

## Politics and the Enigma of Art: The Meaning of Modernism for Adorno

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The premise of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is clearly stated in its opening sentence: "It has become self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the whole, not even its right to exist."<sup>1</sup> To announce this premise at the beginning of a work devoted to the aesthetic and its theory is perplexing to say the least. Does aesthetic theory not require that there is, in fact, an art to which it can refer? If the existence of art cannot be taken for granted, is the whole project of aesthetic theory then inconceivable from the outset? The extent to which the fate of art is tied to the existence of aesthetic theory indicates that Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is as much a work about art as it is a work about the survival of the aesthetic and the theoretical at a moment when art can no longer turn to these categories as the means of sustaining its significance. What is then in question is nothing less than aesthetic theory itself rather than a particular aesthetic theory.

The moment that occasions this questioning of aesthetic theory is the same moment that prompts Adorno's opening statement about art: the moment when art can no longer fulfill its promise. It is this moment that defines, for Adorno, what we now recognize as Modernism. Adorno writes:

The sea of the unforeseen (*Das Meer des nie Geahnten*), on which revolutionary art movements set forth around 1910, has not satisfied the promised happiness of that adventure. Instead, the process released at that time has eaten away the categories in whose name it was begun. (*AT*, 9/1)

Adorno's account of Modernism's adventure recalls the eighth article of Marinetti's 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism* in which Marinetti asks "Why should we look back, when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the impossible?"<sup>2</sup> To set out on the sea of the unforeseen, to break down the doors of the impossible, is to foresee a future whose significance resides in its promise of the new. While this is also the promise of any manifesto, what makes the *Manifesto of Futurism* so striking an example of the genre is that it does not locate the significance of art in a particular practice, form of expression or act – unlike movements such as Imagism or Vorticism whose claims for art are published only a few years later. In this respect, Futurism does not describe a specific historical result for itself, a result that would immediately contradict its openness to the future since such a result would have to be already known in advance. Instead, Futurism emphasizes the increased experience of speed as the sign of a radical shift in what art is. In this respect, it is symptomatic of a shift away from the past as the defining source of what art is. Accordingly, the task of Futurism is to preserve this shift and all the actions described in its manifesto are directed towards this preservation of a future that cannot be comprehended by the past. Oriented toward the impossible knowledge of the unforeseen, Futurism can only promise that the continuing significance of art alone resides in the future. As the eighth article of the manifesto makes explicit, the past is no longer important wherever the significance of art is at issue.

It is not without a sense of irony that we can now look back on Futurism as a movement that had not only a limited future but a politically compromised future as the distance between it and fascist ideology diminished. But the significance of the adventure launched by movements such as Futurism lies less, for Adorno, in the fact of their historical failure than in the reason why they set out on this adventure in the first place. Indeed, Adorno's reference to these movements does not aim to confirm their place within the historical identification and succession of artistic periods – only their historical failure can do that. More is at stake for Adorno than a mere history of Modernism and the relation of its internal movements.

As the names of Futurism and Modernism already indicate, the art undertaken by their adherents was not to be bound by the limit of the past.<sup>3</sup> The consequence of this removal of the past is to pose the question, as Modernism did, of what art itself is. Or, more precisely, it is to pose the question of what significance art can lay claim to when the past is no longer granted the right to guarantee such a meaning. This question made itself felt as the revolutionary movements of this period failed to fulfil their promise or, as Adorno put it in the passage cited above, they ate away the categories in whose name they were undertaken.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the radical effect of these movements does not lie in their failure to sustain the future existence of their claims about art but in the corrosive effect this emphasis had upon art itself. In effect, what was taken away from art in the name of the future was the one thing that had assured a future for art, its history. As such, what was at stake as Modernism set forth on its adventure into the future was nothing less than the claim the past had made upon art as the source of art's significance. Having taken this away and having failed to sustain its promise by "eating away" the categories in which its adventure was undertaken, Modernism becomes the moment in art when the future, the sign of art's continued existence, the sole category art has turned to in order to confirm its significance, comes under question in both its historical and Modernist accounts.

For Adorno, the occurrence of this questioning is the effect of a process released by the revolutionary movements now associated with Modernism. In Adorno's account of this questioning, not only does such a process bring art to the point of uncertainty about its own existence, but it also reveals the extent to which Modernism, despite rejecting the assurance offered by art's past, does not deviate from the task that this past had formerly served: assuring a future. The proliferation of manifestoes within Modernism confirms as much since it is in the manifesto that art is known in terms of its future. In this respect, Modernism, even as it rejects the past of art, still prolongs the sense of a future that the past had formerly sheltered, a past now displaced into unaccountable categories such as the unforeseen, the impossible. For Modernism, then, the history of art is always yet to come. Adorno's account of Modernism seeks to confirm this displacement while interpreting it as the symptom of art's uncertainty about its right to exist.

Adorno explains this uncertainty as an effect of Modernism's orientation toward the unforeseen. Through this orientation, Modernism would appear to have shaken off the past by freeing art from its own history. But, this freedom, as Adorno notes, did not meet with the happiness it promised. Instead of rejoicing over "a newly won realm of freedom," Adorno observes that artists "immediately sought after, once again, an ostensible order that was scarcely ever capable of providing support" (*AT*, 9/1). After defining itself by asserting freedom from its own past, modern art comes to the point where it reacts against its own freedom. Through this reaction, art resubmits itself to the order it had sought to move beyond, that is, it resubmits itself to the order whose inability to provide support had prompted the adventure of Modernism in the first place. The return to order after the promise of such a freedom is not, for Adorno, just another stage in the continuing historical development of art (as if art were simply an endless oscillation between two poles, order and freedom, or however else one wants to define these poles).<sup>5</sup> Rather it is the recognition of the moment in which the future of art, its very existence as art, becomes uncertain – the moment when even the new, the modern cannot provide support except by a return to the order it had rejected. But also, as a result of this return, what had been self-evident can no longer persist in its self-evidence since the price demanded by the adventure of Modernism is the unsustainability of the past of art. To return, after Modernism, to the order of the past is to return to a shell in which art can no longer be at home. To set forth on the sea of the unforeseen is, in this case, the last permutation of an art no longer assured of its significance – in fact, an art no longer assured that its meaning can be sustained by an oscillation between the past and the future. Within the polarized terms provided by the history of art, no other possibility is conceivable. In this sense, to set forth on the sea of the unforeseen is the end of this history and therefore the end of its ability to ensure the existence of art.

The singular importance of Modernism and its adventure on the sea of the unforeseen is then, for Adorno, its failure to sustain not just its future but also the future of art in general. Why art in general fails is because Modernism, no matter how radical its form (and it is almost always a question of a

radicalization of form that identifies Modernism), remains an extension of the promise that has been the foundation of art through much of its history, art's promise that there will be a future for art, in short, the promise that art, however naively, will always confirm what it is to be human.<sup>6</sup> Adorno traces this aspect of art in an account that reiterates terms used by Benjamin to characterize auratic art in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility."<sup>7</sup> First, art becomes an autonomous form, that is, it becomes art properly speaking, by freeing itself from its mythical and religious past. Adorno writes: "The autonomy [art] achieved, after having freed itself from cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity" (AT, 9/1). More explicitly than Benjamin, Adorno emphasizes the role played by the idea of humanity in this freeing of art from its cultic past.<sup>8</sup> In Adorno's account, the autonomy of art derives its social function from this idea. As a result, the autonomy of art is regarded as embodying the autonomy of a society no longer subject to the interpretations of myth and religion. In other words, the rejection of the cultic function and its images not only inaugurates art as an autonomous form but also establishes the significance of this art as a representation of the social structure within which this rejection occurs. While this representative social function has been claimed many times on behalf of art, and while its modern significance may be traced to its origin within the Enlightenment, it is a claim that, Adorno insists, can no longer be made for art, at least not in such a positive way. This is so for Adorno because such a representation of autonomy owes its existence to an idea that has lost its force, the idea that society is human. What autonomy represents can no longer affirm its existence. Adorno is unequivocal on the effect of this loss: "As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was disrupted" (AT, 9/1). The loss is, however, not simply the loss of an idea. If it were, it would only be necessary to await the arrival of another perhaps better idea. Rather, it is also the loss of the sense that the function of art is to reflect any such idea. Adorno's remarks on the autonomy of art after its cultic function makes this clear. Although the autonomy of art owes its significance to the idea of humanity invested in society, once the idea of humanity invested in society is no longer credible, its expression, which occurs in the form of the autonomy of art, can no longer be sustained. Accordingly, this understanding of the autonomy of art is disrupted and art enters the situation to which Modernism responds when it sets forth on the sea of the unforeseen. What is disrupted at this point, however, is not the autonomy of art but rather the significance that was attached to the autonomy through which art first asserted its secular existence. This is why, even after remarking that "the constituent elements which had accrued to art faded (*verblaßten*) by virtue of art's own law of movement," Adorno will assert that "art's autonomy remains irrevocable" (AT, 9/1). In Modernism, this autonomy lives on even if, as Adorno remarks, this "living on" took the form of a blindness that failed to see how much the future, the adventure envisaged by Modernism, was just one more example of how the past had interpreted the autonomy of art. Displacing this interpretation into the future does not displace the relation to art that defines its secular existence: autonomy as means, autonomy as what is always to be represented as the determination of another, non-artistic source. An autonomy not truly autonomous.

What Modernism then brings to an end for Adorno is the autonomy of art as the means of determining art's significance. At the same time, this autonomy remains irrevocable and precisely because the setting apart that frees art from cult and myth is essential to art even if it is not until Modernism that the consequences of this essential gesture come to the fore with all the force of a law, or, as Adorno states in a passage already cited, they occur according to "art's own law of movement."<sup>9</sup> While the operation of such a law threatens the history of art, it is not an external threat, as it would be if this law were to have the same relation to art as the idea of humanity had to its autonomy. Rather, it is occasioned by the impulse of that history to assure the role of art as a means. As already stated, Modernism is no exception to that history since it still adheres to a concept of art as means even if this is no longer a means tied to the past but a means tied to the future of what it is to be modern. In this respect, both the impulse behind Modernism, as well as the past it rejects, respond to that setting apart in which art becomes art rather than an instrument of cult and myth, and they do so without questioning the existence of art. But what distinguishes Modernism is that its pursuit of this impulse releases the movement by which the autonomy of art no longer functions as a means. In its re-

enactment of the origin of secular art – that is, in its own setting apart from the history of art – Modernism takes away the very category that gave such an art its historical significance. It is in this way that art conforms to the law of its movement, its *Bewegungsgesetz*, the movement that embodies the law that governs art. That this release occurs as the effect of Modernism indicates that, for Adorno, Modernism is not just one more historical period in the development of art but the period in which art submits to its own law. This submission poses two questions. First, why must the recognition of this movement occur so forcefully for Adorno in Modernism, the most recent major movement within art for Adorno? Second, what is this movement and how does it release the insecurity of art?

Adorno claims that with the advent of Modernism art enters into a relation with itself that threatens its future. Adorno clarifies this effect of Modernist art when he describes how the revolutionary art movements of this period are forced to contradict the freedom their revolutionary intentions seemed to bestow so easily. For Adorno, a contradiction arises within these movements because what is at stake in them is not just freedom but absolute freedom. By pursuing such a freedom these movements went against a condition to which art must submit if it is to remain art. This condition, Adorno states, requires that art is “always limited to a particular.” As a result, the freedom sought by Modernism “falls into contradiction with the perennial foothold (*Stand*) unfreedom retains in the whole” (*AT*, 9/1). The one thing that the absolute freedom sought by these movements cannot overcome is this unfreedom retained in the whole – whole in the sense of everything that is not art, the world, the social, etc. For Adorno, every work of art must submit to this foothold, to the particular. Consequently, it is to this foothold that the adventure of Modernism will always be forced to return and as it does so, it comes into contradiction with the freedom it sought to affirm: it meets the unfreedom of its own existence, it meets the particular that scarcely supports the freedom of the unforeseen sought by Modernism’s revolutionary art movements. What Adorno understands by the movement of art is revealed in this return: inasmuch as art moves towards a freedom in which its autonomy is absolute, it can only do so as art, but to do so as art is to recognize its limitation in relation to the whole, to recognize its particularity.

The contradictory movement Adorno describes here is fundamental to his account of art. What Adorno regards as the distinguishing characteristic of the art associated with Modernism, its uncertainty, will constantly refer to this movement. To the extent that this movement is the law to which art adheres, this law would then govern the appearance and existence of Modernism itself. But to what end is such a law conceived in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*? What purpose governs such an aesthetic theory if what it gives rise to, the aesthetic, is subject to a movement that questions its existence?

For Adorno, the contradictory movement between freedom and limitation marks the point at which art is forced to challenge its own essence. It is from this challenge that the uncertainty announced at the beginning of the *Aesthetic Theory* emerges as the single most important characteristic of art. What is then at stake in this contradictory movement is that it puts art’s existence into question or, to put this another way, what is at stake in Adorno’s Modernism is uncertainty as the most essential trait of art. Adorno is so absolute in his determination of this uncertainty that he will claim that “all efforts to restore art through its social function . . . are doomed” (*AT*, 9/1). Such efforts are doomed not because art has become uncertain about its social function (this would hold open the possibility of another, less uncertain function), but because such a social function has become the means “by which [art] expresses its own uncertainty” (*AT*, 9/1).<sup>10</sup> Here, the return to “an ostensible order that was scarcely ever capable of providing support” is the expression of such uncertainty. This traditional answer to the question of art’s significance, its social function, has now become the sign of art’s uncertainty about not only this answer but any answer to this question – and precisely because art does not affirm any meaning claimed on its behalf, it remains, in a word Adorno emphasizes, an enigma or riddle (*Rätsel*).<sup>11</sup> This tendency of art to express its uncertainty by asserting a function that would seem to carry all the certainty of self-evidence becomes the sign of art’s inability to recognize its own inmost tendencies. The recognition of such uncertainty is now the task of aesthetic theory.

Art is effectively blind for Adorno not only when it tries to assert or restore its social function but also when, as Modernism, it seeks to emancipate itself from its past. To embark on such an adventure, art must remain blind to the consequences of its own demands if it is even to conceive of the unforeseen or the impossible as the guarantee of its future existence. In Adorno's account, this blindness is not, however, specific to a particular era or period of art. Adorno writes:

However, its autonomy begins to return a moment of blindness. This blindness has always belonged to art; in the age of its emancipation it overshadowed everything else in spite of if not because of its unnaïveté . . . . This binds art to a naïveté raised to a second power: uncertainty about its aesthetic purpose. (*AT*, 9-10/1)

Already within the autonomy separating art from its cultic function there is a blindness. Adorno, however, is not saying that art is constitutionally blind. It is a question of how this blindness belongs to art. Adorno states that it is the autonomy of art that returns a moment of blindness. Here, what is translated as "return" is expressed by *hervorkehren*, a verb that emphasizes the sense of reversal or turning around present in *kehren*. Thus, the blindness arises from a turning around that allows this same blindness to be brought out before or in front of art. Consequently, when Adorno says that this blindness has always belonged to art, what is being said is that art, through its autonomy, brings out this blindness. Art is then what causes this *Hervorkehrung* to occur, and it is in this sense that blindness belongs to art since it only occurs in relation to art. But this same blindness, which occurs at the point when art is emancipated from myth, is only blind because it takes the form of what Adorno terms an "unnaïveté." This unnaïveté, which asserts art's autonomy as an emancipation from the naïveté of myth and cult, is, in effect, blinded by this assertion, that is, it is blinded by its own emancipation from naïveté. The blindness of this emancipation overshadows everything else because, on the one hand, this unnaïveté was not strong enough to see its own naïveté (remains blind in spite of its unnaïveté), and, on the other, its unnaïveté was too strong and therefore could not see its own naïveté (it remains blind because of its unnaïveté). It is this naïveté that Adorno refers to as a naïveté raised to a second power, the naïveté he subsequently defines as art's "uncertainty about its aesthetic purpose (*Wozu*)" (*AT*, 11/1). Art's uncertainty appears at this point because the emancipatory or affirmative purpose assigned to it by unnaïveté can no longer be assumed and precisely because this unnaïveté remains blind to its own naïveté. If the emancipation assigned to art by unnaïveté was in fact a determination of art, then art could have no uncertainty about its aesthetic purpose: its purpose would be emancipation. Because the determination of such a purpose is not a determination made by art it remains blind to what art is. In such a case, the art Adorno describes is an art that resists the affirmations made in its name by neither refusing nor affirming their blindness – an art that neither refuses nor affirms its representation. A first consequence of this account of art is that there is no other way for art to be viewed as emancipatory except by virtue of such blindness. To the extent that political meaning shelters an emancipatory intention, such a meaning can then no longer be assumed for an art whose autonomy resists being understood as a means of representation. The problem faced by Adorno in this case is how to rescue this meaning for an art that must remain autonomous from such a meaning if it is to have any existence as art. Complicating and intensifying this problem is the question of whether art can still lay claim to such an existence, the question of whether art has not already succumbed to the blindness that informs its interpretation as a function, social or otherwise.

That the art of Modernism's revolutionary movements is also implicated in this blindness is made clear when Adorno attributes the occurrence of this uncertainty to the emancipation sought by these movements. In the sentence that continues the passage last cited, Adorno formulates art's uncertainty about its aesthetic purpose as a question about whether "art in general is still possible or whether art, after its complete emancipation, did not isolate itself and lose its own preconditions" (*AT*, 10/1). The reference to complete emancipation reiterates the adventure of an absolute freedom envisaged by the art movements of Modernism. The effect of this adventure is now uncertainly poised between uncertainty about art's future and the foreclosure of any future at all. Furthermore, since Adorno goes

on to say that this question about art's uncertainty is "kindled by what art once was," (AT, 10/1) what is recognized in this uncertainty is the work of a law that persists even in the historical past rejected by the art of Modernism. In this case, Modernism is the historical moment in which art registers this law but, in Adorno's account, it can only do so in the form of a naïveté – the naïveté with which it set out on the sea of the unforeseen. According to Adorno, art, when faced with the uncertainty of its existence, understands this uncertainty as the result of having lost its secular, social function. Such an uncertainty is naïve because it arises in response to a loss which, as Adorno points out, is only the loss of how art had been understood as the reflection of an emancipatory unnaïveté blind to its own naïveté. This is the sense of Adorno's phrase, "this question [whether art in general is still possible or whether it lost all its preconditions] is kindled by what art once was." If such uncertainty is a function of this past, this means that, above all else, it is an effect of the autonomy art took on when art and the cultic function parted ways. This is the autonomy that remains irrevocable for Adorno. In contrast, the disrupted autonomy Adorno speaks of as the prelude to Modernism is the interpretation of autonomy reflected into art after its separation from cult and myth. This withdrawal, Adorno writes, took the form of a "secularization without which art would never have developed" (AT, 10/2). Yet, although this art only developed by its separation from the religiosity implicit in myth and cult, it remained a secular form of theology and, as such, it is the source of the affirmative character historically associated with art.<sup>12</sup>

On this characteristic of art, Adorno writes:

Art condemns itself to dispense a consolation for existence and whoever exists, a consolation that, barring any hope in another, strengthens the spell of what the autonomy of art would like to free itself from. The principle of autonomy is itself suspect of dispensing such consolation. (AT, 10/2)

Just as the revolutionary art movements Adorno associates with Modernism bound themselves more strongly to the historical restraints they would leave behind, so too did the secularization of art as it sought to free itself from its past. Since the repetition of this movement within Modernism marks the emergence of the process through which art becomes uncertain of its right to exist, what then appears here, for Adorno, is a process that confronts art with the necessity of turning away from all consolation, all affirmation. Adorno states: "Art must turn against its essence, against what constitutes its own concept and thereby become uncertain right into its innermost fiber" (AT, 10/2). *Sie muß gegen das [Wesen] sich wenden . . .* To be a matter of necessity is to recognize conformity to law. This being the case, the task of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is to account for the necessity of this recognition, in short, the necessity of art's lawfulness, the necessity of the law that art should turn against itself, turn against its affirmation, even the affirmation that lies at the heart of political meaning.

For Adorno to guarantee such a law, and, in so doing, guarantee that there still can be an aesthetic theory of art, this law cannot be imposed from without. Such an art would be nothing more than the function of an external force. In this respect, the problem faced by Adorno is to account for an art that is literally auto-nomos, its own law, a law that cannot be touched by the blindness of an emancipation from naïveté. Yet, in such a law, an emancipation is still at stake: the emancipation of art from its own history, the history in which it is conceived as a species of affirmation. Why this is so can be discerned from its alternative: a consequence of art's emancipation from all affirmation is that art will not matter, that art, as Adorno noted, will have cut itself off from and lost its preconditions. The effect of such a loss is that art can have no relation whatsoever to either the social or political, not even a negative one. To follow fully the consequences of this phrase, such an art would then be emancipated from all hope of emancipation. While Adorno will refuse the history that sees art as affirmative or emancipatory, this does not mean that art is to be given over to the extreme alternative of losing all its preconditions, to become, as it were, so uncertain as to be incapable of uncertainty. The task of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* becomes in this case the task of interpreting this moment of uncertainty as a moment within art, not a moment in its historical development, but a moment that is fundamental to what art is. In other words, art's uncertainty about its right to exist must become essential to the

existence of art. What is therefore at stake in art's uncertainty is nothing less than art itself. But, at the same time, one can also ask what is at stake in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* that it should turn to uncertainty as the fundamental characteristic of art and its lawfulness.

The law Adorno ascribes to art also governs the movement that results in the refusal of any affirmation of freedom. How this occurs is not the result of anything art does; rather this refusal occurs through the means by which the significance of art is affirmed. Already, within Modernism, Adorno describes how this comes about when he draws attention to the way in which the particular thwarts what the adventure of Modernism had envisaged. What is at work in the operation of this law allows art, however naïvely, to become the promise of what it cannot realize. But, at the same time, this law also ensures that the refusal of this affirmation is no mere historical event – as if its existence were attributable to a particular literary period rather than art itself. Such a refusal, Adorno claims, is “the wound that art itself bears” (AT, 10/2). Why art should be driven to this failure, Adorno says, is because nothing in the concept of art consoles its existence by defining that existence for it. This is also why art can have a history, that is, a changing account of its existence. Since art lacks a clear concept, it can be subject to many concepts. Adorno expresses this tersely when he states: “Art has its concept in a historically changing constellation of moments; it [the concept] resists definition” (AT, 11/2). But, even here, the concept of art is a concept that is not exactly without definition, just as the autonomy framed by art's emancipation was not exactly autonomous. Here art's definition, indeed, its autonomy, is that it resists definition. The paradoxical definition Adorno offers at this point does not, however, describe an art that actively, or even positively, subverts any definition of its concept. It is rather that art does not define itself. This is not even a refusal to define in the sense that this refusal is something art wills. To describe it as such a refusal would be to say too much since it would imply that, for Adorno, art exists as a form of consciousness capable of refusing or affirming what it is and what it is not. Art has no such choice. To insist on such a refusal would be to assert that the significance of art is to be found in something like the idea of humanity now disrupted by Modernism. Art, for Adorno, not only resists such assertions, but does so because of its autonomy. Thus, the resistance to definition Adorno speaks of is directly attributable to the autonomy that distinguishes art from not just the idea of humanity but any idea. It is also as a result of this autonomy that Adorno can offer no other definition of art than to say that art is what it has become. Only an art that remains autonomous, that is, not determined by some idea or some external (referential) function can have such a definition. Again, this does not mean that art has no concept; rather it means, as Adorno asserts, that, “since art is what it has become, its concept refers to what it does not contain” (AT, 12/3). What this assertion implies is made explicit by Adorno:

Art is explainable only according to its law of movement, not through invariants. It [art] is determined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art originates out of its other: to be derived with regard to its content (*ist aus ihrem Anderen: inhaltlich abzuleiten*); that alone would satisfy any demand of a materialistic-dialectic aesthetic. Art becomes specific by means of separating itself from what it develops out of. (AT, 12/3)

Here, what is at stake in an art that resists definition becomes clearer. First, Adorno does not say that art is defined by what it is not – as if it were the determination of something other. To stress the literal sense of origination translated here, art “is *out* of its other.” Art exists because it remains apart from its other. Since art is not defined in the terms of its other, art thus preserves itself as art against its other. This is its autonomy. At the same time, it is only by virtue of this autonomy that art has a relation to what it is not. Consequently, when Adorno speaks about the content of art being derived (*inhaltlich abzuleiten*), he is saying that art is derived from the unavoidable existence of this relation. This is why the derivation occurs in the form of a reflexive separation (*sich scheiden*). In a more literal rendering of Adorno's words, “art separates itself from that out of which it became” (*sie von dem sich scheidet, woraus sie wurde*). The derivation is a separation. By not granting something external the right to determine what art is (in the sense that art is derived from and therefore subject to an external

category), Adorno avoids repeating the classical yet still pervasive means of asserting the political and social significance of art in terms of representation. Art is art, not because it represents what it is not, but because of and despite its separation from its other, it belongs to this other. The question confronted by Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is then how to account for such a relation: a separation that is also a belonging, a separation that preserves art's autonomy without renouncing a political and social significance for art. In other words, a relation that would still "satisfy any demand of a materialistic-dialectic aesthetic." This is the foothold Adorno cannot relinquish if art's uncertainty about its own existence is to be capable of interpretation not to mention capable of still engendering aesthetic theory.

What is then at stake in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is an account of the aesthetic in terms of politics, but an account that would not destroy the autonomy through which art becomes art. To satisfy the demands of such a dialectic means to maintain a relation between the aesthetic and the material without requiring one to become the determination of the other. Were the aesthetic to be determined by the material, it would be reduced to a deterministic historical materialism, in effect, a vulgar Marxism. As Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* attempts to satisfy the demand of a materialistic-dialectic aesthetic without succumbing to the overdetermined account of the aesthetic that has characterized such a Marxism, his theory must also account for what remains unthought within that approach, and more generally within contemporary criticism of ideology: the question of art's autonomy as something other than an ideological, aesthetic category. Indeed, the crucial issue Adorno addresses is the existence of a relation between the aesthetic and the political in which the former is not sacrificed to the latter as its determination. In other words, what is sought is a relation in which each is determined in its relation to the other but a relation that refuses to allow one to be determined through or represented by the other.

Adorno's argument here remains unmistakably dialectical but in the sense put forward in his 1966 *Negative Dialectics*. In this work, the publication of which immediately precedes the years in which Adorno works on his *Aesthetic Theory*, the dialectical relation is to be preserved but without any positive synthesis, that is, without any positive relation between art and the world in which it takes place (a positive relation being one in which the content of a world would be recognized in art as reflection or representation). In the Preface to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno makes clear that what is at stake in this relation is the attempt to "free dialectics from its affirmative nature without decreasing any of its determinacy."<sup>13</sup> While the power of determinacy is retained it is understood to operate without regard to a particular determination. In effect, what occurs within this dialectic is a negation that operates without being subsumed into what it determines. In the terms of the *Aesthetic Theory*, art retains its negational force even as it determines what it is not. In this respect, the *Aesthetic Theory* is an account of art in terms of such a negative dialectic.

As the sentence just cited from *Negative Dialectics* indicates, the relation of the aesthetic to anything else also requires a determinacy without determination if Adorno is to avoid destroying the political and social function of art. Through such a relation Adorno would avoid subjugating art to fixed determinations concerning the meaning and existence of art. It is precisely such determinations which Modernism brings to an end. With the advent of Modernism, art is forced to recognize its preconditions rather than the preconditions external to its own mode of existence (such as the cultic and social functions that predominated prior to Modernism). However, by relying on a relation that requires determinacy without determination, Adorno's account of art turns to the kind of self-negating concept Kant also invokes in the *Third Critique* as a means to set aesthetic judgement apart from other forms of judgement. Like the concept Adorno ascribes to art, Kant's concept is not exactly a concept, as the structuring of its phrase indicates: "purposiveness without purpose" (*Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*). Kant's phrase pivots on a "without" that allows what cannot be said to be said. The fact that Adorno must repeat Kant's quasi-concept of purposiveness as a determinacy without determination, in effect, a negation of the concept's power to affirm itself (what Adorno will refer to in *Negative Dialectics* as the negation of negation), indicates the extent to which Adorno's account of the relation of art to the political has to be thought in terms of an effect that still preserves its mislaid cause, its lost naïveté.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, this reliance on Kant's formulation also indicates the extent to which the

aesthetic is already the possibility of the political and the social in Kant. As a result, the role of the aesthetic as the category that gives significance to art (and when all else fails, it is in the name of the aesthetic that art will be claimed), this category not only guarantees the existence of art but it does so because it is governed by the necessity of repeating the same self-negating structure through which Kant sought to preserve the autonomy of aesthetic judgement. What guarantees and therefore acts with the force of a law within the realm of art is a negation that refuses the concept through which it appears: purposiveness without purpose, determinacy without determination. Although Adorno will not explicitly phrase the governing law of his materialistic-historical dialectic in this way, it is a formulation, indeed, the law, his aesthetic theory cannot do without.

When the relation of art to the political is defined in this way, the political is not what the aesthetic refers to or represents. Rather, the political is what the autonomy of art establishes as other to itself. As a result of the alterity established by this autonomy art continues to exist as art yet, in its continuing acknowledgment of this alterity, art constantly affirms the limit that decides what it is not. Possessing the power of determinacy to which determination is refused, the political and the social, on the one hand, and the aesthetic, on the other, belong to one another but do not determine what each other is. Here, art possesses a power of determinacy yet it is a power that only determines that something is rather than what it is. Such an art refuses what it is not and it does so by eluding any determination by what it is not. Only such an art can rescue the dialectic of historical materialism from its own affirmative and deterministic tendencies. But to fully satisfy the demands of this dialectic, art must still belong in some way to what it is not: to the political and the social. That this relation is not a simple or single act of negation whereby art takes on a power of determination that effectively refutes its uncertainty, but is instead the negation of negation, is an inevitable response to the conflicting demands of Adorno's commitment to a political dimension for art and to Adorno's difficulty in sustaining that commitment in the face of art. Art, for Adorno, must negate its own affirmative tendencies even when those tendencies take the form of a negation that determines the existence of what art is not.

In addition, as Adorno's account of this determinacy without determination also indicates, this cannot be a negation that destroys the negation that precedes it. The negation of negation at issue here is a movement in which the affirmation of the first negative determination is reduced to determinacy rather than complete non-existence. In other words, a first negation occurs so that a second can refuse what it affirms. But what is not refused in this second negation is the power to determine. This is the movement of the negative dialectic. If it refused this power to determine, that is, negated it with unquestioned certainty, there could be no such thing as the art Adorno describes as being unsure of its right to exist. With such a complete negation there could be no uncertainty; in fact, there could not even be uncertainty. But by rendering art as that which negates its determination, its affirmative power, Adorno can define art as a power of determinacy that remains unsure of its own determination. An art unsure of its own determination is an art that can never affirm nor even deny the determinations made in its name. That is the nature of its resistance and refusal. For Adorno, this nature is what appears as the effect of Modernism, the moment when art appears as that which resists its own concept. It is because of this resistance that the autonomy of art remains irrevocable, since to revoke this autonomy is to know art as what it is not. Such resistance is the basis of this autonomy, yet it is a resistance obscured by the naïveté of the emancipatory forces that art served when art separated from its cultic function. To sustain this autonomy, which is to do nothing less than to sustain the meaning of Modernism for Adorno, is not to pose again the question of art as one of two possibilities, that is, whether art in general is still possible *or* whether art has lost its own preconditions. Rather, it is to pose a different question, namely, whether art in general is still possible without severing its preconditions. The questions Adorno had presented as alternatives to one another now threaten to become the same question. Adorno's formulation poses not just a question about the existence of art but also the question of whether the answer to this question can only take place within aesthetic theory, that is, within an aesthetic theory for which the problem addressed by Kant's *Third Critique* still remains unresolved: why the aesthetic can only be accounted for by its negation or, to put this another way,

why the “without” that founds the aesthetic as a theoretical undertaking remains its only justification. In this context, it can be asked whether Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* and its demand that art exist as the negation of negation is not the last possible reformulation within a history that remains thoroughly Kantian.

Given the role Adorno assigns to art as the negation of the forces and categories that would negate its specificity, the ability of art to perform such a role cannot be assigned to anything external to it. Nor can it be attributed to some model of consciousness or will that art merely embodies.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Adorno will account for such a determinacy without determination by emphasizing the form through which art achieves its specificity and through which art makes its claim to be art. This specificity resides for Adorno in the fact that art has form. What this means is that form is what separates art from the material of the world. At the same time, art remains part of that world because of the fact that what is formed in art is what belongs to the world. Form in this respect is the difference between the world and art. What retains the link of art to what it is not and thereby satisfies the demand of a materialist-dialectic aesthetic is then a materialism governed by form. Art then reveals a power of determinacy in its form but, in Adorno’s account, it does so without determining what that form represents; it only determines that it is. Form, by virtue of the fact that it is, presents art as something to be determined. As such, this possession of form is the sign of the material existence of art, the sign of what Adorno describes as its foothold in the whole. Without this foothold it could not claim a position amongst things capable of receiving determination. In its formal aspect, art is both material and resistant to determination. As Adorno already indicated in his remarks on the art movements of Modernism, it is this particular aspect of art that resists any displacement of the significance of art into the unbounded sea of an unforeseen future. By submitting to the particular, these movements follow the law of art’s movement, and this law belongs to its form, as Adorno explicitly confirms in the sentences that continue his description, already cited, of how art acquires its specificity:

Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its own law of form. It exists only in relation to its other; it is the process that transpires with its other. (*AT*, 12/3)

Any law that art follows is therefore a law dictated by the movement through which art takes on its formal existence. Nonetheless, Adorno’s reliance on form is far from advocating formalism as an essential characteristic of art – as if the meaning of Modernism could be reduced to a preoccupation with formal structure and procedure. Form, for Adorno, is more fundamental than any such preoccupation. Indeed, Adorno will go so far as to state that “form is that by which artworks become artworks” (*AT*, 209/144). In this sense form cannot be a descriptive or historical category, much less a particular artistic practice. Since it is only through form that an artwork becomes an artwork, form must take on a constitutive role in the existence of art; it must “determine without determination.” As such, form is called upon by Adorno to determine art without determining what that art represents. Form then becomes the basis of the relation of art to the political and social world.

Such a form, as described by Adorno, is in strict accordance with a concept that sees art as that which resists its definition by anything other than the law of its own movement. Yet, when Adorno describes this movement, the law that emerges is a law of interruption. Form not only suspends its determination by what is external to it, it also suspends itself. Moreover, the interruption through which the form of art exists, becomes by this same interruption both critical and a representation of freedom. Adorno’s insistence on art as both a mode of criticism and a representation of freedom preserves at the very limit of art’s existence – when art is no longer certain of its right to exist – a significance for art that is maintained by this uncertainty. Adorno writes:

A posited unity, [form] continually suspends itself as what is posited; essential to it is to interrupt itself through its other, its coherence is not to cohere. In its relation to its other, whose foreignness it moderates yet still maintains, form is what is anti-barbaric in art; through form art has a part in

the civilization that it criticizes by its existence. The law of the transfiguration of what exists, form represents, in contrast to what exists, freedom. (*AT*, 216/143)

By its mere existence art is critical. Yet to be critical also requires the establishment of a position to be represented in that criticism. For Adorno, such a position results from the immanent law of art's form, which, because it transfigures what exists, establishes the contrast that allows art to be seen as representing freedom. What is then criticized by art is the unfreedom of what is not art. Form is crucial in establishing this freedom; however, the freedom art possesses by this means is not to be confused with the absolute freedom Adorno ascribes to the revolutionary art movements of Modernism. This freedom is restricted by virtue of art's relation to what is other to it. The restriction is necessary, for without it the freedom of art would not matter. Without this restriction art would have no relation to anything whatsoever. Only in this relation to what is other does form represent anything in Adorno's account. The fact that it does represent (and Adorno uses the verb *repräsentieren*) indicates the extent to which Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* preserves at the very limit of its negation the critical capacity through which the autonomy of Enlightenment thought sought to establish itself in the blindness of its unnaïveté. The preservation of this capacity indicates that Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* conforms less to the law of art's own movements than the demands that define the possibility of aesthetic theory and which still operate in this most extreme account of the aesthetic: an aesthetic that not only preserves theory in its uncertainty but reveals that uncertainty as the foundation of aesthetic theory.<sup>16</sup> For Adorno to maintain such an uncertainty, the object of aesthetic theory, art, must exist not just in contrast to what exists but must occupy a position of freedom in relation to what Adorno called "the perennial foothold unfreedom retains in the whole." Art's formal existence is both the source of this freedom and the source of art's critical capacity. In order to possess this capacity, the art of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* must then recognize at the very limit of its power of determinacy, even at the point where art barely exists any more, the force of a representation it had otherwise refused to the history of art. The lawfulness of art's own movement, even as it continually suspends itself in its relation to what art is not, is more than an account of the mere existence of form, the mere existence of a power of determinacy. That more is at stake becomes legible when Adorno states that the critical capacity posited through form's interruption of itself is nothing less than "an unfolding of truth" (*AT*, 216/143).

Form, as the law of art's own movement, is then also an unfolding of truth. Since Adorno describes form as what cannot be separated from content in art, the truth that is unfolded in form is nothing other than the content of art.<sup>17</sup> As such, what is unfolded in form is the truth of art as criticism. In the section of the *Aesthetic Theory* devoted to the enigma of art, Adorno spells this out as follows:

Grasping truth content postulates critique. Nothing is grasped whose truth or untruth is not grasped and that is the concern of criticism. The historical unfolding of artworks through criticism and the philosophical unfolding of their truth content stand in interdependency. (*AT*, 194/128)

In form, as criticism, the relation of art to its other is what is grasped. This privileging of a critical role that relies upon and operates through form indicates the extent to which Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* operates within the parameters established by Kant's account of the aesthetic and subsequently developed by the early German Romantics who were also compelled to assign a critical role to form in art.<sup>19</sup> For the German Romantics, as for Adorno, this critical role operated in the name of a freedom. The task of criticism in the early German Romantics was to unveil the freedom already present within the form of art and throughout its history.<sup>20</sup> Criticism still has such a role in Adorno but, in contradistinction to the Romantics, freedom remains restricted by its relation to what it is not, to its untruth, its unfreedom. From this restriction it receives its critical force since it is through this restriction that a criticism derived from freedom establishes a position for itself. This position is what Adorno refers to as the truth content of art. Unlike the Romantics who sought, through criticism, to dissolve the restriction that establishes this position, namely form, into the universality of the idea of art, Adorno seeks no such dissolution but instead insists on a negative relation that binds art to its other

in a critical way.<sup>21</sup> Yet, despite this distinction through which Adorno preserves art from continual dissolution into universality, his *Aesthetic Theory* does no more than suspend the movement initiated by criticism within the theory of art developed by the early German Romantics. In this respect, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* still operates within the terms established for art in the wake of Kant's account of the aesthetic: form and criticism define the existence of art. But, where the early German Romantics saw the task of criticism as the dissolving of form, Adorno sees the task of criticism as the negation or suspension of this dissolution.<sup>22</sup> As such, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is a theory that can only operate within the history of the unfolding of an aesthetic that confronts at every stage of that history the limitation in which that same aesthetic is established. In Adorno's account, the Romantics sought to dissolve that limitation in the interest of an absolute, and so, too, did the revolutionary art movements of Modernism in their pursuit of an absolute freedom from the past. To reinstate that limit as the law of art's own movement, as Adorno does, is not only to locate form as the content of art but also to recall art from both the lawlessness of its absolute dissolution (the aim of the Romantics) and from a complete emancipation in which art isolates itself and loses its preconditions (the goal of Modernism). For Adorno, to preserve this limit is to preserve the continuing possibility of the aesthetic and its theory as the place in which the existence of art, that is, the significance of art, can still be decided. Yet, as Adorno is well aware, no such decision can restore to art the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment. What remains for Adorno to think is the end of such a project as the continuing existence of art, in effect, to represent freedom without submitting it to determination.<sup>23</sup>

As already stated, the conditions for such a continuing existence are that art must be both autonomous and a social fact, that is, art must retain a relation to the social and the political without determining their content and without its content being determined by them in return. All that is to be determined is the existence of this relation specific to the form of art: "The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of their form. This, not the insertion of objective forces, defines the relation of art to society" (AT, 16/6). The relation of art to society can only be read as a matter of their form. No objective element from reality appears in art as such an element. If it did, the form of art would be lost as the difference between art and what Adorno calls "the external world's factual facade" (AT, 16/6) is effaced. A clear example of how unsolved antagonisms of reality return as immanent problems of form is given in Adorno's essay "Lyric and Society." In this essay, Adorno refers to the individual spontaneity of this form as unable to secure an absoluteness for itself.<sup>24</sup> As such, the lyric is witness to an immanent problem of form by virtue of its inability to transcend that from which it separates itself. Form, as the sign of a separation between art and world, can only maintain such a separation by continually failing to complete it. Lyric can only have a form because of this failure. Were it not for this failure, neither the form of the lyric, nor the lyric itself would be recognized. It is in this sense that Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory* that "form inevitably limits what is formed, for otherwise its concept would lose its specific difference to what is formed" (AT, 217/144). In the case of the lyric, the form limits individual spontaneous expression so that this expression may have a specific existence rather than remain indistinct from what it is formed out of. Only then does form exist.

This problem of form, the fact that it cannot escape its own limitation without relinquishing its existence, is what Adorno first describes in the *Aesthetic Theory* as the law to which even the absolute freedom sought by Modernism must submit: the particular. In Adorno's account this problem is located in the necessity of an otherness. Through otherness art not only relates to what it is not, but does so by negating or limiting itself (the wound that art bears). The form of such an art must be the negation of its own determination if it is to resist its own definition. However, when Adorno insists that there is "no truth of artworks without determinate negation," (AT, 195/129) he reveals the extent to which his *Aesthetic Theory* is marked by a continual denial of its own determining and negative tendencies. Here, as if to confirm the inseparability of determination and negation expressed in Hegel's favorite phrase from Spinoza, "every determination is a negation," Adorno is forced to continually reinterpret, that is, continually negate the kind of determination that would deprive negation of all power to negate or determine.<sup>25</sup> Only then can negation be a determination and a denial

of determination, in short, a determined denial of itself by itself. As a result, negation is never quite negative enough to relinquish its determining function. In this context, the negation of negation takes the form of a criticism whose task is to preserve throughout the history of art a negation that will always distinguish what art is from what it is not. This is why criticism is described by Adorno as the historical unfolding of artworks. But, as Adorno also says, this unfolding cannot be separated from the philosophical unfolding of truth content. But if form is understood as criticism, then form is also one of the dependent parties in this relation. How then is this relation, this interdependency assured? How does criticism maintain a relation to truth content? In other words, what accounts for this interdependency that permits a content, even a truth content, without affirming its determination? In effect, what accounts for an art that continues to exist even when that mode of existence manifests itself as uncertainty about its existence?

When Adorno describes this interdependency he also introduces the necessity that artworks be interpreted. Adorno writes that “the need of artworks for interpretation” is “their need for the production of their truth content.” (AT, 194/128). To the extent that form is intertwined with content and to the extent that art is understood by Adorno as an interdependency between the unfolding of art and the unfolding of truth content, this interdependency now appears dependent on the task of interpretation. But, from where does this need for interpretation stem from if not from a determination rather than a power of determinacy? Adorno will refer this need to what he calls “the stigma of [art’s] constitutive deficiency.” This stigma, as Adorno immediately points out, is attributable to nothing less than an enigma or riddle that constitutes the artwork as an artwork.<sup>26</sup> What this enigma does, in effect, is to constitute the law of art’s movement, the form in which art resists the affirmation of its own existence. The passage in its entirety is as follows:

the need of artworks for interpretation, their need for the production of their truth content is the stigma of their constitutive deficiency. Artworks do not achieve what is objectively sought in them. The zone of indeterminacy between the unreachable and what has been realized constitutes their enigma. They have truth content and they do not have it. (AT, 194/128)

In the end, all roads lead to this enigma in Adorno. Why artworks have and do not have a truth content is because the enigmatic character of art, as Adorno defines it, requires that artworks “say something and in the same breath conceal it” (AT, 182/120). Their truth content is a saying that does not say what it says, but does say that it says. The content of the artwork is consequently tied to its form by this enigma. As a result, the enigmatic is what constitutes form as constitutive of art. What this means is that, if form is how art is mediated as art, form cannot represent an object. This is because art, for Adorno, resists objectification in its very concept. As a result, whatever content art has must be a content that takes away such an object even as it affirms it. This is the task of the enigmatic. Yet, by the same logic, this enigma cannot be known as an enigma. What is enigmatic about this enigma is that it is known only in its solution but this solution, of course, is its negation, the enigmatic rendering of what cannot be rendered except as what it is not. This is why Adorno says that “the enigmatic character of artworks remains bound up with history” (AT, 182/120). Through history artworks are defined in their negation, by what they are not. Enigma cannot be separated from either history or criticism. Adorno confirms as much when he writes: “All artworks and art altogether are enigmas; since antiquity that has irritated the theory of art” (AT, 182/120). Such an enigma even constitutes the history in which both art and the theory of art occurs. If this enigma were to be grasped in its enigmatic character, there could be no such theory, no such history. As a result, the constitutive power of the enigmatic can only be recognized within Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* where it fails (*wo er fehlt*).<sup>27</sup> Where enigma fails is of course where it fails to render itself objectively. Where it fails, that is, where art becomes enigmatic, is where enigma subjects itself to the law of an art that in turn is subject to this enigma. In this movement, the constitutive power of enigma is concealed, but not negated. Enigma thus constitutes art as the law of a movement that continually conceals its own determination. What appears in its name is a power of determinacy, but no determination of itself. To the extent that this

enigma is constitutive of an art that would satisfy the demands of an historical materialistic aesthetic, that is, an aesthetic through which art is never the objectivized form of a politics, then, what is achieved by Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* is a politics of enigma, a politics that can be constituted by no other means than by an art that is itself nothing less than an art of concealment, an art of negative determination, an art that fails so that there may be politics, an art whose negative determination is its negation by the political and the social. It is surely not an understatement when Adorno, after stating that "artworks have no truth without determinate negation" goes on to insist that "developing this is the task of aesthetics today" (AT, 195/129). What Adorno does not state, but what remains a consequence of this configuration of the political and the social by means of such a lawful enigma, is that there can be no new aesthetic theory after Adorno. What his text unfolds is a polarity internal to the aesthetic itself, a polarity formed by the movement between a positive and a negative affirmation of art. Since Adorno's Modernism is the moment in which art submits itself to this movement, it is the moment when art experiences its negation. To produce this experience as the law of art and to affirm this law by virtue of art's uncertainty about its right to exist is to elaborate the only terms in which aesthetic theory remains thinkable at the limit of art's existence, which is to say, at the point of its presumed negation. But even here, as before in the history of the aesthetic, a politics remains at stake, a politics that still demands that art exists, even as it questions that existence. Between this demand and its questioning, politics quietly conceals and forgets its own enigma, conceals the question of the right by which it exists by displacing that question onto art. As a result of this demand can the wound that art bears be anything else than the wound inflicted by politics so that art may become once again its determination, the negation of its negation?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp, 1970), 7: 9. All translations are my own. Page references to Adorno's works will indicate the German edition first. This will be followed by a supplemental page reference to available translations. *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 1. References to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* will use the abbreviation AT and will appear in the main body of the essay.

<sup>2</sup> F. T. Marinetti, *Selected Writings* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux), 42.

<sup>3</sup> As Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* also claims, "we already live in the absolute" (Marinetti, 42).

<sup>4</sup> Janet Lyon, in her study of the modern manifesto, has interpreted this tendency in stronger political terms: "the manifesto is the form that exposes the broken promises of modernity: if modern democratic forms claim to honor the sovereignty of universal political subjecthood, the manifesto is a testimony to the partiality of that claim." Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 3. For Lyon, the manifesto would already be the site of the failure of modernism.

<sup>5</sup> The framing of art's history as a movement between poles persists also in Benjamin who, in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility," explicitly describes art as an alternation between the poles of the auratic and the exhibitional. More recently the same polarity has been reasserted in relation to the postmodern with the emergence of the artistic movement known as Remodernism or Stuckism which sees contemporary art as either postmodern or spiritual.

<sup>6</sup> There is no stronger a condemnation of the humanism that drives this idea than Adorno's remarks on poetry and Auschwitz. For an interpretation of the negativity Adorno expresses in these remarks as a turning away from the ethical imperative of Auschwitz, see Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz* (London: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the relation of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* to Benjamin's work, in particular, to the latter's concept of constellation, see Sherry Nicholsen Weber, "Aesthetic Theory's Mimesis of Walter Benjamin" in her *Exact Imagination, Late Work. On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997): 137-180.

<sup>8</sup> While Benjamin does associate aura with the presence of the human actor in a theatrical performance, he does not distinguish as strongly between the age of aura and the age of cult as Adorno does. Indeed, Benjamin is less concerned with accounting for the emergence of auratic art than he is with accounting for the distinguishing condition that marks the existence of art prior to its age of reproducibility. That condition for Benjamin is the distance art maintains from its observer. For Adorno, this autonomy of art is less a matter of distance and more a matter of the idea through which art emancipates itself from cult, that is, through humanity.

<sup>9</sup> That such autonomy or setting apart is as much a law of art as criticism (of the possibility of speaking critically of art) can be already discerned in Aristotle's *Poetics* when, in Chapter 6, Aristotle explicitly recognizes the gesture through which tragedy achieves its autonomy as a form of art. Aristotle writes "let us speak about tragedy setting apart (*legomen apolabontes*) the definition of its essence which arises out what we have said" (49b22-24). On this gesture see my "Aristotle and the Possibility of Literary Criticism" in *Theory and the Evasion of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993): 1-36.

<sup>10</sup> This contradictory movement is also discerned by Adorno: "Inasmuch as a social function allows itself to be predicated of artworks, it is their functionlessness" (*AT*, 336-337/227).

<sup>11</sup> The closest cognate to *Rätsel* in English is of course "riddle." However, in what follows *Rätsel* will be translated as enigma. The reason for this choice is a practical one: to avoid the recourse to awkward circumlocutions that retain the word riddle when properties such as *Rätselcharakter* ("riddle-like character") are discussed and also because the word "riddle" yields no compact adjectival form such as "enigmatic."

<sup>12</sup> It is in this sense that Gianni Vattimo remarks on Lukács' claim to have achieved emancipation from religion: "the itinerary of his [Lukács'] thinking could be taken as an example of a failed process of emancipation; failed precisely insofar as, not recognizing the ambiguity of the very idea of secularization, he ends by believing that the bond with religion has been left definitively behind, whereas it continues to operate all the more powerfully the less one wishes to recognize it." Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 65.

<sup>13</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp), 6: 9; *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), xix.

<sup>14</sup> In his discussion of Kant's purposiveness without purpose in the *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno adheres to this formulation, stating that it "expresses the facts of the case with that truth which always removes the Kantian theorems from the methodological context in which they appear" (*AT*, 209-10/139). Here, Adorno retains Kant's formulation by separating it from a teleology which in Kant, as Adorno states, is "modelled on [the teleology] of organisms." For Adorno, such a model is "rooted in the unity of

reason, ultimately in the unity of divine reason as it manifests itself in things-in-themselves" (AT, 210/140). Against such a unity, Adorno describes art as the determinate negation of its own progress (AT, 210/140). In such an art, purposiveness is art's "similarity to language" and its "'without purpose' is its nonconceptuality" (AT, 210/140). In this formulation, language, in art, determines itself as artistic by negating its movement towards conceptuality. What therefore changes from Kant in Adorno's definition purposiveness without purpose is the relation of art's teleology to "the abstract, dominating coherence of nature" (AT, 211/140). For other accounts of Adorno's relation to Kant see Tom Huhn, "Kant, Adorno, and the Social Opacity of the Aesthetic" in *The Semblance of Subjectivity*, ed. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuiervaart (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997): 237-258, and Wilhelm S. Wurzer, "Kantian Snapshot of Adorno: Modernity Standing Still" in *The Actuality of Adorno*, ed. Max Pensky (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997): 135-53.

<sup>15</sup> Kant's inability to resolve the question of the aesthetic as an issue defined by the relation of the faculties would already indicate the failure of such an attribution.

<sup>16</sup> This uncertainty is given temporal expression both with respect to art and with respect to theory by Adorno. In both instances, Adorno uses the same word: *Augenblick*. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes: "The moment, on which theory depends, does not allow itself to be prolonged theoretically" (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 15/3). And, in the *Aesthetic Theory*: "Every artwork is a moment; every successful artwork is a cessation, a momentary pausing of the process, as such a moment it reveals itself to the unwavering eye" (Adorno, AT, 17/6). That the negation through which uncertainty occurs is expressed in temporal terms also raises the question of the extent to which time is called upon by Adorno as a form of determination. Furthermore, in the second citation, a different question arises since the moment in which an artwork is constituted as an artwork, literally, in the glance of an eye, has to be met with an unwavering eye that cannot, for a moment, avert its gaze if art is to be recognized as art. By configuring art and its observer in this way, Adorno would assure that art is always, and resolutely, determined as a negation of how and by whom it is viewed.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno alludes to this relation between form and content when he states that "the difficulty in ascertaining [form] is, among other things, due to its entwinement with content" and, more emphatically, "not only in opposition to content but through it is form to be thought" (AT, 211/140).

<sup>18</sup> The word Adorno uses for enigma is *Rätsel*. Here, as earlier in this essay, this word is translated as enigma. See footnote 11 for an explanation of this decision.

<sup>19</sup> What is referred to by the phrase "early German Romantics" is the group of writers and philosophers who came together at Jena in the late 18th century and were responsible for the publication of the journal, the *Athenaeum*, which remains the principal source of their theoretical exploration of art and criticism. Foremost amongst this group were Friedrich Schlegel, his brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Novalis.

<sup>20</sup> On this aspect of criticism for the German Romantics, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), and Walter Benjamin, *The Concept of Criticism in the Early German Romantics (Selected Writings, vol. 1)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 116-200.

<sup>21</sup> In this context, it is somewhat ironic that a fragment by Friedrich Schlegel was intended by Adorno as a motto for the *Aesthetic Theory*. The fragment reads: "What is called the philosophy of art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy or the art" ("Editor's Afterword," AT, 544/366). Despite

his affinity for Schlegel's aphorism, Adorno would not subscribe to the solution sought by Schlegel, namely, the dissolution of one into the other. For Adorno, what is at stake is their interdependency.

<sup>22</sup> Despite this distinction, Adorno will also adhere to a topos central to the early Romantics: the primacy of criticism in relation to art that characterizes the modern existence of art. After stating that "the truth content of artworks is fused with their critical content" Adorno remarks, "that is why works are also critics of one another" (*AT*, 59/35). While criticism, as it is understood by Adorno, remains a firmly negative relation, this is not the case for the German Romantics who, despite beginning from an equally negative point in Kant, sought to transform that point into "positivity." As Benjamin points out in 1919, the Romantics "understood how to preserve and apply the unavoidably negative moment of this concept [Kant's concept of *Kritik*]," and this application as Benjamin again points out, possessed a feature that distinguished it from the modern concept of criticism, its "complete positivity." Benjamin, "Concept of Criticism," *Selected Writings* 1: 142 and 152.

<sup>23</sup> Characterized in this way, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* affirms the course Schiller was also constrained to adopt when he speaks of the passage between two determinations in Letter 20 of his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. This indeterminate passage is what Schiller recognizes as the aesthetic. In it, Schiller states, the mind "acts freely but is in no way free from laws," and that the laws according to which it acts "are not represented." Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 141-43. Again, where a politics is at stake in the aesthetic, a determination that remains undetermined is necessary.

<sup>24</sup> See "Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft," *Noten zur Literatur I, Gesammelte Schriften* 11: 48-68; "On Lyric Poetry and Society," *Notes on Literature I* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): 37-54.

<sup>25</sup> That this is a continual activity is indicated in the following remark on art's autonomy: "Art's double character as both autonomous and *fait social* participates unceasingly in the zone of its autonomy" (Adorno, *AT*, 16/5).

<sup>26</sup> The reference to art as an enigma or riddle has a long history, as long perhaps as the need to interpret art. Amongst these references, two deserve mention in the context of Adorno. The first is by Martin Heidegger in the "Afterword" to his "The Origin of the Work of Art" in *Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 50-52. The second, perhaps more surprisingly, is by Paul de Man in "The Resistance to Theory" when he speaks of the "undecidable enigma" of the "grammatical indeterminacy" of the title of Keats's poem, *The Fall of Hyperion*. The recourse to this term in the work of both these figures signals, as in Adorno, the attempt to account for the specificity of art by accounting for the limit that preserves art as art. While each will speak of this limit in different terms, Adorno alone will claim this limit as what guarantees the dialectical relation of art to its other. Nothing prevents Adorno from doing so, but, by the same token, nothing confirms this relation except the negation this relation would already have conferred.

<sup>27</sup> Adorno, *AT*, 184/121.