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Author: Marcus Steinweg

What is Art?

The definition of art that I attempt to give in this essay culminates in the assertion that art asserts a consistency owed to its opening to inconsistency. We will see that the concept of art, like that of the human subject, must open up to non-art and the nonsubjective in order to situate art and the subject, together with all their claims to autonomy, on the line of fracture between reality and ideality, the possible and the impossible, the particular and the universal.

The nine theses are:

1. Art is that which generates a concept of art
2. The artwork implies a surpassing and transgressing of its factual conditions
3. An artwork is something other than (merely) a document of its times
4. Art articulates a difference from the texture of facts
5. The artwork is the affirmation of this difference
6. This affirmation takes place as an assertion of form
7. Every assertion of form is indebted to making contact with formlessness
8. Making contact with formlessness corresponds to making contact with truth
9. Art's making contact with truth opens it up to universality

1. Art is that which generates a concept of art

Art likewise is in no way simply equivalent with artworks, for artists are always also at work on art and not only on artworks.¹

How can the interrelationship among these three concepts be defined: What is art? What are artworks? What is an artist? How do these concepts fit together? "Art stirs," Adorno says, "most energetically where it decomposes its subordinating concept."² The concept of art cannot be reduced to that of the artwork because every (authentic or real) artwork cannot be reduced to any pre-ceding concept of art, but rather inaugurates a concept appropriate to itself. The work is never exhausted in exemplifying an established, officially sanctioned concept of art. What the work achieves divides into a resisting and an affirmative element. The work embodies resistance against the existing order, against art as an already weakened cultural production with diminished capacity to resist. There is an irreconcilable difference between art and culture, for which reason art is compelled to defend itself against culture and its imperatives. An artist is someone who brings forth a concept of art that did not exist before. Only those artworks count that, instead of inscribing themselves into an instituted concept of art, generate a concept opposed to the instituted concept. It is always a matter of opening up in the dynamics of production to a still undefined concept of art; it is never a matter of a routine program oriented toward fixed norms.

"In truth," Adorno says, artworks are "force fields in which the conflict is carried out between the commend-ed norm and what is seeking expression in them. The higher they rank, the more energetically do they fight out this conflict, frequently renouncing affirmative success."³ The artwork articulates the conflict between what

exists and the new so that the work enters as an arena for carrying out a differentiation (or difference) in which the established understanding of art meets an objection. At the same time it must remain clear that a distinct separation between the existing and new remains an unfulfillable challenge: "Even the category of the new, which in the artwork represents what has yet to exist and that whereby the work transcends the given, bears the scar of the very-same underneath the constant new. Consciousness, fettered to this day, has not gained mastery over the new, not even in the image: Consciousness dreams of the new but is not able to dream the new itself."⁴ The artwork draws its power from resistance against powers that reduce it to an effect of the existing order. The work's affirmative element lies in its opening to beyond what exists, whose positivity it first generates. The experience of art is the experience both of its conditions of possibility and of the affront to those that it represents. The concept of art condenses the paradox of an achievement that has to turn against its own possibilities in favor of the impossible as the impossibility that is possible for achievement.

Art is that which brings forth a concept of art in asserting works that, while resisting their assimilation into the existing order, articulate themselves as affirmations of contingency, as figures of an opening to that indeterminacy and incommensurability marking off the truth of the space of facts. I call the universe of facts the dimension of socially, politically, economically, historically, culturally, biologically, technically, and so on overdetermined reality. Here the artwork struggles for its autonomy—in the field of factual codification, real heteronomy into which it remains in jeopardy of relapsing: "Artworks are able to appropriate their heterogeneous element, their entwinement with society, because they are themselves always at the same time something social. Nevertheless, art's autonomy, wrested painfully from society as well as socially derived in itself, has the potential of reversing into heteronomy; everything new is weaker than the accumulated ever-same, and it is ready to regress back into it."⁵

No matter how much art "refuses definition,"⁶ it also demands one. Art is scarcely anything other than work on its own concept, the determination of what art is and ought to be. In the opening to where it has long since already been admitted, the dimension of constituted certainties and valencies, art is pushed to the limit not only of the space of facts but also of its concept and its form of appearance hitherto. Art contains a dynamic for bringing forth itself through works in a continual redefinition of what is to be understood by its concept. Art extends the concept of art by unbounding itself to its *other* that bounds it. Every artwork is a form of unbounding, an excess directed toward its implicit inconsistency.⁷ It is an excess marking its unbounding from its border, its openness to formlessness, whose bearer it remains. Art is an assertion of form generating itself in an opening to formlessness.⁸ No matter whether this formlessness be society as an overly complex, intracontradictory space of facts (the zone of sociohistorico-symbolic evidence), or whether it be the point of inconsistency within this domain, the incommensurability commensurable with formlessness.

2. The artwork implies a surpassing and transgressing of its factual conditions

*All artworks, even the affirmative, are a priori polemical.*⁹

Affirmation by the artwork is the affirmation of its polemical violence directed against everything that limits its claim to autonomy: constituted reality in its complexity and multiplicity, which Adorno calls *society*. Art exists only in the here and now of this one world without an exit, the world of facts. Art is not an escape from it; it formulates its claim to autonomy in the midst of the world of determinants in order, in an opening to heteronomy, to escape this world's phantasmagoric mistaking of itself. Just as there is freedom only under conditions of factual unfreedom, sovereign independence only under conditions of its absence, autonomy becomes a demand and necessity only in the field of factual heteronomy. Adorno never ceases to plead for the possibility of

aesthetic autonomy in its opening to its impossibility. Thus he becomes the advocate of a possible impossibility. Art implies a "refusal of empirical facts." Art distances itself "from the empirical world," not by fleeing into a second, higher world, but by intensifying its relation to this empirical world. Art's "inescapable affirmative essence"¹⁰ must turn against its distorted image, against the idealist temptation to locate art somewhere beyond the world of facts. Affirmation is not naïveté or approval. Affirmation is invention and construction. The artwork's affirmative intensity implies a double gesture comprising the acknowledgment of its historicity as well as the courage not to enclose itself smugly within the critical, reflexive reassurance of its resultant status, which demands its opening up to the inconsistency of the web of determinants. Facts are nothing but facts: art knows that knowledge is not everything, that the artist's responsibility begins with building up an affirmative resistance against all kinds of vulgar materialism and positivism, at the same time suspending all kinds of idealism, promising it a reality beyond this single, unique reality, in order finally to dehistoricize it completely. Realism and idealism are pseudoalternatives for the history of philosophy, for philosophical aesthetics, for art.

A "concept of history" as a "critique of philosophy" that "does not seek to abandon philosophy itself," as we read in the preface to the 1969 edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,¹¹ has its counterpart in the effort, "by way of the concept, to transcend the concept"¹² as well as in an understanding of art that conceives of itself, in view of its impossibility (heteronomy, historicity), as possible (autonomous, universal). What holds for the concept of a "true human being"—"He would be neither a mere function of a whole, which is inflicted upon him so thoroughly that he cannot distinguish himself from it anymore, nor would he simply retrench himself in his pure selfhood"—holds also for the true artwork.¹³ In the field of tension between immanence and transcendence, the concept of art, along with that of the subject, situates itself porously between the factual social interconnections and their inconsistency, contact with which opens up the chance of autonomy and freedom. That is the affirmation achieved by the artwork, the acknowledgment of itself as an element of the empirical world as well as a figure of its resistant opposition.

3. An artwork is something other than (merely) a document of its times

The distinction ... between the artwork and the document holds good insofar as it rejects works that are not in them

Art was never anything other than consent to the fragility of its times. Art does not come from a stable situation; it is the experience of the inconsistency of its reality. Art exists only as the experience of the porosity of the system of facts. Therefore, for it, there cannot be any alliance with facts, which does not mean that it disputes or misrecognizes their power. But art does not exhaust itself in demonstrating this non-misrecognition through the analytical power that is also immanent within it. As long as art does not surpass its knowledge, it is not art. It would be nothing other than a self-reassurance for the subject within the web of its critically commented situation. Only an assertion of form that evades a narcissistic self-reassuring by articulating the transience of the certainty of facts succeeds in confronting the universal inconsistency that is the subject's proper time and proper place.¹⁵

More than being a document of its times, the artwork is a corruption of the zeitgeist and the sociohistoric texture from which it indeed arises. If a work were nothing other than the result of its conditions and reducible to its determinants, it would not be a work. The essential feature of an artwork is that it inscribes a resistance in the reality to which it belongs by appearing in it as something incommensurable. What distances it from the document is this excess that alienates it from its status as a fact, since this status indicates the ontological fragility of the texture of facts. The artwork's assertion of form disputes neither its origins in the world of facts

nor its existence in this world; it resists simply its reduction to it by appearing in it as something unforeseen. The appearance of the work shows it to be the arena for a conflict between the existing order and that which threatens to topple it. Whereas the document is for transporting information, for communicating and archiving it, the artwork is a questioning of information, communication, and archiving. The insistence that "the arts will not fit into any gapless concept of art" says in the first place that there is no such gapless concept.¹⁶ Since art practices the permanent re-destabilization of all stable forms and concepts, it compels for each artwork its appropriate concept whose universality experiences its corrective through the singularity of the individual work in order, at the same time, to point beyond it to its universality. The artwork's universality must take up the singularity of the individual result like an uninvited guest. If it does not do this, it is a fiction of universality. True universality is one that affirms the singular status of artworks instead of negating it. The artwork is universal by building up a form, beyond its status as a document, that is held hovering above the abyss of formlessness, which in turn points to the incommensurability of the world of facts. No work is grounded in any sort of ontological principle. Rather, it is an assertion that, although such a principle does not exist, the form fought for by the work opposes mere arbitrariness through evidence evident only to the form.

4. Art articulates a difference from the texture of facts

*Foreignness to the world is an element of art: Whoever perceives it other than as foreign fails to perceive it at all.*¹⁷

Art is an assertion of difference. In the zone of familiarity, art appears as something unfamiliar. The artwork has an alienness that makes it into something unfamiliar in the domain of established certainties. With sovereign independence it resists its appropriation by communicative intelligence. The "adequate assimilation" of its reception, as Adorno says, is the "communication of the uncommunicable."¹⁸ Instead of primarily communicating, art is an invention and a construction. Its progressivism is due to the will to assert a form that makes precise the universal formlessness (the *exterior*, the *real*, *chaos*, the *incommensurable*, or, following Adorno, the *nonidentical* or *elementary*). Art exists only as an assertion of form that accelerates beyond what is known while refusing to assimilate itself into any sort of *nature*. The alliance with anything *natural* is necessarily regressive. Such an alliance enters a coalition with a metaphysics of the origin that is at work in every attempt to stabilize the present by turning back to the past. Art is the surpassing and transgressing of naturalism and originism. What is new in art is too new to be as old as an origin. The artwork neither articulates its intimacy with nature and origins, nor does it enter into solidarity with the zeitgeist. Art exists only as a conflict with its times. Every persuasive artwork comes from the future; it never arises from the past. Weak art can be recognized through its sentimentality, nostalgia, adoration of the past, in short, through its inability to make the future precise. Instead of competing with documentation and historical work, it is a matter of giving a form to the formlessness of tomorrow today, here and now. Art implies the courage to give answers to questions that do not preexist. There is no art beyond the affirmation of something new. No matter, as demanded by the Aristotelian perspective, how much it remains tied to what exists, no matter how much it remains embedded in the material texture, nevertheless the new rewrites it by appearing in this texture as something unforeseen.

The artwork implies an "antithetical critical element"¹⁹ that allows it to reflect its conditions. It must not exhaust itself in such *reflection*, however, since it includes, like any positing, assertion of form and decision, an element of *profective blindness*, an element evading its self-understanding and its self-reassuring. A minimum of blindness, a minimum of tendentiousness and interest, a minimum of uncontrollability and violence is still part of the most careful analysis. If it denies that, it is naive and offers itself as such as an object of analysis that

convicts it of an implicit blindness. Now art does not have much to do with mistrust, conviction, and police zeal. Its critical power correlates with an affirmation resembling an ontological consent. Obviously, both elements cross over in the artwork: consent and not being in agreement, affirmation and negativity. The political aspect of art lies in turning equally to both elements, on the one hand, refusing to neutralize its critical power in a merely blind affirmation, in order, on the other hand, to keep the certainty alive within it that there can be no art that could, or even should, get rid of its blindness, since it marks the work's opening to something unknown and new. That is what distinguishes it from journalism—this opening to its blindness as a productive power. Blindness, ambivalence, and truth mark the status of incommensurability of a world that has begun to believe in itself as if in a fact. There is only one world; there is no second world, no world behind this one, no utopian place. But this one world without an exit is in no way identical with the intelligence it supplies about itself in the form of images, language, information. Rather, it has an incommensurability that withdraws from any direct appearance. It denotes nothing other than the inconsistency of the universe of consistency that we call reality. The affirmative trait of the artwork sews it to this incommensurability, which inscribes itself as a resistance in every religiosity of the facts.

The alertness and care of art, its political nature, become visible in its resistance against the temptation to turn itself into journalism, in its resistance against the power of facts, on the one hand, and against the aesthetic, always idealist mistaking of itself in the phantasma of pure art, on the other. Art exists only in the sphere of economic, cultural, social, and political overdetermination. Here it must articulate its distance from everything that limits its claim to autonomy.

5. The artwork is the affirmation of this difference

As an affirmation of difference, art affirms the hyperbolism characterizing it, which obliges it to respect the incommensurable rather than facts that misrecognize their fictitious status. In the eighty-second aphorism in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno describes the opening of thinking to the inconsistency of facts:

While thought relates to facts and moves by criticizing them, its movement depends no less on the maintenance of dis-tance. It expresses exactly what is, precisely because what is is never quite as thought expresses it. Essential to it is an element of exaggeration, of over-shooting the object, of self-detachment from the weight of the factual, so that instead of merely reproducing being it can, at once rigorous and free, determine it. Thus every thought resembles play, with which Hegel no less than Nietzsche compared the work of the mind. The unbarbaric side of philosophy is its tacit awareness of the element of irresponsibility, of blitheness springing from the volatility of thought, which forever escapes what it judges. Such licence is resented by the positivistic spirit and put down to mental disorder. Divergence from the facts becomes mere wrongness, the moment of play a luxury in a world where the intellectual functions have to account for their every moment with a stop-watch. But as soon as thought repudiates its inviolable distance and tries with a thousand subtle arguments to prove its literal correctness, it founders. If it leaves behind the medium of virtuality, of anticipation that cannot be wholly fulfilled by any single piece of actuality; in short, if instead of interpretation it seeks to become mere statement, everything it states becomes, in fact, untrue. Its apologetics, inspired by uncertainty and a bad conscience, can be refuted at every step by demonstrating the non-identity which it will not acknowledge, yet which alone makes it thought. If, on the other hand, it tried to claim its distance as a privilege, it would act no better, but would proclaim two kinds of truth, that of the facts and that of ideas. That would be to decompose truth itself, and truly to denigrate thought. Distance is not a safety-zone but a field of tension.²⁰

What Adorno says about thinking holds in the same degree for art. Art is a form of exaggeration in that it affirms the "difference from facts" as the condition of its possibility.²¹ Art exists only as a hyperbolic (because unreserved) affirmation of its hyperbolism. Positivism, which is devoted to the facts like proven certainties, understands nothing as long as it reduces thinking (as well as art) to a sequence of certain steps, robbing it of its fantasy. It could almost be said that there is no thinking that is not art, if art implies the excess, the surpassing and trans-gressing of the authority of facts. The artistic character of thinking would mark its relatedness to a practice of articulation of the self in the world that pronounces the imperative of literalness in order to provoke a disturbance in the midst of established, correct facts by inventing new (aesthetic) forms and new concepts. The distance from what is correct and well known, from the factual and the firmly existing, is the element in which art and philosophy come to themselves, without relying on arriving punctually. *Ontological unpunctuality* is inherent within the human subject. The subject is never simultaneous, never on time, never identical with itself. Derrida has thought of this incongruence of the subject as an irreducible deferment (*différance*). Adorno's concept of the non-identical marks this rift. Rift or gulf, incision in the subject, these are hallmarks of art and philosophy insofar as they resist positivist and idealist ideology. Art's affirmation is the affirmation of this incision, which, by alienating it from the zone of facts, keeps every subject cut, non-identical with itself, that is, free and unfree at the same time. Autonomous and heteronomous like the artwork, which remains a result of society and history while at the same time flying over them, entirely in the sense of flying over (*survol*) of which Deleuze and Guattari speak in order to articulate the difference between becoming and history. The movement of becoming is transhistorical in that it flies over the merely historical but without losing contact with it. The territory flown over is constitutive for the subject flying over qua subject flown over. *Society*—as denoted by Adorno—has penetrated every artwork, whether the artist wanted it to or not. But nevertheless it affirms a certain distance from it, an infinitesimal freedom that can scarcely be proved, like the aesthetic, nonobjective evidence inherent in the plausibility of a persuasive artwork.

6. This affirmation takes place as an assertion of form

How is the place of the work within the social field to be determined? How do the production of art, art criticism, art studies, and philosophy relate to one another? Is there a political commission for an artwork? Is art necessarily critical—critical of institutions, the market, ideology? Or does an artwork put certain limits upon criticism and its good conscience, which make of it a risky, necessarily affirmative practice? Does its sense lie in these categories of resistance and subversion invariably associated with the artwork, but also in a self-calming that enables the artist to participate in the political game without genuine commitment, so that political consciousness takes on the function of a depoliticization that has not been admitted? How affirmative must an artwork be in order to be subversive or political?

In order to be an assertion of form and truth, art and philosophy must refuse the "order of real politics."²² That is the order of the possible, of pragmatism and its practical cleverness, of situational intelligence. It is the order of *phrónesis*, as Aristotle says, the dimension of diplomatic reason. Aristotle calls *phrónesis* intelligence in particularity, in unfreedom, intelligence that operates in relation to the situation in which it decides and acts. As Gadamer ceaselessly underscored, it is the principle of hermeneutics, reason that ponders and weighs up. That brings it close to the pragmatic estimation of *doxá*, of sound common sense. Art and philosophy have an inherent absolute resistance to *doxá* and *phrónesis* because they compel the subject to decelerate, to brake itself, to renounce power. Philosophy and art want to erect the subject as a power of assertion that resists defusing by *doxá* and *phrónesis*. The subject truly decides and acts only by neglecting its situation, ignoring and transcending it by puncturing the texture of facts. Subject is nothing other than the name for this

puncturing and hyperbole, which it necessarily represents. Hence the mistrust of a subject of such self-authorization because it resists its own defusing by the spirit of facts.

Philosophy and art move as radical forms of assertion assured by no universal principle and beyond the order of feasibility, not in order to be more estranged from the world or reality than politics within the order of real politics, but in order to place the intensity of their assertion in another horizon, in a horizon of infinitude and impossibility where the subject resists absorption by mere interests or *inclinations*, as Kant put it.²⁴ Art and philosophy are forms of self-acceleration of a desire to assert that breaks through the consensual horizons of discussion, argumentation, communication, explanation, justification, and reflective self-securing. Art and philosophy exist only as this breakthrough, as a force of surpassing and transgressing the horizon, which punctures the horizon of the possible through to the dimension of the impossible that is the dimension of truth.

Truth is not founded by philosophy and art. Truth can only be asserted. Truth cannot be grounded. Truth eventuates when the subject alienates itself from the symbolic order, from its sociocultural integrity as well as phantasms of the imaginary. There is truth at the moment when philosophy and art touch the impossible—pure virtuality, the real, or chaos—by risking a transgression of the horizon.²⁵ Philosophy and art are forms of realization of truths that do not preexist. It cannot be a matter of finding truths; it is a matter of inventing them, of producing truth. “Truth is never there of itself or in itself,” and as such decipherable, “but contested and fought for,” says Heidegger.²⁶ Such a truth, insofar as it is the product of a contesting, struggling subject of assertion, is therefore not *relative* in the simple sense of the word. Philosophy and art assert truth (art asserts truth by asserting a form) by withdrawing from the relativism of the truth of facts and the regime of proof and argumentative assurance.²⁷ Philosophy and art do not assert any facts. They constitute truths that corrupt the order of facts. The locus of truth cannot be found within the universe of facts. That is the utopianism of truth, that it is as such deranged, *somewhere* else, that it bursts the register of facts, that it insists on another place not on the map of this topology.

7. Every assertion of form is indebted to making contact with formlessness

*The concept of tension frees itself from the suspicion of being formalistic in that, by pointing up dissonant experiences or antinomical relations in the work, it names the element of 'form' in which form gains its substance by virtue of its relation to its other.*²⁸

The tension that is part of an artwork allows it to mediate that which cannot be mediated. That is the dialectical, aporetic trait of the work that makes it into an arena for the bracketing of form with formlessness. In a letter to Thomas Mann dated August 1, 1950, Adorno, anticipating his concept of negative dialectic, says of the “writer’s dilemma” something that pertains to the dilemma of art in general: “one either defers to the tact of language, which almost inevitably involves a loss of precision in the matter, or one privileges the latter over the former and thereby does violence to the language itself. Every sentence is effectively an aporia, and every successful utterance a happy deliverance, a realization of the impossible, a reconciliation of subjective intention with objective spirit, whereas the essence consists precisely in the diremption of both.”²⁹ Almost every sentence in *Aesthetic Theory* articulates with the means of language the aporetic essence of art. The challenge lies in putting into words, “the constitutive relation of art to what itself is not, to what is not the pure spontaneity of the subject.”³⁰ Once again, the ambiguity of the artwork caught between a desire for reconciliation and its inexorable irrecconcilability, art as an oscillation between identity and difference, between form and formlessness, becomes apparent. It is this between that defines the status of the artistic assertion of form as a

form of formlessness as well as a formlessness of form. In order to avoid aestheticism, art must acknowledge its self-extension to the nonartistic sphere of facts. In order, in turn, not to instrumentalize itself in the image of sociopolitical commitment or in moralism, it insists on aesthetic autonomy. Instead of choosing between violence and nonviolence, art votes for itself as the operator of this interstitial between that can scarcely be reconciled in a speculative synthesis. Every assertion of form mediates itself with its (social) other because the other has long since leaped ahead of it. And yet art must not exhaust itself in an adoration of the other or the incommensurable in order finally to sacrifice its capacity to form to a religiosity of formlessness. Art is that which endures the conflict of form and formlessness, thus articulating it.

8. Making contact with formlessness corresponds to making contact with truth

If art has something to do with truth, then it does so in the following sense: instead of revealing truths like facts, the artwork is the locus of the separating of truth from facts insofar as facts, in the light of their uncovering, obscure the chaotic abyss or nonground that itself does not appear in the light of facts and, by definition, cannot appear. To touch a truth means to make contact with this nonground, which Castoriadis (as does Žižek),³¹ following Hegel, associates with the night of the world. In a well-known passage from the Jena System Draft from 1805-6, Hegel casts this ghostly scenario concerning the subject qua subject:

*The human being is this night, this empty nothingness which contains everything in its simplicity, a wealth of infinitely many ideas, images, of which none simply occurs to it or which are not present. This [is] the night, the interior of nature that exists here—pure self. In phantasmagoric ideas, all around it is night; here a bloody head then suddenly shoots forth, there another white shape, both disappearing just as suddenly. We see this night when we look a human being in the eye, into a night which becomes terrible; the night of the world dangles here before us.*³²

The night of the world is another name for the chaos that the subject's subjectivity is. The subject's confrontation with itself demands of it that it open itself up to this zone, which is both overly rich and void. It is the domain of something real that has not yet assumed the form of a reality, the dimension of an "abyss" marking the "infinite possibility of representation."³³ The artwork, as well as the subject, is related to this abyss, to this lack of focus that makes its stabilization within the established field of reality more difficult. Truth is a title for this instability, which tears the work as well as the subject beyond itself toward the night of the indefinite. Therefore, instead of comprehensibility, clarity is inherent in art because clarity evokes the limit of what can be comprehended. The artwork's transparency opens it up to an intransparency, which is originally part of it.

To make chaos, the incommensurable, the exterior, the nonidentical precise means articulating this transparency toward intransparency. In this sense, art is an assertion of form by tailoring a form to the opening to formlessness, a form that relates the subject of this measured tailoring to the immeasurable. One must gather the courage to combine the always headless assertion that the artwork remains with the clarity of an unassured making-precise that evades the dictates of comprehensibility and communication. The work's assertion is not headless simply because it is subjective or arbitrary. No matter how much every assertion comes from the artist-subject's indeterminate subjectivity, just as much does it refuse the expressive gesture of ego-expression (on this Badiou has said what is necessary³⁴) and the metaphysics of interiority associated with it. The work's assertion of form denies itself the narcissism of making itself into an enigma, a procedure characteristic of bad art.

Inherent in the artwork is that it does not conceal any-thing and has nothing to hide because it has already long since been adjacent to opacity. As a "window on chaos" and "representation of the abyss" art is "nothing phenom-enal" but "transparent": "There is never anything in it that is hidden behind something else."³⁵ Castoriadis is right to separate art—that which he calls "great art"—from the temptation to weaken the subject's self, from the power of diffuseness as well as from appeals of the zeitgeist that reduce it to a documentary reflex. The work's transparency includes a transcendence to something beyond critical reflection. The work neither bends to the esotericism of critical evidence (in order finally to as-simi-late itself into journalism), nor does it enter a coalition with the obscurantism of diffuseness or any kind of meta-physics of the artist.

9. Art's making contact with truth opens it to universality

With art it is always a matter of tearing the work's consistency from a universal inconsistency, of producing a visibility lacking any self-evidence. Therefore, the work's appearance is a surprise because its evidence is of the order of the nonevident. Art exists at the moment when this appearance tears a hole in the web of facts in order to darken the evidence of instituted realities, not through obscurantism or blacking-out, but through clarity, through a surfeit of evidence. The moment of this evidence, which demands concepts that are not at hand, is the moment when the work's necessity shines forth while the subject is seeking its motives. The artwork has the power to dis-turb through clarity, to suspend³⁶ the subject's certainties, "to suspend reality,"³⁶ as Deleuze once said. There has never been art that entered into a coalition with reality. Art is resistance against that which is, not in the name of what ought to be, but in the name of the portion of established reality that has remained nameless. In the artwork, recognized realities communicate with this resistance, denoting its ontological transience: the formlessness that resists its valid formalization. Instead of giv-ing space to a dialectical reconciliation, the work is the place where poles that cannot be mediated cross. It marks the crossing of form and formlessness, while asserting a form that acknowledges chaos. The artwork's autonomy remains indebted to its heteronomy. It does not appear from nothingness as if it were without conditions, but because it articulates the infinitesimal distance from its conditions.³⁷ An artwork behaves toward its objective reality necessarily in a destructive way. It destroys the space of its reality because it lends to an inconsistency a consistency that demonstrates to acknowledged realities their arbitrariness.

These realities are arbitrary because their consistency is limited to the function of covering up an inconsistency that is universal contingency. The artwork, however, marks the threshold to inconsistency, which is the threshold between the order of facts and the dimension of truth. Instead of opening up to a second world which in some sense or other would be more real than "reality," it opens itself to reality in its valency of incommensurabil-ity. The work does not decide either in favor of the real or in favor of reality. It opens itself to the disturbing truth that reality is already the real, that every certainty, every fact, every solidity hovers above the abyss of an inconsistency. The work articulates itself as a construction held above this abyss. It distinguishes itself from the fictions of fact by having its function reside neither in covering up nor in making inconsistency livable. Inher-ent in the real is that it remains invisible, or to employ Wittgensteinian categories, the real *shows* itself, and this showing is of the order of reporting the unspeakable. That is the difference between the factual thing and the artwork. The factual thing remains tied to the dimension of what is given, whereas the artwork gives witness to the questionability of the authorities of facts. Thus it opens itself to a void, which the consciousness of facts un-ceas-ingly tries to fill. Instead of bending to the existing order, the artwork makes contact with the inconsistency in the realities of facts. As a touching of the untouchable, it marks the threshold to something unknown, whose ontological status consists in not existing.³⁸

Translated from the German by Dr. Michael Eldred, Cologne

NOTES

1 Theodor W. Adorno, "Toward a Theory of the Artwork," in *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 182.

2 Ibid.

3 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ohne Leitbild: Parva Aesthetica* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 11. On the determination of the philosophical text and the artwork as a force field, see Adorno's theses from *Zum Studium der Philosophie* (1954): "Philosophical texts do not have any reified, fixed meaning but—in this regard similar to artworks—are force fields, in principle inexhaustible; the better one knows them, the more they give, and repeated reading is indispensable" (in Wolfram Schütte, ed., *Adorno in Frankfurt: Ein Kaleidoskop mit Texten und Bildern* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003], 226–31). The stimulus to view "the codified philosophies as force fields," Adorno says, came from Krakauer. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur III* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965), 84.

4 Theodor W. Adorno, "Society," in *Aesthetic Theory*, 238–39.

5 Ibid., 238.

6 Theodor W. Adorno, "Art, Society, Aesthetics," in *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.

7 A form of unbounding but nevertheless a form. Because "form transcendence" is the form of the artwork, it remains threatened by what Adorno calls the "the romantic principle" (characteristic in music, from which Adorno draws many of his examples, above all for Schumann, but also for Gustav Mahler and Alban Berg): "the giving of oneself, throwing oneself away" that leads to surrender of the ego as well as to the loss of form: "surfeit as form" becomes "deficit in form." The authentic assertion of form, however, opens itself as the form of formlessness in order at the same time to oppose it. -Deleuze and Guattari have defined the task of art (as well as that of philosophy and science) in no other way: to open oneself to chaos without losing oneself in it. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 115, 224, as well as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

8 Cf. Marcus Steinweg, *Behauptungsphilosophie* (Berlin: Merve, 2006).

9 Adorno, "Toward a Theory of the Artwork," 177.

10 Adorno, "Art, Society, Aesthetics," 2.

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

12 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. W. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 15.

13 Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 165.

14 Adorno, "Toward a Theory of the Artwork," 182.

15 To be a subject means to surpass and transgress the horizon of facts in order—in the assertion of a new form, the form of the subject—to give space to the experience of a primordial inner turmoil, which is the truth of the subject. I call this inner turmoil the incommensurability of a life that, as the life of a subject, reaches beyond its representation as subject in the field of aesthetic, social, political, and cultural evidence. The subject articulates this distance not in retrospect. It is nothing other than the distance that it articulates vis-à-vis the authority of facts.

16 Adorno, "Art, Society, Aesthetics," 2.

17 Adorno, "Toward a Theory of the Artwork," 183.

18 Ibid., 196.

- 19 Theodor W. Adorno, *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie: Zwölf theoretische Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 238.
- 20 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 2003), 126–27.
- 21 Cf. Alexander García Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, trans. James Philips (London and New York: Continuum, 2007).
- 22 Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2003), 110.
- 23 On the interplay between *phrónesis* (practical intelligence) and *sophrosyné* (moderation), see Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, liber VI, 1140 b 10ff.
- 24 There is this misunderstanding concerning the concept of form: it is often thought that form creates clarity. That is an error. Form is clarity that produces disorder! Chaos. Hence the widespread wariness of form, in art as well as in thinking. Hence the ubiquitous decision in favor of diffuseness. Because diffuseness cooperates with transparency, whereas the assertion of form risks a clarity that does not betray the extent of factual intransparency.
- 25 On the “identification of truth with the real,” see Alenka Zupancic, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 92.
- 26 Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, Gesamtausgabe, vol. 54 (Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann, 1992), 25.
- 27 “Relativism, no matter how progressive its bearing, has at all times been linked with moments of reaction, beginning with the sophists’ availability to the more powerful interests” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 37).
- 28 Theodor W. Adorno, “Paralipomena,” in *Aesthetic Theory*, 292.
- 29 Theodor W. Adorno and Thomas Mann, *Correspondence, 1943-1955*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Thomas Sprecher, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2006), 62.
- 30 Theodor W. Adorno, “Theories of the Origin of Art,” in *Aesthetic Theory*, 326.
- 31 Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Die Nacht der Welt: Psychoanalyse und Deutscher Idealismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998).
- 32 G. W. F. Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1969), 180–81.
- 33 Cornelius Castoriadis, *Fenêtre sur le chaos* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2007), 152.
- 34 Alain Badiou, *Dritter Entwurf eines Manifests für den Affirmationismus*, ed. Frank R. Ruda and Jan Völker (Berlin: Merve, 2007).
- 35 Castoriadis, *Fenêtre sur le chaos*, 153.
- 36 Gilles Deleuze, “Erschöpft,” in *Quadrat, Geister-Trio: Stücke für das Fernsehen*, by Samuel Beckett (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), 56.
- 37 This distance turns creation into an *act* in the Lacanian sense, a deed that cannot be justified by anything, neither legitimate nor illegitimate. The act as a reality or *creatio ex nihilo* includes that it remains related to the “abyss in reality,” the hole in being, that is, to nothingness (Jacques Lacan, *Das Seminar, Buch IV: Die Objektbeziehung*, 1956-1957 [Vienna: Turia & Kant, 2003], 23). Cf. Lacan, *Das Seminar, Buch VII: Die Ethik der Psychoanalyse*, 1959-1960 (Weinheim: Quadriga, 1996), 143 ff. The “hole of being” is Sartre’s formula for nothingness. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), 55. On the relationship between Sartre and Lacan, see Andreas Cremonini, *Die Durchquerung des Cogito: Lacan contra Sartre* (Munich: Fink, 2003).
- 38 Badiou has described art as a “construction of the visibility of this non-existence” (*Dritter Entwurf*, 35), in order finally, in the section of his *Logiques des mondes* dedicated to Derrida, to short-circuit *inexistence* (he writes it accordingly with a) with *différance*: “inexistence = différence. Pourquoi pas?” Why not, because *différance* marks the distance in being, the gap in presence, the rift in the subject. Cf. Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes: L’être et l’événement*, 2 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2006), 570–71, as well as Badiou, *Petit panthéon portatif* (Paris: Fabrique, 2008), 117–33. Why not take this risk of an ontological narrowing that equates *différance* with *inexistence/inexistence*? For it is also equally clear that the hiatus in consciousness or the

subject (i.e., in being itself) is called by the early Hegel the "night of the world," by Nietzsche "becoming," by Heidegger "hiddenness," by Sartre the "hole of freedom," by Lacan the "real," by Bataille the "heterogeneous," by Blanchot the "exterior," by Deleuze and Guattari "chaos." It is always a matter of thinking presence as absence or withdrawal or originary lethe, as "originary forgetting," as Agamben puts it (cf. Giorgio Agamben, "Tradition de l'immémorial," in *La Puissance de la pensée: Essais et conférences* [Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2006], 129), a forget-ting that marks the contested compossibility of the impossible, the primal conflict between identity and difference.