas Walker (Malden, MA: Polity, 2017).

113 Ibid., 246.

114 Ibid., 245.

115 For a reconstruction of Adorno’s notion of the shudder in its relationship to both the dialectic of nature and history, as well as self-preservation as self-mutilation, see Ryan Crawford, “Adorno as Alibi,” in *Delimiting Experience: Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by Ryan Crawford, Gerhard Unterthurner and Erik M. Vogt (Vienna: Turia+Kant, 2013), 147-166.

116 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 269.

117 Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 260; italics in original.

118 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 245, 51, 244.

119 Ibid., 245, 118, 80.

120 Ibid., 84, 245.

121 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 57.

122 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 47.

123 Ibid.

124 Ibid., 51.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid., 66.

127 Ibid., 77.

128 Ibid., my italics.

129 Ibid., 79.

130 Ibid., 152, 5.

131 Ibid., 152.

132 Ibid.,

133 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 192.

134 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 41.

135 Ibid., 24.

136 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 61-62.

137 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 49.

138 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 6.

## Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

- 139 Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, 29. Bourriaud attributes the conceptualization and critique of this tendency to Hal Foster. See Foster, *The Return of the Real*.
- 140 Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, 13.
- 141 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 267, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 141, *Negative Dialectics*, 320.
- 142 *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 186, 213. According to Bourriaud, the artistic recovery of that which has been vanquished by history is exactly what distinguishes “the relation to History that artists [ ... ] adopt[ed] at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.” See Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2016), 56. Missing from the ‘historical rescue’ Bourriaud credits Walter Benjamin with having facilitated, however, is the intra-historical dialectic of what Adorno calls ‘natural-history,’ equally constitutive of contemporary art and aesthetics, and largely ignored today. For the contemporary inability to regard history as fundamentally natural, as Adorno’s notion requires, see the catalog for *Natural Histories: Traces of the Political*, a recent exhibition at Vienna Museum Moderner Kunst (mumok). In the catalog’s foreword, Karola Kraus and Rainer Fuchs write that the exhibition is “about nature as a historically and culturally determined space and concept, and an idea of history whose course and development should not be equated with the logic of natural processes.” See Karola Kraus and Rainer Fuchs, “Foreword,” in *Natural Histories: Traces of the Political*, ed. Rainer Fuchs (Vienna: mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2017), 7. Note that while the curator and museum director welcome the process by which nature is historicized, the inverse process, by which history would be naturalized – in conformity with Adorno’s notion – is categorically prohibited. I would like to thank Noit Banai, Sabeth Buchmann, Helmut Draxler and Sebastian Egenhofer for the invitation to discuss the exhibition, as well as for providing the spur for the present essay.
- 143 Adorno, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 36.
- 144 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 79, 275, 66, *Aesthetics: 1958/59*, 37, 39.

## References

- Adorno, Theodor W. "Cultural Criticism and Society." In *Prisms*, 17-34. Translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1967.
- . *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E.B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973.
- . "On Tradition." *Telos* 94 (Winter 1992-93): 75-82.
- . *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- . "Those Twenties." In *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, 41-48. Translated by Henry W. Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- . "Criteria of New Music." In *Sound Figures*, 145-196. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- . "Why is the New Art So Hard to Understand?" In *Essays on Music*, 127-134. Translated by Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- . "The Idea of Natural-History." In Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, 251-270. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- . *Philosophy of New Music*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- . *An Introduction to Dialectics*. Edited by Christoph Ziermann. Translated by Nicholas Walker. Malden, MA: Polity, 2017.
- . *Aesthetics: 1958/59*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. Edited by Eberhard Ortland. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.
- . and Benjamin, Walter. *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*. Edited by Henri Lonitz. Translated by Nicholas Walker. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

Baudelaire, Charles. *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Translated by Richard Howard. Boston: David R. Godine, 1982.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990.

—. “The Paris of Second Empire in Baudelaire.” In *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, 3-92. Translated by Harry Zohn. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.

—. “Central Park.” In *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, 161-199. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.

—. “The Study Begins with Some Reflections on the Influence of *Les Fleurs du mal*.” In *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, 95-98. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.

—. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” In *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938-1940*, 313-355. Translated by Harry Zohn. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.

Bernstein, J.M. “Why Rescue Semblance? Metaphysical Experience and the Possibility of Ethics.” In *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, 171-212. Edited by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *The Radicant*. Translated by James Gussen and Lili Porten. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009.

—. *The Exform*. Translated by Erik Butler. London: Verso, 2016.

Buchloh, Benjamin H. D. *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015.

Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

—. “The Decline of Modernism.” In *The Decline of Modernism*. 32-47. Translated by Nicholas Walker. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.

—. “Everydayness, Allegory and the Avant-Garde: Some Reflections on the Work of Joseph Beuys.” In *The Decline of Modernism*, 147-161. Translated by Nicholas Walker. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.

Cioran, E. M. *A Short History of Decay*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Arcade, 2012.

Clark, T.J. *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Crawford, Ryan. “Adorno as Alibi.” In *Delimiting Experience: Aesthetics and Politics*, 147-166. Edited by Ryan Crawford, Gerhard Unterthurner and Erik M. Vogt. Vienna: Turia+Kant, 2013.

Danto, Arthur C. *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Malden: Blackwell, 1990.

Foster, Hal. “Postmodernism: A Preface.” In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ix-xvi. Edited by Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983.

—. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996.

Foster, Kurt W. “Introduction.” In *Aby Warburg, The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, 1-75. Translated by David Britt. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999.

Fried, Michael. “Art and Objecthood.” In *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, 148-172. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998.

Groys, Boris. *On the New*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. London: Verso, 2014.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Translated by T.M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

## Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

Hirsch, Michael. "Utopia of Nonidentity." In *Adorno: The Possibility of the Impossible*, 47-60. Edited by Nicolaus Schafhausen, Vanessa Joan Miller, Michael Hirsch. Translated by James Gussen and Steven Lindberg. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2003.

Hohendahl, Peter Uwe. *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013.

Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Hugo, Victor. "Lettre à Baudelaire, jeudi 6 octobre 1859." In *Baudelaire un demi-siècle de lectures des Fleurs du mal (1855-1905)*, 297-298. Edited by André Guyaux. Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007.

Jauss, Hans Robert. *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

Jeffries, Stuart. "Habermas by Stefan Mueller-Doohm review — from Hitler Youth to famed philosopher." *The Guardian*, February 15, 2017. Accessed February 21, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/15/habermas-biography-stefan-muller-doohm-review>.

Kaplan, Edward K. "Baudelairean Ethics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, 87-100. Edited by Rosemary Lloyd. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Kraus, Karola and Fuchs, Rainer. "Foreword." *Natural Histories: Traces of the Political*. Edited by Rainer Fuchs. Vienna: mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2017.

Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, 31-42. Edited by Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983.

Kukuljevic, Alexi. *Liquidation World: On the Art of Living Absently*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017.

Leppert, Richard. "Introduction." In Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 1-84. Translated by Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Translated by Anna Bostock. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971.

Menke, Christoph. *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*. Translated by Neil Solomon. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998.

Müller-Doohm, Stefan. *Adorno: A Biography*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Malden: Polity, 2009.

Osborne, Peter. *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. London: Verso, 2013.

Rebentisch, Juliane. *Aesthetic of Installation Art*. Translated by Daniel Hendrickson with Gerrit Jackson. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.

Schlegel, Friedrich. *Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Valéry, Paul. *Collected Works of Paul Valéry: Volume 14: Analects*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.

Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

Collision.  
Lepore on the Question  
of Poetic Aboutness

Jason Holt

## Collision. Lepore on the Question of Poetic Aboutness

### Abstract

Poems, according to Ernie Lepore, are partly about their own articulations. This is a provocative proposal that deserves examination. I offer such treatment here and examine Lepore's proposal sympathetically, defending the bulk of it, or a view very much like it, from a pointed critique by Peter Lamarque. Together with my own critical commentary, I suggest ways of developing the account further, then explore some of its implications for our general understanding of literature.

### Keywords

Poetry  
Paraphrase  
Ernie Lepore  
Hyperintensionality  
Use as mention

eä

## Lepore on the Question of Poetic Aboutness

Among recent attempts to subject poetry to philosophical analysis, the one I find most significant has been given not by a literary theorist or philosopher of art but by a philosopher of language: Ernie Lepore.<sup>1</sup> Poems, according to Lepore, are partly about their own articulations. This is a provocative proposal that deserves examination, and I offer such treatment here. I examine the proposal sympathetically, defending the bulk of it, or a view very much like it, from a pointed critique by Peter Lamarque. Along with my own critical commentary, I suggest ways to develop this account further, ending with some remarks on what this account implies about our general understanding of literature.

I assume consensus on what counts as a poem or poetic language use without denying that it would be difficult to specify what it is that qualifies or disqualifies a linguistic expression as verse. That itself would be a worthwhile task, but it is not mine. Toward the end, however, a few of my remarks, somewhat indirectly, will bear on the question of what distinguishes poetry from prose.

Lepore's proposal is meant to account for the "heresy of paraphrase thesis," specifically, as he expresses it, that "Poetry cannot be paraphrased (or translated)."<sup>2</sup> The point is not that it is impossible to paraphrase poems, or that it is senseless, or that it has no place in literary interpretation. As Peter Kivy observes, if we have an appropriately modest criterion of success, paraphrasing poems is not at all problematic, as no sensible paraphraser aims "to provide an alternative way of experiencing the poem."<sup>3</sup> A judicious paraphrasing can firm up our grasp of a poem, helping to orient us in a conceptual and emotional landscape that the original leaves less than sufficiently clear. The point is, rather, that it is a mistake to consider the paraphrased version as preserving all that is poetically significant in the original or as an equally effective articulation that may be substituted for the original without doing it any disservice. Even worse than this equal-footing view is taking the meaning of the poem simply to *be* the paraphrase, as if the purpose of poetic engagement were precisely to find just the right paraphrase, the poem counting as an obstacle, an imperfect articulation or mere coded form of the meaning sought, the paraphrased form being a clearer therefore superior articulation. Paraphrases may be better or worse, more or less helpful in engaging poetry; but except in the case of a language class exercise, they do not constitute the *point* of reading poetry.

## Collision. Lepore on the Question of Poetic Aboutness

The first part of Lepore's account considers poems to be *hyperintensional* contexts, "linguistic environments in which replacing an expression with its synonym changes meaning."<sup>4</sup> As we cannot substitute synonyms in the hyperintensional context of quotation, so too, Lepore says, do we find synonym substitution in poems to be unsupportable. To illustrate, he asks us to consider a stanza from Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner":

And through the drifts the snowy clifts  
Did send a dismal sheen:  
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—  
The ice was all between.<sup>5</sup>

We cannot substitute the ostensible synonym 'luster' for 'sheen' here, since this works "to break the bind between the lines and thereby alters the poem itself."<sup>6</sup>

Lepore then offers the second part of his proposal: that "a poem is partly constituted by its own articulation."<sup>7</sup> It is this articulate aboutness that accounts for poetic hyperintensionality, and it is such hyperintensionality that accounts for the heresy of paraphrase thesis.

On Lamarque's appraisal, "Lepore's suggestion is ingenious and, if correct, has the merit of taking some of the mystery out of the semantics of poetry."<sup>8</sup> Despite such praise, however, he is skeptical: "is it true that poems are even partially *about* their own articulation? That seems doubtful in itself, quite apart from the fact that it doesn't explain their value."<sup>9</sup> For Lamarque, what a poem is about, rather, "is its finegrained content identified by ... but not equivalent to, its particular mode of articulation."<sup>10</sup>

Suppose that 'lonely' and 'lonesome' are synonyms and we substitute 'lonesome' for 'lonely' in Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills."<sup>11</sup> On Lepore's view, even without "breaking the bind," this still would have resulted in a different poem, one partly about the word 'lonesome' instead of the word 'lonely.' But for Lamarque it would then be about the finegrained content identified by 'lonesome' but not by 'lonely.' Lamarque's *finegrained content* can perhaps be sliced thicker or thinner than Lepore's *articulation*, yet one presumes their thickness would be the same. However, if these views turn out to be extensionally equivalent, it is difficult to see how the difference between them makes any difference. Poetry may not be *all* "about the

language,” though it still seems crucially to be partly *about* the language! Poetic salience *becomes* poetic semantics.

We should note that hyperintensionality is often taken as attaching to those contexts in which synonyms cannot be substituted *salva veritate*. In what sense do we *fail to preserve truth* in the Coleridge stanza by substituting ‘luster’ for ‘sheen’? None whatsoever: the snowy cliffs sent forth a dismal sheen if and only if they sent forth a dismal luster. We do lose poetic effect, but this is a failure of substitution *salva pulchritudine*, not *salva veritate*. Lepore leaves unstated this crucial difference between the hyperintensionality of quotation and what he wants to call the hyperintensionality of poetry, and Lamarque fails to take it up. But what hangs in the balance is the very meaning of ‘meaning’ itself: whether words can implicitly be *part of* rather than merely *indicating* subtleties of meaning. We should note, though, that both Lepore and Lamarque depart from the Anglo-American analytic tradition in appreciating how meaning can be finer-grained than both truth and even synonymy.

Poetic hyperintensionality seems mysterious when construed as different from ordinary quotation. Since ordinary hyperintensionality occurs via quotation and mention, we might think of poetry as *either* implicitly self-quotational or as using words in a way that implicitly mentions them or certain of their properties. I distinguish quotation from mention in that quotation refers to word tokens (i.e., things said or written on an occasion) while mention designates word types (i.e., general properties). In this sense, the internal quotation marks of the sentence ‘Bob said “bachelor”’ are to be distinguished from the internal quotation marks (or *mention* marks?) of ‘The word “bachelor” begins with “b”’. But even if we deny this distinction any importance, what follows may be interpreted as applying jointly to both rather than respectively to each.

Are there reasons to think that poetry is inherently if implicitly self-quotational? Perhaps surprisingly, yes. Consider for instance the oral tradition in which a poet announces their subject with ‘*I sing...*’, no less in e.e. cummings’ “i sing of Olaf glad and big” from *W {ViVa}* than in Virgil’s “I sing of arms and the man” from the *Aeneid*.<sup>12</sup> Such cases are plausibly self-quotational, though not all poems are explicitly so framed. Still, given the important role of such conventions in the history of poetry – and giving the genetic fallacy, we hope, sufficiently wide berth – this originally explicit practice may continue to shape how poems generally ought to be interpreted, even if such ancient residue tends to lie dormant in most printed and spoken

## Collision. Lepore on the Question of Poetic Aboutness

verse.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, we might interpret poetry as having an implicit indexical component, holding the meaning of a poem to fragment into different *occasions* of encounter during creation, recitation, or reading. On this view there is no poem *in abstracto* except as a recipe for such occasions; thus poetry is framed as an inherently performing art whose significance is to be found only through such encounters. Another possibility is to view poems as implicitly mentioning the words or word properties they involve: poetic use as mention. This may be Lepore's preferred approach.<sup>14</sup> Consider my motivation for beginning a collection of poems with this meta-poetic definition: "*poetry / is language / masquerading / as itself.*"<sup>15</sup> Altogether we seem to have no fewer than three decent candidates for a mechanism underlying articulate aboutness.

As one final consideration in further developing Lepore's theory, if we grant that poems are partly about their articulations (e.g., the *words* of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner") and not just their apparent subjects (e.g., the *story* of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"), one may ask *to what extent* this is so. The wise if perhaps disheartening answer is: it depends, presumably on such factors as the type or genre of poetry, the degree of formalism, and the idiosyncratic or stylistic focus of the poet in question. For instance, narrative poems such as epics must focus more on plot than do lyric poems in which narrative is not even necessarily present. The more formalist a poem's leanings, likewise, the more attention will be paid to the articulate properties of language rather than to more standard referential and other uses. More pointedly, when a Mallarmé or an e.e. cummings lays a poem out on the page, everything from the spacing to the typeface may be deemed part of the poem's articulated meaning. Such poems may or may not be partly about ostensible subjects as well, but when they are they are given correspondingly less emphasis.

This suggests a conception of relative aboutness in poetry lying on a continuum between poles of language use that are, in turn, purely about the ostensible subject (i.e., prose) and purely about the articulation itself (i.e., mention), with poetry in between, with some degree of articulate emphasis and a complementary degree of subject emphasis. More emphasis on articulation will correspond to less emphasis on the ostensible subject and vice versa. This continuum view has vital implications. First, the heresy of paraphrase thesis might not apply with equal strength to all, or even *to all*, poetry, some of which intuitively allows for variorum without loss of poetic identity.<sup>16</sup> Second, we may come to consider not just poetry but language in general as lying on such a continuum of relative aboutness. The difference

between poetry and prose, then, becomes one of degree – prose as tending *less* toward rhythmic stress, and so on, with some prose writers being, for their stylistics, almost poets. This would apply, statistically, to the *classes* of poetic and prosaic texts rather than helping us decide, say, whether a given text belongs to one or the other category. Just as prose poetry so distinguishes itself from other verse, some prose, for its poetic qualities, stands apart from the prosaic. Even as we blur the distinction between poetry and prose, it is in such articulate subtleties that we find the joints and joys of verse.

Yet questions remain. What determines a poem’s degree of articulate aboutness: poet’s intention, the poem itself, or reader response? What is the underlying mechanism: quotational, indexical, or use-as-mention? How much articulate aboutness, if any, does poetry require? If it is not articulate aboutness, or hyperintensionality, or the heresy of paraphrase, much less rhyme or rhythm, that marks something as poetry, what if anything does? Are we at the mercy of some arbitrary convention, or – equally unprincipled and mercurial – some tyrannous artworld faction, “The Republic of Verse”? These questions need answers, since ultimately what is at stake is the very meaning of ‘meaning’ itself.<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Ernie Lepore, "The Heresy of Paraphrase: When the Medium Really Is the Message," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (2009), 177–197; Lepore, "Poetry, Medium and Message," *New York Times*, July 31, 2011, accessed October 7, 2017, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/beyond-translation/>.
- 2 Lepore, "Heresy of Paraphrase," 177. 'Heresy of paraphrase' is a phrase apparently coined by Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1947), 192.
- 3 Peter Kivy, "On the Unity of Form and Content," in *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 104, 105.
- 4 Lepore, "Heresy of Paraphrase," 195.
- 5 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," in *The Major Works*, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1817]), 50.
- 6 Lepore, "Heresy of Paraphrase," 195.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Peter Lamarque, "Semantic Finegrainedness and Poetic Value," in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 26.
- 9 *Ibid.*, original emphasis.
- 10 *Ibid.* See also Peter Lamarque, "The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning," *Ratio* 22, no. 4 (2009), 398–420.
- 11 William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," in *The Pocket Book of Verse*, ed. M. Edmund Speare (New York: Pocket Books, 1940 [1815]), 91.
- 12 e.e. cummings, "i sing of Olaf glad and big," in *100 Selected Poems* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1959), 37.

- 13 See Anna Christina Soy Ribiero, “The Spoken and the Written: An Ontology of Poems,” in *The Philosophy of Poetry*, ed. John Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 140.
- 14 Indeed, he likens poetry to “other forms of mentioning”: Lepore, “Poetry, Medium and Message,” pars. 16, 19.
- 15 Jason Holt, “Definition,” in *Inversed* (Tucson: Anaphora Literary, 2014), 13, original emphasis.
- 16 Ribiero, “The Spoken and the Written,” 137–138.
- 17 Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Canadian Philosophical Association at Ryerson University and the Poetry and Philosophy conference at Memorial University (Grenfell Campus). Thanks to participants at those conferences and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

## References

- Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. London: Methuen, 1947.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." In *The Major Works*. Edited by H.J. Jackson, 48–68. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1817].
- cummings, e.e. "i sing of Olaf glad and big." In *100 Selected Poems*, 37–38. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1959.
- Holt, Jason. *Inversed*. Tucson: Anaphora Literary, 2014.
- Kivy, Peter. "On the Unity of Form and Content." In *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences*, 84–119. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Lamarque, Peter. "The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning." *Ratio* 22, no. 4 (2009), 398–420.
- . "Semantic Finegrainedness and Poetic Value." In *The Philosophy of Poetry*, 18–36. Edited by John Gibson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Lepore, Ernie. "The Heresy of Paraphrase: When the Medium Really Is the Message." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (2009), 177–197.
- . "Poetry, Medium and Message." *New York Times*, July 31, 2011. Accessed October 7, 2017. <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/31/beyond-translation/>.
- Ribiero, Anna Christina Soy. "The Spoken and the Written: An Ontology of Poems." In *The Philosophy of Poetry*, 127–148. Edited by John Gibson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Wordsworth, William. "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." In *The Pocket Book of Verse*. Edited by M. Edmund Speare, 91. New York: Pocket Books, 1940 [1815].