
Senses



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PUBLISHER & EDITOR:

Sven-Olov Wallenstein

EDITORIAL BOARD: Brian Manning

Delaney, Power Ekroth, Jeff Kinkle,
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Karl Lydén, Helena Mattsson, Meike
Schalk, Susan Schuppli, Kim West

GRAPHIC DESIGN: Konst & Teknik +
Caroline Settergren

SITE

Box 19009

SE-104 32 Stockholm

Sweden

www.sitemagazine.net

info@sitemagazine.net

SUBMISSIONS: Text proposals to
be sent to info@sitemagazine.net

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ISSN 1650-7894

ISBN 978-91-86883-20-1

Distributed by Axl Books

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Any definition of the aesthetic domain poses a challenge to thought: should aesthetics limit itself to the fine arts, and perhaps only to works that attain a particular and paradigmatic status, or should it aspire to formulate a general theory of what may count as an object of aesthetic appreciation, including everyday life and all aspects of our world that pertain to the senses? When the term *aesthetics* was coined in the first half of the eighteenth century, it was from the outset a multidimensional term, beset with tensions and conflicts — on the one hand a theory of the fine arts, which would coalesce into a “system” a few decades later; on the other hand, as was claimed by Baumgarten, who invented the term, an “art of thinking beautifully.” Aesthetics was partly a theory of a new class of objects, but more generally also a profound upheaval of rationalist philosophy that took its cues from a re-evaluation of the sensible. From the moment of its emergence, aesthetics has oscillated between a subordinate position in the

philosophical encyclopedia and a claim to explore the dimension of sense as such, beyond all particular disciplinary demarcations.

The first section explores this question in the past and present, beginning with an interview with Jacques Rancière, whose *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* constitutes one of the most significant attempts in recent times to chart the emergence of a new distribution of the sensible from the eighteenth century onward. Continuing with essays that address crucial moments in the first phases of aesthetics — Baumgarten, who is currently being re-read as providing a general theory of sensibility (Sven-Olov Wallenstein), Lessing, who gives aesthetic pleasure a particular twist by connecting it to a dimension of pain (Cecilia Sjöhom), and the later intertwining of aesthetics and fashion (Sara Danius) — the section proceeds to discussions of modern artistic forms: the role of law and guilt in Kafka (Howard Caygill), the question of filmic illusion (Gertrud

Koch), and the problem of whether art, and particularly the visual arts, can be understood at all on the basis of a generalized aesthetic (Morten Kyndrup). The status of a phenomenology of the sensible is at the center of the last three contributions, Pablo Bustinduy Amador's essay on painting, Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback's meditation on drawing, and finally Susan Kozel's interrogation of the challenge put to a phenomenology of dance by new types of somatic materialism.

Another dimension of the senses, the sensory and the sensible is the necessary intertwining with technologies of perception, storage, and transmission. 2011 was the centenary of the birth of Marshall McLuhan, whose writings were paramount in bringing the idea of "media" to the forefront of culture, and the second section explores the ramifications of this concept in contemporary media and communication studies and art criticism. Drawing on material presented at a symposium at Moderna Museet, this section contains contribu-

tions by Thierry de Duve, on Duchamp and the question of art in general; by Richard Cavell, on McLuhan's fundamental idea of remediation; by Wolfgang Ernst on the temporal structure of electronic media; by Staffan Ericson on the link between McLuhan and Walter Benjamin; and a review by Dan Karlholm of a recent book by Rosalind Krauss that develops her earlier analysis of the "post-medium condition" of the arts.

The third and final section contains a series of essays dealing with architecture and urbanism. Tim Anstey reviews a new book by Pier Vittorio Aureli on the possibility of an absolute architecture, Sten Gromark discusses Łukasz Stanek's recent work of Henri Lefebvre, Sarah Stanley probes the modernity of Japanese Metabolism, and Staffan Lundgren provides a critical take on the ideologies of parametric design. •

THE EDITORS

Aisthesis

Jacques Rancière

Sven-Olov

Wallenstein

Kim West

Cecilia Sjöholm

Sara Danius

Howard Caygill

Gertrud Koch

Morten Kyndrup

Pablo Bustinduy

Amador

Marcia Sá

Cavalcante

Schuback

Susan Kozel

Aisthesis

Senses of the Sensible: Interview with Jacques Rancière

Sven-Olov
Wallenstein
and Kim West

SVEN-OLOV WALLENSTEIN:
In your new book, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, you propose that the aesthetic regime is not a new concept of art, but a way of identifying objects. Could you explain this further? What does it mean to “identify objects”?

JACQUES RANCIÈRE: On a fundamental level, the book tries to identify what the word “art” signifies. So the problem is not to identify objects in general, but to identify the type of event, the type of interpretation of events, the type of relationship between form and signification that make it possible to understand objects, events or performances as belonging to a sphere of experience called “art”. And I’m simply trying to say that what distinguishes the aesthetic regime from the representational regime is that, in the latter, there is a whole set of rules that define the conditions for including certain objects within an art form, an artistic genre, a hierarchy of artistic genres. At the same time, this way of defining objects as belonging to an art form is a way of defining a general structure of relationships between different forms of experience. The fine arts succeed the liberal arts, which are themselves opposed to the mechanical arts; the liberal arts and the mechanical arts were two completely distinct configurations of the realm of the sensible. The question is therefore which types of objects are understood as corresponding

to a certain practice, which is itself defined as corresponding to a certain type of human being, a certain type of experience.

What is important, then, is that in the representational regime certain objects, in the sense of forms, modes of expression or assemblages of words, forms and movements, can, on account of their properties, be identified as belonging to a specific artistic genre. In the aesthetic regime, this identification no longer works. Here, what is identified is a regime of sensible experience within which events that are called art take place, but paradoxically this is only possible on the condition that the criteria for identifying these events as a specific class of objects disappear. What is henceforth identified is therefore a mode of sensible experience that is at a distance from the general distribution of positions, where active subjects are distinguished from passive subjects, objects that belong to ordinary experience are distinguished from objects that belong to a form of art, and so on. That is how I understand identification, on the most general level. Either you identify objects directly, or you identify forms of experience.

sow: How should we understand your notion of the sensible? When you talk of this new distribution of the sensible, there is also a change in the very notion of sensibility, *Sinnlichkeit*, *sensibilitas*. Generally the sensible was thought of as something below the conceptual, the noetic, etc., but here we seem to be dealing with an expansion of the sensible: a sensible which is not placed below the conceptual, but which invades, encompasses the conceptual as well as the noetic.

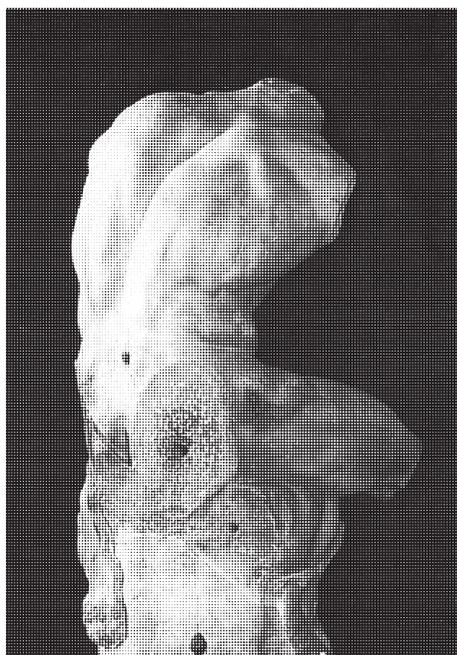
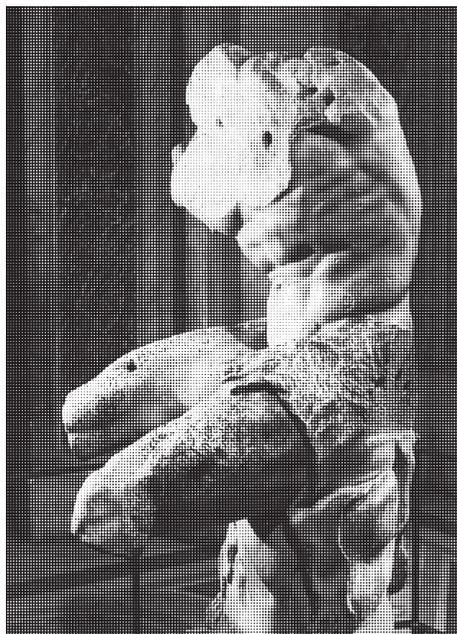
JR: There are several aspects here. The sensible at the heart of the aesthetic regime of art is a sensible that, first of all, is opposed to two other regimes of the sensible, which we could call the “classical” ones. First, the sensible understood as opposed to the intelligible, as inferior in relation to the intelligible, and second, the sensible understood as an arrangement of sensible forms produced by an idea, produced by an intention. What is important with the definition of the new sensible, in Schiller for example, is the idea of a separation between three senses of the sensible: the sensible as an object of knowledge, the sensible as a realization of the will, and finally the sensible understood as something proper to the aesthetic judgment. I believe that this separation is central to Kant. Even though it is never pronounced, it contributes to what I find strange about the architecture of the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*, where there is on the one hand a definition of sensible experience which permits us to attribute and to form sensible judgments, and on the other hand a theory of the fine arts which is bizarrely attached to the analytic of the sublime, but where it is never

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clear how we went from the former to the latter. The heart of the matter is, I believe, that the sensible that is the object of the aesthetic regime of art is fundamentally divided between the forms through which sensible forms are considered or appreciated as beautiful, and the rules according to which the sensible forms are considered as products of art. In a sense my whole reflection has concerned the theme of the aesthetic idea in Kant, because this idea is the bridge, the connection between the experience of the beautiful and the rules of art. The aesthetic idea is the way in which the artist manages to produce a mode of sensible existence that is at the same time the opposite of the normal mode of sensible existence of an artwork, because an artwork is normally the form of sensible existence that results from the intentions of an author, whereas the aesthetic form must be judged independently of all concepts.

sow: There is one essential reference here: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and the transformation of the notion of *aisthesis* that takes place in his work. He is not present in the book, but could you say something about him, and about the connection to the rationalist tradition that he represents? This is a big question, of course, but I believe that there is a reevaluation of Baumgarten today, both in Germany and in France, where the Kantian revolution is perceived as less radical than what is already present in Baumgarten, where we find precisely this expansion of the sensible, whereas in Kant there is a division between sensible and intelligible.

JR: For me, Kant is the point of departure, at least to the extent that philosophical and aesthetic origins can simply be assigned. But I do not relate him to Baumgarten, because Baumgarten remains attached to the Leibnizian notion of the sensible as confused intelligibility, which means that every reading of Baumgarten must take place within the framework of classical poetics, as concerns its objects as well as its modes of analysis. Kant never produces a single analysis of an artwork, because he is the one who actually names the sensible reality with which the aesthetic regime is concerned, which is a divided sensible reality. What is important in Kant is the division between the spheres of sensible experience. I understand that it makes sense to retroactively assign priority to Baumgarten, especially within a Deleuzian tradition that aims precisely to return to Leibniz, to return the opposition between the intelligible and the sensible to a matter of levels of clarity and obscurity, of distinction and indistinction, but for me the aesthetic regime is based on the Kantian division, which breaks with what remains traditional in Baumgarten.



▲
The Belvedere Torso, Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican Museums, Rome.

sow: In fact, you begin with Winckelmann before reaching Kant. Why?

JR: I couldn't say exactly why I begin with Winckelmann. I think I focused on him first of all because of the figure of the Belvedere Torso, and the question: how is it possible that a completely mutilated statue could be perceived not only as the highest achievement in art, but also as the highest expression of a people's liberty? What interests me is this double paradox where, first, the incomplete, the fragmented, the ruined becomes that which is perfect, and, second, the activity of a people becomes manifested in a mutilated body. So Winckelmann has been important for me for many reasons, but first of all because he points toward the ruin of a certain model of perfection. The classical model of perfection is the perfection of the human body with all of its parts, where the head rules, and so on. This is a model of perfection that has often been understood as properly modern — I am thinking of a whole analysis of modernity which sets the autonomous organism against the tradition of representation, the internal perfection of the work against the ideal of representation, an analysis that of course remains bound to the organic model. In some of my texts on literature I have attempted to challenge the Borgesian vision of the fiction as a closed totality where everything is interconnected, that presents itself as a perfectly organized body with all its parts. Winckelmann is essential in the same respect: he helps us conceive of modernity not under the sign of the self-sufficient work, but under the sign of the fragment that definitely remains a fragment. But he has also been important as a model of inactivity, in contrast to all conceptions of the politics of art as the passage from passivity to activity. Here, the torso is a counter-model, something

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entirely inactive that is at the same time the expression of a people's liberty. And then there is a third point, which is that Winckelmann inaugurates art history as art history, that there is a break here with the old ways of describing the life of painters and artists or of studying art works as historical testimony. I believe that it is important that the birth of art occurs through the birth of art history: there is art because there is a history of art, which undermines all attempts at opposing the pure autonomy of art to its historicity. It also seems important to me that three terms here appear at the same time: art, history and people. There is *art* when there is *history* of art, and there is art when we can identify the history of art with the history of the liberty of a *people* — which obviously places us at a complete distance from all discourses about the autonomy of art, in their various versions.

sow: In Winckelmann, this history is also a lost history. If we think of the last lines of his *History of Ancient Art*, it is a history that is lost. Greece is lost. If we would move a little bit further, for example to German romanticism, this would be a question of the history of the future, of the artwork of the future, but in Winckelmann it is a lost art.

JR: Yes, but to say that Greece is a lost fatherland is also to say that it is a fatherland that we could attempt to revive. What I find important is the moment when we leave the classical relationship to antiquity, which used to state that we need to study the ancient masterpieces according to the model of perfection, as examples, but as examples which are nothing but examples. Classically one studied the ancients in order to find models, modes of expression that could suit for dramatic themes and subjects, but at the same time there was a limit, where the ancients remained the ancients. Let us think of the polemics between the ancients and the moderns in late seventeenth century France. Even for the champions of the ancients, it was clear that there are the ancients and there are the moderns. The ancients belonged to education, but at the same time there was a rift between the productions of the ancients and those of the moderns, and there was no possible contemporaneity. So what does Winckelmann do? In the midst of the creation of a new contemporaneity — and this is also connected to the archeological excavations of the eighteenth century — we are no longer dealing with the same Greece that used to be found in the manuals for the education of good taste, but with a country — and a model of art — that is as real as an actually existing one. And this is the condition for the desire, the utopia to resuscitate Greece as a model for the relationship between a people and its art.

KIM WEST: Here we could perhaps approach the question of play, *Spiel*, which is evidently a central figure in the book. You find it already in Winckelmann, and then in Kant, Schiller, and so on. Perhaps we could say that what the book does is to trace the recurrences of this figure in what we normally call modern art, or with the appearance of the aesthetic regime of art. Would you say that this is a fair description?

JR: I wouldn't say that the project could be reduced to a history of the notion of play. At the same time this concept is of course capital, and it is essential that it was placed at the center of aesthetic perception, of the aesthetic perception of art, by Schiller, who took it from Kant, because this too means that there is art when there is a rupture of a certain distribution of the sensible, of the hierarchical system that placed activity on one side and passivity on the other, form on one side and matter on the other — a division which is also a division between different forms of existence and types of human beings. The notion of play is important because it breaks with all these hierarchical models, and because it presents this break, this third type of sensible experience, as the place of aesthetic experience, the place, in other words, where works may be appreciated as works of art, but where works of art may also function as models for a future community. This break is what is essential about the notion of play. This is not so present in the book, but it's there in the background, it's in the chapter on Winckelmann we just discussed, and it is the break with a whole vision of the opposition between different types of activity and inactivity. Play, as it is understood by Kant and Schiller, is opposed to the notion of play we find in Aristotle, who distinguishes between the leisure of free men and the rest of mechanical men. Play here belongs to the realm of free leisure which is opposed to the alternation of tension and relaxation pertaining to those who belong to the mechanical sphere. In Schiller, this whole complex of problems about tension and relaxation is completely transformed. Even though Schiller never refers to Aristotle in this regard, it is nevertheless important to rethink the relationship between tension and release, and all that this may imply as a redistribution of the relations between activity and passivity. What I see as essential to the aesthetic regime and to the political implications of the aesthetic regime is the appearance and the centrality of experiences of suspension of activity or of inactivity — which is what I argue in the chapter about Stendhal. I see it as very important that, at the very moment when the representational regime is criticized and begins to fall into ruin, an ethical counter-model appears, which is the model of the active spectator, the civic sentiment, etc. And at the same time there is the more

or less contemporaneous counter-model of play, which is a way of escaping from the hierarchical realm itself, within which activity was opposed to passivity. I think that “play” is one of the possible names of this redistribution of relationships between the active and the passive which is at the heart of the aesthetic regime, but which can also be translated into philosophical terms as the redistribution of relationships between the conscious and the unconscious, for example.

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sow: If we connect this question about activity and passivity to the other question about Baumgarten and the reevaluation of the sensible, I remember a lecture you gave in Stockholm on Deleuze, where you said that aesthetics is not a part of philosophy in the same sense as logic, ethics, metaphysics, etc. Back then you didn't use the notion of the aesthetic regime, but you said that aesthetics is a new way of thinking, or in other words, that aesthetics is not a specific part of philosophy, not a subdiscipline within philosophy, but a transformation of the very notion of philosophy.

JR: I believe it is important not to think in terms of a division of the different parts of philosophy. I do not understand myself as a philosopher who would attempt to establish the correct relations between aesthetics and the other parts of philosophy. I believe that, at the time, I was mainly focused on the question of the relations between conscious thought and unconscious thought, and on the fact that, within the aesthetic idea, there is a dissolution of the foundations upon which the philosophical edifice as such is constructed. I looked at all the different formulations about the becoming-unconscious of the conscious, which we can find at the heart of the aesthetic thinking of Schelling and Schiller. I tried to follow this thread from romanticism up until Deleuze. In this book I am less interested in the properly philosophical intrigue about the relations between conscious and unconscious, and more in the archeology itself, in the construction of a sensible realm through which this disturbance is introduced into philosophy. What remains true is that the name of a discipline of thought is an idea of thought itself.

sow: If we look at how this book is written we see that you omit the great names of philosophy: there is no chapter on Kant, no chapter on Nietzsche, etc. You begin with lesser known figures and then you work your way back to the philosophical issues. So the book is written in another way: it is not a history of philosophy, it is not a history of aesthetics, it is a way of rethinking aesthetics starting from certain events. Could you say something about the logic of the book's narrative?



▲
Hubert Robert,
Proposed Renovation of the Grande Galerie, circa 1796–1798.
Oil on canvas,
Department of Paintings, Musée du Louvre, Paris (RF 2050).

JR: The logic of this book is essentially the same as the one I employed when I wrote about the life of the proletarians, that is: to rewrite social history not along the great themes of the development of class consciousness in relation to capitalism, but starting from the points of irruption around which individuals and groups restructure their sensible world. Here, in a sense, I operated in the same way. I have chosen a number of scenes where the fundamental question is: what do you do with a form, what do you do with a statue, with a painting, with a dance spectacle, with a photo exhibition; how are they seen, how could they be thought? It is for this reason that I approached Hegel not from the point of view of the development of his aesthetic theory, but from the point of view of what I find is an essential moment, the constitution of another image of modernity, more precisely the dissolution of the hierarchy of subject matter. Which means that we pose the question: what do you do with a canvas? In the last instance I've inscribed Hegel into the extension of the perfectly material experience of the directors of the Louvre welcoming the artworks stolen by the French armies during the revolutionary period, who saw those paintings as the achievement of free humanity, and who found themselves in front of Venuses, portraits of the king's mistresses, religious scenes, and so on, and

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were forced to ask themselves: what can we do to present all these paintings, with their stories of superstition and the turpitudes of the rich and noble, as manifestations of liberty? This is the same question as the one Hegel asks: he feels that there is something in these small genre paintings that can express liberty much stronger than how the great history paintings present their grand episodes, including the grand episodes from the history of liberty itself. Hegel is confronted with this new sensation, that freedom is there, the spirit is there, the spirit is not in the portraits of the philosophers, freedom is not in the representation of the freedom fighters, it is there, in these small genre scenes, and we must learn to think this presence. This is very important because it coincides with the moment I believe is fundamental for the possibility of rethinking painting, and therefore of making another painting, that is, the moment when the hierarchy of genres is overthrown, which will also mean that what the painting says is something else than what it tells, than the persons it represents. This is what I have tried to say several times, that abstract painting becomes possible from the moment when the process of abstracting the subjects of painting began.

sow: The rereading of Hegel is astonishing, in the same sense as your rereading of Winckelmann. Hegel's lectures on aesthetics are of course in a sense the high point of the classic, with its hierarchy of the arts, its system of the arts in the development of the spirit, etc. In this sense, Hegel represents the closure of the classical system of art theory. You do not try to reconstruct this system, you do something else, an excavation: you find Hegel's experience in front of the genre painting. It's not the Hegelian system; it's Hegel's experience.

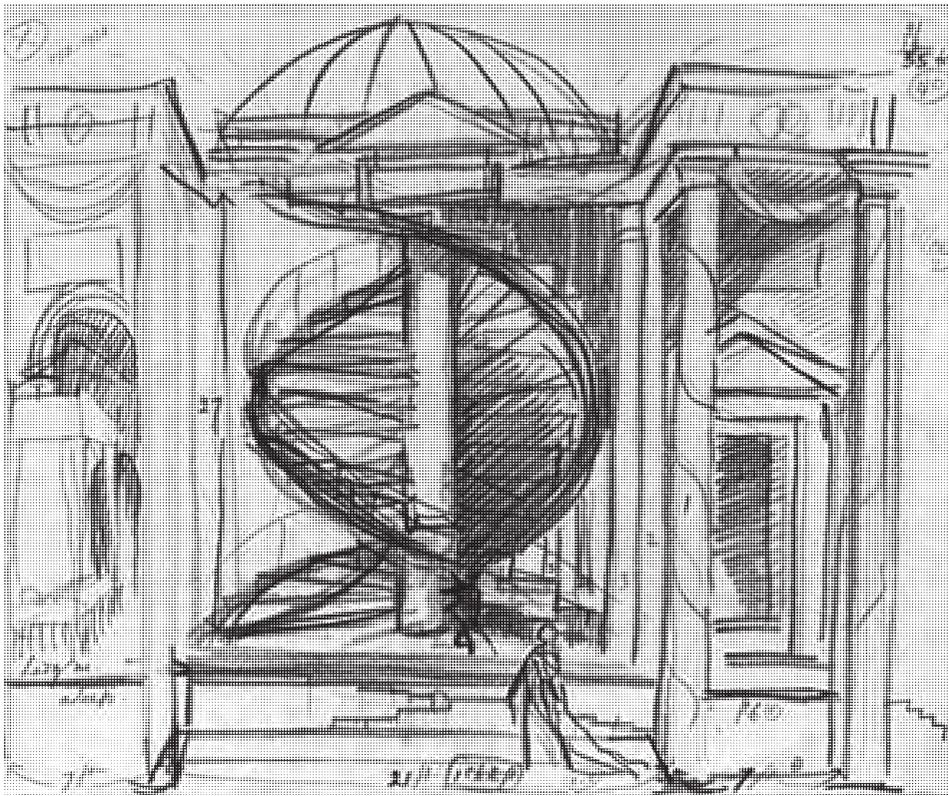
JR: Yes, but that also means that it's the moment when the system breaks down, the moment when we are inside the classical theory of the fine arts and at the same time something else is expressed, which is not at all the type of sensibility and the modes of interpretation that used to belong to the classical theory of the fine arts. In other words, Hegel takes up the objects of the poetic arts or of the traditional discourses on painting, but not exclusively, because he also includes everything that appears with Winckelmann, everything that appears with this tradition of rereading the ancients. So when Hegel returns to Greek sculpture and to the development of painting from the renaissance until the Dutch golden age, he in a sense returns to objects that already exist, but his relationship to them is completely new — and this relationship is not only his, we also find it in a new sensitivity toward the works of these minor masters who painted genre scenes, a sensitivity which is no more

the taste for the exotic that characterized the eighteenth-century aristocracy who bought those paintings. In a sense, there is a Hegelian logic inside Hegel's work itself, that is, the content explodes the form, there are new modes of sensibility regarding what takes place when one is in the presence of a statue or a painting. This is the reason the Hegelian closure is a closure that must be burst open: it is the very contradiction between the objects and the modes of interpretation of these objects. What interests me is therefore what passes through Hegel and points to accomplishments that Hegel may have thought or art forms that he could have known, such as photography.

sow: In your reading of Hegel you also make an essential connection: at the same time as Hegel presented his lectures on aesthetics in Berlin, Schinkel's Altes Museum was being built in front of the university. In other words, Hegel is the thinker of the museum. What he thinks in his aesthetics is the space of the museum.

JR: Yes, certainly. And the space of the museum is the space where works are, at one and the same time, entirely separated from their traditional function in the service of the church, the aristocracy, the monarchy, and arranged in such a manner that they must tell a story. I must say that I always find it striking that all the great museums have adopted this historical mode of presentation of their works. Which means that, in a fundamental sense, painting is the question of the life of the people. This is something extremely important: the museum is the space where works are separated from their destination, and they are presented to a spectator who does not know what they are about, what questions they pose, and what they talk about, and who will therefore resemble the spectator of the Louvre of the republic: he is forced to look at painting itself, because he can no longer know exactly what painting speaks of. But at the same time the presentation of the paintings tells a story, the story of the people.

kw: You started to discuss the narrative structure of your book. In this regard there is another essential name: Auerbach. *Aisthesis* is of course a reference to Auerbach's *Mimesis*, and in the preface to your book you refer explicitly to this work, which serves as a kind of model. At the same time there are obvious differences between the two projects, for example in your respective readings of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*. In your reading, Julien Sorel becomes a figure who, in the end of the novel, experiences a certain pleasure in inactivity, in the way we just discussed. There is a direct connection to the notion of play. So, I'd like to begin with a general question: what is the relationship



between *Mimesis* and *Aisthesis*, both the books and the concepts? Is *aisthesis* a more fundamental concept than *mimesis*? Should we understand the development of the new, aesthetic regime of art as the condition of possibility of literary realism, which is finally the subject of Auerbach's study?

JR: A vast question. Let's say that what I borrow from Auerbach are the modes of exposition, the small scenes where you concentrate upon a small text and attempt to develop all its implications. That said, my perspective is after all very different from that of Auerbach. The difference between our interpretations of Stendhal presupposes a more fundamental difference, because for Auerbach, *mimesis* is understood in the classical sense, as imitation. For him there is, at the heart of the notion of *mimesis*, a relationship to a referent called reality. And the progress of *mimesis* is a progress that concerns what type of reality we have access to. There is a historical teleology, which in a sense is parallel to others — I am thinking of Gombrich, for example — where literary writing becomes more and more apt to grasp a reality that on the one hand becomes more and more concrete, and on the other hand more and more detailed. For me, *mimesis* is not imitation.

Mimesis is a regime of identification of the arts, and what constitutes *mimesis* as an order is not a norm for the imitation of reality, but the fact that imitation or representation is included within a number of rules, within a whole division between what is artistic and what is not artistic, between the noble genres and the non-noble genres, etc. I understand *mimesis* as the classical order, a total order that subjects the representation of reality not only to a certain number of restrictive norms, but to a certain hierarchical model. So what I find important, and what separates me from Auerbach, is that the question of what is called “realism” is connected to the destruction of the fundamental model of Aristotle’s poetics, where the work is defined first of all by its plot, and the plot is defined first of all as a chain of actions. What I tried to say in *The Politics of Literature* is that at the center of the model of *mimesis* there is the privilege of action, the idea of poetry as something that constructs an action or a chain of events, as opposed to history, which simply accounts for life and its developments. I believe that there is a fundamental opposition between action and life, which is an opposition between two types of humanity. As I see it, the birth of modern realism is not connected to how authors, as Auerbach states, began to take an interest in historical reality, in the relationship between the social classes at a certain point in history. It is connected to the destruction of the privilege of a certain model, the privilege of the model of action, of well-formed chains of action, over life in its proper developments. So what I see as central to Stendhal is not that he takes an interest in the specific tonalities of an aristocratic salon in the days preceding the revolution of 1830, but a basic contradiction according to which there are two ways of thinking the transformation of the sensible conditions of an individual who has a low position in the social hierarchy: either he climbs to the top of the hierarchy, or else he completely undoes the hierarchy as a whole. Stendhal’s novel is structured around this fundamental opposition between two ways of conceiving of equality: as revenge against a certain condition, or as abolition of the opposition between different conditions in the sensible event or in the distribution of the sensible event. For me, this is the very heart of realism, which is why I find for example Barthes’ analyses of the reality effect completely irrelevant. What is important about the realist novel in the nineteenth century is not, as he thinks, a sort of excessive manifestation of signs of bourgeois plenitude, but something completely different. If there are many things, if there are many descriptions, it is because the sensible moment becomes essential, which also means that the poetic model based on creating well-formed chains of actions is about to break down.

sow: Even if you prefer not to talk about the connection between aesthetics and politics, we must still pose the question. You've written a history of the worker's movement in the nineteenth century, which is also the history of a new experience of the sensible. So there is a politics of literature, and there is also, as you say in the book, a sort of lag or rupture between a model of activity and a model of passivity in the socialist movement. Could you articulate this connection?

Aisthesis

JR: This is something extremely complex. If we talk about the point of departure, I believe that the moment when ideas of revolution or emancipation take center stage is the moment of a connection between an idea of an active transformation of society and an idea of a suspension, an interruption, where the main issue is to live in another realm of the sensible. What aesthetics does, and this is what we find in Schiller, is to propose another idea of the revolution: a revolution that does not want to kill the king and reform the laws, but to change the very forms of sensible life. And I think that this model is present not only as an opposition between the strategies of different political parties or movements, but inside of Marxism itself, for example it is clearly present in Marx's early texts where we find the romantic model of the human revolution as opposed to the political revolution, a revolution of the forms of sensible existence that goes beyond the scope of a political revolution. We can see how what is commonly called the economism of Marx is also a way of transforming this idea of the peaceful revolution of the forms of life. In Marxism there is always this tension between a peaceful revolution of the material forms of life, and the idea of an insurrection that must await the precise moment of the historical process. And we can see that the primacy of history in Marx is the primacy of the relationship between these two models. History is both the development of the material conditions of a new sensible world, and what must produce the moment in which we can act. I think that we see this fundamental tension when Marx finds himself in front of the German communists in Paris who want to live in a new sensible world. On the one hand, in the manuscripts of 1844, he insists on the fact that they gather together not only for the defense of their interests but as the achievement of a new sense of community. On the other hand, in their correspondence, Engels and Marx scoff at those idiots who ask whether they should not attach forks and knives together to really live as communists.

Of course he thinks that this is stupid, that what counts is to found a party that will create the possibility of communism in the future. But at the same time there is this tension in the heart of Marxism, and it remains central to a

whole idea of the revolution, of social transformation. In short, there is a fundamental opposition between a vision based on the classical model of action, where events are interlinked in order to arrive at a result, and then a model based on the idea of a revolution of the sensible forms, which also means an abolition of the relationship between activity and passivity, a challenge of the model of action. And in the end this is where we still find ourselves, whatever opinion we may have regarding the movements that occupy the streets today.

sow: One author who is situated at the extreme point of this development, this way of breaking the causal chain, the chain of actions, is of course Mallarmé. You have returned to Mallarmé several times, and you place him next to Emerson and Whitman, but you also in a certain way understand him as a consequence of Stendhal's revolution, of Julien Sorel's ultimate fate. Where should we locate Mallarmé in this history?

JR: My reading of Mallarmé has always been animated by a critique of the modernist conception of him as the poet of the impossible work, the poet for whom in the poem the language takes itself as its object, this doxa where Mallarmé figures next to Mondrian and Schönberg as the one who liberates art from the certitude of representation: Mallarmé, in short, as the model of the autonomy of art. What I've been trying to do since quite a while already — in fact, this is almost where I started — has been to return Mallarmé to his place as a spectator of small theater representations, as a spectator of Loie Fuller's dance, as a spectator of attractions and popular shows and fairs: a Mallarmé who, on the stage and in the spatial realm of the performance, searches for the elements that will help him rethink the spatiality of the written poem. This also means that I have tried to place Mallarmé closer to the republican context of the era, where the aim was not at all to withdraw into solitude and separation, but on the contrary to see how poetry, once it had lost its old glory, could be rethought and dignified as a mode of experience of the common world. In Mallarmé's reflections about the theater, the theater is the place where a common world is outlined, defined. And in his reflections on poetry, the forms of poetry can constitute the voice of a common world, without degenerating into Wagnerian nationalism. This is what I find essential in Mallarmé. It is not connected so much to the question of activity-inactivity, but to the question of the model of the work, of the relationship between art and non-art, the fact that art from this point on constitutes itself by a sort of reappropriation of everything that had normally been placed in the domain of non-art. And this is the reason that in this book I've placed Mallarmé in the same

lineage as poets such as Gautier and Banville, who looked at tightrope walkers and musicals, who searched for the elements of a new form of theater that would break with the petrified and dying forms of the old.

sow: There is a presence of theater: Ibsen, Gordon Craig, Maeterlinck — the spatiality of theater plays a central role in the book.

Aisthesis

JR: This is important because I also try to reestablish, in the reflection about what is called modernity, the essential role of the arts of theater, the arts of the spectacle, the performing arts: choreography, tightrope walking, pantomime, early cinema, etc. I think it is very important to admit that there is a whole idea of modernity that is based almost exclusively on painting and on the facile paradigm that painting can offer us. Everyone knows what an abstract painting is, but what is an immobile theater, what is an inactive theater? This, for me, is an essential scene, because it will reconfigure the very relationship between action and life. Theater is the place where the old model of theatrical action will be finally ruined. And the ruin of the old model of theatrical action can be thought antithetically, that is, in the form of the direct presence of bodies, a sort of direct action of the bodies on stage, as opposed to the interpretation of a dramatic text. This is something that I try to follow in the book: the ways that theater can transform itself. On the one hand, it can transform itself into a sort of cathedral of the future, a place for the gathering of a crowd, which poses another problem about the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. The other side to the same story is theater as something that, faced with the classical model of action, tries to conquer a certain immobility, a pictorial immobility in certain stage settings, or a sculptural immobility, which is what is happening in Gordon Craig's work, in a very fascinating way: the destruction of the model of the actor, because the actor is an impossible mediation between two arts, one which is that of the poem, and one which is the art of movement in space. Gordon Craig creates a theater where the scenes are without words and where the staircase is the principal actor, not the support for the action. This was something fundamental, and even though people like Craig were forgotten they gave to the standard conception of theater a new set of elements that, in a sense, were themselves completely oblivious of their origins and their function. Today the staircase has become a sort of obligatory accessory for a whole series of theatrical scenes, without any trace of the dramatic and theoretic function it used to serve. For me many things happen in the domains that are left by the side, such as the theater stage or the crafts, where the scene is redistributed. If we limit ourselves to

the facile perspective of new painting and music, we forget everything that permits us to see the transformation of the paradigms of action on the theater stage, or the transformation of the paradigms of life in the arts and crafts, for example.

kw: In this discussion about what we call modernism, about a certain formalist modernism, one critic has a strategic function in your book, and that is of course Clement Greenberg, who in a sense provides the history of your counter-history. What does Greenberg represent in your book?

JR: Well, let's say that I have nothing particular against Greenberg. Earlier I have confronted modernism in its French versions, both the vulgar ones, such as Jean Clair, and the sophisticated ones, such as Lyotard — or else by way of the question of Adorno. Greenberg is in the book almost by accident, certainly there is a model...

sow: The book ends with Greenberg, after all.

JR: The book ends there, but it is a connection that I... I did not at all have the intention of ending the book with Greenberg, in the sense that I almost did not have any idea of the architecture of the book, of where it would end. I could have continued, at one point I had the idea of talking about the cinema of Godard

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**Frederick Glasier,
Portrait of Loie
Fuller, 1902.**



for example, but I had discussed it several times and I don't like to repeat myself. Anyway, at a certain moment, for reasons that had little to do with the structure of the book, I wanted to write something about James Agee's book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, with the idea that this could perhaps at some stage enter into my work. And then when I was working on Agee I came across an appendix where there is this controversy with the people behind the *Partisan Review*, who made a poll among their writers, and it was clear that the purpose of this poll was to announce that the model of the politics of literature can no longer be Whitman, can no longer be this democratic art, but must be Henry James and T.S. Eliot — and of course, Agee reacted strongly to this. Taking this into account, and thinking of the fact that Agee's book was started in 1936 and published in 1941, a lapse of time that also saw the publication of Greenberg's article, I constructed the final plot of the book, starting from the question: what happens in Agee's book? It is like the ultimate moment of a modernity that wanted precisely to renew art by including all the forms of experience that had been dismissed as trivial, as banal, as belonging outside of art. In a certain sense this is not only the story of Whitman — even though the story of Whitmanism in the US is very important, since it permits us to displace the emphasis from Mallarmé's European model — but it is also what is at play in Hegel in front of Murillo, in Théodore de Banville facing the acrobats, in Mallarmé in front of Loie Fuller, it is what is at play in Vertov, in Chaplin, in a whole idea of modernity as the abolition of the border between art and non-art — and we also find expressions to this effect in James Agee. And finally a moment arrives when people say, "OK, fine, we're tired of all that," and these people are of course Marxists, Trotskyists, who say that this is all Stalinism. I won't develop the Stalin-Trotsky aspect of this affair, but at one point I told myself that this was a possible ending, a provisional ending but a possible ending to the book: to show how the modernist ideology, such as it was thought by Greenberg, by Adorno, who played with it in a highly complex fashion, by Lyotard, who transformed it into a question of the rupture and the sublime, by people like Baudrillard, who transformed it into a paranoia regarding the great art conspiracy — to show, in other words, how this second modernity was constructed late, in opposition to the historical modernity, which wanted just the contrary: not at all to render art autonomous, but to make art a form of life, or to renew art by including everything, quotidian experience, newspapers, the accessories of life, everything.

sow: In a certain way we could see this discussion in the *Partisan Review* as a sort of echo from or a parallel to the battle of

expressionism in Europe in the '30s, with Lukács, Brecht and the others, a battle that is also in a sense the last movement of the period between the wars, and the end of the historical avant-garde, to use Peter Bürger's term. Could you connect these two, the Partisan Review with the *Expressionismstreit* in Europe?

JR: As far as I've understood it, the question of realism in Europe, the way I perceive it through the Lukács-Brecht debate, concerns the way in which Lukács attempts to constitute a sort of progressive bourgeois tradition of realism in opposition to Brecht, who essentially — although it is of course more complicated — belongs to a dramatic tradition that tries to integrate the forms of the amusement park spectacles, to integrate the fragmentation of the plot, into the dramatic spectacle. After all what is important in Brecht is the way in which he takes up and reinterprets what had been at the center of interest of the aesthetes of the nineteenth century for popular theater, pantomime, music-hall and so on: the fact that the “popular” performance, with its sequence of numbers is a break in relation to the classical representative logic and that it is the true form of “art for art's sake” since it “tells” nothing beyond the perfection of its own execution. Brecht takes up this re-evaluation and makes it a political project, when he conceives of epic theater as a suite of numbers. He inscribes himself into the tradition that has attempted to recuperate the popular spectacle as a spectacle without hidden significance, but he turns this “popular form” of “art for art's sake” into an instrument for denouncing a certain social system. On the opposite side, it seems to me that what Lukács tries to do is to mask the break with the model of action, which means that in a sense Brecht is the one who is sensible to this break, even though he tries to reestablish it by thinking that a sequence of numbers instead of a classical plot will be the revelation of a world that must be changed, which is after all an idea that, so to speak, was never verified historically. What is certain is that, when Lukács tries to build upon a model which is broken — and which happens to be the same model that Auerbach uses, the model of progressive history — what is at stake in the European debate is ultimately the question: do we present the socialist revolution as an extension of the progressive bourgeois model, with its supposed artistic forms, or do we play the game of rupture? Which is somewhat different from the way the debate is played out in the case of Greenberg, where you have T.S. Eliot and Hans Hofmann on one side and Whitman and the tradition of realist painters such as Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh and so on, the painters of American life, on the other.

Aisthesis

sow: What I wanted to say with this reference to the battle of expressionism, a battle that was constructed around an opposition between expressionism, which for Lukács included Joyce, Kafka, Woolf, in short modernism, and at the other end writers like Ernst Bloch and Brecht, who attempted to find a way to describe modernism as realism — what I wanted to say is that this debate, even though it may seem a bit bizarre and even though it disappeared very quickly because of WWII, had a very important effect in the sense that it established the program for a certain Marxist aesthetic discourse: we find it in Adorno in the 50s, in Fredric Jameson still today... So this debate was paradigmatic for a certain tradition where modernity and then postmodernity are thought on the basis of a theory of Marxism. And these old notions of realism and modernism still exist, even in Fredric Jameson. But your reading of realism is different: you break with this historicism.

JR: Certainly. What I try to say is precisely that realism is fragmentation. What Lukács does is to set realism, in the sense of the great narrative that unravels its meaning, against fragmentation, with the idea that fragmentation is expressionism, is bourgeois subjectivism, and in the extension of this we find Jameson. What is actually the heart of realism, among all the great realists, is the break with this model, and this is something that can be verified in everyone from Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy to Balzac, Flaubert and Stendhal.

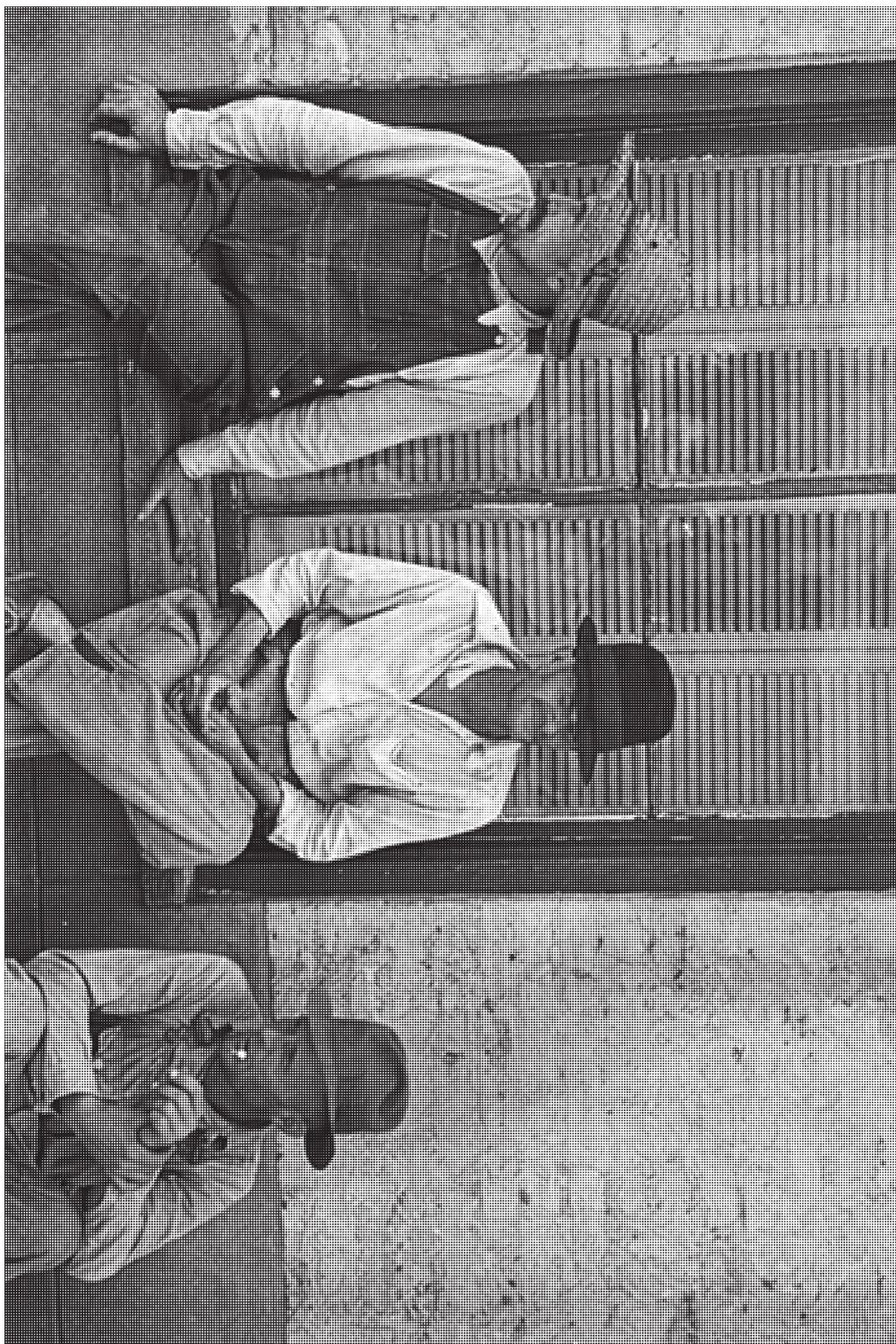
sow: You tell a certain kind of history... For example, if we wanted to compare your project with Peter Bürger's, for you the last part of the nineteenth century is very important: Symbolism, Mallarmé and so on. For Bürger this is the summit of aestheticism, the peak of the theory of art-for-art's-sake, perfected aestheticism: it is achieved autonomy. And then he describes the break that comes with the historical avant-garde, which wants to rejoin art and life. The history that you create is completely different.

JR: Yes, well, I don't know Peter Bürger very well and as you know I haven't taken a great interest in the problem of the avant-garde. Even though I attempt to establish connections to the notions of avant-garde and modernity, they are not my notions. On the contrary I have tried to show that this desire to rejoin art and life is something that runs through the whole of the nineteenth century, and that what is called art-for-art's-sake or autonomous art has always been a search for a certain type of inclusion of the new forms of life within the forms of art. Which is the reason that I have been especially interested in trying to

challenge the perception of Mallarmé as the aestheticist poet who remains enclosed within his ivory tower, just as I have tried to change the perception of Flaubert as the novelist of the ivory tower: what is interesting is that the new form of the novel is only possible in correlation with the new forms of sensible experience, such as those we find in the scenes of *Madame Bovary*, with the women of the people who want to live a new life, to place art in their lives. And then, of course, Flaubert mocks this desire to aestheticize life. But his novel is not conceivable as an autonomous form, its syntax is only possible in correlation with the great social and cultural transformation as a result of which there is no longer a world of refined men and then a popular world below, but all of these forms of mediation, all of these forms of urban culture, all of these forms of culture propagated by newspapers and magazines, thanks to which a certain border can no longer be upheld. Let me remind you that this is all at the center of Greenberg's article: it is after all the culture of the poor that is responsible for the ruin of great art. What is important is that Flaubert makes great art with the culture of the poor: he denounces the culture of the poor and at the same time he proves the total solidarity between great art and the culture of the poor.

sow: There are very few references to other thinkers in your book. There is Greenberg, but there is no Bürger, no Lukács, etc. Adorno appears once in a footnote. As *Aesthetic Theory* is lying there on the table, could you say something about Adorno? Your projects are very different but nevertheless there are certain parallels.

JR: It is very complicated, I am not sure that I have understood Adorno. There are authors that I haven't read so much, who do not interest me in a fundamental way, but Adorno is one of the authors that I have tried to come to terms with — not in the sense of taking position with or against him, but of attempting to understand what he said. Adorno is fascinating because on the one hand he incarnates a certain version of modernity, of the idea of the relationship between artistic modernity and political avant-garde, since modern art, autonomous art separates from the experience of aestheticized life, the experience of the culture industry; but there is also something that he lacks completely, with his rigid oppositions, which resemble those of Greenberg, between the real culture and the true art and then the aestheticized life, the culture industry, and so on. And at the same time he is someone who knows that, at the heart of modern and autonomous art there must be a fracture, in all the senses of the word, that is, an expression of pain and a persistence of childhood. So what I find interesting in Adorno, and what is



completely absent in Greenberg and has disappeared also in thinkers such as Lyotard, is this tension between a model that establishes an equivalence between autonomy, modernity and revolution, in so far as the word revolution still has a sense in the late Adorno, and a fractured model, and at the same time there is the fundamental idea that the distribution that makes art possible is connected to a social distribution which is in the last instance a separation between those who can listen to the song of the sirens and those who cannot. Which means that the autonomy of the work in Adorno must constantly be an autonomy that makes the fracture appear, the fact that behind it there is the pain of the division of labor, the pain of separation and social difference. And this is also at the same time the reappearance of the figure of childhood, the figure of the reconciled world, the world that thinks itself beyond all forms of social division. Think, for example, of Adorno's attitude to the figure of Chaplin, the double relationship that he could have to Chaplin: the positivity of the clown and at the same time the denunciation of *The Dictator* as a bad way of talking about Nazism. In a certain sense Adorno could just as well have understood *The Dictator* in the same way that he had understood the figure of Chaplin before, but at this historical moment he understands Chaplin as humanist denunciation. Fundamentally I think that there is an interesting tension in Adorno, but he also exhausts me a little.

sow: One thing that we do find in Adorno, and also in a different way in Heidegger, is the question of technology. For Adorno there is something in the modern artwork that is very important, its becoming-technical: serialism, etc. For him sensibility is something very suspect, because it implies a notion of immediacy, against which he sets the question of technical mediation. For you I would say that it is rather a question of a reevaluation of the sensible, whereas the question of technology remains in the background, it is not so important for you.

JR: Behind the whole question of the relationship between art and the transformations of technology or of technical mediation there is for me always the figure of the puppeteer, as in the Platonic myth. The puppeteer is the one who, since he creates popular culture, produces reality in a bad sense, the reality of the shadows, the sense of reality of the people who live in the cave. The puppeteer is the one who creates popular culture, and therefore he is bad, but at the same time he is bad as a technician, that is to say: the puppeteer is denounced on the one hand because he produces a vulgar sense of reality for the people, and on the other hand because he produces a false sense of reality which is finally nothing but manipulation. It is for this reason

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**Walker Evans,
Frank Tenge, Bud
Fields, and Floyd
Burroughs, cotton
share-croppers,
Hale County,
Alabama, 1936.**

there is this double discourse, which is very clear in the case of Heidegger: the whole denunciation of media, of what media do, of the new technologies, which are understood as producers of images, but the image is here in fact two completely different things: both the fate of people who are lost in the sensible, and that which separates us from the true sensible, which is always on the order of the immediate. I believe that this is what is important: to think that behind the whole discourse on the role of technology there is always this double game in relationship to the very sense of technology, where technology is that which produces both vulgar materiality and immateriality.

Aisthesis

kw: The book ends with Agee, Greenberg, World War II, but if you would have continued, where would you have gone? We could think of any number of scenes where the play of activity and inactivity returns. You mentioned Godard, but we could also think of the Situationists, for example their notion of the *dérive*, or of the rereading of the readymade among the New Realists, and so on. Where would you have gone?

JR: The notion of play such as it was reappropriated by the New Realists and the Situationists does not interest me a lot because they take this notion too literally, too immediately. In other words, what interests me with the notion of play is the notion of a displacement of one form of sensible experience into another form of sensible experience. On the other hand I of course see that it is significant that this notion turns up in an iconoclastic form among the New Realists and as a sort of anti-politics among the Situationists. Let us say that play does not interest me as much when it becomes identical with derision. There is a whole way of thinking the politics of art according to the model of derision, where you question what is serious in art, and create different sorts of pastiche, an attitude that was important in defining postmodernity, in Jameson for example. This does not interest me. What would have interested me if I would have continued would have been to work with events and forms of art that make sensible forms pass over into other ones. And it is for this reason that Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* could have been interesting, because they set everything into play: by the way in which cinema is treated, where the images of cinema are connected to news images, paintings, and so on; by the way in which the movement of the film images is connected to the movement of images in video art — all of this interests me. What I end in this way is only this book: I have marked a phase, now I must go on. And one can go on by turning back or by going further forward. My problem is, in spite of all, that I am not so interested in all the discourses that have become attached to the artistic events since

the '60s. I would say that with the network of discourses that has been created around Chaplin or around Loie Fuller I still have a certain liberty, but it seems to me that many of the artistic events since the '60s were events that in a sense were anticipated by their own discourses, which makes them less interesting. The discourses that accompany them render them this disservice. So the question would be if we could reestablish events from which some small scenes of discourse could be reinvented. What is interesting to me is to reconstruct a scene of discourse that has escaped. In late modernity, in the art from the '60s until today, there is such an almost obscene intrication of the discourses on art within the forms of art themselves, that for me as a researcher this art is not very interesting. It could place me in a position where I must judge between different interpretative systems, and not in the position of someone who could reestablish the discursive continent around an artistic event.

kw: In a sense this already answers my question, but I need to ask: "anti-Greenbergianism" already has a long tradition, how do you situate yourself within this tradition? From Rosalind Krauss to Thierry de Duve there is a great tradition of re-readings of Greenberg, which ask how Greenberg could miss the '60s, Minimalism, conceptual art, etc. What is your position in relation to these readings?

JR: I have read very little because it interests me very little. Again, I arrived at Greenberg not by way of Krauss or de Duve, but essentially — even though I had read texts by Greenberg before — by way of Agee, which is to say that I arrived at a Greenberg who marked the end of a certain American tradition, and not at someone by recourse to whom we could reevaluate the history of the art movements of the '60s. The art of the New Realists or conceptual art are not things that interest me as forms of art, and therefore they are not things that interest me as supports of discourses on art.

sow: There is actually an astonishing proximity between what you say about Rodin, the surface of Rodin, the becoming-event of the surface in Rodin, and what Rosalind Krauss says in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, where she reads Rodin's experiment in a way that is very close to yours.

JR: That is possible, but I haven't read this book by Rosalind Krauss. I am not a theorist of aesthetics, which means that there are things that I haven't read, and things that I have read very quickly, but I haven't at all tried to follow the development of aesthetic reflection as such. I arrived by transversal routes. •