

Index of the Contemporary: Adorno, Art, Natural History

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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.¹ 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.² For in those poems, the crowd, the very subject Hugo had first “opened ... up for poetry,”³ 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transformed, appearing now under the wings of a modernity in which all birds of serenade and auguries of hope had been replaced by an albatross of piping and cripples.⁴ In *Les Fleurs du mal*’s “swarming city ... gorged with dreams / where ghosts by day accost the passer-by,”⁵ 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.”⁶ 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”⁷ once reigned and “cosmic shudders”⁸ 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!].⁹ 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!”¹⁰ 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.¹¹ In Baudelaire, the crowd is no longer conceived, as it was in Hugo, as an “object of contemplation” modeled on natural beauty,¹² 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.¹³

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.”¹⁴ “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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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,¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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 ...²⁰

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.”²¹

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.²² 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."²³ "An orientation to the new now seems to be not just impossible," adds Boris Groys, "but even undesirable."²⁴ The concept of the new's contemporary inadequacy is symptomatic of the many modernist categories that have each fallen into similar disrepute.²⁵ 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.²⁶

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.²⁷ 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."²⁸ In the face of these fears, Bürger concludes that "a theory of contemporary aesthetics has the task of conceptualizing a dialectical *continuation* of modernism."²⁹ 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).³⁰ “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.”³¹ 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.”³² “[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.”³³

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.”³⁴ 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.³⁵ Indeed, such ignorance about the most advanced art of one’s time is now recognized as a “fatal flaw of many philosophers of

art.”³⁶ 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.”³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ “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.”⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.”⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ Amidst the “multiplicity of material”⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷ 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.”⁴⁸ 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.”⁴⁹ 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?”⁵⁰

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.”⁵¹ 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.”⁵² 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*.”⁵³ All this seems to support Bürger’s oft-repeated claim that “The standard for any contemporary theory of aesthetics is Adorno’s.”⁵⁴

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.”⁵⁵ 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.”⁵⁶ 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."⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸ 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."⁵⁹ "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."⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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."⁶² "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."⁶³ In the case of Osborne, who describes his work "as 'post-Adornian,' or at least that of a philosophy of art 'after *Aesthetic Theory*,'"⁶⁴ 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."⁶⁵ In this, contemporary critics who, like Rebenitsch, recognize that any attempt at "rehabilitat[ing] philosophical aesthetics as a critical project"⁶⁶ 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.”⁶⁷

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.”⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ From this perspective, Adorno appears, then as now, as a “nostalgic *haut bourgeois* intellectual, with all his mandarin fastidiousness and remorseless tunnel vision,”⁷⁰ driven by “purism”⁷¹ and a “puritanical” nature, given to “uninhibited skepticism”⁷² and the kind of “one-sidedness”⁷³ characteristic of one who is said to have taken up permanent residence within what Lukács famously called the “Grand Hotel Abyss.”⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶ 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.”⁷⁷ 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.”⁷⁸ 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."⁷⁹ The problem, for Rebenitsch, 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.⁸⁰ Because there exists, for Rebenitsch, 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 Rebenitsch there exists a "structural autonomy of the aesthetic in relation to the spheres of moral-practical and theoretical-scientific reason."⁸¹ Unlike the "abstract utopia of reconciled humanity" Rebenitsch 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."⁸²

In the critiques of Bürger, Jauss, and Rebenitsch, many of the words are no doubt Adorno's, but the concepts belong to someone else. Rebenitsch'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*."⁸³ When Rebenitsch 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."⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ “[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.”⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ 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.”⁸⁹

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.⁹⁰ 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.”⁹¹

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,⁹² 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.”⁹³ “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*.”⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ 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.”⁹⁶

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.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹

In his unfinished *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno recalls Hugo's abovementioned letter to Baudelaire and introduces that shudder (*frisson* in French, *Schauder* 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.”¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹ 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,”¹⁰² 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.”¹⁰³

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.¹⁰⁴ Such categories, he writes, always have "something extremely inadequate and something extremely superficial about them in comparison to the living works of art."¹⁰⁵

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."¹⁰⁶ 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."¹⁰⁷ "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."¹⁰⁸ 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"¹⁰⁹ 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!"¹¹⁰ 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"¹¹¹ reified relations otherwise disallow¹¹² 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.”¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵ 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.”¹¹⁶ 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.¹¹⁷

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.¹¹⁸ 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."¹¹⁹ 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."¹²⁰

In every "artistic development," Adorno writes, "the aspect of nature and that of the control of nature interlock and enter a form of dialectic."¹²¹ 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."¹²² 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,"¹²³ a form of domination inseparable from artistic progress.¹²⁴ 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."¹²⁵ Indeed, "the concept of nature in art ... is the precise opposite of the notion of an art deemed 'close to nature.'¹²⁶ The idea of an "unmutilated nature, a pure nature," Adorno concludes, "does not exist."¹²⁷ 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."¹²⁸ 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."¹²⁹

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.¹³⁰ 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.”¹³¹ 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.¹³² 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.¹³³ “[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.”¹³⁴ 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.”¹³⁵

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.”¹³⁶ 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.”¹³⁷ 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”,¹³⁸ or a “kind of neo-anthropology that,” in Bourriaud’s words, “aspires to be the quintessential science of otherness”,¹³⁹ or to more recent forms of “political philosophy (catchwords: postcolonial, gender, and queer studies) rather than ... aesthetics,” as Rebenitsch notes.¹⁴⁰ 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.”¹⁴¹ 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.¹⁴² 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.¹⁴³ 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.¹⁴⁴ 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

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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

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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.

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- 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.

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- 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.

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- 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.

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